



*Awakening*

MADELINE FREEMAN

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# **Awaking The Naturals: Book One**

Madeline Freeman

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## DEDICATION

To the Author of my life and the Creator of everything I will ever create.

And for Brian, who announced one day, quietly, as we drove in the car, “My wife is an author.”

Look at that. I am.

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## *Chapter One*

The steady cadence of a bass beat reverberated through Morgan Abbey's chest, feeling as if it originated within her very being instead of the house in front of her. House was actually an understatement. Morgan lived in a house—a three bedroom ranch with temperamental air conditioning and a roof past its prime. The sprawling brick building before her with its manicured lawn and expertly designed landscaping definitely fit into Morgan's idea of a mansion.

To her left stood her best friend, Clarissa Perry—better known as Ris. Even in the darkness, Morgan could see a broad grin stretched across Ris's face and she knew there would be no convincing her to turn around and go home.

As if feeling her friend's gaze on her, Ris turned to Morgan. "Can you believe it? It only took almost four years of high school, but we're finally at a party."

"Don't be so dramatic. We've been to parties before."

Ris rolled her eyes. "Anything involving ice cream or board games doesn't count."

Not allowing Morgan to organize a retort, Ris grabbed her by the arm and pulled her toward the front door. Tripping slightly as they started moving, Morgan quickly managed to regain her balance. The strappy heels on her feet were on loan from Ris, who insisted Morgan couldn't attend a party in flip-flops.

Ris and Morgan made their way up to the front door and stood there for a moment—should they knock?—before Ris pushed the door open and entered the house.

The music was oppressively loud, and Morgan felt almost as though she had to physically fight past it to enter the house. But then she was in and the music was no longer smothering; instead, it seemed to at once become a part of her, to course through her veins, to welcome her. And it was a good thing it did, because no one else seemed interested in doing so.

The foyer was brightly lit, yet the people who stood in it seemed somehow wrapped in shadow. Most stood in tight-knit groups; all held large red plastic cups in their hands. Ris pushed her way through the foyer and Morgan did her best to keep up. Already she was doubting the wisdom of their having come here.

They walked into what might be considered the house's living room and

Morgan saw a DJ set up in the corner. He was a tall, lanky white boy Morgan thought she recognized from school. He was wearing a skull cap and a pair of oversized headphones—though only one headphone was covering an ear. He was bopping rather spasmodically and out of synch with the beat of the music.

“Do you see Corbin anywhere?” Ris called over the music.

Morgan made a face. “Why would I be looking for Corbin?”

Ris’s eyes scanned the room. “It’s his party. He invited us. It’d be rude not to thank him.”

Morgan sighed. She generally avoided conversations with Corbin Starling. He resided at the top of Arthur B. Casey High’s social ladder, due in part to his wealth; in part to the legacy of his older brother, who had been valedictorian, a basketball star, and Homecoming and Prom king in his day; in part, Morgan didn’t doubt, to his wealth; and in part to his looks, which Morgan grudgingly conceded were at least slightly above average. His social standing was usually enough to keep them from interacting; though well-known, Morgan was hardly the height of popularity. People in Corbin’s circle generally interacted with Morgan only when they wanted her to tell their fortune—something she’d been doing since middle school.

“We used to date, you know,” Ris said as they wove around the bodies of their schoolmates.

Morgan couldn’t help smiling. “I know. I still don’t understand why.”

“Have you seen that boy? He asks you out, the only answer is yes. Besides, Corbin’s actually an okay guy—you know, besides not liking Star Wars.”

“I love that you dumped him over Han Solo.”

“Sad, but true,” Ris agreed. “The things you do in fifth grade seem so logical at the time...”

Morgan laughed, resuming her scan of the room. If Ris wanted to thank Corbin, they might as well get it over with quickly. That’s when she noticed him: Not Corbin Starling—this was a guy she’d never seen before. He leaned casually against the far wall, arms crossed over his chest, looking almost too cool for his surroundings in his close-fitting black T-shirt and dark washed jeans. But the thing that stood out most to Morgan was that he was staring at her.

At first, Morgan thought perhaps they’d made eye contact accidentally, but when he didn’t look away, she began to feel self-conscious.

A knot of girls stood in front of the guy and one seemed to notice she no longer had his attention. So focused had Morgan been on the guy that she failed to notice who was talking to him until she turned around to see what he was staring at.

Jocelyn Rochester—who had eschewed her given name in favor of Lynna



back in sixth grade—narrowed her eyes at Morgan. The undisputed Queen Bee of ABC High, Lynna was unaccustomed to attention being diverted from her, especially by someone like Morgan. Like some kind of mob boss, Lynna raised her chin in Morgan’s direction and the two girls standing closest to her started in Morgan’s direction.

Marya McKinney, Lynna’s second-in-command, was the first to approach. Her eyes flicked over Morgan deliberately in a way designed to leave no doubt she was being judged. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“Casing the place,” Morgan replied easily. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m in search of a big safe—or maybe some burlap bags with dollar signs stenciled on them.”

The look on Marya’s face told Morgan she didn’t understand sarcasm. Marya looked to Shayna Malcolm, Lynna’s third-in-command, for assistance.

Before Shayna had a chance to speak, Ris was talking. “We’re here for the same reason you are: we were invited.”

Marya and Shayna tittered with laughter. “Let me guess,” Marya said, “you ran into Corbin at a store or something and asked him how his summer was going, and he mentioned this party. Then he invited you.”

Ris glanced at Morgan briefly before responding. “Yeah.”

Shayna tipped her head back as she laughed. “It was a pity invite. Most people are smart enough to recognize it for what it is and not come.”

Ris’s eyes flicked downward and Morgan could detect the beginnings of a blush even in the dim party light. Anger flared in Morgan. How dare Lynna Rochester’s minions make Ris feel inferior to them.

“You two are so transparent,” Morgan said, her words distracting Marya and Shayna from the glee of watching Ris squirm. “You’re both so obviously threatened by Ris. I mean, she was able to accomplish the one thing neither of you—nor Lynna, for that matter—have been able to. Land Corbin Starling. Don’t tell me that’s not what you’re trying to do right now. Lynna’s over there chatting up that stranger, hoping Corbin’ll see and get jealous. And the two of you are even more sad—hoping that Corbin notices one of you instead.”

The look on Marya’s face told Morgan she’d called it right. It was her turn to shift uncomfortably and blush.

But Shayna wouldn’t be put off so easily. “You think you’re something special, don’t you? Using your freaky mind powers to read us or whatever you do.”

“That’s right,” Ris said, emboldened by Marya’s discomfort. “Morgan is special. Way more special than you. You’re nothing but a follower, hoping for some scraps of attention from the people who fawn all over Lynna.”



Shayna spared a scathing look in Ris's direction before returning her gaze to Morgan. "You try so hard to make people forget, don't you? But they never do. Even the people who fawn all over you to get their fortunes read? Don't think it's not in the back of their minds."

As though a fist had tightened around Morgan's lungs, she felt the oxygen leave her body. She opened her mouth to respond, but words wouldn't come.

A smile played at the corners of Shayna's mouth as she realized she'd hit the right button. A crowd began to gather, the air charged with the promise of a girl fight.

"You think we don't remember," Shayna continued, her voice louder than it had been, playing to her audience. "We all know your history—we know what kind of family you come from. We all know what your dad did."

When Morgan didn't respond, Ris broke in. "Her dad didn't do anything. And clearly the cops don't think so, either, since he's not in prison—"

Marya, who had been standing off to the side during this exchange, pounced t her chance to be in the center of the drama. "Just because he got away with it doesn't mean anything. My dad was the detective on the case and he's still convinced Dylan Abbey killed his wife, he just can't prove it."

Morgan felt physically ill and clenched her fists, digging her nails into her palms in an attempt to distract herself from the urge to vomit. Ten years' worth of torment washed over her like a wave. At the moment she felt she could no longer hang on, salvation came from an unlikely source. Corbin Starling appeared, inserting himself between Morgan and her tormentors.

"Ladies, is there a problem here?" Though Corbin's voice sounded genial, there was an underlying edge to it. His green eyes lingered on Marya and Shayna as he spoke.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Ris said, taking a step closer to Corbin. "Marya and Shayna are just being bitches."

Movement surrounded Morgan as the crowd began to disperse. But one body moved toward the group rather than away. She looked up to see Lynna approaching. The two locked eyes for a moment before Lynna averted her gaze. Was Morgan imagining things, or did Lynna look paler than usual?

Lynna sidled up beside Corbin, displacing Ris. She offered a coy smile. "Such language," she said, casting a glance over her shoulder at Ris. "I know you've got a good heart, Corbin, but you might want give a little more thought to the kind of people you invite to your house..."

Morgan managed to move away from the scene, her attention fully focused on the nearest wall. If she didn't reach some support soon, she was afraid she might fall over.

Ris appeared at her side, helping her to the wall. “I’m so sorry,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “We shouldn’t’ve come—”

Morgan waved her hand. She took in a deep breath, the fog that had enveloped her mind abating. “It’s okay.”

“We should go.”

Morgan laughed. “What? And give them the satisfaction? No way.” She looked at Ris, who was eyeing her dubiously. She gave Ris a playful shove. “Look, go get me a pop. I’m gonna collect myself a bit. We’ll meet back here in five. Then we dance, okay?”

Ris continued to survey Morgan, but the allure of dancing finally won out. A broad grin stretched across her face. “Okay. Back in five.”

Morgan watched as Ris disappeared into the crowd before making her way in the direction of the back of the house. The idea of sitting outside for a few minutes was more than a little appealing.

After some close encounters with a group of exuberantly dancing guys and the scene of what looked like a dramatic breakup, Morgan found the back door. When she exited, to her left, she noticed a hot tub crammed with people. After a quick scan of the deep lot, she noticed a white structure in the far right corner standing out in the darkness. As she approached it, she saw it was actually a set of benches facing each other, connected overhead by a kind of roof. The perfect place to sit and regroup before going back in to Ris.

She sat down, immediately resting her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands. She tried to press from her mind the memory of what had just happened, but she couldn’t. Instead, what Marya and Shayna said seemed to pull from the shadows of her memory the things she tried hardest not to think about, the thing she had spent nearly ten years trying to forget...

Morgan remembered everything about the day in exquisite detail: how the green tights she wore felt as they rubbed against her legs, how the cowlick at the crown of her head stuck out at an angle. How her mother smiled and waved when she dropped Morgan and her cousin off at second grade that morning. She remembered that the apple in her lunch that day had been bruised. She remembered that she had been the one to volunteer the correct spelling of the word accomplishment—remembered how proud she felt and how excited she was to tell her mom when she came to pick her up after school.

But Chelsea Abbey hadn’t been in the parking lot at the end of the day. Morgan and her cousin Joss had waited outside so long that the custodian noticed and brought them inside to call home. But Morgan’s mother hadn’t been there either.

That was when Morgan’s memory became indistinct—more emotion than

recollection. At first, she knew, there had been worry—had her mother been in an accident? But there was no one fitting her description at local hospitals. Once Chelsea's car was located, abandoned at a local mall, people began to think foul play was involved. Morgan remembered coming home one day to a sea of reporters in her front yard, remembered her father giving impassioned pleas for details about her mother's disappearance. And she remembered the day the police came to take her father to the station to ask him some questions.

Something in the air changed, pulling Morgan from her thoughts. She straightened and looked up, surprised to see a figure approaching. It was a distinctly masculine shape, and her first thought was that Corbin Starling had come to check on her. But the person didn't move like Corbin—his movements were more fluid, almost catlike.

"I'm sorry," he said in a voice just as smooth as his movements. "I wasn't trying to scare you. Mind if I sit?"

Morgan's first instinct was to tell the guy to get lost, but something in the back of her mind stopped her. "Go ahead."

He took a seat directly across from her, and when he did, Morgan realized she recognized him: this was the guy Lynna had been chatting up when she arrived.

He smiled, causing a face that was merely handsome before to become devastating. "I thought I should come apologize."

So distracted was Morgan by his smile that it took her a moment to register what he said. "Why would you apologize?"

He shrugged. "You know as well as I do that I'm partially at fault for what happened in there. Your brunette friend was a little irritated when I stopped paying attention to her."

Morgan just stared at him, unsure what to say. So she hadn't been imagining things earlier when she made eye contact with him: he had been watching her.

"You're better than them, you know," he said, leaning toward her just slightly. "Better than all of them put together, Morgan."

She froze, staring at him. "How did you know my name?"

His lips stretched in another smile, this time showing flashes of teeth. "I know lots about you."

A creeping sensation worked its way from her back, over her neck, and up into her scalp. She opened her mouth but closed it again quickly, realizing she didn't know how to respond.

"For example," he continued, unbothered by her unease, "I know that you're your high school's resident psychic, that you and your friend in there run a little business. I also know about your mother."

Morgan's discomfort evaporated, replaced by a flash of anger. "Well that's not

exactly a secret, is it. Especially after Marya and Shayna—”

He shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. I know she disappeared of her own volition. She left to protect you.”

“What?” Morgan’s heartbeat pounded in her ears, and she felt her fingertips trembling. “Who are you? What do you know about my mom?”

He didn’t respond, his body going stiff. He turned his head just slightly before standing up in one quick movement. “This isn’t the time or place. Meet me tomorrow, and I’ll tell you everything I know.”

Morgan stood too, taking hold of his arm. “You can’t just say something like that about my mom and then leave. I don’t even know your name.”

“Meet me tomorrow morning—nine o’clock. There’s a coffee house a few miles from here called the Daily Grind. You know it?”

Morgan nodded.

He removed her hand from his arm and began backing away. “Nine o’clock,” he called back in a voice just loud enough for her to hear. “And my name is Kellen.” He turned around then and disappeared amid a crowd entering the yard through the back door.

## *Chapter Two*

Nine o'clock the next morning couldn't come fast enough.

Despite the fact that Ris had kept her out until after midnight, Morgan still woke with the sun. She attempted to distract herself by cruising Tumblr, but it didn't help. When her dad got up for work and found her making pancakes and bacon, to say he was surprised would be an understatement.

She had already cleaned up the breakfast dishes and was in the middle of vacuuming the living room when nine o'clock finally approached. She was careful not to speed as she made her way to the Daily Grind, a coffee house she had passed numerous times but had never stopped at.

A tinny bell clanged as Morgan pushed open the door to the Daily Grind. She immediately took in her surroundings. The lighting was dim, but not enough to make things seem cave-like. The seating looked worn-in and comfortable, but not in a broken-down way. There was a group of twenty-somethings occupying a set of couches in the front corner, deep in conversation. A few other tables were occupied by singles or couples, most of whom were reading, studying, or working on computers. But no Kellen.

She surveyed the room once more, in case she missed him. Pulling her phone out of her back pocket, she checked the time. It was still a few minutes until nine. He just wasn't here yet.

Morgan suddenly felt self-conscious. She must look strange, just standing there in front of the door. She moved toward the counter to place an order. The barista's back was turned to her, and she took the opportunity to peruse the menu.

The barista finished up what he was doing and walked to his place behind the register. "What can I get for you?"

Morgan pulled her attention on the menu board though she still had no idea. She studied the barista for a moment. He was tall, with wavy hair so dark it almost looked black. He looked familiar. "You go to my school, right?"

He nodded. "ABC. You're Morgan Abbey, psychic to all, friend to one."

Morgan squared her shoulders, preparing to be insulted, but the guy smiled.

"I do have more than one friend, you know," Morgan said, her posture relaxing. "You're Lucas, right? Lucas... Kenrick. We were in Spanish together."

“Both years,” Lucas confirmed. “And English. Last year.”

“And freshman year,” Morgan added, not to be outdone.

Lucas smiled. He seemed pleased that Morgan remembered their shared freshman class.

“So,” Lucas repeated, “what can I get you?”

Morgan realized she still hadn’t made a decision, so she equivocated. “What do you think is good?”

“Hot or cold?”

Morgan shrugged. “Hot?”

Lucas smiled. Without another word, he went to the espresso machine and set to work. Moments later, the machine was hissing and humming. Morgan cast a dubious glance in Lucas’s direction, but he wasn’t paying attention to her.

A few minutes later, Lucas set an oversized mug down in front Morgan. “For you, a white chocolate cocoa with a shot of raspberry.”

Morgan took a sip and smiled broadly. “Lucas, this is fabulous. How’d you know I’d like it?”

Lucas shrugged. “I have a good sense of the drinks people’ll like. It’s my special talent.”

Morgan paid and thanked Lucas before turning her attention back to the coffee shop’s customers. She moved to the left side of the room to get a better look at some of the overstuffed couches, but she still didn’t see Kellen. She pulled out her phone to check the time again. It was now decidedly after nine o’clock, and Morgan started to wonder if this whole thing wasn’t some kind of sick joke. She wouldn’t put something like this past Lynna’s minions, but she refused to believe Lynna herself would stoop to such a level.

“I’m glad you came.”

Morgan jumped, some of her drink sloshing over the side of her mug. Kellen stood before her, looking just as relaxed and nonchalant as he had the previous night.

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, a half smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Come with me.”

He turned and started toward a hallway at the back of the room. The sign above the arch indicated they were moving in the direction of the bathrooms. They entered the hallway and passed the women’s room door on the right. She was about to tell him that she would, on no uncertain terms, to into the men’s bathroom when he turned to the left, indicating a closed door labeled Employees Only.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You work here?”

He let out a short laugh. “No.” He pushed open the door to reveal a room that

looked like it should be an extension of the area they'd just come from. There were two couches forming an L in the corner and a small coffee table loaded down with an old television against the nearby wall. Against the only remaining wall were three high-top tables surrounded by stools.

Kellen made a sweeping motion with his arm toward the couches and Morgan took that to mean he wanted her to sit there. As she moved to take a seat, Kellen closed the door behind them. She watched him as he crossed the room, struck by his appearance. The dim light last night hadn't done him justice. He was possibly the single most handsome guy she'd ever seen in real life. His jaw was strong and angular, but pleasingly so, and his hazel eyes held flecks of green and gold. So overwhelming were his looks that she momentarily forgot why she was here. But as he sat on the couch beside her, her mind snapped back to reality. She took in a breath and faced him.

"You said you knew things about my mom. You said she left on her own and she did it to protect me?"

Kellen nodded. "But before I tell you why, there are some other things you need to know."

She shook her head. "I don't care about other things, I only care about my mom. How do you know this stuff about her? What were you, like, ten when she disappeared? Do you know where she is?"

He didn't respond right away, the look on his face indicating he was considering something. "Nine."

"What, are you speaking German or something?"

He shook his head. "She's been gone almost ten years. I would've been nine. But, yes, I suppose if we were speaking German it would've been the answer to your other question too. I don't know where she is."

Morgan stared at him. The perfection of his face juxtaposed against the imperfection of his information was maddening. "What exactly do you know then?"

"You've gotta let me start at the beginning, otherwise nothing's gonna make sense, okay?"

She considered this for a moment. She still wasn't sure this wasn't some elaborate prank—perpetrated, perhaps, by someone who had received a fortune she didn't like. But, if there was even the slightest chance he could be on the level, she had to hear him out. She nodded.

Kellen took in a breath and released it slowly. He drummed his fingers on the coffee table in front of him for a few measures before turning his attention to Morgan. "The world is divided up into two basic groups. The first group is the one you already know about—the one you deal with every day. The one you



probably think is the only one. But then there's the other group. There are people who can calm you down when you're upset or make you happy when you're sad. And there are people who can know things he's not supposed to know about things that haven't happened yet." He paused, glancing back down at the coffee table. He rested his right hand on it, palm toward Morgan's drink, which was about a foot away. Morgan watched as the glass slid easily across the table until it rested against Kellen's palm. "And there are people like me."

Morgan opened her mouth to say something, but she couldn't form the words. Had she really just seen that happen? Had he made a glass move across the table? Or were there some smoke and mirrors somewhere that she couldn't see?

"Not a trick," he said, answering Morgan's unvoiced question.

Morgan looked into Kellen's eyes. "Which group do I fall in?"

Kellen smiled. "Suffice it to say that if you were in the latter category, we wouldn't be having this conversation. But you... you're special."

"But I can't do any of the things you just mentioned—"

"Really?" He sounded unconvinced. "So you're saying you've never... guessed that something was going to happen before it did? Or known something about someone that you shouldn't have known?"

Morgan considered this. How many times had someone found her after a reading and told her that her prediction had been right? How many people had run up to her, the week's horoscope in hand, and asked how she'd been able to know what was going to happen? "Well, yeah, but... I'm just... lucky. I mean, I'm more logical than most people. My brain works differently—"

Kellen chuckled softly. "Got it in one."

Morgan looked at him. "Are you saying there's something wrong with my brain?"

He shook his head. "To the contrary; there's something very right with it."

"So, I'm... like you? Can I move things with my mind? Because, let me tell you, that's never happened."

"Maybe one day you'll be able to—with training. But even as you are, without training, even among my people, you're special."

"Your people?"

"That second group of people? We've been around since the dawn of humanity—maybe before. We're called the Veneret. And you, you're what's called a Natural—a person who doesn't have Veneret parents, but who possesses our powers."

"So, these... abilities... just kind of... pop up in people?"

"No," Kellen said firmly. "If we could trace your genealogy back, we'd certainly find a member of the Veneret in your family tree. Generations ago, in

order to blend in, lots of the Veneret started marrying in with common people.”

“Why’d they need to blend in?”

Kellen smiled. “Suffice it to say that not all common people are so accepting of our abilities. They’re scared by what they don’t understand. You’ve heard about witch hunts and all that, right? Well, some of those people were Veneret. The common started believing that our abilities were somehow unnatural, evil even. To survive, we’ve had to keep our abilities a secret.”

Morgan allowed the information to sink in. “What does all this have to do with my mom?”

“She’s a Natural too. A Knower—someone who can see things that haven’t happened yet. And she saw something in your future that made her think that her presence in your life would endanger you. So she left.”

“How could you possibly know that? Like you said, you were nine when she disappeared.”

He offered a smile. “Psychic, remember?”

Morgan opened her mouth to respond, but the door they had entered through opened to reveal two guys: One had jet black hair that fell in waves to his shoulders; the dark blond hair of the other was spiked up in a faux-hawk. They both appeared to be around Kellen’s age. She shifted uncomfortably at the sight of them. Did they work here? Were they going to be mad that she and Kellen were invading their staff only room?

Kellen didn’t seem bothered. He stood and crossed to the guys. “Just in time.”

Morgan stood too, following him. “Just in time for what?”

“At the risk of sounding like a Disney movie, we’re about to show you a whole new world.”

## *Chapter Three*

Morgan allowed herself to be led to a car by Kellen and the two strangers. As she climbed into the back seat of the white Aston Martin, Morgan tried not to think about what her dad would say if he ever found out what she was doing.

Kellen sat in the back seat beside her, and the black-haired guy put the car in gear and started out of the parking lot before the blond cleared his throat.

“Ah, manners,” Kellen said. “Tessin and Wen,” he said, indicating the black-haired and blond-haired guys respectively.

“Tessin and Wen?” Morgan asked. “Not to be rude, but what kind of names are those?”

The blond, Wen, looked back at her and smiled. “Well, Wen’s short for Wendell.” He pulled a face. Then he indicated the black-haired guy with his thumb. “Tessin’s mom just had the good drugs when he was born.”

“Don’t listen to him. Tessin’s a family name. And it’s a helluva lot better than Wendell.”

Morgan smiled, not sure what else to do. “So... where are we going?”

Tessin gave a short laugh. “Nowhere.”

Morgan looked out the window as the scenery whipped by. The road they were on, she knew, had a speed limit of thirty-five. Morgan didn’t have to be able to see the speedometer to know they were probably approaching double that.

“Um, Tessin,” Morgan ventured tentatively. “We’re coming up on a police station. You might wanna slow down.”

Tessin shifted gears, but if anything the car sped up.

Morgan looked at Kellen, but his face was unreadable, passive even. She gripped the seat in front of her, positive they were going to crash at any moment.

Red and blue lights flashed through the car’s rear window and Morgan sighed with relief. She’d never been so happy for a cop to pull a car over for speeding.

But Tessin didn’t slow. He wove the car in and out of the lanes, dodging law-abiding citizens in cars traveling at half their speed. When he zipped through a light that turned red before their arrival, Morgan shook Tessin’s seat with as much force as she could muster. “Stop!”

Tessin downshifted and pulled the car into a church parking lot. Seconds

elapsed before the police car pulled in after them.

Morgan glanced back at the police car and then looked at Kellen. “Is your friend insane?”

Kellen leaned back in his seat, his arms crossed over his chest. He waggled his eyebrows and grinned. “All part of the show. Just watch.”

Morgan checked out the rear window again and saw the officer, a slim, broad-shouldered man, approaching their car. Tesin rolled down his window.

“License and registration.” The officer removed his sunglasses, hooking them on his shirt pocket by the ear piece.

From her place directly behind the driver’s seat, Morgan could see that Tesin was making no move to comply.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Tesin said.

The officer took a step closer, resting his forearm at the top of the doorframe and leaning down so that he was nearly level with Tesin. “Son, do you have any idea how fast you were going? Now, I’m sure you wanted to impress your friends here, but, let me tell you, talking back to me is only going to end badly. I recommend you hand over your license and registration.”

Tesin laughed—a full, round sound. Morgan made eye contact with the officer, trying to communicate with her eyes that she had no idea what was going on here.

The officer straightened and took a step back. “I’m going to have to ask you to step out of the vehicle, please.”

“Yeah, not gonna do that either,” Tesin said. “But what I’m gonna do is ask you to leave now.”

Morgan looked from the back of Tesin’s head to Wen to Kellen. All she could think about was how she was about to be arrested and how disappointed her father would be that she had gotten into a car with virtual strangers.

The officer spoke again. “I think I’ll be leaving now. Is there anything else I can help you with today, sir?”

Morgan stared at the officer, sure she hadn’t heard him correctly. She then glanced surreptitiously into the seat in front of her, searching for Tesin’s hands to be sure he hadn’t pulled a gun. But Tesin was still sitting just as calmly as he had been during the entire interaction, his hands resting lightly on the steering wheel.

“I think that’ll be all for today, officer,” Tesin said, his voice easy. “I thank you for your assistance. Actually—you know what? There is just one more thing I’d like you to do for me. How about you spin like a ballerina in a pink tutu until I’m out of sight?”

Without missing a beat, the policeman began spinning on the spot, his arms lifted above his head in a graceful arc.

Chuckling, Tesin rolled up his window and started the car back up. He took his time in exiting the parking lot, making sure to get a view of the officer from every angle.

Morgan was transfixed on the man's twirling figure and could focus on nothing else until he was out of sight. Once Tesin pulled back out onto the road—thankfully setting his speed closer to the limit this time—Morgan turned to Kellen.

“Did he just hypnotize that guy?”

It was Kellen's turn to chuckle. “Hypnosis? Really? What do you take us for? Some kind of Vegas act?”

Wen shifted in his seat so he could see Morgan. “It's called Pushing. It's one of the abilities the Veneret have—one you could have once you fully manifest.”

“When I...?”

“Manifest,” Wen repeated. “When you fully come into your abilities.”

Morgan nodded, not because she understood what he meant, but because she couldn't figure out how to respond. Instead, she stared out the window. They were in an area she recognized as being mere miles from her school.

Tessin pulled the car into the parking lot of a rather nondescript restaurant. Even its name was unremarkable: Restaurant: American Cuisine. Tesin angled the car across three spaces in the back of the lot before cutting the engine. He climbed out of the car and then moved his seat forward so Morgan could exit. He offered her his hand for balance and when she was firmly on the asphalt, she didn't release her grip. He looked down at her, a question in his eyes.

“Why'd you do that back there? With the cop?” Morgan asked.

His eyebrows pulled together. “I wanted to show you what we can do. What you can do.”

“Yeah, but there had to be an easier way to do it,” she pressed. “You didn't need to humiliate that man.”

Kellen approached, placing his hand on the small of Morgan's back and guiding her toward the restaurant. “What does it matter what Tesin did to him? He's common.”

“So?”

“So, they're not like us. They're inferior. And yet, somehow, they've managed to keep the Veneret hiding in the shadows for centuries. Don't think they wouldn't do worse to us if they realized what we could do.” When they reached the door, Kellen pressed it open and allowed Morgan to enter before him.

What met Morgan's eyes when she entered was not what she expected. The inside of the building didn't look like restaurant at all—at least no restaurant Morgan had ever been to. Everything was bright and white or silver—the walls,

the tables, the couches, the curtains. Four people approached them as the door closed behind them: three women and a man. Each one took one of them by the hand and led them to an unoccupied set of couches.

“They’re common,” Wen said, anticipating a question Morgan wasn’t aware she wanted to ask. “Employees, you might say.”

Morgan sat and the man who had led her over sat beside her, busying himself at smoothing her long, red hair. He started at the crown of her head and ran his fingers through to the ends, all the way down her back. Alarmed, she looked at Wen. “Employed to do what?”

Kellen laughed. “Nothing untoward.” He shrugged, running a long finger down the side of his escort’s face, a smile curling his lips. “Not necessarily, anyway.”

Morgan allowed herself to take in the entirety of the room. It seemed as if everyone there had a person attending to him or her the way these four people were attending to Morgan and her group. There was one thing conspicuously missing, however.

“Where’s all the food?”

Kellen laughed again, and the girl beside him echoed the sound. “The food’s right here,” he said, trailing his fingers down the girl’s arm. “Finest American cuisine.”

Morgan’s stomach clenched at the implication. Her eyes went to the necks of the common people attending to them, but she saw no signs of trauma there. “You mean—you’re... you’re...”

Kellen, Tesin, and Wen exchanged glances before laughing. Their attendants laughed too, their voices hollow and devoid of humor.

Wen shook his head. “No. I mean, the whole vampire mythology probably has Veneret origins, but we don’t suck people’s blood.”

“See, the common have an energy to them,” Kellen said, picking up the story. “It’s like the energy the Veneret have, but not. They don’t have any abilities, so they can’t use it. And it doesn’t hurt them if it’s taken away.” As if to demonstrate, Kellen placed a hand at the back of his escort’s neck. Morgan didn’t need any sort of special ability to realize that he was siphoning the girl’s energy, as he’d called it: She suddenly went blank, her eyes unfocused, her lips slightly parted. Kellen’s head tipped back and his body writhed slightly, a faint smile gracing his lips.

Morgan couldn’t watch anymore. She pressed herself to her feet, fighting a twisting sensation in her stomach. “I need to leave.”

Tessin and Wen were on their feet immediately. When Kellen didn’t move, Wen gave him a gentle kick to the shin.

Morgan didn't wait; she jogged to the restaurant's door and slowed to a walk only when she reached the parking lot.

Wen was the first to catch up to her. He kept pace with her as she made her way toward the car. "I know it's a lot to take in."

"Understatement."

"I told Kellen it was a bad idea to take you here first thing, but..." He sighed, catching her by the elbow and pulling her to a stop. "Morgan, what Kellen did in there—it's just one way. For you to manifest, taking energy isn't something you need to worry about doing. Rely on the energy in yourself and—"

Tesin caught up with them then and Wen's lips pressed together in a tight line.

Morgan shook her head. "Just... take me back to the Daily Grind."

On the ride back, Morgan stared resolutely out the window, her head swimming with the new world that was being revealed to her. She couldn't belong to it. They had to be wrong about her.

But even as she tried to convince herself, she became aware of sensations emanating from her companions. The impressions she received were indistinct, but still stronger than anything she had ever experienced when doing a psychic reading for a client. It was almost like a distinct glow coming off each of them. Kellen's was the brightest.

When Tesin pulled in to the Daily Grind's parking lot, Kellen handed Morgan a phone. "Put your number in."

"What? Why?"

He smiled. "So I can call you." When Morgan made no move to comply, he added, "Please."

"Look," said Tesin turning from the driver's seat so he could see her, "there's a group of us getting together tomorrow night—"

Morgan saved her number and handed the phone back to Kellen. "By 'us' you mean—"

"People like us, yes," Tesin clarified. "Kellen will call you tomorrow to give you the where and when. I think you should come."

"Can I bring Ris?" Morgan asked immediately.

Tesin just stared at her, confused, but Kellen chuckled.

"Your little blond friend? From the party? Sure," said Kellen. "You can bring her."

Wen gave Kellen a closed look. "Really?" He sounded dubious.

Kellen just nodded. "It'll be fine." And that seemed to close the matter.

Tesin opened the car door and got out, leaning back in to move his seat forward. "Okay, we should let you go."

Morgan climbed out of the back seat, grateful to feel solid ground underfoot.



“You gonna make it?” Tesin’s voice was quiet, meant just for her.

She considered his question a moment before nodding. “I think so. It’s just... It’s a lot to take in, you know.”

He nodded. “Just try not to let all this stuff freak you out. Kellen will call tomorrow. And I’ll see you tomorrow night. We’ll explain more then.” Not waiting for a response, Tesin swung himself back into the car and shut the door. He backed out of the space and pulled out onto the street as Morgan stood and watched.

