

Dark Rising



Book Two of *the*
ARCHANGEL PROPHECIES

MONICA MCGURK



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Published by River Grove Books
Austin, TX
www.rivergrovebooks.com

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Distributed by River Grove Books

For ordering information or special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact River Grove Books at PO Box 91869, Austin, TX 78709, 512.891.6100.

Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group and Kim Lance
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Publisher's Cataloging Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-63299-033-4

First Edition

Other Edition(s):

eBook ISBN: 978-1-63299-034-1

To victims and survivors of modern-day slavery everywhere.

You are so much more than your circumstances.

*May you know the joy of freedom and the knowledge
that your worth is boundless.*

*A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book
and its predecessor, Dark Hope, will be donated to
organizations that fight human trafficking, especially
the sexual trafficking of minors.*



one

TURKEY

It was cold.

Not the kind of cold that nips your nose and makes you laugh as you stomp your feet to warm up, the briskness bringing a rosy glow to your cheeks and a sparkle to your eyes.

No, this cold was damp and insistent, working its way into my bones, dull and persistent, slowly eating away at me like nagging doubt.

Or loneliness.

I coughed, a harsh barking sound that echoed off the cobblestones of the empty courtyard, and three heads swiveled in unison to stare at me.

The looks on the angels' faces couldn't have been more different. Raph held nothing but disdain for me—the whole reason we were in this mess and a visible reminder of all he hated about humanity. Enoch, on the other hand, knowingly searched

my face, deftly cataloging each and every sign of frailty or pain as if he could single-handedly take them away and make me whole again.

And Michael? Michael just frowned, his eyes remote, before turning away to stare once again up the crumbling, steep steps that led to the church's gate.

We'd set off for Istanbul only a day ago but now that we were here, everything that had happened in Las Vegas already seemed a distant memory.

More like a nightmare, Henri whispered in my mind.

I sighed, willing Henri, my guardian angel, away and walling off my thoughts from him. I knew he was right. Nothing had gone right since Michael came into my life back in Atlanta. I thought I'd made a new friend, getting off to a clean start after I filed for change of custody and moved in with my mom after years of living with my dad. I was in a new school, where nobody knew about how I'd been abducted as a child. Nobody knew about the Mark and how it had materialized, unbidden, upon my neck during my disappearance.

I traced its strange outline with my fingertip, lost deep in thought.

Nothing was as it seemed. I thought nobody knew about the Mark. But Michael may have, and it may have been the real reason he was interested in me to begin with. It designated me as part of an ancient Prophecy, the Bearer of the Key to Heaven's Gate. And because Michael wasn't just a teenage boy, but the Archangel charged with guarding Heaven's Gate, that meant . . .

Even now, I could barely bring myself to think it.

It meant he couldn't have possibly ever loved me. For I was the Bearer of the Key. The one, according to the Prophecy, from whose hands the Fallen would receive the Key that unlocked Heaven's Gate to them, allowing them to overturn Heaven. How could

Michael love me when he knew he might have to kill me to prevent that from ever happening?

Unless we found the Key and destroyed it before the Fallen Angels got to it, I reminded myself. If they got it, they'd use it to storm Heaven and fulfill the Prophecy. But we could find it first if we could only figure out where to look.

That's what took us to Las Vegas. We'd gone to see Enoch, Heaven's Librarian and an angel who had once been human himself. Enoch gave us the entire Prophecy but left it to us to decipher. We made no headway until after The Incident.

That's what I call it. The Incident. It sounds so innocuous, so clinical. It helps me skip over all the confusion of Before and After, the jumble of emotions that welled up in me when I remember what happened.

We were playing a dangerous game, talking our way into gambling with the Chinese syndicate that was responsible for the human trafficking ring that whisked my friend Ana from her hometown in Mexico to Atlanta and, eventually, to Vegas. I made Michael promise to help me find her, my own condition for going willingly with him to Las Vegas to search for the Key—the ancient artifact that would somehow open Heaven's Gate. The Prophecy mentioned it but didn't tell us what it was. The Fallen Angels—Michael's rival, Lucas, chief among them—mistakenly believed I was the Key. Our only chance of beating the Fallen, then, was to find the real Key before they caught up with us. If we found it, we could destroy it and prevent them from using it to gain entry into Heaven, overthrowing it, and casting the entire world into chaos. Michael grudgingly went along with my condition, impersonating my father in order to skirt airline procedures and accompany me, a minor, to Las Vegas. Once there, he pretended to be one of the traffickers, weaseling his way into their good graces in hopes of

finding Maria. While doing so, he went hot and cold on me and treated me so callously it was easy to believe he wanted me dead.

I still felt a twinge of guilt, thinking of how my mother would blame my father for my disappearance, knowing that he would fall under suspicion and that it might make things even worse between my estranged parents. Michael assured me that the best way to protect my father was to create a trail of evidence that meant it was impossible for him to be with me. But still, as crazy as he might seem sometimes, he is my father, and I wish we'd been able to avoid dragging him into this. I couldn't help but wonder if our attempts to protect him made it worse for him instead.

In our search for the Key and Maria, we shut everything out. I was isolated and alone, unsure of whether I could trust Michael. As the Head of God's army, Michael had a special responsibility to defend and protect the innocent on Earth—refugees persecuted for their religious beliefs, peoples ravaged by war or brutalized by their own governments. Throughout history, he guarded them and saved them in the most improbable of ways. Yet, because of me, he has now abandoned his charges, blocking out their insistent cries for help in order to focus on me and our search. Whether it was as a reminder of his neglected duties, or a punishment for failing to take my life, God hounded Michael with unrelenting, crippling pain. He was warping under the weight of it, so that I couldn't tell if he really did hate me, or if it was part of his act.

When he surprised me with dinner on the night of my birthday, I let down my guard, believing him when he told me that he loved me. *So naïve*, I thought bitterly. But how could I have known that an Angel's love was not meant for humankind? What started out as a gentle kiss grew into much more, until the intensity of our need, the depth of Michael's emotion, literally turned him to flame.

My love is meant only for God, he'd explained, too late, when I'd woken up in a hospital bed to find that the flames had engulfed me, too.

I looked at my shiny skin, scarred everywhere he'd touched me. I bent my fingers, forming a fist and winced at the tightness, the pain.

Was it love or hate that caused him to throw me into that inferno? Did he mean to hurt me that night? I could never know for sure, but my marred skin would serve as a painful reminder of what happened.

That, plus the new powers of intuition that transferred from Michael to me. "God's cosmic joke," Henri called it. Just in case a human survived an encounter with an angel, He'd rigged it so the human would absorb the angel's powers. Just as our search was getting more dangerous, Michael was drained, unable to rely on the unerring instinct that guided him in the past. My own hunches often felt like stabs in the dark, but they helped us find and free Maria from the traffickers. And my newfound instincts revealed to me that the Key we were looking for wasn't a literal key; it was the rock that Cain used to slay his brother, Abel, millennia ago, a symbol of the divide over mankind's fate that rent the angelic host in two. How fitting that if it were recovered, the Fallen would use the very thing that had turned them against humanity—and God's authority—to overtake Heaven's Gate?

Henri would have called it another of God's jokes. It was because of Cain's crime that so many angels turned against humanity. And it was because Michael had protected Cain that so many angels hated Michael. Michael hated that rock, which humans came to treat as a sacred relic, twisting it into something to be venerated. He'd wished it away, resenting that it came to be associated with him. And now we must find it before it is too late.

That's what brought us here. My gut told me we would find the

rock somewhere sacred to Michael, perhaps lost along the pilgrimage routes of the Crusades or buried under rubble along the way. When Michael told me about the Michaelion, the ancient church that the Emperor Constantine had dedicated to him, it sounded right. So we came to Turkey to look for it.

That was my first mistake.

The ancient sanctuary was gone, of course. What was once wild, isolated countryside had now been swallowed up by the waves of growth that turned Constantinople into modern-day Istanbul. The distant shores of Istinye were now just another city neighborhood. Where the shrine had stood, a modern shopping mall, all polished steel and glass, now reigned exultant.

We stood in the center of the mall, surrounded by shops that could have been in New York or Paris or Tokyo, and waited for some inspiration to guide me.

But nothing came.

Nothing but bitter accusations from Raph, the other Archangel whom Michael had roped into joining us, ostensibly as protection. Whether he was to protect me from Michael, or Michael from me, I wasn't sure.

Enoch—the other part of the security detail, and the one who'd revealed the full Prophecy to Michael and me—had told me to ignore him, but it was hard when I knew Raph blamed me for leading Michael astray and putting him at risk of Falling.

“So much for her vaunted skills,” Raph spat out in anger, oblivious to the happy din of shopping that swirled about us. “We're lucky she didn't lead us straight to Lucas and the Fallen Ones.”

“She's young,” Enoch interjected, “and new at this. She is just learning her own powers. We shouldn't expect her to do it all alone. Plus, she's tired. She has barely slept since Las Vegas.”

“Ah, yes, human weakness. How quaint. Just what we need at

a time like this,” Raph retorted. “What are we supposed to do now? Shop?”

The bickering escalated until Michael made what he called “an executive decision,” forcing us out of the mall to wander the rain-swept streets of Istinye, dragging our duffels and backpacks behind us. It was an assault on my senses—the incessant honking of traffic; the booming horns, blasted by ships as they passed; the way modern streets would give way to narrow alleys, punctuated by coffee shops and fruit stalls and bakeries that seemed to have grown in that very spot hundreds of years ago; the juxtaposition of mosque with high rise; the strangeness punctuated by the sight of a woman wrapped in her headscarf climbing one foot out of her apartment window, high above the street, vigorously washing the glass in the sputtering rain; and, every now and then, the haunting song of the call to prayer, wafting over the chill air. After hours of searching, slowly winding our way down the hill and closer to the water, we found ourselves in the most run-down of alleys. I would have said we were lost, but Michael—far ahead of me now—had somehow found these crumbling steps and was climbing them with purposeful, renewed energy.

The two other angels moved about him, subtly shifting with his and my every move, shielding him from my view, and building a buffer of wind-driven space between us. They served as a wall—a wall of flesh and bone, meant to keep me away.

I trailed behind them as they climbed, watching for worn spots and crumbling rock, wary of falling. Their heated whispers bounced off the old brick and stone.

“You’re lucky to have found it,” Raph muttered. “There’s not even a *here*, here. And after she said she knew where it was . . .”

“She never said that,” Enoch grunted with the effort of the climb. “She simply said she felt we were supposed to come to Turkey.”

“Enoch’s right,” Michael added quietly, sighing. “I was the one who said we should come to Istanbul. The Michaelion was my idea. It seemed as good a place to start as any. And to be fair, I should have realized it wouldn’t be here any longer. It’s as much my fault that I didn’t know where to find the church that had been rebuilt from its ruins. At least, not without some searching.”

“It’s a wild goose chase,” Raph protested. “She has no idea what she’s doing. How can you entrust this to her?”

“It’s her Prophecy, Raph,” Enoch chastised gently. “We have no choice but to trust it to her. Without her, we are all lost.”

A metal gate, as gray as the weary sky, arched gracefully over the steep steps, and I stopped beneath it to rest. The delicate ironwork didn’t seem of this age. I reached out my hand to touch the filigree, tracing the symbols, wondering what they meant. Droplets of water clung to the metal until my finger interrupted their tenuous hold, and they fell, one by one, like tears, my finger leaving a track against the cold metal.

“Better keep up now, Hope.”

I looked up, startled, to find a red-faced Enoch had descended and was waiting a few steps above me. He reached out and proffered a bottle of water.

“Important to keep hydrated.”

I took the bottle and skeptically eyed him as he wheezed with obvious strain.

“You’re a funny one to be handing out health advice.”

He snorted with a smile, waving me up the stairs. “Such impudence. Come on.”

We began to climb slowly, side by side, Enoch leaning heavily on his cane. The frigid wind carried a faint whiff of his cologne past my nose.

“Enoch,” I began, my curiosity piqued. “If you can choose how you

materialize when you appear here on Earth, why do you choose . . .” I paused, trying to find the right way to phrase my question. “Why don’t you pick a human body more like Raph’s, or Michael’s?”

He fixed me with a stare from behind his aviator glasses. “You mean all ‘hot?’”

He saw my embarrassment and laughed, a hearty sound that bounced off the ancient bricks and stones, filling up the emptiness around us.

“That is the word you teenagers use, isn’t it? Why?” he demanded, sweeping an arm over his overweight, lumpy body like a showgirl. “Is the view not to your liking? Or are you worried I won’t be able to protect you, if it comes to that?”

I blushed, hurrying to correct myself. “It’s not for me. It just seems so hard for you. And unnecessary. Why not at least have a younger and healthier body?”

He leaned into the cane and hoisted himself up the final step, then stopped to catch his breath.

“I loved being human, Hope. Perhaps I didn’t realize how much until my human life was gone. When I have the chance to be human again, I like to take the form I had back then, to remind me of what it was like.”

He peered ahead into the dark shadows of the church’s portal. “Some look at human frailty and see only weakness and heap their scorn upon it. Others see it as an invitation to put themselves in the hands of God and accept his grace. How one views it is a choice.”

He reached a hand down the steps and pulled me up, gently. “This is what is left of Michael’s famous shrine, the Michaelion: a chapel built from its rubble. They are waiting for you inside.” With a tiny push, he sent me ahead of him.

I quickly took in the church, moss growing in the cracks between the stones, modest on a patch of dirt and worn grass. It seemed built

into the surrounding buildings and hillside, engulfed—or perhaps protected—by the shelter they provided. A cement sidewalk ran the width of it, leading to some distant apartment buildings. The yawning distance to the stoop of the church seemed impossible to cross, but I forced my feet to shuffle across the stones and ducked slightly to enter. As I did, a fat cat perched in one of the windowsills looked at me imperiously and, with a whisk of its tail, disappeared from the ledge.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. The few high windows cast little light in the fading shadows of late afternoon, leaving it to the stands of flickering candles to show the way. A gallery graced by pillars marked off the entry, which gave way to a small, open space, cut in half by an aisle that led in a straight line through a jumble of folding chairs. Stained glass windows, a simple pattern of circles, ran the length of the chapel, casting a dull glow of scarlet, peacock, and emerald, even in the day's gloom. A simple altar stood at the end of the aisle. Above it hung a stylized crucifix, flanked on either side by portraits of a winged, armored angel wielding a flaming sword, striking down a serpent whose long tail was entwined about the soldier's feet.

Michael.

I walked wordlessly down the aisle, drawn to the strangely flat portraits. I searched the painted plane of his face, looking for anything familiar, waiting for a flicker of recognition or a surge of insight to overtake me, but nothing came.

“Just paint and gold leaf, I'm afraid,” Enoch said quietly from over my shoulder. “But beautiful in their own right.”

I nodded, trying to swallow my disappointment.

The echoes of feet on the stone floor drew my attention. I turned around to find that Raph and Michael had joined Enoch.

Raph crossed his arms with obvious impatience. “Anything?”

I shook my head, casting my eyes down to stare at the worn stones, which priests and pilgrims had tread for untold years.

“No, of course not,” Raph mocked. “Michael, your prophetic is failing you. What say you now?”

Michael’s face was blank, as flat as that on the painting that hung on the wall. He looked at me coolly, appraising me with a distanced eye. Only the vein throbbing in his forehead gave away that he had any feelings at all.

I tried to drag my eyes away from his penetrating look but found I couldn’t.

“I think we need to give thanks,” he said, his eyes never leaving my face. “And pray for a successful start to our journey, for this is only the start, I am sure. Raph, give me your change.”

Raph started to protest, but a sharp look from Michael cut him off. Indignant, he dug into his pocket and drew out a handful of coins, thrusting them into Michael’s upturned hand.

“Go ahead.” Michael’s eyes directed me to the low rail at the side of the altar. Behind it stood a bank of pillared candles and votives, some already dancing with little flames. A utilitarian metal box stood in front on a low table. I saw something move in the shadows and noticed a small woman, folded into a shawl, tending the candles.

I walked over to the table, unsure of what to do.

