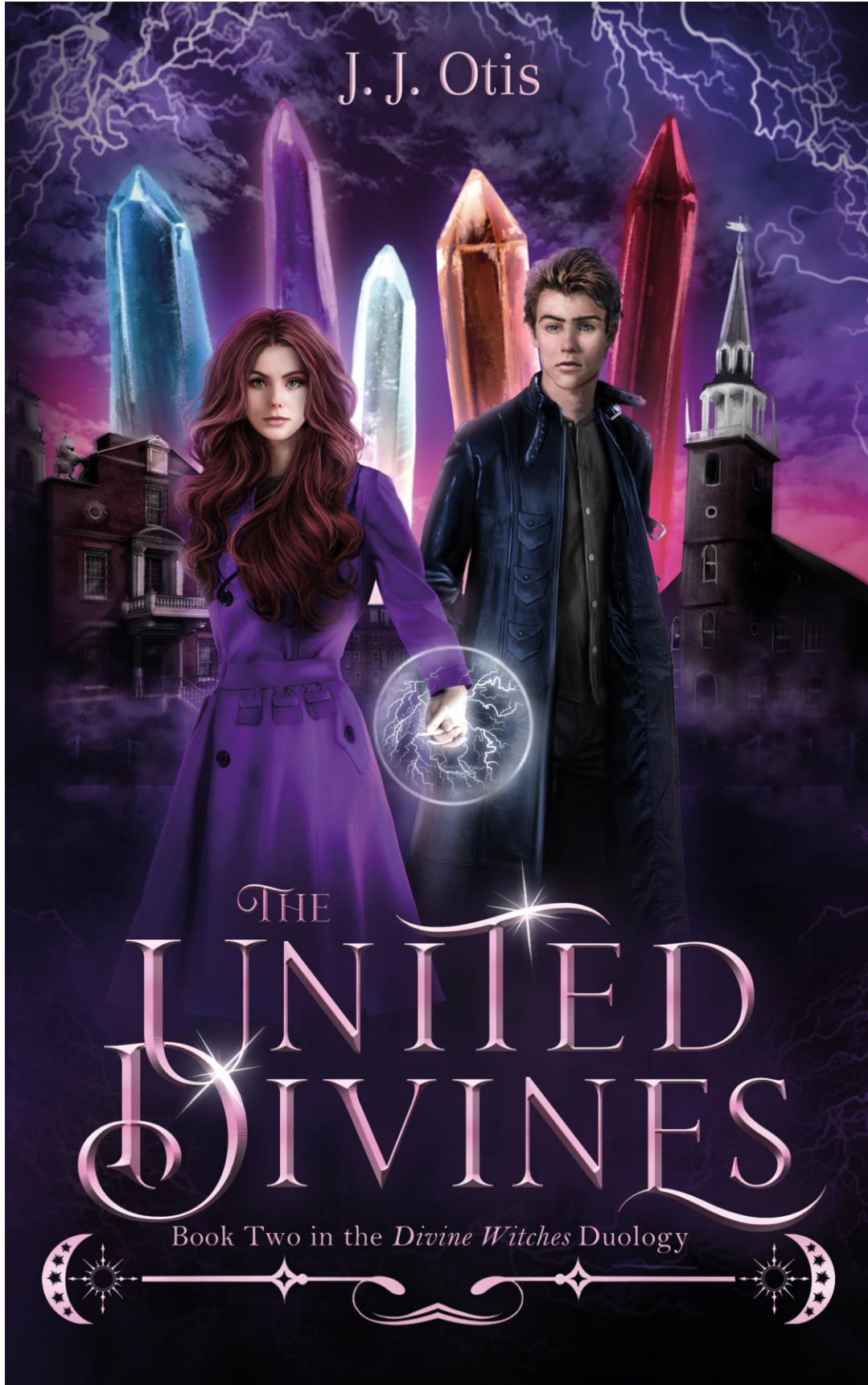


J. J. Otis



THE
UNITED
DIVINES

Book Two in the *Divine Witches* Duology

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THE
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Iris Ink Publishing

THE UNITED DIVINES
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For information contact:
<http://www.jjotis.com>

Cover design by: Ingrid Nordli (@arcticpaintbrush on Instagram)
Editor: Fiona McLaren
Copy Editor: Cassidy Clarke
ISBN: 9798375670416
ASBN: B0BTZ6HDN1
First Edition: April 2023
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Chapter 1 - Meg

EDWIN MANOR LOOMS before me. I shield my eyes and squint at the top floor with the pyramid roof and stained-glass window. The winter sun glares off the snow on the shingles, but I can make out the colored diamond-shaped panes. Dropping my gaze back to the manor's white porch, I take a deep breath and release it. The puff of air crystallizes, stirring memories of the awful night The Torven killed our friends.

To say Edwin Manor holds horrific memories is an understatement. Each one tugs the knot in my chest tighter. Sliding my necklace out from under my coat, I concentrate and clutch my rainbow moonstone pendant along with a new blue jade stone my dad recently gave me. As I do, calming energy soothes my nerves. I've never been more grateful for the stones' soothing effect on my anxiety.

And whenever the moonstone and blue jade don't help, Landen's strength gift does.

Even though I'm late for the coven meeting and the frigid February air nips at my face and hands, I'm in no rush to enter the manor . . . until a warm sensation prickles down my spine and pulls me toward the front door.

Does Landen sense my presence, as I can sense his now due to our Divine Witch bond? Lately, it's become so strong I know when he's nearby; not only that, but his presence has become a magnet, drawing me toward him at all times. Sometimes, it causes such a deep ache in my heart that it hurts not to be with him.

We haven't discussed it, nor how we feel about one another. There's no doubt we need to, but we've both put it off and avoided the topic at all costs. If only I could shake this darn anxiety gnawing at me. It's causing me to question my bond with Landen and my own capabilities.

Pulling my coat tighter, I force myself to climb the porch steps and brace for the pandemonium that will inevitably ensue when I go through the hidden passageway and into the secret room.

The manor's front door swings open, with Landen smirking down at me. His sapphire eyes sparkle in the late morning light. "You're late. They've already started."

I step inside and hang my coat on the rack in the entryway with its robin's-egg-blue walls and dark wooden floor. "Sorry. I was at the dance studio and lost track of time."

"You sure you aren't just avoiding Gage and Wynne?"

I snort. "How'd you guess?"

The night we eradicated The Torven and found out about Wynne's true identity as Delia's younger sister, Branwyn, Gage broke up with her. I get it — she lied to all of us —

but I can tell Gage feels it deeper than any of us. We still haven't gotten her full story yet, since getting everyone together in the same room for a coven meeting has been difficult.

