

**CROSSROADS**  
**FOUR WORLDS**

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# Chapter One

Anabel found her sister giggling with her boyfriend. His deep accompanying laugh reached Anabel as she walked along the campus quad with her best friend.

"You know, I think your sister hangs out with your boyfriend more than you do," Ella said cattily.

"I think it has more to do with Ivan than with Gabriel," Anabel said, rolling her eyes.

"You know he is practically drooling over your sister," Ella said.

"Yes, well, Gabriel is keeping him leashed," Anabel replied.

"When are you going to tell your sister, Ivan is just as in love with her as she is with him?" Ella said turning her laughing blue eyes towards her friend.

"Oh no, I am not interfering in my sister's love life," she replied laughingly.

"Why not?" Ella said, stopping and turning fully to look at Anabel.

Anabel stopped a few steps ahead.

"What do you mean, why not? Say I tell Izzy? What then? Sure they get involved and then what happens when he breaks her heart? I'd feel terrible. No, this way I avoid the guilt later on," Anabel said with a shake of her head before resuming her walk.

"Hang on," Ella said grabbing Anabel's arm.

Anabel stopped short and turned to look at Ella.

"What is it?"

"So to avoid guilty feelings, you're gonna keep this to yourself? What if instead you got to lord it over them at their wedding? Why go all pessimistic?"

"If they are still fawning over each other by summer, I'll speak up, deal?" Anabel said starting to feel a little exasperated.

"Why wait? Come on, spill. I've been wondering what the deal is with you and Ivan. What you want him for yourself?" she joked.

"What? No! Izzy can be fickle, is all. Like I said, if she's still interested and they haven't figured out on their own then I will tell her, okay?" Anabel was starting to get annoyed.

"Alright," Ella said shrugging. Her demeanor suggesting she had not believed a word.

Anabel studied her friend as she walked away. She was a petite brunette with a narrow elfish face. Her ash brown straight hair stopped just short of her shoulders. Anabel frowned wondering what Ella's interest was in all this.

She shook her head, her nearly black hair swirling in riotous curls around her head, and hurried to catch up to her friend.

The two friends walked up to the trio sitting on the quad. Isobel was grinning, her toffee colored hair framed her heart shaped in soft waves. Her olive tinged skin absorbed the rays of sun greedily. Her hazel eyes were dancing as she listened to Gabriel's story. She was either oblivious or pretending not to notice the lovesick way Ivan watched her every move. Anabel was almost nauseous by the desperate display.

Ella noted the grimace, and tucked the information away for later. What was with those two? Ella nudged Anabel, giving the other woman a meaningful glance once she had her attention.

Anabel ignored her and sat down next to Gabriel. She waited until he finished his story before giving him a quick kiss in greeting. Ella was now rolling her eyes in disgust. Isobel laughed at her expression.

"You're just jealous," Isobel said, snickering.

Ella replied by flicking her a dirty look before greeting Ivan warmly.

"Hi Ivan, looking good. I bet you could probably bench press me," Ella said squeezing Ivan's muscled arm.

Ivan blushed but did not pull away.

"You? You'd hardly be challenge," he replied returning the banter.

Isobel's sunny smile slipped momentarily before she quickly replaced her sour expression with an amused one. Ella caught the change in the younger woman's face and felt a little guilty for picking at that particular sore spot. Gabriel and Anabel broke apart laughing at their friends' antics.

"Hola bella," he said, looking Anabel in the eye.

"Hi yourself," she replied wanting to look away from the intensity in his expression but was unable to look away.

He was a good looking man. He looked like he had walked off the set of Latin soap opera with his dark hair, almost black eyes and chiseled features. Only when he smiled did one remember that he was just a college kid like the rest of them albeit on the verge of

graduation. He was twenty-three, a year older than his best friend Ivan and two years older than Anabel and Ella. At nineteen Isobel was the youngest in their group.

The group was embarrassed at such an intimate display. Isobel used to the way Gabriel changed around her sister, managed to break the awkward silence that had descended.

"You know, with everyone here your dorm rooms are available," she said, her perfect eyebrows arching, with a wry tone.

Gabriel laughed at the underlying implication and finally broke eye contact. Anabel chuckled uncomfortably as she turned away with a sense of relief. She loved him, but sometimes he unnerved her.

"Yeah thanks, Izzy," Anabel replied.

"So have you thought more about what I told you?" Gabriel asked.

"Yeah I have and I don't think its a good idea," Anabel said quickly.

"What isn't a good idea?" Ella said turning to look at Anabel. She could hear the slight panic in the other woman's voice.

"Nothing," Anabel said quickly.

Gabriel remained silent for a moment, looking at Anabel with an inscrutable look. He searched her chocolate brown eyes before he turned to the group. Anabel closed her eyes miserably. He was going to ignore her and tell them anyway.

"Have I ever told you what my father does for a living?" he began.

"He works in the military or something, right?" Ivan said.

"Or something. We've never really been told what he does, exactly. Everything's always been hush-hush top secret kind of stuff. We, my mom and I, just got used to it."

They all nodded to show that they understood. He paused, seeming to gather his thoughts. His expression so serious, he held his audience captive. Each one feeling a different level of skepticism. As he continued his story, skepticism turned to incredulity and then outright disbelief.

Anabel groaned inwardly as he continued. She knew their friends would think Gabriel as crazy as she had when he had told her the same thing last night. She had hoped that he would have left it there. She felt embarrassed for him. She hated that feeling.

"I have proof," Gabriel had stopped speaking when he saw the disbelief in their faces. He had waited until they had stopped giving each other disbelieving glances before he spoke.

The words landed in the silence so that they each felt the words.

His confidence was so absolute that for a fraction of a second he had them convinced before their rational minds again shook off his crazy story.

"When have I ever been known to spin crazy conspiracy theories? You guys have known me for years. I would not have told you any of this if I didn't have proof," Gabriel said.

He did not sound like he was desperate to convince them. He looked them in the eye, one at a time, not beseeching but quietly confident.

It was true that Gabriel was not prone to wild speculation. He tended to scoff and sometimes laugh at the crazy conspiracy theories college students liked to bandy about everything from large corporations to shadow governments. That was why Anabel was still more than a little nonplussed at what he told her last night.

"Gabriel, you gotta admit, man. What you're saying sounds crazy," Ivan said with a half smile to try and soften his words. Gabriel did not have a temper exactly, but he could grow so cold when he was angry that he was downright scary. Ivan did not want to witness that right now.

"Gabe, a secret army from another dimension is slowly invading our world and you're the only one who knows about it? Come on, that would sound crazy coming from the President at a nationally televised press conference," Ella said leaning back. Ivan's words had freed them all from the tense spell Gabriel had woven.

Ivan and Anabel both winced at the nickname. Now was not the time to antagonize the man, but he did not seem to notice.

"I know it sounds like the plot of bad sci-fi show, but I am telling you I have proof. All I ask is that you give me the benefit of the doubt and come up with me to my family's cabin upstate this weekend. I'll show you my proof and all the data I've gathered since I found those papers in my father's study. You look at the evidence and come up with your own conclusions. If you're not convinced, I'll drop it. We chalk it up to some wild story from our college days. Deal?"

He turned that intensity on each one. The intense gaze had varying effects on the group gathered in front of him ranging from guilt to outright discomfort. He refused to turn away until each one of his friends nodded their agreement. He grinned. The change was so abrupt, it left them with a sense of whiplash and not a little relief.

"Come on, let's go get pizza, my treat," he said standing.

"I can't. I have class," Ella said with a show of regret.

"No you don't," Gabriel said. His tone hardened but the smile never slipped from his face.

"Come on, Ella. You can study for chem later," Anabel said diffusing the tension.

"Yeah, Ella, it'll be fun," Isobel chimed in.

"Yeah, sure," Ella agreed reluctantly.

"I'll buy you a beer," Ivan said looping his arm through hers.

Isobel turned away before anyone noticed her hurt expression. Ella saw anyway. There was little that escaped her notice which made her question why everyone was so afraid of Gabriel.

Anabel had been dating Gabriel before she and Ella met on the first day of classes as roommates, but not by much. She had heard how wonderful he was, and had seen nothing upon meeting him that would make her question that assessment until now.

Ella was starting to question quite a bit now.

# Chapter Two

Over pizza and beer, the friends forgot about the strange conversation they had shared back on the quad. Gabriel had gotten what he wanted. He was content letting the matter drop until after finals. He was disappointed in their response but not surprised. He was hurt by Anabel's lack of faith more than anything else. Her reaction weighed on him, although he hid it well behind jokes and indulgent smiles.

He kept a watchful eye on Ella. She was Anabel's friend and somewhat immune to his charm. He had not expected that. He had not expected Anabel to so thoroughly disbelieve either. He was willing to admit he had made a miscalculation dropping his theories on them without something other than his father's military service for back up.

It was too late now. They were coming to the cabin. He doubted any of them would walk away any doubts as to the veracity of his story.

He watched Anabel now. He ached for her in a way that he was still not sure he understood. He knew he sometimes unnerved her with that need. He would lie awake nights knowing she did not feel the same. It only intensified his feelings of possessiveness which only served to unnerve her further. He had her traditional background to fall back on. Her family expected them to marry. He was a good catch. He could say that without conceit. He came from a good family. He was headed to law school in the fall. He was a clean cut young man who treated their daughters with respect and would be able to provide for Anabel when they married. Even Isobel liked him, looking up to him like a big brother.

He just had to be careful not to scare her off. He eyed Ella once more. She could be a problem. She could fill Anabel's head with her American women's lib and drive Anabel away from him. Not that Anabel was any less independent. She was pursuing an engineering degree and had every intention of using that degree once she graduated. He had no problem with that. He just knew that her family's expectations were strong enough to keep her by his side, if he was careful.

The group had finished their meal and was starting to slip off one by one, until he had Anabel to himself. She would not look him in the eye. Gabriel inhaled to try and contain his anxiety. Now was not the time to let his possessiveness show in any way. He schooled his features to one of gentle concern. With the tips of his fingers, he tilted her face to look at him.

"Hey, que pasa, bella? What is it?" he said with what he hoped sounded like understanding.

She still refused to look at him, averting her gaze to the side stubbornly.

"Look at me, Anabela," he coaxed.



With a sigh she complied raising her eyes to his.

Anabel stared into those gorgeous dark eyes with the long curling lashes and melted a little. How could she ever be afraid of this man? All she saw was warm and loving concern in his gaze. She did love him, even if he had gone absolutely insane.

She smiled ruefully before saying, "I told you not to say anything."

His answering smile was definitely on the sheepish side.

"Yeah, I know," he said dropping his hand from her chin.

"You could have just invited everyone to the cabin. I'm pretty sure Isobel and Ivan would have jumped at the chance of spending time together away from school so they could pine for each while trying to find the courage to say something," she said impishly.

"I can just imagine it," he said with mock horror.

"And Ella? Would she have come?" he said, his brow wrinkling slightly even as he tried to show disinterest.

"She would be there just to watch the fireworks and to set some off if we didn't provide sufficient drama," she said only half-joking.

"Why would you care?" she was not successful in hiding a hint of jealousy from creeping into her voice.

"Are you jealous?" he said with genuine surprise and not a little pleasure.

"No! Of course not, but don't change the subject. Answer the question," she would not be dissuaded. Jealousy aside, Gabriel and Ella were not exactly bosom buddies.

"I need five people if my plan is going to work," he said.

"You really believe we will be able to travel to these other dimensions?" she said for once not sound completely incredulous at his crazy notions.

"Yes," he said simply.

"Why are you so certain, Gabriel?" she asked searching his face for a hint that he was joking. She found only confidence and determination.

"Because I've already done it," he said quietly.

With a sharp intake of breath, Anabel sat back and stared at him. She believed him despite herself. She had taken a few physics courses in pursuit of her degree. She knew what he

said was impossible. That even the most avant garde theories about multiple universes denied the possibility of crossing from our dimension to another, but she believed him.

"How?" she whispered.

"I found a gate."

"But you said the gate was guarded," she protested.

"There isn't just a single gate. There are multiple soft spots where it is easier to cross over. The gate is just the safest."

"Wait, safest?" she was unconsciously gripping his hand tightly. He did nothing to bring attention to the fact, only relished her concern.

"Are you implying that it is dangerous to step through these soft spots?" she tripped over the unfamiliar term, but she did not blink. Her gaze was unwavering.

"I experimented for months before I stepped through. Its true some of these soft spots aren't all that stable. I can't tell you the number RC cars I ran through, but I finally found one that is stable and opens up to a safe location."

"Its near your father's cabin, isn't it?" Anabel said. It was not really a question.

He answered anyway, "Yes."

"Why do you think these other dimensions mean us harm?" she asked.

The waiter came by to collect the check. Gabriel decided it was time to take this conversation elsewhere. He left a generous tip and grabbed their bags.

"We can't go back to your dorm," she said with regret.

"I'm not in the dorm anymore. I got an apartment off campus at the beginning of the semester. I needed to be able to study without any distractions."

"Oh, why didn't you tell me?" she was even less successful hiding the hurt in her voice.

"I didn't want the temptation," he said.

She could feel the heat climbing up her cheeks at the implication.

"Oh," she said mortified.

"Don't be embarrassed, bella. I know you want to wait, and I respect that. Come on, we'll talk in the car."

They stepped out of the restaurant hand in hand. The blast of cold air was welcome on her heated face. She wanted very much to avoid this particular topic.

Once in the car, she was relieved that he did not mean to pursue that particular subject but the one they had been discussing in the restaurant.

"Aside from the fact that whenever a more technologically advanced people meets a less advanced one, bloodshed and conquest ensue?" he said in response to her earlier question.

"How do you know that they are more advanced?" she asked.

"You couldn't have spent more than a day on the other side," she said.

"How would you know how long I spent over there?" he asked bewildered.

Her cheeks flamed again at his tone.

"You were keeping tabs on me?" he asked with little heat.

"No! Well, I mean, yes but it's not like I had you bugged or something. I-" she stopped, flustered now.

"It's okay, Anabela, I'm not mad. Just tell me how you could possibly know that," he said calmly. He truly was not upset. He was just confused how she had managed to spy on him when it was all he could do to keep himself from doing the same to her.

"I..." she stopped to take a deep breath.

Determined now, she began, "You kept disappearing to visit your folks this summer, but I knew that your parents were abroad, so there was no way you could be visiting them. I got suspicious," she shrugged as her tone grew more defensive.

"Go on," he said somewhat impatiently.

She glared at him, her face still crimson with shame before continuing, "I found an app that let me track your phone, and I downloaded it to your phone on one of your visits to my parents' place. It would tell me a rough area where the phone was, who you called, and whether the phone was on."

"So you were spying on me," he said. He could not quite believe what he was hearing.

"Anyway," she said refusing to fully admit that what she was doing was indeed spying and continued, "Your phone was only out of cell tower range for a few minutes at a time."

"What did you discover?"

"What did I discover?" she parroted, "About what?"

"About my phone calls?" he said with a conspiratorial smile.

"Oh," the heat in her face spread and rose another degree.

"Um, Gabriel, why do you want me to say it? You know very well what I 'discovered'."

She was becoming truly flustered now.

"Say it," he prompted, his smile growing broader as her discomfort grew.

"That you called me more than you called anyone else, including Ivan and your parents," she said all in a rush.

His laughter rang inside the luxury vehicle.

"Shut up! I had every right to be suspicious," she said defensively.

"So why didn't you just ask me?" he said genuinely bewildered.

"Why? Because you were so secretive! Besides you lied to me about where you were going. How could I trust that you wouldn't lie to me again once I confronted you?"

He could not argue with her logic, so he remained quiet for the rest of the trip back to campus. He insisted on walking her back to her dorm. It was still early, but they both had to study. Finals were only few weeks away and there were still term projects and papers to finish before finals week.

Anabel returned to her room to find Ella sitting on her bed staring at the door intently.

"You're okay," she said with a relieved sigh.

"Of course I am," Anabel said dropping her bag on her own bed at the opposite side of the room.

"What were you worried about?" she said turning to look at Ella.

"I don't know. It got weird there with Gabriel. I got worried when you didn't come back sooner."

"Ella, Gabriel would never hurt me," Anabel said looking intently at Ella.

"What makes you so sure?" Ella said.

"Gabriel is not a violent man. He makes me feel... safe," Anabel said her voice going soft on her last word.

"Safe? Then why the hell was everyone so afraid of him today?" Ella said standing up.

"We weren't afraid. We just wanted to diffuse the crazy. Look, you heard what he was saying. It sounded nuts, right? I was just worried that you'd go find the nearest psychiatric hospital to pick him up. Once we were at the restaurant, everything was fine, right?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't explain why Ivan and your sister were so freaked," she said stubbornly.

"You're projecting. Izzy was only following my lead. Ivan just wants everyone to get along. There was no freaking out or fear. Gabriel can get intense, that's all," she finished lamely.

"Whatever," Ella said deciding it was best not to argue further, but not liking it just the same.

"Are you still coming up to the cabin with us after finals?" Anabel asked warily.

"Yeah, yeah. I want to see this proof of your boyfriend's," she said, "It'll be just like an episode of X-files."

"Now, you gonna help me with my chem homework?" Ella said, her way of saying everything was fine.

Anabel gave Ella a relieved smile and nodded, saying, "No problem."

Whatever the dynamics at work, Ella wanted to make sure her friend was safe. Maybe it was a cultural thing, but Ella truly doubted it. She did not trust Gabriel at all.

# Chapter Three

## Chapter Three - She finds the courage

Isobel watched Ivan surreptitiously as he walked her back to her dorm. In a fit of independence, she had chosen to take a room in a different hall from her sister's. Sometimes, she regretted that small bout of rebellion. At least next year she would be allowed to room off campus and she could join her sister and Ella in an apartment.

