

Part One

Chapter One

The sun cautiously peeked above the horizon, gingerly crept through the window and deigned to steal a caress of the delicate curves her sleeping profile left precariously exposed. He felt no jealousy of its pilfering rays, only joy in the picture that the golden light was developing more vividly with each passing minute.

A glint of two illuminated green points and a rapid flurry of movement in his peripheral vision put an end to his study. Bolting upright, he tried to focus on the disruption at the right side of the room. Before anything could resolve itself, an enormous, fleeting shadow dashed toward the foot of their bed to his left. No more than a second passed before a colossal, clawed beast was flying through midair, its trajectory beset on the petite woman asleep beside him.

Reaching out with lightning speed, he managed to snatch the gigantic wildcat out of midair just before it could hit its mark. The writhing creature yowled menacingly, curling its lithe body around his forearms and pushing at his hands with its back paws in a frantic attempt to

escape.

Bringing the serval's incongruously small face to his own, he stared the creature down until it ceased its squirming before whispering, "What's gotten into you? Mommy's trying to sleep." But it was too late. Beside him, her lovely contours lengthened as she stretched languidly and rolled onto her side. Storm grey eyes lazily parted, focused, and squinted with a smile that put her celestial thief to shame.

"Happy anniversary, you two," she said, her tinkling voice lightly roughened with sleep.

"Happy anniversary, my love," he replied, tossing the cat aside unceremoniously and gathering her small frame into his arms. He encircled her with his long limbs and kissed her forehead tenderly.

"What are you doing to my cat?"

"That monstrosity, you mean?" he corrected, feigning offense. "I just saved your life; I'll have you know."

She pulled away and looked at him skeptically. "From that big baby?" She then turned her attention to the vivid, sage green eyes peeking over her husband from the floor and cooed, "Is Daddy mistreating you, darling?" The large, tawny feline issued a soft but affirmative meow before padding off to sulk.

"Poor Bast," she laughed. "It's her special day, too. I'll have to bring her a big juicy steak tonight."

"Goodness, she eats better than I do," he scoffed, tugging her back into his embrace.

"What are you talking about?" she countered, pushing away just enough to look at him rebukingly. "We don't even eat steak."

“I might,” he simpered, “if I could just get past the idea of eating something’s muscles, ugh.”

Shaking her head, she smiled and snuggled closer, despite the heat that was conspiring to accompany the intruding light of morning. “Did you rest well?”

“I did,” he murmured into the crown of her head, nestling his cheek into the thick mass of wavy, black tresses that cascaded down her back. He noted curiously that she never asked him how he slept anymore. “How about you, my love?”

She turned to look at him as all of the levity in her eyes vanished. “I had the dream again,” she said quietly. His expression betrayed no emotion, but he grasped her hand and pressed the knuckles to his lips. She’d had no reoccurrence of the awful nightmare since about a month after they’d been married, but he recalled how painful it was for her. She would wake up in a cold sweat, panting, sometimes screaming. Each time, she’d tell him about the feeling of being ripped apart.

“You didn’t sleep fitfully at all last night. Was it not as severe? How are you?” he inquired gently.

She looked at him askance, “One day, I’m going to ask you about your sleeping habits.” He dropped his head and shot her a quizzical look. This made her smile return, although it did not reach her eyes. “No, it wasn’t as severe. I was in it this time.”

He squeezed her lightly, urging her to continue. “It’s hard to explain, but I felt the pressure and the tearing like before. Just as it became too much to bear, I was suddenly standing beside my body, watching myself lie there fully intact. I wasn’t bleeding or limbless or anything, and do you know what else?”

He gave her an encouraging tilt of the head.

“You were there. I reached out to you, and you held my hand.” At that, he gripped her fingers tighter, drew her to his chest, and tucked her head beneath his chin. “I could still feel everything, but it was muted to a degree that allowed me to observe for the first time. There wasn’t just torture, but purpose, as if I wanted what was happening to happen. I don’t fully comprehend it, but knowing that it was a choice and having you beside me made it somewhat tolerable.”

They pondered this for a while before he smoothed her hair and placed a chaste peck on her mouth to silently offer some comfort.

“I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to bring the mood down.” She wriggled out of his grasp and spun around to sit on her heels.

He planted an elbow into the pillows and rested his head on one hand. “You have done no such thing. I appreciate you letting me know what you’re going through.”

The smile she flashed was so vivid that he couldn’t help but return it. She was right back to her usual, effervescent self. Giddily, she said, “Let me give you your present now.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“Actually, I didn’t,” her grin broadened, displaying the adorable little gap between her front teeth, “I made it.” She rolled to the other side of the bed and reached far beneath to pull out a cloth-wrapped parcel. Pivoting around while holding the rectangular package to her chest, she faced him, took a deep breath, and thrust the gift out with both hands. He sat up, crossing his sinewy legs in front of him, and she solemnly relinquished the piece.

It had to be one of her paintings. He could tell by the shape and weight of the wood

planks she liked to use for her compositions. She'd never shown any reluctance to share them before; this one must mean a great deal to her.

He tugged the thin felt wrapping off to find his naked wife staring back at him. Bast was sitting directly in front of her, the rounded tips of her large ears coming just below perfectly captured, full breasts. The outline of her hips extended beyond the shoulders of the thin, leopard-like cat whose markings were copied precisely. What captivated him most abidingly was her face. She'd managed to portray herself with an expression of defiant vulnerability that epitomized the woman he loved.

She'd used only three colors: charcoal black for her hair, which was shown swept back from her face and flowing down her back; wine red for her body, exaggerating the undertone of her skin; and rich mustard for the serval, depicted at over half her owner's height without embellishment.

The interplay of the pigments was masterful, creating depth and intricacy with the simplest of strokes. She combined the triad of hues in some areas and used the darkest tone to outline and shade. Her boards were always primed with a chalky white base that she intuitively utilized as a highlight by refraining from covering strategic areas.

He took in every line, imagined how each decision was achieved, compared all of their features to mental images of his small family. All the while, she monitored his face for any indication of what he thought. She was confident he was pleased, although that certainty could not be gathered from his motionless appraisal. The only parts of his body that moved were his widened silvery eyes, which danced swiftly over the portrait.

After a few more moments, she blurted, "So?" His gaze snapped to her. Softer, she asked,

“What do you think?”

Occasionally, when lightning strikes the desert, the astronomical heat melts the sand into branching glass fragments that retain the shape of the bolt itself. The way that he looked at her could be likened to these structures in the pale, smoky coloring of his eyes and the tangible voltage harbored within them.

“You have no idea how much it means to me to have this. I am just trying to decide if it’s so beautiful because it captures you perfectly, or if you are perfect and you just captured that beautifully.” She expelled a small sigh of relief and shoved his shoulder jocularly.

“One day, I’m going to ask you where you learned to say such things.”

“I mean it,” he smiled, carefully moving the picture into one hand so that he could clasp her tightly to him with the other. “I truly adore your gift, just as I truly adore you. It’s easily your best work, darling.

“Now,” he playfully jostled her off of the bed, “come with me. I want to show you something.”

Chapter Two

“This is unreal. How did you manage to stumble across this place?” she asked, enraptured.

They’d traveled outside of their bustling river city and into the discrepant desert for what felt like hours. Finally, the monotony of the rolling landscape was interrupted by a massive boulder seated at the base of a dune. Once they reached the huge stone, which was easily four or five times her husband’s incredible height, he’d led her around the base to its shaded side. Behind it, there was no dune at all, but a smooth, flat path cutting straight through a rocky outcrop at the base of a narrow cliff.

It looked as though the boulder had been dragged through the jagged landscape, a consequence of erosion over time, she supposed. The compacted clay track ran the craggy expanse’s length, leading directly to an opening in the sheer limestone cliff face that was as large as the megalith they passed.

Standing at the mouth of the cave, she took in an even more impressive sight than the natural edifices outside of it. An underground lake glittered like a sea of turquoise within the

hollow, bathed in a great swath of sunlight from directly behind them.

“It used to be my job to seek out obscure resources,” he said, after briefly considering her question. “Last week, I was out this way looking for plants that may be useful. The best way to do that is by dowsing.” He held her burnished gold hand in his midnight black one and helped her traverse the dozens of step-like formations that followed the steep incline to the subterranean landing below. “I sensed moisture nearby, but this was beyond my wildest expectations. As soon as I found it, I couldn’t wait to show it to you.”

“It’s so beautiful,” she breathed.

“That just means,” he slung his leather satchel over his shoulder, deftly scooped her into his stalwart arms, and bounded to the bottom of the stepped ramp, “it’s a most fitting setting for you, my love.” She rolled her eyes at him while doing a poor job concealing a broad grin.

“One day, I’m going to ask you about your old job,” she said.

“Why do you say things like that?” he asked, baffled. She was not a passive-aggressive person, but these jests rang with the unspoken truth of her discomfort in questioning him. He was not unaware of his culpability in that. Perhaps his attempts to shield her were erecting a wall between them, instead. This troubled him greatly.

Carefully, he put her down, giving her space to ponder a response as she admired the pebbled beach that bordered the aquamarine water. He watched the thick, shiny coils of her hair bounce with every step as she strode a few paces away from him.

Eventually, she tilted her chin to her shoulder and answered through the curtain of those lovely dark curls. “It’s hard to explain, but if I’m honest,” she returned her gaze to the shore, “you make me nervous.”

It took him two steps to make up the distance to her. Smoothing the willowy green cloth that draped her shoulders, he turned her around and cupped her downcast face in his large hands. Ever so gently, he lifted her chin, beckoning her to look him in the eyes. “Why do I make you nervous, darling?”

He wished that he could convey how profoundly her statement disturbed him. How it worried him that he may have inadvertently given her some cause to be afraid of his size or his strength. Perhaps she’d begun to pay credence to the ineludible whispers that pursued him into town years ago. His expression was imploring but in no way reflected the magnitude of the disquiet in his mind.

“Why?” she echoed, still tugging the threads of her thoughts together. “It’s frustrating to feel that I know you better than I know myself, and yet, I still find you extremely difficult to read,” she said, tilting her cheek to rest against his palm.

“Even now, I’m sure that you’re more upset than you let on, and I think... I know it’s because you are wondering what you did or what someone said to make me anxious. The fact is, what makes me nervous is my own hubris in assuming that I could possibly be the object of your concern.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I can’t look at you and confirm the things that I presume to be true. You’re about as expressive as the stone around us,” she said with a demure smile. Squaring to him, she went on with more gravity, “I don’t have the courage to ask you if my heart’s assumptions are correct because my mind just can’t fathom how they could be. How can I, a nobody, be as important to you as I must be making myself believe.” Her cloudy grey eyes glistened as she looked

beseechingly into his clear silver ones.

“A nobody? How can you say that? How could you possibly question how I feel about you?” When he moved into town three years ago, he’d found her almost immediately and loved her just as quickly. It would be more appropriate to say that she’d found him since she was the one who’d burst into his newly opened clinic with a lifeless kitten, of all things.

He knew the person she was before she even finished telling him about rescuing the tiny creature she’d found flailing around weakly in a water trough.

It just needs your warmth, he’d told her as he closed her hands around its unmoving form. He prompted her to concentrate on sending heat into its cooling body through her fingers. The exhilaration coursing along his nerves from simply touching her grew exponentially with every rejuvenated movement from within their palms.

After a short time, he released her and severed their connection, eliciting a sharp yip. It was impossible to tell if the noise came from her or the cat until twitching black whiskers emerged from between her fingers, accompanied by the same shrill mewling. Their miniature hostage bounded from her grasp, revealing thin red lines across the heel of her hand where it scratched its way to an ungracious escape. She didn’t take any notice.

The look of wonder and gratitude that she bestowed upon him made his heart swell with pride, but her sudden shift to chagrin jarred him from his reverie. That is until she explained her predicament of being a poor farm girl who could not pay for his “services.” Undeterred by his assurances that she was the one who did all of the work, she continued to insist upon finding a way to compensate him. He proposed that she do him a kindness instead and keep him company in his still-empty infirmary, to which she eagerly agreed.

