



JULIANE
MAIBACH

ENTWINED FATES

THE KEY
OF FIRE

I

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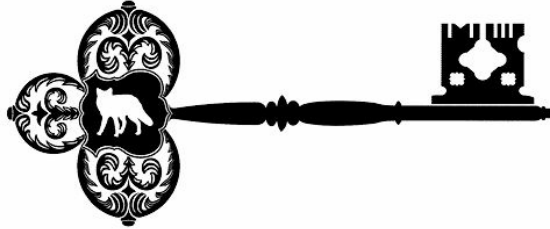


ENTWINED
FATES

Book 1

The Key of Fire

Chapter 1



I sit down on the little window seat in my room and gaze through the large glass panel at the clear blue sky. It's afternoon now, and it's not getting any warmer, which I guess is normal for February. Sitting here in my warm sweater, I take in my new environment, this unfamiliar city. I never expected to live in San Francisco. I'm actually from Tucson, Arizona – a city in the desert, bordered by the Santa Catalina Mountains. I lived there with my Mom and always felt at home. We had a three-room apartment that wasn't very big, but it was cozy.

Three months ago, we found out that my mother's aunt had died. As her only living relatives, Frida – that was her name – left us a little house in San Francisco and her life savings. My mother and I were really surprised, because we'd never had any contact with this aunt.

The following weekend, we drove to San Francisco and took a look at the small townhouse in the neighborhood of Haight-Ashbury. Like most of the houses on the street, it was really narrow, with high windows, and painted in bright colors that dated back to the hippie era. I liked it immediately, and when we went inside, I fell even more in love.

I especially like my room. It has a high ceiling, and the light floods in through big windows. And the best thing: I have my own bathroom, which I can access through a door directly from my room.

Although it's sad we never got to meet Frida, she's done so much for us. My Mom could never afford a house or even an apartment in San Francisco. She's a solo Mom. I never met my father, which I've come to terms with now. My mother and I do just fine on our own. She works as a nurse, and her shift work doesn't make family life easy, but at 17, I can take care of myself,

and I help Mom out as much as I can.

After weighing up the pros and cons, we finally made a decision. Mom searched for a new job and found one at San Francisco General Hospital. We've been in our new home for three days and spent that time setting the place up.

I look at my phone again and read the messages from my friends Sue, Tonya, and Leah.

"We miss you."

"Let's all meet up as soon as possible."

"It really sucks here without you. Miss you so much."

It wasn't easy leaving my friends behind, and I miss them terribly too. But Mom has a better job here, she earns more, and we have this amazing house. Still, that doesn't change the fact that I'd prefer to be near my friends.

"Teresa," Mom calls out. She appears at my door with a box. "This is the last box from the basement. I figured you'd want to look through it. There are some pictures that Frida must have painted."

She puts it down in front of me. I slowly open the box. A musty smell wafts out, then I see the first patches of color. I pull out one picture after another and look at them. Frida was a really good painter – as far as I can judge as an art ignoramus. Apparently, she had a penchant for cityscapes. I see a lot of buildings, anyway, many of which I recognize from our street. There are some landscapes too: clouds in fluid gray tones, green and yellow grass swaying gently in the wind – so convincing that I imagine I can feel it on my skin. Every detail is picked out so lovingly, so realistically, that for a while I can't tear myself away. I've never been so mesmerized by a painting.

"They're incredible," I whisper, still unable to take my eyes off the paintings. I straighten my glasses so I can enjoy them in all their glory.

"Yeah, not bad for an amateur," says my mother, and I look at her in astonishment. The pictures obviously don't evoke the same fascination in her as they do in me. But they're so lifelike, so intense, so captivating. There's something exciting emanating from these pictures that I can't put into words. They awaken something in me and make me wish I could have met my great aunt.

"I'll take another look at them later." I glance around my room. "I'll

definitely hang up a couple in here.”

My mother shrugs and smiles in amusement. “I never figured you’d join the ranks of art lovers.”

“I’m full of hidden talents.”

My mother checks her watch and frowns. “So late already. I have to leave for work.” A bashful smile appears on her face, emphasizing the fine lines around her gray-blue eyes. Even at 45, my mother’s still a very attractive woman, with a slim figure and dark brown hair that’s almost black. The first few silver strands have started to appear, but she doesn’t do anything to combat them, which is something I really admire about her. “I earned my wrinkles and gray hair, fair and square,” she always says with this mischievous smile that really suits her.

I look a lot like my mother – we have the same hair color, although unlike hers, mine is slightly wavy. We have the same small, straight nose, narrowish lips, and slightly pointed ears. But I seem to have inherited my father’s eyes. Big and deep blue.

“Will you be okay on your own?” she asks, as she often does, and I shake my head, amused.

“Honestly? You’re still asking me that?” I stand up and hug her. “Don’t worry, I’m a big girl and I’ll be okay until you get back. I’ll clean up a bit and then go to bed. Tomorrow’s my big day.”

I start school tomorrow. I feel a little uneasy about it, because it’ll be a totally new environment, with new classmates and teachers. But I’m also looking forward to attending the Urban School of San Francisco, which is pretty expensive. We can only afford it thanks to Frida’s money. By the time I graduate, there won’t be a lot left. But it’s important to Mom that I go to a good school, and that I’m happy there.

The only thing that kind of concerns me right now is that I’m changing schools mid-year. So I’m jumping in when everything’s already in full swing. But it has to be that way. Mom had to take the job immediately.

“Have a nice day,” I say to my mother, hugging her again. “I’m sure your colleagues will be nice. You may even want to take a closer look at one or two of them.”

My wink elicits a nervous snort from my Mom. “It’s a little strange when

your own daughter tries to match-make.”

“I’m just saying, there’s no harm in looking,” Her previous relationship was five years ago. Mom was with Dan back then – a nice guy who worked in an office opposite the hospital. They met collecting their coffees-to-go from a Starbucks. But they were too different and split up after a year. Mom’s fine with being single and doesn’t need a man to feel complete. But I’d still love to see her with a partner who understands her and makes her feel good.

“See you later then.” She kisses me. In the doorway she turns back and says, “Wish me luck.”

She’s nervous too, which I can totally understand. She’s already been to the hospital a couple of times in the last few days for orientations, but now she’s starting for real, and it’s a late shift.

After Mom leaves, I gaze through my window again and take in my new neighborhood. I shake my head at the sight of the townhouses all painted in such bright colors. I live in San Francisco now – a whole new life has begun for me and I feel this fluttering in my stomach. I can’t wait to explore the city.

It’s evening now and I make myself a snack. Mom often takes late shifts or even night shifts. We don’t see each other often, and I don’t suppose that will change with her new job. So we use the little time we have to cook or bake together, go on excursions, or just chat about everything that’s been happening.

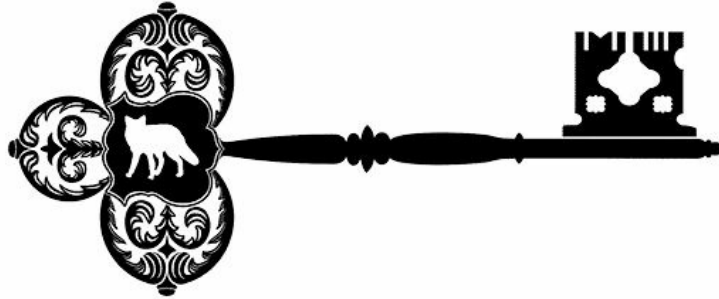
I make myself comfortable on the couch with a ham and cheese sandwich and switch on the TV. Later, I’ll organize my school things for tomorrow, because I’m definitely not an early riser. Every extra minute I can spend in bed is sacred to me. Also, I’m not good for anything in the mornings, and major packing activities should be avoided, as past experience shows.

I watch a movie that doesn’t really grab me, and halfway through I rub my tired eyes. Something flickers briefly in my peripheral vision and I irritably take a deep breath. And another. Then I blink vigorously, but my eyes still feel overtired. To bed then. I guess that’s enough for today – I need to rest my eyes and myself.

I get ready, then crawl into my new bed. I feel a brief chill – I guess I forgot to close the window. I wrap myself more tightly in my duvet and, with a sigh,

I sink into a deep sleep. I'm only vaguely aware of the creaking sounds of the house and the quiet murmur of the wind – which almost sounds like a voice – and I weave them into a really crazy dream.

Chapter 2



A deafening sound jolts me out of a dream that couldn't be more bizarre, but which made total sense when I was asleep. I quickly roll over and switch off my alarm.

My eyes wander around the room and I slowly get my bearings again. I'm in my bed, in my new house. Today is Monday... and I have to go to school. I leap out of bed and the fragments of last night's dream retreat into the background; they no longer make any sense, and fade like the last dark wisps of night slowly driven back by the sun.

I quickly pull on a thick sweater, then jeans and sneakers. I step up to the closed window to double-check it's not raining and I don't need an umbrella or coat. I'm about to turn away when a vague memory surfaces. Wasn't the window open last night? I felt so cold for a moment.

I sigh and stretch. It must just be the unfamiliar climate. I'm not used to San Francisco weather. I guess I should take a jacket just in case.

I walk briskly to the bus stop. San Francisco is famous for its cable car system, but unfortunately that only operates downtown. So my only option is to take the bus or walk several blocks.

About fifteen minutes later, I arrive at my new school. I know from the brochure that over 400 students attend this high school. The buildings are modern, with a lot of glass fronts and windows. The initial impression is both imposing and inviting. The entrance has double doors that look small compared to the stone wall surrounding them. I feel more like I'm entering a hotel foyer than a school.

The entrance hall is big and the ceiling has vaulted arches like the interior of an old church. Students are streaming along the corridors and a hubbub of voices and other sounds greets me. I'm really impressed by this school and already looking forward to my first class. I fish the schedule out of my bag and search for the room number. I have English first. I join a crowd of students surging along a corridor and try to read the room numbers as I pass them. I seem to be moving in the right direction, and finally I'm standing outside my classroom.

A few students are already sitting at desks or standing around talking. I nod and smile, then scan the room for a free seat. I ask a slim brunette girl in a knitted gray sweater if I can sit next to her. She looks up. Her eyes are a very pale blue and she has a few freckles around her nose, which look really cute.

"Uh, sure. That seat's not taken," she says quietly.

"I'm Teresa, but you can call me Tess," I say as I sit down.

"Kate," she says with a shy smile.

"Pretty big school," I say, trying to make small talk as I gaze around the room. It looks really new and modern. The desks aren't scratched and the chairs are ergonomically designed. "I guess it'll take some time to find my way around," I mutter.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out quickly," says Kate. She hesitates but keeps her eyes on me. "You're not from San Francisco?"

I shake my head. "I recently moved here from Tucson with my Mom."

"Then I guess the weather takes a little getting used to."

I nod. "I almost never wore such thick sweaters back home," I reply with a laugh, tugging at my knit sleeve.

"You'll like San Francisco, and the school too. The teachers are really nice and they care about the students."

"Sounds great," I say, then turn toward the door as it opens. A tall man with black hair enters. He's wearing a dark shirt and casual jeans. He walks to the front and the students all take their places.

"You know the drill, phones away, books out." His tone and his friendly smile soften his words. His gaze wanders around the room and stops on me.

"Okay, yeah, we have a new student. You moved here from Arizona, right?"

I nod. "My mother and I used to live in Tucson."

“Welcome to San Francisco. My name’s Chris Hanson. I hope you had a chance to settle in a bit.”

“Yeah, thanks, I like it here so far.”

“You’ll have time to get to know the others later. But for now let’s take a look at the material. We started on ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’. I hope you’ve all done the reading.”

I open my book, glad that I already studied this play at my old school. Mr. Hanson turns to the whiteboard, and for the remainder of the class we have a relaxed discussion, which I’m able to contribute to.

At the end of class, two girls come to my desk with friendly smiles. “I’m Maria and this is Vanessa,” says the tall brunette, whose curly hair falls past her shoulders. “How do you like our school?”

“I guess it’ll take a while for me to find my way around. The place is huge. But I really like what I’ve seen so far.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s not easy. Is Tucson a big city?” Vanessa wears her long blonde hair in an elaborate braid, and she looks down at me.

“Over five hundred thousand inhabitants,” I reply.

She nods. “Not as big as San Francisco then.” Her tone sounds a little scornful – or am I just imagining it?

“I guess not,” I reply, not knowing what to make of this conversation. Are they trying to be nice or not?

“I guess we should go. See you later.”

Maria waves to me as she leaves the classroom with Vanessa. I pack up my things and look at Kate. Her bag is already packed, but she’s still sitting there indecisively.

“What do you have next?” I ask.

“Chemistry.”

“Great. Same here. Want to go together? Then I don’t have to get lost in the corridors and you can tell me about yourself.”

A smile finally appears on Kate’s lips. “Sure.”

We leave the room and follow a corridor that brings us to a wall of lockers.

“I just need to grab some books. Do you have a locker yet?”

I pull out my class schedule again. I find my locker number at the bottom.

“Yes,” I reply, scanning the rows. I catch sight of a guy leaning against the

lockers. His arms are folded in front of his chest. He's wearing a dark shirt and plain jeans, but they look like they were tailor-made for him. His slightly wavy dark blond hair suits him perfectly. He looks like he was born to play the dream guy in some cheesy romance. He glances in my direction. There's something intense about the way he looks at me, and it irritates me. My eyes linger on him for a moment longer than they should. I force myself to look away. Although I don't like to admit it, I'm not immune to prejudice, and when I look at that pretty boy I instantly have a mental image: a guy training from morning till night to harden that perfect Adonis body, posing for hours in front of the mirror to see if his hard work has paid off, posting ridiculous selfies on Instagram: #sixpack #whoneedsphotoshop. He probably insists that his girlfriends go with him to the gym and then eat nothing but a small salad afterward – preferably without dressing. Not my world.

“That's Ayden,” says Kate, her voice jolting me out of my thoughts. “He started here a month ago.”

At that moment, Maria and Vanessa saunter up to him. They speak to him briefly, all smiles. Maria plays with her hair the whole time.

“He made friends pretty quickly, but he's still single,” Kate explains unnecessarily.

I shrug. “Good for him.”

Kate looks at him critically and seems to be searching for the right words. He glances at her, as if he can feel her gaze upon him, and his eyes darken briefly. Then he looks at me again. That gaze is really intense. It almost makes you feel... ensnared.

“We should go, class is about to start,” says Kate, and I manage to extricate myself from Ayden.

And we're on our way to the next class. I try to memorize the way. The endless corridors don't make it easy. Eventually we stop in front of a door and Kate opens it.

“You can sit with me if you like,” she suggests, avoiding eye contact until I say yes and thank her.

The classroom slowly fills up and the bell rings for the start of class just as another student shows up. I don't know why it annoys me so much. I mean, obviously Ayden has classes too. But does he have to be in mine? Why do I

even care? His eyes dart in my direction again, and now I can see that they're an incredibly deep green. His full lips curve into an appealing smile, which is just as hard to interpret as the sparkle in his eyes.

He sits at the desk in front of me. The brown-haired boy next to Ayden immediately starts talking to him. He's obviously popular, and not just with the girls.

The moment the bell stops, an older man enters the room. His thinning white hair sticks out in all directions. His white coat is a size too big and kind of sags around his skinny body. He reminds me of a mad professor. The thought makes me grin.

He scans the room, then turns to the front without comment and begins writing formulas on the board.

"Er, Mr. Cats," says a girl with curly hair. He turns around, looking confused, as if he can't locate the source of the voice that just rudely interrupted his thoughts. He runs his hand nervously through his hair, messing it up even more. Two tufts stick up like cat ears.

"Yes?" he asks in a scratchy voice.

"We have a new student," she says, glancing at me. The teacher follows her gaze, but doesn't seem to know who she means. He obviously spends the majority of the class with his back to the students. Otherwise, he'd surely know which face he hadn't seen before.

I raise my hand. "I'm Teresa Franklin. I just moved here from Arizona."

He looks at me for a few seconds, then his expression darkens. "Arizona, you say?"

I nod, as he's clearly waiting for confirmation.

"Did you have chemistry at your old school?"

I nod again and add loudly, "Yes, and I found it really fun."

"Fun!" he repeats disparagingly. "I had two other students from Arizona. They were only interested in fun too. Fun has nothing to do with chemistry. I hope you're not like them. I guess we'll find out." With that, he turns back to the whiteboard and finishes writing out the formulas.

For a moment I'm stunned, then I can't help chuckling quietly. Okay, I can think of a lot of things more fun than chemistry. But this teacher seems pretty eccentric. If things continue like this, at least I'll have a few laughs in this

class.

When I look up again, I find myself looking into the greenest eyes I've ever seen. They make me think of dense, impenetrable forests, of the wildness of nature, but also its stillness and peace.

Ayden's leaning back in his chair, looking at me, and I catch my breath. The smile on his lips is totally captivating and, I have to admit, kind of sexy.

"You have a pretty smile. I'd love to know what's going through your head." His mesmerizing eyes linger on me briefly, then he grins again and turns around.

Uh, what was that about? I swallow hard and try to focus my attention on the front of the room.

Kate elbows me. "We're supposed to open our books," she whispers. I can tell by her expression she's not too happy. "Don't let Mr. Cats catch you flirting. Once he has you in his scopes, it's over."

"I'm not flirting," I hiss at her, opening my book. "I can't help it if the guy thinks he has to make some dumb comment about everything!" I'm speaking quietly but I can see Ayden looking sideways at me, and the corners of his mouth twitch.

Great. This is how you make friends.

I'm really glad when the class ends. The rest of the day goes by quickly. All the new impressions make the time fly. I meet new teachers and students, and to my relief I don't run into Ayden again. I've barely exchanged three sentences with him, but I have the feeling it's best to avoid him. As a rule, guys like that spell trouble. And there it is again, my prejudice. But I've met enough of his type – or watched them break one heart after another – not to waste another thought on him.

"Where do you live?" Kate asks after school.

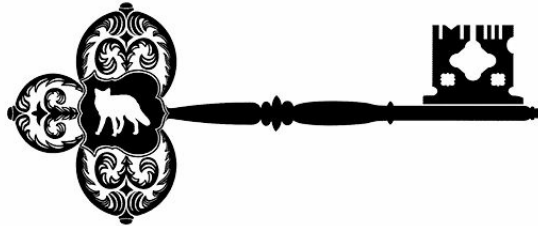
"Here in Haight-Ashbury, a few blocks that way," I reply, pointing down the street.

A radiant smile spreads across her face. "Then we're headed the same way. I live in Western Addition. It's not far."

"Great!" I'm genuinely happy to have found someone who lives nearby, who I can meet after school. "Then we can ride home together," I suggest, and Kate cheerfully agrees. It puts me in good spirits that we're becoming

friends – which is more than I expected from my first day at a new school.

Chapter 3



As Kate and I make our way down the street to the bus stop, she starts telling me more about the city and pointing out some of the buildings.

“That place over there has the best donuts in town. They don’t have all the fancy new kinds that other stores have these days, but everything’s so delicious. You’ll love them,” Kate promises.

On the bus, she continues her sightseeing tour. “Oh, and we have to go to Coit Tower sometime. You may have heard of it. You have an incredible view from up there, although it’s usually swarming with tourists.”

Her enthusiasm makes me smile to myself. I haven’t seen her this cheerful and chatty all day.

“You seem to know the city well,” I say.

She shrugs. “I like San Francisco a lot, and I hope you’ll learn to love the city too. I know it’s hard at first, finding your feet in a new place.” She pauses and gazes through the window. “My father works in IT. It was like hitting the jackpot for him when he was transferred to Silicon Valley and bought our house in San Francisco. I was only eight and I was happy at my school and had friends. It wasn’t easy starting over.” She looks at me and her face brightens. “But that was a long time ago. Now I really love this city and it feels like home.”

I look through the window at the houses rushing by. I’d be lying if I said I already felt at home here. I miss my friends and our old apartment, as small as it was. I even miss my annoying teachers a little. But I’m sure we made the right choice and I’ll soon feel at home here.

I watch the passersby, the tourists sauntering along the street. Suddenly my vision blurs. There’s a patch of light obscuring the person I was just looking

at, and I squeeze my eyes shut in irritation.

“Not again,” I groan, rubbing my eyelids.

“You okay? Something in your eye?” Kate asks.

I shake my head and slowly open my eyes. My vision is still a little cloudy but it’s improving.

“I couldn’t see clearly for a moment,” I explain. Noticing Kate’s concerned expression, I try to reassure her. “It’s nothing serious. I’ve always had this problem, and it’s improved a lot over the years. Actually, it stopped happening altogether.” So it’s all the more disturbing that it seems to be starting again. “It happened way more when I was a kid. I constantly had blurry vision and these bright patches of light. They would clump together until I couldn’t see anything else. At some point, Mom noticed there was something wrong with my eyes, because I often used to just stare straight ahead at one spot.”

“That sounds horrible. Did the doctors find anything?”

“The ophthalmologists couldn’t agree on what kind of vision impairment it was, but most of them thought it was vitreous opacity. Also, I’m shortsighted, and these two problems can exacerbate each other. Anyway, I got glasses, and the problem gradually disappeared. But it still happens now and then.”

“It sucks that there’s nothing they can do,” Kate says sympathetically.

I just shrug and attempt a carefree smile.

“Like I said, it’s not so bad, and it actually doesn’t happen often.”

I lean my head against the window and resist the urge to rub my eyes again. I gaze out at the street and the pedestrians. Everything’s normal, my eyes are working again.

“This is our stop,” Kate reminds me. I stand up and follow her down the swaying bus. When it pulls up, we step out onto the pavement.

“See you tomorrow then,” says Kate.

“Do you want to come see my house? We could talk some more.”

A big smile appears on Kate’s face, then disappears just as quickly. “My Mom’s waiting for me at home.”

Something tells me I should keep my suggestion – that she could call her Mom – to myself.

“But I’ll talk to her and maybe I can come over some other day. And I could

show you around town.”

I nod gratefully, but I’m slightly irked. It’s pretty weird at our age to have to run everything by your Mom.

“I’d like that,” I say. I wave goodbye to her and walk the rest of the way home.

The streets in this part of the neighborhood are a lot quieter, and as I turn into a side street, I suddenly feel very alone. Teresa in the big city, I think, and chuckle to myself again.

“What a pretty smile,” I hear Ayden saying in my memory. I roll my eyes, annoyed at myself. Why am I even thinking about him right now? I pull my jacket tighter around me. A cold wind blasts my face, coming off the sea, I guess. I can smell salt in the air – the unmistakable smell of the ocean. I start to shiver and my heart beats faster. I have a bad feeling, but I can’t explain why or even describe it. This area doesn’t exactly inspire confidence, but I walked the same way this morning.

On impulse, I turn around, but don’t see anything or anyone. What did I expect? Although I know logically that I have nothing to fear, my feet speed up of their own accord. I’m running by the time I turn into our street. I get to the door, fumble with my key and insert it into the lock with trembling fingers. I glance over my shoulder one last time, push open the door, and stumble inside. I quickly lock it behind me and lean against the wall. The fear subsides after a few seconds and I shake my head at myself. I guess the recent upheaval put more strain on me than I realized. I take a deep breath and decide to eat something. Then I’ll relax a while.

I cook a risotto and make myself comfortable on the couch. We normally eat in the kitchen, but when Mom’s not here, I indulge myself a little. I briefly switch on the TV but there’s nothing interesting to watch. I load the dirty dishes in the dishwasher and put the leftover food in the fridge for Mom. Then I go up to my room. It would have been nice if Kate were here so we could get to know each other better. I wonder if her mother’s really that strict or if there’s some other reason she wanted to go home.

I pick up the book on my nightstand and am about to continue reading when Great Aunt Frida’s paintings catch my eye. I stand up and take one of them out of the box. It’s a meadow with blossoming flowers moving in the wind.

The sky is steeped in soft orange and red tones. Around the edges it's darker. A sunset over a meadow that maybe once existed glimmers on the outskirts of San Francisco. The colors are so vivid, and although the painting basically looks peaceful, I can feel a kind of tension in it.

I can't stop looking at the picture. I notice more and more details. A bird is visible in the sky – a tiny dot, and yet so detailed that I have no doubt it's a crow. I see long ferns growing between the flowers. A tiny beetle sits on a twig. Below the flower petals, near the ground, are other plants. I take a closer look, then catch my breath and stiffen, almost dropping the painting. How did I not see that before?! Amongst the flowers I can clearly make out two eyes. Yellow irises around narrow pupils. They look so real and lively, so full of life and... fire. Yes, there's something wild, untamed in them. When I let my eyes wander, I spot more pairs of eyes. They shine in all colors: red, brown, green, blue, yellow. They seem to move into the foreground and the flowers disappear behind the numerous eyes. What has Frida painted here?

Something heavy and cold lands on my shoulder, and gasp and I drop the picture in fright.

"Sorry," says Mom, unable to suppress a grin. She bends over me and looks at the picture that was in my hands a moment ago. "You're looking at Frida's art again?" She smirks. "Well, at least someone's captivated by it."

"It's incredible," I say, picking up the painting. Now that I know where all the eyes are hidden, I see them clearly. They practically jump out at me, and I wonder how I ever failed to notice them. I point to a pair and say, "It's amazing how well she's integrated these eyes into the painting." I turn and hold the artwork up for Mom to see.

"Eyes?" she asks, sounding slightly irritated.

I nod and point them out to her. Mom turns her head this way and that, trying to make them out, but eventually she just shrugs. "I don't know what you're seeing there. All I see is grass and flowers."

"But here," I move my head close to hers and point straight at them. Then I point at the next pair of eyes. "These eyes are hidden everywhere. I didn't see them at first either, but once you know where they are... I'm so intrigued about how she did it. And they're so expressive..."

My mother strokes my hair and says again, to my disappointment, "Sorry, I

can't see them. But that's how it is with art: everyone sees something different. That's probably what makes the work of great artists so special. Although I wouldn't exactly put Frida in that category, but then what do I know about art."

She stands up. For her, that's obviously the end of the matter. I look back at the radiant eyes practically burning with life.

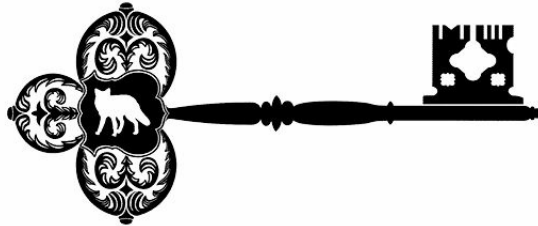
"Did you cook? Otherwise I'll whip something up."

"In the fridge," I reply.

"Thanks for taking care of that," she says. She stands expectantly in the doorway. "Are you coming? I'm burning to know how your first day at school was."

I nod, put the painting aside and follow her. I glance back at the artwork from the doorway. I'm suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of sadness, and wonder why my mother simply refuses to see what's right in front of her eyes.

Chapter 4



You look tired,” Kate comments a few days later. Our first period was math, and although it’s a subject I like, I really struggled to stay awake. The next few classes were a chore too. We’re now on our way to the cafeteria.

“I didn’t sleep well,” I say, stifling a yawn. Last night really wasn’t great. I kept waking up cold, and spent the whole night tossing and turning.

“I guess you’ve had a lot to deal with lately,” says Kate. “Moving to a new city, starting in a new school – that’s enough to make anyone fall asleep on their feet.”

“It hasn’t gotten that bad yet,” I reply with a grin. “It would take several long nights to really knock me off my feet.”

“Long nights? I didn’t figure you’d throw yourself straight into the nightlife – especially on a weekday,” says a melodic voice behind me, which, surprisingly, I recognize immediately even though I’ve only heard it once before. I turn around and find myself looking straight into Ayden’s face. I’m a little flummoxed and take a step back, crashing into the locker behind me.

“I wasn’t partying,” I say, even though I don’t see anything wrong with going out at night with friends.

“Oh? Then why the sleepless nights?” He leans against the locker with his right hand near my head and moves in closer. His eyes flash and the green of his irises is indescribable. But his smug grin stirs up something in me, and thankfully it’s sarcasm. It helps me regain my powers of speech.

“Well, I’m a very busy woman and at night I try to solve all the problems of the world. Important topics such as: Can we organize better meeting places for students than next to a power socket where they can charge their phones?”

Can anything be done about food waste in the cafeteria? And what should a person do when they're constantly being stared at by a strange guy with crazy green eyes?"

"I get it. No wonder you can't sleep worrying about stuff like that. But, lucky for you, I'm also the thoughtful type and I've already pondered about these questions. The school should build free power banks for students in the electronics course. That would definitely be a popular class. As for wasted food, I can confirm that's already under control. The leftovers are saved up and used in a casserole at the end of the week. And the last problem..." His voice becomes deep and husky. He leans in even closer until we're almost touching. "I'll leave that to your imagination." The smile on his lips is bewitching.

As quickly as he appeared, he now turns and walks away. But I can still hear that incredibly attractive laugh and I shake my head. Ayden certainly has a way with words.

Now I register Kate standing beside me, watching in silence. I shrug. "Strange guy," is all I say, then I beckon her to follow me.

We go to the cafeteria. Kate has brought her lunch from home, but I join the line of people waiting to be served. I buy a salad, a slice of pizza, and a large Coke. Then I glance around, searching for Kate. The cafeteria's pretty full, and there are almost no empty seats. I scan the room. As I'm walking, I turn this way and that, but I see only unfamiliar faces.

Suddenly I hear someone call, "Teresa!" I spin around – too fast. Everything on my tray slides and I watch my Coke tip in slow motion. My eyes widen and I try to somehow prevent the inevitable, but it happens: the drink spills all over a girl sitting at a nearby table. She screams and jumps up, then just stands there in shock for a moment.

"I'm so sorry," I say quickly.

Maria slowly turns and gives me an evil look. "The Tucson tart," she observes. "What were you thinking?! Look at me! It's all over my clothes! You're paying for these. This stuff was super expensive."

"It wasn't deliberate, and like I said, I'm sorry," I say, trying to calm her down, but it doesn't seem to help.

“Save your breath. How stupid can you be? You can bring the money tomorrow.” She looks me up and down. “But I guess you don’t actually have that kind of money. Makes me wonder how you can even afford to come here.” She wrinkles her nose. “Keep your money, you obviously need it more than I do.”

“What is up with you?!” I snap at her. “I said I’m sorry. Don’t you think you’re overreacting?”

She looks at me like I’m some disgusting insect. “You think I’m overreacting? You haven’t seen anything yet, believe me.”

She shoots a meaningful glance at her friends, picks up her bag, and marches out. I just shake my head and go to join Kate, who’s staring at me along with everyone else in the room.

“That was dramatic,” she murmurs.

I nod. “Yeah, great start.”

“Maria’s a cold, stuck up bitch. It’s best to stay out of her way.”

“Too late for that,” I remark, already anticipating the worst.

We eat in silence and I try to ignore all the stares. This is really not how I imagined today turning out.

We leave the cafeteria together and go our separate ways in one of the corridors.

“Have fun in physics,” I say.

“The class is actually really interesting, so yeah...” Kate shrugs and waves.

I go to my locker to grab my books. As I’m closing it, someone barges into me. I crash against the locker door and my glasses slide off my face and onto the floor. Maria and Vanessa look down at me with gloating grins. Their expressions are hostile and nasty.

“Oops,” Maria laughs. She’s now wearing her gym clothes. “But that’s what happens when you stand in people’s way.”

I raise my eyebrows and stare at her in disbelief.

“Seriously? This is your response to me accidentally spilling Coke on you?”

“Accidentally? Sure!” Vanessa snorts.

Now I see clearly that she’s had surgery on her nose, and probably her bust. They both turn and begin to walk away. I bend down to pick up my glasses, then I see a foot, and before I can do anything, it stomps right on my glasses,

which break with a loud crunch.

“Are you insane?!” I snarl, straightening up. It’s Maria’s foot, and it’s still on my glasses, grinding the lenses into the floor.

“Oh my. I’m so sorry,” she says sarcastically.

Vanessa grins idiotically beside her.

“You obviously need new glasses anyway. The old ones didn’t work. You’re the one who claimed you tipped Coke all over me accidentally, you blind cow.”

I stare at her as the rage bubbles up inside me. I can’t believe this is actually happening.

“You can’t be serious! How old are you? Five? I already apologized. What else am I supposed to do?!”

“You don’t belong here, and you’re definitely not one of us. So you better start listening to what we say or you’ll wish you never came here.”

They stalk off with big grins on their faces and leave me standing here.

I stoop to pick up my glasses. They’re completely trashed. I clench my teeth, outraged. Before my next class, I go looking for a bathroom where I can put in my contact lenses. Fortunately, I always have them with me, because I sometimes get bad headaches and it helps if I take my glasses off.

I stand in front of the mirror, holding my right eye open with one hand, the lens on the index finger of my other hand. It’s not a comfortable procedure, but I’ve had plenty of practice. I move the finger toward my eye, then the light flickers behind me. I pause, annoyed, then it happens again. Great. Bad lighting really helps when you’re trying to aim a lens at your eye. I sigh and start again. I look in the mirror, and then something flashes in front of my eyes.

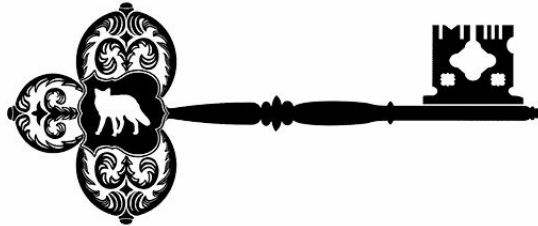
“Shit,” I groan. “Just what I need right now.”

Is it just because I’m tired that my eyes are reacting so sensitively? I stop, close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Determined, I step up to the mirror again and finally get the lenses in place. That’s better. With the lenses in, I can see clearly again and don’t have to strain my eyes.

I leave the bathroom and walk briskly to French class.

Chapter 5



I meet up with Kate after French.

“Where are your glasses?”

“Don’t ask,” I reply, rolling my eyes. “Where can I get a coffee around here? I desperately need a caffeine hit.”

“Cafeteria,” she says. We head there together and I end up telling her in a few short sentences what happened earlier. She looks at me with wide eyes, but keeps her comments to herself, for which I’m really grateful.

A few students are spending their free period in the cafeteria. I instantly spot Maria and Vanessa at a table, chatting with some other girls. They all look alike: figure-hugging clothes, shorts over tights, or skimpy skirts. Plus loads of makeup, extensions and manicured nails. Only Maria stands out a little in her gym clothes.

“They obviously have a thing for you,” Kate mutters when she sees who I’m looking at.

“Just because I was a little clumsy?! They’re insane,” I say pretty loudly.

Kate holds up her hands in a pacifying gesture. “I didn’t say their reaction was justified.”

I shake my head and buy a coffee. Rage is still bubbling in my gut and I can’t stop staring at Maria and her friends. No one gets away with treating me like that. I really want payback. Plans for revenge flash through my mind, in which Maria’s long brown mane plays a leading role.

“No glasses this time?” I hear a voice say behind me. I turn around to discover Ayden standing right next to me, grinning. “I didn’t realize you had such blue eyes. You look so different. Especially with that militant

expression. Are you planning to assassinate one of the problems that keeps you awake at night?”

He’s still has that smile on his cute lips and leans over me. He tilts his head and his green eyes sparkle at me. I realize we’re being watched.

“I’d really like to know what’s going through your head.”

“Er, why?” I ask in a frosty tone.

“I’ll bet it’s interesting.”

“Well, I’m sure you can easily find another girl who’d just love to share her inner thoughts with you. Try one of them,” I hiss, flicking my head toward Maria and friends.

He doesn’t even bother turning to look at them, he just shrugs. “I don’t care too much about what other people expect from me.”

“Oh yeah,” I recall. “You already said you’re the thoughtful type. And now you’re a free spirit too.”

My voice drips with sarcasm, but the only response I get is a husky laugh, which – I reluctantly have to admit – is pretty sexy.

“I am multifaceted.” That look again. “And I think that’s something we have in common. Anyway, I can’t wait to find out if I’m right.”

He winks and goes to join a couple of other guys at one of the tables.

I roll my eyes and head for the door.

That afternoon, I get off the bus with Kate at the stop where we part ways. I’m still preoccupied with the events of the day, but I try to shake them off. I don’t want to be weighed down by things like that – my time is too precious and life’s too short.

Not expecting an affirmative answer, I invite Kate to my place again. I wouldn’t mind some company right now.

“You want to come over today?”

Kate glances around and frowns pensively. She opens her mouth to decline again. I can see it in her face how much she’s struggling with the decision.

“Yeah, sure,” I hear her say, to my surprise.

“That’s great – really.” I put my arm around her shoulders and we start walking.

“My Mom’s not home. She doesn’t get back until eight, so I have to cook.

Is there anything you don't like?"

"I'm pretty uncomplicated when it comes to food," Kate stammers, avoiding my eye.

"Okay, I was thinking of making lasagna and salad today. Is that cool?"

She nods and looks at the street. A couple of cars drive past us.

"Maybe you can tell me something about our neighborhood. I still don't know it well."

"Er, sure," she says distantly. Okay, so that doesn't draw her out of her shell either. She was so chatty yesterday.

"When we get to my place, I'll cook and then I'll give you a tour. We've made good progress with setting the place up, it's basically finished. We could maybe use a few pictures on the walls," I add, thinking of Frida's paintings. "I have a really nice view from my room. I like sitting in the window seat, watching people pass by," I continue, and Kate just nods.

I really like her. Obviously, I noticed when we first met that she's pretty shy. But now and then I see a flash of something else, which tells me that once she feels she can trust you, she has a lot to say, can be fun, and can think for herself. She's being totally monosyllabic today, but I want to get to know her better and earn her trust, because I'm sure there's a really amazing person behind that shy façade.

When we turn into my street I point to our house. "It's that one."

"Looks nice," is all she says.

I unlock the door, step into the hallway, and make way for Kate. She glances around, then we go into the kitchen where I start preparing the food. Kate helps, and she clearly has some skills.

"Do you cook often?"

She keeps her eyes on the carrots she's dicing. "I enjoy it sometimes," she says, but doesn't elaborate.

While the lasagna's in the oven, I give Kate a tour of the house and she slowly seems to thaw.

"I love these sloped ceilings, and the view from up here is awesome," she gushes. "We should go out sometime and I'll show you around the city. There's a lot to discover, trust me, you'll love it."

I'm pleased she's found her enthusiasm again.

“Yeah, let’s do that. I’d love to check out the city with you. We could maybe go out one night too.”

Her expression clouds over instantly. All I get is a short nod.

In my room, Kate takes a good look around and then sinks into an armchair. “Really nice room. Everything’s so lovingly arranged,” she comments.

“I really like it too,” I say. Then I glance at the bare walls and add, “Like I said, it could maybe use some pictures on the walls.” On impulse, I bring out the box of Frida’s paintings. “My great aunt painted these. I find them so impressive that I’d like to hang up a couple.”

Kate joins me and takes a painting out of the box. Her eyes widen as she gazes at the colors and shapes. The picture shows a river slowly snaking down a hill into a valley. Ferns grow on the banks and dragonflies dance in the air. The sky is a deep blue with a few small clouds scudding across it. In the background is a forest that looks dense and impenetrable. The colors are incredible and it’s like looking at a photograph.

I’ve already seen this painting, so it doesn’t take long for me to pick out the eyes, which shine in such varied colors. I discover a dark green pair between blades of grass. There are more peering out from the forest, and two brown eyes are hidden in a gray rock.

I study Kate’s face and try to figure out what she’s seeing in the picture.

“Incredible detail,” she says. “It’s like something from a fairy tale.” She admires the painting in silence, soaking it all in. “Your aunt was really talented. It’s like she’s telling a story with this picture. Someone has just walked along the river and lost something.”

She points out footprints, which I hadn’t noticed. They lead away from the water towards the forest, where there are a lot of twinkling eyes.

My heart races when I look at the finely detailed footprints and wonder why I didn’t notice them before.

“I assume the key is symbolic of something. Maybe a secret that the person wants to bury deep inside themselves. So they throw the key in the river, where nobody can reach it. Or they want to protect the secret.” Kate touches her chin thoughtfully. “But maybe it’s about the key to their heart – they want to protect themselves from being hurt.” She smiles at me with her finger on the little key in the middle of the river. The water is rushing over it.

I stare at the bronze key, mesmerized. It glitters in the water; the bit is broad and thick, and more intricate than any I've seen. The bow – that's the handle – is elaborately decorated.

"I think this picture leaves so much room for interpretation," I hear Kate say, and I nod.

