

BIRTHRIGHT



The Legacy Series
Book One

Jessica Ruddick

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CHAPTER 1



MY MOM LOOKED AROUND MY room at the haphazard tower of boxes and pile of unzipped suitcases spewing clothes. She pursed her lips in that disapproving way moms have. “Aren’t you going to unpack?”

I spared her a glance before returning to the book I was reading. “Why?”

“It’ll be nicer for you if you unpack.”

I flipped over to my stomach without missing a word on the page. “There’s no point. We’ll be moving soon anyway.”

“Yes, but we’re here now.”

“Not for long,” I muttered. Just long enough to ruin some lives, then we’d be on our way again.

She sat down on the edge of my bed, pursed lips replaced by the concerned mom brow furrow. “Can we talk about this?”

“Nope,” I said, not looking up.

“I know the last assignment was hard on you. I’ve found—”

My knuckles whitened on the edges of my book. “I already said I’m not going to talk about it.”

She sighed. “Do you want to go to the movies today or something? I don’t have to work until tonight.”

“No.”

She sat quietly for a few moments, looking down at her hands, which were folded in her lap. I didn't know why. My tone clearly did not invite quality mother-daughter bonding time. She finally left, shutting the door behind her.

Maybe it was petty, because it technically wasn't her fault, but I wasn't ready to forgive her for last year's birthday present—my sweet sixteen. A car would have been nice. More realistically, I would have settled for an iPhone. Earrings, a t-shirt, a book. Hell, I would have settled for socks.

Coming into my birthright of being the Grim Reaper's seeker was not what I'd had in mind.

You see, I now worked for the Grim Reaper. Yup, at seventeen, I was a lackey for the bringer of death. It wasn't a job I would wish on anyone. And it didn't even pay anything.

We'd always moved around a lot, but I never really gave it much thought since it had been that way for as long as I could remember. I'd always figured my mom was just restless. I didn't mind. *Much*.

But lately we'd been moving more and more often, and I couldn't help thinking it had something to do with the increased number of assignments.

I still couldn't believe my mom had kept this from me my whole life. A little advance warning would have been nice. You know, something like, "*Ava, Uncle Xavier isn't really your uncle. He's the middleman between us and the Grim Reaper. And did I mention we have to identify the next platoon of angels?*"

I slammed my book shut and threw it against the wall. I had just read the same paragraph three times and couldn't tell you the first thing about it. Reading was usually my escape, but I was too agitated.

Thanks again, Mom.

I shrugged into a hoodie and slipped on my knock-off Vans. I didn't bother to tell my mom I was going out,

instead I just slammed the apartment door loudly behind me. She'd get the idea.

I trotted down the flights of stairs and took a left out of the apartment complex. A right would take me to a town center, complete with shops, restaurants, and a park. Left took me into the ghetto.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and walked purposefully. After about a mile, I was in the thick of the projects. Men and some not-yet-men congregated outside a convenience store, clutching bottles covered in brown paper bags. Across the street on an abandoned stoop, a drug dealer palmed twenties and handed the goods over to a woman in dirty clothes with wild disheveled hair. Even from twenty feet away, I could see her twitching.

I could read the drug dealer's aura, which meant he couldn't be much older than me since my aura reading range was limited to people in my relative age bracket. His aura was black with a tinge of red. No surprise there. In this part of town, that was typical. It was one of the reasons I liked coming here. There was no danger of running into any pure white auras.

I kicked a plastic cup into the gutter and crossed the street to enter the park. I sat on the one remaining swing, which was surrounded by chains that no longer had swings attached. The metal links swayed in the breeze like metal skeletons hanging from nooses. Some kids—two girls and a boy—ran into the park soon after. My best guess put their ages around eight. They were no older than ten at any rate, too young to be without adult supervision.

They climbed the jungle gym for a few minutes before moving to the slide.

None of them were wearing coats. The smaller of the two girls was only wearing a thin t-shirt with leggings. She had to be cold. I was beneath my long-sleeve shirt and hoodie.

I wondered if they realized how down-trodden their lives were by society's standards. I never thought my

mother and I were rich by any means, but it wasn't until I got a little older that I realized how old our car was, that our furniture was secondhand, and that my mom's clothes were often threadbare so that I could have new ones. Our apartment was always clean and I never had to worry about having food to eat, but we certainly weren't living the high life.

Judging by the state of those children's clothes, I doubted they could say the same.

Screams and shrieks caught my attention. A shoving match had started at the top of the slide. A long ago buried instinct surfaced, and I had to stop myself from intervening.

In the last year, I'd learned that detachment was the best policy.

The boy suddenly shoved the little girl so hard she fell five feet down from the top of the slide. She let out a cry and curled into a ball, her little body shaking with sobs while the bigger kids laughed and ran away, leaving her there.

I watched for a few minutes before closing my eyes and groaning. I hated breaking my own rules.

I walked over and knelt beside her. Now that I was close, I could see eight was an overestimate. Her age was probably closer to six.

I touched her shoulder gently. "Are you okay?"

She jerked up and scooted away from me, her big brown eyes wide and frightened. She used her arm to wipe the tears from her face. Her hands were filthy, dirt caked under her nails.

"Are you okay?" I asked again, keeping my hands to myself.

She nodded.

The sun was setting, taking any remaining warmth with it and leaving a chill in the air. She shivered.

"Do you live around here?"

She hesitated. Maybe in school they had taught her

not to speak to strangers. Stranger danger and all that.

There was nothing I could do to improve her life situation, but I could at least make her walk home more bearable.

I unzipped my hoodie and held it out to her. "Here."

She hesitated again, her little hands clasped in front of her, each one stopping the other from snatching the garment.

I shook it a little. "Take it. I know you're cold. I have another one at home. It's a little big for you, but it should be warm."

She didn't take it from me, so I put it down and walked away.

When I got to the corner, I looked over my shoulder to see her running in the opposite direction, her little body nearly swallowed whole by my hoodie.



AS DARKNESS OVERTOOK THE WANING rays of sunlight on my walk home, goose bumps formed on my arms, and I regretted having given away my hoodie. Just a little.

My stomach growled, angrily reminding me I hadn't eaten lunch today. A meal of canned ravioli followed by a night alone in the apartment sounded fabulous about now. With any luck, my mom would be gone by the time I got home.

Luck was not on my side. Looking at our car in the parking lot, I frowned. She said she had work tonight. She didn't like to let on, but money was tight, and we needed the tips she'd get waitressing on a busy Saturday night. So why was she home?

As soon as I opened the front door, the hair on the back of my neck stood up and a tingle ran down my spine. The scent of cinnamon filled my nostrils. It was like having those little candy Red Hots shoved up my nose. Dread in the form of a knot settled in the base of my stomach.

Xavier.

Xavier was...I wasn't sure what he was. Was he the descendant of a fallen angel like me? Was he an angel himself? Or was he something else, something more sinister?

He certainly looked it. He certainly acted it. He exuded evil.

He was lounging on our couch, his arms spread out over the back of it and his right ankle propped on his left knee. His black hair was slicked back, and he'd grown a goatee since the last time I'd seen him. As usual, he was dressed in a black suit with a red tie, what I mentally referred to as his "villain suit."

I couldn't believe he was the same man who used to read me bedtime stories and tuck me in when my mom had to work nights.

A smile stretched across his face and his black beady eyes watched me enter the room. The only thing that could possibly make him more snakelike was if a thin red forked tongue flitted out of his mouth.

I'd be less surprised than if a hippo flounced around my living room in a pink tutu in true *Fantasia* style.

My mom sat stiffly on a chair across from him. It was our home, but Xavier was in control here. Her eyes met mine, and she shrugged her shoulders slightly. She had no idea why he was here either. We hadn't expected him for at least a couple more months.