Before she left that evening, after talking and playing with the fully restored kitten for hours, she agreed to come back the next day. And the next. Nevertheless, it took another two years to convince her to marry him. He thought that much of her trepidation stemmed from their opposing financial standings, fear of losing her independence, or perhaps his foreignness. Evidently, she had other doubts.

“How could I not question why you’ve chosen me?” she pleaded, interrupting his remembrances. “You could be with anyone. I’m fairly sure this latest spate of headaches hitting town is just every woman’s excuse to come in and see you. Even in that regard, everything you do revolves around helping people. You’re thoughtful and smart and handsome and perfect. I don’t feel worthy of you. I’m just—”

“Compassionate and intelligent and kind and desirable.” As if to prove it, he bent to kiss her deeply, almost forcefully, parting her soft lips with his own and plunging his tongue slowly, sensually into her mouth. She melted against him and returned his ardor, kissing him back with more longing than he’d ever received from her before. It took every ounce of restraint that he possessed to pull away from her all-consuming fire.

“And you are wrong, darling,” he said, willing her to understand. “I can’t be with anyone else. I don’t want to be. Whenever I take stock of the good and decent things about myself, they are invariably a direct result of how you have impacted my world. Please trust your feelings. I love you more than life itself, and you are beyond worthy of that and so much more.”

She placed her hands on the back of his lowered neck and pulled his lips to hers. Succumbing to her spell, he locked his arms under her backside, straightened, and lifted her without breaking the intoxicating kiss. She instinctively clutched his waist with her legs, pressing

her full length against his muscular torso while dipping into his mouth to intertwine her tongue with his.

When she began to fit herself to his hardening girth, he needed to slow things down drastically lest he be tempted to take her right there standing up. As appealing as that was, he felt impelled to make it decisively clear that she was deserving of all the joy and happiness he could provide. This moment needed to be proof of his singular devotion to her.

He reached out and quietly stacked several large stones into a rugged plinth behind her. When they finally came up for air, he disentangled her legs and lowered her onto the pedestal. A startled look passed over her features as she came to rest on a firm surface much sooner than she'd expected. Her astonishment redoubled as he took a few steps back and slowly removed his burgundy robes. After spreading them on the ground, he faced her again with hands splayed.

“One year ago, you gave yourself to me. You forget that I gave you all that I have and all that I am in exchange. My entire being was yours long before then, and you have never given me a reason to question my largess. I am beyond humbled to belong to you, my love.”

She had, of course, seen him naked plenty of times before, but never in full sun with a backdrop of dazzling crystalline water to contrast his obsidian skin. He stood proudly, unashamed, allowing her to take inventory of her possession. The sight of his mercurial eyes, chiseled muscles, and throbbing erection made her utterly weak.

“Come here,” she commanded softly. He unhesitatingly approached, tugged the sash of her caftan loose, and peeled it down over her shoulders, letting it fall away altogether as he effortlessly picked her up. After delicately placing her on the large square of fabric that he'd arranged from his robes, he folded his lengthy limbs beneath himself to lie beside her. Settling on

his side, he looked reverently at the bronze idol with the heavy-lidded pewter eyes before him.

She reached up and lit blazing trails with her touch as she traced along his hardened shoulders, over his broad chest, down his rippling stomach. Before she could descend any further, he captured her wrists, held them above her head, and smiled at her admonishingly. She gave a laughing, capitulating sigh and relaxed.

The humor in their expressions softened the more intensely they stared at each other. He held her captive literally and figuratively, but the gaze he leveled on her was by far the more paralyzing hold. The atmosphere moved beyond nebulous desire and became corporeal as each passing second forged a new indelible link between them.

An eternity passed as he descended painfully slowly until, with a quenching caress, their lips found each others' once more. Pinning her with his left hand, he slid the other through her scalp to grip a fistful of silken hair, pulling her further into the depths of their kiss. His fingers then roamed from the nape of her neck to her cheek, from her jaw to her throat, from her collarbone to her breast. Lingering to pinch and roll her firm, crimson nipple between his fingertips, he gradually increased the pressure until she moaned into his mouth before turning his attentions to its expectant twin.

Assured that she would allow him to continue his ministrations unabated, he released her hands and propped his arm under her back. She immediately clasped her fingers behind his head, rubbing her thumbs over his coarse, close-cropped hair, taking her turn to draw him into her more acutely.

Savoring the sweetness of her lips and her yielding, he brushed his knuckles across her soft stomach, turned his hand over to sweep through the springy hair at her pelvis, and cupped

her mound firmly, pressing the base of his fingers against her most sensitive area. Their endless kiss was finally broken when the sudden gasp she emitted rang throughout the cavern and echoed across the lake. Staring into his white-hot eyes, she slid her heels toward her rear and sedately lowered her knees, opening for him like a butterfly's wings.

Applying steady, rocking pressure, he returned her unfaltering gaze and dipped his middle finger between her sleek petals. Penetrating far into her warm nectar, he added a digit and attempted to touch his palm through the wall of her belly. She shivered with pleasure and shut her eyes tightly as he proceeded to strum her like an instrument, watching the intensifying notes of her face, letting each cry conduct his movements. As her breath began to catch, he bent to capture a pert nipple lightly between his teeth and positioned the pad of his thumb directly onto her swollen bud, massaging in concentric circles.

The ferocity of her orgasm expelled his fingers from within her. He swiftly pressed his palm into her quivering warmth to maintain firm contact as she spasmed, reveling in the rush of wet heat streaming through his fingers. When she floated back into herself, she dragged him down to her for a smoldering kiss, causing his body to press against hers for just a moment before he shifted. In that brief span, it was readily apparent that he was at the height of arousal having made her, and watched her, soar over that ledge.

She fell flat, breathing hard, floored by that realization as much as the rampaging climax he just elicited from her. When her breath began to steady, he brushed an errant curl from her damp forehead and moved to his knees, preparing to stand. She was on him in an instant.

“And where might you be going?” she asked playfully.

“I thought you might like to go for a swim,” he said with a furtive smile.

“After,” she purred, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“It is after,” he grinned down at her. “I wanted to focus on you.”

“Without asking me what I want?”

“And what is it that you want, my love?” he chuckled.

Her answer consisted of placing both feet flat on the ground to either side of his kneeling form and leveraging her hips to come down directly onto his rigid staff, taking him deep within her in one smooth motion. He stopped laughing.

In their marriage thus far, they made love often and at length, but always beneath a firmament of timidity. This reserve was born of the novelty that comes from injecting physical intimacy into a friendship but lived on in her perpetual expectation that he would prove too good to be true. Now, as titillating as her unfettered movements were, they were also extraordinarily gratifying. At last, she must have internalized the message he’d tried to impress upon her since the day they met: he loved her, he belonged to her, and he wasn’t going anywhere.

Never had he felt more in sync with his wife than in this moment, and the desire to manifest that closeness into reality consumed him. Closing his eyes tightly, he ran both hands over the roundness of her bottom and brusquely squeezed her to him, making distinct indentions in her soft flesh, forcing her to take him as far as he could go. She convulsed sharply and sucked in a breath through her teeth when he slammed into the back of her, making him freeze and snap his eyes open.

Where he expected to see her wincing in pain, he instead found the riotous thunderheads of her eyes looking squarely into his with enough passion to melt the sun. She kept her gaze affixed to his and sunk down more, pressing him into her depths until he simply couldn’t

advance any further. Even so, she had yet to harbor the entirety of his prodigious manhood.

Before he could regain equilibrium, she rose until he was almost entirely pulled from her, then dropped back down to take him in just as far. This tore a low, husky groan from the base of his diaphragm. Quickening her onslaught on his tenuous control, she rose and fell more and more rapidly until, still on his knees and still clutching her rear, he leaned back and guided her into deliberate grinding motions. The intention was to calm his ramping desire by shifting her from quick, penetrating drives to unhurried, crushing vacillations, but this was proving to be a futile endeavor.

Sensing his attempt to restrain himself, she feared they would fall back into their habit of subdued lovemaking. Leaning in, she spoke into his ear, "I want you to let go."

He drew back to scan her face, weighing just how far he could open the door of his inhibitions, knowing that he could never throw it wide fully. She responded by undulating her hips, applying deliberate waves of pressure until reluctantly, he cracked the gateway further than ever before.

A low, primal noise escaped him as he cupped her bottom and began to lift her up and down on his slick shaft while simultaneously thrusting into her with ever-increasing speed. Despite the newfound surrender he was allowing himself, he still wanted so badly to prolong her pleasure that he angled his hips to graze along her front walls with each cramming stroke. Just as he was beginning to feel confident in suppressing his own need by giving her the consideration she was due, his astute wife chose that moment to squeeze him to her. She pressed her hardened nipples onto his chest, ensnared him deeply inside of her, and whispered, "I love you, Sy."

He erupted instantly, spilling his seed against the corridor of her womb in a pulsing

deluge. His hammering release sent her over the edge once more. The knowledge that he caused each exquisite jolt of her body, coupled with the sensation of her rhythmic gripping, drew a renewed surge of coursing liquid from his body into hers.

He fell back wearily, holding her close to remain intimately joined, beyond drained. Dragging his heavy legs from under him and spreading them wide, he hugged her close.

“That,” she grinned between gulps of air, “was exactly what I wanted.” Resting against him as he aimlessly stroked her back, she quietly spoke into his chest. “I hope that I will finally give you a child.” Although the lazy trails he was tracing up and down her spine didn’t falter, his silence was disheartening. She knew he’d heard her and that he wasn’t upset. If anything, the mood turned slightly melancholic. Perhaps his previous assertions that he would love to have children with her had changed.

He was not upset. Instead, he was reveling in the fantasy that, at this very moment, they could be conceiving a baby who would alter her body in the most tantalizing of ways. That they would create a new life with a perfect mixture of their hues and hair who was analytical like him and creative like its mother. Taking her pouting lips with his, he forced himself back down to reality, abandoning an imagined future to try and enjoy the present. This wasn’t a difficult task now that he could rest fully inside her as he haltingly contracted. She was so warm and wet, and her mouth was so luscious. Before he knew it, he could feel the tide of his need beginning to turn.

Evidently, she could, too. She broke away from the increasingly erotic kisses to give him an unbelieving smile. Suddenly, she jumped up, liberating his stiffening member from her taut grasp. He was confusedly dejected for a brief moment before she hauled him up, or rather tugged

on his hand until he stood.

“Last one in is cooking dinner!” she shouted, bolting toward the teal pool. It wasn’t a great distance, so her confidence in winning was absolute. Just as her toes were about to break the surface, a huge object blocked out the sun overhead. It crashed into the water, dousing her and everything within a considerable radius.

Lifting her sodden locks from her eyes, she gaped in stupefaction at the epicenter of the vast radiating ripples where his smirking face broke the surface moments later.

“How on earth did you do that?” she yelled, half in wonder, half in anger. He was so far out and had moved so fast.

“Come on in!” he called back. “You should soak for a spell before you have to make all the food I’m going to need after what you just did to me.”

“I’m already soaked, thank you,” she retorted, balling her fists indignantly. “And is there really a need for me to come in since half the lake is out here?” Turning her back to him, she stomped to their drenched robes, shook them out, and tossed them over the sun-warmed stack of stones that he’d placed her upon after they arrived.

The sloshing sound of his long strokes resounded dully off the stalactites as he swam closer to shore. When the cenote grew quiet, she reluctantly peered over her shoulder to find him standing waist-deep, as if halted in his tracks.

He was indecipherable, and at the same time, practically vibrating with a longing and a vulnerability that shook her in turn. Believing, belatedly but intrinsically, that his elicited response was not a betrayal of her imagination, she turned and straightened. Hands unfurled, palms facing outward, she conciliatingly allowed him to take stock.

His eyes caught the light and appeared to glow a pearly alabaster as they grazed over her damp cinnamon skin. He devoured the sight of her shapely thighs and the crisp, dark hair where they met, the shadows her ample breasts cast on her smooth belly, her full lips that perpetually beckoned to him. His exploration concluded at her own steamy gaze.

“Come here,” he ordered, just as tenderly as she’d done but hours ago. Every step rooted an already profound trust for one another even more deeply. As she waded into the yawning coolness, he made up the distance and made up his mind. Lifting her into his embrace, he slumped backward and allowed the evanescent current to gradually carry them further away from the beach.

