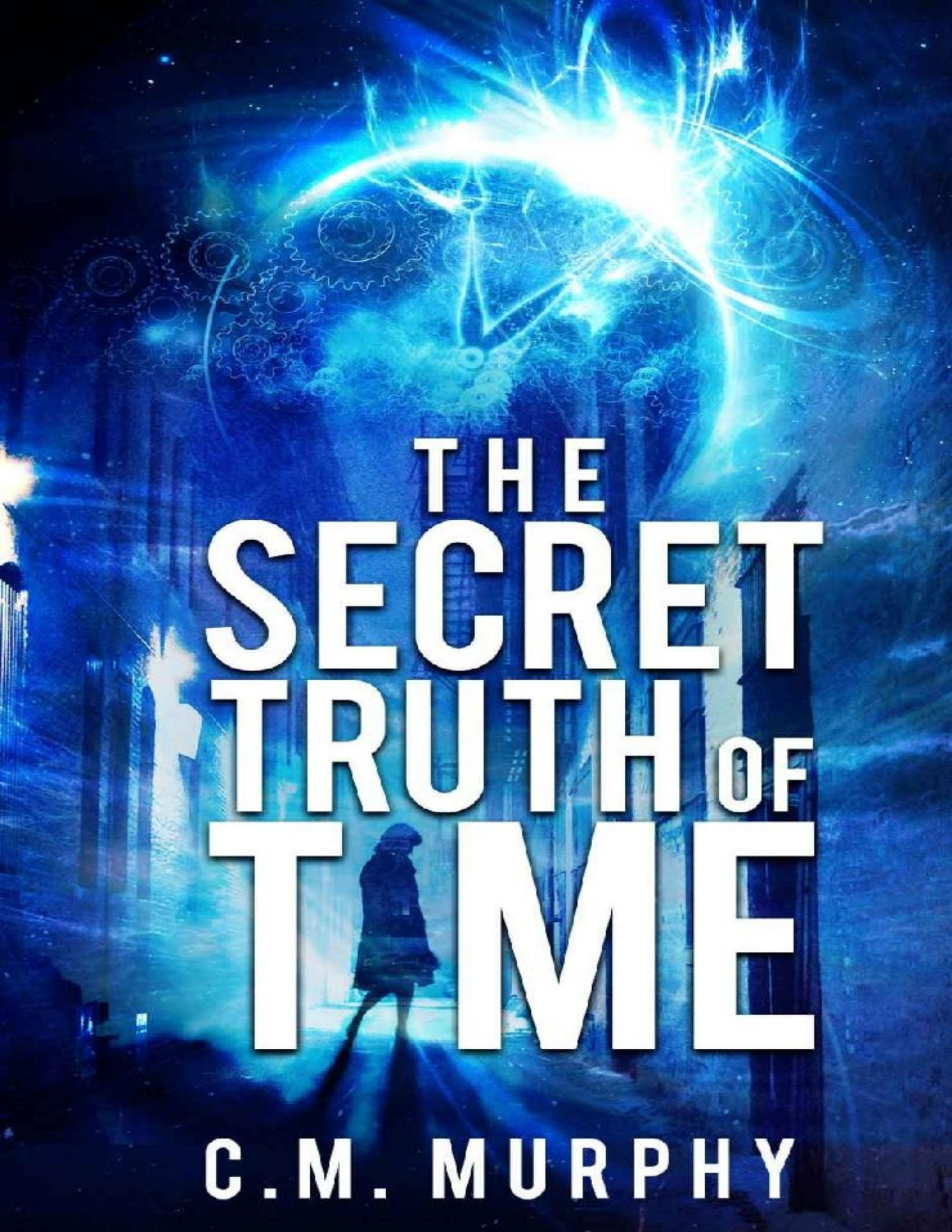
THE
SECRET
TRUTH OF
TIME
C.M. MURPHY

THE SECRET TRUTH OF TIME

C.M. MURPHY

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To my family:
Mom and Dad, Edie, David, David & Diana, Darwin, Jason, Anthony, and Ana

With special thanks to you, Bud!

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A Note from the Author

CHAPTER ONE

AUGUST 29, 1974

Children played kickball in the street, rode bikes without a helmet, and partook in the unattended and pseudo-dangerous activities afforded kids in the 1970s. But the joyous vibe of the neighborhood had evaporated into the silent, late night. Each crack in the sidewalk wouldn't break an imaginary mother's back, but instead threatened to topple one soon-to-be mother.

Bernadette Fernandez rushed as fast as she could negotiate the bumpy sidewalk in the dark. Her walk converted into a waddle by her heavy belly. The baby had grown big and strong in the last month, a comforting thought amidst the fear tornado-ing in her mind.

Two goals consumed Bernadette: reaching the blue post office box on the corner in time, and keeping one thought at the forefront of her mind: forward. Any hope for the future rested with that.

But the fear that her tormentor would come for her early threatened to derail Bernadette's plan. She couldn't help but recall the times her premonitions had been wrong. Visions with strong emotional elements were the likeliest to be inaccurate.

She chanted in her mind. *Forward. Keep moving forward.*

As she neared the corner, Bernadette peeked around to see if anyone was following her. All clear. She darted across the suburban street to the mailbox. A strong surge of déjà vu shivered through her, a good sign. She slipped her letter in, careful to hold on to the metal handle of the door to keep it from clanging shut. It squeaked closed.

Done.

She took a deep breath, returned to the other side of the street, and headed back home. Her mind drifted to her earlier phone call with Stu, her Witness. If

her vision held true, he wouldn't be a Witness after tonight. He'd be a father.

A dog barked from inside his gated yard, his little black and brown body barely visible in the moonlight. *Yes!* She'd envisioned this exact moment. Something tickled at the edge of Bernadette's awareness. She smiled.

Forward.

The barking dwindled as Bernadette continued down the street. It was odd to realize that the little mutt would be the last dog she'd ever see. But souls lived on, didn't they? Bernadette hadn't been the type who remembered past lives. She didn't know if she would even have the gift of sight when she came back, but her soul would live on. Her baby would survive.

Bernadette slowed as she spotted him leaning against her green Pontiac in the driveway, the orange glint of his cigarette moving up to his lips.

To Bernadette, he looked like a calm, lethal killer, coolly having a smoke before continuing with his violent plan. But in truth, he was frightened. He'd stopped to steel himself with one last Winston before going into the house.

But it wouldn't happen inside the house.

Bernadette reached into the pocket of her maternity dress and pulled out her watch, a gift from her mother. Ten minutes to midnight. Right on time for her murder.

Forward.

JULY 20, 1994

Alma Davis squatted as she spoke on the phone. The short, tangled cord didn't stretch far enough for her to stand. "I'll come by after work," she said and scribbled the man's address on the back of that week's *Valley Classified*.

"If you're as cute as you sound, I'll have to find more music boxes," he said.

The man's flirtation sent a zing of excitement through Alma, but she wasn't a fool. "I mentioned I'm not coming alone, right?"

He chuckled. "My nonthreatening charm might not be working over the telephone."

"That's fine," Alma said. "My mace doesn't work over the phone, either."

The man laughed again. Alma wrapped the call, hid the telephone under a cardboard box, and headed to meet her best friend, Doug.

She'd found the telephone in a drawer, and Doug had discovered the working phone jack in one of the building's many abandoned offices. They used it to make personal calls at work. It was the nineties. Cell phones existed, but they

hadn't proliferated.

Alma sneaked across the hall to the makeshift breakroom. In the publishing company's more profitable days, the breakroom had been a reception area. But the other magazines had gone under and *Valley Classified*, a freebie ad rag given out at convenience stores and sidewalk boxes, was all that remained from the high-rolling eighties.

The area behind the old reception desk housed a folding table and chairs. A generic soda dispenser was plugged into the wall and the desk itself was home to a microwave and portable refrigerator. Two tattered recliners, one of which held a napping Doug, took up the space that formerly was the waiting area.

Alma smiled at the sight of Doug snoozing. She still hadn't gotten over how good-looking he was. He had the whole dirty-blond hair, broad shoulders, and square-jawed thing going on. When they'd first met, she'd been surprised he'd struck up a conversation with her. Then she found out he was gay, and her crush was cured. An easy friendship formed.

"All set," she said as she took a seat in the recliner next to Doug.

"You think you might strike gold with this one?" Doug asked. "Striking gold" was a term they'd coined for finding an object in a classified ad that was worth more than advertised.

"Seems promising."

Yolanda, their coworker, entered the breakroom. "You guys are gonna get in trouble with Rick for those," she said, pointing to their recliners.

"The big boss helped us carry them in here," Doug said, referring to the general manager of *Valley Classified*, who rarely came to the office to do actual work. "He even sprayed them with that disinfectant they use in bowling shoes."

"That's so gross," Yolanda said, shaking her head. She fed two quarters into the dilapidated soda machine and hit the button labeled Ginger Ale. A generic grape soda shot out. Yolanda swore under her breath and grabbed it. "Rick the Prick is gonna hate you two even more when he finds out about those chairs," she said and went back to work.

"Does Rick really hate us?" Alma asked Doug in a hushed tone.

"Like we care," Doug said, with full knowledge that Alma cared. He changed the subject. "Where are we going to check out the music box?"

"North Hollywood. Near Tony's Pizza. I said we'd be there between five thirty and six."

Dog nodded and closed his recliner. "Gotta get back."

The two returned to work on the "floor," the still-functioning part of the office that held ten half-empty ad-taking stations, and the supervisor's desk. Doug and Alma sat at their neighboring stations. Dingy yellow cubicle walls

separated them, each wall covered with scripted answers for the callers. Three calls in, Alma found herself trapped on the line with an odd man from Encino.

"But livestock is for eatin'!" the man yelled into the phone for the third time.

"I'm sorry, sir," Alma said after explaining to the man his ad couldn't be placed in the pets section, because his ostrich weighed over one hundred pounds. The caller vacillated between blubbering tears and incoherent rage. His erratic nature made Alma's hands shake with adrenaline. She hated confrontation.

"Let me put you in touch with my supervisor," Alma said and placed the caller on hold.

"Rick!" she called to her boss without getting up. "I need assistance."

Rick strode over to Alma's cube. "Alma," Rick said, "you need to learn to handle caller disputes on your own. Listen and learn." He plugged his headset into her phone without bothering to ask about the situation.

"What's that caller screaming?" Doug asked, leaning back in his rolling chair to see around the cubicle wall.

"Livestock is for eating," Alma said trying to appear calm.

"He's selling a cow?"

"A 180-pound ostrich he's been raising in his one-bedroom in Encino," she said.

Doug laughed and went back to work. Minutes later Rick told the man it was settled and disconnected the call.

"Livestock?" Alma asked.

"Pets." Before she could argue, Rick said, "I'll need you to stay late tonight," and walked away. Alma knew Rick was mad because he lost the argument with the ostrich guy. She wished she'd just handled it herself. Now she was being punished.

The next call in the queue rang through. Alma answered as if she were on autopilot. Her mind was consumed with disappointment. If she stayed late, she wouldn't be able to see the man about the music box tonight. His ad would be out in the new issue tomorrow. Good deals were snatched up fast.

Alma tried to tell herself that it was stupid to be attached to something so small. But as much as she tried to keep herself from being disappointed, her sadness prevailed. It wasn't just the music box. She kind of liked the guy on the telephone. Her brain spiraled into sad self-talk about her silly daydreams, ridiculous crush on a person she'd never met, and how she'd caused herself to miss out on this great deal by being a coward.

HANIEL HANKER WALKED to the front of the shoe repair shop eager to find his father. His dad had bought this place as a cover, but Haniel liked it better than their old house. He found running the shop fun and preferred the cozy living quarters in the back of the store to the sterile, museum-like home of his childhood.

"Dad!" Haniel said as he entered the storefront through the swinging door.

"James," the woman said turning to Haniel's dad, "is this your son? I thought he'd be a young boy. You look like brothers!"

Haniel spotted the muted anger in his father's fake smile.

"You flatter me," James said to the woman.

"I have a daughter about your age," the middle-aged woman said, turning to Haniel. He took this as his opportunity to make things right.

"Is she as beautiful as her mother?" Haniel asked, staring into the woman's dull, brown eyes with his blue ones.

The woman giggled and babbled about her daughter, distracted from her original observation. Women of all ages had made a fuss over Haniel ever since his childhood. Back then, it was no problem calling his father "Dad." But now that Haniel was twenty-six years old and his father's aging had stalled with each "acquisition," Haniel needed to be more careful.

The woman tired of her own talk soon enough. James gave her a ticket for her shoes and told her they would be ready next week. She left, beaming from all the flirty attention.

"You're never supposed to call me Dad in front of people," his father scolded.

"I'm sorry, Dad—" His father glared. "I mean, James. It's just... I was excited, and we rarely have customers," Haniel said.

"You're the one who took out the Yellow Pages ad and put up signs at the local dry cleaners. We have plenty of money. This is a front for crying out loud!"

Haniel did not want to get into that argument again and was glad to have good news to distract his dad. "A girl called about the music box. I think it's her."

His father's eyes snapped to his son's. "So soon?"

"Her name is Alma. She works at that free classified place. She called before the ad even came out."

"My vision was true," James said.

Haniel wanted to point out that it was only somewhat true. His father's vision hadn't told them that the daughter worked at *Valley Classified* or even how or when precisely they would meet. But his father was touchy about his fuzzy psychic abilities. They weren't as extensive as he'd hoped, but all that would change if this was the girl.

"She's coming by the shop tonight after work."

"Good job, son," James said. Haniel basked in the rare praise and his father's use of the word "son." "I'll get going so I'm not here when she arrives. We only have between now and her birthday—maybe six months."

"Dad, I can handle it."

His father nodded, but he sensed his old man didn't believe he could do the job. Haniel resolved that he would earn the girl's trust and prove his worthiness.

CHAPTER TWO

RICK PERFORMED HIS LATE AFTERNOON "WALK-THROUGH." NOBODY, INCLUDING the man himself, understood what he was looking for. Rick neared Alma's station. She figured she'd try to get him to reconsider her working late.

"I have an appointment after work, and Doug and I—"

Rick cut her off. "You're welcome to use the company phone to reschedule, this time," he said and then took off down the hall to the bathroom. All the operators except Yolanda logged off.

Doug leaned back in his chair. "One of these days I'm going to go in there," Doug said gesturing toward the bathroom, "and find out what he's doing for twenty minutes."

"Remember the big guy with the shaved head who stopped showing up?"

"He scared Rick. I liked that big guy," Doug said.

"He told me Rick reads the newspaper in there."

Doug shook his head. "No one should be that comfortable with their business at work."

Yolanda yelled from her station two rows over. "Alma, did you get overtime today?"

"Yeah," Alma said, not hiding her lack of enthusiasm.

"How come I never get overtime? You can't even take ads in Spanish!"

"I'd give you the hours if he'd let me," Alma yelled back.

"Rick really is a prick," Yolanda said and then snapped up the next call. Yolanda lived to take all the calls, and when Rick left the room, the other employees were happy to let her.

Alma sighed and turned back to her best friend. "Maybe I can see the music box by myself after I'm done."

Doug shot her a look. "We carpooled."

"I'll drop you off and then go to the shoe repair place where he works. It's public."

"Those shops are always deserted. Who knows what's in there?"

"Broken shoes?"

Doug rolled his eyes. "Do you really believe people are what they seem?"

As much as she tried to pretend otherwise, Alma had always been distrustful of people. It took her a long time to even trust Doug. Alma glanced up at the digital "on hold" counter on the wall. There were two people in the queue. It was an unspoken rule that if the number got to three callers, they would log on to help. Yolanda would get mad if they jumped in too early.

Alma stared at a spot on the wall of her cubicle. The floaty sensation she'd gotten since she was a kid descended on her. It signaled the start of a daydream or her mind just wandering like it wasn't connected to her body.

Alma enjoyed that spacey feeling. It was like mini vacation from being herself—her boring, ordinary self. In her relaxed state, Alma's mind returned to Yolanda never getting overtime. Yolanda was the best ad-taker, and she wanted more hours. "If I didn't know better, I'd say Rick was racist," Alma heard herself say. Her own words surprised her.

Doug turned to her with a big smile and wide eyes.

"No," she said.

"You have all these interesting thoughts, but you never act on them," Doug said. "You dreamed up the idea turning the old reception area into a breakroom. That worked out great even if I had to force you."

Alma appreciated that Doug loved to stir things up, but accusing their supervisor of being racist might be too much. "Rick's not."

"Are you sure? Yolanda deserves that extra money. She has a kid to support," Doug said.

A pang of guilt hit Alma. Yolanda kept the picture of her two-year-old son right on her desk "for motivation." Yolanda deserved the overtime. She was the best salesperson.

"I'm saying something," Doug said.

Alma stared at Doug, trying to decide if he'd made an idle threat. "He can't be."

"You and I are the only ones who get overtime, and we're the only white workers."

"I'm only half white."

"He doesn't know that," Doug shot back. Then he yelled out, "Yolanda!"

"What?" Yolanda yelled.

Alma shot Doug a look.

"Don't you find it weird that only the white people in the office ever get overtime?"

"That prick!" Yolanda muttered under her breath and snapped up another call.

The on-hold number jumped from one to six. Alma nudged Doug, and they logged back in.

Rick returned from the bathroom twenty minutes later. Alma's gut churned as she watched Yolanda log off her station and march across the office to confront Rick.

"Why don't you ever give any of us Mexicans overtime?" Yolanda asked, not masking her anger.

Rick put down the tan bag he'd brought to the restroom. Alma had never noticed it before. That's probably where he kept the newspaper.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rick said.

The incoming calls died down to zero. Everyone's attention focused on Yolanda and Rick.

"I should get the overtime. I have the best sales," Yolanda said as she folded her arms.

"You have overtime next weekend," Rick said, his face red with embarrassment.

"That's because Doug and Alma asked for it off."

"That's right!" Doug piped in. "It's Alma's aunt's birthday party."

"See! They get all the overtime unless they ask for the same day off, and they're the only white people except for you."

"Alma's like part Chinese," Rick said.

"Filipino!" Doug called out.

"All those people are the same," Rick said.

"Whoa!" Yolanda said at his use of "those people."

The room quieted. Doug turned to Alma with an I-told-you-so expression. Alma's eyes widened.

Rick's face flushed a deeper red.

"Looks like we're going to check out that music box," Doug whispered to Alma.

Alma forced herself not to let her smile get too big. That didn't seem appropriate.

HANIEL WAITED behind the counter of the shop. He caught himself holding his breath, and then let out an anxious laugh. The weight of his father's expectations made him tense. Haniel normalized his breathing and told himself to be cool. It would only prove James right if he blew it by appearing overeager or nervous.

Haniel reached under the counter and grabbed a basket of receipts next to the cardboard box of junk his dad had prepared. The box was a test of some kind for Alma, but his father hadn't shared the details. Omissions like that added to Haniel's growing insecurity. James didn't trust him.

He reached for the ledger in the drawer next to the register. Doing a little work would distract him. He could do the books with Lotus 1-2-3 on the ancient shop PC, but he enjoyed doing the work by hand. If business picked up, he'd upgrade to a new computer that could run Windows 3.0 and Excel. Haniel busied himself recording the receipts, and his nerves calmed.

The bell over the door tinkled. Haniel paused before looking up. He didn't want to appear overeager. It disappointed him when he lifted his head and found an elderly woman with curly hair holding a pair of boots.

"Can you stretch the calves on these?" she asked as she set the boots on the glass countertop.

"Of course," he said slipping into customer-service mode. He enjoyed the customers and running the business. A part of him hoped that his father would move on after all of this was over and leave Haniel to live a normal life. But his father never talked about what came after the girl.

"Have you been here before?" Haniel asked, part making conversation and part hoping to satisfy his curiosity.

"I just got these on sale and saw an open parking spot in front of your shop," the woman said with a smile.

Her voice sounded so familiar. Then it struck him. "You're a professor at Cal State Northridge, aren't you?" Haniel asked, knowing she was Professor Ann Cassidy. He struggled to contain his excitement. An Immortal Mortal was in his shop, today of all days! This couldn't be a coincidence.

"I teach a few classes at Valley College, too," she said, her voice noncommittal.

Haniel didn't introduce himself, but explained to the professor he'd graduated from Cal State Northridge last year, although it was actually three years ago. He told her how he intended to take one of her anthropology classes, but couldn't schedule it in with all of his math studies. The truth was his father forbade it.

The young man's undue excitement put Professor Cassidy on alert. Living over a dozen lifetimes, she'd learned to trust her well-honed intuition. She took her claim ticket from the young man and turned for the door, careful to listen for

the sound of his feet rushing from behind the counter.

"Would you mind checking out some antiques for me?" he asked before she reached the door. Cassidy stopped and turned back. *Of course.* He must've heard about her spotting the fake museum piece. She'd brought too much attention to herself doing that. Cassidy hadn't intended to cause a stir spotting the forgery, but she'd been with the duke when the original vase had been delivered. She'd blurted out that it wasn't his before she'd thought the better of it.

"I have a buyer coming from *Valley Classified* in a few minutes," the young man said, breaking the silence. Cassidy hadn't intended to build tension by not answering, but she decided to go with it and remained silent. People always filled silence with information. If she'd learned anything over her many lifetimes, it was that one rarely regretted remaining silent.

"It's an amazing stroke of fate you being here and all," the young man explained.

The word "fate" caught Cassidy's attention. Words like "fate" and "destiny" popped into the minds and out of the minds of ordinary humans at the most interesting times. Cassidy decided to stick around.

"Despite what you may have heard, I'm an anthropologist, not an archeologist. I'm not good at appraisals."

It was her standard disclaimer. It wasn't true. She'd studied so many things over the years including archeology, but it kept people from bothering with every piece of junk they found at a yard sale.

Haniel reached under the counter and pulled out the cardboard box. "This is what the ad was for," he said, handing her the music box.

Even at a glance, Cassidy surmised the music box wasn't worth much. Holding it in her hands confirmed her initial assessment. The tacky trinket had been deliberately aged and painted to appear like metal, but it was just plastic molded onto a standard low-quality steel base. Cassidy tried to think of a tactful way to let the young man know that his treasure was worthless.

"Hmm," she said, stalling for time. Her eyes fell on the cardboard box. "Let's see what else you've got here."

The bell above the door tinkled. Cassidy assumed it was the young man's buyer. She felt bad for the person who drove in rush-hour traffic to check out that worthless music box. Cassidy dug around the box of junk and spotted an old pocket watch missing its chain. Her heart pounded as she picked it up. The timepiece hummed in her hands. Her breath caught in her throat as she turned it over. There it was engraved on the back—a small infinity symbol. Bernie's watch!

Over the past two decades, Cassidy had gone to countless antique shops,

estate sales, auction houses, and she'd happened upon it in a random box in a shoe repair shop.

Cassidy's mind whirred with the implications of her discovery. She'd completely forgotten another person had entered the shop until the young man spoke.

"You're here," he said. "Alma, right?"

Cassidy's head shot up upon mention of the name, Alma, and found herself staring at a ghost. The young woman's long, dark hair, the expression on her oval face, and even her small rounded shoulders made her a dead ringer for Bernadette Fernandez. *Impossible!* This wasn't the way this was supposed to happen.

ALMA AND DOUG approached the counter. Alma wasn't enthused to see an older woman in a designer suit looking at the items. She didn't want a bidding situation.

At the same time, Haniel wasn't happy to see Doug. It hadn't occurred to him that he might have to beat out a rival for Alma's affections. He pretended like the man didn't faze him, but her companion's good looks rattled Haniel's confidence.

"I was just showing Professor Cassidy the music box," Haniel said, pleased that his voice had come across as casual.

Alma frowned. Doug put his hand on her arm. Haniel fought to keep his pleasant expression unchanged. Cassidy remained dumbfounded.

This wasn't going well for anyone.

Alma broke the silence. "I forgot to get your name when we spoke."

"Haniel."

"Daniel?" she asked.

"Like Daniel, but with an H," he corrected.

"Oh," Alma said, and feeling stupid, she jumped to introduce her best friend. "This is my friend, Doug."

Doug put his hand out for Haniel to shake. The two men shook—each squeezing a little harder and longer than necessary.

Alma turned her full attention to Haniel for the first time. He was cuter than she dared to hope. He looked about two inches shorter than Doug, so he was still tall. Maybe about six feet. He had short, black hair, and an angular jaw.

From the way Doug glared at him, Alma knew the Haniel's good looks weren't lost on her friend either. Doug always glared at men he considered

handsome. He said he did it to keep them from getting too cocky.

But what captivated Alma most about Haniel were his eyes. They were a light blue-gray that almost appeared purple. They made him look mysterious. She wondered how old he was. He looked to be a little older than Alma, but not by much.

He smiled back, and she noted that he even had perfect teeth, with the exception of one incisor that was turned a tad out of place. Alma thought it added to his charm.

Doug spoke up. "Can we see the music box?"

Embarrassed, Alma nodded yes and hurried to the counter. Doug remained close to her. Alma smiled. Her best friend was always protective.

Haniel handed Alma the music box, but the minute Alma held it, she knew it was junk.

"You don't like it," Haniel said.

"It's not that. It's just I was hoping for something older," she said.

When she started hunting for gold, certain objects spoke to her. Some even sparked stories in her mind—especially the older antiques. Somehow the older the object, the more it triggered Alma's imagination. She'd pretend she was in another time and another place. Somehow the antiques made her little fantasies come alive.

"Do you want it for like five bucks?" Haniel asked.

Alma was tempted to buy it just to be nice, but she hated collecting stuff and was disciplined with her money. On the other hand, she did like Haniel.

She was about to cave when he said, "Don't worry about it. What about these other things?" Haniel took the watch from Cassidy, put it in the box, and slid it across the counter toward Alma.

"I was actually interested in buying that," Cassidy said. She hadn't expected the timepiece to be snatched out of her hands.

Alma poked in the box, and the moment her hand grazed the watch, she knew she wanted it. It hummed with history. She'd never been this attached to a new find in all of her gold hunting.

"This looks pretty decent," she said, trying to hide her excitement. Alma couldn't wait to go home and let her imagination take hold. The thing had to be at least a hundred years old.

Professor Cassidy interrupted. "I'm willing to give you a hundred dollars for the watch."

Alma's gaze shot from her newfound treasure to her rival. Alma only had sixty dollars with her.

"Wow!" Haniel said, taking the watch from Alma and pretending to look at it

more closely. "This watch must be pretty old if you'd pay hundred dollars for it, Professor Cassidy."

"It matches another watch in my collection. This would be a nice complementary piece, but I can't imagine it would be worth much on its own." The professor realized she'd overplayed her bargaining hand by leading with all the money she had on her at the moment. But she could get more money from an ATM nearby. She needed the watch to ensure Bernadette's vision came true.

"You teach at my school," Doug interjected, also recognizing the professor.

Alma elbowed Doug. He was fraternizing with the enemy.

"I've only got sixty dollars on me, but I can give you another sixty come payday," Alma said.

"It's not worth that much," Professor Cassidy said.

"I wouldn't want you to go over your budget," Haniel said to Alma.

"I have forty bucks," Doug said, pulling the money out of his wallet and giving it to Alma. "And since you seemed fine with the hundred-dollar offer, we'll give it to you today. After all, Alma called first."

"That seems fair," Haniel said. Alma beamed with excitement, which made Haniel smile until she hugged her friend. Haniel's expression turned sour for a second, but he regained his composure before Alma noticed. Doug had seen it, but no one but Doug knew that. Alma dug into her pocket, pulled out her part of the money, and added it to the forty bucks from Doug.

"I'll hit the money machine down the street and make it two hundred," Cassidy said.

Alma's face fell. Two hundred dollars was well out of her price range.

"I'll tell you what," Haniel said reaching for the money in Alma's hand. "I'll give you the watch," he said to Alma, "and I'll stretch your boots for free," he said, turning to Cassidy. He held his hand out for Alma to shake on the deal. They shook hands. Alma sensed Haniel held her hand for a second longer than necessary. When she looked up at him, he winked. Her heart jumped when he handed her the watch.

Alma held her new treasure in the palm of her hand. It was an old pocket watch that was missing its chain, but the weight of the metal revealed its quality.

"Sorry, professor," Haniel said.

Cassidy nodded and offered her hand to Alma to shake. "No hard feelings. It's a good buy at a hundred dollars."

Now that they weren't competing for the watch, Alma harbored no ill will. She pushed the timepiece into her pocket and reached out to shake the woman's hand.

As their hands clasped, the light in the room flared to a blinding white, and

the sensation of falling into a bottomless hole overwhelmed Alma. Snapshots of people, places, and things flashed into Alma's mind. A classic car. A woman with bobbed hair. A farm. Mountains. Books. Women. A castle. An old church. A broken coffee cup. The images flooded through her thoughts faster and faster until they were unrecognizable.

"Alma! Alma!" Doug called out, but it sounded like he was a far away. It was as if Alma was under water.

Alma tried to blink but was unsure if her eyelids had even moved. The images flashing in front of her weren't affected in any way. It was as if Alma's mind was dreaming in quick scenes on fast forward while her body was still awake. Doug's voice faded. Her vision blurred into a purple haze and then there was darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

DOUG CAUGHT ALMA BEFORE SHE COLLAPSED. HE KNEELED AND LAID HER DOWN on the floor to keep her from hitting her head. Haniel rushed around the counter to see if Alma was all right. Neither he nor Haniel understood what had happened, but Professor Cassidy had suspected Bernadette's daughter had experienced an Awakening. But in all the professor's lifetimes she'd never seen an Awakening outside of her own kind.

Doug and Haniel called to Alma and shook her gently to try to wake her. Cassidy moved closer to look. She could tell from Alma's flushed coloring and the moving of her chest that she would be all right.

"She should be up in a minute," Professor Cassidy said. "I'm sure she'll be fine."

Alma heard the woman's voice and blinked, happy to note that her efforts had an actual effect on her eyelids. Alma found herself on the floor with Doug, Haniel, and the professor staring down at her. Alma hated drawing attention to herself, and this was way too much. She sat up, imagining the dust all over her clothes and how ridiculous she must look.

"Careful, sweetie. Not too fast," Doug whispered.

She knew she must have scared her best friend for him to call her sweetie. He never did that. She gave Doug a reassuring smile.

"I'll help you help her up," Haniel said, slipping his shoulder under her arm and offering her his other hand to steady her. Doug had her other arm.

Alma was on her feet in a few moments. But the two men gave her a moment to steady herself. Haniel looked down at her, and for a moment their eyes locked.

"Let me give you my card in case you ever want to sell the watch," the professor said, stepping closer to Alma.

Alma broke away from Doug and Haniel to step away from Cassidy. "That's

okay," Alma said, and hurried to leave. She needed to get away from the lady that made her faint.

Doug followed after her, but Alma paused in the doorway and turned back. She'd wanted to talk to Haniel longer, but she'd probably made a horrible impression already. Feeling she had to say something, she said, "Thanks for selling me the watch."

"Anytime," he said, his voice low and sexy.

Alma blushed. Doug glared, but Alma didn't notice.

Haniel did but didn't let it show. After they left Haniel could tell Alma liked him at least a little, but that "friend" presented a problem.

Professor Cassidy wanted to chase after the girl, but thought better of it. She didn't want to scare her any more than she'd already had. The watch was definitely a presage, an object that psychics handed down from daughter to daughter in families gifted with the sight. But nothing had gone the way it was foretold. Cassidy worried Bernadette's death may have been in vain.

"Are you feeling okay?" Haniel asked the professor.

"Fine," Cassidy said, studying the young man. His expression seemed concerned, but Cassidy sensed his sympathy was fake.

"Do you think she likes me?" he asked.

Ah. That's what it was. He knew he was supposed to look concerned, but his crush was occupying his mind. "I think she might," Cassidy answered and smiled. It might be handy that this young clerk was so taken with Bernie's daughter. "Do you have her number by chance?"

"No," he said, realizing she rushed off before he could get it. "But I know I'll see her again," he said. He told himself he could reach her at *Valley Classified*, but he knew his father would be angry that he hadn't gotten her number.

"Do me a favor," Cassidy said as she put her business card on the counter. "Give her my card when you see her. I think I can help her with her fainting spells. My niece had the same thing."

Haniel nodded to the professor and put the card in his back pocket.

"I appreciate your help," Cassidy said, but she could see the young man was distracted. She hoped he would see Bernie's daughter again. None of this was supposed to happen this way, and Cassidy needed to figure out why. The professor left the shoe repair shop determined to re-read that letter from Bernadette and call an old friend for help.

IT HAD TAKEN FOREVER to persuade Doug that she was okay. Luckily, he had class tonight, and she'd convinced him not to skip. They made plans to carpool to work together the next day and hang out after.

Alma had parked her Chevy Sprint hatchback in the driveway of Tita Win Win's house, eager to rush up to her mother-in-law suite over the garage. She loved that apartment. It was the right combination of having her own place and being near family. She felt like Fonzie. Except Fonzie spent more time with the Cunninghams than Alma spent with her aunt.

A wave of guilt swept over Alma. She told herself that Tita Win Win never said much about it, so her aunt likely didn't mind not seeing Alma. Maybe she even preferred it.

Alma and her aunt weren't close. She only remembered her aunt visiting her once in Florida when Alma was in elementary school and sick. Tita Win Win had just become a doctor, and she'd come down to help. Alma wondered what Win Win knew that her father didn't. He'd been a doctor, and Tita Win Win specialized in geriatrics. How did she know how to help a nine-year-old girl? Maybe it was something that ran in the family. Regardless, once Alma felt better, Win had left. She hadn't seen her until the funeral last year.

Alma locked her car and darted up the white wooden staircase next to the garage. Her mother-in-law apartment, including the staircase, was shaded by a nearby lemon tree.

Alma smiled as she opened the door to her small place. She'd grown up with shag carpeting and boring brown furniture. Tita Win Win had decorated this apartment with light yellow walls and crisp, cream countertops for the kitchenette. The blond, wood laminate floor made the one-room abode look bright and clean.

Alma set her purse on her dining table that doubled as her desk and got herself something to drink, giddy with the excitement of finding a new treasure. She took a sip of her Diet Coke and set it down on the counter.

She knew it was stupid to be this excited about what was essentially playing pretend. Alma had played by herself and talked to herself since she was a kid. Except when she was a kid, she had an imaginary friend named Kayli. Alma laughed when remembering Kayli. In her teenage years she'd pretend to talk to rock stars or famous actors, but as a little kid, she talked to Kayli—her future grown-up self. How egotistical! And why Alma thought she'd have a different name as a grown-up was beyond her.

A stab of embarrassment combined with a touch of guilt struck Alma as she pulled the watch from her pocket. A grown woman of twenty shouldn't be playing pretend.

Most people give up their imaginary friends at a young age, but her little sessions didn't hurt anybody and gave her something to look forward to. Although, part of her wondered if she should be doing more with her life than just imagining she was somewhere else as someone else in her studio apartment.

Alma turned on the digital clock radio she kept next to her bed as was her ritual. She always turned on music in case she accidentally talked out loud. She didn't want the neighbors or her aunt to overhear her.

Alma turned her attention to the watch, and her reservations fell way. She sat on her unmade bed and waited for her imagination to take over. Sometimes her treasures would take her into fantasies of the past. It amazed her how much history she remembered from school. It was as if her little finds triggered her memory somehow.

She turned the watch over in her hand. It was old, but her imagination formed something more common than a palace or servants' quarters or cobblestone streets that she typically imagined. Instead, she found herself dreaming of just a regular house. It didn't look different from a house she'd find in her neighborhood now. Alma found herself sitting on the floor of a large kitchen.

"Want to play jacks?" a woman said to her. "We used to play it when I was little."

"Dora!" Alma heard herself say, her voice was high and childlike.

"You want to watch your Dora DVD?" the woman asked, tickling her.

Alma squealed and woke up laughing in her bed. Her radio blared an obnoxious commercial for discount electronics. The digital display read 11:30 at night. She turned off the radio and got up to brush her teeth for bed. It was odd that she'd fallen asleep. But her dream had put her in a happy mood. It seemed so real. What had she wanted? A DVD? It made sense at the time, but like most dreams once she awoke, her dream logic escaped her.

Alma changed into a baggy T-shirt and returned to bed. She fell asleep with the watch resting under her arm.

"I'M HOME!" her mother called out from the living room.

She ran from her bedroom down the hallway, through the kitchen, and into the living room, her socks slipping on the tile of the kitchen and then the laminate wood floor.

"Mom, did you get one?" she asked, excited.

Her mother held up the thin gray plastic-and-glass object. "I did."

A confused feeling descended over Alma as she stopped running. She'd known what this thing was when she'd run over here, but now she didn't.

"What's wrong?" her mother asked.

"I don't know," Alma said. "Where—" she stopped talking. The sound of her voice disturbed her. It was the voice of young child again, but not as young as before. She looked around. The kitchen she'd run through was the same as before. Where was she? Who was she?

Her mother kneeled down to be eye level with her. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

Alma looked at the woman. "You're my mom?" she heard her strange new voice say.

"Sweetie," her mom said. "This is important. Can you tell me your name?"

"Alma."

Her mother swept down and hugged her. Alma hugged back and looked over her mother's shoulder at the rest of the room. Although the living room looked like a typical living room, some of the things inside it seemed just a little off even though Alma couldn't put her finger on exactly why that was.

Her mother pulled herself out of the embrace and smiled at Alma. "I hoped you'd come and see me. I have so much to tell you."

Alma heard a buzzing sound from far away that distracted her. She turned to see where it was coming from, but she couldn't see it. She held her ears and turned her head.

Alma's mother said something, but the buzzing grew louder, and Alma couldn't make out what her mother was saying over the noise.

Her mother put her arms on Alma's shoulders and looked into Alma's eyes. Alma watched her mouth move. It looked like her mom had asked if Alma could hear her.

Alma shook her head no.

Her mom put her arm around one of Alma's shoulders so they were side by side, and held up the rectangular glass and plastic object that Alma had been so excited about. Her mother looked at the object, so Alma did too.

The rectangle had what looked like a kind of TV screen. It took a moment for Alma to register that it was their reflection. Was the object some kind of fancy mirror? Alma marveled at the screen. She looked like a kid, and her mom was just a few years older than Alma was in real life.

A ray of light burst from the rectangular object like a camera flash bulb. Her mother brought the object closer, and Alma stared at it. A photograph! On the little TV screen!

Then, Alma's mom turned the object over and pointed to the little picture on

the back—a silhouette of an apple with a bite out of it.

The buzzing grew louder, and Alma found herself in bed staring at her alarm clock radio. The buzzer screamed at her to wake up. She hit the black button.

A dream. A detailed, weird, and wonderful dream. Alma sat up in bed and discovered the watch in her bed. She'd forgotten to put it away. Alma smiled and tucked it away in the drawer of her nightstand. She liked her realistic dreams even more than her fantasies. She was sure it was the watch. What a find!

The dread she'd felt for the last few days was replaced by a giddy happiness. She sprang out of bed and into the bathroom to get ready for work. She turned on the shower, and while she waited for the hot water, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Alma could almost see herself as that girl of ten or eleven. She smiled, remembering the photograph.

