

## PROLOGUE

Everyone had assumed Amelia Vaughn Williams would be a nun. No one asked her if she wanted to join a religious order; it was just a given. She remembered vividly the day those expectations were made known to her. As usual, she wasn't technically included in the conversation.

She was ten, playing at the neighborhood playground in Queens with a few of the children her age as the mothers chatted on a nearby bench. Her younger brother Joseph had fallen off the bars and scraped his elbow. He was being brave and not crying, but Amelia thought a Band-Aid might help. She told him to sit tight and she'd see if their mother had one in her purse.

The women on the bench were so engrossed in discussing her, they didn't notice her approaching from the side.

"It's a shame about your Lia." It was Mrs. Jacobson. She always thought something was a shame. Amelia frowned, waiting for her mother to defend her. She also didn't like Mrs. Jacobson calling her Lia. Joseph called her Lia. Her friends called her Lia. People who thought she was a "shame" didn't get to call her Lia.

"Oh, I know. It's a pity. She has those same pretty hazel eyes as Joe, but it seems he got all the looks in the family. I thought maybe as she got older she'd look less plain, but it doesn't seem like it, does it?" Her mother sighed, and Lia stopped walking.

She clutched her chest, trying to breathe.

"Do you think she'll be able to cook?" That was Mrs. Sanderson. She was famous for two things: her crooked nose and her pies. "Because you don't have to be pretty if you can cook." Lia supposed she would know.

Her mother let out another great sigh. "Well, she's shown no inclination yet. Last week she burnt the green beans. Green beans! How do you ruin a can of green beans?"

Mrs. Jacobson weighed in again. "She'll never snag a man, then. I guess that means only one thing."

"Yes." Her mother nodded.

What? What did that mean? Lia nearly ran up to nasty Mrs. Jacobson and demanded she explain what she meant. It wasn't necessary, though, as her mother decreed what Amelia's occupation was to be.

"She'll have to be a nun."

Mrs. Jacobson bobbed her head in agreement. "The fate of all ugly little Catholic girls."

Lia raced back to the playground, the Band-Aid forgotten. She would have run all the way home, but Joseph called after her.

She stopped and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and tried to control the expression on her face. When she turned to look at her brother, she knew she hadn't done a good job.

"Lia, did you get hurt, too?"

A sob escaped. "Yes."

Joseph studied her with his angelic face. She wanted to hate him, with his perfect blond curls and dimpled grin. Lia wasn't stupid. She always knew he was prettier than her. She supposed that meant that one day he would be a handsome grown-up man.

"No Band-Aids?"

“What? Oh, no.”

Joseph threw his arms around her waist. “I’m sorry.”

Lia hugged him back. “For what?”

“That you’re sad. When I was upset, you gave me a hug.” And that was why she could never hate her brother.

As they grew up, she never told Joseph she didn’t want to become a nun. She never told her parents, either. Lia hoped she would get prettier, or become a better cook, but neither happened. There was also the crazy hope that maybe there would be one boy that wouldn’t care that she was plain and burned things.

She became a teenager, and as the 1960s rolled around, a new hope emerged in the form of Betty Friedan and feminism. One night at dinner, she was brave enough to bring up a hypothetical friend who was thinking about getting a job instead of getting married after high school. She was treated to a long tirade by her father about that “women’s lib nonsense.”

So, when she turned eighteen, Lia decided she might as well start talking to the parish priest about what order to join. She wanted to stay local if possible, and she didn’t want to be cloistered. If she was forced to become a nun, she was at least going to still see her brother on occasion. The arrangements were made, and she would take her vows the week after graduation.

She thought she had resigned herself to her fate, but the night she graduated, Joseph tip-toed into her bedroom. Lia pretended to be asleep.

“I know you’re awake,” he said. “I can hear you crying.”

Lia sat up and tried to focus on Joseph’s face in the darkness. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t want to be a nun, do you?” He sat down next to her on the bed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so. Mom and Dad put you up to it?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Lia, you’re a terrible liar. You might as well be straight with me.”

She sighed. “It doesn’t matter what I want. No one wants to marry me, and I’m not allowed to get a job, so that only leaves becoming a nun.”

“You’re good at typing, right? I know you’re organized, and you’ve always gotten better grades than me.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Leave it to me,” he told her. He seemed so confident, but he was only fifteen. What could he do?

As it turned out, Joseph was a force to be reckoned with, even at that young age. Two days later, Amelia was summoned to the priest’s office.

“Miss Vaughn, it has come to my attention you don’t want to become a nun. Is that correct?” Father Cochran’s gaze was kind, but still intimidating.

“N-no.”

“Your brother tells me you felt pressured into it. Sort of a choice of last resort because your parents have reservations about you getting a job.”

Lia nodded, shocked at her brother’s boldness.

“I’m glad he said something, because the life of a nun is not easy and not for everyone. If you don’t feel called to it, we certainly don’t want to make you.”

“Thanks?”

“You’re welcome. Now then, Joseph tells me you’d make an excellent secretary. I’d like to check those skills myself, if you don’t mind, as little brothers sometimes overstate things.” The

priest smiled at her. “But, if he’s right, we have a parish not far in Jersey that needs a secretary. It’s respectable work I’m sure your parents would approve of. Also, there’s a widow in the parish there that’s been looking to take on a renter to help with the mortgage. You could rent a room in the house, and it would all be on the up and up, too. What do you say?”

“I think I owe my little brother more than I can ever repay,” she said.

Joseph had always told her the debt was settled when he decided to become a priest. Unlike her, he had always been drawn to life in the church. And while it had been fine for Lia, it was not an okay choice for him as far as their parents were concerned. Joseph was the good-looking successful one—the three sport athlete with a college scholarship. He was supposed to be the first person in their family to get a degree. He could have married the homecoming queen and given them beautiful grandchildren, for Pete’s sake! So when he made his decision, Lia had been in his corner, fighting for him all the way.

Neither of them talked to their parents much after that. They had each other, and their work, and they were happy.

Then Joseph was murdered.

The police never found out who did it. They thought maybe it had to do with his work with gangs or his attempts to keep drugs out of the neighborhood, but they didn’t know for sure. Lia didn’t understand why anyone would ever kill her brother. Had they ever met him? Surely not. To know her brother was to love him.

She ached. And cried. And was cold. So, so cold. She went to work, she came home, and she crawled into bed with all of the covers on. And existed.

After six months, her priest rather forcefully suggested she go to a grief support group. She went, and there she met Robert Williams. His wife had died three years earlier after a decade long battle with lymphoma. They had no children because of the cancer, and he was alone like Lia. And then one day they weren’t alone anymore, because they had each other.