As they floated together in the soft tide and in their respective thoughts, he decided that to ask her to have faith in her knowledge of him meant he would have to have faith in his knowledge of her. Ever since he’d met this striking, headstrong, thoughtful beauty, she had unwittingly passed every conceivable trial he could have thought up to assess her character.

She proved her loyalty by continually accepting and defending the strange new giant in her close-knit town until he swiftly lost the brand of ‘outsider’. She proved her fortitude by maintaining an ever-cheerful countenance for her withering father. She proved her devotion after the poor man passed, breaking down from grief and not the many burdens he bequeathed her. She proved her honor by refusing to accept an unconditional loan from him to keep her ramshackle farmhouse and her dedication by instead working at his clinic to pay her father’s considerable debts.

Not long after she started, he’d discovered that she was maintaining the fields and livestock by herself. The next day brought a new routine of traveling to her home in the

mornings while it was still dark outside to help her care for the animals and land before they'd head into town together to care for his patients until it was dark out again. This spectacular being was precisely the woman he'd always known her to be.

"What are you thinking about?" Whereas he was rarely able to exhibit his inner musings, even as he pondered his wife, her face was roiling with thought.

"All this time, you have been trying so hard to move me beyond my worries. I see that now," she answered, hanging onto his shoulders, kicking her feet languorously. "But, I don't know what more I can do to help calm your fears."

"My fears?" he asked, chagrined. "What do you think I am afraid of?"

"I think you're afraid of me," she said, "in the same way I was concerned that I couldn't trust my feelings about you, I think you're terrified of trusting your feelings about me. Or of trusting me. I believe that's why you shut me out in some respects."

She couldn't know that he was rationalizing this exact line of thinking, nor that he'd already deemed his hesitance to be ludicrous and undeserved. Now that he'd made the decision, the desire to tell her everything engulfed him as thoroughly as the waters in which they drifted.

And yet, how to even begin? Their time in this special place was growing short, but he vowed to, at the very least, try to assuage her hurt. He hated that she was of the impression he didn't trust her. He would, and did, trust her with his life.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know—"

"What did you do before you moved here?"

"I was a sort of... engineer."

"Why don't you sleep at night?"

“I do sleep.”

“How did you get into the water so fast?”

“I jumped.”

“Sy, I’m serious.”

“So am I, darling. If you will allow me to finish my original thought,” he smiled and pecked her on the top of her head, “I’ll tell you anything you want to know... but not here. We’re losing the light.” As he said this, she belatedly noticed just how close a crescent of shadow was to devouring the daylight around them.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go back to the beach. I have something for you.”

Quelling any argument, he maneuvered around in the brisk water and kicked to the shallows on his back as she clung to him. Even with the promise of a gift, he could feel the frustration radiating from her. He owed her more satisfactory explanations, but the darkness was creeping in literally and figuratively. He’d never had these questions asked of him before. What if she turns away from him? What if he loses her forever?

Chapter Three

The pair donned their freshly dried garments only to dampen them once more with still-dripping bodies. After strapping on their leather sandals and removing any traces that human beings had ever impeded on this hidden piece of the world, they moved toward the base of the roughly hewn staircase to escape the looming umbrae. Standing in the last vestiges of sunlight, Sy tugged his weathered tote around to rest low on his waist. The bag was at chest-level to her, providing an excellent vantage point to appreciate the juxtaposition of gleaming gold emerging from his shabby, mottled satchel.

She looked on as he turned the hollow, metallic cylinder and pressed an inconspicuous area on the perfectly smooth tube. It split open lengthwise down the middle on a previously unseen axis and gradually came apart with a faint pneumatic hiss.

“Hold out your arms,” he said quietly. Once it was fully opened, he delicately placed one half on the bottom of her forearm and closed the other around her wrist with a dull click.

Before she could move, he’d pulled a second, identical cuff from his bag and repeated the

unclasping and refastening on her other arm. As she examined the elongated bracelets, he watched her with a neutral face while surging inside with anticipation.

Any demarcation of where they were hinged was entirely invisible in a feat of precision she had never seen before. They looked to be formed of solid gold but felt weightless.

“These must have cost a fortune,” she exclaimed reverentially. “You didn’t have to go to all this expense for me, darling.”

“Actually,” he considered his next words carefully, “I acquired them quite a while ago, but I knew they belonged to you the moment we met.”

“Why did you wait three years to give them to me, then?” she joshed.

“Because you hate jewelry and baubles and things, but I finally decided that I don’t care. They’ve always been yours, just as I have.”

“They do feel like they were made exactly for me. Look.” She flexed her wrists and exclaimed, “I can move my hands, and the edges don’t dig into my skin at all. Did you make a cast of my arms when I was sleeping or something?”

“Something like that.” His slight smile straightened into a tight line before he asked, “Do you like them?”

“Yes,” she said, beaming. “One hundred times, yes. I adore them.” He returned her broad grin, and his smile warmed her so profusely that she impulsively flung her arms about his neck with the purest veneration. He bent into her grasp and stood upright, allowing her feet to dangle as he twirled her around and around.

“Thank you, Sy,” she whispered after planting a loving peck on his lips and balancing herself as he placed her on one of the now-shaded steps. Suddenly, he grabbed her wrists and

held them up to his scrutiny. In the darkness, for just a moment, the braces pulsed with a dim white glow.

“Remarkable,” he breathed, clutching her hands to his chest as he searched her face for any reaction. The unusual outpouring of emotion made her reply uncertainly, “The way they catch the light is beautiful.”

For the first time since they met, she misread him, taking the silence that pervaded their ride home to mean that he was upset. By her reaction to his gift or her earlier mention of a child, she did not know.

In truth, he was mentally lashing himself. She must have seen it. Or did she not? Perhaps she did, but her mind couldn't reconcile what she witnessed? If that were the case, would she be able, or willing, to accept things that were even more fantastical?

He grappled with the selfishness of continuing to ostracize her, but also the selfishness of divulging knowledge that could change her irrevocably. She would, at best, be utterly heartbroken and, at worst, go completely mad. And yet and still, his primary hesitance was in fundamentally altering her perception of him. Particularly when she learned that he could never give her children.

By the time they arrived back home, there was an atypical terseness in their interaction that was discordant after such a pleasant, ameliorating outing. When he politely waved her ahead of him to pass into their entryway, she'd had enough.

Whirling on him, she almost screamed, “Come back out, Sy!”

He stopped abruptly to avoid running into her. “What?”

“Come back out of your shell, baby.” She grabbed his stony face and pulled him down to eye level. “Today, you have been more yourself than I’ve ever seen. You let go with me. Had fun with me. Jumped over me,” she jested.

He wondered how she could be so attentive and not notice that she’d activated her byt?

Becoming furious with herself, she implored, “What did I do to make you hide from me again?”

She’d always had a temper. Could coupling that anger with her dismissal of the unconventional make her feel patronized if she hears additional details she finds unbelievable? Or worse, would her disbelief of the things she was made privy to make her take him less seriously regarding the harder-to-digest portions of his story. There were far too many variables that lead to inadvertently isolating her further.

“I’m not hiding, my love. I’m just...” he couldn’t lie to her, “scared.”

“Scared?” she echoed incredulously. “You’re big as a mountain and tall as a house. I saw you shoo away a lion as if it was our pesky cat,” she smiled warmly at him. “What could you possibly have to fear, darling?”

He probed her eyes extensively before deciding to at least divulge one of the more difficult truths he harbored. It was only fair that she knew. After the initial jolt of disappointment, she may be able to come to a place of acceptance. It was far too much to hope that she would ever look at him with the same unimpeded affection he presently enjoyed. “I can’t give you a baby.”

“We’ll adopt,” she countered immediately, never breaking eye contact. His expression instantly registered the shock he felt. “But, that’s not the only thing you wanted to tell me, is it?”

His mouth moved from open surprise to a tight line, but the corners of his lips curled upward slightly as he gave an infinitesimal shake of the head.

“Good,” she said brightly, releasing him and pivoting toward the bathroom. “I’m going to wash my hair and change so you can escort me to the festival in town. I’ll grab a few things at the farmer’s market. We’ll return home so I can prepare the meal you conned out of me. Then, you are going to tell me everything over dinner, after which you will make love to me again. Does that sound about right?” She held onto the door frame and leaned back to observe his response.

He’d lost count of how many times he had been flat out impressed with his bride, but he mentally added yet another tik mark for her ability to rip off the kid gloves they’d worn with each other for years. Furthermore, in the space of a few seconds, she allayed his admittedly irrational doubt that she was anything less than the strong, secure woman she’d always been. It would seem that he was finally internalizing the message that she had tried to impress upon him for longer than he thought wise to reflect upon: she loved him, she belonged to him, and she wasn’t going anywhere.

Chuckling to himself, he replied, “Yes, dear.”

Chapter Four

Still grinning to herself, she tousled her wet hair, loosening the curls so they would air-dry faster. As she pulled a few tresses forward to frame her heart-shaped face, her gaze went to the gorgeous golden braces. They were so lightweight and comfortable that she hardly noticed they were still on throughout her bath. Just now, though, they looked... different.

The natural light faded some as the sun stalked westward toward the back of their home. Her cuffs appeared to shine in the dimness, but not with the brilliant honey hue natural to gold. There was a subtle but distinct white glow all around her wrists.

She moved her arms around experimentally, bringing them to her face and jutting them out to be certain that the vivid sheen was indeed emanating from her adornments and not the late afternoon sun. Her budding wonder in not detecting a light source blossomed into amazement when she discovered that the diffused glow was hovering around her forearms. It was as if she were wearing a second pair of slightly larger cuffs comprised entirely of soft light.

Innately, she figured that the strange effect she was observing had much to do with the

things her husband was so reluctant to speak with her about. She'd made a pact with herself to remain as understanding as possible and to try not to postulate. That wasn't going very well as her mind leaped to conclusions on its own accord before she could willfully intervene.

Perhaps he would tell her that he'd done something terrible to acquire these magnificent ornaments or that the people who made them involved him in some kind of malfeasance. It really didn't matter what he said. She knew who he was, who he'd always been, and no misunderstanding, accident, or mistake could shake her abiding trust in the enigmatic man she'd loved since the first moment she laid eyes on him.

A wave of limpid adoration overtook her, traveling upward from her core, radiating along her extremities with a tangible force. As it flowed toward her fingertips, the pale suffusion followed it in an oddly precise way. It rolled up on itself until the tube of light became a brilliant white ring surrounding the base of each hand.

The sudden transition from a barely perceptible, illuminated mist to an overt gleaming circle startled her. The cuffs flickered off.

What are these things? She wondered, enthralled. *They react when I think about Sy. Are they connected to him in some way?*

To explore this theory, she sat down cross-legged on the floor and placed her forearms on her knees, palms facing the ceiling. She closed her eyes, breathed in slowly, and visualized him in her thoughts. Even when she's old and grey, she will never forget his face. His squared jaw, sharp cheekbones, and piercing eyes were ingrained in her very soul. She pictured one of his fleeting smiles, focusing her mind's eye on the adorable dimple that appeared whenever she made him grin at her.

She felt the cuffs change before she opened her eyes. They didn't emit heat or make any kind of sound, but she just knew. Sure enough, when she peeked, they were both aglow as before.

She chuckled aloud, making her think of his laugh. She loved his laugh. It seemed to ambush him, erupting in a quick, low bark before he inevitably slipped back into perfect composure. As she scrolled through memories of their time together, she couldn't recount having ever heard him deliver a true gut-busting, eye-watering, full-on belly laugh. Nothing remotely close.

This revelation began to dim her mood quite a bit, and amazingly, the already faint haze around the devices started to vanish, as well, until they turned off entirely. *They pick up on my feelings about him. It can sense our bond somehow. This is incredible!*

Closing her eyes once more, she thought about moments with her husband that lit a fire within her, hoping to reignite the braces. She thought of his hands atop hers during their first meeting, his lips on hers at their wedding, his body inside hers that night...

That strange energizing sensation flushed through her again. She looked to find that the cuffs were indeed alight and shining brighter than the previous times.