Landen shoves his hands in the pocket of his blue hooded sweatshirt. "I don't need our bond to know you'd rather dance than go in there with them."

It's sweet but a bit annoying how well he knows me already. I had to drag myself out of the studio to come here. "How bad is it right now?"

He strolls down the hallway with me toward the grand staircase. "So far, they're not speaking."

"That's a first."

Landen's laugh is deep but lacks true joy. "Right." He stops near the closet under the stairs. "My mom and your dad have been questioning Wynne about a few things."

"Like what?"

"How Wynne and Delia have stayed out of the system, as your dad called it."

I roll my eyes. Of course, my detective father would ask something like that.

Landen twists his sunstone ring around his finger as we stand in silence for a moment. Taking a deep breath, I ready myself for the chaos upstairs and nudge Landen. "Something wrong?"

He averts his eyes and stares past me to the front door. "I knew you were here. It's why I came down."

"Right. You could . . . sense me." I straighten my moonstone necklace, so it hangs properly.

"Yeah. Weird how much stronger it's gotten, isn't it?"

"Very," I say.

Landen flicks his gaze to me at last. "You know, Meg, we should —"

I know exactly what he's going to say, but I'm not ready. We can't discuss it here. Not now.

"We should get up there. I'm already late." I hurry into the closet and through the opening to the hidden passageway.

Landen follows in behind me. "We need to talk later."

"I know." Or maybe we could avoid it forever instead. That sounds better to me.

We ascend the winding staircase to another passageway at the top and head toward the secret room where we now hold all our meetings.

When we enter, no one notices us at first. Landen's mom, Charlotte, stands near the loveseat with her hands on her hips. Her long dark brown hair cascades down her back. She wears slim jeans and an azure blue sweater that brings out her eyes. Then there's my dad, who occupies the middle of the space, trying to officiate an argument between Gage

and Wynne. He's still wearing his gray button-down shirt with the navy blazer he wore to work.

He pushes Delia's hand down after she uses her wind gift to shove Gage away when he gets in Wynne's face. My dad pulls Gage further away from them with a huff of frustration.

"I understand you're upset, but fighting like this isn't going to solve anything," my dad says to Gage, then swivels to Delia. "And using your gifts against one another is never appropriate."

"He needs to back off. Wynne barely said anything." Delia flips her pale blonde hair over her shoulder and points to Gage. It's a bit strange to see Delia defending her sister. Even Wynne blinks her blue eyes and stares at Delia.

Charlotte crosses the space to them. "Phillip is right. But Delia has a point too." She glares over her shoulder at Gage and motions to the entire room. "Stay away from one another, and no one uses gifts."

My dad scratches his beard and turns to sit back on the loveseat when he notices us. "You're late."

And all at once, it's like I'm a little girl again, getting scolded for playing outside too late. "Sorry. Lost track of time."

He closes his hazel eyes and takes a breath. My dad isn't wearing the glamour ring to make him look like Uncle Blake. There's no way to explain to an entire town you're actually a different person; publicly, he's still Detective Blake Daly, but in private, he's my dad.

Instead, he twists a silver and blue jade ring on his finger. "If you can't be on time, then no dance studio before a meeting."

And there it is. My dad thinks I'm irresponsible, so I'll never be able to save an entire city of witches, and he's probably right. I might be a Divine, but I'm hardly ready to go against a witch like Carmith. My psychic construct gift barely worked the night we eradicated The Torven. Even now, I can't get weapons to stay fully formed for very long. Besides that, judging by the scene that transpired between Wynne and Gage a minute ago, I highly doubt they'll let us go to Dark Boston alone. They'll insist on going with us, and we can't let it happen. I won't lose my dad again. We'll have to figure out how to get there without our parents knowing.

The tension in the room is as thick as the blazing air from the space heater. Even though it's toasty in here, I wish I'd never come in from the freezing wind. As I shuffle further into the room, my body tenses at the sight of Jacob with Tura near the bookshelves. He bows his head and avoids my gaze. It must be strange for him to be back in the room he grew up in so long ago. The bags under his eyes make me wonder if he's

having trouble adjusting or if guilt is eating away at him. Having The Torven take over his body couldn't have been a good experience.

Tura caresses his hand, holding it as if she's playing the role of anchor for him. Jacob lifts his head and kisses her temple. She's adjusting well and loves modern fashion. Today, Tura wears jeans and an emerald turtleneck sweater that brings out her eyes. She moves her gaze to me and smiles. I return the gesture as I step closer to Gage, who leans against the wall near the door.

Gage crosses his arms across his chest. "Thanks so much for finally gracing us with your presence, Divine."

His tone grates at me. I wish he'd be the Gage I met months ago who told me I'm a Divine Witch in the first place, the Gage who helped me when I couldn't tell anyone else what was going on.

A couple of weeks ago, I found Gage pacing in his attic. At first, he wouldn't talk, but eventually, he opened up and told me how much he loved Wynne and how her betrayal broke his heart. I get it; I do. But taking his anger and grief out on others is getting old.

Landen narrows his eyes at Gage and moves forward. Resting a hand on his chest, I shake my head, and he steps away but continues to glare at Gage.

Landen isn't much better than Gage. The loss of Tommy and Jade has hit him harder than me. He grew up with them and hasn't had time to mourn them. Landen says he's fine, but I don't believe it. His ragged appearance—messy hair, haggard expression, and dark circles under his eyes—showcases how he's not sleeping much. Between Gage's emotions and Landen's exhaustion, our chances of defeating Carmith are only going down.

Anxiety squeezes me like a snake. If we can't get ourselves together, there's no way we'll be able to defeat Carmith. Even though I'm a Divine of the prophecy, I don't feel as powerful as I should. Sure, we eradicated The Torven, but not before it killed two of our friends.

I should've done more. I should have protected them and taken the time to plan rather than jumping in headfirst.

My dad clears his throat and brings my focus back to the coven meeting. He motions to Wynne. "Go on and answer Charlotte's question. Why should we trust you now?"

In the far corner, Wynne sits on the daybed, unglamoured, twisting her long blonde hair around a finger. I'm surprised she's here, to be honest. She's avoided us all since Jade and Tommy's funerals. So it's hard to say if she genuinely cares about us.

Landen's hand presses against my lower back, and a tingle goes up my spine. He leans down and whispers in my ear, "Remember, we're talking later, so no running out when the meeting is over."

I suck in some air and tip my head to show my understanding before turning my attention back to Wynne.