"Welcome home, Ava," Xavier said. "Why don't you have a seat?"

"No, thanks. I'll stand."

He chuckled. "Suit yourself."

Xavier took a moment to inspect his cuticles, as if he weren't in the middle of our living room, as if we weren't waiting for him to say whatever it was he came to say so he would leave again. I'd say he was oblivious to the effect he had on us, but that wouldn't be true. He knew, and he relished it.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “What do you want?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Is that any way to treat a guest in your home?” He looked at my mother. “You should really teach her better manners.”

I laughed bitterly. “Calling yourself a guest implies that you’re wanted here.”

“Ava,” my mom said, her tone sharp.

Xavier just threw his head back and laughed. “No, Mary, let the little vixen spew her venom. I like it. It’s honest. Honesty is underrated in society today, don’t you agree?”

I glared at him.

“I have your next assignment.”

My glare faltered as I fought to keep the air moving in and out of my lungs. An assignment from Xavier meant the blood of an innocent would be on my hands again.

When I said I worked for *the* Grim Reaper, that was oversimplifying it a bit. There’s actually more than one. Think about it—with all the people who die every day in the world, how could there possibly be just one?

The particular Grim Reaper I worked for was special, though. He collected souls that were worthy of being angels. It was my job as a seeker to find those souls.

How’s that for an after school job?

“Forgive me, Xavier, but isn’t it a little soon?” my mom said quietly. “She hasn’t even had a chance to get settled in her new school.”

He glanced at her before returning his attention to me. “She can handle it. Besides, it’s time.”

“But her last assignment was just last month!” my mom protested. “Are you sure—”

“I’m very sure.”

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. The knot of dread in my stomach exploded, seeping into the rest of my body. I breathed deeply, desperately trying to keep control. The last thing I wanted was to lose it in

front of Xavier.

“How long do I have?”

“Two weeks.”

Two weeks. I had two weeks to put a plan into motion that would change lives irrevocably.

My classmates' faces popped into my mind. I hadn't bothered getting to know anyone or even learning names. I told myself it was easier that way, easier being a relative term.

But did any of them have a white aura? When I was at school, I always blocked them out. Otherwise, the barrage of auras became a colorful assault on my senses. School was difficult enough as it was. I didn't need the added distraction. Moving around so much had left gaps in my education, so even though I was pretty smart, I perpetually struggled to maintain decent grades. Why I even bothered anymore was a mystery, though. I would probably end up a waitress just like my mother. It was hard to develop a career or even think about college with our transient lifestyle.

I squared my shoulders and looked Xavier in the eye, faking the bravado I lacked. “I guess I'll see you in two weeks.”

He stroked his goatee with a manicured hand, considering me. “You're quite advanced for your age. One of the better seekers I've worked with.”

My mom's head snapped up, her eyes wide. Xavier was too busy studying me to notice her alarmed expression.

I kept my mouth shut. I supposed he meant it as a compliment, but it didn't feel like one. I was efficient at ruining lives. This wasn't something I would list on my resume as a skill set.

Xavier stood. “Two weeks then.” He looked over at my mom who was rooted to her chair. She avoided his gaze. He chuckled. “I'll just let myself out.”

The click of our front door closing signaled his

leaving, but the wrenching in my gut remained. My mom immediately went to lock the deadbolt. She came back into the room with her arms crossed.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was quiet, her tone resigned.

“It’s not your fault,” I said automatically, my tone dull.

“I can’t believe it’s so soon. I thought for sure we’d have a little bit longer after Woodlawn.” That was how we referred to our assignments, by the names of the towns. “This is the soonest he’s ever come.” Her expression was troubled.

“Did he have an assignment for you, too?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No.” Then she said again, “I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know why she kept apologizing. It was a good thing she didn’t get an assignment. That was one less person who died. “Don’t apologize.”

She sighed. “Sometimes I feel like you hate me. I wish things were different, too, but they’re not.”

I didn’t hate my mom, but I wasn’t ready to be chummy, either. She couldn’t just snap her fingers and undo sixteen years of secrets. Even now, a year into this gig, I still didn’t know everything. I’d been lied to and betrayed my whole life. That kind of behavior didn’t exactly encourage trust or friendly feelings. So forgive me if I didn’t want to have a mother-daughter tea party.

“I don’t hate you.” I sighed. “I just...can’t. Not yet.”

She wasn’t the only one hurting. My whole life she’d been my best friend, my ally, my partner-in-crime, and now there was this void between us. Deceit was quicker and sharper than a knife, and it didn’t leave a clean division. Our relationship had been severed by a hacksaw, and now all that was left were jagged edges and the shards of what was.

I stalked to the kitchen and grabbed a sleeve of saltines and a jar of peanut butter. Calling “good night” over my shoulder, I headed to my room. After my oh-so-

nutritious dinner, I was calling it a night.

A girl needed her beauty sleep when she had a life to ruin.

CHAPTER 2



I WAITED AT THE BUS stop with the freshmen who lived in my apartment complex. Upperclassmen generally didn't ride the bus. They either had cars or finagled a ride with someone who did. The bus suited me just fine.

I climbed the steps onto the bus and moved to sit at the seat behind the driver where I normally sat, but stopped. Instead, I chose a seat farther back, earning a dirty look from a freshman as she walked past. She chose a seat across the aisle, leaning back to talk to her friends sitting behind me. She huffed again and looked at me, her expression clearly indicating the anguish I had caused by separating her from her friends. Whatever.

If she only knew what I really could do. My best guess was that her aura wasn't white enough though.

I took a deep breath and lowered my guards, preparing myself for the onslaught of colors. Auras were like a glow that surrounded a person's whole body. The glow extended a foot or two, depending on the variety of colors. I'd seen them my whole life and had figured out over the years which combinations were good, which ones were bad, and which ones were pure evil. My mother had also taught me at an early age to hide this ability from others. She'd worked with me until blocking them became as second nature as breathing. Now it was letting the

colors in that was difficult.

I squeezed my eyes shut as I was momentarily blinded by the colors. Gradually, I opened them, squinting until my eyes adjusted. My heart was racing, both from the exhilaration that came with such a density of colors and fear of what I'd see.

Fear that I wouldn't find what I was looking for and fear that I would. Would it be someone I knew? I kept to myself, but I was alive. There was no way to avoid all human interaction. Would it be Lissa, the girl who lived in the next building and walked the elderly woman's dog from downstairs every day? Or what about Tyler who helped his single mother carry the groceries up three flights of stairs every Sunday afternoon? As a seeker I was naturally attracted to the goodness in people, so I noticed it whether I wanted to or not.

The aura of the girl whose seat I stole was a mix of dark pink, purple, and green. That didn't surprise me. Immaturity mixed with jealousy and moodiness, a pretty typical combination for a teenage girl. She had some light yellow thrown in as well, signaling creativity. That didn't surprise me either. Her outfits were always well put together, even if the clothing itself wasn't high quality. The girl knew how to do a lot with a little.

Her friends' auras were similar.

I was relieved to see that while Lissa and Tyler's auras did contain some white, it was not enough white to warrant my attention—or the attention of others. They were safe from me. They could get hit by a bus tomorrow while crossing the street, but it wouldn't be on my conscience.

By lunch my head was pounding. After blocking out the auras for so long, I really should have taken it slow, but I was eager to get it over with. The sooner I gave Xavier a name, the sooner I could try to forget about it. It was the quick rip Band-Aid approach.