Encouraged, she latched on to the memories of their first night as man and wife. His anxiety over hurting her was so palpable that it incidentally relieved her own fearfulness to try and comfort him. Even today, it was like a magic trick that they could couple at all, but that first evening seemed like an impossibility. She giggled now, thinking of how large her eyes must have grown at seeing the instrument of her deflowering for the first time.

He was so incredibly gentle and so skilled, using his hands and mouth to move her

beyond readiness for his passionate invasion. When he finally thrust into her, demolishing the meager barrier guarding her virginity, he'd held her to him so tightly, as if he were trying to absorb the pain into himself. It only took a few moments for the sting to subside and a few moments more for her unbelievably tight passage to acclimate to his size, but it took much longer to convince him that she was alright. He held her still until she began to move her own hips, coaxing his body to believe her when his reason would not.

The lustrous mist around her forearms rolled down into ringlets of light around both wrists as before.

The exceptional talent for lovemaking he displayed that night, and since, planted even more seeds of inferiority in her mind. She was already the poor, dirty farm girl who somehow captured the heart of this wealthy, magnanimous, refined gentleman. How could a person who'd obviously taken so many women to bed find someone with absolutely no experience desirable? And yet, she knew that he did want her. He'd wanted... needed her ever since their silly cat brought her crashing into his office. This morning in the cave, she realized, he had coaxed her body to believe him when her reason would not.

The circles around each hand split and contracted from the underside, concentrating into small spheres that hovered above her wrists.

Excited beyond measure, she held firmly to her feelings of devotion for Sy, moving through the events of the morning at the cavern. Concentrating on the joy and awe he evoked from her, she shivered to recall the visceral, constricting waves that gripped her when he used his fingers to elicit a response she didn't know her body was capable of.

The two floating beads grew into small globes.

Her own boldness in besieging her husband was also something she hadn't conceived of doing prior to receiving his permission to rely on her inferences as to how he would feel. From now on, she would initiate things much more frequently, especially when the positive reinforcement that he provided was so alluring. Taking him, seeing his amazement turn into outright lust, feeling him give in and lose himself in her sent a fresh bolt of yearning down her spine.

The white orbs traveled forward over her upturned palms and remained suspended there. Intuitively, she curled her hands around the spheres and fought hard to maintain her link to Sy, tamping down unadulterated enchantment as her fingertips closed onto cold, humming, solid surfaces.

Pressing into their smoothness, she focused as intensely as she could on Sy, trying to discover what this astounding display would show her next. She envisioned his face shyly requesting that she keep him company, looking down at her with longing before driving into her, in wide-eyed admiration at her ability to carry more bags of feed than her diminutive physique would deem possible. She pictured him in their bedroom right now, ready to depart, sitting on the bed reading or scratching Bast as he patiently waited for her to finish whatever it is she gets up to in the bathroom.

The orbs shot out of her hands, flying directly toward the door. Just when she thought they would crash through the wood, leaving two massive holes that she wouldn't begin to know how to explain, they stopped abruptly. They bounced forward and backward three times, then flew back into her hands.

Sometimes, when Bast wants a snack, she will sashay toward the treat jar in the kitchen

but turn to look between her owners and the morsels a few times to ensure they understood just where to find what she wanted. The lights' back and forth motion reminded her so much of this that she could do nothing but interpret it that way.

“Are you trying to show me where Sy is?” she asked. As if in reply, they glowed brightly for an instant before returning to a lower intensity. “Amazing!”

These new tricks that her jewelry could perform only confounded her more as to what her husband wanted to tell her. Did all of his hesitance stem from his concern that she would react negatively to him harboring clearly advanced technology? Maybe if he saw that she was not disconcerted by it, but fascinated with it, he could feel more comfortable telling her where and how he'd gotten it.

She decided that before he began his explanation about these incredible, empathetic, futuristic devices, she would show him what she was capable of making them do. *How relieved he will be when he sees that I can activate them. Hopefully, he will show me how to use them properly. For now, though, how do I shut them off?* Furrowing her brow, she thought about how upset she was that he wouldn't explain how he could jump clear over her head, or what he does at night while she's asleep, or that he never reveals anything about his past.

The dawning of comprehension arose in her as the orbs in her hands blinked out of existence. Of course, it all had something to do with where he'd come from. Perhaps he left a secret organization that enhanced his size and strength? Or he escaped a place that doesn't like to share their advancements? After a moment, she could no longer feel the strange sensation that coursed through her when the cuffs were active. Instead, it was replaced with an intense curiosity and excitement to put together the mysterious puzzle that was her husband.

Chapter Five

They'd walked hand in hand for about a half-hour from their home on the sandy outskirts of the verdant river city where she grew up, passing dozens of people she'd known her entire life along the way. Sy stopped at the locked door of his modest four-room infirmary, which consequently celebrated its third year in operation on this day, as well.

"You go ahead," he urged, "I'm going to prepare that poultice for Sera's boy."

The clinic was one of the first buildings most residents passed when leaving the suburban district to head into the town center proper, which was now overrun with thousands of people attending the solstice festival. Each year, farmers, gardeners, and ranchers from all over the region came to sell their bounty, hawk their wares, show their animals, or generally barter and trade alongside the multitude of citizens and visitors.

"That's fine," she said without argument, "I'll meet you back here as soon as I've gotten everything."

Due to her unrelenting influence, Sy had become a paragon of the community, treating

illnesses, mending wounds, and bringing their little ones into this world. With new faces around for the festivities and in massive crowds that they could already see overflowing from the square, he was choosing not to draw undue attention to himself.

In the past, she assumed this was Sy's attempt to avoid the annoyance of stares and remarks about the atramentous titan in their midst. She quickly came to recognize that it was really his non-confrontational nature, more so than shyness or introversion. He never cared what anyone thought of him, save for her, but they both had to reconcile his uneasy encounters far too often. Some women saw his exotic handsomeness as a seductive challenge, and some men found his incredible size to be a physical one.

"Alright, darling." He released her hand and, facing her, rubbed both her shoulders affectionately. They shared a brief parting kiss, but when she didn't immediately turn to leave, he asked, "What's on your mind, my love?"

"We're in for a difficult conversation later, but I just want you to know that it doesn't have to be," she said, clutching his arms and peering into the bright moonstones of his eyes, "I'm on your side, no matter what you've done or what you say, okay?"

His lids lowered in contemplation before finding her iron eyes again, "Okay."

Weighing his acquiescence, she gave a curt nod. "I don't ever want you to feel conflicted about being honest with me."

Taken aback, he asked, "You think I've been dishonest?"

"Do I think that you *are* dishonest? No. But have you been less than honest by omission? Absolutely." She pinched his little finger, "You have more integrity in your pinky than most people have in their entire body. If you're concerned that my opinion of you will change after

you share your story with me, then I'm afraid you are sorely mistaken."

He could see now that she had been theorizing as to what his revelations could be ever since learning that there were revelations to impart. "I appreciate you putting me out of my misery," he said sincerely. "I wish I could do the same for you, but if I'm going to tell you any of it, I will have to tell you all of it, and that is going to take a great deal of time.

"I can assure you that I am not, and have never been, some sort of thief or killer if that's what you were worried about? If anything, my categorical morality is probably the catalyst for the entire tale."

"That's a relief, I'll admit, but you've somehow managed to be even more cryptic." Before he could reply, she added, "I do trust that you will explain everything, but before you jump into it tonight, will you give me a few minutes to share something with you?"

Curiosity piqued, he gave her a quizzical look before replying, "Very well. Now," he kissed her forehead, turned her around, and gave her a light pat on the bum, "off you go. Hurry back so you can get started on my delicious meal."

Glancing over her shoulder with a rueful smirk, "I guess your categorical morality doesn't pertain to cheating in foot races."

That drew a wide grin from him that she inwardly relished for just a moment before whipping around and striding haughtily toward the bustling plaza.

"Love you," he called sweetly.

Without looking back, she replied drolly, "Love you."

As soon as she moved through the barricades that blocked off the main road and melted into the crowd, he turned to his shelves and reached for the six jars of herbs he needed to make a soothing compress. The poor child was bitten by a yellow recluse as he slept, causing the flesh around the wound to disintegrate. He'd already debrided, irrigated, and sanitized the area but wanted to give his mother a thick curative paste to seal in the ointment he'd provided.

He sent the pots to a nearby cart while filling a seventh vessel halfway with sterile water. He removed the tops of the jars and was setting them aside when he suddenly felt as though he were flung backward by an invisible assault. All six lids clattered to the ground from midair.

"Nuta?" he asked the air around him in a disbelieving hush.

In the periphery of his vision, he could see the slender back of a very tall, very dark woman. She was offhandedly rifling through the items on his desk with one hand as she held him immobile with the other.

"Hello, Sy," she said dispassionately, walking openly into his view.

"It's been a long time, my friend," he said genuinely, but as he tried to move toward her, he found that he could not take a single step.

"It has been a long time, indeed," she replied coolly. "Nephy couldn't pinpoint your location until today."

"I haven't been hiding; I didn't realize that you were looking for me. Is she here, too?" His tone was now utterly devoid of the warmth he briefly experienced from seeing his old companion. She was still beautiful as ever, slim and statuesque with thick, lustrous braids

spilling down her back. He tried again to reach out but remained totally arrested.

“No. She’s not,” Nuta replied, turning to look at him. Above a slight frown and broad nose, her eyes were the faintest lavender, betraying her aloofness. She was exerting a considerable amount of energy to hold him in place.

“If you aren’t hiding, why haven’t we been able to contact you?” she asked calmly, belying the exertion that her eyes disclosed.

“I just wanted to be alone awhile. Why the shackles, Nuta?”

They had always been friendly; it devastated him to think she saw him as a threat. “After everything, are you afraid of me?”

“Afraid of you?” she sneered. “No, Sy. I’m not afraid of you.”

“Then what is this about? Why are you here?” he asked evenly, trying once again to take a step or reach.

“He wanted you to watch.”

“Watch?”

In answer, Nuta lifted the arm that wasn’t confining him and opened a window. His bride’s profile came into view. Even under these bewildering circumstances, his first thought was of just how stunningly beautiful she was. She held hands with one of their neighbor’s children, a five-year-old girl named Mara. They were in the middle of a lively group of dancers, doing a silly jig in time with the raucous musicians.

She did not see the veiled, hooded figure approaching her from behind. He did, and strained harder, and more ineffectually, against Nuta’s hold. Looking on in mounting angst, he witnessed the specter lower its cloak and remove the lacy covering from their face, revealing

bright emerald-green eyes that pierced his own menacingly through the pane.

“Desh!” he cried. A slow, sinister smile spread across their face as they politely tapped on his unsuspecting wife’s shoulder. Still laughing, she released the child and whirled around, expecting to find another merryman. Instead, she confronted the torso of a towering, bald figure with tawny, unusually smooth skin and androgynous features. Craning her neck to meet their amiable eyes, it took her a moment to register the incongruity of that pleasant gaze with the smirking mouth.

Owing to their immensity and likeness to her husband, she exclaimed with a broad, welcoming grin, “You must know Sy!” At the mention of his name, the person called Desh once again turned their attention to the window, radiating smug detachment. They abruptly whipped the hapless woman around and firmly cupped her chin, forcing her against their body, jerking her face toward the portal. She cried out, more from disorientation than fear.

“No,” Sy whispered. The fragile yet tenacious, resilient yet uncompromising woman he loved more than life itself looked at him in helpless confusion, and his heart broke.

A spear of light was produced from behind their back.

“Please, Desh, no!” Sy screamed, rampaging against his restraints so forcefully that the scene before them flickered wildly. Nuta’s eyes glowed white with the sheer amount of power she required to restrain him and keep the window open.

Paralyzed, he watched in horror as the weapon’s blade slowly emerged from his wife’s chest. The puzzlement on her face never faded, even as the life in her eyes did. She let out a single racking cough, spraying blood down the front of her simple wrap dress. Blooming red petals began to materialize in a macabre pattern across the natural fibers.

Desh bent their forehead to rest beside her slack mouth as she drew her final sodden breath. The indifferent expression they'd worn morphed into a flash of violent anger as if her death had been too quick for their liking. Releasing her drooping head, they grabbed the length of the pike's handle with both hands and twisted, collapsing the spear out of existence. With nothing to support her lifeless body, she landed at their bare feet in a jumbled heap. Desh glared at Sy, then at Nuta, before stalking backward through the oblivious throng.

