

## Chapter One

*My body moved, but I wasn't the one in control. While the presence inside my mind was alien, I could still recognize the intense sensations of hate and anger for what they were. Though I fought against the movement, my lips twisted into a contorted grimace that made my face hurt. Of their own accord, my legs propelled me toward the young man who had his back to me.*

*"Orion." It was my voice that called his name; though the quality and tenor was different. It was strong as steel and commanding. The young man turned with a confused expression. My voice continued to speak, "You should have given him the mirror."*

*As soon as I heard those words, I knew what had taken over me. I fought to break free, but I was powerless; it had complete control of my body.*

*Under the direction of this alien force, my hands reached up to his shoulders. The contact sent a strange prickling sensation through my limbs. The presence recoiled at the feel of Ryan's arm though my hands did not remove themselves. I did my best to soften my expression to let him know it wasn't me doing this.*

*Instead, my body leaned closer to him, almost as if the creature controlling me were drinking in his fear. My lips grazed his ear and my voice explained to him silkily, "It would have been so much easier if you had just given me the mirror."*

*The confusion on Ryan's face morphed into terror. He stumbled back. "No. Stella, not you," he half whispered, sounding defeated.*

*"Yes, Orion," the presence said through me. I sensed the creature's triumph and fought harder. It was no use.*

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*The next words that came out of my mouth chilled me to the bone. "And if you don't do what I ask, then your girlfriend will suffer. I promise you."*

*I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that it meant what it said.*

*At once, I found myself at the top of a mound of boulders just off-shore. The ocean crashed onto the rocks below. The wind, in its icy fury, carried the sound of Ryan screaming my name. Twisting, I looked down at the beach. When I spotted Ryan, so small from my vantage point, I realized what I had done; I was able to move again!*

*The relief was short-lived. Just as I was about to start climbing down, my muscles locked up, preventing me from going any further.*

*"I don't think so," the presence inside me said. "If Orion doesn't want to deal, then I will give you a chance to save your life. Where is the mirror, witch?" The presence started mucking around in my head, searching for the information it wanted. Immediately, my mental barriers went up, locking it out of my thoughts.*

*Still, the presence pried.*

*Adding to my defense, I latched onto the first thing outside of the mirror that I could think of; my brother. I pictured him before he went into the military: his narrow face, his warm, brown eyes, and his curly mop of light brown hair. I envisioned him in such acute detail that I could almost hear him call my name.*

*The presence cursed and I felt a flash of satisfaction. He wasn't going to get the information out of me, no matter how hard he tried.*

*"You had your chance, witch. I will get the mirror, one way or another."*

*Again, my body moved without my consent. The force within drove my feet over the rocks and launched my body into the salty air.*

*Terror gripped me as I plummeted. The presence within didn't allow my arms or legs to move; locked tight*

*in death's grip, I braced for the final, icy plunge.*

I jolted awake just as I hit the water in the nightmare. The emotions from the dream shuddered through me and I brought the thick sheet up around my shoulders to ward off the sudden chill. A ragged sigh escaped my lips allowing the remnants of my fear to permeate the otherwise sterilized hospital air. In the darkness of the room, the soft beeps of the monitors next to my bed reminded me that I was safe and that it had only been a dream . . . hadn't it?

I fumbled for the bed control which had gotten tangled in the sheets. Once it was free and in my hand, I pressed a button causing a blinding light to shine above me. It took a full minute for my eyes to adjust. The curtain that divided the room pulled back to reveal an empty bed and a closed window. Small streams of sunlight peeked through the window shades, setting the whole thing aglow.

The table next to me overflowed flowers and balloons and cards. It was amazing how fast word traveled about my accident. In the three days since waking up in the ICU of St. John's Hospital, everyone had written or sent flowers. I'd heard from the family back in Italy, my new teachers, everyone. Well, everyone except Ryan.

For the millionth time, I wondered where he was and if he was alright. I needed to hear from him. Maybe he could fill in the blank spots in my memory. The nightmares seemed so real, so vivid. It couldn't just be my imagination.

Settling back against the pillows, I struggled to piece together what happened. Ryan and I made an agreement: I'd help him end the war between Heaven and Hell and in return, he'd help me bring about the Age of the Daughter. The two events didn't seem completely separate, but we weren't exactly sure how they were

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related.

My family has a legend about a messiah, kind of a witch's version of Jesus or Mohammed or Buddha. According to the stories, the Daughter will begin a new era. Peace and prosperity would grace the earth. Knowledge would illuminate the darkest corners of the human world. The Daughter would rid the world of war, famine, disease, and suffering and replace them with health, peace, compassion, and abundance.