I stared at a quiz in my trig class and rubbed my

temples. The numbers were all blending together, and I couldn't remember the formulas for tangent and cosecant. I worked a problem for the fourth time, erasing my scribbling so fiercely I ripped a hole in the paper. I gave up at that point. What did it really matter in the grand scheme of things? After spending my morning seeking, I didn't have it in me to care if I failed a stupid quiz.

I walked up to Mr. Tolliver's desk to turn in my quiz just as the bell rang. Most of the students rushed out, but one girl lagged behind, biting her lip and shoving her hands in and out of her pockets, like she wasn't quite sure what to do with them. Her hair was dark brown, cut short in a pixie style, and she wore brown hipster style glasses. I took a deep breath and walked down the aisle to gather my belongings.

I smiled at her, a cordial smile, yet not one that invited conversation, and shoved my pencils and notebook into my backpack.

"Hi," she said, not taking the hint.

"Hi...Katie?"

"Kaley, actually."

"Sorry, I—"

"No, it's okay. I know you're new. Well, not super new. You've been here about a month, right?"

I nodded, slinging my backpack over my shoulder.

"I'm good at math." She blushed and a nervous little laugh slipped out. "I mean, I can help you if you want. I noticed you were struggling with your quiz."

"That's nice of you," I replied, "but I'll be fine."

"Really, I don't mind," she insisted with an eager smile. "I was the new girl last year, so I know how hard it is to switch schools."

"Thanks." I tried for a smile but was only half successful. "Can I let you know?"

She grinned, and I felt a pang, realizing how desperately Kaley wanted friends. But friendship was something a seeker didn't have to offer.

“Sure,” she said. “I’m free most afternoons. Or at lunch. Or in the mornings. You know, whenever you’re free.”

As she walked away, I looked at her aura, and my gut churned. Her colors were almost perfectly balanced, so balanced that at first all I saw was white. My breath caught in my throat, and I took a few steps forward so I could still see her as she walked through the door out into the hallway. I squinted, scrutinizing.

Please, don’t let it be her.

There—a touch of tan.

I collapsed into a desk, putting my head between my knees. *It wasn’t her. She has tan—she’s too conservative to be pure white.*

“Miss Parks?”

I pulled my head up and rested my elbows on my knees. Mr. Tolliver was staring at me with his brows furrowed.

“Are you okay?”

I took a shaky breath. “I’m fine. I just got light-headed.”

He frowned. “Perhaps you should go to the nurse.”

I stood, hoping he didn’t notice my white knuckles gripping the desk. I pasted a smile on my face. “I’m fine. Forgot to eat lunch. Silly me.”

Mr. Tolliver nodded slowly, still frowning, but said nothing as I left his classroom. I took a right, going away from my next class, and burst through the closest exit door. Once out in the parking lot, I ran. I had no idea what direction I went in, had no idea where I was going. I didn’t care. I needed to get away.

After several blocks, I stopped running and leaned against a brick building, choking back a sob. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t condemn another good person. It made no difference to me that the person I chose had the potential to become an angel.

The worst part was that I had condemned the first two

without even knowing I was doing it. My mom had asked me to find fated white auras, so I did, not thinking anything of it. Her request wasn't that unusual and was reminiscent of my childhood when we would play the "aura game" at the playground or the mall. She would search the adults, and I would search the kids. Whoever found a fated white aura first won a candy bar.

I ate a lot of chocolate as a kid.

It was through this game that I learned how to tell if an aura was fated. An aura's glow was usually translucent, like a mist. When an aura was fated though, it became less transparent, solidified. I worked hard to find those auras, to learn the difference. I wanted to make my mom proud.

And I wanted to win the stupid candy.

At the time, I just thought it was a special secret game between me and my mom that only we could play. Now that I knew the truth about our little *game*, it made me wonder what other parts of my childhood were lies, especially considering the most recent lie, the biggest one, the one I couldn't bring myself to forgive her for.

It didn't take long for me to figure things out. I came home early from a friend's house and interrupted her giving the second name to Xavier.

I was horrified, shocked, betrayed. There were no appropriate words to describe it.

That's when I learned the truth, that Xavier was our connection to the Grim Reaper, that our job was to find white fated souls to die and join the ranks of angels, that I'd already been inadvertently responsible for the deaths of at least two people.

Xavier couldn't even confirm whether or not the souls achieved angel status. Apparently it wasn't a certainty. Some would become angels. Others would simply die. It all depended on how well I did my job finding pure auras.

Grief of those left behind was the only certainty. I went to the funeral in Woodlawn. I sat in the back, but there was no mistaking the heart wrenching sobs of the

girl's mother. The father whose voice broke in the middle of thanking everyone for coming to mourn his daughter. The weeping friends she'd left behind, the church so full there was standing room only. The ten-year-old little brother who insisted on being a pallbearer even though he physically couldn't carry the casket. His chin quivered as he stoically bore the emotional weight of his sister's death.

Her name was Ashley. Ashley Marie Middleton.

I liked to think she was an angel now.

I liked to think she was at peace.

I liked to think there was a higher purpose for what I'd done.

But I just didn't know.

Any faith I'd had started eroding when I learned my role in life. There was none left.

William Gurganis was the name of the boy from my first assignment. He'd collapsed on the track in gym class. I didn't go to that funeral. Of course, I'd had no idea I'd played a role in his death. But now I couldn't put my head in the sand about what I was doing like my mom did. And it was never going to end.

I couldn't do it again, especially now that I knew.

I started walking again, tears blinding my vision. I didn't know how far I walked. A mile, maybe two? I was in a busy section of town I didn't recognize, but that didn't mean anything. I'd only lived here a month, and I didn't get out much other than my walks through the projects.

I stood at the busy intersection and watched the light change to green, then back to red, then green again. The walk/don't walk sign flashed. Faded pink flowers were tied on the same pole. A cross that had seen better days was propped up.

Tears blurred my vision. I wiped at my eyes with the sleeves of my hoodie and stepped out into the intersection.

I smelled the burning rubber before I saw it, heard the squeal of breaks before I saw the silver bumper on a forest green car careening toward me.

As the headlights got closer, the most inane thoughts ran through my head.

I forgot to give my mom the message from the bank. Now she'll never know about the free checking account they offer.

My library books are due.

I hope the car doesn't ruin my shoes—they're my favorite pair.

The world slowed down to nearly standing still. I watched as the car crept toward me, the Ford emblem on the grill getting closer and closer.

Then the strangest thing happened.

The car slowed down. As it slowed, my world sped up.

The tires screeched, and the car veered to the right, hopping the curb. All I could see through the windshield were the whites of the driver's eyes.

I was no physics expert—in fact, I hadn't even taken the class—but that car shouldn't have been able to slow down enough to avoid hitting me.

Someone grabbed my arm and hauled me back onto the sidewalk.

"Are you okay?"

I looked up at my rescuer. He was tall, with dark hair and eyes—the quintessential tall, dark, and handsome.

I couldn't help myself. I swooned. Of course, that was probably mostly due to the near death experience. Now that I was safe, my mind reeled. *What the heck happened back there?* It was like I was possessed or something. It wasn't like me to step out into traffic. I'd been a junior crossing guard in fifth grade for goodness sake.

For the first time in a year, I worried about my appearance. I wished I had fixed my hair instead of letting it hang straight. I wished I had delved into the bag of makeup I'd shoved under the sink and forgotten about. I wished I'd chosen something other than scrubby jeans, a hoodie, and tennis shoes to wear this morning.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

I looked up, shocked. That comment brought me out of my swoon in a flash. That was no way to talk to someone who almost had her teeth flossed with the grill of a Ford. I opened my mouth to tell him so but was distracted by the commotion of the car reversing and speeding off down the street.

The guy cursed. "I didn't get the full license plate number."

"That's okay. I'm not going to report it."