The bathroom filled up with steam, and Alma stepped in the shower. Unlike most dreams that faded as time went by, the more she thought about her dream, the more her mind added details. The dream built on itself.

A little spider ran up the white tiles toward the ceiling. Alma could almost hear her mother singing "Itsy Bitsy Spider." It felt more like a memory than a dream. She'd never fantasized about a real person. And now she'd more than daydreamed; she'd dreamed of her mother—a realistic, vivid dream. Tears formed in Alma's eyes as her hot shower began to cool.

She'd woken up knowing what it felt like to have a mother. Except it wasn't true.

Even though it felt real, that woman couldn't have been her real mother. For one, it was two different women. How could that be? And her mind had to have just made up her mom, like all her other hours of daydreams and make-believe about history. An empty longing gnawed at Alma's insides. She had almost no knowledge of her real mother—just one singular photograph Tita Win had given her when Alma was in the second grade. Her father never spoke of her mom, and Alma had stopped asking. The woman Alma had seen looked nothing like the photograph—except that she was Filipina. Alma's mind had just made up a woman, and Alma's inner need for connection had filled it with weird dreams.

Alma remembered how she'd fallen at the shoe repair shop. Had she hit her head?

She turned off the now-cold water, stepped out of the shower, and mourned the loss of her mother anew.

The sound of a loud knock on her apartment door snapped her out of her haze of grief. Doug's voice was calling her name. She rushed out of bathroom into the main room of her apartment and spotted the time on her microwave. Quarter to nine. She was late!

CHAPTER FOUR

"YOU DON'T WANT TO GO OUT?" DOUG ASKED AS THEY WALKED TO THE PARKING lot after work. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes," Alma said, annoyed. He'd been asking that all day. The memories, or rather pseudo-memories of her mother, had preoccupied Alma. The more she thought about her dream mom, the more she remembered. Some of the things didn't make sense. They couldn't be real.

Doug unlocked the passenger door for Alma and opened it, but instead of going to his side of the car like usual, her best friend just stood there.

"What?" she asked.

"You were late coming down this morning. You've been quiet all day, and you don't want to hang out. Are you mad at me?"

"Doug, I'm sorry. You should have gone ahead without me."

"I thought you might be in a coma or something in there. You're never late. You worry too much for that. Are you sure you're feeling okay?" Doug put his hand on Alma's forehead.

"Knock it off," Alma said, pushing his hand away and poking him in the side. She knew he was ticklish.

"Okay, okay," he said. "But seriously. Did I do something?"

"I'm just tired."

Her friend nodded and walked over to the driver's side of the car.

Alma climbed into the passenger seat and reached for the seatbelt. All she wanted to do was go home, hold that watch, and dream about her fantasy mom. But had her obsession with her fantasy world gone too far? When she'd just daydreamed about being someone else in another place and another time, it seemed weird but harmless. Now she was rushing away from her only friend to go home and dream of an imaginary mother.

With the exception of her Tita Win Win, Doug was the only person Alma thought she could really count on. And Alma hadn't been much of a friend today. Between her dream and her sad thoughts in the shower, she'd been late and made Doug late, too.

Doug slid into the driver's seat with a sigh.

"I'll buy you tacos," Alma said.

"Really?" he said. The hopeful expression on her best friend's face cemented her decision. What kind of person couldn't spare time for tacos with her best friend?

"At La Fogata," Alma said.

"Yes!" Doug said as he took his portable CD player out of his glove box and plugged it into the cigarette lighter.

"What do you want? U2, The Cranberries, Nirvana?" he asked as he rummaged in the glove box through his CD cases.

"Cranberries," Alma said.

He slipped the CD into the player, and the music started by the time he was backing out of the parking space.

"Let's split some guacamole!" Doug said as he hit the skip button several times until he got to the song he wanted.

"I'm up for that," Alma said, feigning excitement. The quiet jangly introduction to the song "Linger" played in the background as Alma stared out the window. The truth was all she wanted to do was rush home and daydream of her mother—even if it wasn't her real mother. But that would have to wait. *Real friends and real life first.*

MEXICAN FOOD with Doug had been fun, but the moment her best friend's car backed out of the driveway, Alma dashed up the wooden stairs to her apartment. Once inside, she headed straight for her nightstand, grabbed her new treasure out of the drawer, and kicked off her shoes.

The same pang of shame revisited Alma. She really out to be over this by now. This was kid stuff. She sighed remembering Kayli. Her imaginary friend had been so realistic that when Alma was sick, she hadn't noticed being bedridden. But after Alma got better, she'd forgotten Kayli until recently. Had her fantasies stemmed from a deep-seated loneliness and a need to feel connected? When she was a kid, could it have been a longing to connect with a mother she'd never known? And now was it grief for her father?

Alma lay down on the bed still holding the watch. Her real mom had died when Alma was born, and Alma's memory held only one image of her mother in it—the photo of her Filipino mother pregnant, with big sunglasses, and her hair flipped at the bottom like Marlo Thomas on *That Girl*. Alma had always wondered what her mother's eyes looked like. But despite not being able to see her mother's eyes, Alma had gotten the impression that her mother was sad at the time the picture was taken.

An image popped into Alma's mind.

This was how her daydreams started, little images. No elaborate plots. Just simple everyday moments that sometimes grew into more. In some ways she preferred the less elaborate daydreams. The simplicity of them made her fantasy seem more realistic. Alma stared at the ceiling with the old timepiece in her hand and waited for her daydream to deepen. A dizzy and almost drunken feeling descended on Alma.

A scene flooded into her mind. It was of her mother looking in the mirror. Alma watched as her mother stood in the bathroom fixing her hair. As her mother puffed up the sides of her flipped do with the palm of her hands, Alma felt like she could feel her mother's hair. A thought sprang into Alma's mind about her red headband, and her mother rummaged for it in the basket on her crowded bathroom sink counter.

She found the headband and slipped it on. It would go perfect with her dress. A giddy happiness swept over Alma as her eyelids got heavy. Her mother padded down the hallway wearing her indoor slippers and went to the kitchen. Alma got the sense her mother was talking to her, but her eyelids grew heavier and heavier. And her dream jumbled. The taste of coffee. Her mug seemed to go missing. The glint of light from a spoon. Alma fell asleep.

Alma opened her eyes and sat up on her bed, the watch still in her hand. She smiled. She'd seen her mother's eyes. Alma rushed to her bathroom mirror and looked into it, half surprised to see her own face in it instead of her mother's.

So odd. It was as if Alma had been her mother. Alma wondered if she would have seen more of her mom if she hadn't fallen asleep.

She decided she needed a cup of coffee and headed for her kitchenette to microwave some hot water. Alma preferred instant coffee. It saved time. She filled the mug with tap water, popped it into the microwave, and waited for the timer to ding. Standing in front of the microwave, a little tack hole in the wall caught Alma's attention. It was from a wall calendar that had long since been thrown away. The stupid thing had been too heavy for the tack, and it kept falling down.

The little cracks in the wall surrounding the dark hole looked like spindly

legs. The buzzed drunken feeling from earlier returned. Alma chalked it up to being tired and let herself enjoy it even though that made no logical sense.

She stared at the wall until her vision blurred. It made the little cracks seem like they were moving. The hole in the wall, the body of what now looked like a spider, grew. Alma stepped closer to see it better. The sight puzzled her. In one moment it looked like an ordinary pin hole, and a second later it regained its spidery appearance.

She reached out and touched the hole with her index finger. The tip of her finger met a gooey tar-like stickiness. Alma pulled her finger away, and part of the hole stuck to her finger as it stretched open. Like in a dream, the oddity of the situation inspired curiosity more than fear.

A silver thread dangled from the opening. A real spider ran along it. A web! The spider turned toward her. In its inky blackness, Alma swore she saw a face smile, but then the spider scurried up the web and onto the white wall.

That's when Alma noticed the hole in the wall had grown on its own. It was now waist high and about six inches wider than her shoulders. For the first time, fear crept into Alma's consciousness.

Her mind imagined the hole swallowing her entire apartment with her in it. The spider turned to her again. A memory of a book she read as a kid popped into her thoughts, *Charlotte's Web*. And Alma realized this must be a dream. The spider on the wall was her Charlotte, and it had reminded her that she was dreaming.

Alma stepped closer to the hole. She heard the gentle buzz of an oscillating fan. The spider crawled into the hole, and the hole in the wall now led to another room, a bathroom.

Alma could see the square white tiles, and a woman's feet. She squatted down to get a better look. It was her mother.

"Mom?" she said. Her mother turned, but looked in the direction of the door. That's when Alma heard another voice calling out, "Bernie!" in the distance. The voice sounded like Tita Win Win!

"Be right there!" Alma's mom called out, but Alma wasn't ready for her mother to go. As her mother turned away from the mirror and opened the bathroom door to leave, Alma cried out.

"Mom! Wait!" she said as she scrambled closer, her right hand slipping halfway into the hole in the wall and into the dream room.

White spots flooded Alma's vision. The sensation of falling she'd experienced when she'd shook hands with Cassidy returned, but with greater intensity. Wind rushed around Alma's ears. Blinded and afraid, she tried to scream , but she couldn't speak, see, or hear.

A clawing, claustrophobic panic gripped Alma.

Darkness.

She found herself with one hand on the bathroom sink and the other hand on her forehead. The coolness of the porcelain under her left hand, and the warmth of her own hand on her forehead reassured her.

She'd opened her eyes and looked around the bathroom. Everything normal. Same yellow shower curtain liner, avocado tub, and white tiles as always. She'd been in the middle of something. Her date! She had to get ready.

She looked into the mirror and smoothed the errant hairs of her flip hairdo. More hairspray. She reached into the mirrored cabinet and grabbed the Aqua Net. She gave her entire head a fresh coat of spray, careful to place her hand over her eyes when she did the front.

Win Win yelled, her voice sounding so much farther away than the kitchen, "Are you in there?"

"Yes!" she yelled putting on her lipstick. The jingling sound of keys distracted her. Bernadette turned to see where the noise was coming from, but nothing was there. The bathroom door to her and Win Win's house was still open. No one was in the hall.

A hand shook her shoulder, and another hand was on her face. Something hot spilled on her hand. "Alma!" Win Win yelled. Bernadette paused. That name sounded familiar.

She blinked and dropped the cup of coffee on the floor of her studio apartment. "Ow!" she cried as the hot coffee splashed onto her foot. The burn on her hand and foot grounded her to this time and place. But she had been somewhere else. She'd been someone else. And it felt as real as right now.

"Alma why aren't you talking to me?" Tita Win Win asked as she patted the floor with paper towels. "Are you okay?"

Disoriented, Alma stood silent. A moment ago, she would've sworn her name was Bernadette who shared a small, rented house with her sister, Win Win.

Confusion clenched Alma's mind and threatened her sanity. Win Win was older than the part of Alma's brain that thought of her as a sister, but she was the right age that the other portion of her mind thought of her as her aunt.

Her mind tried to settle on one reality—the one where she was Alma Davis. More of her memories were of being Alma Davis.

But was a person made up of memories? Weren't dreams something remembered but not real?

Alma's chest heaved, and her hands and face fell numb as her mind cycloned into existential territory.

"Alma! You're shaking!" Tita Win Win cried out as she wrapped her arms

around her. "Are you cold? Are you scared? Why won't you talk?"

"I'm sorry, Tita," was all Alma could manage for the moment, her voice both familiar and alien. Win Win's petite body comforted Alma. Her aunt was a small-built woman who was only five feet tall, but her aunt's strength made her seem bigger than her size.

Win's embrace grounded her and brought her back to her apartment over the garage, to her own memories, to her identity. A question struck Alma.

"Tita Win Win, did you share a house with my mom?"

Win nodded.

"Did the bathroom have an avocado-green tub?"

Win Win hugged her harder and then stepped back and asked, "Is your hand burned?"

Alma looked down at it. Her hand was red, but it wasn't too bad. "I think it's okay."

Win threw away the paper towels she'd left on the counter from cleaning up the coffee and then took Alma's hand and ran it under some cold water in the sink. Alma knew Tita Win Win would speak when she was ready.

"You may experience some things that are a bit unusual, because of your Filipino side of the family."

"Do we have a history of insanity?" Alma asked.

"Let's say a history of unusual traits and gifts."

"Like what?"

"Psychic powers, healing powers, and other sort of witchcraft-type stuff," her aunt said.

Alma looked at her aunt in disbelief. Tita Win had told her about life in the Philippines and Alma's ancestors on the island of Siquijor, but Alma didn't believe in superstitions. Win didn't push the matter.

"Did you go to work today?" Win Win asked.

"Yeah," Alma said.

"Doug left a note on your door this morning, and it looks like your car hasn't moved since I left for work."

It dawned on Alma that Win was still in her white doctor's coat. "What time is it?"

"Half past five."

Alma dashed to the window and looked out of it. It was light out. Alma turned back to her aunt. "What day is it?"

"Friday."

Alma's mind reeled. She'd lost a day. She'd missed work.

CHAPTER FIVE

HANIEL FORCED HIMSELF TO SOUND CIVIL. HE'D CALLED TWICE YESTERDAY AND four times today. Each time he called he got the same ad-taker, Yolanda. The ad lines would close soon, and his father was getting restless.

"Yolanda," Haniel said attempting to sound charming, "Can you connect me to Alma please?"

"I can take your ad," she said.

"I don't have an ad, I just needed to talk to her for a second," he said, disappointed that his desperation had invaded the sound of his voice.

"Are you the person who keeps calling and hanging up?"

"It's kind of an emergency," Haniel said, knowing he sounded even more desperate.

"She's out sick today," Yolanda said and disconnected the call.

Haniel slammed the phone onto its cradle. He doubted Alma was sick at all.

"I take it she wasn't there," his father said.

Haniel's head shot up from the phone to his father's disapproving gaze. He hadn't even realized his old man had entered the room.

"She's out sick today," Haniel said, his voice tight with fear. He could see the repressed anger swirling beneath his father's way-too-still body.

"That's if she ever even goes back to that job," his father said. "She could have been spooked by that IM woman. You should have rushed that woman out of the shop!"

"But I thought Professor Cassidy was part of your vision," Haniel said.

"Not here. At that damn bookshop," his father snapped, a flash of anger contorting his face.

Haniel's heart exploded with fear. He hadn't seen that type of anger since—

The memory of his mother's death sparked fear and rage. Haniel fought to

tamp down his emotions. His father was dangerous when he was angry.

"Are you going to be of use to me with The Plan or not?" his father asked, his voice icy.

Haniel swallowed hard. His own anger must've shown, and his father wasn't at all pleased with him. Haniel's mind didn't even want to imagine what might happen if his rage-filled father believed Haniel would be of no use to him.

"I'll find her," Haniel pleaded. The two stared at each other. Haniel could feel the heat of his father's temper from across the room. "I can do it. You envisioned it."

"The Cassidy woman is going to the bookstore tomorrow," his father said tossing an opened copy of the *LA Weekly* next to the phone. "You'll be there early."

"Do you think she'll be there?" Haniel asked.

His father turned and left the room without another word.

ALMA STARED at her computer screen in between calls. Saturday afternoons were slow at *Valley Classified*, which she usually liked, but not today. She would have rather kept busy.

After talking with Tita Win Win last night, she'd gone to bed and had nightmare after nightmare. She'd wake up terrified and sweating, but with no recollection of what had frightened her. This morning, the sense of dread she'd experienced over the last month had grown. An image lingered in her mind of being lost in a violet fog trying to escape. She shuddered.

"Are you okay?" Doug asked.

Alma turned to her best friend. "Sure," she said, but his expression let her know he didn't believe her.

Alma worried she had schizophrenia or some other mental illness. Maybe Tita Win could arrange for some kind of brain scan.

"I knew I shouldn't have left you after you passed out at that store."

"It was nothing," Alma said.

Calls rang through to each of their stations and cut off any further conversation. Alma finished taking an ad for free kittens, and Rick called her.

"Yes?" Alma said, masking her irritation as she turned toward her boss's desk.

"Your doctor's on the phone. Log off so I can transfer the call." His voice was quieter than normal, and his expression lacked its usual arrogance.

"Thank you," Alma said, surprised by both the call and Rick's almost-human disposition.

"This is Alma," she said when the call beeped in.

"It's your auntie and doctor," Tita Win Win said with a laugh. "I told your boss I had urgent test results for you. Must be very urgent for a doctor to call on a Saturday. I sounded very serious when I said it to him."

Alma forced herself not to smile and just answered yes. She could see her boss's concerned face out of the corner of her eye.

"Listen, there's someone who might be able to help you," Win continued. "She's going to be at the Third Eye Bookstore tonight." Her aunt gave her the address. "I think you should come. I'll meet you."

"Is that what you would advise?" Alma asked, keeping her voice neutral as if she were talking to her doctor.

"When your mother and I came to America, we decided to forget all things from our Filipino side. It worked for me, but," Tita Win Win paused, "Bernie, I mean your mom..." Win's voice cracked and she stopped.

Alma filled in the blanks. She lowered her voice so no one could overhear. "Did that stuff you mentioned have something to do with her death? I thought she died in childbirth."

"Your mom was truly gifted, very powerful. Maybe too much to ignore. Like our mother. It may be the same for you. I don't know. I always tried to ignore these things, but..." She stopped again. "This lady knew your mom. She might have some answers for you. Seeing the announcement in the paper can't be a coincidence. Just think about it, okay?"

"How much time do I have?" Alma asked, forgetting to keep her voice low.

"It starts at seven."

"I'm working until eight tonight."

"Tell your boss you have to get an important test. Urgent. I'll write you another note like I did for you missing work yesterday."

Alma was sure that there was an ethical line her aunt was crossing with the medical notes, but if Win didn't mind, Alma figured she shouldn't either. "Do you think maybe we can get a brain scan for me?"

Win laughed. "You don't need a real scan for the note. I can write it without the scan. Those are expensive." Win said she'd be there in case Alma decided to go. They said their goodbyes and Alma hung up and stared at the wall of her cubicle, overwhelmed.

"Why don't you log off and take your break early?" Rick suggested.

Alma turned around to see him at his desk. His concerned expression made him look like a regular guy. This change in Rick combined with the flood of new

information about all this psychic stuff freaked Alma out all the more. All she could think to do was say, "Thanks," and logged off for her break.

Doug grabbed her arm. "What's going on?" he whispered.

"I'm just going to take my break," Alma said.

"Rick, can I take my break now, too?" Doug asked.

"Uh," Rick looked to Alma and then back to Doug. "Yeah that's probably a good idea."

Alma rushed off the floor and Doug followed her.

"Rick's being so nice, it's freaking me out," Alma whispered to her best friend.

"You're freaking me out! What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know."

"Are you really sick? Are you dying?"

"I'm not dying, Doug."

Doug exhaled with relief. "You're not just saying that to make me feel better, right? I heard you say something about death on the phone."

"No. I'm not even sick. That was Tita Win on the phone."

Doug took a seat in one of their reclining chairs. "Tell me everything, or I will kill you."

"I have to decide if I want to go to this thing at some weird bookstore tonight," Alma started. She didn't know how to continue. Doug was her best friend, and she didn't want him to think she was crazy.

"Does this have something to do with when you passed out the other day?"

Alma nodded yes.

"But it has nothing to do with your health?"

"I'm fine."

"You look different. You look paler than normal. Worried. You're not talking to me anymore. Is this about your dad's death? You never talk about it."

"Do you believe in psychics?" Alma asked.

"Of course," he said.

Alma turned to him with a shocked expression. "Just like that. You believe in psychics."

"Oh yeah. I believe in all that kind of stuff," Doug said. "Don't you?"

"What if I told you my mom was psychic?"

Doug smiled. "I would say that's awesome. That would mean you might be psychic. Are you psychic? Tell me what I'm thinking right now."

"I don't think it works that way," Alma said.

"But you have an idea how it works, because you're psychic!" Doug said with glee.

"Keep your voice down."

"What's this thing you have to go to? Can I come?"

"It's tonight at The Third Eye Bookstore."

"I know that place. I'm coming."

"We have to work."

"Rick thinks you're sick. So you have to do this test—"

"That's what Tita Win said."

"And I have to drive you!" Doug said miming clapping his hands so no one could hear his excitement. "I knew you were special. The way you took to knowing antiques and all that. So totally a sign."

"How do you know that?" Alma said.

Doug paused for a moment with an odd look on his face that Alma couldn't recognize. "I read it in one of those *Time-Life Mysteries of the Unknown* books."

"You're full of it."

Doug changed the topic. "I'll tell Rick we have to go."

"I haven't decided if I'm going," Alma said.

"Then we'll decide at lunch. At least take the free day off," Doug said.

"I don't feel good about this."

"You'll have to stop me, which we know you won't," Doug said as he left to tell Rick about Alma's urgent brain scan. He invented the brain scan part himself. He spoke in hushed tones, and Rick agreed to let them use their sick time for the day off, a bonus that Doug hadn't expected.

Yolanda was happy to get three hours overtime and all the ads.

When he returned to the breakroom to say they were free to go, Alma couldn't think of anything to say and followed Doug to the parking lot.

"Where to?" Doug asked Alma when they got in the car.

Alma wanted to establish some kind of normalcy, so she chose the most ordinary place she could think of to kill time. "The mall."

DOUG EXITED the parking lot of The Galleria and headed for Ventura Boulevard. It had been a relaxing afternoon of window shopping and lunch.

"How big of a natural disaster does it have to be to get better prices?" Doug said, breaking the silence in the car.

Alma laughed. "That's so wrong."

She hadn't visited the mall since the earthquake earlier in the year, but she knew her best friend didn't mean to make light of it. He just liked to shock her.

They drove in comfortable silence to the Third Eye Bookstore. It wasn't far from the mall. Alma had doubted that whoever it was would be able to explain what was going on, but it might be worth going to talk to someone who had known her mother. Alma needed to know if any of what she'd dreamed was based in reality. Tita Win had confirmed that she and her mom had lived together, but that wasn't enough proof.

Alma's thoughts wandered to her father's things in the garage. Alma had told her aunt to throw it all away, but Win had decided to hang onto it for "just in case." Maybe he had kept old photos or some of her mom's things.

Alma sighed. Nothing made sense. She glanced at the digital clock on the dashboard. There was still time to change her mind. She couldn't put her finger on what she was worried about, but her insides trembled.

Her thoughts turned to the watch. She'd given it to Tita Win Win last night for safekeeping. Alma didn't trust herself with it. Her newfound treasure frightened and fascinated her.

"There's your aunt," Doug said, pointing to Win Win waiting on the sidewalk. "I'll drop you off out front and park."

"Thanks," Alma said, smiling at her best friend. He'd taken all this weirdness in stride. He was a true friend.

"No problem," he said as he made a U-turn to pull up in front of the Third Eye Bookstore. "Maybe I'll get a psychic reading since you won't give me one."

"I told you I crawled into a crack in the wall and ended up in a bathroom as my mom. That's not being psychic, it's being psychotic."

"It was a vision," Doug called to her as she got out of the car. "I've heard they can be very realistic."

Alma rolled her eyes. Tita Win Win had said the same thing. But Alma didn't think it was a vision. Alma felt like she'd been there as her mother. Even her memories of those few minutes felt like her real memories.

"You came!" Tita Win Win said as if Alma had decided to come to a high school dance.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Alma said.

"Neither am I," her aunt said in her customary bright tone. Then, as if she hadn't said anything confusing, she asked, "Is your gay friend coming?"

"His name is Doug, and yes. He just went to park the car."

"I'll go and get us seats," Win said and headed inside.

It dawned on her that she was really going to do this. Her stomach roiled with fear, but she didn't know why she was afraid.

"Alma, is that you?" someone asked from behind her.

She turned and saw Haniel. His shoulders looked broader than she

remembered.

"I thought it was you," he said, walking up to her all smiles and giving her shoulder a slight pat hello. Alma's heart pounded from the brief contact and his proximity. "Are you here for the lecture? I didn't expect you to go in for stuff like this."

"I'm here with my aunt. I don't know much about it," Alma said, flustered.

"I read the book, and it's great. No doubt the talk will be good, too. Listen," he said, looking around. "I have to run to the phone booth and make a call, but you're going to be around after, right?"

"Sure," she said.

"Cool," he said. "I wanted to ask you something. So you can't leave without talking to me, all right?"

"Sure," she said, trying to act cool.

"Promise?" he asked.

"Promise."

He nodded and winked and then strode down the sidewalk. Alma caught herself watching him walk away.

"Who's that?" Doug asked, joining her on the sidewalk.

"Haniel from the other day," Alma answered as they both stared after him.

"Did you talk to him?" Doug asked.

"I think we have to go in. It's seven," Alma said, heading for the door to the bookstore.

Doug followed her. The store was crowded, so he whispered into her ear, "You are not going to keep me in the dark!"

Alma spotted Win and walked over to her. Doug followed. "Don't think I won't hound you during the lecture."

"Hi Doug. You have a boyfriend yet?" Tita Win Win asked. She always asked that.

"No," Doug answered. "How about you?"

Win laughed. They had this same exchange every time they met. "I'm too old."

"You can't be a day over twenty-nine," Doug said, changing his script just slightly. He usually just protested that she looked "lovely" or "I don't think so."

Tita Win shook her head and laughed her quiet laugh. Win's eyes would water when she laughed hard. She grabbed a bargain-brand tissue out of her faux designer purse—both just as good as the real thing—to dab away her happy tears.

Alma took the seat next to her aunt. She caught herself wondering if her mother's eyes watered when she laughed as well.

Doug sat next to her. "Tell me what the cute guy said to you, or I'll ask you about it louder so your aunt hears."

Alma knew that Tita Win would pester her with questions as much as Doug. "He just said that he wanted to ask me something after."

Doug beamed. "He's going to ask you out!"

Alma's face heated with embarrassment. She'd hoped that was the question that Haniel had for her.

"Here she comes. The one who knew your mom," Tita Win Win said.

Alma looked to the front of the room and saw the woman from the shoe repair place, the one that made her faint. Alma's hands trembled and sweat rolled down her neck. She didn't know why, but she wanted to run out of the bookstore and never look back.

CHAPTER SIX

ALMA FORCED HERSELF TO STAY SEATED.

Professor Cassidy thanked everyone for attending and introduced herself with a dizzying array of academic credentials. As she launched into her spiel about her book, *The Modern Relevance of Ancient Mystics*, she spotted Alma in the second to last row.

Stunned at seeing Alma, Cassidy stopped speaking mid-sentence.

Their eyes locked.

Cassidy sensed from the young woman's expression and tight shoulders that she hadn't expected to see Cassidy here.

Cassidy continued, "But you can read the book to hear my views on why past knowledge is so vital to us today. What I want to talk about here is a hypothesis that a friend of mine advocates that cuts to the core of how we think about life, death, and even how we perceive reality. I want to talk to you tonight about Dr. Leonardo Upton's hypothesis of The Infinite Truth."

Tita Win Win's eyes widened as she turned to Alma and said in a hushed whisper, "*Eternidad Paagiha*!"

Alma guessed her aunt was speaking in Visayan and gave Win Win a questioning look. Her aunt pointed with her lips, a Filipino gesture that Tita Win didn't use often.

Alma knew it meant to pay attention to the lady. Alma's stomach tightened so much it was hard to sit up straight. She turned back to Cassidy and focused on her speech.

"Dr. Upton hypothesized that reality was infinite and not bound by time or space. His theory is that as we evolve lifetime after lifetime, we develop a greater awareness of the infinite. This manifests itself in a myriad of ways. Sometimes children and even adults remember past lives. Some have visions of

the future, and some may evolve to the point where they can alter our limited perception of reality."

"She means psychics and healers like me and your mom," Win whispered to Alma.

Cassidy continued to speak for another fifteen minutes and then opened up the talk for questions, hoping that Alma would raise her hand. Cassidy could see she had the young woman's attention, but although several hands shot up, none belonged to Alma.

Hoping to get an intriguing question, Cassidy called upon the distinguished bald Mexican with a professorial demeanor in the front row. "My question is what is this greater truth The Infinite Truth purports to be revealed?"

Cassidy smiled. "That's what we'd all like to know," she began, and her frank answer garnered a laugh from the small crowd of thirty. "But on the way to the greater truth, Dr. Upton believed that glimpses of it were reflected in the eternal nature of the souls via reincarnation and those who could remember their past lives, such as the Dalai Lama and other lamas, healers such as Jesus, and moments of enlightenment purported by spiritual leaders throughout time."

"So no big deal then," the man joked.

Cassidy laughed. She thought she spotted a smile from Alma. She needed to get her to stay so they could talk afterward. Cassidy decided to take only a few more questions and wrap it up.

A woman in a flowing tie-dye dress and way too much turquoise jewelry jangled her spangle-clad hand in an overeager manner with hopes of being chosen. Cassidy had met her type before and called on the woman, hoping to stave off her wanting to talk afterward.

"I'm a big fan, and I just have to say how glad I am that someone of your education would validate the existence of those among us with psychic abilities," the woman said, pausing to put her hand on her chest. "It's just so hard."

Not one person in the crowd, except the woman herself, believed she was psychic. And she wasn't.

After a few more minutes of bragging, the woman got to her question. "Do you have any personal experiences with meeting psychics or any of the people you've mentioned?"

Cassidy's annoyance with the faux psychic lady dissolved upon hearing the rest of her question. It gave her the perfect opportunity to get Alma's attention.

"Only once. I met a woman named Bernadette who was a gifted psychic, and her sister, Winifred, a gifted healer. Bernie not only predicted her own death, but she also predicted the fact that I would meet her daughter Alma twenty years later."

Win elbowed Alma and whispered, "See? I told you she'd know."

The crowd gasped, but Cassidy paid them no attention. Her focus homed in Alma, and as a result the crowd turned to look at her.

Alma wanted to run, but the stares from the audience froze her in place. The self-proclaimed psychic lady in particular glared daggers at Alma.

Cassidy realized she'd made a mistake and drawn undue attention to Alma. She needed to distract the audience. "And of course there are those who remember past lives. I met one man who could recall unknown facts about Leonardo da Vinci that were later corroborated by documents discovered and translated two decades later."

The mention of celebrity and an equally salacious topic such as reincarnation returned the audience's attention to Cassidy. Wanting to keep their attention so as not to scare away Alma, she continued, "And I personally believe that most of the human race has lived before. Although, I do not preclude the possibility of new souls."

"Can you regress people to past lives?" a woman in the second row asked.

Technically, during an Awakening, Cassidy did something similar to a past-life regression, but she knew that the woman was talking about a practice utilized by a charlatan, who claimed to "regress" people by hypnosis.

"While I don't preclude the possibility that some people might be able to remember past lives via hypnosis, it's my personal opinion that many of those hosting seminars claiming to regress people in groups may not be providing a genuine service."

Sensing that didn't go over well with most of the audience, Cassidy added, "Many times children naturally remember past lives. Sometimes as imaginary friends or stories, and then as they grow older and conform to societal standards, they forget."

Cassidy glanced in Alma's direction, but was careful not to stare like before. She couldn't tell if her words resonated with the young woman.

Professor Cassidy thanked the crowd for coming, but before she could make her way over to Alma, the bookstore owner asked her a question.

Alma got up, hurried to the door, and breathed a sigh of relief when she hit the sidewalk. She hadn't even waited for Doug and Tita Win Win. Doug caught up with her, but he gave Alma a moment to breathe. Like a true best friend, he knew when not to talk.

"You don't want to talk to the lady," Win said to Alma when she joined them on the sidewalk.

Alma wanted to leave, but she also didn't want to miss Haniel. She didn't know how to justify staying on the sidewalk and not talking to the professor.

"Maybe I can talk to her for a minute for you," Win suggested.

Alma thought that would be a great way to get rid of Tita Win so she could talk to Haniel alone.

"Okay," Alma said.

Win smiled and went back inside.

"Is that how you know which stuff is the good stuff to buy?" Doug asked Alma.

She didn't know what he was talking about, and her expression reflected her confusion.

"When we mine for gold, you've never been fooled. You automatically know when you look at something if it's the real deal. Is it like a past life thing?"

Alma hadn't considered that particular angle on her antique collecting. Her thoughts had traveled to all the daydreams that the antiques inspired. Before she could answer, she was interrupted by a hand on her shoulder.

Alma yelped in surprise and whirled around to see who it was. Of course, it was Haniel. Alma's cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

"Didn't mean to scare you," he said, looking concerned.

"I wasn't," she stopped. She couldn't say she wasn't startled. That was obvious. "It's fine."

"Hi! Remember me?" Doug said, stepping closer to Haniel in a flirtatious way. Alma wanted to kill him.

"Hey man, how's it going?" Haniel said, not at all flustered by Doug's flirtation.

"Good," Doug said, stepping back. He shot Alma a look that said he was impressed that Haniel had handled his teasing so well. "I'll go get the car while you two talk."

"Cool," Alma said, hiding how excited she was to be alone with Haniel.

"The talk was good, wasn't it?" Haniel asked.

"I didn't see you in there," Alma said.

"I stood in the back."

"Cool," Alma said, and then she realized she'd already said that, but tried not to look awkward.

"I have tomorrow night off," he said, locking eyes with her and moving a little closer.

His light blue eyes mesmerized Alma, and she could have easily squealed with excitement at what she hoped was happening. Instead, she just raised her eyebrows and tried to act nonchalant.

"I was thinking maybe I could take you somewhere. Dinner? A movie? Both?" He stepped even closer, and his arm touched hers for a brief second. The

air between them heated with excitement.

Alma forced herself not to smile too wide. He liked her, and she didn't want to blow it by being too eager or acting like a dorky girl who had never been asked out on a date before, which is what she was. "Sounds good," Alma said.

"Like seven then?" he said.

"Sounds good," Alma said, repeating herself for the second time. Words were hard to come by.

He reached into his back pocket and grabbed a slip of paper. It looked like the back of receipt. "You got a pen?"

"Yeah," Alma said, scrambling for the zipper to her purse and digging out a pen from the bottom. He wanted her number!

He held out his left hand with the paper flattened in the palm. "Write your number down so I can call and find out where to pick you up."

Alma lowered her pen onto the receipt, careful not to press too hard to punch a hole, and wrote her number. She admired his strong hand and pretended that it was not big deal that they were standing so close, and she was touching him. But the truth was this was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her with a boy, and that included making out and second base-type stuff.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he said with a wink and then walked away.

Alma was so caught up in thoughts of her first big date she didn't realize that Tita Win Win was heading over to her with Professor Cassidy.

As Win and Cassidy approached, the professor marveled at how much Alma looked so much like her mother. She was just a few inches taller with lighter skin and a tad longer nose. But their expressions and the shapes of their faces and eyes were so similar.

Alma turned and spotted Cassidy just as they were a few steps away.

Cassidy waved and said, "Hello again!" trying to keep her tone light and friendly.

Alma was startled to see Cassidy, but there was no time to dart away. Why was she afraid of this woman? She seemed nice in person, but—

"The handshake," Cassidy said. "That freaky falling thing spooked you, didn't it?"

Cassidy's statement stunned Alma.

"I didn't know that was going to happen," she continued. "It usually only happens to people like me, not psychics."

"I'm not psychic," Alma said.

"Maybe you're like her," Win Win suggested. "You remember any past lives? Like when you were a kid and kept talking to people from the past until you got sick?"

"No," Alma said. It took a moment for it to register what Tita Win had said about Cassidy and even longer for her to register what her aunt had said about Alma's childhood.

"This was definitely the same watch your mom had," Cassidy said, motioning to the watch Tita Win was holding. "She showed me the engraving."

"I can't see it now," Win said, squinting at the watch, "even though you just showed me inside."

Cassidy bent down to point out the engraving to the much shorter Win Win.

"Here?" Win asked.

"No, that's a scratch," Cassidy said. "You'd think it would be dead center, but it's to the left."

"I can't see without my glasses. Show Alma," Win said, handing Cassidy the watch.

Cassidy stepped closer to Alma. "You see? It's an infinity symbol engraved on the back." Alma bent down to see, but the dark sidewalk made it difficult. "Here, hold it up to the light," Cassidy said, handing her the watch.

At that exact moment bright headlights shined on the three of them. Cassidy's mouth dropped open.

"That's Doug with the car," Alma said.

Cassidy's open mouth turned into a huge smile. It came true. The bright white light in Bernadette's vision were just headlights from a car! "Your mom, Alma. Your mom predicted this exact moment!"

Alma didn't know what to think.

"Here," Cassidy said, taking an old envelope out of her handbag. "Read this letter. Your mother wrote it just before she was murdered. There's a picture in the envelope she wanted you to have. All she wanted in life was to make sure you would be okay."

Alma heard Cassidy's words, but didn't comprehend much after the word "murder."

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALMA WAVED GOODBYE TO DOUG AS HE PULLED OUT OF HER DRIVEWAY. SHE'D been able to avoid the discussion about any "psychic powers" by talking about her date with Haniel tomorrow. And she hadn't told Doug about her mother's murder. She wasn't ready to accept that information, let alone talk about it. Guilt swamped Alma's entire sense of self. How could she be talking about a cute boy when she'd just found out her mother had been murdered?

Alma climbed the wooden stairs up to her apartment. The wood creaked under each step. The familiar sound comforted her. It reminded her of when she first came to live with Tita Win Win and how much of a refuge it had been to have her own space to grieve. Win hadn't pushed her to talk about things, the way her high school friends and therapist had.

Alma reached the top step. Something feathery swept by her nose and cheek. She stepped back and wiped her face. In the faint yellow light from her door lamp, she saw the web. A spider from one of the nearby trees must've spun it while she was out. Alma brushed off the remaining bits of cobweb and unlocked her door.

She sat down on her bed and reached for the letter in her purse. Alma had taken the letter, hopped in the car with Doug, and pretended like she'd hadn't heard what Cassidy had said.

But now, she needed to know. She took out the letter. It was addressed by hand to Ann Cassidy. Alma had never seen her mother's handwriting, and her eyes teared up thinking her mother had touched this very piece of paper. Alma took the letter from the envelope, and a photograph fell into her lap.

Alma picked it up and stared at the picture of her mother, pregnant and smiling with one hand on her belly, and the other waving hello. She was wearing a yellow dress and a red headband.

Alma's heart skipped as she looked at the headband more closely. It was the same one she'd watched her put on in the bathroom mirror—unmistakably the same one. She'd dreamed her real mother.

Tears threatened, but Alma's need to know more compelled her to hold her emotions at bay so she could read the letter her mother wrote to the professor. Alma's eyes gobbled up what her mother had written to the professor.

Her mom had envisioned that she might be murdered, but if she caught the man early, her daughter would survive. The letter stated that the watch Bernadette carried on the night of her death would come into Ann's possession, and she would meet with her full-grown daughter accompanied by a middle-aged Win Win. A flood of light would fall on them as Ann handed the watch to Alma and then the letter.

Alma stopped and replayed the scene earlier in the evening. The headlights. That's why Professor Cassidy was so stunned by the headlights. Her mother had predicted the scene on the sidewalk outside the bookstore! No wonder the professor had wanted to buy the watch in the shoe repair shop. She'd thought she was supposed to have it.

