Advance Praise for ANGELFIRE

"At last a YA novel about a sword-wielding, butt-kicking seventeen-year-old girl who has been destined to fight the forces of evil; by her side is Will, her Guardian. Ellie is not that contemporary teen of other novels, who constantly needs rescuing by her immortal boyfriend. Packed with blistering action, mystery, romance, and terror. Readers will be glued from the first page to the last, breathlessly waiting for book two of this exciting trilogy!"

—Becky Anderson, Anderson's Bookshop

"This is an amazing, powerful novel with lots of action and fighting scenes that will keep you on your toes. Ellie is a strong, hard-core character you wouldn't want to mess with, and this novel is one you wouldn't want to miss out on."

-Lydia Hutcheons, Barbara's Bookstore

"When it comes to the order of meanings listed in dictionaries under the term 'YA romance' it's past time to push 'yearning for the unobtainable' down the list in favor of 'an emotional rip tide fueled by subsumed memories of a five-hundred-year intermittent but evolving and passionate devotion, gradually resurfacing amidst the backdrop of round two of the War Against Heaven,' and ANGELFIRE is just the book to do it. This book throws so many satisfying emotional elements, inventive

action scenes, and even a few philosophical tidbits at its readers that they cannot fail to feel themselves in the midst rather than on the margins of the story. Ellie may ask a lot of questions, but the only thing her audience will be asking is 'When is book two?'"

-Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

COURTNEY ALLISON MOULTON

Angelfire

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First Edition

For my mother, who never for a single instant stopped believing in me

Angelfire

I STARED OUT THE CLASSROOM WINDOW AND longed for freedom, wanting to be anywhere in the world other than gaping up at my economics teacher like the rest of my classmates. The last time I had listened to him, Mr. Meyer had been lecturing about fiscal policy, and that was when he'd lost me. My eyes rolled over to my best friend, Kate Green, who was doodling intricate flowers all over her notes and looked like she was thoroughly entertaining herself. Meanwhile, I was reduced to staring at the wiry, gray chest hair puffing out at the collar of Mr. Meyer's polo shirt like overgrown steel wool and wondering whether he'd ever considered waxing.

Finally, after another tedious twenty minutes, the bell rang at two-thirty and I leaped to my feet, instantly energized. Kate stuffed her papers into her notebook and followed me up the aisle between the desks. The other seniors and a handful of juniors all filed out swiftly, as if they'd only been given a five-second window to escape or they would never get out alive.

"Miss Monroe?" Mr. Meyer called after me just before I left the room.

I turned to Kate. "Your locker in five?"

She nodded and left the room with the rest of the students until I was left alone with our teacher. Mr. Meyer smiled from behind his thick eyeglasses and beckoned me over to his desk.

I took a deep breath, having a pretty good idea of what this discussion might be about. "Yes, sir?"

His smile was warm and friendly, his coarse, gray beard wrinkling around his thin lips. He pushed his glasses back up his nose. "So last week's quiz didn't go so well, did it?"

I braced myself. "No, sir."

He tilted his head up at me. "Last year in my civics class you were doing very well, but the last few months of class, your grades began to slip. Since school began this year, they're worsening. I want to see you succeed, Ellie."

"I know, Mr. Meyer," I said. Excuses ran through my head. In truth, I was distracted. Distracted by college applications. Distracted by my parents' constant fighting. Distracted by the nightmares I experienced every single night. Of course, I wasn't going to talk to my economics teacher about my issues. They weren't any of his business. So I gave him a

vague response in return. "I'm sorry. I've been so distracted. There's a lot that's happened in the last year."

He leaned forward, digging his elbows into the cluttered desk. "I understand the senioritis thing. College, friends, Homecoming, boys . . . There are countless things grabbing your attention from every angle. You've got to stay focused on what's really important."

"I know," I said glumly. "Thank you."

"And I don't mean just schoolwork," he continued. "Life is going to test you in ways it never has before. Don't let your future change the good person you are or make you forget who you are. You're a nice girl, Ellie. I've enjoyed having you in my classes."

"Thanks, Mr. Meyer," I said with an honest smile.

He sat back in his chair. "This class isn't so hard. I know if you just apply yourself a little more, you'll get through it. My class is nothing compared to what's out there in the real world. I know you can do this."

I nodded, assuming he saved this speech for everyone who got a D on a twenty-question quiz, but he spoke with so much sincerity that I wanted to fall for it. "Thanks for believing in me."

"I don't say this to everyone whose grades start to fall," he said, as if reading my mind. "I mean it. I believe in you. Just don't forget to believe in yourself, okay?"

I smiled wider. "Thanks. See you tomorrow?"

"I'll be here," he said, rising weakly to his feet. "Your

birthday is coming up, right?"

I gave him a puzzled look. "Yeah, how'd you know? Do you want me to bring cupcakes to pass around, or something?"

He laughed. "No, no. Unless you really want to, I mean, be my guest. But, happy birthday, Miss Monroe."

"Thanks, sir." I smiled and gave him a polite wave before turning away. As I left the classroom, I couldn't help thinking that speech was a little heavy for an economics teacher about to retire to Arizona.

I found Kate by her locker. She frowned at me as I walked up to her.

"What did Meyer want?"

I shrugged. "He wants me to apply myself more."

She smiled. "Well, I think you're perfect."

"Thanks," I said, laughing. "Are you coming straight over to study for Thursday's math test?"

She shook her head and pulled her blond hair over one shoulder as she dug her backpack out of her locker. "I'm going tanning first," she said.

"Why? It's September and you still look like you hang out at the beach all day." I bumped her shoulder with mine and grinned. Her skin was a glorious golden tone, but I still teased her that she'd end up looking like the other orange Barbie dolls at school if she kept going.

"I'm determined not to get pasty this winter like you always do." Kate was very pretty, and even when she scowled she looked glamorous. She was also almost a head taller than me, but that wasn't a huge feat. I was a couple of inches shorter than most of the girls my age.

"I'm not pasty." I glanced down at my arm sneakily so she wouldn't notice. I wasn't *that* pasty.

"This dazzling skin isn't easy to achieve, you know." She stroked her collarbone for effect and laughed.

I stuck my tongue out at her before we moved on to my own locker. I dumped my bio book inside and stuffed my lit materials into my bag to take home. My paper on *Hamlet* was due the next week, so I needed to get started on it. A thud against the locker next to mine made me look up.

Landon Brooks leaned his shoulder against the locker and ran a hand through his professionally highlighted caramel-colored hair. He was one of those guys who thought surfer hair was the only way to go, even here in Michigan, where there is nowhere to surf. In fact, that was how most of the soccer team felt. Landon was my school's star forward, so of course whatever he thought was awesome, everyone else agreed was awesome too. "So what's up with this party Saturday? Is it still happening?"

My seventeenth birthday was on Thursday, the twenty-first, and I planned to have a party Saturday night. For some reason, the entire school had picked up on it and the general consensus was that it was going to rock. I wasn't wildly popular or known for amazing parties, but usually any party at my school stirred up a fair amount of buzz. That was what happened in a suburban Detroit high school

like Bloomfield Hills, I supposed.

"Yeah," I said tiredly. "We just need to keep the number of guests down. My parents are going to kill me if a hundred people show up."

"Too late," Kate chimed in. "This is the first party of our senior year, so of course everyone is going to be pumped about it. And Homecoming is next weekend, so we need a good party to start the semester off right. The masses are growing restless. It's not like you're Leper Girl or anything. People *do* like you."

"And you invited Josie, remember?" Landon nudged.

Oh yeah. Josie Newport. Our moms had been close in high school and they still talked sometimes. Josie and I had played together a lot when we were little, but things change. She was very popular at school, but outside our moms' engagements, we rarely spoke and never hung out together. I had invited her to my party when we ran into each other at the salon a couple of weeks back. I never understood the stereotype that all the popular, gorgeous girls were complete bitches. Josie was a really nice girl. She was perhaps a little clueless, but she'd never be cruel to anyone on purpose. I had to admit, though, she had some friends I couldn't say the same thing about.

"And Josie has to take her posse with her everywhere she goes, right?" Kate added. "That includes half the school, Ell."

I made yet another face and shut my locker. "I'll figure

it out." Of course, I wasn't actually going to do anything. I wasn't going to walk up to Josie Newport and say, "Oh, by the way, when I invited you, I meant just you and maybe a friend or two. Not *everybody* and their cross-eyed cousins."

"Maybe she thought she was doing you a favor?" Landon offered. "Boost your popularity or something?"

While that sounded cool, I didn't suspect that it was probable. Josie wasn't going to do me any favors. Most likely, if the party sucked, Josie would simply move her entourage elsewhere. They would be like a party within a party. If mine sucked, then Josie would just make a new one. She'd already have enough people to do it.

"All right, I'm out," I said, happy to end the conversation and get out of school and go home, even if it was just to study.

"Okay, I'll see you in an hour," Kate said.

"Adios, ladies," Landon said, mock saluting us. "Why don't you study for me, too, so I don't have to?"

Kate gave him a sarcastic thumbs-up before turning and making her way to the student parking lot. She'd had her license and her car since she was sixteen, like most of the kids I knew. I had my license too, but not a car yet. Kate's daddy had bought her a red BMW for her birthday. I found it to be an absolute miracle of God that Kate hadn't pancaked it yet. She drove like a blind person going into diabetic shock.

I waved good-bye to Landon, scooped my long, dark red

hair out from under my backpack strap, and headed out through the school's front doors to meet my mom.

As I crossed the front lawn, I spotted a boy I'd never seen before lounging against a tree. He wore a brown shirt and jeans, and his hair, which waved around his face in the breeze, looked black until the sun caught the walnut shine. He actually looked a little too old to be in high school, maybe twenty or twenty-one years old. As I looked at him, I felt a certain fondness deep in my heart, but I shook the feeling off. I didn't know who he was. Maybe he had graduated a year or two ago and I'd seen him in the halls at some point? My school was pretty big. There was no way for me to know everyone who went here. I watched him for several more seconds until I noticed that he was watching me back. I blushed fiercely and looked back to the roundabout ahead where the parents' cars were idling. It was strange how he was just hanging out there, but I had to assume that he was waiting for a younger sibling.

My mom's Mercedes was nearly indistinguishable from every other silver Mercedes lining the roundabout. I peered through windshields until I spotted my mom. She and my dad look nothing like me. Mom's hair was more of a light brunette than my rich chocolate red. People asked me all the time if I had my hair colored this way, as if it were hot pink or some other unnatural shade. No, my hair just came this way. Also, she didn't have any freckles. A lot of people think all redheads are completely covered in freckles. Not true. I only have six on the bridge of my nose. You can poke at my face and count them. There are *six*.

I climbed in and we exchanged our typical after-school conversation.

"How was your day, Ellie Bean?" my mom asked, like she did every single time.

"I didn't die," I answered, as usual.

"Well, that's good news" was always her reply.

I looked back out the passenger window to the tree where I'd seen the boy, but he was gone. My eyes scanned the lawn, but I couldn't see him anywhere.

"What are you looking at?" Mom asked as we pulled away. "Nothing," I replied distantly.

My mom shouted an obscenity at the driver in front of her who was taking too long to turn at the light. Wiping her expression clean of anger the next moment, she smiled at me. "I'm so happy this is the last week I will ever have to pick your butt up from school."

"Good for you."

Mom was a web designer and worked from home, so she had always been able to drive me to and from school, thankfully sparing me from ever having to attend daycare. My dad, on the other hand, was rarely home. He worked in medical research and there were many nights when I would go to bed without seeing him. Sometimes I wouldn't see him for a

week. Lately, that was a good thing.

"So you never told me what you want for your birthday," my mom said.

"Lambo."

She laughed. "Yeah, sure, let's just sell the house and get you a Lamborghini for your birthday."

We finally pulled out of the school's drive onto the main road and headed home.

"So, what do you want? I know we talked about a car, and your dad says yes."

"I don't really know."

"Don't make me choose," my mom warned. "I'll get you a moped to drive to school on."

"I'll bet." I rolled my eyes. "I don't know—just get me something cute, safe, and that has an MP3 adapter. I'll be set for life with that."