Robert didn’t care that Lia wasn’t pretty or that she still couldn’t cook. He married her anyway. She still missed Joseph, but the hole in her life was much more manageable with Robert.

They had nearly twenty wonderful years together before the stroke. Then Lia was alone again, and this time she didn’t even have work. She had retired a few years ago. She wandered around their house in Jersey searching for purpose she was sure would never come.

Until it did. She remembered vividly that it was a Tuesday and that it was raining. She went out to get the mail, shaking her fist at the rain, but on the way back to the house she stopped. Joseph, with his endless optimism, had always loved the rain. He used to stand out in it, his face upturned, and laugh.

She dumped the mail on the kitchen table. Bills, catalogs, more junk, and a small padded manila envelope with no return address. She opened it first.

Out spilled a small black smartphone that immediately began to ring. Lia didn’t have a smartphone, didn’t even know how to use one, so the phone rang through three cycles before she was able to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Williams?”

“Yes? Who is this?”

“My name is Damon, Mrs. Williams. I’m about to tell you some things that are shocking, but if you give me a chance, the payoff is well worth it.”

“Is this a scam?” Lia heard a deep chuckle on the other end.

“No, it’s not. Do you know how to use the phone I sent you?”

“Not really.”

“Okay, well, it has some files and pictures on it you might find interesting, but you can try to figure that out later. The most important thing is that you know that your brother Joseph had an affair with a woman before he died.”

Lia clutched the phone tightly. “How dare you—”

“Mrs. Williams, please know that the purpose of this call is not to impugn your brother’s good name. While I never had the pleasure of meeting him, my understanding was that he was an exceptional man whose only failing was that he picked a horrible woman to fall in love with. And she’s the person who murdered him.”

“What?” Lia reached for the nearest chair and sunk into it. She didn’t even know how to respond, which was fine, because Damon had a lot more to say. He told her a story of an evil woman named Irina Rodina and the twin niece and nephew she never knew she had.

“Why are you calling now?” Once Lia had finally collected herself, that seemed the most pressing question. “The twins are how old? Twenty-four? If no one bothered to tell me anything when they were little, why am I getting a call about this now?”

“Ah, because something significant has changed, Mrs. Williams.”

“What?”

“For that answer, I’m afraid you’re going to have to take a little trip. Pack a bag, and board the train to New Haven. Do not take a taxi. Make sure you take subways to the train; stay underground as much as possible. I’m going to give you an address, and you’ll have to memorize it. I’ll be waiting for you there.”

Lia thought the whole thing sounded crazy—the twins, the cloak and dagger, all of it. But what if it were true? What if Joseph had children? Two children who were raised by his murderer no less? If she could help them in any way, she had to do it.

On the train ride over, she eventually managed to find the pictures on the phone Damon had told her about. There were dozens of photos of the twins, at various ages. From the first sight of the boy—Alex, she thought Damon had said his name was— Lia began to cry. He looked exactly like Joseph, yet somehow even more handsome. The girl, Sera, didn’t look like anyone in their family. In fact, Lia thought she might be of a different race. Middle Eastern of some sort, she thought. She was stunning, but she didn’t look like Alex at all.

Lia didn’t get to read the articles before the end of the ride. She was too consumed with the pictures. When the train stopped, she found that the platform was at the bottom of the condo building where she was supposed to meet Damon. She took the elevator up and knocked on the door.

A man of average height answered the door, but she didn’t give him much more than a once over. She assumed he was Damon.

“Are they here? Are the twins here?”

He shook his head. “Alex is in California. He’s getting his masters at Stanford. Not that he’s told anyone that. They all think he is still working on his undergrad.”

Lia was confused. “Why?”

“Alex is complicated. I’m afraid you won’t get to meet him. He’s... not ready.”

“And Sera?”

“She’s still in France, finishing up her year abroad for her masters. She’ll be back next week. Although she’ll go to New York first and pay her respects to Irina, pretending like nothing is different. It may be a week or two before she can get out here.”

Lia couldn't help but let out a grunt of frustration. "Then why am I here?"

"Come with me," Damon said. He crooked a finger at her and led her further back into the condo towards a bedroom. He opened the door softly and tiptoed in.

Following his example, Lia entered quietly. At the sight of the crib, though, she gasped. Damon leaned against the side and motioned for her to peer in. As she did, she beheld a tiny little wonder with a few wisps of white blond hair.

"This is Logan. He's your great-nephew." Damon spoke softly so as not to wake the baby.

"Sera's?" Lia turned to Damon and he nodded. "Are you the, uh, father?" Lia didn't know how to ask that delicately.

"No. His father was Benjamin Dean. He and Sera met while she was an undergrad at Columbia. He was an undercover cop who specifically targeted her. Went by the name Eric Wentworth. He was trying to take down Irina's whole operation. He told Sera the truth about her mother, about Joseph, and how they always suspected Irina was responsible for his murder. Sera agreed to help him."

"And they fell in love?" Lia asked that question, because she was afraid to ask another.

"Yes. They were secretly engaged. They were going to get married right after they took down Irina."

Damon paused, but Lia couldn't ask. She didn't have to. She knew. "Irina killed him."

"Yes. In front of Sera. So she wouldn't ever make the same mistake again."

Lia looked again at the tiny, vulnerable baby sleeping. "Does Irina know about the baby?"

Damon shook his head. "No. Sera left for France before she was showing. I've been over there with her, making sure Irina knew nothing of the pregnancy." He took Lia's hands. "I know this is a lot to ask, but Sera needs you to raise Logan. And it has to be here, in this condo. She'll be able to visit, but you'll be the main caretaker."

Lia looked around again. "It looks expensive. It will take a while to sell my house." Lia shook her head, trying to clear it. This was too much information all at once. Did she even want to sell her house? Did she want to do this?

"The condo is paid for." He handed her a set of keys. "There's also a car in the garage below, and an account set up in your name at the bank down the block. There's more than enough money in it to see to your and Logan's needs. If you need anything else, you can call me on the phone I gave you. Only on that phone, though."

"Did you pay for all of this?"

"No."

"Sera?"

"No, her accounts are closely watched."

"Then who?"

Damon pursed his lips, thinking. "The man who hired me."

"And who would that be?"

"Inquisitive, aren't you?"

"Well, as you pointed out, you are asking for a lot." Lia took a step closer to him and gave his chest a poke.

"Mmm," Damon mumbled, then paused. Finally, he spoke. "When Joseph died, the twins weren't completely alone. There's always been someone watching over them. He's tried as best as he could to be there for them without putting them at risk. When Sera found out she was pregnant, she called him. He would have taken Logan himself, but it wasn't possible. Irina watches him almost as closely as her children."

“I don’t get a name?”

