

KAITLYN DAVIS

She's about
to discover
a whole new world...

Granting Wishes

A Once Upon a Curse Prequel

Granting Wishes

A Once Upon a Curse Prequel



By Kaitlyn Davis

eBook Edition

Copyright 2019 Kaitlyn Davis M.

Cover Art: Manipulated by Kaitlyn Davis from an attribution licensed DeviantArt brush by [kavaeka](#), a Shutterstock.com image copyright Microstocker1 titled [Arabian interior design](#), and a Shutterstock.com image copyright Irina Alexandrovna titled [Beautiful, young, brunette in a luxurious, purple, long dress](#).

Title and Chapter Heading Font: Public Domain Font (Newborough) by [Roger White](#)

The right of Kaitlyn Davis to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the author, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorized distribution or use of this text may be direct infringement of the author's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

This is a work of fiction and any resemblances between the characters and persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

All Works by Kaitlyn Davis

Once Upon a Curse

Gathering Frost
Withering Rose
Chasing Midnight
Parting Worlds
Granting Wishes

The Raven and the Dove

Midnight Fire

Ignite
Simmer
Blaze
Scorch
Burn

Midnight Ice

Frost
Freeze
Fracture
Shatter

A Dance of Dragons

The Shadow Soul
The Spirit Heir
The Phoenix Born
Leena's Story – The Novellas

To my family for their unconditional love,
my friends for their overwhelming support,
and my fans for their incredible enthusiasm.
Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Table of Contents

[All Works by Kaitlyn Davis](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More *Once Upon a Curse* Books](#)

[About the Author](#)

One

I'm falling.

I'm not entirely sure why or how, only that I am. One second, my fingers had a solid grip on the cliff I'd been climbing. Then the world shook, the air shimmered, my eyes clouded with dust, and the ground fell away. An earthquake—it had to be. I'm a California girl, so I know a quake when I feel one. I don't remember letting go of the rock, but I must have, and now I'm plummeting toward the ground. I wait for tension to tug at the harness strapped across my midsection, but it never comes. Either the rope broke or the safety carabiners came loose—just my freaking luck. I blink rapidly, clearing my gaze.

Think, Alanna. Think.

But there's nothing I can do to slow my fall. Through the curtain of rock cascading all around me, I catch a glimpse of the sky and stare at that endless speck of blue, holding on to the beauty in its vibrant sapphire hue. I wish I could say I was having some sort of profound out-of-body experience in the last few moments of my life, but in actuality, the only things going through my mind are, *I can't believe I'm going to die a virgin, my mom is going to kill me*, and, *Oh my gosh, I'm so close to landing my full-twisting double tuck off the uneven bars—this isn't fair!* Moving stuff, right? I wince as I wait for my body to crash against the boulders lining the forest floor below.

Only it doesn't.

The world goes dark, and then water breaks my fall—water I'm positive wasn't there before. I plunge into a deep pool, spinning head over heels as liquid engulfs me in a cool embrace. Muffled splashes echo beneath the surface. A sinking rock scratches my leg. Then another brushes my arm. Something heavy presses into my stomach, dragging me down—a boulder. If I don't get out from underneath it, I'll be pinned. I slide my arms through the water and kick my legs, fighting against gravity's pull. Propping my feet

against the bumpy surface, I shove myself free of the sinking weight. My chest aches from lack of air. I swim, not really sure where I'm going, just hoping my body will know the way. A light catches my eye. I chase it, pumping my limbs as fast as they'll go, then I'm there.

As I break the surface, I inhale sharply. My lungs greedily suck in air. At first, each breath sends little needles prickling into my throat, but the burn eventually subsides. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, but as soon as they do, I realize just how fortunate I am to be alive.

High overhead, the barest blip of blue sky is still visible through a gaping hole. The earthquake that shook me loose must've also opened a small tear in the ground, revealing an entrance to this cave hidden deep below. The existence of the lake was just dumb luck. Even still, from the height I was climbing, falling into the water should've felt like slamming into concrete, not jumping into my town swimming pool from the high dive. The rocks must've hit first, softening my landing. We'd just studied something like it in physics class—a case where a man was flung off a bridge but didn't die, because his car hit the surface first, shifting the velocity of the water in a downward direction. At least, I think that's what my teacher said. Something like that, anyway—I don't usually pay super close attention in physics. Anything with too much math is a hard pass. Gym? Yes. History? Yes. Biology and chem? Heck, yeah.

But maybe I should've paid more attention, because right now, I can't help but feel as if I should be dead. Might be dead? Am totally dreaming?

I mean, I should at least be injured.

But I'm not. Am I?

I run a quick mental check while I continue to tread water. My legs are fine. My arms are too. My fingers sting, so I can tell they're a bit raw and scratched up, but it's nothing major. My brainpower feels a little slower than usual, but I think it's from sheer disbelief. I'm not concussed. I would know—the first time I tried a front tuck on the balance beam, I hit my head so hard I had to skip practice for a week. My mom took me to the hospital while on the brink of a nervous breakdown. But this? I just fell from what had to be at least a hundred feet, and the worst I've got is a few scratches?

I can't believe it.

A laugh slips through my lips as I shake my head. Relief rushes through me like a warm, bubbling river of champagne. I'm allowed a

parental-approved glass every New Year's Eve, and I feel as though I've just chugged an entire bottle. I'm high on adrenaline, drunk on life, and naturally intoxicated from surviving my brush with death.

I mean, I'm stuck in a secret underground cave with no way out. But things could be worse—way worse. I could be dead, or broken into pieces, or paralyzed. Yet, here I am—alive and kicking, literally.

Leaning back, I spread my arms wide and float for a moment as I take in the rest of my surroundings. The longer I spend in the dark, the more my vision adjusts to the shadows. A cavern looms overhead, arching like a dome, with my miraculous little hole at its apex. The water around me glistens, catching the small bit of light slipping inside the cave and twinkling like an unpolluted wilderness sky. The walls shimmer as though slick and wet. Pointed shadows stretch like claws, hinting at invisible stalactites overhead.

How in the world am I going to get out of this one?

I could try climbing, but the ceiling angle looks too steep for me to manage, especially if the walls are wet with humidity. I could try screaming, though the whole damsel-in-distress thing has never sat too well with me. Nah, I think the best plan is to sit and wait for help. Someone's bound to come find me. Right? I was climbing with an instructor when I fell—he must've made it to the top before the earthquake, because I wasn't too far behind—and the two other kids in my spring-break group went before me. It's Yosemite National Park—they must have emergency responders. I'm sure someone will come rappelling through that hole in no time. With a little patience, I'll be fine. Though, truth be told, patience has never been my strong suit.

My stomach, of course, chooses this moment to groan in protest.

I roll my eyes.

The half-eaten protein bar in my pocket is probably a soggy mess right now, along with my brand-new cell phone.

Ugh.

My parents are going to murder me.

No, first they'll be thrilled that I'm alive. Then my mom will do that relieved sort of yell where she's furious with me because she never wanted me to come to this freaking (only, she didn't say freaking) camp in the first place, but then she'll start crying and hugging me. Then my dad will get in on it. Maybe my older brother, Mason, too. Annoying as he and his football

bros can be, I know he's a softie at heart. And then they'll say, *Why didn't you call for help?* I'll shrug and try to put an innocent smile on my face as I say, *My phone broke while I was falling to my death.* But my dad will only hear that first part. *You broke your phone? Again? I can't keep paying a thousand dollars for your irresponsibility.* I'll be all, *Remember that part where you're just so happy I'm alive? And you love me?* Then he'll huff and arch his brow.

Sigh.

What were my mom's last words as the bus drove away? *Be careful, Alanna. Please. This whole climbing thing, I know you love it and you've been saving up for this camp, but it's dangerous. Please just promise me you'll be safe.*

Damn. I hate it when she's right.

Maybe this cave isn't so bad after all.

I return my gaze to the dark dome overhead as my stomach grumbles again. I've probably already used up my miracle allowance for the day—heck, maybe for life—but if there's any sliver of luck left in my repertoire my power bar will still be edible. Now I just need to find a place to sit, dry off, and eat. With a mental shrug, I roll over in the water, prepared to explore. Scanning the darkness, I search for any type of shore to swim toward.

And that's when I see him.

A hazy outline in the dark, no more than a shadow if not for the two bright eyes catching the light—the two eyes that are clearly turned in my direction, watching me.

Two

A jolt of fear shoots down my spine, but I swallow my scream. Now is *not* the time. And I'm being an idiot. It's got to be someone from my climbing group. Who the heck else could it be?

"James?" I call out. That was the name of the instructor, right? I stop swimming and start treading water as I wait for a response. All my internal stranger-danger alarms are blaring. "Is that you?"

There's no response.

I swallow the clog in my throat and try again. What were the other two people's names? Megan... Megan and... Today was our first day of climbing, and I'm terrible with names. But, come on! We'd only arrived at Yosemite yesterday night, so I hadn't even known these people for twenty-four hours. Then it comes to me—Charlie! "Megan? Charlie? Is that you? Did you guys fall too?"

Those eyes keep staring, but the shadow man doesn't speak.

My heart pounds in my chest. I'm not huge on scary movies, but I've seen a few, and before I can stop it, I remember this stupid movie Mace made me watch with him a few weeks ago, when I told him about my camp. It's about these kids who go hiking in a cave, and these evil little goblin monsters hunt them down one by one. Oh, man, there was this one scene where I literally just screamed out loud. My freaking brother laughed, of course. But a shiver raises the hairs at the back of my neck just thinking about it.

I squint, trying to decipher a face within the shadows.

It's useless.

"Do you speak English?" I try instead.

Nothing.

"*Hablas español?*" I pull out some of my sophomore-level Spanish.

Nada.

“*Sprechen sei Englisch?*” I try weakly. I don’t really speak German, like at all, but I heard this somewhere and it’s at least a start.

The ghostly figure remains mute.

A frustrated breath slips through my lips. It’s nothing compared to the heavy thumping of my heart, which has decided to act like a caged animal, beating totally out of control. I lick my lips, scanning my brain for any other foreign phrase I can pull out of thin air. The only thing I can think of is *voulez vous coucher avec moi*, which seems wildly inappropriate at the moment. Damn you, *Moulin Rouge*—now *that* was a great movie.

Why am I thinking about movies?

Focus. There’s a strange man watching me, who is possibly not human and probably a goblin preparing to eat me alive... Ugh—I’m going to kill Mace when I get home for forcing me to watch that movie.

The *snap* of fingers echoes across the cavern, drawing my attention.

Suddenly, a light blinks on, casting out the shadows.

The first thing I think is—whoa, he’s hot. He’s got bright blue eyes and swoopy black hair. He’s a little tall and lanky, maybe, but way better than the creature from the deep I’d been imagining. His stare is fierce and a frown purses his lips, but I’m not sure why.

The second thing I think is—wait, that’s not a flashlight. A bright golden orb floats in the air, like a star brought down to earth. It hovers in the space between us, pulsing with an inner glow as though alive. Then it moves. I blink, not quite believing what I’m seeing. A drone—it’s got to be some sort of hiking drone...right?

Before I can spare another second to inspect the light closer, the water around me surges, yanking me forward. A giant wave crests, carrying me across a lake that was perfectly still a moment before. I try to fight with my arms and feet, but the current is too strong, like a riptide tugging me out to sea. Only I’m not being pulled into the ocean—I’m being pulled toward him.

My body washes up on a pebbly shore. I roll once, then come to a stop on my back. I try to jump to my feet, but before I can, he’s there. Fingers press against my forehead, so hot they burn. I freeze. No, I don’t. My body freezes even as my mind spins. They’ve become disconnected. I will my hands to move or my legs to kick, but they don’t listen. I’m stuck, trapped while an unfamiliar sensation whirls my thoughts, mixing and rearranging them, as though my brain is a deck of cards that has just been shuffled

through. When I meet the eyes staring down at me, they're no longer blue, but flashing with a rainbow of colors. And they're blank, as if staring into a world I can't see.

The stranger snatches his fingers back. His irises return to a vibrant cerulean before he takes me in, more tender this time, as though he's had a change of heart.

I scurry back, jump to my feet, and lift my fists before my face. I'm not big, but I'm scrappy. A lifetime of practicing gymnastics paired with my after-school job at the rock wall means I've got more muscle than my size might indicate. Most importantly, I never back down without a fight.

"Who the hell are you?" I'm not big on cursing, but hey—can you blame me right now?

The stranger smiles. At first, just the corners of his lips lift, but as I narrow my eyes, his grin widens, spreading across his entire face. There's something mystified about his expression—mystified and excited. I don't get it.

"Who are you?" He speaks slowly, as though testing the words for the first time. It puts me on edge.

"I asked you first."

He inclines his head. "I'm Erick."

"Erick?" I repeat, scanning him again. I hadn't expected something so...normal. If I were just going by his face, I'd guess he was two or three years older than me, around my brother's age maybe. But the rest of him looks ancient. Black leather pants hug his thighs, but not like "sexy rock star" leather, more like "someone had a little too much fun at the flea market" leather. A big billowy shirt falls around his shoulders, white and a little dirty. It's partly covered by a velvet-looking vest in bright, saturated blue, the same color as his eyes. Around the collar and the buttons there's golden embroidery. It kind of looks as if a renaissance fair threw up on him, and I have no idea why anyone would be wearing anything like that to hike a national park. My leggings, tank top, and sports bra look comical next to his getup.

I drop my fists as the anxiety coursing through me lessens. The longer I look at him, the more confident I feel. If it came down to a fight, I could totally take him.

He steps closer and tilts his head, eying me expectantly, as though we're two people meeting at the mall instead of two people from what I can

only describe as two different centuries stuck underground in a cave. “And your name?”

“Alanna,” I murmur as I cautiously extend my hand.

He takes it and we shake. “Nice to meet you, Lady Alanna. Welcome to my home.”

“Home...?”

I trail off as he extends his arm to the side, motioning deeper into the cave. A dozen more golden orbs spark to life, stealing my breath along with the darkness. A field of wildflowers extends as far as I can see, disappearing into the shadows at the outer edges of the glow. This far underground, their existence is impossible. And yet, a rainbow stretches across the floor, glistening like a sea of jewels as the dewdrops on the petals reflect the light. I step deeper into the cavern. The lure to see more is overwhelming. My feet sink into the wet shore with each step, until I reach a patch of grass, moist but solid. The stranger, Erick, doesn’t try to stop me as I march up to the flowers and kneel to cup a blossom in my palm. I rub a petal between my fingers, and it’s real—slightly waxy and smooth, not made of silk.

I glance over my shoulder at Erick. “What is this place?”

He steps past me without answering, then gestures forward with his hand. “Come.”

The golden orbs floating overhead follow his movements, gliding deeper into the field. He stops by a small hut I hadn’t noticed, made of twining vines and bending sticks. Then he sits, sinking into the meadow and disappearing from my sight. The orbs drift higher and higher, until they combine into one blinding light that’s five times as bright. If not for the claws of rock reaching down from the ceiling, I’d think I was outside in the bright sunshine on a warm summer’s day.

I shake my head.

This is crazy. Insane. I must’ve hit my head a lot harder than I thought, because the only explanation is that I’m hallucinating.

Yet, I can’t help it.

I dash forward, too intrigued to stop now. I run until I spot Erick’s ebony hair, a dark spot amid a canvas of color. He’s sitting on a boulder at the edge of a small pond which is no more than a few feet in diameter. I follow the path of his eyes to the surface of the water and gasp. Instead of translucent liquid, I see pictures, as though I’m staring into a television screen. And it’s chaos. People run. Children cry. Men carry swords. Women

point guns. Cars are flipped. Buildings have crumbled. He waves his hand through the air, and the surface of the pond ripples. The images disappear, so it's just water again.

I look up.

Is there a projector somewhere? Is he doing this with his phone? Were those orb things drones? Does he work for the government? Is this some strange military testing facility? Oh my gosh—did I stumble upon the real Area 51?

Erick turns toward me.

I open my mouth, but before I get a word out, he asks a question that makes all the ones simmering at the back of my throat disappear.

“Alanna, what do you know about magic?”

“Magic?” I cough as I choke on my words. Is he high? He must be high. Are these poppy flowers? Did he smoke them? I'm not really sure how the whole drug thing works—trying to get an athletic scholarship to a D-1 school for gymnastics doesn't really allow much time for partying—but it's got to be drugs. Right? I lift my fingers to my nose and sniff, but they smell sweet, like the flower I'd touched, nothing more. My gaze drifts back to Erick. His eyes aren't red or puffy. They're not wild or unhinged or vacant. They're crystal clear and sharp with lucidity. He undeniably believes the words coming out of his mouth. Maybe he's just crazy.

For some reason, that scares me more.

Erick rises to his feet and takes a step forward. I stumble back as fear pricks my heart. Sympathy flashes across his irises, and he stops where he stands, lifting his palms.

“You don't need to fear me,” he says calmly. “Or magic. It's not, at its heart, evil. It's as natural as you or me. But in the wrong hands, it becomes a weapon. I promise you, my hands are clean.”

He twists his fingers through the air as though yanking down on an invisible string, then holds his hand out to me. Resting in his open palm is a bright red apple.

I jump back.

We all know how well that apple business worked out for Snow White, and eternal sleep isn't really my thing.

Erick lifts the fruit to his lips and takes a bite. “It's perfectly safe.”

I shake my head.

“I heard your stomach growl and I can sense your hunger. Eat.”

He tosses the apple toward me, but I duck and let it sail over my head to disappear into the meadow at my back. Just to prove my point, I dip my hand into my pocket and pull out the second half of my protein bar, which is, in fact, soggy and falling apart, as I suspected it would be. I carefully unwrap the rest of the already-torn plastic and shove the bar into my mouth anyway. It doesn't taste as good as the few bites I took earlier this morning, pre-earthquake, but, hey—it's still food. "No, thanks. I'm good."

His eyebrows shoot up as the corners of his lips twitch.

Whatever.

I'd rather be stubborn and amusing than dead. Crossing my arms over my chest, I narrow my eyes. "So, how'd you do that?"

"Do what?"

"The apple thing."

He gestures with his hand, and this time a pear rests on his palm. "Magic."

I sigh. This again?

Well, I'll give him one thing—he's got a story, and he's sticking to it. But I want the truth, and the truth can't be magic. It just can't. Because if it were, that would mean... That would be... That would bring everything I've ever known into question.

Fueled by panic and some good old-fashioned denial, I challenge back with, "Okay, you want me to believe in the impossible? Fine. Then do something else—something you can't pull out of those mightily billowing sleeves of yours, magic man."

"Okay." He shrugs, not at all bothered by my tone.

For a moment, nothing happens, and then I feel it—a drop on my nose. Then another. I purse my lips. Is this all he's got? It's a coincidence, nothing more. It probably fell from a stalactite. But as I think it, a curtain of rain drops, as though the floodgates have opened. I can hardly see Erick through the downpour. Water courses in rivulets down my cheeks and over my lips. When I lick my skin, it tastes fresh.

"What—"

I stop short as the rain disappears, and suddenly, the room turns hot, like a sauna. Erick is grinning now, a smug sort of look that I have the urge to slap from his face. In minutes, my clothes are dry and the moisture in the cavern is gone. But he's not done. Erick lifts his palm to his lips, which speak words I can't hear, and then he blows over his fingers, as though in a

kiss. Wind slams into my chest, pushing me back. My knees buckle as they hit something hard, something that wasn't there a moment ago. I drop back, off balance, and land on a mossy cushion. My gaze snaps down. Vines catch me, woven to resemble a chair. Before my eyes, more ivy erupts from the ground, twisting and folding, until another seat is formed. Erick walks over and plops down beside me, finding my eyes.

"How was that?"

I swallow, trying to wet my suddenly parched throat, and force words out. "You, uh, have my attention."

"Good." He leans back in his seat and lifts one of his feet to rest it on the opposite knee, completely at ease. Meanwhile, I feel like I'm Alice, falling into Wonderland, and any minute now I'm going to hear the words, *Off with her head.*

To be honest, I feel like it's already gone.

My mind is completely blown.

"What..." Words fail me. I try again. "How... I mean, it can't really be —"

"Magic? I assure you, it is," Erick cuts smoothly in and holds out his hand, offering me a brand-new shiny apple, green this time.

I take it. I mean, at this point, I'm positive he could find a more original way to kill me if he wanted to, and I'm starving. Still though, my heart is in my throat as I bite down. The apple tastes normal—sweet and tangy.

"I come from a world shaped by magic," Erick explains as I chew. "A long time ago, the magic was like the air, invisible and free and sewn into every fiber of our world. There were creatures who were made of it, shifters, pixies, unicorns, and many more. There were guardians who could harness it, as I just did, and we called them faeries. Then, there were humans, who were kept separate. We lived in a very careful balance. Until one day, everything changed."

He pauses to swallow as a tightness I don't understand overcomes his features. The light in his eyes darkens and he glances to the ground. As though in tune with his mood, the golden glow permeating the cave dims.

Shifters?

Faeries?

Unicorns?