Nona calls me the catalyst to the Age of the Daughter. Ever since I was young, she told me I was destined to do great things. She promised one day I would meet a creature who was both of this world and another. He would guide me on the path to becoming the legend she spoke so much about. Thinking something was nice to believe in and actually believing in it were two different things. I never took Nona seriously about the legend until the day I met Ryan.

The first time I saw him, I knew he was the one Nona had told me about. There had been an immediate deep-seated recognition as if I'd always known him.

Ryan's an angel, or at least his parents were. They were both Grigori—part of the last choir of angels that stayed on earth to keep the balance of power between the Heavenly Host and the Fallen Ones. Angels don't have the ability to procreate with each other, so how Ryan came about was somewhat of a mystery.

The first time we touched, I felt an electric tingle and I knew for certain together we would bring the legends I'd grown up with to life.

Now Ryan was missing and I was healing from a fight that I couldn't remember.

All I could recall was Ryan and I going to the beach find his Uncle Azra when someone attacked us. My memory held only hazy images of imposing inhuman figures. Muted arguments between Ryan and a wicked looking person on a cliff replayed in my mind. Then

there was just darkness.

My cell phone rested next to the get well cards on the bedside table. The display proclaimed it was three o'clock in the afternoon and that there were no waiting texts or missed calls. I pulled up Ryan's number and hesitated for only a moment before pushing the call button.

It rang until it went to voicemail. I hung up without leaving a message and tossed the phone back onto the table. My frustration and anger made me want to scream. Where the hell was he? Why would he stay away for so long without even a text?

Three days of sitting in this room were more than enough. I hated hospitals. They smelled like death except with the sickly sweet aroma of hand sanitizer. I needed to get out of here as much as I needed my memory back. Soon I would be out of here and if Ryan wasn't going to come to me, then I would just have to find him and demand to know what happened.

Just as I had decided to take action, my grandmother strode into the room.

"Good, you are awake. I was wondering if you would be before I went home for supper. How are you feeling, my dear? Did you have a nice nap?" Nona smiled warmly as she settled herself on the stiff-backed chair next to the bed. Though it didn't look comfortable, she hadn't made any complaints.

Her attire was casual for her; a pale blue button down dress with quarter-length sleeves and a skirt that brushed her thin calves. At her throat was a delicate golden chain from which dangled an oval locket. Her long silver hair coiled around her head in a braid.

I always admired Nona. More than just the matriarch and high priestess of the family, she was the stability in my life after a dead mother and an absentee father. I trusted Nona more than anyone else in the world, except for my brother. I doubted she would

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approve of me leaving the hospital just because I hadn't heard from one wayward angel.

"Have they said when I can go home?" I asked.

"Dr. Salinas said perhaps tomorrow." Nona must have seen the annoyance cross my face because she told me gently, "It's important that you are healing properly. You don't want to come back to the hospital because you over did things. Now, do you remember anything else from that night?" It was the same question she asked every time she saw me since I landed in the hospital.

"No. There are still a lot of black spots. Have you heard from Ryan?" I knew the answer before I asked, but I held my breath for it anyway.

Nona hesitated for a fraction of a second before admitting, "We haven't seen him since he brought you here."

"I wish I knew where he was," I sighed. "He could fill me in on what happened."

Nona reached up and patted my arm in sympathy. "I know, my dear. It's a difficult situation. We just have to trust that the Goddess will show us what we need to know."

I made a face as I wriggled into a more comfortable position, trying not to let my irritation show too much. This wasn't Nona's fault.

"You have to be patient," Nona admonished. When I didn't respond, she changed the subject. "If you don't come home tomorrow then the twins are going to set up your phone to do—what is it? A face chat? Video call? Whatever it is with Thomas. He's worried and he wants to hear from you."

I groaned and allowed my head to fall back onto the pillows. "You told my brother? Why would you worry him like that? I'm fine."

"You're in the hospital, Stella. It's right that he should know."

Thomas was my half-brother from my father's first

marriage. Though he was only five years older than me, he acted like the age difference was more like twenty years. He'd joined the Army a couple of years ago and now was stationed in the Middle East.

I was heartbroken when he left for the Army. He and I had always been close. Even before my father abandoned us, Thomas took on the male role model aspect for me.

It must have driven him nuts to know I was in the hospital and there was nothing he could do about it. I was in for a long lecture, depending on how much of the story Nona told him.

"The important thing is that you are safe and whoever it was on the beach didn't get what they were after. Ryan will turn up. I'm sure of it."

At her words, ice went through my veins and my dream came rushing back to me. Ascher had wanted the mirror. Was I so sure he hadn't gotten it?

"Nona, where's my bag?" The alarm in my voice made my grandmother frown.