He really was gorgeous. His skin was light for a Dominican. His family was probably descended straight from Spain. Blue eyes and dirty blonde hair were not typical for someone from that tropical nation, but it happened. Her own grandfather had had blue eyes. He was also quite tall, which she really appreciated even if she felt like pixie walking next to him. She liked tall men.

"You're quiet," he said.

She spared him another sidelong glance looking for mockery in his face. She knew her friends considered her a bit of a flake, a sunny flake, but a flake. Finding nothing in his expression that even suggested humor she relaxed the little furrow that had appeared on her brow.

"I can be quiet, you know Ivan," pronouncing it eye-ven which she knew would irritate him.

"It's Ee-van," he corrected without much heat, the 'a' short like in ban.

"Not even a glower, Ivan?" she said teasingly this time pronouncing his name correctly.

"Are you okay, Isobel?" he said with concern. He had stopped walking, turning to look at her.

She searched his expression for another moment before allowing the impish expression slide from her face. She was going to tell him this time. No more wimping out. Squaring her shoulders, she assumed a determined stance.

"Why were you flirting with Ella?" she said surprised that she had started at the wrong end of the conversation she had intended on having with the object of her unrequited love. It was too late now. She would just have to ride this one out and see where it led.

"What?" He was not expecting this conversation at all.

"Are you interested in Ella?" she asked.

"No, I, uh, just, you know! It's Ella. It's the just the way she is," he finished. His cheeks were practically glowing from the embarrassed flush on his face.



"I see," Isobel said smiling broadly.

"So... does that mean you're seeing someone?" she asked impishly.

"Uh, no, it doesn't," he said starting to realize where her line of questioning was going. He smiled tentatively.

"Why do you ask?" he said with a little more confidence.

"Oh, no reason," she said coyly, lowering her head to look at him through her lashes.

His tentative smile turned into a huge grin.

"Are you asking me out, Isobel?"

"Oh no but I do believe you are about to," she said looking him in the eye with a matching grin.

"I do believe I am. You doing anything tonight?" he said hopefully.

"I have to finish my comparative literature term paper, but I should be done in a couple hours. Why don't you pick me up at my dorm at eight? We could go to the Library," she said referring to the all ages bar near campus.

"Yeah that sounds great. I'll see you at eight," he said trying to contain his excitement.

The two parted each with their own variation of a mental high five running silently through their minds. With eager anticipation, they returned to their respective dorms.

With giddy anticipation, Isobel waited in the lobby of her dorm for Ivan. She had whipped through her term paper in record time. She was sure she would have to re-write the entire thing before Monday, but it was Friday night and Ivan was going to take her out. She was nearly bursting even as she waited with all the patience of a saint. She could not hide the grin plastered across her face no matter how many times she tried to compose herself.

When he arrived at five minutes to eight, she could have fainted from the relief. Her burgundy sweater dress was cinched at the waist by a large black belt which matched her black tights. Soft brown leather boots wrapped up to her knees. Instead of a purse she used the pockets of her caramel colored leather coat to carry her ID, lip gloss and debit card. She had let her wavy hair dry naturally with a little spritz of anti-frizz. It settled around her shoulders, framing her face.

He, on the other hand, had changed from his t-shirt and jeans to a dark cashmere sweater and black dress slacks. A white shirt collar was poking out of the top of his deliciously soft sweater. Expensive black leather shoes matched his black leather jacket. His shy smile could not hide his excitement at finally having a chance to have Isobel all to himself.

"You look amazing," he said.

"Thanks. You look rather scrumptious yourself." He blushed slightly at her compliment.

The blush melted Isobel's heart just that little bit more.

"I was thinking we could drive down to the city tonight instead," he said.

"That would be great. Let me just text Ana and we'll be on our way. Oh, um, where in the city?" she said. She held the phone in her hand looking at him expectantly.

"I made reservations at La Fleur. It was supposed to be surprise," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry! That sounds decadent! I promised Anabel I wouldn't go off campus without telling her who I was with and where I was going. You know how she is," she said.

She turned to the phone to type a quick message to her sister. A few seconds later, she received Anabel's implicit permission. Neither sister admitted they were asking or granting permission for anything, but if Anabel had shown reservations, the date would have been cancelled. They watched out for each other.

They were on the road on the way to the city a few minutes later.

"So have you ever played the movie quote challenge?"

"No, do you have to guess what movie a line is from?"

"No, you can only speak in movie quotes from a particular film or series, but sense this is your first try we'll open it up an entire genre. Only movies that have had theatrical release, though."

"That's easy if I've seen the movie."

"Well, you still have to make sense. It can't just be dialog straight from the movie."

"I think I get it. Why don't you start us off?"

"I'm sorry, Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that."

She challenged him with a grin. The game had begun.

"So that was your entire plan?"

They spent the next hour exchanging bastardized movie lines as the night flashed past the car windows.

The waiter sat them in the back near the kitchen entry, but Isobel did not care. She was

having a wonderful time with Ivan.

"I always imagined I would take you here for our first date," Ivan said.

"Then I'm glad I was able to fulfill this particular fantasy so easily," she said with a smile.

"You know, I think Gabriel brought Anabel to the city on their first date," Isobel said.

"That bastard. He stole the idea from me, of course."

"Did he?"

"His idea of the ideal first date is to go on a tour of the Spy Museum in DC."

"Ha! I could see that backfiring with Anabel."

"But not with you?"

"No, I could see the fascination. I don't know. I feel like you would have to know so many different things to be an effective spy, like James Bond."

"That appeals to you?"

"I guess, probably because I can't settle on a major. I want to learn everything, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it. You want Renaissance woman education," he said.

"Exactly! I want to know about human anatomy, psychology, physics, art, music, literature, just everything!"

Isobel found herself confiding in him things that she had only told Anabel before. He understood her, and better yet, he never compared her to Anabel. She felt like her own woman. She loved her sister, but it was difficult to be the younger sister sometimes.

They spent hours at the restaurant. Isobel could not quite remember what it was she had ordered or even if it had been any good. Their conversation ranged all over the place. They shared so many interests. She could feel herself falling for him so easily.

They took a stroll to a Puerto Rican bakery where he tried valiantly not to laugh at her powder sugar covered lips, while she had no trouble giggling as he vainly wrestled with a dollop of guava that was desperately trying to escape the back of his dessert. Isobel noticed the approving looks they received from the older woman behind the counter. They stayed there for another hour sipping cafe con leche and sharing humorous stories from their childhood.

Isobel was fairly certain that if she had not been in love with him before, she had fallen

tonight. Perhaps he might even feel the same. Could she be as lucky as her sister and meet her future husband in her first year of college? She chided herself for thinking such things so prematurely. Besides, she was not going to get married for ages. Let Anabel provide the husband and grandchildren. Isobel was going to see the world. Nothing said she had to see it alone.

She could not help the small secret smile that played along her lips as she listened to another story of Ivan's misspent youth.

# Chapter Four

The car pulled up to Gabriel's cabin a little after one in the afternoon.

"You call this a cabin, Gabe? It's a freaking palace," Ella exclaimed as she stepped out of the car.

"You know I don't like it when you call me that, Elizabeth," he said a hint of humor behind the teasing words.

"Fine! I won't call you Gabe if you agree never to call me Elizabeth again, deal?" she said as she moved out of the way to allow Isobel to exit the back seat.

"It's a deal," he said with a smile.

Ella had never seen Gabriel this relaxed before. To be honest, it was rather nice.

The cabin was indeed a bit mislabeled. It was two stories, with gabled windows a huge wraparound porch and what looked an a large attic space. The place looked like it could house ten people easily.

"I inherited it from the man whose life my grandfather saved in the war. Come on, I bet everyone is hungry. I had the place fully stocked," he said as all the friends managed to stumble out of the cramped car.

An hour later the five friends sat around the kitchen counter munching on burgers and chips Gabriel had grilled for them.

"And he cooks," Ella said a huge bite of burger tucked in her cheek.

"When are you crazy kids getting married?" Ella joked.

If she had expected an awkward silence followed by even more awkward laughter, she would have been disappointed. Instead she saw Anabel grin before wagging her eyebrows at Gabriel who looked pleased with himself.

"Wait- you're not already engaged and didn't tell me?" Ella screeched.

"Relax!" Isobel said breaking in after swallowing her bite.

"They have an 'understanding'," Isobel said with air quotes, one hand holding a potato chip the other a can of soda.

"Shut up, Izzy," Anabel said throwing the potato chip in her hand at her sister's head.

"What kind of understanding?" Ella said emphatically.

"I'll explain later," Anabel said exasperated.

"It's a cultural thing, Ella. It would take too long to explain. Just sum it up to the fact that when a couple such as these two fine young people before you have dated for this long and whose parents both approve are expected by everyone involved to get married, at some point," Isobel explained.

Anabel was now of course mortified that all of this was now out in the open. It was not something that usually had to be said out loud especially in front of the prospective fiancée.

"Isobel, please just shut up," Anabel said with her face buried in her hands.

"Isobel, stop mortifying your sister. Soon, it will be your turn," Gabriel said nodding at Ivan.

Isobel's grin vanished instantly, replaced with a horrified look. She refused to look at Ivan who was turning his own shade of red at the other end of the counter.

Ella watched the interplay between the two couples and just shook her head. She was fascinated and yet appalled. It all seemed so last century and screamed of arranged marriages and women as chattel to her.

"I can see that look, Ella. Gabriel isn't about to break out a club and drag me by the hair. It's just how it is. No one is forcing anyone into any arranged marriages, okay?" Anabel said accurately guessing her friend's thoughts.

"So where is this evidence, Gabe-rial," Ella said correcting herself quickly.

The brief smile lit across his features changing him completely. Ella could see in that brief expression what her friend saw in the man. She could not help but return that smile while he pretended not to hear the slip.

"I've got some things in the study, but I don't think you will be convinced until you see the gate," he said taking a swig of beer from his bottle.

"What gate?" Ivan said a smile still on his face from the banter he and Isobel were exchanging.

"It's not exactly a gate. Those will lead to more than one dimension. It's more like a soft spot that makes it easier to cross into one of the four adjacent worlds."

"Do you have any idea how crazy you sound?" Ella said with a laugh.

The others tensed at her words. She noted the change, but retained her good humor. This Gabriel did not scare her. She could not say why if you asked her. Gabriel appeared



oblivious to the others' reaction. He laughed and shrugged in a self deprecating manner.

"Yeah, I do," he said.

Ella waited for him to elaborate, but was disappointed.

"Well, as long as you know," she said jokingly.

He smiled but said nothing.

"Where is the gate, or wait what did you call it, the soft spot?" Isobel asked surprising everyone.

Ella studied him as he gazed at Isobel adoringly. He truly saw the younger woman as nothing more than a little sister. Had the man been chaperoning her interactions with Ivan? She had noticed a protective streak in him, from the way he watched them all, including Ella herself.

Ella did not know quite what to make of this man. Was he really this wonderful of a man? She somehow doubted it.

"I'll show you after dinner," he said indulgently.

"Well, I'm finished," Ella said stuffing another chip in her mouth and began wiping her hands on her napkin.

She looked around at her friends' plates and noticed that they were all practically cleared.

Anabel groaned, "Now? I was looking forward to a very long night's sleep. Finals were brutal."

"Don't be such a wimp, Anabel," Ivan said jokingly.

It did not appear that Ella was the only one surprised by Ivan's teasing, as she noted Anabel's startled expression and Gabriel's slightly narrowed eyes. Ella could not remember a time when Ivan had ever said anything even remotely unkind. Isobel seemed to be the only one who had not noticed as she snickered at his teasing.

"I am not a wimp," Anabel said getting into the banter.

"I just need about month of sleep to make up for the fact that I haven't slept in two weeks," Anabel said with mock pragmatism.

"You can sleep in tomorrow. Come on! I can't stand the thought of being inside after that interminable car ride!" Isobel said, practically whining.

"It is a fair bit of a hike and it's getting late. We'll wake up early and hike up to the site," he

held up a hand to forestall the chorus of whines he was expecting from Isobel and Ella.

"In the meantime, there is a little closer to the cabin we can go to right now. It's not big enough or stable enough for a person to step through, but it should be enough to illustrate my point."

Anabel groaned while the rest of the group cheered. She was not what anyone would term "outdoorsy".

Outside near the edge of woods that bordered the cabin, Gabriel showed them a patch of very ordinary frosted grass cordoned off by a tiny fence just tall enough to stop small rabbits and keep people from trampling through it. Skeptical, they each took position in a semi-circle around fenced in area.

"You doing some gardening, Gabriel?" Isobel joked.

"Not quite," Gabriel replied.

Withdrawing a camera from his pack, he affixed a flexible scope to end. Reaching once more into his pack he removed a portable screen with an AV input. Demonstrating that the camera feed is live, he waved his hand in front of the scope. The hand showed up on the screen in real time. Isobel waved her own hand in front of the camera and giggled when she saw it appear on the screen.

"Are you high, Izzy? You're giggling at everything," Ella said with a touch of snark.

"Jeez, Ella, have a sense of humor. No, I'm not high, okay?" Isobel said.

Anabel looked at Ella with on of her what the hell is up with you looks. Ella shrugged. She wanted to get on with the magic show.

"Now are you convinced that this isn't a recording?" Gabriel said impatiently.

"Yes," Ella said impatiently.

Looking around waiting for everyone to nod or in some way acknowledge that they agreed, he turned around leaving the screen pointing to the group.

"Like I said, this particular spot is a little unstable. I'm never quite sure which dimension it will pop you out of. It could be stable for days or minutes. Hopefully, tonight it will be the latter. It would illustrate my point a little better."

"Gabriel, will you just get on with it?" Ella grouched.

Ivan studied her for a moment. Something was definitely off with Ella. At Anabel's gasp, Ivan returned his attention to the monitor.

What he saw nearly drew a gasp from him. He looked quickly at where the camera scope pointed. He realized that he could not see the end of the scope anymore. Even if he could, it would not explain what he was seeing. On the monitor he saw a bright sunlit sandy shore. He could see the water lapping at the shore in tiny eddies. Pulling the camera scope back, the image receded enough to see a vast lake before the frost covered grass came into view almost immediately.

# Chapter Five

"What was that?" Anabel breathed.

"My guess is that what we just saw was a lake in Delta," Gabriel answered.

"How can you tell," Ella asked excitedly. There was no hint of her earlier skepticism.

"The quality of the water, but it could just as easily be Gamma," he answered with a shrug.

"Wait, Delta? Gamma? Are we talking frat houses?" Isobel asked.

"It's the name I've given to the four other dimensions I've been able to identify or simply the only four I have been able to access from here," he said.

No one noticed how Ella snapped her mouth shut before she could answer Isobel's question.

"You suspect there are more dimensions?" Ivan asked fascinated.

"I would imagine that there are infinite dimensions or at least as many dimensions as there are stars. Unfortunately, from here there are only four that intersect and that appear to be as stable as ours. If I encountered others, they were too unstable for me to detect."

"Do it again. We might get another one," Isobel said excitedly.

"Why weren't you sure which dimension we were looking at? Wouldn't the spot pop out in the same geographic region even if not the same dimension?" Ella asked.

"Not through this one. I've yet to find a pattern as to which dimension it will pop out of or where on the other dimension it will show. I lost a few RC cars when it would pop into the middle of a lake or twenty feet in the air. I decided that the camera was my safest bet, even though I could only observe a small segment at any given time."

"So does that mean you found a more stable portal?" Ella asked.

"A few," Gabriel said noncommittally.

"Why are there so many around here?" Anabel finally spoke up.

Everyone turned to look at Gabriel expectantly.

"It wouldn't make sense that they were all here of all places," Ivan said.

"I've asked myself that question more than once. The only thing I can think of, is that the Prime government's early experiments in dimension jumping caused several places all over

the world to be riddled with these soft spots."

"Early experiments?" Ella ventured.

"How do you know so much?" Ivan asked somewhat suspiciously.

"I've been researching all of this for a year now. What I know, I've pieced together from bits and pieces I've been able to dig up. There are reports from all over the world that indicate that this location is not unique."

"What happened, Gabriel, to make you so obsessed?" Anabel asked insightfully.

His sharp intake was the only warning before he shut down completely. Anabel instantly regretted asking him was now an obviously personal question in front of their friends. Not knowing how to salvage the situation, she looked appealingly at Ivan. He nodded imperceptibly at her silent entreaty.

"I never pegged you for a researcher. When did you even find time to do all this research and still keep your grade point average?" Ivan joked.

Realizing how important it was that he not lose his audience now before he had even clinched their acceptance of the plan, he forced himself to smile. He would tell Anabel in private what had made him so tense.

b

"I did most of the field work during the summer. I haven't had a chance to corroborate any of the international reports, but anything within a single or two day drive was fair game. After that, I plowed through my school work as quickly as I could and spent the time between classes researching online. My father's contacts helped nudge me in the right direction."

"Can we see another one before it becomes too dark to see the monitor?" Isobel asked impatiently.

"Yeah, I think we should," Gabriel said smiling gratefully at Anabel's kid sister. She had saved him from revealing more than he should have. How could he be so stupid as to mention his father's contacts?

The camera scope disappeared again. The monitor showed only darkness. With a frown, Gabriel adjusted the camera to reveal that he had managed to stick the camera up against a tree trunk. Isobel, who was dabbling with horticulture this semester, could not quite figure out what species of tree they were looking at. Bending the flexible end of the scope, careful to keep his fingers behind the fenced in area, the camera revealed a patch of green and vibrant grass at twilight.