I must be dreaming. There's no other explanation. I hit my head on the boulders at the foot of the cliff when I fell, and in that agony, my brain catapulted me into a dream. I'm dying, I must be, and this is all happening in my head.

In all honesty, I never knew I was this creative.

My English teacher would be proud.

"Humans learned the secret of magic," Erick continues. His voice has a gravelly edge that wasn't there before. "And they abused it, as they're wont to do. They stole all the magic from the world and locked it inside themselves, not understanding how thoroughly they destroyed the stasis our world was built upon. We were thrown off course, off kilter, and I've been waiting a long time for a sign that the reign of men is over." He swallows and lifts his eyes. "You are that sign."

"Me?" There's an embarrassing squeak to my voice. I quickly smother it by clearing my throat. "I, uh, hate to break it to you, Erick, but I have no idea what you're talking about. And if you want to go somewhere where humans aren't in control, well, you've come to the wrong place. I'm pretty sure, if the news is anything to go by, we're destroying this world too."

"I know," he answers stoically. "I saw it in your mind. Your world was thrown off balance too, by your inventions and your sorcery, and now our worlds have collided. They must find a new equilibrium, together."

Okay, he's officially off his rocker.

I glance over my shoulder, back toward the little hole in the ceiling that now seems ridiculously far away. Any minute, someone will come rappelling down here to save me. I'll go home. Erick, hopefully, will find the help he needs from a qualified psychiatrist. And then maybe he'll have a successful career as a Vegas showman or something, because his tricks are seriously putting David Blaine to shame.

"Right, makes sense," I murmur, playing along. "Why don't you and I try to find a way out of here, and then we can work on this whole balance-of-the-worlds thing together. Sound good?"

"You don't believe me," he whispers sadly. Then he straightens his spine and stands with a sigh. "I understand. In another life, I would've been no different. Come to the water, and I'll show you."

"Show me what?"

"Anything you want to see."

He kneels on the flat rock by the edge of the pond and pats the open space beside him. Damn if I'm not curious. It's as if I'm living my own fantasy novel, and it's two a.m. and I know I should turn the light off and go to bed, but I keep telling myself just one more chapter. Just a little more, then I'll focus on getting out of this mess.

I take the spot by his side.

He lifts one palm and presses it to my forehead, then holds the other one out so it hovers over the glassy surface. "Think of a person or a place, and the water will reflect your thought back to you."

I'm not sure why, but my mind goes to my brother, maybe because I wish he were here. For all the crap he gives me, Mace has always had my back. When he's not trying to act cool for his friends, he's protective to the core. With him around, I've always felt safe. And I could use some of that right now—the security my big bro provides.

The water ripples.

Colors flash.

Then I see him painted across the surface, but I don't understand. He's not on the couch watching TV. He's not playing basketball at the gym. He's not out with his friends. He's on the ground amid a pile of rubble. Blood drips from a cut down the center of his forehead, and his pale skin is covered in a layer of dust. But that's not what makes me gasp. A gleaming dagger presses against his throat, one nervous swallow from cutting deep.

I jump to my feet.

"Mace!"

Three

“Sit,” Erick orders as he clasps my hand and tugs me back down to the rock. “He cannot hear you. We can only watch.”

I grip the edge of the stone and lean forward, trying to see more. The cuts on my palm burn, but I don’t care. My family lives in a pretty safe part of San Diego—I’ve never even seen someone on the street with a knife, let alone one with a gilded hilt that flashes gold in the sunlight. And while I want to write this off as a dream, part of me knows it isn’t. How could Erick fake this? He’s never met my brother—he has no idea what Mace looks like. Sure, we have the same dark brown hair and deep-set hazel eyes, but there’s no way the picture rippling across the water could be a guess.

That *is* my brother.

And someone *is* threatening his life.

“What’s going on? What’s happening to him?”

“I told you, our worlds have merged. There were bound to be casualties.” My heart leaps at the sound of that word, but Erick continues, unflustered. “It’s natural instinct to fight for territorial control—humans, animals, even magic-kind all do it. Right now, our worlds are clashing and there’s no telling yet which side will win the fight for dominance.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re in charge of the water right now. I’m just acting as a magical conduit. Think of what you want to see and it will show you.”

I stare at the image, searching my brother’s gold-flecked eyes for the understanding I lack. His lips are curled and he’s kneeling on the ground, staring up defiantly. That’s what I want to see—who he’s looking at.

The image shifts.

The picture pulls back, as though it’s a camera lens with a wide-angle zoom.

I study my brother first. He’s wearing a T-shirt and mesh shorts, with his high-tops on. Though the ceiling has caved in, I see the basketball hoop

behind him and the banner that's come loose from the wall. It dangles like a flag on a perfectly still day, so the gold lettering within the blue folds is impossible to read, but I know what it says. *Go Warriors*. It's our high school gym. I've spent enough time there to know.

At my command, the image shifts, rotating slowly around. With each subtle turn, my eyes widen and my jaw drops a little farther to the ground until finally, the water settles. I lift my hands to cover my mouth as a gasp whooshes down my throat. Every nerve in my body goes still. It wasn't an earthquake that sent me flying off that cliff—it was the collision of two worlds, just like Erick said. The thought is so impossible I'd never believe it if I weren't staring at it with my own two eyes.

San Diego is gone.

My high school is gone.

The wall of the gym has been cut down the middle, as though with a knife. On one side are the bleachers I've sat upon, stared at, and made out underneath. On the other, a place I've never seen before, like something from the pages of a book. The wood floor of the basketball court gives way to a cobblestone road covered by a layer of sand. Houses of the same flaxen hue line either side of the street, stretching as far as the eye can see. Some have cloth awnings and shutters, but I don't see any glass. A cart full of fruits has toppled on its side, spilling bright pops of color over the sea of tan, but all I see is the horse still tied to the front, now on its side, whining and kicking to be cut loose. The air is clouded with dust, but through it, I see people dressed in rough-spun cloaks, billowing pants with tops that fall to the knees, and loose-fitting dresses with extra fabric that wraps overhead. The garments remind me of something I might have seen in the ancient Middle East, not in California. The man holding a knife to my brother's throat has a curved sword dangling from his leather waistband. His black shirt falls almost to his calves and is covered by a tight leather vest. Engraved golden plates hang around his shoulders, chest, and thighs. There are more men with him wearing similar warrior-style clothes. They shout words I don't understand, then rush forward and wrap chains around Mace's wrists before tying him to a group of more people from my world. I recognize a few, like Mace's basketball teammates and his coach, but there are more I don't. Though with their sundresses and jeans and brightly colored fabrics, it's clear where they come from.

Suddenly a man runs out from beneath the bleachers.

It's our school security guard. He points his gun at the man who'd held the knife to Mace's throat, and the man yells something. The security guard waves his gun around.

"Let them go," he demands. "I don't want anyone to get hurt. Let them go!"

The man shouts back, spitting words in a language I don't understand.

The security guard fires.

The bullet strikes the man in the chest, and blood spurts like a fountain as he falls back. The other guards roar, fear evident in their tone despite the language barrier. They charge the security guard. He fires all his bullets, but they don't land as true as the first. He's a little older. I bet he probably thought he'd never need to use his gun. By the time he thinks to run, it's too late. A sword hacks into his throat and he goes down.

My fingers tremble against my cheeks as I watch. A cold sense of dread permeates my body. I think back to Mace and the image zooms in on his face—on those hazel eyes, so wide with fear and horror. I've never seen my big brother afraid. The sight sends my terror soaring to new heights.

Someone out of sight pulls on his chains, and Mace stumbles forward. I jump to my feet. "I have to help him."

"I know this place," Erick says at the same time, ignoring my outburst. "It's Bahagar."

He leans closer to the water and the scene ripples, zooming farther and farther out until we have a bird's-eye view. The line dividing the worlds couldn't be more obvious, as though a child has cut and pasted two completely different geographical maps together. On one side is the city I've known my entire life—the suburban houses, the hilly terrain, the curving shoreline. On the other are unfamiliar sandy streets in haphazard lines, all centered around a palace that looks towering even from this view, topped with golden tiles that blind in the sun. In the distance, a desert stretches as far as the eye can see. That's when I notice that this new world, this Bahagar, takes up the entire area east of Highway Five. My heart plummets when I realized what that means—my house, and all its memories, is gone.

"My parents," I say as I grab Erick's hand and slam it against my forehead. Then I drop to my knees before the water. "Show me my parents."

Nothing happens.

“My parents,” I repeat, louder this time, voice laced with desperation. I dig my fingers into his skin as though I have claws. Something within me snaps, and when I speak again, the tone is more broken than it’s ever been before. “Please, show me my parents.”

“Alanna.” His voice is so soft, so sorry—I know what that sound means. When I turn to look at him, loathing churns in my gut, hatred of the sympathy in his eyes. “If the water doesn’t show them, they’re not—”

“No,” I cut him off and shake my head. “My mother. Show me my mother.”

I dredge up every memory of her I can imagine—summer afternoons building sandcastles on the beach, winter evenings roasting marshmallows in the backyard, fall hikes up the hills around our home, spring shopping sprees at the stores downtown. Everyone always tells me I look just like her, but I don’t believe it. My mother is beautiful, with silky-smooth hair she used to let me play with for hours, and warm green eyes that are always so bright and loving, like dawn rising over a grassy field. She’s taller than me, lithe and strong, and so friendly, giving her smiles away like candy on Halloween. For some reason, all I think about is the first time she saw me perform a release on the uneven bars. She stopped coming to my practices as soon as I learned how to do flips—she said the mere sight gave her a heart attack. But this was during a competition, so she and my dad were watching from the stands. I took a quick glance toward her as I stepped up to the mat, and immediately rolled my eyes at the way she clasped her hands before her face, wringing them nervously. As soon as I nailed my landing, I darted my gaze her way again, but this time she was beaming. My dad, of course, was clapping too. They were both proud—and that routine put me in first place—but for my mom it was more than that. She was in awe almost. I’d never felt so special in my life, so loved.

And now, she’s gone.

I feel it deep in my soul, as though my heart is physically splitting in two. Every second the water remains calm, I fall apart. My breath shortens. My chest burns. An ache scratches down the back of my throat, like a scream fighting to break its way out, so I clamp my lips shut.

“Mom,” I croak. “Dad.”

His face fills my thoughts, those thick black-rimmed glasses we always teased made him look like a dork, the self-deprecating quirk of his lips as he took the jabs in kind, and the creases at the corners of his eyes when he

returned fire. He's tall, just like my brother, but all limbs where Mace is all muscle. He used to joke that he could've been a basketball stud too, if his mother hadn't been such a terrible cook that he went hungry for most of his childhood, leaving him all skin and bones. My gran always takes offense to that, giving him a good smack on the back of the head and a, *My ungrateful son. Maybe I shouldn't have worked so hard to put food on your table. Children in other parts of the world were starving, you know. And your brother never complained about the fish sticks.* Side note—Uncle Charlie always complained about the fish sticks. He was just smart enough not to do it to my gran's face.

The ghost of a smile passes over my lips with the memory, and the water ripples, colors shifting. They settle on a face I recognize—my uncle. He's alive. He's safe. He's hugging his daughter to his chest, my cousin Emma, while he stares over her shoulder toward the television in the corner of his living room. He and his wife live on Long Island with their kids, about twenty minutes west of my grandparents. We've gone to visit them a few times, but even if I'd never been, I'd recognize the city flashing across the screen. It's New York—only not. Dust plumes above the city, debris from skyscrapers that have fallen, an image too reminiscent of a time in the not-so-distant past. Through the haze I can see that half the skyline is gone, replaced with a medieval style-castle and rolling hills. The picture is only there for a second before the screen switches to static nothingness, as though the feed has blinked out. The news program returns to its anchor.

“Again, that was footage from one of the local helicopters, taken and transmitted a moment before New York City went dark. We've been unable to contact any of the local reporters, and all the national news stations headquartered in the city have been unresponsive. Phones don't seem to be working. Internet and satellite feeds are down. If you have family in the area, please call—”

I yank Erick's hand away and the image disappears. The water clears, so transparent I can see all the way to the algae-covered rocks nestled at the bottom of the pond. In that mossy hue, laced with golden sparks from the orb overhead, I see my brother's eyes.

I need to save him.

“Erick,” I say, not realizing it comes out as a shout until he jolts.

I hardly notice—all I'm thinking is I can't lose them all. Not my mother and my father and my brother all in the same day. I don't want to

believe my parents are gone, just like I don't want to believe this is real. It's crazy. It's insane. But I'm here. I'm sitting by a small pond, beneath a magic light, in a meadow of flowers that somehow bloomed in the darkness of an underground cave, beside a man who pulled apples out of thin air. None of it makes sense, but it's as real as I am breathing. And this is too. I know it in my gut. And I know one more thing—Mace needs me.

“Erick,” I repeat, determined this time. My voice is sharp with steely focus. “My brother, Mason, I need to save him. I can't live without him. And you have to help me. Please, you have to help me.”

“I will,” he says as he takes my hand and squeezes, as though trying to ground me. “I'll do whatever I can to help you, Alanna, because you've given me a gift today. Hope. Something I haven't felt in hundreds of years. I was beginning to think my world would never be saved—that the magic would never be free. But seeing you? Seeing a glimpse of your world? It's given me a glimmer of the salvation I've so longed for. The tides are changing, and I'm only sorry that my elation is coming at the cost of your pain. I'll do whatever I can to lessen the blow. Come.”

He tugs on my hands and we stand together.

As he leads me deeper into the field, he keeps speaking, filling the silence with a plan—something I desperately need right now. “There's something you must know about my world if you're going to survive it—magic is the law. The royal families who rule the kingdoms all have their own sets of powers, and to question them or it is to die. But if they think you're one of them, you might stand a chance.”

I shake my head, glancing down at my black leggings, at the harness still strapped to my waist and thighs. “We might have a problem there.”

“Clothes can easily be adjusted,” he mutters and snaps his fingers.

By the time I blink, my entire outfit has changed. My athletic gear is gone, replaced with something I'd never wear in a million years—a purple silk dress. The fabric cinches tightly around my waist, as though pulled by a corset—heck, it might be—then cascades to the floor in loose, dramatic folds. I bend my elbows, annoyed at how the long sleeves constrict my movement, and frown at the fancy gold embroidery creating a floral pattern up my arms. Heavy weights pull on my ears and I lift my fingers to find jewelry that wasn't there before. When I look down to my wrist, it sparkles, encircled with a bedazzled bracelet, the likes of which I've only seen in the pages of a glossy magazine.

“Uh, Erick, I was thinking more along the lines of breaking and entering. You know, maybe a mask over my eyes, some sick leather pants, and some cool daggers dangling from my hips.”

“Daggers you don’t know how to use?” He arches a brow. I have no idea how someone in a bright blue velvet vest manages to pull off such a smug attitude, but he does.

“I could learn,” I mutter with a shrug.

“Fighting won’t get you anywhere,” he counters. “I believe they’ll be taking your brother and any other prisoners to the dungeons at the base of the palace. Your best hope is to fool them into thinking you’re a fellow royal who was traveling nearby when the collision struck. Here—” He pauses to wave his hand through the air. Suddenly, a warm cloak of roughly spun fabric drapes over my shoulders, a muddy brown. Clearly, Erick’s never been to San Diego in the spring. I’m about to pull the thing off when he holds a hand up to stop me. “Say you stole that off someone who had fallen and then ran into Bahagar to hide after your carriage toppled in the earthquake. You lost your entourage and you’re alone. When they see the silk dress and the jewels, they’ll take you to the king. And when he sees your magic, he’ll believe you. Because like I said—magic is the law. It doesn’t lie. Well, at least it didn’t. But now, everything has changed.”

“One problem,” I cut in. “I don’t have magic, or did you forget that?”

He rolls his eyes. “You have me. And I have all the magic we’ll need.”

“What—”

Erick cuts me off with a look, then kneels and tugs some grass from the dirt. I watch as he braids it together and folds it into a ring. He blows softly over the strands, and the green color deepens, then darkens, until it turns black. With his thumb, he rubs the ash away to reveal polished silver. Then he whispers softly. A prickly vine erupts from the ground and Erick pushes his finger into a thorn, deep enough to draw blood. The drop pools on his skin, growing as he keeps whispering. He dips the silver band into the spot. By the time he pulls back, the wound is sealed and a deep-red ruby sparkles from the center of the ring. Erick reaches for my hand and slips the jewel over my finger.

“Keep this on you at all times,” he says, holding my gaze to emphasize the importance of his words. “I’ll watch you in the water, and when the time comes for you to prove your magic, I’ll do what needs to be done. As long

as my blood is in contact with your skin, I'll be able to channel my power through you."

A shiver zips down my spine as I brush my fingers over the stone. It's smooth and hard and polished, yet as I stare, something deep within it churns, like a current swirling through the liquid trapped inside. I look back up, finding Erick's eyes. "Why don't you just come with me? You be the royal big shot, and I'll be the unassuming sidekick they never saw coming."

A sad smile passes over his lips. "I would, Alanna. Trust me, I would. But I'm the guardian of this place, this cave of wonders as we used to call it. I cannot leave. Not yet."

"Why—"

"That's not for you to know," he interjects sternly, as though I'm a petulant child. But then his features soften. "All you need to know is that I have faith in you, and I'll be with you the entire time, in spirit if not in body. That's all I can give."

I nod and swallow my protest.

It's enough. It's more than enough. If this cave hadn't been here, I'd be dead. And who knows what's happening on the surface above. Does Yosemite even exist anymore? Maybe that's why I fell. I didn't let go—the cliff I'd been climbing had simply disappeared. It would explain why the safety carabiners didn't break my fall—they'd vanished too. No one from my world is coming to get me. If not for Erick, I'd be a goner. And now because of Erick, my brother has a chance too.

"Thank you," I whisper, forcing the words through my tight throat. I push everything else back down—the hurt, the confusion, the pain—and focus on my brother. Everything else can come later.

"Don't thank me yet," Erick says and turns back toward the pond. "I'll get you as close to your brother as I can. Remember, they'll probably take him to the dungeons. Bide your time. First, convince the king you mean no harm, and ask him for safekeeping. Don't go exploring the palace until it's dark. Oh, I almost forgot—you need my tongue."

"What?"

I jerk back, but Erick presses his fingers to my forehead. My eyelids flutter. That same sort of shuffling sensation muffles my brain, but this time, it feels as though something is flooding in rather than flooding out. He pulls his hand away.

"Are you ready?"

The words aren't English, but I understand them just the same. Language—he gave me his language. And before on the beach, the first time he sorted through my mind, he must've been taking knowledge of mine. When I open my mouth to speak, the foreign phrase is there, as though I've known it my entire life. "I'm ready."

"You must promise me one thing before you go." He steps closer, peering into my eyes as though he's a human lie detector and with one glance, he can see the truth within my soul. "After your brother is safe and you're done with this quest, you will come back here to return the ring to me. Do you promise?"

"I promise." The ring on my finger burns as though branding the oath onto my skin, but I don't break his gaze.

Erick nods and puts his hands on my shoulders to spin me around. "Then look into the water and think of your brother."

As I imagine Mace, his face appears. He's a little bruised, but not broken. I can see the determination in his gaze. It's the same stubborn gleam that I'm sure lights my eyes right now. Erick lets go of my shoulders, then shoves me from behind. I stumble forward in surprise and topple into the pond. My eyes close and I hold my breath on instinct, anticipating impact.

But I don't hit the water.

I don't hit anything.

I'm lying on my side on solid ground with my hands tucked beneath my cheek. For a moment, I think I'm waking up from a dream, safe and warm in bed. Maybe I haven't even left for my camp yet. Maybe this was all a crazy nightmare because my mom told me climbing was dangerous and Mace made me watch that stupid movie. Maybe this was all in my head.

The hope vanishes as quickly as it came.

Someone steps on my leg as screams filter into my ears.

When I breathe, sand fills my nose.

I open my eyes to pure chaos.

Four

Everywhere I look, there's motion. People running. People fighting. People falling. The air is filled with equal parts shouts and screams, the terrorizing and the terrified. A loud boom rattles the ground, as though a building nearby has collapsed. The sound jolts me from the madness.

Mace.

He's all I need to think about right now. He's my only concern.

I roll to my feet and quickly take in my surroundings, realizing I'm standing in the last spot I'd seen him—the line dividing my high school gym from these ancient city streets. I spin, circling until I'm dizzy, but I don't see any warriors in black uniforms.

Where is he?

Where are they?

I stumble across the rubble and around the side of the gym, trying to see where they could've gone. The road is littered with cars. None of them are moving—they're just stopped as though frozen in time. And they each have an opened door, giving the impression that people jumped out and ran. An uncomfortable tingle spreads down my back. It's eerie.

Why abandon the cars?

