



Dimensions of Raine

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Chapter One

Well, today is the day, Raine told the mirror before her. Or rather, she told the blanket that covered the mirror in her dumpy room. The horrible eyesore of scratched and swollen ugliness hung above her bureau, the only other piece of furniture able to be squeezed in her limited space being her twin-sized bed. She had once located a screw driver and unhooked the hated mirror, but the director of the orphanage had nearly had a cow.

“This is not your property, nor is this your house, Raine. You have no right to destroy it,” she’d said. Could it be any more obvious that the woman hated her? “And just because you have a phobia for mirrors doesn’t mean anyone else has to suffer.”

“Excuse me, but I thought this was my house. I live here don’t I? And who else would suffer? It’s my room. I sleep there alone.” Raine’s arguments had fallen on deaf ears.

“Whose fault is that? No one wants to share a room with you. If you would learn to control yourself...”

Control herself. That was the director’s answer for when Raine screamed her head off because things weren’t as they should be, when a room shifted on her. The medical doctor, wanna-be shrink, they had taken her to said it was a phobia of mirrors Raine had. She could grow up and get over it. *Could*, as if she chose to have the weird phenomenon happening to her and could turn it off at any time.

Sighing uselessly at the state of her life, she slipped into the dress borrowed from one of the girls. Ruth was taller than she, Raine never having had her growth spurt. Now that she was eighteen, would it ever come? The director gave her little hope. “And you might as well face it, Raine, the best fact about you is that you have a pretty name. You’re squat, your hair will only grow down to your shoulders and it’s stringy. No matter how much you eat, you’ll always have the figure of an emaciated boy.”

Raine hadn’t missed a beat when she said, “My breasts may be small, but at least they’re real.”

She laughed remembering the director’s reddened face when snickers were heard all around the room. Her triumph at one upping the director hadn’t lasted long. She had had to take on two other girls’ chores.

When will I learn to keep my mouth shut? she wondered as she brushed out the raven black straw on her head. The director had not been exaggerating. The only person who seemed impressed with her looks was Jace. “Jace..,” she breathed out. Raine smiled thinking of the gift he was getting today, on her birthday.

Finished with her hair and dress, she moved to do her makeup. She would need to do it without the use of the mirror, for she planned to give herself only a glance in the reflected surface once everything was in place. *Just to be sure I don't look like a horse.*

She set the lipstick, cheek powder and pencil for the eyes all in a row. Ruth would soon miss the stolen products, but she would return them to the girl as soon as she was finished with her time with Jace. Not being sure how long “the deed” took normally, she had arranged to meet him in the woods for a late picnic. Ruth would be at her doctor’s appointment for at least a couple hours.

The makeup done as best she knew how, she turned away from the bureau long enough to gather the book she intended to show Jace. When she swung back, the makeup was no longer in a neat line. It wasn’t there at all. She thought about where she had hid to hidden it after she had taken it from Ruth’s room, and where she would put it again until she was ready to return it. The single shoe box in her closet.

With a pounding heart, she strolled toward the closet and twisted the knob. For a long time, she stood staring down at the box, willing herself to have the nerve to open it. Only being five feet two inches, bending to the floor seemed a long way off. Her fingertips trembled on the lid, and she flicked it away. There it was. The makeup in the faded red handkerchief she knew had been her mother’s so many years ago.

A shriek exploded from her mouth, but she bit down on it, drawing blood from her bottom lip. Slumped on the floor, she squeezed her eyes closed. “Go back to normal. Go back to normal,” she chanted.

No wind rustled her hair, no magic sparkles happened. The temperature of the room remained the same, so surely it couldn’t be a ghost. The only option left, as she had been told too many times, was that it was all in her head. “Psychosis or extreme forgetfulness, take your pick,” she mumbled.

Psychosis. What else could it be? She was certifiably crazy. Five minutes passed before her heart settled enough to open her eyes, and when she did, just like before, everything had gone back to normal. She knelt in front of the closet. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that the makeup was lined on the dresser. No doubt the shoebox inside the closet would not have been disturbed.

No, I'm the one disturbed. She drew in a deep breath and blew it out. “Raine, you’ve accepted yourself as you are—or as much as you can—so just pull yourself together and get out there to the only person in this world who cares about you.”

Ready at last, she pulled back the blanket from the mirror. Winters were bitterly cold in this old house with all the cracks letting in the air. Yet, she accepted that she would shiver the nights away in order to keep one of her ratty covers over the mirror. Better to be safe than sorry. Whatever was happening in the mirror, she wasn’t going to be sucked into it.

She kept her focus on the dresser as she slid the cover off, but already in her peripheral vision, she saw the movement. Reflected surfaces were never still. Something—her wild imagination told her—lurked inside ready to grab her and make her its prisoner.

Her image wobbled and moved so that she couldn't see her face clearly. "Keep still," she whispered. The mirror ignored her soft plea. The center caved inward seeming to draw in color and light. Raine ducked to a corner to examine herself more clearly. Her makeup seemed heavy and a little out of the lines of her lips, but she didn't think it would get much better as nervous as she was.

The dress was a loose fit, hanging too long. The neckline plunged but she had no cleavage to make it sexy. Jace would have to be happy with the fact that she was wearing the color pink for once in her life, black and grey being her normal preferences. Not that the orphans got much of a choice, but the director wasn't a complete ogre. Even second hand stores carried some decent clothing. Raine had never been interested in it.

She bent to lift the covering from the floor where it had fallen, and suddenly the room temperature did change. It plummeted. Smoke blew from her mouth and nostrils. Her fingers stiffened and turned blue. Compelled to look up, whether from some unknown force or from a sense of self-preservation, she didn't know, she saw that the mirror had gone black. Every part of it now.

Reaching out to that ever deepening center was impossible to resist. Her frozen finger tips were inches away, feeling the pull to go inside.

"Raine!"

She jerked. The director was coming down the hall, and she could only be grateful for the disturbance because the black hole disappeared. Only wobbling mirror remained. Jumping to her feet, she tossed the blanket in place and ran to the window. The director had her hand on the doorknob. She saw it turn. Someone stopped her for conversation.

Raine shoved up the rotting window, which she had oiled just a couple of days ago. Still the going was tough. A splinter lodged in her palm and she sucked at the wound, annoyed but noticing the room was warm again and the springtime sunshine thawed her fingers.

She climbed over the ledge, stretching to reach the limb growing near her room. How many times had the director threatened to have it cut away? Who cared? Doing that would cost money. Her escape route would not be compromised.

"Raine!" The director was inside the room, but didn't see her as small as the room was. Bile rose in her throat. She knew why. The tree she clutched with its dried limbs and absence of life a moment ago, now had green leaves and with birds chirping, and the house behind her which always looked abandoned to her, sparkled with newness. When

she reached the ground, maybe the illusion would go away and she could pretend she was sane.

Chapter Two

“Happy birthday to you...” Jace called out when he saw her standing nearby, watching him.

She grinned, always surprised when he didn’t hate her like most others. Still nervous though, she ambled over to him, staring down at her scuffed boots. Ruth might be taller, but she had a child’s size feet. Jace would need to keep his attention higher than her calves to get the full effect. “Well?”

He looked up, having focused on unpacking the pouch of food she had left for him to find. His eyes widened and he burst out laughing. “What the hell did you do to yourself?”

Raine put her fisted hand up to cough into it, stretched her eyes so wide they hurt and turned on her heel to go back to the house. She wouldn’t cry. She never cried, but moisture did gather around the edges of her lower lids.

Jace ran up behind her and grabbed her around the waist to pull her back. The world around them rocked. Jace looked to the left and right. “Hey, was that a small earthquake... Never mind. I was only teasing. I’m sorry, Raine. You look pretty. A dress for your birthday, huh?”

“Whatever.”

He took her hand and led her back to the checkered tablecloth he had spread over the grass. She wrinkled her nose.

“What? Sorry, there were no extra blankets. All the spare ones were over the mirrors.” He gave her a sheepish grin, and she gave in laughing and punching him in his stomach. “There, that’s what I wanted to see. Your beautiful smile.”

She dropped to the ground and rolled her eyes. “Oh please. No part of me is beautiful.”

He cocked his head to the side, studying her from her head to her boots tucked to the side and half covered by the dress. “Well I don’t know. I haven’t seen every part of you yet.”

“Is that a hint?”

He shrugged, going back to unpacking the pouch. A wedge of cheese, two slices of bread, two plums and a half bottle of lemonade was all she could be sure wouldn’t be missed from the kitchen. “A feast fit for a king. Wait...no cake?”

Her cheeks warmed. “Sorry there wasn’t anything in the refrigerator. Not that I could take anyway.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I brought this!” He waved a hand as if he was about to do magic and then brought out a cupcake, complete with icing and her name written in something that didn’t look too appetizing. “Uh...I’d scrap off the icing, but the cake’s good. Happy birthday, Raine.”

He leaned in to kiss her, and she only cringed a little. She cared about him; she was sure of it, but kisses weren’t always what she hoped. “Thanks, Jace. I can always count on you.”

“Of course.”

She settled in place and made them each a napkin of food. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

He bit into a plum, slurping loudly on the juice. “What?”

For a few moments, she silently chewed her cheese and bread. Jace might think she was crazy. He thought the covered mirror thing was just a quirk of hers, but what would he think of everything else, especially the latest peculiarity? Jace did odd jobs around the orphanage, and if the director knew she had been seeing him for the last year, he might get fired. If he thought she was a nut and never wanted to see her again, she didn’t think she could survive. Not because she was so madly in love with him, but because she had no one. She desperately needed and wanted someone to care, despite her weirdness.

“Hello, anyone home in there?” He knocked on her head, then tucked her hair behind her ear. She pulled it out to let it flop across her face.

“You know about the mirrors, right?” she began.

“Hmm.”

“For the last few years, other things have been happening.” There she had made a decent start. The rest should be easier. “Strange stuff, and more often.”

She had his attention. “Like what?”

“L-Like...I’m in a room, and a chair is over here,” she gestured, “and in a heartbeat, it’s over here, across the room. Pictures on the walls are first one scene then another. Some are missing, some added. And then it all goes back to the way it was.”

His eyes grew round. “Spooky. You think you’re being haunted by ghosts or something?”

Her stomach tightened, and she clenched her jaw shaking her head. “No. Maybe *I* am.”

“You’re what?”

“A ghost.”

He laughed. “What are you talking about, baby?” He pinched her gently then stroked along her arm with his hand. When he reached her shoulder, he stopped. As if he were gathering the nerve, his shoulders went up and down. His hand dropped to her breast. “You feel real to me.”

Raine jumped and swung her arm to knock his hand away. Her fingers passed through his arm. Jace winced, pulling back. He rubbed his arm as if it hurt.

“W-What was that, Raine?”

“Nothing.” She was too scared to tell him.

He reached out to touch her, but hesitated. “What just happened? Tell me.”

Without looking at him, she held up her arm. She didn’t want to see the fear, the disgust or whatever negative emotion the fact that her hand was transparent would bring to his face.

“Cool. You *are* a ghost.”

She would have stood but he stopped her. He gently pushed her until she lay on her back with him above her. “Jace, you have to take this seriously. Something is wrong with me.”

“You’re different.” He brushed her hair away from her forehead and kissed it, before moving down to her lips. A breeze rustled the leaves around them. Somewhere in the distance, someone called out to another. Raine listened to those sounds rather than the smack of their lips and Jace’s moans. “I love you, Raine,” he whispered in her ear. “I don’t care if your mom died having you or your dad was killed in a freak bus accident before that. Only thing I know is they made this unique, beautiful woman that I want in my life forever.”

She couldn’t help but to smile. Whatever screwed up feelings she had, maybe even a fear of deep intimacy, that didn’t change the fact that he loved her, that he wasn’t afraid of her. “You can’t know how much that means to me,” she breathed. “Jace, I have a present for you.”

He chuckled. “Silly, this is your day. Unfortunately, what I got you isn’t ready yet, but I’ll get it to you by next week. I promise.”