Dazed, Alma turned over the photo and read her mother's inscription: *To my daughter, Alma, with hopes that this will not be our only photo together. Love, Mom*

Alma stared at the words. Her mother's hope had not come true. She'd died saving Alma.

A desperate urge to see her mother overwhelmed Alma. She dug the watch out of her purse, held it tight, closed her eyes, and tried to remember how she'd gotten into that bathroom.

With eyes still closed, Alma's mind conjured up the image of the hole in the wall and how it looked like a spider. A vision of another spider flashed into Alma's imagination. This spider looked real, and he scuttled into a crack. She rushed to follow it. Wind whipped by Alma's face. Her gut jumped into her throat as if she were in an elevator cut loose from its cables and dropping fifty stories.

Darkness.

Alma blinked and spotted the leg of the spider as it wiggled in the crack of the sidewalk and scuttled out of sight. Her body felt heavy and bloated. She put her hand on her pregnant stomach, and her mind jumbled with alien thoughts and memories. A dog barked. She squinted to see it through the fence. She'd foreseen this. Wait! A panic swept through Alma. What is happening? Who was she?

Astonishment stunned Alma. A flash of clarity struck her. She was Bernadette again, like she'd been in the bathroom, but this time she'd retained

Alma, too.

Forward.

The thought seemed as if it were spoken directly to Alma. Could her mother sense her presence? Alma began to think and searched her memory. But her mind wasn't her own. Her memories were muddled with her mother's. Alma's brain couldn't get a clear picture. A thought popped into Alma's head that her mother's memories had been muddied deliberately. *But why?*

As she turned the corner, it dawned on Alma that the man with the cigarette was going to kill her on the front lawn. She looked down at her watch. The same watch!

Forward.

It was ten minutes to eleven as she crossed the street to surprise her murderer.

No!

She needed to stop her mother from crossing the street. Wind whipped by Alma's face as she was engulfed by darkness.

Alma found herself standing in the center of her apartment, her hands balled into fists, still holding the watch. Sweat drenched her shirt.

Alma collapsed into a heap onto her bed and cried. No thoughts or words entered her mind as chest-wrenching sobs of grief poured out of her. Tears she'd never shed for her mother or her father flooded down her face. She cried until she couldn't breathe and then staggered to the bathroom for tissues to blow her nose.

The dread she'd experienced earlier heightened to a near-panic. The lights in the bathroom seemed to dim, and, like in her nightmare, a purple fog surrounded her. Alma's legs turned weak. She grabbed the bathroom sink to steady herself. Her throat felt as if a large hand had tightened around it. Alma gasped for air.

Alma told herself to calm down. This had to be a panic attack. The room began to turn almost purple, and she felt as if she might pass out. An image of a hand around her throat flashed into her thoughts, and she told herself that she could make it open. She imagined each finger loosening one by one and took a deep breath.

The room seemed like it was filled with violet smoke. Alma blinked, and it evaporated.

Alma stared at her face in the mirror. Her round face, dark hair, even the slight gap between her teeth looked like her mother. She marveled at how many more features she'd had in common with her mother over her father. The eerie dread threatened to grow, and she splashed water on her face.

A thought shot into Alma's mind. What she'd experienced wasn't a vision like

the one her mother had written about in that letter. Alma knew, even though it defied reason, that she had been there on that sidewalk with her mom. She was her mom. Questions flooded Alma's thoughts.

Was all this possible or was she experiencing some kind of psychotic break?

Her stomach turned, and her knees weakened again. Dread crept into Alma's consciousness.

She pushed the feeling away, forced herself to stand tall, and dried her face. Despite her growing uneasiness, the idea that she might in any way get to know her real mother spurred Alma into action. And there was one place she could look that didn't involve falling into darkness. Alma marched downstairs and opened the side door to the garage. There they were. The boxes containing the last of her father's things. *He had to have tucked away something to do with Mom.*

DOUG GAVE up on sleep and got out of bed. It wasn't even half past seven yet, but his mind swirled with thoughts of Alma. She'd finally showed signs of being some kind of paramortal, even if he couldn't figure out what kind. But he hated to admit to himself the real reason he couldn't stop thinking about her. Her date with that Haniel guy.

Doug shuffled across the shag carpet of his bedroom to the adjoining bathroom to take a clichéd cold shower. They'd talked about the possibility of a new outfit for her date. Shopping would be a good excuse to call her. He liked shopping with Alma because she looked so cute trying on clothes.

He lingered in the cold water and chastised himself for not keeping a professional distance. There was no hope for a future with Alma other than as her Witness. He needed to focus on his job and keep her safe.

He dressed and ate breakfast trying to occupy his time until it wasn't too early to call her. At half past eight, he couldn't wait any longer. He needed to hear her voice.

Doug sat down at his wooden roll top desk and reached for the receiver of his *Sports Illustrated* sneaker phone. It had been left behind by a previous tenant, and Doug vowed to himself to buy a new phone. He untangled the cord and then dialed Alma. He'd expected to wake her up, but her line was busy.

His mind jumped to Haniel. That Romeo had gotten her number last night. Doug burned with jealousy. He waited a few minutes and called again. Still busy. He slammed down the sneaker phone.

He sat at his desk with his arms folded and stewed with anger until it struck him that he had another important call to make. The fact that his jealousy had clouded his mind so much he'd neglected his duties amplified Doug's shame.

So unprofessional. Downright pitiful.

He grabbed the ridiculous sneaker phone again, dialed The Observatory headquarters, and glanced at his watch. It was a little after four in the afternoon in London.

"Taylor here," his supervisor said.

"Doug Wyland reporting."

"Good of you to call at a reasonable hour. I trust you've more news."

Doug had been calling later in the afternoons and leaving messages, which was bad form. His mind hadn't been on his assignment.

"Alma Davis and her aunt, Winifred Fernandez, went to the Third Eye Bookstore to meet Professor Ann Cassidy."

"And this was deliberate? Not a chance meeting like before?" Taylor asked.

"Win Win set it up." Taylor cleared his throat, and Doug realized his error in calling Alma's aunt by her nickname. It hinted that he didn't have the emotional distance required for his job. Doug exhaled with relief noting that Taylor hadn't mentioned Doug's slip.

"Did Fernandez give a reason for their attendance?" Taylor asked.

"She said that it couldn't have been a coincidence that the professor had a book event slated for the night after Alma's incident."

"Were you able to get details on that?"

"Alma, I mean Davis, insists that it wasn't a vision. She was sure she'd somehow inhabited her mother's body and experienced a moment from her life."

Doug hoped Taylor would comment on this. In all of his research, he hadn't come across any phenomena that resembled what Alma had described to him.

Taylor remained silent, which disturbed Doug. He was accustomed to his supervisor asking questions in rapid succession.

"Listen," Taylor said. "You've been a great in your role as a Witness, but you're a tad young."

"I'm twenty-six," Doug interrupted. "My cover is that I'm twenty-two."

"Yes, of course. I didn't mean to insult you. It's just we hadn't anticipated that Davis would ever be in play again. You were originally assigned to the aunt, who seems to have opted for a life sans any paramortal activity, except maybe enhancing her position as a doctor. You asked to be reassigned to the niece, and we agreed thinking she was even less likely to be in play considering her father."

"You don't think I'm qualified."

"I think you're in danger of losing your professional distance and perhaps

even mortal danger. You're aware the mother was murdered?"

"Yes," Doug said, not knowing what to say about his boss's accurate perception of "professional distance." He'd been screwing up a lot more than he'd thought.

"The murder was brutal, and it's not the first one like it."

"I didn't get any intel about that," Doug said, surprised.

Silence. Doug refused to break it. He wanted to know what his boss knew.

"This is the kind of thing we don't have in our traditional records. I'd been wanting to tell you this for some time, but you've been calling in your reports so late in the day."

Doug's muscles tensed with anger at himself. "Do you think Alma might be in danger?"

"There is a possibility Davis might be," Taylor answered, pointedly using Alma's last name. "We think this person killing BEIs may have some connection to The Observatory."

"A Witness?"

"A possible relative of a former Witness. We're not sure. Are you familiar with the work of Leo Upton?"

"From the archives, and Cassidy spoke about his work last night," Doug said.

"Things are moving forward quicker than we'd thought," Taylor said. "I'm on a plane today, and I'll be there very late your time. Do be available for my call at your number."

Doug's jaw dropped. He'd never even met Taylor, nor anyone from the London office before. Whatever was happening was more serious than he'd thought. If Alma was the next Being of Interest targeted by the killer—

"No need to be alarmed," Taylor said in response to the silence from Doug. "An old friend called me and I said I'd visit. I'll have a place to stay nearby."

His reassurance helped a little, but Doug cursed himself for not checking in with his boss more often.

"One more thing, Wyland," his boss added. "Do work harder to keep your distance. I can understand the pull of someone like Alma Davis. Stuart Davis certainly did. But just remember, the consequences can be great, and not just professionally," Taylor said and hung up.

Doug set down the phone. The weight of the situation hit him. His boss was coming to town, and the man knew his professional distance with his subject was compromised.

And Alma was in danger. He couldn't trust another Witness to keep her safe. The Observatory mandate limited how much a Witness could interfere.

Doug dialed Alma's number again. Still busy. He imagined her phone

knocked over, and Alma lying dead next to it. *Calm down, Doug.* He needed to keep his wits about him. He grabbed his gun out of his desk drawer, snagged his keys and wallet, and rushed to Alma's place.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE COFFEE POT SPUTTERED AND FILLED ALMA'S APARTMENT WITH ITS reassuring aroma. She needed to wake up and continue her research, and she'd run out of her usual instant coffee.

The smell triggered a memory of mornings with her father. He'd always be up reading at his computer well before sunrise. They were one of the first households on the block to have a PC. Alma smiled to herself. She could almost see her father pushing up his glasses as they slid down on his nose while he read. She couldn't remember a day of her life when she'd woken up first.

Her father's things were scattered across her apartment. She'd unearthed a box of notebooks, his computer, a dot matrix printer, and an envelope containing every one of her report cards. He'd saved them all—even the ones from her senior year of high school when he was undergoing chemo.

A few tears slid down Alma's face. She'd been up all night looking for clues about her mother's life and sifting through memories of her dad. She was glad Tita Win hadn't thrown it all away.

Alma wiped her tears and poured herself a cup of coffee. In addition to her own memories, fragments of what she believed were her mother's memories popped into Alma's mind. A few seconds of her father laughing with her mom in the small kitchen of her old rented house—or rather her mother and Tita Win's old house. Alma smiled. It was similar to her and Doug. *But was it real?*

Despite going through most of the boxes, Alma hadn't found anything of her mother's. No photographs of her mother. Nothing that might have been her mom's. If her father's notebooks had any information about her mom, Alma wouldn't have known. Every page was written in a foreign language Alma didn't recognize.

At around two in the morning, she'd taken a break from the boxes and took to

her father's old computer to research Leo Upton and The Infinite Truth. She'd burned through half of the free ten hours she'd gotten from an AOL promotional CD and was disappointed to have only found out that Upton had died in the seventies.

Alma heard Tita Win exiting from the main house. She darted down the wooden stairs, but stumbled when she was distracted by a spider web caught on her face again. Alma gripped the railing as her ankle slid between the open space in between two steps. She managed to pull her ankle free before doing any serious damage, but got scraped up a bit in the process.

"Aye! Alma!" Win shouted. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, Tita Win," she said as she righted herself and wiped the cobwebs off of her face.

"Why are you up so early?" Win asked.

"I wanted to ask you a favor," Alma said. Despite her newfound surety in her mother's memories, a part of Alma still worried if she was undergoing some kind of identity crisis or brain malfunction triggered by her fall in the shoe repair shop.

Win looked at Alma and waited. Her aunt had a great poker face. There was no way of knowing what she was thinking.

"I want to get a brain scan," Alma said.

Win laughed. "Your brain is fine."

"I have health insurance through work, but I think if I went to a doctor they'd probably refer me to a psychiatrist and put me on medication."

Tita Win frowned. "There's nothing wrong with your brain."

"Then the scan will turn up normal. Can you arrange it?"

"You're saying if I don't you'll go to a doctor and go on medication," Win said. "I don't think you'll do that."

Alma sighed. Tita Win couldn't be manipulated. "Tita Win Win. I'd feel better—I'd sleep better, if I just knew for sure that I wasn't out of my mind."

Win paused to think about it. Then it struck her that she knew the perfect person to help Alma. "Give me a few days, and I'll take care of it," she said, stepping closer and giving her a hug. "And don't tell anybody about all this stuff. People don't like it."

"I already told Doug," Alma said.

Win laughed again. "That's fine. He probably asked about it," she said and then left for work.

Alma never understood what Win Win found funny, but she headed back upstairs, glad to have convinced her aunt to arrange to get her brain checked. A part of Alma hoped there was some kind of operable anomaly in her brain so she

could avoid—

Alma paused outside her apartment and tried to figure out what she wanted to avoid.

Change.

She'd hated how her father's death uprooted everything familiar to her. And whatever this was, it was already shaking Alma's mind to its very core. She wasn't even sure who she was anymore.

And yet the allure of knowing more about her mother—even if she risked losing her own sense of self and the world—pulled at Alma like a tractor beam. She shook off her uncertainty and headed back inside. Having stepped out for a moment gave her fresh perspective, and she realized in her manic quest for information, she'd trashed her apartment.

Alma moved the bigger boxes to the corner, and stacked the smaller boxes on top. A little square of white cardboard fell from one of the boxes. She reached down to pick up the errant paper.

It was a white matchbook with pink polka dots on it with the words Sands Las Vegas emblazoned on it. Alma opened it. Two matches remained.

The obvious wear on the match heads and creases of the cover showed its age. She wondered how it had gotten into her father's stuff. He'd never taken any trips without her. Had he gone before she was born?

She flipped the matchbook over and looked at the logo again. The logo had that hip late-sixties early-seventies look to it. It had to be around twenty-five years old. Had her mom and dad gone to Vegas together?

Alma smiled at the idea of her folks going out to see the Rat Pack. She searched her memories for any sign her mom and dad had taken a trip.

The light dimmed. Alma assumed a cloud had blocked the sun for a moment, but then she remembered she was in her apartment and her blinds were closed. The room darkened and the light took on a purple hue. Alma blinked, and the room was normal again. But when she blinked again, it was dark. She closed her eyes, and even the black of her own shut-off vision seemed tinted with violet.

The falling sensation engulfed her again, but instead of air on her face, Alma felt as if she were falling into a void. She attempted to calm herself by telling herself she might see her mother again. Her stomach roiled as if she'd eaten something spoiled. An urge to gag overwhelmed her, but she couldn't swallow or move any part of her body. She panicked, thinking she might choke to death.

Alma tried to open her eyes, but all she saw was the same purple-black blindness she'd experienced with her eyes shut. Had they even opened? Her ears rang with a maddening high-pitched squeal, making it impossible for her to think.

He wiped the last of the blood from his hands and reached for his pack of Winstons and matches. He lit a match. The faint yellow light illuminated the dark alley as he puffed on his cigarette to catch the flame.

His muscles remained tight with leftover adrenaline. He took a long drag and tossed the smoking match to the ground.

He leaned against the brick wall. The father had fought harder than the others, but in the end he'd won. That's what mattered.

He smiled to himself and relived the moment when he caught up with the man at the ice machine, pulled him into the stairwell, and slit his throat. The power of all those lifetimes flooded into him. Well, not all the lifetimes. Until he got better at his acquisitions, there would be some drain off, but he'd picked the perfect IM. So old. So many lives. Solid mind.

He took a moment and thumbed through his new thoughts and memories. A few fragments of Italian conversations flitted to the forefront of his mind. He marveled at how they made sense, but that wasn't what he wanted to know. He reached into the man's memories and pulled out lifetimes of philosophies and ideas.

He'd believed in the Infinite Truth, but like a passive man of science, he used to look for evidence in books and lectures. He scoffed at his former ridiculousness. He knew the true way now.

The secret to gaining knowledge wasn't to absorb it secondhand; it was to experience it, and if you couldn't experience it directly, you could acquire that experience. He smiled, remembering the powerful feeling of taking the man's life. He'd been horrified during his first acquisitions, but now it was different. He'd accepted his destiny.

He found himself shaking. At first he'd thought it was an earthquake, but then remembered he wasn't in California anymore.

A man's screams echoed through the alley. He yelled a woman's name. It irritated him, and he considered slitting the throat of this man, too. He'd absorb whatever bit of knowledge the insignificant one-lifer had and add it to his own.

"Alma!" the man yelled, shaking him by the arm.

How has this man gotten the drop on him? He went to toss away his cigarette to free both hands, except it wasn't there. He reached into his waistband for his knife, but it wasn't there. *What the hell was going on?*

"Alma!" Doug yelled again.

Wind as strong as a hurricane rushed by his ears as a bright white light

threatened to blind him. He closed his eyes, held them shut, and when the wind died down, opened them.

A man's face loomed inches from his.

"Doug?" he said, recognizing the man. The sound of her own voice snapped Alma back into her body. She looked around and found herself sitting on the floor, leaning against her bed with a folder in her lap.

"Alma, you scared the crap out of me! Why wouldn't you answer me?" Doug asked, crouched next to her.

Alma looked down at the matchbook. She'd held it in the alley to light her cigarette—*his* cigarette. Alma looked at her hands. Feminine hands. Clean hands without blood. But she'd killed the father. She could almost remember his face.

"Alma, are you okay?"

That annoying man interrupted her again. She turned toward him, wanting to slit his throat, until she caught herself looking into the concerned eyes of her best friend. "I'm okay," she said, her voice sounding alien to her.

"You don't look okay," Doug said.

"What do I look like?" Alma asked, unable to remember her own face. She reached up and touched her own cheek with a trembling hand.

Doug's face flooded with concern. His brow furrowed. His hand swept to her shoulder. "Alma, what's wrong?"

Her brain focused on the word "Alma." She knew it was her name, but only in an academic way. Her attachment to her own identity threatened to fall out of her understanding. Sweat rolled down her back, and bile curdled at the base of her throat. She needed a reference point.

"I've been here in this room," she said, touching the floor of her apartment, seeking reassurance in the solidity of it.

"Yes, I've been calling all morning, but your line was busy," he said, motioning to her modem attached to her phone. "You didn't answer the door, so I let myself in." Doug got up off the floor and walked over to the computer. "Can I put your phone back on the hook or are you still online?"

Alma gave him an impatient nod yes. "What was I doing? Was I in a trance?"

"You kept staring at that matchbook, and then you looked around like you didn't even see me until—"

"Until what?"

"You looked right at me, but..." Doug walked back over to her and squatted down. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"But what? This is important," Alma said.

"You looked like you wanted to kill me."

She had wanted to kill him. Even the thought of it now dredged up a hunger

coupled with memory fragments of the people she'd killed. The man by the ice machine. The annoying woman. Guilt tore at her stomach and terror weighed on her chest like the foot of an elephant pushing down on her seconds from releasing its full, crushing weight.

"Alma?" Doug said softly, taking her hand.

Alma erupted into choking sobs of grief and guilt.

CHAPTER NINE

ALMA STARED OUT THE CAR WINDOW, GRATEFUL FOR THE SILENCE. HER BEST friend understood she needed time to think. Doug's idea to visit Professor Cassidy seemed like a good one at the time. He'd promised that she could change her mind, and she knew he meant it. She marveled at how supportive he was being. She would've thought his support would have been more in line with getting a brain scan or going to the doctor. But like Tita Win, Doug assured her that she wasn't losing her mind.

It had taken her almost an hour to feel like Alma Davis again. In that alley, she had forgotten herself completely. She'd tried to tell herself that it was some kind of nightmare, but being in the alley felt as real as the moment she'd spent as her mother—maybe even more so. *But who had she been this time?* Without thinking, Alma's mind reached into her memories. An image of a scared boy hiding under his bed flashed in her mind, followed by a quaint, ancient-looking building by the sea, and then an old-fashioned looking lecture hall full of students.

"We're here," Doug said as he pulled into the Cal State Northridge parking lot.

Alma snapped back to the present. She hadn't even noticed they'd exited the 405 freeway. She glanced out at the parking lot and watched kids with backpacks and books rushing off to their classes. The summer sun beamed hot through the car window, and the warmth on her skin centered her in her own body.

Doug took her hand. The gesture struck Alma as out of character, but his hand around hers comforted her. *My hand. That's my hand. I'm Alma Davis.*

"Listen," he said, "from what you told me, this stuff is getting dangerous, and we don't even know what's happening to you. Professor Cassidy seems like she knows a lot about stuff like this."

Alma hesitated. For all she knew this Cassidy woman was the reason all of this started.

"She knew Leo Upton and your mother, Alma," Doug said.

Doug mentioning her mother sparked Alma's thoughts. If Alma had never met Professor Cassidy, she would have lived her entire life without any knowledge of her mother. And her mother trusted Cassidy. She'd sent her the letter with the photo in it for Alma. With so much happening, Alma hadn't really digested the weight of what her mother had written. Her mother had foreseen that night at the bookstore. She'd even made it happen by writing the letter in the first place. If her mother trusted Cassidy, Alma would, too.

HANIEL BUSIED himself shining a pair of shoes as he sat behind the counter. He wanted his father to leave him alone.

"Did you call her again?" his dad asked.

"She's probably just out."

His father stared at him. Despite hearing so many people comment that they "had the same eyes," Haniel found James's eyes hard and almost lifeless.

Haniel defied his father by returning his attention to the shoes.

James stepped closer, his height blocking the light. Despite Haniel's growing confidence, his father did have two inches and twenty pounds on him, and a temper that could kill. Haniel caved. "I'll call again in an hour."

"I can feel her power growing," James said.

Haniel fought the urge to roll his eyes. He was sick of his father's plan. "If I'm supposed to reach her, I will. Aren't you always saying, 'There is no free will'?"

"Don't get smart with me, young man."

Haniel tossed aside the shoes, pushed by his father, and headed for his room. The sound of his father's boots trailed behind him. He wished he could run the shoe repair shop without his dad and forget the man's stupid "plan."

ALMA'S FRUSTRATION mounted the more Cassidy spoke.

"What you're describing is different from what happened to me," Alma insisted.

"Listen, you mentioned memory fragments from other people. Those people are just you in another lifetime," Cassidy explained.

"Except you said the whole reincarnation thing ran in families. My mother was psychic. Tita Win is a healer."

"It's rarely immediate family. It's sometimes a grandparent or someone more distant."

"Tita Win Win told me my grandmother was a witch on the island of Siquijor. She said nothing about..." Alma paused, trying to think of the phrase. "What did you say you were?"

"An Immortal Mortal," Doug answered. He knew it wasn't a moniker that most IMs enjoyed.

"Yes, but you don't know much about your family beyond that. And perhaps you being from such a diverse array of paramortals in your—

"Para what?" Alma asked.

"Mortals," Doug answered. He wanted to add that Alma's father, Stu, was a Witness with zero paramortals in his family tree. It wasn't likely that Alma was an IM. But he couldn't reveal any of that without blowing his cover.

"Mortals with paranormal abilities," Cassidy explained.

"Like telekinesis? Maybe people who possess other people?" Alma asked, looking for an alternative explanation for what was happening to her.

"I meant more along the lines of psychics and healers. Maybe a bit of witchcraft, and of course people like me," Cassidy said. "We're getting off track. What's important is that we integrate your memories of your past lives before—" Cassidy stopped herself.

"Before what?" Doug asked, but his question was ignored by both Alma and Cassidy.

"So what's happening aren't visions. They're real," Alma said.

"Absolutely. And they can't be visions; they're of the past," Cassidy said.

"Could I be possessing people?" Alma asked.

Cassidy shook her head. "You're a wild incarnation. You're one of us."

"But you said you haven't seen a wild incarnation in centuries, and all your memories feel like memories. With me I feel like I'm living somewhere else as someone else and then have flashes of someone else's remembrances!"

Cassidy took a deep breath, rubbed her temples, and then steepled her hands under her chin, a series of gestures that struck Alma as familiar.

"Most of our kind are awakened around puberty or just before," Cassidy explained. "You were awakened at least seven years past the ideal time. It's been known to have unexpected consequences. For you, it's this identity dysmorphia. Now, I have a friend that can help you."

"What consequences?" Doug interrupted.

Almost at the same time Alma heard herself say, "Identity dysmorphia! You just made that up!" For a moment, Alma had thought she'd seen Cassidy smile, but the woman's mouth hadn't moved nor had her expression noticeably changed. But Alma felt as if she could see the woman had smiled on the inside.

"It's a side effect of your late awakening," Cassidy insisted. "And as I was saying, I have a friend who can help you integrate your past lives. As a matter of fact—"

"Let's say I am an Immortal Mortal," Alma said, impatient to settle this ridiculous argument. "I have memories of my mother. That means I used to be her. So you're saying I died and reincarnated as the child I was pregnant with."

"Well," Cassidy paused, steepling her hands again as she tried to figure how that might work. "Maybe you were someone who knew her," Cassidy suggested.

"I remember the night she died when she was walking alone. I saw what she saw," Alma said.

"Well, it's an unusually tight turnaround, but I suppose it's possible you're your own mother."

Alma folded her arms and shook her head. *Still so stubborn.* "*Ma, che sei grullo, Felix*?" Alma said without thought.

Both Doug and Cassidy sat up and stared at Alma.

"What did you say?" Doug asked.

Alma answered in English, not realizing she'd that she'd switched languages. "I asked her if she was crazy. It's ridiculous to believe I'm my own mother."

"But you said it in Italian," Doug said.

"And you called me Felix," Cassidy said, her voice hushed with shock. Only one person ever called her Felix.

A knock on Cassidy's office door interrupted them. Doug and Alma shot Cassidy a look.

"That's the friend I mentioned. I asked him to come here," Cassidy said.

Before Alma could object the professor called out, "Come in!"

"Ciao," said the swarthy man with dark hair as he opened the door. His jaw dropped open when he saw Alma. "*Birdie bella*," he whispered half to himself.

Alma looked up at him, not understanding what he'd said. But there was something familiar about the way the man stood.

"Leo," Cassidy said. "Meet Alma Davis and her friend, Doug."

Leo regained his composure shook Doug's hand and then turned his attention to Alma. "So you're the one Felix says is having trouble assimilating your past lives." His voice had an Italian accent.

"He called you Felix," Doug said to Cassidy.

"It's a nickname from ages past. This," Leo gestured to Cassidy, "woman thing is only the last three lifetimes. Some kind of penance I presume."

Alma smiled. "You're the only one who calls her Felix, right?"

"Well, bella," Leo began, "the only one in about a thousand years. Am I right, old friend?"

Alma turned to Cassidy and said, "So I couldn't be remembering that from a previous life, because this friend of yours is Leo Upton's reincarnation. So if I'm not one of you, I'm something else."

"What did I miss?" Leo asked.

LEO IGNORED his old friend's babbling explanation. Ever since Felix had chosen to be a woman, Leo believed his friend was more prone to being emotional. "Wait, wait, wait. Let me take a seat, and we'll talk about this rationally."

"We don't have time for your sexism, Leo," Cassidy said with her arms folded.

"You are cute when you are angry," Leo said as he grabbed a chair from the corner of the office and dragged it between Doug's and Alma's chairs. "If you could move over," he said to Doug, "we will all be more comfortable."

Cassidy rolled her eyes. Same old Leo. He wouldn't be rushed and insisted on being in the middle of everything. The man retained his Italian accent for nearly every one of his incarnations and always openly called himself Leo no matter what name appeared on his birth certificate.

"Now, what is this about you not being me?" Leo asked, turning to Alma.

"Did you die in Vegas?" Alma blurted out.

Leo's expression remained blank.

Alma continued. "In your life just before this one. Did you die in Las Vegas?"

"I believe so, yes," Leo said, keeping his voice polite and neutral. It definitely wasn't a coincidence that she looked like his birdie.

Doug frowned at the question. Immortal Mortals didn't like to talk about the way they died. Many of them developed psychosis as a result of remembering their deaths.

"Your last lifetime, you were murdered. How did he do it?" Alma interrupted.

"I can't remember," Leo said.

"But you've always had the best memory. Even the youngest Immortal

Mortal remembers how he died," Cassidy interrupted.

"There are holes now," Leo said.

"Holes?" Cassidy asked.

Alma's brain rummaged through her new memories. "Do you remember feeling like you were being drained? Like your life including your memories were being sucked out of you?"

Leo shook his head no. "I remember nothing but anger."

"He was killed in a stairwell in Las Vegas," Cassidy said.

Leo turned to Cassidy.

"Your throat cut like Irene," Cassidy continued. "I wasn't sure you would come back."

Leo nodded. "I see."

The room dissolved into silence.

"But I am back, and this young lady has questions and a story to tell," Leo said, motioning for Alma to speak.

"I remember parts of my mother's life. Snippets of yours. And pieces of other memories I can't place," Alma said. "But it's not just memories. I was there after you died. I was there just before my mom died."

"She felt like she was there," Cassidy corrected.

"Stop saying that," Alma said. "When I was in the alley earlier today, I felt like I was in the alley. I didn't even remember who I was. Remember?" Alma said, turning to Doug. "You shook me? What did you say?"

Doug didn't want to answer.

"You said that I looked like I wanted to kill you. And I did, but I wasn't me. I was someone else. It's like when I was in the bathroom getting ready for a date. I felt like I was my mom. I became my mom. Sometimes when I come back, I have a hard time even remembering it's me."

"That doesn't make sense," Cassidy said.

"I think it could make sense when you take into account The Infinite Truth," Leo countered. Everyone turned to Leo. "If you imagine that the world is merely an out-picturing of consciousness. From there, imagine that the glimpse of a piece of that truth is what makes it possible for some people like us," Leo said, pointing to Cassidy and himself, "and even small children to remember past lives."

"So you two realized the world wasn't real and then all of the sudden you could remember past lives?" Alma asked.

"It's not that we realized that the world wasn't real, but that a part of us, a part of this consciousness, was 'awakened' to that portion of the truth. You don't have to understand gravity to be aware of its effects. The law holds true regardless."

"Like gravity?" Alma said, her lack of understanding and underlying doubt evident in her confused expression and upward lilt of her voice.

"You see, the body is just a projection of our minds of a shell that holds onto the eternal. People have always believed there was something more to being human. That's why people talk about the 'soul' and the 'holy spirit.' It's hard-wired into us to believe in something undefinable and unknowable—something bigger than ourselves.

"You don't have to believe, but let's say that if it is possible for a portion of us to become aware of the Infinite Truth and realize the separation between one life and the next is just an illusion, you can take it even further. For instance, some may be able to peek through these illusions and see the future, like psychics.

"Others like witches and healers see through the illusion of the material world enough to alter the appearance of sickness or manipulate the world as perceived through the senses. It stands to reason that one could see an even greater truth. That there is no separation from what is infinite but our perception of such. So if we can retain our awareness of past lives, it stands to reason that a person's awareness allows them to perceive life from the perspective of a different person in time and space. You can imagine that the separation from one person to another is also an illusion. "

Leo leaned back in his chair.

The others traded looks.

"I don't get it," Doug said.

"I almost get it," Cassidy said.

"What about you, bella?" Leo said, turning to Alma.

Alma shrugged. "There was something about me getting different perspectives. Like being other people who lived before."

Leo moved his head from side to side. "Yes, you can say that."

An odd thought struck Alma. "It's kind of like I'm time-traveling into the bodies of other people, and my time machine is my thoughts."

Leo laughed. "Not your thoughts exactly, but yes. Your time machine is your *awareness* of different points of consciousness."

"What's the difference?" Doug asked.

"When you're talking about the Infinite Truth you realize that all of what we call reality is an illusion, and you see the truth about time," Leo said with a smile.

"What's the truth about time?" Doug asked.

"There is no time," Leo said, widening his eyes and waggling his eyebrows.

"Because nothing is real," Alma said.

Leo nodded yes. Alma sighed. "I don't see how 'nothing is real' helps me," she said.

"Time is as real an illusion as the illusion of Alma as a separate entity of the totality of consciousness. So for practical purposes, you can say you're as real as time is."

"Fine," Cassidy said. "So she remembered to call me Felix, because she time-traveled into you. Is that it?"

"More or less," Leo said.

"Nope," Doug said. "Don't get it at all."

"I thought I did, but I kind of don't," Alma confessed.

"Okay, imagine this," Leo said. "You're in the car and you're driving. You can see what's out the window, but you know what you see isn't all that exists in the world. You understand that there's more outside your immediate view. You remember the things you saw when you drove past, but not what's front of you. But just because you're not seeing them in this very moment doesn't mean those things no longer exist. They aren't gone. They're just gone from your point of view. You see, your body is the car, the view is your life, and the movement of the car is time.

"Now imagine that a psychic is someone with a telescope that can see ahead farther on the street. Sometimes the psychic is wrong, because the car took an unexpected turn, but what they saw still exists and always existed, just not in view of that particular car. So, if you're a time-traveler you can even see more streets more times, because you can become any car on the road, and follow where it moves."

"But when I travel in time, I'm turning into other cars? How is that possible?" Alma asked.

"Your body is the car. You are not the car. What makes you, the real you, the infinite you, is the same as what makes the car, the street, everything. You are Infinite. We only perceive things as separate. But what makes you the separate entity known as the person Alma housed in a body, is the car."

"So she saw the world from your perspective," Cassidy said. "She stepped into your car so to speak."

Alma frowned, remembering the alley. "No," Alma said. "I was smoking a cigarette in an alley, marveling at the power and memories I'd acquired from a man I'd just killed. The man I became had acquired some of Leo's memories by killing him."

"You mean like a paramortal that can drain someone's life force, including their power," Doug said without thinking. He'd read legends about this type of paramortal in The Observatory archives that were supposedly the origins of

vampire stories, but he didn't think that was true.

"That kind of paramortal exists?" Alma asked.

"I've never heard or seen one in all of my lifetimes," Cassidy said.

"Well, there are legends about immortal beings that drain the life force out of others," Leo said.

"Like what?"

"Vampires," Leo said.

Cassidy rolled her eyes. "We're men of science, not superstition. What's next, unicorns?"

"Some of us have gone missing in the last few lifetimes," Leo said.

"And you think a vampire got them," Cassidy said.

"There are the stories about being erased by another paramortal. An ancient one."

"But those are just stories," Cassidy said, her voice less certain.

"People think tales of reincarnation and time travel as 'just stories,'" Leo said.

"And you think that the loss of your memory is related to one of these life-draining paramortals?" Cassidy asked.

"It could be. We need to find out who and where this vampire is before he—" Leo said, his gaze falling on Alma, and he stopped talking.

"Before he comes after you again?" Cassidy asked.

"Or one of us," Leo said.

"You mean Alma," Doug said. "You mean before whoever this life-force-sucking killer comes after Alma."

Alma's thoughts drifted back into her mind to look for memories from the killer. "Acquires," Alma said. "He calls it acquiring."

CHAPTER TEN

DOUG DROPPED ALMA OFF AT HER APARTMENT AND MADE HER PROMISE TO CALL if anything odd happened. He said he had to rush home to do his homework for class that night, but the truth was he needed to be on the ready for his boss's call. He didn't want to leave Alma alone.

Alma reassured him that she would be okay. All she wanted to do was go to sleep. They vowed to talk every couple of hours. Doug made her promise to pick up, or he'd run over to her apartment assuming something was wrong.

Alma walked up the stairs and let herself into her apartment. She'd forgotten about this mess she'd left the place in, but she was way too tired to clean. Her brain hurt from all the information about The Infinite Truth. She noticed a note on her refrigerator and crossed the room to look at it. It was from Tita Win: *Glad to see you were going through your father's things. I will be out late tonight. Don't wait up. I had some leftover chicken adobo. It's in the Tupperware on the middle shelf. Don't worry about the brain scan. I've got it covered. Try not to think too much.*

Alma laughed at her aunt's advice not to think too much. After her meeting with Leo, her brain was fried. Alma opened the refrigerator and ate a bit of the leftovers from her aunt without bothering to grab a fork or even heat it up. Tita Win Win's home cooking never failed to make Alma feel better. She left the other half to eat later, rinsed her fingers in the sink of her kitchenette, and crawled into bed.

She slept without dreaming until the sound of her phone woke her up. Alma opened her eyes and waited for her answering machine to kick in, but the ringing continued. She remembered she'd unplugged her answering machine to plug in the modem. She got out of bed and answered the phone.

"Hello," she said, remembering her promise to Doug and expecting to hear

his voice.

"Hey, how are you?"

Alma's half-asleep brain didn't recognize the voice on the other end, but she didn't want to admit it. "Nothing much. How about you?" she asked, trying to make herself sound awake despite reality.

"I've been trying to reach you all day. I got worried you'd given me a fake number," Haniel said. He'd planned on using it as a joke before he called, but his confidence nosedived when she didn't seem to know it was him. "You didn't forget about our date, did you?"

"Haniel!" Alma said. "Oh my God! I'm so sorry. I fell asleep. I'm not all the way awake."

He laughed, and Alma tried to hide her panic along with the fact that she'd forgotten their date. They made small talk. He tried to sound cool. She tried not to giggle too much.

"I'm supposed to pick you up in an hour, so I better hop in the shower," Haniel said. "Do you live in the Valley?"

Alma said yes, gave him her address, hung up, and panicked. Only an hour to get ready and nothing to wear!

Before she rushed to her closet, she remembered Doug would be calling all night to check up on her and dialed him right away to let him know she'd be safe and not on her own tonight.

"I'll call you when I get home," she promised her best friend. She could tell he'd rather she didn't go on the date. A part of her almost thought he was jealous, but then she reasoned that he was worried about her safety.

ALMA DASHED down the wooden stairs when she heard his car in the driveway. She'd trashed her already messy place trying to find a decent outfit. With Doug's advice, she'd opted for jeans instead of a skirt so she could skip shaving her legs and have more time to blow dry her hair and do her makeup. Doug said not shaving her legs doubled as protection against sleeping with Haniel on the first date.

Alma hadn't even considered sex, and the idea of it added to her nervousness. She hadn't even told Tita Win she was going out. Thank goodness her aunt would be out late tonight, too. Win was old-fashioned.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Alma didn't notice Haniel standing at the bottom of the stairs. She smacked into his chest with hers so hard, the underwire in her

push-up bra stabbed her.

She hissed at the bra jab as she took a quick step back and tripped on the bottom step.

Haniel caught her by the shoulders and kept her from falling. "I'm sorry. I thought you saw me. Are you okay?"

Humiliation heated Alma's face. "That's just how I greet people," she joked. "Are you okay? I body checked you pretty hard."

He laughed. "Let's get you on solid ground." He guided her by the shoulders off the step and onto the foot of dirt at the bottom of the driveway.

Alma allowed herself to be led. Her cheeks flushed with excitement. In the two steps from the stairs, Haniel slid his arm around her shoulder and turned his body so they walked side by side. The move was so natural and smooth, it amazed Alma. Her experience with boys was solely in high school and could be summed up in one word—awkward.

Alma didn't dare look up at him for fear he would see her grinning like an idiot. Instead she leaned closer to his side so he couldn't see her face.