“Afraid not.” Damon pressed his hand lightly to Logan’s head and headed back to the living room. Lia followed. He turned to her. “So, are you in or out?”

“That’s it? That’s not a very hard sell.”

“I didn’t take you for the type of woman that needed a hard sell.”

Lia shook her head. In the next room slept Joseph’s grandson. She still couldn’t quite believe it. She thought she would be living out the remainder of her days alone. But now, she had a piece of her brother back: his children, his grandson. She thought her brother was done giving her gifts, yet even from the grave he sent her people to love and a purpose for her life.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m in.”

“Great.” Damon opened the closet and reached in for a raincoat. He put a hand on the doorknob and then paused.

“Is there something else?”

He turned and walked back to her. “Yes. Yes, there is. You know Logan needs looking after. He cries, gets hungry, needs his diaper changed. But Sera, she’ll pretend she’s fine. I mean, she may show you some of her grief for Ben.”

“I know how to mourn. I can help her with that.” Lia did her best to keep her voice steady.

Damon placed a hand on her shoulder. “I know you do. I’m sorry for that. But Sera has more weighing on her than her grief. She’ll miss Logan desperately. Her whole life will have to be a lie, and she’ll have to pretend to love the woman she hates most in the world. That’s more than anyone should have to bear. She can’t even talk to her brother about it. Don’t let her shut you out. Please, can you do that for me?”

“For you?” Lia didn’t miss who this last request was for. “Not the man who hired you. For you?”

Damon smiled a half smile but didn’t answer her question.

“Why can’t she talk to you? You’ve been with her for months, right? You already know everything.”

“She’s not ready.”

“Is she not ready or are *you* not ready?”

He laughed, but wouldn’t quite meet her eyes. “Guilty as charged. Neither of us is ready. I hadn’t... planned on Serafima. I’m a bit complicated myself. It wouldn’t be safe for her if I pursued a friendship with her right now.”

“Friendship. I don’t think that’s the word you want.” Lia laughed at him this time. “Need a bit of time to move a few pieces on your chessboard, do you?”

“I need to buy a whole new board,” Damon said. “Your niece changes everything.”

## CHAPTER 1

“Harper’s here!” Kat shouted from above. Alex lay in their cabin on the yacht, still trying to figure out what he was going to say. He heard a car door slam shut and then the sound of a trunk closing. Kat and Harper’s voices were drowned out as the taxi pulled away.

He knew he should help Harper with her bag. He should help Kat cast off. Instead, he didn’t move.

He hadn’t told Kat about his discovery, and he wasn’t sure if he was going to confront Harper, either. The baby had to be his. Harper wasn’t the type to sleep around. Still, why hadn’t she told him? Was she not planning on keeping it?

He sat up in a sudden moment of panic. Harper had been in Chicago for a week. What if she wasn’t pregnant anymore? What if she had already gotten rid of his child without ever telling him?

Harper descended the stairs, bag in hand. She spotted him sitting in bed. “Hey, you.”

“Hey.” One word was all he could manage to get out. She was as beautiful as always. He missed her blonde hair, but he was getting used to the reddish tint. At least when they were on the boat she didn’t wear the contacts that made her blue eyes a muddy brown. She had on a white sundress, more like the type of clothes she used to wear. Sasha wouldn’t like it, but he thought she looked lovely.

Was she thinner? Bigger? He couldn’t tell. The dress had an empire waist, which hid that all-important region. Would she be showing anyway?

“This is a lousy reception after being gone a week.” Harper’s lips curled into a half smile. “What’s a girl got to do around here to get some sugar?”

She dropped her bag on the floor and crawled onto the bed next to him. She immediately took off Alex’s glasses, which he didn’t need anyway, so they didn’t obstruct his hazel eyes. He knew she missed the real him as much as he missed the real her. She used to run her fingers through his blond hair all the time, but she didn’t seem to like touching his brown hair. He understood.

Harper snuggled next to his side and gave him a kiss on the cheek. She frowned when he didn’t respond and looked to see what he was staring at.

“What are you holding, babe?”

“Your pills.” Alex loosened his death grip on the bottle and handed them to her. “I got you some more.”

“Oh, thanks.” Harper took them and set them on a nearby ledge.

“Do you even need them anymore?” He finally looked at her, a clear accusation in his tone.

Harper frowned at him. “I’m not sure. I have been feeling better. I might have finally gotten used to this boat.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Alex said, his anger boiling over. He couldn’t stand not knowing. He pushed her back against the bed and grabbed the hem of her dress, then hiked it up until her stomach was exposed.

“Alex! What are you doing?”

He ignored her question and instead studied her abdomen. He held his breath, but there—there it was. Alex caressed his hand over the unmistakable baby bump, then let out a shuddering breath.

“You didn’t have an abortion.”

Harper sat up, but didn't remove Alex's hands. "No. I considered a number of options, but that wasn't one of them." Alex gave the bump one last pat and then rearranged her dress for her. "How long have you known?"

"Just today. The pharmacist told me what the pills were really for. How far along are you?"

"A little over four months."

"What? But that means you were pregnant before we even ran. Before Sasha shot my mother and we got on this boat and... and everything!"

"I'm aware of that."

"And you were never going to say anything?"

"I wasn't sure, Alex. It was a lot to think about."

"What's there to think about? I'm going to be a dad and you didn't feel I had a right to know? Harper, what's going on here? Don't you... I mean, I thought we were good. Did I do something?" Alex took her hands in his. The temptation to let his power creep into his voice was so strong, he forced himself to stop talking. He couldn't demand answers.

Harper squeezed his hands. "Yes, I love you." She stopped there and let it sink in. Alex had started to ask, but had been afraid of the answer. He also knew he couldn't speak the words back. Damn his power. Sera's warnings rang in his head more and more these days. He didn't know how much choice Harper still had in their relationship, but Sera had told him long ago how much a true confession of love could have over someone. He didn't want to reduce Harper to a groupie. He brought her hands to his mouth and kissed them, trying to show her what he couldn't say. "Why do you think this is so difficult?"

Alex shook his head. "Sorry, babe. I'm even more confused."

"Well, first of all, I didn't realize I was pregnant until I'd already missed two periods. I know, I know, how could I be that dense?" She shook her head at herself. "But a lot was going on. I was worried about Galine disappearing, and Kat with her Mom, and then—well, then everything else happened."

Alex nodded. "I get it. It was nuts."

"It wasn't until I'd been on the yacht for several days and I was still so sick that it finally dawned on me what the problem was. I really did think I'd get my sea legs, because I'd been on longer boat trips before and I'd never been sick like this. I didn't know for sure until I took a pregnancy test on Turks and Caicos."

"Okay, so I get why you didn't tell me for the first two months. Why haven't you said anything for the last two if you knew you were going to keep the baby?"