When they were out of sight, Morgan finally moved toward her car. She pulled her keys out of her pocket and pushed at the button on her remote; however, her grip was not as sure as she anticipated, and she ended up dropping them and kicking them across the parking lot. She stopped, putting her hands over her face and pressing her fingertips against her eyelids. She needed to pull it together before she could drive home, but the proposition was a difficult one to accept. Her brain was still working through what she’d seen: mind control, the taking of energy from a completely willing person. There was the strength she had sensed in Kellen after he took that girl’s energy.

Then, of course, there was the fact that she could sense the strength of Kellen’s energy to begin with.

Suddenly, she sensed something else. Though her eyes were still closed she knew someone was approaching her.

“Morgan? Are these yours?”

She opened her eyes and blinked a few times to focus them. Standing before her was Corbin, his dark blond hair strategically mussed, his green eyes fixed on her. From his outstretched fingers dangled her car keys. She reached out and took them from him. “Thanks.”

He studied her closely. “You okay?”

She shifted under his scrutiny. “Do you care?”

He smiled. “Of course I do. I care immensely about you. You’re my favorite school psychic, you know.”

Morgan wanted to point out that she was the only school psychic, but she didn’t. “That’s hard to believe, since you’ve never come for a reading.”

“I read your horoscopes in the newspaper, though.” He ran a hand through his hair—on the side, Morgan noticed, so as not to destroy the casually unkempt effect. “Look, I’m sorry about last night. Marya and Shayna were out of line.”

The memory of her exchange with Lynna’s minions jolted Morgan’s mind from the craziness of what she had just experienced and her thoughts landed in an entirely different place: Kellen had said that her mother was a Natural, that she had abilities like his. Could that really be true? Had she really had some sort

of vision that told her she needed to leave Morgan, leave Morgan's father?

Corbin must have taken Morgan's silence for discomfort, so he changed the subject. "I noticed you and Clare seemed to be having fun later on in the night, though, so I guess that's good."

Morgan bristled as she did any time Corbin called Ris Clare. She knew that her friend's full name was Clarissa and that she had gone by Clare in elementary school, but she'd been Ris since sixth grade. Leave it to someone like Corbin not to notice.

"She's a really good dancer," Corbin continued. "And she looked fantastic last night. You both did."

She couldn't stifle a snort.

"What?" Corbin shrugged, putting his hands palm-up. "It's true. I didn't really like Clare's hair when she got it cut short like it is, but I like when she spikes it a little and puts those sparkly barrettes or whatever in it. And, Morgan, you rocked those high heels."

Morgan just stared at him, surprised he recalled with that much detail how she and Ris looked at the party.

A car pulled into the parking lot, drawing Corbin's attention. He saluted the driver with a chin raise. "Well, I should probably get inside. I'm meeting my band here and we're scheduling some dates to play. You and Clare should come see us sometime."

Corbin's face was open and earnest, and Morgan found herself believing he really meant it. But that was the problem with Corbin: he always seemed like that. He could be talking to a bum on the street and appear just as genuine in his invitation.

Two of Corbin's band mates approached him and Morgan felt it was the perfect time to exit. She mumbled a generic goodbye before getting into her car and starting for home. But as she pulled onto the street, she got the distinct impression that Corbin was thinking about her.

She didn't know which was more disturbing: that she was able to sense the thoughts of another person or that Corbin Starling seemed to have taken an interest in her.

## *Chapter Four*

The next morning found Morgan in the senior lot at ABC.

In her sophomore year, Morgan was placed in the Journalism and Yearbook class. It was a mistake with her schedule: Morgan never signed up for it, was not interested in the class at all. However, before she was able to go through with a schedule change request, she was won over by the course's teacher, Mr. Kment. He offered to let Morgan write horoscopes for the paper, and since then, JY had been Morgan's favorite class.

Therefore, the fact that the JY staff had to come in to school three weeks before the school year was to begin didn't bother Morgan at all. Instead, she was rather excited to see some of her fellow staff members—McKenna Orłowski and Stew Lackowski among them. And, of course, it would be nice to see Mr. K.

Morgan placed her cell phone into her glove box—Mr. K frowned upon them using cells during meetings—but hesitated before closing it. Kellen hadn't contacted her yet with information about the party and she wanted to have it with her in case he called. After a moment's debate, she slammed the glove box closed. If he called, she could call back.

She headed into the school building and up to the JY room. The room was actually two rooms combined. It had large windows all along the outside wall and a great many tables arranged haphazardly with mismatched chairs surrounding them. In addition to a half dozen or so computers lining the non-windowed walls, there was a laptop cart nestled in a corner.

When she walked into the room, she saw Mr. K immediately. He wore his usual summer-and-Fridays uniform of blue jeans and a solid-color T-shirt (dark blue today). His light brown hair was especially short—he must have just gotten it cut—and on his face was its characteristic stubble, like he shaved yesterday. He was attempting to hook up the data projector. Morgan smiled; he was forever having difficulty with this particular task.

"Hey, Mr. K," she said, walking toward him. "Need some help?"

Mr. K turned to her and smiled. "Morgan. It's good to see you."

"Good to see you, too," Morgan said. And she meant it. She and Ris often joked about the crush Morgan cherished for her teacher. Not that it was a real crush. Not really. It wasn't like Morgan wanted to date Mr. K or have some sort

of elicited relationship with him—she had what Ris liked to call a nonsexual crush on him. She found him very easy on the eyes. She liked to look at him. And he made the long hours the JY staff pulled much, much more tolerable.

“How’s your summer been?” Mr. K asked. He pushed a button on the projector and it beeped angrily.

Morgan shrugged. “Busy.”

“Still telling fortunes?”

She smiled. “You know it. How was your summer?”

Mr. K looked at Morgan for a moment then shrugged. “Busy, too.” He glanced over Morgan’s shoulder as someone else entered the room. “Maybe I’ll be able to tell you about it sometime.”

Morgan turned as another person entered the room and her eyes landed on her friend McKenna Orłowski. Morgan smiled. She walked over to McKenna and engaged in the usual how-have-you-been conversation. As she did so, the person who entered the room just before McKenna walked over to Mr. K. She had blond hair pulled into a bun on the top of her head and wore knee-length linen cargo shorts and a light button-up blouse. Morgan didn’t recognize her, but she seemed to know Mr. K. She called him Greg and nudged him out of the way so she could hook up the projector. Though she looked almost as though she could be a student, Morgan wondered if she was a new teacher.

She also wondered what Mr. K’s last statement to her had meant. He said he might be able to tell Morgan about his summer sometime. It seemed like an odd turn of phrase. But she couldn’t reflect on it too much because the room was filling up. McKenna snagged a table for her and Morgan to sit at, and they were soon joined by Stew Lackowski, a thickset senior with a buzz-cut and a perpetual kind streak.

The room filled, and within five minutes, Mr. Kment called for the staff’s attention and started talking about last year’s yearbook and the theme they chose for this year’s book. Morgan didn’t pay much attention. She worked primarily on the newspaper. She didn’t mind coming to yearbook meetings, though, as they were an excuse to stare at Mr. K. But today she found she couldn’t lose herself in watching him because her mind was back in the glove box of her car with her phone. Had Kellen called yet? What if she entered her phone number wrong? What if he called and needed to talk to her right then? What if he’d found out something about her mother?

By the time Mr. Kment was ready to show the staff a slide presentation of excellent spread designs, Morgan felt physically agitated. She was tapping her fingernails on the tabletop so loudly that people from neighboring tables were shooting her dirty looks. Even Stew, who was rather easygoing, went so far as to

cover Morgan's hands with his.

"Morgan, what's wrong?" he asked.

Morgan just shook her head. "Too much caffeine this morning, I think," she lied. "I'm gonna go get a drink of water."

Stew eyed her dubiously but nodded.

Trying not to draw any more attention to herself, Morgan got out of her seat and walked quietly to the hallway, considering walking down to her car just to check her phone. When she was about halfway down the hall, she realized someone was following her. When she turned, she expected to see McKenna or maybe Stew, so she was surprised when she saw the woman who called Mr. K by his first name earlier.

"Are you okay?" she asked, walking toward Morgan.

"Um... yeah," Morgan replied. "I just... I needed a drink of water."

She waited for the woman to say something, feeling it would be rude to just turn her back and continue down the hall. However, the woman didn't say anything, so Morgan asked the question that had been on her mind since she'd first seen her. "So... who are you?"

The woman seemed slightly surprised by the question, but she smiled. "New English teacher. Ellie—Miss Scotford." She smiled again, apologetically. "I worked at a small school for the last couple years and the students all called the teachers by their first names. It's taking some getting used to."

Morgan nodded. "So—and I don't mean to be rude—but what are you doing here?"

"Fair question." She smiled. "I worked on the newspaper and yearbook at my last school and when I got hired here, I volunteered my services. And Greg—Mr. Kment—was really happy to have some assistance."

Morgan didn't know what to say to that, so she just smiled. For a few moments, she and Miss Ellie Scotford just stared at each other. Then Miss Scotford motioned to the JY door. "I'd better get back in there. Nice talking to you, Morgan."

Miss Scotford walked back into the room, and Morgan made a quick trip out to her car. There were no alerts on her phone and Morgan found she was both disappointed and relieved. Resolving to put Kellen's impending call out of her mind until the end of the meeting, she made her way back into the school. It wasn't until she was almost back to the JY door that she realized something: Miss Scotford had called Morgan by her name, but Morgan hadn't introduced herself.

She wasn't able to reflect on this discovery for long, however, because when she got back to the room, she saw that Mr. K's presentation was over and the

staff was already at work. Morgan smiled. She loved the look of the JY room when everyone was working. It made her feel like she was part of something important.

Apparently she took just a little too long in her appreciation, however, because Lia Roderick, this year's editor-in-chief, approached Morgan, hands on hips. She looked polished and put together, as usual, with her brown hair in a bob just below her chin and a pale yellow shirt that flattered her soft cocoa skin. Upon seeing Morgan, she immediately put on her not amused face.

"Are you just going to stand there?" Lia asked, brushstroke eyebrows arched in irritation.

"I was considering it," she said, just because she knew it would irk Lia.

It seemed to work. Lia crossed her arms over her chest and took a step closer to Morgan. "Look here. I know Mr. Kment's always gone kind of easy on you, but I'm your editor this year, and I don't want your sass. Do I make myself clear?"

"I'm sorry, what did you just say?" Morgan asked.

This comment elicited an exasperated sigh from Lia, who stalked off to terrorize a couple of first-year members of the staff.

Morgan shrugged and walked back to the table where McKenna and Stew were working.

McKenna looked up as Morgan approached the table. "How was your run-in with the fuehrer?"

"Ouch. That's a bit rough, isn't it?" asked Stew.

McKenna shrugged. "Now that her name's listed as editor-in-chief, I'm sure she's going to do more micro-managing than ever. And it looks like the micro-managing has already begun. Morgan?"

Morgan nodded. "She seemed very concerned that I wasn't working already." She sighed. "What're we doing, anyway?"

McKenna explained their task and Morgan set to helping. During the remainder of the meeting, Morgan noticed that Lia didn't stop circulating once. She stopped by Morgan's table not less than a half dozen times. Morgan found it a bit disconcerting. She also noticed Mr. K and Miss Scotford spending a lot of time off to the side of the room, talking quietly to each other. Morgan found this disconcerting, too.

The meeting went on for another hour. Before everyone was dismissed, Mr. K reminded them that they were meeting again tomorrow to sell ad space in the community.

At the end of the meeting, Morgan bid farewell to Stew and McKenna. She wanted to swing by and say goodbye to Mr. K, but Miss Scotford was still beside

him. Deciding she'd catch Mr. K some other day, Morgan headed out into the hallway, which was filled with knots of people chatting and catching up.

Morgan wove around the different groups and started down the stairs. Echoing voices told her that there were people at the bottom of the stairs, but Morgan didn't pay any attention until she heard her own name.

"I never said I was going to ask Morgan—"

"Yes you did. I don't understand why you're so chicken—it's what she does."

Before the girls came into view, Morgan had already identified the speakers by their voices: the first one was Lia Roderick, and the second was a girl named Alecia Emerick, a regular for having her cards read.

Lia made an exasperated noise. "She's a fake. Why do I need to pay someone to tell me what I want to hear? I've got you for that."

"Lee, you're so wrong. Morgan's right, like, all the time! I live by her horoscopes during the school year!"

Morgan stopped at the foot of the stairs and cleared her throat. Lia and Alecia both jumped, but Alecia recovered quickly, rushing to Morgan's side and hooking her arm through Morgan's.

"Look! It's fate!"

Morgan glanced at her out the corner of her eye. "Or I'm just headed to my car."

Alecia laughed, pulling Morgan toward Lia. "Morgan, we're in desperate need of your talents. Lia needs a reading so you can put her mind at ease about her future." She leaned in toward Morgan conspiratorially. "I think it's college. Her parents are all over her about applications and visits... It's all she talks about."

Lia waved her hand in Alecia's direction. "Hello? I'm standing right here."

"She needs a reading," Alecia insisted, "she's just being stubborn."

Lia planted a hand on her hip. "I do not need a reading," she said firmly. "No one does."

Morgan snorted. "Tell me how you really feel."

"I'm sorry," Lia said, her hand moving from her hip to the cross resting in hollow of her neck, "but I just don't believe in this psychic stuff."

"Fine." Morgan disentangled her arm from Alecia's and started toward the stairwell door.

"No, wait!" Alecia ran ahead of Morgan and blocked her path.

Morgan crossed her arms over her chest. "Look, even if she did want a reading, why would I help her? She's insulted my abilities, and she was a jerk to me at the meeting. So, if you'll let me pass..."

Alecia cast an exasperated look over Morgan's shoulder. "Lee, will you just do it?"



Morgan turned just in time to see Lia's face soften. She sighed. "Fine."

Alecia clapped excitedly, but Morgan shook her head, still looking at Lia. "My question stands. Why should I help you?"

"I'll pay you double," Alecia said quickly.

Morgan turned to survey her but didn't respond.

Alecia looked panicked. "Triple!"

At this, Morgan smiled. "Okay. Where do you wanna do it? I'd rather not be out here in the stairwell."

"There's a teacher's lounge right over here..."

Alecia led the way through the hall and pushed open a door to reveal a dingy lounge with a dozen dilapidated chairs arranged around a long table and a few sad-looking couches lining the walls.

Before Morgan could take in much more, Lia brushed past her and planted herself firmly on the closest couch.

"Let's get this over with," she said, arms crossed over her chest.

"Wow, tell me how you really feel," Morgan muttered, sitting beside Lia on the bench. Without waiting for a retort, she held out her hand, palm up, toward Lia. "Gimme your hand."

After the slightest moment of hesitation, Lia obliged. She placed her hand in Morgan's, palm up, but her fingers were curled over as if she were contemplating making a fist. With her free hand, Morgan unfurled Lia's digits. She felt the tension in Lia's hand, felt her start slightly when Morgan brushed her thumbs lightly over the flesh of her palm. As Morgan looked at the different lines—heart, head, life—she tried to block out the thoughts swirling in her mind. Alecia said Lia's worry centered around college. It wasn't surprising. Lia was, as far as Morgan could tell, an overachiever at everything. That her parents were behind it in some way was understandable. As Morgan thumbed Lia's life line, she relaxed herself. Exhaled. Her skin started to tingle, but she figured it was due to the fact they were in a room students weren't allowed to be in. Or because she was itching to go out to her car and check her cell phone. To focus, she closed her eyes.

"College isn't going to be an issue for you," Morgan said after a moment, eyes still closed. The tingling intensified in the region of her arms and hands. "You shouldn't worry about it. Change is coming your way, and... you'll need to embrace it. You need to go down the path set before you—"

Without warning, Lia pulled her hand away from Morgan. The tingling sensation stopped. Morgan's eyes opened and she looked at Lia. "What the hell?"

"I'm done," Lia said, standing. "I just... This is a waste and I'm done." With

that, she stalked to the doorway, pushed past Alecia, and headed out to the hall.

Alecia immediately made a move to follow her, but Morgan cleared her throat. Alecia turned and crossed to Morgan, opening her purse and pulling out her wallet. After Morgan closed her fingers around the payment, Alecia went after Lia.

Morgan took a moment to collect herself before venturing into the hallway herself. In her years of telling fortunes, she'd had all kinds of reactions, but no one had ever reacted so strongly to such an innocuous reading. Lia didn't need to worry about college. It didn't take a psychic to figure that one out. And change was coming her way. No kidding—they were about to enter senior year. She didn't understand what there was to be so upset about.

When she got back out to her car, she immediately retrieved her phone from the glove box. She had received three text messages, all from Ris.

Hey, you're done at 11, right?

I've got your first client booked at 11:45.

Are you done yet???

Morgan typed out a quick reply—Done now. Coming to you—and headed toward Ris's house. Fifteen minutes later, the two were set up in their usual spot under a pavilion at the park near Ris's house.

For years, Morgan had been telling people their fortunes at school during lunch—or, very occasionally immediately before or after school. It was last summer that Ris suggested they continue the business into the summer. Though they weren't at the park every day, most weeks they were there at least three days—and Ris was good about always having Morgan's time fully booked.

Today, Ris had people scheduled back-to-back until two o'clock. Though the day was just like dozens before it, Morgan was acutely aware of one difference: she was preoccupied. In between every client, she surreptitiously checked her phone to see if there was a missed call or a text from Kellen.

Morgan hadn't told Ris about Kellen, Tesin, and Wen. She couldn't find a way to tell her about one part without bringing up the others. And though she'd asked if she could bring Ris to whatever party Tesin had suggested she come to, she wasn't entirely sure how she'd explain the situation surrounding the invitation to Ris.

Morgan was in the process of turning her phone off and on again—in case there was something wrong with it—when her last client of the day sat down across from her, so she didn't immediately register who it was. It wasn't until the client cleared his throat that Morgan actually focused on him.

“Corbin?” she asked incredulously.

Corbin smiled, flashing his straight, white teeth. “And hello to you, too.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Investment banking. What do you mean, what am I doing here?”

Morgan just stared at him for a moment, unsure how to respond. “Nothing... It’s just... I’ve been doing this for years and you’ve never had a reading.”

“Well,” Corbin said slowly, “after the drama last night, Clare and I were talking. She seems to think that starting my senior year without consulting you is—what did she say? Careless.” He smiled.

Morgan smiled too. Leave it to Ris to turn any situation into a marketing opportunity.

“You know, about last night—there’s something I think you should know. I saw Lynna almost yelling at Marya and Shayna for saying what they said to you. She seemed... I’ve never seen her that mad.” He shrugged. “She seemed to think them bringing up... you know... was below the belt, you know?”

In her mind’s eye, she could see an image of Lynna yelling at her minions. The thought made her smile, but she was confused. “Why are you telling me this?”

He shrugged. “I see Lynna a lot—we kinda run with the same crowd. And I’ve never seen her lose it like that in public. I’ve also never seen her apologize when something gets out of hand. I figured she’d never tell you she was sorry for what they said.”

Morgan shifted, uncomfortable. “I appreciate it, Corbin, but Lynna and I aren’t BFFs. We never will be. You can’t mend a relationship that doesn’t exist.”

His eyes flicked to the table. “Sorry.”

She took in a breath and released it, forcing her face into the polite, secretive smile she reserved for customers. “Ready for your reading?”

Corbin met her eyes, the contrition from the previous moment replaced completely with a broad smile. “I’m signed up for a palm reading, I think.”

Morgan put her hands out on the table, palms up, and after a moment, Corbin placed his right hand in both of hers. As usual, Morgan leaned over the palm in her hand and began running her thumbs over the different lines. Then she let herself begin the reading.

All day, her distraction had kept her from feeling much from any of her clients, but it didn’t divert her now. She laid aside the concern about Tesin’s invitation and Kellen’s impending phone call and allowed herself to get lost in the reading. She drifted, at first, around the sorts of information that usually came to her—Corbin had an older brother to whom he never quite measured up; he chose to play guitar mainly because his brother had never touched one; there was a soft spot in his heart for Ris, who was his first kiss back in fifth grade.

But then something happened that Morgan never experienced before. It was as

if any walls between them were suddenly transparent: Not only could Morgan see inside Corbin, Corbin could see inside her.

Morgan pulled her hands away. The connection snapped.

Corbin looked at Morgan, bewilderment clear in his green eyes. “Was that... normal?”

Morgan barely heard him. His voice seemed to be coming to her from a great distance. Darkness hovered in her peripheral vision, threatening to envelop her. She braced her palms against the edge of the table in an attempt to keep upright. Her breaths came in short, shallow gasps. She felt as though she’d just run a mile.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Corbin said quietly.

## *Chapter Five*

Morgan hazarded a glance over at Ris, but Ris seemed blissfully unaware that anything out of the ordinary just occurred. Morgan knew she needed to get herself under control before Ris noticed anything was amiss, otherwise Ris would not rest until she made Morgan explain what happened.

For a minute or so, Corbin stared at a fixed spot in space, a look of bewilderment on his face. Then he gave himself a little shake. "I should take Clare home."

"What?" Morgan managed to ask.

Corbin met her eyes. "Do you wanna try to explain what just happened to her?"

Without waiting for a response, he stood up. He wobbled a little when he first got to his feet, but as he walked over to where Ris sat, his steps were sure and steady. "Hey, Clare," he said as he approached. "Morgan said it'd be okay if I walked you home today."

Ris looked up at him, confused. "Okay," she said slowly.

"Great." Corbin held his hand out to Ris. With a small smile, she took it and stood.

As they walked past Morgan, Ris glanced at her. Morgan was able to pull herself together enough to smile until Ris looked away again.

Once Corbin and Ris were a fair distance away, Morgan rested her elbows on the table and buried her face in her hands, trying to figure out what just happened. She thought back to what Wen explained to her the previous night, about her being a Feeler. Was this just an extension of the things she experienced before? And why was it happening now? It was almost as if learning about her supposed ability had made it stronger.

How long she sat like that, Morgan wasn't sure, but the next thing she was aware of was someone saying her name. When she looked up, she saw Corbin's wide green eyes studying her.

"What?" Morgan asked after a minute.

Corbin didn't say anything. Instead, he sat down next to Morgan and continued to look at her.

Morgan stared back. Then she began to get irritated. "Stop it. You're creeping

me out.”

Corbin laughed humorlessly. “I’m creeping you out? Right.”

“Look, I don’t know what happened.”

“I read your mind, that’s what happened.”

Morgan nodded. “Yes, I’m aware. What I meant was I don’t know how it happened.”

Corbin didn’t say anything for a long while. He opened his mouth a couple times as if he was going to say something, but nothing came out.

“If you’re gonna say something, do it,” Morgan snapped finally.

Corbin put his hands up incredulously. “What the hell can I say to something like this? I just read your mind.”

Morgan shook her head—an unwise move, considering it brought on a wave of dizziness. “If you don’t have anything to say,” she said, bringing a hand to her face, “then leave.”

“I don’t think that’d be the best idea right now,” Corbin said. “You don’t look like you could even stand up.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re lying.”

Morgan didn’t respond, and for a few minutes Corbin didn’t speak either. But Corbin didn’t have to express himself in words for Morgan to know what he was feeling: his emotions radiated off him like heat from the sun and Morgan could feel them all: unease, panic, concern for Morgan. Embarrassment. Curiosity. Wonder.

“You doing okay?” Morgan asked, breaking the silence.

“Processing,” Corbin said. “I kinda feel like I should be waking up soon, you know?”

“Freaked out?”

Corbin shook his head, a look of nonchalance on his face. False bravado, Morgan knew, but she didn’t think it appropriate to call him on it.

“I didn’t know you and Lynna were cousins,” Corbin ventured tentatively.

Morgan made a scathing noise.

“Wow. I mean, you guys don’t exactly seem like relatives.” Corbin looked down at his hands. “I’m sorry about your mom,” he said quietly. “I mean, I guess I knew the highlights from people like Marya and Shayna, but I had no idea... Morgan, it must’ve been awful.”

“It still is.”

“I’m sorry,” Corbin said. He looked up at Morgan. To his credit, his gaze was devoid of pity. After a moment, he spoke again. “I invited Clare out to the party tonight.”

Morgan raised an eyebrow. “What party?”

“The party Kellen and Tesin and Wen invited you to last night,” Corbin said matter-of-factly. “You’re right—you shouldn’t go alone. And now I’m giving you a way to have Clare there. And me.”

“Yeah? How do you plan on that happening?”

Corbin smiled. “That’s easy. When Kellen calls you, you’ll call me with the details. I’ll call Clare and she’ll ask if she can invite you.”

“What, you think you’ve got me all figured out now or something?”

“Not even close,” Corbin admitted. “I just wanted to help.” After a minute, he added tentatively, “What did you see?”

Morgan sighed. “More than I ever wanted to.”

“Oh, come on,” he pressed.

Morgan threw her hands up. “You’re... kind of unsure of yourself. You’re not really good in school or basketball, like your older brother was... You don’t mean to flatter everyone... it’s just the way you are. You like making people feel good about themselves.”

Corbin shrugged. “Well, yeah—”

Morgan cut him off. “But you also realize that by making people feel good about themselves, you can get away with things more easily.” She closed her eyes. “And... you—thought about kissing me. The night of your party.” She looked at him. “Like, full-on. And that’s nothing compared to what went through your mind about Ris.”

Corbin shifted uncomfortably but didn’t look away. “Sorry. What can I say? I’m a guy.”

Morgan rolled her eyes. “What I don’t get,” she said, “is why you don’t do anything about it. I mean, clearly you like her. You’re not dating anyone—even though you totally could be. You know there are at least a half dozen girls into you. You’re most definitely not gay.”

He shrugged. “I dunno. It’d be kinda weird, me and Clare dating. I mean, she’s got her friends, I’ve got mine.”

Morgan groaned. “You sound just like Joss.”

“Joss. It’s weird to hear you call Lynna that.”

“Not really. Her real name is Jocelyn. She wanted an —a name after she started hanging out with Marya and Shayna. So they’d all match. She said she thought Joss sounded like a boy’s name.” Her lip curled. “Everything she does is to fit in and be popular.”

Corbin shook his head. “That’s not fair. I’m not like that.”

Morgan shrugged. “Maybe not entirely. But you’re enough like that.”

Corbin didn’t seem to have anything to say in his defense. After a few

minutes of silence, he cleared his throat. “Well... we should probably get going, then.”

Morgan couldn't disagree. She stood up. “My car's by Ris's house.”

“I'll drive you,” Corbin offered immediately.

“It's not far.”

Corbin nodded. “I know. I'll drive you.”

Morgan was about to decline, but the idea of riding instead of walking was appealing. She felt unsteady on her feet. As she started toward the parking lot, she stumbled slightly.

Corbin was at her side immediately. He put an arm awkwardly around her waist, which he promptly removed when Morgan gave him a death glare. He then proffered his arm, which Morgan took. Though she felt silly, she honestly wasn't sure if she could make it to the car unaided.

When they got to his car, Corbin opened the passenger door for Morgan, helped her in, and closed the door for her. All very gentlemanly things to do and Morgan knew—knew—that he would behave similarly even if she weren't feeling weak. It just wouldn't occur to him not to. Morgan watched Corbin as he walked around the car to the driver's side, not sure how she felt about having this insight into his personality.

Perhaps Ris wasn't so far off when she'd insisted he was a good guy.

The drive to Ris's house was brief and neither of them spoke. Morgan opened the door and got out of Corbin's car slowly. By the time she stood up, Corbin was beside her, guiding her by the arm.

“You're treating me like an invalid,” Morgan muttered, but she didn't shake off his hand.

“You look like hell,” Corbin said simply.

Morgan used the remote to unlock her car door and Corbin helped her into the driver's seat. He eyed her dubiously as she put the key in the ignition.

“I can drive,” she said.

Corbin held his hands up innocently.

Without waiting for another comment from him, Morgan pulled the door closed. She started the car and drove down the street. The act took more concentration than usual. Morgan felt completely drained, not just physically but mentally. She was lucky, really, that her house was only a few miles away. She pulled up to a stop sign at the end of Ris's street. When she got home, she decided, she would take a nap. She put her foot on the gas pedal to make a left.

A horn blared. Morgan looked toward the sound and saw a car stopped mere inches from her passenger side door. The driver of the other car was gesticulating wildly. Morgan felt her heart race. Where had that car come from?



She had looked both ways before turning, hadn't she?

Morgan completed her turn onto the street—there was nothing else she could do—and immediately pulled to the curb. The other driver pulled past, wheels squealing, horn blaring, and middle finger flying. Morgan cut the ignition and rested her head on the steering wheel. She was wrong. She couldn't drive. She needed help.

Morgan pulled out her cell phone. But who could she call? Her first thought was Corbin, but she realized she didn't have his number. She could call Ris—she was mere blocks from Ris's house, after all—but Ris would be full of questions that Morgan both couldn't and didn't want to answer. She opened her phone's address book and began scrolling through the entries.

There was a knock at her window, and Morgan's first thought was that it was the driver of the other car come to curse her out, or worse. So when she looked up at the knocker, she was actually relieved to see Corbin. She pushed open the door.

“Okay to drive, huh?” he asked.

“What, are you stalking me or something?” She attempted to sound irritated.

Corbin gave her an odd look. “What—you mean...? You called me.”

Morgan looked at her cell, then back at Corbin. “No... I don't have your number.”

Corbin shook his head. “Not like that. I... uh... I heard you in my head.”

Morgan was too shocked to fully appreciate how ridiculous Corbin's assertion sounded. “Really?”

He laughed. “Yeah. It was, uh, pretty freaky, actually.” Then, without warning, he leaned into the car, across Morgan's body and unlatched her seatbelt. Somehow, he managed to pull Morgan out of the car and set her on her feet. “I'm driving you home,” he said simply. “Lock your car. We can come get it later.”

Morgan opened her mouth to protest but immediately realized it would be useless. Besides, hadn't she just been trying to figure out who could do just this for her? She locked her car and Corbin helped her to his.

Morgan didn't give directions as Corbin drove and didn't ask how he knew where she lived. When they got to her house, Corbin helped her to the door and then inside to her room. When Morgan lay down on her bed, Corbin picked up the cell phone she had placed on her bedside table.

“I'm putting my number in,” he explained, “so when Kellen calls, you can get the party information to me... in a more conventional way.”

“Ha, ha,” Morgan muttered. She watched Corbin as he entered the information. When he set the phone back on her table, she said, “You know,

you're taking all this pretty well."

Corbin shrugged. "I'm trying. What are my options, really? Either freak out or deal with it." He gave a small smile. "I should probably..."

"Yeah," Morgan agreed. "I need to sleep. Speaking of which—why aren't you... you know? Completely wiped?"

"No clue."

"Maybe because you've got more practice at this whole psychic thing than me."

Morgan managed a small laugh. "Maybe." She sighed.

"What?"

She shook her head slightly. "Nothing. Just... I'm thirsty..."

"I'll get you something, if you want."

"No, it's okay—"

But Corbin was already out the door.

Sighing, Morgan snuggled down into her bed and pulled the blanket over her for good measure. She was exhausted...

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"Perfect" by Pink—Morgan's ringtone—startled Morgan out of her sleep. It took her a moment to focus on her phone and another moment to manage to answer it. "Hello?" she asked groggily.

"Are you asleep?" asked the voice on the other end of the line.

"If I were asleep, how could I answer a phone?" Morgan replied. Her brain was still fighting the post-nap fog. The voice sounded familiar...

"I've got the address where the party'll be. Do you have something to write on?"

"Kellen?"

"Yes. Now, are you ready for the address?"

Morgan fumbled around on her bedside table. She found a pen and a crumpled receipt. "Okay, go."

Kellen rattled off an address and Morgan transcribed it. She even read it back to check for accuracy.

"Okay, then," Kellen said. "Party starts around eight, but I probably won't get there until nine or so."

"Okay," Morgan said. She suddenly remembered something. "Oh, Kellen?"

"Yeah?"

"I... um... was wondering if I could bring someone?"

"Your friend Ris? Yeah, I said that was fine."

“No. Another friend.”

Kellen sighed. “Morgan... this isn’t really open-invitation.”

“But you know him,” Morgan said quickly.

“Him?” Kellen sounded intrigued.

“It’s Corbin—Corbin Starling. You were at his house party the night we met.”

Kellen chuckled softly. “Corbin Starling, huh? Well, I guess I’ll get him added to the list.”

Morgan couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic, so she decided to take his words at face value. “Great. We’ll be there around nine, then.”

“See you.”

Morgan ended the call and set the phone back on her dresser. After a moment, she picked it up again. She’d need to call Corbin with the details. She scrolled through her contact list and called Corbin’s number.

“Don’t Stop Believing” by Journey sounded in Morgan’s room, making her jump. She looked toward the source of the music and was shocked to see Corbin curled up and asleep in the papasan Ris usually occupied.

Morgan ended the call. She got out of her bed, grateful to find she felt steady on her feet, and walked over to where Corbin slept. She shook his shoulder gently. When he didn’t rouse, she shook him a little harder.

Corbin mumbled incoherently for a moment before opening his eyes. The look of confusion he wore shifted slowly to recognition as he sat up, stretching. He smiled at Morgan. “You’re looking better.”

“What the hell are you thinking?” Morgan demanded. “If my dad came home and found you here in my room, he’d flip.”

Corbin waved away her concern. “Don’t worry. He’s working late tonight.”

Morgan stared at him incredulously. “What are you now, the great and mighty psychic?”

