Book One in The Soterians Series

RISING SHADOW

Jacquelyn Wheeler

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Jacquelyn Wheeler

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ISBN 978-0-9825160-0-3

For Drew

One evening by the campfire, an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.

"The battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, jealousy, regret, arrogance, self-pity, fear, resentment, inferiority, lies, and ego.

"The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, empathy, benevolence, truth, and compassion."

"Which wolf wins?" his grandson asked.

"The one you feed," the grandfather replied.

~ Old Cherokee Tale

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Chapter 1: Starting Over

New Year's Eve
Approach to the Golden Gate Bridge
Marin County, California

Suddenly, the road ahead of us was a mosaic of red brake lights, and traffic slowed to a stop. "What is this?" Rebecca shrieked as she hit the brakes.

"Traffic going into the city for New Year's Eve," I groaned. Traffic from Marin to San Francisco was notoriously bad on days like this.

"I bet they're waiting for it to peak before setting off the bombs," Michael said.

I rolled down the window. “I’m going to fly ahead and see what I can do. Try to get over into the right lane in case we need you to pull off.”

“Be careful, Ashlyn,” Rebecca said.

I crouched down, disappeared, and flew out of the window into the darkening sky. I shot over the sea of cars and into the tunnel, the roar of the traffic reverberating off the concrete walls.

I came out on the other side and saw the bridge looming ahead of me. On the approach, a construction truck was moving slowly through the traffic. I sped forward, closing the distance quickly. They were almost on the bridge—another minute and it would be too late. I took a deep breath and summoned fire in my core. It rose into my chest, spreading an intense heat

throughout my body until it erupted from my hands as a fireball that flew straight at the truck's rear tire.

* * *

Four Months Earlier
Berkeley, California

"No!" I screamed as I jolted awake. Panting, I looked around my tiny studio apartment. It was dark and quiet, except for the sound of the man snoring next door. I lay back and rubbed my eyes, trying to shake off the nightmare. It wasn't unusual for me to dream about fighting with my ex-boyfriend Todd. But this time I had hurled a fireball at him, engulfing him in flames. That was certainly a new twist.

I dragged myself into the shower and got ready for work. Only two more weeks, I muttered. The countdown had become

my mantra. I didn't feel like I could stand one more day in that store with the pushy customers and my insane boss, Lisa.

When I arrived at the store, Lisa was setting up a display. I could tell from the crazed look in her eye that one of her manic sub-personalities was at the helm that morning.

"Ashlyn, I need your help!" she said. "I'm thinking we can move more of these fountain pens if we have a real fountain. But I'm not sure how to work the pens into it."

Tentatively, I walked over to where she stood. She had torn apart the existing display, placed a fountain full of water and gravel in the middle of the floor, and stuck a bunch of pens in the gravel bed. They looked like dead sticks in a sad little pond.

She stood back, observing the results of her efforts, then threw her hands in the air. "Make it work, will you? Oh, and you

better hurry. We're opening in ten minutes, and I don't want customers to see this mess."

"I wouldn't worry about it. Customers don't often start trickling in for another hour."

"I don't recall asking for your opinion," she said archly, her deeply offended sub-personality making its first appearance of the day. She stomped off to call her husband and whine. Of all the characters in Lisa's psyche, I found that one the most trying.

As I started cleaning up the mess, the phone rang. It was my friend Maggie.

"Ashlyn, we have to talk about your going-away party. I know you don't like to drink anymore, so I think we should just get a pony keg. Todd said he'd pay for it."

I rubbed my temples as a headache started to surface. "Maggie, I've told you, I don't want a party. And I certainly don't want to be at a party with Todd."

"But we're going to miss you! We have to have one more blow-out before you go."

"I've had enough blow-outs to last a lifetime, thank you. I really just want to say my good-byes individually."

"I can't believe you're going to pass this up. We're your friends. Aren't you going to miss us?" she pouted.

"I have an idea," I said brightly. "Why don't you all throw a party in my honor after I've left? That way you have a reason to get loaded, and I don't have to be there to see it. Everyone wins."

"Fine, be that way. But you'll miss us when you're gone. You'll soon figure out who your real friends are."

Lisa came back into the room and threw me a withering glance. “Maggie,” I sighed, “I have to go. I’ll call you next week, and we’ll have dinner, okay?”

I hung up and began pulling pens out of the gravel. Behind me, I could hear Lisa yanking boxes off a shelf as she started a new project. This was not going to be a good day.

Mark, the assistant manager, walked in carrying the front tire of his bike. “Morning,” he said cheerfully as he removed his helmet. He glanced at the pond project, and we rolled our eyes at each other.

“You’re late!” Lisa yelled at him.

“Lisa, have you lost weight? You look fantastic,” Mark cooed.

She beamed. “I’ve dropped a pound or two.”

“Well, keep up the great work. Before you know it, you’ll be doing triathlons like me and Ashlyn.” He set his tire and helmet

down behind the counter. “I’m going to go get a latte. Can I grab you one, Lisa?”

“I’ll go with you,” she said. “Ashlyn, handle the store while we’re gone, will you?”

Two more weeks, I chanted under my breath. Only two more weeks.

* * *

The alarm went off, and I rubbed my eyes. I was about to drag myself out of bed to get ready for work, when suddenly I remembered what day it was. A burst of joy rushed through me. I never, ever had to go back to that store, and with a little luck, I would never see Lisa’s stupid face again. I rolled over and looked out the window. It was a typical grey Berkeley morning, but that just made me smile. I would soon be spending a lot of time in the sun.

"Ashlyn?" I heard my mom call from the kitchen downstairs, where the sounds of her making breakfast brought me an unexpected pang of sadness. I was going to miss her a lot, but I had dreamed about this day too long to let that dent my enthusiasm. I jumped out of bed and headed downstairs.

In the kitchen, my mom was filling our plates with scrambled eggs and fried potatoes. I glanced around her cozy apartment, where I'd stayed for the last week after moving out of my place. I was beginning to feel nervous. I'd lived on my own for the last two years, but that was in Berkeley where I knew everyone. This was going to be a big move.

We sat down at the table. Her face was calm, but I saw a trace of worry in her eyes.

"Will you come visit me soon?" I asked.

She smiled and squeezed my hand. "You'll be fine, honey. Once you get there, you're not going to look back. Laurel certainly didn't." She got a twinkle in her eye. "I look forward to meeting your next boyfriend when you come home for Thanksgiving."

"No way!" I laughed. "No boyfriends. Breaking up with Todd was the best thing I ever did. I want a chance to enjoy my own space for a while."

"We'll see," she said knowingly as she sipped her coffee. "Wear your new green shirt today. It matches your eyes."

An hour later, I was cruising down Highway 101, the stereo blasting, my hair streaming out the window like long brown tentacles dancing wildly in the wind. I was ecstatic, amazed that this day had finally arrived. I had been so sure that someone

would call me at the last minute to say that there had been a big mistake and that my enrollment was canceled.

I drove through the Salinas valley, gazing at the golden hills rising in the distance, the endless stretches of green farmland, and the soft blue sky. But the farther south I drove, the more my excitement turned to anxiety. I wouldn't know anyone when I got there, not even the two girls that I'd be sharing the apartment with. I was meeting them today for the first time, and I was dying to find out what they were like.

The road climbed to a crest, and there stretched out before me was the Pacific Ocean, the brilliant sunlight dancing on its surface. Even though I grew up near the San Francisco Bay, there was something about seeing the ocean, with its endless horizon and blue-green waves crashing on the beach, that always got me jazzed. My favorite Coldplay song came on, and I turned the

music up louder, drumming along on the steering wheel, singing at the top of my lungs.

In the early afternoon, I saw signs for UCSB: the University of California at Santa Barbara. I rolled into Isla Vista, the tiny town next to campus that was almost entirely populated by students. It was right on the ocean, and the salty tang and the warmth of the beautiful September day filled the car. I drove up to my apartment complex and parked in the lot, taking a deep breath to steady myself as I got out. I grabbed a few bags, checked again that my bike was securely locked on the car's bike rack, and headed for the stairs.

When I reached the front door of unit 235, I knocked as I tentatively swung the door open.

"Anyone home?" I called.

I walked into the apartment, and a tall girl got up from the couch and smiled at me. She was tan with short blonde hair and a very athletic build. She was wearing a T-shirt and shorts, which showed off her toned arms and long, muscular legs. I immediately felt like a troll by comparison.

"Hi, I'm Candace," she said. "Are you Rebecca?"

"Um, no, I'm Ashlyn. Nice to meet you." I held out my hand, and she shook it enthusiastically.

"Nice to meet you, too. Here, let me help you with that." She took one of my bags and headed for a door to the left of the living room. I was intrigued as I followed her through the apartment, which was bright and open and painted a soft white. The large window above the couch looked out over the courtyard, where students were lounging by the pool. On the opposite wall was a TV next to the tiny kitchen.

"Here you are," she said. I glanced around at my new bedroom. It had two single beds at angles to each other, and two desks stood at opposite walls. I walked around slowly, checking everything out. The closets were a decent size, and there was a bathroom I'd share with Rebecca. Candace would use the smaller bathroom in the hall next to her room, which was on the other side of the apartment.

"Let's go get your stuff. I'll help you," Candace offered, and we headed down the stairs. "What are you majoring in?" she asked.

"Geography."

"Oh cool. I hear they have a great department here. I'm in anthropology. I'm graduating at the end of this year. No idea what I'm going to do with it, though. Hey, nice bike," she said as we approached my car.

"Thanks. Do you ride?" I asked, carefully taking my bike off the rack.

"Not much. But I'm on the women's volleyball team. We totally kick ass."

She showed me the storage locker where I could keep my bike, and then we started bringing my things up from the car. We had just finished bringing up the last load when we heard a tentative "Hello?" coming from the front door.

"You must be Rebecca," Candace said, jumping up. "I'm Candace, and this is Ashlyn."

I sized her up quickly. She was a little shorter than I was, about five-foot-six, with beautiful, deep brown eyes and long black hair that hung in thick waves down her back. Peeking out from the cuffs of her jeans was a pair of very unusual shoes, the

kind you only find in small, expensive boutiques. Definitely wealthy, I thought, but I didn't get a snobby vibe from her.

"Come on, I'll show you our room," I said. "I didn't choose a bed yet."

She followed me into the bedroom and glanced around. "I don't really have a preference," she said. "What do you think?"

"I guess I'd prefer the one under the window."

"Perfect," she said with a smile. "I'll take the one closer to the bathroom."

We spent the next couple of hours unpacking and arranging our room. Rebecca was from New York and wanted to be a doctor. I told her how I had worked for the last two years, supporting myself while I went to the community college, and that I had now transferred to UCSB as a junior.

"When the acceptance letter came," I said, organizing my books on the shelf next to my bed, "I felt like I'd won the lottery. I couldn't believe I was going to be able to take out enough student loans to quit working and be a full-time student."

Her eyes gleamed. "It's exciting, isn't it? It's like we're getting to start our lives over."

"Yeah," I muttered as I stuffed my last text book onto the shelf. "I just hope I do a better job the second time around."

"Do you know anyone here?" she asked.

"My sister goes here, but she's taken a year off to teach English in Japan. How about you?"

"No, nobody," she said, absent-mindedly twisting her hair around her finger. I realized that this was an even bigger change for her than it was for me, as she had come to UCSB straight out

of high school, and she'd never been away from home except for summer camp.

I was so busy setting up my things and talking to Rebecca that I didn't realize how hungry I was until my stomach gave a noisy growl. Candace walked in and looked around appraisingly.

"It's looking good!" she said. "Let's go get dinner, and I'll introduce you to everyone."

We left our apartment and headed for the café that was at the front of the complex. The front doors of several apartments stood open, and music spilled out onto the walkway as we passed. Students ambled in and out, moving at a relaxed pace. It seemed like every person was passed was very fit and attractive. I wondered if everyone at UCSB was going to look like a model. Everyone except for me, that is.

As we walked, Candace went over house rules with us.

"We split the cost of the essentials like toilet paper, coffee, dish soap, and bottled water delivery. We're on our own for beer and snacks and stuff."

"Why do you have water delivered?" Rebecca asked.

"Have you tasted the tap water here?" Candace grimaced. "I know people who won't even brush their teeth with it. Anyway, once a week we get together and clean the whole apartment. Sunday mornings tend to work best, if that's okay with you." Rebecca and I both nodded.

"Last but not least: parties and guys. No parties in the apartment during mid-terms or finals until all three of us have finished our last test, okay? And if you have a guy stay overnight, just leave a note on the kitchen counter so that we all know not to walk around in our underwear in the morning."

Rebecca looked a little shell-shocked. I smiled at her reassuringly, fighting the urge to laugh at the contrast between her and Candace.

We walked into the café, and I was excited by all the options. There was a massive salad bar, a counter with pizzas and pastas, an open refrigerator stocked with drinks and sandwiches, a frozen yogurt machine, and a grill where you could order everything from fried chicken to veggie burgers. I grabbed a bottle of water and headed for the pasta counter. Rebecca went to the salad bar, and Candace ordered a burger at the grill.

We took our food into the dining room, which was buzzing with students who were eating and talking about their summers. We followed Candace to a large table near the windows where several people were sitting.

"Hey, everyone," she said. "These are my new roommates, Ashlyn and Rebecca." Candace introduced each of them in turn. I smiled nervously and then dived into my pasta, listening to the conversations around me and hoping I didn't look like an idiot.

I was sitting across from a girl named Kelly, who had creamy skin and somewhat frizzy hair. She and her roommate Laura were talking in low voices.

"Could you believe Michaela was at Dave's on Saturday?" Laura asked Kelly.

"I can't believe he even let her into the party," Kelly scoffed. "She was wearing some kind of smock thing that looked like she got it at a thrift store."

They continued gossiping about everything from Michaela's clothes to the guys she'd slept with, when suddenly a girl walked up with a tray. Kelly and Laura sat up straight and smiled at her.

"Hey, Michaela," Kelly said sweetly. "Come sit by us." They acted perfectly friendly to her, giving no indication that they'd just torn her to shreds behind her back.

I was distracted from my disgust by Toby, the guy sitting next to me. "Where are you girls from?" he asked.

"I'm from Berkeley," I said.

"New York," Rebecca said.

Kelly suddenly seemed interested. "Manhattan?" she asked.

"No, White Plains."

"Oh. Whatever," Kelly sneered. Rebecca looked confused, and I felt myself getting irritated. My guess was that Kelly knew nothing about New York and just assumed that anything outside Manhattan wasn't cool. What a poser.

"Kelly, I think I saw Kai outside with Max," Michaela said. "Do you think he was looking for you?"

"Like I care," she said. She sat back in her chair with a sour expression on her face, then looked me up and down. "So, what made you decide to come to UCSB?" she asked.

"Mmm, so many reasons, but number one would have to be the warm and friendly people," I said, giving her a big fake smile. I heard Candace snort into her napkin. Kelly scowled at me and then turned and talked to her friends, ignoring me for the rest of the evening. I hoped that would be the last conversation I ever had to have with her.

Rebecca and I were soon chatting with the other people at our table. We spent most of our time talking to Toby and Ryan, who shared an apartment with a senior on the other side of the complex.

"It's so beautiful here," Rebecca said. "Is it always this nice?"

"It gets a bit cooler in the winter," Toby replied. "But not by too much."

I grinned. "I hear that UCSB actually stands for 'UC Sunny Beach'."

"Or 'U Can Study Buzzed'," Ryan said.

"Do you guys party a lot?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

Ryan looked blankly at me. "Isn't that the point of college?"

Toby shook his head. "I don't. It cuts too much into my training."

"That's Toby's modest way of trying to tell you that he's actually a studly athlete instead of a stoner like me," Ryan said.

"What kind of training do you do?" I asked Toby.

"Rowing and cycling."

"Really? I do triathlons." I felt a bit smug as everyone's eyes widened. I might not look like a model, but I was athletic, a fact

I suddenly felt compelled to share. Maybe I should have gone to school somewhere less intimidating.

"Cool!" Toby said. "We should go for a ride." His intense blue eyes sparkled at me, and the auburn highlights in his hair gleamed in the fading sunlight coming through the window. He was cute, although not really my type. I usually chose guys with bad tempers and dim futures. Which, of course, was why I desperately needed to take a break from dating.

We talked a while longer, and then Rebecca and I headed back upstairs while Candace stayed behind.

"They all seem pretty nice," Rebecca said, looking more relaxed.

"Most of them, anyway," I added.

As we reached the top of the stairs, I saw Kelly standing down in the courtyard with her back to us, arguing with a guy I

hadn't seen before. He had long blond hair that hung past his shoulders and curled at the ends. She looked furious and was gesturing wildly as she talked. He just stood there in silence, looking annoyed but patient. Suddenly, he glanced up and stared at me.

"Are you even listening to me?" I heard Kelly yell. "What are you looking at, anyway?" She turned around and glared at me with pure hatred in her eyes.

"Ashlyn?" Rebecca called.

"Yeah, I'm coming." I hurried along the walkway and followed Rebecca into our apartment.

Chapter 2: Candidates and Cadavers

The next morning I woke up completely confused. I had no idea where I was until I heard Rebecca breathing rhythmically across the room. Everything from yesterday came flooding back to me. I couldn't believe that twenty-four hours ago I was having breakfast with my mom, and now I was three hundred miles away, sharing an apartment with strangers.

I got up quietly, put on my cycling gear, and went downstairs to get my bike out of the storage locker. I rode through Isla Vista, which was nearly deserted, and then took the main road through campus. I carefully read each sign that I passed, trying to memorize the locations of the buildings in preparation for school starting on Thursday.

I came out on the other side of campus and followed the bike path as it traversed open fields. It reminded me of a golden savanna, with feathery pampas grass shooting up every few feet. A breeze blew off the ocean, and as I picked up speed, I quickly started to feel the sensation I was always after when I rode: flying.

For as long as I could remember, I had dreamed at least a couple of times a month about flying, and I was drawn toward anything that reminded me of it. I particularly loved the weightlessness of swimming and the speed of cycling. I had a very fast bike, which I lovingly nicknamed "The Rocket." It was a shiny, fire-engine red with a blade-like frame that seemed to cut through the air. I rode it every chance I got, and the abundance of bike paths along the ocean was a major reason why I chose UCSB.

When I came to a straightaway, I dropped into a crouch and lifted my butt out of the saddle as I sprinted down the path. I heard the wind howl louder as I accelerated, and the familiar rush swept through my body. I started breathing harder, gasping for air as I flew forward. My muscles were beginning to burn, but I continued to push myself, focusing on the path ahead, the colors and sounds around me intensifying. I felt like a machine, but fully alive.

Finally, I sat down again, my heart pounding, my legs on fire. I downshifted and slowed to an easy pace to spin out my legs as I struggled to get my breathing back to normal. I rode slowly back to Isla Vista, enjoying the beauty of the campus and the sound of the waves through the haze of endorphins. It had been a perfect ride.

When I got back to the apartment, I put my bike away and went upstairs to shower and get dressed. Rebecca was just waking up.

"Hey," I said as I walked into our room. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, actually. Surprisingly well. Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No, and I'm dying for waffles. Give me ten minutes, and I'll go down with you."

When we got to the café, Toby and Ryan were also just walking in, so we got a table with them. Toby flashed us a warm smile. I noticed as we walked to the table that he had a very nice body: fit, but not too muscular. Ryan was taller and thinner, and he always seemed to have a sarcastic expression on his face.

"What are you guys majoring in?" I asked when we sat down.

"Communications," Ryan said through a mouthful of cereal.

"Business administration," Toby replied.

"His parents filled in the application when he wasn't looking," Ryan explained with a smirk.

Toby ignored him. "I'm interested in advertising. And I think business is fascinating. There's so much more to it than just trying to make money, although that's the ultimate goal."

"I'm not sure I agree with that," Rebecca said, sipping her coffee. "The ultimate goal should be to create something worthwhile and provide jobs for people."

"Well, yeah, that's a given," Toby said. "But at the end of the day, if you're not making money, you don't have a business."

"It's not about *not* making money," she said. "It's a question of how much and at what price. If a business can make a smaller profit but be environmentally and socially responsible, that's

good for everyone. Businesses have a responsibility, like anyone else in a position of power."

"Speaking of power, I need more coffee," Ryan said. "Anyone else need a refill?"

"I'll go with you," I said, taking Rebecca's cup and mine. She and Toby continued to discuss the role of business in society. Ryan rolled his eyes at me, but I was impressed by Rebecca's arguments. I was beginning to realize just how smart she was.

As we poured the refills, Kelly and Laura approached. Kelly looked me up and down and whispered to Laura. They laughed as they walked past me, and I felt heat rise to my face. Before I knew what I was doing, I crumpled up a half-empty sweetener packet and flicked it at the back of her head. It stuck in her thick mane of hair, and I watched it bob up and down as she walked away, little grains of sweetener sprinkling behind her.

Ryan chuckled and smiled at me approvingly. “Ten bucks says she’s still wearing it at lunch.”

I walked back to our table and handed Rebecca her coffee, lost in thought as I stared over at where Kelly was sitting. Why did she bug me so much? I usually managed to ignore people like her. Dating Todd for two years had given me plenty of opportunity to ignore nasty comments and underhanded attempts to make me jealous . . .

That was it! Kelly reminded me of Todd’s ex-girlfriend Susan. He was always talking about how beautiful she was, and he made a big show of paying a lot of attention to her whenever she was around. I knew he was just being an asshole, but it made me jealous anyway, and now I was starting a feud with Kelly simply because she reminded me of Todd’s ex.

"Don't let her get to you," Rebecca whispered to me. "She's not worth it."

I gaped at her. How could she tell what I was thinking? I didn't exactly have a poker face, but I didn't think I was that obvious.

I glanced across at Toby and saw that he was looking at me, too, but he looked like he was sizing me up and liked what he saw. I smiled at him. He was the kind of guy you'd want to bring home to meet your father, particularly mine. My dad prized education and money-making potential over all other qualities, and he had disliked every one of my boyfriends so far. It was certainly an appealing idea to bring home someone like Toby for a change.

But I was getting ahead of myself. I had just met Toby. And, I reminded myself, I was dead set against dating anyone for a while.

After breakfast, Rebecca and I decided to go down to the beach. We walked two blocks to Del Playa, known more commonly as DP, which was the street that ran along the ocean edge of Isla Vista. The houses and apartments on Del Playa were very popular because most of them had decks and balconies looking out on the ocean. I didn't know how anyone got studying done with a view like that.

We took the staircase that went down to the beach and took off our shoes. We walked through the soft sand, picking our way through the kelp, shells, and bits of tar that ended up on the beach from the natural offshore tar seeps. Large waves swelled

and then crashed in frothy white foam on the sand. The Channel Islands shimmered in the distance. It was absolutely stunning.

Rebecca looked up and down the beach, holding her long hair away from her face in the brisk wind. She looked to the right and frowned. “Is it my imagination, or is the sun in the wrong place?”

“It’s confusing,” I explained. “We’re right in the spot where the coast runs east-west instead of north-south. So the ocean is actually *south* of us here, not west.”

She shook her head. “I’m going to be so turned around for a while. It’s going to look like the sun is setting in the north.” Her eyes narrowed on the oil platforms that dotted the horizon. “I hope we can do more to protect the coast. I’m worried about what the new governor is going to do.”

The current governor had left office because of a scandal that made headlines across the country, and a special election was scheduled for the next month to elect a new governor to take his place. There was a surprising amount of support for an outsider candidate, Kenneth Lawson, who had some pretty fanatical ideas.

"You think Lawson will win?" I asked.

"I'm sure of it," she said darkly.

"But he's such an extremist. And he's way behind in the polls."

Rebecca bit her lip. "I can't explain it, but I just have a really bad feeling about this election. I hope I'm wrong."

"McIntyre is way ahead, and he'll do a decent job. I'm sure he'll be elected." Frank McIntyre was a well-liked businessman who had served in the state senate for eight years.

"We'll see," Rebecca said. "On a happier note, classes start in three days! I'm really excited."

"You're not scared at all? Your major sounds incredibly tough."

"Oh no, it's going to be great," she said. "I'm finally going to get to do organic chemistry, and I'm going to take an extra anatomy class at the junior college. I'll get to work with real cadavers."

I gasped. "Are you serious? You're going to cut into dead bodies?"

"Of course," she laughed. "You wouldn't want me cutting into living tissue before I'd practiced on dead tissue, would you?"

"I guess I never thought about it that way. But ugh, how will you stand it?"

"I'll take it very seriously. The best way I can show respect for the people who donated their bodies is to learn everything I can from them."

As Rebecca spoke, I noticed that she looked much older than eighteen. Despite the fact that she'd led a sheltered life so far, there seemed to be a deep wisdom in her that went far beyond book learning. She was what my mom would call an "old soul."

"You know, I think you're going to be a very good influence on me," I said. "Come on, let's go buy the rest of our text books before the store is completely cleaned out." We turned our backs on the crashing waves and climbed the steps back up to Del Playa.

Chapter 3: The Warning

I was sitting in the classroom, staring at the test in front of me. I read each of the questions over and over, but none of them made any sense. I realized in horror that I had been studying all the wrong things. I looked around at the other students, but they were all scribbling away. Oh God, I thought, it's just me. I'm going to fail. I don't belong here! Just as I was about to get up and run out of the room, the test burst into flames.

My eyes snapped open, and I looked over at the clock: five-thirty. I rolled over and rubbed my eyes. I knew I wouldn't get back to sleep after a nightmare like that, especially since it was Thursday, the first day of school. I got up, quietly put on my running gear, and ran out the door.

Running was my least favorite of the three triathlon events. I wasn't very fast and only did well in triathlons because I was such a fast cyclist and a good swimmer. But running was great for pounding the stress and anxiety out of my body, which was exactly what I needed to calm my nerves today.

I ran to the west edge of town and followed a trail that lead along the bluffs overlooking the ocean. A stiff wind blew onshore, and I smiled as I looked back at the rising sun. I can do this, I thought. I've worked very hard to get here, and I belong here as much as anyone else does. I picked up speed, pounding the trail, determined not to let my insecurity ruin my first day of school, until suddenly I felt much lighter on my feet, almost like I was floating. It was as if one moment I had been plodding along as usual, and the next moment, running had suddenly become effortless, almost natural. It was a strange new

sensation, and for the first time I could see why people liked running.

I ran faster, marveling at this new experience. At one point, when a strong gust of wind kicked up, I felt like my feet weren't touching the ground at all. It's a sign, I decided, that my new life has begun, and that I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

When I got home, Rebecca and I ate breakfast together in the café. I had scrambled eggs, pancakes, orange juice, and coffee. She had just a croissant and coffee.

"How are you doing?" I asked, as I shoved a pancake into my mouth.

"Excited," she said, her eyes gleaming. "My first class is at nine, but I'm going to leave in about fifteen minutes so that I'll have plenty of time to get there and get a seat in front. Do you want to ride your bike with me?"

"Mmm, can't. The Rocket is too much of a target for theft, even locked up. I'm going to walk."

"You have an unhealthy relationship with that bike," she said, shaking her head.

"I thought you were majoring in biology, not psych." I peered at her croissant. "Is that what you're eating for breakfast? That's not food, you know."

"The French would disagree. Besides, I'm too nervous to eat anything else."

"Rebecca, you're probably smarter than your professors. You'll be fine." I wished I felt as confident about myself. I finished my breakfast and hurried upstairs to get my backpack.

My first class was meteorology. I found the classroom, took a seat near the middle of the room, and started leafing through the thick text book. I was really excited to learn about weather,

and the pictures of the different types of clouds fascinated me. I sometimes thought about being a pilot, and this class would give me a glimpse of what I'd need to study if I went that route.

The professor began lecturing on barometric pressure. I looked around and saw people listening and taking notes, occasionally asking questions. So far, it was just like junior college, and I decided I could relax.

He started talking about calculating density and wrote an equation on the board. It included a symbol that I didn't recognize, so I raised my hand.

"Question?" the professor asked.

"Yes, what is that curly 'p' at the beginning of the equation?"

He looked at me, perplexed, then pointed to the symbol. "Rho? It means density." A couple of people turned and looked at me.

"Oh, right. Thanks." I felt myself turning red.

When the class was over, I gathered my things and walked out quickly without looking at anyone. I was *not* going to let this throw me. I would simply need to ask Rebecca to give me a tutorial on basic physics. Or was it chemistry? I cursed my flippant teenage self who hadn't bothered to take any advanced science in high school and had just stuck to the absolute basics in junior college to meet the transfer requirements. I had the sinking feeling that everyone here was going to be much smarter than I was.

I walked to my next class, which was in a small auditorium. I decided sit up front, so if I had to ask a stupid question, I could ask it quietly.

The professor walked in, and I was immediately struck by his presence. Unlike my meteorology professor, he didn't look like

he spent his time sitting at a desk grading papers and reading books. He was tall, muscular, and fit, and he was dressed in a pair of dark brown dress pants and a crisp black shirt. He carried himself in a way that was somehow both relaxed and alert at the same time. I got the impression that it would be suicide to pick a fight with him.

He took a laptop out of his briefcase, hooked it up to a projector, and flipped it open. A slide show illuminated the screen behind him.

"Good morning. I'm Professor John Gordon. I teach philosophy and religious studies. This class is 'Introduction to the Study of Religion.'" His voice was deep and resonant, almost musical. He proceeded to talk about the format of the class, how many papers would be assigned, and the dates of the exams.

"It's a lot to cover in twelve short weeks, so let's get started." He started the lecture, and I was mesmerized by his voice. He was obviously passionate about the subject matter, and I could tell right away that this was going to be one of my favorite classes. He looked out at the students as he lectured, making eye contact with everyone. It was almost as if he were scanning each person's brain to see how his lecture was being received.

As his gaze swept over to me, he suddenly stopped. His icy blue eyes narrowed as he peered into my face. I felt like disappearing. What stupid thing had I done now? He hesitated for a moment and then continued his lecture as if nothing had happened.

I couldn't understand it. I glanced around, but nobody else seemed to have noticed that anything was wrong. Maybe I just reminded him of someone. That must be it, I decided, relief

washing over me. He just thought for a moment that I was someone else. I started listening again, trying to catch up on my notes.

When the class ended, I gathered up my things and was about to head for the door when I noticed that Professor Gordon was standing right in front of me. He was staring at me again, his blue eyes brilliantly contrasted with his jet black hair that was graying at the temples. Now I was starting to get annoyed. I had made a fool of myself in meteorology, but I was sure I hadn't done a damn thing this time.

"Excellent lecture, Professor," I said, staring back at him. It *had* been a good lecture, so I wasn't worried that I'd sound sarcastic. I was a terrible liar.

"What is your name?" he asked me, his rich voice forming the words slowly.

"Ashlyn Woods," I replied. He was still staring at me, making me feel more and more uncomfortable. "Um, if you'll excuse me, I have another class." I started to walk away.

"Be sure to come to my office hours," he said. "There isn't enough time to cover everything, so you'll want to take advantage of every opportunity you can."

What the hell . . . ? Why hadn't he said this to the rest of the class? Was he some creepy pervert who would try to get me to exchange sexual favors for a good grade? Gross. But I looked back at him, and his expression didn't indicate anything like that. If anything, he looked somewhat worried, even sad. I nodded and walked away.

"Come soon," he said. I walked faster and left the room. I still had my remote sensing class to get through, and I decided to push Professor Gordon out of my mind until later that day.

As I walked across campus, I saw a newspaper on the ground with pictures of Senator McIntyre and Kenneth Lawson on the front page. The discrepancies in their photos made me laugh out loud. McIntyre's photo showed him looking calm and intelligent, his short grey hair neatly trimmed. Conversely, the picture of Lawson made it look like he'd just rolled out of bed after having a nightmare. His sandy hair looked shaggy, his face was red, and his mouth was contorted as he delivered one of his infamous rants. It was a hilarious contrast. I thought about what Rebecca had said and decided she was just being paranoid. People weren't stupid enough to elect someone like Lawson.

Later that afternoon, Rebecca and I were back in our room talking about our first day. When I told her about not recognizing rho, she offered to help me. But when I told her about Professor Gordon, her face darkened.

"I don't like the sound of that, Ashlyn."

"I know," I said. "Wasn't that weird? But I didn't get a creepy vibe from him. It was more like, I don't know, like he was . . . "

" . . . trying to warn you. Yeah, it does kind of sound that way," she said, deep in thought.

I stared at her. "You know, that's not the first time you've known exactly what I was thinking. I'm beginning to think my mom's right and that there really are mind readers."

"It's not like that at all," she said, looking flustered. "I can't read people's thoughts. I just sometimes have a good sense of what people are feeling."

"That was way more than just a *feeling*," I pointed out.

"Yeah, it's funny," she said, looking out the window. "It feels like it's gotten stronger. Especially with you. I seem to know what you're feeling all the time."

I laughed. “Actually, that’s not saying much. I have the worst poker face imaginable.”

She shook her head and smiled. “It’s probably just because we’ve become friends in such a short time.”

“For which I’m very grateful,” I said, opening my backpack. “You’re the first friend I’ve had who actually encourages me to study.”

We dropped the conversation about John Gordon. I decided he was just eccentric and left it at that. I’d have lecture with him again on Tuesday, so I’d find out then whether he really was a freak or had just gone temporarily off his meds or something.

Tuesday . . . my birthday. My stomach did a little flip. There was something very weird about turning twenty and officially moving past my teenage years. I wondered what the next year

would hold. If nothing else, I was ready for some peace and quiet. I'd had enough drama with Todd for a lifetime.

There was a knock at the door, and Toby appeared.

"Hey, girls. How was your first day?"

"Not bad," we replied in unison and then giggled.

"You two are like twins, you know that? Let's go get dinner, and you can tell me all about it. I'm famished."

"I'm not done studying," I said. "We'll meet you there in half an hour."

"Okay, fine," he muttered. "I'll save us a table. Don't be late." He gave me a last quick look before closing the door.

Rebecca turned and looked at me. "What are you going to do about him?" she asked.

"What do *you* think I should do about him?"

"I'd keep it light," she said, turning back to her book. "He's likely to fall much harder for you than you do for him."

I shook my head in amazement. "Well, at least we know that if medical school doesn't pan out, you'll have a brilliant career as a psychic."

We went back to studying, but the image of Professor Gordon's intense gaze kept flashing into my mind. I spent the next half hour lost in thought as I read the same paragraph again and again.

Chapter 4: Kai

"Come on, let's go!" Candace called from the living room. It was Saturday, and she had invited us to a party that evening at a house on Del Playa where several of her volleyball teammates lived.

"One second," I called. I pulled on a soft black sweater over my jeans and quickly ran a brush through my hair. I was excited to go to my first party here.

Rebecca looked anxious. She was deciding between a headband and pulling her hair back into a ponytail. "Neither," I said. "Let it hang down. Your hair is gorgeous. You should show it off."

She blushed slightly but nodded and followed me out of the room. Candace was wearing a pair of faded jeans and a UCSB sweatshirt. I glanced down at my outfit and hoped I wasn't overdressed.

Candace seemed to sense my worry. "You both look awesome. Let's hit it."

"Should we pick up stuff at the store on the way?" I asked.

"Nah," she said. "They've got it covered. The volleyball team throws this party at the beginning of every school year."

We met up with several other people from the complex and walked to the party. Rebecca started talking to a girl she knew from her biology class, and I met a couple of seniors named Carla and Adam who were discussing the upcoming election. Carla told me that she worked for the school paper, and I complimented her on their choice of photos for the front page.

"Do you think Lawson has any chance of winning?" I asked.

"No way he even comes close," Adam answered. "Did you hear what he wants to do to Medi-Cal? The seniors will never go for it."

"Of course he can't win," Carla said. "But it's astonishing that he's made it this far."

"It does seem odd, doesn't it?" I asked. "I mean, who is his main support base anyway?"

"Extremists," Adam said. "It's a small group, but they're very vocal." I felt reassured. Adam and Carla were journalism and poli sci majors, and they knew a lot about what was happening in state politics.

We arrived at the house. It was a large, run-down building with multiple levels of decks in the rear overlooking the ocean. The volleyball players had decorated it for the party with flyers

advertising their upcoming games. A large sign saying "Go Gauchos!" hung over the front door.

Candace introduced us to several of her teammates. They were all tall and athletic and, for the most part, gorgeous. Sandy, the team captain, welcomed us and told us to help ourselves to drinks in the cooler outside. We went out to the deck, which had a sweeping view of the ocean. I found a bottle of sparkling water in the cooler and squeezed a lime wedge into it.

We made our way down to one of the lower decks and sat down near the large fire pit. I sipped my water as I looked out over the ocean, which was now a soft grey with foamy white waves breaking on the beach. I was struck again by how beautiful it was here. How the hell did I end up in such an amazing place?

We were still talking about politics when two guys walked out onto the deck. One of them was a very large Samoan with long, curly brown hair. He had big brown eyes that sparkled when he smiled as a couple of the volleyball players greeted them.

The other guy looked like he was about my height. He had blond hair that fell just below his shoulders. He was wearing a white T-shirt and jeans, and through his T-shirt, I could see the outline of his biceps and his pecs. He was holding a beer in one hand while the other hand rested in his pocket. He had a chiseled nose and chin, but there was also a softness to his face. He was totally hot, and I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

Suddenly, I realized in horror that he was the guy Kelly had been yelling at on my first night in Isla Vista. How could

someone like him be with Kelly of all people? I figured he must be a total jerk. But a *sexy* jerk . . .

Come on now, I thought. I've been here less than a week and already I've found *two* guys to be attracted to? Didn't I tell myself I wasn't going to think about men for a while? Obviously, anyone who spent two years in a relationship with Todd could not be trusted to make decisions about her own love life, and I desperately needed a break from guys. I tore my eyes away from him and went back to talking to Adam and Carla.

As the sun sank into the water, the sky turned a pale blue and pink. The waves crashed rhythmically in the background as everyone sat around drinking, eating barbecued chicken, talking about everything from philosophy to the latest movies. It was an ideal Saturday night in Isla Vista.

As I looked around, I thought about the friends I'd left behind in Berkeley, and their predictions that I wouldn't be happy in Santa Barbara. What was it Todd said when I finally broke up with him for good? That nobody would ever love me as much as he did. That was a shitty thing to say, considering how he put everything else in his life before me. He only acted desperately in love with me whenever I was breaking up with him. Which, sadly, was fairly often.

But what if he'd been right? What if nobody ever loved me again? I only had to think about it for a second before I knew what my answer would be. I'd rather be alone than be loved Todd's way.

"Hey."

I turned and looked up. The guy in the white T-shirt was standing next to me, holding his beer in one hand and a

sparkling water in the other. My heart immediately started to race.

"Hi," I said, trying to sound casual.

"You want another drink?" he asked. I looked down and saw that I was holding an empty bottle.

"Sure, thanks," I said, taking the sparkling water from him. I paused for a moment. "I'm Ashlyn," I said.

He sat in the chair next to me, and I noticed that he had a faint, delicious scent that smelled clean and kind of spicy.

"I'm Kai," he said.

"Ty?"

"With a 'K.' It's spelled 'K-a-i' but rhymes with 'sky'."

"Oh, Kai. That's a cool name," I said.

"So is Ashlyn."

My heart skipped a beat when he said my name. Was I actually blushing? Thankfully it was getting dark . . .

"Do you want to move back from the fire?" he asked. "You look a little flushed."

Damn it. "No, thanks, I'm fine." I watched the reflections of the firelight dancing in his soft green eyes. "So, how do you know these girls?" I asked, looking at the volleyball players. I wasn't completely sure that he and Kelly were broken up, and I wondered whether he was dating one of the girls here.

"Old friends. I used to live here."

"Used to?"

"I live in LA now," he said.

I felt relieved. "LA" could mean anywhere in the greater Los Angeles area. Too far away to start up anything serious.

"What do you do there?" I asked, my curiosity piqued in spite of myself.

"I'm working as a veterinary technician, but I'm trying to break into music. I'm a guitar player."

Uh oh, a musician. My weakness.

"What kind of music?" I asked.

"Rock and funk, mostly. I've studied a little jazz." He fiddled with the label on his beer. "What about you? Do you play an instrument?"

"I sing, and I play piano. I play a little guitar, but nothing serious."

"Let me see your calluses," he said, taking my hand. His hand was very warm, and I felt an electric zing shoot through me. He looked at my finger tips and frowned teasingly. "Haven't played

much in a while, have you?" He let go of my hand before I was ready for him to.

"No, I've been too busy with school. And I have too many other hobbies."

"Such as?"

But for once, I didn't feel like talking about my triathlons. It suddenly seemed like showing off.

"Palm reading," I blurted out. He cocked his head at me. "I'm actually serious," I laughed. "My mom works at a metaphysical bookstore. I've read some very interesting books."

"Show me," he said, holding out his hand. I grasped it gingerly and spread out his fingers. My stomach felt fluttery, and I noticed that my breathing had gotten shallow.

"Well, you're going to live a long life," I managed to say. "And you're going to have one child. No idea if it's a boy or a

girl." I reluctantly let go of his hand and laughed nervously. "That's about all I know."

"Hmm," he said, looking unconvinced. "I don't know about the long life part, but I don't plan to have kids."

"Really? How come?"

"The world is too overpopulated as it is. And I can't imagine I'd be a very good father."

"I feel the same way. About me, I mean. I don't want kids, either." Todd and I had fought about that sometimes, because he wanted a big family. All the world needed was a bunch of Todd juniors running around. Ick.

"That's kind of unusual," he said. "Most women I meet are pretty certain they want kids some day."

"Not me," I said. "The world is too crazy. I can't imagine bringing one more person into it. And I'm certainly not cut out for motherhood."

He held his bottle up to mine. "Here's to doing our part to limit population growth," he said. We clinked bottles. "Do you always drink sparkling water at parties?" he asked.

Here it was. The big question.

"Yeah, I don't drink," I said.

"That's cool." He took a sip of beer and looked into the fire. At this point, one of two things would probably happen: either he'd start telling me about how he doesn't really drink that much, or he'd get quiet and find a reason to leave in about thirty seconds. I tried not to hold my breath as I waited to see which it would be.

"Must be weird for you at parties sometimes," he said after a pause. "I don't eat meat, so I can relate."

Oh no, a vegetarian guitarist who worked with animals and was gorgeous and inexplicably seemed interested in me . . . this was definitely going to be a problem. I looked into his eyes, and I was surprised to see that he was staring back at me. I felt my heart hammering in my chest. My God, he was unbelievably gorgeous. He lips looked so soft and perfect. I had an almost irresistible urge to reach out and trace them with my fingertips.

Suddenly, I felt a weird chill, and I looked around. Kelly was standing behind us.

"Having fun?" she spat. She looked furious, like flames were about to shoot out of her eyes.

"Kelly—" Kai said.

"Go screw yourself!" she said and ran up the stairs.

Kai closed his eyes and sighed. “I need to go talk to her. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Sure thing. It was nice talking to you.”

My head was spinning slightly as I watched him get up and walk away. What exactly was going on with them, anyway? He followed her up the stairs, and they disappeared into the house. I was bummed to see him go, but it was probably all for the best. He was dangerously intriguing.

I moved closer to Adam and Carla and joined in the conversation again. They were talking about a foundation that McIntyre had started for homeless women. “Did you know he’s going to be giving a lecture here on campus on Wednesday night?” Carla asked me.

“Cool!” I said. “Are there any tickets left?”

"I think it's sold out, but I might be able to score an extra one through the student government office. Give me your e-mail address." I wrote it on a napkin and gave it to her. She promised to write me on Monday and let me know.

I was getting tired, so I said good-bye to everyone and headed up the stairs. As I walked toward the front door, I saw Kai in the long hallway that stretched toward the front of the house. He was standing in front of the bathroom door, talking through it in a low voice. No doubt Kelly was on the other side being a drama queen. I shook my head, remembering all the epic fights Todd and I'd had. I was so done with drama.

As I walked out the door, I gave Kai a little wave, but he was just staring at me with a strange expression on his face, something between anger and extreme irritation. Maybe he and

Kelly were trying to patch things up, and talking to me had blown his chances with her. I hurried out and walked home.

Back at the apartment, I opened our bedroom window to let in the cool night air. I lay on my bed and thought about Kai. There was no question that we'd made an instant connection. But what was that weird look he gave me when I left? Maybe he was just an egotistical bastard and didn't like it that I was leaving without saying good-bye to him. Or maybe he just really wanted to spend more time with me . . .

But that's not what I'm here for, I reminded myself. This opportunity was too important to ruin over a guy, no matter how awesome he might seem. Suddenly, the image of bringing Kai home to meet my dad flashed through my mind, and I laughed out loud.

I decided I would spend the next day studying. Falling in lust with out-of-town musicians was very low on my list of priorities. I smiled as I lay there daydreaming about getting top grades in my class, graduating with honors, getting a high-paying job somewhere. A lovely breeze blew in through the window, and soon I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 5: Flight

I was flying over the beach, looking down at the people sitting on the deck. Their voices and laughter rose into the air like the smoke from the fire pit, occasionally drowned out by the crashing surf. I floated slowly, enjoying the feeling of being weightless. I drifted lower over where Rebecca and Candace were talking to people. Through the window, I saw Kelly looking upset and talking angrily to Laura, who was trying to calm her down.

I floated away from the beach and back toward central Isla Vista, where I saw a guy walking alone to his car. I flew closer to see what he was doing.

It was Kai.

I watched him stop and pick up a pen. He wrote something on the back of his hand and then looked at it for a moment, as if double-checking to make sure it was right. Satisfied, he dropped the pen where he had found it and continued on.

I got even closer, until I was floating silently right behind him. He approached his car, an old white Honda Civic, and put his left hand on the roof while he searched for his keys in his back pocket. I took the opportunity to sneak a look at what he'd written on his hand:

Ashlyn

tristar@mail.net

I smiled and drifted backward. My heart felt lighter than my body, as if the warmth that was now flowing through me was carrying me up into the night. I rolled over onto my back and saw the stars twinkling against the velvety sky. I let the gentle

wind carry me along as I drifted through the air, feeling nothing but happiness.

Suddenly, a bat flew past me, jarring me out of my reverie, and I fell out of the sky. As I plummeted toward the ground, I closed my eyes in terror. But at the last second, I slowed down right before I hit, and I landed with a soft thud on what felt like cement. I lay there for a while with my eyes closed. This was definitely a strange dream.

"Ashlyn, wake up!"

I opened my eyes and sat up, blinking as I looked around.

I was on the walkway outside my apartment.

I got up quickly. Rebecca was standing in front of me looking completely freaked out.

"Ashlyn, oh my God, are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, looking around confused. How in the hell did I get there?

Rebecca stared hard at me for a moment, and then her face relaxed.

"You *are* okay," she said, sounding relieved. "But what happened?"

"I—I don't know. I went inside and lay down. I opened the window to get some fresh air, and I must have fallen asleep. And then I was dreaming . . . " The dream had seemed so real, way beyond any flying dream I'd ever had.

"And?"

"And then I woke up outside." I looked around. To my horror, I saw that people were standing down in the courtyard, watching us. Right in the middle was Kelly, a bitter smile on her face.

"Well, it looks like someone had too much fun tonight," Kelly called out sarcastically, and a ripple of laughter broke through the crowd.

Ignore her, I shouted to myself inside my head. Just ignore her.

"Let's get inside," Candace suggested.

I turned away as casually as I could, pretending I hadn't heard her, and walked into the apartment. Rebecca was close on my heels.

"Good-night, Candace," I said. "Thanks for inviting me to the party. Everyone was really cool."

"You bet. I'll see you in the morning."

I walked into the bedroom. Rebecca followed and shut the door after us.

"Okay, now are you going to tell me what's going on?" she asked.

"I did tell you," I insisted, but Rebecca looked unconvinced. "I did! I dreamed I was flying, and then you woke me up."

"What happened in your dream?" she asked.

"I remember flying over the party. I saw you and Candace. And then I saw this guy I met tonight walking to his car. And then I felt . . . " I searched for the word.

"Buoyant," she said.

I stared at her, perplexed. "Yeah. How did you—?"

"Never mind. Ashlyn, the main question is: how did you get outside?"

"Obviously I must have walked in my sleep."

"Do you sleep walk often?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"No," I admitted. "Look, I don't know what to tell you. What's the big deal, anyway? I'm not hurt or anything."

"The big deal is that you ended up outside without knowing how you got there. You should go to the student health center tomorrow and see a doctor."

I couldn't help breathing a sigh of relief. She was worried I had a concussion or something. For a moment there, I thought she was worried I had actually flown out the window.

A small voice in my head said that actually, as absurd as it was, that was exactly what was worrying *me*.

The next day, we said nothing more about my escapade. We cranked up the music and vacuumed, dusted, and scrubbed the kitchen and bathrooms. We'd started our laundry first thing, before it got busy, so that we could do all our loads at once. When it was time to put the laundry in the dryer, I offered to go

and do it for all of us. I walked out into the beautiful morning sunshine and headed downstairs.

There were still a few minutes on each of the washers, so I picked up a fashion magazine that was sitting on the counter. I only read those things in waiting rooms, but I always found them entertaining and fascinating in a vapid way.

"Catching up on your studying?" I heard a cheerful voice say. I looked up and saw Toby smiling at me. He started pulling his clothes out of the dryer.

"Yes. It's required reading for anthropology."

He laughed as he set his clothes down on the table next to me. He peered over at the magazine I had opened. "'How to Make a Guy Give You a Standing Ovation in Bed'," he read out loud. "Be sure to let me know if you'll be giving a presentation on this."

I rolled up the magazine and hit him. He burst into laughter and went back to folding his clothes. “Very funny,” I said. “You’re quite the joker this morning.”

“And you seem kind of cranky. Anything wrong?”

“No, I’d just rather be out training than stuck in here doing laundry.”

“What’s on the agenda today?” he asked.

“Running, unfortunately. Although I think I’m starting to have some kind of breakthrough.”

“You want company?” he asked.

“Sure. What time?”

He picked up his laundry basket, which was now full of neatly folded clothes. His tidy short hair was freshly washed and a little bit spiky, and he was wearing a casual but nice outfit that

didn't look like his closet had attacked him. He really was meet-the-parents material.

"I'll swing by your place in an hour," he said. He walked out looking happy. I congratulated myself again on doing the right thing. Toby was the type of guy that smart girls dated. And I was going to reinvent myself as a smart girl no matter what.

I put the laundry in the dryers and headed out of the laundry room. My head was so full of visions of what life would be like with Toby that I didn't see the puddle of liquid detergent on the slick concrete floor. I stepped in it, and my foot shot out from underneath me. I gasped as I flew into the air, waiting for the impact.

It never came.

I opened my eyes. I was lying on the ground. I got up slowly and brushed myself off. There was a big wet spot on my butt where I'd fallen in the soap, but I wasn't hurt at all.

Dazed, I walked back up to the apartment. Candace and Rebecca were finishing up in the kitchen.

"Hey, what took you so long?" Candace asked.

"I ran into Toby. We're going to go for a run after this," I said as I walked toward the bedroom to go change.

"What happened to your pants?" Rebecca asked.

"Oh, I just slipped. Fell on my ass in a puddle of soap."

"What?" she gasped and rushed over. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It didn't hurt at all, actually."

"You were really lucky," she said, looking concerned. "You could have easily broken your tailbone."

"Not to mention your pride," Candace laughed. "Just be glad it was Toby and not Ryan. He never would have let you live that down."

"Nobody saw it, thank God. I did feel pretty stupid."

"But you didn't hit your head or anything?" Rebecca asked. "That's a miracle."

"I know. It happened so fast. I must have just been so surprised that I didn't have time to tense up or something." Rebecca still looked very worried. "Really, I'm fine. Do you want me to take my pants off so you can take a look?"

Her face broke into a smile. "No, that's okay. I'm glad you're not hurt."

I went into the bedroom and changed, lost in thought. First there was the weird dream last night and waking up on the walkway, and now this. Something very strange was going on

with me. I shook the thoughts out of my head and got ready to go for my run.

Chapter 6: Lying to Toby

Sipping my coffee, I took a break from studying and looked over my schedule. I had chosen my classes rather brilliantly so that I didn't have to be on campus on Mondays until noon, and I had no school at all on Fridays. It was amazing to see all the open slots in my schedule where my job used to be. How I had managed to find the time to work, go to school, train for triathlons, and fight with Todd was a mystery to me now.

Not that I needed time for fighting anymore. Toby was turning out to be really nice. We'd had a great run together the day before, and once again I felt lighter and faster on my feet than I ever had. We met later at his place to study, and when we

took a break to listen to some music and talk, he asked me out to a movie.

Toby really was everything I was looking for: he was attractive, smart, responsible, and he had a bright future. I knew my dad would like him. He didn't exactly make my heart leap out of my chest, but he was cute, and he didn't yell outside my window at two o'clock in the morning.

So why did I have this nagging feeling that something was wrong?

I'm pathological and need therapy, I decided. I gave up on studying and decided to send my family an e-mail instead. I logged into my e-mail and did a double take.

To: tristar@mail.net

From: tritone@chewingguam.com

Subject: hey from Kai

Hey Ashlyn, it's Kai from the party Saturday night. I hope this is the right e-mail address. Carla gave it to me, and I wrote it on my hand but it got smudged. I just wanted to say that it was great meeting you, and I'm sorry I didn't get to say good-bye or to talk with you more. Would you like to have coffee next time I come up?

Cheers,

Kai

P.S. Why did you choose tristar for your e-mail address? Just curious. -KZA

My heart was pounding. I read his e-mail six times, and each time it seemed more personal, even intimate.

This was a fiasco. I was starting to date Toby, the *right* guy, and now I was totally swept off my feet by an e-mail from a guy I barely knew. Well, my heart had been

wrong, very wrong, in the past, and I wasn't going to let it screw me up again.

From: tristar@mail.net
To: tritone@chewingguam.com
Subject: Re: hey from Kai

Hey Kai,
Sure, coffee some time would be great. I'd like to hear more about your music. I should let you know that I'm seeing someone right now, just so that's out on the table.

I went with tristar because I do triathlons, and they make me feel kind of like a rock star. Kind of silly, I know. How funny that both our e-mail addresses start with "tri".

So what's up with Chewing Guam? Is that your band's name? That's hilarious. You'll have to play me something some time.

Cheers,

Ashlyn

P.S. What does KZA stand for? I just realized I don't know your last name. My last name is Woods. Ashlyn Elise Woods.

There, that should do it. I read it over to myself a couple of times and decided it set the right tone: friendly, but not too flirty. I clicked Send and took a deep breath, wondering how long it would take him to reply. Not that it mattered, I reminded myself.

I wrote an e-mail to my family telling them that I was doing well in school and was dating a nice guy who was majoring in business administration. I looked forward to my dad's response to that.

That night, Toby looked really good when he arrived to pick me up. He was wearing a brown button-down shirt, a pair of

new blue jeans, and nice leather shoes that looked freshly polished. His eyes lit up when he saw me.

"You look great," he said. I was wearing my favorite black jeans and a grey blouse with mother-of-pearl buttons.

"Thanks," I said smiling. "So do you."

We walked to the parking lot and got into his Jeep. "Nice car," I said. "Who'd you have to kill to buy this thing?"

He laughed. "Nobody. My uncle owns a car lot, and I got a great deal on it." He looked at me sideways. "Actually, I worked there last summer."

"You worked as a car salesman?" I stifled the urge to laugh as I tried to picture him showing people under the hood.

"Only as a summer job. It was pretty lucrative, though."

"I'll bet it was. My guess is that you can sell anything to anyone."

He smiled. “That’s what my uncle said. He wants me to go into business with him after I graduate, but I’m much more interested in advertising.”