She sits up straighter and pulls her shoulders back. "I'm here because my mother and sisters banished me. I defied our mother and tried to open the portal so the Five Sisters could return. I swear I want to help."

No one says anything at first; instead, we assess her trustworthiness. But discovering she tried to help the Five Sisters does give us a reason to believe she's on our side.

Charlotte gestures to us all scattered around the secret room. "Why not tell us, if you knew we were from the Five Sisters?"

Wynne fiddles with the cuff of her sweater and lets out a slow breath. "It's strange being back in this room. They made it to have coven meetings like this." Wynne's gaze darts around at each of us. "But then when Laurelanna disappeared, and Dr. Edwin felt like he needed to hide Jacob, he decided to—" She stops and stares at Jacob.

He exhales and motions for Wynne to go on.

Wynne swings her legs along the side of the daybed. "Anyways, I suspected, but didn't know for sure about the Reeds." She glances at Charlotte, then Landen. "And you, Meg, you look so much like Tura. I did assume you were a witch, but I wasn't sure if I should say anything to you. We have to be careful not to let others know about us. And I was afraid Delia would find out about me if I told anyone."

Delia, who sits on the floor near the stained-glass window, wrinkles her brows at this statement. She seems happy yet leery to have found her younger sister, and I can't help wondering why. The usual scowl on her face lifts when she glances over at us. Delia has changed over the past month and isn't so irate with me, but I'm not sure I believe the sudden change of heart. Maybe I'm a cynic, but it seems too fast and convenient of a change for her. What if she's using us to get to Dark Boston? And what, then? Will she still be on our side, or will she help her mother, Carmith, instead?

Wynne goes on as she traces the pattern of the quilt on the daybed and keeps her gaze locked on it. "Lauralanna was like a mother to me. She found me in the cave under the manor when I was banished here. They were kind to me—they were all like family. Dr. Edwin and Jacob, Darcia, Nyla, Tura, and Nathaniel O'Dannon." She glances over at Tura, who smiles at the mention of her family.

"Hold up," Landen strides to the center of the room. "You knew Jacob, but didn't warn us about The Torven possessing him?"

The realization sucks the air from my lungs. Why wouldn't she tell us?

"It wasn't her fault. Wynne didn't remember me because The Torven did a ritual to make me a new identity every so often. It knew Wynne was out there somewhere and it didn't want to take the chance of her or anyone else recognizing me. It's how it tricked you all into believing my name was Jacen Blackwell," Jacob explains.

"And you haven't aged since I last saw you so that makes sense now," Wynne says.

"And why we remembered you as Jacen from years ago?" Landen asks.

"Yes," Jacob says.

Gage rubs his forehead and stares over at Wynne. "But why not tell me who you were?"

She gestures to Delia and Jacob. "As I said, Delia. I couldn't risk her knowing I was here. Plus, I never knew if The Torven was in Port Paxton, and I didn't want it to find me."

Gage shakes his head. "Yeah, but—"

Charlotte raises her hand. "Please not right now, Gage, or we'll never get through this meeting."

He hangs his head and leans back against the wall.

Charlotte turns back to Wynne. "We have many more questions for you, but for now, I think we should discuss a few other things. First, none of you are to go to Dark Boston—"

"But we have to. They need us; we're the Divines of the prophecy," I say.

"That's true; however, we don't know what we'll find when we get there. So Delia and Wyn—er, what do we call you, my dear?" Charlotte asks.

Wynne shrugs. "Wynne is fine, especially in Dark Boston. No one can know I'm Branwyn."

Gage grumbles and shakes his head. I nudge him with my elbow, but it's too late.

Wynne glares at him. "Don't start."

He opens his arms wide. "Did I say anything? No."

Landen shoots me a look of *here we go again*. My dad exhales and runs a hand down his face, displaying the frustration I'm sure we all feel as Wynne and Gage continue to snipe at one another.

"I've said I'm sorry a thousand times. What do I have to do to—"

"Sorry isn't good enough." Gage surges forward, pointing a finger at her. "You could've helped us. Instead, you kept quiet. Now Jade and Tommy are dead because you couldn't tell the truth. You couldn't even tell me. I thought we . . ." Gage's voice breaks off, and he swipes wetness from his eyes.

Tears pool in Wynne's blue eyes, and her lips tremble. "I'm sorry. Truly I am. I never meant for anyone to get hurt or . . . Please let me show you how sorry I am. Let me help. I can go to Dark Boston with you and deal with my mother."

Gage waves a hand as if to dismiss her. "You're not going."

Wynne jumps up from the daybed. "The hell I'm not! I'm helping you all to stop my mother. I deserve to go home!"

"It's not your choice," Gage hollers back.

"Enough!" my dad says. "You two need to work this out on your own time later. Right now, we need any information you can give us on Dark Boston and Carmith."

Wynne opens her mouth but closes it again, patting her cheeks dry. After taking a deep breath, she sits back on the daybed and snuffles. "Fine, but I haven't been there in so long. Things might have changed."

"She's right." Delia sets her phone on the wooden floor. "The city isn't in good condition because of our mother, The Torven, and the war."

Jacob steps forward. "War?"

"When the Five Sisters followed The Torven through the portal to here, our mother opened other portals to conjure Shifters, Shades, and Drakes to be her army. Shades and Drakes are creatures who do what she says, but only some witches and Shifters follow her. Those, known as the rebels, see how she's destroying everything. So everyone is at odds," Delia explains.

What are Shades and Drakes? I've never heard of such things. I don't get a chance to ask her about them, because my dad pushes forward with more questions.

"Tell us more about Carmith." He sits next to Charlotte.

Delia stretches her legs out in front of her. "Her gifts are conjuring and power locating."

"What's the last one help her do?" Landen asks.

"She can sense when others use their gifts and track them through that," Wynne tells us.

"What about spells?" Tura asks.

"No. Only our gifts," Delia says. "So when we get there, we must be super careful not to use our gifts."

Landen gives me a side glance as though he's rethinking going to Dark Boston. It does cause issues for us.

"Will she know if we use the portal?" Jacob asks.

"Not sure." Wynne shrugs.

My dad rubs his chin, as if in deep thought. "And what of the city itself?"

“When the founding families created our city, they set it up to be like the Boston they left in the late 1600s,” Delia says.

Wynne scoots closer to the edge of the daybed. “Think of it like a pocket dimension. It’s like Boston, but not.”

“No modern buildings or electricity,” Gage guesses.