I woke to music blasting into my left eardrum. I grappled for my cell phone and hit the reject button without opening my eyes. A few seconds later it rang again. I opened a single eye to check the clock. It was a quarter to six in the morning. Uttering a half-mumbled curse, I dragged the phone off my nightstand and looked at the caller ID. It was Kate.

I rubbed my hand against my forehead, forcing myself out of that groggy post-nightmare haze. In the past few months, I'd been having the strangest dreams that went like period horror films, like the Dracula movie with Gary Oldman. Creepy stuff. They'd kept me from sleeping well for the first few weeks, but I'd started to get used to them, and now they didn't bother me so much. Up until a month before, I'd woken up screaming every single night.

Too lazy to press the phone to my ear, I turned it on speaker mode and thunked it back onto my nightstand. "What is your damage? My alarm hasn't even gone off, yet."

"Jesus, Ellie, turn on your TV." Kate's voice was low and frantic. "It's Mr. Meyer. Channel four."

I reached for my remote, flipped the television on, and went to channel four as instructed. I bolted upright.

"He's dead, Ellie," Kate whispered. "They found him behind that bar, Lane's."

My eyes were glued to the chaos live on-screen.

"... the lack of blood at the scene indicates to investigators that Frank Meyer may have been murdered at another location and dumped here behind Lane's Pub along with the possible murder weapon: a very long hunting knife with a gut hook. The reason for that can only be a matter of speculation at the moment, as authorities have revealed very little about this gruesome discovery. In case you are only just tuning in, this is Debra Michaels reporting from Commerce Township, where the severely mutilated body of one of the community's most beloved educators, Frank Meyer of West Bloomfield, was found early this morning. . . ." I felt like vomiting. I saw the location behind the reporter, swarming with police, the fire department, and ambulances. Mr. Meyer? He was one

of the nicest teachers I'd ever had. I had seen him less than twenty-four hours before. How could he be dead? He was murdered? And severely mutilated?

"Do you think school is canceled?" Kate asked.

I had forgotten she was on the phone. "I'm going to talk to my mom. Meet me at my house." I hung up.

An hour later I was sitting on a stool at the island bar in the kitchen, staring at an untouched plate of pancakes. Mom only ever made pancakes when I was sick or had a horrible day, or when it was a special day like Christmas. I supposed this was one of those days when pancakes were warranted, but I couldn't bring myself to take a bite. The too-rich smell nauseated me.

Mom walked up behind me and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. "You need to eat, honey. Please? Get some food in your stomach and you'll feel better."

"I'll just puke it all up," I grumbled dismally.

"One bite," she ordered. "Then I won't feel so bad about having to throw away this uneaten breakfast."

I scowled and stabbed begrudgingly at the mush before scooping up a bite with my fork, but it toppled over and plopped into my lap. I groaned and banged my head on the counter.

Mom frowned. "You have to be smarter than the pancakes, Ellie."

I glared up at her. Weren't teenagers supposed to be the smartasses, and not their parents?

She ignored my reproachful look and handed me a paper

towel to clean up my pajama pants. "Well, I finally was able to reach someone at the school. They've been trying to deal with this tragedy all morning, so their lines have been all tied up. I'm sure every single parent in the district has been calling them. Anyway, school is closed today, but I suspect it'll reopen tomorrow. I know you really liked Mr. Meyer, and the assistant principle let me know that grief counselors are being assigned, so if you need to talk to anyone—"

"I'm fine, Mom," I said. "I'm not freaking out or anything. I don't feel well, that's all." She was always so on top of things. She had a plan for everything.

She looked at me fondly. "You're my little miracle. I want you to be okay."

I rolled my eyes. "You always say that."

"I'm worried about your nightmares," she said sadly.

"I barely have them anymore," I lied. I thought it would be better for her to worry less about me than she did. I still had nightmares almost every night, but I was learning to deal with them, since the medication I'd been on was useless.

"What if this tragedy starts them back up again? I can get you an appointment with Dr. Niles next week."

"Bye, Mom," I said, dismissing her. I hated when she brought up the shrink shey and my dad had sent me to for three months. All that guy did was tell me a bunch of crap I already knew and give me drugs that didn't work. Of course, they all thought I'd been fixed. What they didn't know couldn't hurt them.

"I didn't mean to make you angry, Ellie Bean."

I exhaled, letting the tension wash from my face, and I looked back up at her. "I know. You just have to trust me when I say I'm going to be fine."

She paused a moment before she said anything. "I'll tell your father to say good-bye to you before he leaves." Mom disappeared from the kitchen.

I picked my cell phone up and texted Kate, asking where she was. A few moments later, I received a reply: "B therr so5on! mayb." I immediately regretted texting Kate while she was driving—for obvious reasons.

I poked at my breakfast a few more times. My dad walked into the kitchen, adjusting the front of his suit jacket. I looked up at him briefly and gave a small smile. He patted the top of my head awkwardly as he passed by.

"Sorry about your teacher," he said. The lines in his face told me that he was sad, but his eyes didn't match. They were calm and unaffected, his mind elsewhere.

I was sure he meant what he said, but he never really knew how to show it. I assumed he had learned how to comfort others by imitating someone else—like he saw it on TV somewhere. It never felt natural, never felt as if he really cared.

"Thanks, Dad," I said sincerely. "Kate's on her way over."

"Oh," he said.

"I don't think we'll do much," I said.

"Okay, then. Good-bye."

"Later." He probably should have said something like

how he hoped I'd be all right and that he loved me, but it would shock me to death if I heard those words come out of him these days. I watched my dad head to the garage and listened to him drive away.

When Kate arrived, she let herself in the front door. She sat down quietly on a stool next to me, picked up my fork, and took a bite of my pancakes.

"I can't believe Mr. Meyer's dead," Kate said through a mouthful.

Thinking about never seeing his kind, smiling face in class again made me really sad. "I can't believe he's dead either. Did the news say anything else about it?"

"They just said he was 'severely mutilated.' I have no idea what they mean by that, though. Could be anything. It was probably some psychopath. Detroit *is* like five minutes away."

I took a bite of my breakfast. Immediately, I felt ill. "I think I might sleep a little more. Come with?"

"Best idea I've heard since Landon and Chris decided they'd steal a zebra from the zoo and turn it loose during commencement for our senior prank," she said. "Do you think they're really going to do it?"

"Doubt it."

I WAS SMOOTHING MY HAND OVER THE WIDE CLAW marks that ran down the length of the metal door when I heard the roars from somewhere deep within the cavernous textile plant. The angry wails shook the dusty floor beneath my shoes in desolate echoes, announcing the reaper's presence below. I conjured both my swords out of thin air and stepped silently through the door and into the darkened hall. The air smelled like smoke and brimstone, the unmistakable stench left behind by the demonic and the only thing that linked the mortal world to the Grim. The floor was littered with yellowing paper, and nothing remained of the small industrial windows dotting the walls but jagged broken glass. Sickly pale light from the streetlamps lining the darkened streets outside streaked in through the shattered windows. Trash was piled up against the walls, which were covered with strips

of peeling, decomposing paint. I stepped around everything, making no noise, but I knew the reaper could feel me. My silence could not mask the energy rolling from me. Nothing could, and the reaper was hungry for me.

I stepped into the Grim, passing through the smoky veil and into the world that most humans could not see. Here the reapers dwelled. The remnants of the mortal plane tugged at my arms and clothes like viscous tendrils. A passing police cruiser lit up the ground floor of the factory like blood-red fireworks, the wail of its siren deafening me for a moment. I took a deep breath to regain my composure and stalked toward the closest emergency stairwell. I kicked the door open, and the heavy clunk of steel gave my position away. I held the helves of both my silver sickle-shaped Khopesh swords tightly as I peered over the edge of the metal railing down the shaft to the basement level.

A dark, massive shape flashed across the floor below. The reaper roared again, making the stairwell shudder.

I descended quickly, whipping my body around the steel spiral staircase at every turn, determined not to let him escape. My footsteps were light, barely brushing the floor beneath me. With one story to go, I jumped over the railing and landed safely with nothing more than a bend of my knees and a thud of my shoes. I kicked open the stairwell door and froze to peer carefully into the darkness. Unseen claws raked the concrete. He wanted me to know he was there.

Behind me came a low, throaty rumble. I spun around

and caught a glimpse of the reaper, but he vanished deeper into the blackness. I clenched my teeth bitterly, and angelfire erupted from my swords, readying for battle. The flames were the only thing that could truly kill a reaper, and I was the only one that could wield them. They lit up the cavernous basement in white light, but the reaper evaded the glow and stuck to the shadows.

He was toying with me, luring me. I held the swords ready and followed him anyway.

The reaper's power was all around me now, washing over me like a flash flood of smoke from an extinguished flame, heavy, inky, merciless, and without warning. I wheeled around and slashed with both swords. The firelight illuminated the colossal, bearlike shape of the reaper as he reared up, his front legs outstretched, waving paws the size of dinner plates. His eyes were black and empty like a shark's, and his goliath jaws dropped to release a roar like an oncoming train straight into my face.

I ducked into a roll as the reaper swiped his foot-long claws at my head. I jumped to my feet and bounded backward. The reaper heaved toward me and took only a half stride to reach me. He spread his mouth again, revealing a set of enormous teeth that could have belonged to a sabertoothed cat, each fang easily as long as my forearm. He reared over me and his roar thundered once again through the factory. I dropped to my knees and slashed at the reaper's chest and across his hind legs. He collapsed in a spray of

blood but righted himself quickly and leaped into the air, landing thirty feet away from me. His flesh sizzled where the silver blades had sliced and the fire had burned. He wheeled and charged.

I stepped back onto my right heel and prepared for impact. Instead, the reaper slipped to my left just before he would have collided with me, and he disappeared for a moment. Claws slashed down my back, shredding my body like hamburger meat. I screeched and fell forward. I shuddered and dropped my swords. The pain I expected never came; I felt nothing at all.

The reaper was distracted by my pooling blood for a moment as I lay unmoving. He paused to taste it and growled a guttural noise of approval with his inhuman mouth before descending on me to finish the job.

I couldn't finish my last breath before I died.

I sat straight up with an enormous gasp of air, feeling as if the life had been taken right out of me. I reached around my back and felt smooth, undamaged skin there and let out a sigh of relief. My nightmares were getting more and more real every time I slept, and I began to worry if I really needed to go back to therapy.

Beside me, Kate stirred. She sat up with me and frowned. "You okay? Bad dream?"

I tucked my knees up to my chest and rested my cheek against them. "Yeah."

She touched my hair soothingly. "Want to watch a movie?"

I nodded. Kate never judged me for my nightmares, never treated me like a psycho, and she understood better than anyone else that the meds and therapy didn't help. She was the only one who listened to me instead of trying to constantly diagnose me. I folded over and curled into a ball while Kate fumbled through the DVD binder on the floor in front of my TV. We went through three fun movies, including one of my favorites, *Sixteen Candles*, to remind myself that it was my birthday the next day. That movie always made me feel better, but attempting to make today seem less crappy was useless. Happy movie marathons—and pancakes—had been our bad-day cure since we wore pigtails, and I figured the ritual would follow us to college the next fall.

"What next?" Kate asked, dragging the binder onto my bed. "Clueless?"

I shook my head. It was after four now, and I was beginning to feel restless. "I don't feel like watching another movie. Do you want to go do something?"

"Like, what? The mall? We should investigate before Gucci's fall stuff is picked clean."

I scrunched my face. "No, I don't want to have to straighten my hair and look decent. We could just go get ice cream."

Kate brightened a little. "Sounds good. I'm game."

I pulled on jeans and a lightweight, zip-up hoodie over my tank top. "Should we call Landon to meet us there?"

Kate gave a quick nod and dialed him up. We let my

mom know where we were going, headed outside to Kate's BMW, and drove to Cold Stone. Landon was waiting for us in the parking lot, talking to a few other people in our circle of friends: Chris, Evan, and Rachel. Chris was on the soccer team with Landon, and they'd been best friends for as long as I could remember. They all stopped talking when Kate and I climbed out of the car.

"Today's been so crazy," Landon said. "How are you guys doing?"

"Fine, just vegging out," Kate said, taking my hand and leading me past him.