“No, he left you a note on the fridge.”

Morgan bristled. “What are you doing wandering through my house?”

“I went to get you something to drink, remember?” Corbin pointed to Morgan’s bedside table where a full glass of water sat. “You were asleep by the time I got back.”

Morgan softened, remembering the pre-nap conversation. “Well... why didn’t you leave after that?”

Corbin shrugged. “You... didn’t want me to.” In response to Morgan’s confused look, he continued. “Every time I went to leave, I heard you.” He tapped his temple. “You kept calling me back.”

Morgan shifted uncomfortably. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He picked up a book off the papasan that Morgan recognized

from her bookshelf. “I got to catch up on my reading.”

Morgan rolled her eyes. “Well, Kellen called.”

Corbin sat up a little straighter. “Okay. I should call Clare.”

“Yeah,” Morgan agreed. “I’ll copy down the address for you.”

“You could probably just give it to me,” Corbin said. When Morgan raised an eyebrow, he added, “Since I’m inviting Clare, I’ll be picking her up. And since she’ll want to bring you, she’ll insist I pick you up, too.”

Morgan shrugged. “Fair enough.” She went to the bedside table and picked up the receipt with the address on it. “He says it starts at eight but that he won’t be getting there till around nine.”

Corbin nodded as he took the receipt from her. His phone was already in his hand, and he punched a couple of buttons before bringing it to his ear. After a moment, he smiled. “Hey, Clare.”

Deciding she didn’t want to hear the conversation, Morgan made her way to the living room. She sat down on the couch and checked the time. Six o’clock. Her father must be pulling a very late day if he wasn’t home by now. Though uncommon, it wasn’t unheard of for Dylan to be at work until ten o’clock at night.

A few minutes later, Corbin joined her in the living room. “Clare should be calling you in a few minutes,” he informed her, smiling. “She sounds really excited.”

Morgan just nodded.

Corbin shifted from side to side. “Well... I think I’ll get going now.” He paused. “If that’s okay with you.”

“Why wouldn’t—” Morgan paused, an embarrassed smile touching her lips. “I don’t think I’m going to mentally call out to you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Corbin smiled, too. “Okay, then. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yeah,” Morgan agreed.

Corbin started toward Morgan’s front door and she followed. When he opened the door, Morgan called his name.

Corbin turned. “Yeah?”

Morgan looked at the floor. “Thanks for... you know.” She glanced up at him.

Corbin nodded. “You’re welcome.” He stepped out the door. “Bye.”

“Bye,” said Morgan as Corbin closed the door behind him. She stared at the door for a moment before turning toward the kitchen. She was suddenly very hungry. On her way to the kitchen, her phone started ringing. When she answered it, she heard Ris’s excited voice on the other end of the line.

## *Chapter Six*

There was a knock at Morgan's door just after nine o'clock. Left to her own devices in dressing for the party, she opted for jeans and a nicer tank top. When she opened the door, she immediately felt underdressed. Ris wore a tiny jean skirt and a shiny silver top. Bangle bracelets jingled on her wrists. Even Corbin looked exceptionally good in a pair of dark-washed jeans and a dark blue button-up shirt.

But if Morgan was underdressed, that fact didn't seem to concern Ris. As they walked out to Corbin's car, Ris linked her arm through Morgan's and leaned in conspiratorially. "I can't believe it," Ris whispered. "It's our second party in a week. And we actually have a date to this one!"

Morgan smiled. "Ris, you have a date. I'm the third wheel."

Ris shrugged. "We can share."

Morgan laughed. "No thanks! He's all yours."

When Corbin reached his car, he turned back and eyed them suspiciously. "No giggling," he called, opening the passenger door for Ris.

Ris got into the car and smiled as Corbin closed the door for her. Corbin then opened the door behind Ris's for Morgan. Morgan smiled politely and got into the car.

Within minutes, they were on their way to the party. While Ris chatted animatedly in the front seat, Morgan allowed her thoughts to wander. She wasn't even sure what to expect. Tesin had said it was people like him and Kellen and Wen—and, Morgan supposed, like her, too—getting together. And then panic flooded her. What was she even thinking, going to this thing? After what they'd shown her this morning, she wasn't sure she wanted to know more about their world. But the allure of discovering something about her mother, about her disappearance, was too strong.

"You okay back there?" Corbin asked suddenly, breaking into Morgan's thoughts. "You're awful quiet."

Morgan caught Corbin's gaze in the rearview mirror. He looked concerned and Morgan wondered how much of what she was thinking he may have sensed. She forced a smile. "I'm good. Just a little... nervous."

Ris turned in her seat so she could see Morgan. "Don't be. It'll be fun..."

Morgan managed to nod and smile at Ris for the remainder of the trip, but she didn't hear anything Ris was saying.

When Corbin pulled his car to a stop, he looked back and forth from the address on the receipt to the building before him several times. Morgan hazarded a glance out the window and was shocked by what she saw. She hadn't been paying attention to where they were going, so she was surprised to see they were downtown. Corbin was now parked outside a hotel—the Royal Grand, a hotel being built by local billionaire Orrick Williams. It was brand new—so much so that it wasn't officially open for business. But this fact was belied by the number of people streaming toward the doors.

Someone knocked at the driver's side door, and Corbin, Morgan, and Ris all jumped. There was a man in a white button-down shirt standing by Corbin's door. With an uneasy chuckle, Corbin rolled the window down.

“Yes?” Corbin asked.

“Names?” the man asked. He held a pen and a clipboard.

Corbin glanced back at Morgan uneasily before clearing his throat. “Corbin Starling,” he said, indicating himself. He then pointed at Ris and Morgan, introducing each of them in turn. “Clarissa Perry. And Morgan Abbey.”

The man made a couple of marks on his clipboard. He then stepped back from Corbin's door. “If you'll step out of the vehicle, sir.”

When Corbin made no move to comply, the man handed Corbin a small square of paper. “Give this ticket to one of the valets when you leave, and we'll pull the car around for you.”

Slowly, Corbin opened his door and stepped out of the car. Morgan was about to open her door as well, but it opened before she could touch it. When she looked up, she saw that two more valets were opening the doors for her and Ris.

When she and Ris were out of the car, Ris looped her arm around Morgan's. “Swanky,” she said appreciatively.

Corbin joined them, walking on Morgan's other side. “What's going on here?” he murmured in Morgan's ear.

Morgan just glanced at him. She had no idea.

A doorman opened the door when Morgan, Corbin, and Ris approached. They walked into the hotel's atrium. There were dozens of people milling about, most with drinks in their hands. But it wasn't like at Corbin's party—they were holding actual glasses. A few of the people wore looks of haughty boredom. Most appeared to be in their twenties or early thirties. Morgan was positive that she, Ris, and Corbin were the youngest people there.

A man in a white button-down shirt and black pants stood at the far end of the atrium. He seemed to be directing people to continue further into the hotel.

Corbin nodded toward the man. “Looks like the party’s that way.” He stepped between Morgan and Ris and placed a hand on each of their backs.

“Look who’s big pimpin’,” Ris teased.

But Corbin didn’t respond. Morgan could feel the unease coming off him in waves. She wished she were able to make him calm down, the way Kellen said that some people with abilities like theirs could. But she realized that even if she had the ability to, she possessed no more calm than Corbin did at the moment.

They walked past the man who was directing traffic and headed down a long hallway. At the end of the hall, a set of double doors stood open. Beyond them were multicolored flashes of light and the pulsing sound of music.

“Corbin, this is so cool,” Ris said. “How’d you hear about this party, again?”

“Friend of a friend,” Corbin said quickly.

“Must be a pretty influential friend,” Ris said. “Did you see there was a list?” She smiled. “I feel like a movie star.”

Corbin looked over at her and smiled. “You look like a movie star.”

Morgan groaned. “I think I just threw up in my mouth a little.” When Ris shot her a dirty look, Morgan grinned and poked her in the stomach.

As they approached the double doors, the three slowed. Morgan cast a dubious look inside and exchanged glances with Corbin. Ris, however, didn’t see the need to wait. She grabbed Corbin’s hand and dragged him through the doors. Morgan followed.

As soon as they entered, Ris let out a little squeal. “This is so cool,” she breathed, looking around the large, open room. “I can’t believe we’re here!”

“Yeah,” Morgan agreed drily. “Phenomenal.”

Ris didn’t seem to notice Morgan’s lack of enthusiasm.

A woman in a conservative black skirt and a white button-down shirt walked by then and offered them a selection of drinks off a tray. Immediately, Ris grabbed one in a funky-looking stemmed glass and took a sip.

“Mm. Tastes like watermelon.” Ris offered the drink to Morgan, who promptly refused. When Corbin also refused a sip, Ris tipped her head back and drained the glass herself. She set the empty glass back on the tray and reached for another.

“Wow, Ris, pace yourself,” Morgan said over the music. “I don’t think that’s Kool-Aid.”

Ris cast Morgan a look that read Don’t start and took a sip of her second drink. “Green apple,” she announced.

Under the guise of scoping the place out, Corbin managed to get close enough to Morgan to whisper, “So... now what?”

But before Morgan could come up with a response, a new song came on and

Ris squealed. “Let’s dance!” She grabbed Corbin’s hand with her free one and sloshed some of her drink on Morgan’s toes as she pulled him onto the dance floor.

Morgan followed grumpily, attempting to shake liquid off her foot as she went. By the time she caught up, Ris was in full dance mode. For as infrequently as she did it, Ris was actually a fairly good dancer. For his part, Corbin looked okay doing the simple guy shuffle that every boy seemed to be preprogrammed with from birth. Trying to blend in, Morgan attempted to imitate Ris’s movements. She was distracted, though, and kept bumping in to Corbin as she scanned the dance floor.

After three or four songs, Morgan was surreptitiously checking the time on her cell phone when Ris spoke up. “Morgs, don’t look now, but there is a guy approaching from your three o’clock and he’s got his eye on you.”

Morgan followed Ris’s gaze. Her eyes landed on Kellen just as Ris whispered in her ear, “Wow, he is hot.”

Morgan had to admit that she agreed. He wore his usual dark blue jeans along with a black button-up shirt that accentuated his lithe physique. His brown hair was tousled to perfection. In the flashing lights of the ballroom, he looked uncharacteristically ethereal.

He approached Morgan, a secretive smile playing on his lips. He turned his gaze to Corbin. “Corbin Starling.” He held his hand out for Corbin to shake.

Corbin shook his hand, exchanging a quick glance with Morgan. “Kellen,” he replied with a nod.

Ris, who was now on her third drink, looked slightly confused by the exchange. “Wait—Corbin, you know this guy?”

But it was Kellen who answered. “I’m a fan of Corbin’s band,” he said easily. He turned his attention back to Corbin. “When I invited you out tonight, I had no idea you’d be bringing the two prettiest girls all for yourself.”

Corbin glanced at Morgan, surprised. Morgan gave the slightest shake of her head. She had no idea how Kellen knew Corbin was in a band—Morgan herself had only learned about it that morning.

Ris clapped her hands together. Corbin looked at her, and she must have mistaken his concern for confusion. “You’re in a band? How did I not know that?” She turned to Morgan. “When we were dating back in fifth grade, Corbin got his first guitar for Christmas and he was so cute. He wanted to be a rock star.”

Kellen smiled at her, looking amused. “And you are?”

She put out her hand and giggled when Kellen bent down to kiss it. “I’m Ris.” She put her hand on Morgan’s back and pushed her toward Kellen. “This is



Morgan. She's psychic."

"Really?" Kellen's face arranged itself into a look of surprise. "How fascinating." He touched Morgan's elbow gently and said to Corbin, "Would you mind if I stole Morgan away for just a little while? I have some friends who would find Morgan's abilities fascinating."

Corbin shifted and Morgan knew immediately what was going through his mind, that he was going to object, to insist he and Ris come with them. Morgan shot him a look that she hoped he could interpret. It seemed to work, because Corbin's face rearranged and he said, "Sure."

Kellen glanced from Morgan to Corbin and back to Morgan. "Interesting," he murmured.

As Morgan turned to go, she glanced at Ris, who grinned broadly and gave a less-than-surreptitious thumbs up. Kellen rested his hand on the small of Morgan's back and led her through the crowd to a room that was an offshoot of the main ballroom. There were couches in the room, and Morgan recognized Tesin and Wen immediately, but there were at least a half dozen people there—mostly women—who she didn't recognize at all.

As Kellen walked over to the couches he made a slight jerking motion with his head, and everyone but Tesin and Wen cleared out. Kellen sat down on a recently vacated couch and patted the spot beside him, indicating Morgan should sit there. "That's a bit more cozy," he said as Morgan sat down, and she wasn't sure if he was referring to the nearly empty room or to her own closeness to him.

Morgan shifted a bit so that she was a polite distance from Kellen before speaking the first question that made its way to her lips: "How is there a party going on here? Is this place even open yet?"

Kellen smiled easily. "Not to the... general population. But Orrick was kind enough to allow a select group of people... test out the new place before opening day."

"People like... us?" Morgan asked.

Kellen nodded. "People like us."

Morgan found herself nodding, too, until something else Kellen had said struck her. "Wait—Orrick?"

"Come on, Morgan," said Kellen. "I'm sure you've heard of Orrick Williams."

"Of course—who hasn't? I just find it hard to believe you're on a first-name basis with him."

Kellen laughed good-naturedly. "One day, I intend to prove you wrong."

Morgan looked around at the room for a moment when something else occurred to her. "Wait—you're not saying that... Orrick Williams...?"

“Is Veneret?” asked Tesin. “Of course.”

“But... how?” Morgan asked. “Why doesn’t anyone know?”

Tessin laughed hollowly. “It’s not exactly something we tend to advertise.”

Wen leaned forward on the couch and nodded his head toward the ballroom.

“The people out there? Most of them are Veneret.”

“Except the servers?” Morgan guessed.

Kellen nodded. “And your delightful friend Ris.”

Immediately, concern for Ris bubbled up in Morgan. But then something else smothered this—curiosity. “Wait. You said Ris. But not—”

“Corbin?” Wen offered. “Strictly speaking, he’s not Veneret, either. Just like, strictly speaking, you’re not.”

“So, is he a... a Natural, like me?”

Wen nodded.

“Which would explain the exchange I noticed between you two out on the dance floor,” Kellen said. “What happened there, by the way? At his party, I got the impression the two of you weren’t exactly friends.”

“We’re not,” Morgan said quickly.

“And yet, there’s some kind of connection between you. I could sense it, but it wasn’t the other night at all.”

Morgan sighed. After a moment, she launched into a brief explanation of what happened between herself and Corbin during his reading. As she told the story, Kellen, Tesin, and Wen listened intently.

“And if he’s a Natural, like you say,” Morgan finished, “I guess what happened makes a lot more sense.”

“Tessin,” Kellen said, standing. “Given what’s happened, I think it might be a good idea to go get Corbin. It might be time for him to hear this, too.”

As Tesin stood, Morgan asked, “What about Ris?”

Kellen gave a wolfish smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep her company.” He winked and he and Tesin headed back out into the ballroom.

Morgan felt a jolt in her stomach vaguely related to Kellen but chose to ignore it—and its implications.

When Kellen and Tesin were gone, Morgan looked at Wen.

“Feeling overwhelmed?” he asked kindly.

Morgan nodded. “A little.”

Wen gave a half smile. “Can’t say I blame you. I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now.”

Morgan looked at him quizzically. “What do you mean? How did you react when you found out about all this stuff?”

Wen shook his head. “You don’t understand. We—the Veneret grow up

knowing about all this stuff. There's no big reveal because there's nothing to reveal."

They sat in silence until Corbin and Tesin walked into the room. Corbin was looking over his shoulder. Tesin placed a hand on Corbin's shoulder to keep Corbin moving toward the couches.

"She's fine," Tesin was saying. "Kellen's going to dance with her a little, maybe get her to eat something."

Corbin stopped walking when he reached Morgan's couch. When he sat down beside her, she could feel the unease he projected. She patted his knee a couple times and offered a small smile.

"How much has she had to drink?"

"A couple since you left," Corbin said. "I've had a few at this point, too—that was the only way to keep her from drinking."

Unbidden, information floated to the surface of Morgan's mind. Corbin didn't drink. He'd seen his brother come home after too many parties sick-drunk and had vowed years ago that he'd never be that way. He'd even been uncomfortable at his own party the other night when some guys showed up with a keg. He hadn't drunk a drop the whole night.

Tesin resumed his seat beside Wen and cleared his throat gently before launching into the same basic information they had already shared with Morgan. Then Wen joined in, and the two of them took turns explaining the different ways abilities manifested. There were Feelers, which Wen seemed to think Morgan was: people who could sense and influence the emotions of others and who could interpret what the feelings meant. Related to Feelers were Seers, who could look into a person's mind and thoughts or see what was going on in a different location. Knowers, as Morgan already knew, had visions of future events. Movers could cause objects to move, while Pushers could influence a person's actions and behavior.

When Tesin and Wen finished speaking, Corbin just sat quietly, staring blankly at a fixed spot in space before him. Morgan could tell he was processing, so she just let him sit.

Finally, Corbin shrugged. "I guess that makes sense."

"Really, that's it?" Morgan asked, surprised.

"What am I supposed to say?" Corbin asked. "Last night I would've said you were crazy, but..." He looked meaningfully at Morgan. "A lot's happened since last night."

"So," Tesin said, suddenly businesslike. "Any questions?"

Corbin nodded. "Um, yeah. How can people not know about this—about you? About us?"

“They don’t know because we don’t want them to know,” Tesin said simply.

“But why?” Corbin pressed.

Tessin opened his mouth to reply, but Wen held his hand up. Tesin sighed. “By all means,” he muttered.

Wen leaned forward and looked at Morgan. “Have you ever seen the X-Men movies?”

“Yeah.”

“Think about it: If regular people knew about us, they’d probably react the same way—with fear. People wouldn’t trust us. Worse—some people might want to study or destroy us.”

“It wasn’t always that way, though,” Tesin said, almost to himself.

Wen nodded in agreement. “Legend says that centuries ago, the Veneret lived out in the open, and they were revered. They lived side-by-side with the common, and the common knew what they were and what they could do, but they didn’t fear them.”

“The common?” Corbin asked.

“Regular people,” Wen clarified.

“Well, if that’s the way it used to be, what changed?” Morgan asked.

Wen shrugged. “A lot of little things. There was a time in human history when anything at all beyond the abilities of the common became something to be feared. And in order to survive, the Veneret went into hiding.”

Corbin looked around. “This doesn’t look like hiding to me.”

Wen shrugged. “What can I say? Given our... particular skill set, success tends to come easily to us. We just don’t let people in on the secret to that success.”

Morgan sighed. “I still can’t believe that Orrick Williams is one.”

“It makes sense, though,” Corbin said. “I mean, he’s made most of his money being one step ahead of everyone else. He always seems to know what the next big thing will be. And if he’s got the ability to... I don’t know... see the future or something, then all his success suddenly makes sense.”

Morgan nodded.

Corbin turned his attention to Tesin and Wen. “So,” he asked, “just how common are, you know, Naturals?”

“Not common at all,” Wen said promptly. “You two are probably the only Naturals here.”

“Wait,” said Morgan. “If they’re not common, then how is it that Corbin and I both are Naturals? I mean, we’re the same age, we go to the same school. That’s gotta be—I don’t know—statistically improbable, right?”

Tessin laughed. ““Statistically improbable,”” he repeated quietly.

But Wen just smiled. "I think you'll find most things happen for a reason."

Morgan opened her mouth to ask another question, but just then, Kellen walked into the room, half-carrying Ris along with him.

Corbin was on his feet immediately. "What happened?" he demanded, crossing to where Kellen stood and leaning down to look into Ris's face.

But Kellen didn't look concerned. He just chuckled. "I think the alcohol finally won," he said simply. "It might be time for you two to take her home."

Morgan joined Corbin and looked at Ris. Her eyes were closed, so Morgan tried calling her by name. When that didn't work, Morgan gave her face a series of light taps. Ris stirred momentarily before falling back into her stupor.

"How much did you let her drink?" Corbin demanded, staring at Kellen.

"How much did you let her drink?" Kellen returned easily.

Corbin bristled and Morgan was afraid he might try to hit Kellen. She grabbed his wrist and tugged on it. "Corbin, help me carry her."

Corbin looked at Morgan and nodded reluctantly. Kellen helped situate Ris's right arm around Corbin's shoulders and her left arm around Morgan's shoulders. Corbin and Morgan each placed an arm around Ris's waist. Before they left the room, Morgan nodded a goodbye to Tesin and Wen. There was something odd in the way Wen was watching them, but Morgan was too distracted to give it much thought.

As Corbin and Morgan half-dragged Ris through the hotel, they did not draw much attention. Indeed, most people seemed far too interested in themselves or their own friends to notice anything else. When they got to the front door, Corbin dug through his pants pocket for their valet slip and handed it to one of the valets.

Morgan shifted uncomfortably as they waited for the valet to return with Corbin's car.

"It's my fault," he said quietly.

Morgan looked at him, confused. "What?"

Corbin shook his head. "I shouldn't've let her drink so much."

"Let her," Morgan scoffed. "Ris is a big girl. She's never been to a party like this. And she was a little nervous to be coming out with you. I'm sure she didn't realize the alcohol would hit her like this."

"Still."

Morgan was spared having to answer because the valet pulled up with Corbin's car. It took some work, but she and Corbin managed to get Ris into the back seat. When Morgan took her place in the passenger seat, she cast a dubious glance at her friend.

"I hope she doesn't throw up."

Corbin didn't dignify her concern with a response. Instead, he put the car in gear and headed out of the city.

The ride to Ris's house passed in silence. Ris's living room light was on, and Morgan hoped that Ms Perry was asleep on the couch, not awake doing Sudoku.

Corbin was able to get Ris out of the back seat. Instead of the two of them supporting her weight like they had before, Corbin insisted on carrying Ris into the house himself. Morgan walked ahead and tried the front door. As expected, it was unlocked. Morgan eased the door open, poked her head in, and smiled. Ms Perry was asleep. She turned back to Corbin and waved him in.

The trip into Ris's room was quick and quiet. Morgan took Ris's shoes off and covered her with a blanket. Corbin smoothed Ris's hair away from her face and kissed her on the forehead. Then they snuck back through the house and closed the front door. They didn't speak until after Corbin had pulled out of Ris's driveway.

"I think you should drop me off at my car," Morgan said. "I can get home from here."

Corbin shook his head. "It's late. I want to make sure you get home safely."

"Then follow behind me. I need my car."

"For what?"

"What do you mean, for what? It's my car and I need it."

"Tonight?"

"What?"

"Do you need your car tonight?" Corbin repeated.

"Well, no, but I need it tomorrow—"

"Then I'll pick you up tomorrow and I'll drop you off then."

"Corbin, don't be ridiculous—"

"Morgan, drop it."

There was a finality in Corbin's voice and Morgan realized she wasn't going to win the argument. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the window grumpily until Corbin pulled up to her house.

"Morgan?"

Morgan glanced at him. "What?"

"Is any of this stuff, you know, kinda freaking you out?" He wasn't looking at her.

Morgan thought about it. "Is it crazy? Abso-freaking-lutely. Is it freaking me out? No."

"Why not?" This time, Corbin actually looked at her.

She shrugged. "I guess because I've always been different from other people. And let me tell you, being different because you've got some sort of crazy ability

is a helluva lot better than being different because your mom up and disappeared and everyone in the school thinks it's because your dad killed her.”

“That’s why Lynna stopped claiming you as family, wasn’t it?” Corbin asked. “Joss, I mean.”

Morgan nodded. “Kids are terrible. After my mom disappeared in second grade, it seemed like the whole school knew about it. I’m sure they did—I mean, it was kind of big news. My dad was taken in for questioning and everything. He was a suspect until the cops realized his alibi was airtight. Still, they called my dad a psycho and they called me a psycho. And when Joss stood up for me, they started calling her a psycho, too.” Morgan sighed. “She’s always cared more about what people thought about her than I have.”

“Cared more about that than her own family.”

“Thing is, I don’t even blame her—not really. Not for that. The thing I can’t stand is that she turned into somebody I don’t even recognize. She’s completely consumed by other people’s perception of her.”

Corbin reached across the car and covered Morgan’s hand with his. He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

Morgan looked down at their hands and then over at Corbin. “Wow. Talk about things that kinda freak you out.”

At this, Corbin laughed. He removed his hand. “I guess we are a strange pair.”

Morgan raised an eyebrow at him. “Pair of what?”

Corbin shrugged. “Naturals, I guess.”

Morgan nodded. “I guess.” She glanced at her house. “Look, I should head in. You’re not gonna, like, insist on walking me to the door, are you?”

Corbin shook his head. “But I will sit here until you’re in the house.”

“Fair enough.” Morgan looked at him. “Thanks, Corbin.”

“You’re welcome,” Corbin said. “For what?”

“For being a completely decent person to have my first freaky experience with.”

Corbin smiled. “Well, then, thank you, too.”

“I’d say anytime, but...”

Corbin laughed. “Goodnight, Morgan.”

“Goodnight.”

Morgan got out of the car and walked up the driveway to her house. She unlocked the door and let herself in. It was only after she closed and relocked the door that she realized her father was sitting in the living room.

“And who was that?” he asked, a twinkle in his eye.

“Banish that thought right away,” Morgan said, walking into the living room and sitting down on the couch. “Just a friend. Kind of.”

“He’s kind of just a friend?”

“No, he’s just kind of a friend. What are you doing, anyway? Peeping out the window at me?”

“That’s a father’s right.”

“A father’s right to be a creeper?”

“Absolutely.” He smiled. “By the way, speaking of things fathers have a right to know: where’s your car?”

“Ris’s house,” Morgan said quickly. It was almost true—it was still near there. “I went over there earlier to get ready and Corbin picked us up there. And after he dropped Ris off, he wouldn’t let me take my own car home. He said... He wanted to make sure I got home safely.”

“Well, that’s nice. A bit inconvenient, but nice.”

“Don’t worry. He said he’d take me to my car tomorrow.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

Morgan raised an eyebrow in return. “I don’t like your tone, sir.”

He just smiled. “Did you have a nice time?”

Morgan nodded. “It was alright.” Morgan yawned. “On that note,” she said, standing.

He stood too. “Goodnight, hon,” he said, hugging Morgan and kissing her on the top of her head.

“ ’Night, Dad.”



## *Chapter Seven*

Morgan called Corbin at seven thirty the next morning to ask him to shuttle her to her car. He arrived just after eight o'clock and handed a brown paper bag to her after she slid into the passenger seat.

"What's this?"

"For you."

Curious, Morgan opened the bag and pulled out a round, wrapped package. She unwrapped it and found a bagel. "Spinach Asiago—how'd you—" Morgan stopped herself, realizing she knew full well how Corbin knew what kind of bagels she liked.

Corbin glanced at her as he started down the street. "Creepy?"

Morgan took a bite of the bagel and chewed thoughtfully for a minute. "Just strange," she said finally. "There are people who know me better than you do who don't know what kind of bagel I like."

"There are people you might be more familiar with, but, at this point, I doubt there's anyone who knows you better," Corbin corrected.

Morgan sighed. "Creepy." But she smiled.

They drove in silence until Corbin pulled up beside Morgan's car.

"So, what've you got going on today?"

Morgan shrugged. "I'm gonna go check on Ris, see how hungover she is. Then I've got to meet up at the school for some yearbook stuff. Might head out to the Daily Grind later. You?"

"Band practice in a bit. And then, yeah, maybe I'll kick around the Daily Grind."

"I didn't tell you so you could stalk me."

"You didn't lie so I couldn't."

Morgan rolled her eyes. "Creepy."

Corbin just smiled at her. Morgan got out of the car and closed the door behind her. Corbin immediately rolled the window down and leaned across the passenger seat toward her.

"Hey, Morgan?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell Clare—" He let the sentence fall, unfinished.

Morgan nodded, understanding. "I will." She clicked the remote to unlock her car, opened the door, and slid into the driver's seat. She glanced back at Corbin and he waved before he drove away.

Morgan drove the short distance to Ris's house and parked in her usual spot out front. She went to the front door and knocked first, but no one answered, as she'd expected. Ms Perry had already gone to work for the day and Morgan suspected Ris was in no shape to be answering the door. Morgan hopped off the porch and jogged around to the attached garage. She entered the code and waited as the garage door opened, then she entered the house.

Morgan poked her head into Ris's bedroom slowly, not quite sure what to expect. But when she looked in, Ris appeared to merely be asleep. Morgan was slightly surprised by this, as Ris was notoriously a morning person. Quietly, she made her way to Ris's bedside. "Ris?" she asked, giving her friend's shoulder a gentle nudge. When there was no response, she nudged a little harder.

Gradually, Ris stirred. When her eyes focused on Morgan, she looked confused.

Morgan smiled. "Hey, sleepy head. How you feeling?"

Ris rolled onto her side. "Tired," she sighed.

Morgan nodded. "Do you feel thirsty? I could go get you some juice or something. Or are you queasy? I could make some food."

Ris looked confused. "Am I sick?"

Morgan laughed. "I don't know. But you did have a awful lot to drink last night."

"Last night?" Ris asked.

"Yeah," Morgan said. Ris had clearly drunk more than Morgan originally thought. "Remember, we went out with Corbin? To the party?"

"A little," Ris whined. "Morgs, I'm sleepy."

"Okay," Morgan said slowly. "I guess I'll let you sleep. You sure you don't need anything?"

Ris grumbled incoherently.

"Call me later."

Ris didn't respond.

Morgan let herself out the same way she'd come in, making sure to close the garage door after her.

She would be the first to admit that her experience with people who were hungover was less than minimal; still, Morgan couldn't shake the feeling that Ris's behavior wasn't quite typical. However, having nothing to compare it to, she decided to do the only thing she could: check on Ris later.

Morgan hadn't anticipated her visit with Ris being so brief. Today was day

one of the ad-selling campaign for the yearbook, but they weren't supposed to meet at the school until nine o'clock. She sighed. "Guess I'll be early," she grumbled, putting her car in gear and heading toward the school.

A few minutes later, Morgan pulled into the small staff parking lot Mr. K had instructed everyone to park in. Hers was, not surprisingly, the only car in the lot. Morgan grabbed her purse and dug out the book she was glad she had foresight enough to bring.

"Guess it makes me psychic," Morgan said quietly, smiling to herself.

She was still getting used to the idea that she really did have some kind of ability. While Kellen's assertion that she possessed powers might not come as a surprise to many who knew her—or knew of her—the news shocked her.

If she was being honest with herself, she was glad that someone else was going through this with her. If she had her druthers, she certainly wouldn't choose Corbin to be that person, but even that situation wasn't as bad as it could be. After their mind-meld yesterday, Morgan had to admit that Corbin wasn't really a bad guy. His mind might be a little dirty, but, she figured, what seventeen-year-old guy's wasn't?

Morgan looked down at her open book and realized she wasn't reading it. She took in a breath and tried to focus on the words in front of her, but to no avail. After a minute of trying to read, she gave up and stuffed the book back in her purse. As she did so, she noticed another car joining hers in the parking lot. She smiled. She recognized the car.

Morgan got out of her car and walked over to the other one as its occupant was climbing out. "Hey, Mr. K," she said brightly.

Mr. K turned and smiled at Morgan. "Why does it not surprise me that you're the first one here?"

"What can I say? I take my responsibility to the yearbook very seriously." Morgan smiled.

"Since you're here, why don't you make yourself useful?" Mr. K held a clipboard out to Morgan. "Hold this, please."

Morgan took the clipboard dutifully. "Anything else?" she asked as Mr. K leaned across the front seat of the car.

"Nope," he said when he emerged, carrying a box. "Except, could you close the door?"

Morgan nodded and went to close the car's door as Mr. K walked to the front of the car and placed the box on its hood. Once the door was closed, Morgan looked down at the clipboard she held. "Are these the selling assignments?"

Mr. K nodded. "And the teams. Don't worry, you don't have to do any creative editing on those. You're grouped with Stew and McKenna."

Morgan smiled. Last year he grouped her with two newbies and Lia Roderick. To say it had not gone well would be an understatement. “Finally realize I don’t play well with others?”

But Mr. K didn’t look amused. “You’re a leader, Morgan,” he said, his voice uncharacteristically serious. “I don’t think you realize it, but you are.”

Morgan shifted uncomfortably. “Um, thanks, I guess.”

Mr. K just looked at her for a moment before giving himself a shake. Then he smiled. “Anyway. How’s your summer been? Before you said it was busy. Anything more specific?”

Relieved by the subject change, Morgan shrugged and walked toward Mr. K. She leaned against his car. “Well, business, of course. And some reading. Ris and I went to a couple parties.”

“And... any college hunting?”

Morgan laughed. “That’s a very teachery question,” she accused.

He shrugged. “Well, I am a teacher.”

“I’ve looked at a few possibilities,” Morgan admitted.

Mr. K nodded and regarded Morgan for a moment. “Forgive me if I’m crossing a line, here, but—have you met someone?”

Immediately, Morgan felt herself blush, but she wasn’t entirely sure why. “No. Why?”

Mr. K shrugged. “You just seem a little different. A little happier. You’re kind of glowing.”