"Wow," Anabel said in awe of the beauty of the single image even as the image began to

break up.

Gabriel quickly pulled the camera back. With a sigh of relief, he noted that the scope was just fine.

"What happened?" Ella asked with a little more alarm than perhaps might be warranted.

"The spot was growing unstable. I've learned to spot the signs. Keeps me from having to replace scopes every fifteen minutes," he joked.

"I'll bet," Ella said disconcerted.

They played with the camera for another hour until descent of dusk made it too difficult to see. From grainy views of underwater rocks to majestic vantage points atop mountains, the camera revealed magnificent vistas.

"Why haven't we run into any people?" Anabel asked.

"A fluke?" Ivan posited.

"More likely it's on purpose," Ella said.

Noticing the silence that met her statement she quickly added, "It's just a guess. I mean if these were experiments, wouldn't the people who created them want to keep to remote areas?"

"Yes, but how would they know?" Isobel asked.

"I believe the portals only open up in areas that have been 'poked' from the other side," Gabriel said as he struggled to find the proper phrasing.

"Huh," Ivan muttered.

"Makes sense, in a way," Anabel said nodding.

As the sun went down, the group of friends decided to call it a night. They were each lost in thought, as they returned to the cabin walking alone.

"Anabel?" Gabriel said as he jogged up to her side.

"Hmm?"

"Let's talk a walk. There's plenty of moonlight tonight," he said.

She looked at the others, seeing that they were now much further ahead on the path, and considered trying to catch up with them. She was not sure why she did not want to be alone



with him in the woods.

"Okay," she said somewhat reluctantly.

"Come on, there's something I want to show you," he said.

She could hear the excitement in his voice almost like a boy wanting to show off his new bicycle. She instantly felt like a fool for doubting him. Gabriel was many things, but above all she usually felt safe with him. She smiled at his enthusiasm as she extended her hand to his. Taking it returned her smile and began pulling her behind him.

"Where are we going?" she said.

"You'll see. Come on!"

Unable to help herself, she laughed. It carried on the night air to reach the others. A couple of frowns met the sound. Only Isobel seemed pleased by the sound of it. She turned to grin at Ivan, only to have that smile melt off her face when she saw his expression. Noting her look, he smiled transforming his face to such an extent, she wondered if she had put too much significance into his sour expression. No one noticed Ella's frown.

"Gabriel, slow down." She was practically panting.

"We're almost there," he said. He tugged gently on her arm once again.

"Is it going anywhere?"

"What?"

"Whatever your going to show me, is it going anywhere?" she said between gulps of breath.

He seemed momentarily flabbergasted by her question. She could see the moment it dawned on him as the sheepish smile spread across his face. He finally came to a standstill allowing Anabel to catch her breath. She quirked on eyebrow at him in teasing admonishment before she collapsed on fallen tree trunk. After a few gulping breaths, she was finally able to control her breathing.

She watched him watching her out of the corner of her eye until his gaze drifted deeper into the woods.

"Is it much farther?" she said softly.

"No, just across this next glen," he said as he pointed with his chin. His gaze did not falter from the spot.

"I'm ready." She stood and reached for his hand again.

Without further comment, he took the proffered hand and began walking quickly albeit slower than before. She smiled gratefully at his back and followed.

A fence impeded their progress.

"What's this?" Anabel asked.

"Just beyond the fence is a gateway. When step inside, you will be able to see the other four dimensions intersecting ours. It's the most stable portal on the property. It's also the most heavily watched," he said.

"Watched? By whom? How?" she said. She turned her startled gaze to him.

"Prime," he said.

"Prime, the world, dimension, whatever that is trying to invade?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm fairly certain they've already infiltrated our world, hiding among us but in plain sight."

"How do you know?"

"Anabel, I have something to tell you, but I can't tell you here. I wanted to show something," he said distractedly. He began digging in his pack as he spoke.

"Gabriel, you're starting not to make sense again," she teased.

"I know, just hang tight," he said.

He pulled the camera from earlier out of his bag.

"Found it!"

"I thought you said we wouldn't be able to see much with it being so dark," she said.

"Don't sound so skeptical," he grouched.

"Well?"

"I can adjust the screen brightness. I just wanted an excuse to get everyone back to the cabin so I could show you the gateway first."

"I see. I kind of expected something a little more high tech than a wooden fence," she said as she eyed the shoddily built structure.

"Give me a break! I don't have that much money," he returned.

"Fine, so show me."

Setting up an elaborate contraption with a tripod and an extension lens, he got the camera into the gateway.

The screen at first dark, suddenly lit up in bright white. Gabriel expecting it had already turned away. Anabel, on the hand, was momentarily blinded by the brightness. What she saw had her gasping in shock.

"It's beautiful," she sighed.

He watched her face as the images on the screen washed that face with various colors. The image on the screen resembled a white room. Illumination seemed to come from all around giving the room a glowing appearance. As she watched the screen, the white amorphous wall began to bleed colors until a picture of a grassy hill overlooking a city off in the distance at dawn resolved itself.

"That is Prime," he whispered in her ear.

She had not noticed him move. She nearly jumped out of her skin. She eyed him, displeasure evident in her expression.

"But it looks so peaceful," she whispered in return.

"Peace is relative," was all he said.

She returned her gaze to the screen in time to see the grassy knoll slowly fade as splashed by bleach. Once the image was again a pulsing white, it stayed that way for several beats. The process began anew, this time resolving into a dense forest. Anabel got the impression that these woods were on the side of a mountain. It was the middle of the night on the other side.

"Delta," he said.

"How do you assign them names?"

<<<"Decide between scientific sounding mumbo jumbo or throw in a hint at classified documents.">>>

They stood watching as the gateway cycled through each dimension.

"Why did you show me this?" she whispered. When she turned, she found him standing very close. Oddly, instead of startling her as he had before, his closeness calmed her. All of this was starting to feel a lot more real.

"Because I have a plan and I'll need your help to convince the others," he said.

"My help? You've never needed help convincing anyone," she chided.

He smiled briefly.

"This time will be much different. I will be asking a great deal of our friends, of you."

He turned to face her directly.

"Like what?" she said.

Her voice was light in an effort to lift the tension this conversation was engendering.

"Doesn't matter now. I just wanted you to see it."

He turned away to fiddle with the camera again.

"Gabriel, how do you know that Prime is watching this gate?"

He did not answer.

"Gabriel?"

"Anabel, do you trust me?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"Just like that? No hesitation?" His voice neutral. He had yet to turn around.

"Yes," she said a little louder.

"Then, let's go," he said.

He fiddled with the straps on his bag for one more beat after stowing the camera and the tripod. He hesitated another moment waiting for what she could not say. When he finally turned around, he was smiling.

"What I'm going to tell you is beyond top secret. Do you understand?"

"I think so," she said, nodding. She searched his face. Hoping there was something there in his eyes that would illuminate the situation.

"Come on." He extended his hand. "We can't talk here."

# Chapter Six

They traveled a short distance back to the clearing they had passed through on their way to the gate. Gabriel led her to a fallen log on the far side away from the the gateway. The moon had risen. Its glow bathed the clearing in eerie blue light. Anabel began to shiver. The temperature had dropped dramatically and her sweater was not quite up to the task.

"Come here, and sit close," he said.

He wagged brows suggestively. Anabel laughed. It was so out of character for him to tease this way. Something was changing with him. Whatever he had been carrying around was finally being unloaded.

"Anabel, can I trust you?"

"You've shown me all this and you ask me that now?" she said.

She sat next to him giving him shooting him a sidelong glance full of irony.

"I'm serious, Anabela," he whispered.

"I'm getting that, but why? Why now?"

"Because what I'm about to tell you will be violating the trust of a family friend."

Her eyes roamed his face. She did not want to give him a quick or flippant answer. She wanted him to know she could be trusted with anything. She decided to say nothing at all. She simply nodded never taking her eyes from his. She could see he had come to a decision. He stood up abruptly and began pacing in front of the fallen log where she remained.

"I used to come up here a lot with my dad. My mom was never the outdoor type. She would stay in the city. I find that strange now considering how rarely he was home."

He paused. He had stopped pacing only to stare blankly at a patch of grass. Anabel stayed quiet and simply watched him. There was pain and not a little sorrow in his face, the line of his shoulders. She wanted to comfort him, but she knew it was more important to let him speak now. She would wrap him in her arms and offer what comfort she could later.

"We would walk all over these woods. Somehow we managed to avoid all of these portals littered all over the damn place." His voice broke but he regained his composure quickly. Anabel sat back down.

"He would disappear for days, sometimes weeks. We never really knew what he was up to. We worried, my mom and I, but we knew somehow that he would always come home. Life went on as usual. Then, two years ago, he left again. We didn't begin to worry until a month had passed and we hadn't heard from him. We tried contacting his superiors, his friends, but nothing. All we were met with was a wall of 'it's classified'."

He slammed his fist into his thigh. Anabel winced but said nothing. She was fighting her instincts, gripping her own hands into fists in her lap. She would let him finish.

"To this day, that is all they will tell us. My mother, she's... I don't know." He shook his head.

"She pretends like nothing is wrong, but I feel like a strong wind will shatter her to pieces. I know if I just told her, she might break, but then she could begin to heal, but I promised."

"Gabriel, what did you promise?"

The words were spoken quietly, so quietly they hung in the air to be picked up or allowed to drift off into the night. He stared out into the night for another beat before he let the words slip away.

"I was contacted six months later by a friend of my father's. He never told me his name or even how he knew my father. His only explanation, I shouldn't be left to question what had happened to my father."

He fell silent. The silence stretched into the night, while Anabel watched on just short of agony.

"Gabriel, stop. If you promised to keep this even from your own mother, you shouldn't tell me. I don't want you to break that promise."

"I can't tell her because we're watched all the time. My mother would not leave it be. She will demand a body to bury, an explanation for the long silence. Everything that would put this person's life in jeopardy because they would never rest until they found the who had leaked the information."

"I tell you because I trust you not only to keep this information to yourself, but to do nothing that would endanger someone else, even if its someone you would never meet."

"Gabriel..."

"Anabel, you can never tell anyone, not Isobel, Ella, not even Ivan."

He waited for her nod of agreement reluctant as it was. Her reluctance only that he was going to go ahead and tell her what she had already guessed. She had no problem keeping his secret, even from her closest friends.

"My father was murdered while investigating Prime agents. Most of what I'm about tell you, I pieced together from bits I've unearthed since I started researching the crossroads."

He began to pace again, his words now coming faster and faster. Anabel, although she had guessed that his father was dead, could not have guessed at how he had met his end.

"Prime weaponry is completely different from anything we have here. If his body had been returned to us, there would be no way to explain his wounds or how he died anyway. His death was classified beyond top secret. My father's friend risked a great deal to tell me what she did. She led me on a path that led me to this point."

"He was probably following undercover Prime agents when he was murdered. What I know for sure is that it happened near here. That gateway, my father knew about it." He nodded toward gateway with his chin. "He knew about all the portals. He placed deterrents around all of them even though it was more than likely against orders. It might even have been what gave him away. I'll never know for sure. His death led to the capture of at least one of the operatives. He has been a font of information. Information I can only glean vague leads and innuendos from."

She could hear the frustration, but she stayed quiet. She sensed that if he did not get everything off his chest right now tonight, it would only drive him insane as he would keep bottled up. He would never find the strength or courage to breach that woman's trust again, so she waited and listened.

"Prime now knows that this gateway has been compromised. They will be monitoring all attempts to dimension jump through here."

"You don't mean..." She paused, shaking her head. "Are you suggesting that we- that I cross through one of these gateways?"

Her voice was rising in volume with every word. No longer able to contain herself, she began to pace.

"Anabel-"

"No, Gabriel." She pronounced his name differently when she was angry with him. She said it in an American accent instead of the more romantic Spanish pronunciation.

"Are you crazy?" She rounded on him.

"Anabel, let me explain. Please?"

She fumed for another moment before nodding once. She did not return to her seat. Instead she crossed her arms, and with a glare urged him to explain if he could.

On a sigh, he said her name again. An arched eyebrow was her only response.

"Prime agents killed my father."

Her aggressive stance instantly relaxed. She dropped her hands to her side and sat back down. With a hand gesture, she asked him to continue.

"It means they have been infiltrating our dimension for years. We're woefully unprepared, but we're not the only ones. The other dimensions, Delta and Gamma, are in danger as well. Beta has already been conquered."

"We have to do what we can to stem the flow."

At her incredulous look, he quickly tried to explain.

"I know the five of us are no army. It would be five inexperienced college students versus an entire world government. We don't have to stop them ourselves, just give the other dimensions a fighting chance. Our government is aware of the threat way ahead of schedule. That has Prime worried. One of us will have to infiltrate Prime itself and report back here. Just being aware of the threat is not remotely enough. The Resistance on Beta will need the intelligence and can provide important information on how to fight them."

He held up a hand to forestall all the questions bubbling just beneath the surface.

"I will go to Prime."

"No!" She stood up again.

"You listen to me, Gabriel Aldo de la Cruz. Your father may be head, but it does not mean that you have to join him." She punctuated each word with a finger to his chest.

"Anabel," he said. He patiently and gently stopped her poking by taking her hand in both of his.

"What."

"I don't have a death wish. I just know more about this place than any of you. I would have the highest chance of making it out undetected."

"Why go at all?"

"One of us has to for all the reasons I've said and because I owe my father and his friend, whoever she is. We all owe our world a chance."

"Oh, Gabriel." He smiled a little as she buried her face in his chest. She had pronounced his name correctly.

"Then, who will go to Beta? It's the second most dangerous place or maybe even the most



dangerous. There, Prime operatives will be suspicious of everyone who even remotely stands out," she said pulling away from his chest so she could look at him.

"Ivan," he said into her hair. His arms tightened around her as she made to break free.

"Ivan? Why him?" she said. He was puzzled by the level of distress in her voice. He felt a twinge of jealousy stab him in the heart.

"Because I won't send you or Isobel into Beta."

"That's it? What about your friend? Couldn't she send a trained operative? Hell, she could send trained operatives to all of them!"

"I have no idea what our government is doing to counter the threat, and I don't want to know. All I know is that I have to do something and I need your help. I need of all your help."

"And Ella? Why have you roped her into this?"

"We need someone here to run interference with our families, and-" He raised his voice to cut her off before she could argue with him. "We'll need someone who will serve as a communication hub between the four of us. I would have preferred Isobel, but your parents would never buy that you went abroad without her."

"True."

She tried to see something to argue with other than all of this was just too insane to even be discussing. He was intent on doing this. He would go alone if he had to. It would mean an increased risk of discovery as he traveled to all four of the intersecting dimensions.

"Gabriel, please, isn't it enough that you know, that we know? Why go ahead with this elaborate plan? Your mother would be alone. She won't understand why you suddenly disappeared. She wouldn't be able to stand it if something happened to you too."

"I've already spoken to her. She believes I'm going to Europe for a year. I could tell that she wanted to say no, but at the same time she wanted me away from the uncertainty and sadness in the house."

She allowed herself to be nudged back into his chest. She tightened her arms around him.

"I'm so sorry, querido (darling)," she said. She buried her face into his chest, before she reached up to kiss his chin.

"Anabel," he said on a sob.

He tightened his arms around, holding her head close with his chin as he cried. He had carried this grief locked inside himself for more than a year. There had been no one he could

confide in until now.

"I miss him," he said in between wracking sobs.

"I know, I know," she soothed. She gripped his back, holding on as tightly as she could.

"I'm here, querido. I'm here."

They sunk to the ground, his head buried in her shoulder. His hands clinging to her hips. She had her arms around his shoulder as she rained tiny kisses along his right temple. His sobs came with lesser frequency until he was only sniffling.

"Anabela, stay with me tonight."

It was not a request. Still she hesitated. She could feel her heart pounding all the way to her temples and down to her finger tips.

"I only want to hold you. Please, I don't want to be alone tonight."

"Okay." She found herself agreeing in a tiny voice.

"Thank you.

# Chapter Seven

Anabel blushed furiously as she met Isobel's questioning look.

"Don't even start," Anabel said.

"So what did you do last night?" she said tongue firmly in cheek.

"Shut up, Izzy," she said.

Isobel's laughter drew the attention of the others.

"What's going on?" Ella said as she made her way from her room.

"Why are you still wearing the same clothes?" Ella asked when she got closer. She appraised Anabel with a knowing look as she noticed whose door they were all standing in front of.

"Stop it!" Anabel said as she stormed down the hall to her room.

Ella and Isobel exchanged a look before dissolving into giggles. Ivan was noticeably heartbroken. Isobel stopped laughing abruptly as he turned to walk away. Ella looked on with sympathy at the younger woman's back. She replaced it with a wicked grin before Isobel turned back around with her own obviously fake smile. With a forced giggle, Isobel led the way to the kitchen.

Gabriel joined everyone for breakfast just they finished eating. Ivan had disappeared earlier and had not returned. Anabel had taken her breakfast to living room to avoid the smirks from her sister and best friend. At Gabriel's entrance, laughter broke through their attempt at serious expressions.

He ignored them as he poured himself a glass of orange juice.

"You're kind of late for breakfast. You have a long night?" Ella asked.

At her suggestive tone, Isobel almost choked on her last bite of scrambled eggs as she started laughing again.

"Yes," he said.

His sober expression stopped their laughter at the knees. With questioning looks, they looked at each other hoping the other would have an explanation. Shrugging, the two friends finished their meal and set off for the car.

"Where are you two going?" Gabriel said.

He turned to look at them, his brows arched questioningly.

"We're going into town," Ella said.

"What's it to you?"

"Just don't be gone too long. There's something I wanted to show everyone in daylight."