We ordered and sat down at the metal tables outside. Landon and the three others joined us. I poked around at my cup of Cookie Doughn't You Want Some before taking a small bite. Considering how little as I had eaten that day, I wasn't very hungry. Mr. Meyer's murder bothered me more than I'd expected it to. I had never known anyone who'd died before, besides my grandfather. He had died peacefully. Something very bad had happened to my teacher.

The others were rambling away at each other about Mr. Meyer.

"I heard it was a bear attack," Evan said through a mouthful. "And Meyer tried to defend himself with a knife."

"There aren't any bears on this side of the state," Rachel said.

"Maybe it was someone's pet cougar," Landon offered.
"I know a guy with an ocelot."

"You do not," Chris scoffed.

"Yeah I do."

Rachel scratched the top of Evan's head with her fingernails. "What's an ocelot?"

"Was it that awful?" Kate asked.

Chris nodded. "A buddy of mine is doing community service at the morgue for a DUI, and he heard it was messy. Like he was in *pieces*, man. I don't think a bar fight would have gotten that far unless the chick it was over was *smoking* hot. I'd tear a guy up if he got between me and Angelina Jolie."

I didn't like the way they were talking about Mr. Meyer, so I tried to block them and the disturbing mental images out. Cold Stone was busy; since it was past four, the elementary school nearby had let out and now the place was beginning to swarm with screaming, squabbling little kids. I tried my best to ignore them, since fifth-grade boys tended to hit on high school girls. My eyes scanned the area, distantly watching their faces, until I spotted the strange boy from outside school the day before.

Today he wore a black long-sleeved tee and dark-washed jeans. He was sitting alone at a table about twenty feet away and staring off into space. I knew him. I had to know him from somewhere. When I looked at him, brief images of his face, his eyes, and his smile flashed in my mind. A warm scent struck me that I knew was his, but

I wasn't close enough to catch it. The tenderness overtaking my heart both frightened my and brought me peace. When he noticed that I was staring at him, he looked back and didn't look away. I tried to block him out, too, but I realized I couldn't ignore everybody. I turned back to my friends.

"School should be open tomorrow," Rachel said.

Kate licked up a glob of whipped cream. "That sucks."

"Do you think we'll still have to finish this week's economics paper?" Landon asked.

Chris shrugged. "Why wouldn't we? We're just going to have a sub until they find a full-time replacement."

I finished my ice cream quickly, without joining the conversation, and then got up to walk to the trash can on the side of the building to throw my cup away. When I turned around, I nearly bumped into a tall form, and I jumped, startled. Looking up, I found myself standing face to face with the boy I'd seen the day before. He was tall, maybe six feet, and broad shouldered—and he was standing much, much too close. His presence wrapped around me—not suffocating, as I would have expected, but peaceful. I didn't pull away from him. He looked down at me with bright green eyes, saying nothing. Around the collar of his shirt were strange black markings like tattoos. His dark hair was tousled just a little by the September breeze.

"Um, hi," I said, drawling in my uneasiness. "Do you . . .

need the trash can?" I felt like an idiot as soon as I said it.

"Hi," he said, and gave me a quiet smile, one that amplified the gentle contours of his face, the curve of his lips, the little line beside his right eye that appeared when he smiled—a smile I felt I'd seen a million times before. "No, I don't need the trash can."

"Okay . . ." I started to walk around him back to my friends.

"Do you remember me?" he asked.

Other than having a distinct sense of déjà vu, I was very sure I didn't know him. "I think I might have seen you yesterday at school."

"That's it?" His expression showed that he felt hurt.

Yeah, he was really weird. "I'm pretty sure. Are you looking for someone?"

"No," he mused. "You're Elisabeth Monroe, right?"

"Ellie, yeah. Do you go to my school?"

"No, sorry. You're having a party Saturday, aren't you?"

Good grief, did the whole world know? "Yeah. How'd you hear about it if you don't go to my school?"

"A friend." He smiled.

"You okay, Ellie?" Landon had joined us. He looked annoyed, almost hostile. "Who's this guy?" He stared at the boy up and down.

The stranger's smile faded. "Just call me Will."

His words triggered something in the back of my mind,

just as his smile felt familiar to me. I felt as if I'd heard him say that before.

"Don't talk to her, man," Landon said, taking a step toward Will.

I put a gentle hand on Landon's chest. "Landon, chill, he's not bothering me. I was just throwing my cup away. Let's go. Nice meeting you, Will."

I nodded to Will and led Landon away. "What's your problem?" I asked him once we were out of earshot.

"Nothing—don't worry about it. He shouldn't be talking to you."

"I thought you were going to punch that guy."

"If he touched you, I would've."

I blinked in surprise. "Well, he didn't."

He huffed. "Good."

I tried not to laugh. Landon had been my friend since the sixth grade, but he was a boy, and boys made no sense to me..

My dad actually made it home in time for dinner, to my astonishment, but as soon as we all sat down at the table, I wanted him gone. Dinners recently had mostly been spent with my parents trying to get me to talk. I didn't need to talk about Mr. Meyer. I wasn't ten years old and I wasn't traumatized. I was just sad. That was natural and to be expected. I didn't need to be babied about it.

I dreaded school the next morning. It was going to be today all over again times a thousand. Not to mention I still had that math test on my schedule. What a way to spend my birthday.

My dad's fist slamming on the table jarred me brutally from my thoughts. I sat up like a shot.

"That's not the point." His voice was frigid and harsh, as if he were holding back an angry yell.

"It's not?" my mom asked. "This is the first night you've been home all week. It wouldn't surprise me to find out her nightmares are a result of her lacking a father figure."

"That is ridiculous. Don't give me that psychobabble, Diane."

"I'm just trying to find a solution," Mom said tiredly. "Her teacher was murdered. If anything, that will start the nightmares again. We should take her back to Dr. Niles."

It was as if she'd totally forgotten what I had told her that morning. I wanted to chuck my spaghetti into both their faces and scream, *Hello! I'm right here!* It was almost more comical than enraging when they argued about me as I sat right next to them. When they totally forgot about my presence in a room, they made it obvious that they cared more about fighting with each other than about my mental health.

My dad huffed. "If you feel that's necessary."

"There are a lot of things that I feel are necessary."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She stared at him. "You know exactly what it means." "Don't play mind games with me."

It was nights like these that made me wish I had a dog. I needed an excuse to get out of my house and go for a walk. Anything to get the hell out of there.

"You're never home, and when you are, all you do is yell," Mom accused him. "I'm afraid of you when—and if—you come home at night. So is Elisabeth. It wouldn't shock me if her nightmares are a result of all these years of you screaming at her for every little thing. This isn't about you and me, Rick—this is about the way you treat your daughter."

That was all I could stomach. I stood up from the table and took my plate into the kitchen, mentally blocking out my dad's enraged response. Everyone's parents argue—that just happens in any relationship—but parents shouldn't fight in front of their kids. My mom and dad were focused on blaming one another for my nightmares, when both of them were probably the cause.

I went up to my bedroom and sat on my bed, staring into the mirror over my dresser. The pink music box my dad had given me when I was seven sat between a pair of scented candles and a birthday card my grandmother had sent me earlier in the week. I got up, walked to my dresser, and lifted the top of the music box. The little plastic ballerina inside unfolded and stood. I lifted the box and turned the key on the bottom. Delicate music began to play, and the ballerina turned slowly. I watched her dance for a few moments, wondering how my life had gotten this way, how my dad had turned into such a hateful person. I loved that music box, now mostly because it reminded me of the wonderful father the man downstairs used to be. I'd have given anything to turn back the last ten years of my life—and that wasn't something someone my age should have to feel.

REFUSING TO LET MY DEPRESSION SINK DEEPER, I popped in a movie. I settled on *13 Going On 30*, since that was how old my parents made me feel. At least the happy, funny moments might be able to restore my cheer. On and off I could hear the yelling. When my clock rolled over midnight, my parents had begun arguing again.

"Happy birthday to me," I said dismally. Within the next minute, I received eight text messages containing variations of "happy birthday!" involving excessive punctuation and two texts including "luv u bitch!"

I decided to spend my first few minutes as a seventeenyear-old by sneaking out the front door to sit on the porch. I leaned against one of the columns and took in a deep breath. Night had settled and the air was a little chilly, but I was comfortable in my T-shirt. After a little while of sitting on my porch and picking at my nails, I stood up and started down my driveway to the sidewalk. Once around the block should be enough, I decided. I *really* needed a dog. I considered for a moment: a car or a dog for my birthday. . . . Yeah, car. I didn't think I'd get it exactly the next day, but more likely over the weekend. I knew a lot of kids didn't get cars for their birthdays, or even cars at all, let alone the chance to go pick one out, so I shouldn't complain. But then again, a lot of kids got to have parents who didn't scream at each other. Everyone made their sacrifices.

I heard a low rumble in front of me and stopped walking. It didn't sound mechanical like a car engine, and I definitely didn't see any headlights ahead, either. I strained my eyes to peer into the darkness. The streetlamp above me buzzed and went out. Past the sidewalk corner and deep into my neighbor's wide lawn, I could see nothing. For an instant I thought of Mr. Meyer's murderer. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to go walking around outside after midnight?

"What are you looking at?"

I let out a small cry and spun around as my heart leaped into my throat.

It was Will as if he'd appeared out of nowhere. He looked worried and determined, but he was obviously trying to hide those feelings.

"What are you doing out here?" I whispered harshly.

"What are *you* doing here?" he countered.

I threw my hand up. "I live here!"

Suddenly, I had a terrible thought. I had first seen Will the day before, the night Mr. Meyer died. No, no, no. That was ridiculous. Will was just some hot, weird guy I happened to be seeing everywhere I went. That didn't make him a murderer. Hadn't my mom given me a can of mace for Christmas? What had I done with that?

"So why are you out for a walk this late at night?" he asked, distracting me from my thoughts. "Even if you live here, it's pretty late to be wandering around at night."

"Well, *you're* out here too. I like being outside at night. It's relaxing."

That smile widened. It was like he thought this was funny. "Most people would feel nervous."

My hands rested on my hips. "Why? Should I be?"

"What?"

"Nervous."

"Probably."

"You don't seem like *you're* nervous."

"I can take care of myself." His smile turned dark, knowing.

"You're the weirdest boy I've ever met—and believe me, every single one of them is weird, so that's saying a lot." Once I realized what I'd just said, I wanted to smack my face into a brick wall. My mouth sure liked to run when it should have been my feet running.

He laughed. "At least you're honest about your feelings." "They say it's a virtue." I turned around to walk back to

my house. It was time to leave. "Do me a favor and leave me alone. I just know you're going to go all Ted Bundy on my ass any second." I looked around me, hoping one of the neighbors would flick their porch lights on and burst out holding a shotgun. I felt pretty sure I wasn't that lucky.

"Are you afraid of me?" Will asked, jogging to catch up to me.

"Are you passive-aggressively trying to tell me that I should be *afraid* of you, too? Not just 'nervous'?" I was only four houses away from home now.

"No, but have you ever heard the saying 'The brave may not live forever, but the cautious never live at all'?"

"No, I haven't heard that, but I'll keep it in mind. Thanks for the proverbial insight, my stalker friend."

He threw an arm across my chest to stop me and looked ahead, staring coldly into the dark. His body stiffened, but something in my gut told me that it wasn't because of the chilly air.

I turned my head to follow his gaze, but I saw nothing in the street ahead. A breeze scattered a handful of already fallen leaves. I smelled something strange, like eggs and black smoke. "Do you smell that? What's wrong?"

He stepped around me to put himself between me and wherever he was staring. "You can't see into the Grim yet."

"See what? The grim what?" I peeked over his shoulder. I thought I saw a shadow cross my path, but when I blinked, nothing was there. It was too dark.

His gaze was fixed on something in the blackness. "It's not time! Stand down. I don't care if it's after midnight—she cannot be touched, unless you're prepared for the consequences."

He was clearly not talking to me. I was suddenly very aware that though I knew his name, I had no idea who he was. He could have been some drug addict. I had never seen anyone on anything other than pot or alcohol, not even shrooms, let alone anything worse, so I had no idea what to expect. My body tensed with fear. "What are you on? I've had enough. I'm leaving now."

I started to turn back to my house.

"No, wait," Will said.