Before I have time to answer my own question, movement in the sky catches my attention. I glance up to find a helicopter in the distance, hardly more than a black dot against a cloud. It drifts closer and closer. Then suddenly it stops. The blades slow. The whole aircraft tilts to the side, and it drops, down, down, down, disappearing behind a hill. Two seconds later, an angry orange cloud erupts, spilling smoke into the sky. My thoughts return to that video of New York on my uncle's television screen—a video that cut to static. The news anchor said New York had gone dark. How could a city with a population in the millions lose contact all at once? I mean—every cell phone, every computer, every satellite feed, every internet connection across the entire city was gone? Just like that?

I know I should be searching for Mace, but this feels important.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm inside one of the cars. The key is still in the ignition. I twist it, turning the car off, then back on, then repeating. The engine doesn't rumble to life. Not a single light on the dashboard even flickers. In the cupholder, I see a cell phone and snatch it. I try to turn it on. I try to auto-restart it. The screen remains blank. So I move to the next car—but the same things happens. It's dead. Everything is dead.

My uncle had electricity. He was watching TV, but...

I glance over my shoulder, toward the ancient desert city on the other side of the line. What if something about this new world, this magic world, affects our technology? It would explain the cars. It would explain the situation in New York. It would explain why I don't see police vehicles or military tanks barreling down the street. When I was talking to Erick, I was freaked out for Mace, but in the back of my mind, I never doubted that if it came to a battle of power, my world would win. We have global communication. We have automatic weapons. We have nukes. But now I'm starting to second-guess.

What if the magic *is* more powerful?

What happens to us then?

A flash of black catches my eye through the chaos. My questions vanish the moment I lay eyes on the warrior down the street, walking deeper into his foreign world.

Mace.

I need to find Mace. Everything else is secondary.

After gathering my skirts in my hands, I spring forward, cursing these freaking silks and the heavy cloak. What the heck was Erick thinking? I look ridiculous. This whole plan is ridiculous. I should just grab Mace and run. But first, I need to find him. So I swerve down the crowded streets, keeping my eyes peeled for the warriors in black and the prisoners they'd chained. I catch a glimpse and follow the dark speck down the street, around one corner, then another, deeper and deeper until every hint of the San Diego I know has disappeared. Everything is clay houses and brown clothes and cobbled streets. The only language I hear is the one Erick put in my head. With each step forward, I move farther and farther from everything I've ever known, but closer and closer to the only thing that matters—my brother.

Shouts cut through the chaos.

The crowd parts and a hundred feet ahead, in the center of a square, I see four warriors in black sitting on horses. A whip snaps through the air and everyone on the street pauses. I freeze—not out of fear, but because finally, I see Mace. He’s with the group of prisoners chained up behind the horses. I could spot his cherry high-tops from a mile away. I did, after all, rag on him for a week after he bought them. They’re the most ridiculous shoes I’ve ever seen, yet right now, I could kiss him for being such an arrogant idiot. He’s huddled with the others by the base of some sort of fountain. The carved statue glistens with moisture, and the stones are a dark, wet brown compared to the more honeyed hue of all the other buildings around me. It must’ve broken in the quake because I don’t see a spout. The area has an air of importance—an idea that’s confirmed a moment later when a horn sounds in announcement.

The people go quiet.

The subtle thump of marching feet echoes down the streets, growing louder and louder, until a carriage appears. It’s not pulled by horses, but rather carried on the shoulders of a dozen men. The top is gilded and bright in the sun. The sides are decorated with mosaic tiles, gaudy and almost shockingly colorful against the monotone tan of everything else. There are no windows, but rather carved wooden trellises that keep whoever resides inside steeped in shadow while still providing air. It’s the king—it has to be—or at least someone royal. The entire city is still and silent. I’m half expecting a tumbleweed to roll by.

Instead, a voice booms.

“Citizens of Bahagar, do not be afraid.” I feel the words in my soul, as though they aren’t coming from the air, but from within, as though the speaker has a direct connection to my eardrums. “Though the events of the day go beyond our understanding of the world, our family has watched over this kingdom for generations and our promise to you remains unchanged. We will protect you. We will provide for you. We will not let foreign enemies steal your home or your lands. We do not know who they are, but we know what they are—flesh and bone. And like all the usurpers who have come before them, they will soon discover that flesh and bone have no power here.”

The quiet returns but the king must have given some sort of signal, because one of the warriors in black climbs down from his horse. The clang of his metal plates and whine of his leathers are loud in the silence, as are

his steps, an ominous *stomp, stomp, stomp* that mirrors the thudding pound inside my chest. He grabs one of the prisoners by the neck and shoves him forward. It's not someone I recognize, but the hairs on the back of my neck stand anyway. My gaze darts to Mace, but his eyes are locked on the prisoner. The warrior removes the man's chains and pushes him so he stumbles forward, separated from the rest. He's wearing jeans and a T-shirt beneath a green apron with the logo of the coffee shop around the corner from our high school. He's a barista, probably in college, not that old now that I look at him. His hair is shaggy and unkempt. His hands tremble. His face is angled toward the ground as though he's too terrified to look up or even move. He's frozen and shaking and I want to look away, but I can't.

The warrior steps forward and slides his sword from its scabbard. A tingle shoots down my spine as the steel rings. The prisoner flinches, but the warrior doesn't move any closer. He just stands there, holding his sword before his face, waiting. We're all waiting. The world is quiet with waiting. A buzz grows beneath my skin and across the air—suffocating anticipation. I think we all feel it, for different reasons, maybe. The people of the city look at the barista as though he's a dragon that might blow fire at any moment. I know he's just a guy probably trying to pay off student loans, but they don't. How could they? He looks different, and to so many, different automatically means dangerous, though that's hardly ever the case. They're as terrified of him as he is of them. The only difference is right now, they have the power.

I want to step forward.

I want to speak up.

Maybe if I can speak in English to the prisoners and Erick's language to the rest, I can explain what's going on. I can negotiate some sort of release. I can clarify that we mean no harm, that we're just as confused and terrified as they are. I can describe everything Erick told me, and maybe we could, maybe we can—

The barista breaks under the pressure of so many foreign eyes. Something snaps. I can see it in his eyes as he looks up. Before I can say anything, he sprints forward. A growl releases from his lips as he charges the warrior, some sort of animal instinct to fight for his life. The warrior doesn't even flinch. His sword is level, held perfectly straight before his face. His feet are square. I'm waiting for him to launch into action, to provide a single lethal strike.

Instead, the barista explodes.

Literally.

One second he's running, and the next he's nothing more than a cloud of red mist hanging in the air. A ruddy stain seeps into the sandy pavement. Drop after drop falls like rain as the cloud disintegrates.

A scream cuts through the silence.

I don't realize it's me until I feel my throat burning.

Eyes turn toward me, too many to count, but there's only one set I see—Mason's. Those hazel eyes find mine through the crowd, wide with a mixture of relief, fear, and utter disbelief. I'm sure mine look the same, wild yet somehow tamed by the fact we know we still have each other. From the corners of my eyes, I see the warriors in black spin, searching for the source of that cry. The people close to me step back, distancing themselves. I don't look away from Mace. I can't, because nausea churns deep in my gut, the rotten sense that it might be the last time I ever see him again.

Someone grabs my hand and yanks.

Mace disappears as I stumble to the side and slam into a hard chest.

"Hey—"

A warm palm covers my lips, cutting off my protest, as my back is pushed into the rough side of a building. I glance up into the most piercing gaze I've ever met. Deep brown eyes laced with golden highlights stare down at me, alight with sympathy, as though this stranger can see all the way into my soul. His thick black brows press together in concern, and I can't help but notice he's got the longest eyelashes I've ever seen as he darts his gaze to the side once before returning it to me. The rest of his face is hidden behind cream fabric, stark against the dark olive tone of his skin. For some reason, I'm itching to see more.

"It's not a good day to be an outsider in Bahagar," he murmurs, voice deep and smooth, like the purr of a panther in the night. "If you want to live, follow me."

Five

Well, when you put it that way...

The stranger drops his hand from my lips and uses his other one to grab my fingers before pulling me down a side street. Though every fiber of my being wants to stay behind with Mace, I know I'm our only chance out of this mess—and I won't be able to do very much if I spontaneously combust. So I follow the stranger around a corner, losing myself in his city.

"Was that magic?" I ask, forcing my voice to come out steady.

He doesn't respond. He just keeps pulling me along.

"Where are we going? Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere safe," he says without glancing back.

I'm starting to believe that no such place exists.

Still, I keep pace with him as we swerve down side streets, cutting and turning as much as possible. The heavy thump of boots on stone haunts my ears, warriors chasing after us. At first, it's all I can hear, but gradually my own heavy breathing drowns out the sounds of pursuit. We're gaining distance, but I'm not sure if it's sufficient. I don't blend in enough to hide in plain sight. We need to get off the streets, and the stranger must think the same. Halfway down the next road, he cuts sharply to the left and rams his shoulder into a door, which flies open. As soon as I step inside, he shuts it behind me, drenching us in shadow. Suddenly, I'm acutely aware that I'm in a strange city, with a strange man, in a sealed building where no one would think to find me.

I step back and wrench my hand free. "Who are you? Why are you helping me?"

"I'll answer all your questions," he says smoothly, voice a rumble in the dark. I can only just see the whites of his eyes and the subtle glow of his cream cloak. "But first, come with me."

Yeah. I've heard that line before. "Where? Why? Who are you?"

"Cyrus." He sighs heavily. "My name is Cyrus."

“And why are you helping me?”

“Because...” He cuts off, leaving the air heavy. His lips smack as he licks them, then draws in a deep breath. “Because I’ve spent eighteen years bottling up my screams, and in a single instant, you showed me the truth. We shouldn’t be silent. We should be appalled. In your cry, I finally found the courage to do what I’ve been waiting my entire life to do—defy the king. Now please, let me finish what I started. Let me save you.”

He extends his hand forward.

My mom told me never to trust boys who are smooth with words. They’re too practiced, too deliberate, too rehearsed when life is supposed to be stumbling and awkward and real. But this feels different. Maybe it’s the raw emotion in his tone, the depth to the words, or the subtle fragility to his final plea—I’m not sure what.

Against my better instincts, I believe him.

Cyrus laces his fingers through mine and leads me through the dark. His palm is hot and his touch sends a fiery current up my arm, making my skin tingle. My heart flutters embarrassingly in my chest and I take a deep breath, trying to calm the sudden bout of nerves. I’m not used to being alone with boys, especially boys with sultry eyes like his. Surrounded by shadows with nothing to distract me, I can’t help it as the memory of his stare surges to the forefront of my thoughts, making my stomach flip. After school, I always have gymnastics practice, then homework. On the weekends, I have competitions. Sprinkled through all of that are my hours at the rock wall earning some much-needed cash. My free time is sacred and usually reserved for my best friends, who, contrary to depictions of teenage girls on television and film, aren’t boy-crazed. We go hiking. We go to the beach. We aren’t really the partying types. Sure, I’ve been kissed a few times, but not so much I’d consider it blasé.

Something about Erick, with his baggy leather pants and goofy blue vest, calmed my nerves. Something about Cyrus sends them into a tizzy.

He leads me up one set of stairs, then another. When I stumble and trip, he wraps his forearm around my waist to stop the fall. Then he lets go, like a gentleman, and keeps guiding me forward, slower this time.

“Wait here,” he whispers, then puts his hand on my shoulder to stop me.

I can tell he’s been in this house a hundred times—even in the dark, it’s familiar to him. The windows are shuttered, letting only slivers of light

penetrate, but he has the route memorized. He doesn't need to see. That fact becomes clear as he jumps and something clicks, releasing with a rolling sort of sound. A ladder, I realize a second later, when the wood creaks and he climbs up. With a grunt and a heave, he forces some sort of trapdoor open. His feet thud overhead as he traverses the space. A moment later, sunlight spills through the opening, so bright I need to cover my eyes.

"Ow," I mutter and wince.

"Sorry." His deep voice washes over me. "We're almost there."

I lower my forearm, then freeze when I look up to find Cyrus's face staring down at me, open and honest, laced with apology. He removed the wrap that had been covering his head, and this first full glimpse of him is... wow. I mean, yeah. Just wow. He's got jet-black hair with the perfect amount of wave, full lips, a defined jaw, and a slightly prominent chin with the subtle hint of a dimple. His nose is a little large and hawkish, but for some reason it just adds to his appeal. The real kickers are those eyes, deep and churning with some secret inner turmoil. I don't think I really understood the word *brooding* until this moment.

"Do you need help?" he asks, dipping his head lower.

"No, thanks." I jolt, inwardly cringing. No, I don't need help. I was just struck dumb by his hotness, but I'm good now. I'm over it.

Despite the nuisance of my skirts, I quickly scramble up the ladder. It's nothing compared to the climbing I'd been doing to prep for my week-long camp at Yosemite. For some reason, I want Cyrus to see that I'm capable of handling myself—most of the time, at least.

"What is this place?" I ask when I reach the top.

The space is mostly empty aside from a mound of pillows near the window and a small stack of books. With the shutters folded back, the view is astonishing. We're above the other structures, allowing for uninterrupted sightlines of the entire sprawling city. With the afternoon sun shining bright and the dust mostly settled, the buildings look like butter against the blue sky—saturated and yellow. I step closer, realizing that all the way to the right, the palace looms, and all the way to the left there's a hint of the San Diego I remember—telephone poles, apartment buildings, a cell tower that I suspect no longer works.

"It's my hideout," Cyrus answers as he stops beside me, then sinks to a seat on the window's ledge. He scans the skyline, pausing for a moment on the palace, before he looks up toward me.

“What are you hiding from?”

“The same thing everyone else runs from, I suspect.” He shrugs and returns his gaze to Bahagar. “The responsibilities I don’t want to face. The rules I don’t want to follow. The truths I can’t stand to believe.”

I take a seat by his side. “Sounds like you lead a pretty constricting life.”

“Don’t we all?” He turns to me and arches a brow as his lips pucker with humor. “Though I guess beautiful strangers who defy kings might not be used to the same restrictions as the rest of us. Is it different where you come from?”

Beautiful? Did he say beautiful?

I’m so not a blusher, but I feel my cheeks warm as I look away, back out the window. The world I come from and the world I’m in couldn’t be more different, and yet, I understand what Cyrus is saying. Why else do I practice gymnastics for so many hours each day when I could be relaxing with friends or watching TV? I might not know what I want to be when I grow up, but I know that whatever I decide, getting into a good college will help make that dream happen. And if I want to graduate from a good school without a mountain of debt, an athletic scholarship could make a world of difference. And in order for that to happen, I need to be the best. My life has its own stresses. My friends’ lives do too. There’s so much pressure to be everything at once—smart and popular and beautiful and fun and hardworking. I know a lot of high school students who get drunk every weekend to escape those realities. I guess the rock wall was my escape, and the gym was my hideout.

I glance back to Cyrus, who studies me intently with those knowing eyes of his. “My world couldn’t be more different, but I think I know exactly what you mean.”

He sighs and slides off the windowsill to land on the heap of pillows on the floor. In the process, his thumb brushes over the topside of my hand. I’m not sure if it was deliberate or an accident, but the spot burns. Cyrus doesn’t seem to notice. He leans into the cushions and folds his hands behind his head, the picture of ease. Those dark eyes are trained on me. I’m not sure he understands the effect his gaze has, but under it, my skin crawls, a mix of discomfort and delight.

“What’s your name?”

“Alanna,” I say and look back out the window. Maybe if I just ignore him, I won’t feel so flustered. If only it were so easy, but at least the cool breeze blowing off the Pacific keeps the heat from coloring my cheeks.

“And where are you from, Alanna?”

My gaze darts to the bits and pieces of the modern world I can see in the distance. If I told Cyrus my crazy story, for some reason I think he’d believe me. But then my eyes drift back to the palace on the other side. It looks like something I could’ve built at the beach, with tall sandy spires and thick walls. The center structure is topped by a massive golden dome, while the smaller domes circling around it are adorned with colorful tiles. Patterns are carved into the stones—trellises and florals. I suspect that if I got a little closer, I’d see even more intricate detail covering every inch of the façade. My gaze drops, down and down, until in my mind’s eye I see the lowest layer of the structure, buried deep underground. The dungeons. The place where Erick said they’d take my brother—the place I need to go to save him.

I can’t tell Cyrus the truth.

Not until I have Mace.

“I need to go to the palace,” I say, glancing back at the boy lounging on the floor.

His body immediately stiffens and he frowns. “Why?”

“I—” What was it Erick told me to say? I try to remember the cover story he spoon-fed me, but so much has happened in the short amount of time since I left that cave. “I need to see the king.”

At that, Cyrus sits up, brown eyes flashing with something I don’t quite understand, something almost like betrayal. “Why? You screamed at him. You were terrified.”

“I was...surprised,” I murmur, measuring my words. At my tone, Cyrus narrows his gaze, as though he can somehow tell I’m lying. My defensive instincts rise. “I mean, can you blame me? After today? We were coming to Bahagar to rest, just for warm food and a night off the road, when the earthquake struck. My, um, my—my carriage! Yeah, my carriage was thrown and it rolled. When it stopped, I was finally able to crawl out, but I was alone. All my guards were gone. And the horses. And, um, everyone. And I was in a strange city. The people looked different. The buildings. Everything. Then I saw Bahagar in the distance, and I made a run for it, because—because—”

I break off, not sure what to say next.

Is any of this coming across as plausible? Because I sort of feel as though I'm pulling it out of my butt, bona fide crappola. Cyrus is leaning forward, staring at me intently, waiting for me to finish. I've never had a flair for the dramatics, but if there was ever a time, this is it. So I yank on my muddy-brown cloak and let it drop to the floor as I straighten my spine, trying to put on the haughtiest attitude I can imagine.

"Because I'm a princess."

Cyrus's gaze skims up and down my purple silk dress. He doesn't seem at all fazed by my display. "Of what kingdom?"

San Diego doesn't sound otherworldly enough. Neither does La Jolla, or Del Mar, or Torrey Pines. And then, out of nowhere, the perfect backstory hits me. I mean, I'd pat myself on the back, but it might blow my cover. "Camelot."

"Camelot?" he asks as he rolls to his feet. "I've never heard of it."

"My father, King Arthur?" I murmur, trying my best to watch him as though he's an idiot for not recognizing my kingdom. Honestly, it's not that difficult. The story of King Arthur is probably one of the most recognized literary tales in western civilization. If anyone from my world didn't know what it was, this is exactly how I'd look at them—with unveiled judgment. "My mother, Lady Guinevere? The legendary sword Excalibur? The Knights of the Round Table?"

"Round table?"

Okay, yeah. His king makes people explode—I'm guessing democracy hasn't made it to Bahagar yet, so I can't fault him. "Don't worry about it. Anyway, that's where I'm from."

He takes a step closer, tilting his head to the side and scrutinizing me. There's an aura of disbelief hanging around him, and yet, I can tell, a small part of him is buying my cover story. "So why were you here and not there?"

Damn. That's a good question.

The thud of boots stomping on stairs saves me from answering.

We both jolt.

"Who's there?" I whisper.

Cyrus darts his gaze to the trapdoor, which is still open. Then he closes the distance between us, enveloping both of my hands in his and staring deep into my eyes. "Why do you want to see the king?"

I don't want to lie to him, but I can't tell the truth either. So I settle on, "I need to get to the palace. I—I'll be safe there."

"You know his magic. You saw it. What makes you think you'll be safe?"

I'm not entirely sure I do know the king's magic, and I'm one hundred percent positive that every step I take toward the palace will bring me closer to danger, but I don't have a choice. I need to save my brother. So I lean toward Cyrus, holding his gaze, and whisper, "Because I have magic too."

I don't.

Not even close.

But there's a ruby ring on my finger full of all the power I hope I'll need—a link to Erick, and the promise he made to help me.

Cyrus's brown eyes pop wide. He believes me. His jaw drops open, but before he can speak, a voice interrupts.

"My Prince, I thought I'd find you—"

The voice stops midsentence. I swivel my head, surprised to find a warrior in black popping his head through the opening in the floor, staring at me with as much shock as I feel. I turn back to Cyrus. Back to the warrior. Back to Cyrus.

I probably look like an idiot.

Scratch that—I definitely look like an idiot. And it only gets worse as I watch Cyrus slip his cream cloak from his shoulders, revealing the black velvet jacket underneath. Every inch of the fabric is intricately embroidered with silken thread of all different colors—gold, red, blue, green. The buttons are decorated with diamonds. An ornate belt is strapped around his waist, holding a sword with a gilded hilt and bejeweled daggers. His white pants billow around his legs, then cinch where they tuck into his boots.

And I thought I was being dramatic.

"Prince?" I stutter as the word slips out.

The edge of his lip lifts in a lopsided grin. Cyrus leans in, so close I can feel his breath like a soft caress against my neck, and speaks softly into my ear. "This conversation isn't over."

Before I have a chance to respond, he pulls back and steps in front of me protectively, putting himself between me and the warrior who could easily be part of the group that was chasing us down the street not too long ago.

“Send word to my father,” Cyrus demands, voice hard and cold, completely different from the one he used with me. “Princess Alanna of Camelot requests an audience with the king.”