He let me go and took a step back, putting his hands on his hips. He was wearing grease-covered faded jeans and a green t-shirt with *Bill's Auto Repair* printed on it. "What the hell were you thinking?" he said again.

"It was an accident."

"Bullshit. I saw you step right in that car's path. Do you have a date with death or something?"

I almost laughed at that. If he only knew.

I looked up at him, now able to focus since my racing heart had slowed from I-think-I'm-going-die speed to OMG-he's-hot speed. Yup, he was a looker. His skin was tan, and I'd bet he had Latino somewhere in his lineage. His lashes were long, unfairly long for a guy. Girls shelled out big bucks to make their eyelashes look like his.

In my former life, I would have hated him for that. In my current life, I hated him for the way he made my skin tingle with his presence.

"Well, thanks," I said, taking a few steps back the way I came.

He grabbed my arm, stopping me.

Okay, so now my skin was tingling for a different reason.

I pointedly looked at his hand on my arm, then looked up at him with venom in my gaze. "Do you mind?"

"I don't trust you to walk home."

"Excuse me?"

"You obviously don't know how to safely walk in traffic."

“What do you care?”

“I don’t.” He dropped my arm, then cursed. “But I’ll be damned if you hurt yourself and it’s on my conscience.”

“You don’t have to worry about me.”

Annoyance flared in his eyes. “If someone gets hit right in front of the shop, it’ll be bad for business.” He jerked his thumb at the automotive repair shop behind him.

I opened my mouth to fire off a snappy retort, but my phone chimed, signaling an incoming text. My mom and I didn’t have much money, but she insisted I have a cell phone so we could always stay in touch with one another. I pulled it out of my back pocket.

Come home now.

I frowned. My mom didn’t usually issue directives like that. I didn’t recognize the number, but she was the only one who had my cell number. My calling circle was more like a straight line.

I glared at my rescuer. “What’s your name?”

“Cole.” His voice was full of caution at my sudden lack of resistance.

“Nice to meet you, Cole,” I said. “Do you have a car?”

“Yeah.” He eyed me warily, as one might eye an unruly puppy.

“Can you drive me home?”

He waited a beat. “Let’s go.” He turned and walked toward the shop, not bothering to make sure I followed. Funny—a minute ago he was preventing me from walking away. Now he didn’t care?

I stalked behind him, following him into the shop. One car was up on the lift with most of its guts spewed onto the floor. A pudgy balding man wearing overalls had his hands all up in the car’s nether regions.

“Bill, I’ve got to take off,” Cole said, pulling a faded black hooded sweatshirt over his head.

Bill spared him a glance. “Same time tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Cole said, then jerked his head toward the

back door. I followed him out to where a rusty sedan was parked. I balked at the sight of it.

“I don’t know if I’ll be any safer in this.” It didn’t look like it would make it out of the parking lot, much less several miles to my house.

Cole stroked the rusty hood. “She might not look pretty, but she runs like a champ.”

“If you say so.”

Cole affectionately patted the hood one last time before opening the passenger’s side door. “Get in.”

My eyes went back and forth between him and the car as he walked around to get behind the wheel of the driver’s side. I looked skyward for a moment and then sighed before walking over to the car. I wrinkled my nose at the sight of the front seat. It was a bench seat—how old was this car? I didn’t think they’d made any cars with bench seats in the past ten or twenty years. A blue towel covered the passenger side. I lifted it up and peered underneath to see yellowed foam spilling out of ripped upholstery.

The engine started with a cough, so I slid into the seat and reached for the seatbelt.

“Where do you live?” He pulled a pair of sunglasses off the visor and put them on. They were aviator style with mirrored lenses. They worked for him.

My skin tingled again.

I hesitated only momentarily before giving him my address. I wondered what my mom would think of me being brought home in the middle of a school day by a strange guy. Hopefully, she would be at work, making it a non-issue.

But honestly? My cutting school should be the least of her worries.

Cole was silent on the ride. He was a very conscientious driver, almost to the point of driving like an old man. A glance at the speedometer confirmed he drove exactly the speed limit.

When we pulled in front of my apartment building, he

frowned, looking at the digital clock on the car's dash. "Wait, shouldn't you be in school?"

I shrugged. "Probably. Thanks for the ride."

I pulled on the door's lever and pushed the door, but it didn't open. I pulled it again and pressed against the door with my shoulder.

"There's a trick to it." Cole leaned across me, and I caught a whiff of motor oil, which was oddly appealing. I quickly shook my head a few times to clear that thought. That close call with the car had me all out of sorts.

That's all it was. Nothing more.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that.

He yanked down on the lever, then pulled it out, and pushed the door open.

"Thanks, again." I hopped out.

He nodded and pulled away from the curb, leaving behind the faint smell of exhaust. It wasn't until I had trudged up the first flight of stairs that the exhaust smell faded.

Then it hit me—cinnamon.

What was Xavier doing here?

He must have been the one to send me the text. That was why I didn't recognize the number. How did he get mine, though? My mom wouldn't have given it to him. Ever since he dropped the nice uncle act, she'd kept him as far away from me as possible.

I looked back out at the parking lot, hoping to see my mom's car. Its absence told me she must be at work. *Damn.*

Be careful what you wish for, I thought bitterly.

My first thought was to turn around and go back the way I came, but I couldn't run. He would know. I still didn't know exactly what Xavier was, but he had uncanny senses. I'm sure he knew I was here the minute Cole pulled into the parking lot.

I sent my mom a simple text. *Xavier's here.*

Breathing deeply, I slowly climbed the remaining

steps. I unlocked the door, dropped my backpack on the floor, and peeked around the corner into the kitchen.

"I'm in the living room."

I jumped at the sound of Xavier's voice and slowly entered the living room, my head down like a guilty child about to be reprimanded. That was how Xavier made me feel—like I wanted to run to my mommy and hide behind her legs.

But she wasn't here now.

And I wasn't the hiding type.

Xavier was sitting on our couch with one arm stretched over the back of it, a cigar in his hand. His right ankle was propped up on his left knee.

He blew out smoke in O-shaped circles. "Have a seat."

"I'll stand, thanks." I rubbed my arms, trying to smooth down the hairs that were standing on end.

"Tell me about your day."

I blinked. "It was, um, fine, I guess."

"Really?" He put the cigar out on the bottom of his shoe. Ashes fell onto our carpet, but he didn't notice, or in any event, he didn't care. "You're home early."

"I got sick."

He chuckled and smiled a Cheshire smile, showing the black nicotine stains on his teeth. "Ava, now you're just lying to me." He looked at me expectantly, but I remained silent. I didn't know where this conversation was heading, and I was afraid that whatever I said would only dig my hole deeper.

"What was the deal with the car?"

"Car?"

His expression shifted once again. The Cheshire was gone. In its place was something much more sinister. "The car you stepped in front of."

Oh, that car.

"There's no deal," I said. "It was an accident."

"Accident. So you didn't want it to hit you?"

I frowned, thinking back to being paralyzed on the

road, watching as the headlights of the car rushed toward me. Part of me didn't want to be saved. I would be lying if I said I didn't want it to hit me, to end it all. It would have been so easy.

"It doesn't work that way, Ava." *Did he read my mind?* Xavier paced the room, his agitation evident. "You don't get to choose. It's not up to you to decide."

"What? What don't I get to choose?" My eyes stayed glued to him, ping ponging back and forth as he paced.

"Your life, my dear. Your death."

I have no control.

I closed my eyes, letting it sink in. I knew Xavier had power over me, but I hadn't realized the extent of that power.

My life was not my own.

I choked down the maniacal laughter that threatened to escape.

I opened my eyes and realized Xavier was staring at me, waiting for a response.