I heard the rumble again, only this time it was louder. That was not a car engine. Was it a growl? Was there a dog—a big dog—out there in the dark? My mind raced with thoughts of a rabid-dog attack. If the dog was close enough for me to hear it, then I should have been able to see it.

Another growl came, and then very heavy footsteps—like *T.-rex*-shaking-the-water-cup-*Jurassic-Park*-style heavy footsteps.

"What is that?" I asked, trembling, my eyes searching the dark. I felt like I'd fallen right into a real-life version of one of my nightmares. My head whirled dizzily, and fear made my stomach churn.

Hot breath, reeking like roadkill, blasted my face from an unseen source, and I spun around, gagging. "Oh my God!" I groaned, covering my mouth.

"Come here," Will said slowly, reaching back for me without taking a step. The look of worry on his face that I'd noticed earlier had deepened. Now he looked afraid, and that scared me a thousand times more.

"No way!" I cried, reeling away from him.

His fear spun into frustration as I pulled away. "Don't scream. You'll make him attack."

Panic set in. "Get away!" I shrieked, and tried to run, but Will grabbed my arm. I twisted and pulled, but his grip was amazingly strong. It was like trying to drag an eighteen-wheeler; I couldn't get him to give even an inch. How could anyone be that strong? I started to pry at his fingers, but they were like solid rock.

"It's time to end this game," he said, sending stabs of ice down my spine. He yanked me to his chest effortlessly and pressed his palm to my forehead.

Bright white light flashed, blinding me. Every inch of my skull felt as if it would explode from the pressure. The ground felt as if it were rocking and rolling at my feet, and a cruel wind—I didn't even know where it came from—punished me violently, beating at me from all directions. My knees began to sway, unable to hold my weight, but Will held me up so I wouldn't fall. The light vanished just as abruptly as it had appeared as he took his hand away and released me. I staggered back and fell on my tailbone, my vision blurring—but through the haze I could have sworn I saw shadowy

wings towering over me, spreading wide. I blinked and saw only Will's blurry form where I thought wings had just been. Every muscle in my body ached as if I'd just run a mile, but I was energized. There was a rushing sensation through the air, through the ground, and every inch of my body tingled with tiny prickles of electricity, as if I were moving a hundred miles an hour, even though I hadn't moved an inch. The air around me was sticky for a moment, sticky and smoky, and I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them again to clear my vision. After a heartbeat, the haziness faded. I stared confusedly at the pavement, rubbing my forehead.

"Ellie!"

My eyes suddenly focused and I saw Will again. My vision was crisp and the world had brightened. I looked past Will, marveling at how easily I could see through the darkness, distinguishing every leaf on my neighbors' bushes, every groove in every shingle on their roofs.

And then I saw the monster: something vaguely resembling a huge dog covered in thick, black fur loomed over us, standing easily five feet tall at the shoulder. It lumbered over on all fours with a snout full of gnarled, vicious-looking teeth in the jaws of a heavy, oversize head. Its paws were the size of an elephant's foot and ended in talons that looked like they could tear a man in half.

But I wasn't afraid. A calmness washed over me, and my mind analyzed at a lightning pace. Strange memories and thoughts that didn't belong to me flooded into my mind: faces and violence I'd seen long ago in different times. I looked up at Will, whose face sparked the clearest and fondest memory. I knew I had to fight now, but I needed my weapons.

The beast leaped toward me, claws outstretched, and took a swipe with one of its front paws, but Will appeared between us. He grabbed the beast's forelimb and kicked full force into its chest, sending it flying back, shattering my neighbor's mailbox into countless little chunks of wood and brick.

It happened so fast that I knew I shouldn't have been able to see it, but I did. I stepped forward, watching the creature climb to its feet as it loosed a low, dangerous-sounding growl.

I held both of my arms out and willed weapons into my open palms. The twin Khopesh swords appeared out of nothing in a flash of shimmering light. The curving silver blades glinted brightly. I glanced over at Will. I could now see intricate black tattoos twisting out from beneath his shirt all the way down his right arm to his knuckles. I remembered the beautiful symbols woven into the spiraling design, because I'd seen them before with different eyes, in another time.

My thoughts were calm and unnervingly clear. The blades exploded into white flames at my command. Blinding light devoured the silver, and the power coursed through me. My fingers squeezed the cool, familiar helves as the scents of silver and old blood flooded my heightened senses. The swords felt right in my grasp, like hugging an old friend.

The monster began to circle me, growling low and releasing an unearthly hiss. Its eyes were bottomless pits of blackness set deep into its deformed, terrible skull. I stared right back into those eyes without fear or hesitation.

I moved with the creature so that it was never at my back, and in a voice that did not seem my own I challenged the beast: "Come for me."

The wolflike monster charged, paws and talons outstretched, massive jaws gaping. I spun out of the way just as teeth clamped down on the hood of my sweatshirt instead of my throat. The beast yanked the cotton flap, wrenching me around awkwardly, twisting, growling. Its paws clawed at my body, pulling me closer to its mouth so it could take a bite out of my face. I smashed my elbow into its nose, and it slumped back onto its haunches with a groan. Then my elbow slammed down on top of its skull and something crunched, but the monster only bit harder on my hoodie, shredding the fabric. Abruptly, it threw me to the ground, and I looked up. Will had it by the throat, his arm buried elbow deep in its thick fur, forcing the beast backward.

"Now!" he roared.

It thrashed like a giant pit bull and broke free.

My eyes locked on my target and my mind cleared to seize the opportunity. Quicker than my heart could beat, I was on my feet and shoving my fiery sword into its soft throat and straight through the top of its skull. The creature's legs buckled as its fur shimmered oddly before exploding in flames. It happened very quickly. Fire devoured the reaper, swallowing it in white light, consuming it until finally the head disappeared, leaving nothing but empty space and falling ashes where a monster had just been.

Then the shadows closed in around me.

THE NEXT MORNING, MY HEAD AND EVERY MUSCLE in my body hurt as if I'd run a marathon through six feet of snow in stilettos. Fragmented chunks of the nightmare I'd had the night before spun through my head. As much as it annoyed me to have dreamed about Will, I was more unsettled because it had been way more vivid and scary than my usual nightmares. Why was I still in my jeans and shirt? My hoodie, however, was AWOL. I dug through my dirty-clothes hamper and the blankets on my bed, but it was nowhere to be found. How had it just disappeared?

What if what happened last night wasn't a dream?

There was a knock on my door. "Is the birthday girl awake, yet?" It was my mom. "Come on, Ellie! Get up!"

I headed to the bathroom to shower, straightened the obnoxious waves in my hair with the flatiron, and tugged on fresh jeans and a T-shirt. I hopped downstairs to meet my mom in the kitchen.

"I made you pancakes, since it's your birthday," Mom said cheerfully, and smiling brightly, she presented a platter stacked high. "I know you didn't eat the ones I made you yesterday, so I hope you're feeling well enough to appreciate them more this morning."

"Thanks, Mom," I said, sitting down at the counter to eat.

"Happy birthday, honey." She kissed the top of my head. "Love you."

"Love you, too. Where's Dad?"

Her smile vanished. "He had to leave early. He's got a meeting in Lansing. He told me to tell you happy birthday and that he loves you."

I forced a smile, pretty certain that she had made the last part up. More likely he had just left for his meeting without saying a thing.

Mom's face brightened. "So I thought we would go get your present after school. I know today is going to be very difficult with everything that happened yesterday, but hopefully this will make today a little less awful. Sound good?"

My heart lifted. "Yeah."

"Okay, then. I'm going to get some work done before we take off for school." She turned to go back to her office. "Make sure you eat. We'll go by the dealership after school and see what they have." Awesome. "Hey, Mom?"

She turned back around. "Yeah, sweetie?"

"Did you hear anything last night?" I wasn't sure what I expected her to answer with.

She frowned. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry your father and I were arguing. I'm so sorry you heard that."

"I mean like growling, like a huge dog or a bear."

Mom gave me an odd look, gauging what I had just said. Heat rushed into my cheeks as I realized how stupid I'd just sounded. "It wasn't another nightmare?"

"No, I was awake."

She sighed and her lips tightened. "Maybe it was a couple of dogs outside fighting? I didn't hear anything. You wouldn't hear strange noises if you shut your window at night."

"I guess you're right." The consensus was official: it was just a dream and I was a lunatic.

As soon as I got to my locker, I was greeted by Landon, who carried a vase of roses. My jaw dropped to the floor.

"Are you serious?" I asked, my gaze spilling over the lush bouquet.

"Happy birthday, Ellie." He kissed my cheek. Any second I would implode from the sweetness.

He handed the vase to me and I took it. "I don't want your birthday to suck, even though it's a sad day and all. I hope this makes it better."

I wrapped my free arm around his shoulders and hugged

him. "Thank you so much, Landon! You are too good to me. This will definitely make my day rock."

His smile widened. "I have to run to class, but I'm really glad you're happy. See you later."

"Bye!" I had to remove a pile of old papers from the bottom of my locker to safely make room for the vase. I'd known Landon for a long time, but he had never given me flowers before. What a doll. I was practically dancing on my way to homeroom.

Classes went just as I'd predicted they would. During morning announcements the principal gave a long speech about Mr. Meyer over the intercom, and then my homeroom teacher, Mrs. Wright, gave another. The first four periods of the day were very much the same. Teachers said their bit, did very little lecturing, and gave no homework. My math test had been postponed until the following Monday, which was fine with me since I had no desire to take a test on my birthday. During third-period shop class, which I swear I only was taking only to boost my GPA, we did nothing but sit at our tables and discuss the sanding projects for the following week. I assumed getting mushy would be too much for poor Mr. Gray to handle. When lunchtime came around, I met up with my friends. We all made an effort to have a decently normal lunch. Even an idiot could see how loved Mr. Meyer had been.

Kate, Landon, and I sat in our usual place in the righthand corner by the windows looking out into the courtyard. Evan, Rachel, and Chris joined us, and to my surprise and happiness, everyone avoided the subject of Mr. Meyer's murder. When I finished my lunch, I headed to the bathroom for a quick break.

As I washed my hands in the sink, something made me stop and take a second look in the mirror. My throat squeezed with fear as I stared at the right side of my face. Black things—spidery, threadlike lines—were creeping from my scalp and across my cheek and around my right eye, interlacing with one another. Fear spun into revulsion as I rubbed my cheek hard, trying to smear the blackness away. The lines kept coming, getting longer and covering more and more of my face. I rubbed, but I couldn't feel them on my skin. Were they *in* my skin?

Half crying, half scared out of my mind, I grabbed a handful of paper towels and wet them under the running water. I rubbed my face vigorously with the wet towels, but when I lowered them, the lines were still there and my eyes had turned solid white like cue balls. I dropped the towels and backed away from the mirror until my back hit the solid frame of the toilet stalls. I covered my face with both of my hands, my fingers weaving through my hair, pulling it in desperation.

When I looked back up, I saw nothing on my face in the mirror but the streaks of tears. No black things. No darkness. They were gone. My eyes were normal again.

I splashed my face with cold water to dull the redness

on my face and took several long, slow breaths to steady my nerves. When I felt confident enough to return to the cafeteria, I burst through the bathroom door, determined to forget what had just happened to me. As I rounded the corner, I turned right into Will.

"You scared the crap out of me! What are you doing at my school? I thought you didn't go here." I nervously tugged my bag higher on my shoulder and took a deep breath. That was when I noticed that the black, spiraling tattoos all up and down his muscled arm were plainly visible—the exact same tattoos he'd worn in my dream. I stared at the strange symbols, and the winding blackness reminded me of the blackness spreading on my face moments before. But this was different. His tattoos were beautiful, frighteningly so, and unearthly. They wound and danced across his skin as if they were proud and defiant. I couldn't take my eyes off them.

He ignored my question. "Are you all right?"

Had he heard my crying? How did he know? Wresting my gaze away from his tattoos, I dismissed my thoughts and sternly asserted, "I'm fine."

"I need to talk to you." He wasn't smiling. In fact he didn't look cheerful at all, and his questioning gaze fell on my still-red cheek. I self-consciously covered it with my palm.

"About what? I have to get back to lunch." I started to

walk around him, but he sidestepped in front of me, blocking my path. After what had just happened in the bathroom, I was not in the mood to deal with any more craziness.

"We need to talk about last night."