What is that unusual key doing in the water? Why the footprints? And why do they lead straight to all those eyes in the forest? My heart keeps pounding as my mind tries to solve a puzzle I'm not even sure exists.

"This painting would look really good on that wall," says Kate, pointing at a spot above my bed.

Just then, the oven timer buzzes and we go down to the kitchen. Kate seems more at ease and we laugh together as we eat. After dinner, we make ourselves comfortable on the couch with a custard dessert. Kate finishes hers and relaxes back in the cushions.

"It's really nice here," she says, looking at me directly.

"I'm glad you like it."

"You've created such a cozy atmosphere, it really feels like a home."

"You make it sound like yours doesn't," I say, seizing the opportunity to voice a suspicion I've had for a while.

Kate instantly stiffens. Her relaxed expression vanishes.

"No, I wouldn't say that. It's just not as... laid back as yours."

She waves her hand in the air, as if to illustrate what she means.

"What is it like? Do you have siblings?"

She shakes her head. "My Dad works in IT in Silicon Valley – I mentioned that already. My mother's a homemaker and has a lot on her plate. She devotes herself to good causes; she's involved in a lot of foundations." She shrugs. "But she tries to be there for me."

"They sound great. Maybe I can meet your Mom sometime."

"Sure," says Kate.

I stand up to get us both a drink, and try to lighten the mood by changing the subject.

"It's almost eight. My Mom should be home soon, so you'll get to meet her."

Kate leaps up from the couch. She checks her phone and gasps. "Shit, damn

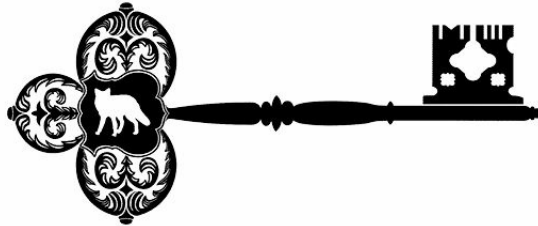
it. How did it get so late? I have to go.”

“What? Why?” I can hardly keep up with her as she runs to the door. “Wait! Should I walk you to the bus stop?”

“No, it’s cool. I’ll see you tomorrow. Thanks again for everything.”

She yanks open the door and rushes outside. I watch, bewildered, as she sprints down the street. I definitely need to find out what’s up with Kate.

Chapter 6



Just a few more minutes, I tell myself, checking the time again. I have to take the next bus or I'll be late for school. I'm fairly certain Kate's not going to show up. I peer down the street just as the bus is rounding the corner. Kate's nowhere to be seen, and I have no choice – I have to take this bus. We agreed to meet here every morning. Is Kate sick? Or is there something else going on? I keep replaying what happened yesterday, wondering why she left so abruptly.

I arrive at school and still can't see her anywhere. I've almost reached the double doors when I instinctively turn around. A black car pulls up, an expensive luxury sedan. The door opens and, to my amazement, Kate gets out. She slams the door and the car speeds away.

Okay, I kind of figured Kate's family's not poor – I mean, her Dad works in Silicon Valley. And I don't care if she has loads of money or none. But the whole scene is a little strange.

Kate walks toward me, head down, oblivious to her surroundings. I intercept her and say hello and she finally looks up. Her hand goes to her heart.

“Oh, it's you.”

“I hope everything's okay. I didn't mean to scare you.”

“It's okay,” she says, and keeps walking. “We should hurry, we're late.”

I follow her and search for a way to broach the subject, but I can't think of anything. So I just blurt it out. Straight talking never hurts.

“What was up with you yesterday? You left in such a rush and you weren't on the bus this morning.”

She opens her mouth, but it takes a while for the answer to come out.

“I was just late home yesterday. Mom doesn't like it when I don't stick to

the rules.”

“Okay,” I reply, stumped. It seems strange for a seventeen-year-old to have such an early curfew. But I guess some families just do things differently.

“Were you in trouble?”

Still avoiding my eyes, she shakes her head. “It’s all good. Mom had some time this morning and wanted to drive me to school.”

“Okay,” I repeat. I can’t think of anything else to say. “Next time, just tell me how long you can stay and we’ll make sure you get home on time.”

Kate looks up in surprise, then she smiles and nods.

“Or I can come to your place if your Mom prefers that.”

Another nod.

I can tell she doesn’t want to talk about it anymore, so I ask, “What do you have first?”

“Free period,” she replies. “I’m exempt from sport. Asthma and so on. But I always come to school anyway and read in the library.”

“I won’t say you’re lucky, but I wouldn’t mind a free period. Especially as we have swimming today.”

I roll my eyes. Who wants to parade themselves in front of the class in a swimsuit? And on top of that, we have to follow orders from the swimming coach standing at the edge of the pool with her whistle.

Luckily, being late means I have the locker room to myself. I quickly peel off my clothes and slip into my swimsuit. A plain blue one that’s comfortable and covers everything properly. A serious mistake, as I discover when I step out into the pool hall. All the other girls are so dolled up that I can’t help wondering whether I’ve strayed into the bikini section of a beauty pageant. Those hairstyles probably shouldn’t come in contact with water – not to mention the thick layers of makeup.

My headache returns and my contact lenses irritate my eyes. I hate these things. As I look at my classmates, my vision is obscured by flashes of light. I squeeze my eyes shut, take a few deep breaths, and open them again. Phew, I can see normally again.

The hall has several pools. One of them even has a diving tower with different levels. I pray desperately that I can somehow escape that ordeal.

Our teacher, a large woman in a white shirt and black leggings, stands at the

edge of a pool that's far enough from the diving platform for me to relax a little. Ms. Pillbrough blows her shrill whistle and the girls all start moving – though not very fast. Once we're all standing in front of her, she runs a hand through her short red curls. She looks distinctly displeased. She scrunches her small nose and says in a commanding voice, "I told you all last time: please wear something you can actually swim in. This is not summer vacation."

She's not exaggerating – some of them even have sunglasses on top of their heads. Meant as a cute accessory, I guess. None of the girls respond.

"So, ladies, today we're..."

Nobody pays any attention to the rest. The girls all look over at a door that's just opened. A stocky, balding, middle-aged man appears. He's wearing red shorts that show off his hairy bowlegs. He's really short, but he makes up for it with self-confidence. I frown and glance sideways at my classmates. The girls in San Francisco either have really unusual taste in men or a daddy complex. Either way, I would recommend they go see a doctor about it. They fuss around with their hair, straighten their backs, and suck their bellies in. It's a pretty odd spectacle.

Then the boys come through the door. A few of them run to the pool, yelling, and throw themselves in the water with as much commotion as possible – mostly cannonballs that splash a lot of water over the side of the pool. And then I see him: Ayden. Unfortunately, it's unavoidable. I roll my eyes. The light streaming through the windows makes his hair shine like gold. I feel like the radiance of his green eyes reaches all the way over to us, although he's talking to one of the boys and not paying us girls any attention. Er... did I just count myself as one of these preening hens?! Anyway, I have to admit his long muscular legs are very presentable. And his torso – perfectly toned, slim, muscular, and that sixpack... I just can't believe there are people who look that perfect without Photoshop. As soon as Ayden meets my eye, I realize I shouldn't have looked. I'm not sure how to interpret the grin on his face. Is he reading my mind somehow? I quickly look away. Fortunately, Maria and her friends, who are busy showing off their assets to the boys, provide me with an amusing distraction.

"Ladies," Ms. Pillbrough thunders. "Don't make me repeat myself. This is not some meat market."

Hmm, most of them clearly see things differently; their knives are already sharpened.

“In the pool, now!”

That earns her a lot of annoyed glances. Soon there’s a traffic jam at the only ladder into the pool. Nobody wants to risk jumping in and ruining their perfect hairdos and makeup.

I have nothing to lose, so I take a run-up and dive in. When I resurface, I get a lot of dirty looks. But my teacher seems relieved.

“At least one of you knows why we’re here.” She claps her hands and shouts. “And the rest of you – in the water, and I mean now!”

The swimming class is a total joke, and Ms. Pillborough’s nerves are put to the test. Mostly, the girls just stick to the side of the pool and watch the boys play water volleyball rather than swim a lap themselves. I also risk a glance now and then, and I have to admit it’s a pretty nice view: Ayden powering through the water, the way the water droplets glisten on his torso, and the way he keeps casually pushing his hair out of his face. I’m annoyed at myself. Am I really that superficial? His looks should be irrelevant to me. I try to concentrate on the swimming exercises. I’m the only one who does. The other girls only follow Ms. Pillborough’s instructions when they have no other choice, but even then they just paddle slowly through the water, craning their scrawny necks as far out of the water as possible to save their hair and makeup.

“Well done, Teresa,” my teacher praises me. I’m really not a good swimmer, but compared to the others who aren’t even trying, my awkward efforts look good.

I climb out of the pool to make way for the next girl. Everyone else is now standing around the sides either chatting or staring at the boys. Maria takes this opportunity to practice cute pouts and poses in front of her phone. I don’t understand how people can think of their Instagram profile in a place like this, but I guess it’s important to some that the world is constantly informed of even the most insignificant aspects of their lives. She sucks in her stomach, puts her left hand on her hip, and smiles mischievously.

I have to walk past her to get my towel, which I’ve left on a bench. I can’t resist the opportunity. She’s so self-absorbed she doesn’t see me coming. Just

before I reach her, I slip – unfortunately – on the wet tiles and collide with her. Maria screams and flails her arms, but she’s standing too close to the pool. She falls in with a loud splash, together with her iPhone.

She resurfaces less than a second later, spluttering. Mascara runs down her cheeks. I’m surprised she’s not wearing waterproof makeup just to be safe. Her hair clings to her face, looking anything but stylish, and her phone is at the bottom of the pool.

“Tucson, you...” she shrieks, but quickly dives back down for her expensive phone. She only makes it halfway down before coming back up. I guess she was so angry she forgot to take a breath first.

“I’m sooo sorry,” I say when she resurfaces a second time. “Maybe I really do need glasses. I didn’t even see that puddle on the on ground.”

“You!” Maria hisses. “You’ll regret this.”

“Yeah, bring it on. But you should salvage your phone first. It’s just down there.” I point to a spot in the pool. “I’m sure there are loads of important photos on it.”

“You little bitch!” Maria can scarcely control her rage.

Ms. Pillbrough’s whistle interrupts our altercation.

“How many times have I told you? No phones in the swimming hall. Get that damn thing out, and then you can swim three extra laps. We all want to see if your astral body can do more than just look pretty.”

Meanwhile, I go to my towel, unable to suppress a grin. I dry myself, then sit on the bench to drink some water.

“Who knew you could be so ruthless,” a voice whispers near me.

Ayden! How does he keep materializing next to me like that without me noticing?

“I can’t wait to see what other surprises you have in you.”

“You should be careful. You might get burned,” I retort.

The twinkle in his eyes intensifies. “Oh, I know how to handle fire, trust me.”

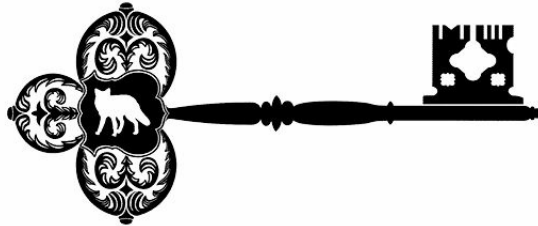
“What an ego,” I say, trying to resist the effect of his smile. He’s so close to me. Water droplets slide off his body, and his hair looks like it’s from a shampoo commercial.

When he leans toward me and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, it feels

like an electric shock. My heart skips a beat, then starts racing.

“Well, if it’s justified...” He quickly pulls back his hand. Part of me wants to grab it. Instead I just sit here, tongue-tied, and watch him straighten up and saunter back to his swimming group.

Chapter 7



Not good, I keep thinking. The effect this guy has on me is really not good. When he's around, I seem to lose my resolve – even question it. Why shouldn't I spend time with him? He's nice enough, and witty. He impresses me, but I don't know him well enough to be sure of him. And part of me wants to change that.

“You. Are. Insane,” Kate says on our way to the cafeteria.

“I know,” I reply. “You've been saying that all morning.”

The incident with Maria has quickly done the rounds. And yet nobody's talking about my broken glasses – which I'm sure a few people saw.

“She deserved it.”

“No question about that, but it's also clear she's going to kill you. And anyway...” Kate tilts her head and gives me a piercing look. “Is it true that Ayden came and talked to you during class?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, so?”

“In the swimming hall, with no shirt on?”

Unsure where she's going with this, I raise an eyebrow.

“Well, I'm guessing you couldn't think straight with that view.”

“Oh, and you protect yourself by not going?” I retort, mainly to shift the focus off myself.

“No way. That guy... he's just...” She shakes her head, trying to find the right words. “...not nice.”

“He seems nice enough to me,” I say, surprised.

“Yeah, he's good at hiding it when he wants to.”

“I'll be careful,” I say, putting a soothing arm around her shoulders.

Out of nowhere, two girls block our way. I instinctively tense up, but relax

when I see that it's not Maria and Vanessa.

"The woman of the day," one of them says. Her hair is long and black. She's wearing dark eye makeup, tight black pants with a couple of silver chains slung around her hips as a belt, and a black leather collar around her neck. Her black top has a few holes. "You gotta tell me everything. Anyone who stands up to Maria Schreiber is instantly my Hero. I'm Alex, by the way, and this is Christina."

The other girl just raises her hand. Christina's wearing her shoulder-length brown hair in a braid. She has friendly light brown eyes and cute dimples at the corners of her mouth.

They walk with us to the cafeteria. We buy lunch and share a table. Alex shoves fries in to her mouth while I recount in detail how Maria landed in the pool, and get a few appreciative laughs.

"Do you two have plans for tonight?" Alex asks after a while. "There's this bar, it's pretty popular right now. We often go there."

I look at her doubtfully.

"Don't worry, they're not too strict with IDs. They have good drinks, nice music and cozy couch niches. Do you guys want to come tonight?"

I definitely do, but judging by Kate's withdrawn expression, I guess it's not really her thing.

"I'll think about it," I say.

"Give me your phone," Alex insists, holding out her hand. I give it to her and she quickly calls her own phone so we have each other's numbers. Her ringtone sounds like a horror movie soundtrack. She sends me a message.

"Now you have my number and the address. Let us know if you decide to come."

"I will."

They're both really nice and I'm pleased they invited me. As we make our way to class after lunch, Kate's gone quiet again.

"Do you want to hang out this afternoon?" I ask. "We should make the most of early finish on Fridays. We could take a look around the city and you could show me everything. Maybe we can even find an optician to fix my glasses."

Kate's expression brightens a little. "I have to talk to my Mom first," she

says. “But I think she has a meeting with the Sheridan Foundation today, so it should be okay. Let’s meet at the bus stop at three. Finding an optician shouldn’t be a problem.”

I’m really looking forward to it. I’ve been wanting to see the city for a while, and I can hardly wait.

Back home, I find my Mom in the kitchen. She has a late shift today, and she’s cooking for us both.

“I could have made something,” I say when I see her hunched over a pot with a wooden spoon in her hand. “So you could relax a bit.”

She smiles broadly and hugs me. “I’m making my famous orange chicken with rice. You’re not a bad cook, but no one makes this quite like I do,” she says with a wink.

“Oh yeah, the toasty flavors are really something.”

My Mom has many talents, but cooking is definitely not one of them. Still, I appreciate it when she goes to the trouble of cooking for me.

“How was school?”

“Pretty good so far. I’m meeting Kate this afternoon. We’re going to take a look around the city. And tonight I’ll maybe go out with Christina and Alex. We’ll see.”

“I’m glad you’ve already made some friends.” She looks at my face and notices something is different “What happened to your glasses?”

“An unpleasant encounter with a stupid cow.”

“She broke your glasses?” she asks incredulously. “Hon, if you need help...”

I laugh and shake my head. “No, don’t worry. I can manage.”

Without hesitation, I tell her about my little act of revenge.

“Well, you know I’m not a fan of that sort of thing, but if you don’t assert yourself with girls like that, it just gets worse. Let’s hope she’ll leave you alone from now on. And if not, I’m always here for you.”

“Thanks, I know that,” I say, giving her hug. “Now, tell me about your work.”

“Oh, it’s pretty stressful, but also really exciting. Totally different to my last job. The hospital is so much bigger and the cases are really interesting. I get along really well with my colleagues, and I’ve already made a friend – her

name's Chloe."

We sit at the table and eat the very dry but thankfully not burnt chicken and talk for a while.

Later, I go to my room to do homework. Or, I make a start. But I eventually push my writing pad away and decide to finish it over the weekend. I want to finish decorating my room before I go and meet Kate. Time for the final touches. I bring out the box with Frida's paintings. Two in particular have caught my eye. The one Kate and I already looked at, with the key in the river, and a picture of a small residential neighborhood with colorful townhouses. They look similar to the ones in our street, but slightly different, and the setting is somehow off too. The sunset sky glows with such amazing vivid reds that you can practically feel the power of nature. There are no people on the street, and yet the painting feels so alive.

I search for more details and quickly find those strange pairs of eyes. They glint in the bushes and I even see them behind a few of the windows. Although the idea is kind of creepy, I don't find them scary – they fascinate me. I grab a hammer and nail, and hang them both. The painting of the houses now hangs directly above my bed. I take a few steps back and admire my work. It looks great, and fits really well with the rest of the room.

I frown and slowly, move closer to it. There's this strange glow. I get so close to the picture that my nose is almost touching it. Yes, behind one of the windows, there's something glowing. I peer closely at it, but it's too small to really see. I jump off the bed and rummage in my desk. My magnifying glass must be here somewhere. Finally I find it. I hurry back and hold it up to the window in the painting. And sure enough, I can make out furniture. A cupboard, if I'm not mistaken. In its door is a glowing key with wings. I step back and shake my head. What does it mean? Why did Frida paint a key in this picture too? And this glowing window. Am I imagining it, or is it glowing even brighter than before?

I magnify it again. The cupboard is made of solid dark wood, and has two lathed columns and a small top part, also wood, which makes it look a little like a writing desk. The doors are decorated with pretty, carved designs. It looks kind of like the old cupboard in the hallway – a remnant of Aunt

Frida's old furniture. Mom and I liked it so much we decided to keep it.

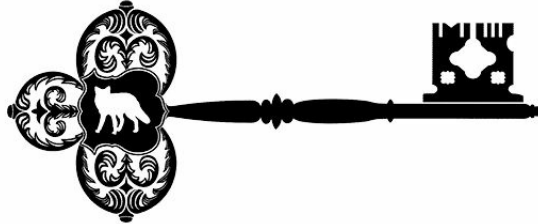
Did Aunt Frida paint her own cupboard? I find it hard to believe, but I can't help myself – I jump down from my bed, go to the hallway, and stand in front of the cupboard. No doubt about it, it's the same cupboard.

The two doors are lockable, and there's a key in the lock. No, not just any key – exactly the same key that Aunt Frida painted. I pull it out. It's made of a bronze-colored metal. The bit is wide and the bow is beautifully decorated. Only the wings are missing.

I run a hand through my hair and stare at the small object. What is it about this key? I put it back in the keyhole and turn it, half expecting the doors not to open. But it turns easily. I open the doors and look inside. Dark, empty shelves, nothing else.

I shake my head, baffled, feeling certain I must have missed something. But what? I lock the cupboard and go back to my room to look at the painting. But I find no other clues. I absent-mindedly slip the key into my jeans pocket.

Chapter 8



I'm gasping when we finally reach the top of Coit Tower. All those steps really took it out of me, especially after walking up Telegraph Hill, but the view is worth it. I just can't believe this panorama.

"That's Alcatraz over there," says Kate, pointing at a small island with a stone structure on it. She's still panting too. I insisted on taking the stairs. The line for the elevator was way too long.

"That's the Bay Bridge," she continues, "and over there..."

She doesn't have to say it. Even I know the famous San Francisco landmark. "The Golden Gate Bridge," I say.

"We'll take a look at it later. And we obviously have to ride in the cable car."

The weather is lovely and I'm really happy that Kate wants to show me everything. There's so much to see in this city. We wander through Japantown, which is basically just two streets, but yet it feels like you've just landed in the middle of Japan. The malls are full of Japanese products. There are pretty parasols, erasers shaped like animals or pieces of cake, manga, anime figurines, and of course loads of restaurants.

Partway through our sightseeing tour, we also find an optician who can actually work the miracle of repairing my glasses. I'm told I can pick them up tomorrow.

We briefly check out Fisherman's Wharf. Kate shows me Pier 39, on which a colony of sea lions bark loudly at each other. They're incredibly cute, and I've never seen these animals up close before. But their smell takes a little getting used to. We stop for a chowder bowl – a thick soup served in a round bread bowl, which is absolutely delicious.

Then we walk along Golden Gate Bridge. Part of it is shrouded in mist, but it's still a really impressive sight. This is a day I definitely won't forget. It's already nine o'clock when we finish our tour.

"Is it really okay for you to be out with me so late?"

Kate smiles and nods. "Don't worry, it's fine." But she checks the time and I can see she'd like to go home now.

"I think I'll go to that bar later that Christina and Alex mentioned. Do you want to come?"

Kate hesitates, and I think she's going to say yes, but then she shakes her head. "It's better if I go now. But it was fun today."

"Yeah, it was great. Thanks so much for everything."

We walk to the bus stop together. When we finally climb on the bus and flop into two empty seats, I'm glad I can rest my feet for a while. I didn't really notice at the time, but we really covered some distance.

Coming up to our stop, we stand up. Someone stands up behind me who obviously wants to get off too. The bus brakes abruptly and I suddenly feel myself get drenched. I scream in fright and turn around to see a young man who looks slightly older than me. He stands there with a dismayed expression on his face. In his hand is a coffee cup, which is now empty, its contents all over my back.

"I'm so incredibly sorry," he apologizes quickly.

His big brown eyes look at me in horror and sympathy. Good, at least he's really uncomfortable about the whole thing. I take off my jacket, which fortunately caught most of it, and inspect it. No idea if it can be washed in a regular machine.

"It's alright, at least it wasn't hot," I say. "And it was an accident." I know how quickly these things can happen.

"I'm really sorry. I'll pay for the dry-cleaning, I promise. Do you have anything to write with? I'll give you my number."

I wave it off. "It's all good, the jacket wasn't expensive."

"No, please. I really want to make this right." He pulls a small note block out of his backpack, tears off a sheet, scribbles down his number, and hands it to me. "Please contact me so I can give you the money."

We arrive at our stop and the guy jumps off the bus and raises his hand

apologetically.

“Strange guy,” I say.

“But nice,” Kate points out.

I wave to her as we part ways, and then head home to freshen up.

It’s a little strenuous walking up the slope and even though I’ve removed my jacket, I start sweating. It’s going to take me a while to get used to all these hills.

The day was tiring but so exhilarating that I’m still full of adrenaline. I’m excited to see how the evening pans out and I’m looking forward to meeting Alex and Christina again. I send them a short message, and I’m relieved when I finally get to the top of the hill. It’s night now, but the streetlamps are on and the lights from all the houses bathe everything in a curious light. The wind buffets me. The parts of my clothes that are damp from coffee and sweat feel like ice on my skin. I can’t help shivering. The street I’m walking along is pretty lonely and I feel this vague fear, which is not like me at all. I hear footsteps behind me and turn around. But there’s no one there.

I’m so relieved when I turn into my street and see my house. I hurry to the door, open it, and look back out into the darkness. I have a distinct feeling something’s lurking out there.

This sense of trepidation stays with me a while and it only starts to fade when I step into the shower and feel the hot water on my skin.

I soon feel a lot better, more alive, and the cold that gripped me earlier has also vanished. I take my jacket from the laundry pile and look for a label. Fortunately, it doesn’t require any special care – I can machine wash it. Feeling cheerful now, I go to my wardrobe and pick out some black skinny jeans and a white blouse. As I change, the key falls out of my pocket. I hold it in my palm for a moment, then stash it in the pocket of my jeans. I redo my hair and put on a little makeup. All in all, I’m satisfied with the result. I pick up my phone and send my friends in Tucson a quick update, telling them about my sightseeing tour. Then I remember the guy from the bus.

I quickly type into my phone: “Hello stranger. About before, it’s really okay. I can just wash the jacket, so don’t worry. You’re not the only one who accidentally tips drinks all over people, I’ve done it before too. Teresa.”

To my amazement, I get an answer immediately: “Okay, that’s a relief, and

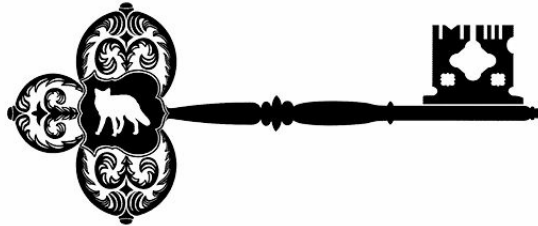
good to know there are other coffee-throwers out there. If you decide to take the jacket to the cleaners, let me know. I'll pay the bill. Noah."

"It's fine," I reply, adding, "With me it wasn't coffee, it was Coke. Really sticky situation. The other person wasn't too happy."

"Yeah, you took it really well. Thanks for that. Have a nice rest of your night."

"I will. I'm going out with a couple of friends. Have a good one yourself."

Chapter 9



The bar looks friendly and I can already hear the music from outside. There are curtains covering the large windows, but they're decorated with little gold lights, which makes the place look inviting.

Two young women come charging through the entrance. To my surprise, it's Christina and Alex.

"Great timing," says Alex. "We figured we should wait outside for you." She looks me up and down and whistles through her teeth. "Man, you look great."

"Thanks," I say with a laugh. "You too."

Alex has stayed true to her look and worn all black. A short leather skirt and a close-fitting blouse with trumpet sleeves. It really suits her.

"You'll like it here," says Christina, walking with me to the door.

She's wearing a red skirt and a sequined top. Makeup too, but it's not overdone, and I'm sure she'll turn some heads.

We approach the bouncer, who my friends seem to know well. They exchange a few words with him and I hold up my fake ID, which a lot of people my age have. I probably don't even need it, because the bouncer seems to be turning a blind eye.

We go inside. It's lively – there's music playing and the small dance floor is full. There are lots of tables with young people sitting in groups, several niches with couches, and of course a bar, which is especially busy. Drinks are constantly being passed across the bar and received by waiting customers.

Alex stops at one of the few empty tables and sits down. Christina and I do the same. I look around and take in the scene. It really does seem to be a popular bar – which is probably partly because they don't look too closely at

IDs.

“You want a drink? Or something non-alcoholic?” Christina asks me.

“A Mojito.”

I give her some cash.

“A Beer,” says Alex.

Christina makes her way to the bar. There’s still quite a crowd there, so I expect she won’t be back for a while.

“It’s really nice here,” I say, raising my voice to be heard over the music.

“Do you come here a lot?”

Alex nodded. “Most weekends. Being underage, it’s hard to find places to party in the city. They don’t look too closely at IDs here, and anyway, I know Clive. He went to school with my brother. We’re pals.”

“Your brother’s at college?”

“Yeah, he studies architecture at the University of Notre Dame.”

“Notre Dame,” I repeat, impressed. “I’ve heard that’s a really good university.”

“Yeah, Mike worked hard to get there. I won’t be going anywhere that exclusive.” She gives a light-hearted shrug. “I don’t even know what I want to do after school. Maybe find a job. What about you?”

“College is definitely part of the plan,” I reply. “But I have no idea which one. I want to settle in here first, and then see how my grades look.”

“Such a serious topic?” asks Christina, putting our drinks on the table and sitting down. “That’s not like you, Alex.”

“Chrissy, even I have profound moments where I take the time to consider my future,” Alex exclaims in a pompous tone. “But right now I just want to enjoy life. And this is the perfect place to do it.” She drinks a large gulp of beer. “Unfortunately, a few of our classmates had the same idea. We can’t even get away from them here.”

And sure enough, I see several guys and two girls from school at a table in back. When a tall guy leans back on the couch, I see that he was blocking our view of another person: Ayden. So he’s here too, and the two girls appear to be flirting with him.

“Looks like you’ve made your choice already,” says Alex, interrupting my thoughts. I look at her with a baffled expression, then realize I must have

been staring at Ayden.

“He’s hot, I’ll give him that,” she continues, glancing in his direction. He’s leaning back, talking to one of the guys. There’s something about that smile. And that shirt, which clings to his perfect body leaving little to the imagination.

“Well, if the opportunity came up, I wouldn’t say no,” Alex continues. “I haven’t actually talked to him that often, so I don’t know if there’s anything going on in that brain of his, but I’m sure it’s enough for a few hours of entertainment.”

Alex has a way with words, and I have to laugh again. “Can’t you think about anything else?”

“Not really,” Chrissy chimes in. “Like I said, it’s the first time I’ve heard the college-or-job topic come up. Talking about boys is more her thing.”

“Hey, I have a very serious side,” Alex contradicts her in a mock indignant tone.

I sip my mojito and notice Alex looking at a boy at Ayden’s table who’s giving her unambiguous looks. He’s not my type, but he’s not bad looking. Light blond mussed up hair and pretty eyes. There are tattoos all over his arms and he’s wearing black gauges in his ears.

“We really need to have a talk about your tastes,” Chrissy hisses at her. “Stop smiling at him, or he’ll come over here.”

Too late. He’s already headed toward us with his glass in his hand. One of the girls nabs his seat to get closer to Ayden. The blond beauty immediately draws him into a conversation.

Ayden responds warmly and looks at her attentively, but then his eyes wander and catch mine. For a moment, all I see are his eyes and his cute smile, which now broadens noticeably.

“Hey,” says the flesh tunnel boy. “I’m Eric.”

“I know,” says Alex. “We’re at the same school.”

“That’s why you look so familiar,” he laughs. “What are your names again...?”

“Alex!”

Chrissy answers tersely and adds, “This is Tess. She’s new at school and we’re celebrating with her. Girls’ night.”

Alex gives her a warning look. I half expect her to kick her friend under the table. Anyway, she immediately resumes the conversation with Eric.

“What classes are you taking this semester?”

I don't hear the reply. I'm too busy sipping my drink and trying not to think about the cupboard and the strange key. I still have it in my pocket, and I catch myself fingering it through the denim. I wish I could take it out and study it. There's something strange about it. Why else would Frida keep painting it into her art? Or was she just odd?

“How about you, Tess?” asks Eric. I didn't hear the question and I have no idea what he wants from me. I look at him, dazed, then at Ayden's table behind him. It's quiet there; the boys are still chatting, but the girls are now sitting off to one side in silence, occasionally sipping their drinks. Where's Ayden? I glance around but can't see him anywhere.

“Earth to Tess,” shouts Alex, snapping her fingers in front of my face. “You okay?”

I realize I still haven't answered Eric's question. I'm saved just in time by my ringtone.

I quickly take the call and probably look even more baffled when I hear the voice on the other end. “Hi, Tess. It's me, Kate.”

“Kate?” I ask, surprised. “What is it? Is everything okay?”

“I changed my mind. I'm coming to meet you guys at the bar. I only have a rough idea where it is. Can you send me the address?”

“Er, sure, but are you sure that's okay with...” I break off, because Alex, Chrissy, and Eric can hear every word I say. I don't want Kate to be embarrassed about her strict mother.

“It's okay,” I hear her say. She knows what I mean. “She's at a party and won't be home till late. So I thought I'd take the opportunity and have some fun.”

“Cool, if you're sure,” I say, and tell her the address. She's not far away, so I stand up. “I'm going outside to wait for Kate.”

“We'll stay here, if that's cool,” says Alex. “It's too cold for me out there.”

I know that's just an excuse, but it's totally fine with me. She can keep talking to Eric. I'm glad to be getting some fresh air.

“Clive knows you're with us. He'll let Kate in with you, but if there's a

problem, let us know.”

Alex sips her beer, catches Eric’s eye, and he gives her that same knowing smile. Chrissy rolls her eyes irritably, but stays with them.

Outside, I feel cold. It makes me think of snow, but I know it’s too warm for that even in San Francisco. Still, it feels frosty when you’ve just stepped out of a well-heated bar.

I walk a short distance away from Clive, who keeps looking at me. To get out of his line of sight, I go around the corner and position myself so I can see Kate when she comes. To my surprise, I’m not alone.

“Ayden,” I whisper into the night.

He’s leaning against the wall. He turns to face me and the moonlight emphasizes his striking features.

“You threw yourself into the nightlife pretty quickly. Didn’t you say you prefer to spend your nights solving the problems of the world?” His tone is pleasantly soft and there’s a touch of mischief in it.

I go to stand beside him and look at him unapologetically. “I decided it couldn’t hurt to take a break. What about you? You’re a self-confessed problem solver too.”

“Well, I’m taking a break from the break.”

His comment elicits a chuckle from me, which I breathe out into the night air.

“I get it. Too much fuss, all that attention, everyone wanting to talk to you. It must be exhausting.”

“Exactly,” he looks at me with those incredible green eyes again. “But it’s nice to have some good company during the downtime, someone I can have an interesting conversation with.”

His scent wafts over me, fresh and tangy at the same time, and I swallow.

“Oh yeah?” I say. “And what’s our next interesting topic?”

He leans back against the wall, resting his head against it, and considers my question for a moment.

“Well, you’re probably constantly getting asked questions like: How do you like San Francisco? Do you feel like you’re settling in? Have you seen the Golden Gate Bridge yet?”

“And we both know how interesting those questions are,” I reply, shaking

my head in amusement.

He shrugs casually. “Not everyone can be as profound as us.”

“Oh, now we’re profound too.”

“Absolutely,” he confirms, and there it is again – that defiant grin. “But maybe we should forget about highbrow conversations and focus on everyday things.”

“Such as?”

He turns his body to face me, and I have the feeling he’s closer this time. My heart beats a little faster, although I wish it wouldn’t.

“Tell me about you. What is there to know about this thoughtful, profound, and uncommonly pretty woman?”

I raise my eyebrows, not sure whether to take his question seriously. It amuses me, and at the same time – I have to admit – it strikes a chord in me.

“There’s not a lot to tell,” I begin. “I live with my Mom in Haight-Ashbury. She works at San Francisco General Hospital as a nurse. Mom’s Aunt Frida died recently and left us her house.”

“Oh, then you’ve had a lot going on recently. A death, moving house, leaving all your friends behind, getting used to a new city...”

“Yeah, but I already like it here, and I love our new house. It’s just a shame I never got to meet Frida. I guess she was kind of a hippie, and a talented artist.” I look at Ayden, who’s listening attentively. “What about you? You changed schools recently too, right?”

“Yeah, but I already feel pretty comfortable here.”

“I can imagine,” I can’t help saying.

“Sounds like the start of a movie: unknown aunt dies and leaves you her house,” Ayden continues.

“Yeah, the question is whether it’s a mystery or a horror,” I ponder.

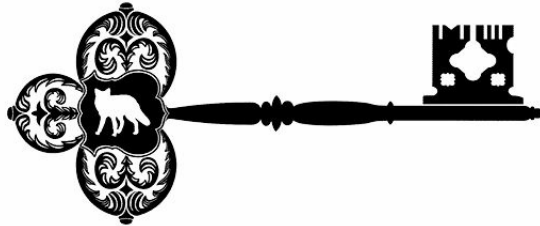
“So serious?” Ayden laughs. “And I thought you were more the comedy type.”

“Because I’m so incredibly funny?”

“Because you’re so unbelievably amusing and quick-witted,” he replies.

For a moment, I’m lost for words. His intense gaze doesn’t help me regain my powers of speech. I’m relieved when I see a figure approaching the bar out of the corner of my eye.

Chapter 10



Kate,” I shout happily, walking toward her. I see the tension in her melt away.

“Oh good, I found it,” she says, taking a deep breath. Ayden appears behind me, which Kate’s not exactly thrilled about.

“I’m really glad you came,” I say, giving her a quick hug. “Come on, let’s go join the others.”

Ayden comes with us and Clive lets us pass without comment.

The tables are now all occupied and I see that Eric is still sitting with Alex and Chrissy. The mood seems to have intensified – Alex and Eric are sitting close together and giving each other meaningful looks. Alex puts her hand on his shoulder and almost falls off her stool laughing. Apparently, she used the time to drink quite a bit.

When we arrive at the table, Alex’s face lights up. “There you are!” She looks at Ayden and grins. “Hey, how do you do that? You always look so damn... you know, hot. Don’t you think?” she asks us, getting a puzzled and slightly irritated look from Eric. “Don’t worry,” she reassures him. “I like you.” Then she laughs shrilly.

“Maybe you should switch to soft drinks for the rest of the night,” Chrissy suggests in an exasperated tone.

“Come on, sit down,” Alex says, waving us over. “You too, Ayden. We’re having fun here.”

But we just stand around looking lost. There are no free seats.

“Come to our table,” Ayden suggests.

“Great idea!” Alex jumps up and whispers in my ear, “Hey, I handled that pretty well, right? Now you can spend more time with him.”

I just shake my head and try not to laugh. “Yeah, a real stroke of genius,” I say, and she nods earnestly.

“Let’s go!” she hoots, punching her fist in the air like an old-school locomotive driver. Yeah, she’s definitely had a few.

Another boy at Ayden’s table introduces himself as Steven. He seems to be in good spirits and delighted with our arrival. The two girls look less happy. Lydia and Nora. I don’t even bother trying to tell the two apart.

I sit on a chair and Ayden takes a seat opposite me on the couch. Kate sits beside me and everyone else finds a chair or squeezes onto the couch.

“I never thought I’d see you in a bar,” Alex declares tactlessly, staring at Kate. Chrissy instantly gives her a withering look, but she doesn’t notice.

“I thought it might be nice,” Kate ventures.

“Oh yeah, nice, that’s us,” says Eric, smirking and elbowing his buddy Steve in the ribs.

“Sure,” says Steve. “It’s turning out to be a really nice evening.”

I roll my eyes and Ayden gives me a knowing smile.

“Nice maybe,” Eric continues, “but this is nothing compared to the parties after our games.” He looks at me and explains, “We play football. Our victory celebrations are legendary.”

“We’ve been trying to get Ayden on our team for weeks,” Steve chimes in. To Ayden he says, “You’re obviously athletic. You’d be great, and the girls would all throw themselves at your feet.” He pauses, then corrects himself: “More than they already do.”

“I’d love to see you in a football jersey,” trills one of the blonde girls. I think it’s Lydia. She bats her fake eyelashes, which I guess is supposed to look flirtatious, and flicks back her long blond hair.

“Yeah, cool,” Nora agrees. “We’re cheerleaders and we’d love to cheer you on.”

“We’re really good.” Lydia leans forward and smiles at him provocatively.

“I’ll bet. But football’s not really my thing.”

“Have you even tried out for a team?” asks Steven. “You should at least give ours a chance. We do a lot of things differently, you’ll see.”

“It’s just not for me,” says Ayden.

“Yeah, he’s more the thoughtful type,” I can’t resist saying. “And if he

played football, he'd be too burned out to devote himself to his philosophizing. Then what would become of the world?"

"I'm just an open book to you," he says sardonically.

"Well, I can't wait to read the last page."

"I'm sure it'll be a happy ending," he replies in a husky voice.

"I guess it depends on the genre. Who knows, maybe it'll turn out to be a thriller."

Our gazes are now intertwined. There's electricity in the air. In a book, the air would be 'crackling' with it. I wouldn't go that far, but there's definitely something going on here, and my racing pulse tells me the mood has changed.

"Er, should I go ask Mr. Hanson if he wants to join the book club? He could suggest some different interpretations." Alex shakes her head. "I can't believe they're talking about books, in a bar," she grumbles to herself, taking another swig of her beer.

"If you're into books," Lydia ventures, sliding closer to Ayden, "I totally get it. It's really important to educate yourself. That's the only way to... have ideas and... uh... thoughts. I mean, you probably can't tell by looking at me," another flick of the hair, "but I'm also really... uh... thoughtful."

Ayden's grin is phenomenal right now. He tries to keep a straight face, but I can tell he's about to laugh his ass off.

"Oh yeah? I didn't realize. I mean, you're so extroverted and open. But I guess you never know what goes on in someone's mind."

She nods. "I think about a lot of different things and toy around with ideas. I don't know if you heard, but I have my own YouTube channel. I already have forty thousand followers," she declares proudly to everyone. "It's a beauty channel and I'm really successful," she adds, in case someone didn't get the message. "But there's this girl trying to compete with me. Her name's Chelsea, and she actually slammed one of my videos, and only because..." She holds up her hands defensively. "That's saying too much. Anyway, she's trying to lure my fans away and tell them I'm clueless. But she's the one who talks trash. She actually says the best way to get rid of eye bags is with foundation. Everyone knows you use a concealer that goes over the foundation." She throws up her arms and looks to me for confirmation.