“I’m sure you’ll be great at that, too.” Toby had the kind of personality that made you like him and trust him within seconds. He’d probably be good at anything he did.

“What do you want to do when you graduate?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” I said.

“Really? But then, what are your plans?”

“I guess I’m going to see what happens with geography. There might be something that sparks my interest and turns into a career.”

“Huh,” he said, sounding somewhat perplexed.

“What?” I asked.

"Nothing. You just seem so driven. I thought for sure you had your whole life planned out already."

"Nope," I said, not liking the direction this conversation was headed. He looked somewhat disappointed, and he was starting to remind me of my dad. Of course he does, I reminded myself. That's one of the things that's good about him. He's ambitious and focused and is going to be successful. That's what the right kind of guy is like.

When we arrived at the theater, I insisted on buying my own ticket, even though Toby argued that he had invited me out and should pay. We found seats near the middle just as the movie started. I was looking forward to being distracted for ninety minutes and not having to think about my looming future and lack of career plans. I soon became totally engrossed in the story and forgot that Toby was even there.

About thirty minutes into the film, there was a scene where a girl gave her phone number to a guy she'd just met. It made me smile as he wrote her phone number on his hand, and I unconsciously pictured Kai, asking Carla for my e-mail address—

I sat upright. I couldn't believe I hadn't put two and two together before. Toby looked at me in alarm.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

"Fine, I'm fine," I said. I stared straight ahead as my heart pounded. What was it Kai had said? He had written my e-mail address on his hand. And in my dream, I'd seen him doing exactly that: picking up a pen and writing my e-mail address on his hand. And then I dreamed I floated backward, and I woke up outside my window. No, it was impossible . . .

I kept going over the dream in my mind. Could I have been running around Isla Vista in my sleep? But then Kai would have heard me if I were right behind him. And speaking of running, why was I suddenly getting so much lighter on my feet when I ran?

The only logical conclusion was that I was cracking up, and that conclusion was completely unacceptable. I had worked too hard to get here, and I wasn't about to blow it by ending up mentally ill. Maybe that was it: I was working too hard. Maybe I needed to relax, have fun, and give myself that space I was looking for. I tried to settle back and pay attention to the movie, but it was hopeless. I waited it out, nearly bolting when the credits rolled.

"Good movie," Toby said. "Do you want to go get coffee?"

I was thrown off guard. All I could think about was getting home and talking this over with Rebecca. I knew she'd think I was nuts, but I had to talk to someone.

"You know, I'm so sorry, but I have a terrible headache. Would you mind if we just went home? Sorry to be such a drag."

"Oh no, you should have said something sooner," he said, looking concerned. I hated lying to Toby. He didn't deserve it. But I had to get back, and feigning illness was my best shot. We got into the car and drove home in silence. He walked me to my door.

"Thank you so much, Toby. It was a lot of fun. I'm just feeling crappy."

"No problem. I'll take a rain check on the coffee," he said. He kissed me on my cheek. "Feel better." He walked toward his apartment.

I opened the door and went straight to my room. Rebecca was lying on her bed.

"Rebecca, I have to talk to you—" I looked at her and realized she didn't look well. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"I'm okay, just a bad headache," she said quietly.

"How ironic," I muttered.

"I'll be fine. I took something for it. It should kick in soon."

I sat next to her and felt her forehead. She didn't feel hot. "Probably too much studying," I said.

She looked up at me and her eyes filled with worry. "You're upset," she said. "What happened?"

"Oh, it's not important. It can wait. Just feel better."

"No really, tell me what's going on."

After a pause, I took a deep breath and told her everything: about the e-mail from Kai, about the running. As I told her the

story, I realized that it was sounding more and more ridiculous. What was I saying, anyway? That I thought I could *fly*, for heaven's sake? But I pressed on and told her my concerns, and she listened without laughing, probably because her head was pounding.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm not judging you. There's a lot of weird stuff happening." She looked kind of spacey, and I got the feeling we weren't just talking about me anymore.

"Rebecca, are you okay? You seem, I don't know, kind of out of it."

She sighed. "It's nothing. I've just been feeling sensitive lately."

"You mean like what we were talking about before? About picking up on people's feelings?"

"I know, it sounds crazy."

"Everything sounds crazy that's happening to us right now! But we can't deny that something really weird is going on."

We looked at each other in silence, both of us entirely at a loss for an explanation.

Later on, I checked my e-mail. My dad wrote back, but to my chagrin he didn't say a word about Toby, just that he and my step-mother would be in Mexico for Thanksgiving. Whatever. There was also an email from Carla saying that she'd gotten me a ticket to McIntyre's lecture on Wednesday night, which I was totally stoked about.

There was still no word from Kai, so I guessed he'd just lost interest after I told him I was seeing someone. I felt a little sad, but also relieved. The last thing I needed right now was more complications in my life. I closed my laptop and went to bed.

Chapter 7: Senator McIntyre

"Happy Birthday!" Rebecca and Candace said in unison. They were standing over me in their bathrobes. Rebecca was holding out a steaming cup of coffee.

I rubbed my eyes and smiled. "Wow, you guys. Thanks! I think this is the first time you've woken up before me." I sat up and took the cup.

"I set the alarm," Candace said sleepily.

"Are you hungry?" Rebecca asked. "We can go down now and beat the breakfast crowds."

"That sounds awesome, but I'm going to go for a run first. Can you wait half an hour?"

"Gladly," Candace said and stumbled out to the living room.

I jumped out of bed, put on my running gear, and went for a run along the cliffs again. It was amazing, just like last time. I had no idea what had caused the improvement, but I really didn't care. For the first time in my life, I was enjoying running, and I savored it. I was excited to see what this would do for my race times. Triathletes often did better as they got older, usually hitting their peak in their thirties, but maybe I was peaking early.

I arrived back at the apartment to see Candace and Rebecca hanging out in the living room drinking coffee.

"That was fast," Candace said, now looking much more awake.

"Hurry up and get ready," Rebecca said. "It's your birthday, so you have to have pancakes with chocolate chips and whipped cream."

"Oh my God, say no more." I hurried into the bedroom and quickly showered and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, visions of pancakes swirling in my head as my stomach growled loudly. We headed down to the café and got our breakfast.

Candace and Rebecca insisted on singing to me, and they got the guys at the next table to join them in a chorus of "Happy Birthday." I looked down at my plate, embarrassed but happy. Candace and Rebecca had turned out to be such wonderful roommates. I just couldn't believe my luck.

School that day was easier than the first day had been. I had studied ahead in all my classes, and I was prepared to answer questions. Remote sensing was turning out to be a great class. We learned about aerial photography and the different filters you could use, including infrared, which allowed you to take photos even in the dark or on cloudy days. It was really cool.

My religious studies class was also interesting, despite the fact that Professor Gordon kept looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I had no idea what his deal was, but I didn't want to ruin my birthday by thinking about it. I saw him start to walk toward me right after class, but I quickly grabbed my backpack and dashed out before he could say anything.

That night, Toby and Ryan came by and invited all of us to go play games at the arcade. It sounded kind of lame to me, but Candace and Rebecca were into the idea, and we ended up having a great time. I beat everyone at air hockey, and Ryan was kicking all our asses at pool.

At one point, I took a break and sat at a small table, watching the others play. Rebecca came and sat by me, sipping her Coke.

"What's it like to be twenty?" she asked.

"About the same as nineteen. But I don't know, it sounds a lot older, doesn't it?"

"It really does, especially since I'm still only eighteen. At home, the big deal is turning twenty-one so you can go to clubs."

"Tell me about New York," I said. "I've never been there."

Her eyes lit up. "It's wonderful. It's so vibrant, and constantly buzzing with activity. I like it here, too, but I can't imagine home being anywhere but New York. My whole family is there. Even my brother, Ben, stayed there for college."

"I always wanted a big brother," I said. "Someone I could look up to, who would bring home his cute friends . . . " We laughed. "I tried dating a couple of my sister's guy friends, but that didn't go over very well."

"How many boyfriends have you had?" she asked.

I looked up at the ceiling as I quickly counted in my head. "Hmm, about seventeen, I think."

"What? How is that possible?"

"Most of them only lasted a few weeks, but I dated Todd for a couple of years."

"My parents didn't let me date anyone until I was sixteen, so I got a late start," she said. "I've only gone out with two guys." I watched her sip her Coke absent-mindedly, lost in her memories.

I adored Rebecca. She really felt like a second sister to me, although I couldn't quite explain why. She was younger than I was and was from the other side of the country. Her parents worked together as human rights lawyers and were totally devoted to each other, whereas my parents were on opposite ends of the political spectrum and were divorced. She had been

the more straight-laced studious type, while I had been rebellious and more focused on partying than school. She was introverted, while I was extroverted. And yet we just clicked. It was like we had something very strongly in common that we just hadn't figured out yet.

Toby walked up and put his arm around me. "How's it going, birthday girl? Are you having a good time?"

"I'm having an awesome time," I said. "Thanks so much for suggesting this. You're the best." He grinned at me, and Rebecca raised an eyebrow. I could tell that she thought Toby wasn't right for me, but how could anyone think that when he was so clearly the ideal boyfriend?

"We really should be getting back," she said. "I'll round up Candace and Ryan. Have you seen them?"

"I think they're about to kill each other at the pool table," he said with a laugh. Rebecca cast another glance at me and hurried away.

"So when are you going to let me take you out for that rain check?" he asked.

"How about Sunday?"

"Sunday it is. Let's go for a bike ride, too."

"Perfect."

Rebecca walked up with Candace and Ryan, who were still arguing about whether his last shot had been legal. We left the arcade and walked back to the apartment complex, singing stupid songs and joking with each other all the way home.

As I got ready for bed, I stopped and looked at the birthday cards and packages I'd received. My sister sent me a beautiful card, along with a package of little dried fishes with almonds,

apparently a popular snack in Japan. My dad sent me one of his funny hand-drawn cards and a check, which I really appreciated. I had myself on a very strict budget so that I could be sure to have enough money to get through school. My mom sent me a beautiful blue shirt, a matching pair of earrings, and a gift certificate to the local bike store. She always got me the most thoughtful gifts, and with the way I went through inner tubes for my bike tires, I was very happy to get the gift certificate.

Todd had sent me an e-mail wishing me a happy birthday and offering to take me out for drinks the next time I was up in Berkeley. I was amazed that he could continue to pretend that I was just taking a break, both from him and from drinking. I couldn't help but notice that none of my friends from back home, including Maggie, had acknowledged my birthday. In fact, I hadn't heard from them at all since I moved. I thought

about what Maggie had said to me that day on the phone: that once I moved, I'd know who my true friends were. Looking at the little basket of chocolates and bath salts that Candace and Rebecca had given me, I realized that Maggie had been absolutely right.

On Wednesday morning, I checked my e-mail, but there still wasn't a reply from Kai. I was so stupid to think there had been a connection there. I had obviously read him wrong, proving once again that I couldn't trust my judgment.

When I went down to breakfast with Candace and Rebecca, I saw Kelly sitting by herself in a corner looking depressed.

"Candace, what's Kelly's deal?" I asked. "Are she and Kai going out or what?"

"They were, up until a few months ago. She dumped him."

"She dumped *him*?"

"Yeah, I hear he's kind of a jerk," she said. "Apparently he didn't treat her very well. But then again, that's all coming from Kelly, so who knows?"

"She doesn't seem very happy about it," I said, watching Kelly pick absent-mindedly at her breakfast. "Do you think she wants him back?"

"Possibly. She's not the brightest bulb on the tree, as you might have noticed."

As I watched Kelly sulk, I felt sorry for her for the first time. Maybe Kai was a jerk, but he was also totally gorgeous, and it can't have been easy to break it off with him. Why did the hottest guys have to be such assholes? I was glad I was dating Toby. He was the perfect combination of good-looking and nice.

That night, I met up with Carla in front of the auditorium where McIntyre would be speaking.

"Thank you so much for getting me a ticket," I said.

"No problem. The student government office got a handful of free passes, and they had one left. It's going to be a full house tonight, so I'm glad we're here early. Let's go get seats up front."

We headed into the auditorium and found a couple of seats together in the seventh row. We still had twenty minutes before the lecture would start, so Carla told me about the school paper and what it was like working in the student government.

"Adam seems really politically active," I said. "Will he be here tonight?"

"Of course. He was one of the people who got McIntyre to come here in the first place. He'll be introducing him."

"That explains why he was so enthusiastic about it at the party."

"Speaking of the party," she said, "as I was leaving, Kai said he had been talking to you and forgot to get your phone number before you left. I told him I had your e-mail address and gave it to him. I hope that was okay."

"Oh yeah, that's fine. Do you know him very well?" I asked in what I hoped was a casual tone.

"I used to run into him at parties when he lived here. And he came to a couple of volunteer drives we organized. He seems really cool. Although what he was doing with Kelly I'll never understand."

"They do seem like an unlikely couple, don't they?"

She nodded. "She's a real piece of work. Don't even get me started."

The lights dimmed, and the audience applauded as Adam walked out on the stage to the podium, his eyes shining.

"Ladies and gentleman, thank you all for being here tonight," he said. "It is my honor and privilege to introduce to you the man who, during his time in the state senate for the last eight years, has been a strong supporter of higher education, expanding healthcare, and improving the protection of our oceans and coastline. Please join me in welcoming the next governor of California, Senator Frank McIntyre."

The audience applauded, and McIntyre walked out on stage. He shook hands with Adam, who looked thrilled. I could see Adam being a politician himself one day. It was so cool that I was getting to meet people like him. UCSB was so different from junior college.

McIntyre stepped up to the microphone. "Thank you, Adam. It's a pleasure to be here tonight. How many of you are

students?" He peered out into the audience. Over three quarters of us had raised our hands.

"Outstanding," he said. "It's heartening to see young people taking an interest in politics and the future of our state." He began talking about the role of the individual and of government, and of the importance of promoting business while ensuring that the neediest segments of the population didn't slip through the cracks. He talked about education as the most important preventive measure to poverty and crime, which drew huge applause. He was completely engaging and managed to make me feel like he was speaking directly to me. By the end of his speech, I was sure that every single person there would be voting for him.

After the lecture, we walked out into the lobby, where people were signing up to join phone banks to call voters and

urge them to go to the polls. Because it was a special election that was being held in October instead of November, they wanted to make sure that people got out and voted.

I signed up to volunteer on Saturday morning. Carla was already signed up to canvas door-to-door. I felt kind of ashamed that I'd never volunteered to do anything before, something that now seemed like such an obvious social responsibility. McIntyre really was inspiring, and I felt very good about where the state was heading with him leading it.

Adam walked up to us. "Carla, Ashlyn, I'm so glad you're here. Do you want to meet Frank?"

"Frank?" I asked.

"Senator McIntyre! You know, the guy you just listened to for the last ninety minutes?" He rolled his eyes in exasperation, and I felt like an idiot.

He led us to a room where a reception was being held. One wall was lined with a buffet table full of fruit, deli meats, cheeses, and rolls. Another table had autographed copies of McIntyre's book on it, which a woman was selling to raise money for his campaign. Adam took us over to McIntyre, who was talking with a very tall blonde woman.

"Senator, I'd like you to meet a couple of fellow students, Carla and Ashlyn. Carla writes for the school paper."

McIntyre turned to us and flashed us a dazzling smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he said, shaking our hands. I was struck by how commanding his presence was. He looked truly presidential, and it suddenly occurred to me that his political career might take him all the way to the White House.

Carla beamed at him. "Your speech was wonderful, Senator. I look forward to writing about your victory on Tuesday."

"Well," he chuckled, "let's not count our chickens until they're hatched." But his smile said that he had no doubt about the outcome.

I found my courage and spoke. "I liked what you had to say about protecting our coast. My roommate will be relieved to hear it. She's worried about the offshore drilling."

"The drilling is actually quite safe, but we have to make sure that it stays that way. The key is striking the right balance between harnessing our natural resources and doing our duty to protect the environment." I was struck by his confidence. He seemed to have compelling answers at the ready on every issue.

We talked a little more with him before he excused himself and went to talk to the chancellor. I looked around the room at all the people who were rallying behind this man to help make our state a better place. It was both humbling and empowering

at the same time, and it felt really good to be part of a team of people working toward something greater than ourselves.

"Ashlyn?"

I turned around and saw Professor Gordon standing in front of me.

"Oh, um, hi," I stammered.

"Did you enjoy the lecture?" he asked. His face was serious, as if he were asking me something critically important and not merely making conversation.

"Yes. I think Senator McIntyre will be a fantastic governor."

"If he is elected," he said, looking across the room. There was an ominous tone in his voice that sent a shiver up my spine.

"I have to go," I said. "I'll see you in class."

"Ashlyn, wait," he said. "I think it would be a good idea if we talked. Please come to my office hours."

"I'll try. I really do have to go." I walked quickly over to Carla and said good-bye before slipping out the side door.

What the hell was that all about? Why was he popping up in random places and bugging me? All I knew was that I wanted to be as far away from him as possible. I ran all the way home, not looking back.

Chapter 8: The Perfect Day

"Thank you for your time, and remember to vote on Tuesday." I hung up the phone and crossed the last person off my list. I got up, stretched, and walked over to the volunteer coordinator.

"That's the last of them," I said, handing her my sheet. "Here are the numbers that are no longer valid, and here are the people I talked to."

"Thank you, Ashlyn. Help yourself to some coffee before you go." I looked at the coffee pot under the poster of McIntyre. I had been here for two hours and hadn't seen anyone make a fresh pot, so I decided to pass and find something better. I walked out of the election headquarters and into the brilliant sunshine in downtown Santa Barbara.

I wandered up State Street, looking at the stores. I hadn't spent much time in Santa Barbara since I was a kid, when we used to come down to visit my grandmother. The town had changed a lot since then, and it was amazing to see how many of the sleepy little shops had been replaced by upscale boutique stores.

I came across a used record store and decided to go in. As soon as I stepped through the door, I knew I had found my new favorite haunt. It was dim inside and had a slightly musty smell. There were racks and racks of CDs, a whole wall of vinyl records, and a bin of cassette tapes. It was totally old school, and I loved it.

I was busy browsing when suddenly I felt someone behind me. I turned around and saw Kai.

"Hey," I said. My stomach suddenly felt like it was full of butterflies. He was even hotter than I'd remembered. Scorching would be a more apt description.

"I thought that was you," he said. "How's it going?"

"Pretty good. What are you doing here?"

He looked confused. "Didn't you get my e-mail?"

"I got the one you sent me on Monday," I said slowly. "I replied, but I didn't see anything after that."

"I e-mailed you back to let you know that I'd be in town today. And that I wanted to meet up with you, if you were free."

"No kidding," I said. "I never got it. Wait a second . . . I bet it ended up in my spam folder. I didn't think to check."

"I'm glad I ran into you, then," he said with a smile that made me feel weak. "Are you just downtown shopping?"

"No," I said, trying to concentrate. "I was volunteering at McIntyre's headquarters, and I just finished up and decided to head out in search of coffee. I found this place instead. It's pretty cool." I looked around admiringly.

"I know a good coffee shop not far from here. You want to grab a cup with me?"

"Sure, that would be great," I said. We headed out of the store and walked up the street. "So what brought you to Santa Barbara today?" I asked.

"I was meeting up with an old bandmate who's selling his amp. I was thinking about buying it, but it's pretty trashed, so I'm going to pass."

"That's too bad. Bummer to have wasted a trip up here."

"Not a total waste," he said, looking sideways at me. I looked back at him in surprise, but then he flashed a small paper bag at

me. “I found an old CD I’ve been wanting for a while.” I laughed, slightly embarrassed. But he just smiled, his eyes crinkling at the edges in the most adorable way. I was glad to know that he hadn’t blown me off after all. I wasn’t going to get involved with him, of course, but it wouldn’t hurt to have a quick cup of coffee with him.

Two hours later, we were still sitting in the coffee shop, deeply engrossed in our conversation. The shop was decorated in rich, dark woods, with round tables illuminated by tiny spot lights that hung low from the ceiling. Posters of plantations and steaming cups of coffee covered the walls, along with a bulletin board advertising everything from study groups to scream therapy. Brazilian music played softly in the background,

frequently drowned out by the loud hissing of the espresso machine.

We had been talking non-stop since we arrived, and we discovered that we had a ton of things in common. We both had left-leaning political views, were interested in Buddhism, and had read a lot of the same books. We both loved Italian and Mexican food and liked to cook, although I preferred baking. His parents split up when he was twelve, four years after his family moved to LA from Minnesota, which was right around the same time my parents divorced. His middle name was Zachary, which was also the name of my favorite pizza place back home. We even discovered that his birthday was just two days after mine.

"Ah, an older woman," he said.

"Oh yes, way older. I'm practically your grandmother."

"No, you don't look a day over forty."

I threw my napkin at him, and he laughed in that infectious way that made it impossible not to laugh right along with him. I found his brilliant, dry sense of humor very attractive.

On our third cup of coffee, Kai was telling me about how he had gone to college for a year but then dropped out after he bounced his tuition check. Since then, he had worked a string of low-paying jobs while he tried to make it in music.

"Do you ever think about going back to school?" I asked. "It would make sense to study music, wouldn't it?"

"Not really. I want to *play* music, not study eighteenth-century counterpoint."

"So it would all just be academic? You wouldn't learn anything useful?"

"Sure, if I decide to get into composing, it would be useful to study music theory and composition. But it doesn't make a lot of sense for what I'm doing right now."

He sipped his coffee, never taking his eyes off of me. I loved the way he looked at me, as if he were trying to see straight into my soul. He made me feel like I was the only other person in the room, and that the rest of the world had simply disappeared. I couldn't remember anyone ever looking at me like that before. It made my stomach feel very strange.

I bit into my ham croissant. "How long have you been a vegetarian?" I asked.

"Since my sophomore year in high school. The arguments I'd heard about how animals were on this planet for our use, that it's okay to eat them because they're dumb, just didn't make sense to me anymore. So I gave it up."

"That's awesome. I couldn't give up meat, though. I need the protein."

"You'd be surprised, actually," he said, flashing me his mesmerizing smile. I'd guessed he'd had this conversation many times with people. "Not that I'm trying to convert you or anything, but the protein thing is a myth perpetuated by the meat industry. You don't need nearly as much as you think. You get plenty from beans and whole grains and vegetables. I was a distance runner in high school, and it didn't affect my performance at all."

"You were a distance runner?" I never understood how people could spend all their training time on just running, let alone for long distances.

"Yeah. I still run sometimes. It feels great to go for a long run when you've had a bad day. Especially along the bluffs."

"I know what you mean. There's something magical about that spot."

"Santa Barbara is full of great spots. Have you been down to the wharf?" he asked.

"No, not since I was a kid."

"Let's go now. It's a perfect day for it. Come on, I'll drive."

We left the coffee shop and walked slowly down the street, talking all the while. What was I doing, exactly? I had specifically decided I wasn't going to get involved with Kai, and yet here I was spending the day with him. I found him completely fascinating. I kept expecting him to get bored and say he had to go, but he seemed just as interested in me as I was in him. I found it hard to take my eyes off of him as we walked, and I noticed that his gaze never seemed to leave my face.

We got to the parking lot, where his white Honda Civic was parked near the entrance. It was old and beat up, but cute somehow. It suited him. I walked up to the passenger door, waiting for him to unlock it. He was standing back, his head cocked to one side, looking at me curiously.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"How did you know that's my car?"

I stared at the car and suddenly realized that the only time I had seen it before was in my dream.

Oh crap.

"I don't know, just psychic I guess," I said airily. He looked at me with an inscrutable expression as he unlocked my door. He stood holding it open for me, and I got in, inhaling his intoxicating scent as I slipped past him and sat down. When he closed the door, I exhaled deeply. Despite the fact that I'd just

had another example that my so-called dream was more than a dream, which should really be freaking me out, I was more concerned at the moment about what he must think of me. First I told him about the palm reading, and then I said I was psychic. He was either going to be totally intrigued with me or think I was a complete freak.

He got in the driver's side and started the car. A song I didn't recognize began to play.

"What are we listening to?" I asked.

"The Stone Roses. They were a popular British band in the eighties."

I settled back and listened. They had a beautiful, haunting sound, with lots of reverb on the guitars and vocals. "They're awesome," I said.

We listened in silence as we drove to the wharf. This was something I always loved about musicians: they actually listen to music and don't feel compelled to talk over it or just use it as a soundtrack to whatever they happen to be doing at the time.

We parked at the wharf and strolled out on the pier. Walking next to Kai made me feel excited and happy, like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. It was a gorgeous day, and the sun gleaming off the water was dazzling. It felt almost too perfect.

We walked all the way to the end of the pier and sat down near the edge, leaning up against a large log that had been set up as a bench.

"Beautiful," I said, looking out at the water. It was a soft, greenish blue with gentle ripples playing across it. "I still can't believe I'm here."

"You deserve it," he said simply. "It sounds like you've worked very hard to get where you are." He looked at me curiously. "So how come you don't drink? Alcohol, I mean."

I knew we'd come back to this eventually, but since we were telling each other our life stories today, it felt natural to give him the background.

"I partied a lot in high school," I said, "and didn't get very good grades. So after I graduated, I upped my hours at work and started taking classes at the junior college. My sister, Laurel—she's a year older than I am—took school more seriously, and she went to UCSB straight out of high school."

I picked at my nails as I talked, remembering the stupid choices I'd made.

"She was meeting cool people from all over the world and taking interesting classes. I was wasting my nights being drunk

and fighting with Todd, and wasting my days being hung over and working at a dead-end job. So I knew I had to give up drinking. Everything else just fell into place after that."

"It made that much of a difference?" he asked.

"Totally. After I quit drinking, I had much more time and energy. So I decided to push myself and see what I could do. I worked four days a week and went to school on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I enrolled in a couple of night classes so I could get through my transfer requirements as quickly as possible. Then one of my co-workers told me about triathlons, and I started training."

"You must not have had much time for anything else," he said. He was listening intently, with no look of pity or judgment on his face. He was so easy to talk to.

"Yeah, Todd was not at all happy about any of it. He wanted me to drop night school and keep going out to bars with him. He said it was a total waste of a fake ID." I laughed bitterly at the memory.

Kai looked amazed. "I love beer, and my fake ID gets fairly regular use. But considering how important this was to you, I'm surprised he wasn't more supportive."

"It was a pretty bad relationship, but I learned a lot, so I guess that was positive. He really did love me, but sometimes that just isn't enough."

Kai nodded. "I know what you mean. Do you know Kelly? She lives in your complex." I nodded and he continued. "She and I went to high school together. We started going out senior year, and we just broke up four months ago. It wasn't a very healthy relationship, and we fought a lot. In the end, she decided she

didn't want to be with me anymore. I don't think she liked my dropping out of school."

"I can't believe she broke up with *you*," I said, shaking my head.

"She was smart," he said. "We weren't right for each other, but I didn't see it at the time. Once I commit to something, I tend to see it through. Except for college."

"I'm guessing that if it's important to you, you'll find a way to go back," I said. I sensed a drive in him that wasn't obvious on the surface. It was becoming clear to me that there was a lot more to Kai than he let people see.

"Possibly." He looked thoughtful for a moment, staring out at the water. "Actually, I think you're right, about finding a way back if it's important. I've never liked LA, so I recently made the decision to move back to Minnesota."

I was stunned for a moment while his words registered.

"My uncle has a recording studio there," he continued. "I'm looking forward to getting in there and recording some tunes."

"Wow," I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster through my disappointment. "Minnesota. Is it nice there?"

"Yeah, Minneapolis is great," he said enthusiastically. "I never wanted to leave Minnesota in the first place, and I've always wanted to go back. Now that I'm an adult, I have no excuse not to. Although, it will be hard to leave some things behind." His face clouded.

I looked out at the water, trying to wrap my head around everything. This explained why he was so willing to spend time with me today—he was leaving anyway. I was such an idiot to think he could like me as much as I liked him.

But there was no question that we were really hitting it off. If I weren't so attracted to him, I would have definitely pursued him as a friend. I was forging a great friendship with Rebecca without dating her, so why not Kai?

As crushed as I was, I decided right then that I was just going to put my stupid infatuation with him aside and focus on developing a friendship with him instead. I sighed as I realized that I had just been rescued from the wrong path. I could go out with the right guy, Toby, and have Kai as a great friend. Like the brother I never had. That seemed like as good a scenario as I could hope for.

I turned back to him. "I'll be really sorry to see you go, but I'm happy for you. You're committed to doing the right thing for yourself, which is great. When are you going?" I was proud of myself for sounding so sincere.

He looked down at his hands, which were busy picking at the log. “In a few weeks.”

“Maybe I’ll come visit you some time. I’ve never seen much of the United States. Minnesota seems like a good place to start.”

He looked into my eyes. “I’d like that,” he said.

The sun moved farther across the sky, and we decided to go back to Isla Vista and get burritos at his favorite taqueria. We drove back to where I was parked, and suddenly I found it very hard to get out of his car. I didn’t want to leave his side, but I couldn’t just leave my car downtown. I sat there, hesitating.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Um, there was something I was going to ask you,” I said, stalling. “I forget what it is now. Well. Okay. So, I’ll see you at the taqueria.”

“Yeah. See you in a few minutes.”

"Okay." I forced myself to open the door and get out. I walked to my car and fumbled with the keys as I tried to unlock it. Finally, I made it into the driver's seat and closed the door. I took a deep breath. What on earth was wrong with me?

A knock on my window made me jump. Kai was standing there, looking very serious. I rolled down the window.

"Here," he said softly. "I thought you might want to listen to this on the way. You can borrow it for a while." He handed me the Stone Roses CD, and I was annoyed to see that my hand was shaking slightly as I took it from him.

"Thanks," I said. He paused for a second and looked at me with a positively smoldering expression on his face. He got in his car and drove slowly out of the lot.

I put the CD in the stereo and cranked it up as I followed him to Isla Vista. I noticed he kept looking in his rearview mirror

at me, his emerald-green eyes filling the mirror. It took all my concentration to watch the road so I wouldn't crash.

When we arrived at the taqueria, he held the door open for me, and we walked up to order. "Vegetarian burrito, please," I said to the woman behind the counter.

He looked at me curiously. "I thought you said chicken burritos were your favorite."

"What the hell," I said. "I might as well try giving up meat. It's certainly in line with my philosophy."

"Okay, make that two vegetarian burritos," he said.

"And to drink?" the woman asked.

"I'll have a horchata," I replied.

"Make that two," he said.

"No beer?" I asked.

"What the hell," he said. "I might as well try giving up drinking. It's certainly in line with my philosophy." We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

We ate our burritos and then walked through Isla Vista to the bluffs. We continued chatting all the way out there. I felt like we'd never run out of things to talk about. I told him about my major and how I was worried about what I was going to do with my future.

"You're smart, Ashlyn. You'll figure it out," he said simply. "I'll bet you've never been unemployed, have you?"

"This is the first time I haven't had a job since I was fifteen."

"Exactly. The right thing will come along. You just haven't found it yet. You can't always make things happen by force."

I studied his face as he spoke. He had so much confidence, but he was also completely laid back. It was that perfect balance

that I had always wished I could achieve. It was just one more thing that I found incredibly attractive about him.

The wind had picked up, but it was warm and balmy. The sun was sinking low into the water, bathing everything in an amber light. I walked ahead of him, enjoying the sensation of my hair streaming behind me in the wind.

"Ashlyn."

I turned and looked at him. He had stopped and was just standing there, staring at me, the fading sunlight shimmering off his hair. He walked slowly toward me, and I felt weak again. Why oh why did he have to be so damn gorgeous? And why did he have to look at me like that? If we were just going to be friends, he was really going to have to stop that.

I felt my breath quicken, and I tried to force myself to look away. But I was frozen by his gaze.

His eyes searched my face. Finally, he spoke again. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” he whispered.

A jolt shot through me. He was definitely not playing fair now. I looked down, trying to regain control of myself. “It’s just the sunset. It makes everything beautiful,” I said quietly.

He put his hand gently under my chin and lifted it until I was looking directly into his eyes.

“It’s not the sunset. You are a remarkably beautiful woman.” His expression was so serious that I knew he meant every word he was saying, even though it didn’t make any sense that someone like him could possibly feel that way about me.

Slowly, he leaned his head in toward me and kissed me. Electricity shot through my body. I put my arms around his neck and pulled him to me, a whirling vortex of energy building between us. His arms tightened around me, and as we kissed

more intensely, I felt like we completely melted into each other. His breathing became faster and his kisses more urgent. I felt slightly dizzy and weightless. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

I felt him start to pull back, and he gave me one more long, slow kiss before gently pulling away. He stared into my eyes with the sexiest look I had ever seen, and I wanted to devour him. There was such a unique mix of strength and passion and softness and gentleness all at once in him that was completely irresistible.

He kissed me on my forehead. "I hope that wasn't too forward of me," he said, looking out at the ocean as he held me to him.

"I hope you're kidding," I said, still trying to catch my breath.

"This day has been perfect. I don't want to ruin it."

"Trust me, you're not."

"So are you dating that guy or what?" he asked.

Toby. I'd completely forgotten about him—and my promise to myself.

"No, not anymore," I said decisively.

"This complicates things," he said softly. "I'm leaving."

"I don't really want to think about that right now."

He took my hand, and we walked back toward Isla Vista in silence. I felt totally elated. The wind picked up again, and I stopped to inhale the fresh breeze. It filled my lungs and made me feel like I was floating.

"Do you ever dream about flying?" I asked.

"Not that I can remember."

"I dream about it all the time. Whenever there's a strong wind, I like to lean into it and pretend I'm flying. Here, put your

arms out like this, and close your eyes." I showed him how to hold his arms out and lean into the wind. He closed his eyes, and a small, peaceful smile spread over his face.

I closed my eyes and leaned into the stiff breeze. It pushed back against me, making me feel lighter and almost beyond gravity's pull. My heart bounced. Here I was, standing on a bluff overlooking the ocean, with the most amazing guy on the planet standing next to me. I opened my eyes to look at the sunset.

I was hovering two feet above the ground.

I gasped and fell back down to earth. Kai opened his eyes and looked at me, startled. "Are you okay?" he asked. "What happened?"

"N-nothing," I stammered. "I . . . I leaned too far forward and fell over. Ha ha ha!" I laughed weakly as he helped me to my

feet. I felt slightly hysterical as my brain grappled with what it had just experienced.

"We should get back," he said. "It'll be too dark to see the trail soon."

"Yeah, good idea." We walked holding hands again, but more quickly this time. I was torn between feeling happier than I ever had and completely freaking out.

"I'm sorry," he said after we had walked in silence for a while. "I shouldn't have kissed you."

"Why?"

"Because I'm leaving."

"Oh, right."

He pulled me to a stop and looked into my eyes, and for a brief moment, I forgot about everything. About Minnesota, about Toby, about the fact that I'd just been levitating . . .

"If you want me to leave you alone, I'll understand," he said.

"No, of course not. Unless," I bit my lip. "Unless you think you've made a mistake."

His face darkened. "Not at all. Ashlyn, I have to move. I've already made my plans, and I need to do this. It seemed so simple before. Kelly had left me, and nothing was keeping me here. But from the moment I saw you at that party last week, I knew things weren't going to be that simple. I spent the first hour that night talking myself out of going over and meeting you, but I kept seeing you sitting there, with the ocean behind you, looking like a goddess in front of the fire. There was nothing I could do."

I watched his face in amazement. Every word he said rang true, and yet how could it be? How could someone like Kai think that I looked like a goddess?

"Let's just take things as they come," I said.

"Will you still come visit me?" he asked.

"Of course I will. Even if we decide that it's all too impossible and all we can ever be is friends. I want you to be in my life however you can be."

He looked at me in silence for a moment. "I've never met anyone like you before, Ashlyn."

As we continued walking, I was proud of myself for being strong enough to let him go, but part of me was screaming that I should tie him up and keep him here. I'd only just met him, but we *knew* each other. There was a connection here that I didn't understand, but it was the most powerful thing I'd ever felt.

And yet, I had something much larger to deal with. I couldn't chalk up all these weird occurrences to hallucinations. I had found myself inexplicably outside my window. I had seen

things in my "dream" that had actually happened. And without question, I had just been hovering above the ground. But the weirdest part was that I wasn't nearly as panicked as I should have been, almost as if some part of me knew what was going on. I had no idea what any of this meant, but it was competing heavily with meeting Kai as the most important event of my life.

When we got back to the apartment, Kai took my face in his hands and kissed me lightly.

"Thank you," he said. "For the most wonderful day I've had in . . . well, ever."

"Thanks for spending the day with me, Kai. I'm so glad I met you."

"I hope you always feel that way," he said, looking a little sad.

"There's no doubt about that." I turned and went inside. He was still watching me as I closed the door.

I walked into the bedroom. Rebecca was sitting on her bed, reading. She looked up as I walked in, saw my face, and immediately jumped to her feet.

"You're in love!" she said. Her eyes looked distant for a second. "And not with Toby, either. Who was it?"

"I spent the day with Kai, that guy I met at the party, but—"

"And he's in love with you, too. Really in love. I've never felt anything like that."

I sat down heavily on my bed. "Rebecca, slow down, you're making me dizzy. How can I be in love with him? We just met."

But I knew she was right. She was feeling what I was feeling without any of the mental filters I had, without the voices in my head fighting to gain control of the situation. But then her words caught up with me.

"Wait a second . . . did you say he's in love with *me*?" I shrieked.

She nodded. "You two made an unbelievable connection. What happened?"

"Rebecca, can we step back for a second here? I'm *almost* getting used to you picking up on my feelings, but how can you tell what he's feeling? He's not even in the room!"

She stopped and her face fell. "I don't know," she whispered finally. "It's getting stronger."

I looked at her and realized she was just as confused about all these changes as I was.

"If I tell you something," I said cautiously, "will you promise not to have me committed to a psych ward?"

"What is it?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"I think . . . I think that I, um, flew. Well, *hovered* is probably a better word," I added quickly.

"What are you talking about?" she asked in alarm.

"Just what I said. I was standing on the bluffs, and I closed my eyes, and suddenly I was like two feet off the ground."

Her face turned pale. "You're speaking figuratively, right? You mean that you felt like you were floating because—"

"No," I insisted. "I was literally in the air. Just hovering there like a kite in the wind. And when I saw where I was, I fell back down to the ground."

"Did you get hurt?" she asked, looking concerned.

"No, I'm fine. That is, if you can call unexplained levitation 'fine'."

She sat down and was quiet for a moment. "Ashlyn, why is this happening to us?"

"I don't know. I am totally at a loss here. But I have a feeling the answer is coming. Maybe that's why I'm not completely freaking out."

"Maybe," she said. "I just hope the answer comes soon. I don't know how much more of this I can take."

That night I slept fitfully. I dreamed that Kai and I saw each other across a busy street. His eyes lit up, and he ran toward me. A second later, he was run over by a large truck as I stood watching in horror. I woke up drenched in sweat with a pounding headache.

Rebecca and I talked very little the next morning, each of us lost in our own thoughts. After we cleaned the apartment, Toby came by to take me out for coffee, but I canceled on him again, telling him I was sick. I looked like crap from my bad night, and

he left quickly, probably not wanting to expose himself to whatever I might have.

I spent the day studying as much as I could, but I couldn't stop obsessing about everything that had happened. I had just had the single most incredible day of my life. I had never, ever connected with another person the way I had with Kai. My mom talked a lot about past lives and soulmates, but I'd never given it much credence. Now, the idea of soulmates seemed to make a lot of sense. If they did exist, this is exactly what it would feel like.

But he was also leaving. No matter what we felt for each other, he was moving two thousand miles away, and I wasn't going to stop him. This was an important step for him, going back to his home town, reclaiming it for himself. If he were to leave Minnesota again, it would be on his own terms. But from

the way he talked about it, I couldn't imagine he'd ever want to leave. I'd lived all my life in California, and I started wondering whether I could learn to call the Midwest my home.

Later that afternoon, I checked my e-mail. There was a short message from Kai.

Ashlyn,

I'm still basking in the afterglow of yesterday. Thank you for a wonderful day.

Kai

I wanted to be excited by this confirmation that yesterday hadn't been a dream, but I just felt sad. It wasn't fair that he swooped into my life and made me feel this way about him, only to leave and move across the country. I shook off the feeling and shut my laptop. I wasn't going to think about it again today. I had too much to do.

But as soon as I pushed Kai out of my mind, the whole levitation thing sprang into its place. This made me angry. I didn't understand why Rebecca and I were going through these weird changes with nobody around to explain them to us. I didn't have a clue where to start looking for answers. I opened my Web browser, but I had no idea what to search for. There was no information, just a void. I tossed and turned that night in bed, wondering if I'd wake up on my ceiling, wondering if I were losing my mind.

The next morning, I got up early to go swim at the lap pool on campus. I was exhausted, but a swim sounded relaxing and energizing—just the thing to get my head into the right space for school. Rebecca was still asleep, so I crept out quietly.

Once I was in the water, I quickly settled into a steady rhythm with my stroke. Pull, pull, pull, breathe. Pull, pull, pull,

breathe. The sound of my breath was meditative, and I started looking at everything on with calm reflection.

I was falling in love with Kai, the most amazing person I'd ever met, and he was falling for me, too.

Pull, pull, pull, breathe.

I had inexplicably levitated, and Rebecca was reading people's feelings, meaning that we were either crazy or freaks of nature.

Pull, pull, pull, breathe.

Speaking of freaks, I had Professor Gordon's class again tomorrow. I had to decide whether I was going to drop the class or just tough it out.

Pull, pull, pull, breathe.

Gordon kept pressing me to come to his office hours . . .

And then suddenly, I knew what I had to do. The connection was so simple, so clear now. I jumped out of the pool and ran to the locker rooms, where I showered and dressed as quickly as I could. I practically sprinted to the religious studies building. I wasn't sure whether he would be there that early, but it was worth a shot.

I found his office and knocked on the door. As soon as my knuckles touched the wood, the door opened, and Professor Gordon was standing there with a slight smile on his face.

"Come in, Ashlyn. We've been expecting you."

Chapter 9: Revelations

I hesitated at the doorway, suddenly worried that things here weren't right at all. "How did you know . . . ?" I began, but as he opened the door wider, my heart skipped a beat. Rebecca was sitting in a chair in his office, looking pale.

"Rebecca, what are you doing here? Are you okay?" I asked, rushing in.

She smiled weakly at me. "I'm fine, Ashlyn. Really. John will explain everything."

"*John*?" I spun around and glared at him. "What have you done to her?"

"Rebecca and I just met for the first time about ten minutes ago," he said, his rich voice softer than usual. "She's here for the same reason you are."

"And what might that be?" A small voice in my head was telling me to run, but I was rooted to the spot.

"You're here for answers, and I'm the only one who can give them to you. But you have to try to trust me, and at least hear me out. Please, have a seat." He gestured at a chair near Rebecca.

"I'd rather stand." I stood protectively by Rebecca's chair.

She laughed quietly. "Really, it's okay. Just hear him out."

"Stand if you like," he said. "But what I'm going to say is not going to be easy to hear." He walked to his desk and sat down behind it. I was more comfortable with a solid piece of furniture between us, and I relaxed a bit.

"The changes you both have been experiencing are nothing to be afraid of. In fact, they are wonderful gifts, but they do come with a burden."

"How do you know about this?" I asked.

"That's *my* gift, but my story comes later," he replied. "There is a name for those who are given these abilities: Soterians."

I decided now might be a good time to sit down. I moved slowly to the chair next to Rebecca as Professor Gordon continued.

"The name comes from Soteria, the ancient Greek goddess of safety and protection. Soterians are called forward whenever the balance of good and evil has shifted too far in evil's favor. Nobody knows why certain people are called, but we suspect it's genetic. You tend to receive the gifts that match your natural tendencies. Rebecca is already a very empathetic person and

wants to become a doctor. So becoming an Empath is a natural extension of her personality."

"An Empath?" I asked.

"Empaths are one of the five types of Soterians. They can feel what others feel, helping them to determine a person's motives. They also have healing abilities. They can't perform miracles, but they can calm an ally, help stop bleeding—"

"Bleeding? Allies? What in the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm getting to that," he said softly. "Empaths also have the power to create illusion, so they can make people see what they want them to see."

I bit my lip to keep from interrupting again. I had about thirty seconds of patience left before I knew I would bolt for the door.

"So Rebecca is a very powerful ally to have," he continued. "But that's no surprise to you, I'm sure. She's already become one of your closest friends." Rebecca smiled at me, and I tried in vain to smile back.

"So, if Rebecca is an Empath . . . ," I prompted. I wasn't sure I really wanted the answer to my next question.

"You are a Scout," he answered. "Your vision and hearing will become very acute, so you will be an excellent information gatherer. You will also be able to become invisible, allowing you to get into places you wouldn't be able to otherwise."

"I'll be able to become invisible?" I repeated weakly.

"But most importantly," he continued, "is your primary power, which is useful beyond all others." His face broke into a soft smile. "You will be able to fly."

My heart stopped, and I felt the room spinning.

Rebecca reached out and put her hand on mine, and I felt warmth spread up my arm and into my head, which cleared immediately. At that moment, I noticed several things at once that had escaped me before: the heavy wood shelves behind Professor Gordon's desk stuffed with books of all sizes, the specks of dust in the sun beams streaming through the window, the twinkle in Rebecca's eye that spoke volumes more than the pallor of her face.

"There's your first demonstration of how useful Rebecca can be," he said. "The fact that her healing is developing already means the event is closer than I thought."

"The event? You said this is happening because evil is becoming stronger?" I asked.

"That's correct. Something is happening that is shifting the balance, but a major event will likely occur to push it well past the tipping point."

"But how can we do anything about that?"

"I mentioned that there are five types of Soterians," he continued. "I've already explained Empaths and Scouts. The other two active types are Sentries and Warriors. Sentries provide defense to all their allies. They are nearly indestructible. Warriors are the real fighters of the group. Their specialty is hand-to-hand combat."

"What about the fifth type?" I asked. "You said there were active types, so is there a non-active type?"

"Yes," Professor Gordon replied. "The fifth type is the Mentor, which is what I am. Mentors have the ability to detect emerging Soterians and to train them to use their skills. Our

lives are devoted to watching and waiting for other Soterians to appear, and then to help them to restore balance."

"So Soterians destroy evil?" Rebecca asked.

"No," he said firmly. "Good and evil will both always exist. You cannot eradicate either one, ever, either in the world or in yourself. All you can do is find a natural balance." I saw Rebecca stiffen in disagreement.

"I think I see what he means," I said slowly. "We all have our weaknesses, our 'evils.' We can't change our character defects, only minimize them. Is it something like that?" I asked him.

"Exactly like that. Think of it like a yin-yang symbol. In the natural balance, good sits on top, and evil is on the bottom. When evil grows, it shifts the balance, and good begins to fall. When evil rises too far, Soterians are called into action to bring it back into balance."

I thought for a moment in silence. “Professor—”

“Please, call me John.”

“John, right. You said that these gifts are also a burden. Why?”

His face clouded. “You have been called to do battle and restore the balance of good and evil. This is not an easy task. There are already many systems of checks and balances in place to prevent evil from getting the upper hand. When it does, it means you’re dealing with a very powerful enemy. It’s going to be difficult and extremely dangerous.”

“And my mom was worried about me swimming in the ocean,” I muttered.

“It’s not only the physical danger,” he said. “There’s also a psychological danger.”

Rebecca and I both looked at him in surprise. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Once you have restored the balance, your powers will fade, and you will become as you are now, only much wiser. It takes a great deal of emotional strength to let go of these powers, and the fear of losing them can corrupt even the strongest Soterians.”

“You mean that a Soterian would promote evil just to prevent his powers from fading?” asked Rebecca, looking aghast.

“Yes, I’m afraid it has happened. Consider how hard it is for you to accept the fact that you have these powers. Now try to imagine how much harder it is to let them go once you’ve developed them.”

He got up and walked slowly around his desk. “The training is key. I have a martial arts school in the hills above Goleta. We

will start training there today. You will also begin a meditation practice to start learning detachment and to hear your ego clearly so that you can learn to disregard it. This is the only way to prevent yourselves from falling victim to the temptation of putting personal desires before your calling."

"So let me get this straight," I said. "You're telling me that I'm going to be able to *fly*, the thing I've dreamed about my whole life, but that I have to use it to battle evil, which will put my life in danger, and then I don't even get to keep it?" I stood up quickly. I was shaking with anger and could barely see straight. "Just what in the hell is this? I didn't ask for this! You can't tell me at nine o'clock on a Monday morning that I'm going to have these powers, but oh yeah, one little caveat, one minor detail: I can't keep them. Well screw you and your mythology *and* your gifts. I don't want any of it!"

John looked at me sadly. "It's not that simple, Ashlyn. You can't give it back. You have been called."

"I don't care! I want out. Tell me what I have to do."

"Ashlyn, I know what you're feeling—"

"Do you? Have you been given gifts you had to give back?"

"I don't get any gifts beyond helping other Soterians," he said slightly more loudly. "I spend my life waiting for them to show up so I can help them use *their* gifts."

There was a hint of bitterness in his voice, and suddenly I saw the situation through his eyes. Being a Mentor had to be the worst of all. To train others, to watch them fight and fly and heal . . . and never to be able to do it yourself.

"I'm sorry," I said after a pause. I sat down again. "Are you a Mentor for life, then?"

"Until I have helped a unit of Soterians succeed, or until I am too old to be useful any longer," he said softly.

We stared at the floor in silence as the clock softly chimed nine times.

Chapter 10: Ninja Training

School that day was pointless. I sat in my labs and nodded in what seemed like the right places, but inside I was melting down.

I was a Soterian, apparently. Some genetic switch had been thrown, and now I was acquiring superhuman powers. I had to train hard, risk my life, and do the thing I had dreamed about forever: flying. And then turn around and give it all back.

Likewise, I'd met a guy who could very well turn out to be my soulmate, but he was moving thousands of miles away. I just didn't want to fly at all or be with Kai one more second if it was just going to end in loss. I would have my heart broken in both cases, and the pain would be more than I could deal with.

But in the midst of the gloom, other thoughts began creeping in. What would it be like to fly? Not just hover, but really fly? Would it be like I had always dreamed it would be? And what would it be like to become invisible? I also thought about all the ways in which Kai and I could be together, everything from moving there after graduation to getting a call from him saying he was staying here after all.

I spent the afternoon like a zombie, walking from lab to lab, completely lost in my thoughts. I alternated between trying to process the enormity of this responsibility that was being shoved on me, trying to grasp the danger I was headed toward, and actually getting excited about the prospect of learning to use my powers.

But then I imagined fighting a battle, losing my powers, losing Kai, and ending up working in the same job I had left with

no better career prospects. When my thoughts turned in the no-Kai/no-career direction, I felt like panic and despair would pull me under, and I spent all my energy pushing those thoughts out of my head.

Finally, my last lab ended at three o'clock, and I walked home slowly. Rebecca was waiting for me.

"How are you doing?" I asked her.

"Okay," she said. "Hmm, better than you are, it would seem. But I'm only dealing with half the burden you are right now."

"You mean you're okay with all this Soterian stuff?" I asked.

"Well, it's nice to have an explanation, however weird it may be. And I don't know, getting to heal people . . . I mean, that's what I'm devoting my life to anyway. Until I have the knowledge to do it medically, it will be nice to be able to do it magically."

"You're obviously much more well-adjusted than I am," I said, slumping into a chair.

"But part of you has to be so excited about flying," she said. "It's what you've always dreamed about."

"Yes, and that's just the problem. When I dream about flying, I wake up so happy. When I swim and bike and get a rush because it feels like flying, it makes me ecstatic. What's going to happen after I've really flown? Will those things do it for me anymore? Don't you see, by flying and then having to give it up, I'm probably losing all sensation of it *forever*."

"And you're worried about the same thing with Kai," she said slowly, as if she were reading the whole story as it scrolled across my face. "About experiencing with him what you always dreamed a relationship could be like, only to lose it forever,

never being able to love anyone again." She paused and looked sadly at me. "Oh God, Ashlyn. I'm so sorry."

She twisted a lock of hair around her finger, her brow furrowed as she considered my dilemma. Suddenly, her face brightened. "You know, it is possible that instead of wrecking your life, this is going to work out great for you. It's possible that flying for real will actually make your dreams even more vivid. And that things will work out with Kai, and you'll spend the rest of your lives happy together, experiencing something every day that most of us will never know. And you know what? Dwelling on the worst-case scenario isn't going to help you through this, so why not just decide that you're going to have the happily-ever-after scenario?"

Her enthusiasm was building as she painted this rosy image, and I started to envision it, too.

"We're going to be helping people in a way nobody else can," she continued. "We're actually going to be empowered to *fight evil* instead of just having to write letters to our senators. We have a lot to be grateful for, and I say we put aside our fears and just embrace it."

"You know, Rebecca, I think you're on to something," I said as her words sank in. "This might be the first step in the mental training John was talking about. About not letting fear get the better of us."

"Yes, you're absolutely right," she said. "That's brilliant!"

"It was your idea," I said, laughing. Rebecca's eyes sparkled, and my heart felt lighter again. "Come on, let's get ready and go start our training," I said. "Lord knows I need another hobby."

At four o'clock, we arrived at John's martial arts school. It was a Japanese-style building painted white with dark brown

trim. A path led from the school to his house, which was tucked away in the trees. I wondered how he had time to be a professor and teach martial arts, let alone take on the task of training us to fight evil.

When we walked in, John was already there, dressed in a black uniform. He walked forward to greet us.

"Welcome. This is my dojo, or training place," he said, gesturing around him. "We'll be meeting here for all our sessions."

He showed us the main room, which had a hardwood floor and a wall of mirrors. There was a pile of thick mats stacked in a corner, which he said we would use for learning to roll and fall. A large bin was stuffed with padded targets and shields that we would use when practicing punching and kicking.

He taught us the proper way to bow at the door when entering and exiting the dojo. He explained that this showed respect for the training, for the teacher, for the other students, and for ourselves.

Whatever I felt about this Soterian business, I was totally stoked about learning martial arts. I had always wanted to study it, but I never got around to signing up for classes. Rebecca, on the other hand, was very quiet during the tour.

"John?" she finally said in a small voice.

"Yes, Rebecca?"

"Um, not to sound ungrateful or uninterested, but why do I have to learn martial arts? I thought I was going to be healing people, not hurting them."

"That's an excellent question, Rebecca. I'm sorry, I should have explained this earlier. I'm rushing things a bit because I can

feel the time pressure. Let's stretch while I explain." He sat on the floor and kicked his legs out to both sides into a saddle stretch. He gently leaned forward and put his arms out on the floor in front of him. We copied his movements and listened closely while we stretched.

"I've already told you that Empaths can heal and create illusion. What I didn't explain yet is that the healing and illusion are powered partially by you, but also by the person you're targeting. You guide their strength to help heal their injury. Likewise, you guide their imagination to perceive the illusions they see and hear." He pulled his legs together and bent double, putting his chest on his knees as he continued.

"Because you're going to be responsible for helping your allies, you will often be in the thick of things, and therefore you need to know how to defend yourself in case an enemy gets too

close to you. Since your gifts revolve around refocusing the energy of your opponent, I will be teaching you Aikido, which is very similar in that it teaches you to use an attacker's power against him. Here, I'll show you," he said, getting up. "Ashlyn, please stand in front of me." I stood up quickly, excited for my first lesson.

"Throw a punch slowly at my chest," he said. I pulled my fist back and slowly punched forward, hitting him in the chest. Rebecca watched us curiously.