"I didn't choose to almost get hit by a car."

"Then I guess you'd better be more careful. It's rather inconvenient when the Reapers have to save a seeker. They detest it, you know. It goes against their nature."

I hadn't seen a Reaper. If one saved me, then why didn't I see it? I'd *never* seen one. I thought back to the strange slowing of time when I was standing in the street. Perhaps that wasn't just in my mind. Could that have been the act of a Reaper?

"I don't understand. Why would the Reapers save me? They kill people."

Xavier studied me for a moment, then sat on the arm of the couch, tsking and shaking his head. "My dear, how ignorant you are. And I thought you were merely being defiant. Teenage rebelliousness and all that." He waved his hand, showing how nonsensical he deemed teenagers. "Every year, I request them to raise the induction age for seekers, but sadly, no one ever listens."

He didn't answer my question, but I didn't let it go. "So, what? I can't die? *Ever?*"

"Not until we decide." He brought his cigar to his lips and smiled. "Do you have any idea how much pain can be inflicted on someone who can't die?"

Chills ran down my spine. I took a step back, instinctively wanting to put distance between me and Xavier.

The front door opened and shut. My mom rushed into the room still wearing her waitress apron, her hair coming loose from her bun. "Xavier, what are you doing here?"

"Schooling your daughter, Mary. It appears she doesn't know the rules."

"I'll teach her, Xavier. I'll teach her the rules."

I hated my mom right then. Even though she was handling Xavier for me, she wasn't doing it the way I wanted her to. I wanted her to play the knight in shining armor, slaying the dragon, not acting like a possum and playing dead until the predator passed her by.

As she looked up at Xavier, I saw weakness in her hazel eyes, eyes we shared along with our auburn hair. Although we could have been twins separated by twenty years, I hoped my eyes never mirrored the weakness in hers.

Xavier stood, straightening his jacket. "See that you do, Mary. It's been a while since I've had to teach them, and I'm afraid my teaching methods might be deemed unorthodox by modern standards."

At the sound of the slamming of our front door, I began to breathe a little easier.

"What...did...you...do?" My mom's expression was fierce, the dead possum gone.

I flopped down on the couch and crossed my arms. "Nothing." I knew I sounded like a sullen child, but I didn't care. I *felt* like a sullen child.

She paced in front of me. Glancing at her watch, she cursed. "Shit."

I raised my eyebrows. My mom very rarely cursed.

“I have to go back to work. I’m not supposed to be gone this long.”

My sullenness faded away and I felt tinges of guilt. Despite the fact that my mom never stayed in one job for long, she did take pride in her work. Plus, it took her longer than normal to land this job, so we were already short on cash. I didn’t know what we’d do if she got fired.

She sighed. The sunlight streaming through the window illuminated her face, and for the first time, I noticed small wrinkles around her eyes. How long had they been there?

“We’ll talk about this when I get home. *Don’t* go anywhere.”

“Okay.”

I had nowhere to go anyway.

CHAPTER 3



AS SOON AS MY MOM left, I flipped the deadbolt on the front door and checked the window locks. It was silly. If Xavier wanted in, he would get in no matter how many layers of security I put between us. Still, the methodical security check eased my nerves a little bit.

Xavier's words echoed in my mind, like an old record that was skipping.

“Do you have any idea how much pain can be inflicted on someone who can't die?”

The answer to that question was no. No, I didn't know how much pain could be inflicted on a person who couldn't die. It wasn't something I wanted to find out, especially firsthand.

Xavier had always been obnoxious, for lack of a better word. There'd always been something a little off about him, but I'd never been afraid of him. Recently though, he'd crossed that line and was firmly planted in menacing. Years ago, my mom actually had him babysit me a few times when she was in a bind, and he'd helped us move on more than one occasion. Now I realized he had a vested interest in our lives. We were linked, for better—no, there was no better. It was only worse and worst. When I gave him the benefit of the doubt, which wasn't often, I figured he and I were probably similar in a way—both stuck in a

crappy situation with crappy roles to play. I got the sense that Xavier wasn't in charge of his own destiny either.

I curled up on my bed under a blue and green afghan my grandmother had crocheted. It was my favorite blanket even though I'd never met her. My mom didn't talk about her much, just an errant comment here and there. I'd always had a natural curiosity about her, but even more so now that I understood she also must have been a seeker. I wondered what the dynamics were like between her and my mom. Probably not good since my mom rarely mentioned her. Now that I'd learned about the whole not dying thing, I was even more curious about her. She was dead—had been since I was three. What made the Reapers decide they were done with her?

I must have drifted off, and when I woke up, it was dark outside. The wind was blowing, making an eerie whistling sound as it rattled the screens on our windows. The click of our front door closing had me clutching the blanket to my chest and holding my breath.

The kitchen light flooded the hallway and danced at the edge of my doorway. I heard someone rooting around in the refrigerator.

I closed my eyes and blew out a breath. It was just my mom.

God, when did I turn into such a wimp?

I slunk down the hall and leaned against the door frame in the kitchen, like a kid waiting to be scolded.

That's kind of what I was.

"Did you get in trouble with your boss?"

"No." My mom spared me a glance from where she was scrubbing her hands at the kitchen sink. "Did you eat?" The faint smell of fried foods wafted off her. I could always tell how busy the restaurant was by how she smelled. Faint smell equaled slow day, which meant few tips.

"No, I haven't eaten yet."

"Good. There's takeout."

Two large Styrofoam boxes were sitting on the counter next to the fridge. How much had that cost?

As if she'd heard my thoughts, she said, "Don't worry. The assistant manager was there today, the nice one, and he sends us home with food if the kitchen is slow." She placed a box on the table and opened it, pushing it toward me. "Eat."

Grilled chicken, garlic mashed potatoes, and brown-sugar baby carrots. There was even a little roll, but I had to forgo the cinnamon butter, immediately tossing it in trash. Ugh. Cinnamon. I sat down and we ate in companionable silence.

The food was so good. I hadn't eaten that well in a while. That made it sound like my mom didn't provide for me, but it wasn't like that. We were poor, but I never went hungry. She worked odd hours though, so she wasn't always home at dinner time. That meant a lot of PB & J's and canned soup.

"What happened today?" she finally asked.

I sighed, and rested my elbows on the table, cradling my face in my hands. I told her the whole story, only leaving out little bits about Cole. I was used to telling my mom everything—well before the last year anyway—but the length of his eyelashes that framed deep chocolate eyes didn't seem relevant, even if I had noticed them.

My mom shook her head, blowing out an exasperated breath. "Ava, you can't do stuff like that."

"I wasn't trying to do anything," I protested lamely, staring down at the table and fiddling with the placemat.

"Aside from everything else, you were skipping school."

"I don't see why that matters," I muttered. "It's not like I can go to college."

She rose and crossed to the sink to refill her glass with water. "Skipping school is *not* okay, young lady. And about college—things are different now than when I was your age. There are lots of online options."

“How would we pay for something like that?” I snapped. She acted like I hadn’t considered these things before. Aside from the finances, even if I did online school and got a degree, what then? What kind of profession would mesh with my seeking responsibilities? My options were mediocre at best.

Sadness and regret filled her eyes, and I wished I could take back the sharpness of my words. I needed to remember she didn’t choose this life either. It just sucked, and there was no easy fix. It irritated me when she tried to slap a Band-Aid on it.

She crossed to the freezer and pulled out a small tub of ice cream. She tossed it to me. Mint chocolate chip, my favorite. She placed a carton of butter pecan in front of her space and fished two spoons out of the drawer.

This could not be good. Whenever anything bad happened, like when I got cut from the softball team in middle school, she soothed my woes with ice cream.

“I need to tell you some things.” She sat and pried the lid off her ice cream.