My stomach clenched, and the fear I had felt moments before came raging back into my body. "I don't know what you're talking about. I was home last night. There's nothing we need to—"

"Don't you remember?" He leaned into me, his green eyes wide and tearing into my hazel ones. He was so close that he was all I could feel, see, and smell. My senses were drowning in him.

"Remember what?" It was just a dream—it *had* to be. What happened could *not* have been real. I'd imagined it, just like I'd imagined the black spiderwebs on my face.

He took my arm and pulled me gently against the lockers when a couple students walked by. "The reaper? The one you killed?" he asked in a harsh whisper.

"The *what*? What the hell are you on, Will?" I tried to pull myself away, but he held me tighter. "Look, I'm not into that stuff, whatever it is, so—"

"Enough of this," he growled, leaning closer to me. "You need to accept what happened last night and what you are, no matter how much you don't want to. Pretending that it was just a dream or that I'm insane isn't going to help you. It'll only make things worse."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" I snarled through

gritted teeth. I was desperate to keep my anger from causing more tears.

Will took a breath and spoke his next words slowly. "Look, I feel awful and I don't want to scare you—"

"Well, you're doing a damn good job of it!"

"Just listen to me for a minute and I'll leave. Okay?"

I studied his face. He was really serious about this. I might as well humor him. "Fine."

He took another deep breath. He spoke slowly, but with an intensity that frightened me even more. "What you saw—what you fought—last night was a reaper. Forget the scythe-wielding skeletons in long robes. This is real. Most don't need scythes, because they have teeth and claws for weapons. They eat you. They eat your flesh and your blood, and then they drag your soul to Hell. Your teacher, Frank Meyer, was killed and eaten by the same one you killed last night. You are the Preliator, the only mortal in the world with the power to fight them. And I am your Guardian, your bodyguard, sworn to protect and defend you. And you are making my job excruciatingly difficult."

I stared at him for a few moments, unable to decide how to respond. I settled for the easy thing. "You're completely out of your mind."

"Damn it!" Will threw his hands up. "This is ridiculous. I don't understand why you don't remember. I triggered your power last night. You woke and entered the Grim on your own and killed the reaper. Why don't you remember now?"

He stepped away from me and clamped his hand over the top of his head. His voice was rapid and worried. "Maybe because it's been so long. Before, it was always only eighteen years between cycles. Your soul has been asleep too long."

I backed away, my hand crawling along the wall, unable to make sense of anything he said. Then I noticed the metal chain around his neck, tucked into his shirt. An image flashed across my mind of something gleaming, dangling—a plus sign. It was like déjà vu, a memory I didn't remember ever having, if that made any sense at all.

"And if you're wondering where your hoodie went, check your wastebasket. Sorry it was ruined."

"Ruined?"

"Is there a problem, Miss Monroe?"

I turned around to see one of the assistant principals, Mr. Abbot, standing behind me, looking from me to Will.

"Who is this young man?" Mr. Abbot asked, clearly seeing that Will was not a high school student. His accusing gaze lingered on the tattoos covering Will's arm. To him, the tattoos must have been a sure sign of delinquency.

"A friend," Will said. "I stopped by to bring some of Ellie's homework she had forgotten at my house."

Mr. Abbot looked questioningly at me. "Is this true?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir. It's okay." I didn't know why I was covering for him. Maybe his craziness had rubbed off on me like a bad cold, or something worse.

He turned to Will. "Young man, I'm going to have to ask

you to leave campus. You've done Ellie a good service by bringing her homework. However, as you are not a student and have not signed for a visitor's pass, you'll need to be on your way."

Will nodded. "That's fine. I'll say my good-byes and go." He stared intently at Mr. Abbot, refusing to budge. Strangely, my assistant principal made a peculiar face before he turned and left. "Ellie, will you talk to me after school?" Will asked me.

"No way," I said, turning my back to him.

He stepped around me so that we were face—to-face. "If you don't, then you won't know how to call your swords and you won't be able to defend yourself."

I felt a shiver crawl up my spine as his eyes bored into mine, locking our gazes, his voice low and downright invasive. "Was that a threat?" I asked cautiously.

His expression gave nothing away. "They'll come for you."

That shiver turned into a brutal stab of fear straight into my gut. My pulse quickened and I pursed my lips together when I felt heat rushing into my face.

"Now that I've woken your powers, you're fair game to the reapers. You're at your most vulnerable, and this is when they'll strike."

I took a deep breath. "If you don't leave me alone, I'm going to scream for security and they're going to call the cops."

He watched me for a few moments. His jaw was clenched

tightly and he sucked in his upper lip in frustration. "It takes a while for your memory to return sometimes, but it's never been this bad before. I know you're having the nightmares. You've always had them when you're ready to face who you are. Of course, the last time I saw you—the *real* you—well, that was over forty years ago. You've been gone for twenty-eight years."

My throat tightened.

He flashed me that astonishing smile, only this time it held something different, something secretive. "Happy birthday, by the way. I'm sorry I didn't say that last night, but I have a gift for you. You passed out before I could give it to you."

Will pulled something out of his pocket and held out his hand. On his palm lay a pendant shaped like a pair of white wings hanging on a gold chain. The necklace was gorgeous, ethereal, the wings so brightly white that they shimmered and appeared to glow in the light. When I blinked, the glow was gone.

"What is this?" I asked, marveling at the winged pendant.

"It's always been yours," he said, lifting my hand and placing the necklace on my palm. "Since before I knew you. It never tarnishes or fades. Always the same. Always permanent even when fate takes so much away." He gently closed my fingers around the pendant, his warm hands lingering a moment too long. "I'll talk to you soon."

Will turned and left. I opened my hand to stare at the

beautiful necklace. Brushing my fingers across the wings, I couldn't decide what it was made of. The pendant's surface was smooth and luminous, as if it were made of mother-of-pearl, but something more precious than that. Its beauty lulled me, and I slipped into a strange, nostalgic trance; and the whispers of memories that couldn't have belonged to me surfaced in my mind. Distant images of Will's face, of reapers lurking in the dark, of me running through alleys and forests, of the necklace in my hands. Things I shouldn't have remembered but did.

I shook my head and stuffed the necklace into my purse.

Over forty years? I fell back against the lockers tiredly and rubbed my face with both hands. Why wouldn't Will just leave me alone? He seemed to firmly believe that I was some kind of superhero, and that had to be the craziest thing I'd ever heard. As if that wasn't enough, he said he'd talk to me soon. Although I knew little about Will, I knew for a fact that was a promise.

I went back to lunch with my friends and tried to forget about him, but I couldn't. Fourth period came and went without incident other than Kate distracting me from the discussion of the week's assignment. Something about dress-shopping plans for Saturday's party outfits. Thankfully, that was the only other class I had with Kate, so I was able to concentrate a little more during my other classes. Fifth period European history was mildly more interesting because I

actually liked history. It was something I got easily, unlike economics.

As I sat at my table, ignoring my tablemate who absently picked at his face, I found myself thinking about the night before. I tried to remember the horrible creature Will had called a reaper. The snarling, dead-eyed monster stared out at me from my memories, its enormous talons digging into the earth, ready to leap. Why would I dream about such awful things? I rubbed my arms, recalling the sensation of its fur brushing against my skin. Never had any nightmare felt so real, in my mind, on my skin, and in my heart.

I decided to imagine for a moment that Will had been telling the truth. If I were indeed what he claimed, the Preliator, then those monsters, the reapers, were real. What did he mean when he said I'd been gone twenty-eight years?

I was so confused. Just trying to make sense of Will's claims was enough to drive me crazy.

I couldn't get past Will's surprise that I couldn't remember anything. Of course, nothing happened—it was just a bad dream, and Will was just nuts. But how could he know so many details from my nightmare? He had even mentioned the "grim" again, whatever that was. And his tattoos . . . I had not seen those when I met him the previous afternoon. The first time I saw them was in my dream.

Will had touched me in my dream the night before and I suddenly had become someone different, someone powerful, someone very frightening. That scared me, but I was still drawn to the idea. I pulled the winged necklace out of my purse and studied the delicate edges and intricate etchings.

Remember. I thought hard, shutting my eyes tightly and closing my fingers around my pendant. Remember, remember. What was I supposed to remember? I stared down at my history notes. If only my own history were written on those pages instead of Charlemagne's.

The events from the night before replayed over and over in my mind like a horror movie: the reaper stalking through the dark, charging at me as I swung those strange, flaming, sickle-shaped swords. So much blood . . .

And then my eyes went out of focus. I squeezed them shut and opened them again, turning my face away from the harsh light of the classroom to stare at the floor. The temperature plummeted, and I shivered and rubbed my arms. The floor blurred and my desk and all the faces around me vanished, leaving me alone in the dark and kneeling on a snowy ground. I stood and looked around me, and I saw the dense, shadowed forest closing in on me and the icy, unyielding wind on my face.

My eyes fell to the trail of blood dotting the snow in front of me as I moved through the Grim. I knew the reaper couldn't be far. He had taken nearly a hundred lives already in the poor region of Le Gévaudan in southern France. The dragoons sent by the French king had found nothing and left an endless trail of innocent wolf carcasses in their wake. The lupine reaper was smarter and hungrier than any of them, and that made him far more dangerous. They couldn't hunt something that they couldn't see and that was smarter than them.

I could suddenly feel it—the tingle of the darkest power crawling across my flesh, rolling through the earth beneath the snow.

Something dark flashed to my right. Then it flashed to my left. He was circling me.

I hated when they hunted me back. I held my swords closely. The flames didn't melt the snow around me. Angelfire only ever burned evil and left everything else untouched.

Footsteps crunched the snow in front of me. The reaper had finally decided to show himself. He stepped closer, allowing me to get a better look at him. He gnashed his teeth with the promise of death, and his black fur glistened with a dark, lurid liquid. Blood. I didn't know what, or who, it belonged to.

"You are a fool for hunting me, Preliator," he growled through wolflike jaws, jaws that should never have been able to speak human words. "This is my territory. The souls in this land will be mine. You will meet your end in this forest."

I scoffed and tightened my grip on both helves. "I may, but before I die, I'll make sure you don't leave this forest alive either. That is the price you pay for taking so much blood."

The reaper lifted his head, his black eyes watching me

curiously. "And what price do you pay? For all the blood you've spilt?"

"This is my duty."

He ignored me. "Loneliness, I suspect." His voice was so deep, it hurt my ears trying to hear him.

"Stop trying to get into my mind and just fight me, Holger."

He lowered his head, and his muzzle formed a strange wolfish smile. His eyes were nearly invisible against his black fur, revealed only by the angelfire cast across their glossy surfaces. "You know my name."

"I know a lot more about you than that."

"Does that knowledge make you fear me?" he asked, frighteningly hopeful. He was old—older and more powerful than most of the reapers I had fought in recent years. Three hundred years was certainly something to boast about.

"That would make you happy, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, yes it would," Holger said, the words rolling over his giant tongue. "Where is your Guardian, Preliator?"

"Not far behind." It didn't matter. I had to destroy the reaper on my own or he would send more innocent souls to Hell.

"Well, that is quite fortunate for me."

He launched, jaws and claws spread wide. I bolted and he landed to the side of me, sliding through the snow and spraying glittery white powder. He leaped for me again, and I dived behind a tree. He collided with it, shaking half the tree free of snow and gouging a massive hole in the bark with his body. He roared in fury, and every tree near him shook with the force of his energy. His power exploded and he bashed a tree trunk with his paw, his talons ripping the trunk nearly in half. The tree groaned, and I stared up as it came crashing down; but I fell back before it pinned me to the ground. Though it missed me, the log had trapped one of my swords beneath it and the flames went out. I grabbed the handle and tugged, but the blade didn't slide free.

Holger climbed over the trunk, and then his snarling muzzle was inches from my face. He snapped his jaws, lashed his thick tail in anger, and lunged at me, but a powerful blow to his skull knocked him off the tree.

My heart leaped when I saw Will. He pounded the reaper's head again, crushing Holger to the ground. Will snapped back around to face me and bellowed, "Your sword!"