"You can see that if she were hitting me at full speed, it would hurt me," John explained. "Now, do it again, Ashlyn, and this time I'll block you."

I threw the punch again, and he slowly brought his forearm across his body and hit my arm out of the way. "This is called a hard block," he said. "It's very effective if you're stronger than

the other person, but if not, you're just going to hurt your arm, because you're trying to stop the attacker's power. One more time, please."

I threw the punch, and this time, he gracefully spun out of the way. As he spun, he grabbed my wrist and pushed it along in the same direction I was punching, causing me to stumble forward.

"Now, instead of trying to stop her attack, I've allowed it to continue and am harnessing it along the way. If I were trying to incapacitate her, I could use that energy to throw her into the ground. That is the essence of Aikido and is what I will be teaching you."

Rebecca looked delighted. "I had no idea," she said. "I always thought martial arts were about hitting and kicking people."

"Not with Aikido," John said. "It should come fairly naturally to you as an Empath, but it will require a lot of dedicated training and hard work. It looks simple, but it takes a long time to master. Of course, we'll also be working on developing your healing and illusion control." Rebecca looked eager to begin.

John turned to me. "Ashlyn, your training will be somewhat different. As a Scout, your emphasis is on stealth. You collect information from a distance and disappear when you have to get in close. Therefore, I will be teaching you Ninjutsu."

"Ninjutsu?"

"You might be more familiar with the term used to describe those who practice Ninjutsu. Have you heard of Ninja?"

My mouth fell open. "Ninja? Are you serious? You're going to train me to be a Ninja?"

He chuckled. “It’s not exactly what you may have seen in the movies. You won’t need the black mask. Ninjutsu means the art of stealth, and it will assist you in your reconnaissance.”

“But what if I’m caught and need to defend myself?” I asked.

“Like Rebecca, you will be studying pressure points on the body and will learn to disable an enemy by striking these points. Ninja used small wooden tools for this, but your finger tips and knuckles can work just as well when you are trying to disable them so that you can get away.”

“So, we won’t be fighting to defeat our enemies, only to defend ourselves?” I asked.

“That’s correct. It’s your job to gather information, Rebecca’s job to confuse the enemy and heal the allies, the Sentry’s job to stop them from harming you, and the Warrior’s job to defeat them.”

"But we don't have a Sentry or Warrior," said Rebecca.

"Not yet, but they're coming."

"You mean, there are more of us on the way?" I asked in surprise, although I should have already guessed that. It was stupid to think that only Rebecca and I had been called.

"I have felt the presence of a Warrior and Sentry. I expect to discover them within the next day or two."

"How will you find them?" I asked.

"They will find me, as you and Rebecca did."

"Speaking of which, how did you find John?" I asked Rebecca.

"When I woke up this morning, I had an overwhelming urge to get to campus right away," she said. "Without thinking, I just headed to the religious studies department and went straight to John's office. I had no idea what I was doing there, but there was

such a relief in following the pull, as if everything were finally moving forward."

"The Sentry and Warrior will find me the same way, unless I see them first," John said.

"Like you did with me?" I asked.

"Yes. I know a Soterian when I look into his or her eyes."

"Is that why you were making eye contact with everyone in the class on the first day?"

"Very perceptive of you, Ashlyn. Yes, I felt the call a couple of weeks ago, and I've been scanning the eyes of every person I've met ever since."

"So in addition to teaching me Ninjutsu, you're going to work with me on flying and disappearing?"

"Yes, we'll start that immediately. The martial arts training is critically important once you're in battle, but learning to master your gifts is the primary goal. Let's begin."

He sat down cross-legged on the floor. "Rebecca, I want you to focus on making Ashlyn see a green circle above her head. Ashlyn, I want you to float straight up into the circle."

We waited for further instructions, but he just stared patiently at us. After a moment, when neither of us had moved, I finally spoke. "Um, okay, but how?"

"You've levitated before. How did you do it then?"

I closed my eyes and thought back. Both times I had been really happy and had felt light and free, like my heart was a balloon. I remembered Kai kissing me on the bluffs, and I realized that if he hadn't been holding me so tightly, I probably would have hovered then, too.

I opened my eyes. “I think I know the trigger.”

“Good,” John said. “Rebecca, I want you to focus on wanting with all your heart for Ashlyn to see that circle above her head.”

Rebecca nodded and concentrated, but nothing happened. What if we couldn’t do this?

“Remember, Ashlyn, that she’s just learning, and that she can feel what you’re feeling. She’s going to sense your doubt. Try a different approach.”

I nodded and thought about how brave Rebecca was, leaving home for the first time and having all this dumped on her within a few short weeks. I reflected on what a great friend she had been to me already, and how smart she was. Rebecca’s face lit up, and suddenly a flash of green appeared above my head. I looked up and saw a circle glowing in the air.

"You did it!" I said, half elated, half in shock as it hit me that all this stuff was real after all.

Suddenly, the circle was at eye level.

Rebecca gasped, and I looked down to see that I was hovering above the floor. An intense joy gushed through me. I was actually flying! The last time I hovered, I only felt panic, because I didn't know what was happening. Now that I was doing it on purpose, I could fully experience it, and it was incredible. It wasn't at all like swimming, as it had always been in my dreams—it was absolutely effortless. It was like I was suddenly made of a gas that was lighter than air and simply drifted where my mind directed.

I bit my lip to keep from shouting as I tried to keep concentrating. I floated all the way up through the circle.

"Good work, both of you," John said. "Keep the image going, Rebecca. Don't lose focus. Remember, you really want her to see it. Ashlyn, fly once around the room, and then slowly come back down. Harness that feeling of weightlessness. Don't just know that you *can* do this, but that you *will* do it."

I visualized myself floating forward, and my body responded. I didn't know how I was doing it, but it just worked. It felt absolutely amazing.

I floated around the room, gaining speed, feeling the air rush past me. The despair I had felt just a few short hours ago was gone. This was what I had always wanted, the sensation I searched for in my dreams, on my bike, during my swims. The weightlessness, the speed, and the ability to move in all directions, no longer limited to two dimensions, felt so natural. It was like an old skill, long forgotten, that suddenly re-emerged.

I completed my loop and slowly touched down. Rebecca ran over and hugged me happily.

"We did it!" she said.

"The hardest part is over," John said. "You both did very well. Now, what do you think were the keys that allowed you to succeed?"

Rebecca spoke first. "Well, at first I didn't think I could do it, and it seemed like Ashlyn didn't think I could, either. But then she felt confidence in us, and I really wanted her to succeed, which made it easier somehow."

"And once Rebecca figured it out," I added, "it made it easier to believe we could do it, and then it just came naturally."

"Exactly," John said. "These are the most important things I can ever teach you. When you allow yourself to doubt, you will fail. When you allow yourself to believe in yourself and embrace

what is possible, you will succeed. And your beliefs about other people impact them far beyond what we understand. So you must gain the mental discipline to avoid doubt and to believe in yourselves, as well as to focus your thoughts on believing the best about each other. If you doubt Rebecca, she will feel it, and then she'll doubt herself and fail, which will then cause you to doubt yourself and also fail. You are only as strong as the other person's mental discipline, which is why you must train and practice both individually and as a unit. This is vital to the success of the Soterians."

John stood up. "That is all I will teach you today. I want you to think about this for the next twenty-four hours and come back here tomorrow at four o'clock to continue training. As you go about your day, watch where you allow yourself to be guided by doubt instead of wisdom. Watch how your thoughts about

other people take a negative or critical turn, and see whether you can turn toward compassion instead. If there's someone you really dislike, he or she would be the ideal person to practice this with."

"Guess I should invite Kelly to dinner then," I said under my breath.

"Don't underestimate the power of compassion," John said. "If there is someone who pushes your buttons, she is a gift to help your training. Feeling gratitude for her will help jump-start your compassion, and soon she will no longer hold power over your emotions."

We left the dojo and drove home in silence, each of us processing what we had learned today. The concept of taking power away from your enemies by having compassion for them was a revelation for me. It would take a lot of work for me to feel

compassion for Kelly, but it was worth a try if it meant she wouldn't get under my skin any more.

I was exhausted when I crawled into bed that night. It had been a ridiculously long day, what with my early swim, learning I was a Soterian, and starting martial arts training. I closed my eyes, and immediately Kai came into my mind. I had no idea how this was going to work out. We had just met each other, for heaven's sake, and I was falling in love with him already? That just didn't seem possible, but it was undeniably true.

And yet, logistically the whole thing was impossible. Even if by some miracle he did decide to stay, how could I start a relationship with anyone now? I couldn't keep my powers a secret from him, but secrecy was absolutely required. How would I explain where I was going when we went off to do battle? Tell him I was at an intensive course somewhere? I

supposed that could work, but what if I accidentally disappeared in front of him? Or flew?

My brain spun through a million questions. I punched my pillow and rolled over, trying to get comfortable. I tried to watch my thoughts and to just notice them and let them go, like watching leaves drift by in a stream as I'd learned from reading books on Buddhism. But my thoughts were bouncing all over the place, and I lay awake late into the night.

Chapter 11: The Election

"Ashlyn, you're not concentrating," John said. We were in training the next day, and we were learning how to fall. The problem was that each time John tried to take me down, I ended up levitating instead of falling. I swore under my breath and got back into position.

"But if she can fly each time she's about to fall, does she really have to learn falling at all?" Rebecca asked. She was practicing doing shoulder rolls on the mats John had laid out and was starting to get the hang of it.

"Absolutely," he answered. "Secrecy about your gifts is critically important, and to keep them secret, you must learn to

control them. If Ashlyn were to trip and fly in front of a group of people instead of falling, her cover would be blown instantly."

"He's right," I said. "The truth is that I'm terrified of falling. I've only had one major crash on my bike, and it scared the hell out of me. I have to conquer this fear."

"The beauty is that by learning to fall correctly, you don't have to be afraid of it anymore," he said. "If you were thrown over your handlebars, you would be able to tuck into a roll and fall without seriously injuring yourself. That will be a useful skill for the rest of your life."

I didn't like to think about not having my powers anymore, but I knew he was right. "Okay, let's try it again," I said.

He grabbed my wrist, turned, and picked me up over his hip. He let me fall softly onto the mat. This time, I focused on what he had said about relaxing and slapping the mat with my arm

just before my body hit. I felt myself falling through space, but instead of resisting it and trying to float back up, I allowed the ground to come toward me and slapped the mat.

"Much better," he said. "You didn't fight it that time. Hold on to that feeling and harness it whenever you feel fear arise. Working *with* what's happening instead of fighting against it is the fluid state of mind we want to have in martial arts."

I nodded. There was so much to learn, and so much of it felt opposite to what my body wanted to do. Whenever I fell forward, I went rigid and wanted to put my hand out to break my fall, but John explained that trying to stop the fall is the quickest way to break your wrist. Instead, we had to practice relaxing instead of being rigid, to slap the ground with our arms to dissipate the energy or to go into a roll, using the energy to

take us forward instead of splatting on the ground. It was a bitch to learn.

After more rolling and falling practice, we moved on to pressure points. I found it difficult to locate them, but Rebecca had an easier time because she could relate them to landmarks on the body that she was learning in anatomy. I was having trouble finding the pressure point on the forearm, and she moved my hand to the right spot.

"No, it's not right in the center. It's just medial to that, on the median nerve."

"Rebecca, you know that's a foreign language to me," I said with a sigh.

"Sorry, but this training is going to cut into my study time, so I'll need to find a way to combine the two whenever possible." She pressed on the point and I jumped.

"I can't believe how much that hurts," I said, rubbing my arm.

"That's the advantage of pressure points," John said. "You don't have to be strong, just accurate. Don't push harder if you don't get it. Keep using gentle pressure until you're on the right spot."

Suddenly, John looked up. "They're here," he said.

"Who?" I asked.

"The rest of our unit."

"What? You found them? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I wasn't sure whether they would come today," he said simply. I knew that was the only explanation I was going to get out of him. I looked curiously toward the entrance.

The door opened, and two guys walked in. One was very tall, built like a football player, with light blue eyes and spiky blond

hair. He had a playful smile on his face. The other was about my height with brown hair and hazel eyes. He had a medium build, not bulky, but looked extremely fit. He was scowling slightly.

John walked forward. “Welcome,” he said. “Ashlyn, Rebecca, I’d like to introduce you to Christoph Voight, our Sentry,” he said gesturing to the tall blond. “And to our Warrior, Michael MacNeil.” He turned toward us. “Gentlemen, this is Ashlyn Woods, our Scout, and Rebecca Epstein, our Empath.”

Christoph was the first to respond. “It’s a great pleasure to meet you,” he said in a thick German accent as he shook our hands. Michael shook our hands in silence.

“Nice to meet you,” Rebecca and I said in unison. I saw Michael roll his eyes slightly. I had a feeling that he was the reason John doubted they would show up today.

"I'm sorry we're late," Christoph said. "I wanted to make sure Michael voted, since I'm not allowed to."

"Good idea," Rebecca said. "This is an important election." Christoph smiled at her, and suddenly her face turned red. I was surprised. She was a bit shy, but I'd never seen her react like that before.

"So how long have you guys been experiencing, um, symptoms?" I asked, trying to draw attention away from Rebecca's flaming face. "Of being Soterians, I mean."

"To tell the truth, it was somewhat hard to notice," Christoph said. "I started kickboxing recently, and I just thought I was getting better. Suddenly, nobody could kick me." He laughed heartily. "Michael is a great fighter already, so he probably doesn't notice any difference."

"Of course I do," Michael said gruffly.

"Michael is an advanced practitioner of Tae Kwon Do and kick boxing," John explained. "He's been training since he was a child. I'm sure there's very little I need to teach him in that area."

"But you think you have something to teach me in other areas?" Michael asked skeptically. I was appalled at how rude he was, questioning John right here in his own dojo, but then I remembered my own reaction when I first learned the truth, and how I'd practically accused John of kidnapping Rebecca. I decided this was a good opportunity to practice compassion.

"My guess is that we will spend most of our time training you to translate your skills into a team setting," John said diplomatically. I couldn't help smirking, as Michael didn't exactly seem like a team player. He glared at me.

"Some kind of problem?" he asked.

"Nope," I said. "Just looking forward to seeing what you can do."

"Let's do that now," John said. "I think it would be good for us to witness each other's skills, get to know what the unit's strengths are. Rebecca, we'll need a sparring ring, please."

Instantly, a large yellow rectangle appeared in the middle of the room. Christoph applauded in appreciation, and Rebecca blushed again. Uh-oh. I was beginning to suspect why she was having this reaction.

"Thank you," John said. "Ashlyn, we'll need you as a ref."

I was excited by the prospect of seeing some sparring, and I rose into the air and drifted toward the ring. I saw Michael's mouth fall open slightly, and Christoph let out a whoop. I couldn't suppress the grin that spread across my face.

"Very good. Now, Christoph, Michael, and Rebecca, please step into the ring." I was surprised he was having Rebecca go into the ring. But I quickly remembered that she could feel my doubts, so I focused on thinking positive thoughts about her.

When they were in the ring, John continued. "Rebecca, stand behind Christoph. Michael, when I say 'go,' I want you to try to hit Rebecca in the face."

"What?" Christoph and I said at the same time.

"Have a little faith, please," John said. "On your mark, get set, go."

Michael became a blur, trying to get around Christoph, but Christoph seemed to be everywhere at once, darting this way and that. No matter how hard Michael tried, Christoph was always in front of Rebecca protecting her. She giggled, and the ring flickered.

"Concentrate, Rebecca," John said. "Okay, very good. Michael, please throw a jump side kick to Christoph's sternum."

Michael launched himself through the air and threw his right leg toward Christoph's chest. When he made contact, he simply bounced off Christoph and fell to the floor. In one fluid motion, he slapped as he landed, did a backward roll, and stood up. It was very impressive.

"Ashlyn," John said. "What did you see?"

I drifted down to the floor. "I saw that Christoph is an unstoppable wall," I said with a laugh. "But I also saw that Michael moves like a panther. Your skills are amazing." I bowed to Michael as John had taught us. He bowed in return with a perfect ease that clearly came from years of practice.

"Yes, Christoph is an ideal Sentry," John said. "And you've seen that Michael is a highly skilled attacker. What I'd like to see

now are Michael's skills at defense. Rebecca and Christoph, please step outside of the ring. Ashlyn, resume your referee position."

We did as John instructed, and then he and Michael stepped into the ring. They bowed to each other and immediately fell into low, crouched stances. In unison, they let out a loud "Ai!" that burst through the air like an explosion, making my ears ring.

The next two minutes were a blur. John attacked Michael with a speed I wouldn't have expected from someone his age while looking completely relaxed. It was clear that he had nearly superhuman skills. But unlike us, he had gained them through sheer effort, through force of will and years and years of training. I felt a deepened respect for him.

Michael moved with an effortless grace, even while his face was a study in intense concentration. He blocked every punch, every kick. John threw a combination, faking a kick to Michael's side first, then raising his leg and kicking at his head instead. He immediately followed with a spinning kick and a straight punch. Michael blocked them all. I flew around the ring, watching from every angle. I was new to this, and it was difficult to know what to look for, but I couldn't see John land a single hit or kick on Michael.

Finally, they stopped and bowed to each other, both breathing very hard.

"Michael wins," I said, and we all bowed to each other. I noticed that Michael retained his stoic expression, but there was a gleam in his eye. He was obviously happy with his new

abilities, and I guessed that he was also feeling a new respect for John.

"Excellent work," John said breathlessly. "I am very pleased with how all your skills have developed already."

"John," I said, "you told me that my vision and hearing would sharpen, but I haven't noticed any difference. Why is that? And also, when will I learn to disappear?"

"It's coming, Ashlyn," he said. "Some skills take longer to develop. They are also an indicator of when the tipping point has occurred. When you notice a sharp improvement, let me know immediately. In the meantime, it will be critical for you to practice consciously controlling your powers, as yours have the most potential for exposing us."

I looked into the faces of the others standing around me and felt the full weight of the responsibility of being a Scout. It

would be up to me to gather information that could make or break our ability to succeed. It was a burden, as John had said yesterday in his office. Yesterday—it seemed like a month had passed already.

We wrapped up our training session with a silent meditation, following our breath and watching our thoughts. John explained that you had to first know your mind intimately before you could practice self-control, and that it was important that we start being able to monitor our thoughts so that we didn't give in to doubt and fear.

Rebecca and I said good-bye to the others and got in the car to head home. As soon as we closed the doors, I started grilling her.

"Okay, what happened?" I asked. "Why were you blushing?"

"I'm not sure I want to talk about it," she said, turning red again.

"Rebecca, you have got to tell me," I insisted. "Come on, what happened?"

"Well, I'm beginning to see that it can really be a nuisance to feel other people's feelings."

"What did you feel?"

"It was Christoph . . . he, well, he was really attracted to me." She put her face in her hands. "Try to imagine just how weird that is. Feeling someone else feeling attracted to you."

"Okay, but Rebecca, that's so cool! I mean, he's totally hot, after all. And he seems really nice. Just be grateful it wasn't Michael."

"I know, but I don't know him at all, and now I'm all mixed up. I can't tell whether I'm attracted to him because I'm feeling

his attraction toward me, or if I'm really attracted to him, or . . . it's all too confusing!" She shook her head in dismay, but I saw a twinkle in her eye. It seemed pretty clear that her feelings had nothing to do with his.

"This is a great opportunity for practicing mental discipline," I said. "When we see them tomorrow, watch your feelings, and start separating them from his."

"Good idea," she said, brightening. "That way I'll be training, and I'll be able to figure out something useful at the same time."

We were starving by this point, so we went straight to the café and had dinner. When we got back to the apartment, Candace was sitting on the living room couch watching TV and drinking a beer. She looked totally pissed off.

"Hey, Candace, what's up?" I asked.

"You're not going to believe this. That bastard has somehow fooled the goddamn sheep in this state into following him."

"Who?" I asked, confused.

"Lawson!" she yelled. "Early results show him winning by a ten percent margin."

I gasped. It was impossible! All the latest polls showed him far behind McIntyre. We quickly sat down next to Candace and watched the coverage, Lawson's grinning face filling the screen.

"This is a mandate from the good people of the state of California to return to traditional values, to put stiffer controls in place, to bring morality back into our lives . . . ," he said.

"You don't legislate morality!" Candace said loudly. "Has this idiot never heard of the separation of church and state?"

" . . . a return to fundamental principles of family, and to eliminate the evils that have plagued our great state and caused our fall from grace."

"You're a fascist!" Candace screamed at the television. An intense anger filled my chest, and my ears roared. The sound got louder, subsided, and then crashed forward again in a wave.

A wave?

Suddenly, I realized the roaring sound was the ocean. I sat up rigidly as I heard the waves crashing on the beach two blocks away.

I looked at Rebecca, but she was staring at the TV, her eyes filled with sorrow. "It's still early," she murmured. "The polls don't close for a couple of hours." Candace crushed the empty beer can in her fist and hurled it at the TV.

I got up and walked toward the window. I could hear the cars on the freeway, which was even farther away than the beach. I cocked my head toward campus and heard conversations among angry people watching the election.

I looked across the courtyard and saw students watching their TVs, and I found I could read the tiny words on their screens as if I were right in front of them. I took a deep breath and let the curtain fall closed.

Rebecca caught the shift in my emotions and came over to me. “What is it?” she asked, concern spreading across her face as she read my feelings.

“The election,” I said quietly. “That was the event. It’s begun.”

Chapter 12: Invisibility

Rebecca and I sat up late talking in our room. The election was called for Lawson at ten o'clock, and Candace stormed out in the middle of McIntyre's concession speech. We called John soon after my new powers had emerged to let him know, but he wasn't surprised. He had seen this coming, but he'd hoped he was wrong.

"Evil spread through politicians is tricky to combat," he said, "because they're usually just the front man. The key is to find out who is backing them."

"You mean Lawson isn't the source of the evil?" I asked.

"Not likely. We have our work cut out for us. Come to the dojo promptly at four o'clock tomorrow."

Rebecca and I were trying to figure out what this meant for us. I was looking up reports and analyses of the election while she looked for background information on Lawson.

"How are we going to find all this out?" she asked in exasperation. "I don't know anybody in the government. I'm just a freshman. How am I supposed to help track down the source of evil behind California's new governor?"

"John must have a plan," I said. "This is bigger than each of us, but the five of us together have to be able to do it."

"Unfortunately, I think a lot of it's on you."

"What do you mean?"

"You're the Scout. Reconnaissance is your job."

I gasped as I realized she was right. Suddenly it all seemed too real, and way too hard. She put a hand on my arm, and I felt calmer immediately.

"Remember, we have to try to move past fear and doubt. Now would be the ideal time to practice that," she said.

I nodded and swallowed the lump in my throat.

"We were called to this for a reason," she added. "And I don't think it was because of our spectacular ability to fail."

Just then, I heard a ping from my laptop. I glanced at the screen and saw that I had an e-mail from Kai. I felt a rush of excitement as I opened it, marveling that with everything going on, just getting an e-mail from him could distract me so immediately.

Hey, Ashlyn, how are you doing? Based on our conversation last weekend, I'm guessing you're as upset as I am about Lawson. I just hope that we figure out how he stole the election and get rid of him before he does too much damage.

I've finalized the date of my move: November 3. It's a little later than I had originally planned, but I wanted to give more notice at my job. I have to admit that seeing you a couple more times before I go is a strong motivator, too. But I don't want you to feel any pressure about that. As you wisely said, we should just take things as they come. But for the record, I'm totally into you.

I'd like to come see you on Saturday the 25th if that works for you. And let me know if it's too much and you want me to back off.

Kai

"Oh man, oh man, oh man," I murmured. Everything was so complicated right now. Could I really handle having Kai come visit right in the middle of it?

"What's the matter?" Rebecca asked.

"Nothing, I'm just totally confused." I let her read Kai's e-mail, and she squealed in delight.

"How can you be confused about that? Answer him right away and tell him you're thrilled, and that of course you want to see him."

But it just wasn't that simple. The election made me fully feel the weight of the responsibility we'd taken on. And where my priorities had to be. I took a deep breath.

"I can't. I have to cut him loose."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking perplexed.

"I mean he's not a Soterian, and I am. I can't do this to him." She looked at me in astonishment. "If I start a relationship with him now, it will be built on lies. Kai deserves more than that. He's already been hurt enough by Kelly. I have to let him go.

That way, he can move and start his life without anything holding him back."

She looked sadly at me. "If you really think that's best. But it's not going to make you happy."

"Being happy isn't my primary concern right now."

I thought about what I should say in my e-mail and finally came up with the most honest communication I could.

Hey Kai,

Yeah, I'm totally blown away by the election. Something is seriously wrong when a guy like Lawson can be elected.

Of course I want to see you again. But after doing a lot of thinking, I think it's going to be better for both of us if we're just friends. It wasn't an easy decision, believe me, because I've never connected with anyone like I have with you.

So if you still want to come visit, the 25th would be great. You're going to laugh at me, but I've taken on another hobby: martial arts. I'm training with a great teacher, and he's really strict about us coming to classes. So I'll need to train in the morning, but I'll be free around noon.

Ashlyn

I hit Send. The martial arts training story was true and wouldn't sound weird coming from me. I felt awful, but I knew it was the right thing to do.

A few moments later, my laptop pinged again.

Ashlyn,

Thank you for your honesty and for still wanting to see me. I understand where you're coming from, and as much as I don't like it, I respect your decision. I'll be there at noon on the 25th.

Let's spend some time at the beach, and I'd also like to show you the butterfly grove, which I don't think you've seen yet.

Kai

I closed my laptop as tears welled up in my eyes. His email made me feel doubly certain that I'd made the right decision. I didn't deserve someone as amazing as Kai.

The next morning, after a lousy night's sleep, I decided I had to work out to blow off some of the stress I was dealing with. But I was struck by a horrible question: were my triathlon days now behind me? Would I even like riding and swimming anymore now that I could actually fly? I felt a little panicky, as if this huge part of my identity was in jeopardy. I decided to take my bike out and see how it felt.

As it turned out, riding my bike was a wonderful relief. I was stiff and sore from all the falling and using new sets of muscles,

and it felt good to spin out the soreness in my legs. The sensation of riding my bike, although it didn't feel like flying as I'd always imagined it, was still fantastic. Now that I knew what flying actually felt like, I could appreciate the triathlon sports for what they were instead of constantly trying to make them feel like something else. I finished my ride feeling like I'd just visited an old friend.

As I put my bike away and headed toward my apartment to get ready for school, I ran into Toby. I stared at him in shock. So much had happened since the last time I saw him, and seeing him now, I couldn't believe I had ever felt anything for him. The Ashlyn who had talked herself into dating him because he was "the right guy" seemed like a different person now.

"How's it going?" he asked, his expression cheerful. "You seem to be feeling better."

"I am, except the election nearly made me sick again."

"Isn't that insane? Lawson is going to take us back to the dark ages." He looked really upset. Toby was such a good guy, and I really hoped we could be friends.

"I'm sorry I haven't called you," I said. "I'd still like to have coffee with you. The truth is, I'm kind of in over my head with stuff at the moment, and I should tell you that I just want to be friends."

"I understand," he said a little too brightly. "You just moved here, started a new school. Best to settle in before you start dating anybody."

"Yeah," I said, feeling a sharp stab of pain in my stomach as Kai popped into my mind. "Anyway, if you're up for a study session, Rebecca and I are going to be hitting the books tonight from seven to ten. Want to join us?"

"Sure, I'll bring Pop Tarts," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Pop Tarts. They're great for studying. The sugar keeps you going."

I laughed. "I'll stick to coffee, thanks. I don't handle sugar crashes all that well. But sure, bring Pop Tarts if that's how you roll."

I was able to concentrate much better in labs that day. I was very concerned about Lawson and how we would even begin to investigate his backers, but I had faith that John would have a plan. I was happy that I had done the right thing with Kai, even though it still made me very sad. I had discovered that I still liked riding my bike, and I had told Toby that I just wanted to be friends. Plus, my classes were really starting to get interesting. On the balance, things were looking up.

We got to the dojo at four o'clock, and Michael and Christoph were already there warming up. We bowed into the room and joined them, stretching and following John in a routine of kicks and punches. As Rebecca and I floundered around trying to do a spin kick and ended up falling over ("practice falling correctly!" John yelled at us), I stopped and watched Michael execute spin after spin with perfect balance. His technique was flawless, and he was very impressive to watch.

Suddenly, he turned and glared at me. I was taken aback and figured I must have offended him. I was still new to all the martial arts etiquette, and I wasn't sure whether it was wrong to stare at someone who was a higher rank than you, even just to observe his technique.

"Michael has an excellent spin kick, wouldn't you agree?" John asked me.

"Yes, I was just noticing how perfect his balance is."

Michael looked at me again with an expression I couldn't read, somewhere between irritation and confusion. I really didn't understand that guy at all, and it annoyed me.

"Time for technique work," John said. "Michael and Ashlyn partner up, and Christoph and Rebecca."

Rebecca blushed, and Christoph looked like he'd won the lottery. I walked toward Michael and stood in front of him, my arms at my side. I looked him straight in the eye as John had taught me, and we bowed to each other.

"Begin," John said. Michael told me to go first, so I ran through the pressure points I had learned yesterday. I was still having trouble finding them, but Michael was surprisingly patient with me. I guessed he had worked with a lot of beginner students throughout his years of training.

When it was time to switch, I held a target for Michael while he practiced kicks, and I quickly became sorry I was partnered with him. He was lightning fast, and he kicked so hard! I was getting more and more afraid of each strike, flinching a little more each time.

"Don't pull away," John warned. "Recognize the fear and move into it, not away from it." I tried to do as he said, but it seemed involuntary at this point. Finally, Michael threw a front kick, and the target slipped as I pulled back. His foot caught my finger, jamming it badly.

"Ow ow ow!" I yelled, hopping around in agony. Rebecca immediately came over to me and took my hand, which was shaking uncontrollably from the pain. Immediately I felt a coolness surround my finger, as if it were immersed in ice. The shaking stopped, and a warm sensation spread through my

whole hand. A moment later, the pain was gone. I wiggled my finger.

"Rebecca," I said, looking at her in astonishment. "John was wrong about you. You *can* perform miracles." I showed everyone my finger, which now looked completely normal.

"Wonderful! It is amazing what you can do," Christoph raved. Rebecca turned red again. Michael stood by in silence, just staring at me.

"Again," John said. "Ashlyn, you must control your fear. You saw that holding back only made things worse. You've also seen that Rebecca can heal you if you do get hurt, so don't be afraid of the pain. Put all your energy into moving into the fear, not away from it."

I picked up the target and waited for Michael to begin. "Ready," I said.

I thought he might go easier on me, since I had just been hurt, but he unleashed a flurry of kicks that were even harder than before. I felt myself starting to panic, wanting to cover my head with my hands and run.

"Move into the fear!" John said. I tried, but it was too strong, and all of a sudden, Michael stopped, looking around with wide eyes. I noticed that Rebecca and Christoph were looking perplexed. Only John looked calm, although a bit frustrated.

"What's wrong?" I asked, and everyone looked toward me in alarm. I noticed that they looked *toward* me but not *at* me, and then I understood why.

I was invisible. I dropped the target, which suddenly reappeared as it fell to the floor, and put my hands in front of my face. I couldn't see them. It was the most unsettling sensation I had ever experienced. Whereas flying had felt

natural, disappearing felt completely wrong. It was kind of like the sickening sensation when your arm is dead because you slept on it, and even though you flap it around, you can't feel a thing. In this case, no matter how wildly I waved my arm, I couldn't *see* it. It made me feel queasy.

"John," I said anxiously, "I'm not sure how to undo this!"

"Be calm, Ashlyn. Follow your breath. Notice what it feels like to be invisible."

"I don't like it," I said in a shaky voice.

"Try walking around the room and see how your body feels. When you're invisible, you must focus on your senses of touch and hearing. It helps your brain cope with the mixed signals it's getting."

I tried taking a few tentative steps, looking desperately at the floor. It reminded me of the time my electricity had gone out,

and I had stumbled around, my eyes bulging wide as I tried to see in the pitch dark. I took a deep breath and focused on feeling my feet touch the floor, rather than trying to see them. I listened to the sound of my step, and soon I was able to walk around, ignoring the longing to see my limbs. I still didn't like it, but I felt less panicked.

"That's good, Ashlyn," Rebecca said, reading my feelings. "You're not fighting it now."

"It's weird, you guys," I said. "Really weird."

"Try to be completely silent," John suggested.

I focused on the feel of my step now, walking lightly on the balls of my feet instead of my heels to create less sound. I breathed quietly through my mouth. And as I walked, nobody in the room was looking in my direction any more.

"Now stop right where you are and stay completely quiet," John said. "Can any of you tell me where Ashlyn is?"

Michael looked around the room. Christoph cocked his head as if he were listening for me. Rebecca stared at the floor in front of her, trying to sense my presence. Finally, they all shook their heads.

"Very good," John said. "Ashlyn, if you're ready, I'd like you to fly while you're still invisible. Do one silent loop around the room and then land in the middle and reappear." I was about to ask him how to reappear, but I knew his answer would be to notice my feelings or something, so I decided to just give it a try.

I slowly lifted off the ground and flew around the room. It was much easier to be invisible while flying, because I didn't have the same expectation of seeing my feet on the floor. I

landed in the middle of the room, but I still wasn't sure how to reappear.

I thought about why I had disappeared in the first place. I was afraid of Michael's kicks, but I also felt an intensity coming from him that I didn't like. He had increased his attacks to help me move past my fear, and it was the first time I had seen him do anything to help someone else. Unleashing his techniques on me felt almost intimate, which made me very uncomfortable.

But if Michael and I were going to depend on each other for our lives, we needed to open up to each other. I needed to put my pride aside, which I saw was wounded by his weird glares and cool demeanor, and rejoin my unit.

I reappeared, and all eyes snapped to me. Rebecca smiled, and Michael looked at me with a softer expression than I'd seen before. It almost looked like respect.

"Excellent," John said. "You're all doing very well with your individual training. It's time to start training as a unit."

Chapter 13: Strategies

We put on our shoes and followed John out into the parking lot. His dojo was nestled at the base of the hills, and on the far side of the parking lot I spotted a thin trail.

"Are we going into the hills?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "This trail is almost never used, but you'll need to keep a sharp eye and ear out for hikers, Ashlyn."

We hiked up the trail for about fifteen minutes until we came to a meadow of golden grasses dotted with scrub oaks and century plants. The view of the ocean was incredible. The sky was a gorgeous soft blue with wispy clouds, and the air smelled like dried grass and sunshine.

"Let's talk about general strategy for our missions," John said. "Ashlyn will first do reconnaissance to get a read on what we're dealing with. In many cases, she'll work alone, as her ability to disappear and fly will give her access to places that the rest of us don't have. Next, we send in either Christoph or Rebecca, depending on what the situation calls for. One of Christoph's key strategic uses in battle is to draw the enemy away from us."

"You mean we'll use him as bait?" Rebecca asked with a frown.

"Don't worry about me," Christoph said. "They can pound on me all they want."

"It can also be useful for Christoph to feign injury and capture," John continued. "If there's a small group of enemies, he

can draw their attention and allow himself to be captured, giving the rest of you time to get in and out."

"Why don't we just all go in and take them out, leaving a clear field?" Michael asked.

"Because you aren't faster than a radio," John said. "As soon as they see you attacking, they'll know what they're up against, and they'll call for backup. I think you could take on five enemies at once, but a squad of twenty or thirty will definitely take you down. We can't let that happen. Your skills are one of our greatest strengths, Michael, but also one of our liabilities. We have to be very careful to bring you in only at the precise moment.

"Typically, Rebecca will go in first to create diversions and buy us time. She can even make you all look like you're from the enemy's own ranks."

A terrible thought had been building slowly in my mind as he spoke. Finally, I had to ask the dreaded question. "John, what about guns? Aren't all our powers useless if they pull out a gun and shoot us?"

"I was just coming to that," John said with a smile. He reached in his pocket, pulled out a bullet, and ran several yards away. "Here, catch!" he yelled as he threw the bullet toward me. I reached out to catch it, but when it was almost within my reach, it suddenly dropped to the ground.

"What was that?" I asked, amazed. I couldn't believe there were any surprises left.

"That was Christoph's shield," John answered, jogging back to us. "Bullets can't penetrate it. So as long as you are within about fifty feet of him, bullets won't harm you. If there are guns involved in a battle, it's critical that you stay close to Christoph.

No flying away," he said to me, "and no going in to take down a bunch of enemies on your own," he said, looking hard at Michael. "We can't protect our allies if we don't allow them to protect us. As soon as one person breaks away, the whole unit falls apart. Always remember that."

"Can Christoph's shield protect us from other things?" Rebecca asked. "Like knives?"

"It works on anything for which there is no natural defense, such as tear gas and fire. For everything else, he must act as a physical shield for you. A knife won't penetrate his skin, but it can penetrate his shield. If anything else physical comes at you—whether it's knives, rocks, even guard dogs—your best defense is to get behind Christoph."

"Or to take down the guy with the weapon," Michael said.

"Absolutely. Disarming the enemy is your main focus, Michael."

"So, if I understand you right," Christoph said, "If we're going to break in someplace, Ashlyn gathers information first, then Rebecca creates an illusion, or I create a diversion, and then Michael disarms them. In a regular fight, what is our strategy?"

"There are very few cases when we'll engage in direct combat," John said. "The battle between good and evil is almost always a war of intelligence. Our primary goals will be to gather information that exposes our enemies and to help get the proof that's needed to convict them. We might also engage in rescue missions, but these are also won through intelligence instead of sheer force. You could just blow up the building where the enemies are hiding, but then you're blowing up the hostages, too. Our job is to be very well informed, and then to get in and

out as quickly and precisely as possible. With no casualties, if possible. Killing enemies, even in the name of good, is still killing, which further promotes evil."

John glanced at the sun, which was beginning to sink lower. "Over the next few weeks, I want you to focus on imagining the unit working together in different situations. If you were rescuing a kidnapped child, what would your strategy be? Or if you needed to recover a stolen item? If your cover were blown, and you were attacked by a small army of guards, how would you face them? Think as if you were the commander of the unit, putting each person's skills to best use."

We walked back down the hill, thinking about what John had said. I found myself wanting to write down the scenarios and draw diagrams, but I could see how it was important to be able to grapple with these questions in my head, as there was a

good chance we would have to alter plans right in the middle of the action.

Rebecca was walking next to me, when suddenly her foot caught in a gopher hole. As she stumbled, Christoph caught her and swooped her up into his arms. He was so strong, he made it look like he was merely lifting a doll. I bit back a laugh as I heard Michael snort in disgust.

Christoph put Rebecca down gently on her feet, looking at her with concern. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, her face a flush of deep pink. “You should have let me fall. I need to learn how to fall correctly. But thank you,” she added quickly as he looked crushed. “I really appreciate it. You’re incredibly strong.” She looked admiringly into his eyes, and I knew it was all over. They were both completely smitten with each other.

* * *

The next couple of weeks were a whirlwind of classes, training, and studying. Toby and Ryan came over fairly often to study. I liked having them there, except that Ryan and Candace had a tendency to start talking about politics. I had to put my foot down several times and tell them to study or leave. I was able to crank out my assignments with occasional help from Rebecca. I could see that she was really starting to feel the pressure from school, so I tried to ask her as few questions as possible, and I helped her out by quizzing her on all the names and definitions she had to memorize.

Kai and I continued to exchange emails almost every day. I tried to keep telling myself that we were just building a friendship, and that this was what friends did. But it was getting harder and harder not to think about him constantly. I kept

remembering the way he looked at me, and that unbelievable kiss. But I had to focus on my work as a Soterian. I trained very hard at the dojo, and Rebecca and I would often practice together in our room.

On Friday the twenty-fourth, we got the news that the election had been certified. It was strange for it to happen so quickly, especially when it was shrouded in suspicion like this election was. The election officials held a press conference and explained how the paperless ballots streamlined the process of tallying votes, and that a software audit had assured them that the results were legitimate. They walked through the entire process they had used, including running the data twice, and the outcome was the same.

Candace took the opportunity to shout a variety of insults and curses at the TV again. McIntyre came on and announced

that he was leading the effort to audit the results and figure out what happened with the election, which made me feel much better. He looked older and very tired. Everyone had been so sure that he would win; it must have been a terrible blow for him to lose.

The next morning, my head was buzzing with excitement about Kai coming to visit in a few hours. But I didn't have a chance to get really worked up about it, as John lead us through the most intense training session we'd had so far. We did a lot of rolls, falls, and throws in the dojo, practicing disabling our opponent quickly and then getting away. After that, we talked for a while about different strategies we'd been developing for each of the scenarios that John had suggested. Christoph had some crazy ideas that made us all laugh ("Rebecca could create the illusion that I am a sexy young woman, and when they come

toward me, I grab them all"), and Michael tended to favor direct attacks over stealth.

Rebecca suggested that she might be helpful with reconnaissance, because she might be able to feel if someone were lying. We were excited by this prospect. We each took turns telling her information, and she had to guess which one of us was lying. She was right every time. We were also thrilled to discover that if I really focused on telegraphing my feelings to her, she was starting to be able to pinpoint my location when I was invisible.

"That's a very valuable addition to your skills," John said. "It's quite advanced for an Empath to read feelings with so much subtlety." Rebecca smiled. I knew it made her happy that she could help me in reconnaissance so that I wouldn't always be alone. Christoph beamed at her proudly.

The sun climbed higher, and I began to get anxious. I wanted to make sure I had enough time to shower and change before Kai got there. My heart raced at the thought of seeing him again. Even though we were just friends, of course. I just couldn't help remembering his impossibly beautiful eyes staring into mine . . .

"Is this something you'd like to share with the rest of us?" John asked. I was startled back to the present and realized that everyone was watching me. Worse, I was hovering six inches off the ground. I landed quickly.

"I—I'm sorry," I stammered. "My mind wandered for a moment."

"Yes, somewhere pleasant it would appear," John said, raising his eyebrow. Christoph chuckled, and Michael looked irritated. Rebecca gave a little start, but when I looked at her curiously,

she just shook her head slightly and gave me an expression that said "later."

"It won't happen again," I said firmly. "I'm getting a bit hungry, and it threw off my concentration."

"Let's head back to the dojo for meditation," John said. "And then I have to kick you all out, because my first Aikido class is starting in half an hour."

When Rebecca and I got in the car to drive home, I asked her what she had felt. She looked sad. "It's Michael. He's jealous."

"Of what?"

"Kai."

"How does he know Kai?" I asked.

"Not Kai specifically," she said. "He saw your reaction, which was obviously inspired by your thinking about a guy. A guy other than *him*. And then his reaction to your reaction annoyed him."

"You're saying Michael is attracted to me?" I asked incredulously. But the truth dawned on me. This explained why he was always glaring at me or being so distant.

"He's not falling in love with you or anything. It's more lust than anything else. He's annoyed that Christoph and I are, um, drawn to each other." A trace of a smile crossed her lips. "I think he was wondering whether you two would end up together, too, but now he knows that's not going to happen, and he's feeling left out."

"Poor Michael," I said. "He acts so cool, so above it all. I had no idea."

"It's going to get complicated, you know," Rebecca said. "Training so often with them. I'm really worried about starting anything with Christoph."

"What do you mean? You guys will be great together."

"But what if it ends up endangering our missions? You've seen how protective he is of me. What if he leaves his post to come help me?"

"This is why we train," I said. "So that our duties are so deeply ingrained in us that we do the right thing automatically."

"I don't think it's that simple." She turned and looked at me. "Ashlyn, this is going to sound melodramatic, but he would die for me. He really would. And that means he would put me before the mission."

I thought about this for a moment. "If that's true, then maybe that's what's meant to happen. There's nothing you can do about it."

"Maybe," she said. "Unless I put a stop to it now."

I sighed. "Rebecca, let me be the first to disabuse you of that completely *ridiculous* idea. You can't stop Christoph from being

who he is by denying your feelings for him and making you both miserable. And since he's a Soterian, you have nothing to worry about. You're really lucky, you know."

She was quiet for a moment. "I'm glad you don't think I'm being irresponsible. Christoph *is* amazing. He's so sweet. And did you see on Wednesday how he lifted that boulder like it weighed nothing?" She started chatting happily about Christoph and the things he'd been doing during training. It was pretty cute, in a nauseating way.

We parked and headed up toward the apartment. As we passed through the courtyard, I heard loud voices. Kelly was hanging out with her friends by the pool. I suddenly realized how uncomfortable it would be for Kai to see her there, and for a moment I wanted to kick myself for not arranging to meet him

somewhere else. But this was my home. I wasn't going to sneak around because of Kelly.

"Compassion," Rebecca reminded me.

I nodded and tried to find compassion for Kelly. She couldn't be *all* bad, or Kai wouldn't have gone out with her for so long.

Suddenly, I heard a loud splash, and Rebecca and I were doused with water. A large, beefy guy surfaced, his thick head and neck bobbing in the water like a buoy. He swam toward Kelly and her friend, who were laughing loudly.

"Great cannonball, Darren," Kelly called. "Sorry Ashlyn, but you looked like you could use a shower anyway."

I clenched my teeth and tried to breathe calmly. Kelly continued to laugh, but then suddenly her face turn from glee to horror.

"Ashlyn?" I heard a voice behind me say.

I turned around, and my heart stopped. It was Kai.

"Kai, hey there. Um, you're early," I said, trying to ignore the fact that I looked like a drowned rat.

"Traffic was much lighter than usual. What happened to you? Were you carrying buckets of water as part of your martial arts training?" He brushed some wet hair out of my eyes and smiled at me. He turned to Rebecca. "Hi, I'm Kai," he said.

"I'm Rebecca, Ashlyn's roommate. It's nice to meet you."

"You too," he said. He turned back to me. "Let's get upstairs so you can change."

"Good plan," I said. As we walked up the stairs together, a rush of happiness swept through me. I avoided looking at Kelly. The part of me that wanted to gloat and see her reaction was definitely not the compassionate part of myself.

Candace was on the couch in her sweats, watching TV and drinking coffee. “Candace, I think you know Kai, right?” I asked when she looked up.

“Hey, Kai,” she said. “Yeah, we met a couple of times.”

“Kai,” I said, “would you mind waiting while I shower? I’ll be quick.”

“Sure thing. Take your time,” he said. “I’ll watch the news with Candace.”

He sat down next to her and looked at me again. His eyes burned into me with an expression that said the dousing in pool water made no difference to him at all.

I dragged myself away and quickly showered. I braided my hair and changed into my brown bikini with light blue trim and a pair of cutoff denim shorts. I slipped into my brown sandals and put on a pair of plain silver stud earrings that wouldn’t fall

out when we swam. I took one quick look in the mirror, decided I was passable, and hurried for the door.

"Have a great time," Rebecca said. "By the way, he's *hot*," she whispered.

"Yes, but we're just friends."

"If you say so," she said with a smirk.

I walked into the living room and saw that Kai was now sitting on the couch playing a guitar. I stood back and gazed at him. He was wearing a pair of black surfing shorts and a toffee-colored T-shirt with a light brown coco-shell necklace hanging just above the neck. He was playing a simple chord progression, alternating between plucking arpeggios and strumming. He took my breath away. The image of him sitting there playing would be burned into my memory forever.

He glanced up and gave me that penetrating gaze that made me feel so weak.

"Where's Candace?" I asked.

"She went to get lunch. I brought my guitar up from the car. Is it okay if I leave it here? I don't like to leave it in the trunk."

"Of course. Are you going to play for me?"

"Later on, I thought I would, if you're interested," he said, putting his guitar back in its case.

I laughed. "Yeah, I'm definitely interested."

He stood up and walked over to me. A tingling sensation spread throughout my body, and I had a hard time moving.

"So, should we head to the beach?" he asked.

"Beach, right. Hang on a second." I went into the kitchen and grabbed a bag that I had packed earlier with bread, fruit, olives, veggies, and drinks.

We left the apartment, and I was glad to see that Kelly wasn't at the pool anymore. Walking next to Kai, I felt like every cell in my body was a magnet that was stretching toward him, desperately wanting to touch him.

I took a deep breath. This was not going to be an easy friendship.

Chapter 14: The Butterfly Grove

"Well, it's not quite the season yet, but there are a few up there," Kai said in a hushed voice. We were standing in the butterfly grove, looking up into the eucalyptus trees. At first, all I could see were leaves, but then I quickly spotted the monarchs perched lightly on the branches, their orange and black wings beating softly. They were so delicate, so perfect. Even though my vision allowed me to see the tiniest details on their wings, I so badly wanted to drift up into the tree and get a closer look.

I was having a spectacular day with Kai. We went swimming in the ocean, and I showed him how to swim over the top of the kelp beds. We lay on the beach, drying off in the sun and eating our lunch. And all the while, we talked about everything from

the election to our favorite colors. We had so much in common, and so much still to discover about each other. I was ecstatic just being around him.

Later, we made the hike out to the Ellwood butterfly preserve, a shady grove of eucalyptus trees where the Monarch butterflies stopped in the winter. It was cool and quiet, the pale green and brown leaves casting soft shadows on the ground.

"How did you find this place?" I asked, walking from tree to tree, touching their trunks. I loved how eucalyptus trunks were completely smooth in some places and very rough in others.

"Most people know about it around here," he said. "It's not much to see right now, which is why it's deserted today. But in the winter, when all the Monarchs have arrived, they cluster together in big groups on the branches, and then suddenly they'll all take off together in a spiral into the air. It's really cool."

"I'm glad you were in California long enough to show it to me," I said. We started hiking further up into the trees and away from the clearing. "Tell me more about Minnesota. What's it like?"

"It's beautiful," he said. "Very green, lots of lakes. The Twin Cities are great."

"That's Minneapolis and St. Paul, right?"

"Right. St. Paul is more old school. Minneapolis has more of a night life, a cool music scene. There's always a lot going on."

"I've never been east of Las Vegas," I said. "I'd really like to see more of the states some day. Which ones will you drive through?"

"Let's see . . . I'll go through the tip of Nevada to Utah, and then through Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, and finally up to Minnesota."

He picked up a long eucalyptus leaf and broke it in half, inhaling its scent.

"I want to do the northern route some day," he said. "My ideal trip would be to drive up the coast all the way to Vancouver, and then dip back down into the states and take the northern route across all the way to Boston."

"That sounds fantastic!" I said. "Can you imagine how amazing it would be to camp along the Pacific coast?"

"Yeah," he said. "But it's too cold right now."

"Well, you could push it out to June," I said in a teasing tone.

"Don't think I haven't thought about it." He looked deeply frustrated, and I had an overwhelming urge to put my arms around him and kiss him. But that's not fair, I reminded myself. I was the one who said we should just be friends. Even though I desperately wanted more from him.

We walked in silence until we were in a dense thicket of trees above the butterfly grove. The amber sunlight filtered through the leaves, the wind whispering through the branches. Suddenly, Kai stopped.

"Will you come visit me soon?" he asked.

"Sure, if you still want me to."

"Of course I do," he said. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, you never know. Once you get there and find a girlfriend, you might not be as interested in having me visit."

"I seriously doubt I'm going to be dating anyone for a while." He looked down for a moment. "Ashlyn, there's something I want to tell you. You might not like it, but I feel like I have to tell you anyway."

"What is it?" I asked. I was burning with curiosity.

He paused. “When I was about twelve, I had this dream one night where I met the perfect woman. She was so beautiful, and I fell completely in love with her. I remember waking up feeling kind of sad, because I didn’t think anything like that was possible. I’ve been in love a couple of times, but it’s never been anything even remotely close to that dream.”

He looked at me with a very serious expression.

“The first night I saw you, when Kelly and I were arguing in the courtyard, I knew there was something familiar about you, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. It wasn’t until I saw you at the party that I finally realized what it was. You were that woman in my dream.”

My heart started pounding. I couldn’t believe I was hearing these words—that he was saying them about *me*. There had to be some mistake.

"I know it was eight years ago," he continued, "but I'm sure of it. I remember your face, your hair, everything about you." He reached up and stroked my cheek, looking at my face as if he were studying a work of art.

"I don't believe in fate," he said. "And I know you said you just want to be friends. But I'm positive that we belong together. That's why I have to leave now. I have to put my past behind me so that I can start my new life. With you. With nothing holding me back."

"But what if—" I swallowed hard. "What if you're wrong? What if you meet someone else and realize that she was the one in your dream? Or that it's just too hard to wait, and it's better to be with someone who's there than to wait around for me?"

"That's not going to happen," he insisted. "I'm a very patient man, and once I set my mind to something, that's it."

"But how can you be sure?" I asked, my voice shaking. All my fear was surfacing now, threatening to pull me under.

He took my face in his hands. "Because I love you," he said, a fire raging in his eyes. "I'm sorry if that sounds crazy. I know it's too soon to say this, but I'm in love with you. I have been since the moment I saw you. I dreamed about you, but I never thought I'd actually meet you. I thought that future didn't belong to me. But I did find you, and there's no way I'm letting you go. Even when I'm thousands of miles away."

He pulled me to him and kissed me gently, almost tentatively. I put my arms around him and kissed him back, my lips caressing his, savoring the tremendous relief of finally getting to touch him. I ran my hands up his back, my fingers digging into the firm muscles rippling through his shirt, trying to memorize the feel of his body to carry with me when he was

gone. Everything about him felt so right. I didn't know how I could ever let him go. I kissed him more urgently, pressing my body against his, feeling his heart and breathing getting faster.

Suddenly, it was as if something broke free inside of him. He began kissing me with the kind of intensity I'd only ever dreamed of experiencing. His arms wrapped so tightly around me that I wouldn't have been able to break free even if I'd wanted to. His heart was now pounding loudly, and there was a sweet, almost metallic taste on his lips as he kissed me so passionately that it felt like he was trying to devour me.

He ran his fingers through my hair, and I gasped as he pulled my head back and began kissing my neck, his soft lips sending electrical jolts through my entire body. My knees began to go soft, unable to support my weight any longer, but he held me in place.

His lips found mine again, and a flood of emotions surged through me. A million little walls that I had put up over the years fell away, leaving my heart wide open to him. And I knew in that moment that I was completely in love with Kai with every ounce of my being, so wholly and so far beyond what I thought love was, it totally consumed me and altered who I was.

We were both on fire, our bodies melting into each other, our souls merging. I lost all sense of time and space. I only knew Kai and me together, one being, alone on the entire planet.

* * *

We walked slowly back along the bluffs, holding hands, too blissed out to speak. The sun was setting over the ocean, and I thought of the last time we were here. This was a truly magical place.

"I love you," I said. He looked at me with so much passion in his eyes, it sent shivers down my spine. He put his arm around me, and I cuddled into him as we walked.

"I love you, too. Those words sound so empty to me now, almost insulting in how insufficient they are. But they're the best I can do. I don't think I'll ever find the right words to express what I'm feeling."

"I know exactly what you mean. Here," I said, placing my hand on his chest. I imagined channeling everything that I was feeling directly into his heart. I wished he were an Empath so he could really feel it.

"You've made me a very happy man, you know that?" he asked softly, brushing his lips across my hair.

"I wish I could stay up all night with you," I said.

"Why don't you?"

"I have training tomorrow," I sighed. A year ago, I would have skipped training without hesitation, but I wasn't that person anymore.

"Could I come along?" Kai asked. "I've been thinking about taking martial arts for a long time, and I'd love to come watch."

My heart skipped a beat. I thought I'd come up with such a perfect cover. It never crossed my mind that he might want to watch me train. I was so used to guys not giving a damn about my training. Todd never came to a single one of my races. He was always too hungover to get up that early. My mind jumped around as I looked for an excuse for why he couldn't go, but I was such a bad liar.

