

Prologue

My fingers tremble as I assemble the pieces.

He'll be back in a few minutes.

I blink away the sweat dripping into my eyes. I can't afford to swipe it away.

The two ceramic pieces chip at the edges as I try to match them up to how they should align. I know he keeps glue in his front desk drawer. Everyone does. *We fix things that are broken.* I slip the tube from the drawer and dab a glob of adhesive on the center of one of the broken pieces and then press it against its counterpart. I'm so used to fixing things, but now I'm not doing it because it's the law. I'm doing it because if he finds out I was here he'll punish me with night terrors again.

The pieces slip just as the glue is setting. Ragged breath hitches in my parched throat. *If he finds out I was here, that there was a trespassing...* I press the pieces together so firmly the glue seeps out and threatens to cement my fingers to the statue. Footsteps in the hallway. Soft-soled shoes. His. I know *his* gait.

I release my fingers from the statue. It teeters but stands, looking unmarked by the fall it recently experienced. But will it stay up?

The envelope still sits neatly on the mahogany desk. It was my own nervous reaction to it that shook the statue down from its high place on the shelf. I knew I should come here and look first. Knew I'd find information. My father always told me, "Instinct is the gods tapping you on the head." Still, I wish I knew what lay inside the folds of that envelope that bears my name.

The key slides into the lock, a sound like a reluctant bell. I close my eyes and dream travel back to my body, pulling my consciousness out of its current location.

Chapter One

My house is haunted. I've never seen a ghost in it, but Tutu, whose gift is seeing the dead, says there are many who reside in our home. I haven't received my gift yet. At age seventeen that's rare. My sister, Dee, teases me that this is a sure sign our mother had an affair with Ed, the mailman, who's a Middling—a person who can't dream travel, has no gifts. I pretend this is a joke but with each passing year I believe it could be a possibility. My family is pureblooded Dream Travelers and they're all gifted with strong talents since puberty. And although I dream travel I have no other talents, which is a first in the Fuller family. My grandmother, who I call Tutu, has three abilities. My mother, two. Even my older sister, Dee, has her gift—which she spends every single opportunity rubbing in my face. Since I have no super power I've reverted to spreading false rumors about her all over Austin Valley.

"You're going to be late again," Dee says, sounding pleased by the prospect.

"Thanks for the reminder," I say, not meaning it.

I slip my favorite organic bamboo blouse over my head and hurry out of the room I share with my sister. With one hand I smooth my hair and the other guides me down the banister as I take the stairs two at a time.

"I'm sure his mother would love the opportunity to be interviewed," my mother says to a visitor in her usual subdued tone. I don't even chance a glance at her as I scurry to the entryway, head low. Maybe this visitor will actually save me from being scolded. The brass doorknob is cold under my palm. I wrench the door open and pull it back, a rush of warm June air greeting me at once.

"Not so fast there, Em," my mother says.

I freeze. Push the door closed. Turn and face her.

My mother stands in the threshold of the sitting room, her hands firmly pinned to her hips. “You’re late for your meeting with your father.”

“Which is why I’m rushing to get out of here,” I say, sweeping my eyes to the person my mother was talking to. Zack. He’s giving me a curious expression, arms crossed in front of his suit jacket.

“Have I not instilled in you the proper manners to know you should greet and say farewell to everyone you come in contact with?” she says, shaking her head at me.

“Hi, Mother. Hi, Zack. I’m leaving before Father kills me for being late. Goodbye,” I say, turning on my toes. I slip my hand onto the door handle again, but don’t even dare to open it.

“Em?”

I turn and stare at my mother. Her red hair is pulled back into a tight low bun. Her sleeveless black turtleneck must be stifling in this heat. “Yes, Mother?” I say, working hard to keep the irritation out of my voice.

“You weren’t planning on leaving the house like that, were you?” she asks with a disappointed glare as she sizes up my appearance.

“I was—”

“Looking for your blazer, right?” Zack plucks my black blazer from underneath a cushion on the settee behind him and holds it out for me.

Reluctantly I eye it and then him. He’s wearing his most encouraging look. It partners well with his slick blond hair and winning smile. He’s right, politics is the right career for him.

I take my blazer from him and slip it on. “Thanks,” I say, pulling my tangled blonde curls out from underneath the jacket.

“Oh, you’re still here?!” Dee says, tromping down the stairs behind me. “You really take advantage of our father’s unending patience, don’t you?” Her black heels make note of each of her steps. When she meets me at the landing she pushes my hair behind my ears. “And really, if you’re not going to at least dress like an upper-class Reverian you could brush your hair once in a while.”

I bat her hand away and clench my teeth together. Insulting my sister will not release me from my mother’s wrath, which seeks to make me even later for my appointment. Still, someone should say something about how my sister looks more and more like an obsessed Goth whose only mission in life is to give the Catholic clergymen a heart attack. She wouldn’t understand that reference though. Most people in Austin Valley wouldn’t. My sister is wearing her usual get-up: short pleated skirt, starched black button-up shirt open to reveal too much, heels, and an assortment of gold jewelry.

Instead of commenting on how she looks like a confused Catholic schoolgirl I lick my finger and press it to a flyaway by her hair line. “You have a hair out of place. Here you go, dear.”

She steps back, grotesque horror written on her face. “Eww, don’t touch me.” My sister turns to our mother. They don’t just share the same disapproving scowl, but also the same straight red hair, which they wear similarly. “Oh, Zack, you’re here,” my sister says, strolling in his direction. “I had no idea.”