I nodded and gave the Khopesh another strong tug, grinding my boot into the trunk for leverage, and finally the blade slipped out. Angelfire burst from it. I turned my head just in time to see Holger charge at me where I lay. His jaws snapped at me, but I twisted away, and his teeth clamped down on earth and snow instead of flesh. With a desperate cry, I swung my sword as hard as I could. The blade cut deep through his neck, and his body burst into flames. Holger's head toppled off his body and onto my face.

I cried out and my chair slipped out from under me. The racket echoed through the classroom as my butt hit the tile floor and the chair crashed.

Everyone around me was silent, too shocked to laugh, but I didn't dare look up. My entire body flushed with heat.

Oh God, oh God... Both my hands covered my face as I sat on the floor, absolutely mortified.

"Holy crap, Ellie, are you okay?" asked my table partner.

I looked up to see his face peering down at me. "The chair . . . it slipped."

THE REST OF THE DAY WENT BY WITHOUT ANY MORE incidents. No more daydreams, I told myself firmly. My nightmares were scary enough and I had no desire to have them while awake. The memory of what I had experienced during history was fresh in my mind and stung like a paper cut; the episode fluttered around school, so by last period I was already known as that chick who fell on her ass during class. I'd have to move away. Probably to Alaska.

At last, school ended and I hurried to my locker. My interlude there with Kate and Landon was brief—I had other things on my mind. Like getting my car. And my nightmares coming to life.

I halfheartedly agreed to meet Kate at the mall on Saturday to get our outfits for my party, as we had discussed during math earlier. After saying a hasty good-bye and thanking Landon once again for the roses, I headed outside with the vase in my arms to meet my mom.

She seemed as excited as I was. "Honey, who are the flowers from?"

"Landon," I said, smelling them again.

"Well, that was very sweet of him," she offered, eying the vase.

"I suppose he's making up for all the snowballs he's thrown in my face and shoved down my shirt over the years."

She nodded slowly and her brow flickered. "If you say so."

We drove to the dealership a few miles from school and inspected nearly every single car there. I was set on a sedan, so we decided to test drive a couple of different cars, with the busty saleswoman tagging gleefully along. I fell in love with a little white Audi with a black interior. It was sportier than the others and definitely felt perfect to me.

After my mom had organized the purchase and we were ready to head home, I hopped into the driver's seat of my birthday present. The interior was wrapped in smooth, cool leather and I let myself sink into it.

Mom dipped her head to smile at me through the driver's-side window.

"I'm going to name him Marshmallow," I announced.

My mom raised an eyebrow. "Marshmallow?"

"Yes, and he loves it." I tenderly ran my fingers along the leather-covered steering wheel.

"So what do you say to driving home in your new car?"

"Yes!" I almost shouted.

"Be sure to tell your dad thank you when you get home." I nodded, smiling widely. I was almost ecstatic enough to forget my frightening daydream from earlier. Almost.

I followed my mom home. The Audi glided along the hilly roads like a dream. Up and down, left and right, the vehicle handled effortlessly and I felt in complete control, otherworldly. I didn't know what had come over me, whether it was the thrill of having my first car or my party coming up, but I felt energized. *Different*. I felt *good*. None of the soreness I had woken up with that morning remained.

As I pulled into the driveway behind my mom's car, I happened to glance at my neighbor's mailbox, which lay in a pile of splinters. My neighbor, Mr. Ashton, was picking up the wooden fragments and chunks of brick scattered across his lawn. A very clear memory from the night before crept into my head, and the blood drained from my face. A cold rush flooded through me as I stepped out of my car, dizzying me so much that I had to lean against the door for support. I noticed a jagged crater in the street not too far off.

"That happened last night," my mom said with a frown on her face. "It appears a sinkhole may have caused a driver to hit the curb and then Mr. Ashton's mailbox. The neighborhood association is having someone come by to fill the hole in tomorrow. It's strange, since these things don't usually happen until spring."

I leaned back against my car for support, my breaths

long but dizzyingly shallow.

"Maybe that's what you heard last night?" Mom offered. "The loud noise you mentioned."

I watched Mr. Ashton dump the remains of his mailbox into a wheelbarrow and haul it into his backyard. "Maybe."

I ran up to my bedroom and dumped the contents of my wastebasket onto the carpet. Will had to be wrong. My missing hoodie couldn't be in there. But right in front of me, in the midst of crumpled notebook paper, wadded tissues, and a candy wrapper, was my hoodie. I lifted it, gingerly plucking the hood up with two fingers. The cotton was shredded, stiff from something wet and thick that had dried all over it, and splattered across the sleeves and chest was dark dried droplets. The whole thing had a sour dog-drool smell laced with the faint tang of old blood.

Scrambling into the bathroom, I threw up into the toilet.

Kate called me that evening at seven to meet her at Starbucks. Any reason was good enough to get me out of the house and driving. As I left, I took a whiff of the roses on my dresser and tried not to think about the shredded discovery in my wastebasket. I let my mom know where I was going and she gave her permission without much resistance. When I arrived, Kate was standing by her car in the parking lot with Landon and Chris. She let out a high-pitched squeal when she saw my new car.

"Ah!" she shrieked. "It is so cute! I approve."

"Thank you!" I said, beaming. "I named him Marshmallow. Isn't it perfect?"

"Oh my God, yes," Kate said, peeking in the driver's-side window. "Ruby wants him to be her boyfriend." She was referring to the name of her red BMW.

"You rich girls and your stupid names for your cars," Chris said, sighing as he checked it out. "A4, nice. I'll race you with my 370Z."

I laughed. "No way. I'm not going to kill myself, thanks, and why would you even bother? I'm pretty sure you'd destroy me in that thing anyway."

"Fine," he said, and turned to Kate. "Let me take on the E90."

She eyed him, grinning. "Keep dreaming."

"You ladies are wasting your cars," Landon said, examining my tires.

"It's really going to suck when we're freshmen at Michigan State and have to leave our cars at home," Kate said, pouting.

"Did you send your application in?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yeah. Haven't you?"

I grimaced. My grades hadn't exactly been awesome, but I was still treading water. "Not yet."

"Well, do it quick," she said. "Spots fill up fast."

I made a mental note to start my application next week. Neither of us wanted to go anywhere else. Well, of course I had wanted to go to Harvard when I was six, but my goals had gotten more realistic since then.

After the boys inspected the Audi from grille to tailpipe, we went into Starbucks to order. Kate bought me a cappuccino for my birthday, and I sipped on it while we talked and laughed. I was happy not to have to worry about the strange events of the past couple of days. At the moment, all I had to worry about was not spilling my coffee on myself and not letting Landon get too close. He seemed to shift himself closer and closer to me as I watched him out the corner of my eye. I wasn't claustrophobic by any means—but I soon would be if he got any closer.

"So what are we seeing tomorrow?" Chris asked, licking the whipped cream topping his cup.

Friday night was Movie Night for our group of friends. It was pretty much a religious event for us. I shrugged. "I don't know. What's out?"

"There's that ghost movie that opened last week," Kate offered.

"Eh," I said. I had had enough of scary situations in the last twenty-four hours.

"Action movie, then?" Landon asked.

We settled on a movie about an existential hit man. Movie Night wasn't about seeing Oscar-worthy films. It was about spending a sweet night out. Clichés be damned.

Suddenly, I remembered my lit paper. I snarled at the ground. "I really need to get started on my paper."

Kate frowned. "Already?"

"Really, Ell," Landon said, flashing a stupid grin. "What's the point of drinking coffee at night if you're just going to go fall asleep?"

I shoved his shoulder playfully. "While your logic is flawless, it doesn't help me get my paper done. This cappuccino will, on the other hand."

"Fine, fine," Kate said, waving her hand in a shooing motion. "You suck. Leave."

"You shouldn't tell me I suck on my birthday," I said with a grin.

"Happy birthday!" She beamed.

"Thanks, lover." I gathered my purse and cup. I said good-bye and headed back out to my car. When I got home, I went up to my room and immediately realized I had left my lit book and notes in my locker that afternoon. I swore loudly and plopped heavily down on my bed.

"Damn it, what am I going to do?" I said aloud to no one. I stared at my backpack, angry at it for not containing the things I needed. If I didn't start my paper tonight, I would never get it done. I'd be too busy with my party. I had to go back to school to get it.

I glanced at my clock. It was almost nine, but the school should definitely still be open for the adult-education night classes. If it wasn't open, then at least I had a pretty good excuse to drive again. I could be optimistic when needed.

I grabbed my backpack, purse, cappuccino, and cell

phone and headed back to school to retrieve my forgotten homework. The was weakly lit, and I found only two other cars parked in the student lot behind the building. The only illumination was provided by the orangeish blotches beneath the parking lot lights, so I parked under one of them instead of in a dark patch. I figured I was less likely to get jumped there.

I found that the doors I usually entered through every morning were locked, so I rounded the building until I found an unlocked one. Inside, I nodded to a janitor I recognized, who smiled kindly to me as he swept the floor, listening to the MP3 player plugged into his ears. The halls were dimly lit, and my footsteps echoed solemnly. It was amazing how creepy this school got at night. I raced to my locker, yanked out what I needed, and stuffed it into my bag before jogging back out of the building. For some reason, outside it now seemed darker to me.

The light on the pole beside my car flickered and hummed. Something tugged on my body, and a hazy veil covered my vision. I had trouble stepping forward, and I looked down at my arms to see what was holding me back. The world, not just the air, but everything solid, stretched and melted away as if I were moving through a gelatinous wall. One more step, and I was suddenly free as a burst of black smoke wound around my limbs and cleared away, leaving the world normal again.

Halfway across the lot, I heard a distinct—and all too familiar—rumble.

"Oh God," I whispered, halting in fear. After two excruciatingly long seconds I heard another growl rolling through the darkness.

I bolted, digging my hands frantically into my pockets for my keys. Something heavy pounded the pavement behind me, but I was too terrified to look back. I pressed Unlock fifty times before I crashed into my car door. A giant, dark shape flashed in the corner of my vision, and I screamed and ducked just as an enormous paw raked its talons across the front fender of my brand-new car.

I hit the ground, spilled my coffee and my bags, and looked up to face my attacker: a reaper, as big as the Audi, loomed over me with one paw on the hood of my car. It looked down on me, covering me completely in its shadow, blocking out the streetlight, its chest heaving with every breath. Its shaggy, dark fur gleamed an ugly charcoal color in the yellow light. The reaper was wolf shaped, just like the ones from my daydream and my nightmare the night before.

"I have found you, Preliator," the reaper said in a deep, husky, but oddly feminine voice. "And now you are *mine*." She grinned a mouthful of fangs and snapped at me. I screamed and threw my arms over my head. The reaper laughed, her hot breath strangling me.

A shadow zipped behind the reaper and suddenly she

was sent flying over the Audi. She landed and skidded across the pavement, digging her claws into the pavement and leaving white streaks behind.

I lowered my arms and looked up to find Will standing over me. His skin beneath the tattoos on his right arm glowed brightly in the streetlight.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, offering his free hand.

I took it, staring at him dazedly, and he helped me up. "The cappuccino . . . It must be the caffeine. . . ."

Will grabbed my shoulder suddenly, threw me back against my car, and looked fiercely into my face. "Snap out of it, Ellie! Denial isn't going to make the reaper go away!"

"I can't! I—"

"Stop saying you can't! You can! You must fight!"

I wheeled around, bumping into Will as I searched for the reaper, who had vanished. I grabbed at Will's shirt in terror, shuddering closer to him, my head whipping around wildly, desperate to find the reaper.

"Release her, Guardian!" Her voice rang out from somewhere unseen.

Letting out a hoarse cry, I snapped my gaze up to see the reaper crouched on the roof of the Audi. Thick saliva dripped from her jaws, hitting the roof and sliding down the driver's-side window.

"Oh, poor child," the thing half cooed, half snarled. "She's shaking. What's the matter, girl? You were supposed to be a nightmare, but all I see is a whimpering little lamb.

We don't even need the Enshi. I'll kill you myself."

Horrified, I scrambled away, but Will caught my arm.

"Again!" he cried out, slamming his palm into my fore-head for the second time in as many days. The blast hit me, stronger this time, and the white light blinded me once more. The world shook and rolled, and I felt like I was trapped in the center of a tornado again. An eerie gust of wind spiraled around me, pulling my hair and body toward the sky. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing myself. Will released me and I fell back, but his arm wound around my waist and pulled me to his chest. After a woozy moment I had the strength to stand on my own, and he let me go.