Morgan raised an eyebrow at him. “I didn’t think it was possible, Mr. K, but you just did it, you crossed the line into creeperdom.”

“It had to happen sooner or later.”

Morgan smiled at him. “Well, I haven’t met anyone,” she said. “I mean, I’ve made a couple new... friends, I guess, but not like that.” She demonstrated her distaste for the idea by giving a pronounced shiver. “But I’m... I’m learning some things about myself.”

For a moment, Mr. K just looked at her. Then he opened his mouth, but what he was about to say was lost when two cars pulled into the lot. He took a step away from Morgan and turned his attention to the new arrivals. Unsure what else to do, Morgan did the same.

Soon, the parking lot filled. McKenna arrived and started chatting with Morgan. When Lia Roderick arrived, she immediately reported to Mr. K and relieved him of his clipboard. Morgan watched as Lia took a pen and started scribbling on the pages. Morgan figured no good could come of this but kept her opinion to herself.

When everyone had arrived, Mr. K called for the staff’s attention. He went

over the process for the day—a refresher on how to sell ads to local business owners. As he spoke, Lia circulated through the crowd, organizing groups and handing out location assignments. By the time Lia got to Morgan’s group, Mr. K had finished talking.

Lia handed the location slip to McKenna and moved on to the next group. When Morgan glanced at the sheet, she noticed that Mr. K’s typing had been crossed out and Lia had written something else in the margins.

McKenna seemed to notice this, too, and she didn’t look pleased. “Unbelievable,” she grumbled. “She crossed out all the places we’ve had ads with before and gave us all brand new places. If the fuehrer thinks we’re taking this assignment, she’s out of her mind...”

Morgan and Stew exchanged glances as McKenna stormed off after Lia. Then, in unison, they held their fists out toward each other. A quick game of rock-paper-scissors later, Morgan was on her way after McKenna.

On her approach, Morgan heard McKenna’s and Lia’s raised voices. She sighed. This was getting ugly quickly.

“No, we’re not,” McKenna was saying. “We’re not gonna take a whole route of new places just so your group can have an easy day!”

“This is your assignment,” Lia insisted. “So go do it!”

“No!” McKenna yelled back.

“I’m telling you, go do this route.”

Morgan finally arrived and stepped next to McKenna, ready to back her play, but when she looked at McKenna, she saw the anger draining from her face.

“Okay,” McKenna said simply.

“Okay,” Lia echoed, sounding both surprised and pleased.

“Okay?” Morgan demanded. She looked from Lia to McKenna and back again. “No, it’s not okay.”

Lia sighed. “Morgan, I’m telling you—go do this route.”

“No,” Morgan snapped.

Lia looked slightly agitated. “But I’m telling you—”

“Shut up,” Morgan snapped. “Mr. K!”

“Really, it’s okay,” McKenna said. “Let’s just do the route.”

Morgan looked at McKenna incredulously. “Like hell. Mr. K!”

“What’s going on here?”

Morgan turned to see Miss Ellie Scotford approaching. “I have to talk to Mr. K,” Morgan said.

“Maybe I can help,” Miss Scotford said. “What seems to be the problem?”

Morgan looked at her doubtfully. “Lia took it upon herself to edit our route from the route Mr. K assigned us.”

Miss Scotford looked confused. “I don’t know why you’d see a need to do that, Lia.”

Lia’s mouth twitched but she said nothing.

“I think you should go to the routes Mr. Kment assigned you,” Miss Scotford said. “Is that clear?”

Morgan smirked at Lia. “Crystal.” She grabbed McKenna by the wrist and tugged her toward where Stew stood, not wanting to wait around for Lia to plead her case.

“What’s the word?” Stew asked.

“We’re on the original route,” Morgan reported. She turned to McKenna. “No thanks to you. What were you thinking, giving in to her?”

McKenna shook her head. “I don’t know—I just didn’t want to argue with her anymore.”

Morgan shot her a suspicious look but shrugged. “Anyway. Who’s driving?”

## *Chapter Eight*

A few hours later, Morgan pulled into the Daily Grind's parking lot. She invited Stew and McKenna to come out with her, but they both declined. Ris still hadn't called or texted, so Morgan took that to mean she wouldn't be ready for an outing yet.

When Morgan walked into the coffee house, the first thing she did was look to see who was working as barista. She smiled.

"Hey, Lucas," she greeted as she approached the counter.

Lucas glanced up from the coffee filter he was filling. "Hey. I'll be with you in a sec."

"Take your time," Morgan said. To pass the time, she read the menu board.

A minute later, Lucas approached the cash register. "What're you thinking?"

"How's the mango smoothie?"

Lucas pulled a face and shook his head.

"That bad?"

"No," Lucas said. "It's not bad. You just wouldn't like it."

Morgan smiled. "Really? And how would you know that?"

"I told you, it's my special talent."

Morgan laughed. "Ah, yes. How could I forget?"

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "Indeed. Did I not made you the perfect beverage last time you were here?"

"Yes, you did."

"But now you doubt me?"

Morgan held her hands up. "Fine. Barista's choice."

"Hot or cold?"

Morgan just shrugged.

Lucas smiled. "Challenge accepted." And he set to work.

Morgan watched him for a few moments. "Why do you even have a menu board if you insist on choosing people's drinks for them?"

"It's for when I'm not here," Lucas called, not looking up from the task at hand.

Morgan laughed. She heard the tinny bell over the door tinkle and turned to see who had walked in. A girl she didn't recognize crossed the room and took a

seat across from a guy who was deeply engrossed in something on his laptop.

Morgan felt disappointed and it took her a moment to figure out why: She expected it to be Corbin. When she realized this, she immediately hated herself a little.

The bell tinkled again as Lucas was ringing her drink up. Morgan made a conscious decision not to turn around this time.

Lucas, however, did look up at the new patron, and he gave the person the chin raise guys give when they recognize someone. Then he turned his attention back to Morgan and gave her the total for her drink.

Morgan began digging through her purse for her wallet, but before she could find it, someone was gently pushing her to the side.

“Hey,” Morgan began to object until she caught sight of the perpetrator. “I should’ve known.”

Corbin smiled at her. “I’ve got it.” He turned his attention to Lucas. “I’ll get mine and hers.”

“I’m capable of paying for my own drink,” Morgan grumbled.

“I am fully aware of that fact.”

Morgan just looked at him for a moment before conceding. “Fine. But I’m getting a sandwich, then, too.”

Corbin laughed. “Sure.” Then he turned to Lucas. “What’s good today?”

“Hot or cold?”

“Cold.”

Lucas nodded and disappeared behind the espresso machine.

Morgan leaned against the counter. “How was practice?”

Corbin shrugged. “Practice. How’s Clare?”

“Really out of it. She didn’t even really wake up when I checked on her earlier.”

“Really?” Corbin looked concerned.

“What?”

“Has she called you today?”

Morgan shook her head. “I was gonna go check on her a little later.”

“I’ll go with you.”

Lucas returned with Corbin’s drink. Then he turned to Morgan. “Sandwich?”

Morgan turned to him and smiled. “What, your special talent doesn’t extend to the deli section?”

“Not nearly as fun,” Lucas said simply.

Morgan laughed. She picked out a sandwich from the case and, after Corbin paid, she and Corbin sat down at the table she usually shared with Ris. She took a sip of her drink—it was cold and pleasantly spicy. She watched as Corbin took



a sip of his drink. “What’d you get?”

Corbin took another pull on his straw. “Mango smoothie, I think.”

Morgan made a face. “That’s what I wanted, but Lucas wouldn’t give it to me.”

Corbin held the drink out to her. “You’re welcome to give it a try.”

Morgan considered the offer for a moment before accepting the cup and taking a sip. She wrinkled her nose.

“Really?” Corbin asked, taking his drink back. “I like it.”

“Told you!” Lucas called lazily from behind the counter. “I made you an iced chai, by the way.”

Morgan smiled. “He really is amazing at that,” she admitted to Corbin.

Corbin just watched Lucas for a moment before turning to Morgan. “He’s curious,” he said. “About us.”

“What about us?”

“Exactly.”

“How can you tell?”

Corbin gave her a confused look. “You didn’t feel it?”

Morgan took a bite of her sandwich and chewed thoughtfully. “Are you saying you can...read him or something?”

“I think so, yeah.” Corbin’s green eyes widened. “Is this what it’s like being you?”

“Clearly, no.”

Corbin stared off in Lucas’s general direction for a few moments before turning back to Morgan. “It’s weird. It’s like... I mean, it’s not like it is with you.”

Morgan swallowed her bite of sandwich. “What’s not?”

“The—I don’t know—impressions. Yesterday, you were really easy to read. It was like I could feel what you were feeling.”

Morgan nodded. “Same for me.”

“But today, it’s different. Like, I can still feel you, but not as strongly. And when we were up at the counter—just for a second—I could swear I could tell Lucas was curious about us.”

Morgan took another bite of her sandwich and considered this as she chewed and swallowed. She made a conscious effort to reach out to Corbin, to test if she could feel what he was feeling. After a moment, she shrugged. “I think you’re right. You don’t seem as... accessible today.”

“What d’you think that means?” Corbin asked.

“Dunno. Maybe we should ask Kellen.”

“Maybe,” Corbin agreed, thoughtful.

They sat in silence as Morgan finished her sandwich.

“Do you wonder what it all means?” Corbin asked suddenly.

Morgan cocked her head. “You getting existential on me?”

He shook his head. “No. I mean the whole—” He leaned forward. “—Naturals thing. I mean, do you wonder what it means? Like, is something going to be expected of us because of this? You know, the whole great power, great responsibility thing?”

“What, now you think you’re Spider-man?”

Corbin sighed. “Forget it.”

Morgan shrugged. “Look, Corbin—I just... I haven’t put much thought into it. I mean, things have been just a little crazy for me lately.”

“Crazy for you?”

“I’m sure Kellen will tell us more.” Morgan finished off her drink and sighed. “You ready to head over to Ris’s?”

Corbin sucked on his straw to confirm his smoothie was gone before nodding. They stood, bussed their table, and waved goodbye to Lucas as they headed out of the coffee house. Refusing to be without her car again, Morgan insisted they drive separately.

When they got to Ris’s house, they tried the front door first, but there was no answer, so Morgan led Corbin in through the garage.

“Are you sure this is okay?” Corbin asked as they entered the house.

“We’re not robbing the place,” Morgan grumbled. “We’re just going to check on Ris...” She knocked lightly on Ris’s bedroom door. When there was no response, Morgan let herself in.

Ris was still lying in bed like she had been that morning. Morgan walked to her friend’s side and shook her. After a few tries, she got a response. Ris opened her eyes and blinked heavily.

“Morgs? What... what time is it?”

“Late,” Morgan said. “After noon.”

Ris propped herself up on her elbow. “Why didn’t you wake me sooner?”

“I tried. You don’t remember? I was here earlier.”

Ris shook her head. “I must’ve been really out of it.”

“How are you feeling?” asked Corbin tentatively.

Noticing Corbin for the first time, Ris suddenly became self-conscious. Her hands went to her hair briefly before she answered. “Um... good. Tired.”

“Probably because you’ve been sleeping for more than twelve hours,” Morgan said.

“I guess,” Ris agreed. “I feel like... I just had the flu or something. Kind of achy.”

“That’ll be the bedsores.”

Ris rolled her eyes at Morgan. Then she looked at Corbin. “So... what brings you by?”

Corbin shrugged. “I was worried about you. Morgan said you were out of it earlier and that you didn’t call her all day...”

Ris’s face clouded with confusion. “Wait—when did you talk to Morgan?”

“Over coffee—”

“We were both at a coffee house,” Morgan said quickly. “He asked about you.”

Ris smiled. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you two were getting to be friends.”

Morgan glanced at Corbin and then back to Ris. “Not likely.”

Corbin made a face at Morgan and turned to Ris. “You need to get out of bed.”

Ris nodded. “True.”

“Have you got any plans for tonight?” he asked.

Ris smiled. “Probably not sleep, but beyond that...”

Corbin smiled, too. “Well, you have plans now. My buddy’s brother’s band is playing at a club tonight at eight or so. We could grab a bite to eat and then head out there. What do you think?”

“That sounds great,” Ris said, sounding slightly baffled.

“Great, then, it’s settled.” Corbin looked at Morgan. “You up for it, Morgan?”

“No thanks,” she said quickly. “I’ve had my fill of quality time with Corbin as of late. But you two crazy kids have a good time.”

Corbin shrugged. “Thought I’d ask.”

Ris kicked the covers off herself and sat up. She was still in her clothes from last night. Her bangle bracelets left marks on her arms. “If you two will excuse me,” she said, standing up, “I have to... take a shower or something.”

“Okay,” Corbin said, heading toward Ris’s bedroom door. “I’ll be by at about six thirty to pick you up—does that sound good?”

Ris nodded enthusiastically.

Corbin smiled. “I’ll let myself out.” And he was gone.

Ris waited until she heard the telltale sound of a door closing before turning to Morgan, eyes wide. “Do you think this is a date?” she asked, barely containing the excitement in her voice.

“Sounds like it to me,” Morgan said.

Ris squealed. “This is so exciting!” Without waiting for a response, she scurried out of her bedroom, presumably to the bathroom to start preparing.

Morgan sighed.

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Morgan wasn't sure exactly why, but that evening found her back at the Daily Grind.

Lucas wasn't behind the counter, so Morgan ordered an iced chai, just to be on the safe side. The room was filled with the evening crowd, so Morgan had to take a lap before she could find a place to settle down. There was an empty spot on a couch toward the front of the room, and Morgan decided to take a seat there. As she pulled the book out of her purse, the couch's other occupant spoke.

"Wow, back again?"

Morgan turned to the guy who had spoken. "Lucas?" she asked. "Sorry, I didn't recognize you on this side of the counter."

Lucas nodded understandingly. "It's like the perfect disguise. On that side of the counter, I'm Clark Kent."

Morgan smiled. "Does that make you Superman now?"

Lucas considered this. "Maybe it's the other way around."

Morgan shoved her book back into her purse and turned so she was facing him. "So, why are you here? Are you on break or something?"

He shook his head. "Shift ended a while ago." Correctly interpreting the question in Morgan's eyes, he added, "My brothers are home from college for the summer and the house gets a little crowded." He shifted so he was facing Morgan. "Do you have any siblings?"

Morgan shook her head. "Just me and my dad."

Lucas just nodded, not following up Morgan's comment with the obvious question. Instead, he asked something completely unrelated: "So, where's Corbin?"

"Taking Ris out on a date."

Lucas's eyebrows knit. "Really? I thought—"

Morgan held up her hand. "You can stop that thought right now."

Lucas shrugged. "Sorry to offend, but, you know, appearances and all."

"At best, we've got a grudging friendship. We've kind of got something in common."

"Ris," Lucas supplied.

Morgan didn't correct him. "How long have you been working here?"

"On and off for the last couple years."

"And when did you discover your special talent?"

Lucas shrugged. "When did you discover yours?"

"Touché," Morgan said. "I guess I've always known. And," Morgan leaned in.

Lucas leaned in, too. “Lately... I think I’m getting stronger.”

Lucas looked mildly impressed. “Show me.”

“What?”

“Show me,” Lucas repeated. “Read me. Wow me. You know, do your thing.”

Morgan raised an eyebrow. “Right now?”

“Sure. Why not?” He smiled. “I’ll even throw in a free drink next time I’m working. We’ll call it... an exchange of talents.”

Morgan considered the offer. “Okay.”

“Okay. So...?”

“So, give me your hand.”

Lucas obliged. Morgan held his hand in both of hers. She closed her eyes and took in a few deep breaths, allowing herself to relax, bidding her mind to reach out.

She felt Lucas, his energy. She reached forward with her mind. However, she received none of the usual impressions—not even the kind she used to get before her interactions with Kellen and Corbin. Gently, she pushed a little further forward. She met resistance.

Morgan opened her eyes. Moments later, Lucas opened his eyes as well.

“What?”

“I can’t... You’re blocking me.”

Lucas made a face. “I’m what?”

“You’re not letting me read you. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“That happen often?”

“No. Never, actually.”

Lucas shrugged. “Wanna try again? I’ll try to be more... open.”

“Okay.” She closed her eyes again. Took in a deep breath. Relaxed. And this time when she reached out, she got something.

It wasn’t feelings or thoughts. It was unlike anything Morgan had ever experienced. It was like energy—pure energy flowing through her fingers and into the very center of her being. She felt light—white light—and a tingling in her fingertips.

Lucas pulled away first. When Morgan opened her eyes to look at him, she saw shock and confusion. Then, slowly, Lucas smiled.

“Wow,” he said quietly.

Morgan took in a breath and released it slowly. “Yeah.”

“Is that... Was that...? Wow.”

“How do you feel?”

“Awesome. What’d you... do?”

Morgan shrugged. “Dunno. It’s never happened before.” She studied Lucas’s

face. “You sure you feel okay?”

“No... I’m way better than okay.” He smiled. “I feel like I can... I don’t know—fly.”

Morgan nodded. “Me, too.” A pure, white energy pulsed through her body. She felt powerful, like she could do absolutely anything. She smiled, unsure how she should be feeling about this. When she had the reading with Corbin, she was completely wiped out. And now, though she hadn’t actually read Lucas, she was having the complete opposite reaction. Instead of feeling like she had just run a marathon, she felt like she could go run a marathon.

Lucas took in a breath. “I’m thirsty.”

“Oh.” She reached for her chai. “Here, you can have a—”

Before Morgan fully extended her arm, the glass was in her hand. She looked down at it incredulously. “What the—”

“No way,” Lucas said, awed. “Did you just—”

Numbly, Morgan nodded. “I think so.” She picked up the glass and her hand trembled slightly as she handed it to Lucas.

“How’d you do that?” Lucas asked.

Morgan just shook her head. “I have no idea... That’s never happened before.”

Lucas took a sip of the chai. “That was fantastic.” He looked at Morgan. Concern clouded his face. “Morgan, you okay?”

“I don’t think so,” Morgan said quietly.

Lucas scooted closer to her on the couch. He placed his hand gently on her arm. “Morgan?”

“I’m freaking out a little, Lucas,” she whispered, feeling her heart pounding against her ribcage. “I just moved a freaking glass with my mind.”

“I know, I saw,” Lucas said, sounding excited.

Morgan couldn’t believe Lucas was being so nonchalant about this event. Though, a part of her mind offered, you didn’t panic when Kellen did the same thing the other night. And it was true. But watching someone do it and doing it inadvertently yourself were two completely different things.

Morgan’s hand went to her chest; her breathing became ragged.

“No, no, no... You’re okay,” Lucas said soothingly, patting her arm. “Sh, sh, sh...” He scooted closer still. “Come on. Just a second ago you felt like you could fly.”

Morgan managed to smile. “Yeah, and then I started moving things with my mind.”

“Which was cool as hell,” Lucas insisted. “I guess you were right about... getting stronger or whatever.”

“You’re telling me.” Morgan glanced at Lucas. He was sitting very close to her and he didn’t seem to have any plans to change that. Morgan wasn’t sure how she felt about it, but she didn’t move away.

“You feeling better?”

Morgan took in a breath and found she was filled with a calm she knew she shouldn’t be feeling. Her heart rate slowed; her breathing went back to normal. Morgan looked at Lucas. It was as if the calm she was feeling was radiating off of him. “I am—what are you doing?”

“Me?”

She nodded.

“Nothing. Just, you know, hoping you’ll calm down.”

“I think you’re doing it.”

“What?”

Morgan shifted a little. “I think you’re calming me down.”

Lucas patted her arm. “I’m glad.”

Morgan sighed. Of course, he didn’t understand what she meant, and she wasn’t sure how to explain. So she smiled at him “Thanks.”

Giving Morgan’s arm a final squeeze, Lucas removed his hand, but he didn’t move away from her. “You are a fascinating person, Morgan Abbey,” he said, taking another sip of her chai. Then he seemed to remember the drink was hers and held it out to her.

She took it and took a sip before responding. “You’re not so bad yourself, Lucas.”

Lucas smiled and turned his face away from her, ostensibly to scan the room. But Morgan could see the blush in his cheeks. She smiled and looked down at her chai. She found his blush endearing.

“Morgan,” Lucas said abruptly.

When Morgan looked up, she saw that Lucas was looking at her. His light eyes shone with excitement. With mischief.

“What?”

“What are you doing? Why do I feel like this?”

Morgan shook her head. “I have no idea. Believe it or not, in a long line of crazy things that’ve been happening to me in the last week or so, this is the most crazy.”

Lucas smiled. Morgan noticed his fingers were trembling slightly. “I can’t just sit here,” he said, his words tumbling out slightly quicker than usual. “I feel too... alive. I can’t just sit here at a coffee house.” He stood, holding his hand out for Morgan to take.

Morgan didn’t hesitate. Now that she was calm, her previous feeling of

invincibility was filling her again. She took Lucas's hand and smiled. "Okay. Let's go."

When they got to the parking lot, Lucas led Morgan to his car. Morgan didn't think to protest as she slid into the passenger seat.

"Okay, where to?"

Morgan didn't know. She knew she wanted to go somewhere that was bright and bustling with activity. Somewhere that felt alive the way she felt alive. But she had no idea where that place could be.

Then, by degrees, Morgan became aware of something. She could feel the collective energy of the people in the coffee house. It was mellow, subdued—not at all the way she was feeling. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath, pushing further with her mind. Just beyond what she could feel, Morgan thought she could sense impressions—like just being able to make out something on the horizon.

She opened her eyes, turned to Lucas, and smiled. "I don't know yet, but I will. Head west."



## *Chapter Nine*

Lucas turned on the radio for something to listen to. Neither of them spoke, save for Morgan's occasional directions.

Adrenaline coursed through Morgan's veins and she knew Lucas was feeling the same thing. Everything seemed clearer, sharper, brighter as they drove. The world seemed to have both sped up and slowed down. It seemed to Morgan that time was slipping by as they sped down the freeway, yet she felt as though she could count individual leaves on trees as they whipped by.

After about fifteen minutes, they ended up in a few cities over in the trendy downtown area of Oakdale. The streets were bustling with activity, and Morgan smiled.

Lucas pulled off the main drag and found a parking space in a small lot. When they got out of the car, Lucas immediately walked over to the meter, checking his pockets. "Got any change?" he asked.

Morgan made a face. "I hate meters. I'm always afraid I'll put in too little."

"How long do you think we'll be here?"

Morgan didn't look up as she dug through her purse. "I don't know... maybe an hour?" She found her change purse and shook it dubiously. "I don't know if I've got enough—"

"Uh, Morgan?"

Morgan looked up at Lucas. He pointed at the meter. She took a few steps closer and saw that the timer on the meter was set to an hour.

"Cool. That was lucky."

Lucas laughed. "No, you don't get it. It was at zero a second ago."

Morgan gave him a confused look. Then she shook her head. "No. You're not saying that I—"

"I think you totally just moved the timer with your mind," Lucas said, sounding gleeful. "Go ahead—do it again."

"I don't know how I even did it a first time," Morgan muttered. But when she looked at Lucas, his face was so encouraging that she shrugged and turned back to the meter. "Maybe we need... an hour and a half?" She watched the timer expectantly, but nothing happened. And she got mad. "See," she said, turning to Lucas, "I can't—"

But Lucas was grinning. He nodded toward the timer. Morgan looked back at it. It now read an hour and a half.

She started at it. Unlike the incident with the glass, this act didn't cause panic to rise. Instead, she grinned and looked up at Lucas. "I totally just moved that."

"This is so cool." He grabbed Morgan's hand and pulled her toward the downtown area. As they joined the throng of people on the street, he gave Morgan's hand a squeeze. "It's like I can... feel everyone's excitement." He paused and pointed at a woman with curly hair and a vague smile who stood next to a man. "Except her. She's pissed at her boyfriend." He looked at Morgan. "How do I know that?"

She looked at the woman Lucas indicated and had the distinct impression he was right. "I don't... I don't know," Morgan said honestly.

"This is awesome," he continued. He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, causing people behind them to grumble angrily and divert around them. He pulled on Morgan's hand, forcing her to face him. "You're doing this. You're letting me do this."

Morgan shook her head. "I'm not, though—"

"But you are, I know it," he insisted. "You're... sharing this with me."

"I have no idea how, though."

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter how." Giving her hand another squeeze and starting down the sidewalk again, he said, "I feel... infinite. Like I can do anything."

Morgan couldn't help smiling. "Okay, there, Superman."

Lucas seemed too excited to focus; his eyes scanned the crowd as they walked. "Hey, check out that guy's fedora," he said, pointing.

Morgan looked at where he was indicating. A man was sitting at a table outside a restaurant, surrounded by a group of people. He wore a dark gray fedora with a black band. "Stylish."

"I love a good fedora."

She laughed. "You should ask him where he got it. Maybe he got it somewhere around here."

Lucas nodded thoughtfully. "It is a nice fedora." He gave Morgan's fingers a final squeeze before releasing her hand. "I'll be right back," he said, heading over to fedora guy.

Morgan watched him go. Fedora guy did not look pleased when Lucas addressed him, but moments later he stood up, handing his hat to Lucas. After the brief exchange, Lucas walked back to where Morgan stood, the fedora atop his head.

Morgan stared at him incredulously. "What just happened?" she asked.

Lucas shook his head, shrugging. “I don’t know. At first, I thought the guy was going to hit me or something—when he stood up. But I started thinking, like, dude, I just want your fedora. And then he handed it to me.” Lucas’s eyes grew wide. “I think I made him give me his hat.”

Morgan glanced back at the man’s table. His companions were glaring at Lucas. “And on that note, I think we should get moving,” she said, pulling Lucas by the arm.

But Lucas wouldn’t be moved. “First—wait.” He turned his head from side to side. “How do I look?”

Morgan rolled her eyes. “Dead sexy—now let’s get going.” She grabbed his wrist and pulled him down the sidewalk.

Lucas smiled, allowing himself to be towed away. “That’s what I figured.”

They walked in silence for a block. When they stopped, waiting for the crosswalk signal, he turned to Morgan. “Do you really think I made that guy give me his hat?”

Morgan shrugged. “The evidence seems to support it.”

Lucas considered this. “That seems kinda freaky, though, right?”

“What d’you mean?”

“Um, I just made some dude do something. I mean, how would you like it if someone made you do something?”

“I dunno. I mean, I guess it depends on what it was.”

“I think I should test it. You know—see if I can make someone else do something.”

“Fine,” Morgan said. “Try to make me do something.”

Lucas smiled. Shook his head. Smiled again. “Really?”

“Go for it.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Just... don’t make me, like, cluck like a chicken or anything ridiculous.”

Lucas nodded. He positioned himself directly in front of Morgan and looked into her eyes. His eyes narrowed in concentration.

After a minute, Morgan turned away. “Okay, you’re creeping me out. What’re you trying to make me do, anyway?”

Lucas shrugged easily. “Doesn’t matter—you didn’t do it.” And without waiting for a response, he started across the street.

Morgan followed him. “Maybe it won’t work on me. You should try someone else.”

“Okay,” Lucas said when Morgan caught up to him. He pointed at a woman a few yards ahead of them. “Watch her.”

Morgan watched dutifully. After a few moments, nothing happened, and Morgan was about to ask Lucas what he was doing when the woman stopped

and turned around. She scanned the crowd for a moment before her eyes locked on Lucas.

“Nice fedora!” she called. Then she turned around and continued on her way.

Morgan raised an eyebrow at Lucas. “Seriously? Egomaniac...”

Lucas shrugged. “She’s right, isn’t she?”

Morgan rolled her eyes, smiling. “You have the ability to make people do things, and the best you can come up with is to have someone compliment your hat?”

“I didn’t think you were giving it the respect it deserves.”

“Spoken like a true freak of nature.”

“Says the founding member of the freaks of nature club.” He proffered his arm to Morgan and, with a smile, she looped her arm through it. Laughing, the two set off down the street.

Morgan felt invigorated. The energies of the people around her converged on her. As they walked, Morgan found she could force the feelings to the back of her mind where they were barely noticeable, like white noise, or she could bring the feelings forward then attach a certain emotion or frame of mind to a specific person. After a while, Lucas seemed to figure this out, too, because he began pointing at different people, quizzing Morgan about how each one felt.

After describing the mental state of perhaps the hundredth person, Morgan sighed. “Let’s sit and people watch,.”

“How’s that different from what we’re doing now?”

“Um, there’s sitting involved?”

Lucas grinned and scanned the immediate vicinity. “There’s a bench,” he said, pointing.

“Yeah. A bench full of people.”

Lucas raised a meaningful eyebrow at her. “Just wait,” he said. Then, with a smile, he turned his attention to the three guys occupying the bench. After a minute or so, they got up and walked away. Lucas waggled his eyebrows at Morgan and led her to the bench.

Morgan sat and turned her attention to the people streaming past them. Lucas, who seemed to have grown bored of their previous activity of identifying people’s emotions, formulated a new game. He appeared to be seeing how many people he could get to compliment his fedora as they passed.

After Lucas managed to make a third biker guy compliment the hat, Morgan groaned. “Seriously, enough with the fedora.”

Lucas turned to her, an exaggerated pout on his face. Then he smiled. “Okay, your turn.”

“My turn what?”

“Try to do something.”

“Like what?” Morgan asked.

Lucas shrugged. “Dunno. Flex your mystical abilities.”

Morgan sighed, unsure what to do. But then she grinned wickedly and turned to Lucas. In one fluid motion, his fedora lifted off his head and landed in Morgan’s hands. She grinned and put it on.

“Hey!” Lucas called once he realized what happened. “No fair!” He reached for it, but Morgan stood and took off down the sidewalk.

Lucas ran after her, but Morgan was able to keep a few yards ahead of him. She wove around people and between crowds, laughing like a lunatic. Ahead, she spotted a group of people coming toward her, walking like an impenetrable wall, so she cut toward the street to get around them, glancing over her shoulder to see where Lucas was.

Several things happened in quick succession. Morgan turned forward just in time to see a broad-chested man directly in front of her. She didn’t have time to course-correct and the man, having seen her coming, put his arm out to fend her off. His arm sent Morgan to the curb where she tripped and started falling, face-first, into the street. She saw headlights coming straight for her but didn’t have balance enough to change directions.

Then she was on the pavement—the sidewalk, not the road. She felt like she’d had the wind knocked out of her and her ribs were sore. She looked around for her rescuer and saw Lucas sprinting to her side. No one else was around her.

“Morgan, are you okay?” Lucas demanded, squatting beside her. His hands fluttered over her, feathering touches on her cheeks, her shoulders, her arms.

“What happened?” Morgan asked, swatting at Lucas’s hands. “I thought for sure I was dead.”

Lucas let his hands come to a rest on Morgan’s forearms. His head shook slowly from side to side.

“Lucas, what?”

“I think...” He took in a breath. “I think I pulled you back.”

Morgan just stared at him for a moment, confused. How could he have pulled her back—he was nowhere near her when she slipped. But then she realized what he meant. The same way she managed to take his hat, he managed to pull her out of harm’s way.

“Okay,” Morgan said after a minute. “Enough excitement for tonight. We should get going.”

Lucas nodded absently. He stood and offered Morgan his hands. She took them and he pulled her to her feet. As they started walking, Morgan winced.

“What’s wrong?”

Morgan took another step. Winced again. “I think I twisted my ankle—on the curb.”

Lucas put his arm around her waist and Morgan put her arm over his shoulders, allowing him to help her back to the car. Neither spoke as Lucas drove back to the coffee house. Lucas didn’t turn on the radio.

Morgan stared out the window but didn’t really see anything. The white light that served as her energy throughout their escapade was still thrumming through her veins, but she pushed it down so she could start processing events.

Wen insisted she was a Feeler, but his description did not include the ability to move things with her mind. But then why had she been able to do it? And what about Lucas? Was he right about Morgan sharing the ability with him, or... Morgan thought of how she met a wall when she tried to read Lucas, as though he possessed the ability to block off his mind.

Could Lucas be a Natural, too?

When they got back to the coffee house, Lucas got out of the car to help Morgan out and over to her car. He helped to steady her as she dug through her purse for her keys. After she unlocked the car and opened the door, she leaned against the car and turned to face Lucas.

“Well,” she said slowly, “thanks for an interesting night.”

“That’s what I should be saying to you.” Lucas smiled.

Morgan just looked at him for a moment. She rested her hand on his chest. “Thanks. For, you know, saving my life.”

Lucas gave a small smile but didn’t say anything. Morgan felt a gentle pressure against her hand as Lucas shifted forward incrementally.

“I’m still wearing your hat,” Morgan said suddenly. She removed her hand from Lucas’s chest pulled the hat off her head. She set it on him and smiled. “Goodnight, Lucas.”

Lucas nodded. “Yeah. See you.”

Morgan got into her car and Lucas closed the door behind her. She waved at him and he made his way back over to his car. She put the keys in the ignition and started her car, but before she could put it into gear, she heard her phone beep. She fished through her purse for a moment before finding the phone. She smiled—a text from Ris: OMG having so much fun.

Morgan hit reply and started typing when a knock at her window made her jump. She turned, expecting to see Lucas. But it wasn’t Lucas.

Morgan rolled down her window. “Kellen? Stalker much?”

Kellen leaned down so his face was even with Morgan’s. He looked pissed. “What were you thinking?”