Wynne shakes her head. “Sort of. As Boston progressed, so did ours in different ways. We use crystals for light, heat, cooking, and many other things.”

Delia picks up her phone, taps on it for a moment, then faces it toward us all. A map of Boston fills the screen. She points to a central location. “When the five founding families of Bane, Carrick, Enright, Loran, and Roark created the city, they used two crystals known as the Stone of Life and the Stone of Death. When they did, five crystal towers formed within the city. They help power everything, in a sense.”

“And the caverns under the towers are a way to sneak in to get to Carmith,” Wynne says.

“Sneak in?” Tura asks.

Delia gestures to the walls of the room. “The towers appear as crystals on the outside, but are like a building with rooms on the inside.”

Charlotte wrings her hands together and shifts to face my dad. “We’ll need a detailed plan.”

“You’re letting us go?” Landen asks.

“Not alone.” My dad glances over at Jacob and Tura. “They promised the Five Sisters they’d help keep you safe in Dark Boston, and I hope they meant it.”

“Absolutely, sir,” Jacob says. Tura bobs her head in agreement.

My dad and Charlotte get to their feet and cross the room to the door, but I still have many more questions.

“What about the portal? How does it work?” I ask.

“I think we need kyanite and Elora’s ring you found,” Wynne tells us. “Years ago, I discovered kyanite can help make a bridge or connection, so it may help. Now that you have the ring, Meg, all we need is the kyanite.”

I twirl Elora’s ring on my finger. The five stones of the Five Sisters form a star and glimmer in the light. Taking a deep breath, I run a finger over the rainbow moonstone, sunstone, blue jade, amethyst, and garnet. Glancing over at Landen, I brace myself for his reaction to my question. “Didn’t Tommy once say his dad has an extensive crystal collection?”

Landen shrugs, avoiding my gaze. Mentioning Tommy probably wasn’t the best idea, but if Tommy’s dad has kyanite, we can use it to go to Dark Boston.

"We'll deal with that later," my dad says.

Charlotte gestures for everyone to follow her. "Yes. Let's take a break for now and have lunch."

Gage moves out of the way as Delia, Wynne, Jacob, and Tura all exit after her.

I desperately want to ask Wynne so much more, but I'm exhausted; not only physically, but emotionally and mentally. The past month has been grueling. Going to school without Tommy and Jade and listening to others talk about how tragic it is they died has been difficult but going to their funerals was worse. A part of me still can't believe they're gone, even if I saw them die.

Before leaving, my dad caresses my arm, and I turn to him.

"Charlotte's right. We can't go without a plan."

"I know. I'll be down in a minute. I need to talk to Landen real quick."

"All right." He kisses me on the head.

As he exits the room, my mind wanders to the promise he made me: a promise to take me to Michigan sometime to visit Mom and Uncle Blake's graves. I never got the chance to say goodbye, and considering my uncle sacrificed himself for me, I need to go and pay my respects somehow. It's the least I can do, even if it's ten years too late. But I have to make it back from Dark Boston first.

Gage breathes out and rubs the back of his head. "I don't believe a word Wyn said."

Landen takes a seat on the loveseat. "Why would she lie about being here after Carmith threw her through the portal? Sounds like she has as many, if not more, issues with her mother than Delia does."

Gage shakes his head, causing a lock of dark hair to fall down his forehead. "All she does is lie."

"We don't know that for sure," I say. "Wynne may have tried to help the Five Sisters like she said."

Gage strides across the room, then back toward me. "I don't trust her. Period. And I hate to say it, but your parents are right. We have no idea what we'll face when we get to Dark Boston."

Landen twists his ring around his finger. "True. Which is why I don't think we should—"

I turn to Landen, but Gage cuts him off and captures my attention. "We'll need to take several things with us. As many crystals as possible, potions, our crystal wand Grimoires, and we should work on certain spells before we go."

I add up all the items and other things we may need—like clothes and maybe even food. "What kind of other things are you thinking of?"

Gage waves his hand around. "What about weapons? If we can't use our gifts and run out of potions at any point, we need a way to defend ourselves."

Landen drums his fingers on his leg and grumbles, "Right."

I sit next to Landen and fiddle with my necklace. I don't want Gage to go, but if he thinks he's part of the plan, maybe he'll calm down.

"We could also ask Delia and Wynne what else we should take." Gage runs a hand over his scruffy face. Before he can blow up at me about mentioning Wynne, I hurry on with what I want to say. "We have four Divines, right? Plus, Rosalie in Dark Boston is a Divine too. So we should be fine."

"You never know." Gage glares down at me.

"Have you tried to contact Rosalie lately?" Landen asks.

"Yeah." Gage shoves his hands in his pockets. "I've tried the spell alone, but I need Meg to help."

I shift my gaze from Landen to Gage and back again. "We can do it tomorrow."

"We have school, and my mom has made it clear I'm not to skip. I need to graduate." Landen lays his head back against the loveseat and closes his eyes.

I pull my knees to my chest. He's right. My dad won't let me skip out on my senior year, either. The thought of going to school tomorrow makes my stomach churn, and I wish I'd taken my anxiety medication earlier. My anxiety hasn't been as bad, but sometimes it rears its ugly head when I least expect it. Still, I can't let it take over now. I need to focus, so I take a deep breath and rest my hand on Landen's. His eyes flutter open; he stares over at me, then intertwines his fingers with mine. A soothing sensation spreads throughout me, and I inhale deeply. Landen squeezes my hand, and I return the gesture to thank him. I've come to lean on his gift of giving strength more.

Reluctantly, I release Landen's hand. "I say we contact Rosalie tonight to make a plan and get supplies together so we can go as soon as possible. Our parents can't make us go to school if we're not here. Besides, if we stay, Rosalie and many others could die."

"We could all die if we're not prepared," Gage says.

"Then what kinds of potions do you think we'll need? And how long will they take to make?" I ask.

A knock interrupts us. Tura peers in from the doorway and studies Gage as if he's a bomb, ready to go off. "Sorry to overhear. Potions can take hours to days to make."

"Are you good with potions?" I ask her.

She grins and nods.

"Perfect. You and Gage can work on them. And the rest of us can gather anything else we might need." I glance over at Gage. "Happy now?"

He shrugs and points his thumb at Tura. "Bring her to my house later, and we can start making the potions." He strides past Tura and exits the room.

"Sorry. He's mad at Wynne, not you," I say.

"Do you blame him?" Landen crosses his arms over his chest.

"No, but—"

Tura adjusts her teardrop moonstone pendant so it hangs straight and clears her throat. Her large green eyes make her seem so much more innocent. "May I speak with you about Branwyn?"