“Give me your hand,” Michael instructed as he edged in next to me. I hadn’t been this close to him since Las Vegas, and the sudden burst of his scent, the feel of the heat radiating from his skin, was a shock. Swallowing hard, I turned my palm up. He cupped the underside of my hand and my entire body quivered as a jolt of heat raced up my arm. He didn’t move, steadying my shaking hand as he dropped the coins in one at a time.

“Place your offering in the box and light the candles.”

Behind us I heard Raph shuffling his feet. “It’s a silly human superstition, Michael. Why are you even bothering?”

Michael shrugged, looking up at me as he spoke. “It may be silly, but it can’t hurt anything. Go on, Hope. Maybe you can bring us some luck.”

I swallowed, not wanting to pull my hand away from Michael’s. But I did, closing my fingers so tightly around the coins that their worn edges seemed to cut into my skin. I turned to the table and noticed a cushioned place to kneel. I lowered myself onto it and then dropped the coins, one by one, into the box, each one clanking against the emptiness inside.

I looked up and saw the old woman watching me intently. She gave a subtle nod, encouraging me on.

A cluster of long matches stuck out of what, long ago, must have been a pitcher. I drew one out. The woman bustled forward and drew out a matchbox, pointing to the strip of sandy paper on its side. I dragged the match against it and watched the flame burst to life. The woman beamed, her mouth a gaping hole with only a few yellow teeth. She muttered something to me, drawing me closer to the candles, nodding at me to continue.

I looked at the candles. What, exactly, should I pray for? I could imagine what the few lonely souls who lit candles before me had asked for. Recovery from an illness, or perhaps just cessation of pain. Entry into Heaven for a loved one who had passed away. Peace from whatever troubles kept them awake at night.

But how could I ask for what I needed? Please, God, let this journey end? Please, God, let me wake up and find it has all been a dream? Help me find The Key before it is too late?

Please keep Michael from killing me?

Or what I really wanted to pray: Bring an end to his pain, God,

for I can see his agony. And please, God, let everything he said to me not be a lie.

You're so melodramatic, Henri, my guardian angel, whispered in the back of my mind. *Let's get this over with.*

I sighed, defeated and betrayed by my own thoughts and leaned over to light a candle. I watched the flame flicker and dance, growing stronger and leaping up high until it drew back into a steady burn.

"Time to go," Enoch intoned. "I think we've done enough for the day."

I pushed myself up and turned to go, leaning instinctively toward Michael. The urgent, hurried voice of the woman tending the candles chased after me. She hurtled herself around the tiny shrine and thrust herself upon us, her voice insistent as she took my hands in hers and repeated herself over and over in a language I didn't recognize.

"What is she saying?" I asked, looking around at the men. Enoch looked amused, Raph indignant, his hard face turning several angry shades of purple.

Before they had the chance to answer, the woman reached out and took Michael's hand, placing it firmly in mine, squeezing our fingers closed so they clasped. She gave a satisfied pat to our entwined hands, squeezing them once again, firmly, before letting us go.

Reaching into her dress, she pulled out a folded pamphlet and shoved it against Michael's chest, her speech now coming with staccato insistence. She poked a finger at his chest until his other hand snuck up to take the flimsy piece of paper in hand.

She beamed at us both. Then, satisfied her work was done, she bustled back into the shadows, leaving us standing in the twilight of the church, holding hands.

"What is it?" I asked. Reluctantly, I let go of Michael's hand to

take the pamphlet. I opened it up, smoothing out the wrinkles from where Michael had clutched it. I held it up to the meager light from the windows, trying to make out what it was. All the writing seemed to be in Turkish, but the text was peppered with pictures of churches, mosques, and ruins.

Michael drew the paper away from me. “Let me see that.” He flipped the paper over. Perplexed, he shot a glance over his shoulder at the woman, now nearly invisible in the darkness. “How did she know?” He handed the paper off to Enoch, who glanced at it quickly before passing it to Raph.

“Know what?” I pressed.

Raph cleared his throat. “It’s a map.”

“A map of what?”

“It’s a tour of all the shrines and churches dedicated to our friend here. Every one of them, in the entire city of Istanbul.”

“What?” I snatched the map out of Raph’s hands. “Let me see.”

In the dim light I could make out the crosshatch of city streets, the winding Bosphorus and Sea of Marmara that made up the city map. Little red crosses studded the sprawl of the city. I scanned it quickly. Nearly twenty, I estimated, my heart sinking.

“We’ll never be able to search them all.”

Michael reached down to take the map, his hand closing over mine. I looked up, startled by the deliberate contact. His steely eyes glinted, his jaw set hard. Whatever we’d shared just a moment ago was gone. He was angry, and determined, once again.

“You’ll just have to try harder, then, won’t you?” His words hit me like a slap in the face. I felt tears gathering in the corners of my eyes, threatening to take away my last shred of dignity.

“It’s not for want of trying, Michael,” Enoch intervened, reaching between us to take the map and stepping in to separate us. He folded the map carefully as he spoke, regarding Michael with

caution. I took advantage of the distraction he was causing to wipe away the errant tears with the back of my hand.

“Look, night descends. You have need of sleep and food. We all do, in this human guise. As you said, we are just at the start of this quest; you cannot wear yourselves, or each other, out so soon.”

Michael’s lips pressed together in a hard line as he looked down on the shorter Enoch. “Fine,” he capitulated. “Have it your way, old man.” He brushed through us, stalking down the aisle and out of the church, Raph trailing after him. My eyes followed him despite myself.

“I’m doing the best I can,” I whispered weakly as the door slammed behind them.

“I know, Hope,” Enoch said, patting my head awkwardly. “He’s not himself. Not now. He probably won’t be as long as we are searching for that blasted rock. Best for you to get used to it now.”

“Why can’t I tell where we are supposed to go?” I asked, desperate for a solution. “I thought with Michael’s powers . . .” I let my voice trail off, unsure how much I should say.

Enoch’s voice became eager. “So it’s true. It really happened.”

“Yes,” I admitted, my misery only deepening. “But I didn’t mean for it to happen. I didn’t know.”

“Of course not, my dear. I can’t really say why it isn’t working for you; perhaps it will only come in flashes. But we must be very careful. Michael is quite vulnerable in this state. His normal instincts cannot be relied upon. And he is equally unpredictable. His emotions are getting the best of him. As is the pain.”

I thought of how easily Michael seemed to swing from gentleness to disdain for me and nodded.

“You must be careful around him, Hope. You should spend the time you need with him to figure out this mystery, for I’m guessing it will take both of your skills to do so. But I would keep it at that.

You don't fully understand your own feelings for him; and his for you . . . ? Ah, those only God knows. Best not to stir the pot. The most important thing is that we find the Key."

I nodded dumbly, knowing what he was saying was true.

The door to the church swung open, banging hard against the massive stone walls. Raph's voice rang out.

"We're waiting."

Enoch leaned into his cane to create the momentum for the walk down the aisle. "Help me, my dear, would you?"

I scurried to his side and took an arm.

"Thank you," he said, pulling me along as he began his shuffling walk down the aisle.

I stole a quick glance at his face as we moved. I could barely make it out in the waning light. I still found it unsettling that I couldn't see his eyes behind the pair of sunglasses he always wore, but then again, there wouldn't be anything to see in those blind eyes. Was it that which made his expression so hard to read?

We swung the door open and stepped out into the night. I shivered, the chill reminding me I had only a hoodie to protect me against the sharp air.

"We must get Hope indoors," Enoch pronounced, watchful of my every move.

"Sultanahmet," Michael said, taking the map back from Enoch and shoving it into the back pocket of his jeans. "The Old City. We can be there in an hour, maybe a little longer."

Enoch raised an eyebrow. "You are thinking of a hotel there?"

Michael shook his head curtly. "No. We have arranged for a house in the back of the quarter."

Enoch wrinkled his nose. "Why, for heaven's sake? Are you deliberately trying to increase your misery?"

Michael turned, dismissing Enoch's complaints. "It will be safe."

“From what?” Enoch shuffled after him, awkwardly negotiating the steps. “There is nowhere you can seek shelter that you cannot be found by the Fallen.”

“The Fallen are not all we have to worry about,” Michael said gruffly, not slowing his pace. He was headed back toward the traffic of the financial district, drawing us out of this ancient place back toward the bustle of the modern day. In the distance I could hear honking horns and the occasional blast of a ship heading in or out of the harbor.

Enoch looked over his shoulder to where I stood at the top of the steps.

“What is he talking about, Hope?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

Michael laughed out loud, more of a bark than a laugh, as he turned to face us both, throwing his duffle bags down on the glistening pavement in frustration.

“Not sure? Let me clarify. We are in Istanbul, long-time bridge between East and West, nexus for trade and transport. The modern age has not changed the unique aspect of geography that is and always will be its entire reason for being; it has just made it more sordid. You are standing in one of the human trafficking and slavery capitals of the world. Every day war-ravaged and desperate people hand over their life’s savings, hoping for an escape to the promise of a new future that so easily slips from the lips of the men who guarantee them safe passage, if just for a little more money. Every day, they are packed inside of trucks and ships, packed so tight, and so full of expectation, that they cannot breathe, dreaming and wishing against reason that, finally, they will be safe. They believe, because they have no choice, that there really is a way out, that there really is a job waiting for them at the end of their hellish journey, that this is their new beginning. And every day, they

are lucky if they find themselves in servitude at the end of their trip, instead of sinking to the bottom of the stormy ocean or being abandoned in the cold and wild halfway through, their money disappeared, cast off in a strange no man's land.

“You, Hope, who outwitted one of the most violent trafficking rings in the world with the stunt you pulled back in Las Vegas, you are in their territory now. Do you think they will just let you go? Who knows what sort of tentacles they have, reaching all the way even to this place? This place you have chosen to begin our search may be the exact place we need to be, but it is one of the worst places in the world for you to be right now. So we need to lay low.” He cut off his speech, glowering at us both.

“Does that explain it to your satisfaction, Enoch?”

Enoch nodded grimly. I swallowed hard.

“I didn't realize,” I said simply.

“No, of course you didn't,” Michael said stiffly, turning on his heel. “You never do. And really, how could you? Let's go.”

Raph fell in silently next to Michael as they strode away, Enoch and I struggling to keep up.



We reached Sultanahmet—the district that was the oldest and at the very heart of the city—after night had fully shrouded Istanbul. The bright lights of the old mosque quickly gave way to dark alleys. Michael and Raph negotiated them with ease, sure of their direction as we went deeper and deeper into the maze of old buildings, ignoring the watchful eyes that stared out from noisy cafés and tiny shops. Here and there, fat stray cats, content with the kibble that was strewn across the cobblestones for them, lounged, never bothering to move, but tracking us with heavy lidded, vigilant eyes as

we invaded their neighborhood. Block by block, we seemed to go back in time, until we found ourselves facing rows of ramshackle wooden houses, upper stories jutting out to claim the street. The wood was black with age and rot. The scent of mildew and decay floated in the air, mingling with the ever-present salt of the sea. For once, I was glad that Enoch had gone a little heavy on his cologne; it made the smells from the street a little bit easier to bear.

“Here we are,” Michael said without ceremony as we approached a lonely house on a corner. The homes surrounding it seemed abandoned, no welcoming lights shining in the windows.

Raph sniffed. “Not much to look at.”

“Which is exactly how I want it,” Michael said emphatically. “There is no one of consequence on this block or the next. Any uninvited visitors will be easy to spot.”

He swung one duffle bag behind him, his shirt stretching across his strained shoulders, and walked up to the door to rattle the knob. He drew out a key and worked the stiff lock until the door swung open. “You and me first,” he said to Raph. “You two stay here until we are sure it is safe.”

I looked over my shoulder. I wasn’t sure waiting in the deserted street was the safer option, but I didn’t want to annoy Michael, so I kept my mouth shut as they disappeared inside the house.

“It’s a shame,” Enoch murmured, staring at the decrepit buildings that occupied the length of the street. “This used to be so beautiful. People used to fight for these homes, especially the ones with the views of the sea or the strait. And now look at them. Passed over.”

“You’ve been here before? I thought you’d been trapped in the desert, waiting out your punishment all this time.”

Enoch waved his cane in the air as if dismissing my question. “It was a long time ago.”

I looked around, trying to imagine what it had been like. I struggled to see any sign of beauty amidst the ruin and waste, my eyes drawn to the persistent weeds and debris.

Raph poked his head out of the door. “You can enter.”

Lonely, tuneless howls split the night, one after another, and Raph smirked.

“Some things never change,” he said, his ear tilted to the night sky. “You’d best come in before the wild dogs get here.” He disappeared into the dark maw of the house, not waiting for us to follow.

I went through the door first and began climbing the stairs, listening for Enoch’s thumping cane behind me. I couldn’t see anything, but felt my way with my hands, the wood of the narrow walls rough beneath my fingertips where strips of wallpaper hung like ribbons.

I emerged into a small vestibule. Across the room, a wide arch beckoned me into the large, open space ahead. The dim light of a fire glowed, filling the room with a soft haze and the gentle crackle of shifting logs. I moved instinctively toward the promised warmth, crossing the hall in a few easy steps.

A gasp of delight escaped my lips as the firelight shifted and I looked around me. “Oh.”

The room was much larger than I had even guessed—perhaps a ballroom in a previous life. And somebody had taken obvious care with it. The wooden floors were polished to a golden sheen, reflecting back the dancing flames. White walls looked freshly painted—only a few cracks and holes in the plaster gave away the wear of time. Intricate moldings wrapped around the length and breadth of the walls, and graceful swags and garlands decorated the mantels above the fireplaces that stood at either end of the room. Enormous windows, stripped of what surely had been grand curtains, looked out upon the very tip of Istanbul, the few lights of homes

on the hill below us twinkling like stars and the waves beckoning where the strait met the ocean.

I turned around, only then noticing the exquisite tiles that surrounded the fireplace where Michael crouched, shifting the burning logs with a poker. The light from the fire reflected off the vibrant blues of the tiles, making the scattering of delicate flowers painted across their surface seem to sway, as if the wind had caught them in an open field.

Michael stood, examining my face and obviously enjoying my reaction. "Iznik tiles," he said quietly. "Famed for their beauty. Very rare."

"I would have never guessed," I breathed, stepping closer to absorb the warmth of the fire and give myself a better view of the delicate hand-worked tiles. "From the outside, it looked like it was about to fall down around us."

I scanned the walls of the room, noting the sheets that covered mirrors or paintings. It was as if someone had moved away and time stood still, eating away at the outside of the house, but leaving the inside pristine.

Michael smiled. "Some things are not as they seem. You'd be wise to remember that. Come, take a seat." From a dark corner, he pulled up a plush, comfortable-looking chair. "You, too, Enoch."

Enoch emerged from the dark and approached the fire. "Not bad, Michael. Not bad at all. Now all we need is to get some food in this girl, and she'll be better in no time."

I collapsed into the deep seat of the chair and Enoch followed, throwing his cane down and easing himself onto the floor beside me.

"I'm too tired to eat," I said, letting my body sink into the cushions and relax. I hadn't realized how tired I was, but now that we'd stopped moving and the heat of the fire was draining the chill from

my bones, I could feel the insistent exhaustion coming back to the surface, along with the surging pain from my healing burns.

“Besides, don’t you guys have a supply of manna that just shows up? You can eat that while I get some sleep.”

Michael eyed me sharply. “You’re feeling okay?”

I let my eyes drift closed for just a second before replying. “I just need some ibuprofen and some rest. Then I’ll be good as new.” No sense in worrying him by mentioning my nerve endings, screaming for relief.

Just then, Raph emerged. “The bedrooms are made up, as the owner promised. We’ll keep the central one for Hope and take turns guarding the door.”

I struggled to pull myself up by the arm of the chair. “I don’t need guarding. Besides, as long as you are in human form, you’ll need sleep as much as I do.”

“It’s not up for debate,” Raph said sharply. “I’ll take first shift. Michael, you take your rest, too.”

Michael looked at me again, something like doubt clouding his blue eyes. “You’re sure, Hope? We can call a doctor. It’s not that long since . . .”

He couldn’t bring himself to finish his sentence.