And then it became clear. Even though he was moving away in a week, I couldn't lie to him. I never wanted to lie to anyone

again. I felt like everything I was learning as a Soterian was about doing the right thing, about devoting myself to good.

I was torn, and the two parts of my brain started battling it out. Didn't I have a responsibility to my unit to keep our secret? All Kai would have to do is tell one person at a party for it to end up all over campus.

But I knew he wouldn't tell anyone. Kai was one of the most honest, trustworthy, steadfast people I had ever met. Sure, I hadn't put him to much of a test yet, but I considered some of the obvious examples, like the fact that he had never once said a bad thing about Kelly, even though she'd broken up with him. He had every reason to hate her, but he just said that she was better able to see the truth than he was. That was true loyalty.

Still, it was very early to be sharing something this important with him. I always noticed that people can hide their true nature

for the first ninety days of a relationship, which is why so many relationships last only three months.

But I just knew Kai wasn't hiding anything from me. I was the only one lying right now, and I didn't want to do it anymore. I stopped walking.

"What's wrong?" Kai asked.

"I have to be honest with you," I said. "I've been keeping a very, very big secret from you. Well, from the world, really, and I don't want to hide anything from you."

"I knew it," he said evenly. "You're secretly married to Kenneth Lawson."

"I'm serious, Kai. This is really important. Do you remember how I said I always wished I could fly, and then I showed you how to lean into the wind to feel like you're really flying?"

"Yeah . . . ," he said slowly.

"Please try to keep an open mind," I said, but I didn't know how to continue. I tried a different tack. "Okay, you know how Lawson's win was really unexpected?"

"This actually *does* have something to do with Lawson?" he asked, looking mystified.

"No. Well, yes. It's about good versus evil. I'm on the good side, fighting evil. Well, fighting for evil to be in balance, that is." I was floundering. Why was this so hard?

"Ashlyn, just spit it out," Kai said gently, taking my hand again.

I looked at him and bit my lip.

"I can't," I said. "So I'm just going to have to show you."

I let go of his hand and floated up into the air, pausing when I was three feet above the ground. His eyes opened wide in shock.

"Jesus!" he said and took a step back. He tripped over a rock and fell backward. I landed and rushed over to him.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think so," he said, quickly getting to his feet. "What the hell just happened?"

"I flew," I said.

"I *know* you flew," he said. "But how?"

"It's a long story."

"I'm listening."

I cocked my head and looked at him. "You are, aren't you?"

He rolled his eyes. "Well, yeah. Wouldn't you be?"

"I guess so, but . . . I mean, I'm just glad I was right about you. You didn't run away."

"It's hard to run when you're busy making a fool of yourself falling on your ass."

"Wait a second . . . I just flew in front of you and you're worried that you looked foolish because you tripped?"

"Of course. It's bad enough that I'm just an ex-runner when you do triathlons and martial arts. Now it turns out that you can also fly. I'm never going to be able to impress you with my manliness," he said with a faint smile. But I could hear his heart pounding wildly.

"Kai, aren't you even the least bit freaked out by what you just saw?" I asked incredulously.

"It's definitely the weirdest thing I've ever seen." He paused. "But considering what happened back by the grove, it's clearly a day for mind-blowing experiences."

My heart filled with giddy excitement. He wasn't bailing on me—he was handling it. He was actually handling it!

I gave him a mischievous smile. "You know, when you fall, you should try slapping the ground with your arm. It helps spread the impact so you don't get injured—"

"Shut up," he said softly and pulled me to him again. He kissed me for what seemed like an eternity, but I never wanted him to stop.

When he finally let me come up for air, he looked at me serenely. "I knew you were a goddess," he said. He took my hand, and we walked slowly back to the apartment.

Along the way, I told him everything that had happened. I showed him how I could disappear, and that *did* freak him out. It took him a few minutes to speak again. I wasn't sure why being invisible was so much harder to deal with. Maybe we're so used to seeing basketball players leap high into the air that our brains can process seeing someone fly. As long as we can still see the

person, we can kind of grasp it. But to disappear—that's just plain creepy.

I told him that I had a unit of people I was training with, but I didn't tell him who. I knew he'd probably figure out that Rebecca was one of them, but that wasn't my information to share.

Finally, I explained that the worst part about this secret is that it had to remain just that: a secret. I was absolutely not going to tell my friends or family about this, not even my sister.

"I'm sorry to drop this burden on you," I said. "It's a huge thing to carry around. It means that every time you hear something about Lawson, you have to keep your mouth shut. Every time you're sitting around talking with your friends, if someone speculates about supernatural stuff, you can't say

anything. You have to watch yourself in every conversation you have from now on so that you don't let anything slip."

"That's not a problem," he said. "I'm just really glad you trusted me enough to be honest with me."

We got back to the apartment, and I put away the leftover food. It was getting chilly now, so I went into the bedroom and pulled on a sweater. When I walked back into the living room, Kai was sitting on the couch again. The lights were off, and he'd lit the candle on the coffee table in front of the couch. He was strumming his guitar softly.

I sat on the floor in front of him, staring up into his face. "Will you play for me now?" I asked.

"You really want me to?"

"Of course," I said. "I want to know everything about you."

He began playing a slow, soulful piece, and I settled back to listen. He played a melody of single-note runs layered over chords, creating simple but beautiful harmonies. The rhythm changed throughout the piece, and he accented some of the beats with a slap on the guitar. His face was serious and focused, and I watched him in fascination, wondering what he was thinking and feeling as he created such amazing sounds. He looked like a god, playing the world into existence, constructing it and shaping it to fit his vision. I was awestruck by him, and by the fact that I had somehow convinced this incredible guy to fall in love with me.

I heard a knock at the door, and I motioned for Kai to keep playing as I got up to answer it.

It was Toby.

"Hey," he said cheerfully. "I just came by to get my notebook. I think I left it here."

"Oh right, of course, one sec and I'll get it for you. It's just right here on the counter." I was completely flustered. I couldn't shut the door and have him wait outside. There was no choice but for them to meet.

"Toby, have you met Kai?" I asked. "He used to go out with Kelly," I muttered lamely.

Toby stiffened. "I think I used to see you around," he said uncomfortably, taking in the scene around him.

"Hey," Kai said with a peaceful smile.

Oh God, what a nightmare. Why hadn't I told Toby the full truth? I was so proud of myself for being honest with him that day, but I knew deep down that I was still deceiving him. I should have come right out and told him that I wasn't interested

in him. Now he was going to feel not only rejected but also lied to.

"Um, here's your notebook," I said, grabbing it off the counter and pressing it into his hands. "Are you off to study, or are you going out?"

"Out," he said with a slight frown. "Actually, that's why I needed my notebook. I wrote a girl's phone number in here. We're going out tonight, and I'm supposed to call her before I leave, but I didn't have her number. So thanks, I better go. Nice to see you, Kai," he said. He headed for the door.

"Have a great time, Toby," I said sincerely. He waved without looking back as he walked away.

I closed the door and sighed. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

"So I guess he didn't know that you're not dating anymore," Kai said.

I walked slowly back toward the couch. "We went out on one date, and I told him I didn't want to get involved right now, and he took it to mean . . . well, truthfully, I let him believe that I didn't want to get involved with *anyone* right now. But I'm glad he has a date."

Kai shook his head. "He doesn't have a date, Ashlyn. He was protecting his pride. Nobody would get another girl's phone number after starting to go out with you."

"Oh come on, I think you're a bit biased there," I said. I sat next to him. He put his guitar down and wrapped his arms around me. I lay my head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat as he gently stroked my hair. We sat there watching

the candle burn. I couldn't remember ever feeling so completely at peace.

"I loved your playing," I said. "That was a beautiful song. What's it called?"

"I haven't given it a title yet," he said. "But I wrote it for you, so I'm thinking about calling it 'Waterfall.'"

"Waterfall?"

"Yeah," he said. "That's kind of my nickname for you."

I sat up and looked at him in surprise. "How come?"

"I don't know. Your hair, and how you're like a force of nature . . . it just fits."

I took his face in my hands and looked deeply into his eyes. "That is the nicest thing anyone has ever called me. Thank you."

He shrugged slightly. "I can't really take credit for it. It's the name of the Stone Roses song that was playing when we drove to

the wharf, remember?" He picked up the guitar and played a few chords to jog my memory. "She'll carry on through it all, she's a waterfall," he sang.

"I loved that song. Honestly, I haven't had time to listen to that CD even once. I can't tell you how busy I've been with training and school and trying not to fall in love with you."

"Why wouldn't you want to fall in love with me?" he asked.

"Aside from the fact that you're moving to Minnesota?"

"Oh, that."

"I was trying to talk myself into Toby. He's such a nice guy, and so . . . "

" . . . safe?" he filled in. "Reliable? Has a promising future?"

"Yeah, something like that. Okay, exactly like that," I laughed. "You have to understand, I'm living my life very, very differently from a year ago, even six months ago. I was pretty

messed up. And I'm still trying to learn how to live like a responsible person, to take care of myself."

"I understand," he said. "It must be hard. I bet you just want to cut loose and do something stupid sometimes."

"Yeah, but being a Soterian kind of takes care of that impulse. It's hard to do anything much crazier than take on a political machine and fight evil."

Just then, the door opened and Rebecca walked in. She had a very strange look on her face.

"Hey, Rebecca, how's it going?" I asked.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?" She headed toward the bedroom.

"Sure." I jumped up and followed her into our room. She closed the door behind us.

"Rebecca, what's up? You look really worried."

"I am," she said. "I'm not sure what to think right now. It sounds like you just told Kai about us."

A jolt of adrenaline pumped through me as the familiar, sickening feeling of being busted washed over me. The look on Rebecca's face made me feel terrible. I sat down on my bed and noticed that my hands were shaking.

"I told him what I am and that I train with a unit," I explained, "but I didn't say who else was in it. I left your name out of it."

She walked toward me. "Ashlyn, I know you thought that was the right thing to do, but think about the rest of us. It puts us all at risk." I could feel that she was struggling to keep her anger in check.

"I promise you, the secret is completely safe with him."

"How do you know? There's no way you can be sure of that."

"I'm sorry, Rebecca. I know I should have discussed this with you first. But I can't keep anything from him. He's too important to me. I just can't lie to him."

"It wasn't just your secret to share," she said. "You have to tell John about this, and Michael and Christoph."

"I will. But try not to be judgmental of me. You're falling for another Soterian, so you don't have to deal with this. Imagine if you had to keep this from Christoph."

"I'm not being judgmental. I'm just worried. We're going to be up against enough problems without bringing in an outsider."

"He's not an outsider," I said. "He's, well, he's my soulmate. You must be able to feel that."

"My—my feelings are all mixed up right now . . ."

"Why? Wait a second, is something else going on?" I asked.

She looked sadly into my eyes. “I don’t want to ruin your evening, but you’ll find out soon enough. There were riots in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Over the election. In San Francisco, somebody in the crowd shot a police officer, and the police opened fire. Over fifty people were shot, and they think fewer than a dozen will survive. And in LA, fights broke out that resulted in some serious injuries. Lawson has called for curfews in all major cities. He hasn’t even been sworn in yet, and already he’s taking power. I think he’s trying to turn California into a police state.”

I stared at Rebecca in shock and then put my head in my hands. Those poor people! What was the point of all this insanity, anyway? What were Lawson and his crew after? What could he possibly stand to gain?

I stood up, my fists balled in anger. “Rebecca, we have to stop him. We just have to. I can’t just stand around while people die. What are we waiting for?” I jumped to my feet. “How come John hasn’t given us more information? I need to start finding out what’s going on,” I said as I paced the room.

“John will give us more information when we’re ready for it. Which is why our training has to be the most important thing in our lives right now,” she said significantly.

I thought about Kai sitting in the living room, the candlelight flickering on his face. I never knew I could be as happy as I was that day. All I wanted to do was curl up in his arms and lie there forever.

But the urge to take action was too strong. Lawson was gaining momentum. Who knew how long it would be before he was beyond our reach?

There was a soft knock at the door. “Come in,” I said.

Kai walked in, his hands in his pockets.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said. “I just flipped on the TV and saw the news. I’m guessing that’s what you’re in here talking about. And I just wanted to tell you that if there’s anything I can do to help, anything at all, please let me know. Ashlyn,” he said, looking seriously at me, “if you need to work on this, I can go.”

“You can’t drive to LA tonight, not with what’s going on,” I said.

“I can stay with Max.”

“No, stay here,” Rebecca said. She looked levelly at me. “You’re right. He’s like a rock. Not quite as much like a rock as Christoph,” she said with a hint of a smile, “but he’s definitely trustworthy.”

Kai sat down next to me and took my hand. “Rebecca,” he said, “I don’t know exactly what your part is in this, but I want you to know that you can count on me. I would never do anything to put you or Ashlyn in jeopardy. If the only way I can help is by keeping your secret, then that’s what I’ll do. I’ll take it to my grave.”

Rebecca frowned. “Thanks, Kai. Let’s hope that won’t happen for a very long time.”

Chapter 15: The Keeper

Rebecca, Kai, and I stayed up late into the night talking. Candace had come home drunk, enraged about the latest political turn of events. I warned her that there was a guy in the apartment, gave her a large glass of water and an Ibuprofen to help ward off a hangover, and helped her into bed.

We told Kai everything that had happened to us so far, and he took it all in stride. He was happy that it wasn't just the two of us, and hearing about our Sentry and Warrior made him feel much more at ease. We were scheduled to train again the next afternoon, and I decided to bring Kai along and tell the whole unit at once.

It wasn't going to be easy—I'd broken their trust and brought in an outsider. I felt sick to my stomach when I thought about John's reaction. After everything he'd done for us, I'd repaid him by betraying the secret. I found myself trying to come up with excuses and ways to sell it to him as a positive thing that Kai was involved. But I knew the truth. I just had to suck it up, face the unit, and deal with whatever consequences there were.

Finally, we decided that we had to get some sleep. Rebecca took her pillow and blanket and prepared to sleep on the couch, but Kai wouldn't hear of it.

"I'm not kicking you out of your room," he said firmly. I admired him for his thoughtfulness, even though I was disappointed. I had been looking forward to sleeping in his arms.

I lay awake for an hour, listening to the sounds around me: Kai's breathing in the next room, the waves breaking softly on the beach, the screech of an owl in the night. I stretched my hearing to see whether I could pick up the wing beats of the butterflies all the way in the grove, but I couldn't hear them.

Finally, I gave up. I couldn't sleep when Kai was in the next room. I walked into the living room and saw him lying there, a ray of moonlight splashed across his face, his lips slightly parted. He was so breathtakingly gorgeous, he didn't quite look real. I tip-toed over, carefully lifted the blanket, and lay down in front of him on the edge of the couch, my back to him. He reached his arms around me and pulled me into him. With his arms wrapped snugly around me, his warm body against mine, I immediately feel asleep.

In the morning, I awoke to the sound of Candace banging around in the kitchen. I looked up and immediately recognized the signs of a bad hangover. I was so glad I didn't have to deal with that anymore.

I got up quietly and went over to her. The sickly sweet odor of alcohol that hung around her made my stomach churn. "What were you drinking last night?" I asked, wrinkling my nose. "Tequila?"

"Don't say that vile word," she said painfully. I could almost see her head throbbing.

"Here, let me get you some ice water." She stood sagging against the counter, her head in her hands, while I filled a glass. "You're going to feel better if you drink this whole thing, go back to sleep for an hour, and then have a good breakfast."

"I can't, it's Sunday. I have a lot of studying to do, we have to clean—"

"It can wait. Go," I said.

She drank the water, burped loudly, and then stumbled back to her room.

I walked back to the couch, where Kai was lying awake, watching me.

"So yesterday really did happen," he said. I smiled at him, my heart bouncing, and sat down next to him. He rolled onto his back, and I snuggled into him and lay my head on his chest. His heartbeat was a low, steady thrum.

"It was nice of you to take care of Candace like that. She looked like she was hurting."

"Yeah, well, I've been there enough myself to know how she's feeling. She's really upset about Lawson. She was hanging out with our friends Adam and Carla last night, and—" I stopped.

"What is it?" Kai asked.

I sat up and looked at him. "Adam and Carla," I said. "They're involved in politics." I stood up. "I bet they would know something about the election, about Lawson. About where to start digging."

I felt a huge wave of relief wash over me. Until now, I'd been shouldering enormous pressure to investigate Lawson without a single clue of how to begin. The idea that I might have even one small lead, one tiny place to start, gave me the first ray of hope I'd felt in a long time.

"I've got to go talk to them," I said, heading toward the bedroom.

"Ashlyn, wait," Kai said. "If they were out with Candace last night, they're probably not in much better shape than she is right now. Besides, we really need to go and talk to John."

"He won't be back until this afternoon."

"Okay," he said, sitting up and stretching. The muscles in his bare chest and arms flexed enticingly, making me forget for a second what I was doing. "Candace said you have to clean, so let's get that out of the way." He stood up, pulled on his shirt, and started folding the blanket.

I stared at him in wonder. "You're going to help us clean?"

"Sure, why not? Candace is in no condition to be around cleaning products, so I'll take her place. I'll make coffee and then clean the kitchen. See if Rebecca is awake, and you two can do your room. Let's wait until the last second to vacuum, though, to give Candace more time to sleep it off."

I stared at him, unable to move. He paused and looked at me quizzically. "What?" he asked.

"You *clean*?" I almost shrieked.

He laughed softly and put his arms around me. "You have been dating the wrong guys, haven't you?" He kissed me on the head, brushed his fingers down my cheek as he looked into my eyes for a moment, and then headed for the kitchen.

I walked into the bedroom in a daze. Rebecca was still lying in bed but was awake. She giggled when I walked in.

"Did you hear that?" I asked, still in shock.

"Yes, every word. I'm sorry, but the bedroom door was open, and Candace woke me up when she was in the kitchen. He's a real keeper, Ashlyn."

"You can say that again," I said, shaking my head. "So what do you think, about me starting with Carla and Adam?"

"I think it's a place to start, which is more than we've had before. You never know. They might know people who are also trying to look into this. It would be better to join forces with other people than to try to do it all on our own."

I nodded. "Leverage."

"What?"

"It's something my dad taught me. The idea is that you can be much more successful by leveraging other people's skills and knowledge instead of trying to do everything yourself. Don't worry," I laughed, seeing the look on her face, "I'm not talking about exploiting workers. You can pay people fairly, and the same principle still applies."

"I see what you mean," she said. "My dad had a similar expression: 'Work smarter, not harder.' I always hated that phrase."

"But that's exactly it. We need to be smart and get people feeding us information. I'm sure Lawson's backed by a network of people. We need to do the same thing."

Kai knocked on the door. "Coffee will be ready in a minute," he said. "Rebecca, how do you take yours?"

I smiled at her and then went over and threw my arms around Kai's neck, planting kisses all over his face.

An hour later, we had finished cleaning the apartment. We put our clothes in the dryer and headed down to breakfast. Candace was astonished that Kai had done her cleaning and thanked him as profusely as her hangover would allow. But she was irritated that she'd slept through the best laundry hours and would have to fight for machines. I laughed and said she should think about that the next time she considered drinking tequila.

"Never again," she assured us. She filled a to-go container with potatoes, eggs, and sausages and went back to the apartment to eat in peace.

Kai, Rebecca, and I got our trays and headed for the cashier. Rebecca and I swiped our resident cards, and Kai paid the cashier for his breakfast. We sat down at a table near the windows.

We were deep in conversation, discussing the kinds of things Adam and Carla might be able to tell us, when suddenly Kai looked up, startled.

"Hello, Kai," Kelly said sarcastically. "What are you all doing over here in the corner? You look like you're plotting a coup or something."

I froze, worried that she'd overheard us, but she just sat down lazily in a chair, looking bored. She looked Kai up and down.

"Weren't you wearing that yesterday?" she said in a disgusted voice.

"I'm going to get more coffee," Rebecca said. She frowned at Kelly and walked away.

"I didn't drive back last night because of the riots," Kai said. "Your family okay?"

"Of course," she said vaguely. I wondered whether she even knew about the riots.

"That reminds me," I said. "I need to call my mom and see if everyone up there is okay."

"Why don't you go call them now?" Kelly asked. "Kai and I have some catching up to do anyway."

I'd backed myself into a corner. If I went now, Kai would be left alone with Kelly, and I knew he was too polite to walk away from her.

"Here, Ashlyn, use my phone," Kai said, handing me his cell phone. "Hurry back," he said, smiling at me and squeezing my hand.

I walked out into the courtyard and quickly called my mom.

"Hi, sweetie," she said. "I didn't recognize your number. Where are you calling from?"

"A friend's phone," I said. "I just wanted to make sure you were all okay."

"Yes, but what an ordeal. They're still trying to figure out what happened. The police were all supposed to have rubber bullets, but it looks like there were real bullets, too."

"How can that be?" I asked. "Didn't they do a weapons check on all the police who were there?"

"I don't know, honey. It's all a mess."

"I'm sorry, Mom. It must be pretty grim around there right now. Are you going into the store today?"

"Of course. I still have to work. Lawson hasn't taken *that* privilege away, yet."

"Do you know anyone who actually supports him?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I don't think anyone I know is that crazy. Ask your dad, though. I'll bet some of his friends are rabid Lawson fans."

"Good thinking," I laughed. "Anyway, I have to go. I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks, sweetie. I'll talk to you soon."

I hung up and went back inside. Rebecca was sitting at the table again, and to my horror, I saw that Toby and Ryan had joined the group. This could not be happening.

"Hey, guys," I said, trying to stay cool. "Here's your phone, Kai. Thanks."

"Kelly was just telling us some funny stories about Kai," Ryan laughed. "Like about the time he got so wasted he broke his key off in the door because it was the wrong house. That's hilarious, man! What were you on?"

"I was just really drunk. I made some bad choices in high school," he said simply. I saw Kelly stiffen as she caught his double meaning.

"I'd say you haven't learned a whole lot since then," she said cattily.

"I've learned a lot, actually, mostly thanks to you. You were right to break up with me. We were completely wrong for each other." He reached out and took my hand.

I couldn't take this anymore. A month ago, this would have made me feel like I'd scored the hugest victory of my life. But now it just seemed so pathetic and utterly pointless. I stood up. My hands were shaking slightly as I gripped the table.

"You guys, this has to stop," I said, the anger rising in my voice. "Kelly, I'm sorry I've been a bitch to you, and I'm sorry if seeing Kai with someone else bothers you. Let's just stay out of each other's way, okay?"

Kelly turned red and snorted, about to argue with me, but I cut her off.

"Toby, I'm really hoping you and I can be friends. I like you a lot, but I wanted to go out with you for the wrong reasons.

You're one of the best friends I've made here, and I'd hate to see that end, but if you're not interested in being my friend, I totally understand."

"It's cool," he said, looking uncomfortable. "You don't have to make a big deal out of it."

"Good, I'm glad that's out in the open. Now, if you'll excuse us, Rebecca, Kai, and I have things to do today. Toby and Ryan, we'd love it if you'd come over and study with us tomorrow night. Kelly, I hope we can bury the hatchet. We'll see you around."

Rebecca and Kai stood up and followed me in tense silence.

"Dude, what the hell was that all about?" I heard Ryan ask as we left the room.

When we got outside, Kai put his arm around me. "I'm sorry I took her bait. She pushes my buttons like nobody else can."

I shook my head in disgust. "I've been playing a really stupid, bitchy game with her ever since I got here, and it ends today. She's in a lot of pain over you, you know."

"I doubt that," he said. "She was pretty happy to leave me."

"Well, she's feeling a ton of regret about it now. She knows she made a mistake and can't make peace with the way things turned out."

Rebecca made a small noise. I turned and looked at her.

"Rebecca, are you okay?" I asked.

"Ashlyn, how—how did you know all that about Kelly?"

"I don't know. It just seemed kind of obvious. Didn't it?" I asked Kai.

"I guess," he said.

"Why, what's up?" I asked her.

"You were reading her feelings exactly," she said.

"Huh. Maybe your talent is rubbing off on me."

"You mean my *power*."

I laughed. "No, it wasn't like that. Just kind of a hunch, that's all." I looked at her, concerned. "Rebecca, are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm just anxious about seeing John and the others today."

I felt horrible as I realized again how much trouble I'd caused. We walked in silence to the apartment.

* * *

"You *what*?!" Michael yelled. "Ashlyn, what the hell were you thinking?"

We were all at the dojo, where I was giving them the news about Kai. Their reactions were exactly what I expected.

Christoph was standing at a distance, looking wary. Rebecca was nervously twisting a lock of hair around her finger. Michael was pacing, his face red with anger. John was standing silently, his hands folded under his chin, looking deep in thought. Kai was waiting outside in the parking lot.

I stood solidly on my feet. Fear was welling up in my chest, threatening to take me down into a full-blown panic attack. But I had been preparing for this all day, and I was using the opportunity to practice moving into the fear instead of trying to push it away. The struggle had me nearly unhinged.

"I already told you," I said as calmly as I could. "I trust Kai completely, and more to the point, Rebecca does, too. Not to drag her into the middle of this, but she's our Empath, and this is our first opportunity to call on her to use her skill. Rebecca," I said, turning to her, "if you have any concerns about what you're

reading from Kai, if you sense any disloyalty or weakness that would endanger us, please tell us now."

She looked toward the parking lot and then closed her eyes for a moment. "It's the same as I felt last night," she said. "He's one hundred percent trustworthy."

Christoph let out a huge sigh of relief and gave her a small smile. I couldn't help but marvel at how completely he trusted her judgment. Michael looked unappeased.

"I know this is a big shock," I said, "and it does present some additional risk, however small. For that I'm very sorry. If I felt there were any alternative, I would have taken it, believe me. The last thing I wanted to do was put this on Kai. But I can't lie to him."

"So where does it stop?" Michael asked angrily. "Will you tell your family? Your friends? Because you don't want to lie to them either?"

"I know this sounds like a cop-out, but it's not the same thing," I said, fighting not to disappear under Michael's attack. "I can easily be evasive with other people. I can tell them I'm training, or that I'm doing research for a project, both of which are true. Most people don't pay close attention to what you're doing, so they're easily diverted. But Kai is different. He's not an outsider, he's part of me."

"Oh give me a break," Michael said with a groan. "Ashlyn, this isn't high school. You can't put us all in jeopardy because you're banging some guy—"

"Enough," John said, his rich voice booming. We all turned and looked at him. "Michael, you will never speak disrespectfully

to Ashlyn or any other member of our unit again. Apologize, now."

"John, you of all people should see that she's putting us all in danger—"

"Right now the greatest danger is coming from you, Michael. Rebecca is our Empath, and she gave her judgment, but you chose to ignore it. You are accusing Ashlyn of putting lust before the safety of our unit. And you have not even thought to ask me, your Mentor, for my opinion before casting judgment. The choices you are making now are based on anger, and they are causing division among us. As I have explained to you, the cohesion of the unit is our greatest strength, and that is what is at greatest risk at this moment."

He looked calmly at Michael, who looked ready to explode.

"Your anger is a tiger, Michael," John continued more softly. "You must put it back in its cage, or it will destroy you, and all of us with you."

I could hear Michael's heart hammering in his chest, and his breathing was ragged. Rebecca took a tentative step toward him, and Christoph instinctively moved forward protectively.

"Christoph, stay where you are, please," John said. "Michael, allow Rebecca to approach you."

Michael looked like a person trying to stand still while engulfed in flames. It seemed to take every ounce of strength he had to prevent himself from recoiling from Rebecca as she approached him. She gently laid a hand on his shoulder, and he sucked in a deep breath. After a moment, his breathing became calmer, and I could hear his pulse slow to a normal speed.

He opened his eyes and looked at Rebecca. “Thank you,” he said hoarsely. He turned to me. “I apologize,” he said.

“That’s okay,” I said gently. “I’m really sorry about this. I wish there was another way.”

“As for that,” John said, “please ask Kai to come in.”

I walked as steadily as I could to the door. When I opened it, Kai was pacing outside. He rushed forward when he saw my face. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. They want to meet you.” I looked sadly into his eyes. I wished I didn’t have to put him through this.

“It’s going to be fine,” he said. He squeezed my hand and followed me into the room. I heard his heart beat faster as he walked in.

“John, this is Kai Anderson. Kai, this is John Gordon, our Mentor.”

"It's a pleasure to meet you," John said, shaking Kai's hand. "Let me introduce you to our unit. You already know Rebecca," he said, and Rebecca smiled at him. I noticed that Christoph was now standing very close to her. "And this is Christoph Voight, our Sentry." Christoph and Kai shook hands. "And our Warrior, Michael MacNeil." A muscle in Michael's neck twitched as he shook Kai's hand. "I understand that Ashlyn and Rebecca have filled you in on our purpose."

"Yes, they have," Kai replied. "And although I'm sure you've already heard this from them, I swear that your secret is safe with me. And I'll do whatever I can to help you, although given the present company," he said, looking around at us, "I can't imagine what I could offer."

John scrutinized Kai's face for a moment before he spoke. "You have chosen an interesting path, Kai, to say the least." He looked around at us. "It is time I told you all about Keepers."

"About what?" I asked. I was shocked. Was it possible there was yet another surprise waiting for us, one more thing John hadn't told us?

"Keepers are the holders of the Soterians' secrets," John explained. "They are not Soterians themselves but are trusted allies. It is not uncommon for Soterians to fall in love with people who fit the qualifications of a Keeper, even if they have not chosen someone like that in the past."

John's words bounced around in my head. Just a few minutes ago, I was worrying that they would label Kai a threat and try to force me to leave him. Now, John was telling me that not only was he a sanctioned member of our unit, but it was part of the

reason I chose him in the first place. For the first time, I felt utterly grateful for being a Soterian. If it did nothing more than stop me from spending my life in a string of bad relationships, it was the greatest gift I could ever ask for.

"What exactly does being a trusted ally involve?" I asked.

"He will know all of our plans, and we will occasionally call on him to help us in our missions. A Keeper is often good at assimilating information, so when you report back from reconnaissance, a Keeper can sometimes spot patterns in the information that the rest of us can't see. In return, he will receive our full protection should the need arise."

"I hope I won't need your protection, but I will do anything I can to help out," Kai said.

"Good. You have sworn before this unit that you will keep our secrets, so you are now our Keeper. Do you have any questions?"

"Yes," Kai replied. "Can I learn martial arts, too?"

Christoph laughed heartily and slapped Kai on the shoulder. Kai buckled under the impact but looked amused.

A flicker of a smile crossed John's face. "That is a discipline I recommend for everyone," he said.

That evening, I said good-bye to Kai in the parking lot. I didn't want to let him go, but I had a lot of studying to do, and he had to go to work in the morning.

"Thank you for another amazing weekend," he said.

I laughed. "Much more than you bargained for, eh?"

"None of that matters, Ashlyn. All that matters is that we found each other. I still don't know how I got so lucky," he said, stroking my hair. He kissed me deeply, and I finally had to push him away.

"Stop, or I'm not going to let you go home," I said breathlessly. He gave me one last smile and got into his car.

As I watched him drive away, I felt a deep ache in my chest, as if my heart were being pulled away right along with him. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, trying to center myself. All I wanted to do was go back upstairs, lie on my bed, and daydream about the unbelievable experience I'd just had, but I couldn't let that urge run away with me. I had to be able to concentrate when Kai wasn't there, and I didn't have time to sit around staring out the window and writing love poems about him.

I walked back up to the apartment and found Candace studying in the living room.

"So, you and Kai, huh?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, smiling. "He's not at all like what you heard."

"Are you sure? Kelly said that he cheated on her a lot, which is why she broke up with him."

"What? That has got to be a lie!"

Candace shrugged. "He sure doesn't seem the type. And he seems crazy about you. Just be careful. I wouldn't trust him with anything important until you know him better."

Way, way too late for that.

I hurried into my room to call Carla. Rebecca had gone to the library to study. I also had some serious catching up to do, but I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate until I made some progress on our mission.

"Hello?" Carla answered.

"Hey, Carla, it's Ashlyn."

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Not great," I said. "I'm sorry to bother you right before mid-terms, but I'm really upset about the election. Do you know much about the certification process and whether there's been any progress on challenging the results?"

"Yes," she said. "McIntyre is leading the effort. But so far they're coming up empty."

"What exactly are they looking for?"

"Well, the problem is that California uses electronic voting machines that don't give a paper backup. So once a vote is registered, if there's a glitch in the machine, the vote can be lost forever, and there's no paper backup to do a manual recount. The only exception is the absentee ballots, which are paper.

Many of these are from voters living overseas, or from senior citizens who can't make it out to vote. But a growing number of average voters are using absentee ballots, too."

"Can the absentee ballots help somehow?" I asked.

"Absolutely. The interesting thing is that when you count the absentee ballot results separately from the voting machine results, the results show Lawson with only fifteen percent of the vote and McIntyre with sixty-five percent, with the remaining twenty percent split among the other candidates. Granted, the absentee ballot voters are a smaller sample size, but the results shouldn't be this far off."

"So what's the hold up? It seems so obvious that the election was rigged."

"They've already done a software audit on the voting machines and re-run the results. It looks clean. They're continuing to dig, though. I'm sure they'll find something."

"Carla, do you know who Lawson's main backers are? Not just his top donors, but really powerful people who are backing him?"

"Adam would be able to tell you much more about that than I can. Do you need his phone number?" She gave it to me, and I wrote in my notebook. "Sounds like you've really taken an interest in this," she said.

"I've just been so curious about whether there's any hope that they're going to get this guy out of office, and I knew you'd have the inside scoop. Is there anything I can do to help out?"

"Keep asking questions and challenging people on the answers," she said. "Write letters to the editor of the major

newspapers. And volunteer whenever you can. The student government Web site has info on volunteer opportunities."

After we hung up, I mulled over what I'd heard. The voting machines were clearly the culprits. But how did they do it? Was it the manufacturer of the machines or someone who came in later? And how did they manage to cover their tracks so well?

Adam didn't answer when I called, so I left him a message with my e-mail address. I hoped he would send me the information soon.

There was nothing more I could do tonight, so I started studying. I worked hard for two hours, and I had made significant progress when suddenly Rebecca came rushing into the room.

"Ashlyn, I need your advice so badly!" she said, dropping her backpack heavily on the floor and throwing herself onto her bed.

"What happened? I thought you were at the library. How much trouble can you have gotten into there?"

"Plenty. *He* was there."

"Who?"

"Christoph!" she wailed. "He followed me there. All I wanted was a quiet evening of studying, and he had to go and follow me to the library. I'll never get caught up!" she said, pulling at her hair.

"Rebecca, calm down," I said. I went and sat next to her and stroked her hair. Her breathing slowed, and she looked calmer. "That's better. Now, tell me what happened."

"It started out fine. I was busy studying, getting all caught up. It was so nice and quiet. And then all of a sudden he was sitting next to me. I asked him what he was doing there, and he said he had just come to read. Of course, then I couldn't

concentrate, but I didn't want to disturb anyone, so I asked him if he wanted to go for a walk. He took my backpack for me—he hoisted it onto his shoulder with one finger, like it weighed nothing," she said with a faint smile.

"We ended up going to get tea," she continued. "He told me about his home in Germany and his family. It sounds so charming." She had a faraway look in her eye as she paused for a moment, but then she became serious again.

"So finally I commented on how strange it was that he'd run into me at the library, and he admitted that he'd followed me there. I was horrified! So I got up and came straight home. He followed me, but I refused to talk to him."

"What? Why?" I asked, bewildered.

"Because he's stalking me! And besides, I chose going for tea over studying. Ashlyn, what's happening to me? I feel like I'm losing my mind!" She pounded her fist into her pillow.

"Rebecca, you are completely overreacting. And I think I know why." She looked at me hopefully. "It's because you're really falling for him, and you don't want to. You're worried that being a Soterian has already taken away too much from your life, and falling in love with a hot German guy definitely wasn't what you had planned. But he really cares about you. I say stop trying to control everything and just let him in."

She rubbed her temples. "I'm not sure I can. I'm under so much pressure right now. I feel like I can't take one more thing."

"Go tell him that. Tell him that you like him, but that you're overwhelmed right now, and that he can't follow you because it's

a violation of your privacy. Tell him you'll go out with him if he asks you."

"I would, but I have no idea where he is now," she said glumly.

I laughed. "He's right outside, of course. My guess is that he's in the courtyard, waiting to see if you change your mind."

She sat up quickly. "How do you know?" she asked.

"It's what Christoph would do," I said simply. I pulled the curtain aside, and sure enough, there he was standing by the main building near the parking lot, looking up hopefully. I saw the lines of worry in his brow. I waved at him, and he waved back, his face relaxing a bit.

"Now go," I said. "And remember, you're only going to make yourself miserable by fighting this. He's already a sanctioned member of our unit, for heaven's sake. You have nothing to

worry about. Just keep your voices down so nobody overhears you if you mention the Soterians."

Rebecca nodded and hurried out of the room. I watched as she ran down to meet him in the courtyard. I tried not to eavesdrop, but I couldn't help myself. I was dying to see how this turned out.

"Christoph, you can't follow me again," Rebecca said firmly. "It's a violation of my privacy." He looked down sadly. It amazed me how much he could look like a kicked puppy from just one cross word from Rebecca.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll leave you alone." He started to turn around.

"No, wait," she said, and he turned quickly back to her. "I don't mean I don't want to see you. You just can't stalk me." He

looked confused. "*Stalk*," she said. "It means to follow someone without their knowing about it."

"So, I can follow you if you know about it?"

"There's no need for that," she said. "I'm really busy with school, but if you ask me out, I can make the time in my schedule."

Christoph beamed at her. "How about tomorrow night? Would you like to have pizza after we train?"

"Let's make it a week from tomorrow. We have mid-terms this week. But yes, I'd like that. Very much." She smiled at him, and he looked ecstatic.

"I'm sorry for . . . *scotting* you," he said, and I saw Rebecca bite back a laugh. "It was because today, seeing Ashlyn and Kai together, and John saying it was okay, it gave me hope that maybe you and I could also go out."

"Yes, we can go out," she said.

"Okay, that's good," he said. "Good. Well. I'll, er, see you tomorrow, then." He turned slowly to walk away, but Rebecca caught him by the arm, stood on her tiptoes, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Yeah!" I yelled. "You go, girl!"

Rebecca and Christoph looked up at the window in surprise.

"Oops," I said, quickly letting the curtain drop closed. I sat smiling, waiting eagerly for Rebecca to return.

In a moment, she came back in, looking flushed and breathless. "I'm sorry I was spying on you guys," I said. "I guess the Scout part of me took over."

"More like the insatiably curious part," she said, raising her eyebrow. "I appreciate the advice, though. It went really well." She walked over to her backpack. "Well, I better get back to it."

"I still have a lot to do, too, so I'll be quiet. You don't have to escape to the library."

We spent the rest of the evening studying in our room. I checked my e-mail and saw that Kai had made it home. We exchanged a couple of e-mails and agreed that I would go down to LA the following Sunday so he could show me around. We avoided mentioning that it would also be to say good-bye.

The rest of the week flew by. My mid-terms went better than I expected. I had studied especially hard for my religious studies mid-term, knowing that John would not go easy on me. But I was only able to concentrate by constantly shoving back the voice in my head that was screaming out the countdown to Kai's departure.

Meanwhile, Kai dived into his job as our Keeper by following up on information Adam sent me about Lawson's campaign contributors. I was very grateful that he was doing the research so that I could focus on my tests.

On Friday, I woke up to a very chilly morning. I pulled back the curtain and saw that Isla Vista was shrouded in a thick blanket of fog, creating an eerie backdrop. Very appropriate for Halloween. I peered out the window, but I couldn't see very far. I wished I had infrared vision so I could see through the fog, like the infrared cameras I'd learned about in my remote sensing class. I tried squinting to see whether I could penetrate the grey. But I was only able to see the misty droplets more closely.

I closed the curtain and lay back down. John felt that Isla Vista might be a target for violence that night, since it was notorious for huge crowds on Halloween, so we were going on

patrol. It wasn't going to help us track down Lawson's backers, but keeping evil in check in our own backyard was the least we could do.

Lawson had tried to establish a curfew that night throughout California, but McIntyre had led the opposition, and thankfully the curfew failed. Not that curfews wouldn't have been helpful in preventing chaos, but each step Lawson took toward creating a police state was too dangerous in the long term.

My stomach growled, and I got up and got dressed. Rebecca and Candace were already on campus taking their last mid-terms. I'd finished my last test the previous day, so I went downstairs to enjoy a leisurely breakfast.

I ate slowly, lost in thought. The local police department would be out in full force that night, and extra police would be called in from Goleta and Santa Barbara to help, but they still

needed all the assistance they could get. I wondered what it would be like if we did have to apprehend someone. We'd only been training together for a short time. Were we really ready for this?

I felt a shift in the air behind me. I turned and saw Toby, who was standing behind me with an uncertain look on his face, holding a cup of coffee.

"Toby, hey," I said. "Come join me. How are your mid-terms going?"

"I'm done," he said as he sat across from me. "I think I aced everything."

"Excellent. You must have studied hard."

He nodded as he took a sip of his coffee. "I've been taking things more seriously. You and Rebecca have kind of inspired me that way."

"You're welcome to study with us any time you like. I miss the smell of your Pop Tarts."

He laughed. "I'll turn you into a junk-food addict yet."

"Not a chance. But we should go out for a ride soon. If the fog clears up, that is."

"This is pretty thick," he said. "I don't remember it ever being quite like this. I like it, though. It makes me feel invisible."

I took a sip of orange juice, not trusting myself to comment. "I hear Halloween in IV is pretty wild," I said. "Do you have plans tonight?"

"Ryan and I are hooking up with some friends and going downtown. I've lived through a couple of Halloweens in IV and don't need to do it again."

"Downtown seems like a wiser choice. Just be careful there, too. Alcohol and testosterone are a lethal combination, and there's always some drunk asshole looking to pick a fight."

He grinned at me. "You sound like you've witnessed a bar fight or two in your life."

"I'm afraid so. Talking hot heads off the ceiling became a talent of mine in my former life. It's not my idea of a good time."

"I promise you won't have to come rescue me," he said. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Going out with Rebecca and some friends. Don't worry, we'll be careful."

"I'm sure you will. So, do you want to go for a ride this Sunday?"

"I already have plans this weekend, but I'm free next Saturday afternoon, if that works for you."

"Perfect. It's a date." He caught himself. "I mean . . . "

I laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not reading anything into it. You don't have to walk on eggshells with me, Toby."

"Okay," he smiled. "See you later." He picked up his empty mug and walked away.

He was such a nice guy, and I was glad I'd met Kai when I did, or I would have talked myself into a relationship with Toby. Still, I wasn't looking forward to my dad's reaction when he met Kai. I wanted them to get along so badly, but I knew there was no chance in hell that my dad would be excited to see me with a college drop-out whose ambition was to be a rock star.

Chapter 17: Halloween

As the day wore on, the fog let up a bit, but Isla Vista was still covered in a veil of mist. Candace returned from her last mid-term looking jazzed and ready for action. The volleyball team was having a party at their house on Del Playa, which seemed like a terrible idea to me, since it was ground zero for chaos.

"We're dressing up as spikes," Candace said. "We're going to have spiked hats, spiked bracelets, spiked boots . . . " She saw the confused expression on my face. "Spike, you know, like when you spike the volleyball?"

"Oh right, spike. Great idea!" I felt a bit better. You'd have to be crazy to crash a party full of tall, athletic women wearing spikes.

"You and Rebecca should definitely come by. What are you dressing up as?"

"Um, myself, actually." I hadn't planned on a costume, but then it occurred to me that maybe we should dress up so we'd fit in better with the crowds. That's when the idea hit me.

"Is there a costume shop anywhere nearby?" I asked.

"Closest one is at the Fairview Center in Goleta," she said. "Not sure they'll have much left, though."

I grabbed my keys and ran out the door.

An hour later, I returned with a large bag in my hand. I was excited, even though I felt a little silly. Rebecca was lying on the couch with a small pillow over her eyes.

"What are you so excited about?" she asked sourly without looking up.

"Rebecca, you look exhausted," I said, my excitement turning to concern. "How did your last test go?"

She groaned. "I don't know. I think it went okay. By the end, it was all a blur."

"You've been studying really, really hard." I sat next to her and put my hand on her arm. "You should really get some rest."

A moment later, I heard her snoring softly. Smiling, I got up and crept into the bedroom to go try on my costume.

When Rebecca awoke from her nap twenty minutes later, she looked around confused. "Ashlyn? I feel like you're right here. Wait, you're not—"

"Don't worry," I said. "Candace isn't here. And I wanted you to get the full effect."

I reappeared. She looked shocked for a moment and then laughed.

"You're dressed as a Ninja!" she said. I was wearing all black, including my long-sleeve shirt, stretch pants, boots, belt, and gloves. A thin black hood covered my head and most of my face, with a cutout that left my eyes exposed.

"What do you think?" I asked, bubbling with excitement. "Isn't it awesome? I thought this would be the perfect disguise for scouting tonight."

"It's fantastic! I don't even think John would object. When are the guys arriving?" Michael and Christoph were meeting us at our place before we started our patrol. John would remain at his house in Goleta, where he could monitor the police scanner.

"At five o'clock," I said. "So you should get ready."

"But I don't have a costume."

"Oh yes you do," I said. "Come with me." She followed me into the bedroom with a puzzled look on her face, but her eyes

lit up when she saw the costume. I had gone into her closet and found a black shirt with long flowing sleeves and a V-neck that was edged with embroidery. I had paired it with her black culottes and tied a thin purple scarf around the waist. Hanging next to these was a black cape lined with a deep purple satin. It had a delicate silver chain that held it closed across the neck.

"You're an illusionist and a healer," I explained, "so I figured you're kind of like a sorceress. I was hoping to find you something white or gold, but I thought black and purple would be better if we have to be in stealth mode. Besides, it's going to look awesome with your hair."

"Ashlyn, it's beautiful," she said, touching the cape. "You got this for me?"

"I knew you didn't have a costume, and I also wanted to thank you for everything. You've been an incredible friend through all of this."

She picked up the cape and felt its smooth satin lining. She looked up at me and gave me a warm smile. "Thank you so much. I'm going to put it on now."

"I'll leave you to it," I said. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I walked out. I had to admit, I looked like a total bad ass.

About ten minutes later, there was a knock at the front door. I opened it, and my jaw dropped.

Christoph and Michael were standing there, but I'd never seen them looking anything like this. Christoph was wearing black military pants with a black leather belt and boots, a tight

black shirt, and a black trench coat that hung to his calves. He was both gorgeous and completely intimidating.

Michael's look was more understated, but he exuded an aura of relaxed power. He was wearing brown leather pants and a white short-sleeve shirt along with brown boots and a belt. On his arm was a tattoo of a Celtic cross that I'd never seen before. I couldn't help noticing how beautifully strong and well-defined the muscles in his arms were.

"Er, Ashlyn, is that you?" Christoph asked after I'd stood there for a moment staring at them.

"Oh yeah, sorry, come on in. Wow, you guys look great! What are you supposed to be?"

They exchanged glances. "These aren't costumes," Michael said with irritation in his voice.

There was a long pause as this sank in. “Oh. I, um, I guess I’m just used to seeing you in workout gear.”

“What the hell are you wearing?” Michael asked, looking me up and down.

“It’s a modified Ninja costume. I thought costumes might help us blend in tonight.” I was beginning to feel really stupid.

“You look great,” Christoph said. “I didn’t know it was you, so it works very well.”

“Why did you modify it?” Michael asked, frowning at my tight-fitting pants.

“Because traditional Ninja uniforms are kind of baggy and can ripple in the wind. That might not have been a problem for the Ninja, but they couldn’t *actually* fly. I was hoping this would give me extra stealth.”

"Except that every guy on DP is going to be staring at your—" Michael started to say, but Christoph nudged him, sending him flying into the wall.

Michael glared at him, but Christoph gave him the most withering look I'd ever seen on his usually cheerful face. Michael took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was out of line."

"It's okay. I'm sure you, um, meant well. Anyway, Rebecca should be . . . " But my words died away as the bedroom door opened and Rebecca came out.

She looked absolutely stunning. Her cape hung behind her with the silver chain sparkling at her neck, the purple lining creating a mysterious, shimmering glow. She had put on a deep red lipstick and dark eye shadow, and her thick black eyelashes

framed her beautiful brown eyes. Her hair cascaded in waves around her shoulders.

I smiled widely under my mask. I could hear both Christoph's and Michael's pulses quicken, their breathing suddenly faster. I stifled a giggle at their reaction and went over to hug Rebecca.

"You are a *vision*," I whispered in her ear. "Poor Christoph doesn't stand a chance."

She smiled at me, slightly embarrassed. We turned and looked at the guys. Christoph was looking at her like he wanted to devour her and lock her up in a glass case at the same time. Michael was looking at the floor, trying to regain his cool.

Rebecca stared back at Christoph with a look of admiration and awe. Poor Rebecca doesn't stand a chance either, I thought.

"So, everyone have their cell phones?" I said, breaking the tension.

"Does your phone become invisible when you disappear?" Christoph asked.

"Yeah, it turns out I can make anything I touch invisible, but I still see a faint image of it, just enough to operate it. Let's check in with John." I flipped open my cell phone and made the call. He answered on the first ring, and I turned on the speaker. "John, we're all here at my place. Any news yet?"

"None," he said. "It's been very quiet so far, but it's early. I suggest you all get some dinner and then start patrolling DP. Put your phones on vibrate so you can feel them ring. Check back with me in an hour."

Twenty minutes later, the four of us were sitting at a table in the café. It was early for dinner, and most people were going out,

so we had the place almost entirely to ourselves. We were enjoying the opportunity to really get to know each other for the first time.

Christoph was polishing off a mountain of food, including roast beef, grilled vegetables, roasted potatoes, salad, and half a loaf of French bread. He'd already made two trips to the soda fountain. Michael had a hamburger, fries, and a chocolate shake. Rebecca ate a salad and a chicken breast, while I'd opted for a vegetable stir fry with tofu and brown rice. Michael looked at my dinner with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Is that all you're eating?" he asked.

"Sure, why?" I asked with my mouth full of food.

"Where's the meat?"

"I don't eat meat."

"You can't train and not eat meat," he said.

"Doesn't seem to be a problem so far," I said, taking another bite. "Anyway, what's it to you?"

"I'll have to rescue you if you faint from lack of protein."

I burst out laughing, spraying rice all over Michael. His expression turned to horror, which only made me laugh harder, causing me to spray more rice. Pretty soon I was laughing uncontrollably, and Christoph and Rebecca were laughing right along with me. Michael was silent.

"Michael," I said when I could finally speak again, "when are you going to see us as a help to you and not a hindrance? Haven't you been listening to anything John has been saying?"

"That's exactly the problem," he said, still irritated, picking rice out of his hair. "If one of us falls, it weakens all of us. So we *all* have to be at the top of our game. Everything was so much

simpler when it was just me." He sucked on his straw. "Don't they serve beer here?"

"No, and do you really think drinking tonight is a good idea?"

"Why not? One beer isn't going to make a difference."

"Except that if one beer turns into six and you pass out, I'll have to rescue you."

He looked intently at me for a moment, and then his expression turned to amusement. "Touché," he said, with a small smile.

"Michael, John said you'd been training all your life," Rebecca said. "When did you start?"

"When I was five," he said, munching a French fry. "I did Tae Kwon Do for twelve years and then switched to kick boxing."

"Wow," Rebecca said. "No wonder you're so good."

"It's also talent," Christoph said. "I started kick boxing four months ago. That's where I met Michael. I saw other people there who had been training a very long time, but nobody is as good as Michael is."

Michael shook his head. "It's a shame you gave it up, man. You were getting pretty good yourself."

"You quit kick boxing?" Rebecca asked Christoph. "How come?"

"Once I became a Soterian, it wasn't fair to the others. I don't have the control Michael has. He is very good at making it look like the other person wins."

"You let them win?" I asked in surprise. Michael was so competitive; I couldn't imagine him letting anyone win at anything.

"John suggested it," Michael said. "It was hard at first, but now it's just like any other training exercise. I challenge myself to win or lose by an exact number of points."

I looked curiously at Michael. The more I got to know him, the more impressed I was by him. But he also seemed to have a pretty intense dark side. I wondered whether he'd end up being our greatest weapon or a loose cannon once we were in battle.

I turned back to Christoph. "When did you come to the U.S.?" I asked.

"A year ago. I'm here studying Early Childhood Education."

I nearly spat my rice out again but managed to keep myself in check. Christoph teaching kindergarten—I simply couldn't fathom it.

"You want to work with kids?" I asked, arranging my face into what I hoped was a polite expression.

"Yes, absolutely," he said. "I love children. They're so honest, always themselves, always thinking about right now. I want to open a daycare center somewhere in the U.S."

"Not back in Germany?"

"No, that's why I'm studying here. I love Germany and I miss it sometimes, but this is where I want to be. I'm only here on a student visa, but I hope to become a citizen as soon as possible after I graduate. But first I have to travel, see more of the states, and decide where I want to live."

"You know, I think you'll be a fantastic teacher," I said, starting to visualize it. "Can't you just see him walking around with like twenty kids hanging off of him?"

"Sounds like a living hell," Michael scoffed.

"What are you studying?" Rebecca asked Michael.

"Political Science. I'm going to move to Washington and become a political analyst."

Just then, my phone vibrated. It was John.

"Ashlyn, we've got some activity starting on DP. You better get down there."

"On our way," I said, snapping my phone shut. "Well, friends," I said as I stood up, "it's time to get to work."

Chapter 18: The First Mission

At eight o'clock, Halloween was in full swing in Isla Vista. The sun had gone down, and the streets were packed with people. Houses were decorated with orange and black streamers, and their balconies were crammed with people who were standing around kegs, yelling into the crowd.

As expected, Christoph drew a lot of stares, and people stood back to make way for him. He and Rebecca looked like royalty walking down the street. Michael looked alert yet relaxed, his eyes constantly scanning the crowd.

We hadn't seen anything too bad yet, but the night was still young, and there were a lot of drunk people. We saw one girl in a leotard and bunny ears staggering down the street, practically

being carried by the guy with her. The unfocused look in her eyes told me that she was going to be sick any minute.

"It's quite a crowd, isn't it?" I asked.

"I wonder who cleans all this up," Rebecca said, picking up a plastic cup and tossing it into a nearby trash can. "Can't keg parties at least be environmentally conscious and use recycled paper cups or something?"

As we passed a bright blue house, we heard a shout from the balcony. "MacNeil! Dude, come up!"

We looked up and saw a guy standing at the front of the balcony. He was holding a bottle of beer. Michael waved to him.

"Hey, Patterson," Michael yelled back. "What's happening?"

"Party at Warner's house. Bring your friends. I'll tell them to let you in."

"Sorry man, we have to be some place. Maybe later, okay?"

"Cool, see you later." He turned to the girl next to him on the balcony, and we kept walking. It was weird to get a glimpse into Michael's life. I was beginning to wonder whether he partied with as much intensity as he trained.

John called again, this time sounding more urgent. "Ashlyn, there's a disturbance on the sixty-seven hundred block of DP, oceanside."

"Got it," I said and hung up. "Guys, we might have trouble. I'm going to fly up to the next block and check it out."

I ran behind a tree and disappeared. I flew quickly to the next block and began looking and listening for signs of trouble. I came across a group of police talking to a guy, but it seemed to be under control.

I was about to turn around when suddenly I got a bad feeling that led me farther up the street. I followed the pull and found

myself in front of the women's volleyball team house where I'd met Kai. Alarm welled up in me as I heard angry voices coming from within. I quickly flew around to the back of the house.