"Yeah sure, Gabriel. Someone definitely didn't get enough sleep last night," she said under her breath to Isobel.

Isobel snickered as she followed the older woman out to the car.

"Where are they going?" Anabel asked as she returned to the kitchen with her empty plate.

"Town," he said.

"Oh," she frowned. Her gaze followed her sister until they were both of sight.

Turning to look at him again, she ran a worried glance over his face.

"Are you okay?" she whispered.

"I'll be fine," he said. His serious expression softened as he felt the touch of her hands on his cheek.

"Good," she said, smiling. She reached up to give him a small kiss on his chin.

"Thank you," he said.

She only smiled before she walked around him to the sink. Ivan walked in as the two were cleaning dishes.

"Did those two harpies leave you with the dishes?" Ivan said.

His entrance let in a draft of cold air from the back door.

"Harpies?" Gabriel said chuckling at the image.

"Ivan, be nice, one of those harpies is your girlfriend and my sister," she said mock seriously.

"You can defend her after the way the two of them teased you this morning?" he asked.

He found a seat at the stool by the counter. He was obviously digging for information. Anabel only shook her head as she turned back rinsing the dishes.

"What are you talking about?" Gabriel asked.

"Anabel didn't tell you? I'm surprised they didn't pounce on you the moment walked in," Ivan said.

"Tell me what?"

"Nothing," Anabel said shaking her head.

"Nothing, huh?" Ivan said.

"Will someone just tell me what all the giggling was about this morning?"

"Well, I can only infer from what I myself saw in the early hours of the morning," Ivan began.

"Will you just get on with it?"

Ivan gestured placatingly.

"Don't get your panties in a wad. Like I was saying, I can only guess that Isobel caught her older sister walking out of your room wearing the same clothes as last night."

"Oh," Gabriel said. For once he was at a loss for words.

"Oh? That's all you can say?" Ivan said.

"Leave it alone, Ivan," Anabel said. It was obvious she was starting to get over her embarrassment and was moving toward angry.

"Alright, alright." Ivan put his hands up.

"So where did they get off to anyway?"

"They didn't tell you they planned on going into town?" Anabel asked. The wrinkled brow showed just that she was getting worried.

"I kind of took off after the, uh, awkwardness. I figured you didn't want another guy in the room."

"Oh, did they say anything last night?" Anabel asked.

"Not really. We all kind of wandered back to our rooms. I think everyone had too much on their mind," he said.

"What time did you two get in last night anyway?"

Exchanging a shy glance, Anabel turned to face the sink again only to find that the dishes were done. Blushing, she turned back to the room making a bee line to the table to start clearing the last few dishes left.

"Why? Were you worried?" Anabel teased. She swung her hair forward to hide her blush.

"Actually, I was. I almost went searching for you at one point."

"What stopped you?" Gabriel asked. He finished drying the last dish then started stacking them back in the cupboards.

Anabel, her embarrassment forgotten, turned to look over her shoulder. She was curious now to hear Ivan's response.

"I didn't want to interrupt anything," he said. He rubbed the back of his neck suddenly feeling very uncomfortable.

"Well, whatever your reason, I'll have to admit to being relieved you didn't come searching for us," Gabriel said.

"Uh yeah no problem."

"It isn't safe to wander the property alone, especially the woods. There are way too many portals, and I haven't managed to cordon off all of them."

"Oh, yeah of course," he said. It was obvious he had understood something else entirely by Gabriel's relief and was now embarrassed to have jumped to conclusions.

"So when do you want to head out to the gateway?" Anabel asked to break the awkward silence.

"When the girls get back."

"Okay, what is there to do if we can't wander the woods?"

"I've got some playing cards," Ivan offered.

"Go get 'em," Anabel said.

"I'm sorry about all that. I know how private you are," Anabel said.

"It's fine. I don't mind. Let them speculate."

He grabbed around the waist in order to bring her close enough for a kiss. A kiss that was quickly interrupted by Ivan clearing his throat. Laughing, the couple broke apart and sat down to play.

"You okay?" Ella asked.

The two were driving in Gabriel's car into the nearest town. Ella looked over at the quiet

young woman sitting in the passenger seat before turning back to the road.

"I will be," Isobel said with a sad smile.

"I'm sorry. I never suspected Ivan had any feelings for your sister."

"I don't think Anabel did either. Otherwise, I would be royally pissed with her for not warning me."

"Why would she? Warn you, I mean. Anabel doesn't strike me as vain."

"True. I wouldn't have paid attention even if she had tried to warn me. She does tend to get a bit overprotective of me."

Isobel shrugged and turned to look at the passing scenery.

"What are you going to do?" Ella asked quietly.

"I honestly don't know," she said.

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to punch him in the face," she said with a self-deprecating laugh.

"That I'd pay to see!"

"Shut up," Isobel said.

"Are you going to tell Anabel?"

"No, regardless of how he hurt me, it's not my secret to tell."

"That's very mature of you. I don't think I could be so understanding."

"I'm no saint, but I think the truth would do more harm to my sister and her relationship with Gabriel."

"What's up with those two anyway? Do you think they actually, you know, last night?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I always expected Anabel to wait until her wedding night."

"Yeah me too. I mean I figured if anyone could, it would be her."

"Well, I guess we'll never know. She never dishes on what those two get up to, which is really annoying I have say," Isobel said.

"Yes, well, perhaps she doesn't reveal anything to her kid sister, but I've heard plenty."

Unfortunately, if she does tell me tonight, I won't be able to share," she said with a measure of regret.

"Great," Isobel said.

"Oh, come on. Do you tell your sister what you and your boyfriends got into?"

"Yes, actually."

"Really?"

"And so did Anabel. It's only been since meeting Gabriel that she's become mute on the subject."

"Huh. Why would she tell me and not you?"

"Probably because the first time she did, I told her it was like she was telling she made out with my brother," she said sheepishly.

"Jeez, kid! No wonder. You don't, though, right? Have a brother, I mean?"

"No, we don't have a brother."

"That's a relief because I think I threw up in my mouth a little at the image."

"Thanks for sharing. Yuk!"

"Oh shut up, twerp. You're the one that put that image into my mind!"



# Chapter Eight

Ella and Isobel arrived a few hours later laden with packages from their shopping spree in town. Ivan bumped into the two friends laughing in the entryway.

"Can I help?" Ivan said.

"Sure!" Isobel answered. She heaped all the bags into his waiting arms.

"Thanks," she said patting his cheek before walking through to the kitchen.

"Can you bring them in here," she called out over her shoulder.

Ella decided not to take him up on his offer and hurried after the younger woman.

"You're welcome," Ivan said to the now empty room.

Shrugging as best he could laden with half the goods from the general store while Ella probably carried the other half, he managed to get everything to the kitchen with only a slight bit of crushing.

He could hear Ella and Gabriel bickering from the living room.

"We're not staying that long! The pantry is fully stocked. What do you expect us to do with all this food?"

"Oh, hush. It's not like there was a mall in town. Besides all of it is non-perishable. We can donate it to a food bank on our way out of town."

"That's not the point. We're trying to keep a low profile up here."

"So what's the big deal? A bunch of college kids blowing off steam after finals bought a bunch of food. That certainly isn't going to raise any red flags anywhere."

"Ella-" He took a long inhale to calm himself. "You know what, never mind. Just find a place to put all this. The place is a mess."

He left the room. Ivan had never seen Gabriel lose his temper or raise his voice to anyone. What the hell?

"What was that all about?" Ivan said.

"I don't know," Anabel answered.

"He seems rather cranky this morning. Didn't you give him reason to relax last night?" Isobel said.

"Isobel, that is enough," Anabel said.

Isobel was drawn up short by the sharpness in her sister's tone.

"Alright, jeez, sis. Relax."

Anabel only shook her head in response before she followed Gabriel.

"Everyone seems to be rare form this morning," Ella said.

"Yes, well, it might help if stopped antagonizing them," Ivan said.

"Oh sure, this our fault?" Isobel said. She turned angrily to look at Ivan. She had one hand on her hip and a glare in her eyes.

"Look, when have you ever known Gabriel to be anything but private? When has Anabel ever liked being teased about her relationship with him?"

Isobel glared at him for another moment before she growled her frustration.

"You're right," Isobel said.

"I wasn't teasing them," Ella said.

"You were being contrary," Ivan said.

"Yeah so? I'm always contrary," she said.

"Is this seriously all food?" he said.

"Not all of it, but yeah most of it is," Ella answered.

"What were you planning?" He was looking at the stacks of packages on the table and kitchen counters.

"I was thinking of making a huge dinner for all of us," Isobel said.

"With pre-packaged food?" He looked up at her a bit incredulously.

"There's fresh meat in the fridge," she said defensively.

"Right. Well shall we get started?" he said.

The three of them began arranging and packing away boxes and bags of ingredients

exchanging barbs and innuendos until the kitchen was once again pristine.

"Gabriel?"

"Hey there, linda (pretty girl)." He turned, allowing her to wrap her arms around him.

"Was there more you needed to tell me?" Anabel said.

He sighed. She understood him so well.

"No, there aren't anymore secrets. I just wanted to ask you a favor. Will you help me convince the others?"

"I still think it's all insane, but yes I will help you."

"Thank you. Perhaps we should rejoin the others?"

"No, I think we should go for a walk. Let them clean up. We cleaned up their breakfast dishes."

"You don't have to twist my arm, let's go."

When everyone was back in the same room, the mood had definitely lightened.

"So what was the plan for all that food?" Gabriel said.

He was smiling. Obviously more relaxed now. Isobel just barely kept herself from teasing her sister again. They apparently did more than walk out in the woods.

"Dinner which is in the oven now. Why don't you show us this gateway you were so eager for us to see?" Isobel said.

"Listen I'm sorry for being such a jerk earlier."

"We were being a bit of a jerk too," Isobel said.

"Alright we all agree that we've been jerks. Let's go," Ella said.

"Yeah let's go," Gabriel said.

At the clearing, Gabriel stopped them.

"Okay, I need you guys to be careful here. No one cross the fence. You'll be able to see everything. I brought a bigger screen this time."

Ella began asking questions almost immediately.

"How do you keep Prime from tracking the camera?"

"The sensors only work on organic matter," Gabriel answered. He exchanged looks with Ivan, but said nothing.

"How do you know so much? You can't have learned all of this from vague reports in the Enquirer," Isobel said skeptically.

"I'll explain everything back at the cabin. It's not safe to talk here," Gabriel said. He began ushering them back the way they had come.

"Besides, I'm getting hungry. If you made Mom's roast pork, I'll race you back!" Anabel said.

She began running before Isobel could reply.

"Oh no you don't!" Isobel said. She began chasing after her sister in sentence.

Ella looked over her shoulder at the gateway, reluctance evident in her eyes before she too ran after the two sisters.

"Hey wait! I actually helped make the damn thing!"

"Coming? We'll be lucky if they serve us anything more than rice," Ivan said.

"Go on. They haven't even started the side dishes yet. If you offer to help, your chances will definitely increase."

"I'm not the one who was a grouchy ass this morning," he said. He arched a brow at his friend, but when Gabriel only shook his head, he took off after the girls.

"Your loss," he said over his shoulder.

Gabriel turned back to the gateway. He took some readings before stowing the equipment back into his pack. Satisfied with what the instruments were telling him, he ran after his friends. He still managed to beat Ivan back to the cabin. He knew a shortcut, but more than that he was in better shape.

Gabriel waited at the backdoor, a cocky grin firmly in place.

"How the hell did you beat me here?" Ivan said between breaths.

Gabriel only laughed and stepped through the backdoor into an empty room. Disconcerted, he rushed through the kitchen and out into the living room, Ivan not far behind.

Gabriel visibly relaxed when he found all three spread out on the various couches and armchairs in the large living room.

"Oh, good you're back. You can start a fire," Anabel said.

"And you couldn't do it because...?" Gabriel said.

"Because at home we have a gas fireplace," she replied.

"Fine," Gabriel said. He was not actually annoyed at being treated as her personal servant. It made him feel needed. He dropped a quick kiss on her brow before doing as she asked. She smiled her thanks.

"Hey, what happened with dinner?" Ivan said.

"Stop whining. The rice will be on the stove in a minute. You can help by slicing the platanos (plantains)," Isobel said.

"Oh man!" Ivan said. He threw his hands up in the air but still turned around to go back into the kitchen.

"Why don't you check to see if the water is boiling?" Isobel asked her sister.

Ella shot her a sharp glance only to be met with Isobel's quick head shake. Anabel watched the exchange with confusion, but decided she would ask one of the two what was up with them later.

"Okay," Anabel said. She uncurled herself from the couch and followed Ivan into the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" Ella said in an incredulous whisper.

"Hush," Isobel said.

"What's up with you two?" Gabriel said turning to look at them.

"Nothing, Gabriel. Can you make your famous garlic sauce for the platanos?" Isobel asked.

"Sure," he said. He stood clapping his hand to get most of the soot off. "Let me just go wash up."

He eyed them certain that whatever they had been whispering about behind his back had something to do with Ivan and Anabel being alone in the kitchen. He was not particularly worried. He trusted Anabel completely.

"Of course, ash flavored maduros (plantain dish) are a little too froo froo for my tastes," Isobel said.

She smiled at her own joke even though no one thought it was funny.

"Right," he said. He walked down a different hallway to the downstairs powder room.

Isobel waited until she heard the door slide closed behind Gabriel before she smacked Ella in the shoulder.

"I know what I'm doing, Ella. Now you've got both Gabriel and Anabel suspicious."

"Ow! You don't have to hit me! Are you insane? Why would you send Anabel into the kitchen with Ivan considering you suspect him of being in love with your sister?" she whispered furiously.

"It's not like I was giving them some kind of trysting opportunity. I sent Gabriel behind them, didn't I?"

"Yeah, why did you do that exactly?" Ella said at a more normal volume.

"Because I want Gabriel to see how Ivan looks at his girlfriend," Isobel said quietly.

"You don't think he hasn't noticed already?" Ella said. She understood now what the younger woman was after.

"I don't know, but this way I can be sure. I just have to follow him into the kitchen to watch his expression. Then I'll know," Isobel said. She set her chin at a defiant angle.

"Alright, if that's what you want," Ella said. She settled back against the cushions and picked up her book. Now that finals were over, she could indulge in a little escapist fiction.

Isobel timed her entrance into the kitchen perfectly. She saw again that little bit of longing in Ivan's eyes as he looked at her sister and she managed to catch the displeasure in Gabriel's face before he hid it behind a helpful smile. He knows. Isobel suddenly felt deflated. She had secretly hoped that once Gabriel figured out how his best friend about his girlfriend, he would try to separate them. Instead, she discovered that the man had already figured it out. Had probably figured it out long ago and planned to do nothing about it. She could not blame him as much as she wanted to. Anabel had eyes only for Gabriel.

Isobel slipped back out of the kitchen before anyone noticed her standing there. She wandered into her room but was unable to settle. She paced the small space trying to figure out just what she was going to do about the situation. She could dump him outright, but that would require answering Anabel's questions and possibly lying to her. She could fight for him, but that sounded kind of pathetic.

"Izzy! Dinner's being served!"

Isobel heard her sister calling from the kitchen. Having arrived at no viable solution, Isobel decided to wait it out and see what happened. She would be her terrific self, and if that was not enough for Ivan, then he was not the one she was looking for. Having come to a decision,

Isobel nodded at her reflection and walked back into the kitchen into a scene of happy chaos. Her determined expression disappeared to be replaced by a happy grin. No matter what else was going on, these were her friends.

# Chapter Nine

"Isobel, you have outdone yourself!" Gabriel said patting his belly.

Isobel grinned.

"My dear, you ain't seen nothing," Isobel said.

"I don't know, Izzy. This could rival Mom's for juiciness," Anabel chimed in.

"It needed to marinate a little longer," Isobel said.

"Stop being modest and just accept the compliments being heaped on your head," Ella said. She slumped back in the chair with a satisfied sigh.

"I think Ivan has just succumbed to a food coma," Gabriel joked.

Ivan smiled at everyone's muffled chuckles and took a swig of beer.

"I was only contemplating the words that could possibly match this absolutely epic meal," he said.

"Aw, gee, guys," Isobel said. She ducked her head and batted her eyes in an exaggerated manner.

"Check her, Ivan, I think she's having a seizure," Anabel said. She shoved Ivan toward her sister with a slight push to the shoulder.

Isobel stood up quickly at her sister's words.

"Who's ready for dessert?" Isobel said.

Her words were met with a chorus of groans and not a few thrown napkins.

"Give us a chance, you monster!" Ella said.

"Yeah, you slave driver. We can barely move as it is!" Anabel said. A small, very unlady like burp escaped from Anabel before she could suppress it.

"Aah!" Ella said.

"Anabel!" This from Isobel.

"Excuse me!" Anabel was now blushing. She was mortified. It was probably the first time she



had done anything of the sort in front of Gabriel.

She buried her face in her hands only half pretending to feel humiliated when Ivan released a belch that actually made them jump.

"Dude!" Gabriel said. He waved a napkin in front himself in mock disgust.

"Ivan!" Isobel and Ella said in unison.

Anabel exchanged a grateful glance with the other man before she too began heaping insults. Soon it turned into a half hour burping contest which eventually chased into the next room. Isobel and Ella soon followed. The burp champion was left undeclared which Ivan felt was rather unfair. He voiced his concerns loudly as he, followed by Gabriel, wandered into the living room.

"Seeing as Izzy made dinner and Gabriel and I cleaned the dishes you guys left out at breakfast, I believe it is only fair that Ella and Ivan be on clean up duty tonight."

"Hear, hear!" Gabriel said. He raised his bottle of beer to punctuate each word.