“I don’t need a doctor. Just show me this bedroom, Raph.” I pushed up from the chair and grabbed my bag, trudging after him. As we were about to leave the room, one of the draped shapes on the wall caught my eye. I reached out to tug the trailing sheet to find that it was hiding a big-screen television.

Before I could say anything, Raph frowned. “Leave it,” he said in a low voice, turning abruptly and proceeding down a dark hallway.

Confused, I dropped the sheet to the floor and followed after him. He was waiting for me outside a lone door. “It locks from the inside. I suggest you keep it locked at all times. Keep away from the

window if you can. If you need anything, I'll be outside." He was nothing but polite. Although I couldn't see his face in the dark, I could tell it pained him to be so civil toward me and that his curt instructions amounted to nothing but a dismissal.

"Raph, back there, with the television . . . ?"

Even in the dark I could feel his black eyes boring into me. "The last thing you, or any of us, need is for Michael to accidentally see a news program and be reminded of all the havoc taking place out there."

"Out there?"

"In the real world."

His unspoken accusation hung before us. The world Michael left behind, abandoned to its fate, while he watches over me.

Raph did not move. His body was like a massive rock wall, looming in front of me, daring me to defy him.

"Is it getting worse? Out there?" My voice was timid and small. I didn't want to hear Raph's answer, but I needed to know.

Raph grunted, crossing his arms as he answered me in a sullen voice. "We have to be sure Michael doesn't find out."

A surge of guilt swept through me. I knew Michael was neglecting his charge to protect the faithful on Earth in order to stay with me and search for the Key, but I hadn't realized the consequences would escalate so quickly. How many thousands of people were suffering because of me? And how long before Michael's pain—the punishment God inflicts on angels who disobey him—got even worse as he ignored his duties as the defender of the innocent?

"Thank you," I said, looking down at my feet, unable to meet Raph's incriminating stare. "Thank you for letting me know." The massive shape of Raph's body barely moved in the dark shadows, just enough to open the door to my bedroom. I slipped by him, his

presence overpowering the narrow hallway, wondering how much he blamed me for Michael's obvious suffering.

I shut the door and turned the key where it waited in the lock, then leaned against the door, exhaling heavily. Almost there.

I crossed into the main part of the room, fumbling toward a curtain, careful to avoid the hulking, sheet-covered armoire that nearly reached the ceiling. I flicked the drape aside to let in a little light from the window. The moonlight illuminated the large iron bed, making the white sheets glow in the dark. I slipped out of my shoes, dropped my backpack and slid under the crisp, cotton sheets, not bothering to change out of my clothes.

As I sank into the pillowy mattress I could feel the tension seeping out of my aching muscles. *I really should take some ibuprofen*, I thought to myself, trying to remember where in my backpack I'd last seen the bottle. But before my mind could envision it, I was drifting away into a dreamless sleep where neither worry nor pain could reach me.



The sliver of daylight that jutted across my wall told me I'd only slept until early morning. The room was still very dark and cool, the heavy draperies muffling out the sounds of the waking city below. I stretched out, testing the dull ache in my muscles, and wondered if anyone else was awake yet. A sense of dread stole over me. If yesterday had been tense, today, I knew, would be even worse: with everyone in our search party following me, hanging on my every word, waiting for my newfound instincts to kick in, waiting for me to cough up some coherent idea of where to search next for the missing Key.

It was laughable, really. And the pressure of knowing they were counting on me would just make it harder.

Steeling myself for whatever the day held in store, I rolled out of bed.

I turned the key and cracked open the door. Nobody standing watch. I slipped out into the dark hallway and worked my way back to the great room, hoping, as I shivered in the cold, that someone had started the fire again. I padded with bare feet across the smooth wooden floor to find fading embers in the hearth. I poked at them, hoping to find a stray spark, but the fire was truly dead.

I stared into the dark, gaping fireplace and realized I was alone.

A thrill shot through me.

Quietly, I dashed into the open rooms and peered out onto the balcony. Yes, it was true—the house was empty. It didn't matter to me whether the others were still in bed or had gone out. I crept back into my bedroom and began rifling through my backpack to fish out my forgotten running clothes.

You aren't really going to do that, are you? Henri butted in, voicing his skepticism directly into my mind. *Michael will be furious. Besides, those clothes aren't nearly warm enough for this weather.*

"Leave me alone," I muttered under my breath as I pulled out a tissue-thin T-shirt. I hated how my guardian angel could simply butt into my thoughts at will. As far as I could tell, I could block him out—but only if I realized he was there, watching me. Where he went when he left me to my own devices, I wasn't sure. "If I could just have a few moments alone, out in the city, I know something will come to me. And I'll be back before anybody realizes I'm gone. Now go away. I need to change."

I barely paused to acknowledge his harrumph of displeasure.

Exhilarated by the promise of freedom, I threw on the T-shirt and tights. I pulled on the same stinky pair of socks I'd worn yesterday and thrust my feet into my shoes, fumbling with the laces.

Of all the things that changed when I moved from my Dad's house in Alabama to live with my Mom in Georgia, the freedom of being able to run outside was one of the best. I'd forgotten how it felt, how much it meant to me, until just now.

I slipped out of my room and down the gloomy stairway to emerge, shivering, into the sunny street.

I was so happy, it felt like my very cells were singing.

I tried to recall the tiny crosses marked out on the map that Michael had tucked away; they seemed to have been scattered across the whole city, so it probably didn't matter where I headed. *Remember*, I warned myself as I started up the alley, back toward the direction we'd come from last night, *just a short run. Just long enough to loosen the hinges of your rusty brain.* But my mind was working as fast as my feet as I raced up the cobbled way. Over the rooftops, the spires and domes of various buildings poked their heads. I set my sights on one and ran even faster, barely pausing to note the landmarks, so I could eventually make my way home.

I ignored the chill that threatened to sink into my very bones, pretending not to see the clouds of steam that I puffed into the cold air with every breath. I stretched out, willing my muscles to work even harder, as I wound through the twists and turns of the old city, eventually picking up the tracks of a trolley or train to follow. I was alone in the dawn, only more stray cats, nestled into shuttered shop-door stoops, to keep me company.

Every now and then I would lose my landmark to the looming rooftops, but I would turn a corner to see its dirty marble rising, catching the sunlight, ever closer, back into my line of sight. At first, the sounds of the city waking up—the vendors pulling up the doors

that protected their shop windows overnight, the mothers calling out to their children as they left for school—barely registered as I focused on my breath, in and out. But as I came closer, another sound, a sound I couldn't place, broke into my consciousness.

I came to a major boulevard at the end of the warren of streets; crossing it, I stepped into an alley teeming with activity. Merchants called from tiny stalls whose wares—carpets and silks, books, and pots—threatened to spill across the paths through which shoppers wandered. Hunched men, wizened by years of heavy labor, skillfully negotiated heaping carts through the lane, ducking into passageways emerged from the long, low building that stretched alongside the outdoor market. They shouted cheerfully at one another in their rapid guttural language, chastising young helpers who were not fast enough on their feet. But that was not the sole source of noise. I froze: Underneath the noise of the market a rhythmic chanting emanated from somewhere deeper inside the city, beyond the stalls.

I pushed my way through, ignoring the curious looks and the repeated calls that followed me:

“Would you like to buy some jeans?”

“A leather jacket? Please, let me show you what I have for sale.”

“Hello? Hola? Salut?”

“Hey! Where are you going, lady?”

Cheeks hot, I stared determinedly at my feet and kept moving.

The alley opened up to a large square. A throng was gathering in front of an impressive gate, the only gap in a high stone wall. Behind the wall, set back behind leafy trees, stood the tower I'd used as my landmark. Young people, dressed in mostly Western attire, shouted and waved signs in front of the gate, which was swathed in an immense Turkish flag. More and more people were joining the crowd, jostling me as they rushed past, towing banners

and makeshift cardboard signs behind them. I moved deeper into the crowd, trying to make out what they were protesting. I peered up at the sign above the gate—*Istanbul Universitesi*, it read. I looked around nervously and realized that they all seemed to be students, some of them were wearing gas masks.

I was pressed against the backs of the people in front of me as the students pushed forward. From the street, sirens wailed. I tried to fight my way through, but I was trapped, forced to march along with them as they thrust themselves forward. I could no longer see anything ahead or around me, my view blocked by the unfurled banners and swaying Turkish flags. Helplessly, I was swept in the tow of the mob as they took to the street. Through the chanting, a stern voice blasted over a bullhorn, warning the students.

Just a short run, eh? Henri's voice, sarcastic as ever, snaked into my panicked brain.

Why don't you do something useful and get me out of this mess? I shot back, looking about wildly for a way out.

Just then, a scream rose over the din. Then another. Sirens, whining insistently, drowned out the shouting. The bullhorn reprimands grew more insistent, the voice rising shrilly.

A loud shriek went out, and then a blast of water pushed us all back in a wave.

It hit me like icy needles, sending me gasping for breath as I fell, my body glancing off of others as I tumbled to the hard pavement.

I was shoved against the ground, pinned down by the people falling on top of me. I pushed up onto my hands and knees and began crawling, trying to avoid being trampled by the running students who were now retreating from the challenge of the police.

Then, in the chaos of the crowd, I spotted him. He was bigger, and dressed differently, but the sneer on his face was unmistakable.

It was one of Lucas's Fallen Ones—the one who picked on me at school.

I gasped.

A wicked grin stole across his face as he relished my shock. He looked past me, though, and I followed his eyes to see others, inexorably working their way toward me.

Over here, Henri whispered. To your left.

I dragged my body toward his voice, trying to block out the keening sounds of the police sirens, the sickening thuds of people being beaten, and the cries of resistance being cut short. Several times I was buffeted in the head, but I kept making my way through the chaos, only daring to look over my shoulder for a moment to be sure the Fallen weren't gaining on me.

Suddenly, I could see a gap in the thicket of feet and legs. I crawled faster, ignoring the gravel that pressed into the heels of my hands.

I blinked at the light. I was in an alley. Alone. Sighing with relief, I crawled over the curb and pulled myself up against the side of a building, leaning back to scan the crowd.

The angels had disappeared, melting back into the crowd. I shrank farther into the shadows of the alley, hoping I was right and they really were gone.

When I'd retreated a bit farther, I stopped to assess the damage. My tights were ripped, the skin on my left knee grazed just enough to be bloody. My T-shirt was ripped as well, but more than that, I was soaked through, having been caught in the direct blast from the hose. I brushed off my hands, picking the bits of gravel out of my palms and noting with amazement that I had no further injuries. Hopefully, no tell-tale bruises would emerge later to give me away.

From the safety and distance of the alley, I watched the crowd disperse, a handful of students getting marched and shoved unceremoniously into waiting police vehicles.

“What was that?” I wondered aloud.

That, Henri answered, is just one of the things that has gone awry since your beloved Michael decided his time was better spent babysitting you. The people are rising up to protect their rights, because no one else is doing it for them. And they are paying with imprisonment and sometimes their lives. The fact that the Fallen were among them should not surprise you. Wherever there is chaos, you will find them. This was their warning to you. Why they did not take you when they had the chance, I do not know.

I gulped hard, trying to swallow back my guilt.

You don't have time to feel sorry. You need to get back to the house before the Fallen change their mind, and before your absence is noticed.

I nodded, knowing he was right. I looked around, trying to reorient myself. I didn't dare find the train tracks; I would be too exposed. I needed to wind my way back through the side streets and alleys. As I peered back into the emptying square, a flock of birds rose up, startling me.

Were those pigeons, or something more sinister?

The fact that the Fallen might still be all around me, that they might have been trailing me this whole time, spurred me to my feet.

I didn't try to run. I was too winded. The adrenaline that had coursed through me now waned, leaving me spent. Instead, I clung to the sides of the buildings as I limped my way back. Every now and then, I darted a glance at the rooftops, hoping I wouldn't spot a stray raven trailing me back to our hiding place.

I managed to creep up the stairs of the house—attracting only a baleful stare from the cat that had apparently taken up residence at

our doorstep—and snuck into my room. Slowly, teeth chattering, I peeled off my clothes, shoving them under the bed where I hoped they would not be found. I longed to climb back into bed, piling the covers on top of me to ward away the cold, but I knew I couldn't linger here, avoiding the angels forever. Instead, I forced myself back into yesterday's clothes and headed out into the living area.

Michael crouched down before the hearth, coaxing the glowing embers back to a roaring fire. I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing I'd barely made it back in time to escape his notice.

The room was flooded with light from the bank of windows and seemed to catch his blond hair so that it shone in the morning sun. He leaned into the fire with a poker, his tight T-shirt clinging to his broad shoulders and back as he poked and prodded the reluctant flames. The fire shifted and sprang to life, a real fire now, and Michael stood up, throwing the poker down to look at the fire with satisfaction. My eyes were drawn down the length of his body, admiring how his muscular back gave way to his narrow waist.

Suddenly, he turned to find me staring at him. There was a light in his eyes, the tiredness and frustration of the previous day seemingly forgotten. He bent his head quizzically as he waited for me to speak, a slight smile on his lips.

“Good morning,” he said, almost asking it as a question.

I cleared my throat, finding myself unable to respond as I drank in the sight of him. “Morning,” I mumbled, awkwardly hiding my hands behind me and hoping he couldn't tell the effect he was having on me. “I need coffee.”

He nodded. “Nothing here, I'm afraid. The water is turned off, so I sent Raph out to look for coffee or tea.”

I groaned. “No water? But I'm desperate for a shower,” I added, hoping that the cold blast of water I'd endured had managed to rinse away most of the sweaty smell of my run.

He nodded, ruefully. "We'll have to use the public baths."

"Public baths?"

"Just like the days of old. Some are still operational, though often just for tourists. We'll take you to one of those, where they are more likely to speak English."

"What do you mean, public baths? How public?"

He shrugged, watching me squirm under his gaze, my panic at the thought of bathing in public obvious. Slowly, he let a wicked grin spread across his face, letting me know how much he was enjoying my embarrassment.

"It's no big deal, Carmichael. Hundreds of thousands of women and men have done it over the centuries. In fact, people pay big money these days to have this kind of authentic *Istanbulu* experience. Consider yourself lucky."

I was so stunned that he'd lapsed into his old nickname for me that I almost didn't catch what he'd said. "Women and men?" I asked quickly.

He didn't even bother to hide his amusement. "Separate baths, separate entrances. Totally above board." A light chuckle escaped his lips. "You know, for a modern woman, you really are a prude, Hope."

He stood there, relishing my discomfort, when a shadow crossed his face and the set of his jaw turned hard. "Of course, you are probably worried about more than your modesty."

I frowned at the sudden change in his mood, until I realized he was talking about my scarred skin.

"Michael," I said quietly, knowing it was dangerous to even approach the topic. But it was sitting there, the obvious issue between us. If we didn't confront it, we would never be able to trust one another.

I took a deep breath and pushed on, looking up at him tentatively. "It will heal in time. You said so yourself."

He scowled, his fist curling on the top of the mantel as if he would hit something. “And yet you won’t let me help you. You refuse the very help that Raph could give you. You do it deliberately, to spite me,” he growled savagely, the words nearly torn from his mouth, as he moved threateningly close.

I backed away, his show of frustration frightening me. But, of course, he was right. I had refused Raph’s healing powers, all because I wanted Michael to be reminded of what he’d done to me. And I didn’t mean just the physical damage covering the length of my body with sores and scars. I wanted him to feel the distrust, the regret, and the anger. I wanted him to feel all of that. And yes, at the core of it all, I wanted him to feel the longing that could never, ever be filled.

I raised my chin, refusing to be cowed.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I breathed, knowing the words were lies.

“You should be,” he glowered, closing the distance between us in a few strides.

I looked down at his clenched fists, wondering just how far things would go before he would snap. We stood there, our breaths coming heavily, staring each other down. I longed to reach out and smooth away the furrow of pain, anger, and worry that was etched into his brow, but I didn’t dare move.

The door slammed below us, and we heard the heavy tread of footsteps on the stairs. Still, we did not move.

“What’s going on?” Raph exclaimed from behind me. I heard him drop something to the floor and, in the instant it took for him to understand the situation, he leapt into the little space between Michael and me. “Get away from him, Hope. Just back away.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I protested, refusing to move.