“Right? I mean, what would you do if you had eye bags?”

I’m a little surprised that I’m expected to interrupt this monologue, but I shrug and say, “Get enough sleep until they’re gone? Or wear them with pride? I mean, I had to pull an all-nighter to get them in the first place.”

I can’t resist glancing at Ayden with a knowing smile.

He smirks and shakes his head. He seems to be the only one who gets that it’s a private joke between us. But then Kate gives me a dark look that tells me she’s in the picture too.

“Uh, yeah, most people don’t want eye bags,” Lydia resumes, which only makes Ayden laugh more. She doesn’t understand why, but she’s pleased she’s made him laugh. So she continues, “Yeah, really. Most women think it’s ugly to go around with dark rings under your eyes. Loads of my viewers...”

Kate tugs at my sleeve and hisses, “Be careful. Those two aren’t the brightest, but they’ll eventually realize you’re making fun of them.”

“That may take a while.”

She flashes me a warning look and I put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry. I can defend myself, and I doubt I’ll see these two air heads often anyway.”

“If you intend to come here regularly I wouldn’t count on it.” Kate glances disdainfully around the bar and she doesn’t seem to like what she sees. But she waves her hand dismissively. “I have nothing against a bit of fun. I just want you to be careful.”

I’m not sure if she’s referring to the girls or Ayden.

“I will. Let’s go get a drink.”

We stand up and go to the bar. As I expect, it takes forever to get our drinks.

I’m holding my second mojito as Kate sips her Coke. I want her to have a good time too. I have a feeling she doesn’t get out often. So I pull myself together and leave Lydia and Nora in peace.

It’s an entertaining evening, and Kate relaxes more and more as the night progresses. We have a lot of fun, especially after Lydia and Nora join another group. Around three in the morning we decide to head home.

“Shit, so late already,” says Alex, glancing at her phone. “It might be a long wait for the night bus.”

“Did you all take the bus?” Eric asks.

I nod.

The boys glance at each other, then grin broadly.

“No problem, we’ll give you a ride.”

“Er, not me, thanks. It’s really okay,” Kate quickly declines. “I don’t mind waiting.”

“No way,” Steven insists. “We’re not leaving you alone at a bus stop.”

“But we won’t fit,” Chrissy points out. “You have room for five, but there are six of us.”

“Well, I’m too drunk to catch a bus,” says Alex candidly.

To put an end to the discussion, I chime in. “I’m sober enough, I can take the bus.”

“You can ride with me,” Ayden says suddenly, and I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

Before I can object, Eric claps his hands together. “Great. Problem solved. Thanks, Ayden.” He turns to the rest of the group and says, “Let’s go.”

Kate shoots me a pleading look, but I just shrug apologetically. Alex notices her unease and hooks her arm through Kate’s. “Just stay close to me, I’ll look after you.”

“More like you’ll be looking after her. She’s had a lot to drink. She might throw up in the car,” Chrissy warns Kate with a grin.

“I can hold my drink,” Alex declares. I watch the five of them climb into the car and drive off. I’m left with Ayden. The cool night envelops me like a cloak. The feeling of tiredness that’s been gradually creeping over me for the last few hours suddenly disappears.

“Where’s your car?” I ask, following Ayden around the corner to another parking lot.

“Who said anything about a car?” he asks, stopping beside a motorcycle and pulling a helmet out of a storage compartment. He throws it to me and I catch it, dumbstruck. The motorcycle is painted black and looks heavy. That’s all I notice. I never rode on a motorcycle before, and never intended to. Serious accidents from the news flash through my mind. I picture motorcyclists leaning into corners so far that they almost touch the road. I’m supposed to ride on that?

“What’s wrong?” he asks once he’s taken out his own helmet and I’m still hesitating.

“I just didn’t know you rode a motorcycle.”

“It’s the only decent way to get around San Francisco,” he says.

Sure, the traffic is pretty bad in this city, and a bike is a lot more maneuverable.

Ayden nods at me. “Come on. Or are you planning to spend the night here?”

I hesitate a moment longer, but realize I have no choice. I put on the helmet with a deep sigh and sit behind him on the bike. I timidly put my arms around him, and he grabs my hands and pulls them tighter around his waist.

“Hold on tight,” he says. Now my face is close to his back. His wonderful scent wafts into my nose. Luckily, I have bigger problems to worry about.

He starts the engine and we ride slowly out of the parking lot, allowing me to get used to the motion of the bike. After we turn onto the street, he accelerates. I swallow. Ayden’s riding style is smooth and agile, and although I’m still a little scared, I begin to relax. After a while, I have to admit it’s not bad. I peer at Ayden’s face. He’s concentrating on the road and I feel his body heat under my hands. I try to keep them still, because every time I move them I feel the contours of his body.

I try to distract myself, try not to think about what’s under his clothes – because I know exactly what it looks like from swimming class. So I gaze at our surroundings, watch the street lamps slide by, and stare at the night sky.

Ayden glances back now and then, as if to make sure I’m okay. At some point he gives me a lingering look, and then I notice the motorcycle accelerating. Within seconds, he’s reached a speed that’s definitely too fast for me. I feel like I’m on a racetrack, the wind buffets me and I have to cower behind Ayden’s back for protection. We reach the crest of a hill and the bike does a jump. For a brief moment, we’re flying through the air, only to land on the road again and shoot forward at breakneck speed. I cry out in fright and have the feeling I’m not long for this world. So this is what Ayden meant when he said it’s the only decent way to get around San Francisco. Sure, you can’t use hills like ski jumps in a car.

He glances back again. I sense something sinister in the way he looks at me. When I see another hill zooming toward us, I shout in anticipation and dig

my fingers into his jacket so hard that I'm sure he must feel my fingernails through the fabric.

"Are you trying to kill us?"

My protestation comes too late. We're already flying again, then we land and hurtle around the next corner. Another glance back at me, and now his eyes look normal. Friendly and a little... amused.

"I'm really sorry. I forgot I had a passenger."

I glare at him. "Who did you think was yelling at you? The police in hot pursuit?"

He laughs that incredible laugh. "As long as there are no bullets flying past us, we're fine."

I bite back the comment on the tip of my tongue. I'm simply relieved that Ayden has slowed the bike down and is now driving through the city at a tolerable – and legal – speed.

When I see my street, I breathe a sigh of relief. I point out my house and Ayden stops. I climb off the bike with quaking knees.

"Thanks for the ride and for keeping me alive. Barely."

"You should ride with me more often. You get used to it," he says, leaning toward me slightly, still on the bike.

"I doubt anyone gets used to near-death experiences," I retort.

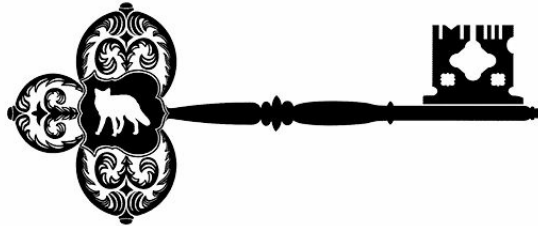
"Hmm, maybe that's exactly when you learn to appreciate life and its merits." He gives me a meaningful look and raises a hand in farewell. "It was fun, have a good night."

Then he swings the bike round and speeds off. He's already moving so fast that he's gone in a few seconds. But I'm pretty certain we were riding even faster than that.

I shake my head and have to laugh. Me on a bike. I replay the entire ride in my head as I unlock the door.

Suddenly, I realize something's not right. Something's pinching and tugging at my thigh. I'm afraid to reach into my pocket, but my hand moves of its own accord. I know something scary is about to happen.

Chapter 11



At first, I hope that the fluttering is coming from my hand – it is shaking a lot right now. But unfortunately, it’s only doing that because the object in my pocket is moving. Oh yeah, no question – the key from Frida’s cupboard has developed a life of its own.

I quickly step inside and close the door behind me. I lean against it, my heart pounding, and slowly draw the key out of my pocket. It’s moving. Am I going crazy? The little thing is amazingly energetic. It’s desperately trying to get out of my hand. Oh God, what’s happening to me? I’m ascribing willpower to an object!

I open my hand just a tiny bit, enough to see the key without losing control of it. I shake my head incredulously. The key is no longer bronze colored. It emits a silvery glow. And that’s not the only change. It has a pair of gossamer wings, which shimmer like mother of pearl. It looks kind of like a delicate dragonfly. I open my hand a little more and its bright shimmer fills the room. My mind is blank. I just can’t understand what’s happening here.

The light suddenly ceases. The key lies lifeless in my hand, as if nothing happened. I open my hand, touch the cold metal with my finger, prod it. But it seems to be a totally normal key again. Did I imagine all that? Am I suffering from delusions? I shake my head, then the key flies out of my hand incredibly quickly. I can’t catch it and I just stand there helplessly for a moment, then I run after it. The tiny glittering wings are beating so fast I can’t follow the movement with my eyes. But it’s now glowing even brighter than before. I round the corner and see it dart upstairs – straight to my room. The door is open and it races inside.

I follow it with a pounding heart and look around my room, puzzled.

Nothing has changed; everything is where I left it. But although the light is off, it's bright in here. A silvery blue glow fills the room. It's coming from the painting above my bed. The window in which you can see the cupboard with the painted key is emitting this incredible light. My key is hovering in front of it. Slowly and tentatively, it approaches the painting. As the key moves closer, the light grows stronger every second. And something about the painting is changing too. I move a few steps closer and gasp in disbelief. The painted window is changing shape, transforming into something resembling a keyhole. Yes, now it's unmistakable. And the key floats toward it with a gentle bobbing motion.

I instinctively reach out for the glowing key. Everything in me yearns to touch it again. The moment my hand closes around it, the world around me explodes in dazzling light. I see something open in front of me – I think it's a door, but it all happens so fast. There's light everywhere and I feel myself falling. I fall and fall and fall. A cry escapes my throat and my body braces itself for impact. But suddenly I'm braked by something and when I hit the ground I scarcely feel a thing.

I open my eyes and forget to breathe. It's gloomy and I can't make out any walls or a ceiling. But there are countless doors all around me in the most varied sizes, shapes, and colors, and they're arranged completely haphazardly in this huge space. Some of them are even suspended in the air, with narrow stairs leading up to them. It's impossible to say how long I've been standing here, unable to move. I feel the cool air, see the light that emanates from the doors and drives back the darkness a little. Where have I landed? That's the question that wanders through my mind, over and over. Am I dreaming? Was I involved in an accident and am I now lying in some sort of coma?

The key is still in my hand. I clutch it tightly, because I'm certain it brought me here. Maybe I can use it to get back?

I open my hand. It slowly floats out between my fingers. For a moment I'm afraid it might dash away from me, but it stays with me, hovering at my side, and doesn't seem to want to leave.

I'll have to move eventually, although it's a struggle for me right now. I slowly get to my feet. If I just stand around here, nothing will change, and I have to get out of here somehow... wherever here is.

So I place one foot in front of the other, and hear nothing but my own footfalls. The silence weighs heavily on my heart. This is the worst nightmare I've ever had, I think, as I pass one door after another. Some of the doors are angular, some are round; they're green, blue, red, brown. Some hang awry and look incredibly old; others are so huge I wonder if there's anyone strong enough to push them open. But they all have one thing in common: they're made of wood. I realize I'm the only person here, and at the same time another grisly thought occurs to me: what if something else is lurking around here? Something that's not human?

"You watch too many horror movies," I mutter to myself, then I immediately correct myself: "But finding yourself in a huge room with thousands of doors is not exactly normal either."

I glance around again, and when I look to the right, there's this sudden... sensation. It's hard to put it into words. It's like a pull, like an internal burn that consumes my whole body. Within a split seconds, it swarms right through me and becomes absolute certainty. I turn and walk in that direction, as if drawn by some invisible force. I have no idea how, but every fiber of my being knows this is the right direction.

Eventually, I'm standing in front of an unremarkable brown door. It has a few scratches, the wood is splintered in a few places, and the brass handle is tarnished. Nothing about this door explains my excitement, the feeling of good fortune, and yet I know I'm right. I grasp the key, which is still hovering beside me. It doesn't resist and allows itself to be inserted into the keyhole. I turn it and the latch opens with a click. With a pounding heart, I open the door and step through it.

Damp air envelops me. Drizzling rain tickles my skin and I hear the rustling of the wind in the trees. It sounds like a softly murmuring voice. The ground beneath my feet is soil, with patches of wet grass. I'm standing in some kind of clearing surrounded by dense forest. The dark treetops sway in the wind, illuminated by pale moonlight that makes them seem less sinister. A few meters from me, mist swirls above the ground, leaving a silvery veil over everything it can reach.

I don't feel afraid. Even the quiet rustling in a thicket in front of me doesn't unsettle me. I just stand and wait for whatever may come.

And something does come. At first, I can only make out something reddish, then the tips of small black ears and a dark nose. A little fox sneaks toward me with cautious steps. Its eyes glow green and they look at me so intently that I can scarcely breathe. Its tail wags excitedly in the air... No, not its tail, its tails. It has three.

“A three-tailed fox,” I hear myself say. It sounds far away and completely alien. This unusual animal and I are unable to tear our eyes away from each other. The fox slowly approaches me. When it’s standing right in front of me, it tilts its head and looks at me expectantly. I crouch down and put my hand on its soft head. I stroke it very gently, and it responds with a soft purr. I’m pretty sure foxes can’t make those kinds of noises, but they don’t usually have three tails either.

The fox nudges my hand and looks at me with its alert, intelligent eyes. Then it turns and heads for the door I came through. It turns back once, and I know I have to follow it. Together we enter the room with all the doors. The animal trots ahead of me purposefully, looking back now and then to make sure I’m following it.

This is all so surreal, so unbelievable, that it can only be a dream. I don’t want to ruin that wishful notion, so I try to forget the feeling of the wind and rain on my skin.

The fox doesn’t make a sound. Its soft paws are silent, unlike my footsteps. Then I notice something else. A scraping, shuffling sound, like something being dragged across the floor. I listen and hear my own ragged breath, which I try to calm. There it is again. I know what it is now: footfalls, and they’re moving toward us. The little fox seems to hear them too and glances back. It looks to me again and this time its expression is serious. It sprints forward, galloping ahead of me. I run after it, trying to keep up and not lose sight of it. The sounds behind us grows louder, come nearer and nearer. Now I can hear rattling breath and heavy panting. I’m scared, terrified, because I know death is lurking behind me.

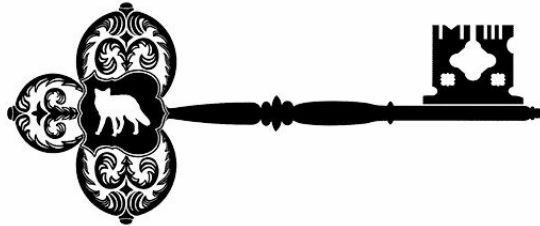
The fox dashes up a staircase, then stops on one of the steps and looks down at me. I run after it as fast as I can. The steps seem to go on forever, and I ignore the deadly drop below me. We’re so high, so incredibly high. There’s no railing, just black nothingness all around us, with the exception of a few

glowing doors. I see another door at the top of the stairs. With trembling knees, I follow the fox. The higher we go, the slower we become. I'm scared, really scared of falling. But our pursuer is still there, chasing us and getting closer every second.

The fox is now standing in front of the door, waiting for me. With a final push, I heave myself up the last few steps, reach for the key, and insert it into the lock. I shove the door open as I turn the key, and look behind me. A dark face – contorted, disfigured, with huge teeth and black, dead eyes – looks at me. A long scrawny arm reaches out, tries to grab me, but I tumble through the door with the fox. I instinctively shove the door hard, and as I sink into the nothingness, I see it close.

Relief floods through me, and something like peace. I close my eyes and hope I never have to set foot in that dark world again.

Chapter 12



The sunlight shines through my closed eyelids and I yawn. I stretch and turn on my side, to sleep a while longer. It's just too comfortable in bed and I'm worn out. Hazy images rise to the surface of my consciousness; a room with an endless number of doors; a small, bizarre fox creature and – to round out the perfect nightmare – a dark pursuer. I smile and wonder how I come up with these things. A dream analyst would have endless fun with me.

I pull the covers tighter around me and blink. The daylight is dazzling, and I make out something red with a black spot in the middle. I close my eyes again and am about to roll onto my other side when I realize there's something wrong with that picture. My eyes fly open and I find myself looking into the face of a fox. It's sitting on my bed, staring at me as if it's the most ordinary thing in the world.

I can't help crying out and scooting backward. THERE'S A FOX ON MY BED! I can't believe it. Rubbing my eyes won't help, I'm sure of that. This animal is real, and the three tails wagging excitedly in the air prove that it's the fox from my dream. And that means it wasn't a dream!

The... the room... and the doors... and my pursuer! I glance frantically around the room, but of course the shadowy figure didn't follow us here.

I closed the door behind me, I recall. I look up at my great aunt's picture. The keyhole is gone – and then it flashes through my mind: the key! I quickly scan the room, but I can't see it anywhere. Nor is it on the floor. It's not until I start throwing everything off my bed – the fox jumps down on its own – that I see it under my pillow. I decide it's probably best to carry it with me, so I pull a leather strip from my jewelry box, tie the key to it, and hang it around my neck. I tuck it under my shirt as a precaution. So, first problem solved. I

look at the fox, which is sitting by my bed, staring at me.

“What am I going to do with you? I can’t pass you off as a big cat or a strange dog – your three tails are too conspicuous.”

Can I take it back to the world inside the picture? Maybe the doorway can be opened with the key again? But do I really want to go back there? What if that hideous creature is still lurking in there? That should be my last resort.

“First I’ll try find out more about you.”

The fox looks at me as if it can understand every word, but it makes no attempt to help me with the problem. I sit on the bed and take another look at the strange animal.

“I don’t suppose you can speak? That would save me a few hours.”

We look at one another – my expression is expectant, the fox looks irritated, if that’s even possible for an animal. I sigh.

“Fine. I suppose I’ll have to answer these questions myself.”

I open my laptop. The fox curls up on my bed. It seems to understand that nothing exciting is going to happen in the immediate future.

My research doesn’t really turn up anything useful. There are three-tailed foxes in Japanese mythology, called kitsune. They’re described as having all kinds of abilities: in particular, they’re supposed to be able to take on human form. I look over at the fox and it gives me a chill. The thought that this creature could suddenly turn into a person is kind of creepy.

They often appear as beautiful women, but also have a preference for warlike young men. Also, they’re said to be able to conjure fire with their snouts or their tails. They often make use of the art of illusion, they can fly, and they even take possession of humans. There are good and bad ones, but the stories of friendly foxes are more common. The older and stronger the creature is, the more tails it has, the highest number being nine.

“Does that mean you’re still young and have a lot to learn, or is this all baloney?”

I study the animal, which is resting its head on its paws and dozing.

“If you really can change into a human, do me a favor and do it now. If I see someone standing in my room in the middle of the night, I’ll have a heart attack.”

I wait for the fox to do something. But it just lifts its head and looks at me.

There's something knowing in its gaze, and I have the feeling it understood me.

"Please, please, don't transform," I mutter, then I glance at the clock. "Shit, it's already ten," I say.

Mom worked the night shift and she'll be awake soon to have breakfast with me. Then she usually takes a nap.

"You stay here," I say to the fox, holding up a warning finger. "I'll just quickly grab a bite." Then it occurs to me: "Do you need to eat too? Or drink? Are you hungry?" No reply. Do these animals even need food? And if yes, what? "I'm definitely not catching mice for you. You look like you could take care of that yourself."

Oh man, I hope I'm not going to find mouse entrails under my bed. I really can't keep him. How am I supposed to lead a normal life with a three-tailed fox? Which might eventually grow more tails!

I quickly make breakfast, glancing frequently at the stairs, afraid the fox might appear. But he seems to understand and obeys my instructions.

I'm brewing fresh coffee when Mom comes down in her pajamas. She looks pretty tired, which is unsurprising since she only came home a few hours ago.

"How was your night?" I ask, passing her a cup of coffee.

She sighs and rubs her eyes. "Really busy. Heart attack, acute appendicitis that had to be operated on immediately, a man who cut himself badly under the influence of alcohol. And two older patients with suspected strokes."

"Sounds like a hard night."

"I'll go back to bed after this. We can do something this afternoon."

"I have to go downtown to pick up my glasses," I say.

"Okay, let's do that together. Then some shopping maybe, and lunch in the mall?"

"Sounds good." I glance at the stairs again. It's probably not a good idea to lock a three-tailed fox inside for several hours.

"I still have to write an essay for English, and it wouldn't hurt to do some study. Chances are, there's a test coming up soon."

"We don't have to stay out too long," she says, and I nod.

I can't really enjoy my breakfast. I scoff down my bagel and gulp coffee. I can only think about one thing: what's that fox doing? Is it still there? Has it

trashed my room?

Mom stands up. "I'm pretty tired. Do you mind clearing up?"

I nod and she goes upstairs while I hurriedly clear everything off the table, throw the dishes in the dishwasher and the food in the fridge. My feet can't carry me upstairs fast enough. I stop on the landing and my heart skips a beat. The door to my room is open. I run in and gasp. My mother's standing in the middle of the room. I rack my brain for an explanation: that's just a big cat that followed me home. As you can see, it's a bit of a mutant, hence the three tails. But they're not that obvious, right? I know she'd never swallow that, so I just stand there with my mouth open like a gasping fish out of water, and can't get a word out. But I don't need to. The fox is nowhere to be seen.

"I'm doing a load of laundry," Mom explains, picking up my laundry basket. "Do you have anything else?" I shake my head and she carries it to the door. "Can you hang it up to dry? I need to sleep."

I nod, the door closes, and I scan the room.

"Fox? Are you still there?"

What do I do if it's gone? Do I need to search for him? Paste up notices? I definitely can't let him wander the streets alone.

Suddenly I catch a movement out of the corner of my eye. The fox creeps out from under my bed. So he's not stupid – he seems to know when it's a good idea to hide.

"Well done," I say, sitting beside him on the floor with a feeling of relief. I tickle him and he curls up beside me and sleeps.

I'm relieved, but the tension doesn't completely leave my body. I have too many questions. What kind of creature is this? And what's it doing here?

I bring the fox a bowl of water and some ham from the kitchen and put them in front of him. He opens his eyes, sniffs the ham, and then eats a few morsels.

Good, he won't starve, despite my ignorance. Not knowing what else to do, I try to go about my day normally and sit down to write my essay. Unsurprisingly, my thoughts keep wandering.

Before I know it, I'm looking up Japanese terms on the internet. I come across the word for 'night', and I have a flash of inspiration. We met at night. One fateful night. I smile. Yes, that's exactly how it feels. I'm sure our

meeting wasn't a coincidence.

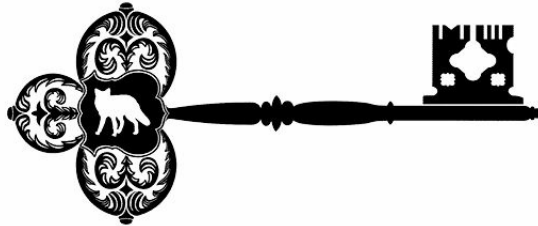
Maybe I'm approaching this the wrong way. Rather than trying to find out something about the creature, I should look into where and how I found it. I look up at my great aunt's painting. Maybe that's the key to my questions.

But first I go to the fox and slowly extend my hand. I cautiously touch its warm, soft fur, and I'm filled with a sense of calm.

"Hey, what do you say, little guy? We can't live in this room together forever, but you need a name. What do you think of Yoru? It's the Japanese word for 'night'. Suits you, don't you think?"

He lifts his head and looks at me. His emerald green eyes fascinate me. There's so much understanding in them, such depth, as if he can see into my soul. He rests his head on my hand and closes his eyes, as if he's trying to convey his agreement, and a feeling of joy floods through me. Yoru, I think, still stroking his fur. I want to find out why you're with me. Because I definitely don't believe this is coincidence.

Chapter 13



I'm so happy when the optician hands me my repaired glasses. The contact lenses have been driving me crazy and irritating my eyes. As soon as I put on the glasses I feel so much better, more relaxed. Mom senses it too.

"Have you been having problems again?"

"Nothing worth mentioning," I reply, but she eyes me suspiciously.

"Don't worry."

I want to enjoy the few hours I have with my mother and not dwell on problems that I can't solve anyway. I have this impairment, and maybe the doctors are right and it'll disappear on its own.

I check the time – it's after two. Mom and I browsed in a few stores on the way to the optician, tried on a sweater here, a pair of pants there. Now Yoru has been alone for over two hours and I'm wondering how long you can leave a fox unattended in a house. Not long if it's a wild fox, I guess, but Yoru is no ordinary wild animal.

"Want to stop for a bite?" I suggest, hoping I can make my excuses after that and go home. I don't often get to spend the day with Mom, so I hate to shorten our time together. But the whole Yoru thing is preying on my mind.

"How are things at school? Are those girls still giving you trouble?" Mom asks. We're at the food court, eating unhealthy, greasy food.

I reach for a couple of fries and say, "No, so far so good."

My mother shakes her head. "I hope it stays that way. If anything else happens or if you need help, just say. You don't have to deal with these problems alone."

"Thank you. I have it under control so far, but if anything comes up, I'll let you know."

She changes the subject. “And how was last night? You went out with some girlfriends, right?”

“Yeah, Alex and Chrissy. They’re really nice. Alex is so funny. Kate came too, which was really cool.”

“That’s the girl you met on your first day? You take the same bus to school?”

“She’s a little shy and I think she has a really strict mother. Unfortunately, I don’t know much about her parents. She doesn’t talk about them often.”

“I’m glad you’ve made friends already. Moving here wasn’t easy, and my biggest concern this whole time was that you’d maybe have a hard time settling in. Kate sounds like a really nice girl and she obviously likes you. She just needs to learn she can trust you, and then I’m sure she’ll open up and tell you if something’s bothering her at home.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figure. I’ll be there for her anyway.”

“Good,” says Mom, biting into her burger.

She chews thoughtfully, and I can see there’s something on her mind. I guess she’s trying to find the right words, but eventually she just comes straight out with it, like I always do.

“Are there any nice boys at school? You know, if you meet someone, I’d really like to be introduced to him. I have no problem you dating someone or even bringing him home, but I’d like you to discuss it with me first and introduce us.”

I laugh and shake my head, amused. “Didn’t we already have this conversation?”

“Uh, yeah,” she says, sounding irritated. “But sometimes it’s a good idea to reiterate things.”

“Don’t worry. There is someone I’m interested in, but we’re not together and won’t be any time soon.”

“Oh? And why not?”

I shrug. I don’t really know what to say to that. I picture Ayden’s face, hear his voice, his laugh. Yeah, he’s attractive, I’m not denying that. He’s funny, articulate, but still. I don’t really know him – I know nothing about him. A few days ago, I was trying to avoid him and figured he was just a conceited pretty boy. Now my opinion of him has changed, and I have to admit I

wouldn't mind spending more time with him.

"I don't know. I have a lot to do, and we've only been here a short time. Everything's so new. I feel I need to find my feet first. I see no reason to rush into a relationship."

And I mean what I say. I'm already thinking of Yoru again – he's my priority right now. I have so many questions, so many mysteries to solve. First I need to deal with those, then maybe I'll have room for something else – or someone.

I check the time again. Three-thirty. "I should head back. My English essay calls."

My mother nods, clears our things off the table, and disposes of them in the trash.

"I have a couple of errands to run, but I'll be home by seven."

I hug her and say goodbye, then make my way home. Waiting for the bus drives me nuts. The minutes really drag. I keep picturing my trashed room and an escaped Yoru. I shouldn't have stayed out so long, I keep thinking.

I glance at my phone to check the time and discover a message. It's from Noah.

"I hope you had a great night with your friends, and that your jacket came up clean. I'm on my way to visit a friend. I decided against taking coffee on the bus this time."

I wasn't expecting to hear from him again, but I'm happy.

"One coffee mishap and now you're avoiding collisions altogether? Just think of all those encounters you're missing out on."

"It could become a really expensive way to meet people. I doubt everybody would be as understanding as you and refuse to let me pay the cleaning bill."

"Luckily, my clothes feel right at home in an ordinary washing machine. I reserve my fur and leather coats for other occasions."

"Yeah, same here. Who would risk wearing ermine on a bus? I save that for classy restaurants. The McDonalds staff never see me in anything else."

I laugh, thankful for the distraction. "Good tip. I'll have to try it some time."

"Do that and report back to me."

My bus arrives. I put my phone away and take a window seat. My thoughts wander and I instinctively look out for a small fox. He could have slipped out

and be roaming the streets. But I don't see him.

I restrain myself from sprinting off the bus when it finally arrives at my stop. I walk briskly and soon reach my street. Fumbling for my key, I glance up and almost have a heart attack when I detect movement in a shrub in the neighbor's garden. I take a horrified step back. I'm petrified and can't do anything but look at those unusual eyes peering out from between the leaves. The eyes close, the bush rustles, and something creeps out from behind it, very slowly, as if it has all the time in the world. I blink and hold my breath as the creature stretches to its full height and trots toward me.

"Yoru, you scared me." I pet him, feeling relieved. "Did you sneak out after me?"

He tilts his head as if in mute reply.

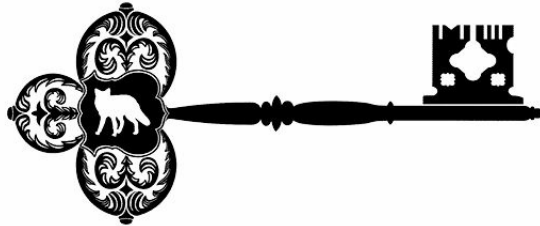
"How long have you been following me? You were supposed to stay home."

Suddenly I'm acutely aware that we're standing out in the street where everyone can see us.

"Come on, let's go inside," I urge him, taking the lead.

After a few paces, I turn back and luckily he's following me. I breathe a sigh of relief when he follows me inside and disappears up to my room. What a day, I think, wondering how I'll get through the next few.

Chapter 14



I spend the rest of the weekend scouring the internet, trying to find out more about Yoru, or about my great aunt and her paintings. Predictably, I find no information about keyholes suddenly appearing in paintings through which you can enter another world. If anyone mentioned something like that to me, I'd tell them to go see a doctor or write a book about the idea.

I don't find out too much about Yoru either. Kitsune are supposedly demigods that like to live in forests. They can specialize in an element. For example, if they've chosen the gift of fire, they can't be harmed by fire. It's also a bad idea to alienate a kitsune, because they can bring people good luck, but they can also bring misfortune.

I put my English essay in my bag along with the rest of my school things. But my mind is on Yoru, who's made himself comfortable in his favorite spot: the carpet at the foot of my bed. He's dozing with his head on his paws, as he often does. So far, he hasn't demonstrated any desire to exercise, which he must have as a wild animal. Right now, he seems more like a large sleepy cat that prefers to stay indoors in the lap of luxury.

But I can't count on him being this quiet forever. And I wonder how long I can – or should – keep him. I haven't tried taking him back to the world behind the painting. I finger the key that I'm wearing around my neck. It's partly because I don't want to return to that sinister place, especially as I can't be sure if that strange creature's still lurking there. I'm reluctant to give up the little fox before I know exactly what the deal is – with him, my great aunt, the key, and the painting. All these things need to be explained first.

I kneel in front of Yoru, who raises his head and looks at me intently. I stroke his soft fur and feel his comforting warmth. His alert eyes keep

looking at me, and I have to admit I really like having this animal around, even though I know so little about him.

“I really hope you’re not a shapeshifter. The idea that I might be stroking a human is kind of freaky.”

It’s clear to me that, even if he does have this ability, he wouldn’t be a real human, he’d just look like one – but does that actually make a difference? Anyway, I don’t want to take the risk, so now I always dress in the bathroom.

“Listen, buddy, I have school today and I have to go now. I’ll be gone for a few hours. You can’t go walking around the house, okay? My mother will be home around midday and if she sees you, she’ll get the fright of her life. I don’t know how to explain all this to her. If she comes into my room, just do what you did last time and hide.”

I don’t normally keep secrets from Mom, but how am I supposed to tell her how and where I found Yoru? She won’t believe me. And she’ll find the three tails pretty suspicious too.

“Just relax and enjoy your day,” I suggest.

I take the plate of ham from my desk and put it on the floor.

“In case you feel hungry.”

I pet him again, go to the door, then turn and wave goodbye. Maybe I can turn this into a kind of ritual, so he knows when I’m going out for a while.

In the kitchen, I only eat a little. I listen out for noises in the house, but everything’s quiet and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I meet Kate on the bus, and she greets me with a warm smile.

“How was your weekend?” she asks.

I don’t know where to start. So much has happened, but I can’t tell her any of it.

She looks at me expectantly. “Did everything go okay with Ayden?”

“Yeah, he was friendly. He needs to work on his riding style, but otherwise everything was fine.”

“I would never get on that infernal machine with him,” she says.

I look at her in surprise. “You knew he had a bike?”

She raises her eyebrows and nods. “Yeah, you didn’t?”

Great, I seem to be the only one who wasn’t aware of this fact. “Anyway, I survived, that’s the main thing. How was your ride home?”

Kate rolls her eyes. “Don’t ask. We all live really far apart and it felt like we were driving half the night. And the boys couldn’t agree on the fastest route. They got lost a couple times and wound up arguing. It was fantastic.”

I stifle a laugh. “Sounds like an adventure.” Then I ask her the burning question: “Did your Mom see you come home? Was she pissed at you for being out so late?”

“Mom was in bed. I snuck into my room like a proper teenager.” Her grin makes me relax a little. I’m relieved she didn’t get in trouble.

At school, we grab our books from our lockers and head to chemistry class.

“On Sunday I just stayed home and studied,” Kate’s telling me. “Mom was out with friends and she actually wanted me to go with her. But honestly, I’d rather brood over math homework for four hours.”

“That bad? Is it…” The rest of my sentence turns into a scream and suddenly I’m lying in the middle of the school corridor. I slowly pick myself up and see a bunch of students standing around me, most of them laughing loudly. I feel for my glasses, which have slipped off my nose, and try to figure out who tripped me up. I quickly identify the culprit.

“Maria,” I hiss furiously. She’s standing over me with her arms crossed and a haughty expression on her face.

“What, you can’t even walk in a straight line without sprawling in front of everyone? I gotta wonder if there’s anything you’re good at.”

“Leave her alone,” Kate interjects, but Maria ignores her.

“I’m pretty sure I’d score higher than you,” I snarl, reaching for my glasses. There’s a crunching sound as Maria stomps on them.

“Are you crazy? You can pay for repairs this time!” I yell, looking around at the circle of faces. At least I have plenty of witnesses. But most of them quickly look away when our eyes meet. Thanks a lot! I guess I won’t get any backup from them.

“You’re completely insane. I’m going to the principal and you can explain to him what just happened,” Kate shouts.

“Those ugly things cost nowhere near as much as my iPhone,” Maria snaps. “And if you want to rat on me – be my guest. There are plenty of people here who’ll say you just slipped.”

“You couldn’t think of a better comeback? Tripping me up and standing on

my glasses again?! So imaginative.”

“Oh, trust me, we’re not done. You should find another school. I’m going to make your life hell here.” With that, she turns and leaves.

Kate helps me pick up the pieces of my glasses.

“We should go to the principal,” she suggests, but doesn’t sound very confident.

I dismiss her suggestion with a wave of my hand. “There’s no point. It would just make everything worse.”

I hold my shattered glasses in my hand and sigh. I’ll have to pay another visit to the optician. I guess I’ll go straight after school.

“You can’t just let it slide,” Kate insists. “You heard her. She won’t stop. Talk to a teacher. There’s a guidance counsellor, maybe he can do something.”

“Kate, Maria’s just a teenager, like us, she’s not a contract killer,” I try to reassure her. “I’ll survive this, and I definitely won’t let anything slide. I can take care of myself.”

“I hope so,” says a voice, and I see Ayden approaching. His expression is dark and brooding. “Everything okay?”

I hold up my broken glasses. “These are the main casualty.”

His mouth twitches, but the darkness in his eyes remains.

“Don’t worry. It may not look like it right now, but I can defend myself,” I add.

“Okay, if you say so.”

He comes a step closer and his hand starts to move toward me, but then he just runs it over his face, looking concerned.

“If you need help, just say. I’m here for you,” he says, giving me that glorious, warm smile that makes my heart leap.

“We should go,” Kate interrupts. “We’ll be late for chemistry.”

I nod and Ayden walks with us. We make it to Mr. Cats’ class just in time. He seems to be in a particularly foul mood. The corners of his mouth droop more than usual and his eyes dart around the room as if he’s looking for someone to yell at.

“Pens and paper out,” he snaps. “We have a test today.”

Loud groans from twenty throats. I have a bad feeling about this test,

because I've only glanced at the book a few times, but not really studied it. I've had more important things to worry about than chemical formulas.

Mr. Cats hands out the test papers. He tells us we can start, and everyone turns over their paper. I feel dizzy when I see how many questions there are. I'll really have to focus if I'm going to finish this on time.

I remember covering mesomerism in chemistry at my old school, but my patchy memory of that doesn't help me out right now. Everyone around me is busy writing and calculating. They all seem to know exactly what to do. Ayden is concentrating on the test paper, writing steadily, and looks like the personification of calmness.

I roll my eyes, and that's when my attention is drawn to the large window to my right. We're on the ground floor, looking out at a couple of trees in the middle of the schoolyard. But something is different, something that makes my pulse race. Yoru is sitting on the windowsill. He looks straight at me and opens his mouth to make a sound I can't hear through the closed window. It seems to be some kind of greeting. His three tails wag excitedly in the air and I jump up from my chair, which doesn't exactly happen silently. But at least all eyes are on me now. I glance furtively at Yoru, who's staring at me with his head tilted to one side. I subtly shake my head, trying to let him know that he needs to disappear, but he just looks at me uncomprehendingly.

"Can I help you?" Mr. Cats asks with narrowed eyes. "Are the questions so difficult for you that you can't stay in your seat?"

"No," I stammer. Everyone's still staring at me. "I just need to... use the bathroom quickly."

Mr. Cats raises his eyebrows and looks at the door. "Please, be my guest. It's your time."

I fight the urge to sprint out of the room, and my eyes keep darting to Yoru, who's still sitting on the windowsill.

Fortunately, my exit attracts a lot of attention and no one notices the little fox. When I open the door and step through it, I see Yoru spring down from the windowsill. I guess he understands that I'm coming to him. As soon as the door closes behind me, I run, barreling around corners and sprinting along the corridors as fast as I can. Once I'm outside, it doesn't take long to reach the place where I last saw Yoru. He's sitting by the wall near the window,

looking at me innocently.

“Yoru,” I growl. “Are you crazy?! What are you doing here? You were supposed to wait for me at home.”

At that moment, I hear footsteps coming around the corner. I’m about to grab Yoru, but where can I hide him? He’s just too big.

Two girls appear and immediately notice me and the little fox. I grit my teeth and brace myself for the startled scream that’s about to come, already searching for an explanation for something that can’t be explained – at least not if I don’t want to sound completely nuts.

“How cute,” says one of the girls. She’s a little younger than me and her brown hair is pulled back in a bun. “It she yours?”

I realize I’ve never thought about whether Yoru is male or female. Do shapeshifters even have a gender?

“Can I pet her?” she asks, and both girls crouch down and smile at Yoru. He takes a small step forward and lets them stroke his fur. I’m not sure what surprises me more right now: that the girls are reacting so casually to the fox, or that Yoru is letting them touch him.

“She looks really unusual,” says the girl with the bun. “But totally gorgeous.”

“I love this red fur,” says the other one. She looks up at me with interest.

Here they come. The questions.

“Is she yours?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess Yoru didn’t want to wait at home for me,” I say haltingly.

“So your name’s Yoru,” says the brown-haired girl, smiling at the fox. “Hello Yoru, you’re a really pretty cat, did you know that?”

I raise my eyebrows, astonished. Did I just hear right?! Cat?! Either the girl’s knowledge of biology is worse than a two-year-old’s, or something’s not right here.

“I love cats,” says her friend. “I wish I could have one, but my parents won’t let me.”

She strokes Yoru’s fur again and the sound he makes really does sound like purring.

“Is it a special breed? I’ve never seen a cat with red fur and black spots.”

Spots? Now I'm really confused. "Uh, honestly, I have no idea what breed he is." I'm not even entirely sure what Yoru is.