"How well did you know her back then?" I ask.

"I tried to tell Gage, but he's so angry he won't listen." She moves further into the room and kneels in front of the coffee table and loveseat. "Branwyn—I mean, I suppose I should call her Wynne now—she tried to help Jacob's mother, Laurelanna, but it was too late. When Wynne found her at the asylum, Laurelanna was—" She hangs her head, and we get her meaning without her finishing. "But later, when The Torven possessed Jacob and killed Dr. Edwin, Wynne saved us. She tried to get her sister Valda to come with us, but Valda swore to return The Torven to Carmith."

"That night in the cave, you said The Torven killed Valda," I say.

"Yes. It turned on her even though she was the one who helped set it free. And if it weren't for Wynne, you would not be here, Meg. Our family line would've died with Jacob's—and my daughter, Colleen."

Her words are a punch to my gut. My parents and other family members would not have lived either if Wynne hadn't helped Tura and her family escape. This realization cracks my wall of protection and creates hope of fully trusting Wynne once again.

"Thank you for telling us," I say.

"We still need more to be able to trust her, though," Landen adds.

Tura rises to her feet. "She'll prove herself to you. I know she will. You can count on Wynne."

I want to trust her, but it's going to take time. Until I do, I'm keeping an eye on Wynne and Delia.

Tura brushes her hands down her jeans. "When do we leave for Dark Boston?"

Landen and I exchange a look of uncertainty. Will she keep her mouth shut?

"Please don't tell anyone, especially our parents," I say.

"I swear it." Tura motions a cross over her heart.

"We hope to leave as soon as we can get all of our supplies ready," I tell her.

Tura pauses in the doorway and turns back to us. "May I at least tell Jacob?"

"Sure. Thanks." When she hurries out, I turn to Landen. "I don't know about taking Wynne."

"I don't think we have a choice. Wynne could help us get to and around Dark Boston, so we need her."

"True. Maybe Delia, too."

Landen raises an eyebrow. "You want Delia to come?"

"Not really, but if their mother trusts Delia, then we could use it to our advantage."

Landen squeezes my hand, and a jolt of energy surges through me. "Good point." His mouth opens again as though he wants to say more, but he lets go of my hand and stares over at the stained-glass window.

I can't seem to speak the words I want to say. The bond between us has messed with my head so much I'm confused about how I truly feel.

"I have a feeling our parents will want to come to Dark Boston too," I finally manage to say.

Landen fidgets with his ring and refuses to meet my gaze. "Yeah. I guess we could go when they're busy with work. And you could make a list of supplies and see if Gage can think of anything else."

"Gage? I thought..." Landen studies me, and my cheeks burn. "I mean, we're the Divines, so why should we endanger anyone? I don't want anyone else getting hurt. Not like—"

I can't even say their names out loud now. It hurts too much. Whenever I think about them, all I see is The Torven slitting Jade's throat and stabbing Tommy. And all the blood. So much blood. My stomach twists, and I close my eyes, hoping to suppress the nausea.

"I know what you mean." Landen pauses and takes a deep breath. "I don't want anyone to get hurt either, but we may need them all to help us. And about the bond—" He reaches out to me but stops and drops his hand to the armrest of the loveseat.

"It scares me," I tell him. "The intensity of it."

"Me too."

"Maybe we can find answers in Dark Boston."

A chill settles over me, and I cross my arms over my chest. "What if Gage and Wynne cause problems because they won't get along?"

He shrugs and rises to his feet. "We could tell them they have to call a truce if they want to go."

"Do you think they'll listen?"

Landen heads toward the door. "We'll talk with them together. First, let's have lunch, then we can deal with other things."

I get to my feet and exit the room with Landen through the passageway to the winding staircase. I'd rather leave right now, but Gage is right. We need to have supplies and a plan. Landen opens the secret door in the pantry, and we enter the kitchen to find everyone at the large white oak table. Jacob sits next to Tura, and she laughs at something he says.

Everyone sits spread out, so they don't have to be next to certain people. My dad and Charlotte chat while enjoying their cups of coffee. It's odd to see them together like this. They've become friends quickly. Maybe it's because they both lost someone they loved.

The only space open is near Jacob and Tura, but his presence bothers me. It shouldn't, but it does. The sight of Jacob still consumes me with memories of how The Torven possessed and controlled him. Jacob never wanted to hurt anyone, but the ache in my chest for my mom, Uncle Blake, Jade, Tommy, and so many others won't let me move on or see him as anything different from the monster who killed them all. It takes a conscious effort not to cringe when he's in the same room or speaks to me. And I'm sure Landen feels the same. There's a distressed look in his eyes, and he stiffens whenever Jacob is around. We're all pretending everything is fine when it's not. How are we ever going to work together to defeat Carmith?

Chapter 2 - Meg

AN EARTLY SCENT penetrates my sinuses the moment I enter Gage's house. In the kitchen, light sage cabinets line the room. The top shelves showcase antique dishes behind glass doors, and a dark granite countertop covers an island in the center of the space. To the right, there's a breakfast nook with a large window where late afternoon light streams onto the walnut table. His mom did an amazing job restoring this Victorian house.

Tura stands at the stove, stirring a potion in a cast-iron pot. The pungent smell filling the space reminds me of when Charlotte made a different potion to help wake Tura. The memory of Tura as a statue in the cave under Edwin Manor flashes in my mind, and a shiver zips down my spine. Being a statue for so long must've been torture, especially since she could feel everything Jacob was going through because their souls were tied together. A few days ago, she'd confided in me that she could feel Jacob's pain and remorse every time The Torven killed a witch. It must've been hell for them both.

I cross the space to the island counter and snatch up a handful of dried herbs. As I crush them with a pestle and mortar, I ask, "Where's Gage?"

"Getting more willow bark." Tura glances over her shoulder at me. "What are you doing?"

I stop grinding the leaves. "I . . . um." Honestly, I'm not sure. My hands started acting on their own. The leaves don't smell; I study their shape more closely. "This is good for healing, right?"

Tura strides over, drying her hands on a tea towel. "Yes. Have you been studying plants and herbs for long?"

I shake my head. "Not at all. I just sort of knew it."

Tura grins at me. "Must be a new gift then." She points to the leaves. "We can use those to make tea, which can help heal wounds. Measure out a quarter cup and put it in a bag. We'll only use a tablespoon at a time, so we should have enough."

"Okay. What are you making?"

"A paste for wounds. It won't heal them completely, but it will protect against infection."