Six

Twenty minutes later, I'm sitting on the back of a horse, riding down the middle of the street toward the palace towering in the distance. I feel more like a circus performer than I ever have in my life. Some people stare, while others gawk. By my side, Cyrus waves with a brilliant smile plastered on his lips. Every so often, he tosses a handful of coins into the crowd. The people gush. They love him. They're intrigued by me.

I don't like the scrutiny.

Because of my stupid dress (Erick and I are *definitely* going to have a conversation about outfit choices moving forward), I need to sit sidesaddle like a proper lady. Cue eye-roll. I've never missed my leggings more. I'm pretty sure I've had a scowl on my face for the entire ride, which probably just makes the crowd more curious—who's the grumpy princess in the ostentatious violet dress?

I'm an athlete. I'm used to being watched, but when I am, I'm sweaty and focused and completely in my zone. I'm doing spins on the balance beam, or flips off the vault, or holds on the uneven bars. I'm powerful and strong. The only part of gymnastics I've never loved is the pretty-princess part—with the makeup and the hair and the shiny leotards—but I take it, because at least everyone watching knows the girl in the hot-pink one-piece could kick some major butt. But now, it's like all the bad parts with none of the good. I've never felt so on display.

It's almost a relief when we finally reach the palace and two iron gates slam shut behind us, blocking out the rest of the city from view. Until I remember that the only reason I'm here is to face a king who can literally make people explode.

So, yeah.

Today sucks.

We come to a stop near the base of a grand staircase. Cyrus jumps down from his horse and turns to offer me a hand. I think I could probably

manage it on my own, but at the same time, I'd rather not face-plant in front of the assembled crowd of warriors I'm trying to convince I'm royal. So, I accept his help. Two sturdy hands grip the narrow of my waist and he lifts me easily off the saddle, biceps straining the fabric of his jacket as he then lowers me slowly to the ground.

I'm a little breathless by the time my feet touch stone.

But, come on. That was undeniably hot.

We don't move for a moment. His hands remain on my waist. Our gazes hold. He's about a foot taller than me, which to be fair, most guys are. But most guys don't look at me as though I'm the most fascinating woman they've ever seen—and that's exactly what lights Cyrus's eyes. Intrigue. Awe. Hunger. Like he's a kid on Christmas morning, dying to unwrap his present and see what's inside.

A cough interrupts and we both turn toward the sound. One of the warriors in black motions toward the steps.

"My Prince, the king is waiting."

"Of course," Cyrus says with a nod and steps back.

He offers me his arm and I take it, resting my palm in the nook of his elbow. The warriors fall in behind us as Cyrus leads me up the stairs. By the time we reach the top, the doors to the palace are already being held open by two more warriors in black. When we step inside, two women peel off from the shadows and fall in line behind us. Cyrus hardly seems to notice. Maybe they're servants? The very idea makes me squirm. I'm too used to doing everything on my own. My mom nipped all that spoiled-brat stuff in the bud as soon as I got to high school. I've got to do my own laundry, make my own lunches, clean my room. Or, at least, I did...

I blink and return my attention to the palace, trying to quell the sudden swell of sadness. It's better not to think about what was, or what might be. All I can do is concentrate on the now. Before I can go looking for my parents, my home, my friends, I need to save Mace, the one person I know I haven't lost. He's my lifeline to a world that I'm terrified might be gone forever.

"My father respects power above all else," Cyrus leans down and whispers into my ear as we make our way down the sweeping center hall of the palace. A rich carpet cushions the floor beneath our feet, muffling the sound of our steps. Columns extend nearly as far as I can see, with intricately carved arches connecting them all. The walls are painted in rich

hues of blue and red with glittering accents of gold. Most of the designs consist of trellises and shapes, but some have animals, some have flowers, some have buildings I don't recognize. We pass portraits of people I assume are Cyrus's ancestors based on their glamorous attire. Doors come and go, but the one at the end of the hall captures most of my attention. It's twenty feet tall at least, and if I were in Vegas, I'd bet everything I have that the king is sitting on a throne somewhere behind it.

"Show him weakness," Cyrus continues, "and he'll use it against you."

Gee, sounds like a real winner. I glance at the prince, but his face is pointed straight ahead. His expression is stoic, and I can't help but notice that his jaw is clenched from the way the muscles in his neck have started to twitch. I turn forward again, thoughts swirling. How would I introduce my parents to someone who was meeting them for the first time? *Beware my father's dad-jokes—your eyes might fall out of your head from rolling so hard? My mom is a nervous wreck who will probably interrogate you, but don't worry, she means well and she's easily won over by a cheesy compliment or two?*

What sort of childhood has Cyrus had that his first bit of advice is to show no weakness? I can't even imagine. My parents have seen all my weaknesses—they and Mace are the only people I love enough to let that close. They've seen me cry. They've seen me fire off. They're family. That's what they're there for. I have a feeling that the mask I see hardening over Cyrus's features is the only thing he lets his father see. Not the boy I saw in that attic hideout, carefree and curious, but a prince who is as sharp as the sword dangling from his waist.

A wave of pity washes over me.

I squeeze Cyrus's forearm, trying to silently show my sympathy and my support. His head shifts to the side, just enough I can tell he's watching me from the corner of his eye.

"Weakness is in the eye of the beholder," I murmur back.

I don't think that's quite the saying, but I like it anyway—and it's true. Some people would look at my height as a weakness. There's no denying I'm short. But there's also no denying that the lower center of gravity helps with my balance and makes it easier to do flips. The idea of strength is a faulty concept, because it all depends on how you look at it. And I have a feeling Cyrus has spent his entire life observing the world from the wrong

angle. I turn fully toward him, not afraid of what these warriors and watchers from the side might think.

“Where I come from,” I continue softly, “murdering an innocent person the way your father did would be considered an act of cowardice, not strength. The difficult thing to do, and the powerful thing to do, would’ve been to try to find some common ground.”

Cyrus flicks his gaze toward me, catching my eye for a brief second as his brows pinch. I’m pretty sure I’ve surprised him yet again.

Before either of us can speak, two more warriors in black step in front of the door at the end of the hall and grip the elaborate golden knobs. Cyrus straightens his spine and looks ahead as the massive doors swing open. At first, all I see is gold—on the walls, on the ceiling, on the floor. A blood-red rug cuts a line down the center of the gilded room, leading to the throne. When my gaze lands on the man sitting upon it, I catch the gasp in my throat and squeeze my lips together. I don’t let out a sound as I take my first true look at the king.

He’s decrepit.

No—not in an *Adorable-Wrinkly-Old-Man* sort of way.

He actually looks rotten, as though he has some sort of flesh-eating disease. His skin is a chartreuse sort of green. It’s cracked and broken, like a desert that’s gone too dry. In some places, yellow pus leaks through the cuts. Boils cover his nose, puffed and bloated as if they’re ready to pop. It’s all I can do not to gag. With the king having a son as attractive as Cyrus, I’ll admit, I expected more of a *Dad-I’d-Love-To-Eff* sort of vibe. I mean, I expected at least passably human. But he’s hunched over on the throne, as if he might break in half at any moment, and to be honest, with the whole zombie aura he has going on, I wouldn’t be surprised. If his hand fell off, I bet it would keep moving, clawing its way across the floor one bony finger at a time.

“Father,” Cyrus says with a bow. “May I present Princess Alanna of Camelot.”

His voice booms. I half expect the sound to blow his father over, but the king hardly moves. Embroidered silk robes that cascade over the edge of the throne and spill onto the floor hide most of his body from view, though I suspect the flesh beneath it is just as putrid. For all I know, he can’t move. But beneath the jewel-encrusted crown resting atop his head, those two eyes are sharp, even if the rest of him appears to be failing.

“Princess Alanna, may I introduce my father, King Jaffa Mulek Sharizi, the ruler of Bahagar.”

I subtly clear my throat and do my best to curtsy. By the way Cyrus’s lips wobble, I’m not quite sure I’ve pulled it off. Oh well, I never claimed to be a debutante.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you...” I pause, not quite sure how to finish that sentence. As quickly as I can, I scan my brain for every movie or book I’ve ever read about the British. It’s the only monarchy I can think of. Your Grace? My liege? I should’ve paid more attention in English class. Eventually, I settle on, “Your Majesty.”

No one gasps in outraged shock, so I must pass the test. Well, that test anyway. The king eyes me with outright suspicion, so I know I have a lot of convincing to do before I’ve won him over.

“Tell me, Princess, where is this Camelot you come from?” he asks. Just like in the square, his voice comes out loud and clear, oozing with authority, completely at odds with the broken body before me. Somehow, I hear it inside my head, as though he speaks directly into my ear instead of from a distance. It must be part of his magic. “I’ve never heard of such a kingdom before.”

“We, um, we come from the north.” I force the words out and pull my shoulders back, trying to give off an air of confidence I don’t quite feel. “The far north. In the summer, it rains almost every day. In the winter, our fields are covered in snow. The only sand we have is the kind on the beach.”

“And what is a princess from the north doing so far from home?”

“I was traveling.”

“Why?”

“I was on my royal tour,” I explain. I’m positive that was a thing in Europe—maybe it’s a thing in this magic world too? Royals are royals, right? No matter what world, all they want to do is flaunt their wealth and power. It’s not so different from some of the rich families I used to see back home, with their beachfront mansions, flashy cars, and expensive purses. Different times. Different lands. Same old crap. “I was just outside of Bahagar when the ground started shaking. I’m not even sure what happened, but when I opened my eyes, I was in a strange place, with strange machines, and strange people. I ran to your city for safekeeping, and that’s why I’m here. For a safe place to stay, at Your Majesty’s mercy, of course.”

Honestly, I might have a career in acting if I get out of this alive.

“Why didn’t you send word of your arrival in our city?”

I wince. I can tell from his tone he doesn’t trust me. I mean, I can’t blame him—I’m lying through my teeth—but still. “There wasn’t time. All my traveling companions were killed, and I came here on my own. I wasn’t in the city for very long before Prince Cyrus found me.”

“And why didn’t your father, the king of Camelot, send word letting me know his daughter would be traveling to my city?”

“He did,” I answer smoothly with a shrug. “His message must’ve been lost.”

“Hmm,” he murmurs disapprovingly. “Surely, you can understand our hesitations, Princess Alanna. You’re a stranger, from a strange land, arriving on the strangest day our world has ever seen, and you want us to ignore all the holes in the story you’re so desperately trying to weave, so that we will grant you safe passage into our home? Another day, maybe we would feel more benevolent. But today is not the day for leniency.”

Cyrus stiffens by my side.

The memory of that barista turning into nothing but red mist floods my brain.

He’s about to pulverize me.

“Wait,” I blurt and take a step forward. The warriors in black in every corner of the room draw their weapons. I immediately stop, realizing my mistake, and hold my hands up in a sign of peace. “I can prove who I am.”

The king leans forward in his throne. For the first time since I’ve arrived, the barest hint of curiosity lights his brown eyes. It’s the only time I’ve seen any resemblance to his son in his face. “How?”

Erick’s words come back to me—magic is the law.

I guess I’m about to make my own set of rules.

I stick my hand out, holding my palm up, and pray that somewhere far away, Erick is watching me through his water-mirror and understands what I’m silently trying to tell him.

A second passes.

Nothing happens.

The king frowns, leaning back in his throne. By my side, Cyrus shifts his weight. I keep my hand outstretched, maintaining my cool, and use every ounce of strength I possess to keep my arm from trembling under the strain.

Then I feel it.

The burn is subtle at first, then scorching. I keep the pain from my face as the blood-ruby on my finger seemingly ignites, shooting fire into my skin. A second later, a true flame bursts to life in the space above my palm, hot enough to sting. I gasp in surprise, but I think everyone else is too absorbed by the blaze to notice. It grows larger and larger, floating higher and higher, until a churning orb of fire spins above our heads. The red glow reflects off the gold so the whole throne room seems to burn. When the velocity reaches a breaking point, the entire thing explodes. Through the ashy rain left behind, I defiantly meet the king's eyes.

That was ridiculously cool.

And I feel ridiculously badass, even though Erick did all the work.

"Princess Alanna." The king breaks the silence. There's something in his tone that's positively giddy and it sends an unsettling shiver down my spine, which only gets worse when he smiles. I immediately wish he hadn't —not only because it's hella creepy, but also because the sight of his rotten black teeth sort of makes me want to barf. "Welcome to our home."

Seven

My time in the throne room goes by pretty quickly after that. King Jaffa motions for a servant and tells her to help me to my rooms. He gives me the welcome to stay the night and says he'll have dinner brought—after all, his honored guest must be hungry.

I'm a little freaked out by his sudden change of heart, to be honest, even though it's exactly what I'd been hoping for. There's just something so calculating in his gaze. It's as though the moment he saw my magic, the cogs in the back of his mind started spinning, rotating around a plan that's got him all jacked up with excitement. I'm even more on edge when he tells Cyrus to stay behind—that they have things to discuss alone. The sinister grin on his lips. The way his gaze darted toward me when he said the word *alone*. I don't like it. Any of it. Good thing I don't plan to stick around long enough to find out what it means.

By tomorrow morning, I'll be gone.

I got my ticket into the palace, and now all that's left is to find Mace.

As the servant leads me down these foreign halls, I keep an eye out for a door that screams, *Dungeon—this way!* Something with padlocks. Something chained off. Something that almost dares you to see what's inside. But I don't notice anything. The entire palace is painted in rich colors, carpeted with luxurious rugs, and draped in lavish silks. I'm on sensory overload trying to take it all in. Before long, the servant opens a door and ushers me inside. She shows me around the room, hands me a set of clean clothes, and points out the bowl of fruit on a side table, mentioning she'll bring dinner soon. Then I'm left alone.

I toss the clothes onto the bed and run to the basin filled with water. It's all I've been able to pay attention to since the second I stepped foot in this room. I'm guessing it's supposed to be for washing my face or hands, but instead, I grip the marble edges with my palms and stare at my reflection in the water, waiting for it to shimmer and change. The ring on my finger

starts to burn, not quite enough to sting. A second later, I see Erick's face on the surface.

"Well done, Alanna." He nods with an approving smile across his lips.

I grin. "Well done, me? Well done, you! That trick with the fire was legit."

"Legit?"

"Awesome...cool...on fleek?" He stares at me blankly. Honestly, it's reminding me of the time I tried to explain emojis to my grandfather. Something about Erick is just so *old*. He looks my age, but his soul is ancient. It's kind of endearing. I roll my eyes. "Never mind. What's next? How do I save my brother? Have you seen him? Where is he?"

"I have." My stomach flips at his grave tone. "He's chained up in the dungeon, just as I suspected he would be."

"Let me see him," I beg, the words just spilling from my lips. "Please, let me see him."

The image in the water blurs and swirls. A second later, I'm staring into my brother's face. His eyes are hollow. His cheeks are gaunt. It looks as if he's aged years in a matter of only hours. The room is so dark I can hardly make out any details. He's sitting on a floor, leaning against stone, with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. I don't see anyone else with him. All I want to do is fill that void, wrap my arms around him, and tell him we'll be okay. I'm not sure if I believe it, but maybe if he does, then I will too.

"What's going on down there, Erick?"

The water shifts again, back to his face. "They're interrogating the prisoners."

"Interrogating?" I frown. "But they don't even speak the same language. How—"

"It's not going well," Erick interrupts. Something pained flickers in his eyes.

My heart sinks.

He doesn't mean interrogate—he means torture. They're torturing people down there, trying to get answers that are impossible to give. Somehow, I doubt King Jaffa cares.

"Mace—have they?"

"No." He shakes his head. I take a deep, relieved breath. "No, they haven't touched him. Not yet. But he's been hearing things. Terrible

things...”

I don't need more detail. The expression on Mace's face said it all. This morning, his biggest worry in the world was finding a date to senior prom and saying goodbye to his friends at the end of the year. Now? It's listening to his teammates get torn apart one by one as he wonders if he'll make it through the night.

He will.

“I need to find him.”

“I know, Alanna. But there's nothing you can do until nightfall.”

“No,” I protest. I'm gripping the basin so hard my arms start to shake with exertion. “Now. Right now. I did what you said. I made it inside the palace. I'm here and I don't want to wait—”

“Listen to me,” Erick cuts in, voice equal parts reprimanding and soothing. “The palace is teeming with guards, with servants, with too many eyes. I'll keep watch on your brother. If I believe he's in any immediate danger, I'll send an alert through the ring. But the best thing you can do now is sleep, gather your strength, and wait for the perfect time to strike. Only the most patient hunter catches the prey.”

“I'm not in the mood for a philosophy lesson.”

“That's often when they're needed most.”

I stare at Erick. He stares right back.

It's a total standoff.

“I have a plan,” he finally says with a sigh.

I arch my brow. “Keep talking.”

“The dungeon has an exit to the outside, to a courtyard near the practice grounds. I believe it will be much easier to sneak in through that door than to try to move through the palace undiscovered. Let me show you.”

Mace's face shimmers across the surface of the water again, but this time it's clear my brain isn't in charge. The view zooms out, through a set of iron bars until we're in a hall that's dark and lit with oil lanterns. Then it adjusts forward, almost as though we're there, walking down a long row of cells, around one corner, through a door, and down one more hall, until I see a door faintly outlined with the bright glow of sunlight. We pass through it, spilling into a courtyard. Erick spins the view around so I can see what the door looks like from the outside. It's wooden and peppered with iron bolts. There's a massive bar just below the handle, sealing it from the outside.

Honestly, it's exactly what I'd assumed a door to a dungeon would look like. Originality must really be dead.

"Show me the route again."

Erick runs through it five more times, until I'm certain I have every turn down. I could easily keep going through the motions until nightfall, but a gentle knock on my door cuts the session short.

"Someone's here," I whisper and jerk my head to the side, but whoever's there is waiting for permission to enter.

"All you need to do is find a way outside," Erick tells me. "I'll be with you the entire time. And Alanna?" I glance back toward the water at the sound of my name. He holds my gaze, willing me to believe his next words. "You're ready."

"Of course I am."

Fake it 'til you make it, right?

Erick grins and then his image fades away.

I splash a little bit of the water on my face before I stand straight and turn toward the door, shouting, "Come in."

I half expect it to be Cyrus, but when the door gently swings open, it's just the servant from before with a tray full of food. She curtsies silently and brings the tray over to a table in the corner, then arranges everything carefully across the top. With another curtsy, she leaves.

All alone, I swipe an apple from the mix and take a bite as I survey my room. I've been here for a while now, but it's the first time I really look around. The bed is freaking inviting, I'm not going to lie. Curtains hang off all four posts, giving it a reading nook sort of vibe, and I can hardly see the mattress beneath all the fluffed pillows. I'm sure I'd fall asleep the second I lay down, but now is so not the time, so I force my gaze to keep going. The ceiling is painted a deep blue with golden stars. A tile mosaic fills the back wall—a desert scene with horses and figures on rolling dunes beneath a midnight sky. It's beautiful, but not useful. I keep skimming, over the painted walls, past the thick draperies—wait.

Did that curtain just move?

I run across the room and throw the fabric open, worried someone's been hiding in the corner this entire time, but there's no intruder. A sweeping balcony almost the same size as the bedroom waits on the other side. Cool air brushes against my cheeks as I make my way to the stone railing, lean over it, and look down at the view below. It's not the desert or

city scene I expected. Instead, a lush garden covers the ground, full of palm trees and flowers and branches ripe with fruits. An intricate network of fountains slices through the carpet of green, glittering as the splashing water catches the sun. Statues, gazebos, and tiled archways decorate every corner, all accessible by a series of walkways. I lean out as far as I can and swivel my head back and forth, trying to find an area that might be the practice grounds I saw in the water. All the way to the left, beyond a covered walkway, I see a group of warriors in black standing in a circle. In the center, two men brawl, swords glinting as they swipe and clash and swing. That's got to be the place. Now, I just need to figure out how to get down.

Climbing, obviously. There's no other way.

I walk to the edge of the balcony and run my palms over the palace walls. They're rough and hard, but flat, which means I won't be able to find any handholds. I'm not going to let that stop me. When I turn back to the bedroom for inspiration, my gaze lands on the drapes and it hits me—I can rappel.

"Psst, Erick," I whisper into the wind, feeling more than a little ridiculous. "Any chance you can help a girl out with a harness and some rope? Maybe a few carabiners?"

I stare at the ring on my finger, willing it to burn with magic.

Nothing happens.

Truth be told, I didn't really expect that to work. It's too easy. And he probably has no idea what climbing gear even is. But you can't knock the hustle, right?

"What about an outfit change?" I ask instead. "This dress really isn't doing me any favors."

This time, the ruby heats up. In a blink, my clothes shift. Navy pants billow around my legs, cinching near my ankles. Tucked into the waistband is a fitted silk shirt in a lighter hue, embroidered with gold and bedazzled with a few sparkling studs, but comfortable. I still look somewhat like a princess, just a slightly sportier one. It's not exactly the leggings and tank top I'd been hoping for, but it'll do.