Morgan stared at him, confused. “What are you—”

But before she could ask the question, Kellen was holding his cell phone out to her. On the screen played a video. She watched for a moment, confused. But then she realized what she was looking at. It was the street she and Lucas had been on not half an hour earlier. She watched the crowd and saw a fedora flip in the air. Then there was someone in a fedora running down the sidewalk. It was her. She watched, mesmerized, as she saw herself look back, smiling, to see where Lucas was. And then she saw as she was knocked out of the way by the broad-chested man, saw as she tumbled toward the road, directly into the path of an oncoming Hummer.

Then it was as if she were lassoed. Morgan watched the screen as she doubled over, completely changing directions and landing on the sidewalk.

Kellen stopped the video. "Well?"

Morgan was baffled. "How'd you get that video? Are you following me?"

"I didn't take the video. We have people everywhere. Someone saw you and wondered what you were up to, so she took this video. A good thing, too."

"You have people spying on me?"

Kellen didn't seem to hear her. "Weren't you listening? The only reason the Veneret exist at all is because we keep our abilities a secret. And there you are, out flaunting your abilities on a crowded street." Kellen sneered. Then he looked at Morgan sharply. "And who's the guy you're with?"

"Lucas."

"You say that like I'm supposed to know who you're talking about."

Morgan pointed to the coffee house. "He works here. He's probably made your drinks before."

Kellen squinted at the coffee house for a moment. "Dark hair, always wants to suggest what you should be drinking?"

Morgan nodded. "Yeah, that's him."

Kellen looked at Morgan, and for the first time since their conversation began, he didn't look angry. "Really?" he asked, sounding surprised. "And he..."

"Pulled me back from the road, yeah. And he made a guy give him that fedora."

Now Kellen looked baffled. "Seriously?"

"How is any of this shocking to you? You're the one who's been telling me about all these abilities. I saw you—you can move things with your mind. Why is it a surprise that someone else can?"

"It's not that it can be done that surprises me. It's the who that's doing it. I've been coming to this place for a while and I never... I didn't realize..."

"That he's a Natural?"

"It fits."

Morgan nodded. “I did a reading for him, and when I first started, he was kind of... blocked off. Is that maybe why you didn’t realize—”

But Morgan was cut short by the look on Kellen’s face.

“If he can block, he’s probably a Feeler,” Kellen said, more to himself than to Morgan. “But if he got the hat and pulled you back, that means he’s a Pusher and a Mover, too...”

“Is this a good thing, or...? I mean, what does it mean?”

Kellen glanced at her, seeming almost surprised to see she was still there. “It means I’ve gotta make some phone calls. Morgan, do me a favor?”

Morgan nodded.

“Don’t show off. If it gets around that you are...” He looked directly at her. “Let’s just say people won’t be happy. No matter who you are.”

“And... who am I?”

Kellen managed a smile. “You’re special.” He turned serious again. “Promise?”

Morgan nodded again. “Yeah, promise. Kellen... I’m sorry. I guess we weren’t thinking. We just felt so—I don’t know—so powerful. We had to do something.”

Kellen just stared at her blankly. “You... you both felt like that?”

“Yeah.” Morgan looked at him quizzically. “Why? Isn’t that normal?”

Kellen’s face remained expressionless for a moment, but then he smiled. “I’m beginning to think there’s nothing normal about you.”

Morgan felt herself blush and looked away.

“Look, I’ve gotta get going in light of... recent developments. What are your plans for the rest of the night?”

Morgan sighed. “Go home like a good girl.”

Kellen nodded. “Good girl. I’ll be in contact.” He waved and turned, walking toward what Morgan presumed was his car. He didn’t get three steps before his cell phone was at his ear.

Morgan rolled up her window, put her car in gear, and headed home. By the time she pulled into her driveway, she was in a pretty good mood. Besides the whole almost dying thing, she’d had fun with Lucas, and she was confident that Ris was having a good time on her date with Corbin. When she cut the ignition and headed toward the front door, she was even able to keep the limping to a minimum. But her good mood dissipated immediately when she opened her front door. There at the kitchen table strewn with papers and text books sat her father and Lynna Rochester.



## Chapter Ten

“Morgan!” Dylan called jovially when he saw his daughter at the door. “There’s pizza in the kitchen if you’re hungry.”

Morgan didn’t look at her father; instead, she glared at her cousin. “What’s she doing here?”

Lynna’s lip curled. “Summer school. If I don’t ace my geometry final’s tomorrow, I’m not gonna pass. Mom says it all looks like Chinese to her, and Dad helped me as much as he could. Uncle Dylan was nice enough to offer his assistance.”

Morgan made a face. She glanced at her father. “I’ll be in my bedroom.”

“No, why don’t you have a seat and eat something?” There was a steely glint in his eye. “I insist.”

Morgan held her father’s gaze for a moment before dropping her eyes and complying.

“Why are you limping?” her father asked as she sat down.

“I twisted my ankle—it’s nothing.”

He nodded. Then he got out of his seat. “I’ll go get you some pizza.”

Morgan and Lynna watched as Dylan left the room. After a few moments, he called, “Where have you been? Out with Corbin again?”

Lynna’s head whipped around so quickly Morgan thought she may have gotten a crick in her neck. “Corbin?” she asked, eyes wide. “Corbin Starling?”

Morgan sighed. “How many other Corbins do you know?”

“What does he mean, again?”

“He, Ris, and I went out to a party last night,” Morgan said, enjoying the look of horror mixed with envy that flitted over her cousin’s face.

“And where’d you go tonight?”

“I wasn’t out with Corbin tonight.” To add fuel to the fire, she added, “But Corbin and Ris are out on a date as we speak.”

Lynna just mouthed wordlessly. Before she could form a sentence, Dylan returned with pizza and a glass of pop for Morgan. As soon as Morgan started eating, Dylan drew Lynna’s attention back to the fascinating world of geometry.

Morgan ate her food quickly and excused herself to her bedroom. She was just laying down on her bed when she heard her door open. She turned to see her

cousin standing in the doorway.

“The hell, Joss? Ever hear of privacy?”

Lynna rolled her eyes and closed the door behind her. She sat down on the papasan Corbin had fallen asleep on the day before. “So, like, a date-date? Or do you mean, like, a friend-date?”

“What’s a friend-date?”

“You know, like, when friends go out. But, you know, a guy and a girl.”

“Well, they are kind of friends.” When a look of relief spread over her cousin’s face, she quickly added, “But that doesn’t mean he’s not interested in her.”

“But it doesn’t mean that he is.”

Morgan shrugged. “Maybe not. Still, how many times has Corbin asked you out—even only as a friend?”

“You’re a bitch.”

“Takes one to know one,” Morgan said lazily, staring at the ceiling.

Jocelyn crossed her arms and stared sullenly at the floor. It was minutes before she spoke again. “So, where were you tonight?”

“Like you care.”

“I’m trying here, okay?”

Morgan looked at her cousin. “Yeah? What is it exactly that you’re trying? Are you suddenly attempting to be a decent human being, or are you just trying to make yourself feel better after what your minions said at Corbin’s party?”

Joss let out an exasperated sigh. “Look—I’m sorry, okay?”

Morgan sat up, facing her. “Really? You’re sorry? Oh, well, then, everything’s forgiven. Let’s hug.” She rolled her eyes.

Joss threw her hands up. “Look, I’m sorry that you think I’m a bitch. I’m sorry that you got stuck being the freaky one and I got to be popular. I’m sorry I still have a mom and yours is gone—”

“She’s not gone.”

“It’s been ten years, Morgan,” Joss said quietly, averting her eyes. “If that’s not gone, I don’t know what is.”

“You’re wrong. She’s still alive.”

A look of pity washed over Joss’s features. “I know that’s what you want to believe. I believed it, too, for a long time—”

“It’s true, though.”

Joss closed her eyes and shook her head. “No it’s not.” She opened her eyes. “Morgan, I’m sorry, but sooner or later you’re gonna have to accept the truth. She’s dead.”

“Get out,” Morgan said quietly. When Joss made no move to comply, Morgan

repeated herself, louder this time. And then louder and louder still. Before she knew it, she was on her feet, towering over her cousin and screaming. “Get out! Get out! Get out!”

Joss finally scurried from the room, slamming the door behind her. Morgan sank down into the papasan, sobbing. Despite Kellen’s assurances to the contrary, Morgan couldn’t help wondering—what if Joss was right? What if her mother really was dead?

When her father came in to check on her, she was completely unresponsive, but he was undaunted. Morgan heard the scrape of the legs of her desk chair against the wood floor, the sound of the chair accepting his weight.

Minutes passed. The only sounds in the room were Morgan’s sobs and her father’s even breathing. Slowly, slowly, Morgan felt herself regaining control. It didn’t feel like it did when Lucas calmed her; instead, her father’s magic was simply letting Morgan realize what she was doing, letting her find her way back to center.

Finally, Morgan was able to look up at him. On his face was the same look of tight control bordering on detachment that he wore whenever she lost it—as though if he let himself be moved even a little he would lose it, too.

“What’s up, hon?”

A quick debate took place in Morgan’s mind. To tell or not to tell. Honesty finally won. “Joss said that Mom is dead.”

He just nodded slowly, pressing his lips together in a tight line. “I’m not surprised. Your uncle’s been telling Aunt Ashleigh for years to give up on your mom ever coming back. He thinks that accepting she’s gone will be easier on her than holding out hope that her sister’s still out there.” He managed to smile at this, a humorless smile. “He thinks I’m crazy for still believing. Lots of people do.”

Morgan felt words forming on her lips—words that would tell her father about what Kellen said about Chelsea still being alive; words that might even tell him everything about Kellen, and everything about herself.

But she bit back the words. Instead she asked, “Then why do you still believe it?”

“I can’t explain it,” he said quietly. “I just think that... if she were really gone, I’d know. And since I still feel like she’s out there somewhere, she’s gotta be.”

She offered a thin smile. “I think she’s out there, too.”

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Morgan awoke late the next morning, hours after her dad usually left for

work.

She showered and threw on a pair of jeans and a tank top. Then, after making herself a quick breakfast, she settled down on the couch and flipped on the TV. After the excitement of the last few days, she decided she deserved a lazy day full of made-for-TV movies and Oreos. She channel surfed for a few minutes before landing on a cheesy-looking disaster movie.

When she heard her cell phone beep in her bedroom, she didn't bother to get up to retrieve it. She figured she could wait to find out the details of Ris's date with Corbin.

Her phone beeped again about five minutes later. Again, Morgan decided to ignore it. She ignored it when it beeped a few minutes later, too. And she ignored it again after that. She was thinking about turning the phone off when it started to ring.

Morgan groaned. Ris must really want to talk to her. She heaved herself to her feet and padded into her bedroom. By the time she got there, the phone was done ringing. She picked it up and took a double take. According to the missed events screen, the call hadn't been from Ris.

Kellen called.

Morgan checked her text messages. Those, too, had been from Kellen. They all said the same thing: Call me. Now.

Under ordinary circumstances, Morgan would not respond well to a guy who demanded she call him immediately, but, as Morgan was coming to understand, nothing involving Kellen fell under the umbrella of "ordinary."

She placed the call.

Kellen answered on the first ring. "Where have you been?"

"Good morning to you, too."

"Call your boyfriends. I'm coming to pick you and them up."

"Two things: I don't have one boyfriend, let alone two, and where the hell do you propose to take me?"

Kellen sighed. "Look, Morgan, I'll explain on the way. Just... could you call them?"

Something in Kellen's voice conveyed the importance and urgency of his request. "Sure," Morgan said finally. "But I don't have—"

Morgan's phone display lit up, indicating Kellen had ended the call.

"—Lucas's number," she finished, staring at the phone's screen. Sighing, she went to her desk and opened her laptop. While she waited for it to wake up, she scrolled through her contact list until she found Corbin's number. As she placed the call, she opened up the web browser on her computer.

The phone rang twice before Corbin answered. "Morgan?" he asked, sounding

groggy.

“Did I wake you?” Morgan asked as she typed in a search for the Daily Grind. “Kellen needs to talk to us.”

“Huh?”

Morgan scrolled through the search results Google provided her. “I don’t know what’s up, but Kellen just called, and he sounded kind of... intense. He wants to talk to you and me and Lucas, like, STAT. He’s on his way to pick me up.”

“Morgan, you’re not—wait. Lucas?” Corbin sounded baffled. “Morgan, I don’t—”

“You know what I know,” Morgan said, cutting him off. “I suggest you get ready, because I’m sure when Kellen shows up at your place he’s not going to be in a waiting-around mood.” Morgan sighed. “I’ll see you soon.”

She ended the call before Corbin could respond and immediately dialed the number to the coffee house. The phone rang four times before someone answered.

“Hi,” Morgan said to the girl who answered the phone. “Does Lucas happen to be working today?”

“No. It’s his day off.”

“Okay, then. Um, would you happen to have his phone number?”

“We’re not really supposed to give out employee information like that.”

“But, I’m a friend,” Morgan said quickly. “He and I—were you working last night?”

“Yes...”

“Well, you might have noticed me and him... on the couch? Then we left together? Well... I was supposed to call him this morning, but I lost his number.” Morgan was surprised by how easily the lie took shape. “You’d really be helping a girl out.”

There was silence on the other end, then a sigh. “Okay, but you can’t tell anybody I did this.”

Morgan let out the breath she’d been holding. “No, never—of course not.” Morgan grabbed a piece of scrap paper and a pencil. “You have no idea how awesome it is you’re doing this for me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the girl said quietly. “Okay, ready?”

Morgan took down the numbers as the girl rattled them off and, after thanking the girl again, ended the call. She immediately dialed Lucas’s number.

Lucas answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Lucas, hey.”

“Why am I getting ready?”

“What?”

“I had the feeling like I should be getting ready for something,” Lucas said matter-of-factly. “And now you’re calling—good job tracking down my number, by the way.”

Morgan was taken aback. “I have no idea why you know that. How long have you had that feeling?”

“Dunno. Five minutes, maybe?”

“That’s when I talked to Kellen,” Morgan muttered. “Can you, like, read my thoughts or something?”

“Are you thinking that I look good in blue?”

“No.”

“Then probably not.”

Morgan was about to respond when she heard a knock at her front door. “Look, I’ve got to go. We’ll be over to pick you up in a little bit, okay?”

“I guess so,” Lucas said. “Bye.”

“Bye.” Morgan ended the call and closed her laptop before leaving her room and jogging to the front door.

She opened the door to reveal Kellen standing on her porch, looking effortlessly handsome in a pair of jeans and a close-fitting green T-shirt. Morgan was unable to reflect on his attractiveness, however, because Kellen was waving impatiently for her to follow him. Making sure to lock the front door before she closed it, Morgan followed Kellen off the porch and to his car. She and Kellen got in and, wordlessly, Kellen started the car, put it in gear, and backed out of Morgan’s driveway. Once he started down the street, Morgan cleared her throat unsurely. When that didn’t get a response, she spoke.

“So... what’s going on?” she ventured tentatively.

“I’d rather wait till you’re all in the car,” Kellen said tersely. “I hate repeating myself.”

Morgan nodded and sat quietly for a moment, but she found the tension was too much for her to bear. “Who are we getting first?”

“Lucas.”

Morgan nodded, but then she realized something: “I don’t have his address. And I only kind of remember where Corbin lives. I could call—”

“I know where I’m going.”

Morgan nodded. “Of course you do.” She figured that Kellen probably also had—or could get—Corbin’s and Lucas’s phone numbers, too, but she realized why he’d asked her to make the calls: Both guys were more likely to respond positively to her than to Kellen.

Morgan didn’t speak again until they were parked outside Lucas’s place.

Morgan was about to ask if she should go knock when the front door opened and Lucas walked out. He got into the car behind Morgan. "Kellen, I presume," he said once he was buckled in.

Kellen acknowledged Lucas with a nod before taking off down the street.

Morgan turned in her seat so she could see Lucas. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," he returned. "I'm supposing it'd be silly for me to ask what's going on?"

"We're on our way to pick up Corbin. I assume," Morgan glanced at Kellen, "once we get him, Kellen will tell us what's up."

Kellen didn't respond.

Lucas nodded a little. "That makes sense, picking up Corbin." He glanced at Morgan and, seeing the question in her eyes, continued. "I'm guessing he's invited along for the same reason as me, which makes the two of you hanging out at the coffee house the other day make a lot more sense."

Morgan nodded. "Told you we had something in common."

Lucas gave a soft chuckle. "Understatement."

Morgan turned forward again and looked out the window. No one spoke. A few minutes passed before Kellen pulled up in front of Corbin's house. Morgan looked at the large house, the manicured lawn. She couldn't believe how much had changed in the short time since she'd attended a party here.

Corbin exited the house through a side door and casually made his way to Kellen's car. When he slid into the back seat, however, the look in his eyes belied his casual demeanor. "So, what's up?" he asked, just a thread of unease weaving through his words.

Kellen didn't glance back at him as he put the car into gear. "In light of everything that's going on with you three, one of the higher-ups wants to have a talk."

Corbin and Lucas started talking at the same time, but Corbin's question won out. "What do you mean? What's going on with us?"

Kellen sighed as he steered the car toward the freeway. "No one expected your abilities to mature this quickly. I mean, Morgan, we knew about. And we were pretty sure about you, Corbin." He glanced in his rearview mirror. "You," he said, looking at Lucas, "took us all by surprise."

"Who is this us? What do you mean, higher-ups?" Lucas demanded.

Morgan turned to Lucas, slightly exasperated, before she remembered that Lucas didn't know anything about the Veneret. She quickly filled Lucas in on all the information she had, glancing occasionally at Corbin and Kellen to be sure she was getting it right. Corbin nodded encouragingly, but Kellen just stared at the road. Lucas just listened, a dubious look on his face. After Morgan finished

relaying everything that had happened to her since Kellen had come into her life, the four sat in the car in silence.

Kellen took the freeway toward downtown. He exited and turned toward the Royal Grand Hotel. Morgan considered asking Kellen where exactly they were headed, but the anxious feeling he projected stilled her tongue. She figured she would find out soon enough.

When the Royal Grand was visible just down the block, Kellen took a right and, a minute later, pulled up to the valet for Desideration Tower, a large skyscraper that also housed multiple events each year, as well as restaurants, businesses, and offices. Kellen handed over the keys and got out of the car. Morgan, Corbin, and Lucas took this as their cue to get out as well, and the three followed him into the building.

“So...” Morgan said as she caught up to Kellen. “Who is it, exactly, that we’re headed to see?”

“Orrick.”

Morgan came to a dead stop. “Orrick? Orrick Williams?”

Kellen stopped too and looked back at her, slightly annoyed. “Morgan. He’s not really a guy who likes to wait.”

Morgan opened her mouth to respond, but she felt a gentle pressure on the small of her back. Turning, she saw Corbin at her side. “Let’s just head up,” he said softly. “I’m sure we’ll get some answers.”

Reluctantly, Morgan continued walking. As they followed Kellen to the elevator, Corbin did not remove his hand from the small of her back.

They boarded the elevator in a silence that persisted as the car made its steady climb upward. Morgan watched as the numbers indicating floors steadily increased. Lucas took a step closer to her.

“You okay?” he said, his lips close to her ears.

Morgan released a breath. “Fine.”

Lucas let out a soft chuckle. “Liar. I can feel how anxious you are. You need to calm down—you’re completely freaking out.”

Morgan closed her eyes and took in a breath. She was surprised Lucas could feel what she was feeling. Curious, she attempted to reach out with her own mind, the way she did during readings. She felt Corbin at her side, uneasy, excited, and curious. And there was something else, too, that she couldn’t quite get a fix on—something shadowy linked to his hand on her back. She felt Kellen, calm but tense, sure, ready. What she didn’t feel was Lucas. She could feel his energy, but it was masked, obscure. She had no idea what he was feeling.

Before she could comment, however, she felt the elevator come to a stop. Morgan glanced at the floor indicator and saw they were on floor twenty. The



doors opened in a fluid motion, and Kellen nodded as an indication that the three should exit.

Morgan felt the pressure of Corbin's hand on her back again and she took it as her cue to lead the way. She took a few steps out of the elevator, expecting to find herself in a hallway; instead, she saw a tastefully-decorated, modern-looking office. It was a corner office, and the two exterior walls were made of glass. Without thinking, Morgan took a few steps toward the windows, wanting to see the view, but Lucas's voice stopped her.

"Kellen, aren't you coming?"

Morgan turned around just in time to see Kellen shake his head. He opened his mouth as though about to say something but closed it quickly. With a curt nod, he hit a button inside the elevator and the doors closed.

For a moment, Morgan, Corbin, and Lucas just looked at each other, each unsure what to say.

Finally, Corbin cleared his throat. "So... d'you think this is his office?"

"Whose?" Lucas asked. "Williams'?"

"Kellen said he was the one who wanted to see us."

Lucas seemed to weigh this information. "He also said Williams isn't the kind of guy who likes to wait. But, apparently, he's not averse to making us wait..."

Morgan sighed. Lucas had a point. However, instead of dwelling on it, Morgan decided to check out the view. She walked over to the nearest wall of windows and surveyed the metropolis below. They were very high up indeed, so high up, in fact, that the cars on the streets looked like mere toys and the people looked as if a moderate breeze could blow them away.

"It's quite breathtaking, isn't it?"

Morgan spun around toward the sound of the voice. A man stood by the wall adjacent to the elevator, looking as though he had been there for a while. He wore a navy blue pinstriped suit and his gray silk tie matched his silver hair. His face was handsome with an ageless quality to it. He could as easily be forty as sixty. When he approached them, his eyes studied each one of them carefully, his gaze lingering on Morgan longer than on either of the boys. Morgan concentrated on not shifting, not showing how uncomfortable she felt.

"Mr. Williams?" Corbin ventured tentatively.

The man peeled his dark blue eyes from Morgan and turned to Corbin, smiling. "Orrick, please."

Behind Orrick's back, Morgan and Lucas exchanged glances.

"Ah, but where are my manners?" Orrick asked suddenly. With a sweeping motion of his hand, he addressed them each in turn: "Morgan, Corbin, Lucas. Please, have a seat."

At the large mahogany desk in the windowed corner of the office there sat three chairs. Morgan sat down, Corbin and Lucas on either side of her, and Orrick walked to the black leather chair behind the desk and took his seat. Framed by sky and tops of buildings, he looked even more impressive.

Morgan suddenly felt incredibly underdressed. She tugged at the hem of her tank top.

If Orrick noticed her actions, he had the grace not to say anything. Instead, he offered them all a benign smile. “You have questions, I assume.”

Morgan glanced surreptitiously to either side of her, waiting for either Lucas or Corbin to say something. When neither spoke, Morgan realized the reason why: It was her place to speak now. After all, she was the original psychic.

“We know a little bit—about the Veneret. And we know that we’re Naturals.” Morgan paused, indicating Lucas. “Well, I assume Lucas is—Kellen didn’t seem to be sure about it, but if he wasn’t, I doubt he’d be here now.”

She turned her attention back to Orrick who inclined his head slightly. Morgan took this as a cue to continue.

“What we don’t know is—why? Kellen keeps saying I’m special, but why? And why are these... abilities showing up now?”

Orrick folded his hands on the desk before him. He seemed to be considering how to answer. After a minute, he spoke.

“There was a time when the Veneret were powerful. Revered. Known. But then the common became jealous of us, our abilities. They knew that we were stronger, better than they were, and they began to hate us for it. They hunted us, killed us. And it was decided that, in order to protect ourselves from annihilation, we needed to go into hiding.” A sneer marred Orrick’s handsome features momentarily, then he continued. “We removed ourselves almost completely from the common for generations before assimilating into the mundane world again. But our exile was not bitter: there was an end foreseen.

“One day, a Natural would be born. That Natural would restore the Veneret to its rightful position in the world. No longer would the Veneret have to live with their abilities hidden, as though they were something shameful, unworthy to see the light of day. One day, she would lead us back to the light.”

“She,” Morgan asked, incredulous.

Orrick inclined his head kindly. “You’re the One we’ve been waiting for.”

Morgan stared blankly at him for a moment before turning to Lucas and Corbin in turn, hoping to exchange incredulous looks with them. However, both Lucas and Corbin wore identical looks of understanding, as if what Orrick said made sense to them.

She turned her attention back to Orrick. “You’re kidding, right?”

“On the contrary,” Orrick said, looking slightly bemused. “For centuries, it has been foretold that you would be born, and that you would lead the Veneret back to our rightful place in the world. Your strength—your power—has been what has kept our hope alive through the generations.”

Morgan just stared at him, waiting for the punch line. When, after a few moments, it became clear that Orrick was being serious, Morgan suddenly felt as though the air had been sucked from the room. What was she supposed to do? What did he mean about her strength and her power? She had neither. How could a group of people she had never heard of be placing their hope in her? Her breathing became shallow; she felt her heart begin to pound. It had to be a joke, a misunderstanding—something. He had to be wrong. He couldn’t mean her. He couldn’t.

Gradually, things began fading away. Morgan was no longer aware of the chair she sat in, of Lucas or Corbin beside her, of Orrick watching her. All she could feel was the pounding of her heart and all she could hear was a rushing sound in her ears. She felt a hot, bubbling sensation fill her from the center of her being outward.

How much time passed, Morgan wasn’t sure, but slowly, by degrees, she came back to herself. The bubbling ceased, rushing in her ears subsided, her heartbeat slowed. She became aware of warm hands on her forearms. To her left, she felt Corbin’s panic, his fear. To her right was Lucas, and Morgan realized he was the one calming her down. She glanced at him.

“There you are,” he said quietly.

Morgan gave him a confused look, and Lucas glanced over his shoulder. Morgan followed his gaze. The artwork on the walls had been knocked off center, and the papers that had been neatly stacked in baskets on Orrick’s desk were scattered haphazardly around the room. It looked as if a strong wind had ripped through the office.

Morgan turned back to Orrick, prepared to stammer out some sort of apology, but the look on Orrick’s face stilled her tongue. His gaze implied curiosity, fascination, and—Morgan could almost swear—something like pride.

Corbin’s hand shifted on Morgan’s arm as he spoke. “So, Morgan’s some kind of long-awaited messiah for the Veneret, but—what about me and Lucas? Why is this happening to us?”

“The prophecy speaks of other Naturals the One will depend on,” Orrick said.

When Orrick didn’t elaborate, Morgan spoke. “So, that’s it?” she asked. “I’m the One and these two are supposed to help me make things right for the Veneret?”

Orrick nodded. “Yes. And for now, that is really all you need to worry about.”

Morgan opened her mouth to say something but closed it when she felt Lucas squeeze her forearm.

When he saw no one was going to speak, Orrick continued. “Can you control it?” he asked, looking at Morgan. When Morgan just stared at him, he added, “The Moving?” He gestured around the room.

Morgan looked down, shaking her head. “Last night was the only other time I’ve done it.”

“With the chai,” said Lucas quietly. “The parking meter. And the fedora.”

Orrick nodded. “Anything else?”

Morgan shrugged, glancing up at him. “I never really thought so, but lately...”

As Morgan recounted the events of the past few days and Corbin and Lucas added their experiences, Orrick listened, nodding occasionally. Nothing they said seemed to surprise him at all. When they finished recounting events, Orrick spoke.

“We’ve been watching you for quite some time, Morgan. No one expected you to mature in your abilities so quickly; Naturals rarely do. And you two,” he looked at Corbin and Lucas. “Your development is quite surprising. Especially yours, Mr. Kenrick. You, Mr. Starling, were already known to us.”

“Like that,” Corbin said. “What does that mean?”

“As you have probably surmised from your own experiences, our abilities manifest themselves in a variety of ways. In the past, we had a great many abilities at our disposal, but today they are somewhat... diminished. It seems every few generations or so, another ability becomes all but extinct.

“Five abilities remain predominant today. There are the Movers, Feelers, Seers, Pushers, and Knowers. Sadly, Knowers are declining in number at an alarming rate.” Orrick sighed, staring down at the desk before him. It was a moment before he looked up and spoke again. “Seers and Feelers have been following you, Morgan, for years. And you, Corbin, were Seen a few months ago.”

“But how?” asked Corbin.

“This is something you’ll learn more about as your abilities develop. Needless to say, I am looking forward to seeing what abilities manifest in the three of you.”

“So...” Lucas said unsurely, “these abilities are gonna continue?”

“Of course,” Orrick said. “I see no reason why they shouldn’t.”

“But—” Lucas stopped. He glanced at Morgan before continuing. “But, you seem so surprised by me. No one saw me. How can you be sure I’m a part of this and not just—I don’t know—under the influence of Morgan’s powers or

something?”

Orrick studied Lucas for a minute before responding. But when he spoke, he directed his comments to Morgan. “What can you Feel? Can you Feel Corbin?”

For a moment, Morgan was confused. Corbin had removed his hand from her arm a while ago; the spot he had been touching was markedly cooler than the rest of her skin now that his warmth was gone. But then she realized what Orrick meant. Taking in a breath, Morgan allowed her mind to reach out. Immediately, she Felt Corbin beside her, feeling both excitement and apprehension. Concern. He was concerned about... something.

Morgan looked at Orrick. “Yes.”

He nodded. “And Lucas?”

Again, Morgan reached out, but this time, she didn’t receive any impressions. She could tell that Lucas was there, but she couldn’t access his feelings at all.

“It’s like... he’s behind a wall or something. A glass wall. I know he’s there, but I can’t... you know—touch him.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Lucas said quietly. When Morgan glanced at him, he raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t think you realize you’re doing it,” said Orrick, “but you’ve been shielding yourself. Unless someone very skilled were actually trying to penetrate your wall, so to speak, your thoughts and feelings would remain private.”

Lucas’s eyebrows furrowed. “So... I am one then? A Natural?”

Orrick nodded. “A Feeler, most definitely. And, as I understand from last night’s events, you may manifest secondary gifts as well.”

“Is that... normal?” Lucas asked.

“It used to be commonplace for us to not only inherently possess but to be proficient with a number of abilities.” Orrick smiled. “And if you three are any indication, those days may be upon us again.”

Lucas gave a slight smile and glanced down. Morgan thought she saw a blush on his cheeks.

Orrick clapped his hands together once, sharply, and Morgan, Corbin, and Lucas all jumped.

“Enough history,” Orrick said, a smile touching his lips. “I think what would benefit you the most would be to spend time with others like yourselves.”

“You’re going to arrange for us to hang out with a bunch of other Naturals?” asked Morgan.

Orrick shook his head. “That would be rather difficult to arrange as there are so few of you. I mean Veneret—of your own age, of course.”

Morgan sensed rather than saw Corbin shift uncomfortably. Orrick seemed to notice, too, and he turned his attention to Corbin. “Yes?”

“I kinda... had plans tonight.”

“With the charming Clarissa Perry, no doubt,” Orrick said. When three sets of surprised eyes turned in his direction, Orrick just chuckled. “I am not without the resources to be well-informed.” He smiled, turning his full attention to Corbin. “Miss Perry is, of course, welcome to accompany you, if you and she are able to accept that some areas of the party might be off-limits to her.”

For a moment, Corbin seemed dumbstruck by the terms, but finally he managed to say, “Um, sure.”

Orrick clasped his hands together. “Splendid. Well, the event doesn’t begin until later tonight. You’ll be picked up between eight and eight fifteen. Until then, Kellen will take you home.” Orrick nodded toward the elevator and Morgan turned to see Kellen standing there. She immediately wondered how long he’d been there, and how he’d known to come back for them.

Morgan stood but didn’t move toward Kellen. While Orrick had given them a lot of information, she realized he hadn’t touched on the subject she most wanted to know about. Did he know anything about her mother? She opened her mouth to ask a question, but at the same moment, Kellen cleared his throat.

When she glanced back at him, Kellen jerked his head toward the elevator, and Morgan took that as her cue to leave. She turned briefly to wave awkwardly at Orrick and mumble an “It was nice to meet you.” Corbin and Lucas followed suit, and the three of them were soon in the elevator with Kellen.

No one spoke as the elevator took them down floor by floor. When the doors opened, Kellen led them through the lobby. He nodded to the doorman as they exited the building. His car was waiting just outside and the four of them got into it wordlessly. It wasn’t until Kellen was on the freeway that someone spoke.

“So, do you... work for Orrick or something?” Corbin asked from the back seat.

“Not exactly,” Kellen said.

“Because it kinda seems like you’re his errand boy.”

Morgan watched as Kellen’s jaw clenched. She pushed forward with her mind—an experiment—to see if she could sense something from him, but she seemed to run into the same sort of wall she hit with Lucas.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Kellen said shortly. He glanced at Morgan. “And you’re sloppy.”

“Not like I’ve had any formal training or anything.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Besides, I didn’t think you’d notice; you’re a Mover, aren’t you?”

“Primarily, yeah. But I think since you’re learning that you can focus your abilities, you’re pushing too hard. Like a tsunami rather than a spring breeze.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Pretty easy to detect.”

Corbin leaned forward. “About Orrick, though. What do you mean, appearances can be—”

“My parents died,” Kellen said stiffly, cutting Corbin off. “When I was young. Nine, I think. Orrick’s been watching over me ever since. He’s taken care of me.”