She wanted to stroke his face above hers, but kept her hands safely at her sides. “That’s okay. I know how hard things are right now, and the director doesn’t pay much.”

His look was sheepish again.

“My gift is...” She swallowed several times. “It’s my virginity.”

Jace gasped. He squeezed her hip and closed his eyes, breathing so hard her air was almost cut off in the heat of the carbon dioxide he gave off. “Are you sure? You don’t have to.”

“I know. I’m sure.”

He leaned back and knelt at her side. When he tried lifting her dress, she brushed his hands away. “I’ll do it.” She didn’t want him to see her panties that had been washed a few too many times. All of her things showed extreme wear, as did the clothing of the other orphans. The state didn’t spring for much.

Jace slipped from his clothing so quickly, she almost didn’t have time to look away from his arousal. When she was free of her underwear, she lay back down and waited.

“You don’t want to take anything else off?” he questioned.

“No. Just lift my dress, but don’t look. Okay?”

“Raine, are you sure?”

She sighed. “I’m sure. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. Do it quickly. I’m scared.”

Grateful he took the time to hold her and stroke her back until her trembling subsided, she then spread her legs. Jace eased between them, and felt beneath her dress. She thought she might pass out at his chilly fingers, but she bit down into her already abused bottom lip. After an eternity, he moved his hand and pressed into her.

Raine cried in silence while he pumped in and out. After her tight muscles relaxed some and the pain faded, she still wept. Just as she suspected, it wasn’t too good. Not even sex could be natural for her.

“Ah, Raine, you’re so tight. It feels so good,” Jace groaned. “I don’t want it to end. Oh baby, I love you so much.” He pushed her legs higher and began to pump harder. She dared a look at his face to find his eyes dark with lust. He yanked open the front of her dress, snapping some of the buttons off. When his tongue found her bared nipple, she yelped.

She didn’t like it. Not at all. She shoved at his chest. He leaned up to look at her, but the lust was too much. When he would have come down to tease her breasts with his mouth, Raine pushed at him again. This time, her hand passed through his skin.

His body went stiff; his breath caught in his throat. Raine jerked back only to pull out a hand covered in blood. She screamed. Jace fell down on top of her, and she fought to get

free without touching him. He rolled over on to his back, but his body convulsed. He struggled to speak.

“No, no, please! Jace!” She screamed for what seemed like hours until footsteps crunched through the trees toward them. The director and several of the other workers were followed by the orphans. At the sight of Jace’s naked body, some of the staff covered the younger girls’ eyes and drew them back toward the house.

The director dropped to her knees, and seeing Jace’s condition, she called over her shoulder, “Someone call 9-1-1.” She did a fast check of his vitals and then began CPR. “Raine, what happened here? Where is this blood from? He has no wound. One, one thousand, two...”

Raine stood above her, staring at Jace, and saying nothing.

“Answer me!” the director yelled.

“I-I...We made love,” she mumbled.

The director looked at Jace then at Raine, and her panties on the ground. “This is your blood...on his chest...? Get in your room and don’t come out until I send for you.”

“But Jace,” she cried.

“Do you really think *you* could be any help to him at all?”

Her shoulders slumped, and she turned on her heel to walk back to the house.

Chapter Three

“That blood was his.” The director stood in her room, after leaving her locked in for hours without word of Jace’s condition. She could have escaped out the window, but what was the point?

“I-Is he okay?” she ventured to ask.

“No thanks to you.”

Raine slumped against the side of her bed where she sat sprawled on the floor. Tears of relief flooded her eyes to course down her face. He was alive. She hadn’t killed him...but she could have. “I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt him. You must believe me. He is the only one I have.”

“Save the melodrama, Raine.” The woman crossed the space between them. She reached out to touch Raine’s head but then changed her mind. Her looming above was meant to intimidate; it worked. “The question is, what did you do to him? How could you pull his blood from his body without a wound? The doctors checked him from head to foot. Nothing. He went into cardiac arrest. How did that happen, Raine? Answer me!”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry won’t cut it!” she snapped. “The other children, even the staff are calling you a witch, and I can’t say I blame them.”

“You don’t understand.” Raine stood, moving to the window. She stared out into the night, seeing nothing in the darkness of the woods, but replaying that scene out there of her hand passing through into Jace. He had been defenseless against her evil. *What am I?* “If I could explain...”

The director waited silently, her stone expression not giving an inch. Raine squelched the sensation of inferiority that constantly rode her back. This hard and cold woman would never embrace the truths of her world. She would come to the conclusion that Raine was not right in her head. Yet she owed it to her friend to at least attempt to tell what happened, to collaborate with his story if he had had the strength to admit it.

“Lately, my hands have become transparent, more often when I feel threatened. It’s like I want to disappear so bad, my body’s making it happen. I don’t know where it comes from.” She didn’t look at the director again after she began her explanation. Instead, she stared into the darkness outside, wishing it would swallow her now. “I felt...threatened, I guess, during the-uh-intimacy Jace and I had. I—”

“You are not saying to me that he forced himself on you!”

Despite herself, Raine looked around and came face-to-face with the director's sharp dislike. "No. Of course not. I'm not saying that," she rushed to assure the woman. "I'm saying that I wasn't as comfortable as I wanted to be. I didn't think about it. I just pushed at him, and my hand went inside his chest. He started shaking or twitching, I should say. I didn't know what to do. I pulled back, and my hand was covered with blood. You have to believe me, I—"

"Believe you?" she spat. "You're crazy as your father."

Raine gasped. "What do you mean? What do you know about him?"

"I know he was apparently insane."

"No!" Raine cried. "That's not true. It can't be. I can't be crazy. What happened today was real. You saw the blood."

The director strolled back toward the door. "I know you were seeing him, and I allowed it for the time being, even though he is too old for you."

"He's nineteen."

"Almost twenty," she corrected. "You were still too young to be dating him. Anyway, what I told everyone else is what I'm sure happened. The two of you planned a prank. You somehow had his blood drawn and then it went wrong. He had a heart attack. No spooky witch stuff. Just that."

"But—"

"You are a danger to the other orphans," she continued. "So, since you are now an official adult, I want you out of here. By tomorrow morning."

Raine jumped to her feet, twisting her hands. "But I don't have anywhere to go. I don't have any money."

The director pulled the door open. "That's not my problem."

"Wait please," Raine called after her.

She paused.

"What about my father? What did he do to make you think I am like him? I mean, I know about the bus accident."

The director gave her a hard look, opened her mouth as if she would explain, and then closed it. Without another word, she walked out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

* * * *

Jace's pale face made her want to weep, but she had cried enough that morning as she packed what few clothes she had in a grocery store bag. All she owned fit in just two, or rather one and a half. She was a woman now, and crying over anything would be a waste of time.

Inching closer to the bed, she reached out a hand to stroke his face. He opened his eyes, saw her hand and flinched. She drew back. "I'm sorry, Jace. I didn't mean to hurt you."

He looked away, but didn't turn his head, as if that would make her think he wasn't afraid of her now. "Don't worry about it. It's no big deal."

"You almost died."

His lids, heavy with apparent weakness, closed and then fluttered open. "I don't want to talk about that. It's over."

What's over? "Well, we can talk about something else." She infused her voice with joy she didn't feel. He didn't buy it.

Jace stared at the ceiling. "Raine, they put my stuff in that drawer beside the bed. Look in there."

She moved to slide open the one he indicated. A white hankie lay inside. An instant of panic hit her when she tried to remember whether she had packed her mother's. Of course she had. It was never far, pinned inside her sleeve. "Do you want this hankie?" she asked. "I don't see anything else."

Answering seemed like too much effort for him. She handed him the bundle and sat down to wait for him to speak again. Jace was such a great guy. If she could only love him the way he needed to be loved. No, the director had been right. Without falling again into self-pity, she realized she could not be good for a man like Jace. Probably no man for that matter.

"This," he began as he slowly unwrapped the hankie, "is for you."

Careful not to touch him, Raine stretched forward to pinch the object between her forefinger and thumb. "What is it?"

The small tan cube with black markings like symbols on each side lay nestled in her palm. To her recollection, she had never seen anything like it. Yet, this strange piece was special, no doubt about it. She wouldn't scare Jace, but the moment it lay in her palm, a sort of hum started up from it. She could both hear and feel it. Jace seemed unaware.

"It's yours," he told her.

"Mine?" She frowned. "I've never seen it before. Oh wait is this my present? You really did get me something."

"No, I was going to have a hole put in it and a chain run through so you could wear it around your neck, but I didn't have enough money for real gold or silver. I didn't want to get you a cheap piece of crap. Not with that. I stole it from your file."

"My file? What are you talking about?"

He glanced at the clock next to the TV mounted on the wall. "Not much time before we're interrupted, so I'll make this fast." He paused to catch his breath. He was looking paler. Raine thought she should make him rest, but something told her his next words were important. "Remember when I worked in the director's office on her air conditioner?"

"Yes." The woman had been annoying all the others, finding fault with their chores because she was hot and miserable. Never mind that they had to scrub and clean all the time with no AC.

"She had shuffled away someone's file when I came in, into this big cabinet. I saw the name, no one of interest, but I started wondering what she had on you. After she left, I looked. I found that cube. No reference to it in the paperwork at all, except for a letter from some guy with no return address. On that plain sheet of paper was one of the symbols from the cube."

Her heart hurt so much, she thought *she* might be having cardiac arrest. "W-What did the letter say?"

"It said, 'To whom it may concern, Raine's dad is dead because he thought he could stop them with a bus. He had decided to take her, but now it's too late. She may be better off here. I wish her a better life on this side. Albin.'"

Raine could barely form her words. "So that means..."

"That the director lied about when your father died. He was still alive when you were born, and there is a man out there who knows who...and maybe *what*...you are."

Chapter Four

Ten years later.

Cale pinched the cube between his fingers, concentrating as hard as he could, but got nothing. In frustration, he hurled it across the room, and smashed a mirror for his pains.

“Hey whoa!” his buddy cried out and ducked as he strolled into the room. “What’s that about, man? You nuts?” Bender picked up a piece of the shattered mirror, flipped it in the air and caught it then, touched a hand to the backing where the mirror had been. Each piece of glass wavered then moved back into its place, unbroken.

“No, I’m not. I’m just fed up.” Cale ran a hand through his hair and growled. “And stop doing that, Bender, you know better.”

“I didn’t see you holding back on that last job we pulled. In fact, you were just fine with moving in and out of that building, not using the locks. Just walking in like you owned the place.”

“Different use of power and you know it,” Cale snapped. “What you just did is going to draw too much attention on us. Not to mention the energy signature you’re giving off. You want them on our tails before we can get this next job done? No, I didn’t think so.”

His pudgy friend hopped in a chair, produced an apple from his sleeve and began noisily chewing. “As I see it, we’ll be able to do whatever we want and go wherever we want as soon as this one is done. Man, I can’t wait.”

“Neither can I,” Cale sighed.

Bender paused in the midst of his bites. “Do you really think it’s her?”

“It’s her,” Cale assured him. “She and her gang of misfits have gotten the jump on too many of our deals lately. All with her using a minimum of her power. The potential she has...”

“Makes you come?”

“This is no joking matter, Bender. She’s the key, I know it. Beside that, her powers can help us get inside that building.” He moved to retrieve the cube from the floor and held it in his palm. “If I can get this piece of crap to work. There!” The vibrations began in the cube. He felt the pull.

“Don’t you know anything, Cale?” Bender scoffed. “She has to use it to connect with you.”

“Yeah well she hasn’t in the last, what, ten years? I thought our luck had changed back then when I got that first wiggle. Then, nothing.”

“Yeah, you acted like it was going to do something by you staring at it hours a day.” His friend tossed the core of his apple in the trash and readied his weapon. “Well, partner. Lead on.”

* * * *

He leaned against a lamp post outside the Y. Checking his watch, he frowned. Eleven p.m. This was where she was living? Even in his and Bender’s poorest of circumstances, they could afford a better place to sleep than renting a room here.