"Can I get a photo with Yoru?" the girl asks. I don't think this is a good idea, but she doesn't wait for my reply. Her phone's out and before I can say anything, I hear the click sound.

"Aren't we cute? This will look great on Instagram."

And now this! My fox creature on Instagram. I may as well go ahead and create a YouTube channel and post funny videos of my three-tailed fox! Yoru the internet star.

The girl holds up her phone and types something into it. I look at the photo and can't believe what I see. I can clearly see the girl who was just petting Yoru. But her hand is not on Yoru, it's on a cat with gleaming red fur. It has little black spots all over it, like a leopard or a small baby lion.

And then I realize: Yoru must have shapeshifted, but for some reason I still see him in his true form. Did he do it on purpose? Is this how the shapeshifting thing always works? I'm totally confused and overwhelmed.

The girls stand up and call out to me as they walk away, "Thanks again. Yoru's really cute."

Then they're gone and I'm left staring at my little fox.

"You're full of surprises," I murmur, wondering what else he can transform into.

"Come on, you need to go home."

But the fox doesn't budge. I sigh, still staring at him, and then I remember the photo.

"Shit," I hiss. "That photo's probably already on Instagram."

Is that a good thing? All it shows is a cat with an unusual pelt. No one will see it as a fox.

I guess I should stop worrying so much and just accept that this little guy can take care of himself. But I'd prefer to keep an eye on him.

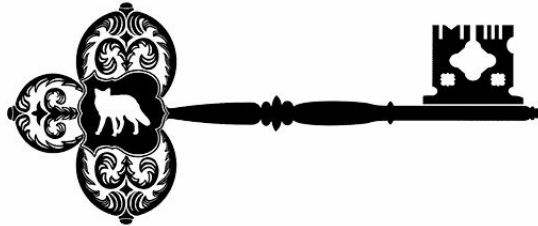
I need to calm down and deal with one problem at a time. First chemistry, then I'll take Yoru home.

"Wait here. I have to finish a test. I'll be back soon."

I lead him to a shrub and gesture for him to wait for me there. He obediently complies. I rush back to class.

A shapeshifter, I keep thinking. Yoru really is a shapeshifter. So the stories about the kitsune are actually true! Let's hope I don't alienate him. If what I read on the internet is true, I don't want to get on his bad side.

Chapter 15



For the next few days, I keep a close eye on Yoru and try to stick to a normal routine as much as possible. At school, the workload is increasing. We have loads of homework every day, and there are tests coming up that I have to study for. Inevitably, I encounter Maria and her clique, who always give me evil, haughty looks, but they haven't followed through with anything physical – and nor have I. There's just no room in my life right now for revenge. I talk to Ayden now and then, which – I have to admit – always brightens my day. The conversations with him are just so different, and I really enjoy them.

With all these distractions, I find it incredibly hard to concentrate on my homework or study. Especially with a shapeshifter sleeping beside my bed. I keep wondering what other forms he can take. So far I've only seen the three-tailed fox.

“What am I going to do with you?” I ask him. I straighten my glasses – which have been repaired again – and look at him expectantly. Can I risk actually keeping him? I'm pretty sure he'll always assume the form of a cat for other people. But what if he doesn't?

“I have a visitor coming soon,” I tell Yoru. “If you promise to hide your true appearance, you can stay.”

The little fox just looks at me silently, but I have a feeling he understands. I glance at Great Aunt Frida's paintings. I looked at them all again a few days ago. And I noticed something else: if you look closely, the eyes don't simply shine out of the darkness. You can actually make out the outlines of bodies. Maybe animals? And each picture has a key painted into it somewhere. In one, you can see a hand holding the key. There are three flickering yellow

lights around it. It must all mean something. But what?

The doorbell rings and I cast Yoru one last glance, pleading with him not to give himself away. His head is raised and he's looking at me, but I can only hope he understands what I want from him.

On my way downstairs I hear Kate's voice in the hallway. "It's really nice to meet you."

"So nice to have you here. Pleased to meet you too."

Mom's shaking her hand.

"Come in," I say, giving Kate a hug. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"My parents are at a dinner party. Dad had to use his powers of persuasion, but he finally won out and I'm allowed to spend the night here."

She holds up her backpack, presumably containing her overnight things.

"I set up a mattress for you in my room," I say. I turn to Mom. "We'll go upstairs."

"Sure. I'm thinking of making pizza for dinner. I hope that's okay?"

"Oh, that sounds great," Kate says enthusiastically, then she follows me upstairs.

My hands are shaking a little as I take a deep breath and open the door to my room. This is the ultimate test. If Kate sees Yoru as a cat, then maybe I can show him to my mother and ask her if he can live here. Mom really likes animals, but she also understands that they're a big responsibility, so it won't be easy to convince her.

When I open the door, my eyes go to Yoru's favorite spot beside my bed, but to my surprise, he's not there. I enter the room and glance around. Where is he? Surely he hasn't gone outside again?

"Oh, how cute," I hear Kate say behind me, and I follow the direction of her gaze, to the right of my desk. My red fox with his three tails comes out from beneath it and a shiver runs up my spine.

Kate kneels on the floor and tries to coax Yoru, who's sitting on the floor a few feet away from her.

"I didn't know you had a cat. And such a beauty. Red with spots – I've never seen one of these before."

I breathe a sigh of relief.

"He just showed up," I explain. Yoru goes to Kate and lets her pet him, then

sits down beside me. “Mom doesn’t know he’s here. I’m waiting for the right moment to tell her.”

“When she sees him, she won’t be able to say no. He’s really special, and so affectionate.”

Yoru is resting his head in my lap with his eyes closed. Yeah, he really is so peaceful and relaxed. I keep wondering if he’ll stay that way, or if I’ll get to know another side of him at some point. I’m not sure I want to.

“I’d love to have a pet,” Kate continues. “But Mom would never agree to it. Too dirty, too much work, fleas, too distracting.”

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. I wouldn’t exactly describe a pet as a distraction, although in my case that can’t be denied. But who else has a shapeshifter for a pet?

“So you’re Mom’s pretty strict?” I ask, trying gently to extract some information from her.

Kate avoids my eyes. “She has certain expectations and basically just wants the best for me. Now and then she goes a bit too far, but I know she means well. It doesn’t make it any easier though.”

I have a distinct feeling Kate wants to drop the subject, so I say, “Well, you’re allowed to sleep over tonight, so that’s something. And I got tickets for the late session of that movie you suggested. I don’t know anything about it.”

Which is no wonder – I’ve been too busy to read the movie guides.

“It’s supposed to be really good,” Kate says enthusiastically. “And it’s breaking all the box-office records.”

She tells me more about the plot, the actors, but my mind is elsewhere. I look at Yoru, whose fur is so soft, and feels familiar to me now. Having him around makes me feel good, and safe. *Will I ever be able to share your secret?* I wonder, and at that moment he lifts his head. He looks at me piercingly with his deep green eyes. It’s almost as if he knows exactly what’s going through my head. As if he understands me.

Kate enjoys Mom’s pizza, and I eat a lot of it too.

“You’re going to a movie later?”

I nod. “A comedy, supposed to be pretty good,” I say, glancing sideways at

Kate, who immediately picks up the thread and tells us all about it. This time she makes no secret of the fact that she thinks one of the actors is really cute.

“I should go,” Mom says after dinner. “It was nice to meet you, Kate. Have fun at the movies.” She gives me a quick hug. “I’ll be home around eight tomorrow.” She waves, picks up her bag, and leaves for work.

Kate and I sit in my room for a while and chat, then later we catch a bus to the movies. Kate’s excited, and so am I. At times like this, I’m always reminded of my friends in Tucson. I heard from them again the day before yesterday. We still message each other, but it’s not the same. And I have to admit the contact is slowly becoming less frequent.

We buy popcorn and then go through to the movie theater.

“I haven’t been to a movie in ages,” says Kate, looking around excitedly. We find our seats and sit down, then start on the popcorn. The taste of butter and salt spreads across my tongue. Being at the movies is glorious.

At that moment, I feel something land on my head. I reach up and before I figure out what it was, something else hits me. I suddenly realize someone is throwing popcorn at me, and I spin around. I spot the culprit a few rows behind us as he raises his arm to throw more.

“Do that again and you can eat the rest of your popcorn off the floor!”

The guy just laughs and shakes his head.

“Moron,” I mutter under my breath. I’m about to turn to face the front again, when I notice the guy next to him. Isn’t that Steven, who was at the bar with Ayden and Eric? I pause and scrutinize him. He recognizes me too and waves cheerfully. Two other boys are with him, and the last one in the row is very familiar. Ayden. This city is so big, and yet we keep running into each other. I’m not sure whether to be happy about that. On one hand, I find him friendly and interesting – more than that, if I’m honest. I haven’t had such good conversations in a long time. But on the other hand, I have enough going on right now and no time to let it potentially turn into something deeper.

Steven squeezes past his friends and comes down to us. “Hey,” he says, grinning from ear to ear. “What a coincidence that you’re here too.”

“It’s not that weird,” says Kate. “This complex is the biggest in town and this movie’s pretty popular. So the chance of meeting someone we know is

not that small.”

Steven waves dismissively. “We could have picked a different screening, or a different movie. It must be fate.”

Neither Kate nor I know what to say to that. And I’m a little distracted, because Ayden is looking in our direction, and I’m not sure if he’s looking at his buddy or at me.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you want to sit with us? There are free seats up there.”

“We’re fine here,” says Kate, demonstratively turning to face the front.

“Don’t be like that,” Steven persists. “Come and join us, we won’t bite, I promise.”

He grabs Kate’s arm and pulls her up. She’s so taken aback that she can’t get a word out and just looks at me helplessly.

“Steven, leave her alone. She doesn’t want...”

“She’s just shy. Sure she wants to sit with us. I mean, we all go to the same school and we know each other. It’s no big deal if we watch a movie together.”

I don’t feel like continuing this discussion, and Kate seems to be giving in too. She lets Steven pull her along their row to the empty seat. I wonder if he has a crush on her.

I scan the seats. The boys are sitting right in the middle of the row. Kate is now at the end on the right, Ayden on the left. So I can either take the free seat beside her, or...

But one of the other guys stands up and goes to sit beside Kate. “Hey, nice to meet you. My name’s Mike. What a coincidence meeting two of Steven and Ayden’s classmates here. Small world.”

Kate is clearly flustered and answers him stiffly.

“Sit down before your feet take root,” Ayden urges me, patting the seat next to him.

I don’t really have a choice, so I sit beside him and say, “So, are you also going to prattle on about what an enormous coincidence it is meeting us here? It’s obviously a really great conversation starter.”

Ayden laughs. “Don’t worry, it was actually all rigged. We saw you walk into the movies and followed you.” I raise my eyebrows doubtfully, think

about it for a moment, and then I hear his melodic laugh. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“It’s not the strangest thing I would expect from you,” I retort with a wink.

He shuffles closer and his breath dances across my skin. “Oh yeah, and what is?”

Even in the dim lighting, I can see the glint in his eyes. There’s something almost magical about it. Anyway, my mouth goes dry and I’m exceptionally relieved when the theater darkens and the movie starts. Ayden leans back in his seat and seems to be focused on the screen, which I now find impossible. All I’m aware of is Ayden. Ayden’s warmth, Ayden’s smell, Ayden’s face, Ayden’s long lashes, Ayden’s mouth. The light from the movie illuminates us and accentuates his features. I swallow hard again.

I have no idea what I’ve been doing this whole time, but suddenly the credits are rolling and I haven’t paid any attention to the storyline. I don’t even understand why I’m so jittery, because Ayden’s in his seat and hasn’t made a move on me. I realize a tiny part of me is disappointed by that.

We’re leaving the theater with the boys when my eyes start to hurt again. I take off my glasses and rub them. I guess I’ve strained them. When I open them again, they’re back: these bright, colorful spots everywhere. They surround people so that I can only vaguely make out their outlines. I shake my head, rub my eyes again and mutter, “I have to use the bathroom.” Then I run off.

I stand in front of the washbasin, close my eyes, and take a few deep breaths. I hate this affliction. It’s so aggravating. I blink again and try to stay calm. Things slowly improve and I can see myself in the mirror again. Behind me, I see the cubicles, white tiles, a window with something reddish behind it. I spin around to face the window and see Yoru.

“What are you doing here?” I cry out in dismay.

Fortunately, I can open the window. The fox immediately jumps through it.

“You’re supposed to stay at home.”

Yoru nestles up to me and doesn’t seem to understand that he’s done anything wrong.

“You can’t just keep following me everywhere, that’s not how it works!”

Why does he keep doing this and how does he find me every time? Or does

he follow me the whole way and I just don't notice? Either way, I'm slightly more relaxed about it this time, because I know he looks like a cat to other people. But I don't feel good about him roaming around the city center. I still have no idea exactly what he is and whether he may be capable of showing someone else his true form. I don't want to take the chance.

"Scram, you need to go home," I say. "I'll be there soon, you go on ahead."

At that moment there's a knock on the bathroom door.

"Tess? Everything okay?"

It's Ayden and he's looking for me, which is no surprise. I've been in here a while.

"Yeah, coming," I call back, giving Yoru a little shove toward the window. He seems to understand and moves off.

Meanwhile, I go to the door. When it opens, I grab it and stop it opening all the way, wedging myself in the gap. Ayden is standing maybe six inches away from me.

"Are you not feeling so good?" He looks at me. Or is he looking at what's going on behind me?

"No, I'm fine. I just had problems with my eyes again."

"Better now?" he asks.

I nod and I'm acutely aware of him edging a little closer. Very slowly, he reaches up and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. I shiver. There's something in his eyes. Is it concern? His fingers are so incredibly soft and warm. They feel so good on my skin and I hold my breath.

"Just the same problem as always. Vitreous opacity. Nothing serious, and there's not a lot can be done about it. I just have to live with it. It'll get better eventually. Hopefully," I stammer in clipped sentences.

Ayden's lips curve into a smirk. He seems to realize just how flustered he makes me – a situation that seems to excite him. He only moves a few millimeters closer, but my body responds instantly and my heart starts pounding.

"I think I can guess what's going through your head this time," he says. His breath tickles my skin. I open my mouth to say something – I don't know what. Then I hear a voice.

"There you are. Everything okay?"

Ayden steps back and I can finally breathe again. I nod and leave the bathroom, but not without one last glance at the window. Yoru has vanished, of course. But for a brief moment, I wonder if Ayden saw the cat. Nothing in his expression suggests he did.

We all leave the movie theater together. Steven offers us a ride again.

“It’s okay,” I say. “Kate’s spending the night at my place, and the bus is close.”

“Pity. I was hoping to enjoy your company a while longer,” says Mike, the guy who sat beside Kate. She just rolls her eyes.

The bus stop is right outside the movie theater and the parking lot is also nearby, so the boys walk with us. In the end they insist on waiting with us.

Kate sits in the bus shelter. Steven and Mike stand on either side of her and start a conversation.

“We’re being escorted by half a battalion to the bus stop and scaring off the other passengers,” I mutter when I see an old woman stand up from her seat and go sit some distance away from us, clutching her handbag tightly.

“Are you feeling better?” Ayden asks, ignoring my comment. He comes to stand right beside me. I feel his gaze on my face.

“Yeah, it’s honestly nothing serious, just annoying,” I reply with a smile, which I hope disguises my insecurity.

“Does it happen often?”

I shrug. “Now and then. But it improved after I got glasses. And it’s not painful or anything. I just see flashes and spots of light; everything’s a bit blurry.”

“Hmm, sounds unpleasant. Have you always had it?”

“It started when I was a kid. Then after I got my glasses, it stopped for a couple of years. Now it’s started happening again. I’m the only one in my family that has it – as far as I know. My family’s not that big.”

Ayden leans against the side of the bus shelter, his arms folded across his chest. “No brothers or sisters? Grandparents?”

I shake my head. “I’m an only child. My father cut and run soon after I was born. I never had much contact with him. When I was little, my Mom wrote him a bunch of letters. But he made it pretty clear that there’s no room for me in his life. He lives in Seattle and probably has a new family by now. My

grandfather died young, when I was only five. A year later my Grandma followed him – as my Mom always says. I guess she just couldn't be without him. I never met my father's parents. And I have no aunts or uncles – except Great Aunt Frida. But sadly I never met her.”

“That’s a shame, but at least you have your Mom, and you seem to have a good relationship with her.”

“Yeah, we get along really well.” I look up at Ayden and realize how close he is. Ayden knows a few things about me now, and I have no idea what his life looks like.

“How about you? Are your parents still together?”

“I live with my Dad, but he travels a lot for work. And that means we have to move every now and then.”

So that’s why he hasn’t been at the school long.

“What does he do for work?” I ask.

But at that moment, Ayden steps closer to me. He puts his hand on my cheek and caresses it gently with his thumb.

He’s so close that his warmth envelops me, and a tingling sensation spreads out from somewhere deep in my body. I see this incredibly beautiful face right in front of me; these eyes, which look stormier than a wild ocean; the straight nose, and those full lips that right now I’d really like to touch.

“You’re really cute, you know that?”

I swallow hard, a cynical comment on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t get a word out.

“What do you say we go out sometime, just the two of us? How about next Saturday?”

My pulse instantly accelerates and I breathe deeply, inhaling Ayden’s incomparable scent.

How can someone have such a powerful effect on another person? It should be illegal.

I vaguely register the bus approaching, then stopping in front of us with squealing tires.

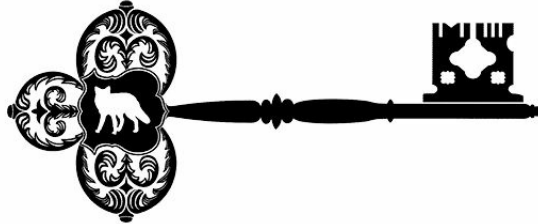
I don’t move a millimeter, then I gradually realize I’m supposed to do something. I nod and Ayden’s smile intensifies.

“Great, I’ll pick you up around eight.”

He lets go of me and I slowly come back to my senses.

Kate is already standing in the open door of the bus, looking at me with an expression that's hard to interpret. I join her and look back at Ayden, who's standing under a street lamp watching me go.

Chapter 16



What's wrong?" I ask Kate.

We've been back at my house for over an hour and we're now ready for bed. Kate's lying on the mattress beside my bed saying nothing.

"Spit it out. What is it? You've hardly said a word since we came back from the movie."

"Do you like him?" Kate asks, catching me totally off guard.

"You mean Ayden?" I ask needlessly.

She turns to face me and nods.

I shrug. "He's not the kind of guy I first took him for. I admit I enjoy his company. He's nice, I can have great conversations with him, and he's..."

"...really good looking," Kate interrupts.

I raise my eyebrows and snort. "I guess so, but that's not what I meant. I was going to say he's different and I just like being around him."

"You shouldn't fall for his looks," she lectures me.

I'm starting to get annoyed. "Did you hear what I just said? It's not about what he looks like."

"But that's part of it. He's perfect, nice, friendly, funny, good looking... Do you really think such a person exists in real life? We're not in some schmaltzy romance. Everyone has imperfections. Nobody's flawless." Kate's voice has grown sharper.

I look at her, stunned. "Hey, what's actually your problem?" I don't get why she can't stand him. "Are you jealous or something?" I say, voicing a thought that just popped into my head. "Do you think that if I date him I won't have time for you? Because that's..."

She interrupts me again. “I just don’t want to see you unhappy.”

“Where are you going with this?” I ask, glaring angrily at her. What is this? What’s she trying to say?

“When he was new at school, he didn’t waste any time. He flirted with every girl and went out with a different one every time. I hear he went to loads of parties, and he’s clearly not the type to get into anything serious.”

I roll my eyes, wavering between relief and anger. I was afraid she was going to tell me about some specific incident involving Ayden.

“And you hold that against him? That he was friendly with other girls and went out a lot? It’s not a crime to go out with different girls. I mean, he was new at school and trying to make friends and contacts.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Kate insists, but I wave my hand dismissively. She doesn’t really have any other friends – at least none that I’m aware of. I’m probably her best friend and she just doesn’t want to lose that. Kate’s scared, which I can understand.

I get up and go sit beside her.

“It’s sweet that you’re worried about me. But you don’t need to be. I like Ayden, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to hook up with him. I just enjoy spending time with him, no more, no less. And I promise I’ll always have time for you too.”

She opens her mouth to say something else, but then she just nods.

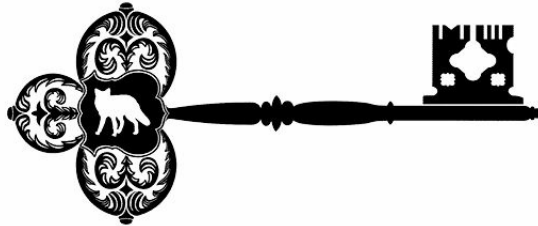
I get back into bed and look over at Yoru, who had to give up his favorite spot for Kate and is now lying on the window seat, sleeping.

“We could do something together next weekend too.”

She hesitates, then says, “Maybe you could come to my place. I’m not sure about the weekend, but maybe one day after school? I’ll ask my Mom.”

I’m surprised by this suggestion, but I’m pleased. Maybe I’ll meet her Mom. In any case, I can spend some time with Kate and alleviate her fears of losing me as a friend.

Chapter 17



It's Thursday afternoon and I'm sitting in the bus with Kate. We've just been downtown and we're about to spend the rest of the day at her house. I'm excited to see her home.

Kate calls ahead to say we're on our way. This strikes me as a little strange, but I know her parents are pretty strict. I check my phone too. Sue has messaged me, asking me how I am. I answer in short sentences and realize I simply don't know what to say. Strange, we used have so much to talk about.

There's a message from Noah too.

"School's out I guess? I'm about to take a test – gotta love these never-ending afternoons."

"So late?! That's rough. Hope you have unlimited access to coffee – that's the only thing that could possibly reactivate my brain cells. Good luck with the exam. I'm on my way to a friend's."

"That sounds like way more fun. And yes, I have a cup of coffee in my hand. When my hands start shaking, I'll know I've had enough. Have a great day."

Kate finishes her call and is really quiet, but I'm starting to realize she just has these quiet spells sometimes.

"I'm really glad you invited me over, and I'm excited to see your home."

She just nods and attempts a smile. Kate is clearly not in the mood to talk, and that's fine by me. I just give her some space and stare out the window.

We get out at the usual stop and walk a short distance to a different stop, then take another bus, which we ride for about ten minutes. Then we have to walk a short way before we reach a street with lots of stylish townhouses and a few freestanding villas. We stop in front of one of the villas. I'm really

surprised. I didn't expect Kate to live in an old Victorian villa. The window frames are painted white and the rest is a subtle gray. But the building looks like it's from another era with its two towers, a balcony, and columns at the entrance.

"You live here?" I ask in amazement.

Kate nods and walks up to the front door.

I follow her and soak up every detail of this beautiful house. We take off our shoes and hang our jackets in the hallway. Kate leads the way. We pass a few rooms. I see a large living room, a kind of library, and a TV room. It seems inconceivable to me that the TV has its own room, but I say nothing and follow Kate, who calls out, "I'm home."

We reach the kitchen. It has a cooking island with several pots on it. A delicious aroma wafts to greet me and I realize I'm pretty hungry.

The woman standing over the pots is wearing a long dark skirt and a pretty, floral blouse. Her dark hair is pulled back in a bun and her dark brown eyes regard us warmly. The smile lines around her eyes make her look especially kind.

"Kate, how lovely. This must be your friend Teresa. I'm so pleased to meet you. I've already heard a lot about you." She shakes my hand and indicates the table with a nod. "I hope you're hungry. I've cooked a little something."

The little something is an incredibly delicious chowder with fresh prawns. I have to resist the temptation to shovel it down. Kate's Mom is incredibly nice and nothing like the picture I had in my head. She's neither overbearing nor cold. The opposite, in fact – she's open and really warm. I don't understand why Kate has such a strained relationship with her.

"It's so nice that Kate's finally found a friend who encourages her to come out of her shell a little. And now she's even been to a bar and sneaked back into the house late at night." Kate's Mom laughs heartily. "Not that I normally approve of secrets, but in your case I'm glad you can let off steam like a normal teenager now and then."

"I told you about the bar in confidence," Kate hisses, looking around as if the devil might be standing behind her.

I'm confused. Did her mother catch her sneaking in? Why does she know about it? Is Kate afraid of her Dad? He's not supposed to know about her

going out?

“I’m amazed that you’re so relaxed about it as a mother. I guess I wasn’t expecting that,” I blurt, earning baffled looks from both of them.

The woman bursts out laughing. “You misunderstood. I work here as a cook. I used to be Kate’s nanny. I’ve known Kate since she was one month old and pretty much raised her. So she’s like a daughter to me,” she says, giving Kate’s hand a quick squeeze.

“You’ve always been like a mother to me too, Mona,” Kate replies with a tender smile.

“It’s nice of you to say so.” She stands up and takes something out of the refrigerator. “Here, dessert for you two.”

She brings us two bowls of a delicious creamy dessert with sweetened blueberries and raspberries. It’s divine.

“We’ll go upstairs,” says Kate, and Mona nods and smiles.

“So you have a cook,” I remark after we’ve left the kitchen.

“Mona’s the heart and soul of this house. I don’t know what I’d do without her. I couldn’t let Mom let her go just because she thought I was too old for a nanny.” Her tone is bitter and cold.

“Oh, so you asked if she could keep working here as a cook,” I say.

“When she was a nanny she lived with us. She doesn’t in her new position, but she’s here every afternoon and leaves in the evening. But I still miss her a lot,” Kate admits.

I can understand that. I guess Mona’s a kind of surrogate mother to her, and it must be hard now that she’s not allowed to live here anymore.

“Mom’s not an easy person. She doesn’t usually care what other people want. When Dad realized how important Mona was to me, he put in a good word for her. Now at least she gets to stay on as a cook.”

“It sounds like you and your mother don’t really get along,” I probe gently.

“She doesn’t mean to be like that... but... she can be really hard to please.”

We enter Kate’s room, which initially leaves me speechless. On one hand, I’m impressed by the size of her four-poster bed, which looks big enough for four people, the beautiful grand piano by the window, and the huge wall of shelves full of books. But I’m put off by the girly décor. Pink walls with little fairies holding wands. Soft toys lined up on a dresser with Tinkerbelle

handles, a lamp in the shape of a ballerina, the fluffy pink carpet. The color pink pretty much dominates the room.

“Just say it – it’s a little girl’s room. I know. That’s why I never invite people over,” she says, throwing her bag into a corner. “Mom doesn’t want me to redecorate because she put so much thought into selecting and designing everything.”

“That must have been a few years ago,” I comment, looking around again.

“She doesn’t trust my taste, so it’s best if everything stays the way it is until she has time to redecorate.”

“And your Mom’s been completely booked out for years?” I ask, pulling aside the pink cloth around the bed. There are princesses dancing to a silent melody on the fabric. “It’s kind of creepy,” I say, imagining having to sleep in this princess nightmare.

“You get used to it,” Kate says drily, sitting down at her desk. There are photos on the wall above it: forests in the light of the setting sun, vibrant flowers and houses, so detailed I can’t stop looking at them. They’re all beautiful and have captured the mood perfectly.

“Did you take these?”

“Yeah, I really like photography, and I’m allowed to arrange this area around the desk however I like.”

And sure enough, there’s nothing girly here at all. A few writing pads, stacks of books, and sheets of paper with quotes hanging on the wall.

“I told Mom I need these things for school. Inspiration for school projects. She couldn’t argue with that,” Kate says with a smile.

“Sneaky.”

“I have to be with my Mom.” She sounds sad again.

It’s obviously hard for her to talk about this, and I try to lighten the mood.

“Tell me about your photos. They’re incredible.”

A smile appears on Kate’s lips and she starts telling me about how Mona gave her a camera for her birthday that she had wanted for so long. “She had to save up for it. I felt uncomfortable taking it at first, but it meant so much to her, and me too.” She opens a drawer and takes out more photos. “Mona also encouraged me to try out for the yearbook, and now I get to photograph the students for it. I stop by the electives from time to time to get a few

snapshots. Everything is supposed to be sort of lively. I try to capture the school's flair, and sometimes I get talking to the other students. Mona's right about me needing to come out of my shell."

There are photos of girls playing basketball. They're clapping and cheering, and you can see the enjoyment and the exertion of the last few minutes in their faces. It's an incredibly dynamic photo. Another one shows the boys' football team. They're taking their positions and waiting for the starting whistle. The mood is captured really well in this one too. You can almost see the tension shimmering in the air. I look at some other photos. A girl at a computer, designing the layout for the student newspaper. Two boys relaxing on a bench, laughing raucously. A boy in front of a piano, with his eyes closed and his hands resting on the keys – the moment when he takes a deep breath before giving himself over to the music.

When I look at the next photo, I automatically take a deep breath. Ayden. He's in the stands beside a sports field. Kate has captured him standing in profile. The wind plays in his hair and in the background you can see dark clouds gathering. It's about to rain. But I notice all this peripherally. My attention is focused on Ayden, who's wearing a light jacket and leaning on a railing. Kate has zoomed in so you can see every little detail on his face. His eyes look dark, his expression tense and reflective. Despite that – or perhaps because of it – he looks breathtakingly beautiful. Like a dark god, I muse, and the whimsical comparison makes me smirk.

"I just had to photograph him," I hear Kate say. "You could see it so perfectly at that moment. The darkness in him."

I'm still looking at the picture and I have to agree with Kate. Yes, the background really does make Ayden look dark and introverted, and I'd love to know what was going through his head at that moment.

"He definitely seems to be brooding over something," I say.

Kate snatches the picture out of my hand. "No, that's not what I meant," she begins, and takes a deep breath.

But then the door opens and before I realize what's happening, a woman is standing in the room. Her blue eyes look at us coldly, almost disdainfully. Her flawless face is marred by frown lines furrowing her brow. She's wearing a chic white blouse and a long skirt, and although both pieces of

clothing look simple, they're obviously expensive. In fact, I'm willing to bet they're designer pieces. This woman probably wouldn't wear anything else.

"Is this the new friend you told me about?" she asks in an icy tone, wrinkling her nose as if there's a bad smell. "Well, I didn't expect her to be a good influence on you, but bringing pictures of young men for you both to look at..." She snatches the photo from Kate's hand and continues, "I don't think such behavior is in any way appropriate."

My eyebrows shoot up. I take a breath to say something, but Kate intercedes.

"Mom," she begins in a small voice, "I took the photos. I'm on the yearbook team and I do all the photography. It's my job to take photos at celebrations, games, and events."

"And this young man is one of the big events?" she asks waspishly.

"It's always good to have photos of individuals too," Kate explains meekly.

Her mother gives a short nod. "I'm disappointed in you. Shouldn't you be focusing on your academic performance instead of participating in such frivolous activities?"

"Extracurricular activities are an advantage when applying for scholarships," I butt in. "And Kate enjoys photography. She has a real talent and..."

"I doubt you are in any way competent to judge that. And do you really think Kate needs a scholarship?!" She shoots me a look that cuts to the quick, then addresses her daughter again. "Think about what I've said and whether you really want to ruin your future for a few pubescent boys and scatterbrained girlfriends." She wrinkles her nose again – a mannerism she has perfected. "I've simply been too lenient with you lately. I assumed you understood and would keep yourself on track without having to be constantly corrected and supervised. You're obviously not mature enough for me to grant you such freedoms. I'll have to pay closer attention to you again."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Freedoms?! What freedoms does Kate have? I don't know a single girl her age who lives under such constant surveillance and has to follow so many rules.

Kate probably senses that I'm about to say something. She puts her hand on my arm to stop me making any rash comments. Anything I say will come

back on her.

“And as for you,” Kate’s Mom snaps at me, “Kate doesn’t need these kinds of distractions. If you don’t have any particular ambitions in life, that’s your business. Perhaps in the milieu you come from people are satisfied with a simple existence. And of course we need nurses like your mother. But my daughter is destined for better things. So please leave Kate in peace and stop giving her strange ideas. I think it’s best if you leave now. I’m sure you have things to do.”

With that, she turns and stalks out of the room.

I stare at the door, speechless, and can hardly believe what just happened.

“I’m... I’m so sorry,” Kate mutters, her head bowed. Her cheeks are hot and her shoulders are hunched.

I quickly pull her into a firm hug. “Why didn’t you tell me how bad your Mom is and how much pressure she puts on you?”

I feel Kate swallow hard and I can tell from her rugged breathing that she’s fighting back tears.

“I didn’t want to scare you off. I know what happens when I tell people about all the things my mother won’t let me do. I’d rather be a quiet outsider than a baby who’s not allowed to do anything. Just imagine what would happen if everyone found out.”

I’m already picturing Maria and her friends standing over Kate and taunting her.

“I hope you know I’m always here for you and I’m on your side. If there’s anything I can do to help, just say.”

Kate pulls away from me and looks me in the eye. “I just want us to keep being friends.”

I smile and say, “Sure we are. The fact that your mother’s a cow doesn’t change that. But now I understand you a little better. It’s unbelievable the way she treats you. I don’t understand it – you’re a good student.”

“And that’s how it has to stay,” Kate says. “She’ll do everything in her power to make sure of it.”

“She made it pretty clear what she thinks of me. A girl whose mother is a nurse... she was pretty rude.”

“I’m really sorry,” Kate apologizes again. I can see she’s ashamed of her

mother's words. "For her, nurses, kindergarten teachers, and so on belong to the working class."

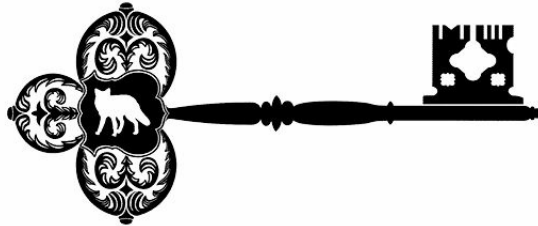
"People who are beneath her," I add.

I hug her again and reassure her that everything's fine between us. She nods gratefully and can no longer hold back the tears. I couldn't live like this, I think.

I'd fight it any way I could. But what choice do you have in the end, if your own mother's so hard on you? Running away? It's not easy to leave your family, even if they're bad for you.

And that's especially true for Kate. She grew up like this. She doesn't know anything else. She's suffering, but she would never rebel. At least not openly. But in a way, she's already doing it. She sneaked out to a bar, and she still wants to be my friend. That makes me smile – I'm actually a good influence on Kate.

Chapter 18



Shapeshifters are special animals that, in addition to their natural form, can also appear in anthropomorphic form. They're born as animals and only assume human form temporarily. Thus, they are not humans that transform into animals, although that is a common misconception."

I look up from my tablet at Yoru's face. I can't be sure if he understands what I'm reading to him, but he looks like he's paying attention. That will have to do. I read on.

"In human form, they can use language and take on various behaviors. They are highly intelligent and can blend into society without difficulty. Many shapeshifters also have mastery of certain forms of magic and some are exceptionally well versed in them. They're often very strong and fast. They have exceptional regeneration capabilities, and can even regrow limbs. Shapeshifters in the form of a fox are found almost exclusively in Asia, specifically China and Japan. Legends from these countries mostly involve female fox spirits that use illusions and manipulations."

I sigh and read the rest of the article silently, but don't really learn anything new from it. Yoru rolls himself into a ball under my desk and dozes quietly. I sometimes wonder if he's a particularly sleepy specimen or if I just need to challenge him more. Dogs have to be walked frequently; you have to play with cats so they don't start shredding the furniture. But is that necessary with a shapeshifter? Do I need to do things with Yoru so he doesn't start chasing his three tails out of boredom? I've never had a pet, not even a hamster, so I really have no experience.

I look at Yoru, who's sleeping peacefully and seems blissfully unaware of my concerns. Why does he never change his appearance for me? He shows

himself to others in the form of a cat, but why not me? And why does he never take on human form? Is he incapable, or just too young? Or does he understand that it would utterly horrify me?

“I’ll just have to find out more about you and where you come from,” I mutter to myself. My eye wanders to my great aunt’s painting. I frequently catch myself thinking that maybe my only option is to use the key to go back to the place full of doors. I’m still putting it off. But what if I have no other choice?

I sigh and look at the clock. It’s already four-thirty. Ayden’s picking me up at eight. The thought makes me tingle a little. I stand up and go downstairs to get something to eat. Mom made burgers for lunch and I reheat one in the microwave. As soon as I bring it back to my room, Yoru comes out from under the desk and sits in front of me. He looks at me expectantly.

“I guess you’re hungry too?”

He tilts his head and I laugh. A three-tailed fox begging like a dog. All that’s missing is the drool. I break off little pieces of meat, which he eats eagerly.

“You’re a strange little guy. But we make a good pair.”

I scratch him behind the ears. At that moment, my vision begins to blur again. I think I see Yoru look at me with a concerned expression. Is that possible in an animal? A shapeshifter even? I rub my eyes and hold my head, then look down.

When I open my eyes again, a scream sticks in my throat. A beam of light, warm and golden, is coming straight out of my chest. It looks a bit like an arrow with its head buried deep inside me. The shaft sticks out a long way and now it’s moving in time with my panicked breathing. It begins to vibrate, no longer stiff and solid, more like a soft arc of light. I don’t understand what’s happening, but the whole room is filled with this light.

I jump up and run to the mirror. I need to take a closer look at it, even if it means I’ll probably lose my mind. I stand in front of the mirror and look... but there’s nothing there. No light, no glowing arrow or arc. Just me. I nervously look down at myself and, no, there’s nothing unusual there.

I slowly sink down on the floor. Did I just imagine that? Does it have something to do with my vitreous opacity? Has my condition worsened?

Yoru comes to me and nudges me affectionately. “Did you see it too?” I ask him, but obviously he doesn’t reply.

I can’t say how long I’ve been sitting on the floor, but I gradually start to think clearly again. Maybe some strange light phenomenon shone into my room from outside and I just couldn’t see where it was coming from. Or it was something to do with my eyes. Thinking about it logically, it could only have come from outside. It must have...

I hear Mom calling up to me. She’s just come home from work. I go down to greet her and we have a stress free conversation. It does me good, because it helps me push the memory of the light out of my mind. I feel slightly better, and I go take a shower.

I just need to function, to keep a grip on reality. I get dressed and force myself to think about the date with Ayden. Anything else would overwhelm me right now.

I’m applying a little eyeliner when I hear the doorbell. My mother opens the door. I draw faster with the pencil and my haste inevitably results in a totally crooked line and a smudged eye.

“Shit,” I curse under my breath, trying to somehow fix the disaster. After several attempts at cleaning it off and reapplying it, I’m marginally presentable and I go from the bathroom into my room. I almost have a heart attack when I see Ayden there.

He grins and says, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. Your Mom said you were nearly ready and I should come upstairs.”

I nod silently. I can’t get a word out. Ayden looks around with interest, checks out the furniture, ornaments, photos, my aunt’s paintings.

“These are really nice. Your great aunt obviously had some talent.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t seem to have inherited any of it,” I say jokingly, trying to mask my nervousness. I wasn’t expecting Ayden to suddenly show up in my room. I frantically scan the room for things he shouldn’t see. Embarrassing romance novels, underwear, a three-tailed fox... But luckily nothing like that is in view. Apparently, Yoru is shy, or he knows when it’s a good idea to hide.

Ayden is still looking at the painting hanging above my bed. There’s an interested expression on his face and his eyes have this impenetrable look.

I'm reminded of Kate's photo of him. But then he turns to me with a friendly smile.

"Ready?"

I've barely thought about our date in the last few days, there's been so much going on. But now that the moment has come, I have an excited tingling sensation in my stomach.

His motorcycle is parked out front.

"I'm supposed to sit on that hellish thing again?" I ask, full of dread. I still remember the last ride vividly.

"Don't worry. I'll ride extra slow for you and try not to fall back on old habits."

He throws me a helmet.

"Well, here's hoping," I mutter, climbing on the bike. It's still a strange feeling, putting my arms around him as if it's no big deal and feeling him so close. Strange, but at the same time totally pleasant and thrilling.

Ayden starts the machine and takes off. I pray that Mom's not looking out the window right now. She's really open-minded, and she trusts me, but she's not a fan of motorcycles. Even she has conservative ideas on some things – and in this case I totally agree.

But Ayden seems to be keeping his promise. No breakneck speeds, no leaning into corners until our knees are nearly touching the road. We ride at a suitable speed and I slowly get used to it. I even start to enjoy it. The maneuverability, feeling the wind through my clothing, the cool of the evening, and Ayden's body under my hands. When he accelerates a little more, I press myself closer against him. I have to admit it doesn't feel bad at all, and I secretly begin to hope the evening will go on forever.