Before I have time to second-guess, or you know, think logically about how idiotic this probably is, I grip the curtains in both hands and yank. They're silk, which should be strong enough to hold my weight if I do this right. After stalking back into the bedroom, I go to the table and grab a knife. Between it and my teeth, I manage to tear a long piece off the curtain.

To strengthen the fabric, I braid a few strips together and tie a whole bunch of knots, then repeat.

The next few hours fly by as I rip and knot, rip and knot, rip and knot, using every inch of curtain I can find. The view outside the window goes from blue skies to blood-red sunset to deep night. I'm a little surprised no one comes to check on me—I mean, I was called an honored guest, after all, and I really thought Cyrus would stop by to see how I was doing—but it's better this way. There are no intrusions, no distractions. The only reason I eventually stop is because I've run out of fabric and my skin has rubbed raw. I walk back over to the water basin and dip my fingers in the cool liquid to soothe the burn.

After a few moments, I remove them and lean over the pool. "I'm making my move. How's Mace?"

"Right where we left him." Erick's face glimmers to life on the surface. "There are a handful of men guarding the dungeons, but I'll take care of them when the time comes."

I nod, then pause. "Hey, Erick?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm not saying I'm scared," I mutter, then take a deep breath. "But if I fall, your magic will catch me, right?"

He smiles but doesn't answer.

"Erick."

The jerk is enjoying this.

"Erick!"

His image on the water fades, but his parting words echo in the silence. "Good luck, Alanna."

He'll catch me.

I know he will.

Or I'll come back and haunt that freaking cave until the end of time.

See how he likes that.

With a huff, I spin. There's a little bit of fire in my blood. Maybe he meant to put it there. Nothing is more motivating than the simmering fuel of frustration. And, well, desperation.

As I make my way out to the balcony, lugging the makeshift rope with me, I bring Mace to the forefront of my thoughts. His smarmy grin. His stupid jokes. That superior air he tries to put on when he wants to pretend he's older and therefore wiser than me. Yeah, right. We both know who

Mom and Dad don't trust enough to leave home alone, and newsflash, it isn't me.

God, I love him so much it hurts.

There's an actual, physical pain in my chest, but it's comforting in an odd way too, as if he's there with me. And I need that little bit of extra courage as I tie the rope around the railing and toss the end over the side. Down and down and down it sails, until it lands in a clump against the ground. It's fifty feet, maybe a little taller. Just like the rope climb in the gym back home—at least, that's what I keep telling myself. But my heart thuds like a jackhammer running wild in my chest. I actually hear the pounding in my ears. I mean, I know people say that, but this time it's true. It's even louder than that time Mace decided he wanted to learn how to play the drums to get girls. Man, that was a rough two weeks in our household. My mom will never admit it, but I'm still convinced she broke the freaking things on purpose. Sure, blame the dog, but Oreo never so much as scratched a piece of furniture before that incident, and until the day he died, I never saw him lay a paw on anything else.

A laugh escapes my lips with the memory, easing a bit of the tension. But that ache in my chest remains. If anything, it strengthens along with my resolve.

I'm coming, Mace.

I'm coming.

Wasting no more time, I climb onto the top of the banister and grip the silk rope just above one of my knots. I've rappelled a bunch of times before. I was the first girl in my sixth-grade class to get all the way to the top of the rope in Phys Ed. Sure, I began today by nearly falling a hundred feet to my death—but that was out of my control. Magical earthquake. Worlds merging. Blah, blah, you know the story. That was a fluke.

I can do this.

I *will* do this.

With a deep breath, I force all the doubts down. My instincts take over. This is just another competition, another challenge. My adrenaline surges. The world grows quiet. I sink into the zone, letting everything but my concentration and the thrill slip away.

I hold onto the rope.

I lean back.

Then I let myself fall over the edge, trusting my body to catch me.

Apparently, not everyone is so confident in my skills.

A worried shout pierces the air, and my eyes go wide as a single word slices through my focus. “Princess!”

Eight

Oh, for the love of God. Talk about timing. Give me a freaking heart attack, why don't you?

My grip on the rope goes slack just long enough that I fall a foot or two before I'm able to catch a knot between my feet. Phew—close one. I squeeze the rope between my fingers and shake my head, clearing the brief moment of sheer panic. By the time I look up, Cyrus is there, leaning over the balcony, eying me strangely.

“What are you doing? I thought you—” He breaks off with a frown, then releases a heavy breath. “It looked like you were jumping.”

“Technically, I did jump,” I murmur, feeling my palms start to sweat, which, I might add, isn't ideal while hanging from a silk rope. But I can't help it. Lying on the spot has never been my forte—well, until earlier today with the king. At least then, I had a plan. If Mace were here, he'd prattle off an excuse without hesitation—heck, he got caught sneaking out of the house enough times to become a pro. But I was always the good child. This really isn't my thing.

“Why?” Cyrus asks slowly as he scans my makeshift rope, then returns his focus to me. The fear in his eyes has been replaced by humor.

“I was just in the mood for a walk in the garden,” I say as I dangle there like a fish caught on a hook, totally exposed.

“We have stairs.”

I shrug. Well, I attempt to, but it's really not that easy when all of my muscles are focused on making sure I don't fall to my death. You know, priorities. “I, um, thought this would be easier. Like, more fun? I do it all the time back home.”

“You do?”

“Sure,” I murmur, but the nonchalance of my response is undermined by the squeak in my voice. “Don't you?”

Both of his brows arch high as the edges of his lips curve up.

“Anyway...” I segue. “I’d love to chat, but I should really keep going before I start cramping. So, um, I’ll see you later.”

I stare determinedly at the rope, embarrassment at an all-time high. My cheeks are flaming, but it’s so dark I’m hoping he can’t see. Inch by inch, I make my descent, aware the entire time that a set of eyes are watching me curiously. There’s something tangible about Cyrus’s stare, a sixth sense that brings a tingle to my skin. I can feel it without looking.

After a few minutes, when I’ve made it about halfway to the ground, the sensation fades. I breathe easily for, oh, half a second, until a transverse wave shoots down the rope, making me sway with the movement.

I jerk my gaze up and hiss, “What are you doing?”

Cyrus doesn’t answer as he drops over the edge of the balcony and joins me on the rope. My heart just about leaps into my throat. Has he ever done this before? Does he know what he’s doing? If he falls, it’s all my fault. Then again, I’ve never really done this before and I have no idea what I’m doing, but at least I’m doing it for a cause. He’s just— He’s just—

Why is he doing this?

“Cyrus!” I try again.

Nothing.

Maybe he’s busy concentrating? Maybe I should let him?

My arms are on fire, which decides for me. We can have a conversation once we both have two feet planted firmly on the ground. With his added weight helping to stabilize the rope, I make quick work getting to the bottom. Then I wait, with my hands on my hips, as he eases down. As soon as his toes touch stone, I shove him.

“What was that?”

“What?” He shrugs with a smug sort of smile on his face. “I was just following you.”

Valid. But I’m irrationally annoyed. “Why didn’t you take the stairs?”

“Because your way was faster,” he answers smoothly, not at all concerned by my tone. “And now, we can talk alone, without servants following our every move. I thought maybe you’d want that?”

There’s something vulnerable in his question, and it makes all my anger vanish in a heartbeat. “Of course I do. It’s just that—”

I break off.

It’s just that, what? I was trying to sneak into the dungeons to save my brother? Because I’m not a princess? And I don’t have magic? And I’ve

been lying to you this entire time?

I sigh.

“I just don’t want to get you into trouble.”

“I’m not afraid of my father,” he replies. There’s something deep and dark hidden beneath the words. But then he blinks, and his voice changes, shifting to something teasing. “I didn’t think you were either. Come on. I’ll show you my favorite place in the garden.”

He takes my hand and tugs me forward. I cast a longing glance to the side, toward the walkway I know leads to the practice grounds. But Mace will have to wait. I can’t exactly knock Cyrus out and make a run for it. He’s a prince. He saved my life earlier today. And he probably has at least sixty pounds on me.

I’m not an idiot. Well, maybe I am, but not because of that.

The second his fingers lace through mine, a little thrill shoots up my arm, then explodes in my heart like one of those fireworks that spark and twinkle and linger long after the initial blast has ended.

Crushing on Cyrus is a bad idea.

Terrible.

Horrible.

But I can’t help it. There’s just something about him, something so different from every boy I’ve ever met before. He’s my age but he seems older, more mature, confident in a way that’s almost unnerving. There’s a conviction when he speaks, as though he knows exactly who he is and exactly what he needs to do. And when he looks at me, butterflies don’t even describe it. So, go ahead, judge me all you want, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. If a handsome prince from a foreign land ever whisks you away on a secret midnight rendezvous, I dare you to say no.

Not so easy, right?

Cyrus leads me down a path along the fountain’s edge and over a bridge to the gazebo sitting in the center of the water. Then, to my surprise, he climbs onto the railing, reaches for the roof, and pulls himself up in one smooth motion I can tell he’s perfected with time. When he leans back over the edge to offer me a hand, I’m already halfway up. Thank you, gymnastics. He drops his mouth open to say something, and then just shakes his head with a wicked grin, clearly impressed. I nudge him with my elbow and fall back against the arched roof, turning my face toward the sky. We’re sloped away from the palace, surrounded by the soft hum of insects

and rustling trees, completely alone beneath a blanket of stars. Cyrus takes the spot by my side and folds his hands behind his head as he leans back.

“So, this is your favorite place?” I ask, turning toward him.

“Favorite place in the garden,” he clarifies, then shifts to meet my gaze. “You’ve already seen my favorite place.”

“Your...hideout?”

He nods.

“Not to sound judgmental,” I begin, then wince, because obviously if I’m starting with that clarification, we all know what’s going to come next. It’s like saying *no offense* and then completely ripping someone to shreds. But Cyrus just widens his smile as sparks of humor twinkle in his eyes. “I mean... I just don’t understand why *that* is your favorite place, when you have an entire palace at your disposal.”

“Then things must be very different in Camelot,” he whispers, turning his face to the sky, but not before I see a resigned sort of sadness pass over his features. His chest rises and falls with the swell of a deep breath. I study his profile, the way the moonlight catches his tan skin, the curve of his nose, the defined line of his jaw. I’m still looking when he turns back to me, capturing my gaze with his. Those deep, dark eyes swirl with thoughts I can’t quite read. “May I ask you something personal, Alanna? If it crosses a line, please tell me.”

“Sure.” The word comes out a little more breathless than I intended, so I clear my throat and look back at the stars. They seem brighter than ever before, but it makes me sad in a way, because the San Diego I know and love must really be gone. “Shoot.”

“Shoot?”

Oh, right. I might be speaking his literal language, but the colloquialisms of English don’t translate. “I mean, of course. Ask away.”

“When did you—” He pauses. I flick my gaze in his direction just in time to see him slowly lick his lips while he thinks. The sight makes my stomach muscles clench. “When did you first get your magic?”

I writhe my shoulders a little, under the guise of trying to get more comfortable. There’s so much vulnerability laced through his tone, so much earnestness. A guilty pit burrows deep in my gut. Is lying by omission still lying? “Um, recently. Very recently. Today, actually.”

“Today?” He sounds shocked.

“Yeah, today.”

He grabs my hand and grips it tight, squeezing emphatically, with a sympathy I don't quite understand. "I'm so sorry for your loss. I didn't realize — I didn't know —"

"It's okay," I cut in, hating how deep his response runs when mine are so surface. What loss is he talking about? Why would gaining magic include losing something?

I don't know what to say, and he doesn't seem to either. Instead, he holds my hand for a few seconds, rubbing his thumb over the top of my palm, before letting go. I'm surprised at how comfortable I feel next to him. Maybe it's just because today has been the longest day of my life, but it feels like I've known him for more than a few scant hours.

"Were you scared?"

"Terrified," I tell him truthfully. As soon as I fell from that cliff, dread got a grip on my soul, and I don't think it'll loosen its hold until I have Mace by my side.

"I am too," he murmurs.

I roll over, cupping my palms beneath my cheek. I'm done with the stars. They're far less fascinating than the boy lying beside me, opening his heart. "Why?"

"I don't want to turn into him," Cyrus confesses, keeping his eyes on the sky. I'm pretty sure I know the *him* he's referring to, and I want to comfort him. Heck, most people our age are horrified by the idea of turning into their parents, but this is something different. It runs deeper. So I stay quiet, waiting for him to fill the silence, to reveal the fears hovering on the tip of his tongue. "Everyone tells me I look just like him when he was younger, before the curse changed him. But that's not what I fear. It's superficial. I fear that once upon a time, he thought just like I do. That he wanted to run from the magic. That he wanted to run from his responsibilities. That he felt as caged and as trapped as I do. What if he did? I'm not sure what's worse. That he once had a rebellious spirit like mine, and the magic clawed it out of him—that it will do the same to me? Or that he's always been just as terrible on the inside as the curse made him appear on the outside—that my father has always been a monster?"

Cyrus lets his head fall to the side.

I stare into his eyes, wishing I could understand what he's trying to tell me, what I can say to alleviate his fears. I feel like I opened a book and started reading from the middle, like I'm missing all the backstory he thinks

I don't need. Anything I say might reveal my own ignorance. I'm caught in the web of my own lies, unable to move.

"Forgive me." Cyrus sighs and turns away. I can't help but feel I've disappointed him. "I don't mean to be so forthright. I've just never met another heir before. I've never been able to speak so openly to someone who might understand, but I can see you don't. Your home must've been a very different place, indeed."

"Maybe it was," I say and place my hand gently on his arm. The contact sparks something between us. I see it flare in the depths of his gaze. I feel it blossom in my chest. "But I know one thing. No one controls your destiny but you. If you don't want to become your father, you won't. Simple as that."

"And what about the magic?" His brows push together inquisitively. "The curse? We can't change that—no heir can."

The question is simple.

Yet when I hear it, everything shifts into place.

All the little pieces of information he's provided twist and turn until they fit together to form a picture I'm only just seeing. When I told him I got my magic today, he apologized for my loss. When he talked about his father changing, he worried how the magic might also change him. When he said we were heirs, he didn't just mean of a kingdom—he meant of magic. The power is hereditary, and apparently, it's cursed. That must be why his father looks the way he does. The magic is rotting him from the inside out. And if Cyrus is the heir—

I gasp with the realization. My eyes go wide and my jaw falls open.

It's so obvious, I can't believe I didn't see it before.

No wonder he's terrified.

If Cyrus is the heir, when his father dies, he'll inherit his magic—and his curse. Eventually, that same twisted power will run through his veins. Eventually, it'll rot him from the inside out too.

I blink and meet Cyrus's gaze, but his expression has changed. My epiphany must've been too obvious, because it looks as though he's had one too. For the first time since I met him, his eyes aren't open or honest or laced with warm golden highlights. They're closed off and guarded, as hard as a patch of dirt that's been stomped on and beaten down until all the air has whizzed out.

"Who are you, Alanna?"

I suck in a breath.

“Who are you, really?”

Nine

“Cyrus, I— I—”

With a sigh, I break off and drop my gaze to the tile roof we’re sitting on. How can I keep lying when he’s being so honest with me? So open? My stomach churns with disgust. I don’t need to hear him tell me that his fear of turning into his father is his deepest secret. I just know. The same way I know that I’m the only person he’s confessed this truth to. The trust was written in his voice, across his face, a trust I’ve earned through lies—a trust I don’t deserve.

“Alanna?” Cyrus whispers. All the gruffness in his voice is gone.

I drop my head to the side, lured by the undercurrent of longing laced through his tone, and meet his gaze again. The sight brings me back to earlier today, when he pulled me off the street and saved my life. Everyone else had chosen to step away, but Cyrus had risked it all to step forward, to defend me, because of the honesty he’d heard in my cry. My first instinct had been to fight him, and I’m pretty sure any girl from my world would’ve done the same. But the moment I met his eyes, that urge faded. Trust blossomed instead. I followed him, based on no reason at all except my gut told me to believe him.

It’s telling me the same thing now.

That he can help me.

That he *will* help me.

All I need to do is gift him with what he gifted me—the truth.

“You’re right, Cyrus. I’m not who you think I am.” The words spill out before I can stop them. His eyebrows lift in surprise, but he doesn’t say anything. He stays quiet, giving me room to speak. So I tell him—everything. That I’m from another world. That I fell into the cave when the earthquake struck. That I met a man who gifted me with a magic ring so I could save my brother. The blood-ruby heats up in warning the more I speak, but I don’t mention Erick by name, and I shy away from too many

details, which must placate him, because no magic bursts forth to shut me up. I explain why I lied and why I needed to get into the palace. When there's nothing more to tell, I finish softly, with a plea I hope he won't be able to deny. "You told me earlier today that you saved my life because I inspired you to defy the king, and I guess that's what I'm asking you to do now—defy the king, save my brother, and help us escape Bahagar with our lives."

At first, he doesn't respond. I force my lips shut and swallow, trying to calm my racing nerves. Cyrus stares at me for a few more seconds. The corners of his eyes narrow slightly and he tilts his head to the side, examining me and my crazy story. When he sits up, I do the same, watching as his gaze roves over the fountain beneath our feet, then the garden stretching into the moonlight. He turns back to me, and before he even opens his mouth, I know what he's going to say. The softness in his gaze is the only answer I need.

"I'll help you. But first, you need to understand what you're really up against, what my family's magic truly is."

"What?" I ask, hating the ominous lilt to his tone, the one silently whispering that the magic is so much worse than I could ever believe. Magic, I remind myself, that will one day belong to this beautiful, compassionate soul. "What do you mean?"

"What you saw today..." Cyrus begins, dropping his focus to the water. His eyes cloud over as though seeing something else. Maybe a scene from his youth—I'm not sure. But his skin pales as the blood drains away, making my heart thump louder in my chest. "It's only a small part of what my father is capable of. His magic—our magic—is to have total control over another person's body, to do with it what we want. That man's body shattered because my father told it to, but that's not the only way the magic can be used. He can make someone perfectly still if they try to run. He can make someone harm themselves, slowly, quickly, whatever will induce the response he desires. He can make someone willing when they otherwise would not be."

Cyrus pauses and darts his gaze toward me. The shame in his eyes makes me, a woman, understand the particular sort of *willingness* he's talking about. I shudder.

"And it's not limited to one person at a time, or even to people within his sight. His magic stretches far beyond the edges of our city, and anyone

within that range of power is susceptible. He has constant awareness of everything everyone is doing—everyone except me, because I’m the heir. Right now, he knows you are lying out here on this roof. He’s aware of every single prisoner in his dungeon, and if any of them escape their cells, he’ll be aware of that too. There’s a reason why no one in Bahagar tried to help you today, and I don’t fault them for it. My father sees everything, and he’s not one to shy away from a punishment if he believes one is due. No armies have marched on Bahagar for hundreds of years, because my father, and all the kings who came before him, could destroy them with a simple thought. We have few thieves and fewer murderers. My father takes liberties here and there, but most are okay turning a blind eye if it doesn’t directly affect them. They remain obedient, and in return, he keeps the city safe.”

“That’s— That’s—” I break off, shaking my head. I can’t even think of a bad enough word—horrible, insane, unimaginable. Nothing is sufficient. My friends and I always used to joke that the government knew everything we were doing, but we didn’t mean it literally. Even if we did, there’s a little thing called due process. I can’t imagine living in a world where you might make one mistake and—*bam!* Your king ends your life before you can even speak a word in your defense. Except today I did shout out, and he didn’t do anything to me. I snap my head toward Cyrus. “Today, when I screamed *no*, is it possible your father didn’t know it was me? Nothing happened to me. What if I’m immune?”

“He knew it was you.” A sad smile lifts the corners of his lips and then falls away. “As soon as the people stepped away, leaving you alone in the center of a very obvious circle, I’m sure he knew. It’s why I pulled you away. I’m sure he felt you run down the street and hide, but in feeling that, he also felt someone pulling you—someone his magic couldn’t touch. He knew I was with you. My presence probably made him curious enough to keep his magic in check.”

“And what about now? He knows we snuck out together, or at least suspects. Why doesn’t he hurt me?”

“Because he sent me.”

“What?” I whip my head to the side, then stare at him hard. “What do you mean he sent you?”

“It’s not how it sounds.”

“It sounds like I’m not the only one who’s been lying.” I cross my arms over my chest and he winces.

“I can explain.”

I arch a single brow, but deep down, I know my self-righteous indignation is completely hypocritical, so I keep my mouth shut and give him the same opportunity he gave me.

“When you showed my father your magic in the throne room, he was impressed, which doesn’t happen very often. You said you were a princess. You had magic. He assumed you were next in line to take over your throne, if you hadn’t already. He sent me to inquire about the possibility of”—he leans in and dips his chin, giving me a strange look—“an *alliance*.”

I understand the word, but I’m still not grasping what he means, so I just stare at him blankly and wait.

“Of the betrothal variety,” Cyrus continues and looks away as a subtle pink flush rises to his cheeks. “It’s not common for two heirs to be matched, but the world is a different place from the one we woke up to. He wanted me to see if Camelot still existed. If you had a home, a people. If you were perhaps alone and in need of a new throne to share.”