When they reached the car Haniel unlocked the passenger door and opened it for her. Alma stepped away from his side and turned to face him. "Thank you," she said, looking up at him.

"My pleasure," he said, not hiding his smile. "You look great by the way."

She tucked her long dark hair behind her ear in a shy way that Haniel found adorable and ducked into the car. He waited until she was seated before shutting the door for her, and with a bounce in his step, headed around the front of the to driver's side.

Even from his hiding place in the bushes across the street, Doug could see the date had started off well. He'd sworn for a moment that the guy was going to kiss her when he opened the car door for her, but Haniel hadn't. Doug put away his mini-binoculars while Haniel headed for the driver's seat and dashed around the corner to where he'd hidden his car.

It was his job to be a Witness, and even though he'd made Alma promise to call him after her date, he needed to make sure this guy wasn't a creep or worse, a vampire. The timing of when this Haniel character met Alma was too convenient. Or at least that's what he told himself as he followed Haniel's white Ford Mustang, making sure to keep enough distance so Alma wouldn't spot his car.

Haniel headed toward Woodman Avenue not sure where he wanted to take Alma. Neither of them noticed their spy. "I brought the *LA Weekly* in case you wanted to check out a movie," Haniel said. "*Forrest Gump* is playing at the Century Eight."

"My aunt saw it already. She said it was good, but it was long," Alma said.

"Dinner then?" Haniel asked.

Alma nodded yes. Haniel suggested Casa Vega on Ventura. Alma had never been there before, but she loved guacamole so she agreed. As they neared the restaurant, Alma noticed an open meter. "There's a spot."

"They have valet," Haniel said with a smile.

"But the meters are free at night."

Haniel pulled into the spot. Money wasn't an issue for him, but she didn't know that. He'd chosen a modest sports car for their date, but Alma hadn't even noticed the car at all. His father had mentioned that her mother wasn't materialistic either. But that kind of thing wasn't a matter of heredity, was it?

Haniel rushed to open the door for her and help her out of the car. She was younger and was the kind of "nice girl" that he'd never taken interest in before, but since the moment he spoke to her on the telephone, Alma Davis defied his expectations. She was funny, and in those jeans and that low-cut T-shirt, she was darn hot. He opened the door and held his hand out for hers.

Alma got out of the car, impressed at Haniel's good manners. She'd never had a date open the door for her. His arm swept behind her, and his hand touched the small of her back as if he were guiding her across the street. She tried not to let her smile get too big and toothy, but her giddiness made her legs wobble.

Doug watched from his car down the street. This guy was a smooth operator. Opening the door was a classy move and an easy way to initiate physical contact without being pushy. It didn't look like Alma minded. As Doug watched them go inside, he leaned his seat back and got comfortable in his car. It looked like it might be a long night. He could only hope his boss wasn't trying to reach him right now.

HANIEL ORDERED a margarita pitcher along with chips and guacamole. Alma's eyes peeked up from the menu. She waited for the waitress to leave and whispered to Haniel. "I'm not old enough to drink yet."

He smiled. "I won't tell if you don't. When's your birthday?" he asked, even though he knew the answer.

"September first," she said.

Her answer caught him off guard. It was two days later than the date his father had given him—another inaccuracy in his father's "vision." "Maybe I can be your date for your birthday party."

"We'll see," she answered in a playful way.

Most women beamed at the idea of a second date let alone an allusion to dating for a few months, but Alma let him know not to get too far ahead of himself. Her answer impressed and intimidated him.

"How old are you?" she asked. A part of her worried he was over thirty. He didn't look it, but he seemed more worldly than she was.

"I'm twenty-three," he said, shaving three years off the truth.

Alma nodded and smiled. Haniel was glad he lied.

The waitress came and delivered their margaritas. Haniel whispered into Alma's ear, "But just in case you don't like your margarita, what do you want as a backup?" His cheek brushed against her long, dark hair, and his shoulder pressed against hers. The ache below his waist surprised him.

"Just some water," Alma said.

She was sweet, and he found himself enjoying that.

They ordered dinner, and Alma took a sip of her strawberry margarita. She thought the margarita would've been better without the sour taste of whatever alcohol they put in it, but she wanted to be grown-up so she sipped a little more. Each sip tasted better.

Alma tried to focus on Haniel instead of looking at all the rest of the girls in the room. They were dressed so much sexier and seemed more sophisticated than her. She'd thought the place was just a restaurant, but there was a large bar area packed with people. The crowd made her anxious, but they had a nice, semicircular booth in the back.

"Do you like it?" Haniel asked, removing the straw and drinking straight from the glass.

Alma nodded and took another sip, enjoying the cold of her margarita. "What's this stuff around the outside?"

"Salt," he said. "Lick some and then drink," he said, doing the same thing.

She took a little lick on the side of the glass and then drank from her straw. Between her pink tongue on that glass and her cleavage, sweet Alma had quite an effect of him. He looked away to calm himself. He'd been to this place a few times. The bartender winked at him and gave him a thumbs up on his date. Haniel nodded at the guy, but didn't smile. Haniel didn't like what the guy seemed to be insinuating.

"Did you say you worked at the shop with your dad?" Alma said.

Haniel's attention snapped back to Alma. "Yeah. He bought the place about a year ago. I like it."

They enjoyed their meals. Alma ate tamales and tacos, and Haniel had his usual burrito combo plate. He took the opportunity to slide closer to her in the

booth over the course of the meal.

"Do you like your job at *Valley Classified*?" he asked, knowing that keeping her talking was the key to a winning her trust. He refilled both their margarita glasses and signaled for a second pitcher when she wasn't looking.

"It's fun working with Doug, but it's obvious that the place won't last more than a few years."

"Doug," Haniel said, sensing a rival. "That's the guy who came with you to buy the watch and was with you at the lecture."

Alma nodded and sipped her margarita.

"You guys spend a lot of time together then," he said, picturing Doug. The man was tall, in shape, and good-looking. But why hadn't his rival closed the deal with Alma yet?

"Every day just about," Alma said.

Haniel did not like the idea of her spending every day with that guy. He tried to act cool. "So what's the deal? Are you guys a couple? Exes? Have an open thing or what?" His tone was a lot less laid back than he'd planned.

Alma laughed and tapped his arm while she did it. "I'm not Doug's type."

Haniel enjoyed the brief bit of contact, but not the answer. It implied that the guy would be able to be with Alma if he'd liked her. "If you're not his type, he's an idiot."

"No, he's gay."

Haniel laughed. "Aha! Now it makes sense."

"You were jealous," Alma giggled and gave him a playful shove. Then she took another big sip of her margarita, which she realized tasted much better now. She enjoyed not being nervous anymore.

"Maybe a little," he smiled back. Her giggles hadn't gone unnoticed. Haniel was sure sweet Alma had caught a little margarita buzz. He scooted closer to her as he refilled her glass.

"Nice watch," Alma said, looking down at his left hand resting on his table.

"Thanks," he said, not realizing he'd made a mistake in wearing it.

"It's an antique Rolex, isn't it?" she said, putting her hand on his arm.

He liked the way her hand felt and noticed she'd scooted closer to him for the first time. Her leg leaned into his.

"Can I see it?" she asked.

He and his dad had already decided on the test object, an antique necklace. "That's right, you like antiques," he said, reaching into his pocket for the necklace. "I wanted to get your thoughts on this necklace."

Alma giggled. "I'm not as good with jewelry as I am with music boxes and watches. Let me look at the watch. I promise I won't break it."

She already had her hands on his wrist and was unbuckling the band. What difference did it really make? He could test her twice this way, and he loved the sensation of her taking off his watch. An image of her with that same excited look on her face unbuckling something else flashed in his mind. Damn. He had it bad for this girl.

He needed to be cool and stay in control. He made it a point to slow his drinking.

Alma examined the watch. Its quality surpassed all the watches she'd purchased from *Valley Classified* ads. It wasn't too old, but judging from the hum it had to be from around World War II.

"This must be almost fifty years old," Alma said.

"It is," Haniel said snapping out of the haze of his infatuation. "What made you guess that?"

"Just a hunch," she said.

He needed more than that to go on. "I've been meaning to ask what you thought about Professor Cassidy's talk last night. I was excited to hear her speak about Leo Upton."

Alma had been so absorbed in her own bewilderment yesterday that she hadn't even wondered why Haniel had been at the bookstore. "Did you call the professor about the music box? Is that why she was at the shop when I got there?"

"No! I wouldn't have done that to you. You were the only buyer for that music box. She came into get her boots fixed. It was just a weird coincidence."

"And another coincidence that you were going to see her at the bookstore?" Alma asked.

"No," he lied. "I talked to her after you left and told her I was a fan. She told me about the bookstore thing. The crazy coincidence was you being there. I thought I was going to have to keep calling *Valley Classified* over and over hoping to get you again."

His explanation made sense to Alma. Her attention floated back to the watch. It buzzed with energy, and it wasn't just the body of the watch. The buckle and band had to be the original, which was unusual.

"Are you getting anything off the watch?" Haniel asked, but he could tell she didn't hear him.

Alma looked almost hypnotized by his Rolex as she slipped the band around her wrist and fastened the buckle. She blinked a few times and then kept her eyes closed.

"Are you okay?" he asked, worried she would get sick.

Alma's eyes opened. "Is this from World War II?"

"Yeah, you asked me that already," he said, relieved that her blinking was probably from being a little drunk. If she'd gone back in time like his father predicted she could do, Haniel was sure he'd be able to tell.

He was wrong.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FALLING SENSATION DIDN'T FRIGHTEN ALMA AS MUCH AS IT HAD BEFORE. IT surprised her how aware she was of what was happening. She blinked, and she was Alma on a date with Haniel. A blink later, she was Irene Polk sitting in her family's den writing a birthday card to her father.

Irene remembered with excitement winning the bid at auction all those years ago. It looked exactly like the one she'd possessed during the war. She reached for the watch one last time before she packed it away. It hummed in her hands.

The humming surprised Alma, as did the ability to perceive this moment—the evening of May 13, 1985—as both Irene and Alma surprised her. Incredible!

Irene put on the watch. The buzzing sensation increased, but didn't trigger any stories or daydreams like antiques did when Alma touched them as herself. Instead, the watch reminded Irene of a man named Hank she'd known in the war.

Before Alma could even question how someone as young as Irene could have also been a fifty-year-old nurse back then, she realized Irene was recalling a memory from a past life. Hank was a nice, young man who'd given her a valentine even though she was older than the other nurses.

A knock at the door interrupted Alma's and Irene's thoughts. Irene hadn't expected anyone at this hour. Leaving the watch on, she exited her den and walked to the front door as quick as she could.

She answered the door and was surprised to see her old friend and lawyer outside. "James."

"Sorry to come here so late," he said.

"It's not a problem, come in. We just need to be quiet so we don't wake up my daughter and her family. They came in for the funeral. Did you have more papers?" she asked. Irene's grief over the recent loss of her husband resonated with Alma. Except Irene's grief, as did everything in Irene's being, possessed a

serene and loving distance.

"Yes, I just need to send it out tomorrow," James said as he entered.

"Let's go into the den," Irene said, turning her back on him and leading him into the other room.

"I'll shut this so they won't hear us," he said, closing the door behind him.

Irene thought signing papers wouldn't make much noise, but she appreciated the considerate gesture. Irene took a seat as the lawyer opened his briefcase. He came over to her side of the desk and set the papers on the desk in front of her.

"Where do I sign?" she asked, scanning the page. It didn't look like insurance forms at all. It looked like a lease of some kind. "I think you have the wrong papers here."

He leaned down closer to the paper, his head close to hers. "I think you're right," he said, turning to her. Irene noticed that his eyes seemed more violet up close than at a distance. They mesmerized her.

He lunged at her throat. It took her by surprise, but she didn't scream. A sharp pain seared in her neck. Terror overwhelmed Alma's thoughts, but Irene observed the attack at a serene distance.

Irene's body numbed to the pain. Thoughts flashed in her mind, memories from lifetimes past drained from her brain. A wooziness fell upon her, while pricks of white light clouded her vision. A fleeting thought of being tricked flared in Irene's consciousness, but it was met with a flurry of examples from life when she hadn't been tricked. *So this is true death.* Irene knew she would not be coming back this time. She sensed a visitor at the edge of her consciousness. The corners of her mouth turned upward with happiness, the proof that she'd long since given up finding had come.

Exaltation and a white light consumed Irene's mind.

THE BATHROOM tile dug through her jeans and into Alma's knees. Irene's state of enlightened bliss morphed into Alma's drunken buzz. Memories from the last half hour of her date dominated Alma's thoughts.

She and Haniel had flirted throughout dinner, and before they'd finished eating he'd kissed her. Alma blushed remembering the kiss. They continued to drink and kiss until Alma excused herself from the table to head to the bathroom and pee. An urge to vomit overtook her, and she crouched down on the floor to purge. The smell threatened to make her sick again. Alma flushed and wiped her mouth with bathroom tissue. The watch. She was still wearing the watch.

Memories from Irene Polk's life lurked in the shadows of Alma's consciousness, drowned out by Alma's share of two pitchers of margaritas. What remained were the woman's serenity and joy. But there was something that had alarmed Alma about what had happened to Irene.

"Are you okay in there?" a woman's voice called out from the doorway.

"I'm fine," Alma yelled back from her stall, realizing that she'd been in the bathroom a long time.

"Your date wanted me to check on you," the woman said. Alma recognized the voice as their waitress.

"I'll be right out," Alma said. She peed, washed her hands, rinsed her mouth, and returned to the table as fast as she could. Upon seeing Haniel, more of her date came into her memory.

Haniel stood up. "Are you okay?"

Embarrassment heated Alma's face. Fifteen minutes in the bathroom did not make a good impression on a first date. She remembered the pay phone by the bathroom. "I called my aunt on the pay phone. I hadn't told her I was going out tonight. She had a lot of questions."

He smiled and nodded.

"Do you have time to grab some coffee? We can walk to Lulu's Beehive."

Not ready to call it a night and go home alone, Alma agreed.

Doug watched as Haniel and Alma walked hand in hand down Ventura to the coffee shop. Alma's smiling, laughing face was intermittently made visible as they passed under the street lights. She stumbled a little, but her date caught her before she fell. Doug watched the way she looked up at him, and he knew what he would do in her date's shoes. And Haniel proved not to be a fool; he swooped down and kissed her. Doug wanted to turn away—not just to give them privacy, but to save himself the agony of seeing her in the arms of another man.

But he couldn't.

He told himself things were as they should be. His job precluded a relationship with Alma, and now his temptation would be rendered moot by her budding relationship. Except he didn't trust Haniel. But without the professional distance, he didn't know if it was his instincts guiding him or his jealousy.

IT STRUCK Haniel as he drove Alma home that she made him laugh, and he liked it. He enjoyed the relief from the seriousness of his father, and the man's alleged grand, noble plan. Haniel pulled into the driveway of Alma's house, sad the date

was over.

"Are you okay?" Alma asked, noticing he'd gone quiet.

He turned to see her sweet face and brown eyes peering up at him from under her furrowed forehead. The usual upturn of her plump lips pulled downward with concern. She looked adorable.

"Real life intruding?" she asked.

"Huh?" he asked, regretting sounding stupid and also realizing he'd been staring.

"You got distracted by all the things you've got to do in real life, right?"

"How'd you guess?" he said, turning toward her.

"I think I did a little of that myself," Alma said.

"Want to tell me about it?"

"Nope!" she said with a grin. "Why ruin a great night when it's time to say goodnight?"

Haniel shot her a smoldering look. It hadn't occurred to Alma that she'd said something forward. She looked down, noticed her empty latte cup, and reached for it so she could put it in the trash.

"Leave it. I'll throw it out," he said, feeling both eager and awkward about the kiss goodnight.

"Thanks," she said.

"I'll walk you to your door." He hopped out of the car, hoping to get to open her door for her. He smiled when he saw she'd waited.

She looked up at him as he helped her out of the car. His chest swelled with pride. The way she looked at him made him feel like a hero.

"Here is fine," she said when they reached the bottom of the stairs leading up to her mother-in-law apartment. "There's barely any room at the top."

He knew he wouldn't be invited inside tonight, and he didn't mind. He enjoyed taking his time with her. Except, if his father had his way—

Haniel pushed that thought out of his mind before he could finish it.

"Can I take you out again?" he asked, pulling her close to him.

"I'd like that," she said.

"Tomorrow?"

She paused and frowned. "I'm not sure," she said, not knowing how long her meeting with Cassidy, Leo, and Doug would take tomorrow. She looked up to see Haniel's disappointed face. "Call me?" she asked. "I'll try to finish early."

"I can do that," he said, and leaned down to her kiss her. The warmth of her body against his and her long, black hair brushing against his arm made the kiss even better.

He drove home grinning like a moron. She liked him, and he liked her. He

thought about where he might take her on their second date and tried not to make too much out of her not being sure if she could see him tomorrow. It was short notice. Maybe he would take her someplace super nice like Yamashiro in Hollywood, or maybe something silly like miniature golf. He passed the on-ramp of the 101 freeway in favor of taking surface streets home. He wanted to take his time. His father would be waiting up for him.

Haniel's mood darkened as he pulled into the alleyway behind their shop and parked in the driveway. He didn't want Alma to be "acquired." Ever since he was a small boy, he dreamed of helping his father attain enlightenment. "Sure, you can be like a monk and meditate for lifetimes and attain a hint of that glorious greater consciousness, or you can acquire the consciousness of the monk," his father had told him. "It doesn't matter. We're all one, anyway."

It had made so much sense when his father had explained it. Haniel had liked the idea that he and his father lived on a plane above everyone else. They didn't need to be concerned with petty, human morality.

But as he locked his car and headed inside, he no longer admired his father's plan. If the true nature of reality was that all of life existed as one and all of this was an illusion, what did it matter if the illusion of his father acquired anything? Why not just enjoy the illusion of being human?

Haniel stopped and took a breath before going inside. He focused his thoughts on the good parts of the date. He didn't want his father to pick up on his feelings.

Haniel entered the back door. A light shined from down the hallway. His father was awake in the kitchen and called out to him. "How did it go?"

"It went great. I think she trusts me," he answered as he walked down the hall and entered the kitchen to find his father beaming at him from the table.

"I'm so proud of you, son. You're a chip off the ol' block," his dad said. "Grab a beer and tell me all about your date."

His father's friendliness and obvious approval surprised Haniel. The man had always been so critical. Doubt crept into Haniel's mind. *Could he betray his father for a girl he just met?*

CHAPTER TWELVE

ALMA DECIDED TO HAVE A GLASS OF WATER BEFORE GOING TO BED. IT WAS AFTER two in the morning, and she'd brushed her teeth and changed into a T-shirt. She grabbed a cup out of her cupboard and filled it with water from the tap.

Alma smiled to herself thinking about her night with Haniel. She'd gone on a bona fide grown-up date complete with cocktails, staying out late, and a kiss goodnight. She looked around her apartment and promised herself that she'd clean up tomorrow. If she did invite him up after their next date, she didn't want him to think she was a slob.

Her phone rang. Alma rushed to pick it up, hoping it was Haniel.

"I take it you're okay then," Doug said, his voice coming out harsher than he'd planned. He'd gone home after watching her kiss goodnight and had waited for her to telephone to no avail.

"I'm sorry. I thought you'd be asleep," Alma said, hiding the fact that she'd completely forgotten about calling her best friend.

"How'd it go?"

"Oh my God! It went so great. We went to Casa Vega and had margaritas—"

"You're not old enough to drink," Doug butted in, angry that her date had plied Alma with alcohol.

"Who are you, Tita Win?"

"I just wanted to make sure he wasn't trying to get you drunk. Men are dogs, Alma."

Doug's judgmental tone smacked straight into Alma's insecurity, and it made her angry. "You're right. He's got to be a dog just trying to liquor me up. Why else would he ask me out?"

"Alma, I didn't mean it like that."

"Yeah, okay," Alma said, wanting to wrap up the conversation and go to bed.

"Please, Alma. I'm sorry, okay?"

"Okay," Alma said, but she didn't mean it.

"I'll make it up to you and buy you lunch before we go to meet Leo and Professor Cassidy tomorrow," he said.

In the excitement of her date, Alma had forgotten about meeting with Leo and the professor tomorrow. A wave of exhaustion swept over her. "I have a lot of cleaning to do. I'll call you."

"I'm sorry, Alma."

"It's fine," she said, but they both knew she didn't mean it.

Alma put the phone on the cradle and sighed, her happy mood dashed.

Something niggled at the edge of her brain. Something important, but she didn't want to remember it. She didn't want to think about her mother's murder or her weird time jumps into other people's brains.

Her mother's murder.

The thought punched her in the gut. Her mother wasn't even that much older than Alma was now.

Alma crossed the room to sit on her bed. She glanced around her apartment filled with her father's things.

What was that saying? The way you do one thing is how you do everything.

Alma sat and thought about the way she'd been acting. When she'd first learned of her mother's murder, she'd jumped in the car with Doug to not think about it. She'd rushed away from Cassidy at the shoe repair shop. Heck, she hadn't even dealt with the angry ostrich guy or Doug on the phone just now.

Alma reached into her nightstand, pulled out the picture of her pregnant mother, and stared at it. Alma could see her own face in her mother's. Alma's guilt morphed into shame. Her mother had been so brave. Alma remembered the feeling of her mother's resolve as she crossed the street, even though she'd known death awaited her. And Alma couldn't even bear to have an uncomfortable conversation with a caller at work or her best friend.

She sat in silence. Her eyes stung with tears of shame. Life was more than just her small perspective. She was connected to something bigger. To her mother, to her father, to something eternal. Alma needed to meet her destiny—not hide from it.

Alma cast away her guilt and shame in favor of her mother's resolve. The sacrifice her mother made would be pointless if Alma didn't put aside her fear and face her problems. She vowed to be brave.

A FAMILIAR VOICE whispered to Alma that it was time to wake up. A sense of excitement, the kind she'd used to get as a kid the night before Christmas, whipped through Alma. She threw the covers off and leapt out of bed like she was jumping off a cliff into a pool.

She floated from place to place like a ghost and found herself looking out the eyes of other people. *Dreaming. I'm dreaming.*

One moment she was a jogger thinking about reaching the corner in record time. Another moment she was a woman stepping into a shower. Then she found herself in a hotel hallway rolling a room service cart to the guest in 1112.

"Thank you for being up so early," the dark-haired young man said, holding the door open. The hotel worker found him very handsome, and Alma giggled to herself. Leo.

He tipped the hotel worker, Janice, twenty dollars, and she headed for the door. Alma wanted to stay, so she jumped over to Leo.

He lifted the tray and scoffed at what passed for sausages in this day and age. Alma marveled at how different it felt in this body—her center of gravity was lower. Leo sat down and began his breakfast, his mind pondering Alma and The Infinite Truth.

Alma felt like a spy as she listened in on his thoughts. Leo had assumed attaining higher consciousness would be something attained by Tibetan monks or an Immortal Mortal. Alma laughed at his puzzlement. It all seemed so obvious to her in that way that dreams made everything seem so simple. In her gleeful state she'd missed Leo's next thought—the one where he'd deduced that it was likely Alma's abilities were because she was his daughter.

Alma drifted toward the smell of blueberry pancakes. She loved Tita Win's pancakes, and she watched Win Win cook at the stove of her sunny, yellow kitchen from the eyes of a stranger. Alma blushed as her gaze shot to her aunt's behind. Win Win had an admirer!

"You don't have to go through so much trouble, Winifred," Alma heard herself say in the voice of an English gentleman.

"No bother. I'm going to make extra for my niece, and bring her some in a little while," Win said. "I do this all the time."

Alma laughed on the inside. Her tita only made blueberry pancakes for special guests. She must like this man Taylor. He certainly liked her aunt. Dream Alma thought it was good for Tita Win Win. Her aunt deserved some male company.

And with the idea of male company, Alma's mind wandered to Haniel Hanker. Dream Alma grew giddy with the idea of entering Haniel's thoughts. Until this moment, she'd just drifted without forethought as to where to go. But

there had to be a way to find Haniel.

She floated above Tita Win's house. She admired the view, but it surprised her that she didn't feel the wind. It struck her that she was the wind, or rather the air. Each atom and tiny particle in that atom was part of a greater whole. Dream Alma could peer out at any point in space or time. She experienced the sensible clarity of something complex only afforded to one in a dream.

Haniel. She wanted to find Haniel. The sky darkened, and the air turned cold. The carefree safety of her dream disappeared. Fear replaced it. She clamored to get back to her own body, her own self. She felt like a sea creature out of her shell, vulnerable to prey.

In her panic she froze. The simple understanding escaped her. She forgot how she came to be out here in the cold sky and how to get back to the safety of her own body. A fog of purple flooded around her. She wanted to cough as it suffocated her, but she didn't have lungs. Limbless, she couldn't flail or run. Her mind screamed with panic. Her vision darkened until the purple fog turned black. It threatened to consume her. Erase her. She wanted to face this danger head on, but she didn't even know what it was. How could someone face a fear that she couldn't see?

It struck her that there was no danger. She was dreaming. All she needed to do was wake up.

She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids fluttered as she cycled into the minds of a rapid succession of strangers. The images flashed so quickly only one in ten registered. A television set. The ceiling of an middle-aged woman in the hospital. The windshield of a security guard waking up in his car.

She struggled to remember who she was when she'd fallen asleep. It was as if her life were a book she'd set down in a pile of books fifty years ago, and she couldn't remember which one it was. She flipped through dozens of lives trying to find herself, and with each change in perspective growing more unsure of herself and more confused.

As she cycled through a dozen different minds even the visions in those bodies grew clouded with the violet haze. The haze thickened like quicksand around her. It became harder for her to enter each body, and once inside, it threatened to trap her.

Alma! She heard herself scream in her mind.

Her eyes shot open, and she jolted upright in bed. No purple. No quicksand-like fog. Only her apartment. She clasped her hands just to feel her own skin rub against itself. Her heart pounded in her chest.

"I'm Alma Davis. I'm Alma Davis," she muttered to herself to ensure she wouldn't forget and careen out of her body to be lost in a sea of violet obscurity.

She rocked back and forth, wrapping her arms around herself as if she could hold herself down. "I'm Alma Davis," she repeated to herself, and after a few minutes tears of relief flowed down her cheeks. The wetness on her face reinforced her embodiment, her connectedness to the shell that housed her independent sense of self. Her tears slowed, and she got out of bed to blow her nose.

After throwing the used tissue in the bamboo wastebasket her aunt had given her, Alma stared at her reflection in the mirror. The skin around her eyes was puffed from sleep and weeping. The redness of her nose and eyes confirmed she'd been crying. She noticed something string-like in her hair—cobweb. It must've gotten there last night when she came up the stairs. She pulled the sticky, cotton-like web out of her hair, threw it away, and washed her hands.

She double-checked to make sure she'd gotten it all, and then stared at her face in the mirror. Her thoughts vacillated between marveling at its familiarity and the alienness of it. That reflection was what the world saw when it looked at Alma Davis. But who was Alma Davis? Why was Alma Davis Alma Davis?

She shook those thoughts out of her head and decided to wash her face. The cool water soothed her red nose and swollen eyes. She dried her face and felt refreshed and calmer.

It was just a dream she told herself as she looked in the mirror again.

No.

She'd resolved to face her problems, not avoid them. With everything that had happened to her in the last few days, there was no way that was a dream. She needed to think. All of this was happening for a reason.

Alma took a deep breath and tried to focus her rattled brain. Coffee. Yes. Nothing like coffee in the morning to kickstart one's mind and make a person feel like herself.

She left the bathroom and went to her kitchenette, but a knock at the door interrupted her. Alma's mouth went dry. She knew it was Tita Win bringing her the blueberry pancakes. Her recent body-hopping was real, and so was the danger lurking in the fog.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALMA OPENED THE DOOR TO FIND HER AUNT HOLDING A PLATE OF BLUEBERRY pancakes.

"What's wrong?" Tita Win Win asked.

"I'm fine."

"You're pale and sweaty," Win said, handing her the plate of pancakes and pushing by to get into the apartment.

Win cleared a space on the little table, took the plate back from Alma, set it down, and motioned for Alma to sit. "Eat pancakes, and tell me what's wrong."

Alma sat down. Her aunt's quiet resolve had a power few could resist.

Win Win got a fork from the drawer, handed it to Alma, and took a seat next to her niece. Alma took a bite and then devoured the rest of the pancakes within minutes. Win waited without a word.

"Sorry," Alma said when she finished. "That hit the spot."

Win nodded. "Feeling better?"

It amazed Alma to realize she *was* feeling better. "Much better."

"Good. Tell me what happened."

"There's this purple mist hovering over me when I sleep, and when I—"

Alma stopped, not knowing how to describe what she'd been going through. Now that she was convinced that what was happening to her was real, she didn't want her aunt to think she was crazy. "I think what killed mom is after me."

Tita Win Win gave Alma a solemn nod. "Have you been followed in this world?" she asked, motioning to the space around her, "or the other?"

"You mean like in my mind or in real life?" Alma asked.

"It's not just in your imagination," Win said.

"I know."

"So has someone followed you on the street or home?"

"No, just this sort of dark haze that feels like it's going to smother me or choke me."

"And this just started after you got the watch?"

"That and other things," Alma said.

"I see," Win Win said, her brow furrowed and the corners of her mouth turned down.

"Do you know who killed Mom?" Alma asked.

Win shook her head no. "Your mother was very specific about me not knowing that."

"Why?"

"She said knowing too much might make her plan not work."

"Her plan to save me?"

Win nodded. They sat in silence for a while until Alma decided to confess.

"Doug and I went to Professor Cassidy's office since all of this started after I met her. Leo—"

"Wait, the Leo who died? Is he back?"

"He's about my age now. Cassidy called him so we could talk."

"You two have a lot to talk about," Win said. "Did he have any ideas about what's been chasing you?"

Alma looked down. "This sort of thing they call a paramortal that wants to acquire our life force or power or something."

"They chase us," Win said. "Your grandmother. Your mother."

"You?"

Win shook her head no. "They don't care for healers much, and I gave up most of my power."

"What do you mean you gave up most of it?"

"I did things the Western way. Studied medicine, prescribed medication, stuff like that," Win said.

"Do you think giving up my power could save me?"

"You might be like your mom—too powerful." Win paused and then changed topics. "Listen, I have a friend in town you should talk to. He's sleeping right now after a long flight. Do you have work today?"

"Doug called us both in sick for the week."

"Then you can come with me to see my patients."

"Doug and I are supposed to go to Professor Cassidy's house to meet with Leo."

Tita paused to think. "You should talk to him, but then meet me here at the house, okay? And no falling asleep."

"Why can't I fall asleep?"

"Your unconscious mind is more susceptible to attack than your waking mind. So stay awake until you see me again. As a matter of fact I'm going to make you coffee."

"I can make it," Alma said.

"It's better when I do," Win insisted as she walked over to the kitchenette.

Win made the coffee, and Alma began to clean up her father's stuff strewn around the apartment. Even Tita Win's healing couldn't save her father from cancer, and apparently Win couldn't have saved Alma's mother either. Her mother had foreseen her own death, but couldn't save herself. Or chose not to save herself to save Alma. What good was having power if you couldn't use it?

Win finished making the coffee and poured a cup for Alma, complete with the newfangled vanilla-flavored creamer Alma enjoyed. Win stayed to make sure Alma finished a whole cup and started on a second.

"Drink the whole pot," Win said.

"I won't fall asleep for years," Alma said.

"Page me if you need me. I'll be home by four. Charles, my guest, is sleeping in the house, so don't be alarmed if you see him."

Alma noticed Tita Win smile when she said Charles's name. Win had a crush, and Alma knew through her few moments in Charles's mind that he liked Win, too.

She assured Win a few more times that she'd drink all the coffee and page if something happened, and Win eventually left.

Alma sat down and sipped her coffee. Win was right. It *was* better when she made it. Her aunt just had the magic touch. Alma's mind mulled over the phrase "magic touch." All of these powers weren't magic, but they were close. And yet, no good seemed to come of them. There had to be a reason why all of this was happening.

The beginnings of an idea blossomed in Alma's mind. She rushed over to the photo of her mom in the drawer and flipped it over to read the back: *To my daughter, Alma, with hopes that this will not be our only photo together. Love, Mom*

Alma had thought that her mother had hoped she wouldn't die that night and might live to see Alma born. But when Alma reached into her borrowed memory of that night, her mother's only worry was that her vision might not be true. That visions with strong emotional ties were more likely to be erroneous.

What if her letter saying that she might be murdered that night was just her mother's uncertainty that her vision might now be true, and not a hope that she wouldn't die like Alma had originally thought? Why would her mother write this if she hoped her prediction of her own death was true?

A possibility dawned on Alma. Her mother knew Alma could travel through time. If Alma was supposed to travel back in time, kill her mother's killer, she would save them both. They would be together.

The telephone rang and startled Alma out of her thoughts. Out of instinct, Alma answered the call.

"I'm sorry I was such a jerk last night," Doug said.

"I know you were looking out for me," Alma said.

Her date seemed so much longer ago than just last night. It was as if it were another lifetime. If her plan worked, her whole life would change. Would she ever meet Haniel? Or Doug?

"Do you want to get lunch before seeing the professor and Leo?"

"How about after? I kind of want to talk to them right away."

"Are you okay?" Doug asked.

"Could you drive us? Professor Cassidy's house is on the hill, and I hate those winding roads. "

"I'll call them to say we're coming over now and come get you." Doug paused. "What's wrong?"

"I just need to learn more about what's going on, and what's coming after me."

DOUG PULLED the car up to the private gate, and pushed the buzzer. "It's Doug and Alma." A voice told him to come on up as the gate buzzed open.

"Was that Professor Cassidy or a servant?" Alma asked as they drove up the long driveway of the enormous estate.

"I think it was her," Doug said.

He was relieved that Alma had forgiven him. He'd let his jealousy get in the way, and he vowed to be more focused on protecting Alma. He'd only had a few minutes to talk to Taylor this morning. His boss's flight had come in late, and they'd arranged to speak on the telephone tonight. Doug hoped he could get away for the call, but if Alma was in any kind of danger, he would just have to miss it.

Alma had told him what had happened to her this morning. In all of his reading through The Observatory archives, he'd never read any paramortal having powers like Alma's. It fascinated and frightened him.

Doug parked in the circular driveway right outside the front door. He wanted the car to be as close to the door as possible in case Alma wanted to leave or

there was an emergency. Doug's mood had turned apprehensive. He need more information and hoped that his boss had it.

Alma got out of the car and looked around some more. "Where do you think Professor Cassidy gets all her money?"

"She's lived more than a dozen lifetimes," Doug began, and then realized he was getting ready to reveal things he shouldn't have known. "She must've figured out something about money."

"How do you know it was more than a dozen?" Alma asked.

Doug took her by the hand and guided her to the door. "Leo said something about calling her Felix from a thousand years so I just guessed," Doug said as he pushed the doorbell.

Alma nodded, and Doug was relieved that he'd covered his tracks. The truth was Witnesses had figured out that Professor Cassidy and other Immortal Mortals stored their wealth in antiques and had networks of lawyers and corporations that allowed them to transfer their wealth to their next lifetime.

"You can let go of my hand now," Alma said. "I won't run away."

Doug released her. He hadn't realized he'd taken it. Her hand felt so natural in his.

"It's cooler up here than in the Valley," Alma said. Her body buzzed like it did with antiques, but even more so.

Professor Cassidy answered the door. "Sorry it took so long. We were out on the back porch."

"This house is from the 1920s?" Alma asked. A flash of her sitting on the porch with a much younger Professor Cassidy popped into her mind.

"Yes," Cassidy answered, holding the door open and waving for them to come inside. "I'll get you something to drink. What would you like?"

"Diet Coke," Alma said, distracted by the home. The place was packed with antiques that buzzed with history.

"Same," Doug said.

"I'll grab them from the kitchen. Leo's out back. It's—

"I know the way," Alma interrupted.

Cassidy and Doug shot her a questioning look, but Alma was too absorbed in her memories. The far wall of the home was one large glass wall. She walked through the living room and took a left as she got toward the dining room, where she knew there would be a sliding glass door that led to the expansive, backyard deck.

Alma stepped outside. She recognized this place. "There's more houses out there now," she said.

Leo nodded. "Do you know that from my memory?"

Alma paused. "I'm not sure."

Doug joined Leo and Alma on the shady deck. Cassidy followed with two glasses and two cans of diet soda. Alma took her drink and sat on a wooden lawn chair. Doug took the seat next to her. The moment Alma sat down, she knew that the chair had been restored, and the chairs were as old as the house. She looked down and inspected the piece of furniture. "You've had the chairs redone," Alma said. "You added the cushions, and redid the finish."

"Yes, I have," Cassidy said. "You can feel the age, can't you?" She glanced over to Leo, who was seated next to her and across from Alma.

"That, and Leo had been here just after the house was built," Alma said. She wondered why so many memories that she'd not had access to before flooded into her mind now. And it wasn't just Leo. Someone else had been here. It wasn't her mom or the killer. Then it struck her that she'd forgotten someone important. Irene Polk! In all the disturbing events of this morning and the drunken excitement of her date, she'd forgotten Irene. She reached back into her mind to try and remember more. "Serene Irene," Alma mumbled. Flashes of Irene's death and moments in the alley sparked in Alma's memory.

"Are you okay, Alma?" Doug asked.

Alma waved him off, not wanting to be distracted. Her eyes snapped to Leo's face. "You don't look that different."

"Did you say Serene Irene?" Cassidy asked.

"Yes," Alma said.

"You used to call her that, didn't you?" Alma asked, remembering bits of Irene's life. How could she have forgotten being in Irene's body when she was killed? Alma remembered how calm Irene had been when she'd died, but how panicked Alma had been at the time. Alma's drunkenness and infatuation had distracted her.

It was as if she'd been trying to solve a complex puzzle and in the last few minutes an avalanche of pieces rained down on her.

Each time she traveled through time, she'd been propelled there by a watch. Her mother's and then Doug's. The only difference had been when she'd traveled back to Irene's death, she hadn't been alone. She'd been on a date, and this time she'd remembered what had happened to her when she'd returned. The memories of her life as Alma and her drunkenness must have overshadowed her memories of Irene Polk's death. But it wasn't just her death. When Irene died, her life had flashed in front of her like people say happens when you die. And then there was that moment of calm.

"Alma, what's wrong?" Doug asked.

Alma shushed him and waved him off. She needed to concentrate. Irene had

known Alma was there. She'd been happy that she'd had proof of the Infinite that she'd always believed in.

"You learned about the Infinite Truth from Irene," Alma said to Leo.

"Cassidy was a student of hers, and she told me about Irene. She was a big influence. We had many of the same ideas, but she was more..." Leo waved his hand in the air as he searched for the word, "mystical or some might say spiritual."

"And you are more scientific," Alma said.

"I like to think so. But the truth is consistent. It's not like false perceptions. It's not dependent as much on point of view. You can come to the truth at any angle, and it still," Leo laughed and said, "holds true."