"Because I wasn't sure I could keep both of you," she said.

Alex shook his head again. She wasn't making any sense. Then it hit him.

His mother.

Alex paled, and he began to see spots in front of his eyes. He felt Harper's cool hand on the back of his neck, bringing his head between his knees. His vision cleared, but he still thought he might be sick.

"You okay?" Harper rubbed his back.

Alex sat up and stared at her. He grabbed her and smashed his lips into hers, kissing her with all the passion and fear he felt. She began to unbutton his shirt, but he stilled her hands.

"No. I have to get you out of here. You need to be as far away from me as possible. You can't tell me where you are. I can't ever know—" Alex's voice cracked and he couldn't continue. He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the tears that were trying to fall. He would be strong for her.

“Alex, I already thought about leaving you. I wasn’t planning on coming back from Chicago. I even told Galine about all your groupies popping up. About how I could never be sure you could ever be faithful to me.”

Alex forced himself to look at her. This is what he wanted. She needed to get away from him because his mother would never stop hunting him. Sirin could never know there was a child. If it was because she could no longer put up with him, so be it.

“I wasn’t going to tell you about the baby because that seemed too cruel. It was bad enough, leaving you based on a lie.” Alex’s breath caught, unsure of what he was hearing. “If you knew that it was two of us leaving, and I was only running to keep the baby safe, I thought you might try to talk me out of it.” Harper laughed with a bitter edge. “But now, once I’ve decided I won’t walk away from you, I come back to find you determined to push me away.”

Alex placed a hand on each of her cheeks, framing the face that was so precious to him. “I want to wake up to you every morning, and make love you each night. I want to raise this child with you and love him or her with all of my being, Harper. But I will not be the death of either of you.”

“And I will not live in fear,” she said.

Alex stood up in an explosion of anger. “Damn it, woman! Be reasonable!”

Harper rose with him, eyes flashing. “Sasha and Galine don’t let your mother dictate their life.”

“They’re immortal!”

“Yes, and they’re on our side. Your mother isn’t even awake yet. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but I want to try. There may come a time when I do have to take the baby and run, but I refuse to do that unless I have to.”

“You’re assuming you’ll still be able to run at that point.” Alex pounded the galley table with his fist.

“And you’re assuming she won’t find me if I hide by myself. At least if I’m with you and the others, I have a fighting chance.”

Alex narrowed his eyes and filled his voice with power. “I command you to—”

Harper covered his mouth with her hand. “Oh, don’t you dare try to use your voodoo on me, Alexei Rodin. There ain’t no power greater than a Southern mama. I’m not going anywhere, and you best get used to it.”

## CHAPTER 2

May became June, and Chicago finally got warm enough for me. Of course, about the time I was starting to enjoy the weather, we made our decision on a college.

The SAT scores had arrived, and the three of us had made an admirable showing. That was good, because our applications were extremely tardy for fall admissions. When all was said and done, there were two colleges that both met our requirements and all five of us got into: Auburn and Purdue University. My vote was for Auburn. Alabama was considerably warmer than northern Indiana. Purdue, however, was just a few hours from Chicago. While it got less snow and wind, on the whole, its winters weren't a whole lot better.

Harper and Alex were indifferent, having both already gone to college before. They felt they should let us undergrads choose. Sasha thought Purdue was more secure being essentially in the middle of nowhere, USA. Auburn was closer to Sirin's center of power on the East Coast, and was also a popular college choice among influential Southern families. He worried there might be more of a chance someone might recognize Harper. He figured there was almost no chance of anyone recognizing any of us in West Lafayette, Indiana. So, it was left to Katja to break the tie.

Her short text reply read, "I vote the opposite of whatever Galine voted."

I sighed when I read it. Obviously she was still put out with me.

"So, what's the verdict?" Sasha asked, trying to get a look at the screen.

I deleted the text before he could see it and have more ammunition against my sister. "She votes Purdue."

A few days later, we loaded up the Honda with our clothes and the few household items we had managed to accrue in our time in Chicago. It was harder to leave our little apartment than I had thought it would be. I was excited about the prospect of college, a dream I had given up on long ago. I also wanted to see Harper and my sister again, and I was even missing Alex. At least he kept things lively. Still, for all its plainness, the apartment had been the first home Sasha and I had lived in together. I gave the doorknob an extra pat on my way out.

"Coming?" Sasha called over his shoulder.

West Lafayette looked tiny after Chicago, and even in comparison to Durham it was small. Before coming upon the city, we had seen little but fields of cornstalks and shorter leafy plants that Sasha informed me were soybeans. I was starting to get worried we had left all signs of civilization behind, but as we entered Lafayette I began to see the familiar neon glow of fast food chains, Walmart, Target, gas stations, grocery stores, and all the other conveniences of suburbia. We stayed that night at a motel across the Wabash River, where we could still make out some of the red brick buildings of the campus.

The next day we embarked on our mission to find a house for the five of us. We had the advantage of arriving two months before the horde of students descended in the fall, so there were several places to choose from within walking distance of the campus. I had a hard time picturing Harper or Alex in any of them, though. They all had a low level of grime in the corners that I didn't think could be removed, even with aggressive scrubbing. The fixtures were cheap brass, the walls were blinding white, and all the carpets were a nondescript beige color with an occasional smattering of unfamiliar stains. I hadn't expected anything less. After all, these were houses that rented to nineteen-year-old undergrad boys. Most of that species I had come in contact with were allergic to basic household cleaners and subsisted on pizza and illegally obtained beer.

Any of the houses were fine with me. Most of them were still nicer than the apartment where Kat and I had lived in Durham. Sasha gave a look of disgust once when his palm stuck to the kitchen counter in a particularly sketchy one. Otherwise, he observed each one without comment. After our sixth house, I turned to him and asked if he had an opinion either way.

“No,” he said. I had suspected as much. After a couple of days of this, while we were standing in the middle of what seemed like our fifty-sixth house, I announced to the woman showing us around that we’d take it.

“Why this one?” Sasha inquired.

“Because I’m done,” I announced.

“Good enough.”

The house was two stories tall with a good-sized kitchen and living room, and even a backyard with a nice deck. It had four bedrooms; the master bedroom was on the first floor, with three more upstairs. Sasha pointed out that we only needed three bedrooms, but I wasn’t so sure. He might be confident that Harper and Alex were back on good terms, but I wanted her to have the option of her own room. In a moment of whole-hearted greed, I declared, “We are taking the master bedroom.”

Sasha raised one eyebrow at me. “Is that so?”

Why is it that only men are capable of operating their eyebrows independently of each other? I tried to match his expression, but both eyebrows went up, which made me look startled instead of cagey. “Indeed.”