Our route takes us away from the city center. The houses are farther apart, the streetlamps dimmer. Where the hell is he taking me? And why didn't I ask before I got on the bike with him? I'm not normally the quiet type. I don't know where my head is at right now. I guess it's the stress of the last few weeks.

"Where are we going?" I say to rectify this, shouting the words into the wind.

“It’s a surprise,” is all I get for an answer. Very helpful.

“If you’re an axe murderer taking me to some forest to kill me and bury me, I’d like to know in advance,” I prattle on.

Ayden’s enchanting laugh rings out. “And where do think I’m hiding the axe? It wouldn’t fit under the seat.”

Goofing around helps me overcome my nerves. “No idea. Maybe you’re taking me to a remote cabin where you take all your victims. That’s obviously where you keep the murder weapon.”

“I hope you just watch too many horror movies, because if this is all coming from your imagination, it’s kind of alarming,” he jokes.

I give him a light, indignant punch. “Are you implying I’m crazy?”

“Just a little quirky, but don’t worry, I like weird girls – it’s one of my weaknesses.”

I can picture the expression on his face, those dreamy eyes glinting mischievously, that amused smirk. I’m trying to think of a comeback when we arrive at our destination. We’ve driven up a gravel road to the top of a hill. We stop near a dense grove of trees and Ayden dismounts.

I feel a little unsettled and scan the surroundings. Where the hell are we?

“You’re an open book, as usual,” Ayden observes wryly. “You should see yourself. That panicked expression.” He walks a few paces and pushes aside some branches. “Come on,” he urges, and I follow him. The next time I look up, it takes my breath away.

A simple “Wow!” passes my lips and doesn’t even begin to describe the incredible view in front of me. Before us is a steep drop, but more important is what lies beyond it. Thousands of city lights twinkle in the darkness, as if the stars have fallen from the sky and continue to shine down there. It’s like another world – huge, unreachable, and so breathtaking.

“That’s incredible,” I murmur, following Ayden, who spreads out his jacket for us to sit on.

“My favorite place. A great spot to sit and think.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Right, yeah, as a thoughtful type, you obviously need a place where you can let your thoughts wander. It’s not easy solving all the problems of the world.”

“Hmm, I guess we both see through one another,” he jokes, looking at me.

That's when I realize how close we are. Our arms are touching, and when he turns to me like this, I can feel his breath on my skin.

He looks away and gazes into the distance. "Your Mom seems really nice. She invited me to come visit you both sometime."

I roll my eyes and say, "She obviously wants to get to know the guy her daughter is maybe going to spend a lot of time with."

"Hmm." He finally looks at me again. The effect of his gaze is indescribable. "And is this daughter even interested in that?"

I grin and say, "Depends how tonight goes. Maybe the guy will turn out to be a total idiot, although he doesn't seem to be so far."

"Good to know I haven't blown it yet."

"No, you're definitely interesting, and I like being around you. We always have a laugh and I find you really easy to talk to. But barely know anything about you, which is kind of a shame."

"You know the most important stuff."

"You think?" I say doubtfully, then run through the little information I have. "I don't even know where you live."

"Should I be worried that *you're* a closet serial killer who's going to lurk outside my house at night?"

"Women are rarely murderers, and never serial killers," I retort. "If anything, they're stalkers."

"Not a nice thought either," says Ayden. "I'm sure my Dad would have a problem with women lurking around in our front yard."

The idea makes me laugh. "Interesting image."

"What's the deal with your Dad?" he asks suddenly.

"He doesn't like stalkers either," I joke, but Ayden is undeterred.

"I mean, how do you feel about the situation?"

"Like I said, he doesn't want to know about me."

"Sad," Ayden sums it up in one word.

"I've come to terms with it. I'm not going to fight for attention from a person who wants nothing to do with me."

"Healthy attitude. It's not easy drawing that line and only fighting when it's worth it."

"Exactly: pick your battles."

“Is that why you didn’t react to Maria last time?”

The incident is still clear in mind. I still feel the anger burning in me like a hot flame. I shrug.

“It’s pointless to keep provoking and challenging her. I just want to get on with my life without stupid power games. If I do nothing, she’ll leave me alone.”

That’s my strategy for now at least. There’s too much going on in my life to play games with that stupid cow. I need to focus my energy on more important things.

“True. Maria’s not worth it.”

I nod. “It makes more sense to focus on the important stuff.”

“Such as?”

“School,” I reply precociously. “But I’ve hardly done any study lately. I really need to apply myself more or my grades are going to slip badly.”

“If you need help with anything, let me know,” he offers, gracing me with that wonderful smile again.

“I can manage. I’m not aiming for top of the class, and that makes life easier. My worst grade so far is in P.E. And I figure I can neglect that.”

“Not sporty then. Any other weaknesses I should know about?” he asks, raising an eyebrow provocatively.

I laugh and elbow him gently in the ribs. “This conversation is going in the wrong direction.”

Ayden scoots even closer to me, but I only notice this peripherally. I’m too mesmerized by his face, his green eyes, which are devouring me right now.

“I doubt anything you say could change my impression of you.” His words are as soft as the evening breeze brushing our skin. Ayden very slowly extends his hand toward me, runs it through my hair. I feel a jolt in my stomach which wanders downward. Fiery passion ignites inside me and spreads into every fiber of my body.

His fingertips feel cool on my flushed skin. They wander very softly over my ears, find their way along my chin, and then touch my lips like a sweet promise. His fingers brush across them, full of yearning, and I automatically open my lips a little. We’re still gazing at one another, entranced, as if we’re under some spell.

His breathing becomes more rapid, tickles my skin, and finally he tilts his face down toward mine. His hands touch my cheeks, softly but assertively. His lips are slightly parted too, and my whole body tingles with desire. I close my eyes as a breeze wafts past us. I tremble, a sweet shiver. I taste Ayden's wonderful scent on my tongue and can scarcely wait to taste more of him.

His hands are suddenly gone and I register an abrupt movement. He's jumped up and is staring out into the darkness. I don't understand what just happened. Ayden looks up into the dark trees and murmurs in a voice that sounds alien to me, "We need to leave."

I don't understand and remain sitting for a moment, stunned. "What... what is it?"

"Nothing. It's just late and I have to take care of something."

"And you just thought of that *now*?!"

I stand up and Ayden picks up his jacket without saying another word. He goes back to the bike and leaves me standing here. I have no choice but to follow him.

"Are you going to say something?" I ask. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he says. "We just need to leave."

I sit on the bike behind him and I have no idea what's going on. Only moments ago, he wanted to kiss me – or did I interpret something wrong? No way. He touched me, caressed me, and then there was that look. It was unmistakable. And now we're more distant than ever before.

Although I'm sitting behind him, I have the feeling I can't reach him. He keeps glancing back, and even catches my eye, but it clearly leaves him cold. He starts speeding, and I have to keep reminding him to slow down. But it's like he can't get rid of me fast enough. I feel a stabbing pang of regret. What happened?

Ayden stops in front of my house. Still he says nothing, just waits for me to get off.

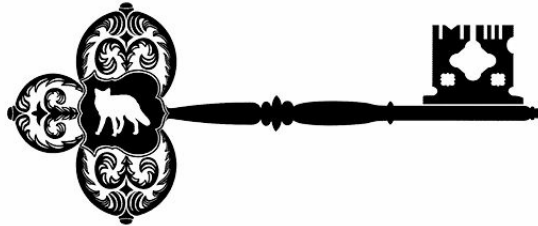
"Ayden, are you going to tell me what's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"Don't worry, it has nothing to do with you. I really just have to take care of something that can't wait. I'll see you round."

With that, he simply rides away and leaves me standing here. I watch him

go and my insides burn. For the first time in ages, I have the feeling again that I've lost something important. Whatever just happened, it destroyed something.

Chapter 19



I spend Sunday revising and doing homework – at least that’s the intention. The English essay that I finally cobble together is far from a glorious achievement, but at least I have something down on paper. As hard as I try, my mind is not on the task at hand. I keep picturing Ayden’s face. I’m furious with myself for thinking about him so much. But isn’t that understandable? We almost kissed, then he backed out at the last second. I’m still trying to figure out why. Did he suddenly decide he can’t stand me after all? Did he just want some fun and then get scared I might want more? I simply don’t understand.

I rest my head on my desk and groan irritably. Yoru’s head instantly pops up and looks at me enquiringly. I wave my hand and murmur, “I’m just really pissed right now at this guy and at myself. Don’t worry about it.”

My little fox curls up and closes his eyes. I wish I could be that calm.

The day drags by exceptionally slowly. On Monday, I can hardly wait to get to school. I’m definitely going to talk to Ayden. He owes me an explanation, at the very least. I look out for him the whole morning, but he doesn’t show up for English, and I don’t run into him in the corridors. So it’s no wonder I’m a little peeved at lunch.

“Are you okay?” Alex asks. I’m sitting at a table with her, Chrissy, and Kate. “You look like you’re trying to crumble your sandwich into a thousand tiny pieces.”

It’s true – I’m just nibbling tiny bits off it and not really eating.

“I’m just not in a great mood today.”

“Is it because of the date with Ayden?” Alex probes. “I’ve been on tenterhooks this whole time, waiting for you to tell us about it.”

“It was... nice,” I reply evasively, feeling my friends’ eyes on me.

“Nice?! Sounds really thrilling,” Alex mutters disappointedly.

“We just talked. That’s pretty much it,” I continue, and notice my voice growing sharper.

“Sounds like you were expecting it to go differently,” Alex surmises.

“Sorry your date didn’t pan out the way you hoped,” Kate says, trying to cheer me up. “But maybe it’s not a bad thing if you just stay friends.”

I look at them all indignantly. “What do you think I was expecting from the date?! Of course we’re just friends. I’m... it was just kind of... strange.”

Fine, even to my ears it sounds like I’m not being truthful.

“Sorry to interrupt, but that cat there, have you guys ever seen it before? It’s incredible the way it just sits there on the windowsill, so self-assured, staring into the cafeteria. Like it’s watching us,” says Chrissy.

I turn around. For a moment, I feel like my heart stops beating from the shock, then I start feeling annoyed again.

“Yeah, that cat hangs around a lot,” says Alex. “It seems to have decided to make our school its new home. I guess there’s plenty to eat here, and students who are happy to give it something. I’ve seen it a bunch of times.”

After hearing this, nothing can stop me. So, Yoru follows me. I just can’t believe I haven’t noticed. Anger bubbles up inside me and I excuse myself.

“I’ll be right back, I just need to use the bathroom.”

I snatch up my bag and race outside. When I get to Yoru, I hiss at him to come to me, which luckily he does without a fuss. His three tails wag excitedly in the air and his eyes shine with pleasure at seeing me.

“So, you little runaway,” I say, crouching down. “You follow me here regularly, even though I’ve told you so many times to stay at home?! What if someone finds out what you really are?”

Yoru looks at me sorrowfully and rubs his head against my hand. It as if he’s trying to reassure me and take away my cares.

“One of the other students could just take you home with them. I mean, to them you’re just a stray without a home, and nice looking too.”

He makes that little noise that sounds like a purr, as if trying to soothe me. Yeah, I guess I have to agree that Yoru seems to know how to take care of himself. But I don’t want to find out what other powers are slumbering in

him. Anyone would have a hard time explaining a fireball-throwing kitsune in the middle of the schoolyard.

Yoru rubs against my legs and sniffs my bag. I remember my sandwich and take it out.

“You must be hungry.” I break him off a couple of pieces, which he devours greedily. “I really can’t understand how someone can be this hungry when all they do is sleep. You don’t get a lot of exercise.”

Then again, I guess he covers pretty big distances if he’s following me to school every day.

“Is that why you’re always so tired?” I ask. Then I notice someone approaching us. I look up and see Ayden a few paces away. His expression is as dark as a brewing storm. I forget to breathe and just stare at him. He looks at me, then at my fox.

“I didn’t know you had a soft spot for strays.”

“Yoru belongs to me,” I correct him. “He showed up recently. My Mom still doesn’t know about him. She doesn’t actually have anything against cats. I just have to find the right moment and hopefully he’ll be allowed to stay with us officially.”

“I can’t help wondering if that’s your only secret.”

The atmosphere is so tense it feels as if it could snap. I can feel electricity in the air. What’s going on here?

“Well, you’ve uncovered this one. There’s not much else; this is definitely my most exciting secret,” I reply drily.

“Just be careful you don’t make your little friend sick with that crap you’re feeding him,” he continues abrasively, then turns and leaves me standing here. I don’t get it. What’s up with him?! I’m so confused, and at the same time the anger is boiling over inside me. Why did we just discuss a cat, instead of talking about what’s actually important? I jump up. Nothing can hold me back. I have to get my anger out. I run after Ayden. He’s fast and is already partway across the schoolyard. I sprint and catch up to him. I call his name, but he doesn’t turn around even once. I grab his arm and hold him still. “What’s going on? Why are you being so cold today?”

“I’m the way I always am,” he says. His icy eyes contradict his words.

“Are you kidding?! You’ve never spoken to me like that. What happened?”

On Saturday we were fine. It felt like we were close and we almost kissed. Why did you suddenly take me home?"

"I had things to do, I already told you."

I can't stand hearing this evasive answer any longer.

"And what things would that be?! In the middle of the night?! Are you secretly a paramedic or a fire fighter, and had to rush to some major incident?"

Okay, not my best joke, but I'm not myself right now.

"You want to know what's up with me?" he whispers, and there it is again – that fire in his eyes, that incredible magnetism. He grabs me by the shoulders, steers me toward one of the school buildings and pushes me up against the wall. There's nobody around, nobody can see us, and I'm not sure if what I'm feeling is fear or just a flutter of nervousness.

His hands are on the wall right by my face. They don't touch me, but I feel so close to him. It's his eyes that caress me and make me gasp for breath. How can someone trigger these kinds of feelings in another person?

"You want to know why I left? Why I didn't finish what you were yearning for me to do?"

His voice is rough and passionate at the same time. His breath touches my skin like a caress, calling to me. His right hand is on my cheek, stroking it. Every millimeter of skin he touches tingles like it's electrically charged. He leans closer and I feel the heat of his body, can maybe even feel his heartbeat.

His lips touch my ear, brush across it and whisper, "It's so easy to see what's going through your mind right now, and it's totally smutty."

I feel the heat rush to my cheeks. I want to say something, but I can't find the words. He runs his hand through my hair, playing with it. It sends a shiver down my spine. Yes, it's embarrassing that he can see so plainly what I want, but is that really so disgusting? I like Ayden, I admit it. I like this guy, and right at this moment, all I want is him.

A smile forms on his lips, his face is close to mine, and the knot in my belly tightens. Finally, we can finish what we started on Saturday.

"This whole time, you've just been waiting for me to kiss you. It's all you can think about," he breathes across my skin.

I close my eyes. His fingers, which ignited this fire in my innards a moment

earlier, disappear from my cheek. I open my eyes irritably, and there it is again, that withering look, cold and sinister. Ayden almost frightens me. A storm is brewing inside him, an inferno building up that will destroy everything.

“You’re so superficial. You don’t have even one exceptional talent. In fact, you’re just ordinary, pathetic, and weak in every way. A total disappointment.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. It feels as if the ground is opening up beneath me. I open and close my mouth like a fish out of water. Everything around me starts spinning. My legs begin to shake. None of this makes sense, but what I do understand is that Ayden has been playing some weird game with me. But why?

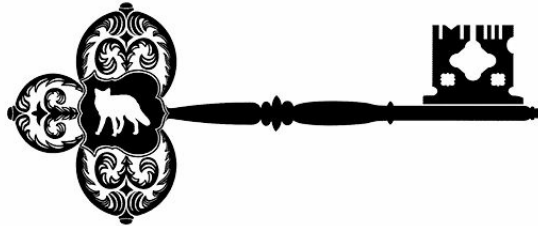
He turns away from me without another word and leaves me standing here. I look at his back, his graceful strut, and I just can’t believe it. The tears well up – mostly in anger. For a moment I’m just angry with myself. How could I trust him? But how could I not? He did everything in his power to make me like him.

Finally, my rage explodes.

“Did it boost your massive ego to toy with me?! Did it make you happy that I liked you and didn’t realize what an asshole you are?! I hope you had your fun! Enjoy it while it lasts, because that’s all you get from me. I’m sure as hell not going to lie in bed crying my eyes out over you. Because that’s what you want, right?!”

He keeps walking, doesn’t turn around, but I hear him laugh. That carefree laugh that makes it clear how indifferent he is to my words – how little he cares about me.

Chapter 20



After Ayden is gone, I send Yoru home. At least that's something I succeed at. I consider going with him, faking some illness and hiding at home for the next few days – preferably weeks or months. I hate to think what will happen next time I encounter Ayden. I'll probably go ballistic with rage and disappointment. There's one word swirling around in my head, sharper than any saw, trying to shred my heart: why? I just don't understand, and I don't want to. There's no justification for his behavior. I fight hard to stand up straight, not to give in to the pain, because that's probably just what the bastard wants.

I'm late for history, but I'm numb to my teacher's reprimand. I take a seat and stare at the whiteboard, but I can't focus. I'm too shocked, too hurt. And even though I try really hard not to let it get to me, what Ayden did has gotten under my skin.

The hour flies by – which is disappointing, because it means I have to pull myself together again, stand up, walk to the next classroom, smile, talk, function, and all the while, everything inside me is in a state of emergency.

On my way to the next class, Kate looks at me with concern, even though I'm grinning like a Cheshire cat. Maybe that's why.

“Are you okay?” she finally asks.

I nod vigorously and my head feels like a marionette's. It wobbles unnaturally on my neck.

“Er, okay,” she says, still looking at me with wide eyes. “Why were you late?”

I take a deep breath. The rage is boiling over inside me, I feel like screaming at her, taking everything out on her that I couldn't take out on

Ayden earlier. But she doesn't deserve that. She's just worried about me.

"Were you with Ayden?" she guesses astutely, and her expression becomes more concerned. "What did he do?"

I'm amazed that she immediately draws the right conclusions. "He obviously had a lot of fun toying with me."

"That asshole! I knew he couldn't be trusted. That damn..."

I interrupt her. "You knew, right? You could tell his intentions weren't serious, and you tried to warn me. But I didn't want to hear it."

"I didn't know anything for sure, or I would have told you. It was more the way he sometimes looks at the people around him. As if he doesn't care about any of them." She shakes her head. "No, that's not the right word. It's more like we're all a *nuisance* to him. And I kept overhearing scraps of conversation about him going to all the parties and clubs. That he always had some girl and then quickly dropped her. But that was all just gossip."

"You told me all that, but I didn't want to believe it. He can go to parties if he wants to – didn't I say something like that? He's an incredibly good actor. I just don't understand why he invested so much energy? Does it give him such a feeling of superiority to see my disappointment that it makes it worth all the effort?"

"Don't try to understand that sick brain," Kate warns me. "It's not worth it."

I nod and try to take her advice, but my heart has developed a life of its own and won't let me calm down.

In the next break, I cling to a cup of coffee. The noise, the people, everything gets on my nerves. And then there are Kate's concerned glances, to which I respond with a scowl.

"It's alright," I grumble at some point. "Stop worrying."

"I just keep thinking about how I would feel if he did that to me."

"You would have been more careful and not a sucker like me."

"You're not a sucker."

I nod. She's right. "He's just incredibly convincing and a total asshole."

"Cussing during coffee break? What's up?" Alex approaches us from behind and puts her arms around both of us.

"I think I can guess," says Chrissy, who has also joined us.

"You don't have to be clairvoyant for that," Alex says with a grin. "Come

on, tell us, what did he do?”

Just as I’m taking a breath to talk my way out of the situation – even if I’m not sure exactly how I’m going to do that – an announcement comes through the loudspeaker.

“Teresa Franklin, please come to the principal’s office. Teresa Franklin to the principal’s office immediately, please.”

I stiffen and raise my eyebrows. Kate looks mystified too. What does the principal want with me? I briefly wonder if it has something to do with Ayden. No, I’m pretty sure the principal has no interest in the students’ love lives.

“I guess I should go,” I say, slightly relieved that I don’t have to justify myself to Alex and Chrissy, although I’m sure a visit to the principal won’t be a walk in the park.

I knock and enter the secretary’s front office. She glances up and waves me straight through to the principal’s office. I knock again and go inside.

An older, balding man is sitting at a large desk, which looks really untidy and cluttered. Sheets of paper and files are strewn all over it. I see pens and pencils peeking out from under them. I’ll bet he’s constantly searching for them.

The principal is wearing a suit that may have been fashionable in the ‘80s, and he regards me with dark brown eyes that look really big behind his very thick glasses.

“Teresa Franklin, nice to see you. We haven’t had the chance to meet in person yet. I’m Mr. Marth. I expect you’re confused about why I’ve called you here.”

That’s when I notice the other man standing in the corner to the right of the desk, arms folded across his chest. I estimate his age to be late forties, his dark hair is fashionably cut, and his suit enhances the authority that he exudes. He greets me with a charming smile.

“I’m so pleased to finally meet you in person. I’m Samuel Collins, from the Siena Hartford Academy.”

If that’s supposed to mean something to me, he’s going to be disappointed. They evidently notice my discomfort and Mr. Marth quickly comes to my aid.

“The Siena Hartford Academy is to us educators what the Amber Room is to historians. We know it once existed and that perhaps it still does, but there are a lot of myths surrounding it,” he explains, with a glance in Mr. Collins’ direction as if seeking applause.

Mr. Collins doesn’t comment on this analogy. Instead he explains to me, “We’re a school for highly gifted students and those with special talents in the sciences and languages. We don’t accept applications, we seek out our students ourselves. We’re constantly receiving letters from teachers all over the country, recommending students with special achievements. Naturally, they also attach a few samples of the exceptional work.”

I still don’t know what he’s talking about. Surely the man’s not trying to suggest that *I’m* gifted in some way?! The thought almost makes me laugh. Sure, I’m not dumb, but I’m definitely not highly gifted.

“And you’re trying to tell me some teacher from this school sent you something that made it worth looking me up? I’ve only been here a few weeks.”

And when I think of my chemistry test, which I’m sure I flunked thanks to Yoru, or the couple of English essays I’ve scribbled down, I’m really not sure which of those could be described as a special achievement.

“No, we were contacted by one of your teachers at your previous school in Tucson. Mr. McCean sent us some of your English essays, and I must admit, we were very impressed. You have an incredibly good command of language and are able to get to the heart of a topic wonderfully succinctly without it becoming dry. You have a very refined, elegant way of expressing yourself, and a refreshing imagination.”

Okay, I realize that I probably look like I’ve just suffered a stroke, but I’m completely baffled. Is this guy actually serious?!

He smiles and nods emphatically. “We don’t make mistakes, trust me. We’ve had our eye on you for a while and we now want to offer you a place at our school. We realize it may not be the best timing so soon after starting at this wonderful high school.”

Mr. Marth grins moronically when he hears this praise.

“I’m sure you’ve already settled in here,” Mr. Collins continues, “and you’re wondering why you should have to start over again. But please

consider it seriously. This is a unique opportunity. We support our students in all areas. We have special learning programs tailored to your needs, and highly experienced teaching staff who are always on hand to offer the students advice and support. We also have a residence on site for students from out of town, but I assume that won't be necessary in your case, as our school is in San Francisco." He gives me a slightly goofy wink. "You could start as early as next week. I've already contacted your mother and I'll give you some information to take away with you. Take your time to consider everything thoroughly."

He approaches me and hands me a beige paper folder. On the outside is an elegantly embossed seal.

"It was very nice to meet you. I hope you'll decide to join us. I'm sure you'll be a valuable addition to our school."

He extends his hand. When I take it, he pulls me in and whispers quietly, "And by that I mean you and your fox. We have a lot to offer both of you. In particular, you'll finally find out what your new companion is all about."

He lets go of my hand and straightens up with a respectable smile. Then he leaves the room and I stare after him, baffled.

He knows about Yoru, and more importantly, he knows his true form. But how? And what does he want from us?

"What a wonderful surprise," says Mr. Marth, snapping me back to the here and now. "I never thought I'd have the Head of the Siena Hartford Academy standing in my office." He shakes his head, as if he's just met God himself. "I hope you won't keep him waiting too long, and that you'll accept his offer. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The Siena Hartford Academy is one of the best schools in the country, and every student they select receives a scholarship. So you should give him an answer as soon as possible."

"I definitely won't take the decision lightly," I say before leaving his office.

My head is spinning. What's this all about? I stare incredulously at the folder in my hands as I walk down the corridor. A school for highly gifted people and those with special talents. What does that mean? Apparently, it has something to do with Yoru.

Suddenly I catch sight of two people out of the corner of my eye, which is surprising, because the break is over and the corridors should be empty. I

quickly hug the wall and peer around the corner. I see Mr. Collins walking along the corridor toward the exit, and Ayden blocking his way. He looks pretty worked up.

“What are you doing?” he hisses at the principal. “I gave you my report. She’s not for us, she’s weak and nothing special. And you just override my decision!”

“Ayden, I can understand your irritation, but she already seems to have a rapport with her key spirit and possibly even the beginnings of a bond. It follows her, protects her, watches over her. It wouldn’t do that if there were nothing between them.”

“She feeds it food scraps,” Ayden hisses. “She treats it like a pet and she’s totally clueless. Believe me, I put her under the microscope. She doesn’t belong with us. She’s never had any training and has no idea what we’re about. She’s also belligerent, doesn’t stand out in any subject, her sporting performance is a joke, and like most girls, she’s totally absorbed with petty teenage problems.”

“We’ll try her out and see. Maybe you’ll prove right in the end, and we’ll have to let her go.”

“You actually want to go through with this?!” Ayden exclaims. He sounds like he’s about to tear off the other man’s head. “Why do I go to so much trouble if you just end up doing whatever you want?! Do you think I enjoyed hanging around at this school, spending time with this dim-witted person?!”

Mr. Collins puts a soothing hand on Ayden’s shoulder. “Essentially, I agree with you. But I believe there’s a chance for her, if only a very small one. Maybe she’ll do well and become one of us. If not...” He shrugs. “We have nothing to lose.”

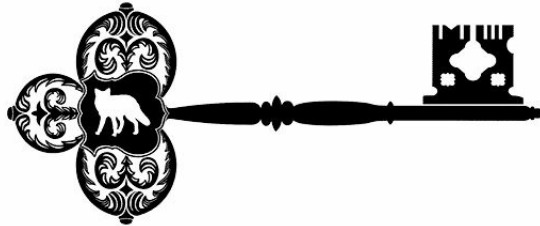
“I can’t believe this!” Ayden snarls. He scowls at Mr. Collins and then stalks off.

I lean back against the wall, breathing heavily. Ayden – he was testing me. He knows about Yoru too – my key spirit, as I’ve just learned. This is so much to process.

But right now there’s just one thing on my mind: Ayden doesn’t want me at that school. He thinks I’m not good enough. He only spent time with me to figure that out.

Loathing and disappointment well up in me again. He's got another thing coming. If he's so dead set against having me at his school, then I'm going to make his life unpleasant, like he did to me. Because after everything I've just heard, only one thing matters: they know about Yoru and can answer all my questions. I have to go just because of that. Yes, I'm going to seize this opportunity. I now have the chance to step into an unknown world, and I'm prepared to take that step.

Chapter 21



On the way home, I'm so lost in thought that I barely say a word, whereas Kate is uncharacteristically chatty. Naturally, she, Alex, and Chrissy immediately asked what the principal wanted with me. It was hard to give them an answer, especially as I could only think about one thing: the conversation between Ayden and Mr. Collins. They made it sound like he'd assigned Ayden to my case, but I can't be sure. Does this man know how Ayden tried to get the information out of me? Does he tolerate those kinds of methods? Did he maybe even suggest them? And how did these people even find me? Was it just coincidence? Was Ayden following a hunch that turned out to be right? I don't know, and it's driving me crazy.

I keep recalling scraps of the conversations between me and Ayden. In retrospect, it's obvious that he was pumping me for information. He wanted to know all about my family; I told him about my tastes, my weaknesses. Ayden even saw Frida's paintings. Now I'm wondering more than ever what the paintings have to do with all of this.

Ayden knew about my problems with Maria, and our disputes obviously influenced his decision. "Why didn't you defend yourself?" Didn't he ask me something like that the other day? Everything evidently led to one conclusion: he sees me as weak and worthless. And that's why he dropped the act and told me brutally to my face what he thought of me. I guess he gave Mr. Collins his final report yesterday morning. No wonder he saw no reason to continue his charade with me after that.

Can I really go to a school where they manipulate people like that? But I have so many questions, and it seems to be the only place I'll get any answers.

“It’s a really good high school, and they don’t take many students,” Kate reiterates for what feels like the thousandth time. She looks a little pale and her voice is unsteady, verging on hysterical even. I guess the news has hit her hard.

I squeeze her hand and try to comfort her. “I still have to think about it. It’s a lot to unpack,” I say, repeating the answer I already gave her, Alex, and Chrissy. And it’s true – I’m not sure what I should do. My first instinct was to spite Ayden and teach him a lesson. But what am I getting myself into at this school? I’ll talk to Mom tonight, read through the brochures, and do some research online. Maybe that will help me reach a decision.

“It’d be a mistake not to go,” says Kate. Part of me knows she’s right. I hug her and feel my throat tighten with sadness. I don’t want to leave another friend behind.

As soon as I open the front door, my mother calls shrilly, “Teresa? Is that you?”

I flinch. I’m not used to Mom’s voice sounding so sharp and high-pitched. Before I have time to reply, she runs into the hallway and stares at me with wide eyes.

“Is it true what this Mr. Collins told me?”

“That I’m an unsung genius?” I joke.

The humor doesn’t seem to hit home. Mom looks at me expectantly. I groan and take off my backpack and jacket.

“Mom, you know me. Do you really think I’m some kind of Rainman?” Still no reaction – fine, we never liked the same movies. “I’m definitely not a genius.”

“Then why is Mr. Collins offering you a place? I looked them up online. The school is amazing. Have you seen everything they have to offer? No formal classes, just excellent teachers, study rooms, a huge library, electives that you can try out, and a curriculum geared toward highly gifted students. It must cost a fortune, but Mr. Collins says every student receives a scholarship. It’s all funded by alumni and prizes that they keep winning. Can you imagine?! This will open so many doors for you.”

Mom looks like she’s about to have a heart attack.

I don’t know what to say. I definitely can’t tell her that they only want me

because... yeah, why? That's something I don't fully understand myself. It has something to do with Yoru. As much as I love my Mom, I can't talk to her about a three-tailed fox. Not before I find out more about him. And that brings us back to the critical question: should I go to this weird school?

"Apparently, I have a slight aptitude in English. I'm really not a genius or anything."

Mom quickly shakes her head. "A slight aptitude!" She snorts. "Teresa, darling, the man said you have extraordinary talent, a gifted writing style, and that your work is exceptionally profound. That doesn't equate to a slight aptitude. He says you need to be challenged, and I agree with him. Who knows what can be teased out of you if you're at the right school, supported by teachers who can really help you?"

"So you think I should go?"

"I'm not going to tell you what to do. We just moved, you've changed schools, made friends, settled in a little. It has to be your decision, but if you want my opinion: you shouldn't pass up this opportunity."

She takes me in her arms and I'm so overwhelmed I feel like I can't breathe.

After dinner, I go to my room with the school prospectus. Yoru lifts his head and comes to greet me. I pet him and feel some of the pressure melt away.

"It's mostly about you," I say. "For some reason, we found each other, and I'd really like to know why."

The brochure is impressive. And the information I find online backs this up. And yet I'm ambivalent. I take out my phone to message my friends Sue, Tonya, and Leah, but I don't type a single word. I just don't know what to tell them. I send a message to someone else instead.

"Hi Noah, how was your day, and how was the exam? I'm kind of overwhelmed. So much happened today and I may be about to change schools again. I've started to settle in here and things are going well. But this other school is a great opportunity."

I flop down on my bed, put my arm over my head, and stare at the wall. The minutes pass and my thoughts go round in circles. At some point I get a reply from Noah.

"Oh, that's a surprise. Are you moving away already?"

“No, the school’s in San Francisco. It’s a high school for gifted students – I’m told I have an aptitude for English. So I’ll look pretty lame next to everyone else.”

“They wouldn’t take you if they weren’t totally sure. But that’s not what’s important. The question you should be asking yourself is if it’s what you want. Do you want to change schools, start over, and maybe measure yourself against students who are totally different? I’m sure you could make it work. But is it what you want?”

And that’s what I’m not sure about.

“Thanks for listening. I need to think about it some more.”

“I hope you find your answer soon.”

I have a restless night and strange dreams, mostly about Ayden. I see his arrogant smile, those cold eyes looking at me with contempt. That’s the image I have in my mind when I wake up next morning. He thinks he knows me, and he’s convinced I’m going to be a failure. But Yoru doesn’t see it that way. He didn’t call me for no reason. Because that’s exactly the feeling that led me to him. We belong together.

This all leads me to a decision: I have nothing to lose. I have a great school waiting for me, new experiences, and most importantly, the answers to my most pressing questions.

On Saturday, I take a look around the school with Mom. Only the resident students are there, hanging out in cozy reading corners, common rooms, or in their private rooms. But I don’t see any animals – normal or supernatural. Either they’re all hiding, or it’s unusual to have a creature like Yoru at your side.

The buildings are big and beautifully designed. Stucco walls, wooden floors, gables, and huge windows that let in a lot of light. In the classrooms, every student has their own desk with a customized chair and a laptop, and everyone has a personally tailored curriculum that they’re largely allowed to design themselves. Visual aids, computer equipment, the rooms, the cafeteria food – everything is the best of the best. I’m just a little worried about how much emphasis there is on sports.

By the end of the day, I’m exhausted by all the new impressions, but they

reinforce my decision. I didn't learn anything about Yoru on my visit, but I hope that will change soon.

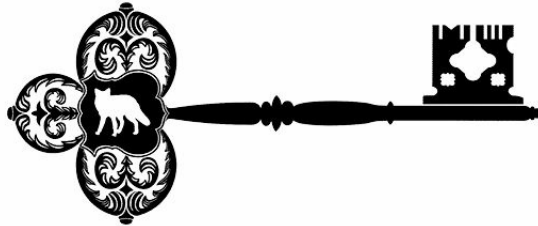
Noah messages me, asking how I am and whether I've made a decision.

"Yes, I'm gonna take the plunge and change schools. I'm worried I'll be out of my depth among all the gifted students, but I think I'd regret not trying it out."

"I totally get it. You'll be fine. Good luck, and if it doesn't work out, it's not the end of the world."

Over the next few days, I slowly say my goodbyes to my current school and my new friends. My new life starts at the beginning of next month. Alex, Chrissy, Kate, and I have all promised to stay in touch and we're going to celebrate my new start soon. By the end, I'm struggling to hold back the tears, and it's no different for the others. I really don't want us to lose touch, and I resolve to stay in contact with them no matter what. Something tells me I'm going to need loyal friends, especially at the beginning.

Chapter 22



I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Here goes. Once again, I'm standing at the entrance to a new school about to start my first day. I feel the tension building, nervousness, but mostly anticipation; I can't wait to get to class and meet my classmates. Will I finally learn more about Yoru?

I open the door and step inside. Unlike my previous schools, there are several common rooms and reading areas near the entrance. Students can use them anytime, before and after class and on breaks. I have some time before classes start, so I go to one of the common rooms. I stop in the doorway, stunned. Two boys and three girls are relaxing on big couches, talking. But that's not what throws me. What really grabs my attention is the animals – if you can call them that. A small bird-like creature that reminds me of a hummingbird is darting around a petite girl. Its feathers are brightly colored and it emits a curious glow. A snow-white owl sitting on the shoulder of a boy with long black hair quickly swivels its head in my direction. A kind of lion with a crimson pelt is lying beside one of the girls, sleeping. I also see an eagle and a snake. I'm speechless, and all I can think is: I'm not the only one. All these students have a special creature at their side. My heart beats faster and I feel for the first time that I'm in the right place.

The black-haired boy, whose owl is still staring at me, also looks in my direction.

“Hey, come in. We don't bite,” he says, adding, “Even if some of us look like we might.”

I can't argue with that – some of these animals look really intimidating.

“Are you new?” he asks when I approach them. He pats the seat next to him and I'm glad to accept.

“Yeah, my first day. I’m Teresa.”

“James,” says the black-haired boy. “This is Emily,” he nods at the girl with the snake, “and Max.” She’s a long-legged beauty with curly brown hair and caramel colored eyes. The little hummingbird is hers. “Lucia.” She’s tall and has a catlike face with full lips and green eyes. The lion belongs to her. “This here is Brad,” says James, pointing at a pudgy boy with short brown hair and a mischievous smile. He gives me a friendly wave. He has an eagle beside him.

“Where’s your spirit?” Brad asks.

“I didn’t know I was allowed to bring him.”

Now they all look at each other in amazement and burst out laughing.

“Sorry,” says Brad, holding up his hand. “That was pretty rude of us, but it’s not often someone arrives who doesn’t know why they’re here.”

“And why am I here exactly?” I ask.

“Well, you’re here to strengthen the bond between you and your spirit. You’ll learn all about it, about our history, and you train to fight by sharing your odeon with the spirit and becoming one with it.”

I raise my eyebrows. Okay, that’s not exactly what I was expecting from this school.

“Odeon?” I ask.

“It’s a kind of inner power that resides in everyone who’s chosen,” Lucia explains. “We need it to empower our key spirits. We can only direct our creature and give it power if we know how to use our odeon correctly.”

“You’ll figure it all out in time. Don’t worry. It’s a lot to take in at first, but you’re going to learn all that stuff,” James promises me. “I’m an outsider too.”

“Outsider?” I’m confused again, and I’m sure it won’t be the last time.

“Most people learn these things from their family. The students that come here aren’t normally thrown into a whole new world. The gift and the key are usually passed down through families.”

“But not always,” Max chimes in, looking at me with curiosity. “I guess no one in your family had the odeon, right?”

I don’t know what to say.

She snorts. “Well, judging by how little you seem to know, I’m guessing

your key wasn't passed down to you by a family member."

The key, I think, and automatically reach for my neck, where I'm still wearing it on a string.

It's Lucia who notices the gesture and nods. "You used it to find and bring back your spirit. You have one, right? You said before, you left at home?"

"Yeah, right. I was suddenly in a room full of doors and that's where I found Yoru."

They all look at each other in dismay. "Are you saying you were alone in the Odyss?" asks Brad.

"Er, if by Odyss you mean that space with all the doors, then yeah. I opened a kind of gateway in a painting with the key and then I found myself in this other world."

"Unbelievable," exclaims Brad. "She was alone in the Odyss, without any help!"

"Did you see any Noctu?"

"Noctu?" I'm starting to think this was all a bad idea. I can't understand anything they're saying.

"A kind of monster surrounded by black smoke," Lucia explains.

"I got away from it, but it was a close call," I admit, eliciting more astonished looks.

"Wow!" James murmurs appreciatively. "I was so glad I didn't have to go there alone to get Trias. I had a teacher with me." He notices my enquiring look and adds, "I found the key in an antique store. It changed shape and glowed, but only I could see it. When a key is in the possession of a key carrier, it comes to life and sends out some of its power. Some key carriers can see it, and there are a few of us here at this school. Anyway, that's how they became aware of me."

"I guess a lot of this is new information, yeah?" asks Max. "I can't help wondering..."

She's interrupted by loud engine noises coming in through the open window. James stands up and looks out.

"So he's back."

He glances at me and seems to know something I don't.

Less than a minute later, Ayden enters the room and looks at us. When he

sees me, his eyes grow dark and cold as ice.

“So, you’re actually here? I was hoping you’d have some sense and turn down the offer.”

“Thanks for the warm welcome. I can hardly contain myself,” I snap. I stick out my chin and have to restrain myself from giving him another piece of my mind. I don’t want to air my dirty laundry in front of the others.

“You’re unbelievably stubborn. Running to your doom with your eyes wide open. That’s the last thing we need here.”

“I’m perfectly capable of deciding that for myself. And I guess the principal doesn’t share your opinion. He didn’t offer me a place for no reason, despite your *kind* recommendation.”

I actually don’t have the faintest idea what I’ve gotten myself into, but the more Ayden rails against me, the more determined it makes me. And he seems to realize this. He strides over to me, grabs my wrist and drags me out into the corridor so fast I can’t stop him.

