

RIPPLES

Book One of the
Guardian Series

CAYLEN D. SMITH

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TO MY FAMILY

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CHAPTER ONE

It's funny how the mind works. One moment you are focusing on one thing and then completely miss what is going on around you. The mind wanders...especially mine, which, in turn can get me into pretty bad situations. And now, here I am, walking along the pathway in the forest. Alone. The stars already shining are probably not the best sign. Out here I have no sense of time. I am completely at a loss. It is so quiet that I can hear the small noise of a pine needle breaking. Tension runs throughout my body reminding me that the only noise out here is me, stepping on all these dying leaves.

Another thing the mind loves to do is play tricks on you, which can be paralyzing. Usually, if your heart stops, there is a high possibility that whatever moved from your peripheral view was real. And of course it had to happen to me at that specific moment. A small flicker of light was the start of the uncontrollable pumping of my heart against my chest. Something was there. . . watching me.

Building up the courage and pushing away pestering anxiety, I wrapped my fingers around the branches of a tree, lowering them for a better view. "Show yourself."

Goosebumps appeared as the thing made itself known. One by one its unnaturally long fingers gripped the tree trunk to haul itself out of the brush. Its head appeared next as it moved away from the tree, and then suddenly, in front of me, appeared a ghost-like creature. Its breathing, low and shallow, it was draped in pale cloth, floating gracefully like a falling feather. Arms stretched out—every second moving closer to me.

Paralyzed with fear, running away was my only option, but my feet had the feeling of heavy cement. I strained to make eye contact with the unknown thing—even more so, once I realized it had no eyes.

Suddenly it spoke, the voice hollow and ghostly as if it had barely spoken for centuries. "Dear child, there is something beyond your reach that will harm you and everyone around you."

My mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. Quick breaths were the best I could do. Shaking my head to clear my mind, "I—I don't. . . I don't understand what you mean?" An invisible hand had to be around my neck. Why was it so hard to speak? The ability to form words with the gut wrenching feeling of being deathly afraid of the beast in front of me was not mixing well.

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The atmosphere was strange, with my breath clear as day in the cold night, but when the creature spoke, I could not see its breath.

“It is coming and you must prepare yourself for the worst.”

“What? Who is coming. . . ?” I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat. I felt out of control of my own body with its shaking. Wrapping my arms around myself like a blanket, I tried to control my tremors.

“I am sorry, but my time is at an end. Trust those who are closest to you and you shall prosper. Farewell.” It turned around and disappeared back into the darkness from which it had come.

I blinked once and finally found my voice that before had been but a whisper. “Wait, don’t go!” I stretched my hand out toward it, but air was the only thing that touched my palm. A hole wide enough for only me to fit through opened up and sucked me into a deep void. Darkness was all I could see.

Suddenly light appeared.

I wrestled in my bed as the images of the dream continued in my mind. Well, closer to a nightmare. My thoughts became more coherent and I could already tell that Gloria had opened the curtains in my room. The warm rays of the morning sun tickled my skin. I have told her countless times not to open the curtains this early in the morning, but does she listen to me? Of course not. I hold no grudge against her. It’s my father’s doing. She is doing her job, but it still irritates me.

“Gloorriiaaa! Why do you always wake me up this early?”

I tried my best to sit up in my bed even though my body begged me to lay my head back onto the pillow and close my eyes. My hair covered part of my face and the urge to push it back was not a high priority.

“I am sorry, Miss Alexandria, but you have your studies this morning,” she said as she scurried to the other windows.

My eyes followed her movements. “Your father wants you to work with Luna this morning. . . and don’t give me that look Miss Alexandria.” She opened the other curtains.

Quickly shielding my eyes with my arm from the blinding light, they began to adjust. I peeked over my exposed arm and searched my room for Luna. Her spot on the bed was vacant. Annoyed, I shook my head at the thought of her already up. She had a habit of doing that, and I had no idea how it was even possible. Don’t people like their sleep or was that only me?

Then Gloria answered my question, “Luna is in the garden waiting for you, so hurry up and get dressed.”

Can she read minds or something? I narrowed my eyes at her retreating back. She knows me too well.

A loud groan escaped my throat. “Just one more hour.” I pulled the covers over my head, hoping to fall back to sleep. For a split, glorious second, I relished the thought of Gloria’s absence. It would be a miracle that would allow me to get a couple more hours of sleep.