"Hey! I helped with shopping!"

"And I cut the plantains!"

"Don't look at me," Isobel said.

"Shopping is hardly a chore for you, Ella," Anabel said.

"And slicing plantains is nowhere near equivalent to cooking," Gabriel said.

"They've ganged up on us, Ella," Ivan said.

"We're on our own. Come, brother. We shall conquer the mountain of soiled flatware and turn our backs on those who have abandoned us!"

"Well said, but I'm not touching anyone's soiled flatware."

Their voices faded as they disappeared back into the kitchen and dining area.

"I am beat!" Isobel said. She fought off a yawn as she stretched before curling into the couch.

Gabriel wriggled his way next Anabel, so he could scoop her into his arms. Anabel granted him a lazy smile as she snuggled her back into his chest.

"You two are disgusting," Isobel said. The bite of her words were softened by the good-

natured tone.

"We know," Anabel said.

"Besides you have your own disgusting half in the kitchen," Gabriel said.

Isobel averted her eyes so Gabriel would not see how much that hurt.

"Why did you bring us all up here, Gabriel?" Isobel asked.

Her eyes were on the opening leading to the kitchen, but she turned to look at Gabriel with a serious expression. Her direct gaze let Gabriel know that it was time to deliver.

"Why don't we wait until the others return?" Anabel said. As always, sticking to her policy of appeasement to Gabriel's temper.

"No, perhaps it is better to talk one on one. I have all kinds of documents, analyses, scans and maps, but I have a feeling that would mean little to you."

Isobel's only response was to arch an eyebrow, as if to say, "and?"

"So I will just tell you what I believe."

Gabriel gave a shorter, albeit more impassioned, version of what he had told Anabel about Prime and their goals. He said nothing about secret government agencies or undercover Prime operatives. Isobel listened in silence. Anabel was unsure whether her younger sister was silent because she was absorbing everything or because she was contemplating the best to have Gabriel committed. That is, until she noticed Isobel glancing her way. Anabel realized that she was looking for Anabel's opinion.

"I truly believe that our best hope is to unite with the other dimensions to prevent Prime from taking control of this particular crossroads."

"Crossroads?" Anabel asked.

She met Gabriel's severe look with one of chagrin. This was Isobel's turn to be convinced. Cutting away, he turned his formidable attention to Isobel.

"How do you propose that the five of us, because I assume you want all of us on this little getaway to help, manage to unite three other worlds who have probably as little knowledge of our existence as we did when we woke up yesterday?" Isobel said.

Gabriel appeared pleased that she had begun with this particular question. It was obvious Isobel wanted to help if he could just provide a reasonable way to do it.

"Our first mission will be to change that very thing in two of the three. Beta is very much

aware of Prime. They may not know about us and the other two dimensions exactly, but they know we exist."

"How do you know all this?" Isobel asked.

"I told you, I have my sources. I can't say anything more."

"Fine, and how do you propose we inform these other two worlds of the threat?"

"There is only one way. Someone has to dimension jump to each world. Once there, that person will need to start planting the seeds. Anything too overt will either lead to you being incarcerated as a spy or committed as a mental patient. No one listens to someone branded as insane."

"Someone? You mean me and Anabel and Ella. While you what? Stay here and watch the home front?"

"No, I will be heading out, too. But, yes, to answer your question. My intention is that we all go each into a separate dimension. Everyone except one. She will need to stay here and monitor our communiques back home and to lend credence to our cover stories."

"She? Anabel?"

"No, Ella."

"Ella?" Her disbelief was splashed all over her face.

"Ella what?" Ella said returning to the room.

"Ella will make an excellent watch tower," Anabel said.

"Watch tower? Are you making fun of my height?"

"Because you're short? No, darling," Anabel said.

"Then, what do you mean?" Ella said testily.

"I'll explain it all tonight. We both will," Anabel said. She nodded to Isobel. Isobel nodded her agreement.

"What will you explain?" Ivan said finally joining them.

"Why I would never dare make fun of Ella's height," Anabel said.

"Shut up!" Ella through a cushion at Anabel.

"Ladies! There's no need to fight over me. I'm sure Gabriel will be more than happy to fall on

his sword and take on one of you," Ivan said.

"Oh, and what are you going to do with the other one?" Isobel said.

"Well, I'm only trying to be a good friend, Izzy. We have to support the only single member in our party," Ivan said. He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"I am not single!" Ella said.

"Of course, you have that boyfriend in Canada. What's his name again, Franz?" Ivan said.

"No, no it's Jacques!" Anabel said.

Another cushion flew at Anabel's head before Gabriel caught it. There was a brief moment as everyone froze, waiting tensely for Gabriel's reaction.

"Now, Ella, you can't blame Anabel for forgetting Pierre's name. She's never met the fortunate man," Gabriel said. He tucked the cushion behind his head.

"That is so unfair Gabriel. You know his name is Milos because you met him when he visited during Spring Break," Ella said.

"Milos?" Ivan said. He nearly choked on his beer as he laughingly repeated the name.

"Yes, Milos," Ella said.

"Where was I?" Anabel said. Her expression all affronted and hurt.

"Oh, now this is about you?" Ella said.

The sniping and banter went on into the night. Anabel would remember this night later when all else seemed so bleak and lonely.

Eventually, they broke off into two groups. The boys left to grab more firewood outside, while the girls wandered off to Anabel's room. There were a few jokes exchanged about the pristine state of her bed before the three plopped down on the bed.

Somehow Anabel was sure that her sister was convinced. She expected Ella would not be swayed by anything Gabriel had to say and by extension her, but she had promised Gabriel.

"So, when do we get to cross over or whatever?" Ella asked.

Nonplussed, the two sisters exchanged a look.

"We are not dimension jumping. You are staying here." Isobel was the first to recover.

"Wait, what?"

"You have to stay here," Anabel said.

"What?! No way!"

"Gabriel has pretty convincing cover stories for all of us, but we need your help to sell it."

"He does?" Isobel said.

Anabel ignored her sister's question.

"You would be collecting all of our communication and forwarding it on to our families."

"So what, I'll be a mail box? This is lame!" She stood up and began pacing.

"No, Ella! Will you stop?" Anabel said.

"Ella? Will you please listen? Think, woman!" Isobel said. She too got to her feet to stand in front of the tiny rampaging tornado.

"Think? What am I supposed to think about? You all go on dimension jumping adventures while I get stuck here running interference with your parents? No!"

"Who will get us out if we get in trouble?" Anabel said. She had stopped trying to match her friend's volume.

Isobel turned to look at her sister. It was obvious she had not fully thought of the implications. Ella stopped rampaging, falling in a heap at the edge of the bed.

"I'm listening," Ella said.

"Gabriel and Ivan are headed into Prime and Beta. They will not be able to help us or each other, but there's more," Anabel said.

"What, Anabel?" Isobel said.

"Gabriel didn't mention this to you, Izzy, but there is evidence that Prime agents have already infiltrated our world. He thinks that's where spots like this one here came from. There is one master gateway where they must have first arrived. The rest are failed attempts to create a stable gateway like the one we saw today. It means that you will be in danger here too."

The three fell into an uncomfortable silence as each contemplated the dangers of what they were about to embark upon.

"Why are you doing this, Anabel?" Ella asked.

"Please tell me it's not for Gabriel."

Isobel focused on her sister. She wanted to hear the answer.

"I can't tell you that," Anabel said.

"Oh come on, Anabel! You'll be away from everything familiar to traipse through another dimension where you could be stuck for the rest of your life. You're telling me, that you of all people, would willingly do this for a man?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

You know what exactly what I mean. You went to a university that is within half day's car ride from home. You visit your parents every other weekend, and hang out with your baby sister. No offense, Izzy, but most people don't hang with their younger siblings willingly after they move out of the house."

"So what? So, I love my parents. I'd rather not be too far away from them. My sister and I have always been close. Our relationship is not unique."

"Anabel..."

Anabel erupted from the bed, gesturing wildly, she began to pace the room.

"Fine! I hate the very idea of leaving home like this. If I were going with Gabriel or Izzy or you, it would be one thing. The thought that I would have to travel through some interdimensional gate alone for months on end makes me want to run screaming into the woods. But I believe in Gabriel. I believe that this task is important. So yes, I am doing this for him, but only because I truly believe that what he says is true about Prime and their intentions."

"Alright," Ella said.

"That's all you can say?" Anabel said.

"What we are proposing to do is stupid dangerous. If you don't understand why you're going to do this crazy stupid thing, it will only lead to trouble. If you believe, wholeheartedly, that what we do is important, for the sake of everyone you love, then it's enough. But you have to hang on to that belief."

Anabel stared at her friend. She would remember this conversation when doubt resurfaced and she would laugh at her naivete.

# Chapter Ten

"For now we all go back home at the end of the week, visit with our families, make as if you're packing for a long trip. I have cover stories set up for everyone including flights and enrollments."

"How long have you been planning this?" Ella asked.

"Long enough."

"O-kay," Ella said.

"We planned for a week in this cabin. I'm assuming once you got us to agree, you were going to fill us in on what you know?" Ivan said.

"Yes, but we don't have to go into all of that right now. Why don't kick back and relax? There's a lake on the property. It hasn't been cold enough to go out safely on the ice, but we have a bonfire roast some marshmallows. What you think?"

"Marshmallows!" Isobel said. She stood up, practically humming with excitement.

"S'mores!" Anabel said.

"Yes!" Isobel said. Her eyes were rolling back in apparent ecstasy.

"I can't say no to chocolate. It's like wired into my DNA," Ella said.

"Well, the ladies have spoken, Ivan. Let's make sure we have the makings for s'mores before there's a lynching."

"Aye, aye, cap'n," Ivan said with a mock salute.

The girls' laughter followed the two young men into the kitchen.

"It looks like Gabriel managed to convince Ivan without too much trouble," Isobel said,

"What makes you say that?" Anabel said. She turned an inquiring look her sister's way.

"I don't know. He just seems to be alright. I figured he'd be tense with us going into danger," Isobel said. She shrugged as if to say, it was not important.

"Maybe he doesn't know?" Ella offered.

"Maybe." Isobel fell silent, a pensive look resting in her eyes.

"Why would he care if we were in danger? I mean, I can see him not wanting you anywhere near any of this, but Ella and me?"

"Don't you think he cares about you?" Isobel asked with genuine curiosity.

"Well, sure. I didn't mean that he wouldn't care at all. I guess I'm just confused why you think Ivan would be freaking out over it. I think he's been a little in love with you from the moment he saw you, so you in danger, totally get. Me? Ella? He wouldn't be happy, but he'd respect our wishes."

"You really don't get it," Ella said. She sounded surprised at the revelation.

"Get what?"

"That Ivan thinks of you as more than a friend," Ella began.

"He thinks of you as a sister," Isobel said, quickly interrupting.

"I guess. We've been friends forever now, almost as long as I've known Gabriel."

Isobel glared at Ella over Anabel's head, mouthing 'quit it!' Ella only rolled her eyes.

"So what's the plan, anyway?" Ella said.

"For saving the known universe in six months or less?" Anabel said.

"Yes," Ella said.

"I figure we'll discuss things with Gabriel one on one," Anabel said. She shrugged.

"Sure, but what has he told you?" Ella insisted.

"Nothing!" Anabel said.

"What's the big deal, Ella? You won't need to know all the details, would you?" Isobel chimed in.

"If I'm supposed to be the last resort of rescue, I'll need to know every detail. How else will I be able to help?"

"We don't know enough about the geography of these worlds that will be of any use," Isobel said.

"Obviously, but wouldn't it be helpful to know where to start?"

"Guys, enough. There are no details to discuss right now. Let it go. We only have a few weeks before we disappear from each other's lives for months. Don't you think we could



maybe enjoy this time together instead of sniping at each other?"

"Oh, Anabel, I'm sorry," Isobel said. She was instantly chagrined to have upset her sister. Anabel needed more than any of them her family and friends to be home. She could only ever stayed away a few weeks at a time. This decision must be killing her.

"I'm sorry, Ana," Ella said.

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled."

"Will you be okay? Are you sure you even want to do this?" Isobel asked.

"I've made my decision, Izzy."

"Alright, Ana. I'll let it go. It still won't stop me from worrying."

"Thank you," Anabel said. She placed her hand on Isobel's arm.

"So what would you do? How would you convince an entire world that you're not insane when you try to warn them that they are about to be invaded by people from another dimension?" Ella said.

"I haven't thought about it. I was hoping Gabriel had a plan."

"What if his plan is stupid? Come on, think about it!"

"Ella..."

"She has a point, Anabel."

"Fine. I'll think about it."

"Well?"

"What you want me to spill a plan wholesale right now?"

"Not a whole plan, no, but give us an idea of what you would do."

"I don't know!"

"What about you Isobel?"

"I guess I would start with the local population surrounding the gate. From Gabriel told us, Gamma is the least advanced dimension in this particular crossroads, so talking about interdimensional travel probably fly right over their heads."

"Yeah, and then what?"

"I don't know, convince them somehow not to trust anyone that steps through one of those things? Keep a guard posted to keep people away from the gate and to watch out for people coming through. I would have to travel to every known gate and start the process all over again. It would probably take me a long time to get through all of them."

"Huh, that actually sounds fairly reasonable," Ella said. She looked impressed.

"Oh shut up, Ella," Isobel said.

"What would you do if you were going instead of Anabel?"

"Me? Huh, I don't know start a blog?"

"A blog, huh? Do they in Delta even have internet like we do?" Isobel said.

"No, Ella is on to something here. Maybe not a blog, but I'm sure they have some form of published story telling. It's a basic tenet of human society. That might work."

"And how are you going to get published? It's not like it's easy to get someone to agree to fork over a bunch of money for your fantastical stories of other dimensions."

"The kid's right," Ella said.

"Gabriel said Delta is pretty much a socialist state. Why wouldn't they want to publish nonsensical fantasies for mass consumption? Anything to keep the masses from thinking too much about how things are run."

"It might work, but how can you guarantee that anyone would pay any attention to your stories as anything more than fantasy?"

"I'll use the real locations of the gateways. Describe them in such detail that people will want to see them for themselves. At this point all I can do is sow a seed. If they are as skeptical there as we are, going Isobel's route will be impossible."

"Those seeds would have to be pretty robust to bear any fruit."

"Way to run with the metaphor, Ella," Anabel said.

"What? You know it's true."

"Yeah, I do. Still I can't imagine Gabriel's ideas are going to be any better. Short of running into the capitol waving pictures of Prime agents shooting up the populace, I don't think I could be more blatant. At least not safely."

"Hey, Isobel, you want to take a walk? There's a lake nearby that Gabriel says is breathtaking."

"Ivan, you shouldn't make fun of your host. He'll spit in your beer," Isobel said.

"Not that he could tell the difference when he drinks that swill," Gabriel said.

"You bought the swill. I am just being polite."

"Only because you made a special request."

"Boys, boys. You're both very clever. Can we go for that walk now?" Isobel said.

"After you, pretty lady," Ivan said.

Chilled by the wind coming off the water, Isobel huddled close to Ivan.

"I got you," Ivan said. He smiled as he draped an arm over her shoulders.

"So what did Gabriel tell you about the plan to infiltrate Prime?" Isobel asked. She tucked her into his shoulder.

"He thinks he can get in with the group of dimension jumpers. He has some kind of immunity that allows him to make multiple jumps without ill effect."

"So were you able to talk him out of going to Prime?"

"No, but honestly I think I might have the more dangerous mission. The resistance fighters in Beta are hardly going to trust anyone they see stepping out of one of those gateways."

"Then why go? They already know about Prime. There's no reason we should be risking you." Isobel looked up at him with worried eyes.

"Hey, don't do that. There's a very good reason. They know how to fight Prime. They know what they're capable of and how they managed to infiltrate so successfully. I'm going there to gather information. If I can provide a little information in return and help fight the good fight, it's the least I can do."

"I'll be fine, Izzy. I promise."

"You better be." She pressed her face into the side of his neck. He lay his chin on top of her head and held tight.

"I promise."

"What did you tell your parents?" Ella said. She was sitting on the bed of Anabel's room a month after their last trip to this cabin.

Anabel was in the process of shuffling clothes from her luggage to the dresser. She would

not be able to bring any of it through the gateway. She would only need a few changes of clothes for the trip itself.

"What Gabriel told me to tell them. I couldn't think of anything more creative. Besides I am flying to Europe with Isobel. We can't use this gateway."

"I know. I guess it's just weird. I'm not used to you being deceitful, especially with your parents. You seem like such a straight arrow sometimes."

"I'm not happy about it, but I made a promise."

"So what happened between you two?"

"Between who?"

"Gabriel and you. You guys seem rather tense."

"I don't want to talk about it. Everything will be fine once we get back."

"You probably shouldn't leave anything this heavy pending. You may never see each other again."

"I don't want to hear it, Ella. I have to believe that everything is going to work out fine or I'm going to run off to the Mediterranean and never look back."

"Ha! You would run home to your parents before you ran off anywhere."

"Fine. I'll run home. Just leave it, okay?"

"Okay, Ana. I'm going to miss you." Ella refused to look at her friend even as she was incapable of hiding the emotion in her voice.

"Hey, none of that. I'll start crying and then you'll start crying and then Isobel will come looking and then she will start crying. It'll be a huge mess!" Anabel sat next to her friend and holding her by the shoulders made Ella look her in the eye.

"Anabel, just stop for a moment and be real, please?" Ella said.

"Okay, Ella. What do you want to hear? That I'm terrified? That I don't want to go anywhere because I'm going to miss you and my sister and everyone so terribly, I want to curl up into a ball every time I allow myself to think about it? Whatever notion you have about me, I am trying to hold it together."