I grind more herbs and place them in one of the plastic bags on the counter. "So even if we used it, we'd still need to have Wynne heal us?"

Tura goes back to the stove and stirs the potion. "Correct. And we can use them in case we're separated at any point and need time to find Wynne or another healer."

I slide the bags closer, opening a few in preparation to speed up the process. "Thank you for your help."

She turns to face me. "It may sound strange, but creating potions relaxes me. So I'm glad to do it."

"Like cooking or baking is relaxing to some people."

"I suppose so, yes. Have you spoken with Gage since the meeting earlier?"

I press harder with the pestle at the mention of him. "No. He's not exactly Mr. Personality right now. I understand he's mad, but I hate how he takes it out on everyone."

Tura's mouth quirks down for a moment. "It seems like Gage lashes out when he's hurt."

"He's lost a lot. I get why he's so upset."

"Yes, but how are *you*?" Tura asks. She puts a silicone mat down to protect the counter before placing the pot within reach.

"Okay, I guess."

"You've been through just as much, and you're a Divine of the prophecy. I can imagine that's an enormous stress." She unscrews several lids and rummages in a drawer to find a spoon to fill the jars.

"It is, but Gage understands that. I think he feels left out now. I feel bad, but I don't know what to say to him."

Tura *hmmms* and scrapes the healing paste out of the pot. "How do you feel about the bond with Landen and being a Divine of the prophecy?"

"I'm not sure." I wish I knew for certain, but who knows if how I feel for Landen is real or if it's the bond twisting my emotions. Regardless, I have to fulfill my destiny by going to Dark Boston to stop Carmith. Not to mention we need to help Rosalie, the Divine Witch whom Gage and I spoke to through a spell with crystals. All because I'm a destined Divine Witch, it's up to me to help defeat Carmith. More thoughts tumble around my head as my heart pounds faster, hitting harder against my chest with every item added to the list.

Am I ready? I don't feel like I am. What if we fail? Is Rosalie all right? What if Carmith...?

My hands stop in mid-air. *Oh my gosh, Rosalie.* We still need to contact her. Gage left so quickly after the coven meeting, we didn't do the spell. And it's strange we haven't heard from Rosalie in weeks. Grabbing a towel off the counter, I wipe my hands. "Sorry, I need to check something."

Tura tilts her head, studying me while I dig through my bag. “Meg, you do know everyone doesn’t expect you to be perfect, right? You’re a Divine, but that doesn’t define you.”

I tap on my phone, texting Gage: *We should try to contact Rosalie.*

“Meg. You understand, right?”

“Hmm? Um, yeah sure. I do.”

A reply pops up immediately from Gage: *Later.*

I glare at the screen and huff.

Meg: You said that earlier. We need to do it now.

Gage: We will. I need to get stuff for potions. I’ll be there soon.

I sigh and drop my phone on the table.

“Everything all right?” Tura asks.

“Yeah. Sorry. Gage and I need to contact Rosalie in Dark Boston before we leave. We haven’t heard from her in weeks. I hope she’s okay.”

“If she’s a Divine, I’m sure she’s fine.”

The swinging kitchen door creaks as Landen enters and tips his head toward the counter covered in plastic bags and jars of paste. “How many so far?”

Tura points to each as she counts them off: “Eight bags for healing teas and five jars of paste so far. We still need to make some poison potions. I think we could get by with hemlock and nightshade. Maybe even belladonna for it. Do you agree?” Tura flicks her gaze between Landen and me.

“Sounds good to me,” I say.

Landen scans the room, then rests his gaze on Tura. “Yeah, any of those should work. So where’s Jacob, anyway?”

“He’s at Edwin Manor. Jacob doesn’t want to get in the way, and he knows he reminds you of The Torven and what it did.” Tura waves her hand toward the back door.

Landen hangs his head, then shifts his gaze to me. It’s difficult for us to be around Jacob, but we can’t avoid him if he’s going with us to Dark Boston. “Sorry. We—”

Tura shakes her head. “Jacob understands it will take you time to trust him. Just give him a chance to show you.”

Landen shifts his weight from one foot to the other, and I wipe my suddenly sweaty hands on the tea towel. She’s not wrong—we know Jacob had no choice and couldn’t fight off The Torven from possessing him. But still . . .

“We’re trying,” I tell her.

Landen shoves his hands in his pockets and leans against the counter near me. “Definitely. And we promise.”

"Thank you." Tura scoops more paste from the pot and places it in a jar. "He will fulfill his promise. Don't worry."

After an awkward silence, Landen clears his throat and shifts his gaze to me. "I have a bag of crystals we may need. Is there anything else you can think of?"

"Do you think we'll need weapons, as Gage suggested?" I ask.

Tura raises her brows but doesn't say anything.

"We'll have Jacob and Tura with us. Jacob is quick and strong," Landen says.

"True. So I guess no to weapons. They'll probably take up more space. What about water or food?" I gesture to my bag on the table. "I brought extra clothes."

"Right. The backpacks are up in the attic. I can put your stuff up there too." He snatches up my things and exits. His footsteps thump down the hallway to the stairs.

Tura rinses a pot and hands it to me; I place it in the dishwasher.

"Do you believe Wynne about using kyanite for the portal? I mean, what do you know about it?"

Tura grabs a cloth and wipes down the countertop. "Wynne is correct. It does build bridges."

"Do you believe we need to find kyanite to go to Dark Boston?"

She shrugs. "I'm not sure if you truly need it. You could potentially use the ley lines instead. Using energy from the earth with the ley lines may add power to Elora's ring and the spell."

I shut the water off to stop rinsing the dishes. "Sorry, what?"

"There are ley lines in the cave. It's why the portal is there."

I shut the dishwasher and dry my hands. "Are you sure?"

Tura takes the towel from me and hangs it on the oven door. "It's what my mother told me."

"I'll be right back." I hurry across the kitchen to the back staircase and up to the attic.

From what I've read about ley lines, this could change everything. I need to tell Landen.

Chapter 3 - Landen

MEG PACES NEAR the round window of the attic and waves her hands as she talks. She's right; if ley lines are in the cave, they could add power to the spell to use the portal. But God, I hope she's wrong, along with Wynne's theory about kyanite opening the portal. If it doesn't work, we can't go to Dark Boston, which in my opinion, is the best course of action. Considering we don't know what to expect, so much could go wrong. I could lose Meg—or someone else—again, and I . . .

I can't think about it.