Alma nodded.

Doug and Cassidy traded looks. Neither understood what was going on.

"How do you know about Irene?" Cassidy asked.

"I was there when she died. It was the vampire—the one that killed you and my mom. He killed her, and he wants to kill me. I need you to help me find him."

"Alma, you need to avoid him!" Doug said.

Alma shook her head no. "I think I'm supposed to kill him."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AFTER SPEAKING THE WORDS ALOUD, ALMA FOUND HERSELF MORE CERTAIN THAT it was her mission to track down her mother's killer. Why else was she there just before her mother's death, just after Leo's, and the moment Irene died? It had to be the reason.

"I don't think it's a good idea," Doug said.

"My mother foresaw it. It's my destiny," Alma said.

Leo and Cassidy traded looks.

"What?" Alma said. "Why did you two look at each other just now?"

"Well—" Cassidy started.

"We'll explain, but I'm going to need something stronger to drink than iced tea," Leo said. "Do you mind?"

"No," Alma said. She could use another drink, too.

"Do you want a beer or something?" Leo asked, standing up.

"Another Diet Coke," Alma said.

"I'll take a beer," Doug answered.

"I'll help," Cassidy said, and the two headed back into the house.

Once in the kitchen, Leo made himself a martini while Cassidy prepared the rest of the drinks. "What was the mother's name?" Leo asked, taking a small sip of vodka before adding the vermouth.

"I told you, Bernadette Fernandez."

"She looked like Alma, yes?"

"Almost twins," Cassidy answered. "Why?"

"Did this mother have a nickname?"

Cassidy took a frosted mug for Doug's beer and a tall glass out of the freezer and set them on the tray. "Tell me where you're going with this."

Leo said nothing and finished mixing his drink. Accustomed to dozens of

lifetimes of the man's stubbornness, Cassidy gave up and answered him. "Bernie. Her sister and everyone at school called her Bernie."

"But that's a man's name," Leo said.

"That's what made it cute," Cassidy said.

"And she had an accent, and I had an accent," Leo muttered, as he realized that he must've mistaken Bernie for Birdie.

"Yes, she was from the Philippines. You're Italian. Tell me what the hell you're getting at."

"This Alma, she is about twenty years old?" Leo asked.

Cassidy sighed and didn't hide her annoyance as she spat out, "Yes." Leo smiled at her agitation. His smile agitated Cassidy even more.

It dawned on Cassidy what her womanizing friend was hinting at. "Leo. You're not. You can't be."

"I met the mother—well, she wasn't one at the time—a few months before I died. This girl might be..." He moved his head side to side and didn't finish his sentence. He opted instead to finish his first martini and mix another.

"Are you sure?"

"There's no way to be sure, but..." Leo stopped, made a gesture with his hands, then slipped two olives into his cocktail. "Let's get back before they wonder." Leo left the tray of drinks for Cassidy to handle on her own and headed out of the kitchen with his second martini.

Cassidy followed. "Don't think you're not going to tell me everything later."

"I know, I know," he muttered as he opened the sliding glass door to the porch.

Without spilling a drop of his martini, Leo grabbed the small, wooden coffee table at one end of the porch with his free hand, and walked over to where the foursome had sat before. "Make room, make room," he said as Doug and Alma got up and rearranged the chairs so there was space to set the table between them. Cassidy set the tray on the table. They all took their seats.

Doug reached for his beer and drank two huge gulps straight from the bottle. Cassidy offered him the mug, but he waved it off. His nerves were frayed, and he needed this beer without a second to waste.

Alma grabbed the can of Diet Coke and the tall, chilled glass with ice. She stared at it as it hummed in her hand.

"You know it's old," Cassidy said, nodding in the direction of the mug. "They say even before someone's Awakened, they sense the history of things. Some regular people, too. Sometimes it's in the form of talent, like being able to play the piano, dance, or write poetry at a young age. Sometimes it takes the form of imaginary friends from the past or an interest in history."

Alma sighed. "But I'm not one of you guys."

"No, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that maybe you also have a bit of what we have," Cassidy said.

Alma nodded. "Why did you guys exchange that look when I said I should kill my mother's murderer?"

Cassidy and Leo exchanged another look. Leo gestured for Cassidy to explain.

"It's not the going after your mother's murderer that made us pay close attention. It was your use of the word 'destiny.'"

"And why is that important?" Alma asked. Doug leaned forward. He'd never heard about any significance of the word "destiny" in his studies with The Observatory.

"You've both heard people use the phrase 'sixth sense,' right?" Cassidy asked.

Alma and Doug nodded.

Cassidy continued. "Everyone has an idea what it means to possess a sixth sense. And on some level most people believe it until they try to force it into the box of reason where it won't stay put. But essentially what it means is that you're aware of something that your other senses aren't entirely cluing you in on."

"The Infinite Truth," Leo interrupted.

Cassidy rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes. You can say that, but even on the most basic human level, people have it. You know, like a hunch. A creepy feeling. A sense of foreboding—"

"Dread—" Alma interrupted, thinking about her mood even before she became untethered in time.

"Precisely," Cassidy said. "The negative things stick out, but people don't realize the sense works for other things. Like a lucky streak or a happy feeling out of nowhere. And then there's one that every IM has noted, which involves use of the words like 'fate' and 'destiny.'"

Cassidy paused to make sure she had everyone's attention and for dramatic effect. "When ordinary humans use those words, ninety-nine out of a hundred times, something big is going to happen—life-changing. And they sense it."

"So I *am* supposed to kill him," Alma said.

"Not so fast, bella," Leo said. "It does not work quite like that. They could think that falling in love with someone is their destiny, but the truth bears out that this heartache from unrequited love causes their life to go into a downward spiral from which they never recover. Regular mortals know something is going to happen, but they rarely guess it right."

Alma looked down, her face warm with embarrassment. She'd only thought it was her destiny. Maybe her destiny was to die at the hands of this life-sucking

paramortal. And then the truth about who she was struck her. "But I'm not a regular mortal. I travel through time, and I'm my mother's daughter."

And my daughter. Leo smiled. "That is a valid point—very valid." He took a sip of his martini, put it on the table, and then leaned back in the chair. "But your plan, it is dangerous."

"I agree," Doug said.

"That's why I need help. I need to learn everything you know about this vampire, and I have to figure out how to control my power so I can go back in time and hunt him down."

"You're going to try to change history?" Leo asked.

"I don't think that's possible," Cassidy said.

"But time is an illusion. So I can change it, right?" Alma said, turning to Leo.

Leo shrugged.

"Seriously?" Cassidy interjected.

"I don't know. How could I know?" Leo asked.

"You've been talking about all of this for lifetimes, and now when we need answers you've got nothing," Cassidy said.

"I have plenty of answers. I have given answer after answer since I have come here. I just cannot confirm you can alter the past."

The two argued for a few minutes until Alma interrupted. "I need to know what you know about time travel and this paramortal that's after me."

"You mean vampire," Doug said.

"Is he really a vampire though?" Alma asked, wanting to avoid the word.

Leo and Cassidy exchanged looks. Leo said, "I can tell you what I know. You decide."

LEO DRAINED his second martini and set the glass on the table, trying to think of where to start. Alma needed to understand that monster that had killed him and her mother had been around a long time. "In my first few lives in Rome, I noticed a pattern in one of the wealthier households. With each generation, the head of the household had an advisor that had appeared in the village as a penniless stranger. The advisor would stay on and help the next head of the household, and when he died about fifteen years later another young stranger would appear and become the new advisor. I began to think that this man was like me. Living from life to life, remembering the history of the family and keeping that wisdom alive.

"When during my third or maybe fourth life yet another penniless stranger came to town, I approached him and made friends. He said his name was Marcus, and I introduced myself. I hinted about what I was and what I expected he was, but he gave no indication that he knew what I was talking about. I proceeded to tell him a very memorable story about a young lady I'd known."

"That's how you approached me," Cassidy said. "I don't remember anyone named Marcus."

"This was before we met," Leo said, glaring at Cassidy. She took the hint and stopped talking. "But by this time I wasn't sticking around Rome as much. I'd lived there so long and wanted to see more of the world. But I got lucky, so to speak, and that particular advisor died shortly after arriving in our town.

"I found myself near the small town again in my next life and went back to see if the family had gained another advisor, and sure enough they had. He'd only just arrived. Many in the village assumed he was a distant relative that had been orphaned because he was accepted into the house, but not as a slave. But I suspected different. And I wasn't the only one interested in the young man.

"Another man whose name I was never able to find out was also following Marcus around town. I waited until my fellow spy wasn't around and approached Marcus at the bathhouse one day. When I called out to him, I could've sworn that I noticed the man start to turn to me and then stop himself. I rushed to catch up with him and introduced myself as Leo.

"We spoke, and I slipped the story about the woman into the conversation. Unlike before, he seemed not to believe me. He even claimed to have heard the story before. Now, I will admit, I had told the story to a number of people, but I was sure he remembered me telling it to him. And I told him so.

"He got a strange look on his face like I'd caught him, and I had. I reassured him that I wouldn't tell anyone about his secret, but he still wouldn't admit that he was one of us. Marcus, or whatever his name was that I can't remember now, rushed off. Now, I may have spooked him, but I'm not sure."

Alma stifled a sigh. She realized that Leo was the kind of person who would only take longer if she interrupted him. But she really wanted to know what all this had to do with the alleged vampire.

Doug took a long swig of his beer, and Cassidy shifted in her seat.

"I know, I know," Leo said, waving his hands. He sensed he was losing his audience. "You're wondering about the vampire. Well, later that night I'm thinking 'I hope that my secret is safe with this Marcus. I'm hoping that no one believes him if he tells them the story.' Then I think if I should see him again that I should tell him I was only joking.

"The next day I do see him, but that man is following him. And I get a very

strange feeling from this man. So I followed the man following Marcus.

"I wasn't following too closely, because I did not want to be seen. So I turned a corner, and they're both gone. I imagined they'd walked farther ahead, but there's two ways to turn. So I rushed up to see if I could see either of them, and that's when I feel this wind. And the air feels so different. Like when you go down too fast in an airplane and your ears pop. Except then I didn't know of airplanes."

Alma sat up and leaned closer. "Like an air pressure drop," she said. "That's what I feel when I travel in time. Like I'm falling."

Leo smiled with surprise and paused to ponder that thought. "That is interesting. The sensation was very similar to the experience of falling, but it hadn't occurred to me, because I wasn't falling. I was just standing on the street."

"The vampire, Leo," Cassidy said." "You were getting to the vampire."

"Yes, well, I turn the corner. There is wind. The falling feeling. And I see the back of the stranger hunched over someone I cannot see, but I believe is Marcus. At first, I hoped they may be secret lovers. But my stomach is very unsettled. I felt... how can I describe it?"

"Dread," Alma said.

Leo's eyes grew wide. "That is it. Dread. But I feel compelled to see what is going on. I crept closer, and I see what could be blood dripping down the stranger's arm. But with the wind, it is hard to tell. And who I think is the young man Marcus, was slumped over. Like he has collapsed. I rush over to help, but then I stop. I cannot believe what I am seeing. The body of Marcus is not a body at all. It looks like a long tattered paper bag. But then I see the outline of a skeleton, and I think I must be seeing things. The wind blows harder and harder, and I realize I am backing away with fear, but I cannot keep from staring at the man.

"I have to squint, because sand and wind is getting into my eyes, and what I think was Marcus turns to dust and disappears.

"The stranger stands there, and I back away looking for somewhere to hide. My feet shuffle on the ground, but it doesn't make too much noise. But the stranger, he hears me and turns around.

"Our eyes lock. For a moment I'm frozen with fear. But then I run away, and I think I can hear him laugh.

"Lifetimes go by, and I am in Bangkok visiting you," Leo said, pointing to Cassidy, "and your patient, Bo."

"Bangkok. Was that the last time?" Cassidy asked.

"Yes," Leo said.

"The cholera. His whole family line, or most of it, must've died," Cassidy

said, shaking her head. "He was probably better off. He had lots of problems. We couldn't help him."

"I thought so, but maybe not," Leo said. "Hooman came to Awaken me this time."

"You haven't needed an Awakening in five lifetimes," Cassidy said.

"But with so many of us not coming back, and I was thirteen and not Awakened," Leo said.

Cassidy shot a questioning look at Leo. He shrugged his shoulders. "What about the theory that our psychosis over many lifetimes kept us from Awakening? And the possibility that that's why most of humanity doesn't remember past lives?" she asked.

"That can be true and a vampire can be hunting us," Leo said.

"I'm lost," Doug said.

"What psychosis?" Alma asked.

"We have trouble recovering from our deaths," Leo said. "It is not surprising. Many people, even those who cannot remember past lives, have trouble with how they died."

"Even more lost," Doug said.

"Have you ever had something go wrong, and it is not a big deal, but it feels like so much more?" Leo asked, looking at Doug. He was met with a blank stare. "Okay, tell me something small that makes you more angry or sad than is necessary."

"I'm an even-tempered guy," Doug said.

Alma laughed. "Not when someone tries to cut you in line like that guy at the movies."

"That's different. That guy just marched right up to the front of the line, and we'd been waiting for our turn in line for five minutes, and he wants to take our spot. He's supposed to go to the back."

"Ah, that's a good one," Leo said. "What happened when he tried to cut? What did you do?"

"I told him where the end of the line was, and the guy apologized and went to the end of the line."

"But you were really angry, right?"

"Well—" Doug said.

"Yes!" Alma said. "You glared at that guy in the popcorn line and barely calmed down until we were seated for the previews."

"He was a jerk," Doug said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Tell me more about how you felt," Leo said.

"Who does that guy think he is? It's like he's completely oblivious to

everyone else," Doug said.

"Did you feel invisible?" Leo asked.

"No," Doug said. "He saw me. He saw all of us in line; he just didn't care. It's like we didn't matter. None of us mattered."

Leo looked to Cassidy, and both of them nodded.

"What?" Doug said, feeling the annoyance of remembering that jerk at the movies and feeling weird about Cassidy and Leo's knowing look.

"That is a big one. We all have it," Cassidy said.

Her statement eased Doug's agitation as Leo continued. "We all think these thoughts like, 'we're invisible' 'we don't matter' 'no one understands us,' etcetera. And it bugs us, because at some point in one of our lives someone didn't see us, or didn't value us, or misunderstood us, and we died. So it rests in the back of our brain, and when it happens, it gives us a shot of that fight-or-flight reflex, because we feel death.

"For people like Cassidy and me, it's even worse because we remember the details of our deaths. So we get even more frightened and angry. Over a few lifetimes, it can turn into a psychosis. Which brings me back to our friend in Bangkok. He had it bad. One of his thoughts was that they were 'out to get him' and that he'd been 'singled out.' He'd been a slave, and one particular master had singled him out and a fellow slave had indeed been out to get him.

"They tortured him mercilessly before he died. And then, in the next life, something very similar happened. The thing about these ideas is that the way we react to try to prevent what we fear from happening seems to make it happen even more. For instance, say you're worried you'll be abandoned, because in one life you were left behind in a storm and died. Well you may try too hard to keep people from leaving you, and in trying too hard and being so desperate, you drive them away."

"This is interesting," Alma said, "but what does this have to do with the vampire?"

"Not much, but a little," Leo said. "Cassidy was a doctor then, and I'd studied philosophy. This was before psychology, which we both studied afterward, but anyway. We had been drawn to medicine and philosophy, because we'd each been troubled by these problems and we were working through them, and we wanted both to help others like us, like Bo, and help ourselves by learning more. We could not help Bo. In the end he sort of turned suicidal, but wouldn't bother killing himself because he'd come back.

"Now, we get to the vampire. When Hooman awakened me, we got to talking about all of us that we haven't been able to find. They do not check in with any of the vault locations to get their money. And we got to remembering Bo. It turns

out Hooman had seen Bo the day before he died, and he was in very good spirits. And you know why?" Leo asked.

They all shook their heads.

"Bo said he had a friend who was going to help him. He said this man was like us, but he didn't die. He just lived on, and the man said he could help Bo die for good. He gave him a card and described what the man looked like in case Hooman ever needed the same service, and then he never heard from him again.

"Hooman thought he was crazy, but when Bo never came back, he had always wondered. Like us, he thought maybe his line died out due to the cholera, or he'd started forgetting. But he said he met another former patient of mine, Victoria, two years after I died in Las Vegas. And that patient said she'd met a man who said he would help her die, and she described him as looking the same, and she has not come back either."

"What did he look like?" Alma asked.

"That is what is interesting. He looked just like the man I saw on the street that turned Marcus into dust. Middle-aged, receding hairline with brown hair, white guy. Not too tall or short. Not too fat."

"That could be anybody," Doug said.

"Except the man who killed Irene, you, and my mom," Alma said.

"It is not?" Leo asked, dumbfounded by her revelation.

"The man who killed Irene—she called him James, and he had a full head of black hair, looked thirty-five years old, and was at least six feet tall."

"So there is more than one," Leo said. "That makes sense, but—" Leo stopped himself from finishing that thought. "It is time for another drink."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ALMA SAT LEGS CROSSED ON THE WHITE CARPETED FLOOR OF PROFESSOR Cassidy's study and attempted to meditate her way into controlled time travel. Her back ached, and the relaxing sound of trickling water from the small fountain annoyed her. Alma opened her eyes and glared at Leo meditating across from her. His serene expression combined with his relaxed yet perfect posture irked her.

"This isn't working," Alma said. "Why can't I lie down and do this?"

"It is meditation, not napping," Leo said, opening up his eyes.

Alma's promise to her aunt not to fall asleep echoed in her mind. This was craziness—ineffective craziness. "I told you the other times, it just happened. I would hold an object, and it would happen. It worked fine."

"You wandered randomly throughout time and space and almost got trapped, possibly smothered by the floating tendrils of power from one of who knows how many vampires," Leo said.

"Is that how he works? Can he just reach out to Alma through space and kill her? Why did he have to kill the other people in real life? What changed?" Doug asked.

"I do not know," Leo answered.

Doug rolled his eyes.

"I appreciate your attempts to help, but this meditation isn't working, and you didn't really have any information about James that I could use," Alma said as she stood up. Pins and needles rushed into her left foot. It had fallen asleep.

"James?" Cassidy asked.

"I told you his name before. James is the 'vampire,'" Alma said, making air quotes with her hands, "who killed Irene and most likely the same one who killed Leo and my mom. Although, according to Leo, it could be some guy

named Marcus."

"Marcus was the man who I saw killed by the vampire," Leo corrected.

"You said James knew Irene," Cassidy said, ignoring Leo.

"They seemed like old friends. He worked for her in some way." Alma tried to reach into Irene's memories, but for some reason she couldn't anymore. The initial rush of recollections she got in when she entered the house had faded to nothing.

Cassidy gasped. "I think I remember a man named James at Irene's Bon Voyage. Nobody else had met him before, but I overheard him tell someone else that he was a student of Irene's."

"Bon Voyage?" Alma asked.

"It is like a wake, but for those like us," Leo said. "Sort of a 'bye for now' and a business meeting about where we're putting the deceased's assets until they come back."

Cassidy rushed across the room to one of her many wooden bookshelves and squatted down to open a closed drawer at the bottom. "I might have a photo. I thought he was one of us."

Alma went over to Cassidy, who'd picked up a yellow Kodak envelope. "About five years ago I found an old camera and a bunch of rolls of old film. I had them developed." Cassidy rummaged through the pictures.

"This is it," Cassidy said, handing the photo to Alma.

"It's him," Alma said.

"And he knows how to find us," Leo said.

"How?" Doug asked.

"At the Bon Voyage we openly discuss the Vaults," Leo said.

Alma turned to Cassidy for explanation.

"It used to be places where we hid gold and other bits of wealth for our next life, but now we do it with corporations and whatnot. But if James was there, he knows all about it."

"We are," Leo paused, "what is the saying? Like the ducks waiting to be killed."

"Sitting ducks," Doug said.

Leo pointed at Doug and nodded. "Yes."

HANIEL SHOOK his head no as he looked at his father and then returned the telephone back into its cradle hanging on the kitchen wall. "She said last night

that she wasn't sure she could get together today, Dad."

James sat at the small kitchen table and tried to hide his impatience. "I know, son. I know. It's just...I feel her power growing. I sensed her power this morning."

"Dad, she put on the watch and nothing happened. We made out for Christ's sake."

"Maybe you were too forward, and she doesn't want to see you anymore."

Haniel paused to think about that and shook his head no again. "No way. She's just busy. Besides, she can't be at full power. Your vision said we had until her birthday. That's over a month away. Unless your vision was wrong." He knew his father would never admit he was wrong.

"You need to respect me. You need to respect what we seek. This is enlightenment for crying out loud!."

Haniel wasn't in the mood to hear about enlightenment. All he wanted to hear was Alma's voice.

DOUG AND ALMA said their goodbyes. Leo and Cassidy needed to get on the telephone and talk to the other IMs about changing how the Vaults were set up. Doug drove down the hill into the Valley. When they hit Ventura, he remembered they hadn't eaten all day.

"Did you want to get tacos?" he asked.

"Can we just get drive-thru burgers?" Alma asked. "I want to be home when Tita Win comes home. She says she has a friend that might be able to tell me something."

"What friend?" Doug asked.

"I forget his name. He came to town for her birthday, and I think he likes her," Alma said.

Doug waggled his eyebrows and turned into the drive-thru. He ordered their usual, and they drove to Alma's pretending like everything was normal, even though it wasn't.

They pulled into the driveway and noticed Win Win's car.

"Your aunt's home early," Doug said, glancing at his watch. Knowing that Alma wouldn't be alone, he thought it would be best for him to eat quickly and leave to check in with his boss.

"Yeah. Let's eat fast and then go see what's up," Alma said.

"I've got homework. Would you mind if I met your aunt's friend at another

time?" Doug asked.

"No problem," Alma said.

"Alma!" Tita Win shouted, peeking her head out of the house. She gestured for Alma to come inside with a low wave of the hand, a Filipino way of getting attention. Hailing someone with the hand held high was rude and unnecessary. "I have someone for you to meet."

"Doug and I were going to eat our burgers. Can I come after?" Alma asked.

"Aye! Eat in here. Come on," Win said, holding the door open for them.

Alma couldn't deny her aunt, and, as an extension neither could Doug. The two of them walked into the living room to find a distinguished gentleman sitting at the dining room table. He stood upon seeing Alma.

"Charles," Win said, beating Alma and Doug across the living room to meet her friend. "This my niece Alma, who I'm sure you know all about from The Observatory, and this is her friend, Doug."

Doug and Taylor traded shocked looks at Win's introduction. The two hadn't recognized each other by sight, having only seen each other in photos and not expecting to meet at this moment. Plus, there was the additional shock of Win Win's casual mention of The Observatory that neither could figure out.

Win laughed.

"Sit, everyone. I'll get dessert for us all."

Tita Win left, and they all sat down at the table as directed.

Awkward silence.

"Will you be staying for Tita Win's birthday party next weekend?" Alma asked Taylor, breaking the silence.

Taylor smiled. "I hope so."

Win Win emerged from the kitchen with a homemade Buko Pie, a Filipino dessert made with coconut.

"I'm stuffed from our late lunch, Winifred," Taylor said.

Alma smiled at how Charles Taylor called her aunt Winifred. The homemade pie was a sign that Taylor was a special guest, and hungry or not, Tita Win's pies were irresistible.

Doug tried to act natural, but he worried that Alma's aunt might at any minute blow his cover.

Win served the pie and then sat down next to Charles. The odd foursome ate in silence for a few minutes.

"How did your research go with Cassidy and Leo?" Win asked.

"Nothing major," Alma said, not knowing what to say.

"He knows all about this kind of stuff," Win said, gesturing to Taylor. "He can run that brain scan for you, too. But you know you're not crazy, don't you?"

"No, just weird," Alma said.

Win laughed. "That runs in the family!"

Doug looked to Taylor to try and figure out how Win knew about his boss and gauge whether or not the woman knew the truth about him. Doug had barely even remembered his boss's first name was Charles.

Taylor shrugged his shoulders when he thought Win and Alma weren't looking. He wondered, too, how long Winifred Fernandez had known the truth about him and why she'd chosen now to reveal it.

Win Win laughed some more. "Aye! Everyone is so quiet. Okay. I'll talk. Charles," Win said, gesturing to Taylor, "is what they call a Witness. He works for this place called The Observatory. They study people like your mom and me, and now I guess you."

"What do you mean study?" Alma asked.

"They follow us around. Report what we do. Do we see the future? Do we heal? Remember past lives? Things like this. Sometimes they make friends with us to get more information like Charles did with me."

"It wasn't just to get information, Winifred," Taylor said.

"I know. Sometimes it's to protect us." Win Win said.

Taylor stopped himself from saying it wasn't just that either. Now wasn't the time.

"Who was the Witness that was supposed to protect my mom?" Alma asked, angry at the idea that someone might be spying on her.

Win didn't answer. Doug remained quiet.

"What does this Observatory want?" Alma asked.

"Nothing," Taylor said. Alma glared at him.

"They're scholars. Mostly good men, but their origins weren't necessarily as pure as most of them think," Win explained.

Doug sneaked a questioning glance at Taylor, but the man didn't catch it. Winifred consumed all of his attention.

"What have you heard?" Taylor asked.

"My grandmother told me as a little girl. Your organization was formed by two men. One was a scholar, but the other was a *balbal* or some say *wak-wak*. Here they say vampire."

"Vampire!" Alma exclaimed.

"That can't be true!" Doug accused.

"But it's not like the vampire you see in the movies. No fangs. No cape. No changing into a bat."

Alma directed her full attention to Charles Taylor. "Do you know that vampires hunt the very people you study? You may not want anything from us,

but your vampire founder is using you to set up his own personal buffet."

"He was cut off and cast out centuries ago," Taylor said.

"How do you know? He could've been the vampire that killed my mom," Alma said.

"No, it wasn't the same vampire," Win Win said. "My lola, your great-grandmother, took care of Livius."

"His name is Livius, not James?" Alma said to Win. Her aunt nodded. Alma sighed and slumped her shoulders.

"What makes you think a vampire named James killed your mother?" Taylor asked.

"Not just Mom. Irene Polk and Leo Upton, too."

Charles Taylor's eyes grew wide. "Are you sure? Do you know what he looked like? How do you know this?"

"You're the spies. You tell me," Alma said.

Doug's heart sank with guilt. He thought he was one of the good guys, but he wasn't.

"This James," Charles said, his voice soft, but his forehead furrowed with concern. "Was he tall with dark hair and blue eyes? Handsome even?"

"Yes," Alma said, leaning forward with interest. "Are you tracking him? Can you tell me where he is?"

"I don't know. He went missing after Irene died," Charles said.

"What do you mean missing?" Doug asked.

"We lost track of James Hanker when Irene Polk died. He was her Witness."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALMA STOOD UP. "GET OUT AND TAKE WHOMEVER MY WITNESS IS WITH YOU."

Doug's stomach dropped into his socks.

"Alma, it's okay," Win said.

"No, it's not. His association is the reason why Mom is dead, and the rest of us are in danger. The only reason you're not dead is because he stopped being your Witness."

"There's nothing we could have done to prevent your mother's death. Your mother foresaw that," Win said.

"That's not true," Alma said. Her mother foresaw them together. "Her Witness probably led him right to her."

"We've been hunted for years," Win said. "Sit down, Alma. I know it's hard, but they mean no harm."

"But that doesn't mean they don't do any harm," Alma said.

"She's right," Taylor interrupted. "But let us—let me—help you."

Alma sat down. "Fine, tell me everything you know about vampires."

"Most of our records on the subject were sealed ages ago, but I was able to get my hands on them. This new one, the one you said was James, seems young. We weren't sure he was a vampire until Leo's death."

"How do vampires come about?" Alma said.

"We're not sure. When we cast out Livius, we halted all contact and study of vampires to prevent them from finding out about us and using us for their plans."

"That didn't work out so well," Alma said.

"Alma! He's a guest and my friend," Tita Win scolded.

"It's okay, Winifred. She has a right to be angry. I was when I found out. It's why I'm leaving The Observatory."

"You are?" Win Win asked. "So your visit can be for longer than a week?"

Charles turned to Win with a shy smile. "I was looking into an apartment."

Doug couldn't believe what he was hearing. His life was a lie, and the man who recruited him was leaving The Observatory. But Charles didn't notice that. His attention was fixed on Win Win.

"There's plenty of room here," Win said. "You can fix my garage door, and help with the garden."

"I'll get an apartment, but I'll still fix your garage and help with the garden," Charles said, sneaking an uneasy glance at Alma.

A pang of guilt hit Alma in the gut. He seemed like a nice man, and she'd never seen Tita Win so happy. She decided to tone down her anger.

"When are you quitting?" Doug asked.

"I told them I'd be here on assignment. Then, I'll tell them I'm retiring a few months down the line. I don't want them to know I've broken into their information on the vampires and copied all their files," Charles Taylor answered, looking directly at Doug. "I just hope nobody in The Observatory discovers my secret and turns me in. My theft is only to help right the wrongs I unwittingly put into play."

Doug nodded.

"So how do vampires come about?" Doug asked.

"As far as we can tell, it runs in families. Families that contain other paramortals like psychics, witches, empaths, IMs. Except no one notices because they're rarely Awakened, so they look like just regular mortal offspring."

"Why don't you just assume that the one regular offspring in a family is likely a vampire?" Alma asked.

"Most of the time it's only one paramortal in every one to three generations," Charles explained. "Your family is very rare."

"Why aren't vampires Awakened?" Doug asked.

"For vampires, it's not a simple hug, handshake, or touching an object. They're awakened by murder—literally bloody murder. According to some of the theories set forth by early members of The Observatory, vampires were more common when there were more bloody battles. It's believed that the legend of Achilles was based on a real-life vampire. If you recall in the story, Achilles's mother was said to be immortal.

"But regardless, what made them strong was they absorbed the life force of other men when they killed them. They lived dangerously and died old for a warrior but not necessarily for a regular human.

"Not to mention many people died of diseases then. So absorbing the life forces of the men one killed in battle merely led to a longer life expectancy.

"Some also theorize that surges of power after killing a human explains serial

killers and Jack the Ripper himself. They might not even be aware of their own power.

"But our sealed records do have portions of the diary of Livius, and he killed many men in battle, and he continued to kill even after his time as a warrior was over.

"When Livius was eighty years old, he met a thirteen-year-old who could remember a battle from Livius's younger days. They became good friends, but the young man was impaled by a tree that broke off during a storm.

"According to Livius, the allure of the young man's life force that radiated from the boy's spilling blood was like no other. In his diary, Livius claimed the boy begged for his own death to be spared the pain. I'm not sure I believe that, but when Livius took the boy's life his aging was reversed by decades. He even found that he could remember some of the other lifetimes that the boy had lived.

"He searched for other young people who remembered past lives, and he found another and murdered her. His mind overloaded with fear, memories, and a flurry of languages. He thought he might go mad, but then he noticed his aging had reversed even more.

"One day he read an article by a man named Edward Wallace, who collected stories of children who seemed to have knowledge of past lives and surmised that reincarnation must be real. Livius tracked down Wallace and the man told him he how he'd been to Asia and how reincarnation was common. Wallace believed that beings who could remember past lifetimes had a greater chance at discovering true enlightenment, and the meaning of life.

"It was Livius who dubbed those who were reincarnated as Immortal Mortals and became obsessed with tracking them down.

"He had accumulated a great deal of wealth over his long life and proposed to Edward Wallace the idea of recruiting scholars to track and study Immortal Mortals. Wallace accepted his offer, and they began The Observatory."

"But didn't they notice all their subjects dying?" Doug asked.

"Livius only needed to consume the soul of one IM to extend his life for seventy years or longer. When they discovered how to track Awakenings in families, there was no need to hurry to kill them. He needed time in between to deal with madness, anyway. Wallace died never suspecting the truth.

"It wasn't until two hundred years later when another Witness named Joshua discovered the truth." Charles Taylor pointed at Alma. "He enlisted your great-grandmother's aid as a witch to kill Livius."

Win nodded. "Your great-grandmother predicted there would be one like you and worried about Livius. He became selective of who he wanted to kill and didn't because the insanity the reincarnated ones feel when they remember their

deaths. My lola tried to kill him, but he'd killed a healer like me and could heal himself. So she made him forget."

"I didn't know that," Charles Taylor said. "That's why we haven't been able to find him."

"But there's a new vampire," Win said, turning to Alma, "and my mother, your lola, sensed his power. That's why she sent us to the United States."

"She said you'd both died, but we found out about the adoption," Charles Taylor said, realizing that if he'd never tracked down Winifred and Bernadette, James would have never found them. Guilt tore at his gut. He remained silent.

"But James isn't like Livius. He's young," Alma said. "He'll be easier to kill."

"True, but we'll need to keep you safe while we find him," Doug said.

Alma wasn't listening. Knowing that with each acquisition, James grew more powerful, Alma knew her best option was to go back in time and kill him before he acquired Leo, Irene, and her mother. It would be easier, and she would also be able to save her mother. She just needed more information about James's whereabouts.

Alma closed her eyes. She reached into her memory to try to remember some piece of information about James that would help her.

There was something important about the man that she needed to grasp. It floated at the periphery of her thoughts just out of the grasp of her mind. She stretched to reach it.

Darkness. The sensation of falling. "Aye! Alma!" Tita Win said.

"WHAT WAS I SAYING?" Alma asked.

"You weren't saying anything," Taylor said.

"Alma!" Tita Win shouted again.

"I'm right here," Alma said from across the dining room table. A part of Alma remained in the room, but the greater part of her consciousness was trapped in the dark.

Alma tried to force her eyes open. The darkness morphed from empty blackness to a deep, dark, violet. Alma tried to scream, but she had no voice. No throat. No body. She imagined she had eyes and closed them. The evil-seeming purple tinge to the darkness faded to black. Her thoughts turned to Tita Win Win. She was in the other room. No, wait. Tita Win was at the table. Win was trying to bring her back. This had happened before.

An odd calm fell over her. Her thoughts relating to Alma began to fade. The

void warmed around her. This wasn't bad. There's no pain here. No people. *No me*. A shriek pierced through the darkness. The warmth ran cold.

The purple hue grew stronger. Fear gripped her. If she had a throat, she would have sworn it was being crushed.

Back at the table only a second had gone by. Doug didn't understand Win Win's alarm. "She's fine."

"No," Win said, rushing from her seat to the other side of the table.

"Alma!" Tita Win screamed as she grabbed Alma's wrist with one hand and her head with another.

"What are you doing?"

With her palm on the crown of Alma's head, Win positioned her thumb so it was between her two eyes above the nose. Win Win closed her eyes. "You're back. You're here. You're with me."

A breeze swept through the dining room. Doug looked to his boss. Taylor's jaw slacked open, and his eyebrows arched wide. He didn't know what to make of it.

Her mind emptied of all thoughts. A cool breeze swept around her. This. This felt familiar. An image floated to the front of her brain. A pregnant woman's smiling face. She knew that face.

The wind swirled around the dining room and picked up force. Doug watched Alma and Win Win. He noted that their hair didn't move with the wind. It was as if they were the eye of a localized tornado. Tita Win's eyes opened. The wind stopped at the same moment.

"Tita Win Win!" Alma gasped as she wrapped her arms around her aunt's waist and wept. "How did you get me back?"

"But you were here the whole time," Doug said.

Win shook her head no. "No, she was here, but her spirit was not."

"I drifted again, but I couldn't get back. He can sense me. I know he can."

"I didn't realize you'd grown so close to the Eternidad," Win said, sitting down in the open chair next to Alma. She didn't want to risk her niece floating off again.

"What is this Eternidad?" Taylor asked.

"Leo calls it the Infinite Truth," Alma said.

"The teachings of Irene?" Taylor asked.

"Then you're familiar," Win Win said.

"To be honest, The Observatory dismissed it as a coping placebo for the mental instability so many of the IMs get over their lifetimes," Taylor said.

"It does help IMs cope, but that's because it's true," Win said.

Taylor moved his head as if to say he would give it the benefit of the doubt.

Win Win laughed. "You don't have to believe in the Sun to be in its orbit, but it is like you Observatory types to only believe what you see with your five senses even when dealing with things that involve a sixth. But Alma is the one destined to be at one with the Eternidad, and there's no way to fight it." She turned to Alma. "Eat some pie first." Win slid over her slice of buko pie.

"I'm full," Alma said.

"I made this pie," Win said. "It will help you, and avoid stretching your mind to remember memories that don't belong to Alma Davis in this lifetime. That 'reaching' is what's making you move all over the place, and you're not strong enough to come back without an anchor. Why didn't you tell me this was happening to you?" Win grabbed a fork and took a spoonful of the pie sweetened with young coconut. "It's your favorite."

"Win, I'm too weirded out for pie," Alma said, pushing it away.

Win laughed. "This pie will keep you here with us, because I made it."

"That's how you do it," Taylor said. "We never noticed."

Win turned to him and smiled.

"Do what?" Doug asked.

"Heal," Taylor said to Doug and turned back to Winifred. "That's what you are, isn't it? A healer."

Win Win laughed. "You can call it that," she said to Taylor, and then turned back to Alma. "Eat the pie."

Alma knew better than to question Tita Win Win any further. She took the spoon from her aunt and swallowed a bite of pie. It surprised Alma how good it tasted, and each bite made her feel better. It was as if she'd had a flu for the last four days, and the dizziness and fever had been cured. She felt like herself.

"Better?" Tita Win asked.

Alma nodded. Win got up and went to a drawer and pulled out an odd-looking red and black bracelet. "I made this. It's made from painted beans from my garden and fishing line," she said, walking over to Alma and wrapping it around her wrist. "There's no history on the beans. It won't take you anywhere. It'll ground you in the here and now.

"That's why I couldn't travel earlier today. You'd grounded me with the pancakes and coffee."

"The bracelet ought to do it, but just in case, cover this," Win said, putting her index finger in between her eyes just above the nose. "It's like that bookstore. The third eye."

"Is that real?" Alma asked.

"As real as anything else," Win said.

"I need to go back and find out about, James, Tita Win," Alma said. "I can

feel Mom leading me back there. Will you help me, too? I don't think we have a lot of time."

Win sighed. "Leo can help me ground you and maybe we can use objects to narrow down in which timeline you want to travel. But the more time you spend as someone else, the less Alma you will be. I won't be able to bring you back if you go too far."

"Then we'll have to plan it all just right," Alma said.

"Or, you can wear the bracelet for a while to ground you and forgo all traveling. After a week, you should be grounded enough for me to heal your thoughts back to being only yours. You would be safe."

Alma picked a loose crumb of pie off the plate and put it in her mouth as she thought. "It'd be nice to go back to normal, but I'd lose my only memory of my mother and any chance of saving her, wouldn't I?"

"I don't think you can save her," Win said.

"But you don't know for a fact that I can't, and I get this feeling like it's the only way," Alma interrupted.

"You've lived your whole life without thoughts of your mother. She wanted, more than anything, for your happiness."

"Even if you erase my ability to travel, James won't believe it." Alma said as she yawned.