"I'm sorry, Ana. I know you are. I just- I feel - I'm just scared! And you seem so composed. I keep asking myself why aren't you running around screaming?"

"Oh Ella, I am just really quietly."

Ella laughed through her tears and hugged her friend tight.

"Ah, the crying jag has begun. Mind if a third weeping girl joins the party?" Isobel said from the open doorway.

The two friends separated. With a laugh, Anabel beckoned her sister over. Isobel stepped into her sister's waiting embrace and held on tight.

"Stop it. We have a whole week ahead of us. By then you'll be so sick of me, you'll push me through the first gateway you find."

"Anabel, sometimes your level of conceit is staggering. What makes you think I'm going to miss you at all? You're supposed to be consoling me because I'm going to be separated from my grand spanking new boyfriend," Isobel said.

She stood up with her hands on her hips gracing her sister with her best obnoxious little sister sneer. Anabel quickly averted her gaze at the mention of Ivan. Ella took note and wondered.

"Now that's an attractive face," Anabel said.

Isobel responded by sticking out her tongue. Now that everyone's spirits were now buoyed, Isobel walked out of the room in search of Ivan. She had noticed Anabel's flinch, and she did not like it one bit.

# Chapter Eleven

The young woman stumbled out of the forest only to interrupt a family of campers eating their dinner.

"Miss? Are you okay?" the father said approaching the obviously disoriented young woman slowly.

"Where?" she said staring at the people in front of her.

"You're in Arias National Park," the man said in a calm voice.

"Arias?" she shook her head as if she could shake the confusion.

"Were you hiking alone?" the woman said as she searched woods while at the same herding her teenage kids behind her.

"What's wrong with her mom?" the boy was asking in a loud whisper.

"Quiet," his mother shushed him.

"Hiking?" she said rubbing her face trying to valiantly to focus.

"I think she has a concussion, honey. Alert the ranger station," he said not taking his eyes off the obviously injured young woman.

"I think.." she stopped as a wave of pain hit her. She clutched her head, biting back a groan.

"Miss, are you okay?" the man said taking another slow step towards the young woman.

"I-" she said before her legs gave way beneath her. She managed to land in a seated position, but only just.

Meanwhile, the woman, with her kids pressed to her side, was paging the ranger station on the emergency frequency.

"The rangers should be here soon," she said.

"Good," her husband responded quietly. He had edged a little closer now. He was afraid to startle the young woman.

"Can you tell me your name?" he said keeping her engaged and awake long enough for him to make an assessment.

She blinked at him owlishly, the pain in her head having disappeared as suddenly as it had

struck.

"My name?" she asked.

"Yes your name. Can you tell me your name?" he repeated again with that calm matter-of-fact voice his patients found so soothing.

"My name... My name is Anabel," she said beaming as if she had answered a great riddle.

"Anabel, what an unusual name," the man said before he remembered himself.

"It's a beautiful name, Anabel. Can you tell me what happened?" he asked again in a soothing voice.

"I think I hit my head," Anabel responded.

The debilitating disorientation was starting to wear off and memory was returning in disjointed pieces. She knew somehow that she had to be careful about revealing too much.

"Anabel, were you hiking alone?" he asked concerned that there might be other injured people out in the woods.

"I think so. I must have been," she said.

"I've never seen a concussed patient become more lucid without treatment," the woman commented.

He made shushing motions with his hands. Now was not the time to confuse the poor girl. If her disorientation was not caused by a concussion, it could be trauma.

"Do you know if you hit your head?" he asked.

With every question he managed to get a little closer, coming at her from the side so she felt less intimidated.

"I don't know," she replied in a low voice.

"Is it okay if I examine you? I'm a doctor," he said reassuringly.

Anabel looked up and realized that the man was within arm's reach. She tried to suppress the sudden urge to run, but was unable to stop herself from flinching. She looked over at the woman across the camp site for reassurance. She saw the other woman nod and smile.

"It's okay. We're both physicians. If you would prefer, I can perform the examination," she said stepping away from her two children.

Anabel nodded slowly, edging away from the male physician toward what she assumed was his wife. Sighing he stepped away to stand by his children.

"My name is Pegga," the woman introduced herself as she squatted in front of the traumatized young woman.

"Hi," Anabel said.

"Hmm?" Pegga said in confusion.

"Uh, hello, it's nice to meet you," Anabel said hoping politeness would hide her flub.

"Oh yes, hello, how very sweet you are," Pegga was saying as she passed her hands lightly along Anabel's scalp.

"I think I'm on vacation," Anabel said.

"Oh?" Pegga replied and stopping her examination for a moment focused on Anabel, "Why do you say that?"

"I'm not sure. I remember packing for a long trip," she said vaguely.

"That would explain the accent and the foreign sounding name. Where are you from?" Pegga said continuing to check for signs of head trauma.

"I-" Anabel began but stopped herself feeling suddenly uncertain, "I don't know."

Pegga exchanged glances with her husband.

"Well, I found no sign of head trauma. Have you ingested anything out in the woods? Some of the fungus and berries can be poisonous," Pegga asked removing a small penlight from the med kit her husband had placed by her side.

She began to examine her pupils, ears and lymph nodes.

"Say 'AH'," as she shone the pen in her mouth.

"Other than a little pupil dilation, I don't see anything immediately wrong. We'll be able to take better readings at the ranger station," Pegga said standing.

Anabel made to follow, but was forestalled by the other woman.

"Oh no, you need to stay seated," Pegga said in a voice that intimated she was rarely disobeyed.

"Yes, ma'am," Anabel said.



"What was that?" Pegga said.

"It's a term of respect, where I'm from. Wherever that is," Anabel said with just enough confusion in her voice to be credible.

"Thank you, child," Pegga said with a bemused smile. The girl was so young and obviously confused.

"Do you know if you ate anything out in the woods?" her husband asked.

"I don't think so," Anabel said.

"Well, maybe it was insect or snake bite," Pegga said unconvinced.

"I have scratches all over my arms and legs. Maybe I brushed up against something poisonous?" Anabel offered.

"That is a possibility," Pegga said nodding as her husband considered.

"I agree. It could have been a poisonous plant after all. Ah, here are the rangers. They'll have transport to get you back to the ranger station," he said.

"I'm Donnar. Sometimes I forget the niceties," he said with a distracted smile.

"Nice to meet you," Anabel replied. Her eyes were on the rangers approaching in the dark.

"These are my kids, Eleen and Rogga," Pegga said nodding at her children.

Anabel turned her attention back to her rescuers. She sent the children a half-hearted wave, but made no move to stand. She took the opportunity to try and sift through the myriad images flitting through her brain. At the same time, she battled with the throbbing headache that seemed to ebb and flow in intensity.

As the rangers rushed to her side, she felt herself poked and prodded before being loaded up into some kind of vehicle. The throbbing pain in her head intensified encompassing her entire skull. She felt each heartbeat as a pulse of agony from the back of her eyes to the tips of her fingers. The headache she had been trying to ignore finally overwhelmed her as she lost consciousness.

# Chapter Twelve

Anabel awoke in a hospital bed strapped up to several machines. Soft cloth handcuffs held her at bay. Machines began beeping incessantly as her heart rate ratcheted up with her anxiety.

Nurses quickly swarmed into the room using some kind of strobe lighting to calm her down until she lost consciousness momentarily.

She dreamed of half remembered conversations and dark forests.

"She's not quite what we were expecting," a woman said.

"Regardless, she was there on the mountain. Just look at her med chart. She has either lived her life in an underdeveloped country mining for coal by hand or she is exactly who were warned about. Frankly, I find it difficult to believe that anyone with such soft hands could be from anywhere but here," another voice said. This time the voice sounded male.

"Why couldn't she be some rich man's daughter from one of the countries that still use fossil fuels?"

"She could be," he said.

"Regardless, we'll treat her and let her go. We can just monitor her actions," she said.

The voices faded away. Anabel came awake quickly. Remembering how quickly they had managed to put her back under, she tried to calm her heart. She hated that she could not move her arms, but her feet were free. She took solace in that. If nothing else, she could twist herself off the bed to remove the restraints.

"I see your awake," a woman's pleasant voice said.

Startled, Anabel jerked back to look in the direction of the voice.

"Now, now. Don't go getting all excited again," the nurse said.

"Can you-" Anabel stopped to lick her dry lips.

"Give you water? Certainly." The nurse smiled and presented Anabel with a glass of water and a straw.

Anabel could not remember the last time she had tasted water so pure. She slurped up the water greedily. The nurse quickly withdrew the straw.

"Careful. I don't want you to choke," the nurse said.

Anabel nodded. The nurse returned the straw to her lips. Anabel drank a little slower. Satisfied at last she leaned her head back against the headboard.

"Thank you," Anabel said.

"You are quite welcome, dear," the nurse said.

"Do you think you could remove the restraints? I'm a little claustrophobic."

"Claustro- what?" the nurse said.

"I feel a little closed in. I'm afraid of closed in spaces," Anabel said.

"Oh yes, I see. That's normal, dear. I'll tell the doctors you're awake," the nurse before she turned and left the room.

Anabel slumped back against the headboard. She would not panic. She would not panic. She took deep breaths through her nose, expelling them slowly through her mouth. She decided the only way she was going to avoid a full out panic was to think of something else. She concentrated on her dreams. Something had brought her awake, but what? The voices! What were they saying?

They were expecting her, well maybe not her exactly, but they were expecting someone to come wandering out of the woods on that mountain. How?

God, why was her memory still so fuzzy! She could barely think! Before she started to beat herself up over her memory loss, she decided to assess her injuries. Her headache had finally disappeared which was a relief. She did not see any bruises on her arms and felt no pain in her legs. She noticed that she could breath easier as if her lungs had been damaged somehow and only now that they were repaired did she notice the difference. Even her vision had improved. Her skin felt less tight. She rubbed her fingers together. Even her hands felt softer. She noticed that even her sense of smell had improved. With that information she realized that the hospital did not have that familiar antiseptic smell she had always associated with them. The air actually smelled clean.

A pair of doctors entered the room as she marveled at the improvements in her health. Even her heart beat a stronger steadier rate.

"Hello Anabel," Pegga said.

"Pegga?"

"Yes! You remembered. That's good. We have some questions for you if you feel up to it," Pegga said.

"Okay," Anabel said looking at Donnar as he circled around to her other side.

"What's that?" Pegga asked.

"I mean, yes, I feel well enough to answer questions," Anabel said. She kept running into problems with her colloquialisms.

"Excellent. I think we can remove these now, don't you agree?" Pegga said. She indicated the restraints.

"Yes, please. Why was I restrained?"

"You were thrashing about in your sleep. It was for your safety," Donnar finally spoke.

"Oh," Anabel said. She was clearly confused.

Pegga removed both of soft cuffs around Anabel's wrists. Anabel immediately clasped her left wrist as if she expected pain. Aside from a slight impression of the wrist cuffs, they had not actually chafed.

"Now do you remember what you were doing in the park?" Donnar began.

Anabel concentrated, trying to recall what park he was referring to, but only shook her head.

"No, was there an accident?" Anabel said.

"We're not quite certain. You had few injuries when we examined you. Your toxicology report, however, was... inconclusive," Pegga said.

"What does that mean?" Anabel said.

"It means we found toxins in your system that we are not familiar with," he said.

Anabel could feel their scrutiny. She searched wildly for an explanation, but decided to play dumb instead. She could use her memory lapse to her advantage.

"I don't know why that would be," Anabel said.

"You mentioned that you were traveling. Where from?" Donnar asked.

"I did? Traveling to where? I'm not even certain of where I am," she said. She was trying to use the same words as they now.

"You are in Luxton, a few miles from where we found you," Pegga said.

"Luxton? Where did you find me?"

"Don't you remember?" Donnar said.

Anabel searched her recent memory but was unable to find a name for the place where she had stumbled across their camp.

"I only remember the two of and your children," she said.

"You were came unto our camp site in the Arias National Forest," Pegga said.

"Arias?"

"Yes, do you remember?" Donnar said.

"No. I'm sorry." Anabel shook her head.

"Can you tell me where you are from?"

"No, I don't remember," Anabel said.

"Can you tell me how old you are?"

"I'm 22, I think," Anabel said.

"Good, that's excellent. Do you know there year?"

"Of course! It's... it's- No, I can't remember."

The questions kept coming. Anabel could only answer one in ten questions. Some she genuinely could not remember the answer to, others she knew would only reveal her true identity. She had not quite expected to be interrogated so soon after arriving. Her cover story was a mess of quasi-formed impressions she had trouble distinguishing from her own memory.

After an hour of relentless questioning, Pegga finally called a halt to the interrogation.

"Donnar, stop. We've only managed to exhaust the poor girl."

"Of course, why don't you get some rest?" Donnar said.

Anabel nodded. She watched as the couple stood and after dimming the lights left the room. Anabel restrained herself from immediately bolting out of the bed. Considering how quickly the nurses had arrived after she first awoke in a panic, she figured disconnecting any of the wires would only illicit a similar response. She looked around for some kind of call button, but found none.

If she could just get a nurse to help her remove some of the umpteen cables, she could at least pretend that she had a shot at escaping. After searching the immediate area on the bed, she tried to slide out of the bed to see just how far the cables she was attached

stretched. What she discovered actually stopped her in her tracks. The cables did not pull on her skin at all because they were in fact part of her hospital gown. She had complete range of movement and could wander the room easily.

Feeling a lot less claustrophobic if no less trapped, she found a bathroom. It took her almost an hour to figure out how to use the contraption, but in the end was successful in taking care of business.

Rummaging through a closet, she discovered her clothes in a canvas bag. They did not smell all that pleasant, but at least she knew where they were. Finally, she dared to approach the doorway. The hallway outside her room was crawling with medical staff and people in suits. No one was standing watch at her door, but it did not matter over much. She only had her hospital gown and the canvas bag full of dirty clothes. There was no way she would be able to blend into the stream of humanity and out onto the streets.

Swallowing her disappointment, she started to listen to the bits of conversations as they flowed past her room.

"I don't know why he keeps losing those reports..."

"If her wife could see how she behaves in the office..."

"...spoke to the Council..."

"...another late session..."

The half heard bits of conversation began to form a picture and it was not pretty. Some of those in suits appeared to be some kind of politician or at least worked for politicians while not all the people in scrubs and lab coats were simply medical professionals. She was in some kind of government building or in a hospital near the capital. Unless she could get a hold of a snazzy power suit, she would not be getting out of this room any time soon.

It was time she figured out as much as she could about this damn place. Looking about the room, she hoped to find a book or something. Finding nothing, she bit back a growl of frustration.

"Is there something the matter?" The door opened to admit a nurse with a ready smile.

Anabel, startled, stared her dumbly for a moment before regaining her equilibrium. She shook her head and returned the smile.

"I'm sorry. Yes, I am feel rather restless. Do you have anything I could read or something?" Anabel asked. She was careful not to name any particular reading material in case they referred to magazines or books by another word.

"Oh, is your entertainment tablet not working?" the nurse. She stepped further into the room.

"My what?"

"My mistake. Doctors didn't think you should have the distraction. I'll bring you a newslet."

"Thank you," she said.

Anabel was hoping this newslet was some kind of magazine or newspaper. Anything at this point that would help her figure out the lingo, current events or culture. She paced the room as she waited for the nurse to return.

The nurse frowned as she entered noting that Anabel was still pacing the room instead of waiting patiently in bed.

"I brought you a few. I wasn't sure what you would like. Just leave them on the table there when you're done with them. The night staff will collect them while you sleep," she said. The nurse offered a kind smile as she set a large stack of large format magazines.

## Chapter Twelve

"Thank you. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this," Anabel said as she clutched the top newslet to her chest.

"You are quite welcome. Don't stay up too late. The doctors prescribed plenty of rest," the nurse admonished.

Anabel nodded obediently as she waited for the nurse to finally leave the room. Before she heard the click in the latch, she was settling into the chair Pegga had recently vacated.

She read through the entire stack from cover to cover even reading the writing credits. The newslets ranged in topic from fashion to politics. She gleaned a general idea of the country she found herself in, Esturia. It considered itself an international power and could be this dimension's version of America. From the educational newslet she found a map of a continent overseas. She frowned as she studied it. There was something wrong, but she could not quite peg it down. Shaking her head, she moved on.

She put aside some of the newlets that were targeted toward teenagers. Although there would be a great deal of useful information about pop culture, she needed to understand the geography and political climate if she was going to get out of the capital undetected.

When a nurse walked and threatened to take the newslets away if she did not go to sleep, Anabel finally crawled into the surprisingly comfortable bed. Anabel drifted off to sleep even as she struggled to think how she could use the information to piece together a new cover story.

She would have to find a way to write home. Her last thoughts before slipping into unconsciousness were of her family.





# Chapter Thirteen

"Anabel?"

"Hmm?"

"You were a million miles away. Is everything well with you?" Pegga said.

"Yes, Pegga. I just feel like I've been here forever. When can I leave?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, actually. We have a social ambassador here who would like to talk to you about your options once you leave the hospital. Do you think you are up to speaking with her?"

"Yes, I am." It was difficult to hide her eagerness. Pegga smiled sadly. The poor girl must feel so trapped.

"Excellent, I'll bring her in."

Anabel was no longer confined to a hospital bed. She had a suite now with a separate bedroom and a sitting area. She was still not allowed to cook for herself or even to leave, but her cage had definitely become more comfortable.

"Pegga?"

"Yes, Anabel?"

"When will I be able to go back to the mountain?"

"We've discussed this before. You are in no condition to go traipsing about the woods alone."

"What if I didn't go alone?"