I’m so wrapped up in how freaking adorable he looks that it takes me a second to understand. When I do, my whole body jolts. “Wait, hold on a second and back up. Betrothal as in marriage? I’m only sixteen!”

“I’m eighteen.” He shrugs. “And my father is impatient to secure his lineage.”

Secure his... My eyes go wide. “Are you talking about babies?”

Well, this conversation just went from zero to sixty in about ten seconds flat. I think I’m actually having heart palpitations, maybe a panic attack. I like Cyrus—I mean, I really do and I could totally see the night ending with us making out on this roof if I play my cards right—but marriage? And babies? The idea makes me squirm, even if he is the cutest guy I’ve ever seen.

Cyrus covers his mouth to hide his laughter, but I hear.

Oh, I hear.

I punch him in the shoulder. “When were you going to tell me? I mean, if I hadn’t told you who I really was, how far were you planning to take this?”

“I wasn’t.” He’s full-on grinning now. “Honestly, I came because I wanted to see you, to talk to you. I wasn’t going to bring it up, unless I

thought maybe you wanted me to..." He trails off and a little bit of the humor dancing in his eyes fades. "But I can see now that you obviously don't, so—"

"It's not that," I hastily interject. I don't want him to think I don't like him, because I do—I really do. More than I should. "It's just in my world, things progress a little slower, I guess? You go on a few dates first. Some people move in together. A lot of people, you know, take each other for a test drive before committing to eternity."

"Test drive?" he asks, not understanding.

Now it's my turn to go red in the cheeks. Why did I say that? "Like kiss each other and, well, that sort of, um, thing, but like, naked..."

"Oh, right." Cyrus snaps his head forward.

I do the same, and swallow. "Right."

If I didn't know better, I'd swear Erick was sending magic through the ring, because my entire body feels on fire.

"People do that before marriage in your world?" Cyrus asks, voice a little hoarse.

"Some people," I clarify. Why are we talking about this? Why did I start talking about this? I feel like I'm back in sex-ed class. Passion is something that was made to be felt—not discussed. Like, ever. I inwardly groan. "It's more about being in love, I guess, in my world? At least, that's how I always saw it. But everyone is free to do what they want, however or whenever they want to, which is the most important thing, right?"

"I think I'd like your world."

I feel him study my profile, gaze like a physical caress. My throat goes a bit dry. I do the only thing I can think of and elbow him flirtatiously, then roll my eyes.

"That's such a guy thing to say," I mutter, trying to play it cool even though every nerve in my body is standing at attention, alight with an energy I've never experienced before.

"Have you..." He trails off, letting the question hang like a little bit of forbidden fruit about to fall from the tree. Guess you can start calling me Eve, because I can't help but take the bait.

"No." I swallow and turn to look at him. "Have you?"

He shakes his head and holds my gaze. I don't move. I'm too transfixed by the way his eyes twinkle, reflecting the moonlight. The rest of the world falls away. All I see is Cyrus. All I hear is the beating of my

heart. All I feel is the flare of heat across my skin and the tightness in my chest. It's difficult to breathe. I lick my lips—I'm not even sure why. His gaze drops to the spot, then lifts back to my eyes. But now, his irises are full of fire, so bright they make me burn.

He leans in.

The scorch intensifies. It's actually a little painful. As the inches disappear between us, Cyrus starts to close his eyes, and that's when I finally notice the scalding heat is coming from my hand, not my heart—well, not entirely.

I jerk away from Cyrus and stare at the ring in my lap.

The ruby glows a brilliant red—Erick's warning couldn't be more obvious. I'm here for my brother. I'm not part of Cyrus's world. He's not part of mine. I need to get Mace and get out. If I kiss him right now, I'll just be making everything harder than it needs to be.

What the heck was I thinking?

"I—I'm sorry," Cyrus stammers. "I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," I cut in, trying to keep things from becoming even more awkward than they already are. Though, let's face it, this is pretty rough as is. "You didn't do anything. I just— I can't be here, with you, when my brother is locked up in a dungeon somewhere, waiting for me to save him. I just can't. I need to help him."

"Still?" Cyrus frowns and sits back, giving me my space. "Even with everything I told you?"

Look, I know this is insane.

I know the king could kill me the second I step into the dungeon.

I know the king could kill me and Mace the second we step out of it.

I know it's reckless, and dangerous, and I'll probably end up dead.

But I have to try.

"He's my brother," I whisper and shrug. "What else can I do?"

"I envy him," Cyrus confesses softly. A haunted look passes over his eyes, darkening them with shadow, as though a cloud has moved overhead blocking the light of the moon. But it's not that. It comes from within. "I envy both of you. Unconditional love is a beautiful gift." He blinks and the demon disappears, exorcised by the determination illuminating his features. "I'll help you, like I promised I would. But first, we need a plan."

I couldn't agree more.

We spend the next twenty minutes running through all the options. Should I go into the dungeon the way Erick and I planned, or is there a better route? What if Cyrus brought me inside? What if he and I went separate ways? Should I use the magic or will that only draw more attention? Can I escape the dungeon in a manner the king would never suspect? Is there a way to distract him? On and on and on, we talk, dissecting each scenario, until finally, we come up with a plan. Cyrus will go to his father and distract him with the news that I've agreed to the betrothal. In the meantime, I'll sneak into the dungeon the way Erick and I first planned. Instead of trying to get back to what's left of San Diego, my brother and I will come to the fountain and I'll get Erick to make a portal. I'll leave the same way I came—through the water. It's as good of a plan as I can hope for. There's just one problem.

It means I'll never see Cyrus again.

We don't say it, but we both know it, and I'm acutely aware of the impending goodbye as we climb down from the roof of the gazebo, then step our feet on stone once more. The air feels heavy, as though I were flying before but I've just come back to earth. I'm grounded, weighted down by the words neither of us want to speak. We stand at the edge of the bridge and look at everywhere but each other—the silver glistening on the water, the flowers glowing in the night, the stars overhead, anything to distract from the fact that I'm going left and he's going right, down two paths that will never meet again.

“Cyrus, I—”

“Alanna, I—”

We finally look at each other and each release a bout of airy laughter that's swept away with the wind. Once it's gone, something deeper takes hold, something that makes the world go still. I don't want to say goodbye. I want my parting words to last, to stick with him long after I'm gone, because I know he'll stick with me—Cyrus, the boy with the soulful brown eyes and a heart so pure nothing could stain it.

“You're not your father,” I whisper and step closer, lifting my palm to cup his cheek. My heart flutters when he dips his head, sinking into my touch. “I don't care about your magic. I don't care that it's cursed. I've looked into your father's eyes, and I've looked into yours, and I want you to believe me when I tell you that no two men could ever be more different. There are things about your life you can't change, but don't let that stop you

from fighting to change the things you can. Your father chooses to use his magic to control people. When your time comes, you can just as easily choose not to. Promise me you'll remember that."

He sighs, lifts his hand to cover mine, and holds my skin against his cheek. His fingers are warm. Beneath a black wave of hair, his eyes smolder, touching something deeper in me than they have any right to. But I guess when the world turns upside down, and everything you thought you understood goes out the window, the rest of the rules do too. I hardly know Cyrus, and yet, I feel like I know him better than anyone else in the world outside of my family. He chose to save me, a stranger from a strange place who everyone else deemed unworthy. I chose to trust him, a stranger from a strange place who spent his life feeling totally alone. For the first time since I fell into that cave, I feel a tiny spark of hope. Maybe Armageddon won't be as bad as I feared. Maybe the end of our worlds is just the beginning of another one, a greater one, one I think we just started to build together.

"Alanna," he murmurs and steps closer. My head drops back and he leans his forward, but he doesn't close the distance. He lifts his hand to brush my cheek with his thumb before sliding his fingers into my hair. "Promise me you'll remember this night. Promise me that no matter where you go and who you become and how the world might change, you'll remember me, as I am now, because I'll never be able to forget you."

Cyrus bends down.

I arch up.

We don't speak—our lips touch instead. And without needing words, we vow to keep our promises to each other.

Ten

Kissing Cyrus is the most unbelievable, bittersweet, magical experience I've ever had—and seeing as I'm the one who's actually channeled a fireball through her body, let me tell you, that's saying something. I don't want this moment to end. His lips are pillow soft, yet demanding. His left hand digs into my hair and his other comes around my waist, then pulls me in until I'm flush against his chest. My fingers slide around the back of his head, tugging him closer, as my face tilts to the side, deepening the kiss. I arch onto my tippy-toes as a whirlwind wreaks chaos across my thoughts, lifting them up, up, and away, so all that's left is me and him and everything this kiss is making me feel—fireworks, butterflies, and all the clichés times a hundred. For the first time, I understand why every book, and movie, and song comes back to the same idea—because there's no truer way to describe it. Delicious nerves swarm across my chest and down my arms, igniting my every synapse until I feel on fire. Each touch awakens a spark that explodes into a million others. Everything builds and builds and builds until I'm not sure I can take any more, and then—

Cyrus breaks away.

Or maybe I do.

We each step back, breathing heavy as reality descends like a storm cloud rolling in over the ocean, dark and ominous, spelling our impending doom. Cool air brushes my cheeks and my arms. It's the rain coming to drown out all those burning fires. We look at each other for another long second. I try to memorize the sheen of starlight on his skin, the golden highlights in his brooding eyes, the plump curves of his slightly swollen lips. His gaze roves over every inch of my face, probably doing the same, and then our eyes meet a final time, whispering goodbye.

I force myself to turn around.

I'm not sure if he does the same, and I don't glance back to check. I run over the bridge, around the edge of the fountain, and down the stretch

of garden, shifting all my thoughts to the person I should be focused on—Mace. My brother alone in a cell. My brother in pain and waiting for me. My brother living through horrors I can only imagine. If I make it through the night, I'm sure my mind will return to that kiss a thousand times, mixed with longing and sorrow and so many questions of *what if*. I'll deal with them when the time comes. First, I need to actually survive.

The slap of my feet on stone sounds loud to my ears, but no one comes to investigate as I make my way through the archway by the garden's edge and down the long walkway to the practice grounds. I locate the door to the dungeon and lift the latch to slip silently inside. The hall is narrow and dark. I press my palms to the wall, using the damp stones as a path to guide me forward. After a few moments in the dark, the ring on my finger glows red and a golden orb blossoms to life above my head, illuminating the path.

"Thanks, Erick."

With the added light, I transition to a sprint and follow the map I memorized earlier in the day. Down this hall, to the right, through a door, down another hall, on and on. The first time I run into a warrior in black, I almost scream in surprise, but before I can react, the ring on my finger burns. Wind whips across the narrow passage, catching the man's shout for help. A spool of silk shoots from my palm and sails across the room. It wraps around his feet and up over his thighs before binding his arms to his torso and finally tying a knot around his mouth. He looks like a mummified version of a Ken Doll, wrapped in shimmery magenta fabric. I'm not entirely sure why Erick couldn't for once choose something a little more neutral, a nice black perhaps, but I'm not complaining. As I run by, the man falls sideways, tipping toward the ground like the king on a chessboard two seconds after *checkmate*. He's done.

We pass three more warriors in black, and Erick gift wraps them all—the only thing missing is the bow. They are presents in a way—presents to me. Erick sees me safely through the dungeons and in the process, no one gets hurt. My qualms aren't with soldiers under the orders of a king they can't physically oppose, and I'd hate to injure innocent men. I mean, I would if it were the only way to save my brother. But thanks to Erick, I don't need to make that choice.

When I reach the room where my brother is being held, I walk straight to the fifth cell on the left side, the last place I saw him earlier today.

"Mace," I whisper. "Mace, it's me."

The body huddled in the far corner moves. “Alanna?”

“Mace!”

“Alanna!”

He rolls to his knees and crawls forward. As soon as his dirt-covered face catches the light, my heart flips. He’s here. He’s real. I actually found him. My knees buckle and I sink to the ground just as he reaches the bars. We shove our arms through the openings and wrap them around each other in an awkward embrace, yet it’s the best one I think we’ve ever shared. My shoulders shake as I silently cry against his chest. His entire body trembles. I take a deep breath, inhaling the lingering scent of home that still clings to his clothes—his deodorant mixed with the fresh smell of the detergent my mother likes to use and the slight spice of the candles she always keeps lit around the house. Even though it makes the tears stream faster down my cheeks, I breathe it in again, because I know it’s probably the last time I ever will.

“How are you here? You’re supposed to be in Yosemite. Earlier today, I thought I saw you, but I didn’t think it was real. I figured I was going crazy right along with the rest of the world,” he mumbles into my hair, digging his fingers into my clothes as though he could pull me through the bars keeping us apart. I’ve never seen my brother cry, but I hear him sniffle, and it just about breaks me. After another moment, he inhales sharply and straightens his arms to examine my clothes. “What are you wearing?” His eyebrows shoot up when he notices the glowing ball of light floating above my head. “What the hell is that?”

“There’s no time to explain,” I cut in and shake my head. “Just come with me.”

“Sure, I’d love to. There’s just one little problem—I’m locked in a prison cell! Or did you forget that part?”

I roll my eyes. Though in a way, it’s almost comforting that some things never change. Even in the face of mortal danger, my brother finds a way to be a complete smart-ass. “I’ve got it.”

“You’ve got it?”

Could he at least pretend to have a little faith in me? I got this far, didn’t I? “Yes, *I’ve got it*. So put those obnoxious red high-tops to good use and stand back. While you’re at it, stop being such a douche.”

I smile sweetly.

Mace snorts but does what I say.

The doubt is written all over his face, and it only deepens when I hold out my hand. The ring burns, casting a crimson radiance across the cell. Mace's eyes open so wide I see the red reflected in the centers of his pupils. The heat intensifies, but I'm almost used to it by now, and it doesn't hurt exactly, as though the fire is in my mind and I'm only imagining the ache. It's a bit removed somehow. The iron bars between us begin to change color, glowing scarlet, then amber, then yellow, the sort that's so bright and so white you need to look away. It reminds me of the sun catching a skyscraper at that perfect angle during sunset, turning the sides of a glass building into live fire. The metal starts to drip like candle wax to the ground, and the bars melt away into nothing more than a puddle on the floor. When the iron cools, dark enough to be lost among the shadows, I look at Mace.

"You were saying?"

"How much I love and adore my amazing little sister."

"That's what I thought you were saying."

His hazel eyes twinkle as he jumps through the opening, and I'm positive mine must look the same. I'm buoyant as he pulls me into his chest, for a real hug this time, with no barrier between us.

"I love you. You know that, right?" he whispers, voice scratchy and raw with all sorts of emotions I've never heard in it before. "For a minute there, I didn't think I'd ever get to tell you that again, and I couldn't believe how stupid I was for not saying it more. I know when you started high school, you thought I'd be there for you more, but instead I sort of pushed you away. I hung out with my teammates and I let you do your own thing. And I never really told you why—but it's because I was worried if you hung out with me and my friends, they'd try to hook up with you, and I knew I wouldn't be able to handle that. But I should've explained. It all seems so stupid now, and I'm sorry."

"I love you too," I say and swallow back the lump in my throat. There are so many things I need to tell him, but I don't—not yet. If I think too hard about my mom, about my dad, about everything that today means, I'll crumble. And we don't have the luxury of falling apart yet. Soon, maybe, but not yet. So I retreat into the teasing we've grown used to, saving the heartfelt confessions for another time. "And you were right to keep your friends away. Carter and I hooked up under the bleachers at homecoming this year, and we made a pact promising not to tell you."

His arms drop away immediately. “You what?”

Well, that ended that. “Relax, Mace. It didn’t mean anything.”

“That’s even worse! I’m going to—”

“You can kill him after we get out of this mess. Deal?”

“Deal.”

We shake on it. When our palms snap apart, we each slide our hands back and wiggle our fingers through the air, then slam our fists together before recoiling in a mock explosion. It’s our old mischief-making handshake and we haven’t broken it out in years, but somehow it felt right.

I grin at my big brother.

He smiles back.

For a brief moment, everything is right in the world.

Then a hoarse voice interrupts the silence. “Mace?”

“Dave!” My brother turns on his heels and lunges toward the sound.

“Oh my God, Dave!” I run after Mace. “I didn’t know you were down here.”

He’s been my brother’s best friend since grade school, and he’s like a second sibling to me. I’ve known him for as long as I can remember.

“Alanna?” He coughs, a wet sound that makes my blood run cold.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

We rush toward the voice and spot Dave in the cell three doors down. Blood stains his shirt and seeps through a bandage hastily wrapped around his arm. His normally pale skin is ashen. Even the freckles smattering his Irish cheeks are sickly-looking and pallid.

“I didn’t know what happened to you,” Mace whispers. All his joy from moments ago is gone. He kneels and reaches through the bars for his friend. Something about the darkness in his eyes, demons I’ve never seen there before, makes me shudder.

I wonder if Dave’s screams echoed across these walls.

I wonder how long Mace was forced to listen.

“Erick, I have to help them,” I whisper. Mace turns, eying me strangely. Dave is too delirious to even notice. He hasn’t moved from his cramped position against the stone floor. I scan the rest of the room, gaze pausing on each of the ten other cells, all filled with people from my world. Some are strangers, some are acquaintances, some are friends, but I don’t think the distinction should matter. They’re all brothers or sisters or daughters or sons. They’re all humans, and they all need my help. “Please,

Erick. Please. I won't be able to live with myself if I just leave them here to rot."

The ring ignites.

One by one, the bars begin to melt. The prisoners emerge, some weak and some strong, all haggard and looking as though they've been through hell. The process is slow, and with each passing second, I grow more acutely aware of the timer in the back of my mind working its way toward zero. I've been down here a long time, too long maybe.

"We have to go. Now."

A dozen faces watch me, waiting for instruction. I'm not sure how I became their hero, but it shines in their eyes—an unyielding faith in my ability to set them free. The pressure makes my shoulders writhe with the newfound weight, but there's no going back now.

We'll never make it to the fountain.

Mace and I, alone? Yeah, maybe we had a shot. But a dozen prisoners and me, their not-so-fearless leader, charging through the halls and making a run for the gardens? Even with Cyrus distracting him, the king is bound to notice.

I have to think fast.

I have to adjust.

I dart my gaze around the room, searching for inspiration. The floor glistens with moisture, reflecting the golden orb still shining above my head.

Water.

The stones are wet.

I strain my ears, shushing everyone else, and listen. There—I hear it. A trickle. I chase the sound, motioning for everyone to wait. In the far corner of the room, there's a shallow puddle, maybe two feet by two feet, extending around a clogged drain. I hope it's enough. I stare at the surface, willing it to warp. The water glimmers, flashing a rainbow sheen, before a familiar face comes into view.

Erick doesn't say anything. He just nods. I think we're having the same thought—if they hear him speak, someone might start screaming. There's only so much magic these people can take before they lose it. Heck, I don't blame them. Melting the bars was one thing—it was their only chance for freedom. But talking water and magic portals? That might be too much to handle. Instead, I glance over my shoulder.

“Mace, come here. I think I found something.”

He furrows his brows but doesn't protest as he quickly crosses the space.

“Look.”

I motion toward the puddle and casually step behind him. His entire body jerks when he sees Erick's face reflected back. Before he has a second to speak, I shove him, the same way Erick shoved me. The second his toe touches the water, his entire body vanishes.

Behind me, everyone gasps.

“Don't worry, I meant to do that,” I hastily explain as I spin around. “It's the only way out of this mess. I know you have no reason to trust me, or magic really, but if you want to live, you don't have a choice. We're running out of time. So, who's next?”

No one moves.

They watch me fearfully, with hesitation carved into the grooves of their faces, until Dave stumbles forward. I catch him before he falls and help him to the water. By the time he disappears within its depths, there's a line behind me. I guide them, one by one, into the gateway, until there's five people left, then four, then three, then —

My body freezes.

I urge my muscles to move. I try to turn my shoulders or twist my head or motion with my fingers, but every inch of me is stuck. I stand straight, but it's not me. I'm a puppet dangling from invisible strings, with no control over myself. My torso spins and my head follows, forcing my gaze onto the three people rigid as statues behind me. I read the terror in their eyes, but their expressions are blank. I know exactly what it means.

The king found us.

Time's up.

The blood-stone scorches. Fire snakes out like a dragon's tongue, searching for a foe to eat. But it's too late. Before my eyes—*boom, boom, boom*—three bodies explode. Droplets splash my face. Through my lips, which are stuck open, I taste iron on my tongue. Disgust coils in my stomach. A scream tears through my mind. I lash out with my thoughts, trying anything to fight the foreign force that's taken hold, but I can't dislodge it. In the silence, I swear I hear laughter echo across my awareness, deep and rich and familiar.

Stomping boots thunder down the hall. A troop of warriors in black burst into the room. Erick forms a wall of fire to keep them away, but they don't stop. They can't, I realize, as two of the men march forward, directly into the flames. It's not the sight of them, but their silence that sends chills down my arms. Their skin blackens and boils, yet they don't scream. Because they can't—their king has silenced them.

Both men fall before they reach me.