“She here?” Bender asked walking up, this time munching on hard candy. One minute the man ate healthy, the next it was junk. Cale couldn’t keep up.

The pupils of his eyes widened, and the pale gray irises bled to black. He had watched the process in a mirror countless times. The change allowed him to see past the brick and plaster inside the building. “Yeah, she’s there. Looks like room thirty-four. Let’s do it.”

He and Bender entered the alley at the side of the building. “How we doing this? Straight in?”

Cale grabbed his arm. “No, there’s too many people wandering around. We don’t want to be identified.” He examined the adjacent structure. No windows at this side, and very light traffic at the front. The back of the alley turned so that there was only another brick wall obscuring view of them. He held up his hand and the building wavered before him.

“When?” Bender asked.

“Fifty years ago. The beams are going to be a tough climb. We can do it.”

Bender clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Okay, I’m in. We better do this fast. Using the beams means they can pick us up a lot faster. We better be ready to fight, because we’re about to lead them right to her.”

Cale growled. “Maybe we should risk being seen. I’d rather the police try tracking us than those guys. Easier to defeat them. They’re ordinary with no powers.”

“I think you forgot about that guy we ran into last year. The-uh-let me think...cop?”

“Don’t remind me. He nearly ripped my head off. I had to run in and out places so quickly, I almost didn’t have time to go transparent.” Cale began the long slow climb, using the steel beams that the building had been constructed with. He fought to keep his focus. If he lost it for a second, he could fall to his death, or imbed himself in the bricks. A painful experience he didn’t want to repeat.

By the time they made it to the third floor, his arm muscles were almost pulsating with pain. He crawled into the building, not bothering to use the window and lay on the floor. It was a good thing no one had been walking the halls at that moment. Bender dropped heavily beside him.

“What,” he panted, “room did you say?”

“Thirty-four.” Cale rolled to his stomach and dragged himself to his feet. “We’re in horrible shape, my friend. We need to enter buildings more often that way. All this walking through walls has made us soft.”

Bender yanked a small thermos from his backpack. “Speak for yourself, muscles. I was already soft.”

Cale chuckled. “Let’s go.”

They inched along the hall, guns ready. Cale’s back ached with tension, thinking any second they would be attacked when the others walked through to their location. He stood on one side of the door where their quarry was, while Bender stood on the other. He nodded. Bender’s hand went transparent. He reached through the door to the lock and turned it. Better to let her think they had picked the lock than to just walk in through the wood. He hadn’t decided yet to let her know they were like her.

Bender, a little too enthusiastic, kicked open the door once he had it unlocked. Cale rolled his eyes and marched in with his friend to find a knife nearly decapitating him. He dropped and pushed back at the same time. A feminine yelp sounded in his ear, followed by soft breasts pushing against his back when he landed on top of the woman. *Of all the positions to land in, I couldn’t be facing her.*

He flipped over in time to catch her second attempt at jabbing her knife in his throat. With ease, he caught her wrist and pinned it to the threadbare carpet while he lay full over her body. This was better.

Cale glanced down into the sexiest eyes he had ever seen, and found himself getting lost and never wanting to be found. “Hello.”

“Piece of shit, get off me!” She struggled to free herself. When he pressed a point on her wrist, her fingers went limp and the knife fell away.

Cale smiled. “Now, that I’m not in danger of being carved, we can talk comfortably.

“Like hell we can,” she spat. “You’re crushing my lungs.

“But it feels so good.” He blatantly eyed her breasts, which to his satisfaction were a little more than a handful. *Very nice!*

“Cale, man, we really need to get out of here,” Bender reminded him.

“Oh yeah.” He rolled off her and stood, pulling her to her feet. “I’m Cale, and this is my friend Bend—” His head snapped back and blood gushed from his nose. Bender burst out laughing. “What the f—”

“That’s for breaking into my room.” Her eyes flashed. She was so beautiful, he found himself hardening just looking at her. “And if you don’t get the hell out of here, you’ll get more.”

“A woman after your own heart, Cale.” Bender moved to the window and peered out. “Whoops, gotta go.”

Cale, who had been distracted holding his nose and looking toward Bender, turned back to the woman in front of him. She was going to hate him for this.

“Cale? Wait, *the* Cale?” she asked, eyes widening.

“Sorry, beautiful. We need to go.” He grabbed her around the waist, dragging her against his side. He really should rethink letting her know right then who they were, but explanations could wait. Right now, they needed to escape. “Come on Bender. Listen, baby, we have some real bad guys tracking us, and by that tracking you, unfortunately. I don’t have time to explain. But if we don’t get out of here, all three of us are dead.”

She gasped, then slammed a fist in his nuts, making his hold go weak as he bent over in pain. She rushed to the window to look out. “You piece of shit!”

“That your favorite phrase or what?” he winced, wanting to wring her neck. Unable to move more than a few shuffling steps, he watched her scurry around the room, gathering up her things. When she had finished packing, she slung the bag over her head to settle on her side.

She stopped in front of him for all of a second. “How interesting to meet Cale, the greatest thief of our time. I’m Raine, but I guess you already knew that. Anyway, it hasn’t been fun. Feel free not to look me up again.” With that, she fled, and Cale had to force himself to run after her. She would not get away from him now that he had found the woman who would change his and Bender’s lives.

Chapter Five

“Stop following me!” she screamed.

Cale held up defenseless hands. “I’m not looking to hurt you, Raine. I only need your...special ability to get me and my friend inside the building on First and Third.”

Her eyes widened. “Have you lost your mind? That place? It’s a fortress. Their security is top rate, cameras, lasers...”

He didn’t tell her that much more than ordinary cameras and lasers protected that building. He knew what that something else was. The treasure it protected inside was what he was after. The key, or maybe he should think of it as the lock, with Raine being the key.

Allowing his gaze to run down over her body, Cale enjoyed the view. Tight jeans that rode low on her hips, and a sleeveless t-shirt under which she wore no bra. How he wished she would take it off. “You’re proud of that body,” he told her.

Despite her anger, she grinned briefly before it disappeared from pink pouty lips. “Yes, actually. It was a long, long time in coming. Why shouldn’t I like it?”

“Do you have a lover?” He stood, moving closer to her. He wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her until she was too weak with lust to fight the feelings he hoped she shared with him. But for the last few hours while he tried convincing her to help him, she had only offered an icy shoulder. “Because if you don’t, I’d like to be a stand in.”

She wrinkled her nose in the cutest way. “Seriously? Does that even work on women?”

He shrugged. “One or two. You haven’t answered my question, Raine. Will you help me?”

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, letting it slide out slowly. Damn, she knew what she was doing to him. Truth was, it had been awhile since he had slowed down long enough to be intimate with a woman. Raine could hit that spot if she gave in to him.

“Well, I’d help the great Cale. But I don’t know what you’re talking about. Powers? Has the guilt of your criminal life gotten to you, made you lose it?”

Cale looked across to where he had sent Bender. His friend jumped from bench to bench along the walkway in the park. The cover of darkness and trees would give them a temporary hideout while he spoke with Raine. And Bender’s lack of tact would not send the skittish little thief running before he could convince her.

Should he admit to her that he and Bender also had the same powers, or most of them that she did? If so, she might question why he would target the Collins building. Then again,

maybe she knew nothing of the construction of the building. Since the others had never tracked her and she used nothing but her hands, it was safe to assume she either didn't know about walking through time, or she knew the danger of opening the way. Either way, he wasn't ready to explain everything. He needed her.

Coming to a decision that the stubborn woman would not be convinced without a dramatic move, he stood and faced her. He knew she couldn't see the change in his eyes, but when he went transparent, she would know it had happened.

She gave a little shriek when he stepped up to her and then passed through her body. "W-What did you just do."

"You know what," he told her. "Although you use only your hands, I have honed the ability to use my entire body. So has Bender."

She gaped, "Him?"

He nodded. "Yeah, okay he's my dopey friend, but yes he's one of us."

"One...of us." She closed her eyes and swayed. He tried holding her, but she pushed him away. "You know what my life has been like?" She sneered as if whatever hardship she had endured was his fault. "I nearly killed the only person in the world who loved me. Even though I couldn't make myself love him back, he cared. And all these years I lived on the streets, stealing what I could, using my curse if I had to, but suppressing it most of the time."

He frowned. "Suppressing?" What was she talking about? Suppressing the ability to slip dimensions, to walk through time in limited spaces was as normal as breathing and as vital too.

"I hate it." She held her hands in front of her face. "You had him, your friend, at least. I had nothing and no one."

"I'm sorry, Raine. But I'm here now."

She cast him a venomous look. "Don't worry about it. I've come a long way. I don't accidentally hurt anyone any more, but I'm still not normal. I don't fit in. Whether I like it or not, I'm still terrified of mirrors, and the only friends I have are thieves who would just as well steal from me as help me. They think I'm brilliant, the best after you. They don't know the truth."

"No, they don't."

She paused to look at him. "Wait, you know what I am. Or was that a trick to get me to share my secrets? Well you can forget it." She made to turn away, but he held onto her, pulling her down to a bench next to him.

“Raine, I know why the mirror shimmers and changes like it’s going to suck you into a black hole.”

She stopped struggling against his hold. “What did you say?”

He leaned his head back and stared up at the night sky, full of beautiful stars. “I used to look up at those stars wondering if they were the same on the other side, but for the life of me I can’t remember. I’m sure I must have gazed at them, even as a child.”

Her voice was a whisper. “The other side?”

“Yes, through the mirror. Well, not necessarily through the mirror, but that is possible. You can pass through the mirror to get to where we come from when the way was opened. Now it is not.”

“Why? Why isn’t it open now?”

“It’s complicated.” He stood, pulling her with him. “Let me show you something. Bender, we’ll catch up with you at spot four. After nine.” His friend nodded, and Cale turned Raine toward the path that led out of the park.

She came willingly. “Spot four. Is that code for something?”

“Yup.”

“What do you have to show me? I feel like I’m going to burst. I was desperate early on, tracking down a lead. Or what I thought was one. Turned out to be a dead end. Later I just made my way in life the best I knew how. Sort of better to live off the radar, if you know what I mean.”

He nodded. “I know exactly what you mean.”

They came to the edge of the park, and Cale stopped. He scanned the area for the others, but no one was on the street at that time of night. Still, he didn’t believe they gave up that quickly. As far as he knew, they hadn’t known he and Bender were in the area or that they knew of the Collins building. Of course, after their little stunt climbing Raine’s temporary home, they would be searching. In retrospect, perhaps walking through the walls would have been better. Moving to the Y’s past was not.

Cale guided Raine down to a diner on the corner. A neon sign flashed Open in the window. Checkered curtains hung at each side. Raine appeared to shiver at the sight of them. “See this place?” he asked.

“Unfortunately,” she muttered.

“If I wanted, I could move into this diner’s past”

She frowned. “I don’t get it.”

“I can’t show you, or we’ll be tracked. Let me put it like this. Say before this diner was put up, there was a junk yard here or a parking lot or anything. We could move into and interact with that past. We could jump on the old junkers just as if it was here. But we would be there in the past at this exact spot.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It is. Back at the Y where you were staying, at one point the building was only steel beams, about fifty years ago. That was during its building stage. Bender and I went into that time, and used the beams to climb up to your floor. Then we moved back into the present and appeared on your floor.”

“You’re powerful.” Her eyes glowed, lighting her entire face. His cock twitched wanting her. She seemed to read his thoughts and turned away reddening. “You could go anywhere in the world back in time. That’s so awesome.”

“Whoa slow down, beautiful.” He took the opportunity to stroke her cheek. She slapped his hand away. “It’s not like that. As I said, the space is limited. We can only go back in time within out immediate scope. Like if you’re in a room, you can move through the room’s past.”

She gasped. “Oh my goodness, I did that. I did it.”

He refocused on her instead of the diner. “What do you mean?”

“Ten years ago, when I turned eighteen. Well, not just then, but all around that time, probably from maybe a few months after I turned seventeen up until then. I thought I was crazy, but sometimes when I was in a room, I would find that a book that was on one table was on another in a second. One incident sticks out in my mind. I was in my room and the makeup I was putting on moved from the bureau to the closet in a shoebox where I had hid it after I swiped it from another one of the orphans.”