I landed softly on the ground-floor deck and peered inside. There was a group of five guys inside the house. Candace and Sandy, the team captain, were arguing with them.

"Why are you being so uptight, bitch?" one guy slurred angrily to Candace. "We just want to enjoy the view." He looked around at the volleyball players with a stupid smile on his face. He had to be really drunk, because I'd never seen a more threatening-looking group of women in my life. I was beginning to worry more about his safety than theirs, but once his buddies joined in, there was no telling what would happen.

"You've already broken a chair, and you need to get the hell out of here, *now*," Candace said. "Or we're calling the cops." It sounded like Candace had also had a few too many.

"The cops aren't coming, sweetheart," said a guy wearing a camouflage shirt. "They're busy. So why don't you just chill out?" He walked over to the stereo and turned it up.

"Get out of here, all of you!" Sandy yelled.

The camouflage-shirt guy grabbed Sandy and started kissing her roughly. She slapped him hard across the face, and he threw her back into a chair, snapping her head backward. He jumped on top of her and started kissing her again as she frantically hit him and thrashed around, trying to get free.

The guy who was arguing with Candace threw her to the ground and took off his jacket. The other guys yelled and

whooped, cheering them on, as the other women tried to pull the guy off Sandy.

I pulled out my phone and was just starting to call Michael to urge him to get here as fast as possible, when suddenly Michael burst through the front door, followed closely by Christoph and Rebecca. One woman screamed, and the room erupted in chaos.

The guy who had shoved Candace turned and threw a punch at Michael. Michael dodged it, grabbed his arm, and in seconds had him on the ground with his arm twisted behind his back. Rebecca quickly took over from Michael, pressing down on the guy's neck with her knee and holding down his bent wrist as he struggled.

Christoph grabbed the three guys who were standing around watching as if he were scooping up a bunch of toys. He held

them tightly under his arms. They struggled and flailed in vain as he stood watching over Rebecca as she kept the first guy subdued.

Michael rushed over to Sandy and pulled the guy off of her with one hand. He landed on his feet and spun around to face Michael, his face red with rage. He threw a kick, but Michael deftly caught his leg and twisted it so that he spiraled in the air and landed hard on the floor. Michael immediately threw his arms around his neck and got him into a headlock.

I reappeared and rushed into the room. "Hold them! I'll have the police here in a minute." I rushed out the door and down the block, weaving in and out of revelers, until I came to the small group of police who had finished questioning the guy and were beginning to walk away. I pulled off my mask.

"Officers, please follow me, quickly. Some guys have attacked my friends at a party up the street. We have them restrained, but I don't know for how long."

The policemen raced after me as I led them up the street and into the front door. The scene was quite different now, and I almost felt like laughing. Candace was sitting on the guy who had shoved her, looking angrier than I'd ever seen her, while Rebecca continued to hold his wrist in a joint lock. The guys under Christoph's arms had quieted down somewhat but were still struggling. The camouflage-shirt guy was looking murderous as Michael stood behind him, holding him firmly in the headlock. Sandy was sobbing in the corner, her friends trying to calm her down.

I quickly told the officers exactly what I had witnessed. "I was out on the deck and saw everything. We were so lucky that

my friends arrived when they did." I explained how the two guys had accosted Candace and Sandy, then pointed to the guys Christoph was holding. "They didn't actually hurt anyone, but they refused to leave when they were told to get out."

The officers handcuffed all five of the guys and led them away, reading them their rights. I closed the door behind them, and the room immediately became quiet. Rebecca had her arm around Sandy's shoulder, surreptitiously healing her as she spoke softly to her. Christoph righted a lamp that had been knocked over and started trying to fix the broken chair, while Michael slipped outside to call John and report what had happened.

"I can't understand how you all came in here like that, right in the nick of time," Candace said. "What do you mean you were out on the deck?"

"It was easy to slip in here unnoticed—look how I'm dressed," I said, choosing my words carefully.

"If it hadn't been for you guys . . . well, thank you," Candace said. "We owe you a lot. I guess your Karate classes are paying off after all," she said, looking at Rebecca. Sandy had calmed down by this time and was even smiling weakly.

"It's a lot of work, though," I said casually. The last thing I needed was for Candace to want to start training with us. Michael walked back into the room. "Michael was the one who really saved the day," I said, "and he's been training since he was five. I was just standing out in the shadows watching."

"Michael, you're a total stud," Candace said. "Would you guys like a beer? Or a bong hit?"

"No, we have to get going," I said quickly before Michael could reply. "I wanted you to see our costumes. Doesn't Rebecca look awesome? And I love your spikes. They worked out great."

"Not well enough, apparently. Okay, I'll see you all out, and then I'm locking the door."

We said good-bye and continued up the street. Rebecca told us that my feelings had translated really clearly. She was able to find the house by sensing my presence, but she said she also got a feeling that it was the same house we'd been at before, which was an excellent sign. It meant her abilities had expanded to the point where she could almost read my thoughts.

I was very impressed with Michael. Not only did he take down the two most violent people in the room before they did any real harm, but he did it without injuring them. My concern

that he might lose his cool in the heat of battle proved to be unfounded. He'd performed brilliantly.

The crowds were getting thicker, and the atmosphere on the street became wilder. It was getting difficult to wade through the throngs of people, and we decided it was time for me to patrol by air. The others would patrol Sabado Tarde, the street next to Del Playa. There was plenty of action throughout all of Isla Vista tonight, and we would have an easier time responding to the next crisis if we weren't stuck in foot traffic.

I disappeared and rose into the air again, the night air cool against my eyes and nose. I was glad for the extra warmth the mask provided. I started patrolling the perimeter of Isla Vista, listening to the tones of conversations, watching for anything beyond typical Friday-night behavior.

I headed up Camino Corto away from Del Playa and turned right over El Colegio, the road that borders Isla Vista at the north end. The fog was still thick enough to limit visibility to aboout a hundred yards.

Suddenly, I felt a slight tug, a gentle pull at my core that felt like something was trying to get my attention. I followed the pull to Children's Park in the north-central part of town. I strained my ears and finally pinpointed what I was seeking.

" . . . and that will get the crowds going. They should be drunk enough now to join in," I heard a man's voice say.

"We're ready," said another voice.

I flew closer and saw a group of about fifteen guys. They were dressed casually, mostly in T-shirts and jeans or shorts. They looked like a group of college students, but there was something about them that wasn't quite right.

They glanced around warily and left the park. I headed toward the first guy I'd heard, and I noticed he had a wireless earphone tucked into his left ear. He pulled his long hair forward so that it covered it as they strode out of the park toward Del Playa, carrying signs saying things like "Bring down Lawson!" and "Stolen Election = Anarchy".

I shot back through the air to find my unit. I ducked behind a car, reappeared, and ran over to them.

"There's a group of fifteen guys headed this way. They're carrying anti-Lawson signs, and I think they're going to try to incite a riot. They're coming up Camino Del Sur."

Christoph and Michael were off like a shot. I ran with Rebecca, knowing she could never catch them and probably shouldn't be running alone. I called John on my cell phone as we ran.

"John, we have a big problem. There's a group of anti-Lawson demonstrators trying to start a protest, or possibly a riot."

"Stop them before they can gather support," he said. "Once they recruit bystanders, the situation will be much harder to control. And Ashlyn, try to figure out who they are."

I hung up and sprinted with Rebecca toward the protestors. In the distance, I could just see Christoph's head bobbing above the crowd. Rebecca struggled to keep up.

"Go," she yelled breathlessly. "I'll be fine."

"No point. By the time I find a safe place to disappear, you'll be there already."

We ran on until we came to the scene of a large crowd. Michael and Christoph were standing in front facing the

protestors. Several people had already joined in and were chanting “Recall Lawson! Recall Lawson!”

Michael looked ready to pounce, and Christoph was trying to shout down the protestors. “Everybody go back to your parties,” he yelled. “This is not the way to get Lawson out of office. It’s too dangerous to start a protest tonight. Everyone be calm!”

“Rebecca, create a diversion,” I said. “I need to find out who’s behind this.” I disappeared, flew over the protestor with the long hair, and waited.

Suddenly, there were loud bangs and pops as fireworks appeared overhead, and everyone in the crowd looked up and cheered. While they were distracted, I flew down, snatched the earphone out of the guy’s ear, and shot back into the air. As he looked desperately around for it on the ground, I pressed its mute button and shoved it into my ear.

" . . . nothing on the police scanner yet. You have to get the crowd going on its own. And you better not screw up this time." There was a pause as Rebecca's magnificent fireworks exploded all around us. "Hey, are those shots? Get back to headquarters! Andrews is going to have your head over this."

"They're not shots, they're fireworks, and I don't know where the hell they came from!" I heard another voice say through the earphone.

"We lost the momentum. Everyone's looking at the fireworks. Damn it!"

"Pull back! Andrews wants everyone back here now."

The men moved swiftly back up the road toward the park. Michael and Christoph started to follow them. I flew down next to Michael and spoke directly into his ear. "Let them think they got away. I'll follow them and contact you when I know

something." Michael nodded and put a hand on Christoph to stop him as I shot back up into the sky.

The earpiece was quiet now, so I tossed it on the ground as I flew after the men. When they reached the park, they got into three black SUVs and sped away.

I followed them out of Isla Vista. When they stopped at the traffic light at Hollister, I realized with a sinking feeling that if they got on the freeway, I didn't know whether I would be able to fly fast enough to follow them. I pulled my phone out of my belt, quickly took a picture of each of their license plates, and sent the images to John.

When the light changed, they got on the freeway and headed south. As they accelerated, I pushed myself to go faster and faster, until the wind roared as I shot through the air. Tears streamed down my mask, and I kept my eyes squinted shut as

far as I could, wishing I'd thought to wear goggles. I had never flown this fast before, and it took all my concentration to keep from spinning out of control as I was tossed around by the air rushing past me at seventy miles per hour.

I was dismayed when the SUVs passed downtown Santa Barbara, and I hoped like hell that they weren't driving all the way to LA. But just after downtown, they pulled into the right lane and got off at the exit for Montecito, a small and very wealthy area of Santa Barbara. It was a tremendous relief when the roar of the wind died down. My ears were ringing, and my eyes felt as if they'd been sandblasted.

They headed toward the beach, winding through streets lined with large trees and stately old homes, until they reached a black iron gate. It opened slowly, and they drove up a long driveway to a beautiful brick mansion. My pulse quickened. I

wasn't sure what kinds of security systems they would have here, but I had a feeling there might be at least one guard with a gun. And Christoph was miles away.

Chapter 19: Bennicort

Hovering over the men as they walked toward the front door, I didn't really have any idea what to do, no strategy for how I would handle this, and I was scared. I was sure that I would be discovered any moment, but I was too curious to turn back. Suddenly, I heard voices coming from inside the house.

"They've arrived, Mr. Bennicort." It sounded like Andrews, the man who'd been in the background on the phone.

"Lead them into the great room and question them," said a voice that I didn't recognize. I heard footsteps walk down what sounded like a hallway going toward the back of the house. They stopped abruptly, followed by the slight *whumpf* of a silent but tight-fitting door closing.

Just as the men reached the front door, it opened. “Follow me,” Andrews commanded.

The men started filing in through the door. I hovered as close as I could to the last man as he entered the house. As soon as I crossed the threshold, I shot upward and out of the way of the door just as it slammed shut.

Inside the foyer, I drifted near the ceiling, carefully avoiding the large chandelier that hung from the high ceiling. A white marble staircase swept up to a landing on the second floor. Underneath it, a hallway ran from the foyer toward the rear of the house.

Just off the foyer on the right was the great room. It had honey-colored hardwood floors and pale amber walls. It was richly furnished, with a large sofa and several overstuffed chairs that looked comfortable and very expensive.

On the right, gold silk curtains hung around the tall windows that looked out onto the grounds. On the left was a wide mirror framed in ornate gold leaf, and at the far end of the room, there was a huge fireplace with a white marble mantle. An Impressionist painting hung above it, and suddenly I realized that my mom had a poster of that same painting hanging in her apartment, which meant that I was now looking at an original Renoir.

I was awestruck. I tried to stay focused on why I was there, even as I tried to grasp how much money all of this must have cost.

A man I assumed was Andrews walked ahead of the others and sat down in a large chair near the fireplace. Behind his patient expression was a hint of agitation as he surveyed the men standing in front of him.

"Steve, I can explain," the guy with the long hair began. "We followed the instructions exactly. But out of nowhere, someone lit a bunch of fireworks right overhead, and everything just stopped. So we pulled back on David's orders."

"David did as I asked," Andrews said. "You were moments from being rounded up by the police."

"If we'd just had another minute or two . . . "

"But then someone shot bottle rockets over your head. Must have been very distracting," he murmured, examining his fingernails.

"It wasn't like that! We kept trying, but nobody was listening anymore." He sounded defensive and slightly panicked, probably because as soon as the fireworks started, he and the rest of them *had* stopped what they were doing and just stood there,

confused, staring up at the sky. Rebecca was a genius. It was the perfect diversion.

"The problem is that this is the second time you've failed, Marco. It's the second time I've had to sit here and listen to you make excuses."

"You know LA wasn't my fault, either," he sulked. "The police were like a wall. We couldn't get through to the front of the line. And besides, it still worked out okay. We put some people in the hospital."

"The police had a strong presence in San Francisco as well, but Donovan achieved his mission there, with twice the number of casualties. The governor was still able to call out the state of emergency, but with far less support than he would have had if you had succeeded. I'm very disappointed in you, Marco."

Andrews stood up and filled a brandy glass with a light brown liquid from a crystal decanter. He swirled it deftly and then took a sip, peering over his glass at the group.

"Gentlemen, you are free to go," he said at last. "William is waiting with your payment in the kitchen. As agreed, you will only receive thirty percent because you did not complete the task. But your work is appreciated, and we look forward to doing business with you again."

The men looked disheartened as they trudged out of the great room and down the hall. I followed close behind, deciding that I had collected enough information and didn't want to risk getting stuck inside.

The hallway was long and somewhat narrow, and the walls on either side had intricate panels. About halfway down, I spotted what looked like a hairline crack in the wall, so fine that

it was almost undetectable. I wondered whether this was where Bennicort had gone to observe the interview.

I was torn. Should I wait for Bennicort to come out so I could see what he looked like? It seemed like an important opportunity, but I was getting panicky again about getting trapped in there. I had never been invisible for so long before. Would I get tired and reappear?

I decided I couldn't pass up the opportunity to see the man behind all of this. I flew back toward the great room and waited in the foyer.

After the men had collected their money and exited out the back door, the hidden door opened in the hallway, and a tall man with silver blond hair stepped out. He had hazel eyes flecked with bright gold, and I had a strong suspicion that the

color scheme in the great room was selected specifically to match his eyes. This had to be Bennicort.

He walked casually down the hall to the great room where Andrews was waiting.

"I believe them," Andrews said.

Bennicort nodded. "They're incompetent, but they're loyal. We have no choice but to continue using them. There isn't time to find replacements."

"I won't have David set off the charges, then," Andrews said.

"Ask William to enable the security system, and please see yourself out."

"Yes, Mr. Bennicort. Good-night."

I followed Andrews down the hall. In the kitchen, I couldn't help pausing a moment to appreciate its magnificence. It was the size of our entire apartment. It had two huge ovens, a stove

top with eight burners, and a cast-iron door in a brick wall that I guessed was a wood-fired oven. A large butcher-block island filled the middle of the room, and a rack full of copper pots and pans hung above it.

Standing by the sink was an older man washing dishes. He nodded slowly at Andrews as he passed.

"Good-night, William. Mr. Bennicort would like you to enable the security system now."

"G'night, Steve," William said in a gravelly voice. "See you tomorrow."

I hovered as close to Andrews as I could, ready to make my escape, but there was a problem. This time, there was only one of him instead of a line of people, and the door opened toward us instead of away from us, so there was no time for me to

squeeze in. He opened the door and walked out into the night, pulling the door closed behind him.

William punched five digits into a keypad on the wall, and I heard clicks throughout the house as the doors and windows locked audibly.

I was trapped.

I immediately fled down the hall in a panic. I decided to head upstairs to look for another exit, but it felt hopeless. I made it to the foyer, when suddenly I heard a sound that made my heart stop.

"Don't freak out, just follow me," a voice whispered in my ear. I spun around and nearly screamed. There, hovering in front of me, was what looked like a ghost, but his face was very much alive. His skin was the color of milk chocolate, and his amber eyes sparkled. His hair was cut very short, the tiny black curls

snug against his scalp. His whole body was almost completely transparent.

"Who are you?" I mouthed silently. My heart was beating so hard that it almost drowned out the sound of everything else around me.

"I'm Jesse," he whispered. "There's no time to explain right now. Just follow me, quick."

At that moment, William reached the foyer and headed toward the stairs. I followed Jesse as he flew up and over the landing and down a hallway. He went through a doorway on the left, which opened to a beautiful bedroom with pale rose-colored walls, gorgeous furniture made of birds-eye maple, and a four-poster bed draped with a soft green canopy. It was the kind of room I had always dreamed of having when I was a kid, and for a split second, I felt the crazy urge to climb under the thick

comforter and go to sleep. But the glorious sight of an open window pulled me back to reality, and relief flooded through me as I sailed through it. Jesse followed, pausing on the outside to gently slide the window closed after us, and we flew off into the night.

Chapter 20: Second Unit

"Where did you come from?" I asked, my heart still pounding.

"Let's fly back along the beach. I'll explain along the way."

We flew the couple of blocks to the ocean and then turned toward Isla Vista. The moon was high in the night sky now, casting a silvery glow on the waves. It made me feel calmer, more still inside. And something about Jesse immediately put me at ease.

"So I'm guessing you're another Scout," I said.

"Got it in one," he said. "Good thing I got here when I did, or you'd be spending the night in that awful place."

"It was actually quite nice inside."

"Please! Did you see those furnishings? Practically *screamed* Old Money. No imagination at all."

"Let me guess: you would have replaced the chandelier with a disco ball?"

He reached over and smacked me on the arm. "Well, aren't we the comedian? Aren't you even going to thank me?"

"Absolutely. I can't tell you how scared I was. Thank you. Now, can you *please* tell me who you are and where you came from?"

"I'm Jesse Burton. We're from San Francisco. Our Mentor felt a pull to come here, so we drove down today. Missed my own Halloween party as a result. Anyway, we arrived right after you left. We met up with your unit, and I immediately followed you here with Rebecca guiding me on the phone. That girl is one hell of an Empath. When I got here just in time to see you go inside

through the *front door*," he scoffed, "I knew you were going to need a better exit. So I sneaked in the back when that gang of losers was leaving, went up the back stairs to the bedrooms, and opened the window."

"Man. That was really smart."

"Yes, well, someone had to be," he sniffed.

"Hey, I took a chance, and it paid off. I have a ton of information to pass on. Now we just have to make sense of it all. By the way, how come I can see you when I can't even see myself?"

"I don't know. When I first saw you floating right behind those convicts, I nearly had a heart attack because I thought you'd forgotten to disappear. But then I realized you were transparent, and I figured it had something to do with my fabulous new vision."

I nodded. "Just like how we can see the stuff we touch, like our cell phones. Speaking of which . . . " I flipped open my phone and called John. "John, we're on our way back. I collected a lot of information, and I found Jesse." He smacked me again. "Okay, okay, Jesse *rescued* me. Where should we meet?"

"At the dojo," John said. "The others will drive over and meet us there."

I replaced the phone in my belt and started veering to the right toward the Goleta hills. "So how long have you been a Soterian?" I asked.

"About a month. Theresa, our Mentor, is fabulous. She's from Brazil, and she's teaching me Capoeira."

"What's that?"

"The Brazilian martial art. It's like a combination of dancing and martial arts. The slaves practiced it in secret and disguised it as dancing."

"That sounds so cool! But wait, don't tell me anything more about it. The last thing I need right now is another hobby."

We talked all the way back to the dojo. I found out that he was going to school to become a hair stylist and wanted to open a salon in a fancy part of Oakland, the city next to Berkeley that was just across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco.

"I'm going to have an espresso bar and also serve champagne," he said. "And a makeup artist to touch up every client's makeup before they leave. My boyfriend, Paul, he's an accountant, and he thinks it's a solid investment. There are plenty of salons, but they don't have that hip style I'm going to give it."

"Have you guys been together long?" I asked.

"Two years. He keeps talking about us moving in together, but I can't bear it."

"Why not?"

"I'm too young! I'm only twenty-one."

"Well, if you've already been together for two years, aren't you already fairly committed?"

"Yes, but I'm just not ready. Besides, I can't think about any big changes until this Soterians business is wrapped up and I've opened my salon. Then I can think about taking the long walk down the aisle."

We talked about some of the places we both went to in the East Bay, and it made me a little homesick. It was nice to talk to someone who understood how life-changing Zachary's Pizza is.

But it amazed me how far away my former life seemed. I already thought of Santa Barbara as my home.

We arrived at the dojo, reappeared, and landed in the parking lot. It felt strange to be on my feet again. Jesse reappeared, and I looked at him more closely. He looked like he was bursting with life. His sharp eyes twinkled as they looked around, taking in every detail. His slim body moved with a quickness and grace that reminded me of a cat. He was wearing a dark outfit like I was, but his was much more stylish.

"What are you wearing?" he asked, looking me up and down.

"That's the second time I've been asked that tonight, and I think I'm done answering the question. We can't all be fashion victims, you know."

He snorted as we walked into the dojo. Rebecca and Christoph were talking eagerly with the rest of Jesse's unit while

Michael stood off to the side watching. When Rebecca saw me, she ran forward. “Ashlyn, thank God you’re safe! You were so brave.”

I heard Jesse clear his throat loudly behind me. I rolled my eyes. “Jesse rescued me.”

“I love your costume, by the way,” he said to Rebecca.

“Ashlyn put it together,” she said. “She even bought me this cape.” I looked smugly at Jesse, who raised his eyebrow at me and gave me a sarcastic look that made me laugh. He was really growing on me.

“Come on,” Rebecca said to me, “You have to meet the others.” Taking my hand and pulling me across the room, she began introducing us all. “Ashlyn, this is Kenji Fukawa, their Sentry.” Kenji was about my height but with a very rugged build like a gymnast. He had short black hair and deep brown eyes.

"And Claire Marks, their Empath." She gestured at a beautiful girl with peaches-and-cream skin, brilliant green eyes, and deep red hair cut into a stylish bob. Claire smiled at me shyly, and I smiled back.

"And this is Raina Forrester, their Warrior," Rebecca said.

"How's it going?" Raina asked, pushing her messy blonde hair out of her hazel eyes. She had a slim, athletic build, and her bored, somewhat irritated expression was strikingly similar to Michael's. I was very curious about how well they'd get along.

"Nice to meet you all," I said. "Where's John?"

"Right here," John said as he strode into the room next to a tall woman with long dark brown hair. She looked about forty-five, with tan skin and brown eyes that were constantly surveying everything around her. "Ashlyn, this is Theresa Silva,

the San Francisco unit's Mentor. Theresa, this is Ashlyn Woods, our Scout."

As I shook her hand, her eyes penetrated mine with the same look John had given me that first day.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ashlyn. Was your mission successful?" Her voice was rich and deep like John's, and she spoke with an accent that I guessed must be Portuguese, since Jesse said she was from Brazil.

"Very successful." I recounted everything that had happened, and everyone listened attentively. Michael's eyes widened when I described flying over the freeway, and Rebecca and Claire both gasped when I told them how Bennicort and Andrews determined that the men were still useful and decided not to set the charges. I shuddered as I imagined what that must mean.

"When the men left, they drove off in their own cars and left the SUVs behind," I explained. "My guess is Bennicort has their cars rigged with explosives so that he can get rid of them as soon as he doesn't need them anymore."

"That makes sense," Kenji agreed. "He might have set small explosives on the axle, or behind the front tire to make it look like a blow-out."

"What a prick," Raina spat.

"Yes, we're dealing with a very powerful man with much to lose," Theresa said. "A most dangerous enemy."

"I ran a trace on the license plates you sent me," John added. "They're all registered to a James Bennicort. I called Kai and asked him to do some research on him." My heart leaped at the mention of Kai's name. I hadn't thought about him for over three hours—a real record for me. I was instantly dying to see

him. My brush with danger tonight made me want to be with him more than ever.

"I'll ask him to look up Steve Andrews," I said. "I didn't get William's last name, unfortunately. And there was also David, the man on the phone. He wasn't in the house as far as I could tell. He might have been running the call from a different location. I know he had a police scanner. But it couldn't have been far away from the house, because I heard him talking to Andrews in the background while he was on the call."

"Maybe there's a cottage on the property," Claire suggested.

John looked pensive. "So it appears that they're connected with Lawson, and that their strategy is to create unrest so Lawson can clamp down on the public. That's certainly in keeping with his platform."

"But why does he want to do that?" Rebecca frowned. "What does he stand to gain?"

"More to the point, what does Bennicort stand to gain?" Michael asked.

"And we still need to figure out how they stole the election," Kenji added.

"I suggest we divide the tasks," Theresa said. "The Scouts should do surveillance this weekend. Your Keeper can continue researching Bennicort and Andrews. Our Keeper can continue digging into the riots and the election. The rest of us can train together."

"You have a Keeper too?" I asked Jesse.

"Didn't I tell you? It's Paul."

"Oh, of course." That made perfect sense. It also indicated that their commitment to each other had to be pretty strong, despite Jesse's reluctance.

"I have to be in LA on Sunday," I said. "But I can do surveillance tomorrow."

"Ashlyn, this is important." Theresa peered intently at me. "I think there's a lot more we can learn at Bennicort's property. Can you reschedule your plans?"

"We really need to drive back to the Bay Area on Sunday anyway," Jesse pointed out. "I can cover Bennicort on Sunday morning for a few hours before we go, and Ashlyn can follow up on any leads that come up in LA."

"Very well," Theresa conceded. "I hope your Keeper finds information you can use." She turned to John. "Thank you for

offering to let us stay at your home. I hope it won't be too much of an imposition."

"Not at all," John said. "It'll be a bit of a squeeze, but we'll manage."

"We have a sofa bed in our living room," Christoph offered. "One person can stay with us."

"And we have a comfy couch," Rebecca said. "So another person can stay with us."

"I'll take the sofa bed," Kenji volunteered. "I can sleep on concrete since I've become a Sentry."

"And I'll take the couch," Claire said. "It'll give me more time to compare notes with Rebecca. If that's okay with you," she said to Jesse and Raina.

"Of course," Jesse replied.

"Fine by me," Raina said. She seemed too independent to care about things like hanging out with the girls, and she was probably the type of person who could sleep wherever she happened to fall. I imagined that she must be an incredibly powerful Warrior.

"That's perfect," John said. "Then everyone else will have a room at my house.

We all said good-night, and I saw Rebecca linger for a moment with Christoph. They looked at each other with such adoring eyes, it would have made me somewhat sick before I met Kai. I knew that the way he and I looked at each other was probably just as nauseating.

We headed out to the parking lot and got into our cars. I watched as John, Theresa, Jesse, and Raina walked down the

bamboo-lined path that led from the dojo to John's house, their figures fading into the night.

Chapter 21: Warring Warriors

Sitting in our room eating popcorn, Rebecca and I listened to Claire tell her story. I was propped up on pillows on my bed, trying hard to stay awake. I felt as exhausted as I did after triathlons, only without the sore muscles.

"I'm a psych major at UC Berkeley," Claire said. "My friends always talk to me about their problems, and I just assumed that the reason I was getting better at understanding their feelings was because of my studies. But one day, I was in my bedroom, looking in the mirror and wishing yet again that I could lose weight, when suddenly my reflection just sort of morphed. And there I was, with the body I'd always wanted, even though my pants still said they were a size ten.

"Needless to say, I was completely freaked out. I was really worried that I was heading for a nervous breakdown because of the stress I'd been under with school. Then Theresa showed up out of the blue at my dorm room, and she explained everything to me. She had already found Raina and Jesse. We found Kenji last."

"So Theresa went around and found all of you?" I asked. "She does seem like the type to step in and take charge. John waited for us to come to him."

"How did you ever find him?" Claire asked.

"He's one of my professors. I suddenly just knew I had to go see him. Rebecca was already in his office when I got there."

Rebecca nodded. "I was really struggling with what was happening to me, too. When I felt the pull to go to his office, I

was just so happy that an answer was coming that I didn't care where it took me."

"That's wild," Claire said. "It's amazing that you were led to him by instinct. There's so much to learn about this."

"So do you train together a lot?" I asked.

"Yes, five times a week. Theresa is very strict. It's causing some problems with school, but I feel grateful to have been given this gift." Her eyes beamed with pride.

"You all seem to get along really well," Rebecca said.

"Jesse and I have become very good friends. Kenji is a great guy, too. He's brilliant. I mean, *really* brilliant. He's studying genetics and taught himself computer science. And Raina is hands-down the toughest, coolest woman I have ever met. She owns her own skate shop in the city. But Jesse is the one I'm closest to. He's so funny. He helps me laugh at myself."

"Claire, I don't get it," Rebecca said. "You're beautiful. You don't need to lose any weight. And I've never seen such gorgeous hair." Claire's hair was really remarkable. It was rare to see such a shiny, deep shade of red with such straight hair.

"You're very sweet," Claire said. "I can't take full credit for my hair. Jesse cut it for me."

"Jesse did that cut? Damn, he is good," I said.

"He's great. And his boyfriend, Paul, is such a sweetheart. He's been really helpful as our Keeper because he's so good at tracking details."

"What do you have so far?" I asked.

"We're gathering information about the riots. We've interviewed a number of people who were there, and we're looking back at video, trying to figure out how it started and who replaced the rubber bullets with real ones."

I felt sheepish. I'd barely gathered any information at all before tonight. I knew Kai was working on it, but I still felt like I'd been wasting time somehow. I just didn't know where to start digging.

"I've gotten a few leads on the election," I said. "Kai is looking into them. I'm seeing him on Sunday, and we're going to go over his findings." That was only partially true. We were also planning to go sightseeing. But after tonight, I felt motivated to make sure I made some progress.

"You are so lucky," Claire said. "To be in love with great guys. I wonder if I'll ever find someone like that."

"Well, I'm not, I mean, Christoph and I . . . ," Rebecca stammered.

I laughed. “Rebecca, give it up. She’s an Empath, remember? She knows you’re in love with him, even if *you* haven’t figured it out yet.”

Rebecca turned scarlet. “It’s really annoying to be on the other side of that, isn’t it?”

“It’s definitely funny to see you get a taste of your own medicine. And yes, Claire,” I said, turning to her with a warm smile. “I’m very sure you will find the right guy. Just don’t settle for someone who’s less than you deserve simply because he pays attention to you.”

Claire looked at me curiously. “That’s exactly the problem I keep having. But I’m determined not to do it anymore. I think becoming a Soterian has given me more self-respect.”

Suddenly, the room started spinning, and I had to catch myself to keep from toppling over. “Okay, that’s it. I have to go

to sleep now. Claire, take my bed and let me sleep on the couch. I'm going to pass out as soon as my head hits the pillow, and I want you two to keep talking as long as you like."

Claire looked worried. "Oh no, I couldn't take your bed."

"Please, I don't have the energy to argue. I'm about thirty seconds from hitting the wall. Good-night."

I grabbed my pillow and headed out to the couch. Rebecca followed me to get another pillow from the closet. "That was nice of you," she said. "It seems like she could use some good friends."

"It's going to be hilarious watching you two," I said with a grin. "You'll get to the point where you're reading each other's feelings so fluently that you won't have a single thing to talk about."

I curled up on the couch with my pillow and blanket, and despite the noise from the Halloween revelers outside, I was asleep within seconds.

When I awoke the next morning, Isla Vista was very quiet. It was a deep and heavy silence, like a house where everyone is still asleep after a late night. The only sounds were the crashing of the waves and a gull crying as it flew overhead.

I thought about the last time I had slept on this couch, with Kai's arms wrapped around me. He was so warm when he slept, and the slow rhythm of his heartbeat was mesmerizing. I imagined that if he ever did have a child, the baby would love sleeping next to his chest. But he didn't want children, so that wasn't going to happen. I felt a sudden pang of loss. No matter what Kai said, I knew he'd be a wonderful father.

I stretched and lay back a moment longer. Surveillance today, which meant spending many hours invisible. I wondered whether we would get any information or were just wasting a Saturday. Sighing, I got up and went into the kitchen to make coffee. It wasn't long before Candace stumbled out, looking hungover again, but not quite as bad as the last time.

"Hey, Candace, how was the rest of your night?" I asked. "No more party crashers, I hope."

"Got even wilder after you left," she croaked, "but in a good way. The men's rugby team came by, and the party was still raging when I finally came home at three. I need water . . . "

She poured herself a glass of water, drank it down, and then poured another.

"You know, if you have a glass of water between every drink, you'll feel much better the next morning," I advised.

"Yes, but then I'd spend the whole evening sober and going to the bathroom, which isn't my idea of a good time. Speaking of which, who did Rebecca have over? I didn't see a note."

"Oh, it's not a guy. It's a girl named Claire. We ran into some students from an affiliated martial arts school in San Francisco, and Claire didn't want to stay with the others, so I offered her my bed so she and Rebecca could stay up late talking." Another carefully constructed explanation that was true without giving anything away. I was getting better at this.

"Too bad," Candace said. "I thought she was finally getting some action. Well, I'm going back to sleep." She shuffled back into her room and closed the door.

I downed my coffee, washed out my cup, and headed for our bedroom. I hated to wake Claire and Rebecca, but we had

training this morning, and I had no interest in finding out just how strict Theresa was by being late.

After a quick breakfast, we drove to the dojo, where John, Theresa, Raina, and Jesse were waiting.

"Good morning," Theresa greeted us. "Did you all sleep well?"

"Yes," Claire answered. "Ashlyn was kind enough to give me her bed."

"I couldn't believe how tired I was," I said. "Flying feels so effortless, but I guess it takes a lot out of you."

"As does disappearing," Theresa added. "It's a very powerful illusion. You must get plenty of sleep to recover from using your gifts."

"So, what's the plan for today?" Rebecca asked.

"As soon as the others arrive, we'll do training drills," John said. "Rebecca and Claire, I think your healing skills will get good practice today."

"Why?" Claire asked, looking alarmed.

"Because Michael thinks he can kick my ass, and I'm going to show him otherwise," Raina answered, stretching her leg over her head.

"I cannot believe I have to miss this," I grumbled.

When Michael, Christoph, and Kenji arrived, Jesse and I said good-bye, disappeared, and flew into the sky. We hadn't gone more than a few feet when Jesse stopped short.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To Bennicort's, of course," I answered impatiently.

"Please, that can wait ten minutes," he said. "There's no way in hell I'm missing this."

"But what if—"

"Girl, give it a rest, already."

I sighed and gave in. I was dying to see Michael and Raina spar. We flew back down to the dojo and peeked in through the small windows near the ceiling. I thought I saw both Rebecca and Claire glance our way, but if they felt our presence, they didn't give us away.

John was leading them all through stretching and warm-ups, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing as Jesse imitated their movements while hovering in the air.

When they were ready, John asked Rebecca and Claire to stand back and had Rebecca create a ring in the middle of the room. Michael and Raina walked in swiftly, bowed to each other, and dropped into their fighting stances. Michael let out an explosive "Ai!" while Raina stood silently, her face like stone.

"Begin," John said.

I expected them to jump forward and attack each other with full force, but they both stayed exactly where they were. Their eyes burned into one another as they sized each other up, trying to predict the other's first move. Michael bounced lightly on the balls of his feet and then shifted his stance a couple of times. It looked like he was trying to get Raina to react, but she just stood there, waiting patiently.

He bounced slightly forward and then back again, but she still didn't react. I could see a muscle in his neck start to twitch, and I wondered whether she'd already figured out that his weakness was his temper, something she could easily exploit.

Finally, he let out another yell, faked a roundhouse kick with his right leg, and then jumped into a spin kick with his left leg. Raina stood perfectly still as he faked the first kick, ducked at

just the right moment for the real kick, and then did a low spin kick that caught his leg just as he landed, sweeping him off his feet.

He fell to the floor, landing perfectly with a slap. He quickly rolled backward and into a standing position. Christoph and Kenji were watching intently with big smiles on their faces, and Christoph let out a "Ha!" when Michael fell. Rebecca and Claire were watching with wide eyes, ready to rush in and heal whoever needed it.

Michael moved into position again. He looked at Raina's stony face, which gave absolutely nothing away. I could feel his frustration even from outside. He was moving around more actively now, faking a few jabs, hoping to distract her. He was lightning fast. It certainly would have thrown me. But she stood as still as before.

Then, almost imperceptibly, I saw her body tense slightly, and suddenly she threw a punch straight at his face. It was so fast I almost didn't see it, but we all saw the aftermath. Blood spurted from Michael's nose, covering his shirt, but he still didn't take his eyes off of her. His ragged breath was the only evidence that he even noticed the pain.

"Time out," John called, and Michael and Raina both bowed to each other. Rebecca went over to Michael and held her hand up in front of his nose. He closed his eyes and breathed in and out deeply through his mouth. After a few seconds, Rebecca pulled her hand away. The bleeding had stopped.

"Again," John commanded. Michael and Raina moved into position, and John cued them to start.

Knowing that fakes were probably not going to work, Michael let out his "Ai!" and burst forward with direct attacks

this time, throwing punches and kicks that were so fast, I couldn't keep up with what I was seeing. Raina blocked them all and threw her own dizzying sets of combinations, all of which he blocked, too. After a minute, John called time out again. Michael and Raina, both breathing hard, bowed to each other and then turned to John.

"Excellent," he praised. "Raina, your skills are exceptional. Your patience and willingness to let the enemy show his plan and his weaknesses to you before you move a muscle is very impressive. Michael, you adapted quickly to Raina's approach. I doubt you've ever fought an opponent like her before, is that correct?"

"Never," he said, still breathing hard.

"Once you moved past your frustration that she wouldn't be toyed with, you took the only approach that works with her and

engaged her head on, forcing her to respond. I was impressed to see you change your approach instead of stubbornly trying to stick with the same strategy as before. Well done, both of you."

John bowed to them, and they bowed back. They left the ring as Rebecca let it fade away. Christoph and Kenji clapped them on the shoulders, and Rebecca and Claire moved in to heal the bruises that were already visible on their forearms and shins. Theresa stood back observing. I wondered what she thought of the exercise, and what she would do differently if she were running the training session.

"Let's go, Jesse."

"Don't you want to see Kenji and Christoph try to knock each other over?"

"I have a feeling we'll have lots of opportunities for that. We really need to go now."

Grudgingly, Jesse turned away from the window, and we flew as fast as we could to Montecito.

Chapter 22: Addictions

That evening, Jesse and I returned wearily to the dojo. It had been a very long day. Just as Claire had guessed, there was a cottage on the property, and it was obvious that this was where David had been transmitting the call I'd overheard. The doors were locked, but we could see a police scanner, computers, and a lot of other equipment through the window. There were several antennae and a satellite dish on the roof. Definitely Command Central.

Bennicort went out only once during our watch to meet a man for tennis and lunch at the nearby country club. I followed him while Jesse stayed behind and watched the house. I got his tennis partner's name and license plate and sent it back to John,

but the guy turned out to be a local businessman, and we decided that this was one of Bennicort's legitimate business contacts.

Jesse reported that William had gone in and out of the house a few times, but all of it seemed to be innocent domestic business: talking to the gardener, taking out the trash, accepting delivery of an express package. Jesse caught the name of a legal firm on the label, which John discovered was a well-known firm in Los Angeles. John forwarded all this information to Kai, who was tracking every detail we uncovered.

As we flew back to the dojo, all I could think about was eating dinner and getting some sleep. But when we got there, the room was buzzing with excitement. It had been a very successful training day for the rest of our group. They'd hiked way up into the hills and done drills where one team acted as

the enemy who was holding a hostage (played by John), and the other team had to rescue him. They'd switched a few times, until each side had gotten smoother at working together as a unit.

I was disappointed that Jesse and I had missed the training, but John explained that the drills operated under the assumption that we'd already done the important recon, which then allowed the rest of the unit to go in. It had been a good opportunity for the others to solidify their teamwork.

We talked about what our next steps should be and decided that we should meet in San Francisco the day after Thanksgiving. I'd be spending Thanksgiving day with my mom, and Michael would spend it with his family in Santa Ana, which was a couple of hours south of Santa Barbara. Since Candace and I would both be gone, Rebecca offered to cook Christoph a traditional Thanksgiving dinner at our place. He looked ecstatic.

Theresa invited John, Rebecca, Christoph, and Michael to stay with her in San Francisco. Claire had told us that Theresa had a spectacular penthouse flat on Nob Hill in the same building where she owned an art gallery. This gave me an idea.

"Theresa, is it possible that one of your clients might know James Bennicort, or at least know more about his business?"

"Hmm, it is possible. I could ask around discreetly."

"He had some beautiful art, so maybe he's a collector. You might even be able to get him to visit your gallery."

"Let's go eat. I'm starving," Jesse complained. He looked as tired as I felt. John and Theresa were going out to dinner and then to a foreign film downtown, and the rest of us decided to go get dinner at the tavern where Ryan would be playing in a pool tournament.

When we got there, it was already filling up, but Christoph and Kenji grabbed some small tables, hoisting them over their heads as they carried them across the room, and pushed them together right near the pool tables. Toby and Ryan showed up, and we grabbed a couple of extra chairs for them as we introduced them to everyone. I saw Toby's eyes lock on Claire, and he immediately took a seat next to her and started talking to her in his most charming way. Ryan was excited to compete in the tournament and kept bouncing around in his seat. He ate his burger quickly and inhaled his fries.

"You play pool, Raina?" Michael asked.

"Yeah, there's a place near my flat where I sometimes go."

"What else do you do for fun?" he asked, taking a swig of beer.

"I'm pretty busy with my skate shop during the week, but I get in a lot of skating on the weekends. Other than that, I play some pool, go see bands play . . . you know, the usual."

"Why don't you enter the tournament?" Ryan asked. "It's only ten bucks."

"I don't know. I play to win, and I'm feeling a little tired tonight."

"Oh come on, I dare you." Ryan's face was glowing with enthusiasm.

Raina burst out laughing. "I can't remember the last time someone dared me to do anything. Okay, bouncy boy, you're on. But first we play a warm-up game, me against you."

"Deal," he said. Raina drained her glass, wiped her mouth on her sleeve as she pushed back her chair, and went over to the pool tables. Ryan quickly followed.

"Oh man, he has no idea what he's started," Kenji said with a laugh.

"How so?" Toby asked.

"Raina means it when she says she plays to win. She was a national champion soccer player in high school, then became a pro skater, and now she owns the most successful skate shop in San Francisco. She's an amazing competitor."

"I'd love to see her skate some time," I said. I noticed Toby staring at Raina and caught Claire looking slightly envious. I decided to try to divert her attention.

"Claire, you said you're studying psychology, right? What do you think you want to do with it when you graduate?"

"I'd like to help people with addictions and eating disorders," she replied.

"That would be a great field to go into," Toby chimed in. "There's a lot of money to be made from treatment centers."

"If you could stand listening to the whining all day," Michael said, pouring himself another glass of beer from the pitcher.

"Helping people overcome addiction is an important calling," Rebecca pointed out. "I imagine it's very rewarding."

"Addictions are crap," Michael scoffed. "People drink or eat too much and then blame it on genetics and call it 'addiction'. I call it laziness."

Claire looked stricken. "Excuse me," she said quietly. She stood up and quickly left the table, and Jesse jumped up to follow her.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" I asked Michael in disgust.

"I'm just calling it like I see it," he said coldly.

"Like you see it through beer goggles."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he snarled.

"It means that maybe you don't like talking about addiction because maybe you have a small problem with drinking yourself. And maybe being around someone trained to help people like you makes you uncomfortable."

Michael slammed his fist down on the table. Several glasses fell over. He put his face close to mine, his eyes blazing.

"You don't know anything about me, Ashlyn. And it's none of your fucking business how much I drink. So just get off your holier-than-thou high horse and shut the hell up!"

Toby started to stand up, but I put a hand out and stopped him, not taking my eyes off Michael.

"You can yell at me all you want," I said in a low voice, "but it's not going to change the truth. And you know it. Now I

suggest you go and apologize to Claire if you ever expect our two uni—, er, *schools*," I said, remembering Toby was right there, "to work together again."

"If you think our training is so important, then why do you keep putting your boyfriend first? Yeah, I know you're planning to go down there tomorrow to spend the day screwing Kai instead of doing recon—" Michael's voice was instantly cut off when Christoph slapped a hand over his mouth and hoisted him under his other arm like a sack of potatoes.

"Well, everyone, that it's for Michael tonight," he said cheerfully. "I'll take him home and be back soon."

Michael struggled furiously, kicking at tables as they went. Kenji jumped up and held his legs so he wouldn't injure anyone on the way out. Once Kenji had his legs pinned, Michael was

completely helpless. It would have been a beautiful thing to watch if it weren't so tragic.

"He has a serious anger-management problem," Toby said, shaking his head.

"That's why he always travels with his own bouncer," I said. "Except that the bouncer is responsible for bouncing *him*."

Jesse and Claire walked back to the table. Jesse was grinning. "Woo *hoo*, did you see that jackass being hauled out of here like yesterday's garbage?" Jesse asked. "That boy has issues."

"Addiction makes people do all kinds of terrible things," Claire said calmly. "That's why addicts need so much help."

"You're going to have to develop a thicker skin, hon'," Jesse said gently to Claire. "Just wait until you tell some crack addict that he doesn't get his pipe back."

"I'm sorry," Claire said. "I know I overreacted."

"Hardly!" Rebecca spat. She looked furious. "Michael is out of control. I apologize on behalf of our school."

Claire shook her head. "Thanks, but there's no need. As Jesse said, I need to develop a thicker skin. I'll chalk that episode up to a good lesson."

Kenji walked back up and joined us. "Hey, check it out, the pool tournament is starting," he said.

We turned our attention to the games and cheered Raina on as she beat every single opponent. Ryan was eliminated in the first round and was so annoyed that he wouldn't speak to us at first, but after Toby reminded him that it was his big idea to have Raina enter in the first place, he got over it and even cheered as she accepted the trophy.

Chapter 23: Farewells

The next morning, I raced around doing my share of the cleaning so I could get on the road. Rebecca and Claire were still asleep in our room, so I was waiting as long as possible to go in there and scrub the bathroom before taking a shower.

I ran down and got my laundry, thinking about what I was going to wear. I was so excited to see Kai, but now that it was the day before he was leaving, I could no longer hold back the horrible voice that kept taunting me, whispering awful things about how today was the last time I would ever see him, and that he was going to die in a fiery car crash as he drove across the country.

I left the laundry room and hurried around the corner, where I ran right smack into Toby. He bounced off my laundry basket and flew two feet backwards, nearly falling down. “Oh Toby, I’m so sorry,” I said. “Wow, this thing is springy.”

He looked at me, startled, and then laughed. “Ashlyn, what are you doing racing around like that? You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m just trying to get out of town.”

“Oh right, you’re going to LA today.” He had a strange look on his face, and I got the impression that he was struggling with his feelings as he realized he wasn’t really upset anymore about Kai. It was like in that moment, we both knew that he was over me, and it was the beginning of our new friendship.

"You going to be around this week?" I asked. "I feel like having some fun now that mid-terms are over. Maybe we could plan a movie night?"

"Sure, give me a call and we'll set it up, maybe for Wednesday. I'll see if we can have it in the lounge and have popcorn and sodas."

"Perfect. Okay, I gotta run, but I'll see you very soon."

"Hey, is Claire still staying with you?" he asked as I started to dash away.

"Yeah, she and Rebecca are still asleep upstairs."

"Would you tell them I want to meet them for breakfast? They can give me a call as soon as they're up."

I smiled at him. "I will. Have a great day, Toby." I ran up the stairs.

Rebecca and Claire were awake and starting to get dressed. "Good morning," I said cheerfully. "I just bumped into Toby. Literally, actually. He wants to have breakfast with you and asked you to call him."

"Sure, I'll give him a call, if that's okay with . . . right," Rebecca said vaguely, reading Claire's feelings. I chuckled as she grabbed her cell phone and called Toby.

Claire watched me curiously, her head tilted to the side. "You're really into Kai, aren't you?" she asked.

"You could say that."

"Mmm, I can feel it," she said. "That is so intense. How do you concentrate?"

"It's hard, but I'm pretty good at compartmentalizing my feelings. Probably not very healthy," I added, remembering that she was a psych major.

"Sounds like a good coping mechanism. I hope you have a killer time today. It's been so great meeting all of you. I can't wait to see you all again when you come up after Thanksgiving."

"All of us?" I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Yes," she sighed. "Michael called this morning to apologize. I don't know if Christoph was forcing him to or not, but it doesn't matter. His comments have nothing to do with me. He's sick. He deserves our compassion."

"You sound like you've been talking to John," I said with a laugh. "But I agree with you completely. I guess we all have our demons."

"Yes, we most certainly do," she agreed and finished getting dressed.

An hour later, I was ready to go. I was wearing my long white skirt with little blue flowers on it and a pale blue boat-neck sweater.

"You look nice," Candace said as I emerged from the bedroom.

"Thanks, Candace. Hey, you know, I never thought to ask: does anyone ever call you Candy?"

"Not if they value their life," she snorted.

"How come?"

"With a last name like Baker? I had enough of that crap in grade school to last a lifetime." She turned the vacuum on and started cleaning with vigor. I laughed and waved as I ran out the door. She was so awesome, and I really wished she wasn't graduating at the end of the school year. It was going to be hard to find another roommate like her.

At nine-thirty, I pulled up outside Kai's house. It was a white ranch-style house with a neatly trimmed lawn in front. I was anxious about meeting his dad and step-mother. I checked my hair in the rearview mirror, got out of the car and straightened my skirt, and walked up and rang the bell. After a moment, Kai answered.

"Hey, you," he said softly, pulling me into his arms. I sighed happily and held him tightly. God, I had missed him. I pressed my face into his neck and stood there for a while, just feeling his body against mine.

I finally let him go and looked into his eyes. His incredibly soft lips caressed mine, and then he took my hand and led me into the house.

"Is your dad here?" I asked.

"No, he and Angie ended up going to an all-day retreat with their church. They'll be back tonight. Come on, I'll give you the tour."

He showed me around the house. It was a typical suburban home, with comfortable-looking furniture and several pictures on the mantle of Kai and his family. I picked up a picture of him as a child in the snow, all bundled up in a parka and snow pants.

"So cute!" I squealed.

"That was in Minnesota when I was five," he said.

"You were so adorable."

"You're ignoring the underbite. I looked like a bulldog in a snowsuit. I'll bet you were much cuter."

I laughed as I put the picture down and followed him up the hall and into his room. On one side were stacks of boxes. I looked away, not wanting to think about his move. In the corner

stood an electric guitar, an amp, and an open case containing all sorts of boxes with lights and dials. I looked at everything in awe. “Noise gate . . . compression . . . I don’t know what any of this even means,” I admitted.

“They’re just effects.” He showed me what each of the different boxes did, and I listened, fascinated. I had no idea it could be so complicated to play the guitar.

“Will you play for me?” I asked.

“Later, if there’s time, but there’s a lot I want to show you.”

We got into his car and drove toward downtown LA, where a layer of brown haze blanketed the horizon. I noted a faint smell of chlorine in the air, which Kai said was from the smog.

As we drove, Kai told me about what he’d learned from investigating the election. “Everything is pointing toward a problem with the voting machines, but they can’t figure out

what's causing it. They've gone through the source code used to build the software installed in the machines, and it checks out. Adam sent me a lot of information on Lawson's backers, and, no surprise, James Bennicort is on the list. But Lawson has other powerful supporters, too, including some foreign backers. They're in a variety of industries: oil, insurance, pharmaceuticals, agribusiness—you name it. So it's not clear yet what the connection is between them."

I listened thoughtfully, trying to put it all together. "There has to be some financial payoff for them, but I can't figure out how Lawson can help all those people make money. I feel like we're missing something."

"I'm going to keep digging, but yeah, it's not making a lot of sense yet."

"Have you learned anything about the LA riot?"

"Not much. The videos the police collected from bystanders don't show how it started, and none of the witnesses could explain it, either. Unlike San Francisco, though, the rest seems straightforward: fights broke out, the police fired rubber bullets to break up the crowd, and people got hurt."

"It seems pretty clear that it was Marco. I bet he and his gang started the fights," I said.

"But how would they have gotten away? He said he'd tried to get through the front line but couldn't. That would indicate he was right up front battling the police. Unless . . . " He thought for a moment, and then his eyes widened. "They weren't dressed as protestors that time. They were dressed as police."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean they tried to get to the front of the police line but from the other side, disguised as police," he explained. "But if

they couldn't get close enough to the front, they couldn't fire on the crowd without hitting the other officers in the back and causing suspicion. So they had to settle for pulling back, changing clothes, and starting fights in the crowd itself."

"Whereas, in San Francisco . . . ," I said slowly as the pieces started to fall into place.

"They were successful," Kai said. "They made it to the front of the line and shot real bullets instead of rubber bullets, then slipped away in the confusion. The reason they haven't been able to trace which of the police officers shot the real bullets is because they weren't real police officers."

I pulled out my cell phone. "This is a big breakthrough. I'm going to call John and tell him about this right now." I paused for a moment. "Although, we still don't know the motive. The

only apparent reason for this was so Lawson could put curfews in place."

"My guess is that it's only the beginning," he said. "If he can make people terrified to leave their homes, he can call in the state militia. Which means he can start throwing out basic civil rights, lock people up without charging them, bypass warrants. And then he can start blackmailing people and businesses. Make a donation to my cause, purchase your supplies from my buddy's company, or the militia will come for you and your family."

I shook my head. "Extortion on a mass scale. It's brilliant, actually."

"Only the governor has the power to order the militia, so the only way to stop him is to get him out of office. And the only way to do that before he's seized all control is to figure out how he stole the election."

"A mildly daunting task," I said, slumping in my seat.

Kai reached over and took my hand. "We'll figure it out," he said. "We've got a lot of smart people on our side."

I called John and told him what Kai had discovered, as well as our theory. He agreed that this was a likely explanation and would pass the information along to the others. As I snapped my phone shut, I started getting anxious again. Would we ever be able to solve this? As I felt the beginnings of a headache coming on, I rubbed my temples and vowed to put Lawson out of my mind and just focus all my attention on Kai for the rest of our time together.

We spent the next few hours driving around LA, stopping at Kai's favorite spots. We went to the Silver Lake district, where we browsed at a used music store. I found lots of CDs I wanted, but I restrained myself and only bought one.

Next, we went to a fancy restaurant where Kai had once been a dishwasher and now was good friends with the owner. We had an amazing, completely over-the-top lunch of crisp organic greens with a lemon-shallot vinaigrette, portobello mushrooms over polenta topped with shaved parmesan and drizzled with truffle oil, and crème brulée for dessert. When the bill came, I tried to pay for half, but Kai wouldn't hear of it. "Felipe gives me a break on the bill," he said.

We drove past the Walt Disney Concert Hall, a soaring vision of stainless steel curves and angles. "It was designed by Frank Gehry," Kai explained. "The auditorium is all hardwood inside, and the acoustics are incredible."

"We'll have to go some time," I said, but then I remembered that he was leaving the next day. I wondered when we'd next be in Los Angeles together. If ever.

We ended up in Santa Monica, where we wandered down to the beach. A warm afternoon breeze was sweeping across the sand, and we bought ice cream cones and sat down to watch the surfers. Kids were running up and down in the wake, shrieking and splashing in the water.