Win nodded. "Do you want to sleep here tonight?”

Alma glanced over at Taylor. "I can take the couch," he offered.

"This house has four bedrooms," Win said. "You don't have to do that."

"I'll sleep in my own bed," Alma said. Even though it was still early the exhaustion of the day weighed on her. "Do you think it’s safe for me to go to bed now?"

"Don't try to remember anything," Win said.

Alma nodded and stood up. Doug needed to know how to contact Taylor, but he couldn't talk in front of Tita Win Win or Alma. He followed Alma to the front door. "Do you want me to stay with you?" Doug asked Alma.

"I just want to sleep," she said.

Doug nodded.

"Doug!" Tita Win Win said. "Come back to the kitchen, and I'll fix you up with a slice of pie."

Alma stopped at the door to wait.

"You go to sleep. You look tired," Tita Win said to Alma.

Alma laughed and waved goodbye to her best friend. Doug stepped back into the house, and Win shut the door. "I'll get you some pie, and we can go back to the table so you and Charles can talk Observatory business."

Win Win knew his secret.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE SOUND OF HIS FATHER'S HANDS SMACKING HARD ON THE SWINGING DOOR made Haniel jump.

"Why did you lie to me about the girl?" his father yelled as he crossed the room and shoved Haniel.

The force of his father's push to his chest made Haniel gasp for breath. Haniel's anger sparked and without thinking he grabbed his father's hand by the wrist and yanked it away. His fingers seemed to lose their strength around his father's powerful wrist.

"How dare you!" his father yelled, pushing his son against the wall and into the glass-framed business license hanging there. A shard of glass stabbed into Haniel's shoulder blade. Haniel could feel it cut his skin.

"What the hell are you talking about, old man?" Haniel yelled.

His father let go and stepped back, almost frightened. Haniel didn't understand it.

"In the beginning part of my meditation. I felt her, but I couldn’t keep her with me. She's drifting. I can't have her like this. I need her before she can control her power and use it against me." Bloodlust consumed James. He'd have killed his son just for the momentary surge of power, but he needed Haniel.

"You're the one whose vision said we had until her birthday," Haniel said. His father's eyes disturbed him. They'd gone from blue to dark purple. He'd never seen his father so angry.

"Why aren't you doing your part right now?" James demanded.

"She hasn't been home. I gotta be cool. We've only had one date."

"You said she took your watch and felt nothing. That's impossible. That watch is teeming with energy."

"Nothing happened. We drank margaritas and made out at the table. She

was fine."

"That's impossible," James said, his voice lower. This morning's meditation brought contact with her energy and moments ago her presence loomed so close it was like she'd reached out to him.

His father's unstable behavior disturbed Haniel. He needed to calm the man down. "I'm working on it. I am. I'll call her every fifteen minutes until she picks up, and if she doesn't pick up in the next two hours, I'll camp out at her house."

James's body hungered for power. He forced himself to appear calm. He needed his son's help. It would cripple his plan to alienate the boy now. "I'm sorry, son," he said in a distracted attempt to excuse his outburst. "We need to move up our timeline."

"How soon?"

"A week."

"But what about your vision of her birthday?" Haniel asked.

"I said a week," James said, leaning closer to him, his eyes still dark purple.

Haniel nodded. His father turned away and left the room.

ALMA ENTERED HER APARTMENT EXHAUSTED. The blinking light on her answering machine drew her attention. She hit play and grabbed a T-shirt out of her dresser to wear to bed.

"Hi Alma, it's me, Haniel. Just calling to see if you wanted to get together today or tonight," the message started.

She'd forgotten all about Haniel. Alma listened to the rest of the message, and the stress of her day evaporated. She glanced at the digital clock on her microwave and wondered if it was too late to call. He'd left his home number. While debating whether or not to wait until morning, her phone rang. She dashed over to answer her phone before her answering machine picked up.

"Hello," she said.

"You're home!" Haniel said into the line.

"I just got in."

"I guess going out today is out of the question."

"My aunt had an old friend in from out of town, and time just slipped by. I'm sorry."

"I'm just glad you weren't avoiding me."

Alma laughed and sat on her bed. "Is that traffic I hear?" she asked as she kicked off her shoes.

"My dad is nosy, and I wanted some privacy," Haniel said, surprised she could hear the traffic.

They made small talk about the gas station where he was, and how Haniel and his father lived in the back of the shop. Haniel caught himself laughing. It surprised him how much he enjoyed talking to Alma. The truth was, he'd been upset that he hadn't gotten to see her today.

"So can I take you out tomorrow?" he asked.

"Oh," Alma said. "I want to, but—"

"Alma, am I being too forward?" Haniel asked, his confidence shaken by his sense that she would turn him down for tomorrow as well.

"No, it's just..." Alma struggled with how to put things into words. "I wish I'd met you a year ago," she heard herself say.

Haniel's heart dropped into his stomach. "It sounds like you're saying goodbye or something. Didn't you enjoy our date? I thought we connected."

It surprised Alma how sad she was at the idea of saying goodbye to Haniel. "So much is going on for me right now. I'm overwhelmed by it." She wanted to say more, but her voice quivered more than she intended.

Haniel swallowed hard. He tried to tell himself he couldn't accept her answer because he needed to fulfill his father's plan, but that wasn't the truth. "Maybe you need someone like me around. Ease the tension or something." His voice trailed off.

Silence.

"I don't understand what's going on, but..." Haniel struggled to find the words. "I know we don't know each other very well, and it was only one date..." he paused again and looked up at the dark, moonless sky. "The idea that I can't see you just makes me sad. I mean, it surprises me how sad I am. Are you sure you can't see me? Ever?"

She wasn't sure. "I don't know. It's not that I don't want to see you—"

"Then see me."

Alma exhaled. "I don't know what tomorrow's going to be like. Things are kind of crazy in my life right now." Alma stopped talking. She didn't want to talk about what was going on with her.

"Are you scared?" Haniel asked. It hadn't occurred to him that Alma might sense something, but now it was obvious that she would.

"This isn't a good time."

"If you say it's not you, it's me, you'll break my heart."

Alma laughed.

"Your laugh is the brightest part of my day, you know," he said.

The tone of his voice and his sincerity tickled Alma's heart. She heard herself

giggle. The stress of the day faded. She wondered if maybe she could make time to see Haniel. Maybe it would help bind her to the present day.

Haniel sensed an opening. "What about breakfast? Just a quick breakfast near your place? Tomorrow?"

Alma hesitated.

"I'll tell you what. Sleep on it. I'll be in your driveway at eight in the morning. Come down if you want to have breakfast with me. If you don't, no hard feelings. I'm going to hang up now, and my dad is sleeping so you can't call the house," he said, and pushed the receiver onto cradle of the phone booth with a satisfying click. Haniel headed home excited that he might get to see her.

But as he entered the shop through the back alley, it dawned on Haniel. He wasn't excited to tell his father about his date tomorrow, and he hated his part in the Grand Plan.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ALMA SAT UP IN BED AND LOOKED UP AT HER MICROWAVE CLOCK—SIX THIRTY. Haniel would be in her driveway in an hour and a half. A giddy excitement swept through her even though she hadn't decided for sure that she would go to breakfast with him. She didn't have time for a boyfriend. Too much was at stake.

As she made her morning coffee, it occurred to her that this was the first time in weeks that she hadn't awakened with that feeling of dread. She wondered if it was the distraction of Haniel, or if it had been because of Tita Win Win.

Alma glanced down at the odd bracelet her aunt had fashioned and toyed with one of the beans. She hadn't wandered away from herself in her dreams or fallen into the existential oddness of being someone else. *Magic beans*. She decided to shower and do her hair just in case she did decide to go on her breakfast date, but didn't want to risk getting her bracelet wet. Using a trick she remembered from when she had to wear a cast on her ankle, Alma snagged a plastic bag and tape from a drawer and taped the bag around her wrist.

She told herself that she hadn't decided whether or not she was going to meet Haniel. It wasn't a good idea considering how much was going on, but she found herself humming as she did her hair and put on makeup.

At a quarter of eight, she peeked out the window and saw Haniel's car. A surge of excitement rushed through her. He was early! She tried not to read too much into it, but it flattered her. Ten hair-fussing minutes later, she decided she'd go to breakfast with him. She told herself she'd figure out a way to table their budding relationship until she'd saved her mother and then maybe she'd have time. But as she locked her door and headed down the wooden stairs from her apartment, she realized the truth. Once she changed the past, her whole life would be different. None of this would happen.

Haniel got out of his car and greeted her. "You look great," he said, and Alma

allowed herself to enjoy the compliment.

"Thanks."

They walked to the car. His arm brushed against hers. Alma tingled with excitement. He opened the door for her and before she got into the car, she looked up at him. Their eyes locked. Haniel smiled.

"I like starting the day off seeing you," he said, surprising himself at how much he meant it.

Alma's face heated with embarrassed joy as she ducked into the car.

At Alma's suggestion, Haniel drove them to Norm's on Sherman Way just a few streets over. He would have taken her someplace more trendy or expensive, but Alma didn't want to go too far.

Haniel stole several glances at her as he drove. She'd styled her black hair, so it curled in at the bottom and framed her cute face. Her light makeup showed off her clear skin and big brown eyes. There was something so cute about her little nose and oval face that melted his heart. His mind flashed back to kissing her on their first date. Everything cute about her turned sexy when he touched her. He shifted in his seat as he drove and pushed those thoughts from the forefront of his mind to avoid embarrassment.

They drove in silence to the restaurant. Each enjoyed the other's company while also being preoccupied with the doomed nature of their relationship.

Haniel's mind whirred with thoughts on how to delay or stop his father's plan. Alma's thoughts vacillated between figuring out how to break up with Haniel to save her own heartache, or spending as much time with him before she saved her mother.

Haniel pulled into the parking lot of Norm's. He opened the door for Alma and helped her out of the car. "What's wrong?" Alma asked.

"Sorry, my mind just drifted to life stuff," he answered, impressed that she'd picked up on his change in mood.

"I can relate to that," Alma said. She could see that he didn't want to talk about what was bothering him, which made it something they both had in common. "Let's just pretend like we don't have any problems and eat pancakes," she said.

Haniel's gaze turned to Alma's face. Her determination to enjoy pancakes and each other's company lightened his heavy heart. He took her hand, pulled her in, and kissed the top of her head. Her hair smelled like strawberries, and the feel of her body close to his soothed him.

"Pancakes it is," he said.

They slid into a bright-orange booth, sitting across from one another. Haniel enjoyed being able to see her face, but missed the warmth of her body next to his

like at Casa Vega. For the first time that morning, he took in the sight of her white and pink T-shirt. It wasn't too tight, but he liked the way it fit.

Alma reached for the menu tucked behind the napkin holder and pretended not to notice Haniel checking her out. The hungry expression on his face flattered her. She'd never thought of herself as "sexy," but the way Haniel looked at her made her feel that way. It also embarrassed her. She forced herself to act unaffected, but the tremble in her chest radiated through her entire body. She worried he might see her hands shake and opted to tuck them in her lap after the resting the menu flat on the table.

"You're so cute one minute and the next you're so..." Haniel stopped himself from saying "hot."

"Smart?"

"True, but not my thought."

"You must've been thinking about my awesome personality then."

"Something like that," he said and winked. He worried the wink was too cheesy.

She smiled at him, but he could tell she was shy about her looks and a bit embarrassed. For some reason that made her even more irresistible.

They ordered breakfast, and Haniel found himself in the unusual position of not knowing what to say. He'd always been a natural with women, but this morning he found himself swimming in awkwardness.

"Did you grow up in California?" Alma asked, breaking the silence.

"Yes, I was born in the Valley. What about you?"

"Technically I was born here, but I grew up in Florida. I moved here two years ago," Alma said, regretting that she'd taken the conversation in this direction. She knew what question would come next.

"What made you move?" Haniel asked. He'd wondered where she'd been all this time. His father had looked for her.

"My father died," Alma said.

"I'm sorry," Haniel said, surprised. He knew that his father had killed the man who was Alma's real father, a few months before he killed her mother. Guilt stabbed at Haniel's heart. She wondered if Alma knew the man who raised her wasn't her biological dad.

"I don't want to bum you out or talk about anything heavy. My dad was a great dad. I miss him, but we're here to enjoy pancakes."

Haniel understood Alma's reticence. His mother had died when he was a kid, and he didn't want to talk about that either. The only problem was that he couldn't think of anything else to talk about. The waitress came by with their breakfast. "Saved by the pancakes," Haniel said, grateful for the distraction.

They ate in silence. Alma had been so stressed over the last few days that she enjoyed eating in Haniel's quiet company.

Haniel, in contrast, found himself feigning calm while his hands sweated with anxiety. He worried he'd lose Alma forever if he continued to be so boring.

"Did you go to school?" Alma asked, breaking the silence.

"I got a bachelors from CSUN in philosophy with a minor in math," he said, happy to have something to day.

"What made you choose math and philosophy?"

"A search for truth and knowledge. I think I liked math more."

"Because?"

"I liked the concrete nature of it," Haniel said, an answer he'd given on many a date.

"I always thought math was abstract with some very concrete and real-world applications, of course, but still abstract."

Her answer impressed Haniel. So many other girls would just nod and be impressed by how smart he was, but Alma had made an interesting point. "I guess concrete isn't the word I meant to use. It's more that, in math, for the most part, there's a right answer and a wrong answer. Philosophy isn't like that."

Alma nodded. "I did enjoy that about math, but I didn't enjoy some of the frustration."

Haniel laughed. "Are you in school?"

"No," Alma said, not knowing how to follow up.

"Is it because of your dad?" Haniel asked.

Alma tilted her head, surprised he'd guessed right.

"You said it happened two years ago, and given your age and your short answer, I figured."

His quick understanding made it easy for Alma to talk. "At first I figured I'd take a year, establish residency here, and adjust to the change. But then I got into the job at *Valley Classified*." She stopped talking and shrugged.

"You really dig it there? Is it fun?"

"My boss is a jerk, but it's fun working with Doug and I enjoy, 'mining for gold,'" she said, using the air quotes gesture.

A flash of jealousy struck Haniel at the mention of Doug, but he reminded himself that her friend was gay and enjoyed the easy flow of conversation. She talked about enjoying finding antiques.

"Are you like one of those people Professor Cassidy talked about at the bookstore?" he asked.

"That night was the first time I'd ever heard of her or her book. I didn't recognize her in your store. Do you believe in that stuff?" Alma asked.

Haniel knew his father would be pleased by the information he could glean if he steered the conversation down this path. It almost made the young man change the topic, but he couldn't help himself. He wanted to know what Alma thought about all of this Infinite Truth stuff. "I'm worried you'll think I'm a weirdo, but—"

"So you believe? In reincarnations, psychics, witches and whatnot?" she asked.

Haniel noticed her voice and body seemed tight with worry. A paranoid part of his brain thought she might somehow have suspected that with this answer, he'd tipped her off to his identity somehow. And yet he continued. "Don't hold it against me, but yes."

Alma's eyes grew wide, and her shoulders relaxed. Haniel thought he caught a sense of relief from her.

"Have you read about paramortals?" he asked.

Alma shook her head no. She didn't dare say a word.

"I have. It's a hobby of mine. My mother..." Haniel swallowed hard and paused. He hadn't intended to reveal this, but he wanted Alma to know that they had this in common. "She was a paramortal, an empath."

"Was?" Alma asked.

"She died when I was seven," Haniel said.

Without thinking Alma heard herself ask, "Was she murdered?"

Her question shocked Haniel, and he confessed something to her that he'd never allowed himself to say out loud or even dwell on more than a moment before burying it. "My father never told me, but I think she was."

"My dad never told me either," Alma said.

Haniel reached across the table and put his hand on top of hers. The smooth, soft skin of the top of her hand warmed his. A sense of peace slipped over him. The relief of his confession unburdened his mind. His father had acquired his mother just like he'd done to Alma's mom.

"Are you a paramortal?" Alma asked.

Haniel sighed. "I don't think so. I always wished I were someone special like her, like you, but I'm not," he said.

Alma jerked her hand away and shook her head. "I'm not."

Haniel gave her a half smile and tilted his head. "I've read enough to recognize an Awakening when I see one."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alma said.

Haniel regretted pushing her. "I don't mean to pry or make you feel weird. Your secret is safe with me."

"I don't have a secret," Alma snapped. Her eyes darted around the room to

see if their conversation was being overheard. "Listen, I have to get going soon."

"I'm sorry," Haniel said in a panic. He lowered his voice to a whisper when he noticed her expression. "You're scared. You're worried what's happened to our moms will happen to you. It makes sense." Haniel began to put it all together. "It's why you can't see me, isn't it?"

"Listen, I've got to go. Don't you have to be at the shop when it opens?"

"Nope, Dad will do it," he said. "What about you? Do you have work today?"

"Sundays are busy days," she said. "Will you take me home now?"

"Baby, it's Monday," Haniel said.

A thrill of being called "baby" took Alma by surprise, as did the day. She searched her memory and remembered that she and Doug had called in to work yesterday. And today she had off, but didn't want to let Haniel know that. But since it was Monday, the mall would be open earlier. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Almost nine thirty," Haniel said.

"I need to get to the mall and buy a birthday present for my aunt before work."

Haniel froze at the mention of a birthday. "Birthday?" he asked, his heart pounding in his chest.

"My aunt's birthday party is Sunday," Alma answered, glad to have something to talk about other than her new powers.

"Are you going to have a party? Like in the backyard?" Haniel said, feigning like he was just curious, but hoping that she would say they were all going to meet at a restaurant or some place different.

"Yes, Tita Win’s friends are coming in from all over. Listen, can we go?"

Haniel swallowed hard and forced a smile. "Of course."

His father's vision was true. He'd foreseen a birthday party. James had assumed it was Alma's own, but now Haniel knew the truth. His father was right. Her power had to be already growing, and his destiny factored into her death this Sunday.

HE PULLED into the driveway behind Alma's car. She worried for reasons she couldn't explain that someone would see them. She wanted to keep Haniel a secret. Meeting him for breakfast felt like it had been a mistake—some kind of weak-willed decision that she was ashamed of.

"Listen, I'm sorry if I pried too much," Haniel said, turning to face her in the passenger seat.

"Thank you for breakfast, but I don't think it's a good idea for us to see each other anymore."

"You can't mean that!" Haniel said, his voice louder than he intended. His body quivered on the inside with panic. "You're just scared. What killed our moms is after you, but I can help."

"How do you know that?" Alma said. She hadn't appreciated his assumptions at breakfast, and now his accurate assessment of her situation made her apprehensive.

"I told you, my mother..." he said, but he stammered with his words and he avoided direct eye contact.

Alma knew he was lying. And then it dawned on her. His mother hadn't died like hers. He'd probably just gotten research about Alma's mother and made up that story. Haniel was her Witness. A sinking shame stuck in her gut. She'd thought this guy had been truly interested in her, but it was just his job to watch her. She could tell by how mad he was that she wasn't admitting to being a paramortal.

She told herself it didn't matter, but she still felt stupid about being tricked. He was so good-looking. She should have known. Well, if he lied to her, she could lie to him. "I'm going to be busy this week," she said, knowing that if she succeeded in changing the past, she'd never see him again, anyway. "Call me after the weekend's over, and we'll go out then. Okay?"

Haniel gave her a weak smile. If his father succeeded in his plan, she'd die at her aunt's party. And in that minute, he resolved to make sure that wouldn't happen. "Promise?" he said.

Alma nodded, but Haniel needed more than a head nod.

"I know you're going through a lot, and you can tell I'm not being completely forthcoming, but in my defense, neither are you."

Alma's defenses against him weakened. He was right.

"Promise me, if I call you on Monday, you will pick up the phone, and we'll talk. I'll tell you everything."

Alma wondered if he was going to quit his job. She didn't want him to do that on her account. "I can't promise that."

"Why?"

"I may not be around come Monday."

Haniel swallowed hard. She knew! It stood to reason that she'd sensed her life was in danger. His lip trembled as he said, "I promise you, you'll be around."

"You can't know that," Alma said, putting her hand on his forearm to comfort

him. Maybe he did like her even though he was her Witness. Charles Taylor seemed to have a thing for Win.

"Then promise me that if you're around on Monday, that you'll see me. You'll meet me."

Alma doubted she wouldn't be around, but there was always a chance. She opened the car door and said, "Don't do anything you wouldn't do if I wasn't around at all, because I might not be."

"I won't. Just promise me."

"If I'm here, I will," she said as she stepped out of the car, closed the door, and waved goodbye.

Haniel didn't push the issue and opted to drive away without saying another word. Breakfast hadn't gone as he'd hoped, but she would come around. He drove without caring where he was headed and plotted how and when he would kill his father.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DOUG SPED DOWN SEPULVEDA BOULEVARD ON HIS WAY TO ALMA'S HOUSE. HE'D called her three times this morning, and she hadn't picked up. He wished he'd thought to get Aunt Win Win's telephone number last night for her to run up and check on Alma. He cursed himself for waiting so long to rush over, but he'd assumed she was either in the shower or sleeping after the first two calls. Breakfast with Tita Win was also a possibility, and that's the one he hoped he'd find when he reached her place.

He turned onto Alma's street and didn't notice Haniel's car as he passed by it. Minutes later he found himself parked behind Alma's car in her driveway. He jumped out of the car and scrambled up her wooden stairs.

Alma heard the car in the driveway and rushed to the front door, worried it was Haniel. She opened the door to find Doug on the top step.

"Hey!" she said, surprised to see her best friend.

Doug, out of breath more from worry than the short run to her door, smiled with relief. "I called, and you didn't pick up. You're really here, right? Not half here half somewhere else?"

Alma pointed to the bracelet. "It's working."

"Maybe we need to go see your aunt just to be safe," Doug said, grabbing her by the wrist.

"We can, but can we wait a minute first?" Alma asked.

"Why didn't you pick up the phone?" Doug said. The concern in his eyes made Alma confess.

"I went on a breakfast date with Haniel, and it was a disaster." Alma's lip quivered. She hadn't thought it was so upsetting until she'd said it out loud.

"Alma, I'm sorry," Doug said, and meant it. No matter what his feelings for Alma were, he hated to see her in pain.

Alma waved Doug inside. She turned back to him, not sure of what to say. Doug swept her into his arms and held her. She cried. "I thought he might actually like me, but he's my Witness," Alma said in between sobs.

Doug's heart went cold. "What makes you think he's your Witness?"

"He started asking about being a paramortal as if he knew it had to be true. Who else would know that?"

Doug's mind jumped to high alert. "Did you ask him if he was your Witness?"

She shook her head. "He said his mother was one of us, an empath, and that's why he was into all the stuff Professor Cassidy and Leo wrote."

"It could be true," Doug said, stalling for time.

"I think he's going to quit."

"What makes you say that?"

"He said he would tell me everything on Monday, but—"

Alma realized she didn't want to talk about changing the past—and therefore the present— with Doug. He would tell Tita Win, and everyone would just try to discourage her.

"But what?"

"It doesn't matter. He's a liar. Let's go downstairs and get started."

A need to confess gripped Doug's heart, but before he gathered his courage Alma had already left the apartment. He rushed to catch up with her.

"Witnesses aren't a bad thing, you know. Taylor seems to truly care for your aunt," Doug said as they crossed the front lawn.

Alma stopped a few feet short of the front door and whispered, "Don't tell Tita Win about my date. I feel stupid going on a date at a time like this."

"I won't."

Alma smiled and put her hand on his arm and said, "You're a true friend."

Doug's gut churned with remorse. He never should have lied to Alma.

NOT WANTING to argue with Win or let her know she'd had a breakfast date, Alma ate a second breakfast. "But won't this ground me too much?" Alma said as Win put another slice of French toast onto Alma's plate.

"Are you sure you don't want to just stay put?" Win asked.

"I need to find out more, and I get this sense that he's coming for me soon."

"Did you see something last night?" Taylor asked. He was seated at the far end of the table drinking tea.

Alma shook her head no.

The doorbell rang and Tita Win Win went to answer it. Alma gave Doug her French toast. He smothered it in syrup. She'd seen him pour maple syrup right into a spoon and eat it before. "I'm cutting you off," she said and took the syrup from next to his plate to just out of his reach.

Doug smiled at her even though he'd fully planned to eat more syrup later to ease his nerves.

Professor Cassidy and Leo entered the living room and waved to Taylor, Alma, and Doug in the dining room. Nervousness tickled at Alma's stomach. They'd come here to help her. Yesterday's failure loomed in her mind.

Win offered breakfast to Cassidy and Leo. They declined food, but accepted coffee. Leo stared at Alma and smiled. It surprised him how pleased he was that she was his daughter. He'd never thought much about children in any of his lifetimes despite the statistical likelihood that he'd fathered many bastards.

Alma looked at everyone gathered at Tita Win's house. A surge of self-consciousness swept through her. She searched her mind for a place to start.

"I want to know why my mother walked willingly to her own murder," Alma heard herself say.

"She knew there was no other way to protect you," Win said.

"I got the vibe that her killer was someone she knew," Alma said even though she had no specific memory to back up her hypothesis.

"I suspected back then it might be a man she'd dated briefly, but your mom insisted it wasn't him. They'd broken up months before she died. But now that you say the wak-wak was named James, I'm sure it was the man she'd dated," Win said.

Doug pretended to look surprised as Win told how Alma's mother called home to the Philippines to find out from their mother how to make a forgetting potion. He appreciated that Aunt Win had chosen to keep his secret identity as Alma's witness, but guilt gnawed at him. Alma deserved the truth. He just needed to find the right time. Cassidy and Leo asked some of the same questions that he and Taylor had last night. Win told them she didn't get too many answers from Bernie at the time, but knowing that memories—and in Bernie's case visions of the future—could be taken by a vampire, Win assumed that was her sister's reason for wanting to forget.

Taylor cleared his throat. "The prime time for him to strike is before you reach the peak of your power so there's enough for him to take, but not too much for you to fight back. Since all of this only started in the last week, it would stand to reason you'd have more time."

"That doesn't account for a few things," Win said.

Alma turned to her. "What things?"

"Let's just say that I think it would be a mistake to assume that we have a great deal of time."

Alma debated letting the details slide, but couldn't. "Tita Win, I'm in danger. This man or whatever he is killed Mom. I need to know everything."

Win Win exhaled and said, "You've been like this since before you were born. So much so, you took your mother with you a few times. At first, we thought Bernie was the one that could travel through time. But then Bernie told me she had visions of a future where a *wak-wak* tried to acquire your powers. So I did a binding type of healing on your mom and you, and it held until you were seven."

"What's a *wak-wak*?" Leo whispered to Cassidy while Alma and Win continued to talk. His whisper was loud enough for Taylor to hear.

"A mystical creatures from Filipino folklore and mythology. It's their word for vampire," Taylor whispered.

Leo tilted his head and nodded to the man, and then they tuned back to Alma and Win. Doug remained silent, too afraid he'd be outed as Alma's Witness at any moment.

"When you came to visit," Alma said, only vaguely remembering, "I don't remember traveling through time."

"Your power was very early stage. Mostly like pretending except you knew things you shouldn't know."

Alma remembered playing pretend, but not much.

"Your mother hadn't foreseen the binding wearing off so soon. So that was unexpected. She knew there would be a time when your power would become detected. She tried to forget as much as she could so when the vampire consumed her, he wouldn't know too much. But her power, like yours, is too great to erase all the way."

"And he consumes by literally blood murder or at least that’s what you guys at the Observatory believe, right?" Alma asked turning to Taylor.

Taylor glanced over to Cassidy and Leo with a pained expression on his face.

Leo laughed. "We have dozen of lives between us. We know you and The Observatory. Most of us do." Doug worried that if Cassidy and Leo knew about The Observatory, they also knew he was Alma's Witness.

Taylor raised his eyebrows with surprise. "Okay then. Most of our records on vampires are sealed, but since—"

"You're the director," Cassidy interrupted.

"Deputy director," Taylor corrected.

"Who is the director then?"

"It would be dishonorable of me to divulge knowledge that was given to me in confidence," Taylor said.

"But you're going to tell us the sealed vampire information. Wasn't that given to you in confidence?" Leo said.

"Actually, I stole it, because I was worried that it might be destroyed soon. So it's in the best interest of all of us that I share it now," Taylor said.

"Why do—" Leo began.

"Can we just get to the information first, and you can interrogate the man later?" Cassidy asked.

Leo smiled and nodded at his friend and then gestured for Taylor to continue.

"Thank you," Taylor said, speaking to Cassidy, but Leo assumed the thanks were for him.

"None of the books gave specifics on how vampires 'acquire' the life force from the people they kill, but it appears that much like other paramortals, the ability has a greater likelihood in certain families."

Doug reached across the table to grab the maple syrup. All of this talk of Alma being in danger along with the prospect of being outed as a Witness put him on edge. He needed the sugar. He swiped the container without drawing too much attention, but as he sat down the syrup bottle knocked over his coffee mug, toppling it and jettisoning the spoon he'd rested inside it onto the floor.

Alma stared at the spinning spoon. The way the light hit it triggered her memory. She'd seen this before, or rather something like it.

"Alma, are you going somewhere?" Tita Win asked.

"No, I'm just remembering something," Alma said.

"That's how it goes sometimes," Win said, stepping closer.

Alma picked up the spoon and stared at it. When she'd become her mother in the bathroom, Alma remembered that she'd put on the headband and went to the kitchen. To make sure she was still Bernadette, she'd ducked down to check her reflection on the side of the toaster on the counter.

"I see you," her mother said to her as they both stared at her mother's reflection. She walked back to the table. "You'll remember this," her mother told her, reaching for a book written by Irene Polk and opened to the foreword. "It's autographed, here," her mother said, pointing to Irene's signature. "Win Win will have it. Tell her hello. But for now, you'll forget, as I drink this coffee. Until you see this," her mother said as she kneeled down and spun a spoon on the floor. She stared at it.

Her mother had foreseen this moment and somehow figured out how to use it as a trigger. "She made me forget with the coffee, and remember with this spoon," Alma said.

"That was my coffee," Tita Win said. "Your mother drank it all the time to keep her memories hidden from the *wak-wak*."

"Well, Mom says hi, and she says you have a book for me. Irene wrote it and signed it."

"What do you need that for?" Win said.

"I think it's so I can go back and find out what Irene knows about *Eternidad Paagiha*."

CHAPTER TWENTY

WINIFRED RUMMAGED THROUGH THE BOOKS IN A BOX IN THE BACK OF HER bedroom closet with Taylor. "Why didn't she tell me? I could have accidentally thrown this away."

"Maybe the forgetting spells were timed to keep the information secret," Taylor said.

"Make sure to tell that to Alma if I forget where I put it," Winifred said as she furrowed her eyebrows and tore through another box of books.

Winifred had always appeared calm and in control to Taylor. At the moment, she appeared flustered. He found it distressing. He attempted to ease her worry. "Well, if it's—

"I found it!" Win Win said, standing up in the walk-in closet with a smile and heading for the door. Taylor headed for the door of the closet at the same time, and they bumped into each other.

"Terribly sorry," Taylor said.

Win laughed. "So polite."

Taylor smiled as he looked down at her. He towered over her—his six-foot-two-inch frame to her five feet. She nudged him playfully in the ribs with her arm. His smile grew even bigger at the contact.

"I missed you," Win declared.

Her honesty caught Taylor off guard and made a lump in his throat. "I've thought about you every day for over twenty years."

"You moved without saying a word, but I knew why."

The futility of his rash decision hit home. "Did you know who I was then?"

She nodded.

"Would you have forgiven me?"

"Nothing to forgive," she said, and hugged him.

Taylor pulled Winifred close and wrapped both arms around her. Her small body felt good against his. He'd longed to hold her for years. "So much time wasted."

Win pulled away just enough so she could look up at him and shook her head no. "There's a season for everything. Ours is coming."

Taylor nodded his head in agreement. He'd been successful with his fight against his tears, but if he spoke now, he worried his victory would be erased.

"Okay," Win said, pushing away after a moment. "Alma needs this," she said as she tucked the book under her arm and headed out of the closet and back to the dining room.

LEO SAT across from Alma at the table and continued to steal looks at her. Her determination and good looks reminded him of himself.

"I found it!" Tita Win Win said as she entered the dining room and rushed to Alma to hand her the book. "It's signed by the author."

"Why does that matter?" Leo asked.

"I think it makes it easier for me to find someone," Alma said.

Win Win nodded.

"That energy, like the energy that radiates from the antiques," Cassidy said. "Home in on that."

"I can do that," Alma said, "but I can't get back."

"We need to ground her here," Win Win said, signaling to Leo.

"Why him?" Alma asked.

Win paused and opted not to lie, but not reveal the whole truth. "Because he knew your mother."

Leo and Win exchanged a quick look, and Leo realized Win knew his secret.

"Didn't Cassidy know her more?" Alma asked.

"Yes. We'll all ground you. We need to sit in a circle," Win said. "Let's go into the living room. We can move the coffee table."

"Is this like a witch thing?" Doug asked.

"Yes," Win answered in her usual upbeat manner, heading for the coffee table. "Now grab the other end for me."

"I'll get that for you," Taylor said, and rushed over to her side to take the end of the table Tita Win was reaching for.

Alma noticed how much Win beamed at the sight of Taylor lending a helping hand.

Win Win urged everyone to sit crosslegged. She maneuvered Leo to the left of Alma and put herself to Alma's right. "Okay everyone, Alma is going to take off the bracelet, and focus our energy on the book. You all hold hands, and you," she said, pointing to Leo, "do what I do." Win put one hand around Alma's wrist and put the other hand on her shoulder. "If it gets really bad, I'll cover her third eye."

Alma thought it was weird that everyone other than Leo and Tita Win just sort of sat there holding hands, but she figured it couldn't hurt. She held the book in her hands, and Leo and her aunt essentially held her down. Alma worried that she'd go nowhere like what happened at Cassidy's house. But then, a powerful zap of electricity surged from the book. Wind whipped by Alma's face, and she could see that even the other people in the room could feel it.

"Go within," Tita Win Win said to her.

Not knowing entirely what that meant or how to do it, Alma closed her eyes and focused on the energy coming from the book. Her hands warmed. The falling sensation engulfed her. She tried to open her eyes, but found herself surrounded by darkness. This time there was no purple. Alma found that change reassuring.

Pinpricks of light filled her eyes, and then Alma felt her body again. Except it wasn't the body of Alma Davis; she was someone else. Her eyes opened, and the sun shined through the sliding glass door that led to the pool.

"Not quite done yet," she heard a voice in her head say, and she closed her eyes.

Alma remembered that she was visiting this person, but every time she asked herself mentally, "Who am I?" She got back odd answers. "I'm the one housed in the body?"

"What's your name?" Alma asked.

"Names do not define me," the inner voice of whoever's body this was replied.

Frustrated Alma asked, "Is this Irene Polk or what?"

Her eyes shot open. And Alma comprehended the thought, "That was the oddest questioning meditation I've ever felt. Did God, or rather the inner part of me that is of God, reach out to me?"

Alma, although still irritated, was relieved that she indeed met Irene Polk.

I'm Alma Davis. My mother told me to get in touch with you. I'm in danger.

Irene Polk's mind didn't comprehend Alma's plea for help.

Alma decided to abandon the idea that she could ask Irene directly for any advice and began to rummage through the woman's memory. She was the wife of a very rich man in the agriculture industry. She was a recovering alcoholic and

turned to spirituality and mysticism to help her with her disease. Her mind filled with axioms and spiritual truths, but the woman felt as if something was blocking her.

The doorbell rang, and Irene went to answer it. She was expecting someone —one of her most gifted students.

"Hello, James, good to see you," she said. She'd found him.

"Are you alone?" he asked and stared directly into Irene's eyes. Alma gasped. It was as if the man could see her.

"Yes, I told you. George is out of town on business."

The man gave her a sinister grin.

"I didn't mean it like that," he said, and within seconds he grabbed Irene and wrapped his arm around her neck.

The woman tried to shout, but all she could do was gasp for air. One thought ran through her head: Betrayal. *That's the rule that'll bring me back*. Alma gasped. She was surrounded by violet. Tita Win Win's voice called her name.

"Oh, no you don't," he said into her ear. "I've been waiting for you for years. And now you've come to me."

James put his finger over Irene's third eye just like Tita Win!

Her vision darkened. The space between her eyes burned. A painful draining sensation yanked through her body. It was as if the air and all of her insides were being sucked out of her. The urge to yell and fight back gripped her entire being, but he'd paralyzed her.

"Let go!" Tita Win Win's voice echoed in her mind. "Alma! Let go!"

In her panic, Alma didn't understand what Win meant. Death neared Irene's body, and it threatened to drag Alma with it.

Win's voice faded. Alma struggled to retain her thoughts. Pure fear fueled her attempt to fight off death. The pain wrenched through her. Even the muscles in her eyes shredded under the strain. Her suffering continued to mount without even the slight relief a scream would bring.

Terror consumed Alma's thoughts. The violet darkness threatened to overtake her. Afraid of the pain, Alma forced herself to stop fighting and surrender.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HANIEL JUMPED AT THE SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS OUTSIDE HIS HOTEL ROOM. A child's laugh eased his frayed nerves. More footsteps followed along with the voices of a man and a woman. It was a family, not his father, walking down the hall. Relief washed over him.

He told himself his father couldn't know where he was. He'd chosen a random hotel and paid cash after emptying out the shoe repair shop's business account at a bank over forty miles from here.

Haniel focused on his breath and tried to calm himself. There was no way he could take part in Alma's death. He loved her, and he'd have his entire life to win her over. He just needed to find a way to mask his feelings long enough to get close to his dad to take his life. If he didn't, Haniel knew his father would pick up on his plan and kill Haniel just like he'd killed his mother.

DOUG STARED at the bruises on Alma's body. They'd appeared after the swelling went down. He told himself they looked smaller than before, and her temperature had gone down, too. The kitchen timer dinged. He removed the ice pack, set the timer for ten minutes, and then placed the pack on the other side of her forehead. He didn't want her to have frostbite when she awakened.

Win Win had stayed at Alma's side for almost a full day with no sleep healing her. Alma's body and face had ballooned so much with fever and swelling, she looked unrecognizable—a combination of being pummeled in a heavyweight bout and stung by thousands of bees. Win's face and hands became swollen as the hours crept by. Taylor finally convinced her to stop when Alma's breathing became more regular and most of the swelling came down.

Doug took the first shift after Win. Taylor tended to Alma after that, and Doug insisted on taking this shift even though Leo had volunteered. Doug had spied Leo's longing gazes at Alma, and he didn't like it. Between Haniel and now Leo, it seemed as if every man who spent any time with Alma fell in love with her. Thank goodness Taylor's sights were fixed on Win Win.

The alarm went off again, and Doug repeated the same process. Alma looked more like herself now. Some of the bruises had turned from black and blue to yellow and black. He hoped that was an improvement. Doug's mind reeled at the idea that the vampire managed to attack Alma's actual body when he wasn't even in the room. The idea bordered on impossible, except that Doug had witnessed it.