Cale tried stroking her face again. This time she was too amazed at discovering she wasn’t insane to notice what he was doing. He took advantage of it and kissed her lips. His body almost vibrated with the heat hers generated in him. When she didn’t pull away, he pressed his tongue between her lips, moaning at her sweet flavor.

“You’re so beautiful. I want to be inside you right now,” he growled into her ear.

She went stiff. “That’s not going to happen.”

“It could.”

“What’s the point? Sex is for someone else. I don’t have time for it.” By that he figured she hadn’t found the right lover. The knowledge set him off even more. How he would enjoy giving her pleasure.

“We should make time before we do our job together.”

She frowned. “Not.” Before he could think of something to ease her tension, make her go back to that comfortable camaraderie they almost had a moment ago, she skipped over to the diner. Before his eyes, she found a pipe here, a crevice in the brick wall there, and she was on the roof of the building.

“Now there goes a woman who doesn’t rely on walking through walls.” He grunted as she disappeared from sight. For a minute, he thought of chasing her, but let her go. Ms. Raine had a lot to mull over, and she might not want to sleep with him just yet, but something told him she would seek him out soon. She was bursting to know more about people like them.

Chapter Six

The two men stood scoping out the Collins building. Raine crouched in the darkness behind them. Why did it seem her whole life was spent out at night, sleeping in the day? The life of a thief she guessed, having graduated from the amateurish profession of being a pick pocket.

“What are we going to do if she doesn’t come back?” she heard Bender ask.

Cale’s deep tone held confidence. Too much, to her annoyance. “She will.”

“Are you sure, because we could talk to her gang, get them to help...”

“Bender, you know we need Raine. We can’t do this without her,” Cale snapped. “But it has been a week, and I’m getting impatient.”

Raine tsked. “Poor Cale. He’s getting impatient.” She laughed. “Did I hear you say you need me?” She walked from the shadows, noting how his eyes lit on her figure. The man had a one track mind. How in the world did he get any job completed if he couldn’t keep his thoughts from between a woman’s legs?

“Raine.”

She pretended his saying her name meant nothing. For years she practiced suppressing all soft emotions, believing it would help her control her curse. Up until now, it worked. At least it helped keep her from hurting anyone as she had Jace. She still remembered every detail of the day she nearly killed him. That would not be repeated.

Ignoring Cale, she turned to Bender, his plump buddy. No threat there. He was a sweet guy, who seemed more interested in his incessant snacking, which was okay with her. “Hello, Bender. How are you tonight?”

The other man grinned. “I’m great now that you’re here. I admit I was worried you wouldn’t come back.” He leaned in close to her, making her draw back a little. “Between you and me, he can get grumpy when his plans don’t work out.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Happen often?”

“No!” Cale snapped. “Now stop talking about me like I’m not here. Bender, make yourself scarce.”

“Why do I always have to leave when you two get together?”

“Yeah why does he?” Raine wasn’t too sure she wanted to be alone with Cale. The man was sexy, all sinewy muscles and icy gray eyes that were anything but cold.

Cale didn't answer. He turned back to the fifty story building with an aura of mystery she had always found intriguing and off putting at the same time. She had never been able to put her finger on just what it was about the Collins, and since she avoided all unnatural phenomenon, she didn't pursue it.

When he didn't answer, Bender shrugged, waved to Raine and then strolled hands in pockets down the street. Raine, resigned to her fate, dropped to the low stone wall Cale occupied. They were a block from First and Third, but the Collins remained in plain sight.

"So what's so special there?" she asked him.

"A treasure."

"Money?"

"Raine, you said you were following a dead end years ago. What was it?"

She wasn't an idiot. He changed the subject, but she allowed it for now. "I grew up in an orphanage. The director hated my guts. She lied to me all my life saying that my mother died in childbirth and my father died prior to that. Turned out, he hadn't. He planned to take me after my mother died."

"I gather he didn't?"

"No, he died before he got the chance. A man named Albin, I assume his friend, sent a letter to my orphanage saying my father thought he could kill someone with a bus. I didn't understand it. Albin said how could he have thought he could defeat them like that."

Cale gasped. "Albin?"

"You know him?"

He didn't answer. Raine studied his face. There was something Cale wasn't telling her. Why should she tell him everything, if he wasn't willing to return the favor? She wouldn't tell him she had found Albin's grave. She had been too late. It was there that her trail went cold. She thought she would never know anything more about herself or her curse.

She shoved at him, immediately regretting the contact because it sent unaccustomed tingles through her body. "Okay, I shared something with you. Your turn."

Cale tapped his lips. "Give me a kiss and I'll tell you."

Raine screwed up her face like the very thought disgusted her. In reality, she fought a need to jump on his lap and hump. She must be tired. "You're not serious."

He tapped again.

She made a show of dragging in a breath and releasing it. When their mouths touched, Raine parted her lips. *Mmm, he tastes so good. Impossible.* She arched into his palm as he ran it down over her breast. Shame filled her at her wanton reaction, but resisting wasn't a consideration.

Cale wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer. He stroked her nipple then tugged it gently. She melted against him, crying out for more. By the time he lifted her t-shirt to clamp down with his mouth on her stiff peaks, she came to her senses. Nearly pushing him back, she stopped herself and dropped her hands to her sides.

"Stop, please."

He moaned against her breast. "You don't want that, Raine. Baby, let me please you. I know I can."

"I know you can't. Stop. I'm begging you." She hated the weakness in her tone.

Cale drew away and lowered her shirt. "You don't have to beg. I'm not going to force myself on you." He was angry. For the first time, she regretted blooming late, blooming at all. It was the only thing that made her stand out when she would have blended into the background of those around her.

"I'm sorry."

He stood up and moved away, but not before she saw the hard-on in his pants. An answering ache clenched her core. *Just calm down, Raine. Having sex with Cale would be no better than it was with Jace. That's who you are. A frigid bitch.*

"Come here," he called over his shoulder.

She hesitated.

He turned around, a hard look in his eyes. "I said come here. You want me to tell you something. I'm going to."

She bit down on her tongue and marched over to his side. "You could be nicer about it."

"You're not the expert on that are you?"

Not answering, she folded her arms across her chest to wait.

“Okay, now look at this place here.” He pointed out the bakery on the corner near where they stood. Open up your mind. Think about what the inside looks like.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been—”

“I said think about it, not bring it up from memory!” Damn, apparently going without his needs met, made him a very grumpy boy. Bender had it wrong on what set Cale off. “Now focus. You’ll feel your pupils dilating, and itchiness in the rest of your eyes. I’m sure you’ve experienced the look and feel before.”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts, Raine. It’s time to stop being afraid to do it wrong.” His voice had gentled. “If you don’t know how to control your ability, eventually you will hurt someone or someone with greater control will hurt you.”

“I’ve survived ten years...”

“So you’re saying I’m stronger and better than you are.” His chest puffed out and a look of pride came over his face, so big she could have sworn she saw his head grow.

“No way!” Her eyes narrowed on the grocery. She tried to zone out everything else. Cale moved to stand behind her, giving her pointers in her ear. His cock pressed against the top of her ass. “How can I concentrate with that thing in my back?” she snapped.

He laughed. “Sorry.” He moved back just a little. She was still sharply aware of him. “Okay, try again.”

Amazingly, it worked. The walls of the bakery seemed to go transparent, although she thought the entire experience was in her eyes. She could see everything inside, from the people to the furniture to the pictures on the interior wall.

“I’m doing it!” she cried.

He hugged her, and she lost focus. “Good, beautiful. Tomorrow we walk through walls together.”

Chapter Seven

“Sir, it’s her,” the guard reported.

The man bent over a pile of papers looked up from his desk. “You’re sure? We’ve had numerous false starts over the years. We thought we found her at that orphanage ten years ago. Turned out we destroyed it for no reason. She had left before we arrived.”

“We’re positive she’s in the city. She used the cube, and we were almost on her but she stopped and moved before we could get a lock. She’s very clever.”

Pounding his fist on the desk, the man spat curses. He stood and began to pace. He wanted her dead, *needed* her dead, as soon as possible.

The guard cleared his throat, trembling. “I’m afraid there’s more.”

“What more could there be? I mean after all, she’s lived as if she’s from this side. Yet, she continues to elude you. She obviously doesn’t move in time or you would pick up the energy, so how can you not keep up with her? Maybe I’m dealing with traitors. Is that it?”

Reporting to this cold-blooded man had fallen to the guard this time around. None of his colleagues had wanted the task. Always it came down to a ‘kill the messenger’ situation. Who could have guessed Raine would have a natural instinct for hiding from them, even without the use of her powers?

“Out with it,” the man demanded. “Tell me how else you bungled this situation.”

“Two others of our kind are believed to be with her, sir.” He swallowed and braced himself. “One of them is Albin’s son.”

“You’re dead! Do you hear me? Dead!”

* * * *

“Hey,” Cale called to her.

“Hey yourself.” She yawned.

Raine watched as Cale sat up, stretching out his muscles. She sighed when her body reacted as it always did. All this time, she had been dead inside, and here he came to mess it up. Resentment bubbled in her gut.

“You always sleep outside or what?” he wondered.

Raine stood with her back to a tree. She arched and walked her hands slowly down the bark so that she ended with her hands behind her feet. "Often," she said in answer to his question.

"Damn, you're flexible."

She shrugged. "Have to be in my job."

"Well, that was before I taught you to walk through the walls instead of climbing the side of buildings."

"Oh, so what you're saying is you want me to get lazy and fat like you." She laughed, seeing the offense in his eyes. The truth was she couldn't spot an ounce of fat on him. He was solid muscle. Unlike Jace, who had been thinner than she, Cale's shoulders were wide as a train and he probably had that much force should he decide to tackle someone. He was pure male beauty. "Don't get your feathers ruffled. You look okay."

"Okay!" He nearly squawked. "I'll have you know I have to beat the women off with a stick."

"So you beat women?" she teased.

"You're impossible."

She patted his shoulder. "Poor Cale. Come on. If you know where we can find Bender, I'll take you two to a place that serves the best waffles. I go there on the rare occasions that I'm up during the day."

"Deal."

When they arrived at Raine's favorite diner, after showering at another of her stops, Raine surveyed the restaurant. As far as she knew, no one had ever been following her, but she had seen those men outside the Y, and the word she had received from another in the business was that someone was looking for her.

They found a table quickly, and Cale didn't waste any time interrogating her on PJ. "So who was that guy you were talking to just now? He looked like he wanted to eat you alive."

She grinned. "Jealous?"

He looked indifferent but she knew better. "No skin off my nose. Just wondering. Whatever he said to you, put that look of fear in your eyes. The kind that makes a skittish person bolt."

“Don’t worry. I said I would help you *if* you tell me why you’re so interested in this particular corporation.” She studied her menu although she knew what she would order. Four waffles, four pieces of bacon and a large orange juice. Stealing had its rewards, and she had promised herself she would never have to starve because there wasn’t enough food like at the orphanage.

“Oh!” Bender piped up suddenly. “They have smiley face pancakes.”

Cale laughed, stirring Raine’s heart. “You idiot. That’s the children’s menu.”

“So I’ll get like four orders then,” Bender said reasonably.

Raine shook her head. How did they end up friends? “How do you two know each other? Why is it you had him, and I didn’t have anybody?” She paused, thinking about all he told her. “And how do you know Albin? Because I know you recognized the name.”

Bender’s eyes widened. “Whoa, you know Cale’s dad?”

Raine gasped. Cale poked Bender’s arm, allowing the tips of his fingers to sink inside the man’s arm.

“Shit! Ouch!” Bender screamed.

“Keep your voice down!” Raine and Cale yelled at the same time.

Raine glanced around, and gave several patrons a threatening look as they stared back at her. Cale laughed at her attempt to look like a street thug.

“You might be a bad ass, Raine, but nobody would know it looking at you. Your hair curls around your forehead making you look like a little cherub. Your wide beautiful eyes could melt any heart.”