“I didn’t say you did,” Raph said tersely, spreading his arms out to force some distance between us. “But you need to back away. *Now.*”

The urgency in his voice spurred me to back up.

“Now, your turn.” Raph directed Michael, his hand remaining on Michael’s chest. Michael’s nostrils flared at the disrespect of being ordered about, but he obeyed, turning and striding to stand in an empty corner. He stretched his arms out to lean against the barren wall, his back rigid from the strain of holding his temper.

“Where is Enoch?” Raph demanded sharply, addressing Michael’s back. “The only thing he had to do is babysit the two of you and what does he do? Leave you unattended until you’re about to tear her apart. Enoch!” He shouted, his voice echoing through the empty room. He turned toward the gaping archway and shouted again. “Enoch, where in God’s name are you?”

A door creaked somewhere down the hall, and we heard the telltale thump and shuffle of Enoch and his cane.

“I wasn’t going to hurt her,” Michael said, barely making himself heard over the sound of Enoch walking.

He turned from the wall, his eyes shining and full of tears, and walked straight to Raph. “I wasn’t going to hurt her,” he repeated, now looking over Raph’s broad shoulder to me, then Enoch as he entered at the far end of the room. “I would never hurt her.”

“Then why the hell are we even here?” Raph threw his hands up in frustration. “Isn’t that the whole reason you asked us here? Because you weren’t sure if you could trust yourself? My God, man. Love the girl if you must, but keep your wits about you. Keep away from her, so she has a chance to find this Godforsaken rock. If you don’t, we’ll all be dead.”

He stormed away, kicking over the bag of morning takeout he’d fetched for us as he left the room. I stared after him. The black stain of spilled coffee spread slowly over the polished wood, an accusation. I rushed over, kneeling next to the mess, and reached into

the bag to find napkins. Deliberately, I began dabbing at the spill, mindful not to lift my eyes.

“Hope.”

I kept mopping at the mess until there was nothing left to clean. I could hear Enoch slowly crossing the room. I bent my head closer to the floor, rubbing away at an imaginary stain. Over the lingering smell of coffee, I caught a whiff of sulfur and choked back a sob. I dashed a tear away and kept wiping.

“Hope.” Michael’s voice was close now, practically in my ear. His hand closed on mine, stopping me mid-swipe.

I looked up from the floor to find Michael crouched beside me, desperation in his eyes. Carefully, as if afraid of my reaction, he dropped my hands and then held his own out, palms raised—a gesture of futility and confusion.

“I promise you, Hope, I won’t hurt you.”

“I know,” I whispered, wanting to believe it. But I had to look away.

I focused, instead, on Enoch’s last few steps toward us, until he was close enough to lean over and place a heavy hand on Michael’s shoulder.

“Raph is right. You shouldn’t be alone together. It will be better this way,” he said, his face grave. “Easier for both of you.”

I continued to watch them out of the corner of my eye. Michael swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, and shook his head silently. His head fell down, his pose one of defeat. Enoch waited until Michael took a deep breath and rose to his feet, stretching out of his crouch to full height.

He stood tall over Enoch, but his eyes were as lost as a little boy’s.

Enoch patted him on the back and led him away, leaving me to sit in the crumpled mess of damp napkins and soggy food.

You’re running out of time, Henri whispered.



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GEORGIA

The fluorescent light was giving Mona a headache. Or maybe it was the slightly burnt coffee from the FBI's kitchen. Or the uncomfortable chairs. She'd been here too long to know what exactly was causing her headache, and she didn't really care.

She knew she could go home. That she probably *should* go home. But it made her feel more in control, to be here in the center of the investigation, even if she really wasn't doing anything. At least she could walk down the hall and ask questions and get answers, instead of waiting by the phone for them to call.

If she ignored the fact that the answers never changed—*no new leads*—she could feel some semblance of control and hope. So, every day she bundled herself into Arthur's hulking SUV for the ride to and from the FBI offices, pretending to herself that the trip was as routine as the countless airport runs on which Arthur had chauffeured her over the years, so she could keep her vigil. She

could have driven herself, but Arthur had insisted and, frankly, she appreciated his comforting, calming presence by her side as she went back and forth, the days stretching on with no resolution.

But there was a reason for optimism, she reminded herself. Her daughter's friend, Tabitha, had called after receiving a message from Hope. Mona didn't yet know what Hope had said, or how long the message had been, but surely something would come of that phone call.

So Mona waited, resolute in her conviction that something would happen to give them new leads about her daughter's disappearance.

A brief knock at the conference room door interrupted her thoughts. An agent she didn't recognize was leaning through the opening of the door, careful not to violate her space.

"Do you want to talk to your daughter's friend with us? She and her parents just completed their formal statements."

Mona pushed away from the table. "Of course," she nodded, her throat suddenly dry.

She followed the agent through the corridor to another dimly lit conference room. The room was smaller—closer to an interrogation room like the one that had held her estranged husband, Don, who'd been a suspect just a few days ago.

Don. Would he be there, too? She squared her shoulders and let the agent open the door for her, trying to ignore the riot of emotions surging through her at the thought of him.

An empty chair was waiting at the narrow Formica-topped table, beckoning Mona to join Agent Hale and Don, who'd already taken their seats. Don smiled at her and, despite herself, happiness surged through her; but it was a joy quickly chased by irritation at her own weakness.

It's just because you're tired. You're worn down, she reasoned

with herself, ignoring the memory of the awkward conversation she'd had just the other day with her boss, Clayton—while having him arrange for help from the FBI—a conversation during which she realized she still had feelings for Don. Really, what right did he have to be here, she reminded herself, trying to stir up some indignation, some old hostility built up over the decade; anything, really, to push away the giddiness that threatened to overtake her. But even that didn't work, because, she grudgingly admitted, he had every legal right to be there. And in the back of her mind, she knew he had even more than that, for it had been on Mona's watch that Hope had disappeared—this time. Swallowing her chagrin, she squeezed in between the FBI agent and Don, doing her best to avoid brushing up against either one of them.

Across the table, sandwiched between her parents, sat Hope's friend Tabitha. She perched on the edge of her chair, ramrod straight, her hands clasped in front of her on the table. Mona had to look twice to be sure it was her. Tabitha had been stripped and scrubbed of all signs of rebelliousness—the funky hair, the fake tattoos and piercings, the ripped clothing—all of it was gone. Her hair was straightened and smoothed into a conservative flip. Pearls—just like her mother's—graced her delicate collarbone and splayed against the subtle herringbone weave of her navy wool dress. She seemed smaller to Mona, the bravado of her larger-than-life alter ego gone, swallowed up inside her grown-up clothes. Mona could hear her nervously tapping her foot under the table and watched as she lifted her shaking hand to tug at the collar of her dress.

Tabitha's mother reached up to smooth Tabitha's collar and took Tabitha's hand in hers, giving it a little squeeze. Ever so subtly, Dr. Franklin shifted closer to his daughter, as if he could prop her up in the chair through force of will and proximity. He was wearing

his ministerial collar, giving him an air of quiet authority and calm that seemed to suffuse the room.

As she watched, Mona felt a little pang of regret that her daughter's friend had been drawn into something so sordid. But just as quickly, she pushed it aside, knowing she couldn't afford to feel sorry for Tabitha nor her parents. Not when her own daughter's life was at stake.

"Tabitha. Dr. and Mrs. Franklin. Thank you for coming," Mona said quietly as she took her place between Agent Hale and Don. "I know this must have been terribly inconvenient for you."

Tabitha smiled nervously back at Mona, then darted a glance at Hale before answering. "No ma'am. I mean, I want to help."

Mona smiled, a sad turning of her lips that did not reach her eyes. "Of course you would. You are a good girl. A good friend to Hope."

Hale cleared his throat. "Normally we wouldn't involve either one of you so directly in the investigation, Mrs. Carmichael," he began. He had slipped into the formality of his official role, warning her that as far as he was concerned she and Don were still persons of interest and potential suspects. "But Tabitha wanted to speak with you personally to tell you what she knows. We thought it might be helpful to see if you can piece some of it together."

Mona nodded, on her guard.

Mrs. Franklin patted Tabitha's hand. "Go on, Tabby. Tell Mr. and Mrs. Carmichael what you know."

Mona startled at the use of her married title. Mrs. Carmichael. Cheeks flushing, she stole a glance at Don. The slightest hint of a smile had crept across his face. He reached down the table, proffering his upturned hand. Slowly, as if not sure what she was doing, Mona took it, bracing herself for whatever Tabitha had to share.

Hale prompted, “Start from the very beginning, Tabitha. From the last time you saw Hope.”

Tabby shifted in her seat. “The last time I saw Hope was after school. We’d been working on our Contemporary Issues project. You know, the one with the shelter.”

Mona leaned her head in recognition. “Yes. Street Grace.” Don shifted in his seat, transferring his attention from Tabitha to her. She could see Agent Hale watching them both out of the corner of his eye, most likely watching their every move, every facial expression, for any signs. She felt herself flushing, cursing herself for not being able to stop it.

Instead, she ignored Don, willing herself to bring her attention back to Tabitha, stating simply, “The girls were doing a research project about human trafficking and had interviewed a young woman at the shelter about a month ago.”

“What’s that?” Don demanded. “You didn’t mention that to me.” Mona pulled away her hand and shot him a cold look, refusing to answer. She wasn’t in the mood to hear his criticisms of her parenting and knew that if it had been up to him, Hope would never have been allowed anywhere, least of all a home for girls like her—girls who had once been abducted.

“Human trafficking. That’s interesting,” Hale said, leaning forward onto the table.

“Exactly,” Tabitha said. “We’d been arguing because we were having trouble getting all the information we needed for our paper, and we knew we’d get a bad grade if we didn’t get it all done.”

Mona’s forehead crumpled. “Arguing? You and Hope?”

Tabitha leaned forward, eager to have the adults’ attention. “No,” she said, her face becoming more animated as she recounted her story. “Hope and I wanted to go back to Street Grace and interview that girl we’d talked to before. Maria. But Michael didn’t want

Hope to go back there. He didn't think it was safe. They had a big argument about it. I sided with Hope, of course."

"Hope never mentioned that."

Tabitha shrugged slightly. "Michael is always really protective when it comes to Hope, but this time he was a little overbearing, in my opinion. It turned out it didn't matter, though, because when Hope called down to see about setting up a visit, we found out that Maria had disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Don asked. "Just like that?"

"We just agreed we'd have to finish the paper the best we could. We had divided it all up, so we just had to work on our own pieces and then I was going to put it all back together."

"When exactly was this?" Don countered, deeply interested.

Tabitha looked at her mother. "We think it was a Wednesday or Tuesday. Because the paper was due that Friday."

"Right before her birthday," Mona mumbled to herself.

Hale interrupted. "It sounds like the right window for the night of her disappearance, as best as we can tell."

"That was the last you saw her?" Mona was impatient to hear the rest of Tabitha's story.

Tabitha nodded and licked her lips. "And Michael. He's been gone since that day, too."

Mona could hear the clicking of the industrial clock mounted on the wall. Michael? Missing, too?

"Michael. And Hope. Tabitha, do you think they are together?"

Tabitha bit her lip. "I don't know, ma'am. Michael used to miss a lot of school, anyway, with his emancipated teen status. It's just that . . ."

"What?" Mona demanded, a bit too sharply.

"Well, usually he comes back after a few days. But he hasn't come back this time. I mean, at least not yet."

Mona's mind raced. "Does he tell you where he goes when he misses school?"

Tabitha's face fell. "No, ma'am. And I don't ask him, because I really don't care. We don't get along all that well."

Mona found this last statement curious. Michael was extremely likeable and had been nothing but a positive influence on Hope, as far as she could tell.

"Why not?"

Tabitha squirmed in her seat once again and stared down at the tabletop. "I guess I didn't like how he was with Hope. It was like . . ."

"Like what?" Mona prompted, finding herself unable to breath.

"He just didn't want anybody else around her. He was kind of bossy." She looked up, somewhat sheepishly. "I mean, I know I am bossy, too, but he was a different kind of bossy. Like he wanted to control her or something."

This was new, an angle she had not considered. Had Mona missed the signs of something more insidious in Hope's relationship with Michael? Had she been encouraging Hope in her blossoming friendship, when all along he was a threat? What if Don was right, and she'd been too lax, too absent, to be a good mother to Hope?

She shot him a glance, wondering if this newest revelation would cause him to blame her, but his face was calm. Only the slight wrinkle in his brow gave away the fact that he was troubled by what he was hearing.

"I don't think Michael would hurt her, Mrs. Carmichael," Tabitha whispered. "I don't think he would force her to go with him, either. But I can't figure out why they would both be gone like that."

She nodded, trying to gulp down her fears. "And then you got the phone call from Hope?"

"First, she sent me her and Michael's part of the paper. That

was a few days before the phone call. She left a short message, just saying to tell you she was okay.”

“We listened to the message and took the SIM card, so we can analyze it further,” Hale interrupted.

“She didn’t tell you anything more? Like where she was or what she was doing?” Mona prompted, frustrated to have such a tenuous tie to her daughter’s whereabouts.

“No, ma’am.”

Mona swiveled in her chair, turning to Hale. “What about this other missing girl, this Maria? Is that a possible connection?”

Hale nodded. “We’re running that one down. Given what we know about Las Vegas, it is a possibility.”

“What about Las Vegas?” Tabitha pressed. “Is Hope in Las Vegas?”

Hale shook his head curtly. “We can’t comment on that at this time.”

Tabitha, undeterred, thrust her chin out. She was a dog with a bone, again, the spirited young woman that Mona recognized from those afternoons in her kitchen, and Mona smiled despite herself.

“Maria probably left to go find her little sister. She didn’t trust the people at the shelter, or the police,” Tabitha said pointedly, shooting a poisonous glance at Hale. “Maybe Hope was going to help her with that.”

Hale perked up, but tried to appear casual as he probed Tabitha’s statement. “Why would you think that, Tabitha?”

Tabitha began slowly. “Hope really identified strongly with Maria. She was very worried about her, and they seemed to . . . connect. She even gave Maria her phone number, in case Maria ever needed any help. The more we researched, the more obsessed Hope seemed to be with trafficking and about Maria. “

The words were spilling out of her, the relief on her face palpable.

“She wasn’t sleeping well. She was working at all hours, doing research online. And she was frantic when Maria went missing.”

Hale scribbled a few notes down on his yellow legal pad while he peppered Tabitha with questions. “What do you know about this sister?”

“Not much. Her name is Jimena. She was younger than Maria, and they got separated before the raid that brought Maria into Street Grace.”

“Any idea where they were from?”

“A border town in Mexico. It’s all in our paper,” she said, drawing out a plastic binder. “I brought a copy, just in case.” She slid the paper across the shiny table toward Hale. The plastic was black and pink, the colorful font of the title page and curlicue decorations belying the horror of their subject matter. Mona’s heart broke, thinking of Hope staying up at night, worrying herself sick about this other girl—and likely her own past. How could she not have seen it? She understood now why Michael was arguing with Hope—he was trying to protect her from herself, something she, Hope’s own mother, had failed to do.

Hale flipped through the paper, skimming the pages for anything that jumped out at him. “Traffickers,” he muttered, slamming the cover shut. “There’s our Vegas connection.”

Tabitha’s eyes widened, but she didn’t say anything.

Hale picked up the paper and ripped the top sheet off of his notepad, handing both wordlessly to one of the anonymous agents in the back of the room. “Find out what you can.”

“You’ve been very helpful, Miss Franklin,” Hale said, standing up to conclude the interview. “Dr. and Mrs. Franklin, they can validate your parking at the front desk. We’ll be in touch if we need anything more from you or your daughter.” He looked down at

Mona, still seated in the hard plastic chair. “Mona and Don, we’d like you to stay a few minutes, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Mona said. Her brain was feverishly trying to piece together the implications of what she’d just learned, but nothing seemed to fit. Nothing.

From across the table, Mrs. Franklin reached over and touched Mona’s hand. Mona looked down, startled, to see she’d been gripping the edge of the table so tightly that her hand was turning white and bloodless.

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Franklin said. “So very sorry.”

“We’ll pray for you. And for Hope,” Dr. Franklin added.