She'd closed her eyes, mumbled something, and then she went silent. Doug assumed she'd successfully landed somewhere in time. Ten minutes later, she gasped for air, her muscles tightened, and her body seemed to deflate.

He closed his eyes and tried to erase the image of Alma's face and body morphing into a skeleton before his eyes.

"Doug," Taylor said, startling Doug.

The young Witness turned to his boss, grateful for the distraction.

"When she wakes up, you need to tell her who you are," Taylor said.

Doug paused and looked down at Alma. Taylor patted him on the shoulder and said, "Take it from a man who made the same mistake."

Doug nodded and resolved to tell her. That's if she ever woke up.

A SEA of whiteness and light surrounded Alma. She couldn't feel her body, but unlike before it wasn't unpleasant. She enjoyed being untethered to the shell that had caused her so much pain. The floaty sensation of her being brought her peace.

"Am I dead?" Alma thought.

"No. I don't think so," came the answer in the form of her own thoughts.

Alma smiled at the at the conversation in her mind, and that instant uncovered the truth about smiling. Even though it registered as an expression on her face, the specific flavor of joy a smile brought wasn't contingent on her body.

"Cool," Alma thought and then wondered. "If I'm not dead, where am I?"

There was a pause, and then an answer came. "I think you're somewhere outside the illusion of time, but that's just a theory."

"Like a limbo?"

"Sort of, but not in a bad way."

Alma shared a laugh with what she assumed was herself. When her other voice didn't contradict that assumption, she figured she'd go with it.

It didn't occur to Alma to worry about where her actual body was or how much time was passing for it. Being outside of time had its perks. She didn't feel rushed, bored, or worried. It would be erroneous to say she had all the time in the world, but the effect was the same.

It occurred to Alma that this would be a good opportunity for reflection. She'd seen so much and understood so little.

HANIEL SPED NORTHWARD on I-15 bound for Las Vegas. His mind fixated on one thing—a gun. Shooting his father gave him the best odds of victory. Any other method would either take too long or require Haniel to get too close to his dad. Proximity to his father would not only allow the man to pick up on Haniel's murderous plan, it increased the likelihood Haniel would be the one who would end up shriveled into dust.

A man at a pawnshop in Victorville had told Haniel he knew of a gun store owner in Vegas that would sell him a gun without any paperwork. He'd paid the pawnshop owner $100 just to get the phone number and secret code word. All of this could be a scam, but Haniel figured Vegas would be an easier place to buy a gun anyhow.

His father had to suspect Haniel now that he'd avoided going home for days. He hadn't even told his father about his breakfast date. For all Haniel knew, his father could be trying to track him now. Even though the man's psychic powers weren't all that reliable, James might find him in Vegas. Vegas was very distinctive. Haniel hoped he'd get the gun before his father figured out what was going on. Or before his dad went after Alma himself.

Nobody would even miss James Hanker. He hadn't had a driver's license in forty years, and by all public records, the man was an impossible 135 years old. They'd likely assumed James Hanker as dead ages ago. James had gone "off the grid" long before Haniel was born.

Everything was in Haniel's name after James killed Haniel's mom. Her will left everything to her son. Even the shoe repair shop was his.

Haniel's gaze turned to the endless miles of desert on the side of the road—the perfect place to bury the body.

A highway sign indicated a fueling station and food at the next exit. He glanced the gas gauge: almost empty. He'd have to stop even though he was in a

hurry. Being stranded on the side of this highway would make him a sitting duck.

Haniel fueled up the car, then went inside and grabbed some chips and soda. In his peripheral vision, he spotted the pay phone outside. If his father had already figured out what was going on, Haniel needed to know before his father went after Alma. And if his father hadn't figured it out, maybe there was a way he could stop him.

"Are you looking for something?" the gruff cashier behind the counter asked.

Haniel realized he was standing in the middle of the store staring outside. "Yes," he said as he put his items on the counter, "I need to pay for these, the gas on pump seven, and I'll need quarters for the pay phone."

The cashier nodded, bagged up the snacks, and gave him the change. Haniel exited the snack shop. A plan began to form in his mind. He needed to picture Alma. Having spent most of his life in his father's immediate vicinity, Haniel didn't know if the man's empathic ability worked over the telephone. He did know that for short periods of time, he'd been able to fool his father. The trick would be to keep the conversation short.

He took a deep breath, picked up the phone, and dialed. His father answered on the fourth ring. "Hi Dad, it's me."

"Where the hell have you been?"

Haniel hoped that meant that his father hadn’t figured out what he was doing. He saw the sign for the bathroom. "I've gotta be quick. She's in the bathroom right now, but I wanted to check in with you."

"You're with her! You're with the daughter!"

His father's genuine-sounding surprise sent waves of relief through Haniel. But he needed to act fast. "I'm taking her to Vegas. But there is something important I need to tell you about the birthday party."

"Go ahead."

Haniel wondered if his father was playing him. This was going better than he could've hoped. "Shoot. I think she's coming. Listen, the party isn't for Alma's birthday. It's for her aunt. And it's this weekend."

"I knew her powers were growing fast," his father said.

"That's why I haven't left her side. We don't have much time. I'll come by the store Saturday afternoon and bring you to the party," Haniel said, lying about the day of the party. He hung up before his father could ask more questions.

He exhaled, grabbed his soda and chips, and headed to the car. Opening his soda and taking a big gulp, his brain wavered between relief and anxiety. Could his father have been faking it? Even if he hadn't, could his dad still catch on? Either way, Haniel needed a gun.

ALMA ATTEMPTED to sift through her mother's memories, but she had a difficult time figuring out where to go. She found herself wishing for a map and then remembered—she wasn't in the real world. Leo's words echoed in her memory. The world wasn't real. It was just a projection from consciousness. Couldn't she just project something from her mind onto this blank canvas of white to help her visualize this time puzzle she was caught in?

A memory of a museum trip from childhood flashed in Alma's mind. The museum had a giant timeline on the floor with little lines splintering off into different dinosaur eras. She imagined in her mind's eye a timeline of her mother's life.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself in a giant room with a skylight ceiling—a feature borrowed from the museum in her childhood. The bright shiny white tiles gleamed under her feet. She laughed when she looked down and realized she conjured up ruby red slippers as well. She could see the year of her mother's birth just behind her, November 25, 1948 in the Philippines, and the first twelve years of her life labeled, "The Philippine Era." An interesting detail caught Alma's eyes. Her mother's last name at birth wasn't "Fernandez." It was Belcinia. It changed, along with her birthday, about a year before she and Tita Win came to the United States.

Alma walked over to that part of the timeline, tapped her foot, and a door whisked up from the floor as if by magic. Alma paused for a deep breath, opened the door, and entered her mother's life.

The bright sun made Alma squint as she stepped off a dirt road cleared in the forest of thick trees. She could hear the ocean and smell the salt air.

Alma spotted an eleven-year-old version of her mother seated on the ground outside of her Nipa hut, a small house made of wood with a bamboo thatched roof. Alma could tell that her mother was listening intently at the doorway to the conversation going on inside. Alma walked closer, knowing that her mother couldn't see her. This wasn't technically a trip back in time; it was a trip through her mother's memory, so Alma could only see what her mother could. Alma peeked into the tiny, dark house and saw her grandmother.

It amazed Alma how strong the family resemblance was. Her grandmother looked so much like Tita Win Win herself, except the sun had darkened her skin, her nose was shorter and flatter at the nostrils, and she was missing a tooth in the front.

"I need them both to go to America," Grandmother said.

"And the curse will be lifted, and my sister will be cured?" the woman asked.

"You've seen she's almost all better now," Grandmother said.

"When will she be fully recovered?"

"Your good deed for my daughters seals the fate of your sister. Here is the paperwork you asked," Grandmother said and handed her two pieces of paper. Alma squinted to see them, but her mother must've not seen the papers, so her memory wouldn't reveal what they were.

"My uncle will get started on the paperwork right away," the woman said as she stood. She turned back. "Thank you."

"I look forward to the time when I will thank you," Grandmother said.

The woman smiled and left.

Bernie ran inside after the woman left.

"Are you excited to go to America?" Grandmother asked.

"I want you to come," Bernie said.

"I'll teach you how to talk to me, and then I will always be with you," Grandmother said.

Bernie nodded and then turned and looked right at Alma.

"She's here," Bernie said.

'Right now?" Grandmother said.

"No, later," Bernie answered.

Grandmother nodded. "Okay, then you have to remember all of this very carefully. And do it in English like you learned in school."

Alma's attention grew more focused. They knew she was there!

Grandmother crouched down and looked straight into Bernie's eyes, and Alma found herself sitting in Bernie's place. "Hello, my granddaughter!" the old woman said, her smile wide. A surge of happiness spread through Alma. "Time it is not what you think. It is not real. Like we are not real. You need not let your attachments trap you. Do not be bound by your body or time, and the man who hunts us will never be able to capture you."

Grandmother stood up, and the room darkened. Alma caught sight of a young child version of Win Win before the memory ended. She was waving goodbye.

Moments later, Alma found herself on the other side of the door. She tried the handle, but it was shut. She could only assume that in that part of her mother's life, that was all she was meant to see. Alma moved further down the timeline. She felt herself drawn to the latter part of 1973. That part of the timeline expanded as she walked closer. The months of October, November, and December grew even larger. Alma stopped. Another door rose from the floor marked October 17, 1973. Somewhere in the recesses of her mother's erased

memories, Alma must've gleaned this day to have something important. Alma opened the door and stepped into her mother's life again.

The surroundings seemed familiar to Alma. Then she realized she was in the same bathroom where she first set eyes on her mother. She heard Tita Win Win call to her mother. Bernie was getting ready for date. Except this time when her mother left the bathroom, Alma was able to follow her. Her mother rushed to the door of the little house she shared with her sister, excited for her date. When the door opened, Alma gasped.

"James!" Bernie said.

The man gave her a funny look for a moment, and the room went black. Alma heard the slam of the door to her mother's memory and found herself back on the timeline. The door in front of her now bolted shut. She banged on it and tried the doorknob without success. Then the door whooshed back into the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ALMA STOOD ON THE WHITE TILE, STUNNED. NO MATTER HOW HARD SHE WILLED it, the door would not reappear. Her mother had been excited about her date with James. And he'd seen her! It may not have registered fully in his mind, but he definitely peered into her mother's eyes just like he had when he recognized Alma visiting Irene Polk.

"But why?" she asked herself.

"Remember what Tita Win Win told you before," Alma said to herself. "Your mother erased part of her memory to keep James from absorbing that knowledge."

Alma remembered walking with her mother to her death. She knew James was going to kill her. Any timeline in her mother's memory would have been absorbed by James. Even Tita Win said that not all the memory potion had worked. Alma had been able to recover parts of her mother's memory. Had James? Would he be waiting for Alma when she went back into her mother's life? There was no way of knowing how much James knew.

"That's not exactly true," she told herself.

The answer dawned on Alma. That matchbook! When she'd touched that matchbook, she gone into James's mind. She could know what he knew. The crisp white tile of the room morphed into that dark alley. The alleyway was filled with unmarked creepy doors. The brick wall had a rusted door marked "Irene Polk." Alma didn't need to go in there. She worried that the same thing that happened when she'd entered the life of Irene would happen to her now.

"But this isn't actually James's mind," she told herself.

"But then how did he see me in Mom's memory?"

"Your mother is psychic, maybe she knew it and she'd prepared to block you in time. Or maybe he sensed you were there, but didn't fully see you."

The uncertainty of her own answers didn't comfort Alma, but she had no choice but to continue.

Alma walked down the alley. Her feet scraped at the dirty ground. Even though she knew she was safe, the sinister vibe of her surroundings made her to hesitate.

She steeled herself and explored further. She peeked into a broken window and saw a woman in a bridal gown. The woman shook her head as if she could read Alma's thoughts. Alma smiled at the bride, and she waved goodbye in return. The sadness in the bride's eyes tugged at Alma's heart. She knew James had killed her.

Alma continued. She let her instincts guide her to the dark end of the alley. The alley narrowed until it dead-ended into the dirty cement wall. Two names were written in blood on that wall with a messy line in between them. Leo Upton's name was scrawled near the left corner, and Bernadette Fernandez's name on the right.

The timelines intersected for only a brief period from late November 1973 to January 1, 1974. Alma put her hand on the wall near the end of the intersection and found herself swept into a hotel casino on New Year's Eve.

GOLD BALLOONS and streamers decked the walls. The ringing slot machines from the casino floor filled Alma's ears. As she walked in the casino the laughter and voices of hotel guests came in waves as the crowds ebbed and flowed throughout the casino. Alma marveled at the mixture of clothes. The wide-collared, loud-colored jackets competed with the wild-patterned carpets and draperies of the hotel. And the women's clothes were straight out of an old television show. Flowing long maxi dresses, one-shoulder sequined numbers, and halter top dresses whisked past Alma.

The festive, party atmosphere made Alma giddy. Then she spotted her mother coming out of the ladies room. She looked so glamorous in a black and silver sleeveless dress with a V-neck.

A very debonair man with full dark hair and a double-breasted suit with a striped tie and white shirt held out his arm for her. Alma followed them as far as The Copa Room. When she crossed the threshold of the showroom, she entered, but it was blank. For a moment, she'd thought this memory had been erased, but when she stepped out of The Copa and back onto the casino floor, the memory roared back to life.

Then she spotted him at a blackjack table at the edge of the casino in a seat facing the doorway to the showroom. Alma approached James with caution even though she knew she was but a ghost floating in her own projection of his memory.

A dark cloud of pain, guilt, jealousy and longing seemed to emanate from him in waves of violet. His energy! She'd been experiencing his dark energy all week. Fear gripped Alma as her mind filled with claustrophobic memories of being suffocated and trapped in a sea of purple.

"No," she told herself. "This is a memory. Don't create danger."

She approached James. His blue eyes were bloodshot, and he was unshaven. He nursed a whiskey as he played blackjack.

Despite the crowded casino, the seat immediately next to him was open and the game only had three other players. Alma couldn't make out their faces or even the face of the dealer. Much of the room had dimmed as well.

The only things with any detail was the area near The Copa Room, James's drink, and each hand of cards.

Wanting to hear his thoughts about her mother, Alma sat in the empty seat and willed James to verbalize his thoughts aloud as he played.

"This one. She's special. Her family is the one," he said, glancing down at his cards, a seven of spades and a two of diamonds. He tapped the felt to indicate to the dealer to give him another card. He got a ten and chose to stay.

"Nice try changing the name and getting adopted. It threw the others off, but not me. It's just a question of when her powers are going to manifest." James won the hand and placed his bet for the next one. His eyes always returned to the showroom and his watch.

"The show gets out at ten thirty," he said. "Eighty-five minutes to go. She picked out another paramortal. That can't be happenstance."

Alma's mind tingled at the thought. She watched the dealer win the hand and scoop all the chips.

James hailed the cigarette girl and bought a pack of Winstons and some matches. "If you see a waitress, send her this way with another whiskey, will you?" he slurred as he paid for the cigarettes and threw a ten-dollar chip on her tray as a tip.

"Right away, sir," she smiled at him, but even her face was blurry.

James placed his bet for the next hand on the table and lit his cigarette. "I'd thought of marrying her, but I think she suspects me now," he said, taking a drag, and Alma's mind remembered the smoking man leaning against the car waiting for her mother.

James set the matchbook on the table. Alma's eyes fixed on it. It was the

matchbook she'd found in her father's things. That's what brought her to the alley.

"She's psychic or so the villagers claimed when she was a little girl," James continued as he flipped over blackjack and won the round. "Her mother almost got Livius himself.

"Her Witness has reported no signs of paramortal abilities. Same for the sister. But I can feel something there. Something powerful brewing."

James's thoughts were all over the place. And some of them didn't make sense.

"I can't believe she's seeing this guy. Sure we broke up, and yes I was wrong to see her when I was married, but I killed my wife a full month before Bernie found out.

"I'd planned on waiting to acquire her powers until at least the boy had grown up, but now I have this kid all sad at home, because I killed his empath mother."

Alma's jaw dropped open. How could she have not seen the resemblance in the eyes? She stared into James's eyes and could almost imagine they were Haniel's. Alma shuddered. Haniel wasn't her Witness, he was James's son!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HANIEL FOUGHT THE URGE TO SPEED BACK TO LOS ANGELES. HE DIDN'T WANT TO be pulled over with an unregistered weapon in his glovebox.

He grabbed a bottled water from his cup holder and took a swig. His head throbbed. He'd spent the night in Vegas at a hotel drinking and pushing the sights of casinos and The Strip into his mind. If his father had foreseen anything, Haniel hoped his father would attribute it to his story about bringing Alma to Vegas.

He'd planned to arrive in the afternoon, kill his father, and wait until late at night to bury the body in the desert. It surprised Haniel that despite his anxiety over committing patricide, he possessed an unparalleled excitement for his future. His future, for the first time, was his own.

He could run the shoe repair shop and live a simple life. He'd win over Alma in time. There'd be no rush. She sensed the danger, and that was what had gotten them off track. Without that danger, she'd have more time to see him. Hell, he'd be the hero. Of course, she'd love him! They could travel the world. He had enough money—especially since Alma wasn't at all materialistic.

Haniel opened the window even though he had the air-conditioning running. He wanted to feel the wind in his face. Freedom! This was what it meant to be free.

The 15 Freeway merged into the 210 and into the 134 as Los Angelenos said. Haniel's hands began to sweat, and his heart pounded.

His thoughts turned to his mother. He tried to remember his childhood and how close he had to be to her for her to pick up on his feelings. But he couldn't remember a time when his mother hadn't known what he felt. And he'd never had cause to hide his feelings from her. Haniel wondered how much of that had to do with her actually caring enough about him to want to know how he felt.

Haniel merged onto the 170. In less than ten minutes he'd be at the shop. Adrenaline pounded through his body, making it impossible for him to calm his mind. His father would catch his mood immediately. Haniel decided his best bet was to pretend his excitement for his future was excitement for his father's plan coming to fruition.

As he exited the freeway and maneuvered the last few turns to the shoe repair shop, Haniel's emotions revved into overdrive. Anger at the death of his mom. Relief at the idea of being freed from his father's tyranny. Joy at the thought of his future with Alma. Fear that he would fail. And way down deep, grief for the death of his father.

The grief caught Haniel off guard. Tears threatened as he pulled into the alley behind the shop. He told himself to pull it together, but a wave of guilt rode on the back of his grief. He'd be a murderer just like his father.

Haniel shook his head no. He wasn't like his father. His father had killed so many. He deserved to die.

ALMA SAT at the blackjack table, stunned about her revelation about Haniel until James grabbed his chips and stood up.

Alma followed him. People streamed out of the Copa Room, and James rushed to stalk Bernie and her date. A woman's laugh pierced through the ruckus of the crowd. James's head snapped in the direction of the sound. Alma followed his gaze and saw her mother with the handsome man in the suit.

The man's arm was draped around her shoulders, and from the looks of it her mother didn't mind. He gave her a quick kiss on the top of the head and then whispered something in her ear. Her mother nodded and laughed again.

Taking her by the arm, the debonair man led her through the crowd to the elevators. James followed the couple and blended with the crowd. Alma didn't have to worry about being caught, so she walked right up to them both.

The man had a familiar air, but Alma couldn't place where she'd known him from. He was charming and confident. It was easy to see how her mother was attracted to him.

"Birdie, you are beautiful," the man said, his voice a charming baritone with a romantic Italian accent.

"Leo, you're just what the doctor ordered," her mother responded.

Leo! Of course. Leo’s name had been on the alley wall, but Alma had forgotten he wouldn’t look like the Leo she knew in her own lifetime. But the

way he carried himself was the same.

The elevator doors dinged open. Alma rushed to follow them in the elevator, but James's memory didn't have any knowledge of that elevator. Instead she found herself staring at the lights of the elevator door to see where they'd stopped.

"Of course, he'd have the fucking penthouse," James sneered in his thoughts.

James got into the next elevator, and Alma went with him.

She watched as James marched around the halls of the top floor looking for the couple. He glanced at his watch. Alma knew it was just before ten at night. His memory was hers. She noticed James's watch. It was the watch Haniel had worn on his date. That's how she'd been transported to Irene Polk's death.

James's gaze was fixed on a Do Not Disturb sign.

"She never slept with me," he said still verbalizing his thoughts as Alma had set forth in this memory reconstruction. "We dated for over four months." His drunken voice dripped with bitterness. "But this guy. She's known him since Thanksgiving, and here she is giving it up like a whore."

Alma wanted to smack the man, but it was pointless. He wasn't there.

"She doesn't even have any power that I can see. But neither does the sister. They're all just useless," he continued.

Then he laughed.

"Not useless," he said, his voice excited. "She's doing the one thing she's good for. She's making a baby. *The* baby."

Waves of bitterness poured off of him.

"Well, Bernie. I'll let you live tonight, but Daddy dies. He'll have served his purpose. But you and the baby, I'll get you both soon. I have time. I'll have eleven more lifetimes when I'm done with Daddy."

Alma's knees weakened. *Of course.* She was born nine months from this time. Leo was her father. James would kill him in the stairwell and then rush out into the alley later. She'd been there. But how did her lifelong dad fit into all of this?

The strike of James's match caught Alma’s attention. He leaned against the wall and lit his cigarette. He looked just like he had when he'd leaned up against the car. That's when she noticed a tear slip down his face. "Bernie, why couldn't you love me? I know I should have waited. I thought it would take longer to find you. We could have been together."

A pang of pity tapped at Alma's heart, but it paled in comparison to her anger, rage, and sadness. Alma vowed to kill him. She just needed to find the perfect moment.

Alma jumped back into the alley and stared at the wall showing the small

intersection of her mother's life with Leo's here in James's timeline.

When she went back into actual time, she'd kill James. But she needed a plan. She needed to know where he'd be, and when she'd have the opportunity to kill him before he detected she was there.

Alma needed a better way to visualize where James's life intersected with anyone else's life in her acquired memories. This dark alley wouldn't suffice. She needed something bigger.

Alma stood on the timeline of her mother again, but this time she added the timelines of everyone's mind she'd jumped into. It surprised her that she had small pieces of Charles Taylor's and Cassidy's memories, but not much.

She asked herself why that might be.

"Maybe it's because you were in their present and didn't travel in their mind to get to a place in time," her inner voice answered.

She made James's timeline a solid red line that stretched down the center of the room about waist high, and then stacked the other timelines at different heights and angles so she could see precisely where each life intersected with the vampire's life.

Her mother's life intersected with James's the most in recent history, but they were in the months just prior to her mother's death. Alma tried to enter those memories, but they were blurred or blacked out by her mom.

Alma turned her attention to Leo Upton's timeline. It stretched farther back than anyone else's. But it only intersected with James on New Year's Eve and the day after when James killed him in the alley. Alma's attention turned to Irene Polk.

Her life intersected with James's for a year in the sixties and then a year before he killed her in 1985. He'd been her estate attorney.

The 1980s were too late to save her mom. So Alma zoomed in on her timeline of the sixties—1967 was the year. Alma vowed to dig through every moment of that year and find the perfect opportunity to kill James.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

HANIEL STEELED HIMSELF WITH HIS RAGE, GRABBED THE LOADED GUN OUT OF the glove compartment, and headed for the back door.

"James!" he heard his voice call out to his father as he entered the back hallway. He'd used his father's first name in case there were customers, but also to distance himself from him.

"Son! You're home!" his father called back. His happy tone and words cut into Haniel's heart. The man rarely acted so excited at Haniel's return.

The little boy inside of him that longed for his father's love surfaced. Haniel told himself it was too late. Scraps of affection given in exchange for being the pawn of an evil man wasn't enough. His father had been corrupted long before Haniel was born. The noble quest for knowledge had been twisted into a hunger for power.

Haniel gripped the gun and willed himself to walk down the hall and enter the living room.

He turned the corner, saw his father just a few yards away, and lifted the gun.

The sound of the gun firing told Haniel he'd pulled the trigger. Haniel marveled at how much louder it sounded than he'd expected. He watched his father's stunned expression. The gun fired again and again. Haniel's ears rang from the explosions.

The gun clicked in his hand. No more bullets. He'd never even told himself to pull the trigger. The ease of the task made Haniel doubt that he'd succeeded. Was he dreaming?

He looked over to where his father had been standing to find his father had crumpled to the floor.

Haniel saw the blood. So much blood. That had to mean his father would die. Dazed, Haniel found himself drawn to the heap of flesh that was his father.

He kneeled down to get a closer look. He could see the rib cage rising and falling. Still breathing. An urge to see his father's face overtook Haniel. He grabbed his father's wrist to turn him over.

An electric shock surged through Haniel's arm. He wanted to pull back and let go, but he couldn't.

He looked down at his father. His eyes were closed, but the corners of his mouth turned up. The man laughed.

Terror pulsed through Haniel's body! He'd gotten too close. Why hadn't he stayed away? His father would drain him until he was nothing.

Blood pounded through his body. He could feel his own pulse in his throat. His heart pumped blood so fast he thought it would explode.

Haniel stared down at his father. The man had beaten him. Haniel wondered how he'd been so deluded into thinking a mere gun could kill his father.

Sweat poured down Haniel's back. His lungs pushed and pulled the air in and out of his body so fast, a sensation of dizzy intoxication overtook him.

Haniel relaxed at the idea that his own death might not be painful. An overwhelming urge to look his father in the eye overtook him.

He used his free hand and lifted his father's eyelid with his thumb. The knuckle of his middle finger grazed the space between his father's eyes. A zing of electricity sparked through Haniel's hand and up through his body.

His father's eyes shot open. Haniel's knuckle pressed harder into his father's flesh. It was as if a circuit had just been completed.

"And I thought you were just an ordinary boy," James said with a smile.

The love and admiration in his father's eyes astounded Haniel. He'd craved that very look his entire life, only to get it moments before his father killed him.

But it was worth it. Haniel closed his eyes to avoid the pain of being drained of his life force like his mother. Would it be quick?

A rush of giddiness swelled in Haniel's heart as waves of euphoria wiped clean his worried mind. Death would be Haniel's salvation.

Haniel opened his eyes to see his father one last time.

The sight of his father's shriveled skin horrified him. His father had been a large man, nearly two hundred pounds. Now, he looked emaciated. His father's wrists and his skull shrank under Haniel's touch. James resembled a skeleton more than a man. A cyclone of wind encircled Haniel and his father's remains. The electric charge faded as the body turned to dust, and the wind blew the remaining specks of his father away.

Haniel sat on the carpet next to where his father had vanished. He laughed as the phrase "drunk with power" popped into his mind. It described his situation to a degree beyond what anyone else had ever experienced. He had access to his

father's thoughts and memories. His own thoughts crystalized in his mind with a clarity he'd never imagined.

Even through his jeans, he found himself aware of each individual fiber of the carpet. Slight fluctuations in the air didn't escape his notice. When sensory input threatened to overload his thoughts, he discovered he could mute certain thoughts and zero in on others. He marveled at his power. No wonder his father craved more knowledge. Knowledge truly was power.

A sense of invincibility had slipped into his consciousness as well along with a healthy warning from himself around it. An urge to be around people and in a more stimulating environment beckoned him. He stood up and looked at the spot where his father died. He smiled, realizing there'd be no need to drive to the desert to dispose of the body. It didn't occur to him to be troubled by his lack of remorse. His father's death was of little consequence. Haniel could see the bigger picture now.

WINIFRED FERNANDEZ LOOKED down at her niece. Alma was still unresponsive. The young woman's coloring had come back, and the swelling and bruising had subsided. But Alma hadn't returned. Something was keeping her away, and that worried Win Win.

ALMA ENTERED Irene Polk's life, or rather Irene's memory of it. Her mansion estate stood on over five acres in the Hollywood Hills. The twelve-bedroom home—not including the servants' quarters—employed two full-time gardeners, and six full-time house staff, including a chef. There was a film screening room, meditation room, upstairs and downstairs sitting room, and a cabana by the pool.

Each Tuesday and Sunday, the house staff converted the downstairs sitting room into a classroom for Irene's highest level students. James was one of the those students. That would be the perfect opportunity to kill him.

Alma rummaged through the drawers of the house for Irene's husband's gun. The problem with Alma's search of Irene's was that Irene Polk only had a vague notion that her husband kept a gun in his desk drawer and sometimes he took it with him to get cleaned or some other excuse the man made up.

Each time Alma entered a room that Irene hadn't been in recently, like her

husband's study, Alma's visualization of the memory got fuzzy. Alma stood in the study and stared at the drawer. She needed to find a time when Irene knew exactly where the gun existed.

Alma paused to think about her problem, and the perception of time in this construct of Irene Polk's memory stopped, as if Alma had hit pause on a VCR. That gave Alma an idea. She trained her eyes on the desk where Irene's husband was supposed to keep the gun and then imagined a fast forward button. She pushed the button, and she watched as the shadows from the sun changed and the occasional visitor or servant swept in and out. After a day or so flew by, Alma didn't need to pretend to push the button. She found she could keep time clipping by with just her thoughts.

Days and nights sped by. Alma worried what she hoped to find may have never happened.

But then, in the middle of a late November night, the lights to the den clicked on. Lawrence Polk dashed toward his desk to get his gun. Someone was in the kitchen, and the servants had the night off. Irene's head poked in the door as she whispered, "Don't go down. I already called the police."

"Stay up here," Lawrence said.

"No!" Irene hissed as her husband pushed by her and headed downstairs.

Irene waited a moment and then tiptoed downstairs after him.

Irene peered into the kitchen. A scratching sound came from the walk-in pantry. The pantry door was cracked, but not open wide enough to see who was inside.

"Show yourself!" Lawrence commanded as he stood next to the sink in the kitchen. "I have a gun."

The intruder continued to rifle through the cupboard, ignoring Lawrence's instructions. The elderly gentleman switched on the light and made his way to pantry.

"Do not make me shoot you," Lawrence said. "If you're hungry, you're welcome to some food, but you need to show yourself right now."

The shuffling continued and then a high-pitched cluck-like sound came from the closet, followed by the sound of a jar crashing to the tile.

Lawrence whipped opened door with one hand, his gun poised in the other. For a moment, he saw nothing, but then he looked down and spotted two raccoons staring up at him. Lawrence laughed.

"Irene!" he called to his wife. "Sweetheart, you can come down."

Irene entered the kitchen, and the two shared a laugh about their "furry bandits." Irene called back the police to tell them not to come, and then the couple lured the raccoons out of the house with food. They closed the open

window that allowed their animal burglars inside and headed upstairs to bed. On the way, Lawrence returned the gun to his desk drawer.

Alma sped up the memory to find out the next moment in Irene Polk's life that included James. Two days later, the man who killed Alma's mother showed up at Irene's house for the Tuesday night class.

Alma had found her moment. Only two things about her plan worried Alma: The possibility that Lawrence Polk had moved the gun without his wife's knowledge, and the fact that Alma had never attempted to influence change when she traveled through time.

But she pushed those thoughts aside and set her mind to waking up from this construct and heading into actual time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

HANIEL MARVELED AT HIS POWER. THE WORLD HUMMED AROUND HIM WITH SUCH clarity and brightness. He could see and feel where the vinyl in the restaurant booth was worn. His body craved food, and the smell of the bacon in the dilapidated old diner called to him. Haniel had stayed up all night walking the streets, dancing in nightclubs, and talking to strangers. Although, the stupidity and slowness of people tried his patience. Now he understood his father's short temper over the years.

A waitress with dark hair, brown eyes, and cute dimples came over to take his order. She reminded him of Alma. Her intelligence revealed itself in her alert expression and even in the way she walked. She slid her feet slightly along the ground, with each step conserving her energy and the impact each step had on her back, which had a slight curvature.

"May I take your order?" she asked.

Haniel smiled up at her, and she smiled back. He could see her attraction to him in her dilated pupils and the slight flush of her cheeks, but her body language remained guarded.

"I want pancakes, eggs, sausage, and bacon," Haniel said as he handed her the menu that he hadn't bothered to read. "Can you choose whatever special would make that the most economical?"

The waitress, who'd cleverly overlapped a promotional orange juice pin over her name tag, nodded and asked, "How would you like your eggs?"

"Scrambled," he answered.

She turned and left to put in his order, grabbing a few empty cups to refill along the way. Haniel watched as his hunger for her dwarfed his interest in breakfast.

WINIFRED LOOKED across the living room at her niece on the couch. Alma's color had returned and the bruising and swelling had gone. She just needed to wake up, which would happen in its own time. Win Win decided it was okay to take a nap. Doug would stay with Alma, anyway. He sat on the floor next to the couch where Alma rested. He'd been there for days, his eyes trained on her face with hope. He was loyal, just like Stuart was to Bernie.

Charles joined Winifred in the living room. "Let's hope they don't waste as many years as we did," he said.

"I'm going to lie down."

Charles nodded.

"You can join me," she said.

He smiled.

"Don't smile too big," she whispered. "I'm really going to sleep."

The two went into Win's room and dozed fully clothed for a half an hour until the jingle of her front doorbell woke them up. Win rushed to the door, passing Doug in the living room. Taylor followed her as far as the living room, but let her answer the door alone.

Win opened the door. Two of her friends greeted her to cheers of, "Happy birthday!"

It was Sunday, her birthday! In all her worry over Alma, Win Win had forgotten to cancel her birthday party.

"Sorry we're late," Ellen, a nurse at Win's agency, said. "But it being LA, we figured a half hour wouldn't hurt. We got the sodas and some food. Karen's bringing the decorations. Did she beat us?"

"No," Win said. "Listen, my niece—

"She's awake! Come quick!" Doug yelled from the living room.

Win Win left the door open and hurried over to Alma's side.

"Doug?" Alma asked, her voice cracking from days of not talking and dryness.

"Are you okay? Are you in pain? I thought you'd never come back," Doug said.

"I went back, and James recognized me in Irene Polk's body. He tried to kill me, but only got Irene."

Alma sat up. Her body felt stiff, but none of the pain she'd experienced during Irene's attack remained.

"We thought you might not make it," Doug said.

"Oh," Alma said, distracted by reality. It didn't feel different from her visualization of her memories. Existing in that construct had seemed as real as this moment. Alma hadn't noticed that the book she'd used initially to catapult her back in time to Irene's life remained on the table.

"Hey!" a female voice said from the doorway! "I'm here."

It was Karen from Win Win's work. Alma noticed, for the first time, that three women carrying presents, a cake, balloons, and other food were huddled by the open front door.

"Aye!" Win said, rushing back to the women at the door. Hushed whispers followed by a few glances in Alma's direction followed. Eventually the women left, but insisted on leaving the birthday goodies.

Win Win and Taylor set the birthday stuff in the dining room.

"You didn't have to cancel your party," Alma said.

"I need to make sure you're okay," her aunt said, and added that she wasn't in the mood for a party.

"I'm okay, but I need to go back again," Alma said.

"No," Doug said. "You almost didn't come back before."

"I stayed on purpose for research. I wasn't in any danger," Alma insisted.

"You were blown up like a balloon until your aunt healed you," Doug said.

But Alma didn't fully listen. She remembered something urgent. "I have to go back soon. I found out that Haniel is James's son."

"Who's Haniel?" Win asked.

Alma explained, and Win's face paled. It sounded so much like what happened to Bernadette.

"He knows where I live, and so his father must know by now. I have to go back," Alma said. "I must've come back to this moment to give myself the time. It's got to be my destiny to kill him before he kills Mom."

"But you almost died last time," Doug said.

"He'll come here in person, and everyone here will be in danger—especially Tita Win, Cassidy, and Leo."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HANIEL LEFT A SEVEN-DOLLAR TIP AND GOT UP TO PAY HIS $9.47 CHECK AT THE cashier. The brash blonde at the register flirted with him, and he flirted back.

"Does the entire morning shift get off at the same time?" he asked.

"We sure do," she said, handing back his change.

"And when is that?" he asked.

"Noon," she said.

"Not much longer left," he said. "But the last hour is the longest I'm sure."

She laughed and smiled. "Maybe I'll see you later," she said.

Haniel nodded.

The blonde was nice enough, but she didn't possess that spark of intelligence that his waitress possessed. Haniel exited the restaurant. They'd turned this part of town into the NoHo Arts district. Construction had begun two years ago. It made the neighborhood more walkable. Haniel enjoyed the energy of the traffic and the people rushing by him.

He stood on the sidewalk outside and looked back through the glass storefront, delighted he could see his table. He waited until his waitress came by and picked up her tip while helping the busboy clear his dishes. It disappointed him that she didn't smile at the tip. He wished he'd thought to bring more money with him.

Haniel knew he ought to walk away, but his obsession with this waitress pulled at him. He found himself crossing the street and popping into a liquor store to buy a pack of cigarettes even though he didn't smoke. He exited the store, leaned against a nearby telephone pole, and opened the pack. The package opened easily. No fumbling with the packaging or the matches. He lit the cigarette and took a long drag. It surprised him how much enjoyed feeling the toxic smoke filtering in and out of his lungs as the rush of the nicotine spread

through his body.

He found himself waiting for the waitress to get off work. The tension of waiting and smoking added to the excitement. His body tingled with anticipation. He smoked nine cigarettes before spotting her leave the restaurant. She'd changed out of her uniform into a white T-shirt and jeans. Her hair remained pulled back in a pony tail, and she wore no makeup.

Haniel flicked his cigarette into the gutter and followed her, careful to keep a reasonable distance. But even at a distance, he could smell her scent, a combination of pancake syrup and the faint smell of her sweet sweat. His heart pounded with hunger, and he sped up his walk to catch up to her. Her stride quickened, and he could hear her heart speed up. She sensed she was being followed, and it frightened her.

"Miss," Haniel called out to her, but she sped up instead of stopping.

Why was she afraid? Haniel's impatience sparked. All he wanted to do was talk to her. Women loved to talk to him. If she'd only turn around, he could explain to her that she was safe.

"Miss, it's me from the diner," he said.

She looked back at him, but didn't slow her gait. "Oh hi! Sorry, I'm in a hurry," she said and began to jog.

Haniel smiled and rushed up beside her. "I thought you were worried I was a creep," he said. "Do you need a ride or something?"

"No, that's okay," she said as her eyes darted around the street.

That's when Haniel noticed they were near a construction site, and the street was empty. He laughed. "You're lost."

"No, I'm fine," she said and started to dart back in the direction they'd just come.

Haniel grabbed her by the arm. "You don't need to worry," he said. "You're fine. Stop running."

She stopped, which delighted Haniel until he realized it was because he was holding her back. He marveled at how easy it was to just hold her there. She tried to pull her arm away, but she was so weak he could barely feel her try. He wondered if he'd gotten stronger, or if he'd just never bothered to test his strength before.

Her skin hummed under his grip. He stared in fascination at her forearm clenched in his hand. So much energy from such a small, thin arm.

"Let me go!" she screamed.

The loudness of her shriek pierced his eardrums as if someone had blown a trumpet into his ear. The pain angered him. His grip tightened around her arm. "You're fine," he spat out. "Stop shouting or you won't be."

She froze and stopped struggling. Her eyes stared directly into his with such horror Haniel found himself insulted.