The window slammed shut. Nuta took a faltering step away from her captive. He was standing motionless and not entirely because of her influence. Resolutely focused on the place where the gateway had been, where his beloved had been, the pain his face belied stirred viscously in his ashen gaze.

“She wasn't just some dalliance, was she?”

Gradually, he turned to look at the refined features and warm lavender eyes that he'd seen almost every day of his life until coming to this place, and he recognized the conflict she grappled with for her part in what just happened. Because she knew him equally as well, her fear began to overtake her regret as rage devoured the sadness behind his stare. Still, she dared to ask, “Who was she, Sy?” She probed his face for an answer but only saw his pupils oscillating more and more wildly.

He would not dignify her with a response, particularly while she still held him hostage and especially when, deep down, she already knew. His irises rapidly lightened from the dusty color of rain clouds to a stark white. She gasped and clenched both fists, concentrating all of her energy on keeping him detained. Backing to the door, she stole away from the incommensurate space and ran for her life.

Her grip loosened incrementally the more distance she put between them. The moment Sy could reach out the tiniest amount, he began to ferociously slash at the tethers that were still encircling him. This onslaught lessened her grasp precipitously until he was able to take one step, and then another. He hacked at the final tendrils stifling his motility until finally, she let him go entirely.

Dashing from the building, he reached for his wife. He cried out despairingly at just how easily he was able to lift her off of the ground. Raising her above the growing circle of onlookers and gingerly drawing her into his waiting arms, he sunk to his knees and scanned her for any sign that what he just witnessed was a cruel hoax.

“Are you here, baby? Don’t leave. Don’t leave me, please.” But there was no rise and fall of her chest. No heartbeat. No pulse in her lovely throat. He hastily unfastened the cuffs he’d given her only hours before to check her delicate wrists, as well.

Nothing.

She was gone.

Resting her fragile body on his lap, he arranged her dress with the utmost care, lovingly brushed a stray lock of hair from her cheek, and wiped the sticky blood from her lips with his thumb. Rocking her back and forth, he draped himself protectively over her and kissed her forehead, her eyelids, her mouth. Grief and guilt scorched through him until all that remained was the fiery blaze of his wrath.

“I’m so sorry, Isis.”

The world exploded around them.

Part Two

Chapter Six

“Seven. 7am sharp, Prism. We do not need to start off on anyone’s bad side, and I swear to god if Fatima mentioned this Dr. Cutter’s fastidiousness one more time, I could have started a drinking game.”

“I got it, David,” she said shortly. “I just wish everyone would stop treating me like a goddamned child. I feel like I’m being sent to the principal’s office yet again. Isn’t it bad enough that I got a demotion *and* kicked out of my lab? Now they’re assigning a hall monitor?”

“You’re 23. You are a child,” his Boston accent turned ‘child’ into two syllables. “And you mean *we* got demoted and kicked out of *our* lab. We were both knocked down a peg so they could have someone keep an eye on *you*. So yeah. Thanks for that.”

David understood why she was so pissed. He had been the head of Functional Genetics for seventeen years. Department leads used to always answer directly to Fatima, the dean of their graduate school. Now, thanks to Prism and her tendency to disregard a silly thing like ethics,

they have a gatekeeper to contend with in the form of the university's new Head of Genetics. They essentially went from holding the ear of the don to having to pass notes through his consigliere. Even though he and Prism were the only two affected, and he empathized with her loss of autonomy, Dave held virtually no pity for his colleague just now.

She must have sensed his silent derision because she uncharacteristically attempted to own up to her part in all this. "Look, Dave. I can't apologize for my actions because big things are going to come of this. Still, I am very sorry about what happened and that I pulled you into this mess in the first place. Some food for thought?" she posed.

"I could eat."

"Have you noticed that they've doled out every single punishment they could think of? Performance reviews, warnings on my record, barring me from the lab, the Spanish inquisition, and now this hand-holder? All of that, but not a hint of letting me go? That means they know I am on to something." She could hear his dubious intake of breath, "But point taken, you know? I can be good. I will be good." She moved the phone to her other ear and pulled her dinner out of the microwave.

"Sure you will," he teased. "I have considered the significance of your continued presence, but you do realize that this hall monitor isn't materializing because of one experiment that happened to fail successfully."

David was reminded of a thought experiment he'd read about where a random person is made to decide whether they will push a lever that controls a railroad switcher. An oncoming train's present course has five people helplessly tied to its tracks. The subject must decide whether to activate the switch, changing the engine's trajectory to a rail with just a single captive

on it. After five years of working together, Dave was confident that Prism would be the kind of person who wouldn't hesitate to shift the tracks, even though doing so would make her directly culpable for that one person's demise. Hell, she would be proud.

He pressed the button on the back of his iMac to power it up and placed a couple of board books back into the children's section of his otherwise technical, and categorically stodgy, bookshelf. Blowing out an acquiescent sigh, he said, "You know I love you, and it's because I do that I'm going to be honest here. You have a history of asking forgiveness before permission, and that shit gets old fast. You can't see the trees for the forest and that disinterest... that indifference to the individual is why your experiments rarely get approved."

She tried to unravel this paradox. Her work could potentially help millions of individuals. "I'm the first to admit that this experiment went horribly, terribly into left field, but ultimately no trees were harmed."

"Just a few monkeys, right?" This caught her up short. She couldn't have felt more remorseful for what happened to those poor creatures, and it cut her deep that her friend and only advocate in this entire debacle could be so flippant about that.

In the awkward silence that fell upon them, he recalled her agonized face at the moment when everything fell apart, and he knew that there was a human being in there somewhere. "I apologize, sweetheart. That was too far," he said delicately.

"It was, man. I was just joking. About the trees."

He paused for a second. "Ha. That was pretty good." They were not on a video call, but he could practically see her smile return, ever so slightly. "Truly, I am sorry, Priz. I'm just stressed. I've been trying to get prepared for tomorrow's meeting all day with zero progress, and

it's starting to get late." He'd just put his little girls to bed and shooed his wife off for her 10-hour shift at the hospital before checking in on his favorite colleague.

"Prepared?" she asked through a mouthful of crunchy vegetables soaked in some kind of coconut sauce. "What are you preparing?"

"You can't be serious."

"What? Fatima's email said this was just an introduction kind of thing."

"Yeah, which is code for impress the new boss with your published work, current projects, and CV so they don't can you in any 'restructuring' they decide to do."

"CV? Restructuring? Dave, if I'm going to down a shot to anyone's fastidiousness, it's yours. Don't worry about it. Go kiss the girls for me and get some rest. I'll see you at 7, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed."

Chapter Seven

Pain. Needle pricks turning into ice picks all over her brain. Light so blindingly radiant that it must be coming from inside her skull. Pieces being cut away in metronomic intervals, each slice punctuated by her staccato screams. Primordial bleats escaped her throat, resolving into shrill atonal beeps...

Prism smacked the blaring alarm clock and sat up. Her entire body was quaking. She could barely remember the dream, but the ache lingered. Damp with sweat, she rubbed her arms briskly nevertheless, chilled to the core. Glancing at the dimmed digits after sitting for a few moments, she was a little jarred by how long it had taken her to regain her bearings.

6:15am. Still, plenty of time to get ready as she planned to grab an Uber instead of running or biking the two miles to campus she usually would. Regardless of the importance everyone else seemed to place on this meeting, Prism decided that a change to her mode of

transportation would be the only alteration of her routine that she would permit.

After running through her usual ablutions of teeth brushing and face washing, she concluded her workday prep by throwing on a comfortable outfit. Prism wasn't wearing intricate braids or twists at the moment, so she'd slept with the entire mass of her tightly-coiled natural hair piled on top of her head in a huge fluffy ponytail. This allowed her to quickly wrap the thick curls into a messy bun that managed to look rather chic.

Despite wearing a simple white v-neck tee, stretchy black pants, and vivid red tennis shoes, she thought she looked professional enough to meet the new boss. That would be especially true once she donned her knee-length lab coat at the office. The relaxed look was not uncommon for scientists as it translates to increased safety when working around reagents and animals. Besides, her attire lent well to getting a run in on the way back home.

6:30am. Plenty of time to feed her kitties and possibly herself, for once. *Where are those jokers, anyway?* She wondered as she headed out of the master bedroom toward her small kitchen. Although her black cat slept with her more often than not, both had made the guest room their own years ago. Seeing as though she rarely kept overnight guests, and none who weren't staying in her room anyway, their commandeering of the space didn't bother her.

Oddly, they didn't come out to meow their customary greetings when she passed their open door. She poked her head in but didn't readily see either of them in the entrance to the automated litter box or anywhere on their massive cat tree. *Of course, they weren't interested in their custom-built furniture. They probably got ahold of the shoebox I tossed out yesterday,* she grinned to herself. In themselves and their accouterments, the golden Bengal and ebony Bombay were her only real indulgences. Her parents' thrifty ways never left her, even after they did.

She continued on toward the front of the apartment, and it didn't take her long to realize just why the little monsters were hiding.

"Trouble!" she yelled as she splashed toward the farmhouse sink. Only her rambunctious leopard cat could have caused the destruction she witnessed. The terra cotta pots on the window sill, in which she was attempting to grow a few herbs, were overturned. Soil, small rocks, and the plants themselves spilled into the basin and effectively stoppered the drain. As the faucet handle must have been knocked on in his getaway, the resulting flow created a lazy waterfall that had begun pooling into a sizable puddle beneath her feet.

Luckily, it was only about a pencil-sized stream, so even though it had been running for what looked to be a couple hours, the kitchen wasn't entirely flooded. Another fortuitous happenstance was that management installed waterproof vinyl planks in every second- and third-floor unit last year. It was a huge relief to know that she wouldn't have to worry about her downstairs neighbors, at least.

Prism grabbed all the dishtowels she owned out of a close-by drawer and lined them along the perimeter of the water. As she turned to head back toward the linen closet in the hallway, she saw four green eyes peering at her from atop the refrigerator.

"There you are, you big jerk," she lovingly cooed, pulling Trouble down first. He seemed no worse for wear, chuffing at her with his strange kitty-bark. After a quick examination, she allowed him to wriggle out of her grasp and scamper into his room. He didn't give her a second glance. Clearly, he was aware he'd crossed a line.

Trouble had always been willful, aptly living up to his name, but he was seven now and seemed to have calmed down fairly significantly in recent years. She thought he was enjoying

the lazy life of a kept man, but perhaps he was in need of a few more toys to keep him occupied. Regardless, Prism was actually pleased to see the kitten in him reemerge, even with the consequential havoc.

When she pulled Lola down, it quickly became apparent that the poor thing had gotten hit by friendly fire. She was covered in wet dirt and looked very unhappy about not being able to clean it all off of herself. Prism tucked the noirette kitty close to her chest and walked into the guest (the cats') bathroom.

"If only you needed the bath, bud," she said to Trouble through the door. He chirped at her in answer from the top level of their large tower. That cat loved the water. This cat, not so much. Clutching the trembling creature to her chest, she could feel her growing realization of what was about to happen as Prism pulled down the handheld showerhead and turned the water on.

When the gentle stream was warm enough, she held the squirming feline in the tub with her right hand and moved the spray slowly toward Lola's back with her left. No sooner had a single drop touched her fur did the little minx latch her front paws around her loving owner's arm and rake its back claws repeatedly down Prism's wrist in an effort to escape. The sharp shredding was almost unendurable, but Prism held fast. Once she'd managed to rinse all the dirt off her tiny diva, she released Lola to go dry in the sun on her favorite roost.

"Was I sleep-bathing you?" she sardonically thought aloud as she maneuvered the spout over her bloody wrist, the fresh sting reminiscent of the burning cuts she felt in her eerie dream. *That girl dug in good*, she thought, observing how the crisp, pale pink lines contrasted with her dark brown skin before seeping red again when the water was moved away.

Once the bleeding subsided, she quickly rinsed the tub and grabbed an armful of thick bath sheets from the linen closet. After draping a couple of the massive towels over the dammed water on the kitchen floor, she pressed her last clean dishcloth over her seeping forearm. Not needing all of the towels, she decided to put them back on her way to grabbing the first aid kit from her own bathroom. The sight of 6:50 on the microwave instantly abolished that plan.