Mona was surprised by how good it felt to have that little touch, the words of comfort. But she could feel the walls of her defenses shifting, knowing if she indulged in that moment of sympathy and self-pity, the entire thing would come crashing down around her.

Instead, she smiled politely and drew her hand away. “She’s fine. I know she is.”

A knowing look crossed both of the elder Franklins’ faces. “Of course she is,” Mrs. Franklin added. They rose to their feet, bundling Tabitha before them, looking anywhere but at Mona as they made their way to the door. As they shuffled out of the too-small room, Tabitha shot one last glance behind her.

“You did well, Tabitha,” Mona said to her as she paused at the door. “Thank you.”

Tabitha’s eyes welled with tears. “I feel like it’s my fault, ma’am.”

“Why ever would you say that, Tabitha?” Mona answered, surprised. “Of course you’re not to blame.”

“If I hadn’t pushed her so hard . . .”

“About the paper?” Don asked, finally breaking his silence.

“About the paper, and about Stone Mountain, and her tattoo . . .”

Tabitha choked back a sob as both Mona and Don froze in their chairs.

“Her tattoo.” Don’s voice was flat, dead, as he repeated Tabitha’s words.

Tabitha nodded. “I didn’t mean to make her feel bad. I thought it was so cool, and to be able to read it . . . I guess I was showing off. I didn’t know it would make her upset. Please, you’ve got to believe me, I’d do anything to have her back. She was my only real friend.” Mrs. Franklin held her daughter’s heaving shoulders, trying to comfort her.

Mona’s mind was racing now. Tabitha said she could read Hope’s Mark. Clearly, Tabitha didn’t know Hope’s history or some of this would make more sense to her. Would Agent Hale be piecing this together? She knew Don already had. He was pressing her knee under the table, silently urging her to be careful, to not let this opportunity slip away.

She had to figure out a way to get more out of Tabitha before she and her parents left the room—and do it in a way that Hale wouldn’t pick up on. Before she knew what she was doing, she was pushing away from the table and moving to Tabitha’s side.

“Tabitha,” she soothed, bending at the knees to get closer to Tabitha’s height, “of course you did only what you thought was best for Hope. We know that, and we know how good of a friend you were to her. Don’t worry about it, sweetie.” She beamed at Tabitha, her best “trust me” smile, able to dazzle CEOs and Chairmen of the Board around the world, and leaned in to give Tabitha a big hug. She lingered there, murmuring her hasty instructions to Tabitha, then kissed her above the ear.

“Thank you for being such a good friend to Hope, Tabby,” Mona said, holding Tabitha’s shaking hands in hers and stepping back to look at her appraisingly. “Thank you.”

Tabitha looked up at Mona, blinking away her tears before nodding quickly. Then, she slipped out of Mona's grip and slid silently out of the room, her parents closing flanks behind her. Hale closed the door behind them.

"That ended up being more promising than I'd anticipated," Hale intoned, yanking the knot of his tie loose and plopping himself down in a chair. "Sometimes, with a little extra time, witnesses come up with a few things they forgot the first time they give their statements. Like this girl, Maria."

Mona wasn't going to tolerate chitchat. "What do you have, Agent Hale?"

He ran his fingers through his hair so it stood on end, another visible sign of the long days and nights he'd been keeping.

"We had the time to check into this Michael character, in between her first statement and when we pulled you in to talk to her. You know this kid?"

Mona nodded, knowing that Don would be listening keenly for details. "He spent a lot of time with Hope. He was one of the first kids she met when she started at her new school. Very mature for his age, it seemed. But I guess you'd expect that from an emancipated teen."

"Emancipated? So you never met his parents? No guardians?"

"No."

"How close were they, Mona? Were they dating?" Don's voice had an edge to it, accusing.

Mona closed her eyes, picturing the way Hope's face lit up when Michael walked in the room; the way her body subtly turned to address his whenever he moved; the way Hope spilled out her secrets, counting them out and sharing their burdens, which Michael gladly took up for her. How could you know that if you hadn't been there to see it for yourself? She settled back

down into her chair, trying to determine how, exactly, to describe their relationship.

“No, they weren’t dating, but I think they were very close.”

Hale sighed, rubbing his face. “So, here’s the thing. You remember him. Tabitha Franklin remembers him. The people at the front office of the school remember him. But there is no actual record of him being enrolled in Dunwoody High School. No registration forms. No parking passes. Nothing about his emancipated teen status. No grades reported in the system. We tried to go to his home and confirm his whereabouts that way, but we can’t even find an address for him in the school IT system. It’s as if the kid never existed.”

Mona’s mind went to the obvious explanation. “It’s the IT system. It’s horribly antiquated. They probably have paper copies of all of those things sitting in some dusty pile somewhere.”

“We thought so, too. But then we used our own systems to try to track him down, looking for the court records from his emancipation hearing, social security information, any public record of him. Nothing.”

He let his words sink in.

“Like I said, it’s as if the kid never existed.”

He leaned in close to Mona. “Mona, are you sure you knew this kid? I mean, really knew him? Did you trust him with your daughter?”

She was gripping the table again. What was he saying?

“I did.” She whispered. “I trusted him. He was so good to Hope.”

Hale did not back away but raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Really? Sounds like a jealous bastard to me.” The way in which he dismissed her was unmistakable. She felt her cheeks burn red with anger, the implied inattention and naïveté on her part an insult. Hale rose back up to his full height. “But that’s not all.”

“What more could you have found?” Mona whispered, afraid to ask.

“We were able to track the call Tabitha received back to Nevada. It was made from a hotel well outside of Las Vegas. Our agent on the ground questioned the staff. They reported seeing three girls together in the time frame we are talking about. Two Hispanic, one Caucasian. One was limping. One, the Caucasian, was badly scarred on her face and arms. Looked like burns, according to the night clerk. The clerk said it was hard to gauge the recency of the injuries, because the scarred one was pretty mobile for being that messed up. But it fits our time frame. And it could place your daughter with this Maria.”

“Was Michael with them?” She whispered, not sure if it would be a good or bad thing if he were.

Hale shook his head. “The clerk only saw the girls. But we’re running through all the security cameras to make sure there was nobody else with them who came in separately.”

Mona sat in silence, her logical mind shifting the pieces of the puzzle around. She could make no sense of it. She was acutely aware of Don, glued to his seat next to her. She sensed the quiet anger mounting in him, anger she remembered from the early years of their marriage, when she’d discovered the intensity of it—his absolute cold control—which made her yearn for the messiness of a real argument.

Hale looked at her, frowning his brow. “You know I am only telling you these things as a favor to our friend Clay. But maybe I should stop. Sometimes it’s actually harder for family members to have the details as they unfold, when there are no answers.”

He paused to assess her reaction. Mona felt keenly that this was a test of some sort.

“No,” she sighed. “I appreciate being kept in the loop. Especially

when I know I am still not officially in the clear.” She smiled grimly. “I want you to keep telling me as much as you can.”

“As you prefer. But if that is the case, you may want to see one other thing. Come with me.” He looked perfunctorily at Don. “Both of you.”

Hale steered her out the door, not bothering to wait for Don, and led her back down the hallway to what had become the central command post for the investigation. The bank of screens, blinking with data and video feeds, was overwhelming, but, at the same time, reassuring. Even as they puzzled things out for themselves, the FBI’s algorithms and search functions were systematically looking for Hope, leaving nothing unexamined.

“We got a data feed from the interrogation of the Chinese traffickers we picked up after that fire in Las Vegas. Only one of them talked, but what he had to say was, well, interesting, to say the least.”

He guided her to a desk and held the chair for her as she sat down. The video was poised to run from the desktop monitor, the little triangle for “Play” blinking patiently.

Hale tapped the “Play” button and sat down on the edge of the desk, next to Mona.

The camera angled in closely on the face of the man being questioned. The bags under his eyes and faint stubble suggested he’d had a rough night. Despite that, Mona could tell he commanded the room. Fatigue did nothing to undercut the presence of a man who was accustomed to ruling with impunity, a man who was routinely obeyed. His expression was unruffled by the circumstances in which he found himself. Only a faint hint of irritation, found in the disdainful curl of his upper lip, suggested anything even unpleasant about his interrogation.

Hale narrated over the close-up. “This is Chen. One of the leaders

of the Triad trafficking group, as far as we can tell. This is about half-way through the session we had with him.”

Off camera, Mona heard the agent questioning Chen.

“You are sure? You are sure that is the man you gambled with? The man who came to your compound last night?”

Chen looked straight at the camera. “You must find more interesting interrogators. I find this one to be repetitive and slow-witted.” He shifted his gaze, presumably to address his questioner. “Yes. As I told you before, I am sure this is the man. I will never forget his face.”

“Can you pick up the book and point to the man in question? Hold it up to the camera. Let’s get a close-up,” the voice said, giving instruction to the cameraman.

The camera zoomed out and Chen wearily lifted a heavy book, flipping it so the open pages were visible. He pointed at the third picture in the middle row.

“This is him. Mr. Carmichael.” The camera zoomed back in for the tight shot. Chen’s finger rested on a snapshot of Mona’s estranged husband, Don.

Mona’s head began to swim.

“Careful, Mona,” Hale soothed, watching her reactions as closely as he watched the evidence before him. “Remember, we already knew there was someone out there who looked like Don.”

She nodded, unable to speak, unable to look at the *real* Don, standing right behind her, her eyes riveted to the video.

“You’re sure?” the off-screen agent asked again.

“Yes,” Chen sighed, snapping the book shut and dropping it on the table in front of him. “For the last time, I am sure this is the person. What I want to know is why you are so interested in him.”

The cameraman reset the angle, giving Mona a fuller picture

of Chen. Even the poor quality of the recording couldn't hide the glint of interest in his keen eyes.

"You don't need to know that. Why were you working with this man? What were your business dealings with him?"

Chen's face broke into an open sneer. "You think I would work with such a man? I would kill him if I had the chance. But perhaps you will find him and deal with him before I can."

There was a long pause. Mona knew the technique. The interrogator was drawing out the uncomfortable silence, laying the trap, hoping the awkwardness of the silence would draw out the nervous chatter that often spelled the downfall of people with something to hide.

Chen just sat. He was too good to fall for such a ploy, Mona could tell.

The interrogator tried again. "Does this man traffic, like you? Is he Triad?"

Chen smiled, thinking he had won. "I don't know what you mean."

"Did he run your operations in Atlanta?"

"What operations? I am a simple Chinese businessman. I don't have any dealings in the United States."

Mona heard a shuffle of papers off-camera. A few brisk footsteps, and the agent filled the screen, dropping some papers in front of Chen before disappearing once again.

"Do you recognize this girl?"

Chen picked up what looked like an 8x10 photo and glanced it over. He shrugged noncommittally, tossing it onto the table in front of him. "What if I did? There are lots of girls in Las Vegas. They all run together in my mind."

"Look again."

Chen raised an eyebrow and picked up the photo. He then picked up a few other snapshots. The corners of his mouth turned up, just slightly. “Yes, this girl I do remember.” He cocked an eyebrow, enjoying the cat and mouse with his questioner. “What do you want to know about her?”

“How do you know her?”

“Can one ever really say one knows another human being?” Chen philosophized, taking his time answering the agent. “I mean, really knows someone? Take Mr. Carmichael. I put my faith in him. And then he turned against me. If I could make such a mistake with him, I doubt whether I can trust my own judgment and say I really know anybody.”

Mona was losing patience. She heard the agent scrape his chair. “Do I need to turn off the camera, so we can have a private talk, Mr. Chen?”

Chen laughed derisively. “Your American laws will keep you from doing that.” He leaned back in his chair and gestured magnanimously. “I had hoped you might indulge me in conversation, but I see I overestimated you. So, you want to know about the girl. She was with Carmichael. He said she was his niece. I have no reason to think otherwise.”

“Keep talking.”

Chen had baited his hook and was enjoying stringing along the agent.

“It was a funny thing. She was clearly very special to him. He would not let her out of his sight, but for a minute. And for good reason. Every time she was alone, she caused great trouble. She was a very disobedient young lady.”

“What kind of trouble?”

Chen’s eyes twinkled as he recounted his story. “It is of no

matter. What matters is how Mr. Carmichael dealt with it. At first I thought him weak. But then he did something I am not sure I could even do, not to one who is a particular favorite.”

He leaned into the table, and the camera zoomed in once again. He had delicate, manicured hands, Mona saw. They gestured with precision as he continued.

“He wanted to prove he could control her, I think. To establish goodwill. Seal our bond.” He clasped his hands together, a physical demonstration of the kind of bond about which he was talking. “He brought me the girl, to show me for myself, and I was astonished.”

Mona was holding her breath.

“What did he do?” the agent prompted, his voice sounding strangely hollow from off-camera.

“He burned her!” Chen announced, his eyes wide with crazy admiration.

Behind her, Mona heard the sharp intake of Don’s breath, but it seemed a million miles away. She couldn’t drag her eyes from the screen. Chen expressed crazy glee as he told his story, relishing the details.

“I didn’t have time to ask him how—battery acid, I would presume. Her face, her arms, her hands, her body. Everywhere, burned. And then he made her stand there, so I could inspect her. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it. Great, oozing sores. She could barely stand.”

Mona’s stomach was beginning to roil, but she couldn’t look away, couldn’t form the words to ask Hale to stop the tape.

“Such a pity,” Chen continued, shaking his head, a tiny smile still evident on his lips. “She was so beautiful; but then, what did it matter? He still thought she was beautiful. Even though he had to destroy her, he still loved her. He even worried about her pain. He is quite a sensitive man, I think, our Mr. Carmichael.” He paused,

tutting softly. “And the poor thing, I think she loved him, too, despite it all. Maybe even because of it.”

Mona felt the bile surging up her throat and reached about her, blindly, for the trash can. She found it just in time.

Over her retching, she was vaguely aware of Agent Hale turning off the video, of Don awkwardly patting her back and holding her hair.

She hovered over the trashcan. When she was sure nothing else was coming up, she dragged her sleeve across her mouth and straightened up in her chair, shrugging off Don’s touch.

“Okay?” Hale asked gently.

She nodded, her back still to him.

His voice was soothing now, trying to paper over the horrible hole that had been ripped in her heart. “What Chen said seems to corroborate what the hotel clerks said, though the disparity in the extent of the injuries is puzzling. We’ve updated the missing persons alert to reflect her reported injuries.”

Mona didn’t say anything. Her mind was blank, refusing to accept what she’d just heard.

“Mona.” He said her name, quietly. She braced herself for whatever he said next. “The thing is, when we went back to the casinos to look for room records or gambling records for our perp, nothing shows up. The forms this man had to file to get his markers to gamble are gone. Even the security videotape from Wynn—the tape *we all saw*—is gone. It’s nothing but static now. Car rental, same thing.”

He paused, waiting for her to comment, but she was uncharacteristically quiet.

“The only organization that has the reach to do that is Triad. Or maybe one of the Russian trafficking operations. And the evidence . . .”

Don finished Agent Hale's sentence, his hard words full of judgment. "The evidence looks as if somehow her friend Michael was involved, too."

Hale nodded. "Whether as a victim or not, we don't know. But I feel like I need to tell you, trafficking cases often start with a so-called boyfriend luring a young girl into trusting him. Trusting him so much that by the time she realizes his intentions, she's cut off from her family. Trapped."

Mona swiveled on her chair to face Hale, unwilling to believe it. Her eyes were wet with tears. "Why? How?"

"We don't know yet, but we'll find out. I promise you. With a proven Triad link, this is moving out of our normal jurisdiction. I need to take our search international, start cooperating with some other agencies. With Triad or other trafficking connections there's no telling where they could have taken her."

Her shoulders sank, a quick nod giving her assent.

He cleared his throat to broach a more delicate subject. "With the evidence we have in hand, there is really no reason for us to keep Don in custody or file any charges. Nor to have you here, for that matter. I think it would be better for you both to go home. I promise we'll keep you up to date."

"Okay," she numbly agreed, recognizing his not-so-subtle attempt to move them both out of the picture. "I'll get out of your way."

"It might be better for the time being," Hale continued. "Don, do you think you will stay in town, or go back to Alabama?"