As I leaned against Kai, his arm tightly around my waist, I picked up a handful of the soft white sand and let the grains slip through my fingers. On a planet of billions of people, how did Kai and I actually end up finding each other? How many people go through their lives just missing their soulmates, or being born thousands of miles apart and speaking different languages, with no hope of ever meeting?

I thought about the choices I'd made that got me to UCSB and led me to my apartment, which led me to Candace, who invited me to the party where Kai was. It made me feel

somewhat panicky to think about all the times I could have taken a different path.

And I thought about the series of events that led to his being at that party: Kelly broke up with him, he moved back to Los Angeles, and then he came back to hang out with friends that weekend. If she hadn't left him, would they have been at that party or home watching TV? I suddenly felt immense gratitude for every single person who had influenced us in one way or another to make the choices that ended up in us finding each other. Even Kelly.

As the sun sank toward the ocean, the time pressure began wearing on me. I didn't want to leave, but I had to get home. I needed to keep on top of my studies in case I needed to take a night off to do reconnaissance. And staying longer wasn't going to make it any easier to say good-bye.

"Can't you stay for dinner?" he asked. "I want to show you the stars from Griffin Observatory."

"No, I really need to get back. I'm so sorry. This has been such a great day. Come to think of it, I've said that every time we've been together."

"I'm planning to come back and visit over Christmas," he said. "I want to meet your parents."

Christmas. It sounded so far away, and I swallowed the lump in my throat. "My mom can't wait to meet you," I said. "I think you're going to get along great."

He kissed me on the top of my head and stroked my hair. "I love you, Waterfall," he said quietly and pulled me closer. I slipped my arms around him, holding him tightly. We sat and watched the sun dip lower toward the water, turning it a silky pale blue.

After a long silence, we stood up and walked toward the car. Suddenly, the reality of his departure hit me with full force. I had been putting off thinking about it, keeping myself in denial, but I couldn't fool myself any longer. He was moving across the country, possibly for good, and if my nightmares came true, I might never see him again. My stomach felt like it was full of hot lead, and my throat became so tight it was hard to breathe.

I fought to keep it together, but it was no use. The tears that I'd been holding back for weeks finally broke free and rolled down my face, blurring my vision so badly that I couldn't see where I was going. I grabbed Kai's hand, and he guided me gently back to the car as I choked back the sobs. When we were finally seated inside, he pulled me to him and held me tightly, the world slowing to a stop as I cried and cried until I had no tears left.

Chapter 24: Thanksgiving

My life became a weird, hazy blur. I found that by keeping myself constantly busy, and by pretending that Kai still lived in LA, I could get through most of each day without sinking into depression. I was doing recon at Bennicort's house several times a week, but Marco and his gang never came around again. I wondered whether Bennicort had decided to get rid of them after all.

I worked hard to keep on top of my classes and even managed to keep biking and swimming, which helped some with the stress. But nothing made me feel good anymore. It was as if all the colors in the world had simply faded to grey.

The best part of my day came every night at eight o'clock when Kai and I talked on the phone. He had signed up with a temp agency when he arrived in Minneapolis, and every night he told me about his latest random office job in his typical wry way. He was sharing an apartment with his cousin while he looked for a more permanent situation, and so far his life there sounded very uneventful. He was trying hard to make it work there, but it sounded like his heart wasn't really in it. We tried to act like we were just talking on the phone and would see each other soon. But after three weeks, I still wasn't used to his being gone. If anything, it was just getting harder.

The day before Thanksgiving, after my last lab was done, I walked quickly across campus toward the apartment. I had packed the car already and was planning to hit the road as soon as I could. As I approached the edge of campus, I spotted Adam,

whom I hadn't seen since McIntyre's lecture. I was curious to know how things were coming along, so I ran and caught up to him.

"Adam, wait up."

"Hey, Ashlyn. You headed out for the weekend?"

"Yeah, how about you?"

"No, I'm staying here. I'm going to meet up with some other members of the watchdog group on Friday."

"How is that going?" I asked. "Have you guys been able to figure anything out about the election fraud?"

"No," he said, sounding exasperated. "The volunteers in the group are all really motivated, but we're having trouble getting information from the government committee that's supposed to be looking into this. I know they're busy trying to deal with the

mess Lawson is making, but I would think they'd make this more of a priority."

"Have you been in touch with McIntyre himself?"

"Yes, and he's promised to look into it and see what the holdup is. So I guess we just have to wait and see."

"I'm sure he'll get it sorted out. It's great that you have access to him."

"We should all have access to him," he said. "He's our elected representative. That's the way it's supposed to work."

"But it doesn't always work that way, huh?"

He shook his head. "There's no question that politics is all about who you know."

I felt his frustration mingle with mine. What exactly was the hold-up, anyway? I wished him a happy Thanksgiving and headed home. I got in my car and drove north, relieved to have

the opportunity to just listen to music and tune everything out for several hours. But just as I was tuning to my favorite station, the music was interrupted by a news conference with Governor Lawson, who began outlining the policies he was putting in place starting that day.

"In light of recent events, our course of action is clear," he said. "We have allowed tolerance for immorality and violations of natural law to pervade our society. We must reign in the behavior that has led to this state of lawlessness so that we may return to a state of grace."

He continued to lay out his plans for putting tight regulations in place on businesses and reducing money for social programs that weren't aligned with his values. I found myself getting angrier and angrier. With everything that was going on,

how could he think the solution was to put time and energy into passing a conservative social agenda?

The press was in an uproar, firing questions at him. I switched stations and heard McIntyre being interviewed, discussing how this diversion was going to lead to further chaos and an inevitable backlash. He sounded frustrated, and I wished I had done more to get him elected. He talked about how he was sure that voter fraud was the reason Lawson was elected, but there had been little progress on figuring out how it was done.

I turned off the radio in disgust. I'd been called forward as a Soterian to help figure this out and rescue our state from a downward spiral into fear and crime, and so far I had done next to nothing. I was angry at myself, frustrated with John for not providing more guidance, and becoming more and more depressed about Kai being gone.

That night, I called Kai after I'd settled in at my mom's place. I felt better as soon as I heard his voice. He was pissed off about Lawson's new policies and just as frustrated as I was about the lack of progress.

"It's getting to the point of absurdity," he said. "How hard can it be to audit those voting machines? I wish I could do more."

"We're all doing everything we can right now," I said. "In fact, our two units are training together this weekend, which I think is going to be great."

"I wish I were there."

I started feeling myself getting depressed and quickly changed the subject. "Tell me about your day."

"Not much to tell. They sent me to a spa to do inventory."

"That's an improvement over the warehouse job you did yesterday. At least you got to be in a tranquil environment."

"Yeah, except that the insipid background music really gets to me after a while. The woman I was partnered up with was cool, though. She's in a band and offered to introduce me to some people. I don't think we're really into the same kind of music, but you never know."

A heavy lump formed in my stomach, and my face suddenly felt hot. "Mmm. Great. I'm glad you're meeting nice people."

He paused. "Is something wrong?"

"No, of course not. Listen, I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Oh, okay. I'm going to my grandparents' place tomorrow for Thanksgiving, but they have their dinner at mid-day, so I should definitely be back in time for your call."

"I'll just call you on Friday," I said quickly.

"No, really, it'll be fine. I don't want to go a day without talking to you."

"Just call me when you get back, and if you get too busy, we can talk on Friday."

There was silence on the other end of the line. "Ashlyn, what's wrong?"

I took a deep breath. "It's nothing. It's just hard sometimes."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I miss you so much."

We hung up, and I lay back on my bed, fighting back the horrible images that were swirling in my brain. Kai meeting a bunch of cool musicians, going out to clubs, and starting his life—without me. When I pictured that woman calling him up and inviting him out, I felt ill. I put the pillow over my face and

tried to push these thoughts away. There was no way this was going to work if I couldn't get my jealousy under control.

The next day, I decided I would take the entire day off from thinking about my life and just relax with my mom. We went for a long walk along the bay and then rented a silly romantic comedy that we'd both been wanting to see. We munched on popcorn as we laughed at the ridiculous plot. It was exactly what I needed.

Later that afternoon, we started cooking our Thanksgiving dinner. It would be just the two of us, but we were still having stuffing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, my mom's famous broccoli-and-cheese casserole, rolls, and cranberry sauce, along with a turkey breast and gravy for her and tofu for me. It was a ridiculous amount of food, and I knew I was going to explode,

but I didn't care. I needed to unwind, and having a cozy feast with my mom was just the thing.

"Mom, what have you done with the cutting board?" I asked, my head in the cupboards.

"Here, I'll get it." She handed it to me and then gave me a huge smile as she pinched me lightly on the chin. "It's so good to have you home, my darling girl."

"It's really good to be home." I gave my tofu a little shake in the marinade. "I needed a break."

"Don't burn out," she said. "You get so obsessive. You have to learn to pace yourself."

"Believe me, I'm trying," I sniffed, chopping the onions for the stuffing.

The kitchen filled with delicious smells as my mom and I cooked and caught up on the last few months. I laughed more

than I had in weeks as she told me funny stories about some of her regular customers at the bookstore. I told her about my martial arts training, and she just rolled her eyes. "Ashlyn, when are you going to take up a nice safe hobby like knitting? Honestly, martial arts?"

"My instructor is great. He's very careful. We use mats to fall on and everything."

"Oh sure," she said. "That's going to be very helpful when you land on your head and break your neck."

"Hey, you were the one who went into the Peace Corps, remember?"

"Yes, I most certainly do remember, and it's one of the reasons I like staying home so much now."

When we finally sat down to eat, Mom gave her usual Thanksgiving toast about gratitude for everything in our lives.

For the first time, I really saw the wisdom in it. I took a sip of cranberry cider and then dived into my massive plate of food, the wonderful smells of sage and sweet potatoes filling the room.

"So Kai is coming at Christmas," she said. "Anything I should know about him?"

"No, except that he's perfect in every way as far as I can tell."

"Except that he lives across the country," she said.

"Yes, well, I try not to think about that."

She looked at me sadly. "I don't want to see you get your heart broken, honey."

"Too late. It's way beyond the point of choice now."

"You're really taken with him, aren't you?" she asked softly.

I put my fork down and sighed. "I wish I could explain it, Mom. There just aren't words to describe what this is. I've tried writing about it in my journal, and it just ends up sounding like

some cheesy novel. I so badly want to describe how deeply I love him, but I've said those words about other guys, and it meant something entirely different. And every damn love song I hear . . . they toss these words and ideas around like it happens every day, and now they're all watered down, and there's nothing left to describe this."

I picked up my fork and stabbed angrily at my broccoli. "Even my hostility toward the world for leaving me with no way of expressing my feelings sounds so trite. I know I sound like a stupid teenager with a crush. All I can do is tell you to trust me when I say that I have absolutely and without question met my soulmate, and my life is changed forever."

She looked at me kindly. "I feel your sincerity, Ashlyn. I just wish this came in an easier package for you. Long-distance relationships are tough. But, I know how you are once you make

up your mind about something, and if anyone can make it work, it's you."

A wave of gratitude and warmth swept through me. My mom was so awesome and supportive of me, even when she thought I was crazy. "Thanks, Mom. I really think you're going to like him. Dad, on the other hand . . . well, I'll burn that bridge when I come to it."

She laughed and nodded knowingly, and we went back to devouring our dinner in silence.

A couple of hours later, the dishes were done, the leftovers were put away, and we'd unbuttoned our pants to make room for our overstuffed bellies. We were in the middle of playing cards when there was a knock at the door.

"Who could that be?" she asked.

"I'll get it. I'm closer." I walked over and opened the door.

I had to blink twice before I could believe my eyes.

"Happy Thanksgiving," Kai said, a huge twinkle in his eye.

"Kai! Oh my God, Kai, what are you doing here?" I threw my arms around him and squeezed him tightly, afraid he was just a figment of my overtaxed imagination.

"There was a last-minute deal on airfares." He buried his head in my hair, holding me tightly. "I had to see you," he said. "I'm sorry if I'm intruding, but I wanted to surprise you."

"Not at all! Come in." I pulled him inside. "Mom, this is Kai. Kai, this is my mom, Elise."

"Hello, Kai," she said smiling warmly at him. "I'm glad you found us okay."

"Your directions were great. Thanks again." He shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you in person. Ashlyn's told me a lot about you."

I stood staring at them, dumbfounded. “You knew about this?” I asked her.

“Of course. You don’t think he would just show up on Thanksgiving unannounced, do you?” She turned back to Kai. “I bet the airport was a zoo, and you must be starving by now.”

My mom went into the kitchen and started pulling the leftovers out of the refrigerator. She loved feeding people, and I could tell she was delighted to have someone else try her gravy. I hated to burst her bubble. “Mom, Kai’s a vegetarian, too.”

“So *that’s* where you got the idea. Well, Ashlyn claims the tofu was good, so I’ll heat up some of that.”

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I said, staring at Kai in disbelief. “I just can’t believe it.”

“I found a late afternoon flight, so I still got to celebrate with my grandparents before I left. It worked out perfectly.”

"Ashlyn and I were just playing cards. Do you want to join us?" my mom called from the kitchen.

"Mom, I want to show him around first."

"Go ahead. Dinner will take a few minutes to heat up."

I showed Kai around the apartment, holding his hand tightly, afraid he might disappear if I let go. He looked intently at all the pictures of Laurel and me when we were children.

"I knew it, you were definitely a cuter kid than I was," he said, picking up a picture of us.

"Totally a matter of opinion."

"That's Laurel?"

"Yeah. She'll be back next September. I miss her a lot."

He nodded. "I've missed *you* a lot," he said softly. "After our conversation last night, when you got kind of distant, I realized how important it is that we see each other as often as we can."

I sighed. “I’m sorry about that. It’s just my insecurity. You didn’t have to fly across the country because of it.”

“I’ll do whatever I have to do to make this work.” He looked at me with deep sincerity in his eyes, and I felt like a total bitch for letting my idiotic jealousy run away with me. I pulled him to me and kissed him deeply, wishing I never had to stop.

We spent the rest of the evening playing cards. Mom and Kai hit it off right away. She loved his sense of humor as much as I did, and they were soon bantering like they’d known each other for years. I watched them in silence, worrying that I was going to wake up from this incredible dream.

At eleven o’clock, my mom yawned and stood up. “I’m going to bed, kids. Kai, I’m so glad you came to visit. See you both in the morning.”

“Good night, Elise,” Kai said. “Thanks for the great dinner.”

My mom went upstairs, and Kai turned to me with a wrinkle in his brow.

"So, would you like me to sleep on the couch?" he asked hesitantly.

"Of course not," I laughed.

"Your mom is okay with us sleeping together here?"

I nodded. "Todd used to stay over all the time when I lived here during my senior year in high school. Mom said she'd rather have us be safe at home than go park somewhere and get busted by the cops."

Kai still looked unsure. "Would *you* be more comfortable sleeping on the couch?" I asked.

In answer, he grabbed me and kissed me. I took his hand and led him upstairs to my room.

The next morning, we got up early and had breakfast. Mom made her delicious veggie scramble, fried potatoes, and coffee. I felt wonderfully relaxed and happy. It was so natural, being here with my mom and Kai. School and the election and everything else felt a million miles away.

I already had plans to meet up with the other Soterians that afternoon at Joaquin Miller Park, a beautiful redwood-tree preserve in the East Bay hills. I called John to let him know that Kai was here, and I was thrilled when he told me to bring him along. I was so glad I wouldn't have to spend any time away from him.

Since we didn't have to be there until three o'clock, we had time to take a little tour of Berkeley. I showed Kai where I'd gone to high school, drove him past the UC Berkeley campus, and then took him up to Telegraph Avenue. We parked the car and

walked around, looking at the shops. Like Isla Vista, this part of town catered almost exclusively to students, but on a larger scale. There were several clothing stores with brightly colored fabrics from India and Thailand, used music stores, book stores, coffee shops, and a place that sold nothing but comic books.

Next we went to College Avenue, which had some very hip and upscale stores. We walked through a furniture store and talked about the different things we'd love to buy if we had the money. Not surprisingly, our taste was very similar. We looked longingly at a rectangular sofa covered in soft moss-colored velvet. We laughed at a set of orange plastic cubes that were supposed to be chairs. And when we passed a boutique of handmade baby clothes, we couldn't help commenting on how adorable the tiny sweaters and socks were.

The best part of our tour was lunch. I was so excited to take Kai to Zachary's, where I introduced him to the sheer beauty of their deep-dish spinach and mushroom pizza. The chunky tomatoes were tangy and perfectly spiced with garlic and herbs, and the crust tasted like pastry. He agreed that it was the best pizza he'd ever had.

At two-thirty, we got back in the car and drove to Joaquin Miller Park. We were the first ones to arrive, so we took the opportunity to wander around in the redwoods. They were magnificent, with their tall trunks stretching up into the sky, their deep green branches filtering the light so that it was dappled and bent by the time it reached the ground. Standing in the middle of the trees, the cool stillness reminded me of the butterfly grove. I felt Kai's fingers curl around mine, and we stood quietly, inhaling the earthy aroma of the trees.

When the others arrived, I was excited to see that Paul had come along with Jesse. He was very cute, with spiky light brown hair and wire-frame glasses. He was dressed in a pair of crisp blue jeans and a maroon sweater with the collar of a white T-shirt peeking out at the neck. I liked the look of him immediately.

Like Christoph and Rebecca, Paul and Jesse seemed an unlikely pairing at first, but it soon became obvious that they were crazy about each other. Jesse was outspoken in his feelings for Paul, using hilarious pet names for him and saying things like "Hand me the water bottle, your Hotness." Paul clearly adored Jesse but in a much quieter way, expressing it mostly through his eyes.

"Let's get started everyone," Theresa commanded. We were on her territory now, and I was excited to see how she did things.

"Most of today will be search-and-rescue training," she said. "Paul and Kai, your job will be to act as our lost hikers. You'll follow directions to a designated spot and stay there until found by your unit. We're going far up into the hills to avoid most of the hikers, so I hope you all wore good hiking shoes." She looked dubiously at Jesse, who was wearing a gorgeous pair of black boots that looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"What?" he asked, raising his eyebrow. "Like I plan to walk!"

She ignored him and continued. "Once Paul and Kai have established their positions, the teams will take off and find their lost hiker. The first team back here wins, and the losing team

buys them dinner. The park closes at sunset, so you'll need to move fast."

"What if we do run into other hikers?" Rebecca asked.

"You'll do the same thing you would in a real-life scenario. Do what you have to do to protect your identity while you continue the mission."

She took out a couple of envelopes and two-way radios and gave them to Kai and Paul. "Here are the directions to your locations. Use the radios to call us when you've arrived at your destinations. Cell phones don't work up there. Any questions?"

Kai and Paul shook their heads. They looked ready for action.

"Go!" Theresa said.

Kai and Paul hurried up the path. While we waited for them to reach their destinations, I began studying a map of the park,

trying to figure out the most likely spots that Theresa might have chosen. The trails all connected and wound around, and she could have led them on any number of routes.

Half an hour later, the radio squawked to life. It was Kai calling in to say that he'd arrived. Ten minutes later, Paul called in to say that he had arrived at his destination, too. I pointed to the map as my unit huddled around.

"Based on how long they've been gone, I'm guessing they're in one of these spots," I said. "It's possible that Theresa had them go a roundabout way, like this set of trails here, in which case they might be at a spot much closer by. So I can fly out to these two farthest points, Michael can take the one in the middle distance, since he's our fastest runner, and Rebecca and Christoph can take the nearest spots. Rebecca, keep a feeler out for Michael and me, and you'll know if we find Kai."

"It's a good strategy," Christoph said. "But how will you know if Rebecca and I find him?"

"Michael and I will go as fast as we can to our points and then hurry straight back here to the rendezvous. If you find him first, we'll probably get back around the same time. If none of us finds him, we'll fan out again in different directions."

"This could take all day," Michael said. "Is there any chance you can follow the trail and catch sight of his footprints or something?"

"These trails are too well used, and I don't have any training in tracking. But I'll be listening and looking for him as I fly, and Rebecca can try to pick up his feelings."

"Rebecca, do you get any sense of Kai now?" Christoph asked.

She closed her eyes and concentrated hard. “Only a vague notion that he’s really looking forward to seeing Ashlyn.”

Michael grimaced. “I can’t think of a better strategy, so let’s go.” Before we could utter another word, he shot off up the trail.

Christoph and Rebecca looked at their map as they headed for the spot I’d pointed out, and I disappeared and zoomed into the air. It was a beautiful November afternoon, and I had to take a moment to turn around and look at the view of San Francisco, the bay, and the Golden Gate Bridge all shimmering in the distance, the sun already low in the sky behind them. It was breathtaking.

I sped off toward the first point I’d targeted. It was really like shooting in the dark, but I thought this strategy gave us the best chance. I stretched out with my hearing and vision as I flew, searching for his voice or a glimpse of him. I heard the rustling

of small animals racing along the forest floor, and the sound of birds fluttering through the trees, but there was no sign of Kai. I flew all around the first point, but he wasn't there.

I was on my way to the second point when suddenly I heard a low growl. Mountain lions were occasionally seen in this area, and a wave of fear swept through me. I moved toward the sound, trying to identify its source. I heard a snuffling sound, and I raced through the trees, still invisible, flying as fast as I dared. The growl came again, this time from behind me. I whipped around but couldn't see it.

I stopped and stayed perfectly still, listening as hard as I could. The snuffling sound came from right behind me again, and then a growl followed shortly after. I floated slowly toward the sound until I was right over it. Below me were a pile of rocks and a board. I carefully lifted the board and saw a tape recorder.

"Bang, you're dead," said Theresa, stepping out from behind a tree.

I slapped myself on the forehead. "I thought it was a mountain lion," I said sheepishly as I reappeared. The tape recorder growled again. "But, now that I listen to it, it doesn't sound that real. And it's the same pattern repeating. I can't believe I didn't notice it."

"You made a snap decision about what you thought you heard, and you acted on it. You were right to check it out, but you should have made sure the area was secure first before going straight for the sound. If you'd listened more broadly, you would have heard me breathing. And as soon as you moved the board, you were as good as visible. You can't afford to make that mistake again."

I nodded. "Can I continue the search?"

"Yes, this delay will serve as its own penalty."

I disappeared and took off again, flying faster to make up for lost time but remembering to listen to a wider range. The sun was sinking in the west, and it was getting dark down on the forest floor. We were supposed to leave the park at sunset, and I didn't want to have to deal with park rangers. We needed a fast resolution.

I started flying in a spiral pattern over the forest, listening, straining to see Kai, but it was too dark now. I was getting frustrated. I took a deep breath to steady myself and focused on listening and feeling. A small, almost imperceptible tug pulled at me from the northeast, and I followed it. It got stronger as I flew, and now that I was no longer trying so hard to see or hear, I found I could sense its pull quite easily. I streaked forward, and there, next to a water tower, was Kai.

"What took you so long?" he asked with a smile.

"We have to get back. Hold on a sec." I focused on projecting the feeling that Kai was safe, hoping that Rebecca would pick it up. It was going to take a long time for us to run back on the paths. I wished Kai could fly, too.

Suddenly, I had an idea.

"I want to try something," I said. Still hovering, I turned around and tilted forward. "Climb up on my back."

"Er, Ashlyn, are you sure?"

"No, but let's try it. I don't want to pay for dinner."

Hesitantly, he put his arms around my neck and put one leg up onto my hip. I grabbed it and held it tight. With a nervous exhale, he lifted up his other leg, and I was thrilled to find that he didn't feel heavy at all. We disappeared, and Kai gasped.

"Ashlyn, I'm invisible . . . ," he said, his voice a little shaky.

"Sorry, I know it's a little hard to get used to at first," I said. I could hear his heart hammering. "Close your eyes if it's freaking you out."

I flew forward and felt his arms tighten around my neck. I went slowly, careful not to roll to either side, and still managed to get back to the rendezvous only a few minutes later. Rebecca and Christoph were standing there looking anxious. The others were nowhere in sight.

"Incoming," I said to alert them to my presence after checking that nobody else was around. I reappeared, and Kai dropped to the ground. He looked a little wobbly.

"Well, I must say, that was much easier than I expected," I said. "I would have thought—"

Rebecca rushed forward. "Nobody else is back yet. I feel like something isn't right."

"Kai, try your radio," Christoph said.

Kai pulled out the radio. "John, Theresa, Paul . . . do you copy?"

He tried several times, but there was no answer. The last of the sun's rays disappeared over the trees, and I knew we were in trouble.

Chapter 25: Illusions

"Okay, let's think about this," I said. "If we go racing out there, we're probably going to fall into a trap. Theresa might have set this all up as the final test."

"Or they could all really be in trouble," Rebecca said.

"The first thing we need to do is move our cars," Kai said. "If all our cars are still in the lot after dusk, the rangers might come looking for us."

"Good point," I said. "Kai, would you move the cars out onto the road? Then wait in my car for us."

"Shouldn't I come back and help?" Kai asked, as he took Rebecca's key.

"You're not supposed to be involved in the action. Technically, one of us should stay with you, but I think we'll need all four of us for this."

Kai got a strange look on his face. "Okay, I'll wait there for your call. If it takes more than an hour, I'll head back to your mom's place and wait there."

"Thanks, Kai." I smiled at him, and he smiled back briefly before heading toward the parking lot.

I turned to Rebecca and Christoph. "Okay, what's our strategy?" I asked.

"We'll take the central loop trail while you fly," Christoph said. "Keep us in sight so I can alert you if something comes."

"And if you hear or see anything," I added, "raise your hand, and I'll come check it out. Don't head straight for it. I learned that the hard way earlier."

I flew off, disappearing as I went, and Christoph and Rebecca headed up the trail. The sky was turning purple and soon would be black. I softened my eyes and tried to see and hear everything at once. The night was very still, with only the sound of crickets and a car starting in the distance breaking the silence.

And then, just as before, there was a tiny pull, so subtle that I could easily have missed it if I'd been focused on something specific. It was coming from the north, where there were several buildings and a meadow. I flew down to Christoph and whispered in his ear. "It's Ashlyn. I think you should head north. I'll come back and tell you when to stop."

He nodded, and I flew forward through the air, hurrying to get to the buildings ahead of them so I could scout around. I felt the pull growing stronger, and I slowed down to make sure the area was secure. Was this really part of the training exercise, or

was there real danger there? The pull directed me toward a barn and I approached it cautiously. My senses were all on maximum alert, waiting to pick up the slightest sound or movement.

Suddenly, I felt a presence off to the left. I slowed and backed up, making a wide arc around it. Someone was standing on the ground. I listened and heard the person's calm, even breathing, and I crept forward until I was close enough to see who it was. It was Michael.

I flew right up next to him. "It's Ashlyn," I whispered. He spun around, looking for me. "Are you alone?" I asked. "I can't hear anyone else."

He pointed at the barn. "Paul, Jesse, and Claire are inside," he whispered. "Theresa and John changed the game and are holding them hostage. Raina, Kenji, and I are keeping watch out here."

"Kai is waiting in the car," I said. "Christoph and Rebecca are on their way. I'll point them here."

I flew south and soon saw them jogging along as quietly as they could. I listened for the sound of anyone in the area, but it seemed clear. I flew to Christoph and whispered in his ear. "We're going to rendezvous with Michael. Head for the tallest tree to the left of the barn."

I streaked back into the air and flew to the old wooden structure. I circled around it, looking for entrances. There was an open window that led to a loft, but that seemed too obvious an entry point. I flew up to it slowly, and sure enough, I spotted three fine strands of filament stretched across the window. I guessed that they would trip an alarm of some kind. Theresa really did things right.

I flew around the side of the building and pressed my ear to the wall near a crack. It was quiet inside except for their breathing. I couldn't see whether they were all in there.

I heard an owl hoot in the night, which gave me an idea. I flew back to the others, who had all congregated by Michael, and reappeared. "The only unsecured entrance appears to be the open window to the loft," I said, "but there are trip wires across it. Rebecca, can you create an illusion around me that will make me look like an owl?"

"Hmm, I think so. Try disappearing so that it reduces the distraction." I disappeared, and suddenly I saw an owl right in the center of where my body should have been.

"Perfect!" Christoph said.

"Okay, I'm going to fly through the window. When I trip the wires and they come to investigate, all they'll see is an owl."

"They're going to see right through that," Michael said.

"Quite possibly, but they might suspend disbelief for this exercise, and normal people won't expect illusionists to come into the picture. At the very least, someone will come to investigate, and when they do, that leaves only one of them downstairs. Hopefully Claire will then pick up on my feelings and will create an illusion of a blackout. You guys can then rush the barn through the front entrance. If they're holding a gun to someone's head, the bullet wouldn't hurt them as soon as Kenji and Christoph are within fifty feet of the barn."

"But what if they have a knife at Claire's throat?" Kenji asked.

We were all quiet for a moment as we considered this. Finally, Raina spoke. "Ashlyn, can you fly with me on your back?"

"Actually, yes, I just discovered today that I can. And I can make you invisible as long as we're touching."

"So I'll fly in with you. Let's say John comes up to investigate. When he sees an owl and turns to go back downstairs, I jump him and take him out. Then Rebecca makes me look like John, I go downstairs, and I take out Theresa."

"It just might work," Michael said.

"Are you kidding? It's genius!" Kenji said. "Rebecca, can you make Raina look like John? You remember what he was wearing today?"

"Or like Theresa, in case she's the one who goes up to investigate," Christoph added.

Rebecca closed her eyes again. Suddenly, Raina turned into Theresa. It was remarkable. A second later, she became John.

"Cool, it worked," Raina said. Her voice sounded so funny coming out of John's mouth that I couldn't help laughing. "Okay," she said with a snort, "as long as I don't speak, we're good. Let's go."

She came over and climbed on my back, wrapping her right arm over my right shoulder and locking her arms in front of my chest. We disappeared, and Rebecca cast an owl illusion over us. We flew forward toward the barn. If Raina found being invisible weird, she didn't say a word about it.

We reached the window and flew through the filaments. Sure enough, a beeping sound started. Raina climbed quietly off my back and stood next to me with a firm grip on my arm so she didn't lose her invisibility.

Shuffling sounds came from below, and John hurried up the stairs. When he saw the owl, a smile came over his face. "It's all

right," he called. "It's just an owl." When he turned to go, Raina shot forward, firmly clapping one hand over his mouth and twisting his arm behind his back. She stood very close to him, wrenching his arm upward so that he was visibly in pain.

"Ordinarily, I'd have just knocked you out," she whispered into his ear, "but since this is a training exercise, will you agree to go down quietly?" He nodded and put his other hand up in a truce position.

She let him sit on the floor, and I stood guard next to him. I focused on projecting my feelings to Rebecca to let her know that John had come to investigate and had been subdued. A second later, Raina was transformed into John and walked down the stairs. It was amazing how skilled Rebecca was getting at reading my feelings as well as creating illusions.

I peeked down the stairs and saw Jesse and Claire tied to each other back-to-back. Theresa sat with a knife next to Paul's throat. Extra points to Kenji, I thought.

Theresa looked up. "Everything okay?" she asked.

Raina, disguised as John, nodded and held a finger to her lips. She walked over to Theresa like she was going to tell her a secret. Theresa leaned in, and Raina quickly took the knife out of her hand, twisted her arm behind her back, and held the knife to her throat.

"Game over," Raina said.

* * *

An hour later, we were all sitting at a large round table in a Chinese restaurant, laughing as we decompressed from the intense training day. We were careful to edit what we said in the restaurant, but the positive atmosphere was infectious. Theresa

announced that since we had worked together as a team, we were calling it a draw, and she was treating us all to dinner.

We toasted Theresa and John for pulling off a great training exercise. I had learned a ton today, and I noticed that at the end, we felt like one unit, not two. I was sure that was their intention behind the changed game: uniting us against a common enemy. Now we could turn that against Lawson.

I looked around the table. On my left, Kai was talking eagerly with Paul. It turned out they knew some of the same local bands, and they were comparing notes.

Next to Paul, Jesse and Christoph were talking about Germany. Jesse had lived in a small German town for eighteen months when his dad was transferred there by his company.

"It's certainly picturesque," Jesse said, "but enough already with the cobblestones. Nearly broke my neck riding my bike.

What that place needs is a healthy supply of asphalt. Pave that crap right over."

On the other side of Christoph, Rebecca and Claire were deep in conversation, and Raina and Michael were talking and laughing raucously, a strong camaraderie building between them. It was so cool to see everyone bonding like that, and it made me feel much better that we'd doubled our resources with the addition of the San Francisco unit. I looked at John and Theresa, who were discussing next steps, and felt humbled by what a huge responsibility they'd taken on when they formed our units.

I turned to Kenji, who was sitting on my right and scarfing down a huge plate of food. "Where are you from originally?" I asked.

"I was born in Japan, but I grew up in Seattle," he said. "My dad owns a software company. I've been programming for him since I was eleven, but I decided I wanted to go into genetics."

"How did you learn programming when you were so young?"

"Just picked up a couple of books. I'm a fast learner when it comes to math and science."

"Your parents must be very proud of you," I said, highly impressed.

"I think they will be when I'm successful."

"But you are successful! Getting into UC Berkeley as a freshman, working as a programmer in middle school . . . "

He shrugged. "It's just what's expected of me. My family believes in pushing yourself. So what if you're naturally gifted? You still have to work as hard as everyone else and just be that much better at what you do."

I saw the logic in that, but it still struck me as odd. I looked around the table again and had that familiar feeling of awe. What was I doing sitting here with a table full of quasi-magical beings? How did I get from my old life, which often involved drinking until I puked, to this?

I took a deep breath and remembered to let it go. The whole thing made me feel oddly queasy, as if thinking about it too much would somehow suck me back in time, and I'd screw everything up and wouldn't be able to repeat all the same steps in the right order, forever doomed to know what my future should have been, without being able to make it come true.

Chapter 26: A New Obstacle

The next morning, we met at the yoga studio where Theresa rented space several times a week for their training sessions. It was a large, airy space with light-wood floors and an entire wall of mirrors. I was amused to see that the sign for her time slots said "private dance lessons."

"Doesn't anyone wonder what all the shouting is about?" I asked Theresa.

"Nobody's said a word," she said. "I had the owner cover the window by the door so nobody could see us training. I told her it was necessary because some of my clients are very shy."

I laughed. "Better not let them meet Jesse, then, or your cover is blown."

We all partnered up and shared what we knew about the techniques we were learning. Jesse taught me some of the Capoeira moves he had learned, and I taught him the pressure points on the wrist and elbow. Christoph and Kenji practiced holds, while Michael and Raina sparred. Rebecca and Claire were in the corner, practicing reading each other's feelings and casting illusions. I couldn't believe how much we learned in just a few hours.

When the session was over, we showered in the locker rooms and then headed to an Italian restaurant in North Beach. Raina was pushing for a taqueria in the Mission district, but we had plenty of taquerias in Santa Barbara, and Theresa said you have to have Italian food in North Beach when you come to San Francisco.

Theresa knew the owner, an older man with a strong Italian accent and thinning grey hair, who was extremely welcoming when we arrived. He showed us into a small room where he had a table set for us. Theresa made recommendations, and Kai and I followed her advice and shared the mushroom risotto and the pumpkin ravioli in sage butter sauce. Even though I was famished from training all morning, I knew it was one of the best meals I'd ever eaten.

Walking up the hill to Coit Tower after lunch, we analyzed everything we knew so far. We tried to guess what kinds of things Lawson might try next and how we could stop him. We knew that his strategy was to create chaos so that he could declare a state of emergency and call in the state militia. Bennicort had helped by inciting the riots, but lately he'd been very quiet, and we had no idea what he was planning next.

When we reached the top of the hill, we looked out over the bay in awe. The sky was a soft blue, and the pale sun sparkled off the water. The Golden Gate Bridge stood majestically in the distance, with boats sailing under its tall spans, and I had a wild urge to fly up to the top of one of its towers and just sit there soaking up the view. But just then, John brought us back to reality with disturbing news. "I read in the paper this morning that robberies are up thirty percent around the state, mostly in big cities. Most of the crimes are happening in public places, like armed robbers holding up restaurants."

"Is it possible that Lawson is recruiting criminals to make people afraid?" Rebecca asked.

"It seems like the most plausible explanation," Theresa said. "The riots created a sense of alarm, and now they're building on that fear with the robberies. After enough restaurants have been

held up, the business owners as well as the public will be calling on the government to protect them. What better excuse to stretch the police force to its maximum and then call in the state militia?"

"So we have two main goals right now," John said. "We need to investigate the voting machines, so we can prove fraud and get Lawson out of office, and we have to figure out who is behind the criminals. We can't be everywhere at once to protect people from the robberies, so we need to stop them at the source."

"I'd like to look into the voting machines more," Kenji said. "I'm curious how they went about doing the software audit. I bet they're missing something obvious."

"Good," John said. "We can really use your expertise there. Paul and Kai, we'll need you both work with Kenji on this."

"I've got a list of Bennicort's close associates," Theresa said. "I told my assistant that he might be a good contact for expanding our client base. She sent me a report last night."

"Ashlyn and I should start checking them out," Jesse said.

"The rest of us should talk to some of the businesses that have been robbed and find out if there's any common theme," John said.

"And I'll go talk to the police," Theresa said. "I'll pretend I'm concerned about my gallery being a target and ask whether there are any suspects identified that I should look out for."

We got back to our cars and went our separate ways. Jesse and I went over the list of Bennicort's associates and picked two in San Francisco we could check out immediately. I would investigate the one who lived in Sea Cliff, a very wealthy section of San Francisco on the ocean side of the Golden Gate Bridge.

After saying good-bye to everyone and promising to meet Kai later for dinner, I crouched behind a dumpster and disappeared. I rose into the chilly air, and soon I was cruising right over San Francisco, watching the throngs of people and cars below me. It was totally cool to see the city from this perspective.

I arrived at the address for Gary Prescott, and I was surprised to see that his house was nearly as big as Bennicort's. I always thought of homes in San Francisco as somewhat small and cramped and always very close together. But this house was large and spacious, sitting peacefully in the middle of a huge lot right on the cliffs. It was magnificent.

I flew around the property, peeking in windows, but nobody was home. I waited for an hour before a car finally pulled into the drive. A tall man, about fifty years old and dressed in a white

shirt and pants, got out of a white Mercedes with the license plate "GWP3."

He pulled a set of golf clubs out of the trunk and headed inside. He looked tan and relaxed. I didn't get the impression he was up to anything criminal, but I wasn't taking any chances. I spent the rest of the afternoon watching him through the windows and listening to his phone conversations, all of which seemed to revolve around closing a business deal and planning a trip to Greece.

At around four o'clock, a pale blue Mercedes drove up the driveway. A tall, stunningly beautiful blonde woman got out of the front seat, followed by a little white dog who trotted along next to her as she pulled several shopping bags out of the trunk and headed toward the house. Suddenly, the dog suddenly looked straight up at me, its nose sniffing the air. It started

barking wildly, and for a moment I was terrified that I had reappeared without realizing it.

"What is it, Carrie?" the woman asked, looking around. She obviously couldn't see me, but the dog acted as if I were perfectly visible. I drifted over to the edge of the property, and the dog followed me, barking all the while. I was infuriated by this new obstacle.

"Come on, Carrie, into the house now. Don't make Mommy wait." She went into the house, but the dog stayed put. I decided it was time to head back anyway and flew over the gate to the street. The dog gave one last yip and then turned and ran into the house, skittering up the steps after the woman.

I called Kai on the way and reported what I had learned. The fact that dogs could sense my presence meant that Jesse and I would have to take extra precautions when we were scouting.

The rest of what I learned didn't seem too important, but we wanted to capture every detail that we could in case something relevant turned up later.

We went back to Berkeley to have dinner with my mom. I felt guilty that I was spending so little time with her, even though she wasn't one to lay guilt trips on me. She prized independence and encouraged me to come and go as I pleased.

Kai said he'd like to cook dinner, so my mom and I hung out at the dining room table next to the kitchen, helping to chop vegetables and talking to him as he measured ingredients. He got the wok sizzling hot, and suddenly the kitchen was in motion as he deftly fried battered tofu in the spattering oil. After a few minutes, he removed it with a slotted spoon and drained it on a paper towel. He threw in the vegetables, and the wok roared. He moved quickly, tossing the ingredients as they

cooked, and then added a sauce that calmed the oil and filled the room with the smell of garlic, ginger, and chilies. My stomach growled as I set the table.

When he had finished, we sat down to a plate full of steaming vegetables and tofu in a golden sauce over brown rice. My mom reached for the soy sauce, but Kai stopped her. “Try it first,” he insisted.

“Okay, master chef,” she teased. She took a bite, and her eyes lit up. “This is delicious. What’s in this sauce?” she asked.

“Master chefs never reveal their secrets,” he said.

She smiled widely. “So what’s on for this evening? Are you going out?”

“There’s a band playing in the city that Kai knows,” I said.

“Would you like to come with us?” Kai asked her.

"Me?" She laughed. "Oh sure, I can just see myself hanging out with you at some loud club. No, thank you. I'm going to see a movie with my friend Mary."

We finished dinner, and Mom offered to do the dishes so we could get going. I ran upstairs and changed into a black camisole with a black lacy shirt over the top, threw on clean blue jeans and a black belt, put on makeup, and changed into my black boots. I ran back downstairs, where Kai was waiting. He had already changed into a long-sleeve shirt with a paisley pattern that he wore over his jeans. He had put a tiny silver hoop earring in his left ear. He looked so cool that I had to stop for a second and just stare at him.

Kai looked me up and down slowly, his eyes coming to rest on my face. He climbed the stairs to where I was standing and slipped his arms around me, pulling me close to him. He looked

deeply into my eyes for a moment and then kissed me slowly. A shiver went down my spine, and I wondered whether I would ever get used to the way I felt when we kissed. I hoped not.

Chapter 27: Attack

Two hours later, we were packed into a small club in the Mission district, watching the band Bramblefish play. Their music had a killer groove, and I couldn't stop dancing. It felt so good to lose myself in the music, to dance and forget about everything, just feeling my body move. Kai didn't like dancing, but even he was rocking along to the music.

"They're amazing," I yelled. "How did you discover them?"

"I used to play with the singer back in high school," he yelled back.

"Let's move closer." I took his hand and led him toward the stage. We stopped in front of the lead singer, who played the bass while he sang in a rich, raspy voice. He belted out the last

note, and the song ended with a crash of the cymbals. The crowd cheered, and I whistled loudly.

The singer glanced our way and came to the edge of the stage. “Kai! Dude, what are you doing in San Francisco?”

“Visiting my girlfriend,” he said, putting his arm around me. “This is Ashlyn. Ashlyn, this is Blake.” It was incredibly gratifying to see Kai act so proud to be with me.

“Hey, Ashlyn,” Blake said. “Kai, come sit in with us. No man, seriously, you gotta play a tune with us.” Kai was shaking his head.

“Go on,” I urged him. “I’d love to see you play.” Before Kai could argue, Blake pulled him up on stage.

“Jared,” Blake called to the guitarist, “is it cool if Kai sits in on ‘Spectrum’?”

"Hey, Kai," Jared said. "Yeah, use my Parker and take the lead. I'll play rhythm."

Jared handed Kai a sleek black guitar and then strapped on a flame-colored guitar with a wide body. He plugged the second guitar into the amp as Blake went up to the microphone.

"Everybody, we have a surprise guest, all the way from Minneapolis. Give it up for Kai Anderson on lead guitar!"

The crowd applauded, and Kai gave a humble wave as he quickly tuned. I watched him with intense curiosity. He strummed a few times and then nodded to the drummer, who counted out the beat and started playing a slow rhythm. Blake played a slow bass line in a minor key, and Jared came in with a simple chord progression. They played a few measures, and then suddenly Kai's guitar sang out with a high wail that sounded more like a human voice than a guitar. His face was so serious

and focused, it was like the rest of the room had vanished and he was all alone with his music.

He finished the intro and dropped into playing a simple melody as Blake sang. I glanced around and saw that people in the crowd were nodding their heads along with the music.

After Blake sang the second chorus, Kai played a solo that started out haunting and soulful like before and then picked up in speed. Soon he was playing dizzyingly fast passages, moving way up the neck. The solo built in momentum, and the drummer was pounding out a fast, complex beat while the rhythm guitar was blazing. Kai played a final high note and then dropped into a low note held with a long, beautiful vibrato. It faded away as Blake sang the final chorus.

When the song ended, the crowd erupted.

"Kai Anderson!" Blake yelled into the mic over the applause and gave Kai a high five. Kai gave the guitar back to Jared and clapped him on the shoulder, waved to the drummer, and hopped off the stage.

"Sorry to have left you like that," he said. "I hope you didn't mind."

I stared at him dumbfounded. "Mind? What the hell are you talking about? Kai, you are amazing! I knew you had talent, but that was absolutely incredible."

Several people nodded at him or gave him a thumbs up. I was so stoked for him, and I felt giddy, being the girlfriend of this totally cool guy who was suddenly the most popular person in the club.

A beautiful woman in a tiny skirt walked up to Kai and smiled at him. "That was great," she said.

"Thanks," Kai said with a smile.

"You're from Minnesota?"

"Yeah, I just moved back there."

"Pity," she said. She gazed at him with smoky eyes, then looked me up and down with a slight frown before sauntering away.

My heart felt like it had suddenly deflated and was slowly filing back up with a toxic gas. Oh God, no, not now. I couldn't let jealousy ruin this moment. I tried to stuff it down, push it away, let it go. But the seed was planted, and the voice in my head wouldn't shut up. *Who are you kidding? It's only a matter of time*.

I swallowed hard as I realized I had to face facts: I was a total loser compared to Kai. What was he doing with me, anyway? How could I possibly compete with the gorgeous women who

were looking his way? I glanced down at my outfit, which now seemed like a pathetic attempt to be sexy, like a little girl playing dress up. I had to fight with every ounce of my being to prevent myself from disappearing.

Kai had a small smile on his face, and when he looked around at me, I tried to arrange my face into something cheerful. I must have failed miserably, because he looked stricken. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

"Mmm," I said. "I'm still blown away by your performance."

"You look, I don't know, a little freaked out maybe. Do you want to get some air?"

"Sure, good idea. I'm pretty tired. It's been a long weekend."

"I'm ready to leave if you are."

"I don't want to take you away from the gig," I said. Bramblefish had just started another song.

"This is their last tune. They'll probably do an encore, but I don't need to stick around for that. Let's go home. I'd much rather be alone with you, anyway," he said with a smile.

I felt like such a fraud. What had I done to convince him to be attracted to me? Suddenly, a horrible thought occurred to me. Maybe it was a special power that came with the whole Soterian package. Oh my God, that must be it! What if it wore off as soon as my powers faded?

I was getting more and more panicked. Every woman we passed was more confident, cool, stylish, beautiful, and undoubtedly smarter than I was. I wanted with all my heart for Kai to achieve his dream of making it in music, but what if that meant losing him?

I walked more quickly to the exit and then started running through the crowd. I burst into the night, sucking in the cool air, trying to calm myself before Kai caught up with me.

"Ashlyn, are you sure you're okay?" he asked, looking worried.

"I'll be fine. It was a little crowded in there."

He took my hand, and we walked toward the car. I felt like there were walls closing in all around me, and I wanted to scream.

Suddenly, he stopped. "Ashlyn, you have to tell me what's wrong." He looked so worried, and I felt a jab of pain in my stomach from the distress I was causing him. I fought with the voice in my head that was telling me to just end the relationship now, before he left me.

"Kai, I'm sorry, please don't worry about me. I'm just kind of screwed up, and it comes out in bad ways sometimes."

"What do you mean? Please, tell me what I did."

"You?" I asked in surprise. "You didn't do anything. You're perfect. That's the problem."

"I'm not following you," he said with a frown.

"I mean that one of these days, you're going to wake up and realize that you made a huge mistake, that I'm not who you think I am. That I'm just an ordinary girl who doesn't deserve you." My voice was shaking now as fear washed over me in nauseating waves.

"Ashlyn, how can you say that? You're the one with the amazing powers, and all I can do is stand by and watch or wait in the car. And you're afraid that I'm going to think you're *ordinary*?"

"But my powers are going to fade one day. Kai, I saw you on that stage. You are headed for greatness, don't you see that? And all those women who were dying to take you home—"

"I don't want any of them," he insisted, suddenly sounding irritated. "I want you. I thought you knew that."

"Maybe you don't want them now, but once you get over your crush on me, you're going to start noticing them, and—"

"Crush? *Crush*? Is that what you think this is? Have you not heard a single word I've said to you? Did you think I was just making things up, that I was lying to you?" His face was a mixture of anger and pain, and I felt absolutely horrible.

"No, of course not," I said quickly. "I'm so sorry. This is why I didn't want to say anything. I told you, I'm really screwed up. I just need time to get over it."

He stared at me, obviously still hurt. “Don’t ever doubt my love for you. I have meant every word I said to you, Ashlyn. I love you more than my own life. I thought you understood that. And I thought you felt the same way.”

I gasped. “I do! This isn’t about me not loving you as much as you love me. This is about me loving you so much it hurts, and about being scared to death about what will happen—what *would* happen,” I corrected myself, “if you were to leave me. I don’t think I could survive it.”

I felt tears welling up in my eyes as I spoke. I was trembling all over now and breathing hard, the panic right at the surface.

“Ashlyn,” he said. “I’m not going to leave you. You have to know that. Come on now,” he said and pulled me into his arms. I sagged into his chest, and he held me tightly until my breathing slowed and I felt calm again.

"I don't know what those assholes you dated did to you," he said softly, "but I want to wring all of their necks. I can't believe you went out with such losers. Why would you do that to yourself?" He lifted my chin and looked into my eyes. "You and I both deserve to be happy. We deserve each other. And nothing is going to take that away from us."

"But, you left," I said weakly. "And I don't know if you're ever coming back."

"Look at me," he said firmly. "I don't know what my future looks like except for two things: I need to play music, and I need to be with you. That's it. The rest are just details that will work themselves out. Okay?"

I nodded and held his hand tightly as we walked slowly away from the club, the warmth from his hand spreading through me. I couldn't believe that I'd flipped out in front of him like that,

and yet there he was, still with me. Whenever I lost it around Todd, he would start yelling at me or just take off. Kai was right—he wasn't like the others.

We turned the corner. Standing by my car were three men, looking around warily. One of them was at the driver-side door, and to my horror, I realized he was trying to break in.

"Hey!" Kai shouted. He started walking faster toward them. They looked up in alarm, but after sizing us up, they stood their ground.

"You got a problem?" the man at the driver side asked. He was wearing an army jacket and was holding a Slim Jim that he was using to try to break into the car. I noticed that one of the other men was holding a crow bar.

"That's our car," Kai said loudly.

The man looked casually to the side and then suddenly punched Kai in the face. The impact made him spin around and fall onto the street. The other two guys ran around the car toward Kai.

A small part of my brain wondered why they were moving in slow motion as I ran in front of Kai's attacker. I caught the Slim Jim just as he was whipping it down toward Kai. His arm came to a dead stop where I blocked it, and I easily wrenched it from his hand. Almost without thinking, I spun around in a circle and kicked him across the face. I watched him fall to the ground next to Kai, who was now getting to his feet.

I turned to the other men. The one with the crow bar was about to swing it down onto my head, but I stepped lightly to the side and guided it down in the same arc so that it ended up smashing into his knee. He doubled over in pain as he dropped

the crow bar, and I side-kicked him into his friend. I thought it was odd how far they were knocked back, as I really hadn't kicked him that hard.

The man with the crow bar lay moaning where he fell, but the third man got up with a look of rage on his face. He reached into his pocket.

"Ashlyn, look out!" Kai yelled. The man pulled out a gun and fired it just as Kai jumped in front of me. There was a loud crack as the bullet shot toward us, followed immediately by the clink of metal falling on the street about six inches in front of Kai. He fired again and again as Kai crouched in front of me, but nothing was happening except the repeated clink of metal.

My brain was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't figure out what was happening. I stepped forward and scooped

up the bullets that had fallen, staring at them curiously, as the man with the gun just stood there with his mouth hanging open.

Just then, Kai let out a howl of pain, and I spun around to see the sickening image of the first man holding a knife that he had just plunged deep into Kai's leg. He got to his feet and ran toward the others.

"Let's go!" he said. They helped the second man to his feet and took off down the street.

Kai was lying on the ground in agony, blood streaming from his leg. The air took on a metallic taste, and everything around me turned red. As I watched the men running away, a rage welled up inside me that was unlike anything I had ever known. Suddenly, a deep, guttural yell burst from my throat, and a dumpster exploded in flames as the men ran past it. They were thrown back several feet by the explosion and knocked out.

I looked down at Kai again, and the fire inside me dwindled and died, as if it had been suddenly snuffed out. I could see everything clearly again, especially the pool of blood spreading around his leg.

"Ashlyn . . . " he croaked. In a flash, I ripped my shirt off and tied it tightly around his thigh above the wound. I unlocked the car doors and lifted Kai in my arms, only vaguely aware of how light he was as I laid him down gently in the back seat.

I hopped into the front seat, jammed the key into the ignition, and fired it up. Just then, two police officers appeared at my window.

"Miss, hold up. We'd like to ask you some questions," one of them said.

"Meet me at the ER," I said quickly. "He's going into shock."

I shoved the car into gear and peeled out of the parking spot, the officers jumping out of the way as my tires squealed on the asphalt. In the back of my mind, a small voice said I didn't know where the hospital was, but my instincts shut it out as I followed the now familiar, subtle pull.

I flipped open my cell phone and called Rebecca as I raced through the streets. I was vaguely aware that I was breaking several laws at once now.

"Rebecca, meet me at San Francisco General. Kai's been stabbed."

"What?!"

"I don't have time to explain. Just hurry." I snapped the phone shut and sped up, pushing my poor little car as fast as it would go, its axles groaning as I took corners at ridiculous speeds.

At the emergency entrance, I brought the car to a screeching halt, leaving the keys in the ignition, and pulled Kai out of the back seat. I ran toward the ambulance entrance with him in my arms.

"Hey, you can't leave your car there," a voice shouted.

"He's been stabbed," I yelled over my shoulder. "Park it and bring me the keys in the ER."

I smashed through the double doors to the emergency room, and a triage nurse rushed to my side, helping me lay Kai down on a gurney. She pushed him toward one of the empty bays, yelling "Limited trauma to Trauma Room One STAT!" as we ran.

I heard an overhead page on the loudspeakers echo the emergency as we dashed into the brightly lit trauma bay filled with equipment. Several people in scrubs flooded into the room, surrounding Kai. I could barely see him through the throng of

people applying blood pressure cuffs, electrical leads to telemetry machines, starting IVs, cutting off his clothes, and yelling information back and forth to each other.

A young woman strode into the room. “I'm Dr. Davidson. Tell me who he is and what happened,” she said, talking very fast.

“Twenty year-old male with a stab wound to the left thigh,” I said. “It’s bleeding heavily, but I put a tourniquet on it. He also has a contusion under his left eye.” I barely knew what I was saying. The words spilled out of me as if someone else was speaking.

“How long ago?” she asked.

“Ten minutes.”

“Are there any other wounds or injuries?”

“No.”

"His name?"

"Kai Anderson, resident of Minneapolis. He's staying with me in Berkeley."

"Kai, do you have any allergies to medications?" the doctor asked as she inspected the gaping knife wound. Seeing it made me start to see red again, but I pushed back the rage. This wasn't the time.

"No, none," he said weakly.

"Are you dizzy, short of breath? How bad is your pain?"