She dropped the bath sheets and sprinted to the master bedroom to retrieve her phone. There was already a missed text from Dave. Ignoring it, she used facial recognition to gain entry into the device and promptly hailed an Uber. Her driver was five minutes away. Perfect. She could still make it without being egregiously late if she tucked and rolled out of the car.

Prism took that time to rapidly change into a nearly identical outfit and pack her laptop into her sporty red backpack. She debated throwing in her notebooks but didn't want to be a hypocrite, having cajoled Dave into appearing less overeager. Ultimately, she did toss in her latest journal because she wanted to. Not to impress anyone in this stupid meeting. If she could ever get to this thing. Where was her Uber, anyway? The cancellation notification came through on her smartwatch just as she picked up the phone.

"Fuck!" she growled and returned to the main screen of the app to flag another driver, but the closest one was fourteen minutes away. "How? This is a college town!" she yelled at the screen as the clock ticked from 6:59 to 7:00.

Though it was summer, there were still plenty of off-campus students needing rides to early classes. Or so she assumed. After checking a couple of other rideshares to find even worse prospects, she did some calculating in her head and typed a response to Dave, letting him know how late she would be running. Literally.

After shoving her phone and keys into the front pouch of the bag, she swung it behind her back and thrust her arms through its straps. Hurriedly, she dumped scoops of dry food into Trouble and Lola's bowls and noted that their water fountain was full before calling a quick goodbye. She was out the door right at 7:10.

Prism ran down the hall to the stairwell, jerked the door open, and bounded down the three flights of concrete steps. After running through her complex gates, she exited directly onto the sidewalk bordering the main campus road. State was a sprawling university, and Thompson Hall was over two miles away, generally about a twenty-minute jog for her. She never needed to sprint the entire way before, but she fully intended to do so now and began racing down the empty path.

After a couple of minutes at top speed, she inexplicably felt incredible. There was no tiredness, no winding, no stitches. She pushed her pistoning legs even more, leaning her entire body into a hard right that then curved past a few restaurants and the residence halls. When she reached another straightaway, she really turned on the jets. Each step felt like ten, and in her imagination, she likened herself to a springbok antelope sailing through the air with every stride.

As she passed the sports fields to her left and approached the right turn that would put her on the last leg of the run, she finally began to feel a trickle of exertion as she rigidly controlled her breathing. Despite this first hint of strain, if another person were near enough to the road to have seen her, they would have witnessed a wild-eyed woman veritably floating by. Fast.

She pressed on without slowing until she all but smashed into the double doors of Thompson. Stopping outside the building for just a moment, she checked her watch. 7:21! She ran two miles at top speed in a little over ten minutes? More confounding still, her heart rate was

just above ninety. *Oh, I'm definitely running home*, Prism thought, already anxious to see if she could replicate that time and that feeling.

Despite her lean physique, she was never the athletic type and only ran or jogged to get some exercise when going from point A to point B. Prism wondered why she never drove herself to the limit before, but now, as she swung the door to the building wide and tore up the stairs to her office, she wondered what that limit was. She was galvanized, feeling no fatigue whatsoever.

Even so, she was sweating a bit and dabbed her forehead with tissues from a box on her desk. She then opened the door to her small closet and flung on her crisp white lab coat with Dr. S. P. Ray embroidered on the breast in a fading navy blue. She laughed to herself every time she read it as “Dr. Spray”, which she welcomed now as her endorphin rush began to fade into apprehension. The thought of a massive hose dousing a pile of distinguished gentlemen in white coats, head reflectors, and stethoscopes was just so deliciously silly.

Dr. Spray took her laptop out and placed it on her desk before shoving the backpack into the wardrobe and closing the door. Smoothing her clothes and hair, she nervously race-walked two doors down to the large corner office where she was sure to be spontaneously flambéed by David's death stare. As she raised her hand to the door, her watch face read 7:25. At least she was several minutes ahead of the time she'd quoted.

Knocking faintly as she opened the door and stepped inside, it was far worse than Prism could have predicted. She shot Dave an apologetic wince at his searing glare, but the physical heat that emanated from within her the moment she locked eyes with Dr. Cutter threatened to scorch the very clothes off of her back.

Prism's heart skipped a beat and then resumed at a faster rate than it had been pumping

after sprinting two straight miles. Before her sat the most unusual, yet beautiful; stolid, yet inviting; familiar, yet foreign person she'd ever encountered in her entire life. There was tension surrounding his dark, tightly drawn lips, but there wasn't a single line etched into the richness of his incredibly black skin. She could only make these details out in periphery to his incongruously light eyes. He was a deeper brown than even her own sateen ebony hue, yet he had grey irises like her. Prism's were dusky and stormy, whereas his were so clear she could see his pupils rapidly oscillate several times before constricting into tight points that drilled into her being.

She was at once enveloped and laid bare. The intensity with which he stared into her depths pressurized the space around them so completely that she could swear she felt the air brush against her cheek. After an eternity, she involuntarily took an unsteady step toward him and unconsciously reached her hand out. Within a second, and without breaking her gaze, he stood up and made his way around the sparse desk to grasp her outstretched arm, slipping his other hand into her palm in a cordial but firm handshake.

His touch sent a current cascading along her extremities, through her shoulder blades, and up to the crown of her head, sparking a feeling of *deja vu* so strong she reeled within his solid grasp.

"You," she whispered, almost inaudibly, searching the silver discs of his eyes. Prism was astonished that, at six feet tall, she had to crane her neck to maintain her fruitless inquisition, for she could not read his unyielding expression. Was she losing her mind? How could she feel so *discarnate* while his striking features remained so detached?

As if in answer to her unspoken questions, the corners of his wide mouth curved upward ever so slightly as he gently tightened his grasp on her elbow and on her hand, slowly drawing

her closer. A crash made Prism jump and whip her head over to find David gawking up at her abashedly. His hand was still hanging in midair, where he'd failed to catch a stack of portfolios that slid off of his lap.

"I... uh. I think..." he stammered, "I think I'm going to get back to my office." After recovering the three hard plastic binders that escaped the larger compliment in his arms, David clutched them all to his chest, stood, and edged around their moored figures. Prism's stunned eyes followed him like a medieval painting. When he reached the door and was too far behind her to keep in view, Prism turned back to the captivating stranger to find that his eyes never left her face.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Cutter," Dave called too loudly as he shut the door behind himself. *What the hell was that?* He thought, leaning against the closed door. For a second, he wondered if he should leave Prism alone with the man. He didn't believe that the person, who had seemed affable enough moments before, would hurt her in any way, but he'd never seen Prism behave like that with anyone. He'd never seen anyone behave like either of them.

David did not go back to his office. He walked downstairs, tossed his tediously cultivated folders into the passenger seat of his old hunter green Jeep, and drove home. His wife was surprised to see him back so soon, and even more surprised when he took her into his arms, buried his face in her hair, and sobbed.

Chapter Eight

“How are you?” His lush, resonant voice landed softly on her ears and a shiver emanated from an awakening place inside of her. Prism rarely looked up to anyone, but her face was acutely tilted to meet his immobilizing stare. He had wide-set eyes and high, distinct cheekbones with a broad, curved nose above well-defined but notably slender lips for someone with such dark skin. She’d never seen a more unusually attractive person in all her life, or had she?

“I’m fine, just...” she began uncertainly, “how do I know you?”

She grasped at a burgeoning memory of adoration in those clear eyes, the feel of his unbelievably soft skin juxtaposing the steely muscle beneath, that inviting mouth on hers... on her.

His face fell an infinitesimal degree, although he answered charmingly, “I’m afraid I have not had the pleasure of your acquaintance, Ms. Ray.” Still gripping her hand, he turned it to expose her wrist. “I was curious about these scars. Are you okay?”

She looked down at the lengthy welts that Lola lovingly administered to her earlier. They

were no longer gaping and pink, but they did travel the full length of her forearm in exact lines.

“You don’t think I…” her large eyes widened in stupefaction, then narrowed in anger as she vehemently tore her arm free from his grasp. “My cat did this,” she spat, “which is partially why I was late. These last few weeks have been hellish, but rest assured, I would never take my own life, sir.”

At that, Dr. Cutter blinked aporetically and abruptly turned on his heel. “Well, that’s very good to know, indeed,” he tossed over his shoulder as he strode back to his desk, stopping to straighten a stack of papers left askew from when he sprang up to catch her.

Oh my god, I literally swooned! she thought, horrified.

While his back was to her, she shook her head fervently. What on earth was wrong with her? This gorgeous specimen probably thought she was very fast, gawking and clutching to him so familiarly. She was sure she’d seen a wave of recognition wash across his face, in spite of his denial. Or maybe she was still heady from her run, and the déjà vu flooding over her was a side effect of her hectic morning. Whatever the case, she needed to get it together. Her entire career depended on this man’s approval. This handsome, unique, intriguing, giant of a man.

Stop it, she thought, tamping down the wild emotions running rampant through her mind and body. She could not let this peculiar, instantaneous attraction show, lest he mistakenly takes it to mean she would do untoward things to get ahead.

“I have a mini-dictator at home myself,” he said once he’d resumed his seat, “I can feel your pain, in some respects. But, Ms. Ray—”

“Dr. Ray,” she corrected. She may have spent less time in school than her peers, but she rightfully thought she deserved her degrees as much as, if not more than, they did. The definition

of a wunderkind, Prism went from homeschooling to college at the age of twelve. She received her doctorate in genetics by seventeen. She'd been the head of State's Genetic Research Department ever since... that is until Dr. Cutter was brought in. Logically, she understood that he wasn't responsible for the events precipitating his hiring, but channeling her anger onto him helped to get her thoughts back under control.

"Dr. Ray. My apologies," he amended with a slightly accented lilt. He gave her a small nod in an effort to hide a grin, but his obvious amusement only goaded her further.

"Fatima... Dr. Adler said that this was to be an introductory meeting. Now that we've been introduced, may I go?"

"May you go?" he scoffed. "This isn't high school, Dr. Ray, and by introductory, Dr. Adler intended for me to acquaint myself with my two team leads. Dr. Murphy and I were having a pleasant time doing just that right before you bounded in. Now, it's your turn." He sat down and motioned for her to do the same. She remained standing.

"Before we discuss this most recent of your *incidents*, I'd like to know more about you beyond what I was forewarned of by Dr. Adler and what I could glean from your bio."

"if you've read that, then you're already reasonably well versed. I'm your run of the mill child prodigy who now works at the same university that trained me up. Trying to give back, and all that jazz. I imagine there's not much else to tell."

Growing up as a savant, completing admissions tests before everyone else, walking to the whiteboard for the first time in her lectures all yielded an abundance of questions. She always expected them and invariably evaded them because how does one take pride in something they have no control over? It felt the same when people complimented her on her beautiful eyes as if

she'd managed to choose her genome.

And yet, disappointment flooded her when Dr. Cutter moved the conversation right along when it was evident she wasn't going to expound.

“Very well. I can answer anything that you may like to ask me, but please, have a seat.”

Prism resolved to ignore him just to be contrary, but as soon as he verbalized the invitation, she could feel that the lip of the chair was right against the back of her legs. Dave must have moved it before he shut the door. Being poised to sit without doing so seemed a tad foolish, so she indignantly plopped down on the cloth seat. She kept her arms folded across her chest, though.

With a poorly-concealed, self-confident smile, Dr. Cutter leaned back in his cushy leather office chair, steepled his hands, and asked, “So as not to waste any more of your precious time; tell me, what do you already know of me?”

“Nothing much. Your name is Dr. Siren Cutter, and you've been brought in from Clemson, South Carolina to be David's and my new overseer,” she lied. Despite her flippant attitude with Dave last night, she was already quite familiar with Dr. Cutter's papers on varying neurological manifestations of obscure genetic traits. After learning that the author of the very work that inspired her own studies was the person the university had chosen to bring in, she did bone up on the latest publications.

“Overseer?” The simmering mirth wholly dissipated from his tone.

Prism suddenly regretted her analogy but wasn't entirely sure why. “Surely, you know what I mean,” she bluntly asserted. “Since the start of this debacle, I have maintained that my data and means of acquiring it were solid. Bringing in the world's premiere geneticist to be my

babysitter seems a touch drastic, wouldn't you say so?"