When I opened my eyes, I called my blades and they appeared in my hands, growing magically from the pommel at the bottom of each of the helves to the tips of the blades. The simplest tug in my chest sent flames bursting from the swords, as if they came alight by my will alone. My power surged through me, and the creepy, spiderlike energy of the reaper heated my face like crackling fire. I could feel—and see—Will's power as he stood beside me. He looked dark and beautiful.

"I'm ready now," I said.

The reaper snarled and leaped off the car, landing with an earthshaking thud. I didn't wait for her to charge. I crouched to the pavement, tightened my grip on each sword, and let out a terrible cry. My power erupted, deafening me momentarily, bursting forth from my body as an explosion of inky, wispy white smoke, its strength rocking the ground like an earthquake. The pressure slammed into the reaper and my car with enough force to shove it several feet to one side. My ears rang as I watched the reaper brace herself and hold her ground. Her empty eyes stared back at me like pieces of twisted volcanic glass.

I shot at the reaper, swords high over my head. I summoned my power and leaped up, spinning through the air and crushing my foot into the reaper's jaw. As I came down, I slashed my flaming blades across her body, slicing both her shoulders. She ducked her head and chomped at me as I landed, her fangs nicking my arm and tearing the skin. She swung her neck and her head into my body, smashing me into a light pole. The light went dark as the glass rained down, shattering all around me.

I lay there, my eyes fogging over for a moment, and looked down at my arm. Cuts lined my skin from the lamp's glass and the reaper's teeth. I wiped away the blood and watched my skin heal right before my eyes. The torn flesh wove in and out as though it were being sewn back together with invisible needle and thread until my skin was smooth and flawless except for smears of blood. My gaze snapped back up to see the reaper stomping toward me. Her jaw clicked and contorted grotesquely as the bones I'd smashed with my foot healed back into place.

"You taste good, Preliator," she snarled, giving her jaws a stretch. "I think I'll have another bite." I grabbed one of my swords and charged. The reaper saw me coming and threw her paw into my face, snapping my head to the side. I ground my teeth bitterly, reeled my arm back, and pounded my fist into her jaw as hard as I could. Instead of just breaking again, her jaw flung free from her skull and skidded across the pavement in a spray of blood.

Another reaper came out of nowhere. It sprang from the shadows at my left, its fangs a flash of white in the dark, but Will swept his own sword through the air between us, stopping my breath. His giant blade sliced through the reaper's neck, sending its head spiraling high over me as it hardened to stone. The head and body hit the pavement and smashed into a thousand stony pieces.

I spun back around as the first reaper reared onto her hind legs, swinging her head in a rage, and I slammed my sword through her ribcage. As the fiery blade struck her heart, she crumpled to all fours. She wheezed and gagged just before her shuddering body erupted into flames and she was gone forever.

I PICKED THE BLADE UP AND WIPED IT CLEAN ON my jeans. Will watched me with careful, darkened eyes.

"Thank you," I said.

"Are you going to black out on me again?" he asked, hoisting his sword over his shoulders as if it weighed nothing. Now I got a better look at it. The blade was wide and almost as long as my whole body, and the hilt was incredibly beautiful, with its sleek silver and gold curves molded into what looked like a wing.

"No, I'm okay," I said. "Sort of. So then—I did black out last night?"

"Yeah. You hit the ground pretty hard afterward."

Heat crept into my cheeks. "Thank you for getting me back to my room."

"I wasn't just going to leave you there," he said. "So,

you're remembering then?"

I shrugged. "The fighting part has come back to me and my swords appeared when I called them. I felt like I knew what I was doing." What freaked me out the most was that I didn't really need to think when I fought. My body just kind of knew what it was doing, and I was only along for the ride.

"You've had a lot of practice."

"But everything else," I said distractedly, looking down at the vicious swords in my hands. "It's so fuzzy, still. It's strange, because I know it's all there, but I just can't dig it out. I don't know what I am."

"You are the Preliator," Will declared with an edge of authority to his voice.

"I know who I am," I said. "I can remember that, but I don't know what I am. And I don't know who you are."

Hurt crushed his stony resolve, surprising me. "I am your Guardian, your servant. I'm here to protect and guide you. That is my duty, and that is all that I am."

"How old are you?" I asked, studying his face.

"Six hundred."

My head grew foggy. "How old am I?"

"I don't know exactly. A few thousand years, maybe. We have records of you predating ancient Rome."

I crumpled to the ground next to my car. I looked up at the enormous gashes and the dent in the Audi's fender. My parents were going to kill me.

"This is all real, isn't it?"

"Yes." Will crouched down in front of me. He wiped at my cheek. The touch was soft, kind, *familiar*. His gaze was firm but gentle. "You had blood on your face."

I nodded toward my weapons. "Those swords are so strange looking. Why am I able to just make them appear out of thin air? Why do they light on fire? *How?*"

"They are Khopesh, an ancient weapon," he explained. I recognized the name from my nightmares. "They are exceptional blades—meant for slashing, not stabbing, but they get the job done. We are both able to call our swords through our power with angelic magic, but once they appear, they are here. We can't conjure new ones, so you had better not lose either of them. We can will them away also, when we are holding them in our hands, or when we die. They disappear until we call them again."

He held his sword out straight, and it vanished right before my eyes with that same shimmering light. He opened his palm and conjured the sword once more to show me how simple it was, and then he willed it away once more.

"The fire around your swords is angelfire, the only thing effective, catastrophic enough to destroy reapers besides decapitation. Or destruction of the heart—that's what those hooks on the back of your blades are for."

I examined my swords. Sure enough, the tip of the blunt edge of each blade curved back into a hook that I imagined could do an extreme amount of damage if lodged in soft flesh. I swallowed hard, picturing what had happened to the first reaper's heart when the hook had grabbed it.

"If a reaper dies by means other than angelfire," Will continued, "its body turns to stone instead of burning up. Silver also burns, which is why our blades are made of it, but it doesn't have the permanent effects of angelfire."

I nodded. "That's what happened to the second reaper. Can you make the angelfire appear?"

"No. Only you can, because you are the Preliator."

I held both swords up and wondered how I'd made them light up before. They had done it just because I'd wanted them to. Could I do it again, outside of battle? I watched the blades. Was it like an on-off switch? I let one word cross my mind and concentrated. On. Flames erupted around the blades, leaving the handles and my hands unscorched. They didn't feel warm and they didn't burn anything. I touched the fiery swords to my pant legs and felt no heat. I touched the flat side of a blade to Will's arm. He looked at me oddly but otherwise did not react. Off. The flames vanished. "Cool."

I examined one of the blades closely. Etched in the silver, just above the helve, was a series of strange, whirling, beautiful markings. "What does this mean?"

I looked up at him, and his gaze met mine.

"It's Enochian," he explained, his attention flickering to the sword. "The language of the divine, angelic magic. You once told me that it's a prayer of power, but I can't read it myself. We've tried re-creating the writings on other weapons in order to make them as powerful as your Khopesh swords, but so far they are the only weapons able to light with angelfire."

"That's pretty cool," I said. "Who engraved the prayer onto my swords?"

He sat down on the ground next to me, his back up against my car. "You did."

I blinked in surprise. My fingers brushed the strange words, the edges of the markings scraping my skin softly. I felt a sense of nostalgia, but it was distant, like the memory of a wonderful dream. The more I admired them, the more I remembered. "Just like the tattoos on your arm. I put them there a long time ago."

"Yes."

I traced the spiraling symbols of the tattoo with my finger. His arm tensed under my touch and his breaths became slower and steadier. "It's so strange," I said. "I can't believe that what I'm saying out loud isn't something I made up. I remember tattooing this into your arm. I meant for it to protect you."

"It's an Enochian spell, like the one on your swords."

I noticed he was watching my fingers on his skin, and I pulled back shyly. "Well, you're still here, so it must work. Why don't I have one?"

"The spell is ineffective on human skin."

How inconvenient. "How did you find me? Do you always know where I am?"

"Yes. I can sense you above all others. I always know

where you are, and I try never to be far away. I found you again a few years ago, and the reapers found you more recently."

"Are they hunting me now?"

"Most don't. They're too afraid. But yes, some will hunt you. Be glad it's only a few. Most of them try to stay under the radar, and the weakest ones wouldn't even know you until they saw those swords light up."

"Will, I'm so confused," I began. "How can I be that old when I know exactly where and when I born? I have baby pictures. I'm only seventeen."

"When you die, you are reincarnated," he explained. "Your body and soul are reborn over and over in the same human form. I find you again, usually when you're just a small child, and guard you as you grow up. When you're seventeen and ready to face your true identity, I wake you."

"When you find me as a little girl, how do you know it's me?"

I caught the slightest glimmer of a smile. "I've known you for a very long time. I can always tell when it's you."

I let my head fall back against the car. "Then I'm not immortal."

"Not in the way that I am."

"Does that mean you can't die?"

"I have never died, but I am not invincible. I just don't age."

"You're so strong," I noted. "You punched that reaper so hard and you picked her up just by her neck. She was as big as my car. How can anyone be that strong?"

Will's expression turned very serious. "You're stronger than I am, Ellie."

I shook my head tiredly. "I don't understand how it's possible—how *any* of this is possible. What are they? The reapers?"

"They are monsters in this world," he said with an edge to his voice that forced shivers through my body. "They hunt humans for their flesh and their souls, which they harvest in order to restore the armies of Hell for the Second War between Lucifer and God—the Apocalypse. The reapers are immortal and come in many forms; they are most effective killing machines."

"I don't understand how there can be creatures that big and no one knows about them. How come I've never seen any of them until last night?"

"They spend most of their time in the Grim, where they hide from human sight. Powerful psychics, however, can sense them like the ground rumbling as a train passes by and can enter the Grim at will. Beings within the Grim can see and even interact with objects and people in the mortal world, but they cannot be seen or heard through the veil. The reapers have had many thousands of years to perfect their hunting. They've been seen a few times by ordinary humans, but these sightings are rare and are usually happen

only because the reaper was being careless. It's even rarer for reapers to intentionally allow a human to see them and not kill them, but some like to do that for sport. There are legends about them in virtually every religion, with all the legends identifying them as harbingers of death. But instead of guiding people to the afterlife, the reapers eat them, their souls get one-way tickets to Hell."

"So there are no studies of them, even though there have been sightings?" I asked. "Never? People believe in Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster, and I see documentaries about expeditions to find them on the History Channel all the time—not that I watch that channel much or anything. There's no proof that either of those exist. Yet the reapers leave bodies behind like Mr. Meyer's and no one ever stops to wonder?"

"Reaper attacks are usually blamed on animals or psychotic humans. Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster aren't real."

"The reapers obviously are! Why hasn't there been some hysteria over sightings?"

Will took a breath and spoke slowly. "There've been many reported sightings of reapers. The most famous are the ones that resemble humans, hence the legend of the Grim Reaper."

My eyes shot wide. "There are human reapers?"

He nodded, watching the ground. "Yes, there are

human-shaped reapers, called the vir, and they are the most powerful. They're also the cockiest and the most likely to show their faces to humans. The other forms, like the ursid, the lupine, the nycterid, and others, have been mistaken for other monsters, because the humans don't know what they're seeing. Like your Bigfoot, dragons, or even werewolves. The reaper you just fought was lupine."

I remembered my daydream about the snowy forest in France. I remembered that I'd been in the Le Gévaudan region, a place where the villagers were ravaged by a wolf-like monster. Historians blamed the hysteria on moldy bread, but I knew better. I felt like I had really been there.

"You keep talking about the Grim," I said. "What is it?"

"The Grim is a dimension parallel to the mortal plane," he explained. "Supernatural creatures live there unseen by mortals and are able to cross over into this dimension. Most humans cannot enter the Grim, unless they are true psychics or creatures like you and me. Last night, you entered the Grim unwittingly so you could see the reaper hunting you, but you did that by pure instinct."

"How was I created?"

"We don't know what you really are. Your body and soul are human, but your power . . . it's something very different. There are a lot of things about you that we still don't understand."

"By we, do you mean you and me? Does anyone else

know about me? Is there another Preliator?"

"No, you are the only one."

"Are you my only Guardian?"

"Yes, but before me, there were others who protected you."