“Oh,” Corbin said softly, and Morgan could feel his chagrin, his discomfort. Immediately she wondered if she could do the calming-down thing that Lucas had been able to do. She took in a breath and focused her energy on Corbin. Not sure what else to do, she repeated Calm down over and over in her mind.

Lucas began chuckling, breaking Morgan’s concentration.

“What?” Morgan demanded, turning in her seat so she could face him.

Lucas just shook his head, still smiling. “Nothing. By all means, continue.”

Morgan shot him her best evil look, but Lucas was unfazed by it and continued to smile contentedly. Morgan turned forward again and stared out the window for the duration of the drive.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Morgan sat on the couch watching TV until around six when her dad came home. He announced he was pulling out the grill for cheeseburgers and assigned Morgan sous chef duties. While Morgan was making macaroni and cheese and steaming broccoli, she heard her phone's ring tone sounding in the living room.

When she got to the phone, she saw Ris's name on the caller ID. She answered the call. "What's up, lady?"

"Guess who's got another date tonight?" Ris asked, her words tumbling out quickly.

Morgan headed back to the kitchen. "Hm... Let me think about this... It's a very difficult question..."

"Shut up," Ris said playfully. "Corbin called. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Morgan paused in her stirring of the macaroni. "Already knew what?"

Ris laughed softly. "Yeah right. Corbin told me to go to your place because we were being picked up there... by the hot guy from the party." Ris's voice dripped with suggestion. "Anything you want to tell me?"

"It's not like that," she said, checking on the broccoli's progress. "You know Lucas? The barista from that coffee house I was telling you about? He's coming, too."

"Now who's big pimpin'?"

Morgan decided to ignore the comment. "So, when're you coming over?"

"How's now?"

"Fine. Have you eaten?"

"Nope."

"Cheeseburger?"

"Hell yeah."

Morgan smiled. "Okay, I'll tell my dad to put another burger on for you. And I'll see you in a bit."

"Bye."

Morgan ended her call and headed out to the back yard.

"What's up, princess?" her father asked when he noticed her.

Morgan smiled. "Ris is coming over. She and I are going out tonight and she



wants to get ready together.”

He raised an eyebrow. “So... I’m making another burger?”

Morgan nodded. “If you please. She hasn’t eaten yet.”

Her father nodded and, after putting the grill’s lid down, walked into the house. Morgan followed. By the time she got into the kitchen, he was already in the process of making another burger patty. “So,” he said when he noticed she’d entered the room. “Going out with Corbin again?”

“I’m not going out with Corbin,” Morgan clarified as she walked to the stove, “but he’ll be there.”

Dylan held his hands up innocently. “Pardon me for asking.”

“No way. Off with your head.”

“Then who’s going to make you the perfect cheeseburger?”

Morgan considered this. “Fine. I’ll spare your life. This time.” She smiled.

He smiled too. He placed the new patty on a plate and washed his hands. “So... is there anyone you are interested in?”

“Dad,” Morgan whined.

“It’s my job to ask,” he said, turning off the water.

“Then I guess it’s my job to be mortified.”

He dried his hands. “It’s true. Any other response from you would just be a letdown.”

Morgan rolled her eyes as her father grabbed the plate with the patty and exited the kitchen. She then turned her attention back to her sous chef duties. She strained the noodles and was mixing up the cheese sauce when the front door opened, revealing Ris and a large overnight bag. Ris waved before hauling her belongings in the direction of Morgan’s bedroom. When she returned she was smiling.

“How long till dinner?”

Morgan shrugged. “Probably just a couple minutes.”

“Okay, then. Not enough time to tell you about last night.”

“Not unless you want to share the details with my dad, too.”

Ris shrugged. “I could always leave out the tawdry bits.” She grinned, an assurance she was kidding.

Just then, Morgan’s dad entered the house, cheeseburgers in hand. He greeted Ris cordially and invited her and Morgan to fix their plates. Then the three of them moved out to the dining room table.

Dinner conversation was filled with laughs as Morgan’s dad gently teased both girls about the evening’s plans. The girls, in turn, teased him by informing him of all the borderline illegal things they intended to do on the night’s outing. He just smiled and regaled them with stories of the stupid things he’d done as a

teenager, like trying to impress a girl by riding his bike down a flight of stairs, an attempt which completely backfired when he fell off the bike and face-planted in front of his crush.

“It all worked out for the best, though,” he said at the end of his story. “That girl wasn’t the one for me, so I guess it really didn’t matter that I embarrassed myself like that.”

Ris nodded appreciatively. “Very grown-up of you to say.”

He nodded. “I’d hope so. I am, after all, a grown-up.” He smiled for a moment, then his expression turned more serious, more sad. He glanced at Morgan. “Her birthday’s coming up soon.”

“I know,” Morgan said quietly. It would be the tenth birthday Chelsea would not be there for. The anniversary of her disappearance was also rapidly approaching, but she didn’t say anything about that, and neither did her father.

The meal ended rather quickly after that. Morgan and Ris cleared their places and put their dishes in the dishwasher. Morgan put away the extra macaroni and broccoli and put the pans in the sink to be dealt with later. Then the two of them headed off to Morgan’s room.

Morgan went directly to her closet and stared at her clothing blankly. She wasn’t really thinking about clothes. After a minute, she turned to Ris to ask for some assistance, but Ris wasn’t paying attention to her. Instead, Ris was holding the photograph Morgan kept on her bedside table, looking down at it thoughtfully. Morgan went to stand beside her and looked down at the picture, though she didn’t really need to. She had every detail memorized from staring at it so many nights. It was a picture of her mother, Chelsea. In the picture, she was laughing, her head tipped back, her brown hair spilling around her shoulders in loose waves, her light brown eyes sparkling.

“She’s really pretty,” Ris said quietly, careful, Morgan noticed, to use the present tense. Once, years ago, Morgan had thrown a fit when Ris had referred to Chelsea in the past tense, as if she were dead.

Without even realizing it, as she looked at the picture, Morgan allowed her mind to reach out. She became aware of a variety of emotions swirling through Ris’s mind: sadness, worry, confusion. But then there was something else—not thoughts, per se, but impressions. They were jumbled, but Morgan was able to sort a few out—Where could she be? If she’s still alive, why hasn’t she come home? I wonder if she just doesn’t want to come home?

Morgan turned away from the picture and took a few steps away from Ris, anger coursing through her veins. How dare Ris even suggest that her mother didn’t want to be with her family? How dare she?

But then, suddenly, Morgan came to her senses. Ris hadn’t suggested it.

Morgan had been traipsing through her friend's inmost thoughts. If anyone had the right to be mad at the moment, that person was certainly Ris. Taking in a deep breath, Morgan turned to Ris and smiled. "Weren't you going to tell me about your date?"

Ris set the picture down in its place and looked up at Morgan, grinning. She launched into a description of the details of the previous night, from what Corbin wore to what they ate to what covers the band they saw butchered. Morgan listened and nodded encouragingly as Ris spoke.

It wasn't until Ris got to the end of her description that Morgan realized one piece was conspicuously absent. "What about the end of the night?"

Ris looked at her, an expression of mock confusion on her face. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean." Morgan waggled an eyebrow suggestively.

Ris just stared at Morgan a moment before sighing. "Fine. No kiss. Well, not really. He kissed me on the cheek."

Morgan nodded in light of this information, a flash of emotion coursing through her. When she identified the feeling, she felt a wash of alarm: was she jealous? She gave herself a mental shake. Of course she wasn't jealous. Ris was her best friend, and it wasn't like she liked Corbin. Still, she didn't know whether she was displeased with the fact that he had kissed her only on the cheek. "Well, there's always tonight," she said after a beat.

Ris smiled. "That's what I'm thinking."

"Only—" Morgan said, thinking of the last time she'd been out with Corbin and Ris, "—I would lay off the drinks this time if I were you."

Ris gave a humorless laugh. "I think I learned that one on my own. I was just so nervous last time... but tonight it's water only for me. Maybe some pop."

"I think that's a good call. No way you're getting a kiss if we've gotta carry you out of the place."

Ris tossed a stuffed penguin in Morgan's general direction.

Morgan didn't flinch and the penguin hit the wall behind her: Ris's aim was notoriously off. "Okay, if we're going to get ready for this thing, let's get ready."

"Okay," Ris agreed. She walked over to her overnight bag and unzipped it. "I brought a handful of choices for us to try on..."

"Of course you did."

Ris turned to Morgan and made a face before continuing her excavation of the overnight bag. They spent the time until Kellen was supposed to pick them up getting ready, occasionally walking to the living room to get feedback from Morgan's father on their looks. He was, predictably, not particularly helpful, but Morgan liked the idea of making him feel involved in their craziness.

By the time the doorbell rang, the girls were dressed and ready to go. Ris opted to wear a short dress with leggings and a variety of sparkly clips in her short hair for decoration. Morgan was ordered to wear a silver dress which was, in Morgan's opinion, indecently short. Ris also put Morgan into knee-high boots that made her dad's eyebrows hitch up when he saw them.

He insisted on opening the door—"So you girls can make an entrance."—and seemed surprised to see not one but three guys on his front porch.

"And which of you is Corbin?" he asked as Morgan and Ris approached the door.

The impressions Morgan got from the guys as they caught sight of her and Ris made Morgan blush. Behind her father's back, she raised an eyebrow. Only Lucas looked in any way abashed.

Corbin held his hand out for Dylan to shake. "Corbin Starling. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Abbey."

Dylan shook Corbin's hand and eyed Lucas and Kellen warily. "And you two are...?"

"Lucas Kenrick," Lucas said promptly, also offering his hand for Dylan to shake. "I go to school with your daughter. And Corbin. And Ris."

Morgan smiled at Lucas's obvious nervousness. She wondered if he'd ever met a girl's dad before.

After Dylan shook Lucas's hand, he turned to Kellen, suspicion in his gaze. "You don't go to school with Morgan?"

"No."

"Kellen's a friend of mine," Corbin offered helpfully.

Dylan didn't take the bait. "What school are you at?" he asked, still looking at Kellen.

"Not in school."

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Morgan's only seventeen," Dylan said.

Morgan groaned. "And since Kellen's not my date, his age in relation to mine isn't an issue."

Dylan glanced at his daughter. "So, Lucas is your date?"

"No," Morgan insisted quickly—perhaps a bit too quickly. "He's my friend. The only ones on a date are Corbin and Ris."

Dylan looked unconvinced. For a moment, Morgan wasn't sure what her dad was going to do. He was clearly uncomfortable with the situation, but he couldn't very well forbid both Morgan and Ris to go out. And if he forbid Morgan, he wouldn't feel right about Ris being alone with three guys. Morgan

watched the conflict brewing behind his eyes and then, suddenly, the conflict was gone. Her father's shoulders relaxed. He smiled.

"You'll have your phone on you?" he asked Morgan.

"Of course," Morgan said, eyeing him suspiciously.

"You can have my number, too, sir, if you'd like," Corbin said from the doorway.

He waved a hand absently at Corbin. "That's not necessary." He looked from Morgan to Ris and back again. "Have fun, girls."

"Thanks, we will," Ris said quickly. She grabbed Morgan's forearm and pulled her out the door as if afraid if they waited around he would change his mind.

Kellen directed Morgan to sit in the passenger seat and for Corbin, Ris, and Lucas to sit in the back. As Corbin and Ris debated who should ride in the center, Morgan leaned in close to Lucas.

"Did you do it?"

"What?"

"Do your... calming thing on my dad?"

"No."

Morgan wanted to ask more, but Corbin, Ris, and Kellen were already in the car.

Corbin, ever the gentleman, was in the center of the bench seat, flanked by Lucas and Ris. As soon as Kellen put the car in gear, Ris began prattling away—a habit when she was nervous. She asked Kellen where they were going, asked Lucas about work, asked Corbin about his shoes. Even though she'd spent the last few hours with Morgan, Ris asked Morgan some questions, too. After about five minutes of incessant chatter, Morgan turned in her seat to look at Lucas. She raised an eyebrow at him and glanced pointedly at Ris, hoping Lucas would catch her meaning. After a moment, Lucas nodded and glanced at Ris. Slowly, Ris stopped talking, her shoulders relaxing. She turned to Corbin and smiled. When Morgan turned forward in her seat again, she caught Kellen shooting her an approving look.

Kellen turned on his radio and the rest of the trip passed quickly. Their destination was a large warehouse downtown, and Morgan was unsurprised by the presence of valets dressed in black pants and white button-up shirts. Four valets came to Kellen's car and opened all the doors. Kellen handed over his keys and led the group inside.

Whatever Morgan's expectations for the décor of the warehouse were, they were quickly forgotten when she entered the space. The warehouse was enormous and open, painted white from floor to ceiling. Lights twinkled up in

the rafters and down support posts. Different color flood lights flashed across the dance floor at unpredictable intervals. Hundreds of people crowded the space, some dancing to the music, some talking, some watching.

A woman in black and white walked up to them, proffering a tray of exotic-looking drinks. Kellen waved her away and led them further into the room. When they got near the center, Kellen muttered something to Lucas, who was closest to him, and disappeared into the thronging mass around them.

Ris, who had noticed only that they had stopped moving, immediately started dancing, touching Corbin lightly on the wrists. After a glance in Morgan and Lucas's direction, Corbin began dancing as well.

Morgan glanced at Lucas unsurely before the two of them also began to dance. Under the guise of rhythm, Morgan moved closer to Lucas. "Where did Kellen go?"

"Just said he'd be back and for us to stay here."

Morgan nodded and continued to sway to the music. She scanned the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of Kellen. It was not Kellen's face that caught Morgan's attention, however: in the far corner of the dance floor, Morgan thought she recognized someone's sleek bob.

"Lucas, is that—"

But before Morgan could finish her question, she felt a presence at her side. She turned to see Wen standing just a few inches too close to her. "Come with me."

Morgan's hand went involuntarily to her heart. "Wen, you scared the crap outta me."

Wen seemed unfazed by this information. He jerked his head in the direction he intended them to go. "Bring Lucas."

"What about Corbin?"

"I think he's a little busy with your friend. And, unfortunately, she's not invited right now."

Morgan glanced over at Corbin and Ris. They were still dancing, attention focused on each other; Morgan wondered if either of them noticed Wen's arrival. One thing was certain: Lucas noticed. He watched Morgan curiously. Morgan beckoned to him and the two of them followed Wen.

They wove their way through dancing groups of people, Lucas keeping the fingertips of one hand pressed gently against the small of Morgan's back as if to keep from losing track of her. Wen led them to a curtained-off area, behind which a few dozen people sat or stood in groups. No one paid them much attention as they entered. It wasn't until they crossed to where Kellen was seated that a few sets of eyes flicked up at them.

“What’s with the cloak and dagger?” Morgan asked as she sat next to Kellen. Kellen shrugged. “We’re well-practiced at being secretive, I guess.”

As Lucas took a seat beside Morgan, he scanned the room. “Why are people looking at us?”

Morgan glanced around, too, and saw several people casting surreptitious looks in their direction. “Do they know who we are or something?”

“Well, they are psychic,” Kellen said lazily.

Morgan and Lucas exchanged glances.

“So, why did Orrick want us to come here tonight?” Morgan asked.

Kellen made a sweeping motion with his hand. “To be around your own kind.”

If he said something else, Morgan didn’t hear it. She was suddenly overwhelmed by what felt like white noise enveloping her senses. Instinctively, she reached out, taking hold of Lucas’s hand. As he squeezed her fingers, she felt the buzzing fog receding, but not dissipating entirely.

“What is that?” she whispered.

“Them,” Wen said, glancing up at the others in the room. “They’re curious. Just trying to feel you out.”

Morgan closed her eyes. Taking in a steadying breath, she focused her energy on blocking out the noise the others were producing in her mind. She thought of the wall she encountered when she tried to read Lucas and concentrated on that. Slowly, by degrees, quiet returned to Morgan’s mind. She looked up at the strangers in the room; several people were watching her and a few nodded appreciatively. Morgan made a face. “You could just ask me.”

Wen chuckled softly. “Not exactly the way we do things.”

“Still,” Lucas said. “A little rude, don’t you think?”

“Not if you can block it. And you both can.”

Morgan considered mounting an argument to this point, but decided that this wasn’t exactly the venue for it.

Lucas seemed to be thinking along the same lines. “Since we’re kinda new to this whole thing, why don’t we keep this meeting more... low-tech.”

Wen nodded. “As you wish.” He stood up, and as soon as Morgan and Lucas followed suit, the people in the room began to crowd around them, many smiling and offering their hands for Morgan and Lucas to shake.

And then the conversations began. Some people asked Morgan about herself—but trivial, banal things like her favorite this or her least favorite that. Morgan asked questions, too, and received occasional answers as people pushed and shuffled to get closer to her. As the minutes passed, she was separated from Lucas and Wen, but this didn’t concern her much. If she pushed out with her

mind, she found she could sense they were nearby. She could sense everyone, actually, but there was something familiar about the way both Lucas and Wen felt; whereas, the energies from the other partygoers was somehow foreign. It was almost like being able to pick out the voice of a friend in a crowded room.

How much time had passed in the meet and greet, Morgan wasn't sure, but at one point, she noticed Tesin standing over against a wall. He didn't notice her looking; he was too busy surveying the room. His eyes seemed to be following someone. Morgan tried to catch a glimpse at who was holding his attention, but she couldn't see through the ever-thickening crowd of people. With a shrug, she allowed herself to continue to be passed from person to person, answering the same questions again and again, consciously attempting to keep her wall in place. Every few minutes or so, she was aware of someone trying to penetrate her defenses, but she was able to keep her wall up. At least she was pretty sure she was.

Growing tired of smiling and shaking hands, Morgan decided to go say hello to Tesin. He was a familiar face and she was at least relatively certain that he wouldn't attempt to enter her mind. Nodding politely as she edged by people, Morgan made her way toward the wall where Tesin stood. However, when she was less than ten paces from him, she saw another person approaching him—someone familiar. The person she had thought she'd seen earlier.

Morgan changed directions abruptly, turning toward where she knew Lucas was. She pushed her way to him and tugged on his arm.

“What?” Lucas asked, turning to her.

“Look,” she said, nodding her head toward Tesin. When Lucas turned his attention where she'd indicated, she continued. “Am I on crack, or is that Lia Roderick?”



## *Chapter Twelve*

As if she'd heard Morgan's words, Lia Roderick glanced over her shoulder. Instinctively, Morgan ducked against Lucas to hide.

"Really?" Lucas asked skeptically. "And you're hiding why?"

Truthfully, Morgan wasn't entirely sure why she felt the need not to be seen by Lia. Somehow it felt almost as if she were being caught doing something she wasn't supposed to be doing. But if Lia was at this party—and in this room—then it must mean that she belonged. Which meant that Lia was either Veneret or —

"Do you think she's a Natural?" Morgan asked suddenly.

"Didn't Orrick say Naturals are really rare? What's the chance that you and me and Corbin and Lia are all—"

Morgan made a face at him. "You moved me with your mind, but this you find outside the realm of possibility?"

Lucas shrugged. Then he smiled. Before Morgan could ask what he was doing, she saw the set to his face and knew—he was going to make Lia do something. He had stared this way at countless people the other night when he'd wanted people to compliment his hat. Curious, Morgan turned to see what he was trying to make Lia do.

Seconds passed as she watched. Then seconds more. When she glanced up at Lucas she saw a look of disappointment on his face. "Maybe it doesn't work on other Naturals," she said, placing a conciliatory hand on his arm. "You couldn't get me to do whatever it was you wanted me to do, remember?"

Lucas nodded. Shook his head. "But I could yank you out of the road. And I can calm you down—you've said so yourself."

Morgan shrugged. "It's just a guess. Like I know anything about this stuff!" She smiled.

Lucas nodded. "Fair enough." He glanced back at Lia. "So... you wanna go talk to her?"

Morgan raised a dubious eyebrow. "The last interaction I had with her, she was trying to manipulate my yearbook group to go on all the hard routes so she and her friends could have an easy—" Morgan stopped. "She's a Pusher."

"What?"

“A Pusher—she can make people do things. I saw her do it.” Morgan smiled and couldn’t help feeling slightly impressed. “But...”

“But what?”

“Just the other day, someone wanted me to do a reading for Lia, and she was all like, ‘Oh, I don’t believe in that kind of stuff...’ It just... doesn’t really make sense.”

“Maybe she found out about it afterward.” Lucas considered this for a moment. “Wait—did you actually do the reading for her?”

Morgan thought back. “Kinda, yeah.”

Lucas nodded as if something was making sense to him. “Maybe it is you.”

“Huh?”

“Orrick said that you weren’t, like, giving your powers to anyone, but maybe you’re—I don’t know—activating us or something. Maybe you’re waking something up inside us.”

Morgan looked at him doubtfully. “Seriously?”

“Depends. Did everything start for Corbin after you gave him a reading?”

“Well, yeah...”

“See? Maybe you are doing it.”

Morgan was unconvinced. “So, you’re saying that I somehow turned Lia into a Pusher? And she then tried to use that ability to screw me and my group when we were selling ads?”

“I didn’t know what I was doing, if that’s any consolation.”

Morgan jumped and turned around to find herself face to face with Lia Roderick. After eyeing Lia for a moment, Morgan said, “Actually, that makes you lose esteem in my eyes.”

Lia huffed. “Like I had any to begin with?”

“Now, ladies, play nice,” Tesin said, walking up beside Lia.

Morgan immediately turned her attention to Tesin. “And when exactly were you going to tell me about this? About her?”

Tessin raised an appraising eyebrow at Morgan. “And what makes you think I answer to you?”

Morgan looked down. “I didn’t mean—”

But Tesin was talking again. “Lia’s been a little... hard to convince.”

Lia’s hand went automatically to the necklace she wore—a cross. She smiled thinly. “I just... It’s so incredible.”

“It is at that,” Lucas said.

Lia looked around the room, apprehension and wonder apparent in her eyes, and Morgan bristled.

“You seem to’ve come pretty far in your acceptance of this kind of thing,” she

said coldly. “I seem to remember you saying you didn’t believe in this psychic stuff.”

“And she didn’t,” Tesin said firmly, an edge to his voice. “It took lots of effort to convince her I wasn’t crazy.”

“You?” Morgan asked, surprised.

Tesin raised an eyebrow.

“I mean—I guess I just thought—”

“That it was Kellen’s job?” Tesin supplied.

Morgan shrugged. “Well, yeah, I guess.”

He smiled. “Kellen’s not, like, my boss or anything. We’re more like... coworkers.”

Lia placed a hand on Morgan’s arm and Morgan started.

“Look, I’m sorry I was such a jerk the other day.” Lia smiled. “You were right, though. Your reading.”

Lucas glanced from Lia to Morgan and back again. “What’d she say at the reading?”

Lia looked at Morgan, as if waiting to see if she was going to explain. When it became apparent that she wasn’t, she spoke. “She said change was coming, and that I should embrace it.”

“Hear, hear,” Lucas muttered. Just then, something seemed to catch his eye.

Morgan turned to where he was looking and saw Corbin walking toward them. Alone.

“She’s with Kellen,” Corbin said before Morgan could even ask. He looked around the makeshift room, nodding. “Cozy in here.”

Lia shifted perceptibly toward Corbin. “It certainly is.”

Morgan rolled her eyes. Of course Lia had a crush on Corbin.

Corbin seemed to notice Lia for the first time. “Wait—what’re you doing here?”

“She sneaked past the doorman,” Morgan said sarcastically. “Why do you think she’s here?”

After a moment, Corbin’s face broke into a grin. “That’s fantastic!” he said, wrapping his arm around Lia’s shoulders in a brief squeeze.

“I’m glad you think so,” Lia said.

Morgan noticed how Lia remained close to him even after he released her. Hadn’t she put it together that he was here with someone else?

Corbin glanced at Morgan and Lucas. “How’s it going in here?”

“Lots of handshakes,” Lucas supplied. “How’s Ris liking the party?”

“She’s easily amused; I’m sure she’s having a ball,” Morgan said.

Corbin laughed. “She hasn’t stopped dancing. I was actually kinda glad when

Kellen showed up. I needed a break.”

“Well, it’s not much of a break in here,” Morgan said. She briefly explained about the mental wall she’d been keeping in place.

Corbin gave a low whistle. “Sounds rough.” He glanced at Lucas and Lia for verification.

To Morgan’s surprise, Lucas just shrugged.

“I don’t see the need to put up a wall,” Lia said airily. “I haven’t got anything to hide.”

Morgan caught Lucas’s eye, and he grinned at her exasperation.

Wen approached them then and clapped Corbin on the back. “How’s it going?”

“Great,” Corbin said.

Wen nodded. “Good.” He motioned around the room. “Plenty of people here who wanna meet you. Come on, let me introduce you...”

Corbin allowed himself to be led away. One glance at Tesin told her that she was expected to get back to mingling as well, but the thought of interacting with these strangers again wearied her.

“I’ve gotta pee,” she announced.

Lucas raised an eyebrow. “Good for you...?”

She waited for another second, partially feeling as if she needed clearance from Tesin. When he said nothing, she decided it was safe to go.

Morgan ducked out of the room. She skirted the wall, figuring if she walked far enough, she was bound to run into a bathroom.

There were people everywhere. Most were dancing, but some were just standing around, impeding her progress. She wove around groups and individuals, avoiding being hit by flailing limbs only narrowly on a couple of occasions.

The first wall was a wash, and the second wall consisted of more curtains. Wondering whether the bathroom might be tucked behind this section, Morgan poked her head in.

Her first thought was that she’d walked in on a couple. There were two people seated on a couch in the corner of the empty makeshift room. The guy was close to the girl—hovering over her face, almost. Morgan froze, her heart pounding. She knew she should turn away, walk away, but there was something so strange about the scene. So familiar about the guy’s disheveled brown hair. So recognizable about the sparkly clips in the short blond hair of the girl—

“Ris!” The name escaped before Morgan had fully come to the realization that the girl on the couch was her friend. She crossed to the couch, and before she was close enough to reach either party, Kellen looked up at her, a lazy smile

playing on his lips.

“Morgan,” he said, his tone pleasant, silky. “How’s it going?”

“What the hell are you doing?” Morgan demanded, her eyes on Ris, who didn’t seem to have noticed Morgan’s arrival.

Kellen shrugged easily. “Getting better acquainted with your friend.”

Morgan turned to him, glaring. “What’s wrong with her? What’d you do?” She looked at Ris again, waving her hand in front of her friend’s face. Ris’s eyes remained unfocused and her jaw was slack. “She looks like she’s been—I don’t know—drugged or something!”

Kellen chuckled, leaning back against the arm of the couch. “Come on, I didn’t drug her. Please. Give me a little credit.”

“Oh, so I suppose your boyish charm just overwhelmed her, then, huh?” Morgan slapped Ris’s cheek gently, hoping to get a response from her.

Kellen grabbed Morgan by the wrist. “Don’t bother. She’ll come to in a little while.”

Morgan wrenched her wrist from Kellen’s grasp, glaring at him. “How can you be so calm? Look at her—there’s something wrong.” Suddenly, Morgan stopped. A memory floated to the top of her consciousness and she understood exactly what was happening. “Wait—you’re taking her energy?”

“Like Orrick told you earlier, the abilities the Veneret possess are diminishing. We think—well, there are a few schools of thought on the matter, but, basically, the thought is that the more people there are in—you know—the world, the more the basic energy available to those people is spread thin. The Veneret have always been able to use the power in a way that the common just can’t—they don’t know how to use it.” He made a face, as if what he was saying wasn’t coming out the way he wanted it to. “Look, Morgan. She doesn’t need it. I haven’t hurt her. Calm down.”

“Calm down? You’re... you’re violating my best friend and you’re telling me to calm down?”

Kellen rolled his eyes. “Please. I’m not violating her. I’m merely taking back a little of what rightfully belongs to me.”

“I think Ris would disagree with that,” Morgan snapped.

“Trust me. She won’t even notice.” He smiled. “She didn’t notice before.”

“Before—?” But Morgan knew what he meant. “At that first party—it wasn’t the alcohol that made her pass out like that. It was you. And that’s why she didn’t wake up the next morning.”

“Well, let’s be fair. She did consume a fair bit of alcohol. If she hadn’t, she might have slept an hour longer than usual, but beyond that, you’d never’ve noticed.” Kellen crossed his arms over his chest and surveyed Morgan. “I’m not

sure why you're freaking out on me. It's not like you didn't know we do this. We can do more with a little borrowed power than we could ever do by ourselves. You'll see that."

Morgan let out a humorless laugh. "I will not," she insisted. "I'm not going to suck the life out of unsuspecting people. I don't care how powerful it'll make me. If that's what I've got to do, count me out."

"Come on now, Morgan. It's really not as bad as you're making it out to be. You'll see—tomorrow, your friend will be as good as new. And ask yourself this: if it were a random stranger in here with me, not your best friend, would this still be your reaction?"

"Of course it would." The air in the room suddenly seemed oppressive, and she realized she needed to get out. She stood. Her first instinct was to stalk out of the room, but then there was Ris to consider. She hesitated, and in that moment of indecision, Kellen pounced.

He was on his feet and standing in front of her almost before she could blink. He placed a hand on either of her shoulders, holding her in place. "You're not going to tell anyone about this. Especially not Corbin or Lucas. Especially not Ris. You're going to keep this to yourself."

Morgan felt her mind fighting against these plans, actively making plans to send text messages to Corbin, to Lucas, to get them to come save her and Ris. But even as these plans formed, Morgan began to question the wisdom of them. There was really no need to concern the guys with this. Kellen said Ris was okay. And when he'd taken the power before, Ris had been fine afterward—she'd just needed a little extra sleep. Ris would be okay, so there was no need to make a big deal over this. In fact, Kellen's point made sense—

It doesn't make sense. The Veneret are already more powerful than regular people. Why do they need more power?

—the common weren't using the power for anything, so why not take it? Put it to the use it was meant for? It was logical. It was fair.

It was right.

By the time Kellen released Morgan from his grip, Morgan felt completely calm. In fact, she couldn't put her finger on what exactly had been her qualm to begin with. When she glanced at Ris, she saw that her jaw was not slack anymore, and she seemed moderately more lucid, though she still wasn't focusing on Morgan.

She looked back at Kellen, convinced he'd just said something to her. After a moment, she thought she remembered what he'd said, so she replied, "Yeah, I should go find the bathroom."

Kellen shrugged and turned back to the couch.

Morgan left the room, continuing her search for the ladies' room.

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Two hours later, Ris was snuggled up next to Corbin in the backseat of Kellen's car. "Don't know why I'm so tired," she muttered almost incoherently, her eyes closing.

Corbin put an arm around her, smiling.

Morgan exchanged glances with Lucas, who sat on Corbin's other side, and rolled her eyes as she turned forward in the passenger seat.

"So, how'd you all enjoy the party?" Kellen asked as he merged onto the freeway.

"It was... something else," Lucas offered.

Kellen gave a short laugh. "It's a little overwhelming, I imagine. I mean, we're all so used to it—and we're so not used to Naturals. It's hard to know exactly how to interact with you."

Corbin sighed. "I'm pretty beat. I mean, it's a lot of work, tuning out all the noise, you know? All those people just... pressing at your mind. Tiring."

"I wonder if that's why Ris is so beat," Lucas said.

"Maybe," Corbin agreed. "I mean, maybe she was subconsciously aware of all that stuff and it wore her out? You think so, Kellen?"

Kellen shrugged. "Not sure. Can't say I really know how the common deal with high-ability situations. I mean, they don't usually come to our parties."

Morgan didn't feel the need to point out that the servers were all common. Nor did she think it important to mention what had happened between Kellen and Ris. Instead, she stared off into the sky, attention fixed on a particularly bright star.

Morgan and Ris were the first to be dropped off. Corbin got out of the car to help walk Ris to the door. Ris seemed awake enough to stay unsteadily upright, but Morgan was unsure whether her friend could have found her way to the front door unassisted.

Kellen called his goodbye from the car, but Lucas got out to walk with Morgan to the door. They followed a few steps behind Corbin and Ris.

"You okay?" Lucas asked.

Morgan glanced at him. "What d'you mean?"

Lucas shrugged. "Dunno. You just seem... distant, maybe?"

"Maybe I'm still all walled up from the party."

Lucas didn't look convinced, but he nodded. By that time, Corbin and Ris had made it to the front door. Corbin stood unsurely on the porch, waiting,

presumably, for Morgan to take possession of Ris, to open the door, something.

Morgan obliged and went to the front door to unlock it. When she turned to relieve Corbin of Ris, she saw that he was holding her so that she faced him, looking down at her. He leaned down to kiss her on the cheek, but Ris twisted her face toward him just before his lips made contact and Morgan felt her stomach drop as she watched her best friend locked in a kiss with Corbin Starling.

Instinctively, Morgan looked over at Lucas. Lucas looked just as uncomfortable as she felt. He shifted awkwardly beside her.

When Corbin and Ris separated, Morgan swooped in to usher Ris toward the door. Ris smiled benignly over her shoulder at Corbin and even aimed a lazy wave in Lucas's direction. Morgan helped Ris into the house and leaned her up against the wall before turning back to the guys.

Corbin looked a bit dazed, his eyebrows furrowed slightly. Morgan turned to Lucas who took a step forward and put his arms around her in a clumsy hug. Morgan returned it, her movements just as awkward. When the two parted, Lucas shrugged as if to say, Seemed like the thing to do.