Their bodies smoke as they hit the ground.

For a moment, I think I've won. No other warriors step forward. They just watch me through the inferno, waiting for instruction. If I can step back, the water is right behind me, hardly an inch away. I just need to touch it, only for an instant. I just need to...

My finger twitches.

It's not by my command.

My hands lift, moving toward each other. I can't do anything but stare as my palms arch closer and closer together. Horror sends my pulse racing.

No.

No.

No.

I know what he's planning. I know what he's going to do even before my fingers fasten around the ring and pull. The clang of metal striking stone reverberates like a bullet shooting out the barrel of a gun, sending shock waves.

The fire winks out.

My connection to Erick is gone.

I'm alone in a foreign world, and there's no magic left to save me.

Eleven

The warriors carry my unresponsive body to a cell in another room and deposit me inside. I'm cold and wet. The ground beneath me is rough and hard. It's so dark I can't see. The only thing I hear is the chattering of my own teeth. And yet, I'm relieved.

Because I'm alive.

And the second I was thrown behind bars, the king released his magical hold over me.

Back in my own skin, I pull my knees into my chest and hug them close. The tears I cry are my tears. The shakes that rack my frame come from my own despair. There's a small comfort in knowing I'm in control of myself again, despite the fears simmering to the surface.

Why didn't he kill me?

What does he want with me?

How am I going to get out of here without Erick's help?

The questions circle round and round as the hours pass, a vortex I can't escape. Eventually, I must fall into an exhausted, dreamless sleep, because I jolt awake as the latch on my prison clanks open.

Two warriors in black step inside and haul me to my feet. My legs wobble but I force them to steady as I shrug the hands from my arms. If I'm walking to my death, I'm going to do it by myself, with my head held high. The warriors let me follow them down the halls and up a few sets of stairs. More men fall in line behind us, preventing any chance of making a run for it. With my hands in chains, I don't think I'd get very far anyway.

Before long, we emerge into the sunlit palace. I wince against the sudden brightness, blinking until the pain clears. The gold is so brilliant, the murals so vivid, it stuns the senses. For a moment, I understand why in ancient times, people believed their kings were gods. But I know the person I'm about to face is just a man. Sure, he has magic that's so powerful I have

no idea how to fight back, but he's still a man—which means he has a weakness, if I can only find it.

The throne room is the same as I remember, covered in gilt and glittering mosaics. As I walk along the blood-red runner stretching down the center of the room, I can't help but realize I'm the only thing out of place. The king rests on his throne, flesh just as rotten as the day before, but his silks and jewels and studded crown label him at home. Cyrus stands by his side, hands clasped behind his back, in billowing white pants. His jacket is stitched with golden embroidery and decorated by an array of precious stones. I try to meet his gaze, but his face is stoic as he studies the patterns on the tiled floor beneath his feet. Warriors in black stand in every corner of the room, faces blank, bodies at the ready, steeped with loyalty.

And then there's me.

The blue silk clothes Erick whipped up are streaked with patches of dirt and splatters of blood. They cling to my skin, which is still wet with the dampness of the underground mixed with a little bit of sweat. My bared arms are scratched. My hair is undone. But most of all, my face is defiant, which is something I don't think this king often sees.

"Curious how much can change in a day," he booms. I don't flinch. "Yesterday, you were a princess. Today, you're our prisoner. Yesterday, you had magic. Today, you're at our mercy. Yesterday, you spun a web of lies. Today, we demand the truth. Who are you? Who sent you? And how did you come upon this ring?"

The king opens his palm, revealing my ring with Erick's blood-ruby. I don't look directly at it and I try to keep my expression blank, but even still, I bet King Jaffa can sense the way my heartbeat spikes. I lift my chin and meet his stare, refusing to give anything away.

He sighs. "Very well."

The next thing I know, my scream echoes across the room. The pain is so intense, it takes a moment for me to even realize what's happened. One second, I was standing my ground. And the next, I'd fallen to my knees, clutching my hand to my chest. I glance to my left pointer finger, which is bent backward, unnaturally flat against the topside of my hand, and whimper. There's nothing I can do. The king releases his magic and my finger flops forward, useless and aching. The burn scratches up my arm, drying my throat, but I grit my teeth and stand back up. I won't let him win this game.

“We don’t want to hurt you, but we will. Answer our questions, or next time it will be your leg that snaps in half, or maybe your arm that simply shatters into dust.”

I glance toward Cyrus.

His expression is unreadable. Those usually warm eyes appear black, and he won’t meet my gaze. I open my lips to whisper, *please*, but a foreign command clamps my throat and stills my vocal cords, so not a sound comes out.

I look back to the king.

“Who are you?” he asks again.

The grip on my throat loosens, giving me just enough air to answer. “Alanna.”

“Where are you from?”

“A different world.”

“Why are you here?”

“To save my brother. Your warriors grabbed him off the street yesterday and locked him in your dungeon. That’s the only reason I lied—I needed a way into your palace to save him.”

The king narrows his eyes, staring me down. He lifts his other arm to pick the ring up from his palm, studying it. His skin squelches with each movement, and puss oozes from the cracks around his knuckles. I fight the vomit roiling in my gut and try to think of a cover story, because I have no doubt which question is coming next.

“Where did you get this ring?”

If I lie, he might blow me up. But if I tell the truth, everyone I delivered to Erick last night will be in danger—including Mace. Everything I went through would be for nothing.

“I found it.”

My hands rise to my face. One covers my lips and the other clamps my nostrils, so I can’t breathe. After about thirty seconds, my chest starts to convulse. Black spots invade my vision and I drop to my knees, unable to stop shaking.

No one steps forward to help.

Not even Cyrus.

Just when I think I might pass out, my hands fall away and I’m able to gasp in a breath, filling up my aching lungs. I cough a few times, waiting for the burn to subside. Then I meet King Jaffa’s gaze.

“Where did you get this ring?” he asks again, unaffected.

“I wasn’t lying,” I croak, voice hoarse and choppy. “When the worlds merged, I was in my house. Half of it was ripped away, and on the other side, there was a bustling street covered in dust. I saw the ring on the ground and grabbed it. I don’t even know why. Because it was pretty? Because I thought it was expensive? Everything was so chaotic—I don’t really remember. But the second I slipped it over my finger, the magic was there. When people saw me on the ground, I made a wish to blend in, and my clothes changed. When they started talking, I made a wish to understand, and just like that, I could speak your language. When I wished to find my brother, the ring guided me to him. I didn’t question it, not when it was saving me.”

The king rolls the ring between his fingers. I’m not sure if he believes me, but I know he’s curious—and that curiosity is the only thing keeping me alive.

“Prince Cyrus tried on this ring, and the magic wouldn’t come. Our warriors tried on this ring, and the magic wouldn’t come. Our servants tried on this ring, and the magic wouldn’t come. And yet, for you, a girl from another world, it responds.” King Jaffa’s gaze nails me to the spot. “Why?”

Because Erick thinks you guys are all total jerks.

I don’t say that, obviously.

“I—I think it took my blood.” The fib rolls from my lips, surprising even me, but I go with it. Who knew that deep in my subconscious there was a pathological liar just waiting to be unleashed? “I thought it was a diamond at first, but when I put the ring on, it pricked me and turned red.”

The king raises his brows. When he moves, the open wounds carved into his skin ooze. I wonder if it’s painful, this curse, or if it’s like the pain I felt when Erick channeled his magic through me—somehow removed. The king seems unbothered, but he could just be used to it after so many years.

“Then it seems we’re at a bit of an impasse,” the king finally says, closing his fist around the ring and sealing my fate. “We can control your body, but not your thoughts, and we’re living proof that magic is a power of the mind. If we return this ring to you, there’s nothing to prevent you from using it against us. And though we could offer great fortune and even greater security, you’ve already proven eager to throw those things away. We had hoped an alliance might be formed, but now, with the trust so broken between us...”

I recoil, bracing for impact.

I know what comes next—*bam*.

Will it hurt? Will I feel it? Will I see my parents on the other side? A million thoughts rush through my head, memories and dreams—all the things I'll never get to experience and all the things I'm grateful I already have. My mind pauses on one specific morning when I was seven and Mace was nine. We'd been begging our parents for a dog for months, and we both knew that if it was ever going to happen, Christmas would be the day. I'd slept in Mace's room the night before. I still believed in Santa and we spent the entire night—well, what felt like the entire night but was probably really only a little while—staring out the window, searching for the red spark of Rudolph's nose in the sky. Looking back, I know Mace didn't believe anymore, but he pretended he did for me. We woke up at the crack of dawn the next day and ran into our parents' room to jump onto their bed, waking them up. We were so excited. I remember ripping through my gifts and searching the pile for a box with holes, anything that moved. When Mace and I were done opening presents, we were so defeated. There was no dog. All that good behavior, all that begging and pleading, it was for nothing.

And then we heard a bark.

We looked at each other, eyes wide. Then we looked at our parents, who were grinning these goofy smiles. Then we ran. In the back corner of the kitchen, a tiny little fluff of black-and-white fur waited in a crate. I screamed. Mace hollered. Our parents made us calm down before they let the puppy out. He immediately plopped onto my lap and started licking my face—Mace was so jealous. We chose the name Oreo together. Honestly, I think it was the happiest I've ever been in my life.

I hold onto that childlike joy as I brace for my death. Maybe it'll bring me good luck in the next life. Or maybe I just want my last few moments to be brighter than all the rest.

My heart constricts.

My muscles tighten.

I can almost feel the tingle of magic as it sinks beneath my skin.

"Father, wait," Cyrus interrupts, stepping in front of the throne—stepping between us. I suck in a breath, but there's a wary edge to my relief, because he still won't look at me. He's acting as if we're strangers, aloof and unconcerned. Even his voice rings hollow.

I thought I knew who he was, but what if I was wrong? What if I was swept up in his kiss and his words? He wouldn't be the first boy to whisper sweet nothings with ulterior motives in mind. He admitted that his father sent him last night. Maybe this was all part of a plan to access my magic. Come to think of it, how did the king know the magic was in my ring? Cyrus was the only one who I told. And yet, King Jaffa didn't know who I really was. His son could've just as easily informed him of that fact.

What angle is the prince playing?

What is he really after?

"Let's not act rashly," Cyrus continues, voice a warm vibrato. It brings a shiver to my skin, because he sounds different, practiced—not raw and honest like he was the night before. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad one. Which person was fake? Which was real? The prince before me or the prince in the night? "The ring still holds great power—power we won't be able to access if she's dead. With time, maybe we can learn to trust one another. With time, maybe an alliance can be built. Let me speak to her."

The king exhales. A long second passes before he motions with his finger, giving his son permission to approach me. Cyrus takes the stairs one step at a time, in no hurry. I'm not sure what to do, but I can't help but stare as he makes his way closer. His gaze is glued to the rug beneath our feet. I will him to look up, to meet my eyes, but he won't.

My heart pounds, matching the slow pace of his feet.

Left. Then right. Then left. Then right.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Will he save me? Will he doom me? Was I wrong to trust a stranger from a strange place? Was I right to believe there was compassion in his soul?

"Alanna." Cyrus stops before me, still focused on the ground. His fingers wrap around my palms, careful to avoid the spot his father injured. His touch is warm and comforting, and despite all my doubts, I can't help how his presence soothes my fears. "I made a promise to you last night, and I intend to keep it. I hope you'll do the same."

Is he talking about a betrothal? Is he lying for his father's sake?

Or is he talking about the words we sealed with a kiss?

I don't know. I can't tell.

Look at me, I want to say.

Look at me.

As though he hears, those warm brown eyes finally glance up, capturing my gaze. I want to search them for answers, but before I have a chance, Cyrus looks down, then up, then down again. When he meets my gaze for a third time, his eyes are narrowed, silently pleading with me to understand. I don't want to look away, but I get the message, and drop my gaze.

A small silver ring with a blood-red stone sits on Cyrus's palm.

I jerk my head up. He nods.

Yes, that is my ring. Yes, he stole it sometime in the night. Yes, the one his father holds is a fake. Yes, he risked everything for me. Yes, he is the person I always thought he was.

All the answers I need are written across his face.

Before anyone else in the room has time to notice the exchange, Cyrus, immune to his father's power and free from that magical gaze, slips the ring around my finger. As soon as it slides into place, a familiar burn scorches my skin, and then all hell breaks loose.

Twelve

The magic erupts with the violence of a volcano, furiously shooting fire in an arc around Cyrus and me before anyone has time to react. Winds blow through the open windows, whipping the flames and our clothes. A blazing tornado spins around the throne room. In its center, we hold hands, oddly separate from the chaos.

“You must leave. Now,” Cyrus says, even as he squeezes my fingers.

“What about you?” I shake my head. “What will your father do to you?”

“Don’t worry about me,” he murmurs as the right side of his lip lifts. I’m going to miss that lopsided grin. “I’m the heir, remember? His magic can’t touch me.”

“His warriors can.”

“Go,” he pleads, ignoring me. “Please, go.”

“I—I don’t even know how.” There’s no puddle of water nearby. No portal for me to jump through. I have Erick’s magic, but I’m still trapped. “I —”

My throat clamps shut.

Cyrus must see in my eyes that the silencing wasn’t of my own doing. His father can’t stop the magic from shooting out of the ring while it’s still in contact with my skin, but he can do something, and we both know what that something is. Cyrus immediately tightens his grip on my hands. When they start to move closer together, he uses all his strength to keep them apart. It’s useless. My fingers rip free from his. They come together. They grip the ring and start to pull—

Something crashes with a thunderous boom, shaking the ground beneath our feet.

Shouts fill the air.

The prince’s eyes roll into the back of his head and he falls.

“Cyrus!”

I drop to my knees beside him and gently cup his cheek. The king's magic has fled my body. The ring on my finger no longer burns. I don't see fire out of the corner of my eye, nor do I hear howling winds, but I'm too absorbed in the prince to disentangle what that means. His entire body trembles, subtly at first, and then so roughly he starts flailing, body half on tile and half on rug. His skull *snaps* loudly against the hard floor. I try to hold his shoulders down, but it's no use. I'm not strong enough to keep him still.

"Cyrus!"

I jerk my head up in search of help, and that's when I see the iron chandelier imbedded in the floor where the throne once sat. I gasp. Splinters of wood kaleidoscope around the area, flecked with red and gold. A scarlet pool drips down the tile steps. There are chunks of—of— I look away, back toward Cyrus, because I really don't want to know what those gory chunks are. But I do know one thing. He's not having a seizure.

It's the magic.

And the curse.

They're sinking into his skin and laying claim to his body now that his father is dead.

"Oh, Cyrus. No..." I run my fingers through his soft black hair. His body is still, chest rising and falling in a smooth rhythm, as though in sleep. What will he think of me when he wakes up? Erick's magic might have killed the king, but I'm the reason he's dead. I'm the reason all of Cyrus's greatest fears have been realized. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean— I'm so sorry."

The jangle of metal catches my attention, then the shuffle of boots and the ring of a sword sliding free of its scabbard. I know what it is before I even lift my head—the warriors in black. They step out from their stations around the throne room, weapons drawn, and close in. The gem on my finger heats with magic.

"No, Erick," I whisper, shaking my head. "I don't want to hurt anyone else."

There's been too much violence already, and these men are just trying to protect their prince. In their eyes, I'm a liar and a usurper, and I don't blame them for wanting me dead. I glance down at Cyrus, brushing my thumb over his cheek. He's their king now. They'll protect him. They'll obey him. The people will love him—I know they will. He'll be different

from his father. He'll keep his promise. His reign will be a new dawn in Bahagar—one I can't be a part of.

I need to go.

I belong with Mace.

We'll find a new home together.

"Get me out of here, Erick," I murmur as the warriors continue their slow approach, wary of me and of my supposed magic. I hold my hands up in peace, then stand and back away from Cyrus. A strong breeze gusts in from the window, ruffling my hair before spooling underneath the small rug at the foot of the dais. The tasseled edges lift slowly off the ground. Soon, the whole carpet floats two feet above the tile, hovering there, waiting.

Cyrus groans.

He blinks and starts to move.

Just like that, my fragile moment of peace with the warriors in black disintegrates. They charge, buoyed by the sight of their new king coming back to life. To my left, one of them pulls out a dagger and throws it. I do a back handspring to dodge the knife. By the time I return to standing, all the warriors in the room are still. They're frozen in place midrun with swords held high or daggers about to fly. It's as though time has simply stopped. But I know that's not what happened even before Cyrus slowly turns around.

The first thing I notice is the cut on his cheek. It wasn't there a few minutes ago—it's fresh. A single bead of blood leaks out and drips down the side of his face, then hangs on the edge of his jaw before dropping silently to the floor.

The curse.

Cyrus is using his magic, and in return, the magic is hurting him, just like it did his father, and his father before him, back and back and back for as long as his family has been in power. When will it end?

He wipes his cheek and nudges his chin toward the window. "Go, Alanna."

I hate the desolate edge to his voice, as though he's lost in the middle of a vast desert and all of the dreams he dared to dream were nothing more than a mirage—gone in a blink, or worse, never even there to begin with. I meet his eyes and they're black. All the joy I'd seen shining within them has vanished, leaving shame and horror behind.

"Just go," Cyrus softly pleads.

I glance over my shoulder toward the carpet hovering invitingly behind me, but I can't cross the distance, not after looking into my prince's eyes and seeing the destruction I've inadvertently caused. He doesn't want this magic or his birthright. Using it, being here, taking the throne—it will kill the man I've come to know. I can't let that happen.

"Come with me."

I turn back around and Cyrus eyes me strangely, as though he doesn't understand what I just said. But he does—that little spark of hope burning in his irises tells me so.

"Come with me," I repeat, louder, and step toward him to offer my hand.

Cyrus drops his gaze to my fingers, then casts it around the room, glancing at his frozen warriors, before settling on the view out of the window, where the flaxen skyline of his city stretches into the horizon. "I can't abandon my people. Not now. They need me and the protection I can provide."

"You don't need to sell your soul to save them." I close the distance and wrap my fingers around his. Cyrus flinches, but then his face shifts slowly toward me as though pulled by a yearning outside of his control. There's a war alive in his eyes. "The man who gave me this ring, maybe he can help you. Maybe he can remove your magic and your curse. And when he's done, you can come back and be the king you always wanted to be. A king who rules through love, not force. The king they deserve. You don't have to choose between yourself and your people—you can choose both."

Cyrus closes his eyes as his entire face tightens with indecision. The cut on his cheek reopens and another drop of blood slips free. With his face tilted to the side like that, the bead rolls down his skin and disappears inside the corner of his mouth. He opens his eyes.

"Do you really think he could help me?"

I shrug. "It's worth a try."

"Without the magic, Bahagar will be vulnerable."

He darts his gaze out the window again, but I tug on his arm, forcing him to look at me.

"If history class taught me anything, it's that most people would rather be vulnerable and free than safe inside their prisons. Besides, it's a whole new world out there. Maybe a little change will do your city good. Where I come from, there are no kings and queens. The people choose their own

leaders. We have a say, a voice. Maybe it's time for the people of Bahagar to be heard. Maybe without magic, they'll finally have a ruler who will listen."

Cyrus frowns and furrows his brows.

Giving him space to think, I step back until the wind whips against my ankles and my calves touch the rug. Not going to lie—I'm a little nervous to sit down. Flying carpets have always been more of a storybook sort of thing to me, but in the grand scheme of the past two days, this is just par for the course. And I need to be strong for him. So I sit and fold my legs, sucking in a breath as the rug dips beneath my weight and then picks back up, bobbing in midair.

"Do you trust me, Cyrus?"

"Yes." He stares into my eyes.

"Then come with me," I say and pat the empty space by my side.

He hesitates. The tension in the room swells, as though the walls themselves are breathing deep with anticipation, and then it bursts. In one swift motion, Cyrus marches across the room and takes the open seat beside me. The second he sits down, the carpet launches into motion, surging forward. With a yelp, I grab onto Cyrus's arm to keep from falling. He's got a little more sense and grabs the tassels at the front to stop us both from toppling over the edge. Behind us, I hear the clang of motion as Cyrus releases his hold on the magic. If all goes well, he'll never need to touch that evil again.

We soar out the large open window and over the balcony, then bank left toward the garden. The air is crisp. The sky is blue. And even though the world I knew has ended, I feel like my life is only just beginning, especially as a set of warm fingers laces through mine and holds me so tight it's as if they never want to let go.

With Erick's magic guiding the way, the carpet flies to the fountain and then stops to hover a few feet above the water, which splashes and ripples with the force of the wind keeping us aloft. Through the chaos, I spot a familiar rainbow sheen along the choppy surface. Even though I can't see Erick's face, I know he's there. I know he's waiting.

"I think we have to jump," I shout over the whipping gales.

"What?"

I meet Cyrus's wide eyes, understanding in an instant that his question wasn't because he didn't hear me—it's because he thinks I'm insane. And

look, I get it—travel via secret water portal isn't exactly the norm—but you'd think by now he'd trust me. And it's not *that* far down. Using my superior balancing skills, which have been perfected through years of training, I carefully ease to my feet and then tug Cyrus up with me.