Raine squirmed and stroked her short hair. “It used to be longer. I got a perm and chopped it off. I changed a lot over the last few years.”

Bender punched Cale. “Somebody’s smitten.”

Cale growled. “Shut up!”

The waitress came by and everyone gave their orders. As soon as her glass of orange juice arrived, Raine drained it and requested another. She sipped the second slowly, watching Cale over the rim of the glass. Finally, she set it down. “Well, Cale?”

He hesitated, then spoke with his voice lowered. “If you use that first ability I taught you, and look at the Collins building from Third Street, you’ll see something very interesting.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“Go see and hurry back.”

For a moment, she didn’t move. Was he serious? The diner was right at the corner of Third and Andover. They were only three blocks from the Collins building. Would she really see anything unusual at that distance? She had to try.

When she stood, Cale held her hand. “Be careful. Do not use the past, just see the dimensions.”

“What?” she frowned.

“Just do it.”

Raine pushed open the front door of the restaurant, grumbling. What did he mean use the dimensions? All this power stuff was confusing. Cale had alluded to her having an ability that was more advanced than his and Bender’s. Why was that? What made her so special?

She stepped to the corner of Third and glanced down the street. There was the big white monstrosity of a building, dominating that entire block and stretching higher than all the other surrounding structures. The architecture was bold, but frankly cool with all the shaded windows and the odd cube with symbols at the front of the building.

She gasped. “What the fuck?” The cube. Reaching up to pinch her cube behind her t-shirt, she fingered the small engraved symbols. Cale had shown her his. She knew he had used it to track her, and advised her not to put it in her palm if she didn’t want undesirables locating her.

Was this what he wanted to show her? They had been looking at the building from another angle before so she hadn’t seen the cube. Then she remembered he said to use the dimensions. He wanted her to change her sight as he taught her. There was something more she needed to see.

The shift in sight was easier for her after a lot of practice. The bright sunny day dulled somewhat when her eyes changed. The blue of the sky surrounding the top of one side of the Collins building disappeared. In its place was more structure.

“What the hell?” she whispered.

Cale was right. There was definitely something special about that place. The Collins building didn’t just exist in this dimension, but it stretched on into another, simultaneously.

Chapter Eight

Raine turned to go back inside the diner in complete amazement. For years she felt like she was less than scum for what she did to Jace. She did still feel sorry it happened, but had she known, or been around those who could teach her, it never would have occurred. She almost wanted to go back to the orphanage and throw it in the director's face that she wasn't a freak, that she was not alone in her special abilities.

She had nearly stepped through the doorway before she spotted the man standing on the other side of the street. He seemed shocked. *Shit*. Had he seen her eyes change? Impossible from so far away, but what if he did? She hurried inside and flopped down in her seat, blowing out a noisy breath.

Cale nodded. "Exactly. I do believe the Collins place has a few secrets to share, don't you?"

Raine glanced back over her shoulder. The man was still standing there. He didn't appear to be calling in backup or venturing inside to demand an explanation. She let it go for now, and spun back to face Cale. "So was Albin your father? And you never said how you know Bender."

"I owe you that much," Cale conceded. "Yes, Albin was my father. Bender and I lived right next door to each other, and we grew up together."

"Here?" She knew he was avoiding telling her that part, and decided to pin him down right away.

"Our homes are on the other side. Or rather, one of the other sides. In a city much like this one, but all of the citizens can bend space and time, in different degrees. Kind of like everyone can run, but some run faster than others. Every dimension is not open to all. Right now, this side is not open to anyone but the first family."

"The first family? Like the president?"

"Sure." He hesitated. "The first family has a power that can do anything, go anywhere, but with that comes great responsibility. You know the drill. And the leader of the first family has the ability to take away and give the power to any of the others."

She stopped him. "Wait, this doesn't make sense. You have me believing that this ability is natural, something you're born with. Now you're saying some guy can just snatch it away?"

He tapped his fingers on the table.

With syrup smeared across the side of his face, Bender jumped into the conversation. "You're screwing up the story, Cale. Put it like this, Raine, everybody can move through

time, in a limited space like we said. And everybody can move across dimensions or bend themselves to the point of passing through whatever's solid. But the big guy or girl can put a seal on you so you can't cross dimensions. Wherever you are, that's where you're stuck until he decides to break the seal on you."

"Wow!" Her eyes were so wide they ached. "That is...that's just freaky. So if you piss this person off, you're screwed."

Cale nodded. "Pretty much."

Raine munched her food, mulling over what she had just learned, and paring it with what Cale had told her previously. The puzzle to her existence was slowly coming together. If she could just get the stubborn man to stop holding out, she could have a complete picture of who she was. He still had secrets. She was convinced of it.

"Cale, you said that the way to the other side is closed, and that's why the mirror, normally an opening, wouldn't open all the way. Have I been sealed and you too?"

He grinned. "Astute little beauty. That's why I love you."

She rolled her eyes.

"No, you haven't been sealed. All roads out of here have been sealed. Any Shadrooms over here can't get back unless, I suspect, they go through Collins."

"Shadrooms?"

He nodded. "That's what we're called. All those from the other side, no matter which dimension. We're all Shadrooms."

"Cool." She stood. "Well what are we waiting for? Let's go. I want to see where I come from."

Cale grabbed hold of her when she would have rushed from the table. "Sit down, woman. First, we don't know which dimension you are from. Second, you can't just waltz into Collins half cocked. Did you forget? I told you we are being tracked. Who do you think is tracking us?"

For the moment, Raine sat pressing her lips together. When she spoke, she couldn't keep the distrust from her voice. "You give me the impression that they are the bad guys. But from what you've said, Collins is run by the first family, if they are indeed the ones that closed the openings to the other side. So why is it that *you* are the ones trying to keep me from going home?"

He reached to stroke her face, but she moved away. "Raine, I know how you feel—"

“You don’t!” she spat. “You don’t know how I feel. You knew your father. You grew up with your family, on a street where your own kind lived. You have your buddy right here.”

“Raine, you can’t hold on to this bitterness forever,” he began.

She stood, slapped down money on the table and walked out. As soon as she hit the street, a hand covered her mouth, and strong arms circled her waist. Seconds later, darkness descended.

Chapter Nine

Raine opened her eyes slowly, becoming aware of both the thick state of her tongue and the complete lack of sound around her. She had become used to the whoosh of cars zooming by, horns blasting, people yelling, in the city she inhabited. The experience was much different from the location of the orphanage, deep in the country.

She sat up and looked around her. Four white walls, a ceiling and a floor. That was the entire makeup of the room. There was no door, nor window. The bastards hadn't even had the decency to give her a bed to lie on or cover.

She reached up to feel for her cube and found it gone. So was the money she'd had in her pocket. "Thieves!"

Using her ability, she attempted to walk through the wall. For her pains, she got a banged nose. She glanced down at her hands and tried to change only them. Still no reaction. Her eyes narrowed on the wall. Not even an itch or a shift in vision.

Resorting to the old fashioned method, she pounded on the wall. "Let me out of here!"

Immediately, a panel opened where none had appeared before. A man she didn't recognize stepped through. His stiff shoulders, expanded chest and flared nostrils said pompous ass, but she figured that wasn't his name. She glared.

He smiled. "Hello Raine, my dear. I've been looking for you for years."

"What? Why? How do you know me?"

He crossed the room and took her in a bear hug before she realized what he intended. When he held her by the shoulders as if to see for himself if it was really her, she thought about kneeing him in the nuts, but he moved away.

"I am your uncle." His hands behind his back, he stood like an important person. "I came to the orphanage many years ago."

She gasped.

"I met a woman who was so..." he shuddered, "mean I guess is the most polite word I can find."

Raine gaped. "The director. You came there?"

He turned away and sniffed. "She said you died, even showed me a death certificate. Now, I know it was a plot. There are those who strongly oppose the first family."

Her knees buckled. She sagged against the wall. "First...family?"

“Oh yes. I’m sorry. You’ve been in the third dimension all your life. You wouldn’t know about our ways. Suffice it to say that you are born into a very influential family, the top of the Shadroons. One can get no higher. I guess in your experience, one would call it like being a princess.”

She couldn’t believe her ears. But if this was true, why was she being held as a prisoner. “If you’re really my uncle and I’m who you say I am, why was I abducted like that, and why hold me here in this room where I can’t even use my powers.”

“I’m sorry, precautions, my dear.” The formality of his speaking started to grate on her nerves. “You were found with known fugitives, the sons of those who conspired to murder your father, the former leader of the Shadroons.”

“What!” Now she did sink to the floor. Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. No wonder Cale had been holding back. He didn’t want to admit that Albin had killed her father. Yet, it didn’t entirely make sense. Albin’s letter made himself out to be her father’s friend. Why would he even send the letter?

He waved quivering plump fingers. “Never mind. We can discuss it more over dinner. Like I said, I apologize for my men’s hasty decision to put you here. I will send in someone to escort you to a proper room where you can get cleaned up and then take a tour.”

“Uncle...” she paused. “I don’t know your name.”

“Kaz.” He moved to the panel before she could say anything else and was gone.

Did she dare believe him? Cale had been keeping secrets, and he had avoided as long as he could about admitting that Albin was his father. On top of that, the jerk had neglected to mention *she* was a part of the first family!

“Raine?”

She looked up to find a young woman standing in the panel opening.

“Will you come with me?” she asked kindly.

Following the woman down a narrow hallway, Raine, glanced out the windows at intervals and was shocked to see the city far below. Much lower than she would have thought. “Is this the Collins building I’m in?”

The woman nodded. “Yes, it is. Lord Kaz likes to have a presence in all dimensions to oversee our people while they interact with the third dimension dwellers.”

“What’s so special about this side?” she wondered.

The woman stopped. "Are you kidding? Nothing compares with this side. It's so...bare bones. So limited, yet the people are diverse and strong. They continue to thrive. Their inventions are copied by Shadroons dimensions over. There's much to learn from these people. We are all the same, all of the Shadroons on whatever plain, but there is only one group of people from the third dimension."

"All righty then," Raine said and fell silent, despite the millions of questions dancing in her head.

They continued down the hall and passed through a doorway. At least it looked like a regular doorway. Raine noticed the changeover, from the third dimension to another, a wavering in the space. Strangely, the air felt cleaner on this side, and outside the window she was shocked to see a whole other city.

She stopped to stare out the window. This city had buildings, people and vehicles, but it was more like the country. Trees and other greenery everywhere. Her guide had said they copied inventions and such from her side, but she was pretty sure she saw a few things that were starkly different. She longed to take a closer look.

"I'm sorry, I don't know your name," she began.

"Lydia."

She nodded. "Lydia, I want to go out there and look around. It appears so much fresher...different. I want to meet the people."

Lydia smiled. "Soon. Right now you must get ready for dinner."

"I just ate some waffles," Raine assured her.

The woman smiled again. "That was seven hours ago."

Raine gaped. While she stood stunned at the loss of time, she heard raised voices down the hall. She spared Lydia only a glance before running down there to see if it was who she thought. Cale and Bender struggled in the hold of several men who were obviously guards. The two men's bodies flicked in and out of solidity, but the cuffs on their wrists seemed to suppress their powers.

"Cale!" she shouted.

He looked up and stopped struggling. "Raine, you're okay." She saw relief in his expression, but it could be pretense.

Raine walked over to him. One of the guards tried to block her way. "Miss, don't."

“It’s okay,” Lydia informed him. The man moved aside.

Raine stood looking up at Cale, trying to sort out her feelings for him. He touched his forehead to hers and smiled. In the next second, she kneed him as hard as she could in the nuts. He went down to the floor dragging Bender whose cuffs were connected to his.

“You lied to me, you piece of shit!” she yelled.

“Raine, I...”

“I don’t want to hear it. You knew I was in the first family all along, but you failed to mention that part. And you conveniently forgot that your father killed mine.”

“That’s a lie!” He struggled to his feet. “I don’t know what Lord Kaz has been telling you, but whatever it is, it’s not true. He is the one who had your father killed. His own brother.”