I sighed and eyed the ice cream warily. She held a spoon out to me, and I took it reluctantly.

“Our situation is very...unique,” she started.

This information was not new to me. If this was how she was easing into the conversation, it would be next week before she got around to telling me what I needed to know.

Xavier’s words once again played in my mind. “*Do you have any idea how much pain can be inflicted on someone who can’t die?*”

I took a quick breath and blurted out my question before I could chicken out. “Can we die? I mean, Grandma’s dead, so we obviously won’t live forever, right?”

Her spoon paused midway to her mouth, her eyes widening. Slowly, she brought the spoon the rest of the way to her mouth and licked off the ice cream. “That’s

complicated.”

“How is it complicated?” I tried not to sound annoyed, but failed miserably. “It’s a yes or no question.”

“Yes and no.”

I slammed my spoon on the table with a clatter. “There’s no point in having this conversation if you aren’t going to tell me anything. I can’t believe you would keep something this important from me.”

Actually, I could. She’d kept *everything* from me for sixteen years.

She met my gaze, then calmly slid her spoon into her ice cream, eating another spoonful before speaking. “If you’re not going to eat your ice cream, then put it back in the freezer so it doesn’t melt.”

“Mom.” This one syllable word carried the weight of all my questions.

She sighed. “We can die, just not until they’re done with us.”

“They?”

She waved her spoon in the air, toward the sky. “You know. The powers that be.”

“So Xavier, then.”

She shook her head. “Xavier is not as all powerful as he would like you to believe.”

Some of the tension left my shoulders. “That’s good to know.”

“Oh, he’s still powerful, but after all these years, I get the impression he’s either a big fish in a little pond or a small fish in a big pond. I can’t figure out which.”

“Have you ever met anyone else like him?”

She chuckled. “There’s no one like Xavier. To answer your question though, I haven’t formally met anyone like him. I’ve seen others, but they didn’t approach me, and I certainly didn’t approach them.”

She held her ice cream out to me, offering me a taste. I shook my head. “So what exactly does it mean that we can’t die until they’re done with us? I mean, accidents

happen.” I shifted uncomfortably. “What if that car had hit me?”

“You wouldn’t have died,” she said simply.

“What if it were a bus? How could I not die if I were creamed by a bus?”

She winced, no doubt imagining my gray matter splattered all over the windshield of a Greyhound. “You would be saved.”

“How?” I pressed. I felt like I was Dorothy and she was the wizard, only showing me what was in front of the curtain. I wanted to see behind it.

She shrugged. “Reapers. Maybe angels. I don’t know for sure.”

I snorted. “That’s rich.” Angels saved seekers so that we could continue adding to their ranks. How twisted.

She smiled wryly. Yeah, she caught the irony in that. We actually had similar viewpoints and thought a lot alike, which was one reason why her deceit over the last year hurt so much.

“How do you know this?” I asked.

She hesitated. “I had a near death...” She paused, obviously wrestling with something inside herself. “...experience.” She put the lid on her ice cream and put it in the freezer. The discussion was over.

I suddenly felt like a little kid again, like when my mom used to cover my eyes for the more mature parts of PG-13 movies. Just when it was about to get good? Hands over the eyes.

I stood abruptly, slamming the lid onto my ice cream container. “You know, I thought you were finally going to treat me like an equal here. Why are you still hiding things from me?”

Here I thought we were on the road to mending our relationship, and she had to ruin it by throwing up a huge roadblock.

“You’re not an adult yet.”

I stared at her. I couldn’t believe she was still treating

me like a child when I held the balance of people's lives in my hands.

“Tell that to the kids who die because of me.”

I strode to my room and slammed the door.



MY MOM DROPPED ME OFF at school the next morning. I think she wanted to make sure I got there. It wasn't getting there that was the problem though—it was staying there. By the end of the day, my stomach was churning from interacting with my classmates, knowing I was scouting them for reaping.

By my last class of the day, junior seminar, I was ready to bolt. My head was pounding from looking at auras for hours on end. I'd tried wearing sunglasses to ease the glare, but that made me look like I was hung over or something. I took them off after the third teacher graced me with an accusatory stare. The last thing I needed was to spend the afternoon in detention.

Junior seminar was a joke from what I could tell. It was a required class for all students, and it was supposed to prepare us for our senior year. My teacher was Ms. Green, who decorated her classroom walls with posters with cutesy sayings like “Warning! Your Future is Closer Than it Appears!” So far all I had to show for the class was a stack of SAT vocab word flashcards. I now knew that a dromedary was a one-humped camel.

I felt so enriched.

Ms. Green was unusually perky today, which didn't help my throbbing head. It felt like my brain was trying to pound its way out of my skull.

“Today is the best day of the year. Today...” she paused, looking around for dramatic emphasis to ensure we were all sufficiently excited. Seeing our dull expressions, she pursed her lips a little, then pasted on an even brighter smile as if her enthusiasm could make up for

our lack of it. “Today you start your career projects!”

She walked down the front of the rows, distributing brightly colored handouts. Most other teachers relied on basic white paper. Not Ms. Green. Today’s color selection was blue, and not even plain blue—electric blue.

I tuned her out and instead read over the handout. Huh. We had to do a project on a potential career. In addition to writing a paper, we also had to work with a partner to do a massive presentation at the end of the unit.

I looked around at my classmates who were already pairing up and sighed. Finding a partner was going to be a problem.

I raised my hand. Might as well get the embarrassment of having the teacher find me a partner out of the way.

Just as Ms. Green noticed my hand, the classroom door swung open.

I slowly pulled my hand down. *You have to be freaking kidding me.*

Cole filled the doorway. He was wearing faded jeans, a navy blue shirt, and a disinterested attitude. No oil stains. I guessed he saved those for the garage.

I ducked down, waiting for him to get what he needed from Ms. Green and leave. Instead, she announced to the class, “Everyone, this is Cole Fowler. He’ll be joining us for this project.”

A few of the girls perked up, flipping their hair over their shoulders and subtly giving him the once over. He stood at the front of the class with his hands shoved in his pockets, a backpack slung over one shoulder. His expression stopped just short of a scowl.

The ever-attentive teacher that she was, Ms. Green turned in my direction. “Did you have a question, Ava?”

I sat up in my chair. No use trying to hide now. I’d been outed. “Yeah, I, um, don’t have a partner.”

Ms. Green looked around the room. “Raise your hand if you need a partner.”

No one raised their hand. There might as well have been crickets chirping.

She turned to Cole and smiled brightly. “Now I’m doubly happy you’re joining us, Cole. You can partner with Ava.”

He looked at me, and some sort of smile-thing crossed his face. Like half-smile, half-grimace. It was the kind of look I probably made when old men hit on me at my mom’s job.

He took the handout Ms. Green gave him and sauntered down the aisle. Dropping his backpack on the floor, he slid into the desk next to me.

I twisted to face him. “What are you doing here?” I blurted out.

He eyed me warily. “Getting a diploma.”

“Aren’t you like twenty-five or something?”

“Nineteen.”

“And you’re a junior?”

“No, I’m a senior, but I transferred so I didn’t do this project last year. They won’t let me graduate without it.” His tone expressed his annoyance. “Any other questions?”

I twisted back around in my desk and picked up the handout. I didn’t read it. I just needed something to focus on other than him and all his...*Cole-ness*.

“My mom works at a restaurant.” I spoke without looking up from my handout. “We could do something with that for this project.”

“It says here we’re not allowed to work with our parents.”

“What? Where?” I looked over at where he was pointing. Sure enough it was right there in black and electric blue. That severely limited my options down to, oh, nothing since it also clearly stated that we were responsible for finding our businesses to volunteer with. I didn’t know any other adults with jobs I could ask, and it was doubtful my mom did either.