“What are you doing?” I hiss, freeing myself from his grasp as soon as I regain my composure. I fold my arms in front of me and glare at him. It hurts so much to see him, but at the same time there’s this all-consuming rage. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?! Do you enjoy toying with girls’ emotions?”

One look is enough for me to realize the truth, and it’s worse than I figured. He doesn’t give a damn about me, just like all the other girls he’s probably pulled the same shit with.

“Listen to me carefully,” he warns me. He leans in close, hunching slightly so that our eyes are at the same level. His are practically blazing, and my instinct is to retreat, but I don’t want to show any weakness. “You don’t belong here. I’ve seen right through you, and I’m never wrong. You’ll flunk this school, and the sooner you realize that the better. Take it from me – you should leave voluntarily before you get yourself into some serious trouble that could cost you everything. Because this is no game. Your life is on the line, all of our lives are on the line. So beat it!”

With that, he turns and leaves me standing here. The others peer through the door at me. Luckily we were too far away for them to hear anything.

“So, Ayden found you,” Brad comments. “We knew he was out on

assignment to test a candidate. But we didn't know it was you."

"There can be several hunters out searching for candidates at any given time, so we couldn't be sure which one found you," Lucia explains.

"He looked pretty pissed," says James.

"When does he not?" Brad asks, rolling his eyes.

Max comes to stand beside me and asks, "Everything okay? Ayden can be pretty abrasive, but he doesn't mean it."

"Oh really? That's news to me," Brad chimes in, earning scowls from Max and Lucia.

"Anyway, you guys already seem to know each other well," Max continues. "So you know he has his moments."

I shake my head and say, "Uh-uh, I don't know him at all. I thought I did but..." I swallow and trail off.

Max smiles reassuringly and says, "Who cares? You're here now and you're one of us. What kind of spirit do you have? What abilities does it have?"

"No idea," I admit.

"Hmm, so you're still in the discovery phase," she surmises. "Then you should check out the individual courses and start putting together a timetable. You can come with me if you like, I'll show you around."

She gives me a friendly smile and I'm relieved by her offer. I'm overwhelmed by all the new impressions, not to mention my encounter with Ayden. I glance down the corridor in the direction he went. How could he fake it with me like that? How could he mislead me so blatantly? But I guess I have to put all that behind me, even if it seems impossible right now.

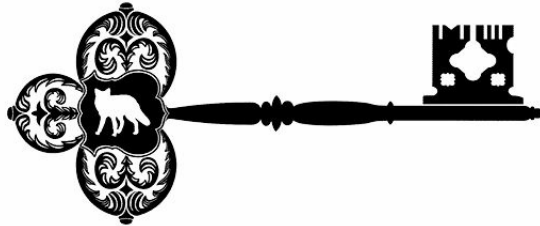
"First I'll take you to our Head of School. He'll want to greet you and give you some information to take away. I'm happy to wait for you, and then you can come to class with me."

"Thanks, that's really kind of you."

"No problem."

I follow her, excited to find out what awaits me.

Chapter 23



As we walk along the corridors, I take in my surroundings and wonder which questions to formulate first.

“This must be a whole new world for you.”

“You can say that again,” I reply, looking at two girls walking past us. They’re accompanied by an ermine-type creature and a silver badger.

“How long have you known about the spirits? And how did you get your, uh, bird?”

“My bird’s called Flit,” Max says with a smile. “I was eight when my grandmother died. My key belonged to her.” She lifts the hem of her shirt and I see a delicate key attached to her waistband. “As soon as a key carrier dies, the key seeks out a successor – unless someone gets their hands on it before it can begin its search. Then it remains in their possession, and can be transferred to a key carrier of their choosing. But normally, we let the key choose its new carrier. It’s often a family member, but not always. It’s not clear how the carriers are selected, but they have to have the odeon. That’s what creates the bond with the spirit, and as soon as that’s established, the spirits draw on the odeon to strengthen their own power. If the bond is strong, we can also access the spirit’s power and use it for ourselves.”

My eyes widen and it takes me a while to digest everything I’ve just heard. Yoru gets strength from me, and when I have a strong connection with him, I can access his power too.

“Anyway, I knew about everything before my grandmother died. Light – that was the name of her spirit – was always at her side, and when she died, it returned to the world of doors, the Odyss. But she wasn’t the only one in our family to have a spirit,” Max continues with a smile. “The gift was also

passed on to my father. His companion is a lynx. So I had contact with this world early on, and for me it's nothing unusual. It was strange spending all those years thinking I would probably get a key spirit of my own – but not until the death of my grandmother or my father.”

“That’s a really eerie thought,” I have to agree.

Max nods. “Yeah, but I was really well prepared for that moment by my family, and the key makes me feel like I always have a part of her with me.” She looks at me and smiles. “But enough about me. What kind of spirit do you have? You said his name was Yoru, right?”

“Yeah, right. He’s a fox, or rather a kitsune.”

Max looks baffled.

“He has three tails. I found out that these creatures are called kitsune – fox spirits. They’re supposed to have all kinds of magic, which they often use to provoke people, including shapeshifting. But he hasn’t shown me anything like that so far.”

Max is still gaping at me, as if I just said something about aliens. “You think he can change his shape?”

“Well, he doesn’t assume human form, but he changes into a cat. He makes sure I’m the only one who can see his true form.”

Now Max can’t help laughing. “Sorry. If I grew up without this knowledge, I’d probably draw the same conclusions, but it sounds really funny. A shapeshifter.” She shakes her head, amused. “It’s a protective mechanism that all key spirits have naturally. Only key carriers can see what they really are. To everyone else they look like normal animals.”

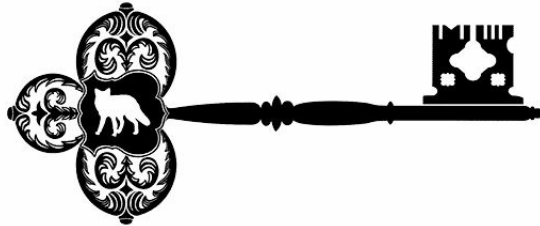
“So Yoru didn’t do it deliberately?”

“No,” Max says, putting her arm around my shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. At least from now on you won’t have to figure everything out for yourself. You’ll find answers here, plus your bond with Yoru will strengthen. Nice name, by the way, sounds cool.” She rolls her eyes. “I wish I was a little older when I named my spirit. Flit. But what can you expect from an eight-year-old whose favorite movie is Pocahontas and the main character also has a hummingbird as a companion?!”

I laugh, and the tension of the last few hours melts a little. But only for a moment, because we arrive at the principal’s office. Will I get to ask him a

few of my most pressing questions?

Chapter 24



Teresa, so nice to see you,” says Mr. Collins.

He’s sitting behind his desk in a surprisingly large and modern-looking office. Light floods through the high windows, making the bright, fresh colors of the room almost glow. He stands up and comes to shake my hand.

“Have you had a chance to look around? I hope you like what you’ve seen so far.”

“Yes, definitely. I just feel a little swamped by all the new information.”

“That’s understandable. But rest assured that you and your key spirit are welcome here. We didn’t select you for no reason.”

That makes me think of Ayden, who has a very different opinion.

“How did you even find me?”

“Well, we know all of our key carriers and keep our eye on them and their families, especially when there’s a death. Frida was very special. She worked for the school for many years as a secretary, so I knew her well. It wasn’t easy tracking down her family. But in the end we found you and your mother. It soon became clear to us that your mother couldn’t be a key carrier. So that left only two possibilities: either the key would choose you as its new carrier, or it would seek out another person. To ascertain that, we had to... how can I put it? Get to know you better. I learned that you were moving to San Francisco, into Frida’s old house. I made some inquiries about you, including which school you would attend.”

“And you sent Ayden there ahead of me, so he had time to familiarize himself with my new school?”

“It was his job to form an impression,” the principal confirms.

“And what about my mother? You said you tested her too?” I ask, surprised.

“Just a small test. Your mother was unaware of it.”

“And then the second test is carried out by these so-called hunters?” I ask.

Mr. Collins looks slightly surprised. “You obviously learn fast, that’s encouraging.”

He smiles appreciatively. But it just makes me angry.

“So you think it’s totally okay to assign a young guy to me, to toy with my emotions and extract information from me?”

Mr. Collins sighs and folds his hands. “I can understand if you’re angry or even hurt. But it’s absolutely essential to build trust with the candidates so that they open up and our hunters can assess whether they’re suited to our school.”

Well, he certainly achieved that. I trusted him completely and told him everything without reservation. The memory of this makes me boil with rage.

“But you decided to take me despite Ayden’s assessment. Why?” I ask.

“For one thing, because you already had a spirit at your side. It must have called you – you could never have found it alone. And because there already seems to be some kind of connection between you two. It protects you and never leaves your side. I think there’s a good chance you’ll be able to draw on your odeon to empower your fox. Ayden doesn’t think so, as you’ve obviously gathered. He’s an exceptional hunter, has a lot of experience assessing candidates, and I value his judgment. But I decided to give you a chance anyway.”

I’m not sure if I should be happy about this. One thing’s clear: I’m on trial and can’t afford to make any mistakes.

“Can you tell me more about Frida?” I ask, trying to change the subject and think about the things I’ve been so preoccupied with lately.

“Of course. What would you like to know?”

“Why did she paint those pictures? Why did she put the keys and those creatures with glowing eyes in them?”

Mr. Collins thoughtfully rests his chin in his hand. “Some key carriers try to prepare their relatives for the task that may lie ahead of them. That’s especially the case when there’s no contact between them. Your great aunt seems to have done this through her paintings. She knew you’d only be able

to see that information if you were a potential key carrier. And at some point the key itself begins to call out to its new carrier. In some cases, it appears repeatedly in dreams.”

That didn't happen to me, although I have to admit I've had some pretty bizarre dreams lately.

“Teresa, once you've learned more about us key carriers and our world, then you'll understand our methods.”

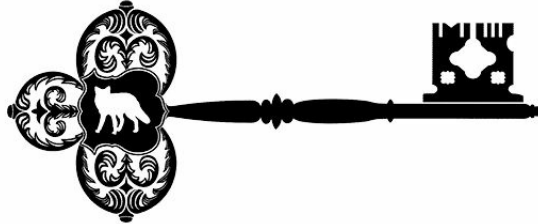
“Maybe,” I say. “But I don't think I'll ever approve of them.”

“That may be so,” says the principal. “But I hope you'll give us the same chance we're giving you. You can learn an incredible amount at this school, and you'll need to. For the sake of your key spirit if nothing else. But for now, just give yourself time to take everything in and attend the classes. I'm sure you'll soon find that you won't want to be without this institution.”

He stands up, shakes my hand, and wishes me well. All these new insights are buzzing in my head. I think about the fact that Frida used her paintings to tell me about this world. She wanted to prepare me for the creatures with the glowing eyes – the key spirits.

I walk down the corridor and wonder: why could Kate see the keys in the pictures? Are those visible to everyone? Was it only the spirits that she made invisible to normal people? But why? Maybe someday I'll learn the answer to that too.

Chapter 25



Max is waiting for me, as promised. We head to the first class together. When I enter the classroom, I'm stunned once again. It's full of plants and pulsing with life. The walls are a pastel green, which enhances this impression. Ergonomic chairs, height-adjustable desks, the latest model laptops – you can see at first glance that a lot of money has been spent on this place.

I sit at the desk beside Max and can hardly wait for the lesson to begin. I'm so excited about what we're about to learn. For the first time ever, I'm really looking forward to a class.

Students slowly drift in – among them are Brad, James, and Lucia. They greet me warmly and take their places.

A tall man enters the room. He has dark hair and a very prominent nose. It reminds me of a bird's beak. But his light brown eyes radiate warmth and soften his face a little.

"I see we have a new student trying out this class. I hope you'll choose to include it in your timetable. My name's Conrad Klein and this is the mathematics foundation course. Even if many people think that our work here has a very different focus, a high school diploma can never hurt. And for that, you have to pass the math exam. So I recommend that everyone attend at least the foundation course in this subject. So," he claps his hands and scans the room, "let's begin."

Part of me is relieved, because I definitely want a high school diploma, but I was expecting something else in terms of subjects. I only have to look around to remind myself that nothing here is normal. The room is full of key spirits casually flitting or wandering between the students or sleeping at their feet.

I try to concentrate on the class and keep up. I attend a double period in English, then a double period in chemistry, which is exhausting. So far no mention of the world of doors – the Odyss, as Max called it.

At lunch, I go to the cafeteria with my new friend and we wait in line to be served.

“How far is it to your house?” she asks me.

“About thirty minutes on the bus,” I reply, surprised by the question.

“We train with our spirits all afternoon.”

“And Yoru’s not here,” I observe. If he’s at home, I might just make it to the next class. But if I’m in luck, he’s followed me again.

“I’ll see if I can find him, otherwise I’ll go home and get him.”

I return my tray to the stack and head out. He’s nowhere around the entrance. I call him several times, but he doesn’t show up. Two girls pass me with their spirits and look at me doubtfully, almost contemptuously. I guess it’s unusual for the creatures not to respond to their key carrier’s calls – or maybe key spirits aren’t supposed to leave your side at all. I definitely don’t know enough about this stuff.

I have no choice but to catch the next bus home. I go upstairs to my room, calling out to my fox as I go, but no response. And when I open the door – no Yoru. I curse and wonder where the little guy could be.

“Yoru, come on. We need to go. You normally hang around me the whole time. Where are you?”

I know that my words are pointless, but I need to vent my anxiety. I wait a few minutes, but nothing happens. Time to head back if I don’t want to be late for class. I sigh and walk back to the bus stop. I guess I’ll have to attend the class without Yoru. I’m already picturing the strange looks I’ll get, but there’s nothing I can do about it.

I see the bus pulling out just as I approach the stop. Could my luck get any worse?! I decide to walk to the next stop. Better than just standing around, and I can keep an eye out for Yoru. He must be around here somewhere.

Along the way, I scan my surroundings and quietly call out his name. There are a few people in the street and I don’t want to look like a crazy person, so I contain myself. Whenever there’s no one near me, I intensify my search for the little fox. I even peer into other people’s backyards, up fire escapes, and

behind garbage cans. Did I just hear something? I go into a courtyard between apartment blocks, which is anything but clean. The buildings are so high that no sunlight makes its way in here. It's cold, the asphalt is cracked in several places, and putrid water has collected in the holes. Trash is scattered everywhere, dissolving in the puddles. I hear that sound again. It seems to be coming from the garbage bins. I walk toward them and I'm about to lean over them when something leaps out at me. I jump back as a stripy gray cat darts past me with a meow. A cat, not a fox.

"It would be great if you could show up right about now," I grumble once I get over my fright. I check the time. "Shit," I mutter. I've lost track of time and the class has already begun.

Damn it! Should I even bother going? Skipping class on my first day doesn't seem very smart.

So I head back out to the street, and I'm about to exit the courtyard when I hear another sound behind me. Is there a whole pack of cats living in here?

I turn around and my jaw drops. A huge animal rears up in front of me. It has a body like an ox and the muscular legs of a dog. Its growling muzzle is full of sharp teeth the size of daggers. But the most striking thing about it is all the festering open wounds in its flesh. I can see exposed ribs in places, and I can even see taut sinews in one of the legs. I feel sick. I want to turn my head and look away. But I'm paralyzed.

The creature digs its claws into the pavement with a clattering sound. Its black fur bristles and a growl rumbles in its throat. And that's when I realize: it's all over. The monster hurtles forward, takes a giant leap, and lunges at me. My legs are shaking, but I manage to take a few steps. I search for something to defend myself with. I grab a trash can lid and throw it up in front of me. The beast knocks me to the ground. I push back with the lid and feel its teeth scraping across the metal. My arm is wrenched from side to side, and I almost lose my grip on the lid. The monster lunges at me again and crashes against my shield in a frenzy, and I know it'll all be over in a matter of seconds. All I can think is: "Shit!"

The creature throws itself at me again with its full weight and my arms give way. I hear a horrible growl. I close my eyes. Nothing but darkness; my whole body is braced for what's about to come, and I know the pain will be

excruciating. But instead, the pressure on my chest suddenly disappears. I slowly open my eyes and can't believe what I see.

"Yoru," I breathe.

My fox has attacked the creature and sunk his teeth into its shoulder. The monster is trying to grab the fox. It tries to shake him off, throws itself back and forth. Eventually Yoru can no longer hold on. He's hurled a few meters through the air and lands elegantly on his paws.

"Watch out!" I cry, springing to my feet and searching for a weapon, something I can use to help Yoru. A couple of bricks are lying on the ground from the crumbling masonry. I pick them up and throw them at the beast. But that only distracts it momentarily, then it bares its teeth and growls at me.

"Shit," I hiss, and turn to run. My body is full of adrenalin, every muscle ready to engage in the sprint of my life. "Run, Yoru, get out of here!" I call out, hoping the monster will chase me so my fox can escape.

But something's happening to Yoru. His head is lowered, his eyes closed. His entire body is surrounded by a peculiar golden glow. He's getting bigger and his fur is turning blood red. Black symbols appear on the top of his head and when he opens his eyes again, they glow with a golden light. He rears up and fans out his nine tails.

He sprints at our enemy, opens his mouth, and spits fireballs at it. The monster dodges some of them, but it's big and slow, and some of them hit their mark. Where the fireballs hit, they eat into the creature's skin, making its flesh glow like lava. The patches spread out rapidly, and it looks as if the monster is decomposing. Its hind legs snap off and melt into a hot black mass, then its body follows. It scrabbles desperately with its front legs, as if trying to escape its fate, but it's futile – its front legs disappear too. It opens its muzzle soundlessly one last time, then everything melts into the dark gooey mass.

I'm dumbstruck, staring at Yoru, who's standing in front of me like some supernatural being – which is exactly what he is. But I guess it's the first time I'm fully aware of it. He's a key spirit.

"Yoru," I whisper. I'm about to go to him, but he turns his head and looks behind him, and I see more of these monsters closing in on us. Five of them. They're all different, but I have no time to take a closer look. I glance at

Yoru, who seems determined to face off against their superior number. I rush to him, bury my fingers in his fur and hold him firmly.

“Forget it, there are too many of them. Run, get out of here!”

I’m not sure how many of these opponents Yoru could take on, but I don’t want to find out. Thankfully, the fox follows me – he’s hot on my heels as I run toward the entrance to the courtyard. Then I hear a sound – a roaring engine – and I can’t begin to describe how relieved I am to see a familiar face. Even if he’s in my bad books at the moment, I’m so glad to see him.

“Come on,” Ayden yells, extending his hand. I grasp it, Yoru transforms back into the little fox and leaps into my arms. I hold him tightly with one hand and cling to Ayden with the other, and he accelerates.

This time I’m extremely grateful for his reckless riding style, because the creatures can’t keep up.

“I warned you,” I hear him say once the monsters are out of sight. But he doesn’t slow down. My heart’s still pounding.

I realize I haven’t replied. “What do you mean?” I ask.

“You don’t belong at our school. You’re putting yourself in danger as long as you’re a key carrier.”

“Are you saying those things, those monsters, are after me and my key?”

“We call them Noctu, and yes, they hunt us key carriers. They lurk in quiet places where they can target individual victims without being seen. They kill us and take our keys. Then they use them to recruit more Noctu, and they keep themselves alive with our energy.”

“You mean, we’re some kind of food for them?”

“Something like that.”

I recall moments when Ayden behaved strangely – the first time I rode on his bike and he suddenly started speeding. When he broke off the kiss. Were these monsters around then too? It makes sense. And something else becomes clear to me: if these creatures hadn’t been lurking around, Ayden probably wouldn’t have interrupted his insidious plan that evening. He would have kissed me, kept toying with me, dropped me home, only to deliver his report to Mr. Collins the next morning – as he did. I try to swallow back my pain and anger. This is the wrong time to confront him. First I need some answers.

“And what... what are these Noctu?” I ask.

“Basically, they’re humans like you and I. Many of them still look human. They have spirits like we do, but totally different motivations. They’re always trying to increase their power and do whatever they can to escape mortality. They hunt ordinary people and steal their dying breath. This means the soul can’t be reborn, but the Noctu use its power to reinforce their own magic and escape death a while longer.”

I shake my head. None of this makes any sense. Monsters, Noctu, who murder people and are after me and Yoru.

“The creatures that just tried to kill you are no longer human. They once were. At some point, they tried to unite with their spirits – something that only the most experienced key carriers should attempt. If you go too far, you lose yourself – you can no longer separate yourself from your key spirit and you merge with it. You become one, forever. At that point, there’s not a lot left of either the human or the spirit. There’s just this animal that slowly decomposes. And if it can’t keep itself alive with the breath of a dying person, the body just keeps disintegrating and finally dies.”

“Sounds like something out of a science fiction story,” I mutter, clutching Yoru tighter. “What have I gotten myself into?”

“I warned you,” Ayden reminds me. “You don’t belong with us. As long as you have your key, you’ll be hunted. Go to Mr. Collins. He’ll take you into the Odyss so you can return your fox and leave the key with us. It’ll find someone else, someone who’s prepared to fight.”

A lump forms in my throat. His words really hurt, but I get where he’s coming from. Am I cut out for fighting? Can I imagine living in constant fear?

“And you fight these creatures?” I ask.

He nods. “I was confronted with this world and the Noctu from a young age. I’ve been training since I was small. Now I’m a hunter. Most of the students at our school want to belong to that group, to play a part in destroying the Noctu. But it takes a lot of training. You have to achieve a really strong bond with your key spirit to be recognized as a hunter.”

“And part of the job is testing candidates,” I add, wondering why anyone would want to be a hunter. Their lives seem to consist of nothing but fighting and deception. “Why didn’t Mr. Collins tell me that right from the start? He

could have warned me about these creatures.”

“Students don’t often get into situations like this. As long as we don’t use magic outside of school, the Noctu can’t locate us. They have to search for us just like ordinary people. Plus, our school is protected by an enchantment, making it impossible for our enemies to find it. But somehow you keep attracting trouble.”

“Look who’s talking. They’ve been after you a few times, or am I wrong about that?” I assume he knows what I’m hinting at.

He shakes his head. “I think that was a Noctu, but I don’t know how it found us. With you around, the best option was just to disappear. You would have been a hindrance to me.”

I’m suddenly aware of how close I am to him and I try to slide back a little, which isn’t easy to do without falling off the bike.

“You manipulated my emotions,” I remind him again.

“I was trying to find out what I needed to know to get a clear idea of what kind of person you are. And now I have: you’re weak in every way.”

“Oh, how nice that you can figure all that out from a few conversations and my reaction to you hitting on me, Mr. Psychologist.”

“Believe whatever you like. I’ve done this before and I know what I’m doing.”

I just groan and shake my head. “So sad. You’re actually proud of what you do.”

“Save your moralizing and just admit it: you’re not up to this. Hand in your key and go back to your old school. If I didn’t show up just now, you’d be dead.”

I swallow hard. There’s nothing else to say. Ayden drives me home in silence – the class is almost over anyway.

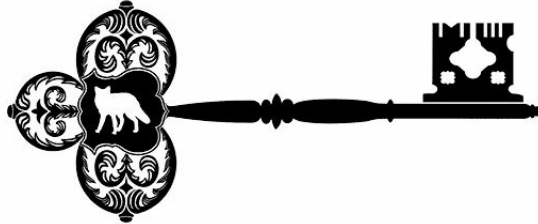
I slowly dismount, then I look him in the eye.

“Why did you come? And how did you find me?”

“You didn’t show up for class. Mr. Laydon sent me to look for you. My key spirit found you. He’s good at tracking people.” He looks at me through his helmet visor, and his gaze bores into me despite the plastic separating us. “I hope you learned your lesson today.”

He revs the bike and rides off.

Chapter 26



My eyes are closed and I listen to my breathing, feel my ribcage rise and fall. I tense the muscles in my right arm and focus on the sensations. What does that do to my body? What do I feel? I'm trying to keep all my thoughts at bay: of Ayden, who despises me at least as much as I despise him, and who goes to the same school as me. Of the spirits that go in and out of that place. Of the Noctu, who are out to get me. Of my fox spirit, who can transform into this supernatural fighting creature. Oh yeah, I almost died today.

I sit up and glance at my phone. The display still shows the instructions for progressive muscle relaxation. But I don't feel relaxed at all. I feel like my life is completely slipping away from me right now – for good reason. I almost DIED today! I don't think someone my age should have a near-death experience. Although... is there any suitable age for that? My attempts to redirect my thoughts has failed miserably. All I can think about is what happened today, which was a lot, and pretty scary.

Basically, I only need to ask myself one question: what do I do now? But I can't answer that. Ayden says I don't belong at the school. He manipulated me, tested me, and it's an unbelievably horrible feeling. But what's worse is this voice in me that keeps whispering: is he right? What do I know about this world of spirits, Noctu, and dying breaths? Is this really something I want to get involved in? Do I have a choice? Could I just forget all this and go back to a normal life? And most importantly: could I really give up Yoru? Take him back to the Odyss and forget about him? I mean, the key chose me, and Yoru called me to him.

I look at my fox spirit. He's lying by the bed, sleeping with his head on his

paws as if nothing has happened. I don't understand how he can be so relaxed after all that.

What if I run into the Noctu again? Do they know something about me? Have they been following me for a while? I felt afraid at times, like I was being watched. Was that the Noctu? But why didn't they attack me? I would have been a pretty easy target. None of it makes sense. I groan and cover my eyes with my hands. I wish I could stop thinking about it all.

At that moment, my phone beeps. I have a message. It's from Sue.

"Hey, how are you? Leah, Tonya, and I are on our way to the mall. Shopping! We're thinking of you. Oh yeah, and we have a great idea. But I'll tell you about that later."

I type an innocuous reply and feel guilty for not being more interested. But it feels like she's from another life that I can never return to. I send the message and see that another one has come in. From Noah. It's just a few lines, but it makes me smile.

"How's the new school? Is it worst-case scenario: classmates all super-nerds who panic when they get an A- and reach for their asthma inhalers? And teachers writing entire essays on the whiteboard while you try to keep up? I hope they at least go easy on you in P.E. It would be irresponsible to overtax the poor asthmatics."

I quickly type a reply. "No super-nerds and no teachers living in a world of their own. But there's this guy who I can't stand the sight of. Other than that, nice classmates, great facilities, everyone's really friendly... but still not my world somehow."

The reply comes promptly. "I totally get it. Nice classmates are the last thing you want. But seriously, I'm sorry to hear about the stupid guy. Don't let him ruin everything. You're strong and he'll just break his teeth on you. And without teeth he won't be so intimidating, right?"

I laugh and type a final message. "He's got this really angry stare. My one small pleasure is that I drive him nuts. Because he can't stand the sight of me either. Thanks for your messages, anyway. I'll try to remember your tips."

"Good luck."

I put my phone away and look at Yoru, who's still sleeping. "So, my big little fighting fox? What do you say? Should we give up or keep going to this

weird school?”

He lifts his head, tilts it, and gives me a piercing look. I nod. “I agree. They’ll soon see what we’re made of.”

I stand up, feeling more like myself, stronger. I won’t give up. Never!

It’s evening and Mom rushes to my door wanting to know exactly how my first day at the Siena Hartford Academy went. I can see how proud she is, and I feel bad not telling her the truth. But I’m struggling to understand it all myself, so how am I supposed to explain it to her?!

After a good meal, I sit with her in front of the TV and forget all my problems for a few hours. I send Kate a message telling her I’m doing well, and get a sincere reply: “I’m sooo glad, even though I miss you like crazy.”

I go to bed with so many impressions and thoughts in my head that I’m sure I won’t be able to sleep. But somehow it doesn’t take long, because when I open my eyes it’s morning and my alarm is blaring. I switch it off, get ready for school, and leave, this time with Yoru.

On the way to school I keep glancing around anxiously. Is one of those creatures nearby? Yoru seems relaxed, and I hope he’ll detect any danger in time. But still I’m wary. When I arrive at school I breathe a sigh of relief.

The morning proceeds much like my first day, and I’m almost disappointed. Somehow, I was expecting more from this school. When will I finally learn something about Yoru? When do I get to ask all my questions?

The answer to that: training.

It starts after lunch. My class goes to one of the school gyms. Like everything else, this is really modern and well equipped. But it’s an athletic facility, and at first I feel pretty unenthusiastic. Sports are really not my thing, but I guess that has to change quickly if I want to survive. As usual, the spirits arrive with their students, but they look more alert than they were in the other classes.

A short, wiry woman enters. She exudes such an air of combative athleticism that I feel weak at the knees. She has arms some men would be jealous of. And I can see a sixpack under her tight top. I swallow hard. I hope I survive this class. A man enters too. He has short blond hair and looks no less fit than his colleague.

“We have a new student, is that right?”

I raise my hand. “I’m Teresa Franklin and this is Yoru,” I say with a nod at my fox.

“I’m glad you could make it today. I’m Mr. Laydon and this is Ms. Rupert.”

At that moment, the door opens and a few more students enter.

“Sorry we’re late,” says a tall boy with an otter.

I snort quietly when I see Ayden in the group. Of course he’s here. So far I’ve been lucky enough to not have any classes with him, but I knew that wouldn’t last. What surprises me is that I can’t see a spirit with him.

“Ayden found you yesterday, I hear,” Mr. Laydon continues. “You had a run in with a few Noctu.”

I nod slowly and feel all eyes swivel toward me.

“Then tell us about the fight. What techniques did you and your fox use? How many attackers did you neutralize? Obviously, you don’t have a lot of combat experience. Fortunately, it’s not often that one of our students gets into a fight, but it happens now and then, and past experience shows that most students instinctively know what to do.”

Oh yeah, I knew very instinctively that I had to either run or die. A true warrior.

I’m not sure what the guy wants to hear. If he’s expecting some kind of heroic story, he’s going to be disappointed.

“I was looking for Yoru.”

Some of the students raise their eyebrows. Great start.

“I went into this courtyard because I heard a noise. And I found one of those things there, a Noctu. I looked for something to defend myself with, and picked up a trash can lid.” I describe the rest of the fight. “Then more monsters came at me. Ayden came around the corner on his bike, Yoru and I jumped on, and we got out of there.”

I shrug. Not a glorious story, I know. The two teachers also look stumped.

“So you didn’t guide your spirit or give it any commands? You and your fox didn’t consciously share or access each other’s odeon?”

My baffled expression answers that question.

“Okay,” says Ms. Rupert, running her hand through her silvery blonde hair. “You’ll learn all that here. Not easy, I know, but necessary, as we can see

from this fight.”

“I’m just glad I could stand my ground for as long as I did and survive it,” I reply, eliciting frowns from both teachers.

“Survival is the absolute minimum requirement,” Mr. Laydon explains. He claps his hands. “Right, you all know what to do. Get to work.”

The students spread out around the room. Some of them practice in pairs. Their spirits transform, grow bigger, take flight, change their colors and shapes. I don’t even know where to look. Then I see snowballs flying through the air, whirlwinds being whipped up, rain pouring down from nowhere and flooding parts of the hall, and feel like I’m in a dream. I guess I’m about to find out whether it’s a nightmare.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a snowball speeding toward me and instinctively duck. But before it reaches me, it smashes against an invisible barrier. I assume this is some kind of shield to stop the hexes reducing the whole place to rubble and ash.

Other students are training on the kind of equipment I’ve seen in fitness studios. Their animals do laps of the hall and seem to get faster and faster.

Mr. Laydon comes to me and says, “So, let’s see what your spirit can do. What do you know about him so far?”

I raise my eyebrows and once again have no idea how to answer him.

“Well, he can change his appearance. In the fight yesterday, he suddenly got really big, he was glowing and had nine tails. There were also these symbols on his head.”

Hmm, the teacher doesn’t seem happy with this answer either.

“Why don’t you show us what abilities he has.”

I turn to Yoru, whose expression looks just as uncertain as mine. I bend down and say, “Can you quickly transform yourself? We’re going to do some training.”

The little fox does nothing, and again the whole class is focused on me. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do.

“You need to give him a nudge with your odeon. That’s the signal for him to take on his true form,” the teacher explains.

“Er, yeah, I’m sorry, but I don’t know how to do that. Can you explain it again in a way that someone that’s never had anything to do with these

creatures could understand?” I ask. I mean, what does the guy expect from me?!

Ms. Rupert steps forward and tries to help. “You concentrate your odeon on a point and then transfer it to your spirit in a sudden impulse. He senses it and can use the energy you send to transform himself.”

Yeah, that’s way more enlightening. It’s all Greek to me, and I guess they can see it in my face.

“The odeon can manifest in different ways,” Mr. Laydon lectures me. “It could be a bright light or a heat source.”

“Some people describe it as bright colors,” Ms. Rupert adds.

Bright colors... I wonder if these teachers took one too many hits to the head during a fight.

“Why don’t you just try it a few times?” She pauses for a moment. “Maybe it would work better if there’s not so much attention on you.”

Well that’s a step in the right direction.

“If you need any help, we’ll come around later and check in with you and your fox.”

Great, time pressure now too. I sigh and focus my attention on Yoru. “So, what are we going to do, little big guy?” I scratch him under his chin and he closes his eyes appreciatively.

“That won’t help,” says a harsh voice, cutting through the air. I straighten up and see Ayden, whose expression is stony.

“Great advice, really helpful,” I snap. “You can focus on your own key spirit now.” I look around demonstratively – there’s still no spirit anywhere near him. “He probably can’t stand being around you either,” I mutter.

I turn back to Yoru and stroke him again. “Want to give it a try? You can transform, like you did before, and we’ll show these guys.”

I hear Ayden snort loudly. “If there was ever any doubt whether you belonged here, you’ve now dispelled it completely. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Anger begins to bubble up inside me. Who does he think he is?! Standing around, staring at me and making fun of me!

“Why don’t you mind your own business? You can’t stand me, and trust me, it’s mutual. Just leave me alone.”

“So you can keep kidding yourself that you can make it at this school, in this world?” He snorts with laughter. “You have no idea how to handle your key spirit. You can’t even get him to transform. He doesn’t listen to you, he just does what he wants. And you give him food scraps instead feeding him with your odeon.”

Fine, at least now I know what key spirits normally feed on. Still, I never had the sense that Yoru only eats the food I give him out of desperation.

I feel Ayden’s icy stare scraping down my spine like a dead person’s fingernail. I try to ignore him and focus on Yoru.

“You’re a joke, you’re weak, gullible, and totally superficial. It was so easy to manipulate you.”

I’m speechless. Rage surges in me like a hot wave. I see his incredible green eyes in my memory, looking at me like I was something precious to him. That inimitable smile, his warm arms, his melodious voice – which whispered nothing but lies to me. It was all a lie. Every movement, every touch, every word. I hate him!

He turns and mutters as he walks away, “Just leave. The sooner the better.”

“You asshole!” I scream at him. “Who do you think you are?! I could...”

My rage flares up. No, it’s more than that. At this moment, it’s pure hate, and it’s bursting out of me. It goes so fast that I don’t realize what’s happening at first. Something leaps over me and rears up in front of me. It’s Yoru, but he’s not the little, harmless fox anymore, he’s the glowing key spirit, and every muscle in his body is tensed. He opens his mouth and a brilliant fireball speeds toward Ayden. He just stands there, with no chance of dodging it. I can’t breathe, I just watch the flaming orb headed straight for him.

At exactly the moment when it should hit him, something throws itself in the way. A white shadow, which is hit by the fireball but doesn’t even flinch. The creature stretches up to its full height and curls its lips with a snarl. A huge snow-white wolf with green eyes that sparkle like emeralds. It’s surrounded by a gray fog that slowly darkens and then begins to spit sparks. I see a flicker of red – little flames beginning to flare up.

“Snow,” Ayden says calmly, as if nothing has happened. The wolf immediately turns around and trots after its master, who slowly walks away

from me. “Like I said – weak and pathetic. Who would have guessed that your fox is too,” I hear him say, but I don’t feel angry anymore. I’m still shocked by what just happened.

Mr. Laydon is suddenly standing in front of me, and he touches my arm gently. “I’ll have to report this. Attacking other students is unacceptable. You were lucky it was Ayden, who knows how to defend himself, but still, we don’t tolerate that kind of behavior.”

“It wasn’t deliberate,” I mutter. I gradually register my pounding heart and realize what just happened.

“Even worse,” mutters the teacher. “You have a lot to learn.”

“Which is why I’m at this school,” I say, looking him straight in the eye. “If I already knew how to do everything, I wouldn’t need help.”

Mr. Laydon scrutinizes me and says, “We’ll get there eventually. At least we got to see your fox’s fire magic. It’s really impressive and... a little surprising.”

I’m not sure what he means by that.

“Take a short break. I’ll... I’ll be right back. I need to inform the principal of...” He waves his hand feebly in the air. “...all this. If you need anything, ask Ms. Rupert.”

He walks away. I don’t ask the other teacher for help. She’s busy anyway, and keeps giving me these weird, disapproving looks. I seem to have sunk lower in the eyes of the other students too. Great, now I’m not just the new girl, I’m the assassin who attacked the wonderful Ayden. I glance in his direction. His wolf has retreated to a dark corner and I can only see its sparkling eyes. I can’t tell if it’s transformed back, but I’d really like to see it again. It’s an incredible animal – imposing and pretty scary too.

“What was all that?”

The voice makes me flinch. Max is standing beside me with an expectant expression.

“A fight with Ayden?” She giggles. “That’s asking for trouble.”

“It wasn’t deliberate,” I mutter. “He... he just made me see red.”

“He’s good at that,” she admits. “Although, it looks like he’s really got a thing for you. He doesn’t normally try this hard with anyone.”

Great, so I’m supposed to feel honored.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. He sure wasn’t expecting that. None of us were,” she adds, giving me a strange look. “Anyway, it was pretty exciting watching those fireballs flying across the room. Really impressive, and very rare. I bet Ayden didn’t like that.”

I frown. I’m not following her.

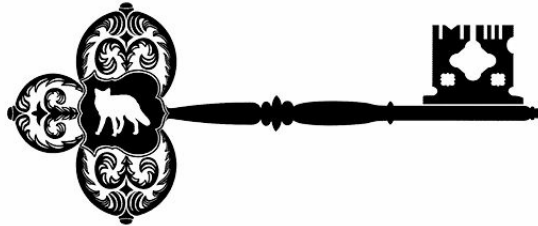
“You must have noticed that the key spirits all specialize in a particular magical element. The creatures aren’t all equally powerful by nature, and that’s is also influenced by the key carrier. The stronger your odeon, the stronger the spirit. But some elements are more powerful than others too. Earth is the weakest, then wind, then water, and the strongest is fire. Unfortunately, it’s also the rarest. At this school, there’s only Ayden’s wolf snow – and now your fox – that use fire. So until now Ayden had no competition. He’s really powerful and he’s the youngest student ever to join the hunters.”

Only Ayden’s key spirit and mine use fire. I can’t believe it.

“I guess that doesn’t exactly make things easier for you. The teachers will keep a closer eye on you now.” She lowers her voice slightly. “And they won’t be the only ones.”

I look at Ayden, who’s leaning against the wall, staring at me – and probably has been this whole time. I can clearly see the anger in his face. I guess I made a dangerous enemy today.

Chapter 27



So the three of us racked our brains for days and finally decided: we want to come visit you in two weeks. We would arrive Friday evening and go home Sunday. Not long, I know, but at least we get to see each other. You could show us around the city, we could go shopping, and generally catch up. What do you say?”

I read Sue’s message a third time and have no idea how to reply. I miss my old friends. We were always together – laughed together, talked, lived normal teenage lives. But that all seems so far away now. Now there’s Yoru, my new school, powers I need learn to control, and also great danger. Can I really risk involving them in that? What if we’re attacked while walking around town? I definitely couldn’t protect them, or even myself. I regret it from the bottom of my heart, but I don’t think I can take the risk. Still, I delay answering and just stare at my phone. Then I receive another message.

“How’s your day?” Noah asks.

“Exhausting, and it’s given me a lot to think about.”

“Sounds serious. I hope that guy you mentioned isn’t making your life difficult.”

“I’m totally capable of doing that myself,” I reply with a smiley emoji. “But he’s also part of the problem.”

“Hmm... does he really deserve to take up so much of your headspace?”

“Definitely not. But he keeps finding ways to rub me the wrong way.”

“How does the saying go? All bark and no bite.”

I smirk and think of Ayden’s white wolf.

“Believe me, he has teeth and knows how to use them. But thanks for your words. I’m not going to give up easily.”

“Didn’t think you would,” Noah writes back. “You’re not easily intimidated, I know that by now.”