He snickered at me, but didn’t argue. “Okay, so we have the house, and we have decided at least which bedroom is ours. Now comes the hard part.”

“What’s that?”

“We have to furnish this thing.”

I groaned. “Can’t we let Harper do that when she gets here?”

“Sure, if you want everything to be white and impractical,” he reminded me. “And if you want to sleep, eat, and sit on the floor until August.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Most of the rest of the week was devoted to setting up house. Sasha saw to turning on all of our utilities and getting us Internet service. Meanwhile, I trudged up and down the aisles of Target buying sheets, towels, pots, pans, lamps, end tables, and a variety of other things. I was beginning to see why most people registered for all of that stuff when they got married. Buying it all on your own was both expensive and time consuming. We managed to find a couple of couches and a kitchen table on Craigslist, as well as a decent bedroom set, although we did buy a new mattress.

Sasha reminded me that there was no need to fuss over prices so much. “Love, buy whatever you want. We have money. We. Not me. I hope now that we’re married you aren’t going to be so stubborn about money.”

“It’s not that,” I told him. Well, it might have started as my normal penny-pinching reflex, but then my brain kicked in. “How many real college students live in anything but houses furnished with mismatched used furniture? We’re trying to fit in, remember? Maybe if this were Duke, but this is a state school. You, Alex, and Harper might be loaded, but living in a palatial estate will make us stick out.”

“Alex, Harper, and we are loaded,” he corrected. “But, point taken.”

After I got the downstairs furnished, I called it quits and decided Alex, Harper, and Kat could shop for their own rooms when they arrived.

I grumbled about all of the shopping hassle that night as we lay in bed. Sasha let me go for a good fifteen minutes before he propped himself up on his elbow and gave me a cease and desist order.

“Galine, do you realize what you’re complaining about? Ordinary things,” he pointed out. “Boring, everyday tasks like waiting in line at the store, or not being able to find towels in the right color.”

“I suppose it’s not children starving in Africa, but it doesn’t mean it’s not frustrating,” I said, attempting to defend myself.

“I’m not saying it isn’t frustrating, love, but do you also realize what a gift it is? In the last year, when were towels your biggest concern? Aside from the visions, haven’t the last few months been delightfully normal? I mean, we’re buying spatulas and driving a Civic. If I don’t think about it too hard, I can almost pretend we’re just like everyone else.”

I mentally did the math. It had been four months since I’d worn the flame-colored feathers of the Gamayun. Four months since I had faced Sirin. Four months that I had anticipated would involve lots of running and hiding and fighting with Alex and my sister. Instead, I had gotten married, hadn’t moved much at all, and hadn’t had to make a decision harder than whether I should make grilled chicken or hamburgers for dinner. Yes, the visions were confusing and at times frightening, but they were no threat to my immediate safety. I had a roof over my head, food in my stomach, and clothes on my back—luxuries I hadn’t had a mere five months ago.

I felt I had been given even more than what Sasha suggested, though. Yes, we had been granted a wonderful respite of normalcy, but even more than that, I was happy. And the source of all that joy lay next to me, warm and strong and beautiful.

“You’re right,” I said. “We’ve been lucky.” I wanted Sasha to know how much better my life was with him, but I wasn’t sure how to put it into words.

“Not luck. A gift,” he corrected. He locked onto my eyes with his. Sasha didn’t want me to misunderstand.

I caught his meaning, and I could feel the anger rising to the surface that always accompanied Sasha’s mentions of God. Then I remembered how encouraging he had been with Harper before she left, and it stilled my sharp tongue. He had kept his promise to me, so I needed to honor his request as well. I thought the credit was due more to Sasha’s shotgun and the hole it blew in Sirin’s chest, but if he wanted to believe we had been granted a time of peace by God, I wasn’t going to argue with him. Instead, I kissed him long and slow and tried to show him what he meant to me, since my clumsy tongue didn’t allow me to say it.

Sunlight filtered through the windows, warming my cheeks and waking me early. I could hear several birds chirping, each one louder than the next. We hadn’t been in West Lafayette long, but I didn’t remember the birds being quite so exuberant. The house was on a fairly busy street, so the sounds of cars predominated. I opened my eyes to see if I could make out which bird was being so shrill. The window was further away from the bed than it was last night, and our popcorn ceiling had been replaced with exposed wooden beams.

I wasn’t at Purdue anymore. I was in Sasha’s cabin.

What had happened? As I thought, I brought my hand up to my wedding band in my hair and worried it like Sasha had taken to doing. The feather-light strands of my multicolor hair caught the sunlight, and for a moment they looked like they were on fire. It was a reminder of my prophetic role, and I began to have an inkling of what was going on.

I must have had a vision. What else could explain the obvious passage of time? It would have taken hours to drive from Indiana back to North Carolina. I imagined it had been more like days or weeks, though, for our situation to change so drastically that it was safe to live in the cabin again.

Why couldn't I remember what I saw, though? What good was a vision if I couldn't recall it?

I opened my eyes again and rolled to my side. Sasha's back was to me, but I saw enough of him to confirm that I had been out a while. His hair was once again the jet black I was used to, not the light brown he had been dying it, and it had grown out some. It still wasn't as long as before, but there was enough that I could run my fingers through it, which I did with delight. His hair was as soft and thick as I remembered it. He stirred and turned to face me, smiling.

There was the face I knew so well, with his hard jawline and cheekbones that could make you cry. His long eyelashes fluttered and he fixed his clear blue eyes on me.

"Morning," he said, his voice still gruff from sleep.

I backed away so fast I couldn't catch myself, and I slid off the bed in a heap. This man had my husband's face, but I knew with one glance that this was not my Sasha.

I fought to free myself from the bed sheets that were tangled around my legs, but in my struggle I realized I was not wearing near enough clothes for my liking. I changed tactics and tried to make sure the sheets covered as much as possible.

"Yuna, honey, you okay?" The voice was similar to Sasha's, but with an accent that let me know this man had been born and raised in the mountains of North Carolina. Sasha had lived too many other places to speak with such a pronounced accent.

"Yes. I'm good," I assured him. "Don't come help."

I stood up, draped in the sheets. Once I felt less vulnerable, I let myself take a good look at Jeremiah Harris, for there was no one else this could be. I wasn't waking up from a vision, I was smack in the middle of one.

I had wished many times I could have met Sasha's father, but meeting him in the body of Sasha's mother was not the way I would have picked. I realized that it was not my wedding ring I had clasped for comfort, at least it wasn't mine yet. Currently, it belonged to its original owner, Yuna Harris. I tried hard not to think of Manya, because I didn't want her surfacing and taking over the driver's seat.