Following suit, Corbin stepped into the spot Lucas had vacated and hugged Morgan, too. She had to admit, it was a good hug, and she felt herself conforming to the shape of his body before she caught herself. He'd just been kissing her best friend, after all.

Guiding Corbin away from her by his shoulders, Morgan offered a smile. "Goodnight, Corbin."

"Night, Morgan," he said absently.

Morgan nodded toward Lucas, who nodded back and offered a small half-wave as he turned toward Kellen's car. Morgan turned and walked into her house, closing and locking the door behind her and draping Ris's arm around her own shoulder as she led the way toward her bedroom.

"That was a good party," Ris said dreamily.

Morgan jostled them into her room. "Yeah, the best," she agreed flatly.



## *Chapter Thirteen*

“Morgan, are you even paying attention?”

Morgan looked up from the checkerboard before her into the light blue eyes of Lucas. He looked mildly annoyed. “Yeah, Lucas—I’m paying attention.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. Leaning back into the cushions of what he had claimed was his favorite armchair in the Daily Grind, he asked, “Oh, really then? What was I saying?”

Stalling for time, Morgan glanced around the coffee house. “Um...” she said after a few moments. “Something important?”

Lucas sighed, sounding slightly exasperated. “What’s up with you? You’ve seemed a little out of it since the party last night.”

“Out of it how?”

“Just... distracted, I guess.”

She immediately felt a pang of guilt. When Lucas called her this morning, he seemed more excited than she could recall him ever being and now she wasn’t giving him her full attention.

“Okay,” she said, sitting up a little straighter. “I’m one hundred percent focused. What were you saying?”

“It’s Orrick. I’ve been doing a little research. I mean, I already knew who he was, but I guess I never knew how he got to be a billionaire.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“Well, there’s the stock market, of course. He’s apparently got a knack for buying up stocks when they’re really cheap, just before they start making lots and lots of money. Like, he’ll buy a ton of shares of something at, like, two dollars apiece, and then a week later they’ll be trading for hundreds.”

“Sounds like he’s got a little inside knowledge.”

“Or a little future knowledge. He’s never been wrong. If he’s a Knower or if he knows a Knower, that’ll be why.”

“So, that’s it? He became a billionaire playing the stock market?”

Lucas shook his head. “Not even close. He did some time in real estate. From what I could find out, he constantly bought these really, really nice, expensive houses way below market value.”

Morgan shrugged. “Well, the economy’s been bad—”

“No—since before then. And, like, millionaires selling million-dollar homes for a fraction of the cost. Then Orrick would turn around and sell the homes for millions of dollars again.”

“So... he could convince people to sell their houses for far under what they were worth? Sounds like a Pusher to me.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too. From real estate, he moved on to business acquisition. From what I could tell, he’d just kinda swoop in on a company that wasn’t up for sale and he’d buy it. A few people were quoted as saying he’s a ‘persuasive businessman.’”

“If they only knew...”

“Right?” Lucas tilted his head back, surveying the ceiling, apparently deep in thought. When he returned his gaze to Morgan, he was smiling.

“What?”

“I just... I guess I never pictured myself as being rich before.”

“You are now?”

“You’re not? I mean, I looked at the numbers. Starting salary for someone in one of Orrick’s organizations is something like a hundred grand a year.”

“So, what? You wanna just go work for Orrick now or something?”

“No—not necessarily. I mean, I know we could. I mean...” He lowered his voice and leaned in. “How much you wanna bet most, if not all, Orrick’s employees are Veneret? I’m sure if we wanted it, Orrick would give us a job, no problem. But... I feel like we’ve got more options than that. I mean, why just work for the man when we could become—I dunno—the next Orrick Williams?”

“And how’re we gonna do that? I mean, can you See the future?”

He shrugged. “I kinda thought you might be able to—what with your experience as a fortune-teller and all.”

Morgan narrowed her eyes at him.

“And if not,” he said with a shrug, “then maybe one of us will—what’s the word?—manifest that ability.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Then there are other ways to make money.”

Morgan stared at him incredulously. “You mean like Orrick? Pushing people to sell things they don’t want to sell?”

“Why not?”

“It just seems really... dishonest. Immoral even, maybe. To just take something because you want it.”

Too late, Morgan’s eyes landed on the infamous fedora from their fateful outing the night Lucas had been “activated.” Lucas’s eyes skimmed over the fedora, too, before he turned his attention back to Morgan.

“So, I’m immoral?”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” she said quickly. “That’s a hat—and you didn’t realize what you were doing.”

Lucas shrugged. “Orrick buys houses and businesses. How are those things that much different from the fedora? That guy didn’t want to give it to me.”

“Again, you didn’t know what you were doing.”

“I could’ve given it back once I realized, though, and I didn’t.”

Morgan sighed, exasperated. “Fine, you’re immoral. Is that what you wanna hear?”

Lucas raised his eyebrows. “Just add in ‘depraved’ and I’m a happy camper.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re a weirdo.”

“And you’re willingly being seen in public with me. What does that say about you?”

She smiled. “Clearly, I’m deeply disturbed—hanging out with such a depraved, immoral individual...”

They turned their attention back to the checkers game for a few minutes before Lucas spoke again.

“So, you’d never, like, work for Orrick if he offered you a job?”

Morgan considered this for a moment. She picked up a checker and began running her fingers along the edges. “Dunno. I mean, I guess it depends what the job was. But... you know what? No. I wouldn’t want to just be given a job, you know? I’d wanna earn it. I don’t think I could just work for Orrick.” She turned her attention from the checker to Lucas. “How ’bout you?”

He shrugged. “Shoot. If Orrick gave me the opportunity to make some serious money, I can’t say I’d say no.”

She shook her head. “Depraved, immoral...” she said, smiling.

Lucas smiled, too, and turned his attention back to the checkerboard. “You don’t seem to have any problem with Kellen working for Orrick,” he said, eyes down as he moved one of his pieces.

Morgan returned with a move of her own before responding. “Why would I care if Kellen worked for Orrick?”

“Dunno. You just seem... close to him is all.”

She sighed. “Seriously? First Kellen calls you and Corbin my boyfriends, now you’re accusing me of—”

“Wait—I’m not accusing you of anything,” Lucas said. “But if you’d like me to...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Lucas moved one of his checkers before responding. “You’re not exactly difficult to read—now that I know how. And when I see you with Kellen, there’s

a certain—”

“Fascination?” Morgan supplied. “Because, yes, I’ll admit, I’m a little fascinated by him. Because of his abilities—and what he knows about—” She lowered her voice and leaned toward Lucas. “—the Veneret.”

“I was gonna say attraction, but if you wanna call it fascination, sure.”

Morgan threw a checker at Lucas, hitting him squarely in the chest.

Lucas ignored her abuse. “You coming tonight?” he asked, nodding toward a flier on the community bulletin board.

Morgan glanced at the flier, which announced a band was playing here tonight at seven. “Dreamers Often Lie... Never heard of them.”

“It’s Corbin’s band,” Lucas supplied. “I work tonight, so I’ll be here.”

Morgan shrugged. “Dunno. Ris might wanna come. If she wants to, I guess I’ll probably end up here.”

“Lia might want to come, too.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “What, we’re BFFs with Lia now?”

“Well, no, but...” Lucas shrugged. “I mean, we weren’t friends before all this started, but now...”

“Well, you weren’t a total bitch before all this started happening.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and surveyed her for a moment. “Give her a chance.”

Morgan sighed. “If you insist. But—oh, no!” She brought her hand to her mouth in mock horror. “I don’t have her number. I guess I can’t invite her...”

“Lucky for you, I’ve got her number.” Lucas pulled his cell phone out and began scrolling through his contacts.

Morgan pulled her phone out, too. “How do you have her number?”

“She, Corbin, and I exchanged numbers last night. Must’ve been when you were in the bathroom.”

Morgan felt a momentary twinge. Something shadowy danced formlessly around the edges of her mind.

“Whoa—what just happened?”

“Huh?”

“You. You just... You went all fuzzy just now.”

Morgan raised an eyebrow at him. “What did you say you were drinking?”

Lucas ignored her. “Your energy,” he said quietly, intently. “Usually it feels a certain way, but a second ago it went all—”

“Fuzzy?”

“Kinda, yeah. Just... off, y’know?”

“No.”

“Did something happen last night?” Lucas asked, leaning forward.

“What? No,” Morgan said quickly, though something inside her told her that wasn’t the truth. Last night she’d been looking for the bathroom and she’d found Kellen and Ris together... But there was nothing wrong. Kellen had said there was nothing wrong.

Lucas eyed her dubiously. “There you go, all fuzzy again,” he said quietly. Then he sighed. “You ready for Lia’s number?”

“Yes,” Morgan said, eager for the subject change.

After Lucas rattled off Lia’s phone number, he shifted uneasily. “Oh—uh oh.”

Morgan eyed him. “What, uh oh?”

“I just noticed the time. Told my mom I’d be home about five minutes ago. We’ve got some family picnic thing to go to—”

Morgan waved her hand dismissively. “Go, go.”

He stood and gave an apologetic smile. “See you tonight, though?”

She nodded, also standing. “Yeah, I’ll be here. So, be thinking of what drink you’ll be convincing me I should have tonight.”

Lucas started toward the door. “Oh, I already know,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

“Oh, really?” Morgan asked following him. “Care to share?”

Lucas opened the door and allowed Morgan to exit before him. “You’ll just have to wait and be surprised.”

“Ooh, intrigue.” She stopped to face him, smiling.

Lucas smiled, too, and shifted his weight from foot to foot. After a moment, he offered an awkward wave. “See you tonight, then.” With that, he headed toward his car.

Morgan watched him for a moment before heading toward her own car. When she got in, she immediately, mechanically, pulled on her seatbelt and put her keys in the ignition. But before she started the car, she realized she had no firm plans about where to go or what to do. It wasn’t quite noon yet and she knew Ris was supposed to be shopping with her mother, which might take all day.

Suddenly, Morgan felt it again. The twinge. She wondered briefly if Lucas were still nearby if he’d insist she’d gone fuzzy again. It was silly, though, she convinced herself. There was no reason for her to go fuzzy when she thought about Ris or Kellen.

Kellen. Her phone was in her hand and before she realized what she was doing, she was scrolling through her contacts. She would call Kellen.

The thought that she’d never been the one to initiate contact with Kellen didn’t enter her mind as she placed the call. That she wasn’t sure what she would even say when he picked up didn’t faze her as she listened to the line ring once, twice. It wasn’t until Kellen picked up the phone on the third ring that Morgan’s

actions even registered with her, so when Kellen's voice greeted her, she didn't know what to say.

"Morgan?" Kellen asked after his initial hello went unanswered.

"Yeah," Morgan managed to say.

"I figured you'd call today."

He said it with such certainty that Morgan was taken aback. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Kellen laughed on the other side of the line. "Don't get all offended. You're a curious girl; I figured you'd call eventually with some questions."

"And you figured it'd be today?"

"Yes. You got something to write on?"

"Um..." Morgan's eyes scanned the vicinity. She found a pen, but nothing to write on. Pinning her phone between her shoulder and ear, she poised the pen over her palm. "Yeah. Ready."

Kellen recited some directions and Morgan wrote them—as small as possible—on her hand. When he finished telling Morgan how to get to their rendezvous location, he bid her farewell and hung up. Morgan put her phone down and started her car.

It took twenty minutes to arrive at the location Kellen's directions led. Morgan wasn't familiar with the area, so she found herself checking and rechecking the words on her palm.

She wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but it certainly wasn't what she found. Kellen's directions led to a subdivision filled with luxury condominiums. When she parked and got out of her Honda Civic, she felt slightly bad for not having stopped to wash the car before arriving. The few automobiles visible as she walked up the driveway were spotless SUVs and sports cars.

When she arrived at the front door, her hand barely had time to lift to knocking position before the door opened, revealing Kellen, who had evidently just gotten out of the shower. He wore a pair of dark washed blue jeans, as usual, but no shirt, and he was towel-drying his hair as he stepped out of the doorway to allow Morgan passage.

Morgan walked into the house, attempting to take everything in. Opulence was the only word that came to mind as she walked down a hallway decorated with handsomely framed canvasses interspersed with ornate sconces. Kellen ushered her into what appeared to be a living room: the carpet a rich cream color; the walls just hinting at gold; the couch, love seat, and chair all of a soft brown leather.

Morgan sat down on the couch and marveled at the glass-topped coffee table before her; there was no dust, no fingerprints, not even a water ring from a cold

glass.

As Kellen sat down beside her, she turned to him. “Whose place is this?”

Kellen seemed mildly amused by this question. “Mine.”

“You own this place?”

Kellen shrugged. “Don’t need to.” Then, to answer Morgan’s unvoiced question, he added, “Orrick owns it.”

“You live here by yourself?”

At this, Kellen smiled in earnest, and it was not lost on Morgan that he still wasn’t wearing a shirt. “Would you be jealous if I said I shared this place with a gorgeous supermodel?”

Morgan rolled her eyes.

Kellen chuckled. “Yes, I live here by myself.”

Morgan surveyed the room. “How do you keep it so clean?”

Kellen looked offended. “What? You think since I’m a guy living alone this place should be some kind of cesspool or something? I happen to appreciate order. And beauty.” As he said the last part, his eyes found hers and held them.

“So,” she said, shifting slightly in her seat, “when you figured I’d call today, what’d you figure I’d be calling about?”

Kellen leaned forward. “Isn’t it obvious?” he asked, his voice low. Then, abruptly, he straightened, putting distance between them again. “Your powers. I could tell you were upset the other day when I said you were sloppy. I thought you’d want to start some training.”

“How are you supposed to train me? I mean—you’re not a Feeler, but I am, right?”

Kellen shrugged. “I don’t think there’s one label we can apply to you.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“That’s a very good thing. It confirms what Orrick already knows.”

“That I’m the One?”

Kellen smiled. “Yes.”

“I’m still not sure I’m sold on that.”

“If Orrick says you are, then you are.”

Morgan cocked her head inquisitively. “You’ve got a lot of faith in him, don’t you?”

“Absolutely. He’s a great man.” He leaned in toward Morgan. “You should trust him.”

“I know—I do.”

Morgan intended for her assertion to reassure Kellen, and for him to back away again, but he didn’t. Instead, he stayed close, his eyes traveling the length of her body. When his gaze was once again fixed on her eyes, he spoke.

“Tell me what I’m feeling.”

Morgan, who had been focusing all her energy on not shifting under Kellen’s gaze, was momentarily thrown by the demand. After a moment, she got her bearings and focused her mind. She closed her eyes and allowed her breath to fall into the same easy cadence it always did during her readings. When she reached out, she could feel Kellen’s energy, but it was muted—blocked behind the same sort of wall Lucas usually had up.

“I can’t,” she said, opening her eyes. “You’re blocking me.”

“That’s true,” Kellen said quietly. “But I still need you to tell me what I’m feeling.”

“Well, then, stop blocking me—”

“Push through it.” Kellen’s hazel eyes were intent.

For an instant, Morgan considered telling him that she didn’t know how, but she knew her words would be ignored. Instead, she closed her eyes again and reached out with her mind. When she came up against the barrier again, she attempted to simply push forward. Predictably, it didn’t work. For a few moments, she just sat, considering her options. If she couldn’t knock it over, perhaps she could tear it down? Or maybe just create a hole large enough to get through. But how could she dismantle something that didn’t really exist?

If the barrier between herself and Kellen were real, she wondered, what would it look like? The first image that popped into her head was a brick wall, so she decided to go with it. She began to scan the wall for any chinks, any weak spots. On first glance, the wall looked to be impenetrable, but when she looked a little closer, she saw two bricks that were crumbling slightly. She focused her energy there and slowly, steadily, the bricks disintegrated, as did the bricks surrounding them, until there was a hole large enough for Morgan to reach through.

“You’re curious,” Morgan said. “Excited. Anxious, a little. And... powerful. There’s power coursing through you—more than I’ve picked up on before.”

“Good... That’s good.”

Morgan opened her eyes. “Why is that? Why are you so much more powerful?”

He shrugged. “Maybe you’re just better at detecting it.” Before Morgan had a chance to respond, he was talking again. “That night with Lucas, you were able to Move some things, right? Why don’t you try that now?”

Morgan considered this. She hadn’t attempted to Move anything since taking Lucas’s fedora on the street. The only other times she’d Moved anything, she hadn’t meant to. “I’m really not sure how—”

“You weren’t sure how to get into my mind when I was blocking you, either, but you did it.” Kellen leaned back against the couch, lacing his fingers behind



his head. “Let’s see it, then.”

Morgan’s first instinct was to argue, but he did have a point. She turned her attention to the living room. She wanted so start with something easy—a piece of paper or a shoe—but a quick look around the room revealed no such targets. After a short debate, she decided on the lamp on the end table beside the chair. The lamp was unlike anything she’d seen before: anchored to a thin metal square were at least a dozen spikes protruding upward, each terminating in a glass sphere. It looked light enough, so she focused her energy toward it.

After what felt like an eternity, nothing happened and Morgan turned back to Kellen. “I can’t.”

Kellen sighed, repositioning his arms across his chest. “Just because you didn’t doesn’t mean you can’t. Try again.”

Morgan pursed her lips and turned back to the lamp. Again she focused on it, imagined it hovering, and again, nothing happened.

“It’s not working,” she said after a few minutes.

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Well, you’re a Mover, right? Tell me how I’m supposed to do it.”

“Why do you need me to tell you? You’ve done it before.”

“But that was different.”

“Really, how so?”

“I don’t know—it just was.”

“You know what I think?” Kellen asked, sitting up straighter and positioning his arms by his sides.

“No.”

“I think you don’t want to do it. I think you’re afraid that if you can do this on your own, you won’t need me anymore and I’ll leave you, like your mom did—”

Morgan slapped Kellen as hard as she could. “Don’t you dare say that about my mother—”

From behind her, Morgan heard a crash and the sound of glass breaking. She spun around to find the lamp had fallen to the floor and smashed into a thousand tiny pieces.

Kellen began clapping slowly. “Well done.”

Morgan turned back to him, aware of the sting on her palm from its contact with his face. “Kellen, I’m sorry, I was just so mad—”

But Kellen didn’t look upset. “I know you were mad. And I’m sorry for the low blow, but I knew bringing up your mom would make you angry.”

“Wait—you were trying to make me angry?” Suddenly the red mark on Kellen’s cheek didn’t make Morgan feel so bad.

He smiled. “Sometimes, when you’re not in control of your powers yet, you

can focus more when you're in a heightened emotional state. Anger was the easiest for me to get you to feel."

"Wait—is that why—? In Orrick's office I kind of..."

"Sent things flying?" Kellen supplied.

She nodded. "After he told me I was the One."

"Fear, maybe. Panic. Either one could've pushed you to Moving the things around you."

Morgan turned again to the shattered lamp. "I'm sorry about that. Where's your broom? I'll sweep it up." She got so far as to stand before Kellen grabbed her wrist and tugged her down again.

"Don't worry about it. I'll have Donna clean it up later," he said, not removing his hand from her wrist.

"Donna?"

"The maid. When she's done upstairs, I'll have her take care of it."

"Wait—she's here?"

"Yes. Can't you Feel her?"

"I wasn't exactly trying—"

"That's no excuse," Kellen said. "In order to gain more control over your abilities, you have to use them. As a Feeler, you should never be surprised by a person's presence somewhere—you should always be able to Feel a person's energy, even if you can't see the person."

"Okay, okay," Morgan muttered. Closing her eyes, she bid her mind to reach out. She felt Kellen, of course, but she ignored his energy, pushing past him, imagining her mind to be moving through the ceiling.

After a few moments, Morgan became aware of a faint glimmering pulse of energy. This, she decided, must be Donna. The energy felt busy, task-oriented, but muted.

"She's common?" Morgan guessed, opening her eyes.

Kellen chuckled. "Of course. Do you think a Veneret would be caught dead as a maid?"

Morgan bristled, pulling her wrist away from Kellen's hand. "You say that like the common are so beneath you."

"Beneath us," Kellen corrected. "Because they are. They're not like us. They're weak. Like I told you last night—they can't even use the little bit of power they have."

Kellen's casual reference to their conversation last night sounded harsh and discordant in Morgan's ears. Something wasn't right about what happened last night. Then, like a cold rush of water, images came to Morgan's mind. Ris on a couch, unresponsive. Kellen positioned over her—

“You took energy from Ris,” she said quietly.

“Yes.” He said it matter-of-factly.

“Oh, my god.” Morgan pushed herself against the arm of the couch—as far away from Kellen as she could get. “You took her energy at the first party, too. And I didn’t—I didn’t stop you. I haven’t told anyone—”

“You haven’t told anyone because I haven’t wanted you to,” Kellen said, his voice low. He leaned toward her, hazel eyes gazing intently into hers.

“You Pushed me. I was gonna tell and you—you Pushed me so I wouldn’t—”

“Yes. And if you don’t stop now, I’ll do it again.”

Morgan stood and pulled her cell phone from her back pocket, her only thoughts to tell Corbin and Lucas what was happening.

Kellen stood, too, and grabbed Morgan by the shoulders, turning her so she was facing him. “Put the phone away,” he said, his voice even.

Morgan’s finger hovered over her phone’s call button, but she did not press it. “I have to—”

Kellen shook his head. He didn’t say anything, but Morgan knew he didn’t need to. He was right, after all, she didn’t need to call anyone. Ris was fine. Everyone was fine.

She slid her phone back into her pocket.

“That’s a good girl,” Kellen said, smiling.

Morgan nodded vaguely. “I’ll see you tonight?”

Kellen’s eyebrows furrowed.

“Corbin’s band is playing at the Daily Grind.”

“Oh. Wouldn’t miss it.”

Morgan nodded again and started toward the front door. “Okay, then, I’ll see you tonight.”

Kellen followed her and opened the front door when he arrived. “You’re going home now.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. Home.”

“Drive safe.”

Morgan waved at him and walked to her car. When she got behind the wheel, she had a nagging feeling that something wasn’t quite right, but she pushed it away. She had to drive home now.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Morgan pulled into the parking lot of the Daily Grind just before seven that night.

“You think we’ll get a good seat?” Ris asked as she got out of the car.

Morgan shrugged, falling into step beside her friend. “Don’t they have, like, special seating for the girlfriend?”

“I’m not his girlfriend.”

“I think the kiss you landed on him last night tells a different story.”

Ris stopped walking. “Wait—I what? I kissed Corbin last night?”

Morgan stopped too and turned to her. “Yeah. You don’t remember?”

Ris covered her face with her hands. “I thought that was a dream.” She removed her hands and started walking again. “I can’t believe it.”

Morgan put her arm around Ris’s waist. “Look on the bright side. It wasn’t your first kiss with Corbin anyway. You kissed when you went out before.”

“Yeah, in the fifth grade.”

Morgan held open the front door for Ris and followed her in. The band was setting up in the front and Lucas was, as promised, behind the counter. She scanned the rest of the main room, which was more crowded than usual, and saw Lia sitting at a table right in front of the band. When she noticed Morgan, she waved enthusiastically and indicated the empty seats around her.

Morgan pinned a smile to her face and started over to Lia.

“I thought you were kidding about meeting Lia here,” Ris said quietly as they approached.

“Hi!” Lia greeted brightly, looking more genuinely pleased to see Morgan than Morgan ever recalled. “Have a seat.”

Morgan did as she was told. “Hey, Lia. Great seats.”

“I know, right?” Lia glanced up toward the stage area and waved demurely at Corbin, who seemed to have noticed their arrival.

The wave was not lost on Ris who immediately stood up. “I think I’m gonna go say hi,” she said, starting toward the stage.

Lia watched Ris go with mild interest. When Ris greeted Corbin with a deliberate kiss on the cheek, Lia turned her attention back to Morgan. “I was really surprised you called.”

Morgan shrugged. “Lucas made me.”

Lia laughed.

Morgan smiled, deciding not to point out she hadn’t been joking. “I was gonna head up to get something to drink—you want something?”

Lia looked surprised by Morgan’s offer. She turned to the menu board. “Sure. I’ll have—”

“Don’t bother. Lucas’ll just insult your choice and make you something different anyway.” Without waiting for a response, Morgan headed up to the counter.

Lucas greeted her with a smile. “Long time no see.”

“How was the family picnic thing?”

He shrugged. “Lame, as expected. But the food was pretty good, so I can’t complain too much. Ready for your mystery drink?”

“Yes. And one for Lia and one for Ris, too, please.”

Lucas nodded and set to work.

Morgan watched him. “I’m calling my freebie, by the way.”

“What?”

“The free drink you promised me on the night of the fedora. I’m cashing it in. And I think Lia’s drink should be on you because you’re the one who wanted me to invite her.”

Lucas turned his attention from the task at hand momentarily. “Oh, really now. And what about Ris’s drink?”

“Oh, I’ll pay for hers.”

He smiled and turned back to the drinks. One by one he placed three drinks on a tray, indicating which was for whom.

Morgan started rifling through her purse for her wallet but Lucas waved a hand at her.

“On the house.”

“Thanks. Aren’t you gonna tell me what they are?”

He shook his head. “Tell you what—you guess correctly and the next round’s on the house, too.”

Morgan smiled. “Challenge accepted.” She picked up the tray and walked back over to Lia’s table.

Ris had returned and she and Lia seemed to be making polite small talk. Morgan set the tray down and passed out the drinks.

“Don’t ask me what they are; Lucas wouldn’t tell me. But feel free to hazard a guess.”

Lia took a sip of her drink. “Oh, this is really good.” Then she glanced up at Morgan. “How much do I owe you?”

Morgan just shook her head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Thanks,” Lia said.

Ris raised an eyebrow at Morgan, who raised an eyebrow back.

Lia turned her attention back to Ris. “I didn’t realize you and Corbin were a couple.”

Color rose to Ris’s cheeks. “Oh—we’re not. Not officially, or anything. We’ve just been hanging out lately.”

Lia nodded appreciatively before turning her attention toward Morgan. “And you? Any special guy in your life, Morgan?”

“What? No.”

Lia looked like she was going to ask another question, but Dreamers Often Lie took that moment to thank the crowd gathered in the Daily Grind for coming out to see them. Lia turned her attention to the stage.

The music was good and loud enough to hinder conversation. Morgan had to admit they did a decent job with their covers. The crowd seemed to agree and a few songs in, a group of people got up and started dancing near the entrance. Ris got up to dance, too, and even managed to persuade Lia to join her. Under the guise of saving their seats, Morgan stayed at the table.

She allowed her gaze to drift between Corbin on stage and Ris and Lia dancing. As another song ended, a thought suddenly surfaced as if from a great depth: Kellen said he would be here.

Immediately, Morgan began scanning the room for him, but it was impossible to see through the bodies of so many people.

Then she realized something: She had something better than eyes for seeking people out. Hadn’t Kellen said she should never be surprised by a person’s presence? That she should always know who was around her?

Knowing she’d look silly closing her eyes in this environment, Morgan kept her eyes open as she pushed out with her mind, trying to locate Kellen’s energy. Almost immediately, she felt Lucas and Corbin. Their energies were so familiar to her, they seemed to jump out above the rest. When she pushed a little further she felt Lia and, more faintly, Ris.

Other energies ebbed and flowed around her—elation, irritation, sadness, affection. But she pushed all the unfamiliar energies away and tried to tune herself to the one she was searching for—the one that was Kellen.

And then, suddenly, she Felt him. He was there, in the coffee house—in the back room they’d spoken in the first time she’d been here. Tesin and Wen were with him, along with a dozen or so other people—some common, some Veneret.

Morgan smiled, impressed with herself. Maybe getting better with her abilities wouldn’t be so difficult after all.

Up front, Corbin was speaking into his microphone. “Hope you all enjoyed the first set. We’re gonna take a short break, so don’t go anywhere. We’ve got another set coming up.” With high-fives to the band’s other guitarist and its bass player, Corbin hopped off the makeshift stage and was immediately swarmed by at least a dozen people.

Morgan couldn’t help smiling. Corbin the rock star.

Turning her attention back to the glass in front of her, Morgan pulled on the straw a few times, finishing off the beverage within. She noticed Lia making her way back to the table, so she took the opportunity to go to the counter for a refill.

After waiting in line for a few minutes, Morgan set her glass on the counter triumphantly. “Get ready to make me another free drink, Kenrick.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really. You figured it out, then?”

“It’s a chai. Only you did something sneaky to it.”

“Interesting guess. Can you identify said sneakiness?”

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” Morgan said, pointing at him. “You just said to guess what it was, not to guess what craziness you did to it.”

“Fair enough.” Lucas smiled. “Another, then?”

“I trust you.”

Lucas took her glass and set to work on her next drink. As Morgan watched him, she allowed her mind to wander, to encounter the different energies buzzing around the room. She wondered if it would be possible to identify each one individually—to count them all.

When Lucas set the drink in front of her, he looked at her quizzically.

“What?”

“You just seem... more focused than you were earlier.”

“Less fuzzy?”

Lucas grinned. “Definitely less fuzzy.”

“Kellen’s here—did you know that?”

Lucas glanced around the room. “No. I haven’t seen him. Where is he?”

“The back room.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “I haven’t seen him either. But I can feel him. And Tesin and Wen. They’re all back there.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Someone’s getting better at this.”

Morgan nodded. “Got that right.” She glanced over her shoulder and noticed another person in line behind her. “I should let you get back to work.”

“Probably,” Lucas agreed.

When Morgan turned and headed back to her table, she noticed Lia wasn’t the only one occupying it. In her absence, Ris and Corbin had joined her. She smiled as she approached. “Hey, Corbin—good job.”

Corbin looked up as Morgan sat down, appearing slightly surprised by the

compliment. “Thanks, Morgan. It means a lot, coming from you.”

Morgan inclined her head and took a sip of her drink. It was even better than the last one.

“What’d Lucas make for you?” Corbin asked.

“No clue.” She held the glass out to him. “Wanna try?”

Corbin took the glass from her and took a few pulls out of the straw. As he did so, Morgan became aware of the surprise and unease felt by both Lia and Ris. Neither of them were sure how to react to this development. As Corbin handed the glass back to her, Morgan raised her eyebrow at him, wondering if he’d sensed what she had. Corbin’s confused gaze told her he hadn’t.

“That’s good,” Corbin said. “Wow—I could really use some water. I think I’ll go—”

“Oh, no, wait—I’ll get you some,” said Lia, springing to her feet.

Ris eyed her warily but didn’t stop her. Her eyes watched Lia as she sauntered to the lineup at the counter. She seemed to deliberate for a moment before saying, “I’ll be right, back, too.” With an apologetic smile toward Corbin, she got up and wove her way toward the bathroom.

Morgan took a few sips from her glass before speaking. “Kellen’s here, you know.”

Like Lucas had, Corbin immediately began scanning the room. “Where?”

“In the back.” She leaned forward, smiling. “I can Feel him.”

Corbin nodded appreciatively. “Well done. Should we go say hi?”

She shrugged. “If you wanna.”

“Why not, right? I’ve got a few minutes.” He stood.

Morgan stood too and cast a glance at their table. “You think it’ll be okay, us leaving the table empty? I think Lia’d be pretty mad if someone else claimed it.”

“Leave your drink. And Lia’s jacket’s on that chair—it looks like someone’s coming back. And if anyone takes the table, we’ll just take it back.”

Morgan laughed. “You’re right. If it comes down to it, Lia could always Push them.” Leaving her drink on the table, she followed Corbin through the crowd toward the back hallway. As they passed the counter, Morgan noticed Lia watching them, suspicion evident in the arch of her eyebrows. Morgan just grinned and kept walking.

As she and Corbin passed through the hallway and into the back room, Morgan felt the atmosphere around them changing. Things felt more loose and casual, like they were in a friend’s basement, not a coffee house. Every seat was occupied and the air buzzed with conversation. As Morgan and Corbin pushed further into the room, some of the conversations halted as people watched them.

Only the Veneret are paying attention to us, Morgan realized.



Kellen, Tesin, and Wen stood from their locations—Kellen and Tesin each on a couch and Wen at a table—and crossed to Morgan and Corbin.

“Music’s sounding good,” Tesin said to Corbin by way of salutation.

“Thanks,” Corbin said. “You can hear it back here?”

Tessin nodded toward the wall and Morgan noticed a speaker hanging in the corner.

They probably have a remote to control the volume, too, Morgan thought. Or—maybe Kellen just controls the volume with his mind.

“I agree,” Kellen said. “Excellent job, Corbin. So good, in fact, I think you deserve a reward.”

Corbin gave an uneasy chuckle. “That’s not really—”

Kellen shook his head. “I insist.” He turned and beckoned for Corbin to follow.

Corbin glanced at Morgan and shrugged. The two of them walked toward the couch—seemingly Kellen’s destination. Kellen motioned for them to sit and they did so, each perching on the edge of the cushion.

Morgan noticed that the eyes of every person in the room were turned to them. Some were still speaking in low tones, but the majority of the noise in the room now came from the main room of the coffee house. Anticipation built, both in Morgan’s own stomach and in the emotion of the room. Morgan could sense it, and it was almost too much to bear.