His words do me a world of good, and I feel slightly liberated. I can’t give up. And maybe I can make it work with Sue, Tonya, and Leah after all. I quickly type a message.

“That’s great news. Yes, I have time and can’t wait to see you. I miss you guys so much.”

The bell rings, signaling the start of the next class. I put my phone away and head to the classroom.

Max catches up with me.

“Sorry it took so long,” she says.

She said she wanted to go get her books from her locker, but then she was gone the whole break.

“I saw Pam and she told me about her new boyfriend. He actually goes to another school, can you imagine? These things never work out, trust me. Lots of people have tried, but the lives we lead – you can’t keep that a secret long term.”

She puts a friendly arm around my shoulder.

“What about you? Do you have a boyfriend?”

“I have too much going on right now, I don’t need a boyfriend, especially not one I can’t explain all this to. It’s like you say – an outsider wouldn’t understand. And a guy from school...” I shake my head. “I need to focus on other things right now.”

“Very sensible,” she agrees. “But you still like to go out, right?”

I laugh. “Sure, I’m no hermit.”

“Cool, how about tonight? A few of us are going out for drinks. Want to come?”

“Sure, why not,” I say, and then something occurs to me. “Would it be okay to invite a friend from my old school? I haven’t seen her for a while and she could probably use a night out.”

I feel really bad that I still haven’t seen Kate since I changed schools. I’d rather have her visit me at home after school. I assume she’d prefer that too, but since the opportunity has presented itself...

“Sure, go ahead. I wasn’t planning to talk about school, so she won’t hear

anything she shouldn't."

I sit down at my desk. Max is taking out her things when the door opens and Mr. Brian enters – an older man with a slight hunchback and a very sinister vibe. At first glance, he looks like a boring old grouch. But Mr. Brian is an exceptionally good teacher. He teaches history and really brings the subject to life. Today it's about the Noctu and how they seek out the last breath of a dying person.

"In 1837 they wiped out an entire hospital. A number of them invaded it, attacking patients and killing them to take their last breath. The hospital was set on fire afterward to destroy the evidence. Attacks like this have happened now and again throughout history, but fortunately they're rare. The Noctu aren't stupid and they know the risks. Large-scale attacks like that make them vulnerable, because it all takes time. Time in which we can find them and neutralize them. As bad as such attacks are, they also give us the chance to kill a lot of Noctu, because it's no easy task tracking them down.

"As you know, this building is protected by special enchantments, making it impossible for our enemies to detect it. Even if they look up the school's address and stand right out front, they see something else – an abandoned building. When you students leave the premises, some of this protection sticks to you for a while. So it's not easy for the Noctu to get to you. The inverse is also true. Many of the Noctu live in the Odyss, which is why we seldom go there. In the past, there were many attempts to stage an attack on our enemies there. But it's their home and they know how to use the doors to escape us or launch surprise counterattacks."

I'm glad to be reassured again that we're safe here. Mr. Brian suddenly gives me a piercing look, and I feel like he's reading my thoughts.

"But of course the Noctu can be alerted to the whereabouts of a key carrier. If you use your spirit's power outside of the school, our enemies can sense the release of odeon. This method is often used by hunters to lure out the enemy, but even hunters only practice this technique with great caution."

I swallow hard. Yoru and I really need to work on getting our powers under control. I hate to think what would happen if Yoru accidentally transformed outside of school.

The bus slows and pulls up to the curb, and I see Max already standing at the bus stop. She waves, I get out, and she greets me with a hug.

“Lucia and Amber are waiting in the club. It’s not far,” she says.

I’m excited to check out the club Max has been raving about all day at school. She told me it’s fairly new but already really popular. Good music, great drinks, and bouncers who look the other way.

I check the time.

“I need to wait for Kate, but she should be here any moment.”

At least, I hope so. I was a little surprised when she immediately agreed to come. I was expecting her to say she needed to check with her mother first. But either she’s not home tonight, or Kate came up with a really good excuse.

I peer down the street, looking out for her bus, but there’s nothing in sight. Instead, I see Yoru sitting behind a hedge, not letting me out of his view. It’s comforting to know that he’s nearby and keeping tabs on me.

I look for Max’s key spirit, but can’t see it.

“He’s pretty good at hiding,” she says when she sees me glance around. She jerks her head at the branches of a tree. It takes me a while to spot Flit.

Then the bus arrives and Kate gets out. She looks a little tense, but she’s wearing a friendly smile. She hugs me and introduces herself to Max.

“Nice to meet you,” says Max. “Okay, let’s go.”

I can hear the excitement in her voice. We start walking, and it’s a long way. It takes us twenty minutes to get to the club, which is kind of tucked away, but the exterior lighting makes it look really inviting. The front is painted white and the windows are darkened, so you can’t see inside. We pass the bouncer, step inside and are greeted by loud music. We check our coats and go into a large room with cozy booths, a bar with stools, and even a couple of comfortable couches. To the right is a large dance floor with a DJ booth, where a young guy is holding one headphone to his ear and turning dials. The music is not really to my taste – something with a lot of bass and heavy beats that you can feel through the floor.

Someone waves to us. It’s Lucia. She’s taken over a booth with a good view of the whole venue. As I approach, I see another girl with her. She has striking red hair, bright blue eyes, and a very slim figure.

“I’m Tess,” I say. “You must be Amber.”

She nods. “You’re at our school now?”

“Yeah.”

“And you?” she asks Kate.

Kate shakes her head. “No, I’m at the school Tess used to go to. Unfortunately, I don’t have any exceptional talents.”

I guess it’s meant as a joke, but Amber doesn’t go for it. Her eyes narrow slightly.

“Hmm, an ignoramus.”

It’s obvious to me what she means. But Kate will interpret that differently.

I quickly change the subject and ask, “What do you all want to drink? I’ll go.”

“I’ll help you,” Kate offers, as I expected she would.

“I’m so glad you could come. I wasn’t sure if it would work out,” I say as we make our way to the bar.

“Mom’s at a benefit tonight. Dad’s there too. I told him I was going out with you. He was cool about it, and he won’t tell Mom. They’ll be out late, so I have time.”

We order drinks and they’re served in record time despite the crowd at the bar. When we arrive back at our booth, I hand Max her piña colada and take a sip of my mojito.

“Max was just telling me you hadn’t heard of our school before,” says Amber, staring at me. I’m uncomfortable with this subject, especially as Kate is sitting beside me and we can’t speak openly.

“No, I never really thought about special schools for gifted students. So I wasn’t aware of our school.”

“Most of us discover our gifts at a young age, but I guess there are exceptions.”

She sounds snooty and condescending. This girl is starting to get on my nerves.

“There’s a lot to get used to, but I’m doing okay.”

“Oh yeah, your clash with Ayden showed what you’re made of.”

Kate raises her eyebrows in astonishment and asks, “Ayden’s at the Siena Hartford Academy now? I heard he’d changed schools too, but I didn’t know he was offered a place there...”

“Uh, yeah, we were both selected around the same time and Ayden was already friends with a few students at the Academy,” I lie, hoping Amber will keep her comments to herself. “Mr. Marth must have been really surprised to lose two students at once to that school.”

Kate nods, but it’s hard to tell what she’s thinking.

“Anyway, that’s just how Ayden is,” Lucia chimes in, picking up the conversation thread. “When something irritates him, he can’t keep his mouth shut.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call him talkative,” Amber corrects her. “But he has other ways of making it clear when there’s something he doesn’t like.”

In my mind I hear the unspoken phrase: or someone. My fists automatically clench. One thing’s for sure: I can’t stand Amber.

“Well, luckily he doesn’t decide who gets to attend the school and who doesn’t.”

“Hmm, really?” she remarks, and I know what she’s hinting at. “Anyway, I hope you settle in soon. I guess it can’t be easy.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will. If everyone’s as friendly as you, then I’ll feel right at home in no time,” I sneer sarcastically.

“And you make it so easy for people to like you.”

“Right back at you,” I retort, glaring at her and sipping my drink.

“Well anyway, it’s nice to spend the evening together and have a chance to chat,” Max intervenes. “The club’s great and the guys here aren’t bad either,” she adds with a wink.

The three of them start commenting on every guy that comes into their line of sight. I drink more and feel the anger smoldering in my gut.

Kate gives me an encouraging smile and whispers, “So there are bitches at your new school too. And I thought you were finally rid of people like Maria.”

“That’s what I was hoping, but exceptional talents don’t necessarily equate to a high degree of friendliness.”

“Amber’s a real bitch,” Kate whispers. “I hope you don’t run into each other too often.”

I shrug. “I won’t put up with any shit from her. If all else fails, she can go for a swim like Maria.”

Kate looks past me and says, “Oh shit! Will you be alright, or should we leave?”

At first I don't know what she's talking about. Then I notice something's changed. Amber, Lucia, and Max all look distracted. They're looking at a couch niche on the other side of the room. I crane my neck and groan softly. Of course. Just my luck. Ayden is sitting on one of the couches. Was he outside when we arrived? Or did I really not notice him when we came in? He's with a couple of other boys. But my attention is drawn to the three girls sitting around him – or rather, one of them is sitting on his lap. He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and graces her with his incredible smile.

“He's found another one,” Amber groans. The disdain in her voice is unmistakable.

“He's easily amused,” says Lucia, still looking at him.

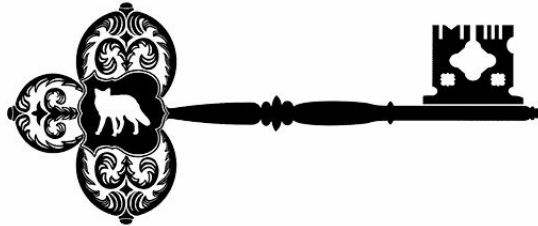
“I just don't understand why he always picks such bimbos,” Amber grumbles. I can't help wondering if she wishes she were the one on his lap.

The girl leans in really close to Ayden, giggling. I feel like I can see the deep green of his eyes from here. He smiles and she kisses his neck lasciviously. My stomach turns. I'm about to look away when he turns his head toward me. Our eyes meet and I can tell he already knew I was here. The smile on his lips is cold, and so is the fire in his eyes. There's nothing tender in them anymore, just contempt and something like loathing. He turns back to his plaything, lifts her chin, and looks into her eyes. Her lips part slightly. I remember being in that position very recently. I was so stupid.

I jump up – I can't stay here – and mumble, “I need some air,” then run outside. Within seconds I've crossed the club and opened the door.

Cold air rushes to greet me, and it feels so good. It numbs everything around me and especially inside me. My thoughts slow down, my heart stops pounding with rage, and something in me becomes very calm. At least for a brief moment.

Chapter 28



I breathe in the cool air, which tightens around my chest like a band of ice – but it’s somehow comforting. How can someone be so fake?! He hides behind the façade of his emerald green eyes, his provocative smile, and that voice that draws you into its spell. Like a male siren, I muse, and the analogy makes me smirk. Ayden would probably look good even with a fish tail.

“What a beautiful smile,” I hear a voice say.

I turn to my left to see a tall guy step out of the shadows. My heart tightens with apprehension. Where’s Yoru? Is this guy going to attack me? Is he one of the human Noctu? Is that why he’s here? These are the first thoughts that race through my mind, but then I realize he can’t be. He comes closer and I can see he’s put some effort into his appearance. Styled hair, black jeans, a close-fitting blue shirt, and a cloud of cologne that envelops him as if he’s just bathed in the stuff.

He leans against the wall beside me, juts his chin and murmurs a flirtatious, “Hi.” I get a whiff of cigarettes and alcohol, although I have to say, the guy doesn’t seem all that drunk.

“Just getting some air? That pout is really cute, by the way,” he continues when I don’t react to his extremely creative pickup line.

“That’s how I look when I’m annoyed. I’ll be straight with you, I’m having a hard night and I really don’t need you to make it worse. So do me a favor and just leave me alone. Thanks.”

I turn away and count the seconds until my words have sunk into his alcohol-numbed brain.

“You’re a sassy one, and you look so innocent.”

I groan. I turn around and glare at him. “It must be the light, it’s deceptive.”

He puts his hand on the wall right by my head and leans in. “Not so innocent then. There’s something about you that I’m really digging right now.”

I sidestep him and reply, “I think I know what that is: I’m the only female in sight to try your moves on. But you’ve definitely picked the wrong girl.” I push him away from me and walk past him. “Great, this night just keeps getting better.”

I’m about to go back into the club when he grabs my hand and pulls me around the side of the building. It’s only a few meters and it all happens so fast I don’t have time to react. I pull myself together and wrench myself free of him.

“Hey, are you nuts?!” I snarl, shoving him away from me, but his arms are right there, reaching for me, grabbing me and squeezing my wrists like they’re in a vise.

“You’re hurting me!” I hiss. “Let go of me, dammit! Have you totally lost your mind?!”

My words clearly have no effect on him, because he tightens his grip and pulls me in toward him. His funky breath makes my skin crawl.

“No one talks to me like that. You got that? You need a guy to put you in your place.”

He wraps an arm around me and holds me so I can’t get free. My heart is racing. Anger, revulsion, and fear well up in me.

When a cold hand slides under my top, I yell, “Don’t you dare, asshole! I’ll kill you?! Stop that!”

But I can’t stop him groping me, I can’t defend myself, and he knows that. I glance around for help. But we’re at the rear of the building and there’s no one here, no street where a passerby could see us. And I remember how loud the music is inside. No one will hear my screams. Where’s Yoru? Why isn’t he attacking? But I already know the answer: the guy is an ordinary human and Yoru can’t show his true form.

Fingers creep like cold worms across my belly, then wander upward, leaving me with a feeling of utter disgust. I grunt and kick, but I’m scared.

“You’re so cute. I just knew it.” His hand wanders toward my waistband. “You feel so good and you smell incredible,” he pants into my ear. I feel like

I'm going to puke.

At that moment, I hear a quiet rustling in a shrub. I can't see anyone, but the sound is loud enough to make the guy look up nervously, turn around, and stare at the bush. That brief moment is all I need, and I know what to do. I turn my head and make out eyes in the bush. Yoru. He did help me. I ram my knee into the guy's groin as hard as I can. He screams like a wounded animal and goes down. His hands go to his crotch and he howls, which is music to my ears.

It takes all my self-control not to give him another one. Instead, I run as fast as I can to the front of the club. A figure comes toward me.

"Kate?"

She looks anxious, keeps glancing around. Then she sees me and stops. "Oh good, there you are. I have to go. Dad messaged me. They're about to head home. Mom had an argument with one of her friends and now she has a migraine. So she won't be in the best mood. I should go home before she catches me."

I nod and Kate hugs me goodbye and leaves. My heart is still pounding and I glance back at the path the guy dragged me down. A chill runs down my spine. I just want to go home.

Back in the club, I go to Max, who's still sitting in the booth with the others. "You okay? You were gone for ages."

"I just had an unpleasant encounter with a guy outside, but luckily nothing happened," I explain.

Images of what could have happened flash through my head. I flop down on a chair, drain my drink, and look up. Directly into Ayden's eyes. The girl is still on his lap, giggling cheerfully and prattling to him. But he's not paying her any attention. His gaze is on me, dark, menacing, angry. He was probably hoping I went home. He's clearly not thrilled to see me. Well, it's mutual. I've had enough for one day. Enough fighting for one evening. I'm tired and want to go to bed.

"I'm going home."

I stand up, and Max does too.

"I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have let you go outside alone. Are you sure you're okay?"

I nod and assure her it wasn't her fault.

"Still, I should come with you."

"You don't have to," I say.

But Max shakes her head and smiles. "No problem. I'm over this anyway."

She waves goodbye to her friends and we weave our way through the packed room. I sense a pair of eyes on me the whole time, and I'm sure they're as green as the densest forest, and dark, like a hurricane is raging in them.

We retrieve our coats and head for the bus stop.

"I'm sorry you had such a bad night," says Max as we walk down the empty street. She looks at me sideways. "I hope you defended yourself."

"I kicked him in the groin," I reply. "Yoru helped me by distracting the guy."

She raises her eyebrows. "You need your key spirit's help to defend yourself against a creepy guy?" She sounds a bit condescending, but then she puts a comforting arm around me. "Sorry, I keep forgetting you didn't grow up in our world and you have no training. Trust me, in a few weeks, a guy like that won't be a threat to you."

I'm not so sure. But I'll definitely try to acquire the necessary skills.

"And you said you had to defend yourself alone against the guy?" she asks.

I nod. "But if Yoru didn't show up, it could have ended badly."

"So Ayden wasn't with you," she says more to herself than me.

I look at her in surprise. "Why would he be with me?"

"He left for a while. I thought he might be looking for you. But I guess he just went to the bathroom."

"Or he saw everything and did nothing to help."

Did he want to watch me fight so he could mock me again? I recall his words: you don't belong with us. I secretly hope he was in the bathroom. The thought of him watching me in distress without doing anything makes me feel sick. Although I wouldn't put it past him.

"I'm sure he didn't see it," Max reassures me.

I nod and try not to think about Ayden. The street is totally empty. The streetlamps cast a gloomy light and make our shadows look like huge specters.

I look around me, confused. “Hey, did we come this way before?”

“No, we’re going a different way. Noctu often hang around here. So it’s better to take a different route.”

“Why didn’t we take this route earlier?”

“Don’t worry.” She glances sideways and her hummingbird comes and hovers beside her. But it looks a little different. It’s surrounded by a strange light. Is that magic?!

“What was that?” I ask, turning toward a noise I just heard. Was that something pawing at the ground? Flit darts around excitedly, and Max looks tense too.

“There’s a Noctu nearby.”

I hold my breath and try not to make a sound. But my heart is thundering in my chest so loud I’m sure anyone could hear it.

“Come on, this a rare opportunity. We can’t let it slip away.” She grabs my arm and tries to pull me toward the noise. I’m petrified and can’t believe what she just said.

I wrench myself free and glare at her. “You can’t be serious. Are you nuts?! Did you tell Flit to glow like that? Can the Noctu sense it?”

“Stop being so hesitant, so timid. We’ll never get the upper hand that way. We have to go on the offensive, give it our best shot, and be prepared to take risks. It’s not fair that only graduates and people with a lot of experience get to fight this war.”

Okay, Max has clearly lost her mind.

“Mr. Brian warned us today against looking for fights.”

I still remember the disapproving look he gave me. And now I realize – he wasn’t looking at me, he was looking at the girl sitting next to me. It was a warning to her. Does she have a reputation for breaking the rules and getting herself in trouble?

“Listen, there are two of us. Yoru uses fire, the most powerful form of magic, and I have training. We can do it. Imagine everyone’s faces when they hear we defeated a Noctu. You’ll get to prove yourself to them. Ayden’s eyes will fall out of his head. He won’t be the only one in our year who gets to fight.”

He can rampage around playing the warrior all he likes, but I have other

plans.

“Let’s just get out of here as fast as possible,” I beg her. “They don’t seem to have found us yet.”

“Are you sure about that?” she murmurs. There’s a chilling smile on her lips. Now I’m convinced Max planned this – that’s why we came this way.

“You’re insane,” I hiss. “What have you done?”

Then I hear a scratching sound. Bare claws on asphalt. I slowly turn around and see a dark figure looming out from behind a building. Its eyes are glowing red, its body swathed in dark smoke. It’s covered in gaping wounds, dangling shreds of flesh, and exposed bone gleaming in the pale lamplight. A chill runs down my spine.

“Now we finally get to prove what we can do,” Max whispers, looking gleefully at our adversary. “Flit!” she calls, and the little bird transforms fully. He gets bigger and his light intensifies. His tail feathers lengthen and fan out like shafts of light. His sharp beak glows golden. He opens it and calls out shrilly. A gust of wind accompanies the noise, sweeps up the trash at the edges of the street, and hits the Noctu. It’s flung backward and does a few somersaults before landing firmly on its feet.

“Again,” she mutters. Her bird glows even brighter. He flies up into the air and flings several swirling gusts at the enemy, which dodges each one of them so fast that the gusts just hit the asphalt and tear it up. The Noctu is headed straight for us, its hideous lips curled back.

I’m so scared I can hardly breathe. What do I do? How did I get myself into this?! I have no weapon, nothing I can use to defend myself. I can only hope Yoru is nearby. As soon as I think of him, I sense something to my left. A fox with blood-red fur and nine tails rushes past and rears up in front of me. He throws himself at the Noctu, and it slams against a wall and lies stunned on the ground. I can catch my breath, but not for long.

“I knew it! Let’s finish this guy off!” Max exclaims, launching her bird in another attack.

But I see a devious grin on our enemy’s lips and cry out to warn my friend.

“No, don’t!”

It’s too late. The Noctu lifts its front leg and a black mass shoots out of it, directly at Flit, who’s in a nosedive. The creature’s leg wraps around the

bird's neck like a tarred piece of rope. Flit makes a croaking sound and his eyes roll back. The Noctu flings him around, smashing him against the ground, the wall.

“Yoru!” I cry.

My fox attacks too. He runs at the enemy, opens his mouth, and spits several fireballs at the Noctu. But they don't have much effect. I realize it's about our bond. I'm not giving my key spirit enough oedon. I want to, but I don't know how. My fear takes my breath away. It's hopeless.

The Noctu sends out its other front leg and slings it in Yoru's direction like a column of black smoke. He jumps over it, but the leg twists like a snake, as if it has a life of its own. My fox evades it and hurls more fireballs, but he has no chance, and he's hit. He slams against a wall at speed and lies stunned on the ground.

The monster finally lets go of Flit. It flings him down the street and the bird lands on the asphalt, which cracks open like a grave under him. He just lies there, motionless. The Noctu sneers and slowly approaches us.

“Shit,” Max hisses. “Okay, there's no other way.”

She shoves me and I fall sideways. The Noctu looks at me, and Max sprints to pick up Flit, who has assumed his usual form and is still not moving. Then she runs down the street.

“Go! Run!” she calls after me, then disappears.

The creature watches her go, indecisive about who to pursue. I don't need to be told twice.

Yoru struggles to his feet. I call to him, “Hurry, this way!” and rush off in the opposite direction. Hopefully the creature is confused enough not to pursue us immediately.

I run along the street, hurtle around the corner of a building, and race across a courtyard. I make as many turns as possible, hoping to shake it off. My thoughts are in turmoil. I keep thinking about Max. How could she be so stupid?! At the same time, I desperately hope nothing's happened to her.

I'm gasping for air and all this running is sapping my strength, but I have to keep going. Then I hear something: scraping claws. The Noctu is close behind me. My legs are trembling with exhaustion. I look at Yoru and see the strained look in his eyes. I know what he's thinking. He knows we're being

hunted. I glance back and make out the dark figure in the gloom. It's going to kill us.

Ahead of us is a brightly lit street. I hear car engines and people's voices. There's life there, I'll be safe there. The Noctu seek out solitary victims, but they won't go where there are crowds. I summon my reserves. The creature behind me is closing in. It knows I'm about to escape it.

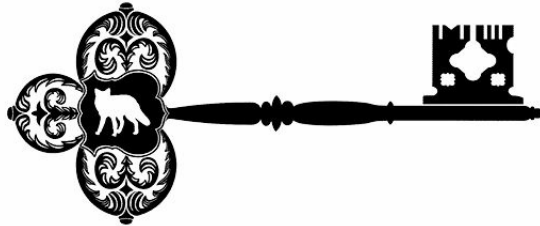
It'll do everything it can to stop me, and it's so fast. I think I can feel its teeth snapping at my heels. It pounces.

I dive too, out of the alley and into the middle of a sidewalk, and I scream as I fall on top of something.

Someone catches me, holds me. A warm, protective body.

I hear a soothing heartbeat, and when I look up, I see warm brown eyes with golden arcs dancing in them. I'm finally safe.

Chapter 29



Whoa! Slow down. Are you okay?” says a voice next to my ear. Noah gently pushes me away from him, and there’s a mischievous smile on his lips, which disappears when he recognizes me. “Teresa, you? This is a surprise. Funny, you of all people falling into my arms.”

I look back down the alley out of the corner of my eye. The Noctu’s eyes flash furiously at me, but it slowly retreats.

“Sorry. I almost knocked you down.”

I run my hand nervously through my hair and try to appear calm. I don’t want him to know what’s really going through my head.

“You okay?” he asks, stepping closer. He pushes back a strand of hair that’s fallen across my face and tucks it behind my ear. His golden eyes narrow slightly as he studies my face. I didn’t really take a good look at Noah the first time we met, and now it’s as if I’m seeing him for the first time. A slender but toned figure, a symmetrical face, dark brown, wavy hair.

“Uh, yeah,” I finally reply. “I just had a feeling there was... uh, someone behind me... and I wanted to get out of that dark alley as fast as possible.”

“Someone was following you?” he asks, and he strides toward the alley. “Maybe I can still catch him,” he growls.

I quickly grab his arm and hold him back. I can’t let him go down there. What if the Noctu’s still there? It could attack Noah.

“All good. I’m sure there’s no one there. It’s just my nerves. I’ve been a little on edge lately,” I admit with a smile.

“Okay, if you say so,” he says, glancing into the alley again. “Should I take you home?”

“Oh, you really don’t need to,” I say. I surreptitiously scan the area for Yoru

and see him dart behind a building. He may look like a normal house cat, but his behavior is pretty conspicuous. What kind of cat follows its human around town at a distance?

Noah shakes his head. “Which way are you headed?”

I don’t even know where I am, but I know the number of the bus I have to take, and I tell him.

“At least let me walk you to your stop. But hey, I’d rather take you right to your door. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’ve been kind of on edge lately is all. I should really stop watching horror movies,” I jest.

Noah smirks. “Wow, that’s a big sacrifice.” My sense of humor has finally returned and I chuckle. Noah responds with a warm smile. “I’m glad we ran into each other. Meeting like this a second time kind of feels like fate, especially with you literally running into my arms.”

I don’t really believe in fate or predestination, but I know what he means, and the thought appeals to me.

“Come on, let’s go.”

I’m aware of Yoru sneaking along behind us, so I don’t need to worry about him. But I wonder where Max wound up. When I think about what she did, it makes me angry. Then again, she did try to distract the Noctu in the end – although that failed completely. The fact that the creature chased me means she must be safe. And that’s the only reason I don’t go looking for her.

“So, tell me! Do you feel like you’ll be able to fit in okay at your new school?”

I’m grateful to him for changing the subject and trying to distract me with other things.

“It’s not easy, but I’ll get there somehow. As long as I can steer clear of Ayden...”

“Ah, so that’s the guy’s name. Well, if you make it clear you’re not intimidated by him, I imagine that’ll annoy him more than anything.”

He’s probably right. I look at Noah, grateful that he doesn’t ask more questions.

“I’m just trying to get by and avoid him as much possible.”

“It’s definitely not for me,” he says. “That kind of school, I mean. Sounds

really stressful, and it's kind of a world of its own. All those overachievers, gifted people – next to them I'd look pretty lame.”

I laugh, because that's exactly how I feel, but for totally different reasons.

“I'm trying to warm to that world,” I say.

We arrive at the bus stop. Noah looks at me as though he's wondering whether it's okay to leave me alone.

“You still look pale. Sure you don't want me to take you to your door?”

I think about it. I've pretty much pulled myself together and definitely don't need an escort. But it's nice with Noah – I can laugh with him and avoid thinking about certain things. So I nod.

“Actually, I'd like that, thanks.”

We sit facing each other on the bus and continue the conversation.

“My school won't score me any points on my résumé, but I'm okay with that. I'm happy there and I know I'll graduate. People often underestimate the importance of that.”

“Do you know what you want to do after?”

“College I guess. I'm interested in medicine. Depends on my grades.”

“If you're considering medicine, you can't be that bad. Maybe you should think about coming to my school,” I joke.

He pulls a mock-horrified face. It feels really good to talk about normal things. When I'm with him, I feel like a normal teenager and can forget my problems for a while. I'm thankful for that alone.

We arrive at my stop and he walks me to my door.

“Well, if you ever need to stumble into somebody's arms again, I'm available any time,” he says with a wink.

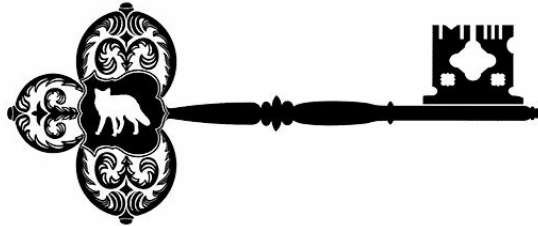
He hugs me goodbye and I notice how good he smells. I cling to him for maybe a moment too long, but I don't care.

I've had so much shit to deal with today and I just want to enjoy the comforting closeness of a friend.

When I pull back, he gives me a dreamy smile. He's so unlike Ayden. He can be kind of a tease, but at the same time he's so open and genuine that it really warms my heart.

“Take care, Tess,” he says, and waits until I'm inside. I lean against the door and hope to see him again soon.

Chapter 30



The next morning I feel good, and the first thing I do is check my phone. There's a message from Noah.

"I really enjoyed our chance encounter. Have a good day at school. Don't let anyone get you down."

I don't intend to.

When I arrive, I look out for Max. I find her in one of the common rooms. She's sitting with Lucia, James, and two other boys whose names I don't know, but I'm not focused on them anyway.

"Nice to see that you're okay," I snap at her. "How can you sit there so casually, as if nothing happened? You get us into a fight and then just leave? That monster chased after me, not you. Did you even come looking for me?!"

Max's eyes widen for a moment, and I'm sure she's about to get defensive, but then she takes a deep breath and says, "You're right, that was really shitty of me. I thought we had a chance if we worked together. I mean, Yoru has fire magic. Imagine if we'd defeated that Noctu! People would finally take us seriously and recognize our talent."

"Talent?!" I snarl. "I'm just glad if I can send Yoru enough odeon to make him transform on command, and you get us mixed up in a fight?!"

She narrows her eyes and presses her lips into a thin, angry line. She takes another deep breath and tries to relax. "Sure, I get it. You're right to be pissed at me. And I'm sorry, okay? It won't happen again."

She gives me a hug and that shuts me up. I'm still furious – we could have been killed. But Max has admitted her mistake and apologized. So I have no choice but to swallow my anger.

The rest of the day passes slowly, and I'm grateful for the ordinary,

uneventful classes. At least I can keep up. When I think about afternoon training with our key spirits, I get butterflies. Part of me looks forward to these classes, because I want to improve. But I know I fall short of expectations, and I'm not sure what to do about that. I'm definitely not giving up, no matter how many times Ayden gives me that icy stare and tells me I should leave.

I eat a forkful of noodles and take out my phone. I stare absent-mindedly at the display.

"We can't wait to come. Tonya's making a shopping schedule. I hope you know some cool shops, she has a few things on her wish list."

Shopping – was there really a time when I used to care about stuff like that? My life looks so different now.

I look around at all my classmates with their key spirits. You could be forgiven for thinking I'd wound up in some strange zoo.

Max and Lucia come to my table. They're discussing the previous period. I'm still thinking about my friends from Tucson and how I seem to be drifting farther and farther away from them. The thing I have to do now is so hard.

I sigh and write, "I'm so incredibly sorry, but I have to cancel. There's so much going on with school right now. I have important exams coming up and I really need to study. I'm really sorry, I was so looking forward to seeing you guys."

I hesitate, then hit send. I know she won't understand – I wouldn't if I were her. I mean, it's a pretty lame excuse, but what else can I do?! Pretending to be sick is no good – I'd have to cancel at short notice, and that's not fair. And school is an ongoing issue for me from now on, because I can't let my friends come here. The recent attack made that clear. There's just no guarantee I won't get mixed up in another fight. And what if my friends are with me?! I chose this life, but I can't put them in danger.

"Oh, okay. That's a shame, but no problem. Just tell us when you have a bit more breathing space," she replies. I can sense her disappointment.

I push away my plate of noodles. I've totally lost my appetite. But I know it was the right decision.

The sinking feeling intensifies the closer I get to the training hall. Yoru trots beside me, totally relaxed. He doesn't seem to mind that we're still not working well as a team.

Ms. Rupert is standing in the center of the room. Today she's wearing black leggings that hug her muscular legs like a second skin. Her six-pack is defined under her tank top – as if her bulky arms aren't impressive enough. There's not much on my body that's rock hard, although my Mom always says I could smash through walls with my hard head. But I doubt that will help me here.

Mr. Laydon enters and stands beside Ms. Rupert. He's an impressive muscle package too, and I wonder if you really have to look like that to make it in this world. If so, my chances don't look good.

I take a deep breath and flinch when Ms. Rupert blows her shrill whistle. My classmates spread out and begin fighting in pairs or training on the fitness equipment. Ayden's here too, but I'm careful to look in his direction as little as possible.

I take a deep breath and try to focus entirely on Yoru.

“Okay, buddy. Let's try it again,” I say to him.

At the same time, I force myself to think back to yesterday, when we were attacked and Yoru succeeded in assuming his other form. He didn't seem to get much odeen, but it was enough for him to transform. How did I do that? Or did Yoru just take what he needed? I feel inside me for light, colors, or warmth. My odeen must be in here somewhere!

“Try to transform, take the odeen that's there,” I say.

The little fox looks at me uncomprehendingly.

“It won't be easy if you keep trying with words,” Mr. Laydon intercedes.

He's come to observe me and I sigh inwardly. Just what I need – a coach standing by and commenting on every failed attempt. I was hoping to try it out alone. So far, their tips haven't helped me at all. I wonder if they're terrible teachers, or if I'm just an especially stupid student, or if it's so rare for someone to have no prior experience that they just don't know how deal with me.

“Give him clear commands with pulses of odeen. Bundle the energy and nudge him with it – that's the signal for him to transform. When you're

fighting, you'll have to learn to control him with these pulses send him commands.”

I raise my eyebrows. I honestly understand nothing he's just said. Odeon pulses – as if I'm some kind of machine that sends out electric shocks.

Mr. Laydon sees the helplessness in my eyes and runs a hand through his hair.

“Maybe we should think about pairing you up with another student. You may learn faster by putting it into practice. I'll discuss it with Ms. Rupert and the Head of School – we don't want you getting injured.”

Great, I get to stand around and be somebody's punching bag. I feel everyone's eyes on me and realize my incompetence is attracting a lot of attention again. As unpleasant as these glances are, one of them is especially piercing: Ayden looks at me with his lips drawn into a thin angry line and his eyes radiating the kind of contempt that cuts to the bone. Despite this – or because of it – I jut my chin and keep trying to persuade Yoru to transform. I can't stand Ayden, but apparently he hasn't reported Max's and my nighttime skirmish to the teachers. That would definitely spell trouble for us.

The afternoon stretches out like chewing gum and by the end of it, I've made no progress. But I still feel totally drained because, in order to do something useful with my time, I tried out the fitness machines, which turned out to be real torture devices. Now everything hurts and I'm glad school is out.

I traipse to the bus stop with Yoru at my side and wait. I look up at the cloudy sky and long for bed and rest. But I also feel deeply disappointed in myself for not being able to meet expectations. Why isn't it working? What am I doing wrong? Then again, it's not easy to achieve anything when I'm constantly being stared at by teachers and classmates. How am I supposed to focus?

Then I have an idea. Just as the bus pulls up to the stop, I get up and run past it. I only have one thought: I'll find a way. If I were in a movie, 'Eye of the Tiger' would now be playing in the background. I picture myself standing in front of a boxing bag, practicing ineffectually. But in a few weeks everything will look totally different. Will it happen like that in reality? I hope so.

As I hoped, the gym is still open. I change into my gym clothes and go back to the hall with Yoru.

“Okay, buddy. Now we have some peace and quiet so we can...”

I stop mid-sentence, because as soon as I open the door, I see an unearthly being. It looks totally alien. The sight should frighten me, but it doesn't. I know this can't be a Noctu. No, this creature is beautiful.

At first all I see are flames, but then I can make out a human form within them. The whole body is burning, even the hair is made of licking flames. The figure is athletic, muscles defined within the fire. I've never seen anything like it before and I'm totally mesmerized. Especially when I see the figure throwing fireballs that cause the spherical shield around it to quiver. Then I notice another figure: a key spirit, also made entirely of fire. It has the features of a wolf.

I move a step closer, very quietly. The next fireball evaporates mid-air. Smoldering red eyes engulf me like a hot sea of flames. I can't breathe and see nothing but the blazing fire in them, the ruby glow.

“What are you doing here?” a sharp voice snarls, and the flames gradually die down to reveal a young man who is unfortunately all too familiar.

“I asked you what you're doing here!” Ayden snaps at me again. His torso is bare and the sight of him still has some effect on me, regrettably. But the hate that wells up in me helps.

“I wanted to train some more,” I say without hesitation.

That seems to surprise him. He's quiet for a moment, then says, “I doubt it will help, but go ahead, the facility is for here for anyone to use.”

It's not the answer I was expecting, but I don't show it. The fact that Ayden is here is awkward, but I won't let him distract me from my plan.

He turns away and briefly pets Snow, who's standing beside him and looking at him with those amazing green eyes. The wolf steps back as if he's received a silent command, closes his eyes, and transforms. Flames immediately flare up and envelop Snow within seconds. The crackling sound can be heard from across the room and I think I can even feel the heat on my skin. Suddenly, the key spirit springs forward and opens its mouth. Several fireballs fly through the air and are absorbed by the magic shield, which trembles violently.

The wolf launches another attack and I turn away and try to concentrate on myself. But I keep glancing over at them. I hate to admit it, but I'm deeply impressed. They both exude so much power and I wonder if I'll ever reach that level. Yoru can use fire too, but will we ever have mastery of it like Ayden and Snow? They look like they've merged with the flames, which is a breathtaking sight in itself, never mind the power involved.

"We'll just do our best," I say to my little fox, ruffling his soft fur. He looks at me as if he's understood every word. I close my eyes and try to switch off my thoughts and concentrate solely on Yoru. I want to give him my odeon so he can transform, that's my only goal.

Minutes pass, but when I open my eyes, nothing has happened. I rub my little fox's head and say, "Doesn't matter. We've done it a couple of times in emergencies, and that's what's important. The rest will come. Let's try something else."

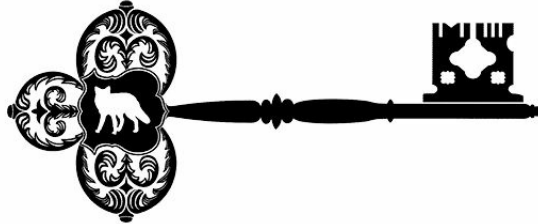
I decide to jog around the hall with Yoru. I'm not the most seasoned runner and I'm soon panting with the effort, but I hold out as long as possible. Then I get on the fitness machines and I know my muscles are going to ache tomorrow.

Meanwhile, fireballs are zooming around, and to my surprise, they're not all coming from Snow. Ayden also holds blazing orbs in his hands, and they light up his face and accentuate his striking features. He glances in my direction and his expression is dark and anything but friendly – intensely menacing in fact. If he really thinks he can drive me away, he's mistaken. I shake my head at his bizarre behavior. First he says it's okay for me to stay, and now he's making it clear he doesn't want me here. Spurred on by my determination not to cave in, I train obsessively, and by evening I'm so spent I just want to drop dead. Ayden is done training too and disappears into the changing rooms.

I stagger to the showers. The hot water helps to relax my abused muscles a little. Afterward, I encounter him again in the corridor. His wolf is with him, but they don't head outside. Instead, he takes a corridor into another building. I know from my tour of the school that the student residence is that way. So, Ayden lives here, and I guess he uses every spare minute to train. No wonder he's so good. I make my way home, wishing I were already there, so I could

just fall into bed.

Chapter 31



By lunchtime the next day, I can't stop yawning. The night was far too short to make up for yesterday's exertion.

"You have a rough night?" asks Max, who's sitting with me and Lucia.

"More like a rough day," I reply, and yawn again.

"You mean training?" Lucia asks. "Yeah, it's hard at the start. It wasn't easy for us either, and we didn't arrive here totally unprepared."

I poke around in my salad with my fork and say, "I came back after school and trained a while longer."

"In the gym?" Max asks, surprised.

I raise my eyebrows and look at her uncomprehendingly. "Uh, it wasn't in the bathroom."

"And Ayden let you?" Lucia ignores my comment and exchanges an irritated glance with Max. "He's always training there."

I shrug. "Yeah, he was there, and at first he said I could stay. But I guess he figured I wouldn't take him up on it. The look on his face said something else."

They exchange another astonished glance.

"And he just trained the whole time? Or did he talk to you?" Lucia asks.