Jeremiah sat up and stretched. His chest was bare, and if I hadn't already known this wasn't Sasha, I had even more evidence. His arms and torso were corded with muscle, much bulkier than Sasha. I supposed it came from cutting and hauling his own timber for a living. Sasha sold the logging rights to a company, so his leaner musculature was from splitting logs for the cabin stove and fireplace. Jeremiah's chest was also unmarked. He bore no scars from cavalry sabers or bullets, just smooth tanned skin. Perhaps that was one of the reasons Sasha's father had a carefree grin that I had never seen cross my husband's countenance.

For the briefest of moments, I ached for what Sasha had lost. Then Jeremiah spoke, breaking me out of my melancholy.

"It's early," he said. "Come back to bed."

"No!" I squeaked in alarm. "I, uh, I've slept long enough. I think I'll get dressed." I made a beeline for the nearby dresser and began to rummage through the drawers.

I heard a chuckle behind me. "Goin' to wear my britches today, are you?"

Shoot. Yes, I was clearly rummaging through men's clothes. His use of "britches," a term I hadn't heard anyone ever use, got me thinking, too. I needed to look for dresses. If Jeremiah was

still alive, it was sometime before 1862. He didn't look much older than Sasha, so it was probably the 1840s. I scanned the room and spied the wardrobe that had held Manya's clothes when I first visited Sasha. When I opened it, I found two cotton dresses and a few heavy wool ones. It felt warm out and there wasn't a fire burning, so I opted for one of the cotton dresses. I had it over my head and on quickly enough, but the buttons in the back were impossible. I felt warm, calloused hands swat my fingers out of the way gently and take over the fastening.

"Thanks," I told Jeremiah hesitantly. As soon as the top button was done, he reached for me, but I ducked under his embrace and headed for the kitchen. "Breakfast?" I asked with a measure of early morning cheer I didn't feel. My palms were sweating. I rubbed my clammy hands down the front of my dress, but it didn't help much. I had to touch the hair, didn't I? Now he was awake, and I didn't know how to keep my distance.

Sasha was a toucher, too. Every time he was in my vicinity he couldn't help but put a hand on my shoulder, or caress my face, or any number of small intimacies that created a physical connection between us. I was beginning to think he came by it honestly, because his Dad was full of loving glances for Yuna. I had to do quite the two-step in the kitchen while I was cooking to avoid Jeremiah's touch.

As we sat down to eat, I congratulated myself for making the best of an awkward situation. I stuffed a forkful of eggs into my mouth and hoped this vision would get to the point.

"Yuna?"

"Hmm?" I managed to get out with a mouthful of food.

"Forgetting something?" he chided, holding out his hands to me, palms up, inviting me to place my hands in his.

I couldn't think of anything I was forgetting. One of the benefits to Sasha never changing anything was the fact that the kitchen was laid out the exact same way it was in the present. I assumed even the cast iron skillet I used was the same one Sasha still made his eggs in.

"Not enough salt?" I asked.

Jeremiah laughed a full, deep belly laugh. I'd say it fell into the guffaw category. The sound caught me off guard, and I found myself laughing with him. It was a laugh I had never heard out of Sasha. Jeremiah's eyes and nose crinkled up, exposing a few tiny laugh lines. Sasha didn't have any of those, either. No wrinkles for his hundred and seventy plus years on the planet.

Jeremiah reached over and took my hands and bowed his head. "Thank you, God, for this food. Thank you for my beautiful wife who prepared it, and thank you for the wonderful sunshine this morning. Amen."

I was still frozen with my eyes open when he finished. It took me a moment to collect myself and begin eating again. I hadn't prayed over a meal since I was seven, and even then it had been a memorized Orthodox blessing that my father said over every meal with no variation. I hadn't heard such a simple, honest prayer before. Did Sasha still pray over his food in silence? Did he feel like he couldn't do it out loud because it would anger me?

"Yuna, are you sure you're okay? You seem peculiar this morning. I haven't done something to upset you, have I?" Concern filled Jeremiah's eyes.

"No, Jere-uh, Jer," I corrected myself clumsily, remembering at the last moment that Sasha's father had gone by a shortened version of his name. "I'm fine."

Jer wasn't convinced, but I was saved from further questioning by a knock on the door. "I wonder who that could be so early." He scraped his chair back from the table so he could answer the door. I stood up, too, but remained by the table.

Jer opened the heavy wooden door, and from where I stood it was easy to make out our visitor. The sun reflected off her shiny black hair, and she was wearing a much more expensive gown than my simple cotton dress. The emerald green fabric was silk, and there were a number of flounces and ribbons sewn onto it. She even wore an elaborate hat with black feathers arranged around the band. I wondered if they were hers, or if some unfortunate bird had to meet its end so Sirin could accessorize.

“Can I help you, miss?” Jer asked politely.

I was surprised he didn't know Sirin's name. Had they not met? Did Manya ever tell Jer about her sister? Surely she did. Crap, I knew I was going to have to let Manya take over, or I was going to screw this up. I wasn't sure how these visions worked. Perhaps this was all in my head, but it felt real. High school physics had not covered the intricacies of the space time continuum, so I was at a bit of a loss. Was it possible for me to mess up the past and therefore the future, or was I really here? I knew every time someone did it on TV, it didn't end well. I dropped my defenses, and silently called for Manya.

While I tried to get myself in order, Sirin dealt with things in the way she knew best: violence. Her answer to Jer's simple inquiry was downright hostile.

“Yes, you can release my sister,” she demanded as she produced a small pistol from her drawstring handbag. Was there ever an era she didn't cart a gun around in her purse? At the risk of getting shot again, I launched myself in front of Jer. About halfway through the movement Manya took over, so we stumbled a bit and nearly toppled over onto Sirin.

I think I would have fallen over regardless of the clumsy hand-off of consciousness. Manya's emotions were so violent, I was having trouble collecting myself. If I had been in charge of our body, I would have shaken my head a bit to clear it, but I didn't have that luxury. I was flooded with the feeling of abject terror. Manya disentangled us from Sirin, and then threw us around Jer in a full body death grip, making us a decent human shield, even though Manya's small frame didn't come close to covering all of Jer's bulk.

“Please, sister, don't hurt him. It's not what you think. He's not holding me captive.”

Jer was not pleased that his wife was protecting him. He was stronger than us, so he had our positions reversed in a moment's scuffling, even though Manya fought him with all she had. I was useless. I was still drowning in the tidal wave of Manya's thoughts. I was able to gather that she and Jer hadn't been married long, and the courtship had been even shorter. All told, she hadn't seen her sister in about four months, and hadn't bothered to send word during that time. I was barely able to piece that together because Manya wasn't thinking clearly at the moment. She was petrified. After centuries of being alone, she had found Jeremiah. There was an edge of desperation in her love for him already, but with a gun pointed at him, she was nigh onto hysterical.