“Why should I ever believe anything you say?”

He stared into her eyes, making her waver for a minute. Even knowing he might have been a part of betraying her family, she desired him. What the body wanted, it wanted. The thing had no sense of right and wrong.

“Raine, trust me. You are the next in line for leadership of the Shadroons, not your uncle. And if you think he wouldn’t kill you to maintain control, you better think again.”

At his words of what amounted to treason, one of the guards hit him with what looked like a taser. Cale fell to the floor unconscious.

Chapter Ten

“What are your orders, Lord Kaz?” the guard asked.

Kaz stood at the window overlooking the courtyard at the back of the Collins building. With his hands clasped behind him, in an effort to remain calm, he watched Raine laugh and chat with several Shadrooms. Ones that were loyal to him, of course. He couldn't have her getting wind of what most knew as rumors, that he had forced his way into the head seat of the first family. Still, he couldn't be sure it would last. It had been unfortunate that Lydia and others had learned of her existence. He had wanted to dispose of her before anyone knew her father had had a daughter. That route was not an option now.

“Make it look like an accident,” he told the guard. “She doesn't know our ways yet, nor does she understand the extent of her power.”

“Yes, my lord.” The man turned to leave.

“Wait.”

“Yes?”

A slow grin spread over Kaz' face. “Take her to the orb.”

“But my lord, that's the last place I thought you would want her to go.”

Kaz shook his head. “That's why I'm leader and you're not. She's not had her tour of the facilities yet. The orb is extremely powerful. A young woman like her would never be able to handle it even if she is from the first family. You forget that Raine is the first female in line for the last two centuries. I'm confident, when she touches it—and she will touch it as no first family member can resist attempting the bond—the power will end my little problem forever.”

The guard bowed his head. “I'll arrange it with Lydia, sir.”

“Do that.”

* * * *

Cale punched his pillow for the fifth time then tossed it away. “Damn it, damn it, damn it!”

Bender, on the other bed across the room sighed. “You think they'll bring us dinner soon?”

Cale growled. "This is no time to think of your belly, Bender. We're in trouble. Worse, Raine is in trouble."

"You love her." It was a statement not a question.

"Pah! Why should I love a woman who thinks my father murdered her father just because a man she's never met who happens to be her uncle says he did?"

Bender laughed. "When you put it that way...Yeah, you love her. I'm just trying to figure out when it happened. I mean we only spent a few days with her, and a lot of that time you two were either arguing or you were teaching her about her ability. So when did love come in? Did you even kiss her?"

"Yes!" Cale calmed himself. "I mean, that's none of your business. Either way, I'd rather have her as the leader of our people, a person at least willing to learn, than Kaz who cares about nothing but money and power. After all, why would he have his company half way into the third dimension?"

"To benevolently look over his people who are living among the people there," Bender offered.

Cale snorted. "Yeah right." He stood and paced to the wall and examined it carefully. There were no openings as far as he could see. He wondered if the door was in another dimension."

Bender yawned. "I'm hungry. Hey, forget looking for a door, Cale. I overheard one of the guards saying these rooms have seals over them, placed there by the orb. We won't be able to use our powers to get out, and the door is in another dimension."

Cale sighed. "Figured as much. You know what that means. Only Kaz or Raine could make our powers work in here, with the orb."

Bender had his rare moments of brilliance. "You know if you had told Raine about her family history and told her our quest was to get our hands on the orb, or rather hers, then we wouldn't be in this mess."

"Great, thanks!" Cale continued to search the wall. "If I can find where the door will appear, I can try to get the jump on the guard. It was about here right?" As he spoke the panel opened and his pains resulted in another shock to his system. Once again, he found himself on the floor, with lights fading fast. *How am I going to save her, when I can't save my self?*

* * * *

Raine felt a pull from the glowing round object. She looked at Lydia. "It's called a what now?"

“We simply call it the orb, but the official name is Amendoono Orb of the Shadroons.” Lydia put a hand out as if she would stop Raine from drawing nearer, but a guard held her back. All first family members had the right and privilege of bonding with the orb. In fact, no one but the first family could. Raine found that bit of info interesting and scary at the same time.

“That’s quite a mouthful. I see why you call it simply the orb.” She moved a step closer, energy and life pulsing inside her from the orb. It was like the thing was alive. “Where did it come from? I have so many questions; I can’t even form them all.”

Lydia, always pleasant, was ready with an answer. “The orb is believed to have been brought here on a spacecraft millions of years ago by alien creatures we believe we descended from. They had our natural abilities, enhanced by the orb, a life form in its own way who helped harmonize life here on several dimensions.”

Raine frowned. “Yet, you’re convinced that the third dimension dwellers are the unique ones.”

Her guide laughed. “Yes, well we all grew up with these stories, so they’re nothing new.”

“So what you’re saying is we’re not even human?”

Lydia pondered it. “It’s possible at a later time or even around the same time, the third dimensioners settled on Earth also from other galaxies. Maybe their lack of power is some sort of virus.”

Raine nodded. “Interesting.” She finally made it to the orb, staring at it as it sat on a pedestal in the center of the room. Actually, it didn’t sit on the pedestal, more like it floated above it. She ran her hand beneath and found no connection. “How does it work?”

“The leader takes it in his hand and somehow there’s communication. The leader tells the orb what he wants and it happens. Only for the first position leader. I think that the orb might not have known you existed, so it recognized Lord Taz.”

“Isn’t it all powerful?” Raine joked. Lydia didn’t seem to be amused. “It seems odd that a thing like this isn’t better protected. I mean someone could steal it.”

She shook her head. “Why would someone want to do that? Besides, the orb has its own protection. None other than the first family can even get close to it. The fact that you are standing so near testifies to who you are.” Raine thought she heard a snuffle from the woman.

So this was why Cale had wanted her help with this particular break-in. He wanted to steal the orb and knew he couldn’t touch it. When she got her hands on him, she would rip into him for using her. Tears filled her eyes. *Stupid! I love him.*

He wasn't worth her love. The first time she felt anything for a man or any person, and it had to be a man who was a murderer's son. If her uncle was really the bad man Cale had her believe, he would never have let her inside this room. She was the next in line. Lydia had confirmed it, and touching the orb would let it know that too. She would automatically become first leader of the Shadrooms.

That thought made her pause when she would have stroked the smooth looking surface of the orb. In fact she longed to do so, but she resisted. The thing had a voice she could almost hear. It called to her to bond. What did bonding with it mean? Would it hurt or alter her perception on life? Not that she didn't need her head screwed on straight. She knew from her life experiences, she was rather pessimistic. Only in the last few days of being with Cale did she stop calling her power a curse.

Whether she wanted it or not, the power reached up to her like that ball in the science center that made a person's hair stand on end when touching it. Little lines of lightening reached up to her hands and seemed to pull them down to the orb. As soon as her palms wrapped around the cool slick surface, energy so white hot it hurt, exploded throughout her body, making her feel like she was coming apart at the seams.

She screamed in agony, trying to pull away, but the orb held on. Its power wrapped around her fingers like it welded them on. Sinking to her knees, she pleaded for help, but no one came near. When she fell onto her back with the orb resting against her stomach and her mouth working now with no sound, she saw Lydia crying and screaming she assumed for help as she ran out the door. The guard stood there staring at her in shock.

I'm going to die. I finally find where I belong and now I'm going to die.

Chapter Eleven

Cale sat in a corner of the white room with his head in his hands and rocking back and forth. “Damn, if they hit me with that taser one more time, I think my head may pop. That hurts like hell!” he complained.

His friend only seemed to be half listening. Bender was busy slurping up the watery Jello they had been served. “Yeah, you shouldn’t have been near the door, man. Isn’t it funny though, they keep hitting you?”

“Not funny!”

Bender shrugged when Cale glared up at him. “I’m just saying.”

A commotion outside the room caught their attention. Before they hadn’t been able to hear anything outside the room, which was how that guard got the drop on him. Cale stood on trembling legs intending to check it out. He hesitated. His head was still spinning, and being hit again was for the birds. In the next instant, he didn’t have to wonder what was going on.

The flat white wall near where the panel had appeared earlier began to waver. A vision of light and beauty passed through into the room. It took him a few blinks and the exclamation yelled by Bender to realize it was Raine. He rushed over to her.

“Raine!” Cale tried taking her in his arms, but he passed through her, almost blinding himself in the process. Light rolled off her almost like she was a small sun. “Power down, baby, I almost didn’t recognize you. I’m so glad you’re okay. I wanted to tell you I’m sorry...” His words fell away when she didn’t immediately speak.

“This isn’t weird to you?” She spoke in his mind.

He grinned and scratched his head. “Uh, sorry. I neglected to mention what our head leader looks like when they bond with the orb. I can see you did. Can you power down though? The light is a little painful.”

“You little shit! I would power down as you call it, if I knew how. I’m surprised I’m not dead. That thing almost killed me. And from what I learned from the orb before I passed out from the assault of images, my uncle was counting on me dying from it. And...” She ran a hand over her mouth, glistening tears like stars coming to her eyes. *“I can’t figure out how to speak out loud. I couldn’t figure out how to open the door. I can’t do anything except float around. Cale, help me!”*

He would have reached for her to hold her again, but remembered she barely had substance. “Okay, get us out of here, into the other side. I think I know someone who can help.”

Bender moved next to them and put a finger out to touch Raine. His hand and then his arms lit like the sun shown on his pale skin. He laughed in wonder. "Wow, I've never been this close to our leader. It's awesome."

Cale punched him. "Shut up, idiot. We need to get out of here. Raine, can you do it?"

She looked worried. *"I think I turned off the seals. All of them, even the ones outside of here, trapping Shadrooms on one plain or the other. I'm not sure if that was such a good idea, but I didn't know how to be selective."*

Cale grinned, then pulled out his cube. "Don't worry about that." The small object, nestled in his palm only a moment before, vibrated and rose an inch above his hand. Light almost like what radiated from Raine's body came from it. "Take me home!" he demanded happily, not that he needed to command it out loud. The cube would open a portal only to his own dimension based on the symbols and how he settled it in his hand.

A small portal started and then grew until it was big enough for them to step through.

"I don't understand. You said the passage was in a mirror."

He nodded. "First family only. I can use a mirror, but only in conjunction with this little cube. Remember I told you, you are more powerful than we are. Come on, let's go. We don't want to be caught here. Even with your new awareness, it means nothing if you don't know what to do."

They stepped through and Cale could have kissed the ground. How he had missed home all these years, stuck on the other side. He strolled around touching trees, sniffing the air. Nearby other portals opened as his fellow Shadrooms discovered the ability to come home again. Their tears mirrored his. Somehow, he didn't think it would be difficult now to gather those who would fight against Raine's uncle and his guards. At least he hoped not.

He reached for Raine's hand, missed and gestured for her to follow. They headed out to the main street and caught a taxi. "Number three, Arrow, please." At Raine's confused look, he explained. "My dimension isn't nearly as big as where you grew up. There's only one major city and five small communities on the outskirts. Mine is number three. The short row of houses where Bender and I live is called Arrow."

She nodded and Cale looked up in time to see the driver barely watching the road. He was too busy staring at Raine. Her transparency wasn't so pronounced now, and he expected it would wear down after a while. But she still stuck out. Everyone knew what her look indicated.

"I-Is she...?" the man asked with reverence in his voice.

"Yes," Cale answered. "This is your leader, Raine."

The man nodded. "Lady."

Raine acknowledged him. Cale touched her hand and this time his hand didn't go through. He did feel the surge of energy coming from her. The purest power the Shadrooms knew of, that which came off the orb. "*I love you,*" he whispered hopefully into her mind. He had never been able to do that, but perhaps in this advanced state, she could hear him, just like she could speak in his mind.

She turned to look at him, and again he saw her fear. All of this was a shock and probably hard to bear. Now here he was adding to it by telling her he loved her. But he couldn't help it. When she had looked at him earlier in the hallway, like she thought he had somehow been involved with killing her father, he thought his heart would break.