Kellen nodded at a girl who had been sitting at Wen’s table. Petite and brunette, she hopped down from the high stool and crossed to the couch. Kellen flicked his eyes to the empty seat beside Corbin and the girl sat.

Corbin looked up at Kellen unsurely. Morgan could sense his discomfort. “Kellen, I—”

Kellen cut him off with a shake of his head. “Don’t worry. Just... look at her.”

Corbin looked at the girl. Morgan did, too, wondering what it was Kellen wanted Corbin to see. The girl was pretty, sure, but in a generic sort of way. She wore a little too much eye makeup and her top was, in Morgan’s opinion, a bit too tight.

Then another impression came to Morgan. This girl wasn’t Veneret. She was common. At that moment, she had a vague impression of what was about to happen, but she wasn’t fast enough to prevent it.

Kellen placed his hand on Corbin’s shoulder, and Morgan could feel immediately what Corbin was feeling. The common girl’s energy lay bare before him, and then her energy flowed into him, strengthening him. Morgan could feel the power radiating from him.

And she knew she had to stop it.

Morgan stood and pushed Kellen squarely in the chest, breaking his connection with Corbin. Corbin's connection with the girl was also severed, and he looked up, slightly bemused, and searched for Morgan's eyes.

"That was—"

"Completely wrong!" Morgan exclaimed.

Corbin stood, shaking his head slightly. "Morgan—I can't even describe it." His green eyes looked brighter than usual. "I didn't even feel this after the reading you gave me. It's like... like I can... do anything."

"But you just stole energy from her!" Morgan motioned to the petite brunette, but she seemed unaware of her surroundings.

Corbin looked at the girl. "She doesn't seem to mind."

"I doubt she was asked to volunteer!" Morgan looked around the room. All eyes were still on her, some confused, some incredulous, some seemingly entertained. She turned back to Corbin. "Kellen did this to Ris," she said. "He's taken her energy at least twice—and she has no idea!"

"Then it didn't bother her," Corbin said. "She didn't even notice. It's okay—"

"It's not okay!" Again, Morgan looked around the room. Wen was the only person who looked back with any sympathy. She rounded on Kellen, who had rebounded from her shove and made his way back toward the couch. "You can't keep doing this! You have to stop!"

Kellen chuckled. "And you're gonna make me, Morgan? I don't really see that happening."

Tesin moved forward, placing a hand on Morgan's shoulder. "Don't you think you're kinda making a big deal out of this? You saw the restaurant. There are places like that all around the city—all around the world. The Veneret have been doing this for generations."

Morgan shook his hand off. "I don't care if they've been doing it since the dawn of time. It needs to stop. And since I'm your precious One, or whatever, doesn't that mean you should listen to me?"

A gentle wave of laughter coursed throughout the room, and Morgan looked around to see amused looks on the faces of all the Veneret. Even Corbin chuckled.

Fury bubbled up in Morgan, making her skin tingle. "Fine. You won't listen to me. But I know someone you will listen to. Orrick Williams. I'll tell Orrick this needs to stop—and he'll make you listen."

Kellen grinned at her. "Orrick, huh?" Murmurs traveled through the little room. "Orrick... Okay, then. Why don't you go tell him right now?"

Whatever reaction Morgan had been expecting, this was not it. "I'll tell him," she said cautiously. "I really will."

“That’s fine,” Kellen said. “In fact—I’ll drive you.”

Morgan opened her mouth to argue, but Kellen grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the door. Instinctively, Morgan grabbed Corbin’s hand and pulled him along as well.

The three turned some heads as they walked that way through the main part of the coffee house. They were almost to the door when Corbin pulled himself free.

“Wait—I’ve still got another set to do.”

Morgan glared at him. “Seriously? You think your second set is the most important thing going on right now?”

“Morgan, I really think you’re overreacting,” Corbin began.

“Yeah? Well, I think you’re under-reacting.” She took a step closer to him, looking into his eyes intently. “Corbin, I need you to come with me on this.”

“Are we going or what?” Kellen asked, his hand on the front door.

Corbin glanced up at him. “Yeah—one sec.” He headed off toward the stage where the rest of his band mates were setting up. Morgan watched as the looks on his friends’ faces turned from mutinous to blank to understanding and she realized what was happening: Corbin was Pushing them. The power he’d absorbed from the girl must have given him access to abilities he didn’t normally possess.

Morgan scanned the room. Tesin and Wen had followed them from the back room. Lia and Ris were at the table, watching Corbin and looking confused. Lucas stood behind the counter, an expression of concern clouding his features. She looked right at him and focused all her energy on conveying an impression to him: I’ve got this under control.

Corbin was back at her side. “Taken care of,” he said to Morgan. Then, nodding at Kellen, he said, “Let’s go.”

They walked out of the coffee house, and Kellen led the way to his car. Before Morgan got to the passenger door, she heard the distinct clip-clop of high heels on pavement and looked back to see Lia.

“What’s going on?” she asked, her glance skimming over Corbin, Kellen, Tesin, and Wen before returning to Morgan.

“We’ve gotta take care of something,” Morgan said.

“Wait—something Naturals something?”

Morgan sighed, exasperated. “Kinda.”

Lia crossed her arms over her chest. “Then I think I should go. I mean, I am one of you, right?”

“Yes, but Lia, this doesn’t concern you right now, okay?” Morgan took a step toward her. “Stay with Ris. Please.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “I drove her here and she doesn’t have a ride home... and I need her to be with someone

I... with someone I trust. And I'm gonna trust you, Lia."

Lia looked mildly shocked, but also moderately pleased. "Okay," she said quietly. "But you'll tell me what happens, right?"

"You'll know everything you need to know," Morgan assured her.

With a nod, Lia turned and headed back to the coffee house.

When Morgan turned, she noticed Kellen was watching her, a look of slight annoyance on his face.

"Touching moment over?" he asked. "Good. Get in the car."

Morgan and Corbin did as they were told. As Kellen put the car in gear, Morgan looked around.

"Tessin and Wen are following us," Kellen said.

"And where exactly are we going?" Morgan asked, feeling, for the first time that this might not have been the best idea.

Kellen glanced at her as he pulled out onto the road. "To see Orrick."

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Morgan was surprised when Kellen pulled up to Desideration Tower.

“It’s after ten—you really think Orrick’s still at the office?” she asked, getting out of Kellen’s car.

Kellen ignored her and headed toward the front door.

Things were different here at night, Morgan noticed. When they had been here before, a valet had been all too willing to relieve Kellen of his keys; now, Kellen just left his car in the large horseshoe driveway. The lights in the lobby were on, but they were dim.

As they entered the building, Morgan noticed two employees standing behind the front desk. One glanced up and nodded at Kellen, who didn’t pause in his walk toward the elevators.

Kellen pushed the elevator call button and Morgan turned to Corbin. A bit of the fervor was gone from his eyes, but he still looked different somehow—slightly manic. She put a hand on his arm. “How you feeling?”

With some effort, he focused on her. “I feel great, Morgan. You’ve gotta try it.”

She glared at him. “You know what Kellen did, right? He sucked energy out of the poor common girl—”

“It didn’t hurt her though, right?” He glanced at Kellen as if for assurance. “I mean, Morgan said you did this to Clare too, and Clare’s fine.”

Morgan couldn’t think of how to respond to this, but she was spared having to by the arrival of Tesin and Wen and the opening of the elevator doors.

The five boarded the elevator and stood in silence as it made its ascent.

Morgan stared at Corbin. She couldn’t believe how he was handling all of this. It was as if he’d be lobotomized.

Perhaps she should have told him about Ris before.

Morgan felt a twinge. Why hadn’t she told him about Ris before? She felt like there was a good reason for keeping the information to herself, but she couldn’t remember what that reason could be.

She rounded on Kellen. “You Pushed me. And you’re Pushing Corbin right now.”

Kellen smiled. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said, his tone

clearly indicating the opposite.

Morgan's fist clenched at her side.

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open. Instinctively, Morgan turned, expecting to see Orrick's office. However, the doors revealed a hallway that was unremarkable but for the fact that two men stood in it. Before Morgan could register anything else, the men lunged inside the elevator, grabbing Corbin and pulling him out into the hallway. Morgan started after him, but Kellen grabbed her from behind. She thrashed in his grip, but it was no use. The elevator doors closed and the car began rising again.

"What the hell is going on?" Morgan demanded, twisting against Kellen's arms.

No one responded, and the elevator dinged once more, opening its doors to reveal Orrick's office. Kellen picked Morgan up and deposited her in the room. She turned, thinking she could get back into the elevator to go after Corbin, but Tesin and Wen stood before it like sentinels. Undaunted, she attempted to push through them.

Kellen grabbed her again, and in one fluid motion, he picked her up and positioned her over his shoulder. She kicked and pounded at his back like a toddler, but his steps didn't falter as he walked toward Orrick's desk. When he set her on her feet, he held her still with his hands on her shoulders.

Orrick stood behind his desk, silhouetted by the city lights. He smiled at Morgan, as if he were genuinely pleased to see her and not at all off-put by her behavior.

He made a sweeping motion toward the chairs in front of his desk. "Please, have a seat."

She made no move to comply. "Where's Corbin?"

"Safe."

"That's not an answer."

"It most certainly is," Orrick said, just the slightest edge to his voice. "And it's the only answer you'll be getting." He approached the desk and stood behind his large office chair, placing his hands on its back. He raised his chin at Tesin and Wen, and Morgan heard the elevator doors open and close. "Now, I hear you have some concerns you wish to present to me."

Morgan straightened under the hands that held her still. "The Veneret are taking energy from unsuspecting people. These guys seem to think it's the way it's always been, and it's okay, but it's not. These people who are being drained deserve better than to be treated like... like some sort of snack. They're human beings."

"Human beings." A sneer flitted over Orrick's handsome features. "What

exactly is it about them that makes you think they deserve better?”

Morgan gaped at him. “What do you mean, them? You sound like you think you’re not human—and since no one has said word one about the mother ship —”

“We’re better than human. The common. They don’t deserve to possess the power. It’s wasted on them. What do they do with it?” Orrick slammed his hands down on the back of his chair and turned from it, starting to pace. “The few that ever manage to wield it don’t manifest abilities. At best, they become the charismatic leader. But even that tends to end badly, with other, weaker minds following these leaders to their death. Death and destruction—that’s all the world is since we faded to the shadows and allowed the common to take over. But we’re poised now—poised to put ourselves back in the position we were born to but have abdicated for so long. For generations we’ve worked toward this end, Knowing that you were to come, Knowing that you would be born soon. This is what you were born for, Morgan, to lead us back to our rightful place in the world.”

She shook her head, struggling against Kellen’s grip. “No. You already have these insane abilities—why do you think you need more power? If you think I’m gonna have anything to do with helping you steal energy from anyone, you’re crazy.”

“But you will. It has been foreseen!” Orrick’s voice rang clearly through the room.

“By who? By you? Forgive me if I don’t believe—”

“By your mother.”

Morgan froze. Orrick’s words hit her like a rushing wind, halting her thoughts, shifting them to an entirely different path. She shook off Kellen’s hands and sank down into the nearest chair. “What do you know about my mother?”

Orrick eyed Morgan, appraising her before responding. “I know quite a bit, actually. More than you, probably. And more than your father.”

“You’re lying,” Morgan accused, but she wasn’t convinced she believed it.

Orrick’s eyebrows hitched upward momentarily, and he smiled knowingly. “I assure you I am not. Would you like to know something you don’t know about your mother?” Without waiting for Morgan to respond, he continued. “Kellen already told you she was a Natural. The first I’d ever met. And powerful, too, with a gift that so few Veneret possess today. And you are aware she was a Knower. The Veneret have known for generations that one day someone would be born who could lift us back to the positions we deserve, who would make sure the common wouldn’t rise up against us. But we had no idea when that One

would be born. Your mother is the one who realized you would be the One.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Now, Morgan, you were how old when your mother disappeared? Seven? How well do you really remember her? How much does a seven-year-old really know?”

Morgan bristled, her fists clenching. “But my dad would’ve known. And if my dad knew, he would’ve told me. If she could really see the future, he would’ve told me.”

At this assertion, Orrick actually chuckled softly. “There were a number of things your father never knew about your mother. Her abilities were certainly most prominent among them. That’s why she married him, you know. To escape the life she was born for. She felt like she was losing something, joining the Veneret. Her sister is common so she couldn’t share this world with her. That, I think, was the biggest obstacle to her embracing the life. Had her sister been a Natural, Morgan, then you would have grown up among your people, the way you were supposed to. But she wasn’t, and Chelsea chose her sister over her purpose, her destiny. She turned her back on us and married the first man she met—”

“She loved my dad,” Morgan interrupted. “They loved each other. They were happy together—”

This time Orrick’s laugh wasn’t a polite chuckle, but a loud guffaw. He even halted in his walking as he laughed. He pulled out a handkerchief as he turned his attention to Morgan after his fit subsided, dabbing his eyes. “While I’m sure your father is still under that impression, believe me, your mother had no love for the man. He was an escape, that is all.”

Morgan opened her mouth to protest, but Orrick continued talking.

“Have you ever asked about when your parents met? How long it was before they were married? How long after that you were born?”

Morgan could feel her mind fighting to work through what Orrick was telling her, fighting to dredge up the dates and numbers he mentioned. But her brain wasn’t cooperating—instead, she found herself both accepting his premise and trying to argue with it. But the part of her mind that was arguing the point became weaker and weaker as Orrick began speaking again.

“She was pregnant with you when they married. She lied to him in a misguided attempt to keep you safe from us.”

As if through a fog, Morgan asked, “Are you saying...? Who’s my father?”

Orrick just smiled. “All in good time.” He crossed to where she stood. “You want to see her again, don’t you?” he asked, looking directly into Morgan’s eyes.

She nodded, the movements slow. She felt like everything she did took more



concentration, more energy. “More than anything.” Her tongue felt thick in her mouth and she wasn’t sure why.

“What if I told you that you could see her again? Better than that—that you could be with her again? The two of you can be together, Morgan. You want that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have to do something for me.”

There was something strange occurring, but she couldn’t put her finger on what it was. She found herself nodding.

Orrick smiled. “You have to be strong. To be with your mother, you have to be very strong. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes. I can do that. I can be strong.” And she believed it. “What do I need to do?”

“I was hoping you’d ask,” Orrick said. As he turned toward the elevator, the doors slid open and Tesin walked out, guiding a young woman in a white button up shirt and black pants. The girl’s face was oddly blank as she was marched to the seat beside the one Morgan sat in. Tesin eased the girl into the seat and then went to stand against the wall.

“Do you Feel her?” Orrick asked, his attention riveted on Morgan. “Her energy?”

Morgan found herself automatically reaching her mind out before Orrick had even finished speaking. She was vaguely aware of Orrick’s anticipation, of Kellen’s cool detachment, of Tesin’s nervous excitement. But she focused instead on the dim glow of the girl before her. She could Feel the girl’s energy, but it was muted. Because she’s common, Morgan realized.

“Yes, I can Feel it.”

Orrick nodded eagerly. “Now... take it.”

Morgan looked at him, her mind struggling with something. It seemed like a simple request, but she felt as though she couldn’t comply. “Take it?”

“Yes, Morgan. You have to be strong to be with your mother. This is the only way to be stronger. Take her energy. She’s not using it.”

Morgan looked at the girl, who seemed completely unaware of her surroundings. She seemed almost like Ris had the night Kellen had taken energy from her, like the petite brunette from tonight. Morgan wondered if that was the case here or whether she was simply being Pushed, convinced to sit there.

Something in Morgan stirred. “I can’t.”

“You can,” Orrick insisted.

“No, I can’t.” Morgan turned to him, feeling bolder. “It’s just... it’s not right.”

“I thought you wanted to be with your mother,” Orrick said quietly, sadly.

The sensation that was bubbling within her grew. “How can I trust you? You could just be lying to me—telling me what I want to hear. You probably don’t even know her, do you?”

“I most certainly do.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“Of course.”

Morgan stared at him. “Wait—you know? Where is she?”

“Nice try,” Orrick said quietly. “She is safe. Where do you think she’s been all this time? She’s been with us.”

Morgan shook her head. “That doesn’t make any sense. You said she didn’t want to be with the Veneret. Kellen said she left to protect me. How does leaving me and going into hiding with you do that?”

“Do this, and she’ll be able to tell you herself.”

Morgan just stared at Orrick for a moment. She attempted to discern whether or not he was telling the truth but found she couldn’t break through his exterior feelings. She couldn’t get to the truth beyond. She’d have to take him at his word.

She turned to the girl, who still sat, staring blankly ahead. I can’t do this. I came here to tell Orrick that taking energy from the common was wrong. I can’t do it, Morgan told herself. But another part of her mind struggled against her resolve. She had to do this. If she wanted to see her mother, she had to. But, if it was true that her mother had been hiding out with the Veneret all these years, then why should Morgan want to see her? If Chelsea really wanted to be a part of Morgan’s life, why couldn’t she just come back of her own volition? What could Morgan taking this girl’s energy accomplish?

“No,” she said quietly.

She felt Orrick start behind his desk. “What?”

Morgan turned to face him. “No. I won’t do it.”

In an instant, Orrick’s face changed. He no longer had an air of pleasantness around his features; instead, something about him seemed to harden. “You have to.”

Morgan shook her head. “No, I don’t. I won’t.”

“You will.”

Suddenly, Morgan felt almost as if the wind had been knocked out of her. Blackness tinged her peripheral vision momentarily as she turned back toward the girl seated before her. From a back corner of her mind, she watched as she knelt down in front of the girl, as she took the girl’s hands in her own.

From the back corner of her mind she found herself in, she knew what was about to happen. She wasn’t sure how she knew, but she knew that she would

reach forward into the girl's mind, she would feel the girl's energy, she would take hold of it, take possession of it. She knew it, but she found she couldn't accept it. She didn't want to do it. She felt like she should; nearly every fiber of her being wanted her to, but a small part of her resisted.

She listened to the small part. It felt more true, more like her. And she fought. She felt anger flare up in Orrick. "Morgan, give in."

Morgan felt her hands grip the girl's harder, but she managed to say, "No."

"Morgan," Orrick said again, his voice tight. "Do as I say."

Unbidden, Morgan felt her mind taking hold of the girl's energy. She knew what would come next and focused her energy on forestalling the inevitable. "Don't tell me what to do," she managed to say between clenched teeth. "You've got no right to tell me what to do."

"I have every right," Orrick said in the same tight, pained voice. "I'm your father."

The concentration Morgan was holding shattered as Orrick's words registered. She turned her head toward Orrick, and he took the opportunity to push his will further into her mind. Morgan sensed herself reaching farther into the girl's mind, tugging at the girl's energy as if trying to pull it loose. It was unavoidable that it would happen now; Morgan couldn't muster the will to fight. And suddenly, she didn't want to. The part of her that was still in control broke and she knew what would come next: she would take that girl's energy. She wanted it.

A commotion in the room jarred Orrick, jarred Morgan. Morgan felt herself filling her mind again—Orrick's oppressive presence left her as he turned his attention toward the elevator.

Releasing the girl's hands, Morgan stood and turned to see what was going on behind her. She saw Wen followed by two people in ski masks running into the room. Morgan's first thought was that this was an odd place for a robbery, but she did not have much time to reflect because the new arrivals were running toward her. Orrick moved to position himself in front of Morgan, between her and the people headed for her. It was then that the last minute's happenings became clear to her. Orrick's assertion.

Anger flared up in Morgan. She grabbed Orrick by his shoulder and spun him around to face her. She barely had time to register the shock on his face before she began speaking. "You're not my father! How dare you say that!"

"Morgan, I wouldn't lie to you," Orrick said calmly. "Not about something like this."

Morgan couldn't believe what she was hearing. It couldn't be true. Her father was Dylan Abbey, the man who had raised her mostly on his own, the man who

had loved her since she was born. And now this man was trying to claim that title? Morgan felt the rage bubbling hot within her, felt the pounding of her heart, heard the rushing in her ears. She focused the fury at Orrick, at his mind, pushing through the barriers he kept up to keep others out. She knew there was one place he couldn't lie to her. She would pull the truth from his mind.

Something solid collided with Morgan's shoulder and she felt herself being propelled across the room. She slammed into the window to her left so hard that she heard it splinter, felt the rough cracks against her shoulder, her back. Her feet were inches from the ground. When she looked for her assailant, she saw Kellen standing before her, his arm outstretched toward her, his hand out as if holding her in place. He hadn't touched her; he had Moved her across the room.

There was tumult in the room beyond Kellen, but Morgan couldn't see it. All she could see was Kellen, and all she could feel was how pliable the glass behind her felt as her body was pressed into it.

"Kellen..." she managed to say. "Don't."

"I have to protect him, Morgan," Kellen said, his voice strained. "You attacked him."

"Did you see what he was making me do? Did you hear his lies? He's not a good man, Kellen." Morgan gasped as her body pressed ever more steadily into the glass behind her—glass that now felt more like plastic, conforming to the shape of her back.

"How can you say that? Everything he's done has been for you."

Morgan opened her mouth to say something, but fear stilled her tongue. Instead, she thrust her emotions forward—her fear, her rage, and the feeling of betrayal she felt toward Kellen himself. And for an instant, she swore she saw a relenting in his eyes.

And then she was falling.

A split second later, she landed, crumpled, on the office floor, and there was a person at her side, tugging on her arm. "Morgan, get up. We have to go."

Morgan heard the urgency in the female voice—and something else, something almost familiar. Her face was obscured behind the ski mask, so she couldn't identify the speaker. But the familiarity was enough for her. Morgan struggled to her feet and allowed the woman at her side to lead her over to the elevator. As she went, she caught sight of Orrick, Tesin, and Kellen pinned up against an interior wall seemingly by an invisible hand. Before them stood the second ski mask-wearing person, one arm outstretched toward them the way Kellen's had been toward her moments earlier, the other arm clutching Wen by the shoulder.

The woman leading Morgan hit the elevator button and the doors slid

soundlessly open. She whistled as she ushered Morgan into the elevator, and they were quickly joined by Wen and the other person. The doors slid closed behind them and Wen jabbed at a button. The elevator began its descent.

Morgan turned to Wen. “What the hell just happened?”

“No time for that now,” Wen said as the elevator gave a slight jolt and the doors slid open again. “We still have to escape.”

The woman who had spoken to Morgan earlier pressed a hand to the small of Morgan’s back and guided her out of the elevator. Standing in the empty corridor before them was Corbin, looking both wild-eyed and bewildered.

When Corbin saw Morgan, his face relaxed. “Morgan, I was so worried—”

“Let’s get moving,” said the second ski-masked individual, a male. Morgan was convinced there was something familiar about his voice as well, but she had no time to think about it before the group was moving down the hallway toward the stairwell. But instead of descending when they arrived at the stairs, the masked man led them upward.

Morgan looked at Wen. “I thought we were escaping?”

Wen didn’t answer. The man in the lead reached a door at the very top of the steps labeled Roof Access. Wen pushed to the front of the group and slid a pass card through the reader. The lights flashed green and Wen led the way out onto the roof.

Corbin looked around. “What, are we waiting on a helicopter or something?”

The masked man shook his head, a wry smile playing on his lips. “No. Now we jump.”

“Jump?” Morgan demanded. “Are you insane?”

The masked woman touched Morgan’s shoulder. “We’re not jumping out to the street, we’re jumping to the roof of the next building.” She pointed at the rooftop to their right.

Morgan and Corbin inched toward the side of the roof to get a better look at the next building over. It was several stories shorter than the one they were on, and it was dozens—perhaps hundreds—of feet away. Morgan knew without a doubt that she could not make the jump.

Corbin seemed to be having the same thoughts. “We can’t jump that far.”

“And you won’t have to,” said the man with the familiar voice. “Together, we can focus our abilities and use them to get us across to that rooftop.”

“Is that even possible?” Corbin asked.

“They’re going to be here soon,” the woman said suddenly. “We’ve got to go now, or they’ll catch us.”

The man turned his attention toward Morgan. As he did so, he removed his ski mask. And of all the things that had happened so far that night, this one shocked

Morgan the most: the man behind the mask was her teacher Mr. Kment.

“Mr. K?” she asked incredulously.

“I know you’ve got questions right now, Morgan, and I’ll answer them, but first I have to get you safe.” He put his hands on Morgan’s shoulders and looked directly into her eyes as he spoke. “If you’ve ever trusted me, Morgan, trust me now. We have to jump.”

Slowly, Morgan nodded. She wasn’t sure how she knew, but she was certain Mr. K wasn’t lying to her, and she was certain his plan would work. “Okay.”

Mr. K nodded, too, and he took Morgan’s hand in his. “Everybody, join hands, and focus on us landing on that roof.”

“Focus on the roof,” Corbin muttered, sounding completely disbelieving.

“You’re strong right now, Corbin,” said the woman. “Clear your mind and focus on the roof.”

Morgan felt as Corbin’s energy, which had been rather unfocused since the incident at the Daily Grind, centered and redirected.

“Thank you, Ellie,” Mr. K said to the masked woman. Then he led the group so they were standing a few yards from the roof’s edge. “Now, I don’t mean to rush anyone, but we really need to go. So, on the count of three, we’ll run for it and jump. One... two... three—”

Morgan didn’t allow herself to think as she began running. She focused only on the movements of her body, of the roof in front of them. She couldn’t think of the impossibility of the task, only of the possibility that they would actually be able to do it. And as they all jumped, Morgan felt a force like wind pushing them up, propelling them over. She watched as they passed over the headlights on the street below, as the neighboring roof came closer and closer. And then they were there, safe on the other side.

Before Morgan even had a chance to breathe a sigh of relief, they were on the move again. Mr. K pulled them toward a doorway on the roof. As they approached, the door opened and Morgan’s first thought was that somehow Orrick had already sent someone to catch them.

Mr. K seemed to sense her trepidation, because he called, “It’s okay—he’s with us.”

Morgan just nodded as they approached the door. The group all released each other’s hands and started down the stairs. Mr. K led them through the first doorway they came to and then to the nearest elevator. When they boarded the elevator, Morgan saw the still-masked woman was standing beside her.

“Miss Scotford, I presume.”

Ellie Scotford removed her mask and smiled. “Hey, Morgan.”

Morgan had a thousand questions to ask, but the only one that came out was,

“So... where to?”

\*\*\*

They drove for more than an hour. Miss Scotford and Mr. Kment talked in hushed tones in the front seats of the Ford Explorer they'd acquired in the building's parking garage. Morgan sat between Corbin and Wen in the second row of seats. The only time Miss Scotford directed a comment to anyone behind her was when she instructed Corbin and Morgan to call home to tell their parents they would be spending the night out. Morgan thought the vagueness of her assertion would make Dylan nervous, but he seemed okay with the idea when she told him. She wondered if his reaction had anything to do with Ellie, as she kept her hand on Morgan's knee during the entire phone conversation.

When Mr. K finally stopped the car, Morgan could make out that they had parked in the driveway of a moderately sized single story house situated on at least a few acres of land. Neighboring houses were visible, but far enough away as to keep from prying eyes.

They spilled out of the car and Morgan stretched. Mr. K walked up to the front door as if he owned the place, and Morgan wondered if he did. He unlocked the door and motioned for everyone to follow him.

Once inside the house, Wen immediately disappeared down a hallway. Miss Scotford walked toward the kitchen.

“I'll get us a little something to eat. Corbin, could you help me?”

Corbin immediately glanced at Morgan, as if for permission. Morgan nodded slightly and he followed Miss Scotford into the kitchen.

As soon as they were gone, Mr. K sat down, motioning for Morgan to do the same.

“I'm sure you have a million questions,” Mr. K said, leaning back into the couch cushions. “And, in time, I hope to be able to answer them all. But we'll start with the basics. You've heard of the Veneret, no doubt, and you know you're the One they've been waiting for. They've been keeping an eye on you for years, waiting for you to start showing abilities. And I think you already know at least part of Orrick's plans for the Veneret.

“Am I like them? In a way, I guess. But Ellie, Wen, and I don't believe what they believe. We don't use our abilities the way the Veneret use them. We're Watchers—and we've been watching you for a long time, too. And, yes, that's why I've been your teacher. It's why you were put in JY when you didn't request it. It's why Ellie started at ABC this year—we knew your abilities were blooming. But we had no idea—no idea—that Orrick would make his move so

quickly.”

Morgan nodded, taking in only a portion of the explanation Mr. K was giving her. At the moment, she only had one question on her mind. “Was he telling me the truth? Is Orrick my father?”

Mr. K looked away briefly before speaking. “I’m not sure. I won’t lie and say it hasn’t been rumored, but I honestly don’t know.”

“Does he have my mother?”

Mr. K closed his eyes and wiped his hands over his face, rubbing the stubble along his jaw line. His mouth twitched. “Wherever she is, she’s been well-hidden since her disappearance. Wen’s been working within the Veneret for years and he’s never found definitive evidence one way or the other. If Orrick has her, he might be the only one who knows where she is.”

“And if he doesn’t have her?”

Mr. K shook his head.

Morgan stamped her foot. “What the hell do you actually know then?”

Mr. K made a face at her—the same face he made when a student was not doing what she was supposed to be doing in class. “We know we’re going to keep you safe. Wen is already contacting the network of Watchers so we can keep a better eye on you—and on Corbin. And Lucas and Lia.”

“Why? Why me? Why us?”

Mr. K just looked at her sadly. “Because a war is coming. And you—and your friends—you’re directly in the middle of it.”

“But why?”

“Don’t you get it, Morgan?” Mr. K reached over and put his hand on Morgan’s. “Because you’re the One.”

They passed the next few hours at the house with Mr. K, Miss Scotford, and eventually Wen explaining the safeguards the Watchers would be immediately putting in to place in order to keep everyone protected. Apparently the Watchers were relatively certain that Orrick would not actively come after Morgan—not at the moment. News had swept through the Veneret that Morgan had been able to withstand Orrick’s Pushing, and the Watchers felt confident that Orrick would not attempt to persuade Morgan again until he was stronger.

Morgan didn’t let herself think of what that would entail.

Night faded to early morning and Miss Scotford led Morgan and Corbin each to a guest room to sleep in. Morgan lay awake until sunrise.

After a quick breakfast of cereal, Wen was tasked with taking Morgan and Corbin home. Corbin sat in the passenger’s seat, talking to Wen as he drove. Morgan sat in the second row of seats and stared off at the horizon.

Slowly, their surroundings began looking familiar. Morgan’s house was the



first they stopped at. Morgan murmured a thank you to Wen and exited the vehicle.

When she was about halfway up the driveway, she realized she hadn't said goodbye to Corbin, so she turned around. But when she turned, she saw Corbin standing just a few feet behind her.

"Wow, Corbin—way to sneak up on someone."

Corbin just smiled, closing the distance between them. When he finally stopped, mere inches from her, his expression turned serious. "I was so worried about you. Even when we were separated, I could still Feel how scared you were. And I could Feel when he was Pushing you. And I was so afraid... I thought something bad was going to happen to you, and..." He stopped, closing his eyes as if the thought was too much for him. When he opened them again, he continued quietly, "I don't know what I would've done if something happened to you. You mean too much to me."

Morgan didn't know how to respond to this, but Corbin didn't seem to expect her to. Instead, he placed his hands on her cheeks and leaned forward. Before Morgan really knew what was going on, Corbin's lips covered hers in a gentle, tentative kiss. And before her mind had time to react, she found that her body was already doing so. Placing her hands on the back of his neck, she kissed him back, working her lips against his.

When they separated, Morgan gazed searchingly into his eyes. She couldn't read his expression, and she was too full of what she was feeling to sense his reaction. He leaned down and feathered one more quick kiss on her lips before removing his hands from her face and taking a step back. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Morgan just nodded. She watched as he walked back to the SUV, as he got in. She waited for Wen to pull away, and when he didn't, she realized he was waiting until she was safe. Turning on her heel, she continued up the driveway.

When she walked into the house, she found Dylan at the table, eating breakfast. When Morgan walked in, he greeted her enthusiastically. Morgan forced a smile and hugged her father. She made small talk with him for a few minutes, inventing creative fictions about the previous night.

When Dylan announced it was time for him to head to work, Morgan sighed a sigh of relief. She didn't know how much more lying she could take.

As soon as he left, Morgan sank into the couch cushions and stared up at the ceiling. The idea that Dylan was not really her father nagged at her thoughts. In less than twenty-four hours, her entire life had been turned upside down. Her mother—who had maybe never even loved the man she'd married—was possibly a prisoner of the Veneret. Orrick Williams might be her biological

father. Corbin Starling kissed her. And Morgan kissed Corbin back.

At that very moment, Morgan knew there were Watchers outside her house, keeping tabs on her. Orrick might be draining the power from countless common people in order to make himself stronger for his next encounter with Morgan. Her best friend Ris was probably fantasizing about her next date with the guy Morgan had just kissed. And Dylan Abbey was on his way to work.

Morgan didn't know what tomorrow would hold, and she found she didn't want to. For the moment, she was safe. Despite the questions racing in her mind, she almost felt peace. And, for now, that would have to be enough.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madeline Freeman lives in the metro-Detroit area with her husband, her cats, her sister, and her sister's cat. In her spare time, she reads, sews, rides her bike, and watches way too much TV on DVD. She also loves anything to do with astronomy, outer space, plate tectonics, and dinosaurs.

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