Jer spoke, the anger and threat clear in his voice. “You will stop pointing that at my wife immediately.” He didn't have to add “or else” because his eyes blazed with menace. That looked like Sasha.

“Wife?” gasped Sirin. “My, you have been busy, Yuna.” With a short laugh, she put the gun back in her purse. She still spoke with a heavy Russian accent, as did Manya. They must not have been in the New World long.

I felt Manya relax and we took a step towards Sirin. Jer responded by gripping our arm tightly, halting our forward movement. “It's all right, Jer. This is my sister Sirin that I told you about. She won't hurt us. She was afraid for me.” That was all it took, and with complete trust in her words, Jeremiah let us go.

I wanted to yell at him, “No, dummy, you’re right to be suspicious! Your son would never let me walk into a dangerous situation alone because I told him to.” But what use did Jeremiah have for suspicion? His life had not taught him to fear.

Manya walked forward and embraced Sirin. She switched to Russian, the language it was obvious the two sisters preferred. “I can’t believe you found me. Please forgive me for not writing. At first I was unable, and then I wasn’t sure how to break the news.”

“It was wicked of you to make me worry like that,” Sirin scolded.

“Surely you weren’t worried, though? I always heal.”

“Yes, but you can be very miserable and still not be dead, as you well know. You took off to deliver that message to a slave owner, and then you didn’t come back. What was I supposed to think? Certainly not that you had gotten married.” Sirin closed the door behind her and made her way fully into the cabin, placing her hat on the kitchen table.

“Yuna, would you like a moment with your sister? I’m not following what you’re saying anyway, and I imagine you two have a lot to talk about.” Jer shuffled, unsure what to do.

Manya switched back to English. “Yes, that would be wonderful, dear. You go on to work, and the two of you can get acquainted at dinner tonight. Sirin, you’ll stay, won’t you?”

Sirin was wandering about the small space of the cabin, assessing it. At the sound of her name, she turned and looked at Manya again. “I suppose so,” she replied, still in Russian.

Jer hesitated, unsure of what Sirin’s response had been. Manya had us give him a quick kiss on the cheek and began to scoot him out the door. He left, still a bit bewildered. Manya then turned us to her sister. “Sirin, was the pistol necessary?”

“Don’t you scold me. You’re the one that’s been keeping secrets. I was trying to save you, because being held against your will was the only acceptable reason for being going this long without contacting me.” Sirin was angry, but I could also tell she was genuinely hurt. There were cracks in that perfectly cool countenance of hers. Her forehead was creased and her cheeks were even flushed.

“I am sorry. I was in a bad way when I arrived. I met Jer by crash landing on his lawn. He took excellent care of me, though.”

“Yes, clearly. You must have been full of gratitude to stoop to marrying the man.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Manya’s temper blazed to life, and mine with it.

“Don’t get me wrong. He’s certainly attractive, but he doesn’t seem to have much to offer in the way of material goods. Tell me, is this some rustic holiday retreat? Please tell me this isn’t your house.” Sirin’s nose wrinkled, showing her obvious distaste.

“I’ll ask you to not insult our home, and especially not in Jer’s presence. He built this cabin himself, even the furniture.” I could hear the pride in Manya’s voice. I thought it was well placed. I happened to know that this humble little abode would still be standing over a hundred years later.

“Yuna, have you temporarily taken leave of your senses?” Sirin asked. “Forget the house, why in the world did you marry a human? Sure, the men can be a welcome distraction. I’ve been telling you that for ages. If you were lonely, why didn’t you take a lover? Why did you tie yourself to one of them so permanently? Granted, he’ll die sooner or later, but you could lose a good forty years with him. He looks young and hardy. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re stuck with him for sixty.”

“Oh, I do hope so,” Manya said. “Do you think we might have that long together?”

Sirin threw her hands up in exasperation. “Stop being ridiculous. Do you think you can hide up here with a human and pretend you’re not the Gamayun? This is not going to work. Pack your things this instant. I’m taking you home before what’s-his-name returns.”

“Jeremiah,” Manya corrected through clenched teeth. “His name is Jeremiah Harris, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“He’s a *human*, Yuna. You don’t have any more patience for them than I do. Be sensible. Your place is with me, not him.”

“He’s different,” Manya said.

“Oh, they always seem that way at first. It’s lust. It wears off quickly enough, I can assure you.” Sirin began pinning her hat back on.

“No, you don’t understand. I love him.” Manya grabbed Sirin’s hand, trying to make her listen. “I’m not leaving him. My life is here, with Jer.”

Sirin’s pitch black eyes narrowed into a glare I knew well. She was beginning to understand that Manya was not going to do as she was told. “I can’t be understanding you correctly,” she said. “Are you telling me that you are choosing that thing over me? Me? I have been with you forever. Literally forever. I came to this godforsaken country for you, and you want to leave me?”

“Don’t be like that. That’s not what I said. I’m not choosing anyone. Of course, I still want you in my life. Move here. You’re welcome to stay with us, but I imagine you’ll manage to convince someone to build you a monstrosity of a house nearby.” Manya laughed at her own joke, hoping to lighten the mood. “I am not willing to leave Jer. You’re both my family.”

“I will not lower myself to be ‘family’ with a despicable human,” Sirin declared coolly. “I’m returning to New York. Hopefully I’ll have gotten over this slight when you’ve realized the mistake you’ve made. Don’t wait too long, though. You know how I hold a grudge.” Her hat back in place, she strode out of the cabin, her chin in the air.

I felt Manya’s devastation. She sat at the table and cried. I tried to communicate to her that she was better off without Sirin, but even though we were sharing the same body, there was no way for me to comfort her.

I heard the door open and close again quietly. Then Jeremiah picked us up and placed us in his lap, curling his huge arms around Manya. He stroked her hair and murmured to her as hot tears spilled down her face.

I would have argued it was impossible for a person to love someone as much as I loved Sasha, but as I was wrapped both in Manya’s emotions and her husband’s arms, I realized Manya had loved Jer as wholeheartedly as I did her son. Her love for him consumed nearly all of her. She had just enough room left over for fear. Fear that at this moment was small, but the seed was there nonetheless. What would she do if Jeremiah were ever taken from her? Worse yet, what would I do when it was my turn?

When I woke, Jeremiah was standing above me, looking haggard and thin. “Jer, honey, you look awful. Are you ill?” I reached a hand out and felt the thickness of his dark beard. It didn’t match the lighter brown of his short hair. “Did you cut your hair?”

I didn’t think it was possible for him to look worse, but Jer’s skin took on a greenish tint. “Mom?” he croaked.