"I was there to train, not gossip," I reply, unsure why they're making such a fuss. "And you know Ayden. Since when does he stand around and chat?"

"Well, it's pretty ambitious of you to train after school. Hardly anyone does that," Lucia says with an appreciative smile.

"She needs to. I mean, she's pretty far behind," says Max, then eats a forkful of salad. "What?" she asks when she sees the look on our faces. "I just mean it's great that you're taking it seriously and doing something about

it. Not everyone would. It just shows how important the school is to you.”

She puts an arm around me and gives me a squeeze. Max is sometimes tactless, but at least she says what she thinks.

“Anyway, I stayed late and was so tired afterward that I almost fell asleep on the bus. It makes me realize why some students prefer to live here in the residence. Not so far to go.”

Ayden pops into my head. It’s irrelevant now, but it still hurts that he lied to me about that part of his life. He doesn’t live with a father who’s constantly moving around for work. He lives here at the school. Obviously, he couldn’t tell me the truth, but deep down I know he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to get close to me. It was all just part of his game.

“I’m glad I get to go home after school,” says Max, and Lucia agrees.

“Has Ayden lived at the school long? What’s the deal with his family? Do they live far away?”

I don’t know why I’m asking this, but I just have to get these thoughts off my chest. The other two look at me irritably again. Max eventually answers my question.

“Ayden’s lived here since childhood. He grew up here. His Dad’s the Head of School.”

“Didn’t you know that?” Lucia asks unnecessarily.

“How was I supposed to know?” I say.

Lucia shrugs. “I don’t know, Ayden’s still young and he’s already a hunter. That’s unusual. But he’s been training here since he was small. I guess he showed talent early on, but he wouldn’t have come this far without a lot of practice. And he’s good-looking, so the new girls usually want to know all about him.”

“Well, I guess I’m different in that regard,” I reply, thinking about what I’ve just learned. Mr. Collins is Ayden’s father. I think back to seeing them in the corridor at my old school. So Ayden was testing me at his father’s request, and even though he wrote me off, his Dad argued in my favor. I’m not sure what to think about that.

After lunch we go to the gym, where Ms. Rupert immediately takes me aside.

“The Head of School agrees you should train with another student. But

we'll take the next couple of periods to assess you and find you a suitable partner.”

I take a deep breath. I don't know which is worse: being observed and waiting for signs of progress that may never appear, or being paired up another student who probably won't be too happy with their new training partner.

I really hope I can finally make some progress and avoid this extra help. But that doesn't happen, at least not today. So I continue the training I did yesterday. I run laps around the hall with Yoru and then train on the equipment, but this time I pace myself so I don't wear myself out. By the end, I feel like I've exerted myself, but I still have some energy left. The teachers and students swarm out to the changing rooms, but I stay back with Yoru. I sigh when I see that Ayden clearly has the same idea.

“Do you do this every afternoon?” I ask him.

“If you're looking for a space to train alone, you should take a look at the room schedule and see which halls are free. But don't be too hopeful. There are a lot of classes – some train in the mornings and others in the afternoons or evenings. The sports facilities are generally booked out. Anyway, I'll definitely be here,” he says, then turns his attention to his wolf.

I roll my eyes, because that's not what I meant. And I'm sure as hell not going to let him scare me off.

“Okay, let's try again” I say to Yoru, who's sitting in front of me and looking at me expectantly.

“You talk to your key spirit too much, and you keep saying the same thing,” Ayden lectures me.

“Yoru hasn't complained about it.”

He shakes his head, but I think I detect a faint smile too. He turns away and continues training with Snow. It's incredible how fast Snow can move. My eyes widen in astonishment as Ayden starts running and reaches an inhuman speed. I can scarcely follow his movements.

I don't spend too much time on my unsuccessful attempts at sending Yoru enough odeon for him to transform. It probably makes more sense to continue my fitness training.

It's sobering to watch Ayden out of the corner of my eye as he runs,

practices fighting techniques, and trains with his wolf. When he takes on this other form, I can't help stopping what I'm doing and staring at him. Flames lick around his body; his eyes are ruby red and look like active volcanoes – powerful, deadly, and at the same time... breathtakingly beautiful. He flings glowing fireballs from his hands while his wolf also launches attacks on invisible enemies.

My staring doesn't go unnoticed. Ayden looks over at me with his usual coldness.

“Maybe it would have helped in your fight with the Noctu if you talked less and focused more on your odeon and your key spirit. Maybe then you'd have a chance.”

“I heard you've been training since you were small. So you obviously have a head-start on me and you're allowed to get into fights. I just want to defend myself in emergencies and survive.”

“What humble desires,” he says sarcastically, and I feel the anger welling up in me again.

“Not everyone can turn themselves into a... a flame creature like you.”

For the first time in ages, I hear him laugh. It awakens memories I'd rather forget.

“Flame creature,” he shakes his head in amusement. “I just merged with Snow and combined our odeon.”

My brow creases in astonishment. “Didn't you tell me that's what creates those Noctu monsters?”

“Yeah, there's a risk that if you go too far you can no longer separate yourself from your key spirit. You fuse and your odeon becomes one with theirs, until eventually all that's left is a wild animal. So you have to know exactly where the line is and never overstep it. But don't worry, I doubt you'll never find yourself in that situation.”

He returns his attention to Snow, who rests his large head in Ayden's hand and closes his eyes with pleasure as Ayden ruffles his fur.

The scene is so intimate and shows another side of Ayden, but I know too well that he's only like this with his key spirit. The rest of his heart seems to be a lump of ice.

“Believe me, I'm not as defenseless as you think,” I growl before resuming

my training with Yoru.

The time flies and by the end, every muscle in my body is burning. I wipe the sweat from my brow. Ayden is standing at the door, watching me.

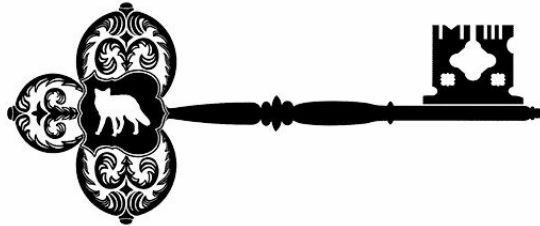
“Stop trying to send energy to your fox, and stop straining so much.” I roll my eyes and wait for the next unhelpful comment, which I’m sure will come. “Just relax and focus on a particular feeling. It has to be the only thing you perceive.”

Then he opens the door and leaves with Snow. I’m left standing here speechless, watching him go. Did he really just try to help me?

I immediately try to put his tip into practice, but I’m so exhausted I can’t feel any emotions. I guess that’s not the feeling I should be focused on.

After I shower and dress, I feel a lot better and my stomach is growling. I could go home, but Mom’s at work and I’d have to cook for myself. I’m too tired to do that. But I have another idea.

Chapter 32



San Francisco General Hospital is not really on my way home, but it's not a big detour. Mom and I haven't seen a lot of each other in the last few days and I'm sure she'll appreciate a snack. I buy ramen and make my way there.

When I arrive at the hospital I go to the nurses' station in the ward where Mom's currently working. There I meet a young nurse with dark hair and friendly eyes.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

"I'm Teresa, Maggie Franklin's daughter."

"Oh, and you've come to see her. She'll be pleased. My name's Chloe. Your Mom's a colleague of mine."

I vaguely remember hearing the name. "Right, Mom mentioned you."

"Oh, that's nice to hear," she says with a pleasant smile. "Your mother's lovely. It's really great to have her here." She looks at the takeout bag I'm carrying. "I see you brought food, she'll appreciate that. She hasn't had a proper break today."

Chloe leads me down the corridor and stops at a door. She knocks and opens it.

"Maggie, your daughter's here. You want to take a break? I can take over your rounds."

"Teresa?! This is a surprise." She comes and hugs me. "What brings you here?"

"I thought you might be hungry." I lift up the bag. "And we haven't seen a lot of each other lately."

She squeezes me again and gives me a peck on the forehead. "Great timing.

I'm starving." She looks at Chloe. "Are you sure it's okay?"

"Sure, go ahead."

She winks at us and goes about her work, and Mom and I go to the break room. We enjoy our hot noodles and I feel some of my energy return.

"How was your day?" Mom asks.

I roll my eyes and say, "Really tiring. The athletic program is hardcore."

"So it really is a lot," says Mom. "I was surprised on our tour when the principal said they place a lot of emphasis on sports."

"Yeah. I didn't expect it to be this much either. But I'm making an effort and I often train after class too."

"We knew the school had high standards." She sighs and pats my arm. "But I have no doubt you can do it."

When I think about my progress so far...

"How do you like the school otherwise? Have you made any friends? Or is there maybe a nice boy?" she winks mischievously, and I answer tersely and then change the subject.

"Friends, yeah. Lucia and Max are cool." I look around the room and say, "Nice hospital. And it's great that you have such a nice colleague."

"I gotta say, I feel really comfortable here. It's a lot of work, but we have an incredible team. The meetings here are a lot less tedious than at my old job. Recently, Ben – he's one of the old timers here – he said..."

I'm glad Mom is so happy, and she keeps making me laugh as she shares anecdotes from her work. At some point she looks at the clock and sighs.

"This is so nice, but I have to get back to work."

I clear away the food cartons and throw them in the trash.

"No problem, I should go too. When will you be home?"

"Late. One of the nurses couldn't come in today, so we need all hands. And I can always use the extra pay."

I kiss her and say, "That's cool. I'll see you later. Have a good rest of your night."

"Thanks again for stopping by. It was so nice to see you."

I leave the break room, turning back once to wave goodbye. Right at that moment I stumble backward into something – or rather someone.

"Sorry, I..." I look up and I'm dumbstruck. "Noah? What are you doing

here?” I ask, looking into his grinning face.

“Tess?” he looks just as surprised as I am. “You really seem to like running into me. I could get used to this.”

“Hopefully someday we can have a less awkward encounter. I don’t want to almost knock you to the ground every time.”

“I have nothing against it,” he jokes.

“I was visiting my Mom. She works here as a nurse. What brings you here?” I ask with a concerned expression, because people don’t normally come to hospitals for nice reasons.

“I was just visiting someone. Don’t worry, it’s nothing bad.”

I nod and Noah checks the time. He scratches the back of his head and looks embarrassed.

“It’s great to see you again, but I don’t have a lot of time right now. Destiny seems to keep throwing us together. Pretty incredible, all these coincidences.”

He smiles and looks at me for a moment, as if he’s weighing something up, then he asks, “How about we meet intentionally some time?”

His voice is soft and his eyes sparkle like the starry sky. Since when do I come up with such corny analogies? There’s just no other way to describe what I see. I really don’t want to rush into anything after Ayden. But I like Noah as a friend and I want to get to know him better.

“Sure,” I say.

“Great, how about next weekend? We could go out for a meal and just spend some time together.”

“Sound good.”

He nods happily. “Okay, I’ll figure something out and send you a time and place. I look forward to it.”

He gives me that dreamy smile again and then disappears down the corridor.

“He’s nice. And pretty good looking too, don’t you think?”

I jump and gasp. My mother is standing behind me.

“Sorry, I saw you two talking. Do you know Noah?”

I nod. “He accidentally spilled his coffee on me on the bus and wanted to pay the cleaning bill. Since then we’ve exchanged a few messages.”

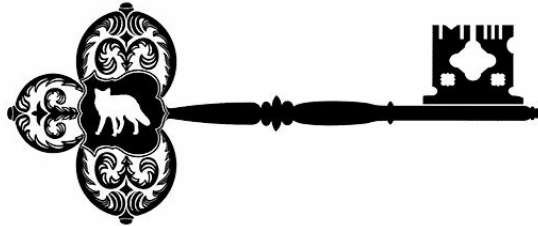
“He’s a really nice guy. He’s here a lot.”

“Visiting a patient?”

“No, he volunteers for the Read and Dream program. People come here once a week and read aloud to the patients. It’s popular and Noah’s really dedicated.”

I’m surprised he didn’t tell me, but I can understand in a way. The program is probably too important to him to brag about. Anyway, it shows what kind of person he is – one that I’m really starting to like.

Chapter 33



I'm so tired. I'm going to take it easy at training today," says Lucia with a yawn.

Max elbows her and grins. "Don't let Ms. Rupert hear you say that."

Lucia waves it off. "Since Tess started here, Mr. Laydon and Ms. Rupert are always focused on her. They won't even notice me," she says, looking at me apologetically. "It's not so great for you, but it makes life easier for the rest of us."

"Great, at least my problems are good for something," I jest. I know she's right and I'm not offended.

"Sucks that you're so tired. I was going to ask if you want to go out tonight? I heard there's a party at Lucas'," Max says to Lucia.

Lucia immediately nods. "Sure, why not? I'll be fine by then," she says with a wink.

"What about you, Tess?" Max asks. "You want to come?"

It's Friday and Noah wants to meet me tonight.

"Sorry, I have plans."

"Are you meeting someone?" Max asks.

"Yeah, but we're just friends. You don't need to make a big deal out of it."

Judging by her expression, she doesn't believe me, but she leaves it at that.

"Ayden will most likely be there," she continues. "So I guess you wouldn't have a good time anyway."

I can't argue with that, and I'm glad I don't have to see him tonight.

At that moment, my phone beeps.

"Are we still on for tonight? Should I pick you up around eight? Then we can go eat somewhere if you want."

“Yeah, sure. Looking forward to it,” I write back.

“Your *friend*?” Max asks, raising her eyebrows demonstratively. The way she emphasizes the word... I sigh and know that an explanation won’t help.

“We’re really just friends so far.”

She nods knowingly. “So far. Good luck, anyway.”

I keep my cynical comment to myself and we all go to the gym.

First I warm up and watch as the rest of the class spreads out around the hall to begin their practice. I’m itching to try out Ayden’s suggestion, and desperately hoping it will help me send my oedon to Yoru. I should be starting to show progress by now.

“Okay, close your eyes and try to find the power inside yourself,” I hear Ms. Rupert say. She’s suddenly standing beside me with her arms folded. I roll my eyes and can hardly contain my joy. It looks like I’m going to have another private coaching session with her – no, correction – both teachers want to help. Mr. Laydon is standing beside me too, looking at me expectantly.

He tries an encouraging smile. “Don’t lose heart, you can do this.”

It won’t fail due to lack of heart. I close my eyes and try to think about Ayden’s advice.

Concentrate on a feeling, he said. I try, but it’s not easy. Right now I mainly feel impatient and irritated.

“Stay calm,” I mutter to myself, trying to ignore the teachers’ presence.

“Go deep inside yourself, look for the source of your power,” Mr. Laydon urges me, and my pulse starts to race.

“If you feel warmth, then that could be it,” Ms. Rupert suggests.

“This is not making it easy to concentrate,” I grumble through gritted teeth.

“In a fight, there’s even more going on. Nobody will give you the time to search inside yourself,” Ms. Rupert replies, and I have to restrain myself from thanking her for her extremely helpful tip.

There’s nothing in me. No light, no colors, no warmth – just my increasing impatience and anger.

“This isn’t working,” Mr. Laydon observes. “You’re too tense. In that state, you have no chance.”

“Yeah, I realize that,” I hiss, giving the guy a withering look.

“You have a fire key spirit, one of the most powerful beings, and you can’t even begin to use its power. It’s not good enough! You need to make more of an effort, try harder,” Ms. Rupert urges me.

I’m starting to wonder if I’ve ended up in some kind of boot camp. Well, maybe I have, but it’s not helping!

“Ms. Rupert, Mr. Laydon,” a voice calls out, and I look up. Ayden’s approaching us. “Mike and Paul are having problems maintaining their ice crystals. Can you take a look?”

They hesitate, unsure whether it’s a good idea to leave me alone. Then Mr. Laydon says to me, “We’ll be right back. Keep trying. Don’t give up.”

Then they leave. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Ayden’s arms are folded across his chest and he’s looking at me in a way that makes me feel hot and cold at the same time.

“That kind of advice is unhelpful if you have no idea what odeon feels like,” he observes.

I nod, but I’m amazed. Since when does Ayden have any sympathy for things that affect me?

“You can say that again.”

“You look pretty angry,” he says.

His green eyes are still scrutinizing me, and I feel trapped by them. I’m also angry at myself for letting him have that power over me.

“Good opportunity to use that emotion, don’t you think? Or have you finally reached the point where you’re ready to admit you’re going nowhere and just quit?”

His voice is cold and it makes me shiver. And that arrogant stance and expression, looking down on everything. How I despise this guy!

I snort loudly, close my eyes, and feel the rage still burning in me. Everything else gradually fades into the background: my classmates’ skirmishes, voices, crashing barbells. I see Mr. Laydon’s and Ms. Rupert’s faces in my mind’s eye, hear their annoying voices, their absolutely useless tips. And then I see Ayden. I see his smile, hear his false words, feel his touch on my skin, all of which was a manipulation. When I picture him bending toward me and nearly kissing me, it happens: I cry out in anger. Unbridled heat floods through me. It surges along my bones like molten lava,

through my veins, and finally fills every muscle, every part of me. It's so vast, so irrepressible, and it seems to want to tear me apart... and suddenly it's gone. I feel powerless and empty, but somehow relieved too. When I open my eyes, Yoru is standing in front of me. But he's no longer the little fox, he's the glowing creature with nine tails, golden eyes, and blood-red fur.

"Yoru," I whisper incredulously. "I did it!" I cheer, and without thinking, I bound joyfully across the hall. Before I know it, I'm hugging Ayden out of sheer relief and saying, "Thank you thank you thank you. I couldn't have done that without you."

"You have strong emotions, you just need to learn how to use them. Hold onto them for longer, then Yoru can draw more from them." He looks at me and smiles. "It's a good start, anyway," he says, then looks at Yoru, who's still standing there in his otherworldly form.

I nod. I can't believe Ayden helped me. We look at one another and suddenly I'm aware that the coldness is gone from his eyes. They're shining, and so green and wild you could lose yourself in them. But I also remember other moments when he looked at me in the same way. I gradually realize I'm still hugging him and everyone's looking at us.

"Let's hope things start to move faster for you now. You won't always have someone to rush to your aid and save you. And with your talent for getting yourself into dangerous situations, you're going to be attacked sooner or later." My heart tightens painfully. He only cares about protecting the other hunters. He doesn't want them winding up in fights just because I need help. I have to be able to take care of myself – and that's what I want too. And I will.

"Yoru, try a fireball," I command, and the nine-tailed fox closes his eyes, opens his mouth, and actually spits out a small fireball. Before it even hits the shield, Yoru transforms back. The oeon is spent and I have to give him more. But at least he was able to obey my command, and that's more than just a small step for me: it's a breakthrough.

Apparently, I'm not the only one who sees it that way. My classmates and teachers are looking at me, and we all know that I'm now part of their group. I finally made it.

Both teachers immediately come to me. Mr. Laydon is the first to pat my

shoulder and say, “Looks like the penny finally dropped. Now we can really get started.”

Ms. Rupert is also full of praise. “Well done, I knew you could do it. Now you just need to keep working at it, but we’re still here to help.”

I frown at these words, because it’s not like their advice actually helped me.

Lucia, James, and Max come running and they all fling their arms around me.

“Congratulations, you did great,” James praises me.

“Crazy!” says Lucia.

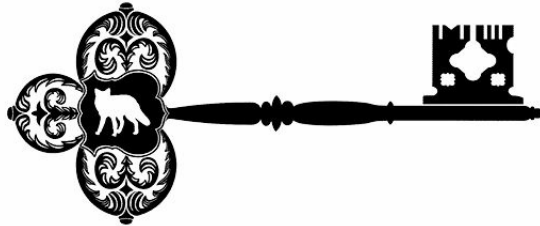
“Well, the question is whether you can consistently access your odeon, or if it was just a coincidence,” Max says. Then she immediately tries to soften her blunt words. “I mean, it’s hard, and you should be proud of yourself. Just don’t be disappointed if it doesn’t always happen like that. If you need help, we’re here for you.”

I glance at Ayden, but he’s returned his attention to his own training.

At the end of the period, I want to thank him again, and I walk up to him. But he immediately snaps at me, “Shouldn’t you be training? Your progress today counts for nothing if you get lazy now. If you don’t want people to die because of you, you need to work hard.”

My words of thanks stick in my throat and I just leave him standing there. I’ve had enough for one day, I’ve achieved enough. I’m leaving now with everyone else.

Chapter 34



Still totally elated after what happened this afternoon, I stretch out on my bed, simultaneously exhausted and amped. Yoru has made himself comfortable on the floor and is curling up into a ball. I roll over and look at him and I'm immediately overwhelmed with joy. I leap off the bed and cuddle Yoru, who flinches at my abrupt movement, but then relaxes and nestles up to me.

"We got this, buddy. You did great today, and we'll catch up to the others in no time."

But right now I need to focus on my normal life and give myself a break. I think about what to wear on my date with Noah as I shower and get ready.

I'm standing in front of the mirror when Mom knocks on my door.

"You want to come eat with me?"

I shake my head. "I'm going out."

"Oh, are you meeting your girlfriends?"

"No, I'm going out with Noah."

Mom gives me a mischievous wink. "That's nice. Do you know where you're going?"

"Someplace to eat and then walk around town."

She nods. "And I can trust you not to bring him back here without discussing it with me first? I have a late shift tonight, so I'll be back early in the morning."

"You know you can," I reply, and I mean it.

"Message me when you get back, and have a nice evening."

I nod and check the time. At that moment, the doorbell rings. So Noah's punctual.

I hurry downstairs and open the door. Noah looks great, mostly thanks to his breathtakingly beautiful smile. He looks me up and down and his eyes widen slightly.

“You look breathtaking,” he murmurs.

I smile gratefully.

“You ready?”

I close the door behind me and after a few steps I realize someone’s following me. I’ve developed a keen sense of Yoru, and I now know when he’s nearby.

“Sorry, I don’t have a car. We’ll have to take the bus, but I wanted to come collect you anyway.”

“So you arrive like a prince taking his princess to the ball, but you show up without a coach,” I tease.

“Hmm, maybe I could get my hands on a pumpkin, but can we find a fairy to turn it into something useful?”

“Vegetable and animal transformations are overrated. I’m happy with the bus,” I say, and Noah’s brown eyes sparkle at me.

“All that matters to me is good company,” he says, making me squirm.

I like Noah and want to get to know him better. But after the thing with Ayden, I mean to be careful and not rush into anything.

We wait together at the bus stop.

“Where are we going?”

“Downtown. Little Italy, to be precise. I know this great restaurant. You’ll like it.”

“Fine, as long as you don’t expect me to just eat salad,” I reply with a grin.

He laughs. “If I wanted my dinner guest to eat nothing but raw vegetables, I’d invite a rabbit.”

I can’t help chuckling.

We sit in the back of the bus.

“So, tell me, how was your day? How’s school?”

He looks at me with that mischievous grin and I smile back.

“Today was actually pretty good,” I begin. “As you know, they’re really big on sports at my school.”

“Not your best subject,” he recalls.

“That’s one way of putting it. Anyway, I guess I had a kind of breakthrough today. I may make the team after all.”

His eyes widen. “Congratulations! Which sport are we talking? Let me guess. Volleyball?”

I shake my head. “No, ball sports are not my thing. It’s a kind of martial art.” Hopefully, he’s not too knowledgeable on the subject.

“That sounds tough.”

“You can say that again.”

“But you’re going to make the team, that’s great.”

“That’s what I’m hoping, anyway,” I reply. “What about you? What do you do in your free time? I know about the volunteer work,” I say, and Noah actually seems surprised.

“Oh, right. Your mother told you?”

I nod. “You could have told me yourself. I think it’s great that you go to the hospital every week and read to the patients.”

He looks embarrassed and runs his hand through his hair, which makes him look incredibly cute.

“I don’t know, most people think it’s weird. And it’s no big deal. I enjoy it. You meet great people and get to brighten their day a little. What’s not to like?”

“You said you want to be a doctor?”

He nods. “That’s my dream. I like working with people, and if I can help them – I mean really help them – does it get any better than that?”

His brown eyes light up passionately and I can see how much this means to him.

The bus arrives at our destination, we get out, and as we walk to the restaurant he tells me about his parents, who are pleased their son has ambitious goals. I tell him about my Dad and how I never really got to know him.

“But I’m okay with that,” I say. “I don’t miss having a father. I’ve accepted that neither of us have room in our lives for each other.”

“Must be hard,” he says.

I shrug. “At first, sure, but I have an amazing Mom, and we get along great, and if my Dad doesn’t want contact with me, I can accept that. It beats

constantly chasing after him. It sounds rough, and it's definitely not easy, but now I know I can't change it. And I'm okay with it now."

"Sounds like a healthy attitude," Noah observes. "Otherwise it could cause you a lot of pain in the long term."

We arrive at the restaurant, which looks inviting from outside. The lights shine through the windows and I can already smell the aroma of pizza and pasta. I instantly feel hungry.

We enter the small eatery with its rustic tablecloths and candles burning on each table. The floor and paneled walls are dark wood, lending the room an especially cozy atmosphere.

I order pasta and Noah orders a pizza. Our drinks are served and I take a sip of my cola. Noah looks at me with that enchanting smile on his lips. His caramel colored eyes gaze at me, so soft and tender that I get a tingling sensation in my belly. The way Ayden looks at me is so different – as if there's a storm raging in his eyes, unpredictable and destructive.

Noah is very open and he tells me about his life, which is totally normal and full of things that I should care about too: school, friends, leisure time, career plans. It's like a vacation from my outlandish existence, and I'm grateful for every minute.

"I'm really glad we met," says Noah. "This city is huge, and yet we keep running into each other. I like that. Except the part with the coffee." His voice has changed – somehow rougher and, I have to admit, damned attractive. "Anyway, it's good to be sitting here with you, and I'm happy we can communicate so well beyond just text messaging."

The waiter brings out our food. It's delicious and I'm pretty sure I've never had tortellini this good.

After we finish eating, we keep talking for a while before eventually deciding to move on. Noah pays the bill and we step outside. As soon as I'm standing on the sidewalk, I feel cold. I wrap my jacket tighter around myself and reach into my pocket, but it's empty.

"Shit, my beanie must have fallen out," I say, about to go back into the restaurant.

"Let me go look for it," Noah offers, and hurries inside.

I stand on the sidewalk, feeling buoyant. I look out at the passersby, lights

from other the restaurants and stores. It really is a beautiful city, and I have to admit I'm starting to feel at home here.

I see a small group of young men coming down the opposite side of the street. I notice them immediately, because two of them are laughing loudly. They've probably already had a few drinks and are on their way to a party to get really tanked up. I roll my eyes, then I catch sight of someone. I sigh and mutter to myself, "Not him of all people."

What's Ayden doing here? And then I remember Max mentioning a classmate's party. Just my luck that Ayden has to pass right by this place, probably headed there with friends.

Then he looks over at me, and I can see despite the distance the way his face hardens. Hmm, evidently just the sight of me is enough to ruin his mood – and it's totally mutual.

"Found it," I hear a voice say behind me, and I turn around. Noah hands me my hat. I'm so relieved that he's back, and I secretly enjoy the fact that Ayden is seeing me with Noah. Yes, even I can find a guy – someone who's nice and who's not just toying with me.

"Let's go," he says, and I nod. I don't even glance back at Ayden.

The streets drift by as we continue our conversation and I don't waste a single thought on a certain someone.

"You saw it. Our house is not very big, but it's ours and it's an absolute dream. I often sit at my window and just gaze out at the sky, the streets, the people. I never imagined we would live in San Francisco. And we have my great aunt to thank for everything."

"Sounds like the start of a movie," Noah remarks. "Shame you never got to meet her."

"Yeah, I know. My Mom's parents died relatively young. Our family was never big. Mom knew of Aunt Frida by name, but she didn't know anything about her."

"Then it's nice that you can live in her house and get to know her a little better."

"Yeah, that's how I see it too," I admit with a smile. Frida must have been an interesting woman, and I still hope to find out more about her someday.

We cross the street and pass a row of townhouses. Some of them have lights

on. But most are dark as night.

“Maybe we should head more toward the city center? We kind of lost our way,” Noah says, sheepishly scratching his head.

“Yeah, sure,” I say, glad he doesn’t want the night to end either.

We turn right down a narrow alley between two apartment blocks. Trashcans are lined up against the wall and a rat scampers by.

“Sorry, it’s not the nicest area.”

“No problem,” I say, but I immediately look around for Yoru. I’ve never been fond of places like this, and now that I know about the Noctu, I feel really uneasy.

Noah seems to sense my anxiety and he moves a little closer to me.

“You okay?”

I nod. Suddenly, he’s tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. It’s just a small gesture, but it stirs something in me. Before he lets his hand drop, I grab it and hold it. Noah smiles and my heart beats faster. We’re facing one another. I can feel his breath on my face, and his deep, calm gaze looks into my soul. It’s the most unromantic place in the world, but there’s nowhere else I’d rather be. My resolve vanishes. Why shouldn’t I just enjoy life and follow my heart?!

I close my eyes. I just want to give myself over to this moment. I like Noah, I like him a lot, and I want to feel close to him.

He moves even closer to me and his warmth envelops me like a protective blanket. I hear his breath fluttering like mine. And then there’s another sound: claws scraping on asphalt.

My eyes fly open and I see three creatures emerge out of the darkness. They growl as they approach us. I get an instant hit of adrenalin.

I turn to Noah and say, “Run, now. Get out of here!”

There’s no time to explain. I can only hope he’ll snap out of his trance and run. And I have to do everything in my power to pull off at least one attack with Yoru. Then I need to distract these beasts enough for me so I have a chance at escaping them too. These are the thoughts that race through my mind in a split second.

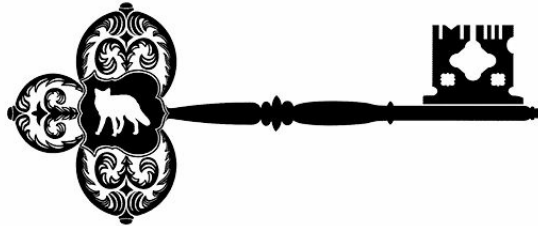
But then I hear a sigh and an irritable voice saying, “Didn’t I say I was going to take care of it? What are you doing here? I almost had her.”

An icy chill creeps up my spine. I turn around very slowly. Noah's standing there with his arms folded and that mischievous grin on his lips, which has suddenly lost all of its charm.

"Sorry. I didn't want you to find out like this." He touches his chin with his index finger and corrects himself, "Actually, you were never supposed to find out. But what can a guy do?"

I stagger back and stare at him in disbelief. This can't be happening. This just can't be happening. I hear the Noctu growling behind me, but the horror that stands before me is so much worse that I just keep stumbling backward. Noah, I keep thinking, Noah's one of them.

Chapter 35



Don't look so mortified," he says with mock indignation. "I can understand your surprise, but..."

"You're a Noctu," I say. "One of the ones that hasn't completely merged with its key spirit. You haven't lost your mind."

"I hope not," he says, grinning broadly.

At that moment, something else emerges from the darkness. Something black comes out of the shadows, snarling, and goes to stand beside Noah.

"Rain, be still," he says in a firm voice to the monster beside him. A huge wolf with ruby red eyes and bared teeth. Its fur is pitch black and it's surrounded by a kind of smoky haze. I can't believe what I'm seeing.

"Tess, stay where you are," he demands. "It's no use running."

I shake my head and keep backing away from him. I'm so horrified that I only vaguely register Yoru appearing at my side and growling softly.

"Tess, for the last time, stand still!" He cocks his head and smiles at me. "We can talk about this."

His voice is mocking. I take four more steps, then hear a snarl behind me. The other three Noctu... I'm now really close to them. I feel hot breath on my back and a foul stench wafts over me.

There's a loud growl, then the sound of claws scraping at the ground. Something leaps into the air and is already above me. I don't trust myself to look up, I can't. I'm too horrified, not in my right mind. I feel like I'm standing outside of myself. Everything happens so fast. Noah jerks his head subtly and a fireball shoots out of the mouth of his key spirit. It's headed straight for me. I want to give Yoru my odeon so he can transform. He has to do something. I have to do something. But I can't. I simply can't move.

I see the fireball headed for me, getting bigger, and suddenly it veers up in the air, flies over me and crashes down behind me. Something falls to the ground with a howl. Noah's key spirit pounces forward and attacks the Noctu that's now lying on the ground, tearing it apart. My eyes widen in horror. Why is he killing his own people?

"I told you to give me a moment with her. I have a plan and I didn't invest all that time for nothing."

Noah's still standing with his arms folded, totally calm.

"You'll have to forgive them, some of us are a little impetuous," he says to me, and his smile terrifies me.

"I wouldn't call you impetuous," says another voice, and I see a figure walking down the alley. "But that makes you even more dangerous."

Ayden is standing in front of us. Snow is at his side, his teeth bared and his body tensed, ready for action. Any moment now, he'll pounce on the enemy.

"Ayden, so nice to see you. Are you here to put your skills to the test again and find out if you can defeat me? If I remember right, you almost died last time."

"That's what you think," Ayden retorts. "It was a coincidence that I spotted you with Tess. I hoped I was mistaken, but I had to make sure." He glances at me. "And I was right."

I swallow hard as a feeling of humiliation wells up in me. I've been used and fallen for the wrong guy all over again. And this time my blind trust almost cost me my life.

"Tess, get out of here! Now!" says Ayden. Snow tenses up even more. Noah's key spirit doesn't take its eyes off him. They both snarl and curl their lips.

Ayden looks at me, and in his eyes I can see unbridled power, but also this all-consuming rage. Which is understandable. I've put myself in danger again, and he's here to save me, again.

"Run! Go!" he yells. I close my eyes for a moment, take a deep breath, and run. Yoru is at my side, and behind me I hear the snarls of the key spirits as they engage. Claws clatter on the pavement, and then I hear the high-pitched hum of hexes and the cracking sounds as they hit.

I get out of the alley and gasp for breath. My whole body is in shock. I've

been betrayed and manipulated again, pumped for information. I was stupid enough to get lured into a trap that nearly cost me my life, and now Ayden's paying for it. That's the worst part, because I'm responsible for all this. But could I have prevented it? Am I too gullible? Do I really have to go through life assuming every nice person I meet is my enemy? The idea is horrifying.

I look at Yoru, who looks back at me. I see a thousand questions in his eyes. He doesn't understand why we ran. Ayden could use our help – or he could if I knew how to fight. But I'm light years away from that. Maybe I should actually listen to Ayden for once in my life.

I continue along the street, away from the alley, where I can still hear the sounds of fighting.

I keep thinking: How could I? Why did I open myself up so willingly and let Noah in?

I stop at a crossing, still short of breath. I look back in the direction I came. How's Ayden doing? What if something happens to him? I picture Noah's face, his gold-flecked eyes, his mischievous smile that I always found so cute. That bastard! What a total asshole! Who does he think he is?! And more importantly, what did he want from me? Why didn't he just kill me and take my key and my odeon? It would have been so easy. He had thousands of opportunities to do it.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I start running back. I'm not going to back out and wait for someone else to rescue me. I let Noah to reel me in, that's on me, but I won't let him get away with it, and I won't shirk my responsibility. I know Ayden will be pissed, but I couldn't care less about that right now.

I reach the alley. Snow is engulfed in flames. He leaps at Rain, whose fur is as black as night and still enveloped in smoke. When I look closer, I realize it's something else. It's not smoke anymore. It's black flames. My eyes wander to Ayden and my heart tightens. His body looks like it's made of molten lava. It's a beautiful sight, but at the same time dangerous and terrifying. Noah's facing him – at least I think so, but he's changed completely too. A figure made of black fire. He looks like some creature risen from the underworld to plunge this world into ruin.

A Noctu is creeping around Ayden. All that's left of the others is a grayish mass on the ground. Ayden must have taken care of the second one already.

“Oh, great, we have company,” Noah says with a grin when he sees me.

Ayden turns around. His expression freezes. “What are you doing here? Are you crazy? Beat it!”

I don’t waste any time. I look into his eyes and focus solely on this one feeling inside me: rage. I won’t give up and I won’t allow myself to be pushed around. I’m going to fight.

Yoru transforms, his blood-red fur glistening in the light of the flames. His nine tails wag energetically in the air.

Ayden shakes his head. “Don’t do this.”

I close my eyes and send Yoru forward. His feet glide across the ground so fast I can’t follow their movement. He’s focused on the Noctu that’s creeping around Ayden and waiting for the right moment to attack.

Not taking my eyes off the enemy key spirit, I communicate silently with Yoru. “Now, Yoru!”

He opens his mouth and spits a fireball at the Noctu. It finds its mark and flames quickly spread across its body. It thrashes, turning this way and that. Yoru pounces, latches onto the beleaguered Noctu, and spits out more fireballs. He and his opponent are now engulfed in flames. One final attack and the Noctu slumps to the ground, lifeless. A few seconds later, it’s nothing but a shapeless black mass. Yoru straightens up and turns to face Noah. He’s our real enemy.

“Not bad. After everything you’ve told me, I didn’t figure you were so advanced. Impressive,” says Noah, smiling at me like we’re best friends.

“I have no idea what your game is, but stay away from her,” Ayden warns him.

“Of course you have no idea,” says Noah. “It’s a shame I couldn’t finish what I started. I had really big plans.” An exaggerated sigh. “But what can you do? I guess we’re back to the usual program. But with one difference.” His expression darkens. “This time I’ll kill you.”

With that, he hurtles forward, followed closely by Rain. Snow throws himself at the black wolf. Noah flings a black fireball, which Ayden dodges. He deflects the second attack with a fireball of his own, which collides with Noah’s. Sparks fly. Ayden raises his hand and flames shoot out of it, racing through the night. Just before they reach Noah, I see that he’s holding an

object in his hand, and he turns it in the air. A key, I realize. A door opens abruptly and Noah disappears through it.

I glance around in alarm, and so does Ayden. Suddenly Noah appears behind Ayden and kicks him, causing him to fly across the alley and smash into a wall.

I gasp, momentarily paralyzed with fright. Noah smiles and walks toward me.

“It’s a pity you know who I am now. But you actually have no idea what it really means.”

His eyes flash and the black flames flicker wildly around him.

“You were playing games with me,” I pant. “Why? And why didn’t you try kill me sooner?”

He shrugs. “You’re interesting,” he says. “Really interesting and different.”

“You wanted to know if it was even worth killing me? If I actually have any odeon for you to take for yourself?”

He tilts his head, now standing directly in front of me, and slowly extends his hand toward me. He nods.

“I guess that’s what it was.”

“You’re worse than I thought,” I say quietly, calling Yoru to me. My fox leaps out of nowhere and bites Noah’s arm. Noah flinches and tries to pry him off, then shoots black flames out of his body, which surround Yoru and fling him to the ground.

“Yoru,” I cry out in dismay. He’s lying on the ground, but he’s already picking himself up.

“You have no chance against me,” Noah snarls, producing a flame that grabs me and winds itself around me. I can’t breathe. “I really didn’t want things to end this way,” he says regretfully, looking at me. “I had totally different plans.”

“I believe you,” I croak, and at that moment, a sea of flame rushes at Noah, and it’s coming from Ayden. Noah’s still looking at me, his expression so dark, so menacing and intense that I want to look away. But I can’t. I don’t want to show weakness. When the flames reach him, he uses his key again, letting go of me and disappearing through a door. I fall to the ground and the flames flash past me.

Yoru is back on his feet, and he spits another fireball at Noah, who has appeared behind Ayden again. Ayden spins around and tries again with his own flames, but Noah has already disappeared again.

Ayden and I glance around, waiting for our adversary to reappear. And he does. Behind me. My heart skips a beat as he grabs me from behind and wraps his arms around me. I feel the black flames against my skin. They're hot, unbearably hot, but they don't seem to harm me.

"Let go of her!" I hear Ayden shout in the distance.

Noah ignores him. He brings his face close and his cheek touches mine, tender and tantalizing.

"Do you really want to continue down this path? You have no idea what that means. Just wait until you're face to face with a goddess. Maybe then you'll finally recognize the truth. I just hope I'm not wrong about you."

His breath tickles my skin, hot as only hell can be. I can't breathe, all I can feel is this all-consuming heat.

"I'm sure we'll see each other again soon," Noah whispers. Then I see the flames rushing toward me and I feel myself being released. I'm surrounded by nothing but heat, fire, an inferno devouring me. I hear voices in my ear, but I can't understand them. I collapse to the ground, fall down a black hole. The last thing I see is Noah's face, but I'm not sure if it's just a sinister memory. He smiles and waves at me. Then everything goes dark.

- End of book 1 -

Continued in volume 2:
Goddess of Destiny