"We'll see. First you have a visitor."

Anabel nodded. She felt like a child being denied the chance to visit the zoo. Unfortunately, out in those woods was her pack. She needed to get out there to search for it. How could she have been so stupid as to lose it?

"Miss Cardenas?"

"Yes?"

Anabel stood from the window seat overlooking the busy capitol several stories below at the

social worker's entrance. The woman gave a general impression of roundness, her round glasses rested on her rounded face which sat atop a rotund body.

"I'm Elgina. How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling great if a little restless."

"I'm sure you are. Why don't you join me?" Elgina pointed to the table and chairs Anabel ate most of her meals at.

"So what's this about? Am I finally being released?"

Anabel quickly took a seat at the table. The idea that she would finally leave this place had her feeling practically giddy.

"You'll have to discuss that with your doctors. Right now, we're simply trying to determine how we can best help you transition if such an event should occur."

"Oh."

"We'll go through some general questions about your experience, general knowledge, and so on. Now, it looks like you are fairly independent currently. I don't see access to cooking utensils and the like. Do you feel safe performing such tasks on your own?"

"Yes, of course. I was told no patients were allowed to cook in their room."

"Indeed." She made a note in her file and continued with questions.

She asked Anabel about her capacities physically and mentally.

"I will be able to double check all your answers with your doctors, so be sure to answer as honestly as possible."

Anabel nodded and answered the other woman's questions as honestly as she dared. Then came a barrage of questions about her mental and emotional aptitude. With a few more non-verbal responses from Elgina, they wrapped up that part of the interview.

"Now, I need to ask you as best as you can about your work history."

"Have you read my med chart?"

"Not yet. I like to visit with my clients without any preconceived notions. I will once this interview has come to a close. Is there something I should pay special attention to?"

"No, I just seem to have lapses in memory. It's been happening since the doctors found me wandering around Arias."

"I see. Describe these lapses as you call them."

"I seem to have retained a great deal of functional memory, but I have trouble remembering where I'm from. Things like general geography escape me. It could be that my education was lacking, but I have the impression that education was very important to my parents. I think I was in school before this happened, but I don't remember what I was studying."

"I understand. You mentioned lapses, though. Do you find yourself forgetting things now?"

"Yes. I'll forget conversations I've had with the doctors or lose track of the days. The doctors say that they are becoming less frequent and only happen now when I am tired."

"Interesting. Are you aware of blacking out or missing time?"

"No, well not at first. I am starting to recognize when I have started to repeat myself. I've started keeping journals just in case."

"Are the journals helping?"

"Yes, actually. Whenever I have the feeling I've maybe forgotten something, I'll read through the journal for that day. Sometimes I am mystified by what I've written."

"That is fascinating. I will take it into account during my final evaluation."

"Okay."

After several more questions, Elgina wrapped up the interview.

"I will let your doctors know my findings. When you are ready to be released, I will return to discuss your work options and domicile. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today."

"Thank you, Elgina."

Anabel could not help but feel dejected at the results of the interview or rather the lack of results.

A week later, Anabel was back at the window seat staring longingly at the outside world.

"Anabel, Elgina is here to see you," Pegga said.

"Really?"

"Truly."

"Does that mean..."

"Yes, Anabel it does."

"Oh, that's wonderful!"

"I know. I will miss you."

Anabel only smiled. As kind as Pegga and the hospital's staff had been, they had also been her jailers. She could not say with any honesty that she would miss any of them.

"Anabel, it is a pleasure to see you again. I hope all is well? Your doctors tell me you are no longer in any danger of a relapse and that your memory lapses have all but disappeared. I take it your coping strategy is working?"

"Coping strategy? Oh, yes my journals. Yes, they've been a tremendous help."

"There are several options for you as far as work goes. I want you to study these carefully. Changing positions once you've accepted is rather difficult."

"Thank you." Anabel accepted the four binders Elgina slid across the table to her.

"Each packet describes the pay structure, required skills, advancement opportunities, benefits and level of stress the typical employee would deal with on a day to day basis. There is also a brief job description and the expected work schedule. I've built in accommodations for your memory problems, so you don't have to worry about that."

"Wow, you're very thorough."

"Thank you, Anabel. That is very kind." Elgina sounded genuinely touched. Anabel guessed it was easier to take social workers for granted in a place like this.

"So what's next? I assume I don't have to give you a decision on where I want to work today."

"You're quite right. I want you to spend some time with each packet. I'll be back in a few days and we can go over any questions."

"Great." Anabel placed the binders aside and waited with both hands clasped atop the white wood table.

"We have a few options as far as housing. We have group homes with full time nurses in residence. They have communal dining rooms, but you can cook and eat in your private room. This option will help with the transition from a hospital setting. There are still a number of treatments you will need to undergo. With the nurses on staff, you won't have to travel to the hospital."

"No, I need more privacy. I- I can't do a group home. I can live on my own." Anabel was

visibly shaken by the prospect that she would end up in some halfway house where her every move would be monitored by government nurses.

"No, I guessed you would find that option distasteful. Your next option is a house share with a homestay nurse. Again, you avoid having to travel into the city for your treatments, but there would be a great deal more privacy. You would have only two other roommates. The nurse would come visit you."

"Is there an option where I live on my own?" Anabel said rather desperately.

Elgina smiled.

"Yes, it is an apartment complex in the city. The apartment would have a single bedroom with a single necessary room, a den, full kitchen and access to onsite laundry facilities. You would have to travel once a week to a local clinic for your treatments," Elgina said.

"Yes, that one. That sounds perfect."

"You would also have to wear a med alert bracelet at all times. It will track your vital signs and signal emergency personnel should anything drop below critical levels. It will hold a copy of all your medical records as well as an emergency button to alert the EP."

"Oh," Anabel said.

As much as she would love to avoid the blasted bracelet, she could abide having to live with others. She might never be able to share a room with someone she was not related to again. It was foolish, but she had to take the apartment option.

"It has to be the apartment, Elgina. I just can't even contemplate any other option."

"I understand. There is one more thing before you make up your mind. If you attempt to take off the bracelet, it will trigger a warning as well." Her voice had dropped several notches in volume. Anabel understood that Elgina was not supposed to be divulging this particular feature of the bracelet.

"I understand, Elgina. It will have to be the apartment. I just can't..."

"Hush, now. The apartment it is. Here." She handed over another binder with the location of the apartment, directions to the local clinic and a map showing the locations of all the work options Elgina had given her.

"Thank you," Anabel said in a whisper.

"Now, do you know how to get around the city?"

"No, I don't think I've ever been here before."

"I thought as much. This is how you would get to and from your apartment to the clinic if the weather is too inclement to walk. Public transport can be expensive on days when the weather is mild. The only exception is during the morning and afternoon peak hours when people are getting to work."

"Okay."

"To the fun stuff!"

"Fun stuff?"

"Yes, we get to go shopping. Now I see that gleam in your eye. Realize that it is a small budget and we need to get you the essentials for your first week of work. You can take the hospital clothing you have been using, but you obviously cannot wear any of that to the office."

"Of course."

"You have been collecting a small stipend since you've been here. It is not much money, but it should be enough to get you by for a bit."

Elgina handed over a credit chip with a note stating how much was on there. Anabel was assaulted by a moment of panic. She had no idea what she could buy with that amount. Was it truly a small sum? She had no way of knowing.

"Hush now. We'll go over how to use it when we go out later and shop for clothes."

Elgina had seen the panic but had obviously misinterpreted it. Although, that had also been a real worry she had not yet thought of. She took a deep calming breath. She would be fine. It would be simply a matter of learning the ropes. She had done it before when she had left home for school. She could do it again.

"That's it. Be brave. I have a friend who lives in that apartment complex. I think you two will get on famously."

"Thank you, Elgina. You don't know how much I..."

"Sssh. I know, believe me I do."

"I brought you something. I'm not technically supposed to give you anything I've purchased with my own money as it is considered a gift, but I couldn't bear the thought of making you go out dressed in hospital cotton when I can do something about it."

She pulled around a brown canvas bag. Inside Anabel found a pretty little dress with a red and white floral pattern. Anabel instantly teared up. The thoughtfulness of the gift touched her heart.

"I asked the nurse your size the last time I was here."

"Thank you. There's another thing I don't know. What size am I?" Anabel said through her sniffing.

Elgina handed her a tissue without commenting on the tears while Anabel looked for a tag. Not finding one, she almost despaired.

"The size is printed on the back panel."

"Oh."

Finally seeing the number, Anabel filed the information away. At least she would be able to try on garments within a few numbers of the one printed on the label.

"I believe we will be needing a few more visits before your move. Nurses will begin providing you with a great deal of information now that you have decided to live alone. If you find yourself overwhelmed just remember that all of it will be stored on your med alert bracelet and handed to you in writing. You won't have to memorize everything."

"Okay," she said. She was clutching the dress to her chest.

"Loosen your hold! I'm not going to take it back. You'll crush the thing and make unwearable. Check the bag again. It's not you could go out on the street in hospital slippers."

Anabel instantly loosened her grip on the dress. Laying the dress gently on the back of the chair, she looked in the bag as instructed. At the bottom were a pair of red ballet style flats. They were the most gorgeous shoes she had ever seen no matter the cheap material or gaudy color because they were hers. Welling up anew, she snatched the bag and the dress and ran back into her room to change.

In her excitement, she forgot to look at how the dress was supposed to be worn. She saw no zippers or buttons. It was obvious the dress would not fit over her shoulders. Before she could let out her frustration on the dress, she placed it on the bed face down. Taking a calming breath, she searched for a seam or slip or something that would open the dress enough for her to wear it. It took several minutes before she found the slit with the eye hook. Breathing a sigh of relief, she quickly changed into the dress. It fit a little snugly at the waist, but otherwise it fit perfectly. Noting the shoe size printed on the inside of the heel, she slipped the shoes on as well. Glad now that she had bothered to shower that morning, she spent several minutes trying to tame the mass of curls. She was not exactly allowed any cosmetic products outside of those needed for general hygiene.

Disgusted with the mess, she gave up and returned to the sitting area where Elgina waited.

"How much have you forgotten, Anabel?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I wandered what was taking so long when I saw you wrestling with the dress stays. Is it that you do not remember or something else?"

"Where I am from, clothes are fastened with buttons. I couldn't find any. It is so frustrating. I never know if it's my ignorance of this country's ways or my memory playing tricks."

"I see. Buttons are usually reserved for pants here. I will have to assign a transition nurse, Anabel. I'm sorry."

"I- Yes, of course. For how long?" Anabel said. She had been so close to freedom.

"Don't worry. She won't be a homestay nurse, but she will have to visit daily to make sure you're getting on well."

"I can live with that."

"She will report directly to me, and I will determine how long she will be assigned to you. Deal?"

"Deal!"

"Let's go shopping!"

"Yes!"

The two women linked arms collecting the credit chip and the brown canvas bag and stepped out into the world.



# Chapter Fourteen

Anabel's mind was a whirl with all she had to absorb. It would take a while before she would know how much a single credit was worth. She was grateful for Elgina's patient explanations both verbal and silent.

Given the small budget, she had managed to purchase only a few things. She was happy that she could at least keep the undergarments she had received during her stay at the hospital. She had been gone now for nearly a month and had yet to check in with Ella. Without her pack, there was no way for her to send communications through the gate.

Her new apartment was quite tiny, but it was still bigger than the dorm room she shared with Ella. It was a little lonely, but the privacy was welcome. Elgina had introduced her to her two neighbors Astrig and Ilda. The two older women had immediately adopted Anabel as one of theirs.

She developed a routine. Ilda would feed her dinner while Astrig escorted her to the clinic. The transition nurse only spent a week with her before she was satisfied that Anabel could fend for herself. She learned to shop for food on her meager budget. She decided on a job in Archives. It would probably be the best place to learn about this world. The other choices seemed rather tedious.

Two weeks after moving into her new apartment, Astrig and Anabel were walking to her weekly appointment at the clinic.

"When do you start your new position?" Astrig said.

"Hopefully next week. We'll have to see what the doctors say after this visit. I'm sure everyone would prefer I start earning my keep."

"You have such strange notions. No one has to earn their keep. We all contribute in some way."

"In what way do I contribute?"

"You keep an old woman company in her retirement."

"Oh please! You are anything but old!"

"Who said I was referring to myself?"

"You are incorrigible!"

Astrig only grinned. Anabel laughed at her friend's antics.

"You know I find it so strange that your doctors travel all the way from the capitol to this clinic. You would think they would leave your care to the locals."

"Pegga and Donnar feel responsible for me. They were the ones who found me after my accident."

"Were they? How fascinating. What were those two doing out at Arias?"

"Why? Who are they?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"Obviously."

"They work for the special council for the committee on national health. If they were going to vacation with their family, they would have went sailing on Blue Lake."

"Blue Lake, huh? I imagine that is a pretty swanky place?"

"Swanky? If you mean expensive and exclusive, then yes it is very swanky."

"Interesting. They never mentioned it."

"Well it wouldn't do to brag about one's status and wealth."

"Of course not."

"Can I ask you something?" Anabel said after a little while.

"Sure anything."

"How do I get back on that mountain?"

"At Arias National Park?"

Anabel nodded.

"Are you insane? Only trained doctors and EP are allowed to hike on the mountain trails. How you ever got up there is beyond me."

"That isn't true, though. Their kids were with them."

"They brought their kids out into the woods?" Astrig was incredulous.

"Yes, a teenage boy and a young girl."

"That is just bizarre! Well, you're right. You can hike in the mountains as a regular human

being as long as you have a pass from your doctor stating that you are fit enough to do so. You'll never get a pass like that." Astrig's tone was apologetic.

"I'm physically in the best shape of my life. As long as I have someone with me to alert the rangers if I don't check in, why shouldn't I get a pass?"

"Who would go with you? It's not as if you have an abundance of friends in town."

"I was hoping you would come with me."

"Me? Now I know you've lost your mind. What would I want with a place like that?"

"Please, Astrig. I'm begging you. I need to go back on that mountain. I need to know what happened to me there. You wouldn't even have to traipse all over the mountain. You could come to just where Pegga's family were camping. I'll message back to you every fifteen minutes. If I miss two checks in a row, you alert the rangers. What do you say?"

"Anabel, you're asking me to smuggle you up to a state park without the proper permits. Do you have any idea how irresponsible that would be?"

"No, I'm only asking you to agree to go with me so I can convince Pegga to grant me the pass. Nothing more. If Pegga denies me the permit, I won't ask you again. I promise."

"Alright, you can tell the doctors that I will be your spotter in the woods if you think it will be enough to convince them that you can go hiking up there again."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Anabel hugged the older woman as she practically danced in the street.

"Pegga, please tell me I am well enough to start work," Anabel said.

"Hello Anabel. Astrig, thank you for being so diligent about bringing Anabel to her appointments."

"You know, I am not a child. I can come to these appointments on my own."

"Yes, of course, Anabel. We just need to perform a few tests, so we can declare you fit for work."

"Then, let's get on with it."

"I'll just go wait in the lobby, Pegga."

"That will be fine, Astrig."

"So, depending on the results of these tests do you think I can go back to the camp site?"

"Anabel, you ask every visit. I always tell you the same thing. Today is not going to be any different."

"This time I am asking for permission to go with someone like Astrig. She will go to the camp site where you found me with me. Then, she can keep an eye on me. You've said countless times that physically I am in better condition than when you found me. If someone is with me, you won't have to worry if I relapse out in the woods alone."

Anabel pleaded silently with Pegga to agree.

"We shall see."

"Thank you, Pegga."

"Don't thank me yet. I have to consult with Donnar."

Anabel nodded. She heard the underlying warning. If Donnar did not like her wave scans, she was not going to be granted the permit she so desperately needed.

Pegga went about her examination and scans, making satisfied noises when she saw the results. She left the examination room leaving Anabel to pace the small room in a fit of anxiety.

"Anabel, I've spoken to Donnar. He wants to wait another week before granting you permission to visit Arias. However, you have been cleared to begin working starting Monday."

"Really?"

"Truly." Pegga nodded with a big grin.

"When is my next visit?"

Although happy with the news that she could start working, she was still in desperate need to get to the mountain. With all this scrutiny, there was no way for her to make an emergency exit through the gateway she had come in. She would have to find another. She had no idea how she would manage it. Almost every public transport logged their passengers through their credit chips. Private transport was restricted to emergency personnel and specialized doctors. It would take days to walk anywhere.

Her only option lay in acquiring the pack and finding a map and a friendly ear. It was the only way she would be able to plot a path home.

"Why are you so eager to get back to the site of such a traumatic event?"

"I need to know what happened to me."

"You don't think security personnel haven't scoured the park looking for evidence of what happened?"

"You don't understand! I need to remember. If I could just be there, wander around, maybe no I'm certain it will spark my memory."

Pegga fell silent as she studied the younger woman. She nodded once. She had come to a decision.

"Anabel, you will just have to remain patient. Here are your instructions to hand over to your supervisor when you start work."

Anabel's shoulders drooped in disappointment. Pegga handed over a sheaf of papers. Anabel made to stuff them in the canvas carryall only for Pegga to stop her with a minute shake of her head.

"Make sure you review those papers before handing them over. You will be held to these restrictions for the first week or two."

Anabel eyed the doctor for a moment before she shuffled through the pages. There in the middle of the stack were the permits she would need to enter the hiking trails at Arias National Park. Anabel nodded her thanks.

"Thank you, Pegga. I will make sure to look these over carefully."

"Be sure you do. You should get plenty of rest before you start work. Why don't you take your friend on a little excursion to Lake Aster? I know funds are tight, so here is a little spending money."