"I just wanted to talk to you," he said through gritted teeth. "Why are you being so stubborn?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Haniel smiled. She was coming to her senses. He loosened his grip on her arm. "I hope I didn't hurt—"

Before he could finish, she bolted away. He charged after her, his blood pumping anger throughout his body. He caught up in a few quick strides. He snatched her by the wrist and pulled her back to him.

Her tingling energy flooded to him. Such a tender, sweet, power. The tap of her pulse beat into his grip. He looked down at her small wrist. She wasn't struggling anymore. A peaceful quiet encircled him. The gentle smell of pancakes wafted in Haniel's nostrils as an image of her laughing at the diner with coworkers popped into his mind.

He smiled as he caught more glimpses of her life. This is what he wanted. He just wanted to get to know her. Something pricked at his palm and interrupted his daydream.

The horror that met his eyes took a moment to register. The waitress had been replaced by a skeletal frame pricking through ashen, shriveled skin. He tried to pull his hand away, but in a flash the skeleton disintegrated into dust.

He shook his head and blinked. This couldn't be. She'd been here a moment ago. A wind funneled around him. Not the tornado-like wind like before. Just a swirly breeze that carried the dust away, the faint smell of pancakes and syrup disappearing with it. He'd killed her like his father had killed his mother.

Haniel crumpled to his knees and wept.

ALMA PEERED out from the eyes of Irene Polk into darkness. The woman's eyes were closed in meditation. Alma knew she'd reached the correct day. It had been so easy to reach this point, Alma worried for a moment if this was her construct instead of the actual past.

Alma flipped through Irene's thoughts as the woman meditated. Tonight's class would start in two hours. Irene's husband, Lawrence, had already left for the evening. Alma hoped the man hadn't taken his gun with him. Deep in the recesses of Irene's mind, the woman hid away the memory of seeing her husband

"prepare for a meeting" by tucking his gun into his coat pocket. Back then, Irene had her own secrets and hadn't confronted him. She'd tried to broach the subject, but the stubborn man always brushed it off. Irene gave up trying to convince him to get rid of the gun and let him do as he pleased.

Alma attempted to will Irene to open her eyes, but couldn't do it. Worry struck at Alma's heart. If she couldn't get Irene to open her eyes, there would be no way to control Irene enough to shoot James.

Alma found that her internal awareness had improved, but she still had no control. An idea struck her. She needed to create a construct to solidify her understanding. It had sped up so much of her learning before. She hoped it would now.

Alma closed her inner eye and the darkness of Irene's eyelids grew complete. She imagined a barrier between her thoughts and Irene's so she could keep them separate. She imagined herself climbing over the barrier.

The darkness faded from Alma's vision until she found herself surrounded by gears and wheels—almost like a cartoon version of the inside of a clock. She hunted around, found a lever, and pulled it. Memories from Irene's childhood flooded into her thoughts. Alma pushed the lever back and rooted around some more until she found a leather bucket seat.

She smiled, recognizing the seat from her father's old car. Alma slid into the seat and found herself sitting in Irene's meditation room like before, but this time Irene's eyes were open.

She could feel Irene's protestations. Alma tried to quell the woman's fear as Alma stood up and checked the time. It was an hour before class. Alma had taken more time trying to figure out how to gain control than she'd imagined. Irene fought for control, and Alma knew she would have to hurry.

Alma rushed out of the meditation room on the first floor to the main staircase and down the long hall to Lawrence's study. The door was open.

She went to the desk and tried to open the top-right drawer that housed the gun. Locked.

Alma skimmed Irene's mind for information about the key to drawer. Lawrence kept the key stashed in the bar, reasoning that Irene would never happen across it there. His reasoning was sound. Irene hadn't had a drink in over fifteen years, and she only knew of the key's hiding place because she'd seen him place it there once seven years ago. The memory wasn't even a conscious one. Alma could tell by the faint, fluttery feel of it.

Irene's hands lifted the roll-top cover of the bar and then opened a small side drawer that held two corkscrews and a bottle opener. The drawers didn't open all the way, so she slid her palm along the bottom of the wooden drawer to the back.

She smiled as her fingertips brushed against a small, metal object. She curled her fingers around it and brought it out of the drawer.

Alma marveled at how it felt to move as another person. She hadn't appreciated how much each body colored one's experience of the outside world. A craving struck her. What would it be like to be drunk in another person's body? Would Irene be breaking her sobriety?

The oddness of such a thought shocked Alma. She could feel the brain of this body crave a drink, and that craving had triggered a thought in Alma's mind, not Irene's. Alma slammed the roll-top down and pushed that thought out of her mind. It was the first time she recognized the difference between her brain, the organ that enabled thought, and her thoughts. Until that moment she had always thought of her mind as her brain instead of it as the receptacle that housed her thoughts.

It was just like she'd always associated her body as being who she was instead of a vessel. Alma shook off her contemplative mood. She had a man to murder, and she needed that gun.

Alma marched over to the drawer, slipped the key into the lock, and took a deep breath. *Please let the gun be there*. She pulled open the drawer. Her heart pounded with relief upon sight of the old revolver. She picked up the gun. It was so much heavier than she imagined.

She glanced at the clock. She only had ten minutes before class began. The gun was too big to put in Irene's trouser pocket. Alma dashed to another room and into the woman's large walk-in closet. None of the blazers had pockets large enough and the thick winter coats with large pockets were in storage. The doorbell rang downstairs. One of her students was here.

Alma dashed to the master bathroom and snatched Irene's bathrobe from the back of the door. She pulled on the robe, tied it tight around her waist, and slipped the gun into the pocket.

Alma overheard her housekeeper let in the student downstairs as she hurried down the hallway. It was Stacy. Alma froze at the top of the stairs. Was she just going to shoot James in front of the class? Would he see her right away? He'd spotted her so fast before. She clutched the gun and vowed to shoot him on sight.

Irene's will kicked inside of their shared mind. Alma had gotten so good at separating her thoughts from the woman, she'd forgotten to factor in the part where Irene Polk would have knowledge of Alma's thoughts. And the woman did not want her to kill James at all.

Alma tried to show her how James would kill her soon, but the doorbell rang again. Alma stepped down six steps. She remained out of sight, but she could hear better and would be closer to James if it was him.

The sound of a male's voice talking with the housekeeper garnered Alma's full attention. She relaxed a moment later when she realized it was just another student and not James.

Alma shuddered as she remembered her last encounter with James in Irene's body. She'd almost died with Irene. Except, something about that didn't make sense.

The doorbell rang, and her attention switched to the door.

Her housekeeper answered it. She heard the woman laugh. Alma's ears perked up. James had that effect on women. They were drawn to those eyes and his charm. Alma started down the stairs just in case it was him. She slipped her hands into the pocket of the bathrobe and around the gun. The clunky heaviness of the gun added to Alma's nerves. She needed to get this right. Just as she hit the middle landing of her stairs she heard James's voice.

"There she is," James said, and after a quick moment he added, "Irene, are you sick?"

Alma glanced up to find James and the housekeeper, Adele, staring up at her.

"Just a bit," Alma said, careful to avoid James's gaze. "Give us a minute, Adele. Tell the other students we might be late."

Adele stepped away.

"Do you need me to help?" James asked. He sounded concerned and even kind. Irene's terror made thinking difficult.

Alma took three quick strides to get from the foot of the stairs to the foyer where James stood. She put her finger around the trigger of the gun. "I was thinking perhaps you could lead class today," she said as she rushed over to his side.

"I'd be honored," James said.

Alma whipped out the gun, pushed the gun into his side, and pulled the trigger. The bang echoed off the tiled floor and high ceiling of Irene's foyer. James stumbled and then looked up at her with an incredulous expression. Her lack of remorse at shooting him struck her as odd. She wasn't even angry.

Alma shot him again, but this time in the chest. He collapsed to floor. A woman's scream echoed in the foyer. Filled with numb determination, Alma stood over James's bleeding body and continued to pull the trigger until the gun stopped firing bullets and clicked in her hand. The screaming stopped.

A raspy irritation scratched at her throat, and that's when Alma realized it was her own screams, or rather the screams of Irene Polk, that she'd heard. Students and the housekeeper stared at her with horror. They must've rushed into the room upon hearing the gunshots.

In all her planning to kill James, Alma hadn't stopped to consider that she'd

be ruining Irene's life to save her mother's. She told herself that perhaps Irene could plead insanity.

Alma kneeled down over James to make sure he was dead. No pulse. No heartbeat. Lots of blood. Irene kicked and screamed inside of their shared mind. Alma "let go" of her embodiment of Irene. The sound of Irene's hysterical cries rang in Alma's mind as she traveled back to her own time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ALMA OPENED HER EYES AND SAW TITA WIN SMILING DOWN AT HER. HER AUNT was happy to see Alma, but she worried her niece wouldn't be happy with the state of the present.

"You made it!" Doug said, relieved to have her return unscathed.

Alma turned to see him kneeling next to the couch. She spotted Leo and Cassidy. She assumed that they must have come to the house while she'd gone back to kill James.

Alma sat up on the couch, enjoying the familiar feeling of her own body, but she was haunted by an odd sensation.

Reality didn't feel real, and the memories of her mother, Irene, and James blurred together. Alma peered out of what she had to remind herself was her own eyes. It was definitely Win Win's living room. The off-white sofa with the flowered cushions. The same glass coffee table. White walls with the large, hand-carved, wooden fork and spoon hanging on them. Nothing had changed. Except, it had to be impossible for nothing to have changed. Irene Polk killed James Hanker.

"Is Mom here?" Alma asked.

Win shook her head no.

"How has nothing changed?" Alma asked, half to herself and half to the others.

"I don't think it's possible," Win Win said.

"But you can't know for sure. Your memory might be different," Alma said. "Is Irene in jail?"

"Irene never went to jail," Cassidy said.

"Did you still meet my mother in Vegas?" Alma asked Leo.

"Yes," Leo said.

"And you're still—" Alma stopped short of mentioning his death or her own conception.

"You were still born, and I'm in this life at this age," Leo said.

"But I watched him die," Alma said. "I don't understand." Alma looked down at the carpet. Her plan had failed. She spotted the Irene's book on the coffee table and grabbed it. It was still signed. "Win," Alma asked, "was this book here the entire time?"

"Yes," Win said.

"I put it there after we brought you to the couch when you were..." Doug paused to find a way to phrase it, "recovering from your first trip."

Alma's mind was exhausted from time-traveling. The surreal experience of reality itself wore on her. But there was something about this book that didn't sit right with her.

She stared at it, and it struck her. The book shouldn't exist.

When Alma had gone back in time the first time, James had seen her in Irene's body. He'd killed Irene on the spot to try to gain Alma's power. If that had happened, then Irene wouldn't have lived to write this book twenty years later let alone sign it. But it had been here the entire time.

But what had happened in that moment with James? The effects had been seen in the here and now. Alma decided to double check. "You all could tell that I'd been hurt by James when I went back, right?"

Doug nodded, his face glum as he recalled her swollen face and bruises.

"I don't think you can change what happens," Tita Win Win said.

"But that doesn't make sense," Alma said, even though imagined she looked like she was pouting. Alma opened the cover of Irene Polk's book. The author's signature graced the page of the foreword. There was no inscription. Alma set the book on the table. "Then why did we even need this?"

"Your mother went through a lot of trouble to make sure you got it, but I'm not sure," Win said, picking up the book. She continued to talk, but Alma had trouble hearing her. Win's words were drowned out with white noise, and the room blurred into a field of white.

ALMA FOUND herself in her childhood bedroom, sitting crosslegged on the floor. The room was decorated just like it had been when she was in elementary school. She smiled as she looked at her Smurf poster on the wall, and her ABCs bedspread. Her bookshelf stocked with a ton of Nancy Drew mysteries and a

complete set of *Anzetta's A-to-Z Illustrated Encyclopedia for Children*.

Something tingled in Alma's awareness. She wasn't alone. Alma shuddered with fear as she realized she hadn't come here. This wasn't like when she followed the spider into the hole and spotted her mother. She'd been brought here, and more germane to the point, here wasn't real. Alma needed to get out. She needed to get back and figure out how to stop James or whatever it was that was coming.

"It's okay," a voice inside of Alma's head said to her.

The voice reminded her not only of the way she talked to herself in her own construct, but it also reminded her of something from her childhood. The familiarity eased Alma's fear, but her grasp on her selfhood felt fleeting. She worried she would float away, and faced with that thought, she caught herself unable to recall her own name.

Her eyes closed. The unreal nature of this room that both was and wasn't her childhood bedroom was too much for her to absorb.

Alma struggled to remember what made reality real. After all, a dream seemed real to the dreamer until she woke up. And if a person could construct reality in their mind and walk through it in perceived time, but not time passing, why bother with time at all?

Time didn't exist. She didn't exist. Everything was an illusion. Just like this moment. A crack opened in her mind. Was it like the crack the spider came out? Should she disappear—

"Wait!" a woman's voice said.

The familiarity of the voice triggered Alma to remember her own name. Except, she wasn't in her own body. And if she—

"Stop!" the voice said. "Open your eyes."

Alma opened her eyes. The surreal quality of the room remained. It wasn't her room. It was a replica of it, a life-sized, plastic replica.

"I did my best," the woman said.

Alma jumped upon sight of the woman. Her long, straight dark hair, brown eyes and angular face looked familiar.

"Yes, that's right. You know me. We know each other. From when you were little."

"Kayli!" Alma said in a hushed voice. Memories of Kayli rushed into Alma's mind. The smile. The familiarity. When she was a kid, Kayli was her "grown-up" self, but now Alma finally understood why her grown-up self had a different name. "You're a future incarnation of me." Alma looked around the room. Now, she understood the unrealness of it. "This is your construct."

"To make you more comfortable, and to avoid some parallel universe stuff.

Although, I haven't worked out if that matters so much."

"I need to get back," Alma said.

"This won't take any time," said Kayli.

Alma didn't like the riddle of Kayli's words.

"You used to trust me more when you were little," Kayli said.

"I also used to eat dog food," Alma answered.

Kayli laughed. The laugh sounded so much like her own, it disturbed Alma.

"If you can't trust yourself," Kayli said, "who can you trust?" Kayli stood up, and walked over to the door.

Alma didn't want to leave this room or see what was on the other side of the door. A silver string swayed in front of her. The way the light glinted off of it captured Alma's attention. A dark spot dangled on the string. It moved.

A spider.

Alma stared as its body grew in size, and its spindly legs fluttered around the string. It dropped to the ground and scurried toward the door.

"Our totem," Kayli said. "I'd forgotten all about it."

Alma had heard the term "totem" before, but she'd never discerned its meaning.

"Like a spirit animal," Kayli explained. "The spider is a weaver of fate. Your lifetime is the first time I ever consciously saw it, but when I look back, the spider was always there."

It dawned on Alma that she wasn't in Kayli's mind. Kayli was in hers. That's how she knew Alma's thoughts. Alma stretched out with her mind to reach into Kayli's thoughts and memories, but was met with a brick wall—literally a picture of a wall made of red bricks flashed in her mind.

"I'm sorry. I don't know if you knowing what I know will put you into another reality, and I want us to try to stay in the same one. Listen, I know what you need to know, but I can't tell you too much, okay?" Kayli said.

The cryptic nature of the conversation frustrated Alma.

The movement of the spider caught Alma's eyes, and she looked down at it. It looked as if he smiled at her. She remembered the spider that led her to her mother and decided to follow it.

"Good," Kayli said as she reached for the doorknob and turned it.

Alma's stood. Her legs and hips tightened with anxiety as she took the three steps to the doorway. She knew it wouldn't be the hallway of her childhood home on the other side.

She stepped through the doorway into a dark room filled with what looked like a universe of stars. Alma worried she would fall into the deep expanse of space and into a black hole, but somehow she didn't. Alma told herself this was a

construct that Kayli must've put together. But what did it represent?

"The illusion of time," Kayli answered.

Alma didn't understand what she meant.

DOUG POURED himself a cup of coffee in Win Win's kitchen and tried to muster the courage to pull Alma aside and tell her the truth. He just needed to figure out the right words.

The door remained open, and he could see Tita Win's birthday cake resting on the dining room table surrounded by the balloons. The juxtaposition of the carefree party look of dining room and the heavy concern in his heart made him shake his head.

If only he could convince Alma to quit her plan to kill that vampire. They should be on the run right now.

Taylor entered the kitchen with his mug. "I think I'm beginning to like coffee," he said, reaching for the pot and pouring himself a cup. "I'm usually a tea drinker, but this stuff isn't so bad."

Doug smiled. He'd always thought of his boss as a hard ass, but seeing him with Win Win changed his perception. It humanized Taylor.

"What makes it hard to tell the truth is that you're trying to control her response," Taylor said. "You can't do that. She gets to have all of her feelings and thoughts about the betrayal. The more you try to control how she sees it, the harder it is to do, and the worse off you'll be."

Before Doug could respond, his boss left. The man was giving up The Observatory for Win Win. Doug wondered if he, himself, would do that for Alma. And within a second the answer was a resounding yes. The place wasn't what he thought it was. Almost losing Alma to that James character had altered Doug's outlook. Doug remembered how betrayed Alma felt when she thought that guy Haniel was her Witness and how mad she'd been upon hearing that Taylor had been Win's Witness. She still didn't know that her father, Stu, had been her mom's Witness. He wondered how Alma would take that news.

His boss was right. He needed to come clean and deal with the consequences. He took a gulp of his coffee and headed for the living room to talk to Alma.

Alma was seated on the couch talking to Win Win, Leo, and Professor Cassidy. She still hadn't fully let go of the idea that nothing had changed. Alma picked up Irene Polk's book and looked at the signature page again.

"Alma, can I talk to you for a minute?" Doug said, trying to sound casual.

Win, Cassidy, and Leo all stopped and looked at him.

"Sure," Alma said. "What's up?"

"You want some coffee?" Doug asked, wanting to talk somewhere private.

"Good idea," Alma said as she stood up still holding onto the book. "Maybe you can help me figure out why my mom thought this useless book was so important."

"Yeah," Doug said, hoping she'd forgive him when he told her the truth. No one knew that Alma wasn't entirely "here" in the present. She'd be able to remember this moment when she returned, but in this moment, in the way humanity perceived time, Alma was with Kayli.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

HANIEL STOOD UNDER THE SCALDING WATER OF THE SHOWER. HE'D RETURNED home to the shoe repair shop. The water failed to seer away his guilt, and now it threatened to turn cold. Haniel's heightened senses picked up on the slight wane in water temperature. Rather than wait, Haniel shut off the hot water and turned the unused cold water dial sharply to the right.

His red skin jumped at the shock of cold water pouring down on him. The muscles in his body clenched, and an uncontrollable shiver shuddered through his body. He hadn't been burned by the water despite its obvious heat. No blisters appeared on his arms or chest. He wondered if his body was more resilient now, but that thought passed.

His guilt remained.

He'd "acquired" the waitress and his father.

Haniel realized he held the knowledge of his father, the waitress, and all the people his father acquired.

But the knowledge about Alma called to him the most. Did she know that her real father was a paramortal? James had been in love with Alma's mother, but she'd run off with another paramortal.

Together they'd made Alma, one of the rare few who could conquer time. James had craved that power, but Haniel didn't want it. He wanted Alma. James wasn't worthy of Alma's mother, Bernadette, but that wasn't because he didn't have power. It was because he'd been married. James had killed Haniel's mother to make room for Bernadette. But reaching into his father's memory, Haniel could see that he hadn't intended to kill his first wife. He'd just wanted to leave her, but—

It was the same as what happened this afternoon for Haniel.

Haniel steered his thoughts away from that painful train of thought. He

wasn't married, and now he had power. Alma would most certainly love him. He'd win her over. They'd raise a family. Their child would be like no paramortal before. This was his destiny. He'd been drawn to that waitress, because she was smart and looked like Alma. But she was just a mortal. Alma was different—better.

Haniel rifled though his mind to get more information about Alma from the memories his father acquired from Bernadette. There were holes in Bernadette's memory, self-inflicted gaps in her memory. She'd known about James somehow. She knew Alma was in danger and must've warned her. That's why his father's psychic abilities had been week. Bernadette had managed to diminish her abilities before he killed her. She'd done it to save Alma and keep her from danger.

And now Alma wasn't in danger anymore. He'd taken care of that. Her mother would be happy to know that. Alma would be happy to know these things about her mother. He could share these memories with Alma, and she'd love him for it.

Alma.

Alma was his answer. His redemption. His destiny.

And he knew exactly where she was.

ALMA DIDN'T like having Kayli inside her mind. It seemed invasive. Guilt gnawed in Alma's gut. She'd jumped into the mind of Irene Polk and forced the woman to commit murder.

"You did, or I should say, we did do that," Kayli answered. "It's why I didn't force you to walk into this room."

"But then why didn't James die?" Alma asked.

"He did in that reality," Kayli said. "I'll show you."

Kayli stepped into the abyss of space, but didn't fall. She waved to Alma to follow her. Alma stepped into the darkness, relieved to find what felt like solid ground beneath her, her favorite kind of solid ground—the soft cushion of grass over the top of solid dirt. It struck her that Kayli had known that and created that part of the construct to help Alma feel more secure.

"And because I like it, too," Kayli said, weaving her way through the stars. "I'm you, after all."

"When are you, me?" Alma asked, annoyed that Kayli kept answering her thoughts. She preferred private thoughts.

"I guess about nine lifetimes from now," Kayli answered. "But a lot happens between now and then."

Alma noticed that the stars were actually moving. Looking more closely, it looked like a working model of the universe.

"In two decades they'll be able to get better images of the brain. It looks a lot like this, too," Kayli said. "It's not a coincidence either."

As they approached a particular star, that bit of the universe grew larger. Their surroundings zoomed back in time to the point where Irene Polk shot James Hanker. It was as if it were playing on a tiny television screen in a bubble. The picture froze, and Alma noticed that dozens of little bubbles surrounded it—like a cell multiplying.

"That's the different timelines," Kayli said. "You're in this one," she said, touching the bubble, so it lit up into a beautiful flame of gold. "I'm in it too, but farther down," Kayli said. And with those words a shimmering, golden, spidery web illuminated, connecting a series of bubbles and spinning stars that went on into what looked to be infinity. "The one where he dies exists next to it," Kayli said, touching one of the bubbles. "There might be one where he's injured. One where he knows what you're doing and stops you," she said, pointing to the bubbles around it. "We just can't see them all, but they exist. Everything exists. But the construct that is Alma and Kayli can't always see them."

"So there's no changing your fate?" Alma asked.

"Yes, and no," Kayli said. "Time is just the way we perceive the Nature of What Exists. But the truth is it already exists. So in that way there is no changing your Fate, because we only experience where we are. For the most part, in the timeline, you can control what you experience along the Nature of What Exists."

"Not understanding what you're saying."

Kaylie pointed to the spinning, golden bubble. "You're here. Another version of you is here," she said, pointing to another bubble. "But you can only experience where you're at. Each choice and decision creates a new path for you, but the 'you' you regard as yourself only experiences one."

"And when I go back in time?" Alma asked.

"You can travel up and down your own timeline and even jump into another person's reality and do the same for theirs."

"But if I can switch people, why can't I switch versions of me and experience an alternate timeline?" Alma asked.

"You can, but you won't be able to sustain it for long."

"Why?" Alma said.

"I think it has something to do with how all of this works. You see, the truth is reality, even our expanded version of it, is all just a construct. There is no

time. There is no you or me. And the more we move amongst it, the closer to that truth we get."

"That sounds like fortune cookie crap," Alma said. Something about this interaction annoyed Alma. In the back of her mind, she felt like this knowledge meant she would have to give up something important to come to this understanding, and even though she didn't know what it was, she didn't want to lose it.

"I'd forgotten how impatient I was in past lives. You learn it later."

"Actually, I don't think that's how that works," Alma said with a smirk. She didn't bother to wait for her future self to ask a question. The woman would just pluck it from her thoughts. And yet, Alma wanted to verbalize it. "I think it's just like when you're a young kid and a week feels like forever. People older than you have no problem waiting, but that's because time goes by faster the longer you've experienced it. You're not more patient than I am. You've just experienced time longer."

Kayli smiled. "Impressive. I'd forgotten I knew that."

Alma didn't like her future self. If the saying "hell was other people" was true, being with an older version of yourself was even worse.

"This isn't how I wanted this to go," Kayli said.

"Shouldn't I get back to my timeline? Because I don't understand the point to all of this," Alma said, ready to leave. The things Kayli spoke about threatened Alma's very existence. If what her future self was telling her was true, Alma didn't exist and even if she couldn't grasp that theory, one other thing struck her.

There truly was no free will if everything already happened and time didn't exist. And Alma didn't want to believe that. She focused on the spinning stars and found the star that held the parallel universe she'd created. The one where Alma killed her mother's killer.

"You won't want to do that," Kayli insisted, reaching out and holding Alma back.

"I need to see," Alma insisted, and Kayli released her grip.

Alma stared closer at the planet that spun around the star of her mother. The star that represented the parallel universes of her life. The more Alma focused the larger that solar system grew, and the gravity of one reality pulled Alma inside of it.

Darkness. Falling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

FROM DOUG'S PERSPECTIVE, TIME MOVED AS IT ALWAYS HAD. ALMA DAVIS WAS in front of him, and he was about to confess that he'd been lying to her his entire life. Even though Alma was traipsing across alternate universes with her future self, a part of her remained back in 1994. She'd come back, if she could, and remember this conversation exactly as she'd been here.

"Remember how you worried about Haniel being your Witness?" Doug blurted out. His tight throat made his voice come out higher than he was comfortable with. He didn't want to sound whiny.

Alma nodded.

Doug, pitching his voice lower, "Well, he's not."

"I know," Alma said.

"I am," Doug answered and waited. His heart pounded in his throat, but he forced himself to look as calm as possible, as if his calm demeanor would influence Alma's thoughts.

"You're what?" Alma said, her voice neutral.

"I'm your Witness," he said.

Alma's face remained blank. Doug's faux calm began to unravel.

"It's not that I wanted to lie to you. I took the job with The Observatory, because I wanted to learn the meaning of life. I didn't have any idea that you would be you."

"You mean it never occurred to you that I'd be a real human being with thoughts and feelings."

"No," Doug said, flustered. "I mean I guess not, but as a Witness my job was to protect you."

"And spy on me," she said.

"For the good of humanity," Doug said.

"At my expense, because I'm somehow less human."

"Not less. You're more. You're special."

"How lucky for me!" Alma said.

Doug sighed. This wasn't going well at all.

"Alma, I've been wanting to tell you since the day after we met. I wish I had. You deserved the truth, but I was dishonest at the start and a coward over time. I didn't want you to hate me and never want to see me."

"Because you'd be out of a cushy job discovering the meaning of life or whatever it is you think you're doing while being a liar and pretending to be my best friend!"

"No!" Doug said. "Not that. I'd quit the job tomorrow if it would make you happy."

"So you don't even care about the job? You just lied to me for fun?" Alma shook her head. "I feel so stupid." Alma turned to leave.

Doug panicked.

"I couldn't because I love you, Alma. I've loved you for so long."

Alma stopped. That wasn't the answer she expected. She'd always had a crush on Doug, but she kept those feelings on a leash, because, "Aren't you gay?" she asked as she turned around.

"I thought you'd trust me more if you knew I wasn't some guy trying to get into your pants," Doug said.

"So you decided to lie like this was *Three's Company*?" Alma asked, dumbfounded.

"That was so stupid. I was trying to make sure that I kept a distance because from the moment we first talked I just knew that I—" Doug stopped. He didn't have the guts to say it again. It embarrassed him. None of this was going as he hoped.

"Loved me?" Alma asked.

Doug nodded yes.

"But in a platonic way. Like a friend. Like a gay best friend."

Doug's eyes met hers. His heart pounded in his chest. He wondered if she wanted to hear that he loved her like a friend or if she longed to hear that it was something more. Doug didn't want to hope. He was afraid to hope. He'd lied to the woman he loved for the entire time he knew her. He couldn't lie anymore.

Doug noticed that he'd moved closer to her. He'd been drawn to her.

"No. I love you." He paused to catch his breath and think. Blood rushed to his ears and below his waist. "Like a man."

Her lips parted slightly, and she leaned closer to him. Doug didn't think. He took the opportunity and kissed her. His heart leapt when she kissed him back.

Alma Davis was kissing him back. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. Her arms encircled his body.

HANIEL HAD PARKED on the street and was on his way to the stairs leading up to Alma's apartment when he spotted Alma through the kitchen window. He could hear their voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying. He stepped closer, wanting to tap on the glass to get Alma's attention. The he saw Doug sweep down and kiss Alma, and she definitely didn't mind.

Haniel's eyes turned a deep shade of violet. She lied! That bitch had lied to him. Gay best friend! She was just like her mother and all the other women. A lying whore! His father was right. She didn't deserve the power she wielded. He had planned to spare Alma. They would have had beautiful, gifted children. But that was over. He'd take the best of her, her power, and the rest of her lying whorish self would be dust.

ALMA'S EYES OPENED, and she found herself on a soccer field. "Jenna!" someone shouted, and in a moment Alma acclimated to her life. Except this life didn't have anything familiar in it. Jenna, the version of Alma that existed in this universe, continued to play soccer.

Alma sifted through her memories. Two parents, Michelle and Frank. Both white. Two older brothers, Derek and Easton. An ordinary life in central Florida. Birthdays with cake. Sports. Trophies. More sports.

But there was nothing that even resembled Alma's old life. No Tita Win Win. Her mother might be alive, but her life didn't touch Alma's. Neither did her father's. No Doug. Alma's mind lingered on Doug. The pain of not knowing him surprised her.

But all of that didn't matter. If her mother's life was better and happier, Alma could live here in this reality and know it was best. She needed to find her mother.

Dizziness swept over Alma, and darkness overcame her again. She found herself back with Kayli in the universe room.

"Don't do that," Kayli said. "You could get lost for no good reason."

"Mom's life might be better," Alma said.

"Just watch from here," Kayli said, grabbing Alma's hand. "Don't fall in this time."

Kayli zeroed in on the lifetime where Alma had successfully killed James. The one where Alma was Jenna and never knew her mother. Her mother indeed remained alive, but had no children. Alma watched glimpses of her mother's life.

"It looks like a happy one," she said.

"Don't you remember what she told us?" Kayli said.

"Always go forward."

Kayli sped forward into the lives of her mother. Tita Win Win had a baby late in life, and that baby had the power that Alma possessed. Another vampire grew, and the vampire murdered Win Win's baby by just putting his hands on her. The vision stopped.

"No," Alma said. "This can't be."

"It happens over and over again, eventually. Sometimes it takes several lifetimes. In one scenario it takes ten lifetimes."

"But it doesn't happen in mine," Alma answered.

"Sometimes it does, sometimes it's delayed," Kayli said.

"Does it ever not happen?" Alma asked.

"In the timeline I appear in, it doesn't," Kayli said.

"Then I better get back and live my life," Alma said, turning around and beginning to walk away.

"Where do you think you're walking to?" Kayli asked with a laugh in her voice. That laugh angered Alma.

"I'm leaving," Alma said, and walked in a direction she imagined was the way back.

"Well," Kayli said. "It's not as easy as that. There are things you need to know before you go."

Alma knew she was being childish, but she didn't want to hear any more. Something about this parallel-lives construct rattled Alma to her core. The idea that nothing was "real" and that even the life she lived was just a more elaborate construct had begun to take hold in Alma's mind. That even "the universe" was just a construct like this room. It all made her feel boxed in and confined.

Alma ran harder, and Kayli chased after her. Alma knew that Kayli could dash out in front of her if she wanted to, but Alma imagined her future self knew there really was no running away. A thought sprang into Alma's brain. If this reality was just a construct of Kayli's mind, then it was just a construct of hers as well.

Alma pictured a door and told herself that when she went through it she'd be back in her reality.

The door appeared.

"No! Alma wait!" Kayli shouted.

But Alma had already popped through the door.

She fell through the darkness, but this time she found it comforting. It meant she was going home.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE USUAL DIZZINESS OF HER SUDDEN RETURN TO HER BODY IN THIS REALITY WAS amplified by her passionate kiss with Doug. Alma heard a moan escape from her throat. Memories of the last five minutes flooded her mind. Doug wasn't gay, and he loved her. She'd been angry, but from the feel of all this now, she'd come to terms with this information quickly.

His arms were so much stronger than she'd imagined. She dropped all of her thoughts and focused on kissing Doug back. He pulled her tighter, and she could tell he was as excited as she was. She was kissing Doug! And it felt amazing.

Their kiss ended, but they remained in an embrace.

"That was unexpected," Doug said, his voice a low, husky grumble.

Alma let out a breathy laugh. "Yeah." Too many thoughts bubbled into Alma's befuddled brain to say more. She'd never allowed herself to admit she'd had a crush on Doug.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the crash of broken glass.

She turned to see shards of glass from the small window on the kitchen door scattered across the yellow and white tiles. Her skin tingled. The air in the room turned brisk and even the light in the room seemed like it brightened.

"You fucking whore!" Haniel said.

Alma's gaze snapped upward just as Haniel broke open the back door and stepped into the kitchen. His feet crunched on the broken glass. His eyes darkened to an almost-black-violet.

Her senses heightened. She felt almost as if she was watching the scene from somewhere else. To Alma, he looked so much like his father, and the burning in his eyes reminded her of how James looked the day he'd killed Irene.

"What happened to you?" Alma heard herself ask.

"You were supposed to be different, but you're just like your mother,"

Haniel said.

A chill shuddered through Alma's body.

"He's the vampire," Doug said, and called for Taylor.

"Alma run!" he said, pushing her away and stepping in front of her.

But Alma's body didn't move. A clarity she'd never experienced before guided her actions. She'd once heard an athlete on TV talk about how in a game time slowed down, and five seconds could feel like ten minutes.

As she dashed toward Doug, the truth broke through.

Time wasn't a finite occurrence. It was an illusion. Everything that was and will be already is. Time is just the construct in which one experienced it. Even the person she was in this lifetime and the next was an illusion. Perhaps it all was some kind of dream, but she liked to think of it as something bigger. One mind.

One consciousness. All of everything was one.

Knowing this, she watched this reality play out in slow-motion.

Haniel lunged at Doug, but Alma pulled him away. She could feel the electricity in the air.

Tita Win Win rushed into the kitchen.

"Take him away," Alma heard herself say as she pushed Doug toward her aunt. She ordered everyone to leave and knew they'd obey. They had no choice. It was what was supposed to happen. She turned to Haniel, and he reached for her.

Alma found herself unafraid. What was next was only what she perceived as next. Everything had already happened.

Haniel lunged toward her. His expression looked surprised when she didn't try to run away. His hands caught her wrist and her neck. She wondered why he didn't reach for her third eye. Maybe he didn't know to do that yet.

"We could have made an amazing child," he said.

Alma's thoughts drifted to all the parallel lives she'd seen. She'd been so consumed with the ones where her mother survived, she hadn't bothered to notice if one existed where she and Haniel or she and Doug wound up together. "Maybe there's a lifetime where it happened," she heard herself say.

Alma could feel the life draining out of her. Would her timeline simply end in this moment? Or would it become part of Haniel's? Her instinct to fight the drain had kicked in, but then she remembered. She'd experienced this before.

Haniel's father had tried to drain her before when she was in Irene Polk's body. She'd merely let go and returned to her own body. But now she was in her own body. There was no where to let go and return to.

Except, what made this body her own? This body. This Alma Davis was

destined to die. But was she? In all of those lifetimes, she hadn't seen her death. She'd seen her future. The future.

Alma's mind flashed forward to the weird camera taking a photo with her mother. Alma asking to watch *Dora*. Her mother had shown her glimpses of her future. She remembered her mother's words the day she headed to her own death.

Forward.

The page Irene Polk had signed in her book hadn't been the inside cover. It had been the foreword!

Alma realized the message her mother had been trying to send her. Alma wasn't supposed to travel back in time so they could be together, she needed to go forward so they could be together. And so she took a deep breath, let go of this body—this Alma—and moved forward.

THE WIND from the kitchen whipped through the rest of the house. Tita Win rushed everyone out the front door. She made Charles carry Doug to ensure that he wouldn't try to stop her. As soon as everyone was outside, Win locked the door so they couldn't get back inside. She ran to the kitchen. The banging of appliances falling to the ground was still audible over the wind. But the noise and tornado-like gusts began to die down just as she approached the kitchen door.

Win barged into the kitchen just in time to see Alma's lifeless body drop with a sickening thud. The *wak-wak* turned to Win. She scanned the kitchen and spotted a knife on the floor and grabbed it. She looked back toward the monster, surprised to see a young man with tears in his hypnotically violet eyes.

"I erased her somehow," he said. "I don’t even have her memories." Then, he ran out the back door.

Win rushed over to Alma to heal her, even though in her heart she knew it was likely too late. The moment Win's hands touched her niece's body, she knew that no life existed in the empty shell that was left.

Win shook her head in disbelief. This couldn't have been what Bernadette had planned. It couldn't be.

The tattered ruins of Irene Polk's book open on the ground just a few feet away. Several pages had been torn out of it.

Handwriting on one of the torn pages—Bernadette's writing—caught Win Win’s attention. She crawled over to it and snatched the paper off the ground. All

her sister had written was a date, a time, and a place, but it was all Win needed.

MAY 13, 1996

Winifred dragged Charles onto the escalator of the Westfield Shopping Plaza and continued to walk up each step of the escalator to get upstairs faster.

"What's the hurry?" he asked.

"There's a sale at Macy's," Win Win said. She'd brought her mother's old watch that Alma had left behind. The last couple of years had been hard, but Charles had been there to comfort her. She wanted to tell him about today—about her secret hope. But she couldn't risk it. She'd promised Bernadette long ago.

They reached the entrance to Macy's and heard a woman scream.

A crowd rushed over to the housewares section. Win and Charles followed the crowd to see what was going on.

"She's having a baby!" another woman yelled.

Win's heart jumped into her throat.

"Give her room," a man's voice said as Win Win pushed her way through the crowd. "Is there a doctor in the store?"

"My wife's a doctor," Charles called out as the crowd made way for Win.

Win kneeled down and took the young woman's hand.

An electric current rushed through Win's arm. She'd never Awakened anyone before, but her mother had explained it was merely a healing of one's memory. "You're going to be okay. Hold my good luck charm," she said, slipping the watch into the woman's hand.

"Hi Bernie!" Win Win whispered into her sister's ear.

"It's Joyce," the woman whispered back. Win worried she'd been mistaken, but then her sister squeezed her hand and spoke again. “I’ve waited so long, Win. I can barely wait to meet Alma.”

Win laughed and patted her sister’s hand. "I’ll introduce you."

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading. This book was intended to be standalone novel of Alma's story. But in the process of writing it, I found that there were so many more stories that I wanted to explore. If you'd like information on other books set in this world and other future titles, you can sign up for updates at this link:

https://christymurphy.activehosted.com/f/10

If you've enjoyed this book, would you consider posting an honest review? Reviews help other readers decide whether or not a book is for them. Even a short review can make a tremendous difference. Thanks, again.

Warmest Regards,

C.M.