“Let’s do the repair shop.”

I wrinkled my nose. My career options were limited at best, but I could safely say I would not end up a mechanic.

Cole noticed my reaction. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"We're supposed to choose a career we'd actually want to have, and I have *nooooo* interest in working on cars."

He stared at me for half a beat. "Do you have a better idea?"

I shook my head.

"Good. Give me your phone."

"What?" I frowned. "Why?" He was crazy if he thought I letting an arrogant, bossy, know-it-all grease monkey put his paws all over my phone. I didn't care how hot he was.

I got that stare again, like I'd suddenly morphed into an ogre or something.

"So I can put my number in it," he said. "We might need to contact each other." When I didn't hand it over, he added, "For the project?"

"Oh." Of course. Duh. I leaned down to fumble through my backpack for my phone. And hide the massive blush that had started on my cheeks and spread to every other part of me. I was such an idiot.

After we'd put our numbers in each other's phones, he glanced at his watch.

"I've got to go. Come by the shop tomorrow afternoon." He stood and slung his backpack over one shoulder. He gave a short wave to Ms. Green and left.

My mouth hung open. What was that all about? The class didn't end for another forty-five minutes. I crossed my arms, fuming. Not only was I paired with someone I never wanted to see again, I was also going to be stuck hanging out in a dirty, smelly repair shop.

I should've chosen today to skip school.

take in.

I noticed how the ring leader's aura was the darkest. He was the most evil. Red and orange lines threaded through the black, signaling anger and ignorance. I noticed the bulge in his waistband, probably a gun. I noticed how the others walked a few steps behind him, deferring to him and his apparent authority.

So excuse me if I didn't notice the clothing he was wearing. I had become a master at reading people this last year, but that involved behaviors. Clothing wasn't even a blip on my radar. I glanced down at my uniform of jeans and a hoodie. Nope, clothing wasn't my thing.

Cole glanced over at me. "Gang colors. They were wearing gang colors."

"How so?"

"On their heads."

I tried to remember what they were wearing. "Black beanies?"

"They had bandanas on under the beanies."

I blinked. Yeah, maybe I saw a snatch of blue beneath the beanies. So what? So what if they were matching?

Then the *so what* dawned on me, and I felt like an idiot.

"So you're saying they're gang members?"

Cole maneuvered through traffic, just barely making it through an intersection on a yellow light. "Glad to see you've finally caught up."

I didn't know the implications of their being gang members. It was bad, obviously. But what kind of bad and how bad I had no clue. I was so pissed at Cole right now I could hardly see straight, much less think straight.

"You're an asshole, you know that?"

"I've heard that about me." There was no pride or sarcasm. He was simply matter-of-fact. It dawned on me that this was a person who truly didn't care what others thought of him.

That must be nice, freeing.

It made me hate him a little more.

“What were *you* doing in that part of town? Were you following me?” I accused.

His expression told me how ridiculous that accusation was.

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

His words stung. Okay, so maybe it was a ridiculous accusation, especially since I was pretty sure he didn’t see me go by the shop. He didn’t have to be an ass about it though.

“What *were* you doing there?” I asked again.

He pulled the car into the shop parking lot and remained silent.

I smirked. “Someone’s got a secret. I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”

He turned off the car and gave me a scathing look. “Just be glad I *was* there. You don’t know what those guys are capable of.”

I didn’t *know* what they were capable of, but given their auras, I could make an educated guess. I had been scared back there. Part of me was relieved Cole whisked me away. The other part of me was angry. I’d gone there because I had a task to complete, not because I had a death wish as Cole liked to say. I was no closer to having a name for Xavier than I was this morning. Even if I went back tomorrow, who knew if my luck would be the same and I’d find a black aura so quickly? For my sake, I hoped it would be easy.

For humanity’s sake, I hoped otherwise.

I unbuckled my seatbelt. “Your concern is touching, truly, but I can take care of myself.”

He snorted and got out of the car. I did the same.

As I entered the building, I called out, “Bill! It’s me, Ava! You may want to hide now!”

Cole slammed his keys down on the counter. “That’s enough. I’ve told you before not to mess with Bill.”

I crossed my arms and raised one eyebrow. “I’m doing

him the courtesy of announcing my presence.” I was being a bitch. I knew it, but Cole brought it out in me.

“If you’re going to hang around, then do something useful.” He pulled two boxes off the shelf and shoved them into my arms. “Match these up.”

I looked down into the boxes. One was full of bolts, the other nuts. They were various sizes and shapes.

I gave Cole one last dirty look before hopping up on my stool and starting on the task. Even though I knew I was acting like a bitch, I really wasn’t one. I shouldn’t tease Bill, and I wouldn’t except it annoyed Cole. Bill was doing us a solid by letting us use his shop for our project. It could be much worse. One group was working at a dry cleaners. I overheard them talking about how awful it was and how the manager basically used them as slave labor.

So if it would help Bill for me to match up nuts and bolts, then I would, even if it was Cole who gave me the order.

Cole pulled a car into his work area. I recognized he was going through the routine of a basic oil change. I smiled a little, pleased with myself. A week ago I wouldn’t have known that.

While Cole was busy with the oil, I took the opportunity to observe him. I didn’t know why I let him get under my skin. I *let* him have that power over me.

I just...couldn’t help it. There was something about him that drew me in, like that old *moth to the flame* saying. Except who was the moth and who was the flame? It could go both ways.

He was more...*competent* than most guys his age. Competent seemed like an odd word, but it was what popped into my mind as I watched him. He moved with purpose, like he knew what he was doing. He did because he’d probably changed the oil for hundreds of cars, but he was just like that in general. Everything he did had a purpose.

While I grudgingly admitted that being competent

was a worthy trait, it did not make him worthy of a white aura. I slowly let down my guards, bracing myself for the onslaught of brightness. I cringed as I was bathed in the pure white light. I had half expected (maybe not expected, but definitely *hoped*) the aura to be different this time, that last time was a fluke.

But despite my irritation with Cole, I knew somewhere in my gut he was good. I could see it in those rare moments he let his guard down.

Unfortunately for me, his method of keeping his guard up was acting like an asshole.

I forced myself to put aside my irritation and really study his aura.

It wasn't fated.

Thank God.

Still, it wasn't exactly *not* fated, either. I had never seen a white aura quite like his. It was odd. Instead of the white being consistently bright, it throbbed ever so slightly, so slight I almost missed it. But once I saw it, it was unmistakably throbbing.

It figured he'd have a difficult aura. I didn't know what to make of it. But now that I'd determined his aura wasn't fated, I could freely embrace my irritation with him.

The car he was currently working on was an older model. Still, he took the same amount of care with it as he did with the luxury car he had just finished, even taking the time to buff out a spot where it looked like another car's paint had rubbed off on it. He did a good job, worked hard, went the extra mile.

God, it pissed me off.

He would be a lot easier to deal with if he were a complete asshole. Then I could write off the knee jerk spine tingling that occurred whenever I looked at him as nothing but hormones, nothing but a reaction to his general hotness.

He choose that moment to look up at me. The spine

tingling turned into full on body tingling.

I blushed and looked down at the nut and bolt I held, my fingers fumbling when trying to fit them together.

He walked over and put his hands on his hips, surveying my pile of matches. “Not bad.”

My blush deepened at the compliment. “I still have a lot more to match.” I gestured to the still full boxes. “I hope Bill doesn’t need them anytime soon,” I added. If he could play nice, then so could I.

He grinned wickedly. “He doesn’t.”

I frowned. “Is there something I’m missing here?”