The subject of her estranged husband was hard for her to take right now, when the images of his face from the video were still fresh and her own confused feelings for him still unresolved. Before he had a chance to speak for himself, she announced, "He'll be going back to Alabama."

Her words hung in the air awkwardly, but Don did nothing to dispute her decision. Finally, Hale cleared his throat.

“Fair enough. I’ll clear it with your employer, Don, if that’s what you really want to do. You’ll just have to stay where we can find you. Just in case. Neither one of you should talk to the press or attempt to interfere in the investigation. And then there’s the matter of security . . .”

She looked up, confused.

“Given what you just saw, we thought you might be more comfortable with a security detail. In case the traffickers trace Hope back to you, or try to make good on that threat to kill Hope’s kidnapper. Remember, Triad won’t know that Don is not their man. They could come after you with everything they’ve got.”

“That’s not necessary,” she said, her voice firm.

“I know it seems like an imposition, but you should think it over, Mona. For your own peace of mind. And what about you, Don?” He peered over Mona’s head, to where Don still stood behind her. “With the physical resemblance, and the perp using your name as an alias . . .” he left his thought unfinished, knowing they would fill in the blanks themselves.

“I don’t need security,” Don answered simply. “I’ll be fine on my own in Alabama. After all, it’s a flyover state, right? Nobody would think to look for the kidnapper there,” he joked lamely, trying to make light of the situation. “I’ll just need to get my truck, Mona. It’s parked at your house.”

Hale began to argue, but Mona cut him off.

“Don is Hope’s father and an adult. If he doesn’t want a security attachment, you can’t force it on him.” Her words came out more sharply than she meant, but she was tired and losing patience.

Hale sighed and then threw up his hands. “You’re right. I can’t

force you. But if you change your mind, we can have a detail there in minutes. Don't forget."

He pulled the bits and pieces of his files back together and, before leaving, reached out to squeeze Mona's shoulder.

"She's alive, Mona. If Chen is telling the truth, we have that going for us." He gave her shoulder another quick squeeze and began winding his way through the cubicles back to his own office, leaving her alone with Don.

All she could think was, *She's alive—but for how long?*



three

TURKEY

The disastrous morning with Michael boded ill for my next adventure—the trip to the public baths. And, indeed, the outing began on a sour note. I emerged from my room having changed into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, the only clean clothes I had left.

“You can’t go out in that,” Michael said, abruptly. He looked me up and down with a critical eye. “That won’t do at all.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“First of all, it’s too cold out. You’re not used to the wind off the water—it can be biting and will cut you to the bone in no time at all.”

“So I’ll put on a sweatshirt when we go out.”

“Second, there is the matter of your skin.”

He stopped talking and all the air seemed to get sucked out of the room. I was vaguely aware of Enoch and Raph watching us.

“What about my skin?” I said, trying to keep my tone even, challenging him to even speak of it.

Michael, sensing he was in dangerous territory, adopted a reasonable tone. “I think you’ll be more comfortable covering yourself. Especially in a Muslim city.”

Enoch spoke up. “This is a secular country, Michael. They do not practice sharia law here. She has no need for covering.”

“It’s changed,” Michael asserted, looking at me as if he dared me to contradict him. “It is not as safe for an uncovered woman to walk through the city. You can feel it everywhere. And the government. . . . Even this morning, there were more protests.”

I felt myself flushing. Had he been near the university that morning, just as I had been? Did he already know I’d been there? And did he know I had encountered the Fallen? I stared at him, hard, refusing to be drawn out. Besides, I knew what was really motivating his insistence. My chin lifted in defiance as if daring him to say what he really thought about my uncovered skin—that he couldn’t stand to be reminded of the damage he had done.

“You said we were going to a tourist district for this bath, correct?” I very consciously kept my tone steady, my voice calmer than I was feeling on the inside.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, his eyes wary.

“They are not going to expect tourists to obey Muslim law. I’m going uncovered. I’ll wear the sweatshirt and that’s it. Deal?”

“She’s being very reasonable, Michael,” Enoch added, trying to smooth things over.

Michael shot an annoyed look over my head at Enoch. “Fine,” he said, turning on his heel and walking away. “We leave in five minutes.”

Raph brushed past me, clearly annoyed. “Why must you provoke him? You’re only making things worse.”

“That’s not fair,” I called after him as he pounded down the stairs. I moved to follow him, but Enoch grabbed my arm and held me back.

“Hope, there is only so much he can take. You must choose your battles.”

“I’m not going to veil myself, Enoch. That’s completely ridiculous.”

“I don’t suggest that you do. But think about what you say to him. Please. For me.”

I looked up into the lenses of the shiny aviator sunglasses that were perched on Enoch’s nose. I wished I could see into his eyes instead of seeing my own, powerless figure reflected back at me.

I sighed, knowing Enoch was right. “I’ll try, Enoch. I promise.”

The old man is the last person from whom you should be seeking advice, Henri whispered to me. After all, look at what happened to him. But, he continued begrudgingly, this time I happen to agree with him. Don’t provoke Michael if you can avoid it.

I thought about what Henri was implying. He was right, in one sense. Enoch had followed his own way and ended up banished to the outskirts of Heaven, sentenced to live an eternity in solitude as punishment for giving voice to the Prophecy—the Prophecy that foretold the rise of the Fallen Angels and spelled almost certain death for me.

I went cold at the thought of it and shivered.

“See?” Enoch tutted at me, patting my hand. “Michael was right. You’ll be much too cold in such light clothing.”

I forced a smile, never completely sure if he could really see me through his seemingly blind eyes. “I’ll go get my sweatshirt.”

“Good girl,” he said.

We walked in silence from the house, working our way back through the labyrinth of streets toward the heart of the old district. Michael and Raph kept tightly together, leaving Enoch and me to straggle behind.

“Enoch, have you ever been in the public baths?”

“No, my dear. When I was human, we did not have such niceties. I was more likely to clean myself off with sand.”

I tucked my hands deeper into my pockets, head down against the wind, and kept walking, wondering what was in store for me.

We had apparently reached the more touristy part of Sultanahmet. Crowds milled about, holding up their cell phones to get the perfect photo and straining to listen to the tour guides shouting out their litanies of dates and facts. A swarm of young men, watchful, circled around the tourists, looking for the lone, hapless ones, offering their helpful guidance and asking if maybe, just maybe, they would be interested in a carpet. They gave us a wide berth, apprehensive of the warning silently flashing from Raph’s black eyes. We cut through them all and headed for the other side of the square.

I tilted my head back, agape at the minarets soaring above me, left and right. The white marble seemed to draw the smallest bits of sun from behind the clouds, which floated, a radiant mix of orange and gray and purple, against the muddy sky. Everything was reflected in the wet puddles of the square, still slick with rain. On the opposite side, brick, stone, and marble rioted on the façade of another massive complex, glowing pink with morning radiance as the sun managed to peek out from behind the clouds.

Suddenly, a grand flock of birds wheeled overhead, silhouetted against the sky. I gave a start.

“It’s just seagulls,” Raph volunteered, understanding my fear that the Fallen had found us. I took a shaky breath, grateful for his reassurance, and looked back up to the sky. Entranced, I watched the birds whirl and streak across the sky before the gigantic domes ahead of us, majestic and grand, commanded my attention.

“What are those buildings?”

“Ayasofya and the Blue Mosque,” Michael answered over his shoulder. “But we’ll be going to the building between them.”

I reluctantly dragged my eyes away from the spires to where Michael was pointing. Across the square, past a dancing fountain, sat a slightly smaller, more austere complex. Only between such magnificent structures could this third site have been deemed humble. It stretched the length of the square, row after row of domes that spoke of untold wealth.

“That’s a bath house?” I gaped, incredulous.

“A *hammam*,” Michael corrected me, pausing for me to catch up. “Most Ottoman homes didn’t have private baths, so hammams like this were vital to the public. And this one was special. It was designed by one of the most famous architects of the Ottomans, built for a slave who became the powerful wife of the sultan.”

“This was built for a slave?”

“She didn’t remain a slave. Roxelana grew powerful in her own right. These were just recently restored after having fallen into great disrepair. Imagine, hawkers were using the navel stones to display carpets to tourists.”

“Navel stones?”

“You’ll see,” he said, a slight smile on his face as he began walking swiftly across the square, following the cobblestone path toward the fountain.

I didn’t have time to wonder what had improved his mood. Raph had already moved ahead and was consulting with a street vendor next to the fountain. When we caught up with him, he turned from the vendor, who resumed the business of peddling his wares from under his red and white striped awning, his voice cutting through the low murmur of the crowds and the gurgling fountain.

A deep frown marred Raph’s dark face. “I’m not sure this is such a good idea,” he began, looking at me doubtfully. “We will have to

part here. Even the entrances are separate. I think we should skip the baths.”

My heart sank. I could practically feel the dirt between my toes. Any inhibitions I had felt earlier were quickly slipping away. I wanted—no, needed—that bath.

“I promise, I’ll be watchful. Besides,” I added, pointing at the crowds milling about near the building, “nothing could happen to me in there, not with all these people around to witness it.”

Michael seemed to be weighing the risk, looking about the square for any sign of danger. His eyes narrowed as a particularly loud group of young men cut across the lawn, which, despite the grayness of the day, glistened a dewy green.

“Maybe one of us should go in with you. As a woman, of course,” he declared hastily, lest any of us mistake his meaning.

I felt my face turning a deep red. Of course, any one of them could shape-shift at will and take the form of anybody they pleased. I became indignant at the thought of it.

“No way,” I said in a clipped voice. “That is not going to happen. You can forget about it right now. I’d rather stay filthy than have one of you watching me taking a bath.”

Raph shrugged, his black eyes glittering with amusement. “It is a logical solution,” he said, struggling to keep a sardonic smile from stealing across his hardened face. “But I would never impose against your wishes.” He gave a short, mocking bow and backed away, leaving me to square off with Michael.

Behind me, Enoch gave a snort. “She’s surrounded by people in there, Michael. Let her go. Set a time and place to meet and be done with it.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Fine. We’ll split up here. You’re going to go around the other end to the women’s entrance. Pay with this,” he said, thrusting a credit card into my hand. “They’ll issue you a

cloth and slippers and take you into the *camekan*. It's like a locker room. You'll change there and then make your way into the main baths. You'll see what to do once you are there."

He put his hands on my shoulders and squeezed gently. A shimmer of heat ran through my body. He looked at me intently, as if he were trying to memorize my face in case we never saw each other again.

"Don't let yourself get trapped alone."

"It's just a bath," I whispered, my voice catching in my throat. My skin was singing at his touch, the heaviness of his hands upon my shoulders the only thing keeping me grounded.

You have more to fear from him than from anything that could happen to you in those baths, Henri whispered.

Michael's voice cut off Henri's taunt. "Promise me."

I nodded and looked down at the ground, my morning encounter with the Fallen an all-too-real reminder of the danger I faced. "I promise."

"We'll give you an hour. Come to the fountain when you're done."

He released me and waited for me to go.

"Enoch?" I said, turning behind me to find the old angel leaning into his cane.

"Don't worry," he said, grinning. "I'll make sure neither follows you in."

"Thank you," I said, grateful he was on my side.

I turned and started walking toward the side of the hammam. Now that I was close to the complex, I could see how the two ends were composed of alternating white and red bricks, towering above the deep pink walls of the two inner domes. The entire building was topped with a slate gray that matched the cloudy sky.

The feeling of eyes boring into my back made me pick up my pace as I made my way toward the women's entrance.

I turned the corner, out of sight, following the discreet signs. There was no line. I climbed down a staircase, taking a deep breath before slipping through the massive wooden door.

I found myself in a high-ceilinged hall, steps leading down into a square, sunken room lined with low cushions. The interior was bright and clean, calming cool white walls reaching up two stories to a tidy dome bathed in blue. Polished wood, gold as it caught the light of scattered lamps, glowed from the upper floors. Brass plaques and stained glass warmed the walls, giving the place a cozy feel. Across the room, up the stairs and behind a polished wooden desk, stood a lone attendant. She was wrapped in a turquoise skirt and top, her glossy black hair falling in waves beneath her shoulders. She smiled expectantly.

“English?” she asked, scanning me up and down as I crossed the room and climbed the stairs to her.

“No, American,” I answered, my gesturing hands broadcasting my nervousness. She caught a glimpse of my reddened skin, and her eyes flamed with curiosity. But just as quickly, she looked away, burrowing in her desk in pretended distraction. My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and I pulled the sleeves of my sweatshirt over my fingertips.

The woman pretended not to notice, keeping up a cheerful chatter. “For you the distinction is so important. American, British—you have fought wars to be what you are. But for me, it means nothing. You read your services in English, no?” She looked up from her desk, her eyes twinkling, and handed me a laminated menu. I scanned it quickly, looking for the simplest thing I could find.

“This,” I said, pointing and showing her the card. “The basic service, please.”

She nodded, taking the card from me, her eager eyes taking in the shiny skin on my fingertip. “No special needs, then?” She

waited politely for me to respond. When I said nothing, she nodded her head and continued on. “Your attendant’s tip is included in the price, Miss. If you would like to pay now?”

I dug into my pocket and handed her the credit card. She took it from my hand, and I noticed how elegant her slender, manicured fingers looked next to my dirty, scarred skin. Ashamed, I snatched my hand away.

She turned behind the desk and smoothly executed the payment, and then offered me a pile of fluffy linens.

“This is your first time in a hammam, *yes?*” She didn’t even wait for me to answer before continuing. “Come with me.” She whisked me up a flight of wooden stairs, a study in grace, guiding me to one of the airy, rattan-like cubicles against the corridor.

“This is your changing room. You can leave your clothes inside. Put these on,” she said, handing me a neat pile of slippers and fabric. “You may come back down when you are ready to meet your attendant.”

I peered around the inside of my personal locker. Empty hooks awaited towels and discarded clothing. I laid out the things she handed to me. The linen unfolded into a towel-sized wrap of thin, purple cotton, white fringe decorating each end.

Swiftly, I pulled my clothes off, stacking each piece into a neat pile on the bench. I didn’t look at myself in the mirror; I didn’t want to see the welts of angry flesh, the hardening scar tissue that I knew marked my body. Instead, I wrapped myself snugly into the towel, fastening and refastening it about my chest, and slid my feet into the too-tight slippers, clearly not made for large, corn-fed American girls. I tugged at the wrap, which barely covered my thighs. Resigned, clutching the thin fabric about me, I headed down the stairs to meet my waiting attendant. Michael’s words of caution hurried me along.

She was dressed in a smart, dusty-rose uniform. Stretching out her hand, she beamed at me. “Come. I will show you.” She grasped my hand firmly and led me through a narrow arched door.

I felt an immediate change in temperature as I slipped into the next corridor. The air behind me swirled, chilly and dry, as I moved deeper into the moist heat that was beckoning from the other side of the narrow space. I looked up and saw that the ceiling here was considerably lower than that of the changing room—no dome here, just a hallway. Beads of perspiration began to form above my lip. I dragged an arm across my face and kept walking, careful not to slip on the increasingly slick floor. My attendant gripped my hand more tightly, checking that I was safe. To my side I noted the deep marble sinks, stacked with thick towels. Another attendant, standing against the wall, smiled shyly and murmured something encouraging, pointing toward the next door.

Unsure, I followed my attendant and stepped through.

A grand space opened up before me, a pristine hall, soft white marble for the first six feet, then stucco soaring high. The space was softly lit by ruby red glass lamps tucked into niches in the wall and shafts of daylight that pierced the steamy air from above. I craned my neck and saw the ceiling was made up of several domes or half-domes, each pierced through with small, star-like windows, so that, even on a gray day like today, the interior of the baths seemed to glow. Little rivulets of condensation dripped around each opening, marring the perfect white. I squinted and noticed that the biggest, central dome was topped by a glass eye, letting in even more light. I followed the shaft to where it ended on a large, inlaid marble table in the center of the room, an intricate design of squares, octagons, and shooting stars in black, gold, and pink marble. Women lay on their stomachs or backs, some resting peacefully, a big mound of bubbles hiding everything but their heads, others being scrubbed

vigorously by young women dressed in halters and sarongs. Still others were being pummeled and pounded, their sighs testament to the thoroughness of the massages they were receiving.