"It's in the cabinet over there, why?"

"Will you get it for me, please? I need to check something."

Frowning, Nona did as I asked, passing me the small, patchwork messenger bag. Immediately I upended the contents onto the bed. I sifted through the odds and ends until my fingers closed around the velvet drawstring bag. As I crushed the familiar pouch in my fist, my worst fear wrapped itself around my heart.

Empty. No, there was something there . . .

"Stella?" Nona asked, "What's going on?"

Ignoring her, I yanked the strings to open the pouch for confirmation. Sure enough, there was a piece of folded paper crumpled by my grasp and nothing else. I unfolded the lined sheet and what I saw took my breath away.

It was a sketch of my favorite painting: *The Farewell*

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of *Eucharis and Telemachus* by Jaques Louis David. The scene depicted a girl clinging to a boy with her head on his shoulder and her hands clasped about his neck in a sad embrace. The youth posed with his back more to the girl, gazing out to his audience with a grim and resolute face. His hand rested on the girl's knee and his other hand held a spear. A hunting dog stared at the boy.

From the girl's closed eyes and the slight frown upon her lips, showing the sorrow of one who knows this embrace will be the last one. Resignation and sadness emanated from her.

Besides the lack of color, the sketch differed from the real painting in that the faces of Eucharis and Telemachus were replaced with mine and Ryan's.

Below the sketch was a scrawled message: "*Doubt thou the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move, doubt truth to be a liar, bur never doubt I love. Ryan*"

What the hell did that mean?

I stared at the paper, my mind reaching for explanations I would never be able to confirm. The message didn't do any good; it only created more questions that I couldn't get any answers to. Furious, I crumpled the paper and tossed it onto the floor.

"You stupid idiot!" I yelled though I wasn't sure if I was referring to myself or to Ryan.

"Stella, what is going on?" Nona's tone held a stern warning.

Despair filled me to the brim and threatened to spill over. I'd lost the mirror. Keeping it safe was the one duty, the one expectation my grandmother had of me and I failed. Failed spectacularly. Now I had to explain that to the woman who had given me the responsibility.

It wasn't really a mirror. The mirror part was the disguise my family put on an object that a goddess gave to us generations ago. Legend had it that the object was some sort of tool that would help advance the Age of the Daughter. My family kept this heavenly object safe for

hundreds of years. If it ever got into the wrong hands, it could mean the end of the world as we know it.

Nona gave the mirror to me after I told her about meeting Ryan for the first time. She believed I was the one who would finally use it and bring the family legends to life.

Instead, I'm the one who lost it.

My grandmother waited for my explanation.

With my voice hoarse, I confessed, "I think Ryan took the mirror."

"What?"

I couldn't even bring myself to look at her because of the shame I felt. Tears welled up in my eyes. I hated myself for crying, but I couldn't stop because I was beyond furious. "He must have stolen it while I was unconscious. It was in my bag. The mirror is what Ascher was after."

With my confession done, I chanced a look at my grandmother.

Her thin face was somehow sharper than before. Her eyes narrowed in fury and disappointment. "Do you have any idea what you have done?" The words were so harsh with anger that they cut the air between us. I winced at them.

"I'm sorry, Nona."

My apology only served to enrage her more. "Sorry? Stella Seraphina Evangeline, you have lost the most dangerous item on earth; an object that our family was sworn to guard. Your carelessness put the entire world in danger and all you can say for yourself is *sorry*?"

"I didn't do it on purpose!" I knew it was stupid to talk back to her right then; I'd never seen her so angry before. Still, I felt the need to explain myself. "I took the mirror to the Getty to see if Ryan knew how to use it. I forgot to take it out of my bag when we got back home. I'm sorry. It was a stupid move."

For a moment, my grandmother was too angry to

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speak. With visible effort, she calmed enough to say, "Give me your phone, Stella. I am calling the twins to come pick me up. There's no time to waste."

"What are you going to do?" The question came out a whisper as I handed her my phone.

"I'm calling the Stregheria together for a meeting. They need to know the mirror was stolen."

I stared at the drawing as Nona called for a ride. As angry as she was with me, I was more upset with myself. How stupid had I been to trust Ryan with my family's secrets? How could I know he'd betray me though?

Truth be told, it made my determination to find the angel that much stronger. It was my fault the mirror was taken, so it was my responsibility to get it back. As soon as Nona left, I'd break out of the hospital and hunt Ryan down. He owed me more than an explanation now.

Nona hung up the phone and passed it back to me. "They twins will be here in a few minutes to pick me up." She paused and watched me carefully. Anger still marked her features though it was more controlled. At last, she spoke, "This is something you have to take responsibility for, Stella. You're the guardian of the mirror. You lost it. Now you will have a major part to play to bring it back. Do you understand?"