“No way little Miss. I set your clothes on your chair near your desk. Now get up and get dressed!” Rushing footsteps came toward my canopy bed from the other side of my bedroom.

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She ripped the sheets from my tight grasp, then left and closed the door behind her, all within seconds. Cold penetrated my bones as the warmth of the sheets disappeared. Sitting up in my bed for a moment, desperately wanting to go back to sleep, eyelids slowly closed and opened until the sound of her rushing footsteps approached the door.

Adrenaline kicked in from the fear of Gloria's wrath. My sleepy mind was completely gone but not enough to stop me from jumping out of bed—covers falling onto the wooden floor. “I’m up, I am up!” I made my way over to the windows and pushed open the cold glass to let in the fresh air. It was a nice morning with the sun already peeking out from behind the trees, the sliver of rays shining through the branches. The sky turned orange as the sun crept up inch by inch. I took hold of my pendant that hung on a long string around my ridged neck. Filling my lungs with a breath of fresh air as it blew into a bright room, my pendant felt cold between my small fingers. Its rough metal rubbed against my smooth fingertips.

Walking over to the clothes draped over the auburn chair, I saw what Gloria had chosen for me. The short-sleeved dress was beige and white with the neckline falling just below my collarbone. The weather was warming up but still had a cool breeze here and there. This was appropriate attire for the ever-changing weather. Putting on the dress, I turned around toward the mirror that stood against the wall.

I frowned. Everyone said I resembled my mother, but when I saw pictures of her, she was gorgeous, unlike how I saw myself. Sitting in the chair, I brushed the tangles that were made overnight. My wavy, hazelnut brown hair fell over my shoulders hitting the middle of my back. Staring into the mirror, my piercing green eyes looked back at me and my light olive skin glowed against the sun’s ray.

Picking up the picture frame of my mother that leaned against the wall on my desk, I studied it. She is in her summer dress on the beach, smiling. Without any hesitation, I set it back down. Looking back at the mirror one more time, I made a face at my reflection, then scooted out of the chair to tie my shoelaces, which always took an eternity.

Turning the knob of the door, I didn't wait another moment to walk down the hallway. People passed me carrying trays and various items throughout the mansion. They gave their normal morning greetings, and I returned the gesture. Other servants were opening windows in the hallway, trying to make the gloomy place more cheerful. The stairway that led to the front entrance of the mansion came into view. The courtyard was easy to spot through the open doors.

Nobody was around, so taking my chance, I quickly went down the steps. Running in the building may not matter to most, but I was the daughter of one of Republic City’s council members and was expected to behave like a "good girl" but sometimes I bend the rules.

I burst into the courtyard. The flowing water of the fountain soothed me as it sank to the bottom of the pool. Entering the garden, my movements slowed. A tall iron archway stood tall at the entrance with vines wrapped around it. Walking along the graveled pathway, I searched for Luna.

Trying to catch my breath, with my hands cupped around my mouth, I yelled, “Luna, where are you?!” The birds were frightened by my sudden outburst and flew out of the garden.

No response. I rolled my eyes in a dramatic fashion. This must be a training exercise she’d been planning. She always tried to sneak in a training session in any type of situation. So, making a grab for the small pendant, I closed my eyelids and focused, slowed down my heavy breathing and only focused on the littlest of things. The sound of the wind or the soft flow of the water... Soon, silence overcame me. Taking advantage, I mentally grabbed at the stillness and concentrated even harder.

Eyes shot open. “There.”

Taking a sharp right toward the row of archways in the garden, low and behold, there was Luna sitting near another fountain.

“Hey Luna, I knew I could find you.” A huge grin plastered on my face even though my heavy breathing was ruining my triumphant look.

“You know that it took you an hour to get down here.” She raised an eyebrow with a hint of annoyance in her voice. Her most famous look—the raised eyebrow. Something about it with the way her eyes sparkle from the expression was dubbed, The Luna Look. Quite famous.

“Yes.” I ignored the hint and breathed in deeply. “Luna don’t be so pouty. I am here, aren’t I?”

Ignoring her glare, I jumped on the fountain’s rim making sure to balance myself by sticking out both arms then placing one foot in front of the other.

“Sometimes you can be a handful,” she muttered thinking I didn’t hear her. But she reluctantly followed behind me already knowing that her attempt at trying to convince me of being in the wrong was useless.

“So, what do you have planned for me today?” I asked, looking at her out of the corner of my eye.