Prism hoped that stroking his ego would restore the previous mood. But, to what? The incredibly charged atmosphere she experienced after walking in? No. She didn't think she could handle that level of intensity again, real or imagined. Fortunately, she soon felt the embers of his joviality rekindle. It began to dawn on her that he wasn't mollified by her compliment, but by her unintentional indication that she knew more about him than she'd let on.

"What I think is that I can forgo my own introduction," he said.

Certain he could see the blush permeating her mahogany skin, she admitted, "I am familiar with your work, but I can't say that I know much else about you. Clemson doesn't have your bio up, and I couldn't find a single thing online, not even behind journal paywalls. Until a few minutes ago, I'd assumed you were a woman."

A sonorous guffaw rang from his throat; Prism's flush intensified. She rushed to explain, "I'm sorry, it's just that you have a very unusual name, and I still couldn't find any social media, websites, or articles that showed your picture. Plus, Sirens are female in mythology..." She cut herself short at his renewed peels of laughter. Prism was comforted that he wasn't perturbed with her, but she didn't see how her statement was as funny as he'd apparently found it be. She ventured to keep her mouth shut until he recovered himself.

"I apologize," he said, his grin exhibiting beautiful straight, white teeth, "I can't begin to tell you why that's so amusing."

Still slightly rankled, she took a calming breath and said, "Then tell me about yourself."

"What would you like to know?" he countered.

Anything. Everything. Are you single? Do you live in the gym? What kind of cologne are

you wearing, and why do you smell so good? Where have we met before? Am I going crazy, or did you recognize me, too? Is it my good luck or bad luck that you're here?

"You have a cat?" she proffered instead.

"I do. Her name is Bast. She rode up from Clemson with me."

"Just the two of you?"

"It's just the two of us."

"Ah. Well. Good. Good that you had some company," she rallied, "How was the trip? When did you get in? Are you settling down alright?"

"It was fairly uneventful. I'm fortunate; Bast enjoys riding in the car. We got in yesterday, and yes, thank you. So far, so good. We're staying at the Umstead until I can find something permanent," he said, cataloging his answers a touch sarcastically.

"Seriously? I couldn't afford that for one night, let alone the time it would take to find an apartment. The University must have really gunned for you," she posited aloud. "Why are you so hard to find anything on, then? Are you one of those contrarians who's scared to leave a digital footprint?"

"Something like that," he chuckled. "Really? I just don't have any time or any friends. Now, do you have any more questions?"

Yes. "No."

"Are you sure?"

No. "Yes."

"Then why don't you tell me more about what happened?" He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out its only contents, one large brass key. "Or better yet, show me."

On the short walk to her lab, Prism found that the anxiousness she'd been feeling these past three weeks was now tinged with trepidation. She knew that this work was essential and right, but for some reason, she sincerely wished for Dr. Cutter to agree. Not because he was in charge now, but because she wanted his approval. His admiration, even. Would he see the value in her efforts when a committee of six barely could, or would the experiment's collapse overshadow its discoveries?

All worry dissolved into elation when they reached her coveted lab door, as he turned to her and held out the key by its teeth. She grinned up at him and giddily grasped the cold metal with both hands. He smiled back, and in a whirl of white cotton, she spun, unlocked the door, and swooped inside. Prism was flung from her reverie by a flash of panic before her eyes adequately registered the room, almost convinced that the grisly scene exaggerated in her consciousness would be on full display.

Alas, the walls were not drenched in viscera. Miniature corpses were not strewn about. The room was still arranged how she had left it, except that behind the half dozen black tables and along the counter that spanned the back wall of the room, there was only one canvas-covered metal cage instead of four.

"I had him brought up from The Habitat last night," Dr. Cutter said, referring to the area of the building that housed all of the graduate school's lab animals. This earned him another grin.

As they made their way toward the rear of the lab, Prism noticed that the entire

countertop and surrounding area were thoroughly scoured of the blood and hair that were still strewn everywhere when she ran from the room three weeks ago. She hadn't been allowed back since, but apparently, Fatima or Dave had everything cleared away. Prism was at least informed that her only surviving charge was being well taken care of during her banishment, but she wasn't permitted to check on him herself.

Slowly lifting the heavy, dark fabric from the cage, she held her breath in anticipation of what she would see inside. When she was able to peek in on the huddled monkey, it was sitting on its haunches, placidly and sadly looking down at its feet. He raised soft brown eyes to her and immediately ran to the bars, staring in disbelief, as if he hadn't thought he would see her again. She tore the covering off the rest of the way, unlatched the door, and reached inside palm up.

His small pink face angled down, noticed the lines on Prism's wrist, and cautiously exited the enclosure by carefully crawling up her arm, never once touching her cuts. When he reached her shoulder and was entirely outside of the cage, she pulled her hand out and affectionately cupped his back. At that, he threw his arms around her neck and gave her the sweetest, most heart-wrenching hug.

Tears sprung from her that she wasn't aware she'd been holding back since she last saw his tiny, horrified face. She fiercely squeezed him back, helplessly recounting the abject fear that he must have felt, as well as the accompanying weeks of loneliness and trauma he certainly experienced. When his shoulders shivered as if he were lamenting, too, she cried even harder. After an indeterminate amount of time, the little creature pulled its face from the crook of her neck, put his slender fingers on both sides of her face, and probed her face with dry, reddened eyes.

Prism started when Siren's large hand pressed against her lower back. The monkey also jumped but didn't try to scamper away as Dr. Cutter ushered them to a pair of metal swivel stools that he somehow managed to pull noiselessly from beneath the table.

"Why don't you start from the beginning?" he offered.

Prism slid onto the seat, situated the little animal on her lap, and waited for Dr. Cutter to sit. Stroking the pale blonde fur on the top of her charge's head, she took a deep breath and tried to prepare herself to recount the dumbest smart thing she'd ever done. Before launching into a play-by-play of that morning, she decided that if she were going to tell him any of it, she would have to tell him all of it.

"My mother had MS," Prism began, "and if you couple her mistrust of the medical establishment with a very aggressive form of the disease... you can guess how well she went about managing her illness."

Siren sat in quiet comprehension. When she stopped talking for a moment, he hesitantly brushed the flat of his palm up and down her shoulder blade, urging her on. She flashed him a quick smile that didn't come close to reaching her eyes.

"It's okay, really," she continued, "I just think it's important that you understand my motivations. Throughout graduate school, into my doctoral work, and my research as an adjunct here, I've focused on fully understanding the genetic code that governs our brains. What's funny is, before writing my own, almost every notable paper that I could find on the topic was written or co-written by a one Dr. Siren Cutter," she smiled more earnestly, "so, thank you. Truly."

He accepted her acknowledgment with a slight, gracious nod of the head but remained silent.

“A few years ago, just when I’d begun making headway toward finding ways to at least help ease my mom’s pain, she took it upon herself to find a more permanent solution.”

“Oh,” Siren breathed, “Oh no. I’m so sorry.” He’d returned his hands to his knees, and his face remained placid, contrasting the commiseration in his words; and yet, Prism felt wrapped in his warmth.

“Thank you.” Her full, cocoa lips widened more genuinely, making the points of her almond-shaped eyes tilt upward. She never expected the new Head of Genetics to actually listen to her side of things, yet he was paying attention to her motives and clearly trying to understand. This encouraged her to continue explaining her rationale and not just her actions.

“When she died, I dove headfirst into my work. Part of me wondered what the point of it all was, but I tried to drown that part out with the sheer volume of research I was tackling. I churned out five or six papers on genetic neurological conditions that year, a couple of which landed me a distinguished professorship here.

“Fast forward a ways, and my latest theories surround a curiosity in the human genome that stumped me. Normally, I can make sense of even the most complicated strings, but I just couldn’t parse this, no matter how hard I tried.”

“Couldn’t parse? What do you mean?” he pressed. The macaque seemed to have calmed, although it looked at Dr. Cutter with an expression that appeared expectant as Prism spoke. It seemed to be gauging his reaction. Perhaps it, too, was holding out hope for his continued accord.

“I know the scientific community at large holds fast to the abounding mystery of the DNA sequence, but not me,” she said. “There are computer programmers who can look at lines

and lines of code and decipher it instantly. I can read a majority of the human genome in the same way that only a fraction of those coders can read the string of 1s and 0s that the machine itself interprets.”

“That’s extraordinary, Prism,” he said without a hint of sarcasm or disbelief. She could feel her face ignite at the bass of his voice rolling her name from his sensual mouth. “What was stumping you?”

She snatched her gaze away from the crucible of his silky, dark lips, directly into the flames of his clear, silver eyes. “Well,” she stalled to regain her composure, “I kept seeing a unique pattern appear whenever I was looking for switches near Broca’s area, the SMA, and also in the brain stem. All of the brain regions that control consciousness in any capacity seemed to be connected by this repeating string.

“The best I could tell is that these identical markers in very disparate areas formed a sort of compass or axis system. Every neuron in our body, particularly those in our brains, create and use electricity,” she explained, “but it looked like this map controlled a different type of energy.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, leaning forward.

“Neurons in the brain conduct electricity in ionic bursts. They send a signal and boom. That’s it. They’re done. Whether it made you blink or take a step or recall a word, that one electron movement set off a domino effect of other neurons firing their own bursts of electricity, but none of that matters. That initial spark did its job, sent its message, then poof,” she mimicked a bursting gesture with both hands, “it’s done saying what it had to say.”

“I follow. Go on,” he said.

“What I was seeing, again and again, was a genetic mechanism to hold a static, sustained

force; some sort of non-ionic energy.” She paused for a moment before speaking again and looked at him as solemnly as she could, knowing that her next words were going to sound preposterous. “I believe that what I have found is the location of the human soul.”

Chapter Nine

It had been one week since the CRISPR experiment, and the monkeys were beginning to behave oddly. None of the primate DNA provided by The Human Genome Project for comparative analysis contained the pattern Prism was finding in homo sapiens. Not gorillas, not orangutans, not chimpanzees, and not the four agitated Rhesus Macaques in her lab. However, she did find their precursors, truncated segments that held origins of the ACTG combination she cataloged in the human brain.

“They’re not any better today,” David observed. As well as being one of Prism’s closest friends, he was also much more adept at creating the RNA CAS-9 formulas required to find and replace one DNA sequence with another. Prism thought nothing of enlisting his expertise. Still, she had not shared her latent hypothesis with him, choosing instead to divulge the one she outlined in her proposal for testing the viability of editing multiple nodes at once. As one of the monkeys started rocking its heavy cage back and forth on the counter, she was beginning to wonder just what she’d dragged Dave into.

“I’m hoping Cooper here can help us piece things together,” she yelled back over the din. Dave monitored the four cages from a safe distance while she and her lab assistant conferred at one of the black laminate tables near the front of the room, farthest from the noise. Cooper’s pale face whipped back to her at the mention of his name.

“Right,” he began shakily. “My regular shift starts at seven, but I was worried, you know? So, I came in around six this morning. Those two,” he pointed to the leftmost cages, “well, you could tell they were super anxious, but the other two were almost catatonic. They didn’t respond to me at all and didn’t seem to notice that the other monkeys were losing their minds right beside them. I thought they were sleeping at first, but their eyes were open and they weren’t relaxed at all.”

“What was worrying you enough to make you come in early?” Prism asked.

“They were weird with me all morning yesterday, but when Joy called me, I knew I wasn’t overreacting. We’ve been in the same classes throughout undergrad, plus we’ve been your only assistants this whole year. She has never, not once, acknowledged my existence. I don’t even know how she got my number because—”

“Cooper,” Prism interrupted, “what did Joy say? And why didn’t you call me? I shouldn’t have had to walk into this unawares this morning.”

“I’m sorry, I just figured I’d catch you when you got here. All Joy and I did was trade notes on what we were seeing. She said the first two were pacing, grabbing their heads and stuff. On the other hand, the ones on the right were starting to move less and less. I told her that was what they’d been like for me, but just, like, less.”

“So, she saw a progression of what you observed, and this morning there was further

exacerbation of those behaviors?”