"Not really dizzy. The pain is pretty bad."

"I've got two large-gauge IVs in," a nurse said. "BP is 60 over 40, pulse 130."

"Start a liter of normal saline wide open," the doctor said. "Type and cross him for two units of packed red blood cells. Kai, stay with us—we're going to take care of you. I need pressure on

the wound and suture material to close the bleeder. Clamp!" She was working quickly but carefully, her face very serious.

After what seemed like an eternity, she looked up at Kai.

"Okay, Kai, the wound isn't that deep, but it's close to the femoral artery. The bleeding is slowing. You were very lucky. I'm going to clean the wound and stitch you up. Nurse, give ten of morphine."

I edged over to Kai's side. "I'm going to get your wallet out of your pocket and register you, okay?"

"It's in there," he said, pointing to the bloody mess of cut-up jeans on the floor. I pulled out his wallet, gave him a reassuring smile, and walked toward reception. On the way out, I touched the doctor on the arm.

"Thanks for taking care of him so quickly. I know you guys can get very busy on a Saturday night."

"No problem," she said, as she worked with a tray of instruments. "It was a good thing you brought him through the ambulance entry instead of the front door. It can get a bit bogged down in reception. Which department do you work in?"

"Oh, um, I don't . . . ," I said, realizing she must have thought I was some kind of medical worker. I didn't want to disabuse her of the notion in case it was getting Kai better care. "I mean, I just moved to Santa Barbara," I said vaguely. "I'm going to go get him registered. I'll be back soon."

I walked toward reception and waited in line. The waiting room was packed with people, many holding ice packs or rags on various parts of their bodies. I felt terrible for them and also grateful for the pull that led me to come in the back entrance.

A man walked up to me and handed me my keys. "Is he okay?" he asked.

"Yes, he's going to be fine. Thank you so much. Here," I said, reaching into my pocket and handing him a ten-dollar bill. "Please take this."

"Oh, no, you don't have to—"

"It's the least I can do," I said firmly and pressed it into his hand. "Thank you for being one of the good guys tonight."

He smiled at me. "You have a good night," he said and walked away.

After ten minutes, I was finally at the front of the line. I gave the receptionist Kai's driver's license and insurance card. He pointed out where the restroom was so that I could wash up, which confused me until I looked down and realized I was covered in blood. The thought of it made me furious again, and I had to push back the rage that threatened to engulf me once more.

Finally, I was done at registration, and I walked back to where Kai was being treated. The doctor stood up. “I’ve just finished stitching him up. He’s going to be fine.”

“Will he need to stay overnight?” I asked.

“Yes, I'm going to admit him for observation, prophylactic intravenous antibiotics, and pain control. We'll retest his hemoglobin and hematocrit in the morning to see if he’ll need any additional transfusions, but I suspect that he may be fine to be released in a day or two with oral antibiotics to take at home. Luckily, the blade was vertically oriented, and it went between the rectus femoris and sartorius, missing the femoral artery. It should heal nicely. He'll just have to watch for infection.”

“Oh, that’s good,” I said. Suddenly, none of the words seemed to make as much sense as they did before. I didn’t know what a rectus thingy was, but I knew from quizzing Rebecca on

anatomy during our study sessions what the femoral artery was, and it was definitely not something you wanted severed. “Thank you again,” I said.

“No problem.” She smiled and walked away. I sat on a stool next to Kai, who was now sleeping. He looked peaceful, and I realized the crisis had passed—which, of course, meant that the meltdown was coming. This was always how I responded in emergencies: I would get super calm and focused while the crisis was happening, and then as soon as the danger passed, I always fell apart.

I felt the tears welling up already as the full weight of what had just happened dropped onto me as if out of the sky. Oh my God, Kai was attacked! What if the knife *had* hit the artery? What if he’d died there in my arms? I started crying harder as I

remembered him jumping in front of me, bravely trying to protect me, just as that guy was shooting at me—

Shooting at me. I reached into my pocket and found the bullets I'd scooped up off the ground. I went completely numb as I remembered that he had shot at us from only several feet away, and yet he hadn't hit us. At the time, I'd thought how odd it was that he'd missed, but the bullets were all on the ground in front of us. Which meant only one thing.

"She's right over there," I heard the doctor say, and I turned my head to see the two police officers approaching me. I quickly shoved the bullets back in my pocket and rose to greet them, wiping the tears from my eyes.

"Officers, I'm so sorry I had to leave the scene like that, but he was bleeding heavily, and I had to get him to the ER. I can give you a full report here or go back there if you need me to."

"No need for that. Let's go outside so we're not in the way."

"Sure," I said. I took a last look at Kai and then followed them out to the parking lot.

I gave them the report, downplaying my part and saying I'd simply defended myself. When it came to describing how the guy shot at us, I just said that he fired about three rounds but missed us, and then his friend stabbed Kai and they ran off. I paused a moment when I thought about the dumpster. A small voice in my head was screaming something at me, but I pushed it away. I told them that something had then exploded in the dumpster next to them, throwing them back.

The officer made a note on his report and then looked up. "There's something puzzling me," he said. "You said that Kai was knocked down by the first suspect and that the other two suspects attacked you, leaving you to defend yourself against

three guys, one with a crow bar and one with a gun. How is it you took on three guys with weapons, but you don't have a scratch on you?"

"Oh, that," I said. "Well, actually, I study martial arts, but I didn't really have to do much because those guys were obviously amateurs. It didn't take much to get the Slim Jim out of the first guy's hands. And I simply stepped out of the way when the guy swung at me with the crow bar, so he ended up injuring himself instead. With the third guy, it was pure luck. He just missed. As I said, real amateurs."

"I see," the officer said as he scribbled on his form. His partner was peering at me through beady eyes, giving me the creeps. "And the dumpster just happened to explode. Another stroke of luck was it?"

"Must have been. One of the bullets must have hit the dumpster and started a fire, which then ignited something explosive. People really should be more careful about what they toss in dumpsters." I had arranged my face into what I hoped was an innocent and convincing expression, hoping he wouldn't figure out that the guy was shooting *away* from the dumpster.

"Okay, we have the report. The District Attorney's office will be in touch if your testimony is needed."

"Thank you, officers," I said. I watched them walk away, the second officer giving me another strange look. I shuddered and then turned around to go back in and see Kai.

Standing in front of the entrance like two statues were John and Theresa. And Theresa was looking angrier than I'd ever seen her.

Chapter 28: The Alchemist

"Explain," Theresa said curtly.

"Okay," I said slowly. "Which part?" So much had happened; I couldn't be sure what they were upset about. "And how did you know we were here?" I asked.

"We were pulled here, Ashlyn. We're Mentors, remember? We're drawn to the key places where the balance has shifted."

"You think those attackers had something to do with Lawson?" I asked. "If so, Bennicort is scraping the bottom of the barrel, because those guys—"

"No, Ashlyn, the balance has been shifted by you," Theresa said coldly. I stared at her, dumbfounded.

"Me? How could I have shifted it?"

"Based on what we overheard you tell the police, it would appear that you've evolved into an Alchemist. Why didn't you tell us this was happening?" Theresa's eyes blazed.

"An Alchemist? What on earth is that?" My brain was just about completely overloaded at this point, and I was beginning to feel slightly dizzy.

Theresa looked at John in disbelief. "Do you mean to tell me that you never told them about Alchemists?"

John's eyes hardened. "I train my unit my own way. If I'd told them about Alchemists, it would have distracted them from their training and made them more vulnerable to corruption."

"But in the meantime, you missed the signs completely."

"As did you, Theresa."

"Wait a second!" I shouted. "Can you two stop bickering long enough to tell me what the hell you're talking about?"

Theresa and John both looked alarmed and took a step back. "What?" I asked, getting more annoyed by the moment.

"Ashlyn," John said softly. "It is imperative that you control your temper, now more than ever. I will explain everything. But first, you need to tell us exactly what happened tonight."

"Fine, but if you're going to make me wait for an explanation, you're also going to have to wait a few minutes while I check on Kai." I marched into the ER, walking past everyone in the waiting room to the bay where Kai had been. The space was now empty.

I stopped a passing nurse. "Excuse me, can you tell me where Kai Anderson is? He was right here in this bay."

She glanced at a white board on the wall. "He's been moved upstairs to room seven-fifteen. Go down that hall, and take the

second elevator . . . " But her words faded as I felt the pull telling me where I needed to go.

"Thank you," I said and walked quickly toward the stairs. As soon as I was in the stairwell, I flew up to the seventh floor. I opened the door and walked straight to room 715.

Kai was lying in bed, dozing. I walked in noiselessly and sat down next to his bed, gently holding his hand. He opened his eyes.

"Hey," he said in a croaky voice.

"Hey," I said. "I'm sorry I wasn't there when they moved you. I had to go give a police report."

"I figured you were dealing with something like that." He sat up slightly, wincing in pain. "Ashlyn, I'm so sorry."

I looked at him in surprise. "Sorry? For what?"

"For being an idiot. I never should have approached those guys. I should have just let them do their thing and called the police from around the corner."

"Kai, this is not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I put you in danger," he said.

"You jumped in front of me to save me from a bullet. I'd say that clearly made up for any mistake you might have made."

"Yes, but—"

"Shhh," I said. "Everything is okay now. You got very lucky. Although your parents will never let you visit me again."

"I should call them. My mom is going to freak out."

"So is mine, believe me. Don't stress yourself out right now. You really need to rest." I heard footsteps coming up the hall. "John and Theresa are here. I need to go talk to them about what

happened. I'll be back as soon as I can, okay?" I kissed him softly and walked out of the room.

"How's Kai?" John asked.

"He's going to be fine. Let's go to the waiting lounge and I'll tell you everything, but then I expect some answers, too."

Ten minutes later, John and Theresa sat in silence. I had told them everything that had happened, including my seeing red and the dumpster exploding, the bullets landing in front of us, and the pull that brought me right to the emergency room. They had quizzed me about every emotion I'd felt and wanted exact details of the conversations I'd had.

"And when the police arrived, they were particularly interested in knowing how the dumpster exploded?" John asked.

"Yes, but wouldn't you be?"

"Ashlyn, did you get the police officers' names?" Theresa asked.

"The guy I talked to most was Officer Kochler," I said and spelled his last name for her. "I didn't catch the other officer's name. I'm sorry." I knew as a Scout I should always be noticing details like that, but it had been a busy night.

Theresa pulled out her cell phone and walked away. John continued talking to me.

"Ashlyn, you did a great job tonight of protecting Kai. I'm proud of you. Your training has paid off, and you showed tremendous cool under pressure." He looked weary, as if this experience had taken a great toll on him.

Just then, Michael, Christoph, and Rebecca hurried into the room. Rebecca gasped when she saw my blood-covered jeans and rushed over. "Ashlyn, what happened?"

"Don't worry, we're okay," I said. "Kai and I were attacked by some guys trying to break into my car. Kai was stabbed in the leg, but the knife missed the artery. He's going to be fine."

Rebecca looked pale, and Michael and Christoph both looked angry. "I wish I'd been there," Michael said through his teeth.

"As it turns out, it wasn't necessary. Ashlyn took them out on her own," John said.

"You did?" Rebecca asked, her eyes growing wide. "That's amazing!"

"It is amazing," John said. "But I'm glad you're all here, because I need to explain something to all of you."

Christoph and Michael sat down, looking puzzled.

"There's another type of Soterian," John began. "This one is extremely rare. It happens when a Soterian is able to harness

both light and dark energy at the same time. We call them Alchemists. They're the most powerful type of Soterian, because not only do they have their own powers, they have all of ours as well." Michael looked shocked and then narrowed his eyes on me. Rebecca and Christoph just looked confused.

"But I don't have . . . ," I started to say, but then I stopped. Everything started to fall into place. The bullets didn't hit us because I had a shield like Christoph's. I was able to fight those attackers, who looked like they were in slow motion, because I now had the combat skills of a Warrior. And I'd been picking up on people's feelings in a very intuitive way for weeks now. There was also the time I ran into Toby, and he'd bounced off the laundry basket—he'd actually bounced off of *me*. And then there was the weird pull that told me exactly where to go. This was what John and Theresa felt when they were called to action.

Before I could wrap my head around this, John continued. "In addition to those powers, Alchemists have one more: they can create fire and explosions. For this reason, the Alchemist is the most powerful but also the most dangerous of the Soterians. An Alchemist must learn above all to control anger. They are also susceptible to being turned to evil if the enemy can play on their deepest fears." John looked at me sadly.

"Are you telling us that Ashlyn is an Alchemist?" Michael asked. "That she's some kind of secret weapon?"

"Yes and no," Theresa said, walking into the room. "She is an Alchemist, but she is no longer a secret."

"What do you mean?" John asked.

"I mean those weren't police officers," Theresa said, a look of grave concern on her face. "Officers Kochler and Roarke were found unconscious three hours ago and are now patients in this

very hospital. Their squad car, guns, and even their uniforms were gone. It sounds like they were attacked from behind and never saw who hit them."

"I—I don't understand," I spluttered. "Why would they—"

"My guess is that they hired those thugs to break into your car and attack you to draw out your powers," Theresa continued. "Once they determined that you really were an Alchemist, it was a simple task to walk in here disguised as police officers and ask you all the questions they wanted."

My head was spinning. "How could Bennicort know about Alchemists?" I asked.

"There's one detail John has not told you yet that will clarify all of this. John, would you like to continue, or shall I cut to the chase?" Theresa looked hard at John. It was obvious that she felt

he'd mishandled things, and as much as I respected John, I couldn't help but agree with her.

John took a deep breath. "It takes two factors to call an Alchemist into existence. The Soterian must have a rare combination of talents, as Ashlyn here does. But there must also be a growing threat, not only of tipping the balance toward evil, but of a complete overthrow. That only happens when Deimos re-emerges."

"Who in the hell is Deimos?" Michael asked.

"He is the most powerful force of evil on earth. He works in cycles, showing up in different places, in different incarnations. He comes into power slowly, like a rising shadow, throwing off the balance. Only when good overpowers evil does he fade back into a sort of hibernation. His greatest strength is his ability to recruit followers, rewarding them with money and power. It

would appear that Bennicort, and probably many others, are actually working for Deimos."

"Leverage," I muttered to myself. "Very smart."

"And Ashlyn has to go up against him?" Rebecca asked.

"We all do, but Ashlyn helps tip the scales in our favor."

"How do we kill him?" Michael asked.

"You can't. Remember, evil cannot be completely defeated, only brought into balance."

"So we just have to bring this guy into 'balance' but can't defeat him?" Michael asked angrily.

"The balance consists of light rising above the dark. Deimos feeds on evil, so if we can bring the rest of the world into balance, we starve him of his power, and he will fade again. But he's undoubtedly already putting plans in place to cause chaos and spread evil across the globe."

"So we have to figure out what he's up to, stop his plans, and restore the balance. And then he'll fade away again?" Christoph said.

"Yes, that's essentially it."

"How is my becoming an Alchemist an advantage?" I asked. "If I can't blow him up, what's the use of that skill?"

"You can harness that power only when you're channeling both good and evil. That means you can draw his power and use it to work for good, which helps tip the balance in our favor and weaken him at the same time. But now that he knows about you, he's going to try to make you join his side, because having an Alchemist at his disposal would make him nearly unstoppable." John looked sad. "That means Kai is in great danger."

"Why is Kai in danger?" I asked in horror.

"Because you told that 'officer' that Kai is your boyfriend," Theresa said. "Step one in getting you to turn to evil is to take away the things that you love."

"No!" I shouted, earning me a glare from a passing nurse. "We have to keep him safe!"

"And we will," John said. "As long as he remains our Keeper, he is under our protection. It wasn't luck that kept that knife from missing his artery. That was the power of our protection. It doesn't stop attacks, but it helps deflect them, which is usually enough."

"Usually isn't good enough for me. I need to protect him." I started to leave the room, but Michael caught my arm.

"So that's it, you're just going to walk out on the mission? You're going to devote yourself to becoming Kai's personal body guard while the rest of us defeat Deimos?"

"What choice do I have? You heard what John said. They're going to try to use him to get to me."

"Then get rid of him," Michael snarled, a hard look on his face. I glared at him, trying to keep the rage under control so that I wouldn't blow him up.

"Ashlyn, Michael has a point," John said carefully. "If you make it look like you broke up, they'll leave him alone. They have plenty to worry about without going after an ex-boyfriend."

"Pretend we broke up? You mean not see each other. And not talk anymore." I began to have trouble breathing.

"Not until we've restored the balance," John said sadly.

"But that could take months. Maybe years!" I was on the verge of hysteria now. This couldn't be happening. They couldn't take Kai away from me. He was the one thing that kept me going now. In the beginning, it had all seemed kind of like a game,

learning to fly and disappear and practice maneuvers. But tonight had made everything very, very real.

Rebecca came up and put her arms around me, and I broke down sobbing. Another nurse came by to see what was causing all the noise, but when she saw me, she cast a sympathetic look my way and walked on.

"It's not fair. It's just not fair," I gasped through sobs. Rebecca was very comforting, holding me tightly and stroking my hair, sending a wave of warmth through me, but my grief seemed bottomless.

After I had calmed down a bit, John came over and handed me a tissue. I blew my nose loudly.

"I know this is difficult," he said. "But you have the power now to ensure our mission will succeed. This is a gift as well as a

curse. The sooner you can restore the balance, the sooner you will have Kai back."

I nodded and wiped my eyes on my arm. A shiver ran through me, and I realized I was freezing now that I was only wearing the little black camisole. Rebecca started to take off her jacket to put around me, but I suddenly found I was able to warm myself from my core. There was plenty of evil around, so I could easily siphon it and transform it into heat. This new power required no training to use, but I knew it would take a lot of mental training to control.

Without another word, I walked slowly out of the lounge, feeling completely numb. I walked into Kai's room, where I found him awake and watching television. I closed the door behind me, and he clicked off the TV from the remote.

"Ashlyn, what is it?" he asked, looking worried.

I sat down next to him and looked deeply into his eyes. I touched his lips with my fingers and stroked his cheek, memorizing his features.

"Things have gotten a lot more serious," I said. "There's a new threat, and it's caused me to transform into something more powerful. An Alchemist, it's called." I was speaking quickly, rattling off everything I'd learned. "I have the powers of all the Soterians, and the ability to siphon evil and use it as an explosive weapon. I have to go up against a very dangerous enemy named Deimos, who is some mythical being who feeds on evil and creates chaos. And since Deimos would love to get an Alchemist on his side, it appears that you're now in danger because he will try to get to me through you. So now you have to go back to Minnesota, and we have to pretend that we're—" but

I choked on the words and couldn't finish the sentence. Kai closed his eyes.

After a moment, I continued. "All that matters is that you're safe. If they get to you, my life is over. We'll find a way to stay in contact. Whatever it takes. I can't lose you, Kai." I took his hand and held it tightly. "I'm so sorry I got you into this whole mess."

He squeezed my hand and lay there for some time. Finally, he sighed. "I don't suppose there's any way of convincing you not to take this on. I can't tell you what it's going to do to me to leave, knowing that you're battling such a dangerous enemy."

"You saw what happened tonight. Those guys couldn't touch me. I'm going to take them down, every last one of them, and resolve this fiasco so that we can get our lives back."

"Don't let anger get the better of you," he said softly, reaching up and stroking my hair. "You know it will take you down the wrong path."

"As long as I have your love, there's no chance of that." I leaned over and kissed him tenderly, carefully avoiding the angry bruise that was blooming on his cheek. "I love you, Kai. With every cell in my body. I swear to you, I will resolve this."

He looked down. "I'll keep in touch with Paul so that I can at least keep helping out with research."

I took his wallet out of my pocket and handed it to him. "I'll have Rebecca bring your things tomorrow."

"Okay. Okay," he said again, as if trying to make peace with this impossible situation. I kissed him on the forehead, and he wrapped his arms around me, squeezing me like he would never let go.

Chapter 29: Christmas

"Merry Christmas!" Laurel's voice crackled over the line from Japan. "What are you doing today?"

"Mom and I are hanging out in front of the tree, drinking egg nog," I said.

"Cozy!" Laurel loved Christmas, and it was obviously driving her crazy not being here. "Jason and I had sushi for dinner. Nothing at all like a real Christmas. I wish I were there with you guys."

"Yeah, me too. It's not the same without you." I ran my fingers over the light green silk pajamas Kai had given me for Christmas. He'd sent the package to Max's house to avoid suspicion. I didn't know anyone in Minneapolis except for him,

and I couldn't risk sending something to his address, so I couldn't even get him a Christmas present.

"Are you going to build a fire and watch a movie?" Laurel asked.

"I'm supposed to go to Dad's today, although I just can't seem to muster the energy."

"Ashlyn, you have to stop pining for Kai. If it's meant to be, it'll work out. If not, well, then you have to move on."

"Right. You try having your heart cut out and shipped two thousand miles away and then tell me how easy it is for you to move on."

"I'm not saying it's easy," she said. "I just want you to be happy again. Why don't you call up Maggie and go visit her?"

"I did. We had lunch last week, and it was a disaster. We have absolutely nothing in common anymore. I said maybe two

words the whole time while she talked non-stop about the bartender she's in love with."

"There's always Todd," Laurel joked.

"And there's always suicide. Listen, Mom wants to say hi, so I'm going to put her on. Merry Christmas, Laurel."

I put my mom on the phone and slowly went upstairs to get dressed. The last month had been like living in a barrel of molasses. I wasn't eating much, and I barely slept. I'd lie awake late into the night staring at my ceiling, my thoughts churning between Kai and Deimos in equal measure. I stopped caring about my studies and just managed to go through the motions and get through finals. I think I still pulled off passing grades, but I didn't really care anymore.

I kept myself from slipping into total despair by spending every spare minute monitoring Bennicort's house, trying to

figure out his connection to Lawson and Deimos. I got a good sampling of Bennicort's life as I watched him go to his office in downtown Santa Barbara, host luncheons with business associates, close real estate deals, and play tennis. But I never saw him have any contact with Lawson at all, and certainly nobody who looked like they might be the greatest source of evil on earth.

Jesse and I checked out Bennicort's remaining associates, but they all appeared to be legitimate. Clearly, we were missing something very important, but once again we were just shooting in the dark with no idea where to start. It felt like we'd simply hit a dead end.

Meanwhile, the crime waves continued. We had no leads on who was hiring the criminals. Lawson had ordered more cops onto the streets, and the police force was stretched way too thin.

One more major event could send the state into anarchy. Time was slipping dangerously away, and I hadn't made any progress at all.

I managed to get myself dressed and drove to my dad's place, a large shingled house on a hillside in Sausalito, just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. He and my stepmother, Evelyn, greeted me warmly when I arrived, and we all sat down in their living room. It had a wall of windows that looked out over the bay, the lights from the boats and houses twinkling on the water. When I was younger, I used to like to sit for hours looking out at the bay, imagining that people were sailing off to exotic places. I realized now that they weren't going anywhere; they were just wasting time sailing around in circles.

"Come see our pictures from Mexico," Evelyn said. She and my dad started telling me about their trip as I flipped through a

large stack of photos. I stopped at one where they'd posed with a merchant who was selling brightly colored pottery from a cart. I was always amused to see pictures of my dad and Evelyn in foreign locations because of how out of place they looked. They were both over six feet tall, and Evelyn had a crown of bright blonde hair. My dad's black hair was almost always covered by a hat, but his thick moustache and bright green eyes were very striking. They definitely stood out in a crowd.

I turned to a picture of them climbing a pyramid in the Yucatán peninsula.

"It's a Mayan ruin called Chichen Itza," Evelyn said. "It was a steep climb to get all the way to the top. And then of course we had to go all the way back down again. I felt like we'd run a marathon by the end." In my present state of mind, it looked exhausting.

"Are you still doing marathons?" my dad asked me.

"Triathlons," I corrected him for probably the fiftieth time. "No, the season doesn't really start again until the spring."

"You look so thin," Evelyn said appreciatively.

"I'm still training," I said. I had actually given up on triathlon training completely, as it took all my energy these days just to train with my unit. The thought of my poor Rocket gathering dust in the storage locker made me feel like crying.

"How is school going?" Dad asked.

"Pretty well. I aced my midterms, and I think I did okay on my finals."

"I want to hear more about this guy you're dating," Evelyn said with a twinkle in her eye. "He sounds great. What was his name . . . Tony?"

I was confused for a second, and then I realized that the last time I'd written to them about my love life, I was talking about Toby. Could that really have been only three months ago? The Ashlyn who had fantasized about bringing Toby home to meet the parents simply didn't exist anymore.

"I just dated him a couple times. I'm not really seeing anyone right now." Which, sadly, was all too true.

"Well, that's too bad," my dad said, sounding quite pleased. "But there's plenty of time for that. School should be your main focus right now."

"I agree, it really should," I said ironically. I put the pictures down on the coffee table. "So, what did you think of the election?"

"Lawson's a communist," my dad said. "All these regulations he's trying to introduce . . . the market always does better when

you let it govern itself. Did you know he now wants to raise taxes to subsidize his own special interests?"

"Like what?"

"He wants the government to take over biotech. I've seen a draft of his proposal, and it's outrageous. He'd put regulations in place to make sure firms aren't doing stem-cell research, that they're using specific software to ensure quality, and all this other nonsense. And then he'd jack up our taxes to enforce them. Only a couple of firms would actually get to stay in business."

"Which ones?" I asked curiously.

"Genco and BioTrek," he said. I made a mental note of the names. "The idiots in the state senate should have thrown him out by now," he growled.

"But how could they?" I asked.

"Hire people in the private sector to investigate the elections, of course. Not McIntyre—he's a senator and has no business doing it. Never leave the important tasks to politicians. You call in the experts with real jobs."

My dad was a devout Libertarian and firmly opposed to government intervention in his life. I didn't agree with most of his beliefs, but this was an interesting point. Who exactly was working on the election probe? Adam was getting information through the watchdog group, but it seemed like all the people who were actually analyzing the code were in the government. I spent the rest of the evening mulling this over as I picked at my dinner and nodded at what seemed like logical places in the conversation.

As I drove back to my mom's, I looked forward to my phone call with Kai so I could tell him what my dad had said. Although

we weren't supposed to be communicating, Kai had come up with the brilliant idea of getting cell phones using a fake name and a phone number in Texas. We used them exclusively for calling each other at an appointed time every third day, which was about as long as we could go without talking to each other.

When he called that night, I first asked him how his job search was going. He still hadn't found a veterinary technician position and was continuing to work temp jobs. His music wasn't going any better. He'd auditioned for two bands, but they both sucked, and he was getting discouraged. He had gone into his uncle's studio and recorded some tunes, but it didn't sound like he was feeling very inspired. I felt bad for him. As much as I wanted him to come home, I really wanted him to be happy wherever he was.

We turned the conversation to Lawson, and I told him what my dad had said.

"This is definitely worth looking into," he said. "I'll check out the people on the committee. I'll also look into the two biotech firms. It's possible there's a connection."

"I'm beginning to think there is," I said. "Dig through as many layers as you can. I'm guessing they all lead back to a single source. Anyway, how's the weather there?"

"It was only ten below today. Downright warm for this time of year." He paused. "I miss you, Ashlyn. I think about you all the time."

I closed my eyes and concentrated on trying to feel his presence over the cold, hard plastic phone. "Merry Christmas, Kai. I hope next year is very different."

"It will be. I'll be with you."

We hung up, and I felt terrible. I always loved to hear his voice, but every time we talked, I just ended up feeling emptier than before. I needed to be with him, not just talk to him on the phone. It felt like part of me was slowly dying. I didn't know how I'd get through the rest of the day, let alone the months that stretched endlessly ahead of me.

I picked up my journal and read the last entry I'd written:

So this is my life.

I've developed special powers, which I don't get to keep, to battle the ultimate source of evil, which can never be destroyed.

And the man of my dreams just moved two thousand miles away.

Not exactly what I had in mind for my junior year.

I slammed the journal shut and threw it across the room.

That night, I dreamed about a man with jet black hair in a dark suit walking slowly and deliberately after Kai and me. We ran as fast as we could, but it was like we were running through mud. He came closer and closer until I could see fire in his eyes, and in a sickening instant, I realized he was Deimos.

I tried to fly, but nothing happened. I tried to siphon his evil and summon a fireball to throw at him, but I couldn't feel anything. My powers were gone. I jolted awake, drenched in sweat, my head pounding.

In the morning, I decided the one thing that might make me feel better was training, so I ran through pressure-point techniques in my mind while I was still lying in bed. I had been training with the San Francisco unit over the holidays to try to keep my skills sharp, but my training had really plummeted

since Thanksgiving. I couldn't concentrate, and all I could think about was seeing Kai and exposing Lawson. Worse, my Scout powers seemed to be getting less acute, and I hadn't been able to harness the other powers at all.

John was really worried about me, and Michael was furious. He kept saying things like "just get over it" and other such helpful advice that did nothing but make me more depressed. The rest of the Soterians were trying to be patient, but Theresa was about as subtle as Michael was in her criticism.

Rebecca, however, had been a true friend. She spent a lot of time just being with me and working her healing on me as well as she could. But I felt sealed off from the world, like I was living behind walls that nobody could penetrate, and being away from her for the last two weeks while she was home for the holidays hadn't helped matters.

My phone rang, interrupting my thoughts.

"Ashlyn, it's John. How are you doing?"

"Hi, John. I'm okay. I'm just running through pressure points."

"Very good. It's helpful to visualize them so that they become second nature."

"Are you on your way up?" I asked. He was driving up with Christoph and Michael today, and Rebecca was flying to San Francisco in a couple of days.

"Yes, and I wanted to let you know that I have some good news: Kenji has a lead for us that might be the answer we've been seeking."

"What is it?"

"Kenji will give us the information later today. We're meeting at Theresa's at three o'clock."

I felt a spark of excitement. I didn't want to get my hopes up, but the thought of having some new information made me feel happier than I had in weeks.

At three o'clock, we were all gathered in Theresa's living room. She had a penthouse suite that was truly magnificent, with a granite entryway, light wood floors covered with large area rugs, and sweeping views of the city and the Golden Gate Bridge. She had filled her suite with simple but beautiful furniture, and folk art from her gallery hung on her walls. She had exquisite taste, and evidently quite a lot of money.

Theresa served us some snacks and then got down to business. "Kenji, you're on. Tell us what you know."

"Okay, I was talking with my dad yesterday over Christmas dinner, and we got to talking about the election. He's been intrigued by the electronic voting machines, and he

hypothesized how they might have done it. Everyone has been focused on the idea that a virus was introduced to the machines right before the election, maybe even the day of. But it struck me that maybe the problem is right there in the original code, but the source code they gave the auditors isn't the same as the code they used in the machines. Maybe the fraudulent code is hidden within a function with a benign-sounding name, and they simply swapped out the real code with dummy code that doesn't do anything useful."

"I'm afraid you might be losing some of us," John said, smiling.

"The point is, we need to check their source code repository going back a few weeks before the Votomatic machines were delivered to see if the code they loaded onto the machines and the code they provided to the auditors was the same. My guess is

that the source code they gave the auditors is newer than what was on those machines."

"But why can't the auditors just look at the code on the machines themselves?" Christoph asked.

"Source code is compiled into binary files before it's installed on the machines. So you can't just look at the software on the machines—it won't tell you anything, because you're not looking at the source code. The auditors are relying on them to provide the actual code they used to create the compiled files. But if you were really sneaky, you could make sure your dummy file has exactly the same number of bytes as the real file. That would make the code compile to the same size as what's on the machines, so it would look like it must be the same."

"So how do we get our hands on their source code?" Raina asked. I was grateful that she cut to the chase, because my eyes were starting to glaze over from all the computer speak.

"All software companies have a central repository where they check in their code. My guess is that by now Votomatic has destroyed the earlier versions. But all companies also have a data backup system of some sort, usually through a backup service. So if we can break into the computers at the backup company, we can get the last few months of source code images from Votomatic, and then we can analyze it until we find what we're looking for."

"That's brilliant," Paul said. "I bet it'll work. The problem is that if we find it by breaking in, it won't stand up in court."

"Not if they don't know we broke in," Kenji said. "If we cover our tracks carefully enough, we can analyze the code, then

submit it anonymously to the watchdog group, saying we're a whistleblower inside the company who wants to come forward. The watchdog group can get the subpoena for the data storage company. Within a week, the voter fraud will be all over the news, and Lawson's governorship will be declared invalid."

We all sat looking at each other in amazement. This seemed too good to be true. Sure, it was going to be incredibly difficult to break into a data storage facility, hack into their system to get the files, and then get out without anyone realizing we'd been there. But just having any possible solution at this point felt like a victory.

"This is fantastic news," Paul said. "Especially in light of the fact that Kai and I looked into the two biotech companies that stand to benefit from Lawson's new regulations. As you might expect, we found out that Bennicort is a major shareholder in

each of the companies and even serves on the board of directors of one of them."

Theresa kicked into high gear. "Kenji, can you call Votomatic and pretend you're a data storage vendor? Ask them who they're currently using so that you can prepare a competitive bid for them. They might give you the name right over the phone."

"Great idea," Kenji said, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "I'll try them on Monday. Since it's the holidays, they might be out until after the first of the year, but it's worth a try."

"Good," she said. "Once you have the information, Jesse and Ashlyn will need to scout the headquarters and figure out how we get in."

I swallowed hard. My confidence was shaken from my lousy performance during training over the past month. I was scared I was going to reappear accidentally, or drop out of the sky. How

could I have become an Alchemist, the most powerful of the Soterians, and then lose all of my powers? It didn't make sense. I went home feeling even more empty than I had before.

That night, I dreamed again about Deimos. Just like last time, he pursued us slowly, as if he weren't in any hurry and knew he'd get to us eventually. I saw the fire in his eyes, and I tried to attack him, but I still couldn't use any of my powers. He got closer this time and almost reached Kai before I jolted awake. I lay awake for hours. I was exhausted from many bad nights, but it seemed like it was just getting harder and harder to sleep.

The sun finally rose, and I decided to get up and make some coffee. My mom was still asleep, so I crept downstairs quietly. Three steps from the bottom, my toe caught on the rug, and I tripped. I smashed into the wall at the bottom of the stairs and

landed in a crumpled heap. Pain shot through my leg as it twisted underneath me.

This is it, I thought numbly. The end. I couldn't even hover to save myself from falling down the stairs. My powers were truly gone, and I had to face the fact that I had failed. Kai was living across the country and was in danger because of me, and now I couldn't even help him if something did happen. I was completely useless.

I heard my mom jump out of bed. "Ashlyn?" she called. "Are you all right?"

She came to the stairs and saw me lying there, tears streaming down my face. "Ashlyn, what happened? Did you fall down the stairs?"

"Yeah, but I think I'm okay. It just scared me more than anything." I got up stiffly, the tears flowing more freely now. My leg was killing me. My mom put her arms around me.

"My darling girl," she said, stroking my hair. "I'm so sorry you're having such a hard time with this."

"It's okay," I said. "I'll get over it eventually."

"No you won't, but you won't have to. He'll be back soon."

I pulled back and looked at her. "Why do you say that?"

"Honey, I saw the way he was with you. He's having just as hard a time as you are. It's starting to dawn on him that moving there isn't going to give him his childhood back. Once that sinks in, he'll start looking forward, not backward. And his future is with you."

I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and stared at her. "How do you know all this?"

She laughed. “It’s rather obvious. All anyone has to do is watch you two for about five seconds to see that you belong together.”

I put my arms around her again. “I’m so lucky to have you.”

“And I’m very lucky to have such a fabulous daughter. Now,” she said, steering me toward the kitchen, “What do you say we have some breakfast now that I’m up? You haven’t been eating much lately, and you’re getting too skinny. You have to nourish yourself if you’re going to do all that exercise. Calories in before calories out.”

At least I still had triathlons, I thought. Now I’d have more time to train, and to put into school. Maybe things would work out with Kai eventually. I clung to what my mom said, daring to hope. It was all I had.

After breakfast, I hobbled back upstairs to my room, my leg still hurting. I had just started writing in my journal when my Texas phone rang, making me jump. I dug it out of my bag and answered it.

"I was just thinking about you," I said. "Well, that's a given. Anyway, what are you doing calling today?"

"I've got some potentially bad news," he said slowly. "I talked to my dad this morning, and he said that a guy came to the house looking for me. He claimed he was a friend of mine from the last vet clinic I worked at in LA and that they had some papers to send to me, so my dad gave him my phone number. The guy called me this morning, asking for my address. I had a bad feeling about him, so I asked him if he was calling on behalf of Dr. Rose at the clinic, and he said yes. But Dr. Rose hasn't

worked there in two years. I think it must be one of Bennicort's men."

My head swam. This couldn't be happening. After how careful we'd been, how could they still want to follow him? And with my powers fading and now gone, surely they couldn't still think I was an Alchemist. Why would they want him? Unless they knew something that I didn't . . .

And then suddenly, it hit me. It all made perfect sense now, and I couldn't believe I hadn't figured it out before. A wave of energy rushed through me as I knew exactly what we needed to do.

"You have to move back here," I said. "Now."

"What?"

"I'm serious. I'm getting on a plane this afternoon. You can't drive alone this time."

"Ashlyn, wait, what do you—"

"No, I'm done waiting," I said, my voice getting louder. "They're after you because they know something I didn't know until just this moment. That you're the key to my powers. I'm an Alchemist now, which means I *combine elements*. The reason I haven't been able to call up fire again and that all my other powers are fading is because I have to channel love as well as evil. Without you, I have only half of what I need."

There was silence on the line for a few moments. "Okay, you might be right about this," he conceded, "but what about the fact that they might come after me to get to you? I don't care about my own safety except for how they could manipulate you if they do catch me."

"They're already looking for you for exactly that reason, so you need to be back here where we can protect you. I get it now

that I can't devote myself full-time to your protection, but I can't be a Soterian without you, either. Like everything else, my mission seems to be about finding balance. I know you've only been there a month, and you have a lot of history to revisit—"

"No," he said firmly. "I knew after about two weeks that I'd gotten what I came here for. I moved back here and reconnected with my extended family. I know that this is still home for me and always will be, and I can leave now by my own choice. We might decide to move back here some day, but while you still need to be in California for school and for your work with the Soterians, that's where home needs to be."

I felt a surge of relief spread through my body. It was like my blood hadn't been flowing for the past month and was now circulating again for the first time.

"Start packing," I said. "I'm going to get a flight."

"It's going to cost you a fortune."

"I don't care. I'll call you later when I know my flight information. Don't leave the house until I get there."

"I won't," he said. "And Ashlyn?"

"Yes?"

"I love you so much."

My heart raced. "I love you more than life itself," I said. "I can't wait to see you."

We hung up, and I quickly called John.

"Ashlyn, slow down," he said after I had spilled the whole story out to him. But I couldn't slow down. I felt like we were racing against a merciless clock, and any second could mean Kai's capture. I was booting up my laptop to look for flights and was throwing clothes into a bag while I talked to him.

"John, I'm one hundred percent positive about this. He is the key to my powers. Without him, I'm useless. You've seen that. And they're already on his trail again, so I have to go get him now."

"What do you propose?" he asked.

"I'm going to get the next flight out of town to Minneapolis, help him pack his car, and drive back to California with him."

"In the middle of winter?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid that there's a complication," he sighed. "Theresa and I have both felt a pull this morning. We think Bennicort's next move will be on New Year's Eve."

I was taken aback. It made sense that he'd try something on a night when lots of people were out partying. "All the more

reason for me to leave today and get back here as soon as possible," I said.

"But it's across the country, and the roads are going to be icy," he said. "Can you make it back here by Wednesday?"

"Yes. Don't worry, John. We'll leave tomorrow and drive straight through. We'll take turns sleeping and only stop if we have to."

"Hold on a second. Theresa wants to talk to you." I heard him give the phone to Theresa, who sounded more intense than usual.

"Ashlyn, this is Theresa. Thank God you finally found a solution. I was getting very worried that you were going to be of no use to us anymore. I think that you're right. Kai needs to be back with us. Do you have your flight yet?"

"No, I'm just looking at fares now. Oh holy crap," I said as I saw the prices for the flights leaving that day. My heart sank. This would eat up my budget for three months.

"Stop what you're doing and let me make a phone call," she said. "I'll call you right back."

She hung up, and I tossed the phone on the bed while I continued packing. Ten minutes later, the phone rang again.

"Okay, you're all set. I've got you booked on a flight out of SFO at twelve-twenty, which means you have about forty-five minutes to get to the airport to check in on time."

"Awesome! Thank you so much. Can I give them a credit card when I check in?"

"No need. I used my frequent flyer miles."

"Are you serious? Theresa, I don't know how I can ever repay you for this."

"Just come back ready to do your job," she said flatly.

"I will. I promise."

Chapter 30: Chasing the Sun

Sipping a ginger ale, I looked at the map in the back of the in-flight magazine and planned our trip. The most direct way would be to use the same route Kai took when he moved to Minnesota, but I was worried about crossing the Rocky Mountains in winter. I decided we should take the southern route instead, which would add two hundred miles but would probably take about the same amount of time because of the drier roads. Either way, it was going to be a very long trip. Kai had taken four days to drive back there, and we were doing it in half that time.

The big question was what to do with Kai after we got back. He needed to be close by, but he couldn't live with us. Maybe he

could move in with a friend. His cousin wouldn't be upset about him leaving the apartment, since that was a temporary arrangement anyway. I was so glad he was working as a temp and could easily quit his job. But I wasn't sure how easy it would be for him to get a job in Santa Barbara, and I got the sense that he didn't have much savings, if any.

But even as my brain churned over the logistics, my heart was bouncing. Kai was coming home! After countless hours of thinking about him every day, desperately wanting to see him, and an entire month of my life lost to misery, I was going to see him again in only a few hours, and then we were going to spend three whole days together. I couldn't wait.

After that, everything else would be up in the air. How long would it take for my powers to return? What was Bennicort planning for New Year's Eve? Who else was working for Deimos?

There was so much to think about, it made my head hurt. I closed my eyes and let the roar of the plane block everything out for a little while, just feeling the joy of being carried closer and closer to Kai.

As we started our descent, I felt my excitement building. I hadn't checked a bag, so I could skip baggage claim, get straight into a cab, and go to his apartment. I pulled out my compact and my hairbrush and tried to tidy up a bit. My reflection showed dark circles under my eyes from a month of bad sleep. I sighed and snapped the compact shut.

When we landed, it seemed like an eternity before we could get off the plane. People slowly got out of their seats, pulled bags awkwardly from the overhead bins, dropped things, and generally took far longer than was necessary. I tapped my foot impatiently and fought the urge to fly over all their heads. I had

no idea whether I *could* fly anymore, but I wasn't going to risk letting those thoughts run away with me.

Finally, I was in the terminal and practically sprinted toward the exit. I gasped when I walked outside, the freezing Minnesota air taking me by surprise as my breath caught in my throat. I quickly hailed a cab and spent the next twenty minutes fidgeting in the back seat.

When the cab pulled up around the corner from Kai's apartment, a smile spread widely across on my face. I was actually going to see Kai. I was actually going to see him! I got out of the cab, waited for it to drive out of sight, and then carefully looked around the corner.

There were several cars parked on Kai's street. I waited, shivering in the cold, until a car drove up the street, its headlights illuminating the interiors of the parked cars as it

passed them. Sure enough, I spotted the dim outline of a person sitting in a car across the street from Kai's apartment.

I turned around and headed to the next street, where I walked along the icy sidewalk until I came to the fifth house. I quietly crept up the driveway and climbed over the fence to the small patio behind Kai's place.

I dashed to the rear stairwell and ran up the stairs to his unit. I knocked on the door three times, then once, and then three times again as we had agreed.

There was no answer.

I looked around, fighting the panic rising in my chest. I waited thirty seconds and tried again, but there was still no answer. This was torture. After counting down the minutes all day, here I was at last, in Minneapolis, in front of Kai's door, and

there was no answer. My heart was pounding as I tried to figure out what to do next.

"Ashlyn?"

I spun around, and there was Kai walking quickly toward me. I ran and threw myself into his arms, squeezing him so tightly he stopped breathing for a moment. I burst into tears and stood there, just holding him, feeling his warmth filling up every inch of my body. I never wanted to let him go.

"Ashlyn," he murmured, stroking my hair. "God, I missed you."

I looked up into his face. His beautiful eyes were luminous and shining. I kissed him over and over, his soft, warm lips melting into mine.

After a very long time, I pulled back and held his hands. I just wanted to stare at him. A month didn't sound like that

much time in the abstract, but a month of having your heart ripped out and hanging outside of your body by a thread was a very, very long time indeed. Seeing him and touching him, I started to feel like a whole person again. I dried my eyes as he unlocked the door, and we went inside the apartment.

"I was so worried about you," I said. "Why did you leave the apartment?"

"I had to get some groceries for our trip before the store closed. I waited until it was dark, and I dressed as inconspicuously as I could." I noticed for the first time that he was dressed all in black and even had a black knit hat pulled down low on his head.

I smiled at him. "Good thinking. You were much more likely to be hit by a car than spotted by Bennicort's guy."

"Yeah, he's been sitting out there for a few hours," Kai said, glancing toward the door. "I hope he's freezing his ass off."

"What did you end up telling your cousin?" I asked.

"I told him that I was dealing with a dispute with my credit card company, and in the meantime, if anyone asked for me, he should just say I was out and not tell them that I've moved."

"Good story," I said. "Hopefully that will buy us a little time. Wow, I can't believe you got everything packed already," I said, looking at the boxes stacked by the front door.

"I never really unpacked, to tell you the truth. I guess some part of me knew I wouldn't be staying."

"I can't believe you're coming back. I know it's wrong to say this, but I actually feel grateful to Bennicort right now."

He put his arms around me. "Nothing is going to keep us apart again. You're stuck with me, I'm afraid."

I pulled him closer and kissed him again, wishing we could stop time and savor this moment forever.

* * *

Early the next morning, we were driving south on Interstate 35 toward Iowa, his car packed to the seams. I held his hand as he drove, alternating between staring at him and looking out at the scenery. It was flat here, and the ground was white for as far as we could see. Grey, barren trees poked up through the blanket of snow, reaching gnarled fingers into the icy blue sky, and farm houses stood braced against the weather. It was desolate but beautiful.

I felt totally at peace. I had slept in Kai's arms all night, and it was the best night's sleep I'd ever had, even though we'd gotten up at four-thirty to pack his car under cover of darkness. I looked out the window when we first woke up to see whether I

could spot anyone watching his cousin's place, but the street was deserted.

I was thrilled to discover that my eyesight was sharp again. I hadn't tried flying yet, but I didn't feel any need to. Being with Kai was so fulfilling, it completely took over that desire for the rush of flying. I kept my hand on his, never wanting to let go.

Our plan was ambitious: we'd drive sixteen hours to Amarillo, Texas, stop at a motel for the night, and then drive another sixteen hours straight through to Santa Barbara the next day. Then we'd unload his stuff at Max's house, spend the night at my place, and drive up to the Bay Area the next morning. That would put us in San Francisco on Tuesday afternoon, a day before New Year's Eve, which would give us time to rest at my mom's before the big day. We would desperately need it after such a long haul. But the important thing was that I felt like

everything was working again. My energy was high, my heart was spilling over with joy, and I felt calm, confident, and ready to face Bennicort and whatever he had planned.

The miles rolled by. We played CDs, sometimes listening quietly, sometimes talking. We told each other stories from our childhoods, talked about what we wanted out of life, and discussed politics and religion. There's nothing like a long road trip for getting to know someone, and by the time we reached Amarillo at ten o'clock that night, I felt like I'd known Kai my entire life.

The next day we got up at five-thirty. It wasn't nearly enough sleep, but we were taking turns driving and napping in four-hour shifts. I took the first shift, well-caffeinated from the terrible coffee from the motel room.

The sun wasn't going to come up for another two hours, and I was glad for my enhanced vision. I watched as Kai dozed in the passenger seat, his breathing soft and even. He looked so beautiful and serene.

Suddenly, headlights shone in my face, and a car honked loudly. I gasped as I realized I had drifted into the oncoming traffic. I swerved back to the right, overcorrecting and making the car bounce from side to side. I held my breath as I gripped the wheel tightly, struggling to regain control. I slowed down carefully, and the car finally straightened out.

I took several breaths to calm down. Kai let out a snore—incredibly, he'd slept through the whole thing. I focused my eyes straight ahead and made a promise to myself right then that I would never again let my feelings for Kai distract me from what I

needed to do to keep him safe, whether that was keeping my eyes on the road or focusing on my work with the Soterians.

I drove through the northern tip of Texas, marveling at its beauty. We'd noticed the previous night that it lived up to its reputation of vast, wide-open spaces with huge stars twinkling in the sky. As I crossed the border into New Mexico, the sky began to lighten, and rays of light peeked up over the horizon in my rearview mirror. Kai stirred, and I glanced at him as he blinked his sleepy eyes, looking simply adorable. I resisted the urge to stare at him, dutifully watching the road.

"Where are we?" he asked, yawning and stretching.

"New Mexico. You slept through the rest of Texas."

He looked around slowly. I'd come to learn that Kai wasn't much of a morning person and didn't have a whole lot to say

before he'd had coffee. I smiled, so happy that I had this opportunity to learn about his little quirks.

We stopped at a gas station in Albuquerque, where Kai got coffee that was even worse than the swill at the motel, and then he took the next shift driving. We had both always wanted to travel to the Southwest, and we talked about what a shame it was that we didn't have time to stop and see the sights. But there was plenty to see even from the car. Interstate 40 followed much of the same route that used to be Route 66, and we could see why it had been such a popular drive. The Southwest was beautiful, with gently sloping mesas rising above the rich reds and browns of the Painted Desert.

We arrived in Flagstaff, Arizona at around two o'clock in the afternoon. I noticed that Kai had been rather quiet for the last half an hour.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"It's just a drag that we can't stop and see anything. It sucks to be this close to Sedona and not stop there."

I pulled out the map and did some quick calculations. "Head south on Highway eighty-nine A."

"Do we have time for that?" he asked.

"It's less than an hour south of Flagstaff, and then if we keep going south, we'll hook up with Highway ten, which will take us straight to the one-oh-one. If we spend no more than an hour in Sedona, we'll be in Santa Barbara at midnight."

He thought about it for a moment. "It would probably be a good idea to take a break. And I could seriously go for something different to eat." He tossed his apple core into the bag. It had been nice to eat the healthy food he'd bought instead

of stopping at greasy roadside diners, but it was all getting a little stale, and suddenly a hot lunch sounded awesome.

He took the exit, and soon we were driving down into a canyon, the rust-colored walls dotted with dark green shrubs and trees. Small, puffy clouds hung in the brilliant blue sky. All the colors seemed brighter, more saturated somehow. We kept pointing things out to each other and commenting on how gorgeous it all was.

Finally, we rolled into Sedona around three o'clock and found a pizza place. We got a couple of cheese and veggie slices and walked around, taking in the scenery and stretching our legs. The cool, clean air and the hot pizza made us feel refreshed again.

"It's beautiful here," I said. "Good idea stopping. I needed a break before I drive the next shift."

"It would be nice to stay longer some time," he said.

"Let's come back here and stay at a bed and breakfast," I suggested.

"I'd like that." He held my hand as we walked through a small park. The canyon walls loomed in the distance, and the cool air swept through my hair. "I want to travel all over the world with you."

"I was thinking the same thing," I said. "Despite the fact that we're on this mad dash across the country, I'm enjoying the hell out of myself. I really like travelling with you."

"Just one more way in which we're compatible," he said. "I think we agree on almost everything."

"What don't we agree on?" I asked playfully.

He looked at me with a penetrating gaze. “I just never want to be without you. Ever. Every time I think about my future, it includes you.”

“And I feel exactly the same way. I can’t imagine a life without you.”

He paused, searching my face. There was something strange in his expression. “I guess we should get back on the road. It’s getting late.”

I looked at him, perplexed, but something in his tone told me not to press him. We were silent until we were on the road again, when we started talking about our plans.

“It would be so much nicer if we could just move in together,” he said.

“I know, but you’ll find something close by. And besides, this will give me some time to get my head straight.”

"How do you mean?"

"I mean I'm obviously still kind of a train wreck, and I need to deal with my insecurity. I want to make sure that I do things right with you. I don't ever want to blame our problems on the fact that we moved too fast too soon."

"I can't imagine ever having problems with you," he said.

"I know, but they're sure to come up. I'm a pain in the ass, Kai. I really am. Believe it or not, we're going to have disagreements, even fights, as hard as it is to imagine that right now. I want to make sure we don't have any surprises about each other after we do move in together."

"I'm not worried about it," he said. "You and I both know that relationships take work. It seems to me that most relationships fail because people just aren't willing to work on

them. As soon as they have to consult each other and make compromises, they give up."

"Or they try to make the other person responsible for their happiness," I added. "I've known a lot of girls who wanted a guy to come along and 'make them happy,' to give them an identity."

"Well," he said, stroking my hair, "I can't pretend you don't make me happy. I was very unhappy without you."

"I know. I was miserable when you were gone. Absolutely miserable. But I also know that I have to find balance. I feel like I would die without you, Kai, but I still have to live my life, pursue my studies, get a career, all of that."

"And occasionally save the world."

"That too," I said. "And you have your music. That's what I mean about needing to get my head straight. I can't believe I

freaked out that night at the club. I want you to be successful, and if I'm going to support you in that, I have to get over this."

"You don't still doubt me, do you?"

I sighed. "Most of me doesn't, but the damaged, freaked-out part of me is always going to doubt. I just need to make sure the rest of me is strong enough not to listen to it."

We drove south, watching the landscape change to classic desert, with saguaro cactuses and pale green shrubs rising out of the ground. Finally, we reached Highway 10 and headed west again, the sun sinking low on the horizon in front of us. It felt like we were chasing the sun, trying to catch up to it before it slipped away.

Chapter 31: Trapped

At half past midnight, we finally arrived in Isla Vista, absolutely exhausted. I could not wrap my brain around everything that had happened. In three days, I had gone from falling down the stairs and losing all my powers, to flying across the country, to driving back across the country with my powers fully restored and Kai at my side. I felt like I was in some bizarre movie. Things like that just didn't happen in real life.

We pulled up to Max's house, which he shared with three other people. They had a large garage, and Max had cleared some space for Kai's stuff. Even though it was the last thing in the world we wanted to do, we wearily unloaded Kai's car. Max offered us drinks and suggested ordering a pizza, but we were

too tired for anything but sleep. On the last of our energy, we drove back to my place, crawled into bed, and fell asleep within seconds.

The next morning we slept in until ten-thirty. I couldn't believe it. I hadn't slept that late since my drinking days. My stomach growled angrily at me, and we hurried to get dressed and get some breakfast at a restaurant, since the café in my apartment complex was closed for the holidays. We didn't much feel like getting back in the car, but we had to get back to Berkeley that night. We decided we'd leave at two o'clock, which would get us home in time for a late dinner with my mom.

"What do you want to do until then?" I asked.

"I have a couple of errands to run," he said. "Do you have something in mind?"

"Actually, I thought it might be a good opportunity to go by Bennicort's place and see if I can get any information. You take the car and run your errands, and I'll fly there."

"Are you sure you're ready for that?"

"No time like the present to find out. I'll just poke around and see if I can hear anything. If they're planning something for tomorrow, there must be some buzz."

"Okay, I'll meet you back here at a quarter to two," he said.

"Be careful, Kai. I don't know if Bennicort knows that we're here, but stay in public places, okay?"

We left the restaurant, and I ducked behind the building and disappeared. I took a deep breath and rose effortlessly. I had all my powers back! I was so happy, I zoomed into the air and shot off toward Bennicort's house.