He rocked back on his heels. “These are junk nuts and bolts. Bill just throws them in these boxes whenever he finds them lying around.”

I gaped at him. “So you’re saying...”

“They’re worthless.”

I dropped the bolt I was holding like it’d burned me. “Worthless?” I growled the word.

He threw his head back and laughed.



COLE BOUGHT ME DINNER. NOTHING fancy, just fast food. Even though he didn’t say so, I could tell he felt bad about the whole nuts and bolts thing. After I’d gotten over my initial anger, I had to admit it was kind of funny.

Cole had gotten up to get a drink refill, so I used the opportunity to check out his aura again. I took a few cleansing breaths and let down my guards. I squinted at the blinding flash of light but managed to keep my eyes open to inspect the aura.

I tilted my head, trying to get another angle. Every way I looked at it, it was white. No matter how hard I looked, how much I scrutinized the light surrounding him, I couldn’t find any trace of color, just the strange throbbing. If I had to guess at Cole’s aura, I’d say blue—he was definitely masculine—or red—he was a danger to girls

everywhere. I *never* would have picked white. The more time I spent with him, the more I realized he was a nice guy, but I had a list of reasons why he shouldn't possess a white aura.

Starting with telling me it would be bad for business if I died in front of the shop.

Joking or not—and given his seriousness when he'd made that comment, I'd guess not—that was not a nice thing to say. Lucky for him, my grudges against my mom and Xavier didn't leave any room for any more.

Well, big grudges anyway.

He popped the lid on his cup and headed back to our table. I ducked my head and dragged my french fry through the blob of ketchup on my burger wrapper. When he sat down, the edges of his lips were curved up in a smirk.

Damn. He must have caught me staring at him. Heat rushed to my cheeks, so I kept my head down and focused on my food.

“So where did you move from?” he asked.

I waited a few seconds before raising my head to ensure the blush had faded. I raised one eyebrow, a cool trick I'd taught myself when I was nine by practicing for hours in front a mirror. “So we're those kind of friends, now, huh?”

He shrugged, then took a massive bite of his deluxe burger, his second one. The first one he'd polished off nearly before I could even get mine unwrapped. “If you don't want to be friends, that's cool.”

“No,” I said a little too quickly. I took a sip of soda, hoping it would cool the heat spreading to my cheeks again. “We can be friends.”

I fidgeted, still not answering his original question. There was no way he'd connect the tragedy in Woodlawn with me. It didn't make the national news or anything, just the local news. He probably hadn't even heard of the place anyway.

“Woodlawn,” I said. “I came from Woodlawn.”

He looked at me with a blank expression, and my shoulders sank a little with relief. “It’s a podunk little town in the middle of nowhere in southwest Virginia.”

“Did you like it there?”

Sure, aside from being responsible for the death of the homecoming queen.

“It was okay.” My mom had chosen it because it was small and unassuming. She thought it would be easier to find a white aura in a simpler environment, one where people hadn’t been corrupted by the hustle of urban life. In a way, she was right. I spotted the white aura right away. But Ashley’s death reverberated through that small town like an echo in a chasm. That had made it much harder.

“Why did you move?”

“My mom has a wandering spirit,” I said. That had been her explanation for our moves my whole life. In the last year, that explanation had taken on new meaning. “What about you? Why did you move from D.C.?”

He hesitated, shoving a handful of fries in his mouth to buy time. I could tell he still didn’t want to share personal details, despite his previous declaration that made us friends.

“I got an opportunity to go through the auto program here,” he finally said.

There seemed to be more to it than that, but I didn’t want to pry and ruin our little “Kumbaya” moment. His opening up to me, even this little bit, felt like a huge step.

“Did you like it there?” I asked, taking my cue from the questions he’d asked.

“It was okay.” He took a sip of his soda. “There was always something going on.”

“I’ve never been there.”

“Really?” He looked surprised.

“Maybe I’ll go some day, and you can show me around.” I said it jokingly, but as soon as the words were

out of my mouth, I wished I could suck them back in.

His expression was stricken. "I don't really go back there."

There was pain there. I suddenly wanted to reach across the table and hold his hand, but I knew it wouldn't be welcome.

And that would just open doors that were best kept shut.

"What do your parents do?"

The stricken expression was replaced by another one, this one hard. "My parents aren't a factor in my life."

Strike two for me. Not wanting to go for the trifecta, I munched on my fries.

Cole sighed, running his hands through his hair. A bunch of it stuck up in the front. I wanted to run my hands through it, to smooth it down, to soothe the obvious pain caused by his past.

Keep that door shut, remember? I chided myself. Friendly. That's all you're going for here. Keep it simple.

"I've never met my dad. He left my mom before I was born. And my mom—" he broke off suddenly, looking away.

"You don't have to tell me," I said quickly. If anyone understood about family secrets, it was me.

"I know," he said. "For some reason I want to. My mom was a drug addict. Probably still is. She wasn't the best mother, so I got used to fending for myself."

"That sucks," I said simply. Although I would love to coddle him, Cole wasn't the coddling type. A simply acknowledgment of his misfortune was enough.

"Thanks."

"I've never met my dad, either," I offered in solidarity. "He took off when I was a baby. I figure I probably don't want to have anything to do with the type of guy who would do that anyway. My mom and I are better off without him."

We sat in silence for a moment, Cole flicking his straw

with his finger and me folding up my burger wrapper into a tiny square.

Cole cleared his throat and grinned. "Are you going to do some real work at the shop tomorrow?"

I scowled but ruined it by laughing. "That bolt trick was mean."

He held up a soggy fry, offering it to me. "Do you forgive me?"

I looked at the fry skeptically before turning my gaze to him. "That limp fry is not going to win you forgiveness."

He looked at it, shrugged, and stuffed it in his mouth. "I'll tell you what. I'll teach you how to change a tire tomorrow. You don't have to go under the car for that."

"How do you know I don't already know how to change one?" It didn't escape my notice that he remembered my claustrophobia. I was pleased, even more pleased that he took it seriously, suggesting an activity that wouldn't set it off.

"Do you?" he asked pointedly.

I stuck out my chin. "No," I admitted.

"That's what I thought." He leaned back in his chair, observing me knowingly. "You're stubborn for the sake of being stubborn, you know that?"

I thought about that. Yes, I could be stubborn, but Cole brought that trait out in me like never before. My aura must be flooded with it right now.

If I could see my own aura, what other colors would I find? Would I have any pink for compassion? Or would I just find the steely blue that represents coldness? At what point would my aura become black? Surely it couldn't stay light. With every name I turned in it had to be getting darker and darker until one day it would be ebony.

But maybe, just maybe, if I could pull off turning in black auras instead of white ones, then I could slow down the blackening of my own aura.

"So what classes are you taking?" I asked in a lame attempt to keep the conversation going.

“Government and English,” he replied. “Oh, and the junior seminar. Just for the project, though.”

“You only have two full-time classes?” That was crazy. I had seven.

He shrugged. “I’m in the apprenticeship program, so working at the shop counts toward graduation.”

“Geez, I wish I could do that.”

“You can when you’re a senior. What are your skills?” The smirk on his face was becoming a fixture.

I gave him a look, then opened my mouth to answer and promptly shut it.

I didn’t have any skills.

I could write a decent essay and was scraping by in trig now, thanks to Kaley, but they weren’t exactly skills. Did doing laundry count as a skill? Probably, but it wasn’t an important or hard to learn skill.

I could see auras. That was a skill you didn’t run into every day, but it wasn’t exactly something I could share.

But it was the one that consumed most of my energy.

It shaped my world. The rest of my life was going to revolve around seeing auras and finding the white ones, being the Grim Reaper’s seeker. It defined me.

The thought made me sick to my stomach.