“Right. Plus, they haven’t eaten since yesterday. Not that Joy or I saw. All four of them looked like they hadn’t really slept, either. I mean, it was clear that they were exhausted. I watched the second one try to doze off, but as soon as he’d settle down, he jerked his head back up and started screaming. That freaked the first one out all over again.” Cooper pondered the curiosities at hand and those still niggling at him. He didn’t want to sound disparaging by questioning his mentor, but he just had to know what could be causing such a strong reaction in such a short amount of time. Concern won out over deference.

“What exactly did you alter in their DNA? If they weren’t dummy strands, then perhaps the genomes are conflicting in some way? Or, could there have been a flaw in the procedure? Maybe it’s not the edits, but some kind of blood-brain barrier breach?”

Due to her age, sex, and race, Prism’s actions were often questioned. It was impossible to tell which one, or what combination, handed people a license to be dubious. She’d never gotten used to it and found it even more irksome when the second-guessing came from people younger than her.

Although she tried to chalk his cross-examination up to stress, her irritation seeped through as condescension.

“Remember, Coop? I showed you the pattern I found? The monkeys don't have the same code as us." she over-articulated slowly and deliberately. "Instead, it's like they have a bunch of empty lunch boxes, and we have full ones. David... Dr. Murphy... helped me stuff all our human snacks in their little lunch pails to see if they'll stay closed. We didn't replace anything, change colors or switch cartoon characters; we just added food, so the body shouldn't have noticed a

change at all without x-ray vision, of sorts. Does that make sense?"

He didn't even notice her perturbation. "Absolutely. Thanks, Dr. Ray. That means there's a strong probability that the new code stuck and that they can be recognized by the brain! I can't imagine we'd see these kinds of neurological responses from contamination."

Prism's ire was doused by his congratulatory tone. Feeling foolish for misjudging his very reasonable concerns, she dilatorily saw the fear lingering behind his good-natured grin and resolved to try and ameliorate the situation.

"Honestly, Coop, I'm not entirely sure. That's why you and Joy's data is so invaluable. What makes you think it's neurological?" she asked with legitimate interest.

"I mean," he chortled, "take your pick. Increased aggression or depression, depending on the subject. Altered circadian rhythm, schizophrenia, anxiety—"

"Wait, what?" Prism interrupted.

"Yeah, they—" Cooper was cut off, yet again. This time, by a blood-curdling screech from the back of the room. The second monkey had reached into the cage beside it and was clutching its listless occupant by the neck. The ear-splitting scream issued from the macaque again as he brought his neighbor's face up to his own, slamming him into the bars and dragging the heavy cages closer together. He glowered at his unresponsive captive through the slats, then hooted and yowled in what could only be described as an accusatory tone.

In the next instance, every living being in the lab began performing a different action. The shrieking monkey proceeded to extend its arm and jerk it back quickly and violently, smashing the other little creature's head against the unforgiving steel over and over. Dave ran for help. The monkey in the first pen went quiet and stared, while the one in the fourth kennel

scouted as far away as it could from the blood and teeth flying through the enclosure next to him. Cooper lunged for the cages. Prism snatched him back so forcibly that the pop of his shoulder dislocating could be heard in a brief interval between bone hitting metal.

After an interminable amount of time, the brutal beating ceased abruptly when the frenzied beast's arm flew back into its own space, leaving a disgusting pile of fur and pulp behind. Momentum from his final, unhindered snatch propelled him onto his backside. His victim's tattered throat sickeningly slid from his fingers as he slowly lowered his head and covered his ears with his gory hands. He looked utterly distraught, shaking his head from side to side in exasperation.

Everyone else was still, but the space around them all continued to reverberate with the horrible tumult. Prism sat on the floor with her mouth agape, holding tight to her dazed assistant. She was taller than most men, but at five foot six, Cooper seemed particularly small, sitting in her lap like a child. They were close in age, but the maternal protectiveness she was exhibiting was not at all unpleasant. In fact, it was far afield from her usual uberprofessional, cold behavior. That was always weird in itself because she is so hot!

His mind went in every direction possible to avoid acknowledging the reality that was directly in front of him. Prism tore her eyes away from the scene to appraise the young man and caught sight of his oddly squared shoulder and stricken, sheet-white face. Using his shock to her benefit, Prism swiftly pulled his limp arm up, bent it at the elbow, and jerked it across his back. His startled yelp didn't draw the attention of the three surviving monkeys, but it hurtled Cooper back down to earth. He threw a multitudinous look over his shoulder of incredulity, terror, anger, deference, and gratitude in such quick succession that it might have been comical in any other

circumstance.

“We need to get you to the hospital. Now. Can you walk?” she asked sharply.

He nodded, pulled himself from atop her, and briskly pushed his way through the heavy door without a second glance at the macabre tableau. Conversely, Prism faced the sordid display and could not avert her eyes. The small animals were all breathing heavily but were otherwise frozen in various states of horror. The attacking monkey was still clutching his head while the one in the first cage covered his face, turning away to avoid the sight. Number Four was still huddled in the far corner of its enclosure with both hands over its mouth, a personification of disgust.

Prism stood and began walking to the back of the room just as the wooden door burst open. Dave hurried in, followed by a handler and the diminutive, but imposing, Dr. Fatima Adler. She took one look around, locked hard cobalt blue eyes onto Prism, and ordered, “We passed your tech. Get him to the clinic. After that, go home.”

As staunch as Fatima could sometimes be, she boasted an extremely effervescent manner that belied her incredible intellect. Prism had seen firsthand how people meeting Dr. Adler for the first time would take in the elfin frame, pronounced bust, flowing golden hair, and bubbly verbosity only to assume that she was a walking blond joke. She was famous with her friend group, which included Prism, for obliterating that presumption within a sentence or two. Fatima was also known for rabbit-holing, or taking a conversation into a million different tangents. For her to issue such clipped commands caused Prism to broach no argument.

Prism met the glassy eyes of Number Four for just a second, then she obediently exited the lab to find Cooper.

Chapter Ten

When she finished her account of that horrendous morning, Dr. Cutter did not react how she'd expected. He did not express displeasure, or worse, incredulity. He did not actually react at all. Prism gradually began to waiver in her hopes that he could be an advocate as the inviting face from just moments ago became implacable. The anxiety growing inside her boiled over when he finally spoke, harkening back to the tribunal she was made to face as he fired off question after question.

“Was there any evidence that this incident was precipitated by a procedural error?”

“Not that I've been able to gather from my own inquiries or from the investigation's findings,” she said. “Dr. Murphy and I both had eyes on the process, and everything was done by the book. The collapses began to occur several days after the CRISPR procedure was already complete.”

“Could their behavior have been attributed to an environmental disruption?”

“It's unlikely. These are older, experienced examinees bred specifically for lab use,” she

responded rotely.

“I am aware that the aggressor, Number Two, was euthanized, but what’s the story on the other primate? Number One?”

“From what I’ve been told, he was found... unresponsive in his cage that next day and needed to be put down, as well.”

Dr. Cutter considered that for a second before asking more delicately, “Unresponsive in what way?”

She hated thinking of it. Lowering her voice, she answered, “The Habitat keepers said that it looked like he’d hit his head against the bars of his cage.”

“On purpose?”

“They believe so, yes.”

“How could they tell?”

“There were multiple contusions. He did it repeatedly.”

She recalled the dripping, broken skull of the wild-eyed macaque’s victim and couldn’t help imagining Number One doing that to itself. The revulsion on her face was not mirrored on Dr. Cutter’s, but she felt that the similarities in the deaths ruffled him nevertheless.

“Do we know why he would do that himself?”

“No.” She looked at the monkey on her lap and tried gauging its reaction to their discussion of its cognates. He was not asleep but had relaxed into a drowsy, torpid state, making Prism chastise herself for anthropomorphizing him. It struck her then that Dr. Cutter’s references to the monkeys’ cage placements, and his gentler phrasing of what amounted to murder and suicide, seemed to exercise the same consideration she was chastising herself for.

“The thinking,” she reported, “is that it was reenacting the behavior it witnessed.”

“Whose thinking?” he said, with a somewhat incredulous inflection.

“The handlers and Dr. Adler’s team of arbitrators.”

Another pause. Then, “What do you think?”

She considered agreeing with Fatima’s assessment to bypass his interrogation. That might have been fine for the adjudication panel, but she strongly doubted acquiescence would assuage this particular man.

“I think it was something to do with the insertions we... I instituted,” Prism said, refusing to place any of the blame elsewhere. “Something in the code changed their brain chemistry, perhaps even their brain architecture, in a much more drastic way than I could have anticipated.”

“Where was the DNA for the edits sourced from?” he continued, without acknowledging her concession.

“From four different individuals. Two profiles came from the Human Genome Project, and the other two were of myself and Dr. Murphy since we have our sequences on file.”

“Why did you use so many people? Earlier, you said that the pattern was the same?”

“Within each individual, yes,” she clarified. “The segments were identical at several locations but diverged slightly in configuration and presentations by person. I used different sequences and a small sample size to examine whether those minor variations affected how and if the pattern appeared in multiple areas.”

Finding comfort in her oft-repeated explanation, Prism continued with increased confidence. “This study was exploratory and overall successful. Even though I was disallowed from participating, Dr. Murphy was permitted to run the sequences of all four subjects, and it

appears that we were correct. Several precursor areas now harbor the ACTG pattern we inserted. We can now move on to isolating the variations of the source DNA in future research.”

“But that’s not the full story, is it?” he asked declaratively.

The regret of spouting the script she’d almost convinced herself to be the whole truth reared up and smacked her in the face. Opening her mouth to exonerate herself from the presumption in his question, she felt like asking him what more he wanted from her. She had postulated correctly, after all, but that seemed too defensive a stance. Then she almost protested that she was simply having trouble discerning what it was he really wanted to hear, her actual thoughts, or that she had learned her lesson. That would obviously be the wrong thing to say, too. After waffling ineffectually, she clamped her jaw shut and frowned, unable to formulate an answer. In her silence, he continued with more authority in his voice, “You could have used an inert string and tested for its presence, but no. You wanted to see what would happen if you replicated a human phenomenon you didn’t understand in these poor creatures.”

Prism raged inside. “Isn’t that the point of scientific experimentation, Dr. Cutter?” she snapped.

“It is when you’re honest with your team, and yourself, about the true nature of your experiments, Dr. Ray,” he bit back. “They didn’t have any idea what you thought those patterns meant, did they?”

She sighed, “Of course not.” Deflated and disconcerted at having flown from contrition to anger and back to penitence in a matter of moments, she added, “I couldn’t very well tell them that I thought spirits were floating around in the brain. They would have laughed me out of the building, after stripping me of my degrees.”

“Then why did you tell me?”

Stunned, she was once again at a loss for words. The short answer was that she hadn't planned to, but that didn't make sense to her. Even in the most impassioned of moments, her every action or utterance was precise, calibrated. What was it about him that made her slip? Made her trust?

Pleadingly, she replied, “I don't know.”

His luminous eyes froze her in place. Not a single muscle relaxed in his hardened face, and yet she sensed his icy stare thawing precipitously before he said, “Be that as it may, I would appreciate your continued confidence.”

Dr. Cutter proceeded with his inquiry, delving into the experiment's specifics in a way that helped Prism affirm suspected associations between the sequencing and the monkeys' behavior. Unlike the arbitration committee, this interrogation was not concerned with fault or resources or even ethics. She soared inside when it became clear that he was, instead, trying to process the full picture under the auspice of her original theory. Answering each question as thoroughly as possible, she aimed to help him resolve it.

“You mentioned that your lab assistant proposed a few diagnoses of his own?” he questioned.

“Yeah, he thought they were exhibiting neurological symptoms of hyperaggression, depression, circadian rhythm disruption, schizophrenia, and anxiety. There may have been more, but I'd cut him off and then—” *shit hit the fan*— “that's when the situation escalated.”

“You are what interrupted him? Not the... situation?”

Taking his request for transparency to heart, Prism was obliged to tell him what pervaded

her mind when Cooper ran through his list. To even ask, Dr. Cutter must be circling the conclusion she'd arrived at on that erratic morning three weeks ago.

“When he mentioned schizophrenia, everything clicked,” she said. “I believe the monkeys were hearing their own inner-voices for the first time.”

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