The navel stone, I thought, satisfied to have figured it out.

I scanned the perimeter of the room, noticing the deep niches set back from steps, each punctuated by gray-streaked marble basins. Gleaming brass fixtures shone through the steam.

“Here,” my attendant whispered softly, guiding me slowly across the floor and up a set of steps. She turned the handles, and water gushed forth into the basin, a new rush of steam rising up. She gestured for me to take off my wrap and sit on one of the low marble benches that lined the room. I hesitated, but she nodded, miming the routines of bathing to spur me on.

I let the towel drop to the floor and shivered despite the heat of the steam room. Her eyes grew soft. She stared frankly at my scarred body, murmuring to herself in words I could not understand.

I bent down to snatch the towel back, wanting to hide, but her hand grabbed mine, stopping me.

I looked up, and her eyes were kind.

“I’ll take care of you,” she said, rubbing my hand gently until I dropped the towel and settled back into my seat. I let the warmth emanating from deep under the bowels of the room sink into my bones. She smiled quickly, dipping an elaborate golden bowl into a deep sink and motioning for me to drop my head. I did, closing my eyes, letting the heat of the hammam lull me. Hot water trickled down my neck and back, then all over me, as my attendant dipped and poured, dipped and poured, the sounds of the running water and soft swooshing sounds of the furnace soothing me.

My relaxation did not last long, however, as a stream of ice-cold water dumped over my head and ran down my back, shocking me back awake.

My eyes flew open to find my young attendant smiling sweetly. “Shock therapy,” she said, shaking off my attempt to end the session right then and there.

She dipped her ladle back into the running water and poured it around my shoulders and all over my body, delicious heat sinking into my tired muscles. I could feel the tension slipping away as she poured the water, again and again, the rhythm of it soothing my body into relaxation once again.

“My name is Ays,” she said, pointing to the charm around her neck that spelled out her name in delicate gold. “Now your turn,” she insisted, handing me the bowl. “I will be right back.”

I snuck a few glances about me as I tried to replicate Ays’s perfect rhythm. A few women were tucked up in alcoves like mine, chatting away, mindlessly dunking and dumping their bowls full of water, as they gossiped in quiet voices, every now and then turning the water faucets to refill their basins. I sank deeper into my seat, letting my eyes flutter closed. The clank and whir of the mechanical workings deep in the belly of the hammam punctuated the silence, as did the call to prayer floating out over the square.

I felt a hand tapping my shoulder. I opened my eyes to see Ays, now dressed in a sarong. She winked, taking the bowl from my side and moving swiftly to repeat the dousing with which she’d started. She ran her fingers over my limbs, twisting me this way and that, having me stand and turn before her. Tutting softly, she picked up my hand and led me, like a baby, to the great marble table in the center of the room, where my wrap had already been spread out next to a big silver bucket, gesturing for me to lie down on my back.

My self-consciousness gone, I stretched out on the towel, feeling the heat from the furnaces below seeping into my body, my eyes fluttering shut.

“No scrub. Too tender,” my attendant whispered in my ear, her fingers lightly dancing across my scars. “But I will fix you.”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t want to wonder what she thought. I just wanted to give myself over to the steam and the heat. Through the echoes, I could hear my attendant talking to herself as she prepared.

“Very soft,” she whispered, and I was conscious of her hovering over my body. “Very soft,” she said again, reassuring, laying her hands upon my back.

I heard a soft whirring in the air above me. Then, big dollops of warm suds fell about me. Whir, plop. Whir, plop. She was weaving a long white cloth through the air, then deftly slinging it across my body, never actually touching me but depositing mounds of soap bubbles in her wake until I could no longer see any of my body. When she was satisfied I was sufficiently soaped up, she dropped her cloth back into the bucket and began to work.

Deftly, as if I were an infant, she picked up my limbs and moved me about, wiping away the grime from days of travel. Her hands never ceased, bending me this way and that, rinsing away the soap with torrents of hot water. Swiftly, she whisked away my wet towels, wrapping my clean parts in fluffy new ones, so that I was entirely protected in a warm cocoon of cotton before she moved on to the next part of my body. I sighed, sinking deeper into relaxation, wondering at her skill.

As she washed my body, she began to tell a story.

“The sultan once loved his concubine so much he made her his wife. Very unusual to do this. He stopped visiting the harem, all for love of this wife. He gave her everything. He even built this hammam in her honor, so that all the staff at mosque could come and bathe here. But the wife, Hurrem—you call her Roxelana—she was never satisfied. She wanted more. More buildings. More jewels. More power. Never happy, this Roxelana. The sultan was a

powerful man in his own right—some say the best ruler in the all of Ottoman history—but Hurrem wrapped around his brain like a snake.”

A dollop of suds fell on me as she continued her tale.

“This sultan had a son by another woman. This son was loved by the people and was to be the sultan’s heir. But Hurrem wanted the throne for her favorite son. She whispered in the sultan’s ear and convinced the sultan to kill his best advisor. Then she whispered some more, and convinced him to order and witness the death of his own heir.

“Turn over,” she whispered. Dutifully, I flipped myself over, easing onto my stomach.

Whir, plop. Whir, plop. She prepared me for the next round of bathing before taking her story back up.

“But still, this Hurrem was not satisfied. No, to be satisfied she had to kill her other son, and his four boys, to be sure that her favorite son was safe upon the throne.”

My blood ran cold.

“See?” My attendant asked sweetly, never pausing in her ministrations. “Love can make you do terrible things. It can twist one’s mind, so that it is no longer possible to tell right from wrong. It can cause one to destroy what should be cherished. But even such a terrible love can leave behind great beauty,” she said, giving me another dollop of soap. “Like this hammam.”

She fell into quiet humming, then, folding me this way and that while I pondered her story. Was it a warning? Would I be the thing Michael destroyed? I pushed my curiosity and foreboding away, telling myself there was no deeper meaning in the tale, so that I could surrender to the lull of the bath.

After several minutes, she finished her ministrations with a final wipe of a cloth. I lay there on the hot marble table, swaddled

in warm towels and in a state of complete bliss, oblivious to my surroundings. Then, she leaned over and whispered to me again.

“Yes, love does terrible things,” she repeated, tracing the scars that criss-crossed my skin as if she already knew the truth of their origin. “But now I will fix you.”

Shock rippled through me, but before I could react, she was unwrapping the towels covering my back. I mumbled a slight protest, as she exposed me once again to the wet air of the *hararet*, trying to push myself up off the stone to ask her meaning. Firmly, she pushed me back onto the marble. Then, her hands began fluttering across my skin, barely touching me before moving to the next spot, and the next. The scent of roses, lavender, and rosemary surrounded me, and I breathed in deeply, feeling the ageless peace of the hammam sinking into my soul, pushing all other thoughts out of my mind.

My attendant was murmuring to herself, now, a slight, sing-songy sound that rose and fell with the movements of her hands. The rhythm and the heat were intoxicating; so much so that I didn't notice when she began going deeper into the muscle, kneading and pulsing my broken body.

I gasped at the pain as she began to work the knot in my neck and tried to push myself up. She stopped me, laying a steady hand on my shoulder. “Hurt now, better later,” she whispered into my ear, easing me back down onto the marble slab. “Trust me. Okay?”

I paused, unsure, before I nodded for her to continue, bracing myself for the pain.

Her skillful fingers began working again, drifting over each part of my body, unerringly finding each knot. She would ease into it, trying to learn the secrets my muscles held, and then coaxing and persistent, would undo the fear, doubt, and regret that lingered there. As my body fought to hold onto its pain, clenching

and protesting her touch, her voice would rise into song, as if she could dash away the memories my body held with the lightness of her tune. Each tightly held hurt came undone, chased away by her swift fingers, until she finished, leaving me weeping silently into my towel.

“You will be okay,” she whispered, pulling a dry towel up around me and patting my shoulder in a last, comforting gesture before moving away, back into the folds of steam that circled the hararet.

I lay there, wanting nothing more than to curl myself into a ball. While the bath and massage had given my aching body and skin relief, my doubt about Michael had rushed to the surface, leaving me feeling raw and exposed. The twisted logic of the harem and its safety, the separation of women and men into their different worlds, suddenly seemed appealing, especially with the words of my attendant, a warning really—“love does terrible things”—echoing in my mind. I didn’t want to leave this sanctuary. But I knew I couldn’t stay. Michael was waiting for me, and his warnings about being trapped alone were insistently worming their way to the front of my consciousness, urging me to hurry.

I pushed myself up, clutching my towel close. Mindful of the slippery floors, I shuffled across the open space toward the door. I left behind the magical peace of the steamy dome and slipped through the arched exit, a small sign pointing the way back to the changing rooms. As I did, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

My skin, once crisscrossed with angry red welts and white scar tissue, seemed different. In the dim light of the locker, I almost had a healthy pink glow. Could it be?

I leaned in closer and wiped the mirror, foggy from the steam, with the corner of my towel.

The harsh reality of my scars had been softened by the steam

and mist from the hammam, but it was more than an illusion. My skin definitely looked different. I was healing, faster than I should have been.

I stared for another moment, confused, slipping out the door and climbing, heavy limbed, back to my changing room. Once inside, I sat on the bench and stared at my pile of clothes. I couldn't bear the thought of wearing them again, the stiff cotton sure to rub against my tender skin, but I had no choice. My emotions spent, I slipped out of the towel and dressed myself. Muscles tender, I checked to be sure I hadn't forgotten anything and stole one last glance in the mirror to confirm it had not all been in my imagination. Then, I slipped down the wooden staircase, moving past the tall glasses of tea and water that waited by the cushions. The front desk was empty. I lingered, hoping for the desk attendant to appear, giving me an excuse to delay my return to reality, but after a few minutes it was evident she wasn't coming back. Knowing I had probably taken more time than we'd planned, I gathered myself to meet the others. I crossed to the heavy wooden door and left the confines of the hammam, wondering just what magic had been worked upon me, body and soul.

I climbed the stairs, walking alone around the perimeter of the building back to our designated meeting place. Suddenly, a strong hand clamped my shoulder.

I reeled, pushing my assailant's hand away, afraid that Michael's misgivings had been right and that the Fallen had found me after all. As I stumbled, trying to regain my bearings, I looked up to see the puzzled face of the hammam receptionist.

She held out her hand. "You forgot this, miss." It was my credit card.

Embarrassed, I thanked her and shoved the card deep into my pocket, hurrying to find my band of angels.



Nobody berated me for being late. All I got was one sideways glance from Michael as I handed him back the credit card.

“You’re okay? Nothing unusual happened while you were in there?” he interrogated me.

I hid how shaken I was by my harmless interaction with the receptionist outside the hammam—better for him not to know how terrified of the Fallen I actually was.

“Good,” he nodded, his relief at my safety palpable.

It was past midday by this point. It was late to be restarting our search, but we had to do something to stave off the hopelessness I knew we all felt. So, with a sense of purpose, Enoch spread out the map we’d gotten at the chapel the day before and looked for a place to start. He was dressed like a fisherman now, a thick cable sweater straining against his burgeoning stomach, his gray head topped with a jaunty cap that tilted to one side, its ribbons twisting in the breeze. His shiny aviator sunglasses looked oddly out of place, but then again, he was a complete anachronism.

“Nice getup,” I said, the sight of him making me smile despite myself.

“This is a maritime city. I thought it an appropriate homage.”

He peered over the map, never letting on whether or not he was actually able to read it with his empty eyes. With a satisfied grunt, he picked up the map and slapped it with his hand. “Perfect. We can get started right now.”

“Here?” I looked around the square.

“Not every site on this map was a church dedicated to Michael. There are other things that were sacred to him. One is right here. Isn’t it Michael?”

Michael was peering intently through the streams of water that

jetted from the fountain's perimeter. He didn't look at us as he answered; he simply nodded across the square before voicing almost reverently, "Ayasofya."

We followed him across the wet pavement toward the old church.

The great wooden doors loomed ahead of us. Michael hesitated at the threshold, reaching one hand to grip the doorway. "She is an old friend, this church. Many memories tread her grand halls. But you wish to see the icons, do you not, Enoch?"

"You know the one we wish to see."

"Very well," Michael said, slipping inside the great door.

He walked with purpose, leaving me to steal little glimpses of the ancient church, as I hurried after him. But when I followed him through another set of vast, wooden doors, it was as if the sky opened up and I had to stop and stare, dumbstruck.

A huge dome spanned the entirety of the nave, easily two hundred feet above me. It seemed to float overhead, somehow supported only by tiers of marble columns that ran the length of the space. The weak sun streamed in from the endless rows of windows, filling the vastness with an ethereal light. Huge black circles, emblazoned with gold calligraphy, hung from the arches of the dome, marking the church—long ago converted to a mosque—for Islam. Shadows crisscrossed the marble floor. Overhead there was a dizzyingly spectacular gold mosaic, covering the ceiling and filling the entire place with a heavenly glow.

I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the place. There was so much to see, I wasn't sure where to look. But then I saw Michael and the others heading out the side. With a pang of regret at not having time to explore on my own, I followed after them.

I caught up with them at the top of the ramp that led us to the upper galleries of the building. We wordlessly passed a mosaic of a man holding a skull and a drawing of a sailing ship, not pausing

in our pursuit of the icon Enoch had mentioned. The crowds were thin in this second level, and Enoch's cane, with its distinctive thump, echoed among the marble as we hurried along.

We went through another marble doorway and Enoch whispered, "The Gates of Heaven and Hell."

"What?" I whispered back, confused.

"That's what this archway is called. The Gates of Heaven and Hell. Nobody is sure why."

We turned the corner and found ourselves facing a gorgeous mosaic—resplendent with gold and blue tiles—of Christ, his mother, and John the Baptist. But we didn't stop there, either, instead winding through the halls, past more magnificent art, heading directly toward the center of the church to push ourselves up against the rail.

We were high up, near the base of the dome. Across from me, nearly at the same level now, hung one of the black medallions with Arabic writing. The soft murmur of the sightseers below floated up, muffled and distant. Michael was leaning against the low rail, his lean body draped, so I could see every muscle. He didn't say anything but shifted away to make room for me. I took the spot he cleared for me, aware of the closeness of his body and the heat that emanated from it.

"Look up," Enoch urged, nudging me with his cane.

I looked to where he pointed, at the top of the half-dome that protruded from the main part of the church, and saw an enormous mosaic of the Virgin with the Christ Child in her lap.

"Now, over there," he said, nodding across the way. I looked across the dome and gasped.

A majestic angel, composed of thousands of tiny tiles, was set into the wall, filling the bottom of the arch. Large pieces of the mosaic had apparently fallen away in ruins over the years, but I

could still see his mournful, dignified eyes staring at me across the empty space. Half of a golden halo encircled his head. Most of his wings were intact, the greens, blues, and creamy whites of his feathers falling in graceful rows to the very ends of his wings, which nearly dragged to the tips of his toes.

“That’s Gabriel,” Enoch whispered. “And if you look straight up, above your head, you’ll see what is left of Michael.”

I leaned out over the rail and strained my head to look. All I could see were a few lonely feathers.

“Is there one of Raph, too?” I asked, looking about. There were pictures of what looked like saints and some weird, six-winged creatures, but nothing else that looked like an Archangel.

Raph snorted. “Not likely. I’m surprised they even bothered to show Gabriel, after all.”

I bent my head quizzically. “I don’t understand.”

Michael answered, continuing to stare off into space. “The people had a special love for me here. That’s all.”

Enoch interrupted. “You should tell her why, Michael.”

Michael sighed and unfolded his body from the railing, turning to speak. “Because the Emperor Constantine credited me with a great victory and built many shrines to me, many people believed the greatness of Constantinople came from my blessings upon him. It is nothing more than that.”

“Michael always had a knack for getting all the glory,” Raph har-rumphed. “And for ingratiating himself to humans.” His easy smile was belied by the sharpness of his tone. I looked at his black eyes, flashing with resentment, and wondered whether Michael could really trust him.