But memories of The Torven murdering Jade and Tommy replays on a loop in my head, tearing me apart a little more each time. I drag my hands down my face, hoping to dispel the gruesome memories. It doesn't work. Instead, Meg's gentle, soothing voice brings me back to the attic. I focus on her green eyes which sparkle like they always do when she has an idea, and wisps of her auburn hair curl around her face. My hand itches to brush it away and—

No. Don't go there. I banish the thoughts and wants.

What if I'm no better than my dad, and I hurt Meg somehow like he hurt Mom? Getting close to her now will only make things worse. I'm an idiot for kissing Meg and asking her to go out with me weeks ago. If something happens to her or if I hurt her in some way . . . I can't even imagine what I'll do.

"Landen." Meg's voice cuts through my awful imagination again. I stare up at her, and there's concern in her eyes.

What did she say? Does she expect me to answer something? Meg crosses the room to me and places her hands on her hips, which her jeans hug just right and show off her dancer's body. I blink and force myself to meet her gaze. She studies me as though trying to read my mind. Does she have that gift? God, I hope not.

"What do you think?" Meg asks.

"About what?" Gage enters the attic, followed by Jacob, Tura, Delia, and Wynne.

Gage shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans, waiting for our answer. His mannerisms remind me so much of my dad that it hurts. I'm such a selfish idiot for blaming Gage and not telling him sooner that we're half-brothers. At least he doesn't blame me for our dad's death.

Pain and guilt clench my heart, and a flash of my dad's face the day he died strangles me. I inhale and rub my hands on my thighs to regain my composure. Thankfully, no one seems to notice. The room shrinks as they file in further.

Meg surveys me for a moment before explaining to the others about the ley lines. While she does, I settle onto one of the red velvet chairs and twist my ring around my finger, even though I'd rather fling it across the room. The silver band has a geometric puzzle pattern with sunstone, amethyst, an orange star sapphire, and more stones glittering up at me.

I wish I could leave and let them all go to Dark Boston. But I can't. I'm a Destined Divine of the prophecy because I descend from all five sisterhoods, like Meg. No other Divine Witches have had all five lines in their blood. So I'm damned. But even if I wasn't, I wouldn't leave Meg. I need to protect her. And I owe Meg that much; she deserves to achieve her dream of dancing.

The others' conversation drifts away while I drum a beat on my leg. Listening to the melody of the song I've been working on keeps me from drowning. My tense shoulders finally relax, allowing me to breathe. I make notes on my phone for the song, so I don't lose the ideas while everyone else discusses Dark Boston.

It's a bad idea for all of us to go. There are too many of us. Who knows what Carmith is capable of doing. What else can she conjure if she can conjure something like The Torven? But no one will listen even if I say anything, just like yesterday. I get interrupted or ignored whenever I try to give a rational opinion. So, I've given up.

"But we need kyanite, too," Jacob says, interrupting my thoughts.

"I checked. It's out of stock at Spellbound," Delia tells us.

"Reed could talk to Colonel Williams," Gage says.

My fingers pause on the phone keyboard. Leave it to Gage to bring up Tommy's dad. If only Meg hadn't reminded him of how Colonel Williams has a crystal collection. Gage's lack of a filter sometimes irritates me and reminds me even more of our dad. As I flick my gaze between him and Meg, he lifts a dark brow in question. But I ignore him. Instead, I allow myself to imagine what it'd be like if Gage and Meg were the Divines of the prophecy. With them as the Divines, I wouldn't have to deal with any of this. More importantly, I'd be free and wouldn't worry about my gifts harming someone I care about again.

I killed my dad and failed to help Tommy and Jade. The night The Torven attacked, I froze; I didn't react quick enough. Tommy barged out the front door and around the back of the house to help before I did anything. I wanted to, but the mere thought of using my gifts, my fire, terrified me. But in the end, it didn't matter; I got them killed by not telling them I'm a Divine.

I don't want to go to Dark Boston, but I'm not about to lose more people I care about. So I'm stuck going.

I glare up at Gage. "Why the hell would I do that?"

Gage glowers back at me, challenging me. "Meg's right. I remember Tommy bragging about his dad's crystal collection. He has several pretty rare ones."

"Then you ask him," I say.

There's no way I'm going to visit Tommy's dad. It's my fault Tommy's dead, and I can't face Colonel Williams again. Not after the way he looked at the funeral. He barely spoke. I may have promised Tommy I would watch over his dad, but it doesn't mean I have to go over there and be buddies with him or ask him for a rare stone. And who's to say he'd even give us the kyanite? He'll probably go straight to our parents and tell them our plan to go to Dark Boston without them.

Gage rolls his eyes and mumbles something to Meg, and the stale air in the attic suffocates me more.

Damn it all. I need out of here. Out of Port Paxton and this oppressive life. All I want to do is write and play my music. Besides drinking, it's the one thing that helps me escape. But what I want to do with my life doesn't matter. Ever since I was little and my parents taught me everything about our gifts, I've known that I need to live up to being a witch by using my gifts discretely and wisely. Now I have to live up to that expectation and the responsibility of being a Divine Witch. I want to scream. *Thanks for the crappy hand, Universe.*

But I don't. God, the universe, my destiny, fate . . . whatever you want to call it, it brought Meg into my life. And I'm grateful it did.

Gage breaks me out of my thoughts. "He doesn't know me. He'll trust you more."

Meg steps forward with worried wrinkles on her forehead. "Why not ask Colonel Williams?"

I cross my arms. "You realize he'll tell our parents what we're doing, right?"

Her shoulders sag as she turns to Gage. "Landen has a point."

Gage strolls across the attic and waves a hand at me. "At least try to talk to him and explain the situation. You never know. Maybe he'll help us so you and Meg can stop Carmith. She did conjure The Torven who killed his son."

My jaw tightens, and I resist jumping to my feet. He had to bring up Tommy, didn't he? "No. I won't go there and cause him more pain."

"Oh, come on. Man up, Reed. Do it for Tommy and Jade," Gage insists.

His words slice through me, and I launch to my feet. Gage might be my half-brother, but at the moment, I don't care. He doesn't get to use my guilt against me.

Meg throws herself in front of me so I can't reach him. My hands ball into fists, and I grind my teeth together so hard it hurts. I'd never shove Meg aside to get to Gage, but he's tempting me right now. I can't face Colonel Williams. I just can't.

"Landen," Meg whispers. She reaches out and takes my fist. Her gentle touch calms me as energy flows between us. I relax my hands and step back. She glances over her shoulder. "Gage is right." Before I can protest, her tone becomes stern. "He may have worded it poorly, so he should probably *apologize*—" Gage stares at the floor and mumbles an apology, "—but it's our only shot to getting the stone we need. Please just ask him. If he says no, then we'll try to find another way."