"Why don't I have any others?"

"Now it is my duty alone."

"How long have you been my Guardian?"

"Five hundred years."

I blushed and looked away from him. "You've been following me around for five hundred years?"

"I'm your soldier, your protector. And I don't follow you around all the time."

"So I'm not human, am I?"

"Not entirely."

"Am I a psychic, like the ones who can see the reapers?"

"No."

"Then, how can I see them?"

"I don't know. You're the Preliator."

I remembered my torn arm. "How was I able to heal so quickly?"

"Your power regenerates your body when you're injured," he explained.

"Then how do I die, if my body just fixes itself right away?"

"Some injuries are too traumatic for your body to heal.

I am the same way, and so were your previous Guardians."

"Are you human? Or a psychic?"

He paused before he answered me. "No."

"Then what are you?"

"Your Guardian."

"That's not a straight answer," I said, frowning. "Is Will your real name?"

"Of course."

"So, what are you?"

"Your Guardian."

I frowned. I had a million more questions, and I had a feeling he'd dodge as many of the good ones as possible. It should all come in time, right? There were flashes of images, of terrible things, battles and blood, scattered across my memory in distorted fragments. I looked down at the reaper's blood on my hands and I felt very sad. How could I adapt to this? I wasn't dreaming anymore. My skin felt raw from when I had hit the ground. My arm ached where it was cut. Dreams never hurt you. This was real. My nightmares had become real. I was frightened, and I didn't want to have to deal with this. Wasn't it enough worrying about getting into college?

"Why can't I remember?" I asked. "This isn't normal, is it?"

Will shook his head. "No, this has never happened before, but it's been a very long time since you were last alive. Usually your reincarnation is almost immediate and you are reborn somewhere in the world, but this time you took four decades to become the Preliator again. I don't know why."

"My memory should return in time, right?"
"It will."

"When you touched my face, everything became so clear. My strength, my purpose . . . How did you do that?"

Will leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. "Because I'm your Guardian, I have the ability to awaken your power. You were a normal girl until the moment you turned seventeen, and it's my duty to restore your power and memories and defend you in battle from that moment on."

I suddenly remembered my lit paper and scrambled to my feet, looking around for my purse. I spotted it lying beside my backpack, right where I'd dropped them. My car had been moved two parking spots away from where I had left it. I paused, realizing the impossibility of what I had done.

"I did that, didn't I?"

"You can do a lot more than that with your power."

"Is it telekinesis?"

"No, your power can only push things, not pull them. It's like an immensely strong gust of wind made of pure energy, of life force."

"That is insane," I mumbled, retrieving my lost items. I dug my cell out and checked the time, then shoved my phone back into my bag. It was after ten. Fantastic. I'd never be able to get anything written on my paper and wake up with a working brain in the morning. Strangely, my homework seemed quite insignificant.

"I need to get home. My parents are going to flip when they see what that thing did to my car. What do I tell them?" I stroked the deep claw marks in the Audi's fender. It would have to be repainted, probably replaced. How would I explain it, though?

"Tell them someone hit your car and drove off. Your insurance should cover the damages."

"They'll never buy that."

"You don't have another option."

I made an ugly noise and scowled. My dad was going to slaughter me no matter what. Distracting my thoughts from my likely fate, I remembered something the first reaper had said. "Did you hear the reaper say something about an Enshi?"

He stared at me. "Enshi? What exactly did she say?"

"She said, 'We don't need the Enshi,' because she'd just kill me herself. Do you know what that word means? And who are 'we'?"

"It's Sumerian," he said thoughtfully. "Lord of . . . something. I'll need to check exactly what -shi means."

"You speak Sumerian? Who speaks that? Seriously."

"Can you meet me at the library after school? We should look into it."

"I have too much homework," I said. "How about Saturday afternoon? Three o'clock?"

"That will work. Tomorrow night we need to train. Your

skills need to come back to you faster than they are."

"But it's Friday night. That's our Movie Night."

"Otherwise you won't last."

"You mean I'll die." It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

I shrugged. "Well, we don't want that, but my friends and I always go to the movies Friday night, so it'll have to be later."

"I can wait. The night is long."

"I'll give you a call when we're done. What's your number?" I started to get my phone back out to punch in his information.

"I don't have a phone. You won't need to call me."

I looked at him quizzically. "No one can survive without a cell phone. Are you going to be stalking me at the movies, too?"

He seemed unaffected. "I've been your companion for five hundred years as your Guardian, your bodyguard. During the day, while you're at school, you're safe, so I'm usually home until dusk. I need to rest too. I'm not following you around constantly, but I can sense if you're distressed or frightened. If you're attacked, I'll know. It's part of the bond we share."

I wondered if he had sensed my fear during my hallucination in the bathroom earlier at school, and if that was why he had come to find me. "So while I'm at school, how do you keep yourself busy? Got any hobbies?"

He smiled. "You're enjoying all these questions, aren't you?"

"I'm just trying to figure you out."

His eyes met mine challengingly, but I was too tired to keep interrogating him.

I sighed. "I really need to get home. I'm so exhausted." $\,$

He nodded. "I will see you tomorrow after your movie."

"Yeah," I said, not particularly ecstatic about it. I understood what was happening to my life, but I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to accept it. At this point, there could be no denying that my life would never be normal again.

SCHOOL FLEW BY LIKE A BREEZE. FRIDAYS WERE often that way. Everyone, including teachers and staff, just wanted to get the hell out of there and enjoy the weekend. The night before, I had fallen asleep almost upon impact with the pillow, and obviously I hadn't gotten any work done on my paper. Luckily, neither of my parents had looked closely enough at my car that morning to notice the giant claw marks in the paint. I knew it was only a matter of time and bad luck before they did, however. Kate, on the other hand, had noticed them right away. I went with Will's story and explained that someone had hit my car in a parking lot, but I wasn't sure Kate was convinced. I would still need to figure out how to fix those the cheapest way possible and without getting caught by my parents. I

drove home right after school to squeeze out three of the five pages needed for my lit paper.

That night I wore the winged necklace Will had given me. It felt right wearing it, like reattaching a lost fifth limb. The feeling was comforting, and the necklace was beautiful. I loved it.

I met Kate and Landon at the theater, and we were soon joined by Rachel and Chris. As soon as I arrived, Kate noticed my necklace.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, gaping at the pendant and examining it closely. "It looks antique. So gorgeous."

"Yeah, it's pretty old." I didn't want to tell her Will had given it to me, or that it was mine to begin with.

"I'm going to steal it," Kate said, and walked away.

I smiled and followed her inside. It was chilly outside, so I was glad I was wearing a hoodie over my tank top. We wouldn't have many more seventy-degree days in September.

The movie was all right, with some pretty good special effects, but I couldn't focus enough to enjoy it as much as my friends seemed to. I had already forgotten most of the plot by the time we all left the theater, with my friends chattering about how sweetly some random henchman had taken a knife to the head and how the hero had escaped the burning train. The boys were pretty stuck on recalling how hot the love interest was. All I could think about was meeting Will afterward and about how God only knew what other horrors

I'd have to witness. I found myself looking in the darkest places around me, fearful of what might leap out from the shadows. I wondered if I would pass someone on the sidewalk who might be killed by a reaper that very night and lose his soul to Hell, no matter what kind of good life he had lived. If I was to be some kind of hero, how many people would I be unable to save? I couldn't even eat fries without dripping ketchup on myself. How could I be responsible for someone else's life when I couldn't even be responsible for my own shirt?

"You okay, Ell?" Kate asked, lowering her head to whisper into my ear. "You seem so distant and quiet."

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. I've just got to get going."

"Huh?" Kate asked, surprised. "Are you ditching us early again?"

Landon overheard and jogged up beside me, throwing an arm over my shoulder. "You'd better not be thinking about bailing. It's only ten and your party is tomorrow. There's got to be a preparty and then an after party. And a *day-after* party. Stay out later. Your paper can wait. I haven't even started mine."

"No, it's not my paper." I didn't want to lie, but I couldn't exactly tell the truth, either. A partial truth would do. "I'm meeting Will in a little bit." Landon's arm became stiff around my shoulder.

Kate's eyes bulged. "You mean that weird guy from Cold Stone? You're going on a date with him?" I put my hands up defensively, not wanting them to get the wrong idea. "No, no, no. It's not a date, we're just hanging out."

"Honey, it's Friday night, and when it's just you and him hanging out, that's a date. He's hot as hell, so have fun, okay?" Kate winked.

Rachel nodded. "Yeah, he is. Let me know if you don't want him! I will gladly take him off your hands." She laughed and playfully pinched me in the side. I twisted away uncomfortably.

Landon's expression turned dark and he withdrew his arm. "Are you serious? You're going somewhere with that guy? You don't even know him!"

"Yeah, do you think that's such a good idea?" Chris asked. "He's got to be, like, twenty."

"He's just fine," I said, scowling. "Yeah, he's a little strange, but he's actually a really nice guy. And so what if he's a little older than me?" On second thought, neither of us was sure how old I actually was.

Kate shrugged. "Okay, well, let me know how it goes."

"I can't *believe* this!" Landon said, the volume of his voice causing heads to turn and stare. He stomped off toward the parking lot.

I ran a hand through my hair. "Seriously! What is wrong with him?"

Kate laughed. "Ellie, are you really that blind? He likes you."

I gaped at her. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah," Chris said, the look on his face telling me that he found this far too amusing. "We thought you knew."

Just what I needed. I had thought his newfound extreme interest in my well-being was something more benign—I must have been mistaken. I remembered my birthday roses and the kiss on the cheek. Was I *really* that stupid? Landon was cute and a nice guy and all, but this was *Landon*. Just . . . no way. I put a hand to my forehead. "I have to go. Now."

"See you later, Ell," Rachel said.

"Be safe," Kate said. "Just call me if you want me to bail you out."

I nodded. "See you bright and early? Somerset at eleven? Maybe lunch while we're there?"

"Sounds great!" She smiled, and then her expression wiped clean.

"Ellie," said Will's voice behind me.

I turned around and was shocked to see him. "Will! What are you doing here?"

His eyes flickered to the necklace around my neck and a warm smile shaped his lips. "We were going to meet, remember?"

"Right," I said, glancing back at my friends. I waved good-bye and headed to where I had parked. "I didn't know you were going to surprise me right outside the theater."

"Well, you said we could meet right after, so here I am."

"Where's your car?" I asked, as we climbed in and buckled up.

"I didn't drive."

Taxi, I guessed. "Where are we going?"

"I've found a good location in Pontiac," he said.

"Pontiac? All the way there? Why?" That wasn't exactly the safest area around here to hang out in at night. I panicked a little inside.

"Would you like me to drive?"

"No, it's my car," I said possessively.

"Then don't complain about where we're going."

It took longer than usual to travel the thirty-five miles to Pontiac because of heavy traffic. Will didn't say much during the drive, and the awkward silence was beginning to take its toll on my psyche.

"So where are you living?" I asked him, trying to make conversation during the back-up.

"You're tense," Will observed, staring out the windshield.

"I have a ninja sitting shotgun. Of course, I'm tense."

The smallest smile in the corner of his mouth.

"Don't worry about it."

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. "Don't you have an apartment or something? How do you pay for it? Do you have a job?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Why all the secrets?"

"You haven't asked the right questions." He glanced at me and smiled.

I huffed, annoyed. "You have a place to live, right?"

"Yes, but I'm only there for essentials."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I need to sleep, shower, and eat, of course. I'm not a robot."

I sat there seething for a moment. He obviously wasn't going to give me a straight answer, so I changed my question. "Why are you my Guardian?"

"I am very proficient at fighting. We made a good team." I glanced at him. "Are we still?"

"I hope so. You ask a lot of questions. I am not what's important right now. We need to focus on your waking up and becoming strong again."

"Well, it would be nice if I could remember it all, since I'm supposed to know this already." It all sounded so covert. I was having a difficult time believing that I could be part of something so much bigger than myself. I stared out the windshield at the cars zooming by on the opposite side of the highway.

"Do you mind?" Will asked.

"What?" I blinked at him. He had his hand on the stereo knob.

"It's a bit of a drive," he said. "I don't like sitting in silence."
"Yeah, I guess."

He turned the radio on and flipped over to the classic