Before all this, his only thought was getting home, and if it meant using her to get there, he hadn't cared. Now, he just wanted to spend all his time with her, to hold her and take away her fears and the sorrow he always saw deep in her eyes.

"Home at last," Bender quipped.

Cale looked up to find they had drawn up to his house. The green door he had always wished his mother would paint over stood dulled and weathered with time. He stepped from the cab and helped Raine out. Not since he was ten years old had he been home.

Bender disappeared around the side of the house next door, and Cale led Raine to his own house. His heart pounded. What if something had happened to his mother? What if she moved away or had gone looking for him and was lost in another dimension?

When he hesitated, Raine clutched his hand and they moved together to the door. He knocked and waited. Slowly, he became aware of others coming from their houses to stare at them. One woman who appeared vaguely familiar spoke loudly in her phone. "Answer the door, honey, I think it's the first family!"

The woman who answered the door was older, with wrinkles surrounding her eyes and mouth. Her hair had gone mostly grey and she seemed to have dropped quite a bit of weight. But he knew her. "Mom."

"Cale?"

He nodded.

She burst out crying and dragged him into her arms. "I never gave up. I never gave up hope, Cale. I knew you were alive. My son." She pulled him into the doorway. "Come in. Is Bender with you? Oh dear, he'll be so hurt, son. His mother died last year. But his father's still there, crazy as anything." She paused, seeing Raine for the first time.

He ran his hand around behind Raine's back to hold her close, despite how the power from her tickled his side. "Mom, this is Raine, my...uh...the first leader."

His mother spat on the ground in front of Raine. "No one from that family is welcome here. Ever! She can go back where she came from."

Cale stared in shock. "Mom, I can't believe you would act like that. Listen, she—"

"I don't want to hear it! It was her family that took away the only two people I ever loved. Lord Kaz was kind enough," she spat again, "to bring me word that your father was dead years ago, and that he would not allow him to be buried here in our dimension because he was a traitor."

Before he could respond, he heard the screech of tires behind them. When he turned the area was crawling with guards.

Raine squeezed his hand and looked at his mother. "I'm sorry. I promise to bring him back." And with those words, a portal opened and she pulled him inside.

Chapter Twelve

Raine opened her eyes to darkness all around. She gasped and tried to sit up only to find a heavy arm holding her down. She struggled.

“Shh, Raine it’s me,” Cale calmed her.

“Cale? Where are we?” She glanced down at herself, but couldn’t see a thing in the darkness. “And I assumed that power wore off. I can speak out loud. I remember taking us in a portal, but I don’t know where I was going.”

She felt rather than saw him shrug. “I don’t know. We’ve been here a couple hours. You fell out as soon as we came through. At first your body lit the space around us a little, but I still couldn’t make anything out.”

Raine felt the ground beneath her, but couldn’t identify whether it was wood or cement or anything. The solid surface didn’t remind her of any material she knew. “You said there were only various dimensions of Shadroon living places and one third dimension. Since we know we’re not in the third, doesn’t that mean we’re in one of the others?”

She heard him stand, moving around slowly. “All of them are basically the same, sky, grass, houses, people. This is different. Way different. Even if we moved through into someone’s house, it should feel like it. I can’t tell anything. It feels like I could move forward forever. Hear that hollow sound? It’s like there are no walls to bounce the sound back.

Curling up with her knees to her chest, Raine shivered. “I’m so sorry, Cale. My family got you all into this. Your mom hates me. And now I’ve screwed up again. I promised I would bring you back, but I don’t have my cube, which I never learned to properly use. I think my uncle took it while I was unconscious in that room and I never noticed.”

He moved to kneel in front of her, resting his palms on her knees. “Don’t worry, baby. We’re in this together. My mother will come around. She’s a naturally kind person from what I remember. She’s just been through a lot; I guess we all have. We’ll heal as soon as things get back to how they’re supposed to be.” Clothing rustled. “Besides, I do have my cube.”

She waited while he tried, her eyes beginning to ache trying to see him. After a few minutes, he sighed. “Please don’t tell me...”

“Not even a hum. Something’s blocking it. Like we’re...I don’t know. Like we’re nowhere. Baby, you need to do this.”

“I can’t. I can’t, Cale. The power is gone. Look at me.” She held up her hands. “Well, you can’t see me, but all that energy I felt is gone. I don’t feel anything inside me anymore. I’ve screwed up everything all over again, ruined your life.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her lips gently. "Raine, don't. You saved my life and Bender's. You know what your uncle would have done, what he planned to do. You got us out of there, and you opened the seals so hundreds, maybe even thousands of Shadroons could return to their families." He stroked her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "For letting me get to see my mother's face once more after so many years, it's worth it even being stuck in this place for the time being."

She closed her eyes, fighting despair. "I just want to stop screwing up. I stayed clear of relationships all this time, and the one minute I decide to care, this happens."

He caught her face between both hands. "Raine, are you admitting that you love me?"

She hesitated. Well, if they were going to be stuck here forever, she should at be honest with him. She smiled in the darkness through her tears. "Yes, I love you. It snuck up on me, and happened so fast. But I do love you, Cale. I didn't think I had the ability, thought maybe that was one of the screwy things with me."

He lifted her chin and covered her mouth with his. She didn't resist when his tongue pushed between her lips to gently sweep her warm mouth. A shiver of pleasure rippled over her body. She arched into him as his hand roved over her to her breast and rubbed her nipple into a hardened peak. "Raine, my heart. I know you have it in you to free us. You are the one to save our people. But don't think you are alone. I'm going to stand by your side all the way."

"What if I can't?"

"You can." She felt his smile against her cheek. "I think maybe someone needs to relax. I have just the thing to help you."

He laid her back, sliding his hand beneath her blouse to cup her bare breast. "I don't understand, baby. You didn't want a man to touch you, but you don't wear a bra. You dress to make a man salivate to have you."

Raine arched to his touch. A moisture started at her center, something she couldn't remember feeling so intensely. "I might be afraid I can't feel and enjoy a man's touch, but I love being prettier."

"Prettier?" He chuckled. "You are beautiful, Raine. I want you so much I'm hurting for you."

"I don't want you to hurt, Cale." She reached up to touch his lips. "If making love to me will take away your pain, I want you inside me."

He groaned. "Raine..."

She sat up to tug her shirt over her head. A shimmer to her skin lit a limited space around them. She stared down at her breasts, astounded that even the tips glowed enough to make out in the darkness.

“Wow, you’re amazing.” Cale captured her breast and lowered his mouth to her heated skin. A tingle of energy passed between them. She moaned. “Mmm, you taste incredible, Raine.” He kissed his way down across her stomach, pausing to dip his tongue in her navel. Raine held onto his head, never wanting him to stop.

He moved to her jeans and undid the button and then the zipper. Raine trembled again, this time because she was afraid. What if it didn’t feel good, but made her sick to her stomach like with Jace years ago? She didn’t think she could stand it if her body hated Cale’s touch.

He sensed her hesitation. “Don’t worry. I know you haven’t had much experience. We’ll take it slow.”

“Cale...” She swallowed, trying to get her nerve up. “What if...”

His mouth was just above her apex. He had already eased her pants off her hips along with her panties. She had never felt so exposed. “What if what, baby?”

“What if I don’t...What if I don’t like it, if you can’t make me feel good?” She sounded like a complete idiot. She closed her eyes in shame. Why couldn’t she just be someone else? Why couldn’t she be like one of the girls in the group she had sometimes done jobs with? She’d watched them with men, even the ones in the group who were their friends and not love interests. The girls had a natural ability to wrap the men around their fingers with just a look, a batted lash or wiggle of the hips. Raine had none of those skills, and even if she did, it didn’t mean she would *feel* anything. She desperately wanted to experience whatever it was she was supposed to.

He lowered his head and blew on her clit. She jumped. “I think the best move in that case is to do a test,” he told her.

“A test?”

Instead of telling her about it, he showed her. Without preamble, he lifted her thighs and plunged his mouth between her legs. In two wanton swipes of his tongue over her clit, Raine was trembling out of control. When he dipped inside her, sucking gently, she let out a small cry. He drew back.

She gasped. “No, please don’t stop, Cale. Un...Unless you don’t like it.”

“Baby, you’re delicious.” He dove in again, licking and sucking until Raine’s hips came up off the floor. She held onto his head, keeping him in place. She rolled her hips with the rhythm of his lap at her juices.

“Cale. Oh-my-goodness. Cale, I feel...I’m not sure!” she screamed.

His lifted his head long enough to encourage her. “Come for me, Raine. Baby, trust me and come.”

Tears spilled down the side of her face. “I don’t know how.”

“Ride the wave of pleasure, baby. I promise you’ll love it.”

The pleasure his mouth brought to her body was incredible. Raine couldn’t imagine sex could be like this, or the beginnings of it. Would it be better when he was inside her, when his test was over? Before she could question further, the waves of bliss overtook her. She cried out when it felt like all the pleasure in the world zeroed into to her pussy. As fast as her cream flowed, her lover fed his hungry mouth with it.

Her body glowed brighter. She could see Cale while he ate and moaned between her legs. Just watching him turned her on so much, she felt the buildup again. It crashed down over her and she ground into his mouth, hoping she wasn’t hurting him. If he’d never stop sucking her swollen clit, she’d die a happy woman.

Finally, the waves eased and he drew back to rest on his heels. “Well? Did you like it, baby?”

She nodded, breathing heavily. “I can’t believe it, Cale. It was so good, I didn’t want you to stop. I still feel this longing for more. Can I feel like that every time?”

He laughed. “As often as you like, my heart.”

Raine stared at him, the hard plains of his body. She noticed the bulge in his pants and licked her lips. Cale winked. “Oh no you don’t, honey. As much as I would like to feel your hot mouth on my cock, I don’t think I can wait a second longer to get inside you.”

Her eyes widened as he undressed. Just as she suspected, the man’s body was perfection itself. She drank in his sexy build. His cock was so thick and long, she wondered if it could fit in her. Jace had never been so well-endowed. She couldn’t turn away.

Cale stroked himself while she watched. Pre-come leaked from him making her bite her lip. She lay back and lifted her legs in invitation. Cale didn’t have to be asked twice. He settled down above her, looking deep into her eyes. Raine lost all sense of herself and her fears in his gray eyes. “Cale, I love you.” Her voice shook. For the first time, she felt free to love, to feel. Her heart cried out to him.

He settled his hips against her, and Raine felt his erection pressing against her moist opening. “Don’t worry, honey. Like I said, we’re going to go slow. I’m somewhat big...”

“Proud of yourself, aren’t you?” She tried to laugh but she was terrified.

He kissed her lips. “Just stating a fact. Are you ready for me?”

She tried not to shake too much, but she did want him. With a nod, she ran her hands down over his sides, enjoying the smooth warm skin and the tautness of his ass when she stroked it. Cale groaned, easing inch by inch into her. Her pussy clenched him like a vise. She bit down to keep from crying out.

“Relax, Raine, honey. Take all of me.”

“Ah. It hurts, but it feels good. Cale, don’t stop.”

He lifted her hips to his thrust, stroking deeper and deeper. Cale hooked her knees and pushed them higher. He kissed the inside of her leg and stared down into her eyes. She saw the love he felt for her. Her heart swelled. And then raw passion took over. She moved in perfect rhythm with his thrusts. Her climax built fast, before she knew it she was coming hard. On a cry of bliss, she screamed. Seconds after, Cale cried his own release.

He collapsed on top of her, whispering sweet nothings in her ear. And she held on, knowing she would never let him go again. Where Cale was, she needed to be with him for her life to mean anything at all.

Chapter Thirteen

“Ready to try again?”

Raine nodded. “Yes, let’s do it. I feel the ability in me, churning in my belly, but the translation like I had before is jumbled. Before, I heard the orb’s voice. Not physically or like we speak. Something I can’t describe. Just before we entered here, I could still hear it. Right now, nothing. Where are we?”

Cale moved a little ways away from her, searching the area. “I think...” He snapped his fingers. “You know what, I think we’re between dimensions.”