Running my fingers through my hair, I stare into her eyes and take a deep breath. Maybe we should go to Colonel Williams. He'll talk sense into them; they'll listen to him about not going to Dark Boston. But does Meg even understand what she's asking of me? What am I going to do? Go to Tommy's house, and say something like, *Hey, Colonel Williams. Sorry again about getting your son killed, but we need this stone so we can leave.*

Leave.

I cast my gaze toward the round window. Leave Port Paxton. Dark Boston might not be the best place to go to right now, but at least I'll be out of this oppressive town. And I can't let Meg down.

I flick my gaze back to find Meg studying me. Her brows scrunch together, and she opens her mouth to speak, but stops. Does Meg know? It makes me wonder again if she can read minds. Who knows, with her barrage of gifts, it's a scary possibility.

"Fine," I say.

"I'll go too." Jacob steps forward.

My hands flex into fists again. It wasn't his fault The Torven used him and killed Tommy and Jade, but I can't get used to him being around now. Not after that night. All I can see is him murdering my friends. I inhale deeply and release it.

"You, of all people, shouldn't go there." My tone is harsher than I meant for it to be. Jacob hangs his head and backs up toward the wall. "Sorry. I meant—"

He shrugs. "It's fine. I understand."

"Then I'll go," Gage says.

"I don't need a babysitter," I snap.

He rolls his eyes, but it's Tura who speaks. "The two of you need to learn to work together if we're going to succeed in Dark Boston."

"Exactly. Please talk, and don't kill one another." Meg gestures to the others. "We'll check out the cave and see about ley lines."

I shuffle down the attic stairs behind Gage and out to my Jeep. This isn't going to go well.

§

THE WILLIAMS' ONE-STORY brick house stands before us, and the sight suck-punches the air out of me.

Gage ascends the porch stairs and turns back to me. I hesitantly approach the door, standing beside him as he presses the doorbell. Several seconds tick by; I already want to teleport home. I haven't seen Tommy's dad since the funeral; I don't want to face him, but if he blames me in any way, I understand. I could've saved his son . . . my best friend. But I didn't.

Finally, the door opens, revealing Colonel Williams' tall, muscular figure looming over us.

"Landen." His gaze flicks to Gage. "Mr. Moore. What are you doing here?"

"Colonel Williams, sir. I . . . *we* need your help," I say.

He motions for us to enter, and we step into the foyer, where boxes line the walls — my stomach drops.

Is this all Tommy's? I should've helped him go through Tommy's room; it couldn't have been easy to do by himself. But all of this can't only be Tommy's stuff. There are over twenty boxes, and there's no furniture in the living room ahead of us.

I shift my gaze between the boxes and Colonel Williams. "Sir, are you moving?"

"I've gotten approval to relocate. Then I'll retire in a few years. There's nothing left here but bad memories." He leads us into the kitchen. "So, what can I do for you?"

He's leaving. I scan the kitchen as memories flash through my mind. Foremost is Tommy's Halloween party a few months back when Delia tried to give me a love potion, and my insides twist. If he's leaving, it'll be difficult to keep my promise to Tommy, but I also understand why he needs this. It's good he's moving. It'll help him heal.

I switch my gaze to Gage, who tips his head for me to go on.

"I was wondering if you still had your crystal collection," I finally ask.

Colonel Williams straightens his spine, making him even taller. "Of course. I haven't had time to pack it up yet. What are you looking for?"

"Kyanite," Gage says.

Colonel Williams furrows his brows and crosses his arms over his chest. "Why in the world do you need kyanite?"

Shit. I knew this was a bad idea. But all I can do is tell him the truth. "For the portal. So we can go to Dark Boston and stop Carmith."

He raises his chin, studying me closely. "Your mom and Detective Daly are good with you going?"

"They plan to go with us," I say. Which is true, but we're not going to let them. Of course, he doesn't need to know that.

He presses his lips together as if considering my words. "Good. If you need anything else, let me know. Sorry I can't go with you, but . . ." He gestures to the boxes in the foyer.

"It's all right. We understand," I say.

"And you're helping by giving us the kyanite," Gage adds.

"Right. This way." Colonel Williams stiffly nods, leading us down the hallway and into his bedroom closet. He moves aside some clothes to reveal a keypad. Once he types in a code, a red light turns green. A clicking sound alerts us, and he opens the door to a cramped safe room. Shelves covered with various crystals line the walls. Gage's eyes widen as we enter, roaming the room before finally landing on me.

"You knew about this?" Gage asks.

"It's where we get everything we need," I tell him.

Colonel Williams motions around the space. "My mother ran a shop for many years, and when she passed away, I kept everything."

"Dang, wish I'd known sooner." Gage inspects a red stone. "Which one is kyanite?"

Colonel Williams strides across the safe room and picks up a large, pyramid-shaped blue stone with white streaks in it. "This is the only one I have." He hands it to me, and its heft in my palm surprises me.

"Thank you, sir." I wrap my fingers around it. A part of me still hopes the stone won't help open the portal, but its intense energy assures me my hopes are in vain.

Colonel Williams rests a hand on my shoulder. "Do me a favor."

"Anything." And I mean it; I owe him so much more than he realizes.

"Make sure Carmith pays for what she's done."

All of the reasons why we shouldn't go to Dark Boston vanish when he stares at me with deep pain and grief. Fate or destiny, it doesn't matter. I'm going to Dark Boston not only for Meg, but for my friends too. So Jade's and Tommy's deaths aren't for nothing. Colonel Williams is right. Carmith needs to pay.

"I swear it, sir."

"Good." He pats my shoulder. "Be safe."

"We will," Gage says. We exit the tiny space, and once we're outside, he turns to me. "That wasn't so bad. But . . ." The intensity of his gaze concerns me.

“What?”

“You promised him you’d stop Carmith.”

I inspect the blue stone with white streaks. Will Colonel Williams mention this to my mom? “Yeah, so? That’s why we’re going to Dark Boston.”

He blows out a puff of air, and it mists away from his face. “It’s not that. It’s the way you said it.”

“We need to stop her, right? So, we will.”

Gage shakes his head. “That’s not my point, Reed.”

“Then spit it out, *Moore!*” I use his last name like he always insists on using mine. I hate the way he calls me *Reed*.

“You need to stop denying who you are and how you feel. If you don’t, you’re going to get us all killed.”

Gage trudges through the snow on the driveway, leaving me speechless. He’s the one to talk. Him fighting with Wynne could do the same.