I frowned at him and inspected him further. “Wait, you’re not Jeremiah, are you? The resemblance is remarkable, but you’re not quite the same. You feel familiar, though.”

“Galine, it’s me, Sasha,” the Jer look-a-like said. He reached for my face, and gripped each side tightly and gave me one quick shake.

“Stop that,” I insisted, and tried to back away from him. I was prevented from going too far, though, because of a tube coming out of my nose. “What is that?” I asked fearfully. “What have you done to me?”

“Shh,” he said, trying to calm me. “That was keeping you fed while you slept. Hold still and I’ll take it out for you.”

I obeyed, and he had it out without too much discomfort. He stood back, giving me space to think. “Did you call me Mom a minute ago?” I was trying to figure out what was going on, but my brain felt fuzzy and slow. “You said your name was Sasha? Are you my son?” That would explain the resemblance to Jeremiah.

“No.” He was angry, I thought, but something told me to look at his eyes. No, he wasn’t angry, I realized. He was afraid--very, very afraid. “I am Jeremiah Harris’ son, but you are not Yuna Harris. You are my *wife*.” I could hear the anguish in his voice, and I found that it distressed me. I leaned closer to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

He saw this as an opening, or maybe he had reached a certain level of desperation and didn’t care. Sasha grabbed me and crushed his lips to mine. At first I fought against this stranger, but he refused to release me, bruising me with his kisses. For a few moments I couldn’t concentrate on anything but his tongue invading my mouth and the scratch of his beard against my cheeks. Then, at some point, I crossed from not-knowing to knowing. I remembered those lips, those hands, this man. I could feel that he realized I had returned. His kisses became less urgent, less fierce, and more tender until he pulled back from me. “Galine?” he asked in barely a whisper, fearful of my response.

“It’s me.” I reassured him. “I don’t know what happened. I couldn’t shake Manya’s consciousness.” The whole process was odd beyond words. When I was in her body, I felt trapped and hated the loss of control, but I always knew where I ended and she began. This time when I woke, however, it was almost as if a part of her still clung to me, sticky as cobwebs. As much as I pulled away from Manya to return to my world, her consciousness clung to the corners of my mind, confusing me.

“What was it this time?” he asked.

“Nothing that won’t keep. You look exhausted. Sleep. We can talk once you’re rested.” He wanted to argue, and he was still holding me close, rubbing my back in a gesture that comforted him more than it did me. “Sasha, lie down. I’m okay.”

I got him in bed and ducked into the bathroom, trying to shower quietly. When I emerged, he was already asleep. I wandered into the kitchen in search of food. I had gone grocery shopping the day before I fell asleep, but I didn’t know how long ago that was. I hadn’t wanted to ask Sasha, knowing it would upset him. The fridge was bare, and so were the cupboards. The recycling bin was overflowing with cans and pizza boxes. Well, at least he ate something, although from the looks of him, it hadn’t been enough. I thought briefly about going out for supplies, but dismissed it, afraid Sasha might wake up and find me gone. I found my phone on the coffee table where I left it, and dialing the number I found on one of the discarded boxes, I ordered some more pizza.

After I hung up, I looked at the time and date on my phone, and couldn’t catch myself before a loud, “Shit!” escaped my lips. It was the last week of July. I’d been out over three weeks. Out of habit, I looked around to make sure my impressionable sister wasn’t within earshot, but I was alone. I wouldn’t be much longer, though. The other three were due to arrive in Indiana the first week of August.

I stood up and paced, angry. What was the point of all of these visions? I was sick of them. If I was supposed to be gleaning some earth-shattering message, it was lost on me. I ate the pizza when it arrived, putting me in a better mood, but I was still antsy and irritated. Itching for something to do, I pulled out trash bags, cleaners, and paper towels and decided to give the house a thorough scrubbing. Sasha had neglected any housekeeping duties in favor of watching over me, and it wasn't as if the house was super clean when we moved in. I made it my mission to get that unmovable grime in the corners to budge.

As I cleaned, I thought. I went over every minute detail of the three visions I had experienced, analyzing them. What was I supposed to be learning? Manya and Sirin used to be close. I knew that already. They had killed some servant girl. I could do some research, but I didn't think that had any significant historical ripples. They had moved to the States. I knew that already, too. Manya had married Jeremiah. Aaagh! No duh! I threw a wet sponge at the bathroom wall and let it slide down in a sappy mess. I even knew how it ended. Manya and Sirin eventually stopped speaking to each other, and Jer died. I sighed and retrieved my sponge and started back at the beginning. What else? Sirin always had wealth and power...

By that evening, the house was sparkling and I was exhausted, but I was no closer to figuring out the mystery of the visions. If they were supposed to help us find another cage site, the visions were doing it in the most obscure way possible. Maybe when Sasha woke he could offer another perspective. I wasn't sure, though. Even he was growing frustrated. Despite his repeated prayers, we still had heard nothing from the Alkonost. If Alex came up with nothing in Brazil, we were back to square one.

I ordered another pizza for dinner and perused Craigslist ads for possible bedroom furniture for Alex, Harper, and Kat. I bookmarked a couple of possibilities they might want to look at when they arrived. I found some bunk beds that looked nice for Alex and Harper. I couldn't help snickering to myself, and seriously considered buying them to get a rise out of Alex. I ended up falling asleep on the couch watching TV but was jerked awake by Sasha's shout, "Galine!"

I jumped to my feet and ran to the bedroom to find him sitting up in bed, his eyes filled with dread. "What is it?" I demanded. I couldn't see that there was anything wrong with him. I climbed over the end of the bed until I was on my knees in front of him. "Sasha?"

He grabbed me like he had that morning, ferocious in his need to touch me. I had thought when he was awake he would want to talk about the vision, or tell me what had happened in the past few weeks. The last two times that was what we had done. He had been anxious, sure, and upped the amount he hovered for a couple of days. But this was so different. With this last vision, he had crossed some threshold and was terrified. I supposed it could've been because the amount of time I was under kept increasing, but I didn't think that was it. It was that I didn't recognize him when I finally stirred.

Sasha didn't want to talk. Words were not his medium anyway. He feverishly ran his fingertips over me, trying to map every inch of me. Then he guided my hands to do the same, his desire clear. I was to physically commit him to memory so there would be no more forgetting.

I could have told him it was unnecessary. What did he think I had been doing since we had been married? Every time we came together there was this awful voice in my head that said, "Drink this in. Remember how warm his skin is, what he smells like, how his smile lights up his whole face. This could be the last time."

But I didn't tell him that. I didn't speak of visions or death. I didn't speak at all. I loved him until he stopped trembling and I could no longer hear him whisper, "*Ne pokidaj menja, Ne pokidaj menja.*" *Don't leave me, Don't leave me.*