“On the count of three,” I prompt, not giving him the chance to say no as I clutch his hand in a viselike grip. I'll pull him over the edge if I have to. “One.”

Cyrus sighs and shrugs his brows, as though to say, *Here goes nothing*. “Two.”

“Three.”

Together, we leap into the unknown.

Thirteen

I open my eyes to soft golden light mixed with deep shadow. The sweet scent of flowers drifts into my nose, and beneath my palms, I feel the supple brush of grass.

“Cyrus! Erick!”

“You’re a little late,” a teasing voice greets. “And I see you brought a stowaway.”

“I had to,” I say as I roll over and meet Erick’s cobalt eyes. They’re even bluer than I remembered. “Where is he?”

“Over there.” Erick nudges his head to the left where Cyrus is easing to a seated position on the grass. He rubs his head, confused as he takes in the stalactites overhead, the sprawling meadow, the deep lake. I notice that Erick sealed the opening I fell through while I was gone, so we’re completely hidden from the outside world.

“What is this place?”

I ignore Cyrus. Sue me, but there are slightly more pressing concerns. “Where’s Mace? And Dave? And everyone else I sent through last night?”

“Your brother is sleeping,” Erick explains, this time motioning in the opposite direction, to where Mace is out cold by the grassy edge of the pond. “And the rest I sent home. Mason wanted to wait for you before leaving.”

He looks so peaceful I don’t want to wake him. Instead, I turn back to the other two men in my life—which really isn’t something I ever thought I’d say. One complicated boy would be more than enough.

“Cyrus, this is Erick. He gave me the ring. It’s his magic I’ve been using. And he’s the person who I think might be able to break your curse. Erick, this is Prince Cyrus of Bahagar.” I play up the title in a bit of a teasing voice, but then turn serious. “Please, tell me you can help him.”

Cyrus bows his head in formal greeting.

Erick doesn't move. He sweeps his gaze over Cyrus's frame, examining him from head to toe with an expression I don't quite understand—one that hovers somewhere between sympathy and suspicion. "Tell me plainly, Prince Cyrus, what is your magic and what is your curse?"

Cyrus curls his fingers into fists, but I know the discomfort passing over his features isn't directed at Erick—it's self-loathing, a disgust at the evil hiding beneath his skin. "My magic is to have complete power over other people's bodies, and my curse is to lose power over my own."

Erick steps closer. "Do you know why your magic is cursed, Prince Cyrus?"

"All magic is cursed." Cyrus furrows his brow.

"No, it's not," Erick says sadly and lifts his palm. Glittering sparks dance between his fingers, then disappear. He sighs. "Long ago, in a world now forgotten with time, the magic was free, invisible and ever present, like the air. One day, humans found a way to tap into that power using a binding spell they were never supposed to learn. In their never-ending quest for dominance, they ripped the magic from the earth and sealed it to their flesh instead. Inch by inch, the magic was sucked from the soil, from the creatures whose lives depended on it, from the ground and the sky. The faerie priestesses, who were guardians of the natural realm, knew that with their greed, the humans would destroy us all. So the priestesses sacrificed their lives and their power to lay a spell on mankind. They bound the stolen magic to human bloodlines and sealed that union with a curse, limiting the power and providing balance. *That* is why you have a curse, Prince Cyrus. Because your magic never belonged to you in the first place."

Cyrus swallows, but doesn't say a word.

I glance at Erick, wondering how he knows all this stuff. He told me part of that story before, when I first landed in his cave, but I was too confused and overwhelmed to question how he knows so much. Why is he stuck in this cavern? Why does he remember an ancient world that everyone else forgot? Why do I get the sense that he was there—that he saw the destruction with his own two eyes?

"I cannot remove the curse without also removing the magic," Erick says and steps closer to Cyrus, silently asking permission.

"I know."

"It might hurt."

"I don't care."

“You must be absolutely sure and absolutely willing for there to be any hope of success.”

“I am.”

“Very well,” Erick murmurs. “Give me your hand.”

Cyrus offers his palm, and before I can blink, an invisible knife slashes down the center of his olive skin, slicing it open. A red puddle pools. The only visible sign of his discomfort is the wrinkle that appears on his forehead. I’m not entirely sure what’s going on, but Erick’s gotten me this far. I have no reason not to trust him, especially when he lifts his hand and gashes it in kind. Blood glistens on his palm, oozing from the wound, but it’s not red, much to my surprise. It’s creamy, almost like a salmon pink, laced with the glittering spark of magic.

What is he?

I’d assumed human, but now I’m not so sure.

I don’t have time to wonder. As soon as Erick presses his hand to Cyrus’s, a maelstrom of magic erupts, sweeping across the cavern like an electric storm. Little shocks pepper my exposed skin. The air sparks. Winds spin around us, laced with colorful currents, all glowing and glimmering. While I’m thrown off balance, struggling to remain on my feet, Cyrus and Erick stand in the center, unaffected by the gale. Both their hands are clasped now. Their eyes are closed and their heads arch, spines bending back until their arms are fully extended, locked together by fused fingers. All the flowers in the field begin to radiate an effervescent light, illuminating the top of the cavern in a rainbow sheen.

“Is this supposed to be happening?” I shout into the din. My words are either lost to chaos or ignored. I’m not sure which.

A beam of light shoots up from the dirt, enshrouding Erick and Cyrus in bright silver. I can just barely make out their silhouettes within the luminescent haze. They pull farther and farther apart. The magical winds blow harder and harder. My body is tossed this way and that, as though I’m stuck in the center of a kaleidoscope and some jerk won’t stop turning it round and round. I’m stumbling in a spectral vortex, losing sense of left or right or up or down. All the colors spot my vision, distorting my sense of reality. Then a white light flashes, steals my sight, and knocks me to the ground.

When I open my eyes, it’s done.

The magic is gone—the storm, the colors, the sparks. Erick stands alone in the center of the meadow. He wipes his hand on his pants and I jump to my feet.

“Where’s—” I cut off when I see Cyrus lying on the ground and run to him. After falling to my knees, I drop my head against his chest, relieved to hear the strong thud of a heartbeat. “Is he okay? Did you take the curse? What happened?”

“He’ll be fine,” Erick soothes and squats beside me. “He needs rest.”

“What was that?” I ask, turning to Erick. “That— That—” I wave my fingers through the air, struggling to find the words. “I mean, that was crazy.”

Erick shrugs. “That was free magic. Wild, untamed, like it was meant to be.”

“That was inside of Cyrus?” I shiver, trying to imagine holding a power like that beneath my skin. “Where did it go now that it’s not in him?”

“Back to the sky, to the sea, to the creature it originally belonged to. I can’t say, but the magic knows where it’s supposed to be. It has a mind of its own—at least, I like to think it does.”

I glance back toward Cyrus and gently skim my fingers over his cheeks, then shift them through his hair. Even with his eyes closed, I can already tell there’s a peace about him I’ve never seen. His lips are plush, not at all strained. His skin is smooth, unmarred by concerned wrinkles. His chest rises and falls in long even breaths. I look back to Erick.

“How did you know what to do?”

“I knew because...” He trails off and glances around the meadow. There’s something somber in his eyes. When he turns back to me, his mouth is twisted in a lopsided smile, but it’s not humor or joy written across his face. It’s nostalgia and regret. “Because I am every curse, and every curse lives in me.”

I frown and furrow my brows. “I don’t—”

“Do you know what happens to faeries when they die?” Erick interrupts. I shake my head. He cups a blossoming flower in his palm and rubs his thumb over one of the petals, then turns back to me. “They live forever as flowers, until their next lives begin.”

My eyes go wide as I glance at the field of blooms surrounding us, stretching across the cave and disappearing into the shadows, extending far

beyond the space that I can see. What's he trying to tell me? Are these faeries? Was he one of them?

"I don't understand."

"Sweet girl," Erick murmurs as he wraps his fingers around mine. Our gazes meet and hold as he raises my hand to his lips, then presses a gentle kiss to my skin. "You're not meant to."

The blue of his irises flickers, like a crystal refracting white light into a spectrum of color, until rainbows dance in the centers of his eyes. I've seen this before, when I first landed in the cave and he dove inside my mind. What's he doing? I try to tug my hand away, but he holds on tight. My stomach flips. My heart races. This is wrong. I don't like it. This is—

"Erick," I snap.

He doesn't let go. Instead, he sighs.

"You won't remember this, Alanna, but I want you to know that meeting you has been the most wonderful surprise I've had in nearly a thousand years. Thank you for giving me such a marvelous gift."

"Erick! Erick!"

I yank my arm, pulling and twisting and fighting with everything I have. But he's holding me with the viselike grip of a hunting trap, and I'm the prey clamped inside. There's nowhere to go, nowhere to run, as he lifts his other hand and presses it to my forehead.

As soon as his fingers touch my brow, I freeze.

I blink.

Everything goes fuzzy.

Where am I? What's happening?

I can't remember...

I don't...

I...

Epilogue

~ Erick ~

I shuffle through her thoughts, the same way I did the boy's and the same way I did her brother's, removing all knowledge of me, all awareness of my home, leaving crumbs behind. I weave new visions in, imagining them to life and fusing them to her mind, until they blend with her memories. When she wakes, Bahagar will be a distant dream, a phantom that sometimes visits in the night, but disappears at the first light of dawn. There will be no prince, no king, and no magic ring. There will be no cave and no devilishly handsome magical man waiting in the dark—that's me, in case you didn't realize.

Do try to keep up.

Alanna will remember her application to her climbing camp at Yosemite being denied. To ease the heaviness in her heart, her parents offered to fly her and her brother to New York. They planned to stay with her uncle in a place I believe she called Long Island, and while they were driving to his house, the earthquake struck. They were lost in an unfamiliar town. Everything was so chaotic. The little devices they call cell phones stopped working. They had to use maps to find her uncle's house. Along the way, they picked up a stray—a boy named Cyrus, who lost his family when the worlds merged. Alanna will remember how she felt the moment she first looked into his eyes, the trust that instantly burned to life inside her heart, how her soul sang when he stole a kiss in the night while Mason was asleep. The emotions will stay the same. It's just the why and the how that'll get a bit fuzzy.

But there's no way around it.

She can't know.

Not now—not when I'm so close to the end. I can't risk it.

Still though, I'll miss her charm, how she oozed that distinct conviction and naiveté of youth. It's been a long time since I've had a companion—dare I say a friend?

With a sigh, I pull my hand from her forehead and call a swell of wind, which billows beneath her body, catching her fall. The gusts carry her to the pond, where I lay her beside her brother, and then I do the same to Cyrus, so all three rest near the edge of the water. Looking at the glassy surface, I call her uncle's home to the forefront of my thoughts. I've been watching him for two days. He's kind with his children and gentle with his wife. If nothing else, there will be love waiting for Alanna when she wakes in this new world. There will be sorrow too, but such is the nature of life. You can't have one without the other.

The image of his front yard swirls to life.

I ease Mason into the water first. He rolls over and vanishes the second his finger touches the portal, then reappears on the grass reflected on the surface. Next I kneel beside Cyrus, the sad prince. He reminds me of myself in another life, full of beautiful dreams and so much love, with not a soul to share them with. Until, that is, a beautiful girl came along to turn his world upside down. Maybe I can give him what I never had, what we never had—a second chance. I push his shoulders, flipping him over, until he disappears and joins Mason on the other side. Then I turn to Alanna.

You wonderful girl.

I brush her dark brown hair from her cheek and tuck it behind her ear. I'll miss her hazel eyes, bright with inner spirit. They remind me of another set of green eyes, burned into my memories from a time long ago.

"Live," I whisper in her ear. "The road ahead will be tough and winding, so don't forget to live and love and laugh whenever you get the chance. The world will need it." I slip the ring from her finger and with a little bit of magic, fashion it into a necklace instead. "This was your mother's. It's the last thing you have of hers and you never take it off." After fastening the jewel around her neck, I sit back on my heels and brush my thumb along her cheek. "I'll be watching."

Then I roll her into the water and she disappears.

I watch all three of them wake on the grass a few minutes later, drowsy and unsure. A voice calls from somewhere beyond my vision.

“Alanna! Mason! What are you doing here?”

Their uncle charges down his front steps and wraps them in a hug.

“Didn’t Mom tell you we were coming for spring break?” Alanna frowns. Her mind is sharp, and I can see it fighting the memories I planted in her head, but after another second, the discomfort clears. “I don’t think it was supposed to be a surprise.”

“There was this earthquake and our taxi flipped,” Mason says slowly as he stands and presses a hand to his head. “It was wild. Everyone went completely postal and our phones stopped working. It took us an insane amount of time to get here from the airport.”

“I know,” their uncle says, the pain evident in his voice. I wiped the reality from their brains, and now he’ll be responsible for telling them that their entire world has changed. In the end, it’ll bring them closer together. At least, I hope it will. He turns to Cyrus. “Who’s this?”

Alanna laces her fingers through the former prince’s and pulls him toward her. “He’s with me.”

“My father...” Cyrus pauses at the word. A shadow passes over his irises, but he shakes it away. “Something fell on him during the earthquake. I—I’m alone. I don’t have anyone. I—”

“Come inside,” their uncle interrupts, putting a hand on Cyrus’s arm. He takes a moment to look at each of them, shoulders dipping with the weight of his new burden. But his lips purse with resolve, and there’s nothing but sympathy in his eyes. “Come inside, all of you, and have something to eat.”

I keep watching until they disappear inside the house, and then I wave my hand over the water, shifting the scene to the one I see every time I close my eyes—a crumbling stone wall held together by a vibrant stretch of climbing roses. It lives inside my heart and in my mind. It’s sewn into my soul. Those red petals thrum to the beat inside my chest. One can’t survive without the other.

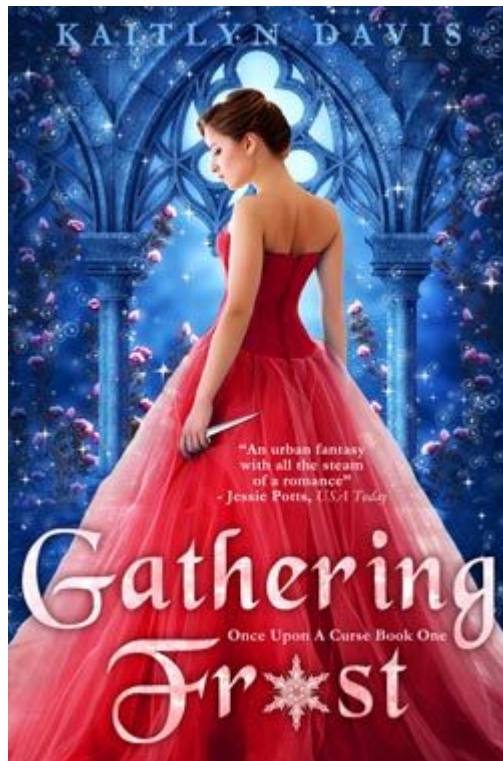
“Soon, my love,” I whisper, holding my palm so it hovers just above the surface, so close yet so far from what I covet. “Soon.”

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed my twisted take on *Aladdin*!

If you have a moment, please consider leaving a review. Even a few words can make a huge difference in someone deciding to give my book a chance.

If you want to learn more about the curse, the magic, the mysterious genie, Erick, and the earthquake that transformed the world, don't miss all four full-length books in the *Once Upon a Curse* series—each retelling a different fairy tale!

***Gathering Frost*, a twisted take on *Sleeping Beauty*!**
***Withering Rose*, a twisted take on *Beauty and the Beast*!**
***Chasing Midnight*, a twisted take on *Cinderella*!**
***Parting Worlds*, a twisted take on *The Little Mermaid*!**



Keep reading for a preview of the first chapter of *Gathering Frost*!

One

The world ended on a Saturday in spring. Beautiful. Sunny. The sort of afternoon that pulled New Yorkers from their hibernation, urging them to shed their floor-length coats and stiletto boots, to let the sun kiss their pale skin once more.

When the earthquake began, my mother and I were in Central Park.

“Pedal!” I remember her shouting. “Pedal!”

And I did. My little legs pumped in circles, my heart lifted as I felt her fingers release the bike, and suddenly I was riding on my own. For the first time. The breeze whipped against my grinning cheeks, stinging my eyes.

But then the ground shook. The earth began to tremble. And I had no hope. In a flash, I was on the ground, sandwiched against the concrete as screams rose around me. Darkness stole my vision as my mother’s arms encircled me and hugged me closer. Teeth chattering, I tried to be strong, but tears leaked from my eyes, the reaction of a baby. Shame burned my chest.

Time passed but my young mind had lost count. Minutes. Hours. I still don’t really know. But when the ground stilled, I woke to a new world.

My mother was frozen with shock, so I pulled against her hold, straining to see. Over her shoulder to the south, I saw smoke and ash rise like clouds over my skyline. The trees looked gray and the sky washed out. Faint outlines of buildings were only just visible through the fog, a mix of skyscrapers still standing or leveled to the ground.

I looked at my mother. Her arms had fallen to her sides, completely limp. I’ll never forget the sight of her green eyes, pulled so taut I swore they were about to snap. Her lips were just slightly open.

“Mommy?”

But she didn’t hear. Something behind me had her so transfixed that even her only child, her little girl, couldn’t shake the alarm.

So I turned.

New York was gone.

As if a line were driven through the ground, we stood on one side with the past while our future rested a few feet away—a future that was backward in time.

Atop a hill, a giant castle rose from the ground, surrounded by green lawns where apartments used to stand. At its base sat stone houses with smoking chimneys, horses, carriages, carts, and people—people dressed in dull brown clothes looked at us just as we looked at them, confused and terrified.

And then she appeared.

Her red gown sparkled in the sun, cinching in at the waist and then expanding into a magnificent skirt that billowed in the breeze, brilliant against the dull backdrop. Silky white gloves encased her hands. Jewels dripped around her thin neck. Pins held her hair so that it curled elegantly down her back. And right above her forehead, a golden crown rested.

My gaze went straight to her.

She was a princess. I knew she'd save us. I'd seen it before, so many times, so many princesses saving the day.

I ran to her, crossing the threshold without hesitation as my mother screamed at me to come back. But my mom was an adult, and adults didn't believe in these things. I knew she'd see my side if I could just get the princess to help us.

She knelt as I approached. A wide inviting smile spread across her face just before she caught me in her arms.

"What's your name, child?" Her voice was warm. It soothed me, relaxed me, filled me with hope.

"Jade."

She brushed my bangs from my forehead, then kissed it softly.

"Would you like me to help you? To make all your fears go away?"

"Yes!" I wanted to run to my mom, to show her she didn't need to be afraid. The princess would help us. But I couldn't. Something stopped me.

A hand pressed against my chest and pricked my skin.

I looked up at the princess, struggling to break free of her hold, then a freeze snatched my heart, so cold that it burned. I tried to speak, but I was frozen. My limbs grew heavy. My lips felt fat. My vision started to spot.

“Don’t worry, little Jade. I’m just putting you to sleep for a little while. You’ll wake up soon.”

I did. In a cell with other frightened girls. But I never felt the same. Icy. That’s what some of us started calling it, this feeling as though our hearts won’t thaw. Even a fire doesn’t warm me. I’m hard. Frigid. Emotionless. Sometimes I think I must still be caught in a long dream.

But time has only made me tougher.

Now I know the princess by another name—Queen Deirdre, the Ice Queen.

And I wish I could say I was the hero of the story. A resister. A rebel. Someone who lived to bring an end to the queen who stole my childhood—my mother, my life, my very world.

But I’m not.

I’m not the good guy.

I’m the one who puts the good guys in their graves.

I hope you enjoyed this preview! *Gathering Frost* is available now!

Please head to my website for purchase links or more information.

www.KaitlynDavisBooks.com

About the Author



Bestselling author Kaitlyn Davis writes young adult fantasy novels under the name Kaitlyn Davis and contemporary romance novels under the name Kay Marie.

Always blessed with an overactive imagination, Kaitlyn has been writing ever since she picked up her first crayon and is overjoyed to share her work with the world. When she's not daydreaming, typing stories, or getting lost in fictional worlds, Kaitlyn can be found indulging in some puppy videos, watching a little too much television, or spending time with her family.

Join Kaitlyn's monthly newsletter for exclusive content, updates about her upcoming releases, book recommendations, and more!

bit.ly/KaitlynDavisNewsletter

Other ways to connect with Kaitlyn online:

Website:

KaitlynDavisBooks.com

Facebook:

[Facebook.com/KaitlynDavisBooks](https://www.facebook.com/KaitlynDavisBooks)

Instagram:

[@KaitlynDavisBooks](https://www.instagram.com/KaitlynDavisBooks)

Twitter:

[@DavisKaitlyn](https://twitter.com/DavisKaitlyn)

BookBub:

[@KaitlynDavis](https://www.bookbub.com/authors/KaitlynDavis)

Goodreads:

[Goodreads.com/Kaitlyn Davis](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/Kaitlyn_Davis)