“Are you blind?” I say dully.

She throws me a contemptuous glare over her shoulder before turning back in Zack’s direction. “You could obviously teach my sister something about dress, couldn’t you?”

He coughs nervously, flicking his eyes over her shoulder to me. I know Dee makes him nervous. Hell, she makes the devil nervous, probably because she’s soulless. I shrug and sling my bag over my shoulder.

“Well...I...” Zack begins.

“There are not many students who choose to wear a suit before they’re chosen for positions,” Dee says, having cleared the space between them. Her long pointy fingernail has found his shoulder and is now tracing its way down his pinstriped sleeve until she finds his hands. She pulls his fingertips up close to her face and inspects. “And such clean nails. This says so very much about you. Obviously you take a great deal of pride in your appearance.”

“I’m merely tryin—”

“Zack is actually here because he’d like to interview your tutu in order to better understand cultural changes which have transpired within our society over the generations,” my mother informs Dee, pride evident in her tone.

“Impeccable dresser and ambitious,” Dee says, her hand still gripping Zack’s.

“Yes, I dare say that if you stay on this track then you’ll make great contributions for the Reverians once released from your studies,” my mother says, her stare not on Zack, but rather on my sister.

Although I realize I’ll be punished later for interrupting this crafty attempt at mating I dare say something. I have other punishments way worse I’d rather avoid. “Well, I really must take my leave,” I say, injecting pleasantry into my voice. “I don’t want to keep Father waiting any longer than I already have. Goodbye.” Again the brass knob greets the palm of my hand.

“Yes, you are *so* late,” my sister says, eyeing the ancient grandfather clock in the entryway. “He’s going to be livid.”

“I’m going that way too,” Zack says, taking hurried steps in my direction. “I’ll walk with you.”

Just over his shoulder I catch a fiery glare flash in my sister’s eyes.

“Sure,” I say with a shrug and turn at once and hurry out the door.

The humid breeze is a welcome relief from the frigid air in my house. Sunlight greets my eyes with a quiet satisfaction and I smile at the blue sky like it's an old friend.

"You always do that, don't you?" Zack says, hurrying to keep up with me.

"Make my mother and sister furious? Yes."

"Well, yes, that, but I was referring to your reaction to the outdoors. You always break into a relieved smile when you walk outside."

I snuggle my shoulders up high, enjoying the warm sun on my cheeks. "I do love it," I say, pausing to allow a group of elderly Reverians to pass in front of us. Zack pauses with me but gives an irritated expression while we wait. "I'm already late," I finally say to him when they've moved on and we continue down Central Boulevard.

"I don't get you, Em," he says, shaking his head. "Why do you make your life harder when you know what they want you to do?"

"I just find it difficult to conform to their standards. I mean, why in the hell should I have to wear a blazer in the middle of the summer?" I say, scratching at my forearms which are already sweating under the tight-fitting jacket.

"It's just customs. If you followed them then they'd leave you alone and let you do what you want."

"Somehow I doubt that," I say, raising an eyebrow at Zack.

"It seems you're looking to get in trouble: being late when it's easy to be early, dressing inappropriately when they supply you the right clothes, and not following etiquette."

“And may I point out that you seem to only notice my shortcomings,” I say, taking an early turn. It’s a shortcut down a less than desirable neighborhood, but still completely safe and will save us an extra minute on the commute.

Zack’s hand clamps down on my shoulder. I stop and look at him, ready to defend the route I’ve chosen. His denim blue eyes lock on mine. “That’s not all I notice,” he says, a firmness in his voice.

“Mmm...” I say, gauging his expression which is so familiar and also year by year growing indistinct, like my father’s. “Yeah, what else do you notice?” I say, turning and continuing our trek. The alleyway here is a little more crowded, but only because this is a Middling street where they build the houses too close together and the insides are too small for the families who are forced to reside within them.

“It doesn’t matter,” Zack says, eyeing a man leaning in his doorway up ahead. “We can finish this conversation later. Let’s just get you to Chief Fuller’s office quickly.”

“Right,” I say, kicking the contents of a puddle, which is no doubt a result of poor drainage from the sprinkler system. It splatters droplets on my shoes and bare legs, but doesn’t irritate me in the least.

At my father’s office Zack stops, eyeing the door and then me with an uncertain expression. “You know I’m just trying to help, right?”

“Then you shouldn’t have offered to escort me here,” I say, pushing him playfully in the chest. “Dee will probably set fire to my bed while I’m sleeping tonight as retribution.” Literally she’s done that a time or two. I have no idea why the most hostile Dream Traveler born to the gods was given the gift of pyrokinesis.

Zack doesn't respond, but instead gives me his usual commiserative expression. He doesn't know what to say. I get that. "Yeah, I know you're trying to help," I finally say. "You may want to consider there's no help for me. I'm a Dream Traveler whose only talent is I disappoint my family."

"Oh, Em, I've told you that your gift is delayed. It will come on soon and when it does you'll blow all of them away."

"Thanks, Zack," I say, reaching out and straightening his tie. It isn't even that crooked, but I know he likes when I do it because it sharpens his appearance. "Are you off to go take over Austin Valley?"

"Not quite yet," he says with a wink. "I've got a thing or two to learn still."

"Don't we all," I say, returning the wink and then dismissing him by facing my father's ornately carved door. I've stalled long enough. Now I must face that which is certain to be extremely unpleasant.