There was nothing to do except nod.

Seeing my stricken expression, Nona's tone softened. "I'll be back in the morning and we can talk about this more. For now, get some rest." She planted a kiss on my forehead and collected her bag. She left the room with one last glance back and a disappointed shake of her head.

Then I was alone.

I forced myself to wait until seven o'clock—well after supper had been delivered and cleaned up—before making my escape. Yes, I was tired and no, I wasn't sure how to get out of the hospital. Those minor details weren't going to get in my way.

I had to find Ryan and the mirror. Part of me held onto the hope that Ryan had taken the mirror to hide it. Maybe he'd kept it safe when I couldn't and was going to give it back to me. That didn't explain the sketch and the cryptic note.

My body ached and it hurt to move. Working against my protesting muscles, I eased out of bed. The linoleum was freezing and I wished that I had socks. Being in bed so long made me unsteady on my feet. Stumbling, I had to clutch onto the bed to steady myself. I only got a couple of steps in before the IV line tugged against my skin. Well that wasn't going to get me far.

Bracing for the sting, I yanked the line out of my hand. Immediately, alarms started beeping from the machine stand next to me.

A passing nurse poked her head into the room. "Everything alright in here?"

Smiling, I said, "Yeah. My IV came out when I stood up. I just needed to go to the bathroom."

The nurse nodded and went to the beeping machine next to the bed. She fiddled with some buttons and the noise stopped. "I'll be back in a few minutes to reattach your IV." She smiled as she left me to my own devices.

On my way to the bathroom, I grabbed my bag and the change of clothes that Nona had brought for when I'd get discharged. Laying on the floor next to them was the crumpled picture that Ryan had drawn. I picked it up and smoothed it out as best as I could. For reasons I wasn't quite clear about, I folded it and took it with me.

The bathroom was large enough to accommodate those who had to wrestle with walkers and wheelchairs. The door felt heavy, but it clicked silently closed. I wasn't sure how long before they would come in to check on me, so there was no time to waste. After slipping into a shirt and pulling on my jeans, I tried to tear the hospital bracelet from my wrist. It was impossible. I settled for painfully squeezing my hand out of the plastic wrapped

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paper and tossed it into the garbage.

On the way out of the bathroom, I caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror. I looked like shit. Angry red scrapes and cuts marred my bruised skin. Dark shadows around my nose and my brown eyes gave me a certain raccoon-like appearance.

There was no time to worry about how I looked. I pulled on my hoodie and sucked in a deep breath. Even after three days of resting in the hospital, the simple act of raising my arms over my head caused a sharp shooting pain in my side. Damn these injuries!

To get out of the hospital, I'd use an invisibility spell. Well, it's not exactly complete invisibility. It worked like a shield, refracting the surrounding light to disguise my movements. It was originally created for me to sneak out of the house; now it would be vital if I were going to get out of here.

I quieted my thoughts as I'd been taught. Focus was important; without it, the spell wouldn't work. The words of the incantation repeated in my head, the syllables coming out under my breath in a rhythm. The beat that fell in time with the cadence of my heart.

The power of a spell isn't something that's seen; it's something that's felt. Energy stirs around inside of you and it lets you know when it is ready. As soon as I was sure the incantation was working, I eased open the oversized door to the bathroom and crept out. I locked the door and allowed it to close again, hoping the nurse would just assume I was still in there.

With all the confidence I could muster, I strode out into the hallway. My pace was as normal as I could make it between my urge to rush away and the injuries which prevented me from going too fast. As long as I made it out of the hospital, that's what counted.

The nurses at the hub-like station didn't look up or stop their conversations as I passed. The spell was working! I continued to the elevator. As luck would have

it, the doors opened on their own just as I approached. A man wheeling a gurney passed by without as much as a glance my way. I slipped into the elevator and pressed the button that would take me to the ground floor.

The energy flickered around me. Sweat popped up on my forehead from the effort of keeping the spell going. I wasn't sure if I could keep it up long enough to get completely out of the hospital.

After what seemed like forever, the elevator stopped. My focus renewed as the doors slid open with a ping. Directly ahead was the exit guarded by a uniformed cop. Now was not the time to chicken out or to doubt. Lifting my chin, I continued forward, watching him out of the corner of my eye.

He looked bored. As his gaze wandered in my direction, he blinked and shook his head. My control must have slipped, making me visible once again. There was no point in trying to recapture the spell. Let him think that he just hadn't noticed me before.

As confidently as I could, I gave him a single nod and walked through the front door.