When I arrived, I heard voices coming from the cottage. The windows were covered, but I was able to peek through a crack in the blinds. I could just see Steve Andrews, Bennicort's front man. I recognized the voice of the second man as David, the dispatcher who was on the phone on Halloween.

" . . . have to make sure that we have enough to get each tower," Andrews said. "I don't want any mistakes tomorrow night."

"There won't be," David said. "We've got a very tight plan. It's going to be quite a spectacle. I almost wish I were going to be there watching."

"You can watch it all night on the news afterwards." Andrews walked out and headed into the main house. I flew around the cottage, going from window to window until I finally found one that gave me a better view. I could see lots of papers strewn

about on the desk. But what really caught my eye was a map of San Francisco and a large blueprint of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Oh no. Not the bridge.

Suddenly, several men drove up in the same black SUVs as before. They pulled around back, and the compound became a flurry of activity as they started loading up crates and boxes. I flew over to one of the SUVs and slipped through the open double doors in the rear. When they had their backs turned, I carefully lifted the lid on a crate.

Inside, there was a black metal device with a mass of wires. I didn't know anything about explosives, but that was definitely what it looked like to me. I had to let John know as soon as possible. I flew back toward the doors . . .

. . . which suddenly slammed in my face.

"Okay, that's it. Let's head out," a man said as he got into the driver's seat. Another man got in the passenger seat and carelessly tossed a duffle bag toward the back, which just missed me. The driver slapped him on the side of the head. "Luke, you moron, be careful! Don't you know what's back there?"

"Hey, lay off, man. It's just got clothes and stuff in it." He rubbed the side of his head and looked sulky.

The clock on the dashboard said one-thirty. I was going to be late meeting Kai, and I didn't know how I was going to get out of there. But I couldn't pass up this opportunity to learn something. The other three SUVs drove down the driveway, and we brought up the rear, following them through Montecito and onto Highway 101 heading north.

I hovered quietly, waiting for the men to talk about their plans. Unfortunately, they weren't much in the way of

conversationalists. Brian, the driver, chatted stupidly about the "bimbo" he was sleeping with, while Luke talked incessantly about going to Las Vegas. I wondered where Andrews had dug up these guys. They seemed like bigger losers than the last bunch.

Finally, I knew I had to let Kai know what was going on. I carefully pulled out my phone and sent him a text message.

Following Bennicorts crew north on 101. Meet u on the road.

We drove for an hour and a half. It was impossible to get comfortable on the crates, so I hovered the whole time, which was especially exhausting after our marathon drive across the country. As we approached Santa Maria, I suddenly felt myself touch down and realized I had nodded off for a moment. I started pinching myself to make sure I stayed awake.

As we pulled into Santa Maria, we moved into the right lane and headed for an exit. “What are we stopping here for?” Luke asked.

“I’m finding a gas station. I gotta take a piss.”

“You should have gone before we left the house,” Luke said in a mocking tone.

“Shut your trap.”

This would be my opportunity to get out, but how could I do that without being noticed? When I opened the door to get out, people would see the door opening, apparently all on its own. In desperation, an idea hit me. I carefully summoned fire in my core and projected it forward until the temperature in the car rose several degrees.

“Damn, it’s hot in here,” Luke said. He rolled down his window, and I breathed a sigh of relief. As soon as he got out, I

would just fly out his window and be gone. It was the perfect solution.

We turned toward a gas station but then drove right past it. I looked around, confused. There didn't seem to be any other gas stations around. Where was he going?

Suddenly, Brian pulled into an empty parking lot and brought the car to a screeching halt. He yanked a gun out of his pocket, turned around, and pointed it straight at me. My heart stopped.

"What the hell are you doing?" Luke asked.

"Shut up," Brian growled. "Listen up," he said loudly. "I know you're back there. Show yourself or I start shooting."

"Oh dude, is it one of those freaks Andrews warned us about?" asked Luke, his eyes wide. "How do you know he's back there?"

"It's not a he, it's a her. I saw her for a second in the rearview mirror." He cocked the gun at me, his eyes wide.

My heart was hammering in my chest as I tried to keep my breathing quiet, jamming myself into the corner. *Just calm down*, I told myself. I tried to convince myself that even these two idiots weren't stupid enough to start randomly shooting when they had explosives in the car.

"Show yourself, now!" Brian yelled. I had to do something fast. I needed a diversion.

I focused all my energy on a tiny point between them, desperately wanting them to see it. At first, nothing happened, and I felt my panic rising.

"That's it, I'm coming back there," Brian said, starting to climb over the seat.

I focused harder, and suddenly a small bee appeared next to Brian's head. I made it fly around next to him and then in front of his face. It even buzzed convincingly. Brian seemed only vaguely aware of it, but Luke freaked out.

"Aaaah!" he screamed. He opened the door and jumped out, running about six feet away.

"What's the matter with you?" Brian shouted, his gun still pointed at me.

"There's a bee in there!" Luke yelled.

"You're afraid of a little bee? Get your ass back here!"

Encouraged, I conjured up a large swarm of bees, and they buzzed angrily around Brian. He shrieked and started batting at them, waving the gun around dangerously. To my relief, he finally jumped out of the car.

I flew forward and out of the passenger door as Brian and Luke continued to yell at each other.

"What did you think you were going to do, shoot at someone you couldn't see?" Luke asked.

"Shut your mouth before I shut it for you," Brian raged. I rolled my eyes. I was certainly not going to miss those guys.

I reached for my cell phone and felt a horrible sinking feeling in my stomach. My phone wasn't there—it must have fallen out in the SUV. Oh God, I couldn't go back in there! But I had to. If they found my phone, they'd also find all my contacts in it.

Biting my lip, I flew back through the window. I searched around madly until I found my phone wedged between the crate and the back door. I yanked it out and flew forward, but just then the guys got back in.

"It was a trick," Brian said. "They're not real. She's probably long gone by now."

"That's really creepy," Luke said, looking around warily. "I'm allergic to bee stings."

"You're a pussy is what you are."

"Shut up."

They pulled out of the parking lot and headed back toward the freeway. I was feeling completely desperate and had to get out of there. I thought about trying to make a run for it out the back doors, but then the crate might slip out and blow up the whole street.

Steeling my resolve, I edged forward until I was just behind Luke's head. Leaning as far around to the side of him as I could, I summoned fire in my core and sent a fireball out his window at a large tree branch hanging over the street. It exploded and

dropped heavily to the ground in front of us. Brian hit the brakes.

"What are you doing? It's probably another one of her tricks," Luke said.

"You want to take a chance running over something like that with the cargo we're carrying?" Brian snarled. He inched the SUV up to the branch and bumped it with the tires. "See? It's solid. Help me move it out of the way." They got out of the car, and I shot out of Luke's window.

I exhaled deeply, relief washing over me. I'd never felt so trapped in my life, not even when I was stuck in Bennicort's house on Halloween. As I watched them struggle with the branch, my heart began to return to a normal pace, and the whole situation suddenly struck me as funny now that the crisis

had passed. I fought the urge to laugh out loud as I flew to the back of the gas station, where I landed and called Kai.

"Ashlyn?" He sounded very worried.

"It's me. I'm okay. Where are you?"

"I'm just heading toward Santa Maria," he said.

"Perfect, that's where I am. Take the Main Street exit and turn left. I'm at the gas station on the right."

"Okay," he said, sounding relieved. "See you in a few minutes." I watched as the SUV sped up the street toward the freeway on-ramp, Brian and Luke still visibly arguing as they drove by.

I stayed invisible until I saw Kai pull up. I reappeared behind the building and ran to his car.

"Ashlyn," he said with relief. "I was so worried about you." He reached over and put his arms around me, squeezing me tightly.

"I'm fine. Wait until you hear what I found out." I told him everything I'd discovered as we started north again. He listened intently as I told him how I'd flown into the back of the SUV, and he groaned at the part where I got shut in. When I told him about falling asleep and reappearing, he shook his head.

"Okay, that's it. You're never going on a mission again without proper sleep."

"Agreed," I said. I told him the rest of the story, and he glanced at me in amazement.

"Creating an illusion is new for you, isn't it?" he asked.

"I guess so. I've never tried it before."

"And projecting heat instead of fire outside of yourself?"

"Also something new. I'm sort of making this up as I go along."

"It sounds to me like your powers are advancing," he said. "You better call John and give him the update."

I pulled out my phone again and told John the full story.

"It's a good thing he only caught a glimpse of you in the mirror," he said. "Do you have them in your sights?"

"We're about five minutes behind them," I said. "Should we try to catch up and follow them?"

"Yes, we need to watch their every move. I'll tell Jesse that he'll need to be on duty tonight. And we should also get the police involved. This is too big for us to tackle alone."

"The police are already stretched to their limit," I said. "I wonder if we should contact the FBI, since this is essentially a terrorist act we're talking about."

"Good idea. When we have more information, I'll place an anonymous tip. I'll tell Jesse that you'll call him with info about where to go."

I hung up, and we raced along until we finally caught up with one of the SUVs. Kai eased up on the gas and pulled back into the slow lane. He kept about four cars back from that point on so that we could just keep their black roofs in view.

Now that the excitement had died down, we settled back into conversation. "How were your errands?" I asked.

"I'm glad you asked," he said, with a mysterious smile on his face. "I wanted to talk to you about that."

"What is it?" I asked curiously.

"Well, when you called and said you were bringing me back to California, I started thinking more about my plans. And I had to admit that there's a good chance I won't make it as a rock

musician, so I really need a backup plan. There's not much besides music that interests me, but I think I'd like to teach it. So I decided to go back to school."

"Kai, that's wonderful! I mean, I don't think you'll need it," I added quickly. "I can't imagine you won't make it in music. But I think you'd be a great teacher. Which age group are you thinking about?"

"Probably college," he said. "I'm thinking of focusing on composition. Anyway, I went down to UCSB today and talked to an admissions counselor, who helped me figure out what I'd need to transfer there. Since I already completed a year of college, I'll just need two semesters at Santa Barbara City College, and then I can transfer to UCSB in the fall. So I went online and signed up for classes at the city college for the spring semester. I'll also go during the summer to finish up."

"You are such a stud," I said in amazement. "I can't believe you managed to do all that in just a couple of hours."

"It wasn't really a big deal. The counselor was very helpful. The office was practically deserted, so I think she was just glad to talk to someone."

I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm so happy for you. I think you've made a great choice."

"Well, actually, there's more," he said. "While I was waiting for you, I stopped in at the office to see whether there were any openings at your apartment complex. Since I'm a college student now, I'm eligible to live there. They have a waiting list for next year, but they said there might be someone not coming back in January, in which case there would be an open spot in one of the units."

"Are you serious? You might be living in our complex?" I nearly shrieked.

"She said she'd know by Friday and will give me a call. Otherwise, I can crash at Max's place until I find something."

I cuddled up next to Kai and put my head on his shoulder. I was so happy, I couldn't speak. How could things have been so horrible just a few days ago and now be so perfect? I knew it could all turn bad again any second, but I wasn't going to think about that right now. For now, I just wanted to enjoy the happiness I was feeling right in this moment.

Chapter 32: Judgment Day

"It's about time you called," Jesse's voice chided through the phone. "What do you have?"

"They've pulled up to a warehouse in China Basin," I said. Kai and I were parked down the dark street, where we were watching them as they got out of the SUVs and unloaded crates into the warehouse. I gave Jesse the address. "You'd better get over here fast."

"Oh, look who's giving orders all of a sudden," he said in a mocking tone and hung up. A few minutes later, I saw him fly overhead and into the warehouse.

"Kai, I'm going to go scout with Jesse. I'll call you when we're ready to head back to Berkeley."

"You feeling up to it?"

"Yeah, that nap between Gilroy and San Francisco really helped. I'll be fine."

"Okay. I'll be at Paul's."

I kissed him quickly and flew over to the warehouse. Brian and Luke were there, still bickering. Inside the warehouse, a couple of men were looking at a clipboard and talking in low voices. I strained to hear them as I flew closer.

"The boats will arrive at five o'clock," said the first man, who spoke with a Spanish accent. "Make sure everything is on the docks and ready to load no later than a quarter to."

"No problem, we got it covered," said a short, squat man with pasty skin and hair that stuck up in the middle, reminding me vaguely of a turnip. He spoke casually but looked anxious.

"Remember," said the first man, "one word of this leaks out, you don't get paid. Just an early trip to Judgment Day. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. I've given everyone an extra day off tomorrow. They think I'm the nicest boss in the world. There won't be anyone around."

"There better not be." He turned around and walked away. The boss shook his head and started yelling at the drivers. "Hurry up with those so I can lock up. I want to get out of here."

I saw Jesse's outline as he flew out of the warehouse. He had a smile on his face as he approached me. "I'm going to tail Señor Judgment Day over there," he whispered. "You follow the minions back to wherever they're staying tonight." I watched Jesse fly away, amused by how much he was enjoying himself, and then got in position behind the SUVs.

I followed them through San Francisco and onto the Golden Gate Bridge. Thankfully, traffic was moving slowly, so I didn't have to fly very fast. I looked up at the amber lights twinkling on the towers and at the inky black ocean stretched out to my left. A red tanker floated under the bridge, loaded with cargo. Was that their plan? Would they load the explosives onto a ship and detonate it under the bridge?

They drove through Marin to San Rafael, where they headed into the warehouse district. They stopped in front of a building with the same name as the warehouse in San Francisco: B.J. Reynolds & Sons. I wondered whether the boss in the first warehouse was B.J. They unloaded the second half of the crates and drove away. Maybe they were planning to head in from both sides of the bridge in case one of the boats was apprehended. I

wracked my brain to figure out their plan, but there just wasn't enough information.

I followed them into downtown San Rafael, where they checked into a small hotel. After I had waited outside for ten minutes, they all came out and walked up the street to a sushi restaurant. It was small and crowded, and I knew I'd have trouble getting in there while invisible, so I hovered outside. The smell of soy sauce and rice reached my nose, and I felt light-headed as I realized I was starving. I decided to take a chance that they wouldn't recognize me. I reappeared and walked into the restaurant, keeping my head down.

I sat at the bar where there was one stool left and ordered an avocado roll, cucumber roll, and ume roll. I had been happy to discover not long ago that there were good vegetarian sushi options, and I didn't miss the fish at all.

I sipped my tea and tuned my ears to the men, who were sitting a couple of tables behind me. I immediately recognized the voices of Brian and Luke.

"I don't care what he says. I'm driving, not you," Brian said.

"But you're a terrible actor. You'll start sweating and give it away," Luke said.

"Anyone would be sweating in a situation like that!"

"Look, would you morons keep your voices down?" another man urged. "You're acting like a couple of kids. This is serious."

"No kidding, Einstein. Which is why I'm driving tomorrow," Luke said.

"No, you're not. Man, we went over this already," Brian said.

I sighed. I was beginning to doubt that they would say anything useful. I chewed my sushi slowly and listened to them talk for another ten minutes before I decided I'd had enough.

They'd quickly moved on to planning that night's adventures, which involved drinking and trying to find women willing to put up with them.

I signed the credit card slip and handed it back to the man behind the counter. I was still listening to the men at the table as I walked out. Just before I reached the door, I heard a sickening sound: my name.

"Ashlyn Woods? Miss Woods, wait! You left your card." The man behind the counter came running forward with my credit card.

"Thank you," I said, quickly taking the card and shoving it into my pocket. I glanced at the men, and my stomach lurched as I saw them all staring at me. They started pushing back their chairs, and I slipped out onto the street.

I jogged down the sidewalk looking for a dark corner. The streets were just crowded enough that I'd be seen if I tried to disappear, but they weren't busy enough to hide me.

I heard the men yelling behind me. They were getting closer. I rounded a corner, ducked between two parked cars, and disappeared. I shot into the air just as they turned the corner.

The guys stopped, looking confused.

"She can't have gone far."

"You think she was listening?"

"Of course she was. I told you to keep your voices down."

Just then, the man from behind the counter caught up with the men and started yelling that they hadn't paid.

"Okay, okay, take it easy, old man," Brian said. "We just thought we saw someone we knew, that's all."

They headed back to the restaurant, the counter man still fuming. I took a deep breath. How could I have been so stupid as to leave my credit card behind? I flew back to San Francisco, feeling incredibly foolish. I tried telling myself that I had only been doing this for a few months, that I wasn't a trained undercover officer, and that this was how you learned. But I couldn't shake the feeling that maybe I just wasn't any good at this. Maybe it was something that couldn't be taught.

When I got to Paul's apartment, Jesse, Kai, and Paul were playing cards. I told them what little I'd learned. Jesse's eyes gleamed.

"I had better luck than you did. Turns out Señor Judgment Day is named Miguel Sanchez. He's here from Mexico and does business with Bennicort. Sanchez was on his cell phone a lot and was talking to someone about providing cheap labor for the

reconstruction, and there was lots of talk about getting around immigration."

"Reconstruction?" I gasped. "You don't mean . . . "

"I do mean. They're already preparing a bid for rebuilding the bridge. After they blow it up, of course."

I sat down hard in a chair. "So this isn't about power after all. It's about money."

"It's both," Paul said. "Lawson gets a kickback for pushing through the bid from his buddy Sanchez, and for turning a blind eye while they blow up the bridge to create the project in the first place. And Lawson gets to call in the state militia and start exerting total control. It's a slam dunk."

"It's revolting," I said, feeling queasy at the thought that they would blow up the bridge and kill innocent people, all for money.

"But now that we know what's going to happen, we can stop them," Jesse said. "John will call the FBI, and they'll shut down the operation."

"There's just one problem," I said. "Do you think maybe the reason they chose New Year's Eve, and such a high-profile target, was because it's so far-fetched? Think about it. How believable is it going to sound if John calls in with an anonymous tip that someone is going to blow up the Golden Gate Bridge on New Year's Eve? They probably get tons of calls like that every year."

I looked around the room as this sunk in. None of us could risk identifying ourselves, so it would have to be anonymous. And yet the fact that it would be anonymous would make it that much less believable.

"We're just going to have to stop them ourselves," Jesse said. "We'll have to catch Bennicort's men in the act and stop them

before they can detonate the explosives. Hopefully they'll lead the trail back to Andrews and Bennicort."

We decided it was the best plan we had and called John and Theresa with the news. He agreed the phone call wasn't likely to produce much in the way of results, but we had to give it a shot.

John was excited to hear about Sanchez. "The net is closing," he said, his voice buzzing through the speakerphone. "We're ferreting out Lawson's backers one by one. And I have some more good news. I just talked to Kenji, and he said he finally got through to the Votomatic people and found out the name of their data storage company. They're called FailSafe Data Storage, and they're located in San Jose."

"That's fantastic," Jesse said. "How did he get the name?"

John chuckled. “He ended up going to Votomatic for a job interview. When it was his turn to ask questions, he grilled them on their development tools, and they just told him.”

“Brilliant,” I said. “Kenji is amazing. So what’s the strategy?”

“Kenji figured that he was already wearing a suit, so he went straight down to FailSafe’s office and asked to talk to the development manager about job openings. He managed to talk himself into an interview, and he got a good look at the office space.”

“We’re really lucky to have him,” Kai said, shaking his head in awe. “No one else could have pulled off something like that.”

Suddenly, I started feeling woozy. “John, I’m going to be useless tomorrow if I don’t get some sleep,” I said. “We’ll call you in the morning.”

"Very good. All of you get plenty of rest tonight. We know the boats are arriving at the warehouse at five, but we don't know when they're planning to set off the explosives. It could be as late as midnight."

"Happy New Year," I muttered. We hung up, and Kai and I said good-night to Jesse and Paul.

When we arrived at my mom's, her eyes were wide with concern as she opened the door.

"It's ten o'clock!" she said. "What happened?" She looked at me searchingly for a moment. "Oh, never mind," she said, giving me a hug. "I can see this trip has been very good for you. Hello, Kai, good to see you again. Come in, I'll heat up some lasagna. I left out the meat for you guys, but it's still good."

My stomach growled. Even though I'd had sushi an hour ago, my appetite was starting to come back, and Mom's lasagna was not something to be turned down in any case.

We spent the next hour eating and telling my mom all about our road trip. When Kai excused himself to call his parents, Mom spoke to me in a low voice.

"It seems like things have taken a more serious turn with you two."

"Yeah, definitely," I smiled.

"I think Kai is great, honey, but I'm just a bit concerned that this is moving somewhat fast."

"You're right—it is. But it's not something I really have a choice over. I can't *not* be with him. That should be obvious from how unhappy I've been."

She nodded. “You do look like yourself again.” Her eyes brightened. “I can see him as my son-in-law.”

“Mom!” I said, about to argue, but Kai walked back into the room. My mom grinned at him. “So, I guess Ashlyn gets to meet your family next.”

My stomach felt like it was suddenly full of lead. I was terrified of meeting Kai’s parents. Todd’s family had hated me and made my life miserable, and I couldn’t bear it if the same thing happened with Kai’s family. But if Kai could handle my dad’s inevitable dislike of him, I could suck it up and deal. I would do everything I could to make things peaceful with Kai’s family.

My mom stood up. “Bed time for me. Will I see you for breakfast in the morning?”

“Yes, let’s cook together,” I said.

"I could make a frittata," Kai offered.

"And I'll make my fried potatoes," my mom said enthusiastically.

"Great. See you in the morning." I kissed her and she went upstairs.

"Your mom is so cool," Kai said. "And don't worry, my folks are going to love you."

"How did you know I was worried about that?"

"Ashlyn, your face is an open book. It's one of the things I love about you. Your eyebrow gives you away every time."

"I really do need to work on that," I said, trying to stifle a big yawn. "It has a mind of its own. Gets me in trouble sometimes, especially with teachers."

Kai laughed. "I'll bet. Come on, you have a big job to do tomorrow, and you need your sleep. Let's get you to bed."

He helped me up, and we headed for the stairs. Suddenly, he stopped and held my hand for a moment.

"I want you to be very careful tomorrow," he said. "I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you."

He looked at me hard, and I felt a surge of adrenaline as I thought about what we would be facing the next day.

Chapter 33: New Year's Eve

Darkness was already falling at a quarter to five, hanging a purple shroud around the bay that hazed the outline of the warehouse in Marin. I was hovering over the building, biting my nails almost down to the quick. As expected, when John called the FBI, they wrote him off as a crank caller. Theresa was furious and also tried calling, but she got the same response. We were definitely on our own.

Jesse was patrolling the San Francisco warehouse with Raina and Claire waiting in the car nearby. Michael was with Rebecca in my car a block away from me. Kenji and Christoph were on the bridge. The plan was that we'd create a distraction at the warehouses and try to stop the boats, but if that didn't work,

Kenji and Christoph would try to physically stop them as they approached the bridge.

As the minutes ticked by, I began to get concerned. Nobody was showing up. Was it possible that they changed their plans after seeing me last night? It would make sense. They would have no way of knowing that I heard them at the warehouse, but they might have changed some of the details in case they'd let something slip at the restaurant. But we'd been there all afternoon in case they did change their plans, and we hadn't seen anything.

I decided to look around the warehouse. It was locked tight, but after a long search, I finally found a dirty window that was cracked in one corner. I peeked through it and felt my heart stop.

The crates weren't there. All that was left were three red spray-painted outlines where the crates had been. My mind raced to try to make sense of it.

Just then, Rebecca flashed the headlights. I flew over to the car and slipped in through the open window to the back seat.

"The crates are gone," I said as I reappeared. "They must have moved them last night." As soon as I spoke, Rebecca put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb.

"I know. We just got a call from Jesse. There was no sign of the boats, so he broke into the warehouse, and the crates are gone there, too."

"Where could they have moved them?" I asked.

"Good question," Michael said, pulling out his phone. "I'm calling Christoph now to see if he's found anything." He had a

quick conversation with Christoph, repeating what had happened.

"No sign of anything yet," he said, snapping his phone shut.

"But they said five o'clock. I specifically heard them, and Jesse did, too."

"Wait a second," Michael said. "Maybe they meant five in the *morning*?"

My heart sank. "Oh my God, that must have been it," I said in a small voice.

Rebecca looked at Michael in horror. "That means they have a twelve-hour head start on us!" She sped up.

Oh man, what a stupid mistake. But there was no time for that now. *Think*, I told myself. Why would they pick up the crates at five o'clock in the morning if they weren't going to blow

them up until later? I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to visualize all the pieces at once.

It would be dark at five in the morning . . .

Bennicort was blowing up the bridge, and Sanchez would rebuild it . . .

Sanchez was in construction . . .

The guys were arguing over who got to *drive* . . .

"Quick, call Christoph back and ask him if there are any construction workers or trucks on the bridge."

Michael's eyes got wide. He called Christoph and had the answer in seconds. "Find them and stop them," he said. "And don't let any construction trucks onto the bridge."

He hung up. "He said there were painters working on the bridge earlier, but he doesn't see them now." He punched a

number into his phone. “Jesse, head over to the bridge now. We think the bombs might be in place already. We’re on our way.”

“That’s got to be it,” I said, my mind spinning. “They must have taken the boats out early this morning and disguised themselves as painters so they could set up the bombs without being spotted. Christoph and Kenji wouldn’t have noticed the crates, because they weren’t expecting them to be painted the same color as the bridge.”

Suddenly, the road ahead of us was a mosaic of red brake lights, and traffic slowed to a stop. “What is this?” Rebecca shrieked as she hit the brakes.

“Traffic going into the city for New Year’s Eve,” I groaned. Traffic from Marin to San Francisco was notoriously bad on days like this.

"I bet they're waiting for the traffic to peak before setting off the bombs," Michael said.

I rolled down the window. "I'm going to fly ahead and see what I can do. Try to get over into the right lane in case we need you to pull off."

"Be careful, Ashlyn," Rebecca said.

I crouched down, disappeared, and flew out of the window into the darkening sky. I shot over the sea of cars and then into the tunnel, the roar of the traffic reverberating off the concrete walls.

I emerged on the other side and saw the bridge looming before me. On the approach, a construction truck was moving slowly through the traffic. I sped forward, closing the distance quickly. They were almost on the bridge—another minute and it would be too late. I took a deep breath and summoned fire in

my core. It rose into my chest, spreading an intense heat throughout my body until it erupted from my hands as a fireball that flew straight at the truck's rear tire.

Bang! The tire exploded, and the truck made a horrible screeching sound as it pulled over and came to a stop on the side of the road. Brian got out and quickly inspected the burst tire, kicking it in frustration.

A police car drove up along the right shoulder. The officer pulled up behind the truck and opened his door, about to get out. An idea struck me, and I flew right up to his door. Using my new power of illusion, I made my voice crackle like a radio.

"We have a report of a stolen construction truck carrying explosives. Approach with caution." The officer furrowed his brow and then ambled up to Brian.

"Having trouble with your truck?" he asked casually.

"Yeah, looks like a blown tire. Didn't think that was possible with these trucks. Supposed to be so rugged." He laughed nervously. Sweat was beading on his forehead.

"Do you have a spare?" the officer asked.

"Um, I think so, let me check." As Brian turned and bent into the cab of the truck, the officer grabbed his hands and handcuffed him. He pushed him up against the side of the truck and frisked him as he read him his rights. He searched his pockets, but he found nothing more than a cell phone.

The officer shoved Brian into the back seat of the squad car. Brian was howling protestations, but the officer ignored him as he cautiously approached the truck. He unfastened a tarp that covered the back and pulled away a corner. There was one of the crates. He lifted its lid, saw its contents, and immediately grabbed his radio and called the bomb squad.

Just then, I heard a shout. I flew down under the bridge and saw Kenji and Christoph crawling through the trusses, chasing after two guys dressed as painters. My heart was pounding wildly as I watched them. “I see the crates!” Christoph shouted.

I felt panic rising as he raced toward the crate. Was it set to go off at a particular time? Or did someone have the detonator? It was sickening to see them racing toward bombs that could go off any second.

I looked around frantically. Down near the water, I spotted a crate sitting on the small landing pier next to the north tower. Further on, I noticed another crate next to the south tower. To my horror, I saw Jesse taking its lid off while he talked on his cell phone. In the distance, a Coast Guard boat was headed toward him.

Still invisible, I shot over to Christoph and Kenji. "It's Ashlyn," I yelled. "Don't touch anything yet. Go stop the painters."

I flew down to where Jesse was and could now hear his conversation.

"Yes, John, but I don't happen to have any liquid nitrogen handy at the moment," he said.

"Oh my God, Jesse, you're not trying to disarm this thing?!" I shrieked.

"Of course I am," he said. "Somebody has to take care of this before our beloved bridge is blown to bits. Hmm, unintentional alliteration—I must be nervous," he mused to himself. "Sorry, John, you were saying?"

I looked at the bomb, and suddenly it seemed oddly familiar. I gently lifted the mass of wires and saw a cell phone sitting

underneath them. I carefully disconnected the phone and set it down next to the case.

Jesse gawked at me. "How did you know how to do that?"

"I don't know, but fly over and do the one on the north tower, and then go help Kenji and Christoph." I darted up to the first crate that Christoph had found. Very carefully, I lifted the lid and removed the cell phone.

I raced to the other crate, disconnected its cell phone, and then flew over to where Christoph and Kenji had just caught up with the painters. I recognized them as two of the guys from the restaurant. They turned and tried to hit Christoph and Kenji, immediately clutching their fists in pain as their blows bounced off the Sentries like they were made of brick. Christoph laughed, and he and Kenji each picked up one of the men, whose arms flailed uselessly, and climbed back up to the main deck of the

bridge. The deck was now completely empty because the police had stopped traffic in both directions. It was eerie to see it deserted like that.

Christoph and Kenji dropped the men, who stumbled to their feet and stupidly ran toward the edge of the bridge, where police were holding back the traffic. I shot forward and created another radio illusion.

"All units, two bombing suspects have been identified on the bridge dressed as painters."

The police saw them running toward them and pulled out their guns. "Freeze!" yelled an officer, and the men skidded to a halt, putting their hands in the air. The police surrounded them and immediately took them into custody.

I flew back to Kenji and Christoph, who were ducked next to a tower, with Jesse hovering nearby. "Christoph! Kenji!" I

shouted, reappearing. “Climb onto our backs, quickly. The place is about to be crawling with cops.”

Christoph climbed onto my back, and I was surprised that even he didn’t feel heavy. He held on tightly, and we all disappeared. We flew toward the parking lot on the San Francisco side, where Raina and Claire had just pulled off the main road.

“Weeeee hooooo!” Christoph shouted in glee, making me laugh in spite of everything. As we headed toward the parking lot, I looked out at the ocean, where the sun was making its final descent behind the horizon. Behind me, I saw the bomb squad fanning out on the bridge, and I realized the crisis had passed. It made me feel giddy, and I decided to take a little detour.

I took a sharp right turn and headed out toward the ocean, Christoph whooping as we streaked through the sky. I whipped

around in an arc and shot back toward the bridge to fly under it. Christoph laughed as he hung on tightly, the wind tearing past us.

As we were about to fly under the span, I spotted something that made my blood freeze. There, on the side of the bridge, was another bomb. It wasn't in a crate this time. It looked like it had just been bolted on, with its wires hanging out.

"Oh my God, hang on!" I shouted. I streaked toward it and carefully pulled the wires aside. The cell phone was attached like the others, but I couldn't get it off. I wiggled and pulled, but it was completely stuck.

All of a sudden, I heard the sound of a cell phone go off in the distance near the truck. It rang twice and then was silent. A second later, I heard another cell phone, closer this time, and I realized it was coming from one of the crates on the deck that

I'd disarmed. After two rings, it stopped, and a third cell phone began to ring, coming from down near the water.

"Christoph, get this thing off of here!" I yelled.

He grabbed the casing and ripped the whole thing free from the bridge. I shot toward the ocean as the last of the sun's rays disappeared.

"Throw it!" I screamed.

I felt my body wrench as he hoisted his arm backward and then hurled the bomb forward with all his strength. Immediately after he released it, I did a sharp turn and streaked back toward the bridge. Time slowed down as I heard the sound I was dreading pierce the air behind me.

The brief, split-second sound of a cell phone beginning to ring.

A deafening blast that sounded like the world had exploded.

A tidal wave of heat and flame sent us tumbling through the air and slammed us into the side of the bridge, the impact giving me a concussion and jarring Christoph loose. I felt him slipping off my back, and as everything started to go dim, I reached out and grabbed him. I hoisted him up onto the bridge with the last of my strength, and then I slipped into darkness.

Splash! I felt a crushing blow, followed by the roar of water and bubbles filling my ears. I had plunged deep into the ocean, and I immediately started struggling to swim to the surface. But my left arm wasn't working, and my legs were screaming in pain. I was almost out of air, and I had no idea how far down I was.

Don't give up! shouted a voice in my head. With a last desperate flurry of kicks, I thrashed wildly upward, my remaining air escaping my lips as I broke through the surface.

Coughing and spluttering, I gasped as I started to feel just how badly I was injured. My left shoulder was dislocated and hung uselessly at my side, and I was sure both my legs were broken. I struggled to stay above the surface, but I was exhausted. Feeling myself starting to slip under again, I lay backward on the surface and floated, keeping my lungs as full of air as I could and treading water with my right arm. The rough swells of icy water splashed over me and threatened to send me under again and again.

"Jesse!" I called in a weak voice. "Jesse, help me!" But all I heard in answer was the lapping of the waves. I was shivering uncontrollably now, losing body heat quickly. The sounds of sirens on both sides of the bridge filled the air away in the distance.

I closed my eyes and tried to send all the healing energy I could into my arm, but I had nothing left. The last of my energy was ebbing away. I felt tiny and insignificant, just a broken body floating in the vast ocean. I felt the bitter irony of how all the swimming I'd done wouldn't help me one bit now. It was a terrible, lonely way to have to die, and I desperately wanted to see Kai one more time.

At that thought, I realized with horror just how much pain this would bring him and my family, and I couldn't bear it. That's just not an option, I decided through the haze of endorphins that were flooding my brain. I had no choice but to live.

Just as I felt myself sinking for the last time, I heard a small whooshing sound and then a gasp.

"Ashlyn!"

"Jesse? Jesse, my arm . . . "

I heard a splash as he dived into the water and came up under me. "You're going to be fine, honey. Just hang on as best you can. *Crap* this water is cold!" He rolled me onto my stomach on top of him, like I was a baby sea otter on its mother's belly, and then flew backward up into the air, his arms tightly around me as we became invisible.

"Jesse, oh my God . . . "

"Shhh, it's all going to be okay. Bet you didn't know I could fly backward, did you?"

"No," I said through gritted teeth, still shivering convulsively, the pain in my arm and legs threatening to knock me out again.

"Neither did I. It's kind of disorienting. Sort of a head rush, actually."

He kept chattering stupidly, trying to keep me awake. Colored spots twinkled before my eyes, and I slipped in and out of consciousness.

After what seemed like an eternity, we reached the parking lot and touched down behind a small building. “Claire, it’s us!” I heard him call.

I saw my body reappear as he gently rolled me onto the ground, and suddenly Claire was standing over me. She quickly laid her hands on my abdomen, and I felt a beautiful warmth spreading throughout my entire body. I shrieked when my left shoulder popped back into its socket, but the pain was immediately replaced by a warm tingling as the ligaments and tendons repaired themselves. The sensation of my bones knitting themselves back together along the many fractures in my legs was nauseating, and I fought hard to stay conscious.

Finally, the storm inside my body died down. I lay there completely exhausted, unable to move or speak. I felt Christoph's strong arms lift me gently and carry me to the car. I blinked and glanced up at him. Deep concern was etched across his face.

"You okay?" I whispered.

"Yes. Because of you," he said simply. He placed me in the front passenger seat, and I immediately passed out.

* * *

When I opened my eyes again, I was lying on the couch in Theresa's living room. Everyone was talking in hushed voices, but I felt a festive mood in the air.

"Hey, there," I heard Kai say softly. I looked up and saw that he was sitting by my head, stroking my hair.

"Ashlyn's awake!" Rebecca said. She came rushing over and held my hand. "How are you doing?"

I sat up carefully and flexed my arm and legs. I felt completely normal again, aside from being very drained. "I'm starving. Is that Thai food I smell?"

Kenji, who was standing next to Rebecca, laughed heartily. "I'll get you a plate," he said. I looked around at the others, who were eating noodles and curries and were drinking champagne. Theresa and John were standing next to a spotting scope that was set up in front of the windows, looking out over the bridge. They walked over to me.

"We watched the whole thing from here," Theresa said. "You and Christoph are very lucky to be alive."

"Is the bridge okay?" I asked.

"It's fine. They're already letting traffic across it again." The atmosphere in the room was peaceful and light-hearted. Kenji brought over a gigantic plate of food, and suddenly everyone started talking at once, filling me in on what had happened, praising everyone else for their parts.

"Michael called Paul, who suggested we turn around and take a ferry across the bay from Sausalito," Rebecca said. "It worked out perfectly. We'd still be stuck in traffic if it weren't for him."

"And Raina was brilliant," Claire said. "I was able to pick up on what was happening, and she got the idea to call the Coast Guard from the car."

"What did you say to them?" I asked.

"I told them I'd been out kayaking and saw some strange crates on the piers around the bridge towers," Raina said. "I

guess that sounded more convincing than 'someone's going to blow up the bridge on New Year's Eve!'" We all laughed, and John smiled.

"Very true," he said. "Once we had the right information in front of us, it was all much easier to put the wheels in motion."

"Yes, and speaking of which," Jesse said, raising his eyebrow at me, "maybe now would be a good time to fill us all in on how you suddenly knew how to disarm the bombs."

I flushed. "I have no idea. This is like the second time this has happened to me, where suddenly I just knew something I'd never known before." I turned to Kai. "Like the time I took you to the emergency room. Somehow, I knew exactly what to tell the nurses and doctor. The doctor thought I was a medical worker or something."

"Yeah, I remember that," he said slowly. Everyone stared at me, and I saw John and Theresa exchange glances.

"It's very simple," Theresa said. "You're using Mentor powers."

"I thought that was just the pull I feel sometimes that leads me where I need to go."

"No, in times of crisis, Mentors also have access to universal knowledge. Not knowledge that's just in one person's head—we can't read minds. It has to be knowledge shared by other people. So at the hospital, you drew that knowledge from the doctors and nurses. And on the bridge, you drew it from the bomb squad."

I thought for a moment. "If I can access universal knowledge, would it help me figure out how to break into FailSafe's records?"

"It would," John replied, "but typically there has to be a crisis to activate it."

"Oh, I think we can manage that," Raina said with a wry smile, and everyone laughed.

I looked over at Jesse. "You saved my ass again," I said.

"Yes, well, you really are a trouble magnet, aren't you? Try not to make such a habit of it." He winked at me and walked over to get more champagne.

I looked at Kai, who had a crinkle in his forehead. "I'm okay," I said. "Really."

"I know. Rebecca and Claire worked on you for a long time while you were unconscious. You were in very good hands, so to speak."

Just then, I noticed that Christoph was standing off to the side by himself. I got up and walked over to him.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

He looked sadly at me. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't protect you."

"What are you talking about?" I asked in surprise.

"I'm supposed to protect you, and you saved me instead." It was heartbreaking to see him looking so despondent.

I laid my hand gently on his arm. "Christoph, if it hadn't been for you, I would have either been burned to a crisp or killed when we were thrown into the bridge. And you were the one who ripped the bomb free, the one who threw it out of harm's way. Only a Sentry could have done that. I owe you my life, and we all owe you for saving the bridge."

Rebecca came up and took his hand. "She means it, Christoph. You were a true hero today." She kissed him gently on the lips, and his face bloomed into a huge smile. They spent

the rest of the evening holding hands, looking simply adorable together.

We all stayed until midnight, toasting each other and watching fireworks go off in the distance. I shuddered as I thought about what a different view we'd be seeing if we hadn't been able to stop Bennicort's plot, but I pushed away those thoughts as soon as they came up. I had earned a night off from being a Soterian.

Chapter 34: FailSafe

"The parking lot is half empty. I knew today would be ideal," Kenji said. It was Friday morning, and we were sitting in a van in the parking lot of the FailSafe headquarters in San Jose. "Most people took today off, since yesterday was a holiday. But all of the accounting staff should be there, wrapping up their year-end reports."

"Good," Claire said. "That means Ashlyn should have access to the information."

"But I'm worried about passwords," I said. "If everyone has their own password, it's not universal knowledge."

"There might be a shared administrator password," Kenji said. "Besides, once we're inside and have access to a computer

behind the firewall, I can run a password program that will try to crack it."

"Rebecca and Claire, are you ready?" Raina asked. Her eyes were blazing, and she looked ready for action.

"Ready," they said.

Raina opened the side door, and they got out of the van. They were dressed in business suits and carried briefcases. Michael, Raina, Christoph, and Kenji were dressed in blue coveralls with patches that said "Maintenance" on the front. I silently thanked Theresa for providing us with everything we'd needed. Without her financial assistance, I didn't know how we'd accomplish everything we did.

Jesse and I disappeared and followed Claire and Rebecca to the front doors. Rebecca held the door open. "After you," she said to Claire.

"Oh no, after you," Claire said.

"Really, I insist."

"Okay, thank you." Claire walked in, and Rebecca followed her. The brief conversation had allowed them to hold the door open just long enough for Jesse and me to fly inside.

Claire and Rebecca approached the receptionist. They pretended to be sales representatives for an office supply company and claimed that they had an appointment with FailSafe's buyer. We'd gotten the buyer's name from the corporate phone list, which Kenji had managed to swipe from the conference room that he was in when he was being interviewed.

While the receptionist was busy looking at the calendar on her computer, Michael and the others came into the lobby.

Christoph was carrying a ladder. They talked loudly and pointed at the ceiling.

"Excuse me . . . ," the receptionist said.

"We need to check out the ducts," Michael said. "They're having problems on the second floor."

"I'm sorry, but is there someone else we can talk to in Purchasing?" Rebecca asked, pulling the receptionist's attention back to her.

Looking harried, the receptionist motioned for Michael to go on in as she went back to talking to Rebecca and Claire. Michael and his crew walked past the reception desk and into the office area beyond. Jesse and I followed closely, quickly taking in our surroundings.

The room was a maze of grey cubicles with small offices and conference rooms lining the walls. It seemed almost completely

deserted. Jesse and I fanned out, flying above the cubicles, until we came to a section where there were several people at adjacent desks who were tapping away furiously on their keyboards and poring over documents. I guessed that these were the accounting people doing the reports.

Michael and the others turned a corner and stopped in front of a door marked "Server Room." Raina picked the lock, and she and Kenji slipped inside. Christoph and Michael set up the ladder in front of the door and removed the acoustic tile above. Michael climbed up and pretended to be working in the ceiling, while Christoph held the ladder.

We knew Kenji had very little time to try to crack the administrator password and find the files he was looking for before someone got suspicious. Meanwhile, I flew closer to the accounting people, who had spreadsheets and charts all over

their desks. One woman was typing an annual report for the FailSafe board of directors, and I noticed that there was a list of the board members' names at the top of the page.

I glanced at it and then did a double take. My heart started pounding, and I blinked a few times, unable to believe what I was seeing.

Senator Frank McIntyre was on the board of directors.

My mind reeled. I knew he was in business, but I had no idea he was connected with FailSafe. And since he had been running for governor, and one of his companies was storing data for Votronic, wasn't that a major conflict of interest?

I felt dizzy as the truth began to hit me in slow motion. Lawson hadn't rigged the voting machines. McIntyre had done it—he'd rigged the election *against* himself to put Lawson in office. Bennicort was working for McIntyre, not Lawson.

McIntyre had been the silent power behind the riots, the bridge attack . . . all of it. Lawson was simply a pawn in McIntyre's game. He did what McIntyre knew he'd do, calling for curfews and trying to call in the state militia. It was McIntyre who was actually pulling all the strings.

Suddenly, my mind was flooded with information, and I knew we were in trouble. I flew over to where Christoph and Michael were standing by the ladder.

"Open the door," I whispered. "I have information for Kenji."

Christoph leaned casually against the door and then brought his elbow down on the handle as if by accident, causing the door to fly open.

"Whoops!" he said, stumbling backwards into the server room. He slowly caught himself and walked back out, closing the door behind him. I slipped in and ran over to Kenji.

"Kenji, the administrator password is admin one-two-three with a one instead of an 'i'."

"Are you serious? That's about the lamest password ever. First they leave the corporate phone list lying around, and now this. How can they be in the data security business with such sloppy policies? If I were working here—"

"Shut up and listen! Log in to the Cyclone server, and you'll find the backups for Votronic. Hurry, we have to get out of here."

Kenji found the files and started copying the data to his external drive. Just then, we heard a scuffle outside the door. Raina held the handle tightly so that it would appear to be locked. I listened to the conversation outside.

"We don't have any subcontractors working for us," a voice said. "You are not authorized to be here, and you need to leave now!"

"There's some screw-up, then," Michael said calmly. "All I know is I got a call to come and check out the HVAC on this part of the floor."

"What company did you say you work for?"

"Allston Heat and Air," Michael said. "But hey, it's no problem. If we're off the job, that's your decision. Who do I give the invoice to for the quarter hour we've been here?"

They continued arguing, when suddenly there were loud voices, and we heard the sounds of people moving quickly across the floor. I smiled. "Rebecca and Claire have created a diversion," I said. I noticed the room was filling with smoke, and I knew it

was only a matter of minutes before the fire department arrived. We had to get out of there.

"How much longer will this take?" I asked.

"It's ninety percent done," Kenji said. "Another minute or two."

We waited for what seemed like an eternity, and finally the computer beeped to indicate the files had finished copying. "Got it," he said. He unhooked the external drive, closed the console window, and logged out.

"Let's go," I said. Raina opened the door, and we saw Jesse standing right outside.

"Follow me," he said. We raced to the emergency exit at the back of the building, piled into the van, and drove quickly out of the parking lot as the sound of sirens filled the air. We sat in

tense silence, constantly looking behind us, until we were on the highway.

Once we were sure we weren't being followed, we looked around at each other and started cheering. We'd actually broken into FailSafe and gotten the files! I couldn't believe it had actually worked. We all gave each other high fives and began talking excitedly.

When the levity died down, I told them about McIntyre, and after everyone recovered from the shock of the news, we started trying to piece it all together. By the time we finally got back to Theresa's place, we had plenty of hypotheses.

"McIntyre knew Lawson was a moron and would make predictable moves when faced with a crisis," Raina said. "McIntyre could safely put his plans into motion and still get the

outcome he wanted, but all the attention would be on Lawson, not on himself."

"We're guessing that when he was in the state senate, he made a lot of contacts with people who would grease the wheels for his business associates, like Bennicort and Sanchez, for which he'd get a hefty kickback," Jesse said.

"More importantly," Michael added, "if Lawson succeeded in calling in the state militia, McIntyre's buddies could start going after anyone who stood in their way." We were all sobered by the image of what life would be like if he succeeded.

"Kenji, how long do you think it will take you to analyze the code?" John asked.

"A few days. I just need to compare the backups to figure out what was added back in right before the machines went live. That'll narrow down the code I have to look at significantly."

"Excellent. We need to move quickly on this before they figure out why we were there," Theresa said.

"And before McIntyre plans his next move," Claire said.

"Or Deimos makes his," Rebecca said. "That is, if they're not the same person."

"It's possible, but I doubt we'd have caught him so easily if that were the case," John said.

"You think that was easy?" Jesse asked, flabbergasted. We all laughed, and the conversation shifted to what a great job everyone had done playing their parts.

But I was still very worried. Even if Kenji found the code right away, there was still the problem of submitting it as evidence, getting McIntyre charged, and getting Lawson out of office. It seemed like so many things could still go wrong, and I

wasn't sure we could accomplish all this before McIntyre caused more chaos.

Chapter 35: Open Highway

"We're finally done!" Candace said, popping open a beer. She settled back onto the couch next to me, a trashy novel in her hands and a bowl of chips and salsa on the coffee table in front of her. We had just finished our last finals of the winter quarter, and she was in a celebratory mood.

Reclining on the couch next to her, I was thoroughly enjoying the warm breeze coming in through the front door. I always loved the first day of spring because of the promise of summer being just around the corner. I felt more relaxed than I had been in as long as I could remember.

"I can't believe you're down to your last quarter," I said to Candace.

"Please shut up. I don't want to think about that right now. I still have no idea what I'm going to do when I graduate."

"Candace, you of all people will think of something. It might be at the very last minute, but trust me, you're going to land on your feet."

"La la la la la la la not listening," she sang and took another swig of beer. I laughed and went back to poring over a map of the United States, looking at the names of towns along the coast and along Interstate 90 and 94. We'd be driving through Northern California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, South Dakota, and then Minnesota. How many stops could we fit into two weeks? How much driving should we do, and how much sightseeing?

It was going to be such a relaxing trip. I just wished there had been more progress on the political front so we could really

celebrate. Kenji's suspicions had been correct, and he'd found a virus in the code that caused every other vote for McIntyre to be switched to Lawson. Furthermore, they'd coded the virus so that it only kicked in if the software was run on the date of the election and after more than 1,000 votes were cast.

This meant that when people tested the machines before and after the election, or with a small batch of votes on the day of the election, the software would seem to be fine. And as he'd suspected, they'd swapped out the function with a dummy function of the exact same size before giving the source code to the auditors, so they'd never be able to find the virus. He'd submitted his findings, and now two months later, we were still waiting to hear what was going to happen.

At least there was more activity on the criminal side. Bennicort had been indicted after the driver and his buddies had

squealed on David and Andrews, pointing the police to Bennicort's house. It didn't take long to get a confession out of David, and soon Andrews and Bennicort were also charged. But I wondered what was taking so long to overturn the election. And when would McIntyre be charged?

There was a knock at the door, and Toby and Ryan came in. "Hey," Toby said. "You all done with your finals?"

"Hell yeah we are," Candace said, and Ryan gave her a high five.

"We're off to Cancun tomorrow," Ryan said smugly. "Hope you don't miss us too much while we're gone. But of course, Ashlyn will be busy making sure our new roommate isn't lonely."

I chuckled. "I still can't believe Kai ended up in your apartment."

"He's a great roommate," Toby said fairly.

"You just say that because he does all the cleaning," Ryan snorted.

"And because he doesn't drink all my beer," Toby said, raising an eyebrow at Ryan.

Just then, Rebecca rushed into the room. "Great news!" she said. "That was my mom on the phone. The evidence the watchdog group submitted to the state was reviewed, and they've just declared the election illegal and are charging McIntyre!"

"What?!" I shrieked, leaping off the couch. "Rebecca, that's fantastic!" We flipped on the TV, and it was all over the news. McIntyre was refusing to talk to reporters and was shown being bustled into a car. He managed to maintain an innocent look on his face. I wasn't surprised he had taken in so many people,

myself included. He was obviously a master at disguising his true nature.

"McIntyre was behind it?" Candace asked in shock. "No way! Damn, you can't trust anyone in politics!" She was about to launch into a tirade, but Lawson's press conference was starting.

Lawson took questions from reporters, but he just looked confused and spluttered nonsensical statements about the democratic process. The Lieutenant Governor was the only one who looked like he had things under control. He urged everyone to be calm, and he announced a freeze on all the executive orders Lawson had made since taking office until they could be reviewed. Lawson was led away from the microphones.

"Ha! That's right, you jackass," Candace said gleefully, munching a chip. "Go home with your tail between your legs."

"He may not be the smartest man in the world, but remember that it was McIntyre who masterminded all of this," Rebecca reminded Candace.

"Whatever, they're all crooks. Anyway, this calls for a celebration."

"Let's throw a party," I suggested. "We can invite Adam and Carla, too."

"Great idea," Candace said. "One last fiesta before spring break. I'll make the beer run now."

"We'll join you," Toby said. Candace brushed the crumbs off her lap, slipped on her shoes, and headed out the door with the guys.

"And so what happens to McIntyre next?" I asked Rebecca.

"They've been investigating him, which is why this all took so long," she said. "It turns out he's not only on the board of

directors for FailSafe, but he's on the board of an investment firm that's one of the largest backers of Votronic, and he's also invested in BioTrek and Genco, although not nearly as much as Bennicort. They had enough evidence to charge McIntyre, but they still have to build the case against him to convict him. He's been careful to keep a low profile. You'll notice that the robberies have died down."

"I'm so glad it's finally moving forward," I said happily. "I hope McIntyre ends up in the slammer. He'll be in good company with his buddy Bennicort headed for prison."

There was a knock on the door, and Kai walked in. "I just heard the news. Congratulations," he said, smiling at us.

"Isn't it fantastic?" I asked, putting my arms around him. "I'm so stoked that this happened right before our trip. How was class?"

"Pretty good," he said. "My teachers approved my being gone next week. And my boss is letting me borrow ahead on my vacation time. So we're all set."

"You are going to have such a great time," Rebecca said. "But I'm not sure camping is going to be that much fun at this time of year. It's still really cold in the northern states."

"We'll camp as far as we can and stay in motels if need be," Kai said. "And we'll stay with my grandparents in Minneapolis."

"What if something happens with Deimos?" Rebecca asked, starting to twirl a lock of hair anxiously around her finger. "John feels sure that we've only seen the beginning of him."

"We'll turn around and come home," I said. "We're only going to be gone for two weeks. I'm sure nothing will happen during that time." But I had a strong sense of foreboding. What

would Deimos' next move be? What if he did attack while we were gone?

I pushed these thoughts out of my head, vowing not to spend one minute of my vacation worrying about it. There would be plenty of work to do as a Soterian when I got back.

"Come on," Kai said. "We still need to go buy our tent. I found two that are in the right price range, and I want your opinion on them."

We waved good-bye to Rebecca and headed out into the beautiful spring day. As we walked to the parking lot, I thought I could hear the butterflies in the grove beating their wings as they prepared to fly north for the summer. I smiled at Kai, feeling totally content, with the glorious promise of our future together stretching out before us like an open highway.

Acknowledgments

This book would never have been what it is without the love, guidance, and inspiration from so many who cheered me on as this series took over my life. I would like to thank the following people specifically:

My magnificent daughter, Holly, who listened to every word I wrote and gave me such fantastic feedback every step of the way. You are truly wise beyond your years.

My mother, Kathleen Jacoby, and my sister, Betsy Appell, both excellent writers themselves who read my

drafts, gave me advice, and listened supportively to my ravings on a daily basis. You are outstanding mentors.

My father, Allen Appell, who taught me perseverance and the value of balancing hard work with leverage, and my step-mother, Elizabeth Appell, a truly dedicated writer and filmmaker who helped set me on the path of writing fiction.

Marianne Schwerdtfeger, who worked tirelessly with me on the cover, gave me great feedback on the text, and designed the Soterians logo.

My wonderful friends who gave me feedback and assistance: Rachel Tennenbaum, Jen Strauss, Meghan Ward, Mari Cunningham, Christi Weidling, Minette Norman, Rachel Elson, Steve Freier, Steve Anderson, Connor Sleeper, Laurel McCaull, and Raina Fitzpatrick.

All my friends on Facebook, who patiently watched my status updates and cheered me on.

Barbara Wright, for her edits and encouragement.

Greg Collis, for introducing me to martial arts, and my martial arts teachers, Masters Rick Schubert and Thomas Brewer, who taught me to find my power and my center, which are one and the same.

Beat Jegerlehner and Paul Moylan, who introduced me to the wonders of triathlon.

And all my friends from UCSB, who broadened my horizons.

A special thanks to my muse from beyond, Ronnie Smeland. You are so dearly missed.

Most of all, I would like to express my undying gratitude to my beloved soulmate, Drew, who has been my guiding star since we met at that party in Isla Vista all those years ago. My life would still be half in shadow without you.