“Today, I thought we could work on some of your city’s history.”

“Ugh! Really Luna? Can’t we do something fun?” My ankle gave out and my foot was within inches of meeting the ground, but I caught myself. “Can’t we walk on the beach and observe the animals?” She knew I hated history, but she always insisted I start learning our city’s past which still, to this day, didn’t move me as it did her. However, I agreed about the importance, since my father is the leader.

She let out a sigh, “If that is what you truly want to do.”

I nodded and slipped off the fountain, trying to make a graceful landing without her knowing my mess-up. We both made our way out of the vast garden and onto the path that led to the beach.

The side of the cliff was the closest way to get down there. I had taken this pathway countless of times because there, at the end of the cove, an old lighthouse was built where, on occasion, I used to visit at night with my good friend.

Her eyes narrowed, “You know your way around here a little too well... have you been sneaking off more?” Luna always jumped to conclusions even if half of the things she said were only remotely true.

My body became tense at the accusation. “Um, I have no idea what you mean.”

I wasn’t supposed to leave the mansion without Luna, but I did it every now and then. That’s how I knew this path like the back of my hand. And I didn’t believe it was a bad thing that I’d snuck off, but she and my father always worried for my safety even though I knew I could take care of myself.

“Mhmm,” she said curiously.

“Awe, Luna, don’t worry about it.” I pointed down toward the beach. “Look, we are practically there.” I could see the end of the pathway to the beach as it curved around the cliff.

We were a few feet from the ground so I jumped off the small ledge onto the soft sand and Luna followed. A powder of sand dust puffed into the air and gently fell back down from where it came. The crashing of the waves was strong today as they hit the side of the cliff and the overwhelming scent of the ocean and sea air always smelled wonderful. Every summer, my mother would take me here, which would probably answer why I loved the sea so much.

The sand pulled my shoes in with every step I took. The seagulls cried as they flew above us, gliding gracefully above the ocean’s waves, barely touching the clear blue water.

As we approached the tide pools, a dark figure stood in the distance. Someone resembling Luna stood beside him. A smile crept across my face and breaking into a run I heard, “Alexandria hold on a minute.”

I didn’t care about Luna’s worried voice because I knew who they were. I bet she could see them in the distance even better than I could. As I got closer, I could tell they noticed because he turned toward me just in time for me to jump into his arms.

Catching me in the nick of time, he patted me in the middle of my shoulder blades. “Hey Aly, what are you up to?” His eyes wandered. “Where is Luna?”

“I am right here, Landon.” Seconds behind me although not much of a surprise to know she was basically right next to me the whole time. I could never outrun her even if I tried my hardest. Letting go of Landon to see Kosmo beside him, I backed away to nod at him.

“Hello, Kosmo. How are you?”

He raised his snout in a pompous way. He was always so stubborn toward me and never really tried to give me the time of day. “I am doing well Miss Alexandria.” He gave Luna notice. “What brings you two here today?”

“Studying the sea as usual,” she said, shaking her head.

Landon laughed with a mocking tone. “Aly trying to change the study session again.” It wasn’t even a question. He said it as if it was a normal occurrence. I could feel my face become hot even though it was not yet warm out.

“Very well, Landon and I were on our way back to the estate.”

Everyone related to the council members were required to live in the Gefferson Mansion. The estate and grounds were expansive, stretching farther than the naked eye could see. Since our fathers were in the

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council, we all lived in the mansion but in different wings because it was easier for our fathers to keep everything in order if they lived in close proximity to each other. This had been going on for generations. All of the children had known each other since birth and, yes, there were more of us. There were a total of four councilmen in the council of Republic City. We lived on the outskirts of the main city, just a few miles away.

Each member had their own personal duty to manage in the city.

My face fell. “Really? I guess we will see you later.”

“Yeah, see you soon.” Landon smiled a crooked smile and took his leave up the path that we’d just come from. He half waved as he walked away from view.

A sigh left my lips. Landon was a really close friend of mine, but as we got older we’d become more distant. We had a connection. No, not a romantic connection. It was kind of difficult to explain because—

“Alexandria, we must start your studies of the ocean if you want to be finished early,” Luna retorted, trotting away on her four legs down the sandy beach...with or without me. Blinking out of my thoughts, I followed after her. A historical fact of Republic City was that all children had animal guardians. Luna, my guardian, was most definitely a wolf. A white wolf.