“Huh?” She frowned.

He turned to face her. “Like when you’re passing through a portal and there’s like this short, I don’t know, black wall or something between here and there. I think we’re in that wall.”

Raine rolled her eyes. “Right. I think you had too much sex.”

He winked, allowing his eyes to course down over her body. The sneak had convinced her, her light would help them to see better with no obstructions over it, as in her clothes. So, she stood there for his amusement and pleasure, completely naked.

“Cale, what happened to your father?”

He went still.

“Your father’s letter said my father was silly enough to try to kill someone with a bus. Why would he do that, and what did it all have to do with Albin?”

He rushed up to her and took her in his arms. “You must believe me, baby. I, nor my father, had anything to do with your father’s death.

“I know. I believe you. I just want to understand.” She fought tears thinking about how different her life could have been. “You realize what it means to me to know, right?”

“Yes.” He pulled her down to the floor and tugged her onto his lap. “My father and I went to the third dimension sort of like you would a vacation or a fishing trip for the men. We took Bender the year I turned ten. What had been kept quiet was that the first leader, your father, had also frequented that side. And he—”

“What was his name?”

“Lucas.”

She toyed with the name wondering if it sounded like the man she had envisioned all these years. Her mother had been named Rose, she knew already. "Lucas and Rose," she said with tears in her eyes. "Go on, Cale."

He hugged her tight then continued. "Lucas had secretly gotten involved with a third dimension woman. We don't really encourage that. It opens up all kinds of issues. Although after all these years of Shadrooms stuck on that side, I wouldn't be surprised if there's a whole new generation of half and half."

"I'll bet."

"During our trip over there, we ran into your father with Rose. His cube had the ability to pick up on where all Shadrooms were." Cale shook his head, a look of awe in his eyes. He was pure Shadroom, very powerful. I'm guessing normally, he would never have been seeing Rose in a place where Shadrooms were. Your side is massive, and there's no reason to think he couldn't find a community where no Shadroom had ventured. One could disappear in the midst and never be found unless one used the cube."

"That's how you found me," she wondered.

"No. Oddly enough, I dreamed about you. Shadrooms have no ability to foretell by dreams or anything. At first Bender thought I was nuts, but that dream was so powerful, I couldn't ignore it. By my calculations, it didn't even come to me until you were eighteen. I saw you as clear as day like you are now. I think I loved you instantly."

She grinned. "Hmm, well if you had seen my homely self back then, you wouldn't have. What do you think? The orb reached out to you? From what I've learned so far, it never bonds or speaks to anyone outside the first family. Are you sure we're not related?"

"Positive!" The horrified look on his face said it all. "I think it was the orb, trying to protect you, trying to make things right. And now that you've bonded with it, your uncle will not be able to use it. He'll try getting you back, controlling you somehow to rule the Shadrooms."

Raine shivered. "He might try hurting you, knowing how much I love you. That means your mother isn't safe either, or Bender."

Cale had a look of fear and desperation in his eyes that Raine longed to wipe away. If she didn't learn to control the abilities she had, if any, he could lose everything. She didn't want to be responsible for that happening. And what abilities did she really have anyway? She could close portals and open them wherever. What did that matter against an army set to kill her?

"We'll figure it out, Raine. I promise. Like I told you, I'm not leaving you, ever."

"Me either." She kissed him. "Tell me the rest."

“We found Lucas with Rose and she was ready to have you. He had brought her to a hospital, and we were there because Bender, clumsy idiot that he is, broke his arm. It just so happens that Kaz had a sympathizer also on that side. She informed him about them being there, and before you knew it there was a swarm of Kaz’ men coming after Lucas. My father told Bender and I to meet him at this certain place where we had visited a monument or something. He, Rose and Lucas ran, which must have been hard given she was ready to deliver. I never saw them again, and my father never came to pick up Bender and me. The portals were all sealed, I assume to be sure no one got you on that side as the rightful leader.”

Raine cried. “Oh Cale, I’m so sorry. You must have been terrified being so young and alone?”

He laughed. “We cried three days straight. We could have latched onto some adult Shadroons, but Kaz, learning that my father tried to help the first leader escape, put out the word that we were fugitives. So we had to keep out of sight. It’s why we became common thieves rather than respectable people with regular jobs.”

“So where does the bus come in. I remember the letter your father left and how he said my father had tried to kill *them* with a bus.”

“My guess is that when they were trying to get away, your father hijacked a bus or something. Maybe he even tried running down Kaz’ men with it. But something as unwieldy as a bus wouldn’t be able to catch those guys. They could zip in and out of portals faster than you could blink. My theory is that because Bender and I were so young, we didn’t know there were combinations you could use the symbols on the cubes in. I bet it’s some kind of mathematical calculation.”

Raine tapped her lip. “Hm, I’m excellent at math.”

He nodded. “So am I and nutty as Bender is, he is also. In fact everyone I know.”

“Strange.”

He laughed. “That’s Shadroons for you.”

Raine pushed up from Cale’s lap and began to dress. “I know you like the view, lover, but it’s time to get serious. If we are going to bring Kaz down, we have to get out of here. If I have to yell some dramatic call to the orb, then damn it, I’ll do it to get back there.”

He grinned. “That’s why I love you.”

Chapter Fourteen

One of the men his mother put him in touch with inched up close to Cale. “Hey, man, are you sure you trust her? I mean she’s kind of an outsider isn’t she? Even if she is the first leader, she’s been in the third dimension her entire life.”

Cale kept his face from registering the animosity he suddenly felt for this guy who dared criticize the woman he loved. “I trust her with my life. I lived most of my life on the other side also, but we both have the best interests of the Shadrooms in mind. Don’t doubt it.”

The guy nodded and dropped back a few paces. Better than to get Cale’s fist in his face. He glanced over to where Raine was giving instructions to a few of the women who had also joined the coming storm on Kaz’ base of operations. She had come into her element. Confidence rolled off her even though the light of the orb had completely gone out. He supposed its influence was still there deep inside her, but Raine was born for this.

“Okay, you all know the coordinates of the portals we need to open to neutralize the guards,” she announced when he moved up with the men. “Stick to the plan. Remember even without the use of the orb, Uncle Kaz is powerful and tricky. I don’t doubt there is residual enhancement still in him from the orb. If for some reason he’s not in the room our informant tells us he is, and one of you comes across him, please radio us. Me, Cale and our group will find you. Is that good?”

“Agreed,” they all shouted.

Cale winced. These people weren’t natural guards. They held positions ranging from farmers to cashiers to school teachers. He had to believe they would be successful in bringing Kaz down.

He followed Raine and the rest of his group into a portal that let out on the inside of the Collins. They gathered around the room. Cale nodded at Raine. Each of them went transparent and walked into the room. At first he thought the room was empty and then he realized there was another area toward the back. Cale indicated with a hand sign for Raine to wait with the others while he checked it out.

She moved next to him. “No way, Cale. I’m not letting you go in there alone.”

“Baby, I want you safe.” He tried holding her back, but she shook him off.

“Cale, you go. I go.” Her decision was final. He had the feeling she was commanding him as his leader. He had never been so turned out by his powerful woman. “Yes, Lady,” he said with a bow of his head.

Together they moved into the back of the room, though a doorway. Before Cale could search the room, someone jumped him and knocked him backward against the wall.

When he got his bearings it was to find Raine wrapped in her uncle's hold and disappearing through a portal.

"Raine!" He cried out as he buried his fist into the guard's face. The man's head cracked on the floor, and he didn't move again. Cale climbed over his body to get to the portal, but it was too late. The passage was closed, and he had no way of knowing where they went.

He flicked the button on his radio. "Raine? Raine, can you hear me?" No answer. He turned back to the group gathered in the doorway. "Search this entire building! Find her!"

* * * *

"Uncle Kaz, let me go! What do you think you'll accomplish?" Raine struggled in the older man's hold to no avail.

He pushed her toward the orb, his grip so tight her arm pulsed with pain. "You, my dear, are going to touch the orb and declare that you are renouncing your position as leader, and turning it over to me."

"The hell I will!" She stomped his foot and when his hold loosened, she broke one arm free long enough to jam it back into his stomach. He doubled over in pain. Raine shoved him and backed away. When she moved to open a portal, she heard a click.

"Raine." Her uncle's voice was deadly calm. "Turn around slowly. I'm sure being young and strong—stronger than I anticipated—you realize you still cannot outrun a bullet."

She spun around to face him. "You seriously can't be planning to shoot me, your own blood?"

He sneered. "Do you honestly think I hesitated for an instant in giving that order to kill your father? Not at all. And had I the chance to do it again, I would. The perks of first leader are everything. There is power in that orb someone like you could not dream of. I enjoyed some of it for twenty-eight years. I intend to spend many more unlocking its secrets."

"Uncle Kaz, give up," she demanded with more bravado than she felt facing his weapon. "I have quite a few people with me, the citizens you locked on the other side, or their family members you robbed them of for so long. No one will allow you to remain the leader now."

His laugh was cold and ugly. "Stupid girl! You don't know anything. The orb will protect me. It has an obligation to do it. When you give up your rights, the orb is bound to accept me as leader. It will bond with me again. And I can promise you, I will kill every traitor. No one will dare stand against me. Now, get your ass over there and release your position."

Raine racked her brain for some way to avoid doing what he said, but no ideas surfaced. Maybe if she delayed, Cale and the others would come. "Uncle, think about what you're doing. I'm sure you're a good person inside." *Okay, that sounded lame even to my own ears.*

He threw back his head and laughed. When he lost eye contact, Raine scooted toward the door. Her uncle shot in the space beside her. She screamed and covered her ears. "Going somewhere?"

"Uncle..."

"Don't call me that! I don't recognize you. Your mother was nothing but a third dimensioner. You lived your entire life bound to that world." His visage darkened. "Do you think that somehow you're worthy of the lead position here, Raine? Did you forget what you did to Jace?"

She gasped, her eyes widening.

"Oh yes, I know about him. And all about your life at the orphanage. In fact, it's your fault that they're all dead."

"W-What?" A lump rose in her throat. "What are you talking about? I left there ten years ago."

He nodded. "Yes, but you being the ignorant fool that you are, used your cube. Its activation alerted my men to your location. When they appeared from portals all over the area, well the little orphans couldn't be left to know about our kind could they?"

"You're evil!" Raine charged him. She was on him so fast, he didn't have time to shoot. She fisted her hand and punched him several times before he slung her across the room. She landed at the foot of the orb's pedestal, slamming her head against the hard surface.

When she blinked away dizziness, her uncle was wiping blood from his mouth. He frowned and lifted the gun to take aim at her. Desperate to end this and hopefully save her life, Raine flung one hand up to grip the orb and directed the other to her uncle.

"Die!" she screamed. Lightening that seemed to fry the blood in her veins, shot along her arm, through her body and down the other arm. Blue crackling light streaked across the room from her to Kaz. The force of energy struck him so hard, he crashed against the wall.

Raine screamed again seeing the man who had been the cause of her losing so much literally cooking. His skin blackened and his hair singed into nothing. His clothes went up in flames. By the time, the energy lessened, Kaz was dead on the floor.

Raine slumped over, her face falling into her limp hands on the floor. She cried and cried for all the orphans, for Jace and even for the director.

“Raine?” Cale entered the room at a run. When he saw her, he hurried over and scooted her onto his lap. “Are you okay?”

She didn’t move although he had rested her head against his chest. “He’s dead, Cale.”

“I know.”

“He killed the orphans. It’s my fault.”

“No! No, don’t you say that.” He lifted her chin. “What Kaz did was because of his own greed for power. He caused all this destruction, but you stopped him. He will never hurt anyone else and our people are free. Raine, I love you.”

Her smile was weak. “I love you too. I don’t think I can do this...”

“Raine.”

“...alone. Will you marry me, Cale?” she asked seriously.

He chuckled. “Hey, I wanted to ask you.”

She grinned. “Is that a yes?”

“You better believe it is. I’ll stand by you forever and ever.”

The End