“I still don’t understand why you dragged us here,” Raph complained, pushing away from the railing and stretching like a languorous cat in a beam of sunlight. “There’s nothing special

to see; you wouldn't even know that was supposed to have been Michael if you hadn't read your guide book. It makes no sense to have him here, anyway, with the Virgin and Child. Gabriel, yes, because of the Annunciation. But Michael, no. Just another sign of the addled human mind."

Enoch's lips moved into the faintest of smiles. "Perhaps not. Does anything strike you, Hope?"

I thought hard, knowing Enoch wanted me to figure something out on my own, but I came up blank. I shrugged and looked down at the marble floor.

"No matter," Enoch continued. "We have seen enough here. Time for us to make our way to the next stop on our tour."

Enoch gestured to Raph and, together, they began winding their way back through the hallways toward the ramp. Michael lingered, gazing at the floor below.

I hesitated before asking, "What are you thinking?"

He turned and smiled, but his eyes were sad. "I was remembering the night the city fell to the Ottoman army. The very last refugees fled here, to Ayasofya, pleading with God to save them."

"You were here," I whispered, searching his face. The lines in his face seemed to deepen with sorrow as he relived that night.

"Yes, I was. But I could do nothing to stop it. God's face had turned from them, so I could only watch."

"I'm sorry," I said, impulsively reaching out to take his hand. He pulled it to his chest, pressing my hand against his heart.

In a flash, his memories flooded my mind. The air was filled with ash, the sconces ripped from the wall turned to torches as the soldiers set about ruining the sacred place of worship. Screams pierced the acrid air; voices begged for mercy in a language I couldn't understand. But the vicious warriors paid no heed. They cut down everyone in their path, the bodies piling upon each other,

their work done only when the marble floors ran with blood, the tangy, ferrous stench of it so strong that it even cut through the lingering smoke.

I snatched my hand away, horrified.

He looked at me, his gaze steady, but the strain of his sinewy neck, the tightness around his eyes, told me the storminess of his soul.

“That is what I remember. What it is like . . .”

I finished his sentence, feeling dead inside. “. . . when you cannot help those you should.”

I blindly ran from the gallery, swamped with guilt for all the people who were suffering because Michael was preoccupied with me. I knew that their plight plagued his every moment, and I was certain that there was nothing I could say, nothing I could ever do to make up for the pain and horror he would experience—was experiencing—because of me.



We traveled in silence from Ayasofya, each of us pointedly staring away from one another, fixating on the endless rows of shops, pretending to be fascinated by the magnets and key chains and evil eye pendants that still managed to twinkle despite the dull sky. Enoch had taken over the itinerary, picking places marked on the map for us to visit, narrating as we walked as if we were simply tourists with no other purpose than to take in the historic glories of the fallen empire. We did not have to go far to reach his first destination.

“That, right there, is the Column of Constantine,” he said, pointing down the plaza at a rather dirty marble column, mounted on what looked like an ugly pile of concrete. “They say there is an

incredible cache of relics somewhere under or inside the column. These relics include the hatchet Noah used to build the Ark, the stone from which Moses made water flow in the desert, the nails of Christ's crucifixion, and the basket and remains of loaves from when Christ fed the multitudes . . . ”

“But no rock, stained by Abel's blood? How unfortunate,” Raph scoffed. “Where are you taking us, old man? And why isn't the girl leading the way?”

Enoch ignored Raph's outburst and smiled serenely. “We're going over by the prison gate to the Church of the Pantocrator.”

“The Pantocrator. The Church of Christ the Almighty,” Michael whispered. “I haven't been there in . . . ”

“. . . Centuries? I figured as much,” Enoch interrupted. “We'll be there soon,” he promised, hustling us toward the platform for a tram. He handed out passes like candy for children, shooing us through the turnstile just in time to see a little train wheezing its way up the hill to us.

Why we were going there, and what we would see, was not discussed. Nobody spoke again until we'd been dropped off back near the Golden Horn, at the base of a wide avenue. We trudged in the direction Enoch pointed. The ruins of the ancient aqueduct were looming in the distance, the walls of an old cistern bulging out toward the sidewalk as we climbed.

“Up here,” he directed, pointing his cane up a steep stone path, rutted with age.

I peered up the hill with skepticism.

“It looks like an abandoned construction site,” I said, unable to keep the questioning tone from sneaking into my voice.

“Trust me,” Enoch said, flashing a smile as he forged ahead, hobbling with difficulty over the rocky path.

The climb was steep, winding us past several walled-off renovation

sites and more decrepit wooden houses, leaning and crowding into the alleys as if they were about to collapse around us. “For sale” signs were nailed up against their warped wooden walls, and I wondered who would buy such disastrous piles of decay. We kept winding our way through the alleys, running into dead ends and crumbling walls encroached by brushes and weeds, seemingly going in circles until we found our way past a fleet of driverless trucks to another barricaded work site. My pace quickened. Beyond the tarps and corrugated tin walls topped with barbed wire, I could see the top of a dome, silhouetted against the sky. I began running, my skepticism forgotten. I emerged first from the street, finding myself alongside another stone monolithic church and in front of an abutting restaurant, perched high above the city on a terrace. We walked through the terrace, winding our way through a maze of café tables and umbrellas. A carpet of green grass, punctuated by odd, crescent-topped statues, columns, and shrubbery, surrounded the space. Below it, the Golden Horn was visible. In fact, the entire city of Istanbul spread out before us. It was a crazy quilt of collapse, abandonment, construction, and restoration, sliced through by the blue sparkle of waters where the Bosphorus and the Marmara Sea converged. It seemed somehow out of place to me, like I was visiting a botanical garden, not a church.

But what a church it was.

It was a magnificent pile of stone and bricks, all arches and domes and soaring windows, great bulbous bays protruding from the walls and obscuring its actual heart. It was muscular and massive, commanding my attention.

We followed the packed dirt path around the church walls, looking for the entrance. As we walked, I dragged my hand against the rough stone and bricks, sunk deep into the masonry. I could feel their age, as if the stones were speaking to me of the long-ago time when they were laid, carefully, as a monument to God. I tried

to peer through the arched windows, hoping to get a glimpse, but most of them were high above my head, with lattice and steel bars blocking the view and revealing only darkness.

Occasionally we'd see a break in the walls, an avalanche of brick where time had gotten the best of the monumental edifice. Tufts of stubborn grass poked through gaps in the mortar. Elsewhere, gaping windows were covered with sheets or boarded up, and whole sections were embraced with scaffolding that looked just as precarious as the crumbling church itself.

"Neglected," Michael breathed. I gave him a sideways glance, trying to gauge his mood, but his face was placid.

"At least it looks like it is being restored," Enoch said. His limping gait seemed firmer now, and he charged ahead, pulling us forward by sheer force of will.

We turned the corner, following Enoch's lead, and came to a full stop.

"It's closed," I said, disappointment flooding me. I couldn't read the words on the sign in the roped-off area in front of the entrance, but I didn't need to when I saw the heavy chain and padlock on the outside of the door.

"It doesn't matter," Enoch said. "Michael, Raph, can you move the ropes away?"

They glanced about quickly to make sure nobody was watching us before rolling away the ropes. Enoch waddled up to the door. He lifted his cane and pressed it, deliberately, against the giant padlock. It fell open, sinking to the cobblestone, immediately followed by the slipping chains that fell with a clank to the ground.

Enoch pushed against the door, and it swung open, hinges shrieking. He turned, pleased with himself, and gestured at us with his cane. "Come on, then. Let's go inside before somebody sees us."

“Wait,” Michael ordered. “It’s a mosque now. We should take off our shoes.”

Hurriedly, we deposited our footwear, dumping it unceremoniously outside the door before slipping inside. Carefully, we pushed the heavy wooden doors closed behind us, wincing as the hinges protested once again.

“Make it quick, Enoch,” Raph complained as we stood, poised, on the edge of the room. “Show us whatever it is you want us to see.”

“It’s not so much what you can see, as what it is,” Enoch answered, his voice echoing against the cold plaster and stone walls. “This is actually three churches. Right now we’re in the original Pantocrator. As you said, Michael, it’s a mosque today.”

My eyes began adjusting to the dim light, and the shape of the church began to make sense to me. It was shaped like a cross, a giant dome spanning the center with a half-dome at the head. The floor of the half-dome was covered in a rich, burgundy carpet. Its upper walls were decorated in ornate calligraphy—graceful white on green, surrounded by swags of gold—delicate flourishes in jewel tones circling the domes and arches, reaching higher and higher toward the sky. A turned wooden pulpit sat at the far end, to the side. I started to walk toward it, but Michael’s hand darted out and grabbed my elbow.

“Better not,” he warned. “I’m not sure it’s safe.”

“Hurry up, Enoch,” Raph ordered, looking uneasily about him.

Enoch’s mirrored sunglasses reflected a tiny sliver of light from the far-off windows as he turned to speak. “This is the Pantocrator, Christ Almighty and Triumphant. Over there, on the far side,” he continued, waving his cane to the north end of the building, “is the Church of the Virgin Eleousa, The Merciful. What we came to see is the chapel that connects them.”

He turned and began making his way toward a dark arch, not bothering to see if we were following him. Ahead of us, from the shadows, we heard him swear an oath.

“It’s boarded up! We’ll have to push our way through.”

Michael and Raph gave each other a look.

“Enoch . . .” Raph began, a note of warning in his voice. They pushed ahead, forming a wall of angelic flesh before me. I couldn’t see past them but heard the creaky protest of boards and the sudden explosion when they splintered. A cloud of dust blew toward me. I closed my eyes and felt a rush of dust, woodchips, and dirt whip about me. My hands flew up to cover my mouth, but not before a fit of coughing shook my body.

“Are you okay?” Michael was at my side. The heat radiating from his body exercised some sort of magnetic pull on me. I wanted to lean into him and rest my head against his shoulder, breathing him in. Instead, I just mumbled something and shook my head.

“You can open your eyes now; the dust has settled.”

I lowered my arm and looked. The tiniest hint of light glimmered ahead of us, well past a row of stone arches. We began to pick our way through the broken plywood that littered the floor, heading toward the light.

The passageway opened up into a narrow, but very long, room. The limited light came from tiny windows that punctuated the two oval domes overhead. Pale beams of sun filtered through their dirty glass, illuminating the floating particles of dust and glancing off silvery cobwebs that hung from piers and unlit sconces. The air was stale. At the right end of the room, I saw a half-dome and a raised pulpit that mirrored that of the church from which we’d just come, scaffolding from some forgotten project abandoned up against the dirty marble walls.

“This is the mortuary chapel of the Comneni dynasty,” Enoch explained breathlessly, worn out from his escapade.

“That means you’re standing on bones,” Raph said drily, laughing as I jumped to the edge of the room and backed against the wall.

“Really?”

Michael nodded. “The crypt is underneath us.”

The floor was dirty, but when I scraped my foot across the layer of dirt I could see the strange script of an ancient grave marker. A faint pattern of them ran in straight lines across the marble.

“It reminds you of the Martyrium in Jerusalem, does it not?” Raph queried Michael. Michael nodded, distracted, as he walked around in the empty chapel.

“A martyrium? Like for people who sacrificed themselves for God?” I asked, curious.

“Yes,” Enoch replied, his voice bouncing off the marble walls. “How interesting, then, that it is dedicated to Michael.”

In the dimness, I could see Michael’s back stiffen. Without turning, he announced, “It means nothing, Enoch.”

His denial was still echoing when Raph snorted derisively. “You would say that, wouldn’t you? You, who are the only one of us to whom churches are built and icons are struck?”

Michael swung around, then, his face stiffened with irritation. “Your jealousy ill becomes you, brother. I would have thought the millennia would have diminished your pettiness.”

Raph crossed his arms as if daring Michael to come closer. “I have no jealousy of your sick love of humans. Did you extend your protection to these dissolute emperors, too? Is that why they bowed and scraped to your name?”

Michael scowled. “Actually, no. I had nothing to do with them. I have no idea why they named their burial chapel for me.”

Raph laughed, a harsh bark that rang through the chapel. “Likely story. You, linked as equal with the Virgin and the Savior, with your own church at the center of it all? I would have thought even you would have some shame.” With that, he stalked off through the corridor. Behind us, I could hear the giant door of the Pantocrator squeal angrily and then slam shut as he stormed out of the church.

Michael wasted no time before pouncing on Enoch, who stayed uncharacteristically silent through the whole exchange. The throbbing vein in his forehead broadcasted that his irritation was quickly turning into anger.

“What game are you playing, Enoch? Why did you bring us here if not to stir up trouble between Raph and me?”

Enoch backed away, raising his palms in protest. “I meant nothing by it. But you must admit, it is unusual.”

“Not so unusual,” Michael retorted, biting his words with anger. “Mont Saint-Michel. Castel Sant’Angelo. There are countless churches around the world named for me.” He took a swipe at the open map that still drooped in Enoch’s hand. “That damned pamphlet is full of them; you said so yourself.”

Enoch tilted his head, seeming to be lost in thought. “Yes, perhaps you are right. Perhaps it was a mistake. But to be—”

“That’s enough.” Michael didn’t raise his voice, but he didn’t need to. His steely eyes flashed his warning to Enoch. No more.

Enoch shrugged. “Perhaps we can go to the next—”

“Enough!” Michael’s voice shook with fury. “We’re leaving. Now!”

He pointed through the dark archway and stared at Enoch while the old man slowly folded the pamphlet and tucked it into his guidebook. Enoch took his time before placing his cane firmly in front of him and beginning his strange, thumping walk through the dark.

Michael turned and waited for me to go next, his lips clamped into a firm line.

Instinctively, I defended Enoch and tried to smooth things over. “It’s not so bad. What he did, Michael. He didn’t mean to cause any trouble.” I said, the stillness of the chapel making my voice seem tiny.

Be careful, Henri whispered. He’s not thinking rationally.

I tried to ignore my guardian angel and focused on Michael.

His mouth curved into a frown as he shook his head. “He knows the history between us. He knows how hard it is for Raph . . .” He cut himself off, and I could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

“How hard it is for Raph to help you when he resents you? Or how hard it is for Raph to help me, when he hates humanity?”

Michael’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. “You. You see too much. Your mind grasps understanding too quickly. I should have known it was useless trying to hide it from you.”

Impulsively, I moved closer and reached out to rest my hand on his arm. I could feel his biceps tense under my touch, but I didn’t move away, not even as my fingers began to tingle with the familiar heat. And neither did he.

“You don’t need to hide anything from me,” I whispered.

“I just . . .” He stopped short again. Frustrated, he threw off my hand and raked his fingers through his hair. He turned toward me, suddenly close, eyes wild.

“If this damn pain would just stop.” His tone was almost plaintive, beseeching me to make the hurt go away. He clenched and unclenched his fists, and I swallowed hard, knowing Henri was right. Michael was dangerously close to the edge.

“We need to go, Michael. You said so yourself.” My voice trembled, but I kept my eyes steady, gazing directly into his, hoping he couldn’t see how scared I was. I needed to be strong—strong enough for the both of us.

My words echoed around me, fading bit by bit until we were alone in silence. Every plane of Michael's face was taut. He looked stretched beyond his limits, and I watched as he took deep breaths, gulping down the stale air until slowly, with great effort, he forced himself to relax.

He let out a big breath and dragged his hand over his eyes, rubbing his temples to chase the last vestiges of his pain away. When he dropped his hand, his eyes looked normal, except for the lines that seemed to be carved even more deeply around them.

"I don't like for you to see me like this. Let's go," he said, his voice emotionless, the moment between us lost.

He led the way, guiding me in the dark over the fallen splintered boards that were scattered in the arched corridor as we moved back toward the first church. Wordlessly, he pushed open the door, which creaked its protest at being disturbed, and waited for me to walk out.

Phew, Henri said. That was too close. You better hurry up and figure out where that rock is. Once he loses control, there's no telling what he'll do.

My finger snaked up involuntarily to trace the outlines of the Mark, once something I did out of habit. I traced its intricate design, knowing now that it identified me as the bearer of the rock with which Cain had slain Abel—the rock that was, in reality, the key to unlock Heaven's Gate, the thing the Fallen Angels wanted more than anything, so they could overthrow Heaven. If I failed in my quest to find it in time—or if Michael decided to take things into his own hands—this Mark meant my death sentence.