"Pegga, you are too kind. I'm sure Astrig would love to visit the lake. Thank you so much!"

The amount Pegga handed over was more than she had seen since she had left the hospital.

"That should be enough to get you both there and back on a private transport van."

"You've been so generous. Thank you."

Anabel stopped herself from giving the other woman a hug and settled for a somewhat watery smile before she quickly left the examination room to find Astrig.

After securing a rental to Lake Arias, Astrig and Anabel found themselves at the base of Mount Eyreen early the next day. It took them the better part of an hour to walk up to the camp site Pegga had marked on the map she had included with the permits.

"I honestly can't believe I let you talk me into this, Annie," Astrig said.

"I hate that name, Astrig. Stop your grouching. We're almost there and then you can sit for an hour if you want."

They were both a bit out of breath as they snapped at each other in good natured ribbing. Anabel carried an expandable carryall on her back. She fished out a bottle of water and handed it to the older woman. For all her complaining, she was only slightly out of breath and barely sweating. Fishing out the second bottle, the two drank deep as they broke through the trees and into the clearing that had set Anabel's life spinning in the complete opposite direction of what she had planned.

"See, I told you we were almost there."

"Yeah, yeah," Astrig said.

Anabel grinned as she explored the area. She tried to match the layout of the camp site with what she remembered of that night. Orienting herself with the ranger path off to the left, she tried to guess from which direction she had stumbled into the camp.

"What are you doing?" Astrig said. She settled herself on a stump after doing a few quick stretches.

"I'm trying to remember which way I came from."

Astrig about to blurt out a teasing remark stopped herself and fell silent. Anabel sent her a grateful smile. It was obvious the other woman understood just how important this was to Anabel if not the reasons for it. With the other woman now sitting silently, Anabel could concentrate.

She breathed in the smells of the forest, the remains of a camp fire, and the crunch of leaves under her feet. Memory returned in drips and brief flashes of remembered pain. She took off in the direction of her initial entry into the site. Following instinct and half remembered wisps of images, she found her way to the spot she had fallen. Fearing the rangers had found her pack during their search for evidence of an attack that had never happened, she began searching frantically.

"Anabel?"

Her head snapped up at the sound, her pulse beating a crazy tattoo in her temple. Realizing the voice had come from the message device at her hip, she sank back on her heels.

"Astrig, I'm fine. I just got a little excited."

"Watch your heart rate, Anabel. We don't need rangers descending on us en masse asking a bunch of questions."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'll be more careful," Anabel said.

The message device was linked to her med alert bracelet as per Pegga's instructions. Astrig was monitoring her vital signs from the camp site.

Deciding it was time for caution, Anabel took a calming breath, closing her eyes. She pictured herself sprawled on the ground. The pack had slipped off her shoulders and slid away to the right! Her eyes snapped open as she scrambled to her feet. She forced herself to walk in the direction she saw in her memory. There buried under several leaves and wedged under a tree root was her pack.

She fished through it quickly to make sure everything was still in there and intact. She found the communicator device. It looked surprisingly as if it had survived with hardly a blemish. She checked the power levels. With an excited, 'yes!', she discovered that the communicator was in standby mode and still had plenty of power. She set it aside as she found the folder with the pictures and a rough topographical map of the area surrounding each gate. She stuffed those in her carryall. Finding everything was exactly as she remembered, she began packing everything into her carryall. She folded the pack until she could shove it in the carryall as well. Next she removed the hospital sweats she had stuffed into the canvas bag to make it seem as if she carried more than she did. Satisfied that the bulges all looked familiar, she hid the unappealing gray clothes under a pile of leaves.

She sent her first message home and watched as the tiny silver ball flew away into the woods toward the gateway. She dared not approach the gateway on this visit. The temptation to step through it, her mission forgotten, was too great. Nor could she be sure if it had not been discovered.

# Chapter Fifteen

The grey room remained unchanged. Why Anabel expected anything different, she could not say. It would be another boring day in this terribly drab room followed by a mind numbing hours waiting for the one or two people to walk in and request records from the archives. With access to innumerable archives all over the city, few people ever came to this remote location. It would have been a perfect opportunity for her to do some research, but she could only access a file when someone placed a request. The amount of bureaucracy in this place was astonishing.

It did not help her mood at all that she felt nauseous again that morning. With a defeated sigh, Anabel started opening up the histories archive for business. She went about each task as slowly as she could. She challenged herself to find new ways of doing the simplest task if only to make the time pass a little faster. She had been chastised for decorating the walls by her supervisor. Anabel was convinced the old bat did nothing but stare at the security monitors all day for the other three archives Anabel visited on alternating basis. Of the four, this was truly the most boring. In any case, she was unable to even wile away the time reading without receiving an angry message from Haringa. How she detested the woman.

After an hour of dawdling over the pass over machine, watering the two plants in the lobby area, and re-arranging the waiting room's three chairs four or five times, Anabel greeted the first petitioner of the day. Happy to have something to do, Anabel smiled broadly at the elderly gentleman.

"Good morning, sir." Anabel was practically crowing.

"Good morning, Anabel. Have I told you what a strange name that is?" the older man said.

"Not since last week, Bennar," Anabel said. Her smile did not waiver. She gave the chair one final nudge so that it lined up perfectly with whatever geometric shape she had in her head.

"Would you like something to drink? I think we have a new herbal hot drink. We received a fresh batch of refreshments just yesterday."

"I would love to try it, dear Anabel, but you know with my stomach... It's best I stay with what I know," Bennar said.

Anabel could and sometimes did manage to repeat his response verbatim. He rarely responded with anything else.

"Then I will fetch you that warm cider presently."



Anabel walked into the employee break room. Humming to herself, she set about fixing Bennar his cider. Having set the machine to percolate, she returned to waiting area. It would take nearly an hour for the old machine to reach the right temperature. In the meantime, she could enjoy her visit.

"All set, Bennar," she said.

He was sitting in his usual chair. No matter how many times she re-arranged the furniture, he always managed to sit in the same chair with the blue scuff mark on the arm. She smiled at the sight. Her job was monumentally boring and by extension predictable, yet she still found Bennar's dependably predictable behavior endearing when it could have so easily been the one thing that sent her over the edge.

She sat in the chair closest to him, and offered another friendly smile.

"The cider will be ready before you know it. How is your garden?"

Anabel settled in for a nice chat with one of her favorite regular. After a half hour listening to and exclaiming over the new hybrid forsynthia bush he had just spliced that morning, she stood to collect the cider. She had no idea what a forsynthia bush was, but guessed it had to be some kind of flowering bush like the forsythia bushes outside her dorm room back in school.

"I do enjoy a nice hot cider," Bennar said.

"It is very soothing," Anabel said almost at the same time as Bennar said.

"Oh, so it is," he said catching himself.

Anabel smiled again. He was such a dear old man. After chatting for another half hour, he finally placed his petition. He did not any assistance from her. Truly the position required very little human interaction. However, if nothing else, Anabel prided her self in making the petitioners feel well served. She would often enter the petition herself, letting the petitioner dictate nearby.

A few minutes later, the tape machine spit out a petition request number. This number was the only way to enter the archive room. She could just wander in and stay for several hours even with a petitioner waiting outside. Unfortunately, she would do all that wandering in the dark. Once entered, the request number would provide a lit pathway that led straight to the requested file and nothing more. She had made the mistake of stepping off the lit pathway only once. She had to press her panic alarm for Haringa to come rescue her after she spent hours trying to find the way back to lobby in pitch darkness. Not only did the venture lead to an unpleasant lecture, it increased Haringa's vigilance. She would not readily repeat that mistake.

Retrieving the file took only moments. After placing the file in the pass over machine, she was able to hand the redacted copy of the file to Bennar's waiting hands. She escorted him to a room where he could review it in peace. She would have to wait until he finished before returning the original to the stacks. The copy would then need to be destroyed.

As safe as this world seemed to be, there were a great many controls on information. The pass over machines actually changed the content of some of the files. When she had asked Haringa in a rare moment of conversation, her supervisor claimed it was the government's way of ensuring only the most current medical data was available. It would make sense if that were the things people were requesting. This government readily changed history in the official archives and no one has ever called them on it. It was unnerving how readily people believed what they were told.

She was more surprised that there were not anarchist groups or something anything that even resembled a rebellious movement.

Bennar returned an hour later with the copy.

"Thanks, dear Anabel. The information was just what I needed for my next hybridization project. See you next week!"

He traipsed happily out the door. One thing that had been astonishing and gratifying to see were the number of older people who moved just as spry as any twenty-something. Canes were rare sights even in this sleepy corner of retirees and pensioners. She waved at his retreating back waiting until he had left before returning to the stacks, both sets in hand. The copy had to be destroyed in the archive room. Another lesson she had to learn the hard way.

Entering the return code, she waited as the lights program re-calibrated. She walked the quiet corridor lit by tiny LED like lights in the floor. After making sure it was the original she put back, she tapped in the second return code at the file location. The lights hummed for moment before rearranging and pointing the way to the recycler. Once fully engulfed, the lights hummed again this time showing her the way back.

She did not expect any more petitioners today, so she was surprised to find one waiting for her. She was even more surprised since the doors automatically lock whenever she entered the archive room or at least that was what she had been led to believe. She had never needed to test the theory before. The second shock was discovering that the person waiting for her was not an elderly person but a young man, perhaps in his twenties. The third shock hit her when he landed a fist to her stomach.

With an oomph, she fell to the ground winded. He stepped over her toward the petition screen. With his back to her, she hit the panic button around her neck that she had not had a chance to stow before she was attacked.

"What's the entry code?" he said. He was yelling into her ear as he grabbed her by the hair

bending her neck backwards.

Still winded from the hit to the stomach, she was unable to answer. He drew back his other fist, but now that she was no longer caught by surprise she managed to avoid being hit. With a swift elbow to the groin, she was free. She scrambled quickly to the archives door and entered the emergency code, one she had never thought she would need.

With a roar, he was inches behind her before she managed to slam the door shut. The pneumatic locks engaged in quick succession. The area immediately around the door was well lit. The room behind her remained in darkness. She braced her arms in front of her, resting her head on the door when she felt the impact of his fists on the other side. Startled she took a step back.

Almost at the edge of pool of light, she stepped forward quickly. She did not want to be lost in the stacks after the ordeal she had just undergone. The pounding on the door went on for hours, or so it seemed. In reality it was only minutes before Haringa and a couple of medical officers opened the door to find Anabel standing in a pool of blood.

"Anabel!"

"Haringa!" Anabel said.

It appeared the medics had arrived at the same time as her supervisor.

# Chapter Sixteen

Anabel noticed the warmth streaming down her legs. She felt light headed. She looked down to discover blood sliding down the inside of her thigh. She nearly fainted. Gripping the door handle of the archive door with both hands, Anabel managed to remain conscious. For once thankful of the constant medical scrutiny she had been in since arriving in this place, she depressed the emergency alert button on her medical alert band.

Choking back a nearly hysterical laugh at the memory of geriatrics yelling something about not being able to get up, she inhaled slowly and deeply, expelling the air in her lungs slowly. She had vowed to stay away from hospitals at any expense, but that vow rang rather hollow now. The archives job had been such a great idea. If she could at least gather intelligence, that would make her utter failure to remain unnoticed somewhat less complete. Except now again she was on her way to another government run hospital.

The medics found her still gripping the door, her head bowed while blood continued to seep down her leg.

After answering their questions, they rushed her to the hospital. Anabel allowed herself to slip into unconsciousness. She was not safe, not by a long shot, but she was out of immediate danger. It would just have to do.

A steady beeping sound finally managed to rouse Anabel into consciousness. After a quick look around, she realized she was lying in a hospital bed. Whatever this place lacked in the modern amenities she was used to, they certainly made up in medical know how. Here cancer was treated with an outpatient procedure, heart attacks with a pill. While strange hemorrhaging and loss of consciousness with a few hours in a hospital bed and a saline drip? This seemed much more reminiscent of a hospital back home than this dimension.

"I see we're awake. I'm Dr. Costas," a woman in smart business suit said as she entered the room.

The woman made a note on the electronic medchart. Anabel had become accustomed to the terminology in the numerous medical facilities she had been in and out of since they had discovered her wandering disoriented and disheveled the day she had arrived.

"Yes, I am. Why am I attached to such a relic?" Anabel said pointing with her chin to the IV stand holding a bag of saline.

"We resort to tried and true methods when we have cases like yours," the doctor answered.

"Cases like mine? Why, what's wrong with me, doctor?" Anabel said trying to scramble into a sitting position using her elbows.

"Now, now calm down. There is nothing wrong. The attack stressed a blood vessel in your uterus causing the hemorrhaging. The baby is fine," she said soothingly.

"Baby?!" Anabel said nearly choking on the word.

"Yes, I thought you knew. Usually, it's only pregnant women who are otherwise healthy are the only ones with medical alert bracelets," the doctor said with confusion.

"You mean, you don't have my records?" Anabel said distracted momentarily from the bomb the doctor had just dropped in her lap.

"No, which is a little strange, but not unheard of. The chip was probably damaged in the attack. We have the ID number off the bracelet and should have your records shortly. I take it that your pregnancy was not the reason you carried a monitoring device?" Dr. Acostas said sitting at the edge of the bed.

"No, I didn't know I was pregnant. None of my doctors felt it was important information to have," she said bracingly.

"You're not that far along. It could simply be that the levels of hormone in your blood were not high enough to detect. We don't usually screen for pregnancy unless there is cause to suspect that is the case. What is the reason for your Med Alert?" the doctor nodded towards her now useless medical alert bracelet.

Anabel sighed as she told the doctor about the "accident," her memory loss and the disorientation afterwards.

"Doctors found the levels of carcinogens in my system unacceptable. I've been in and out doctor's offices and hospitals for months. The doctors allowed me to work as long as I wore this," she said holding up her wrist.

"I see. Well, my dear whatever treatment you have been receiving for the last few months have cleared out any trace of carcinogens. You're perfectly healthy and so is the baby," Dr. Costas said patting her knee above the sheets.

"There goes that word again. How can I possibly be pregnant?" she said, the fear and bewilderment clear in her voice.

"The old fashioned way still works. There were no birth control chemicals in your system nor the typical devices a woman of your age would have implanted to prevent your condition," the doctor said dryly.

"I'm aware of that. I just haven't had any contact, old-fashioned or otherwise, since..." Realization hit her like blow to the head.

"Oh no, could it have happened before my accident? Is that why I was wandering around in

that field?" she said genuine fear in her voice.

The doctor noted her patient's pallor and the fear.

"You think you were attacked?" Dr. Costas said, all hint of humor now gone replaced with concern and no-nonsense determination.

"I- I don't know," she nearly wailed.

She knew of course. That night three months ago when Gabriel had seduced her at his parent's cabin. What was she going to do now? She had barely escaped her doctors' scrutiny. This world's obsession with health and proper living was hardly a menace to her world, but she had barely scratched the surface. Now she would be under further scrutiny and unable to take the risks she would have before she discovered her condition.

Unfortunately, she could not mention Gabriel or her mission. She could only express her dismay by lying. Anxiety beat at her as her thoughts refused to focus.

"Calm down now, Anabel," Dr. Costas was saying.

Anabel barely heard. Could she terminate the pregnancy? Did she even want to? Would they allow it? Here life was sacred. They did not even have the death penalty. Murder was not only rare, it was the ultimate taboo. Would they allow it when the mother was in no danger?

Anabel could not believe she was even contemplating any of this. She was Catholic for Pete's sake! Except she was alone, no backup and no way to return home, at least not for another six months at best. By then she would be the size of a house and unable to cross without possibly harming her baby. Her baby. Oh God, her baby.

"Anabel, I need you to calm down. This is not good for the baby," the doctor was saying even as she signaled for a nurse.

"I would rather not give you a sedative," she was saying.

Nothing the doctor said was getting through. Anabel rocked herself as her arms wrapped protectively around her middle. Tears slipped down her cheeks as she stared unseeingly into the room.

The nurse finally arrived with the light therapy machine. They would never risk a chemical sedative on a pregnant woman. The nurse doused the lights, as she and the doctor slid protective lenses on her face. The gentle pulses of light began to have their desired effect as Anabel started to calm down.

The lights came back on. Dr. Costas ripped the lenses from her face. The intake doctors were going to get an earful once she had their names. The girl was hardly out of school, pretty and alone. How could they fail to test for the most routine of matters? It was

supposed to be a matter of course to check for assault and pregnancy. The old hormone tests required weeks before one could determine conception. The latest technology could identify pregnancy within days. Damn it! It should have come up.

"We'll get you a full work up, make sure the baby is doing well. We'll see what treatments you've had since your accident to see if there is anything else we should be looking for. In the meantime, relax, okay?" the doctor said patting her knee.

She got to her feet, checked her vitals one more and with a final note in Anabel's medchart she nodded the nurse out of the room.

Finally calm, Anabel began to plan ahead. There was nothing she could do without more information. The hospital would not allow her to leave until they had finished running their tests and that could take days. In the meantime, she would research the laws and attitudes of this country. That could wait until tomorrow, though.

She lay one hand on her abdomen. Her brow was furrowed with worry. Pregnant. A baby was growing inside her. Her lips quirked up in a small smile and brow smoothed. Afraid to fall in love with the tiny creature she harbored inside herself, she removed her hand from her belly. She closed her eyes determined to get some sleep. *Tomorrow, tomorrow I will make my choice.*

# Chapter Seventeen

After a day of tests, Anabel was finally able to escape the hospital. They had been unable to get her medalert bracelet functioning sufficiently to get all of her records. Certain that they would keep trying, Anabel convinced Dr. Costas that she should be released.

Once the doctor learned where she worked, she almost stopped the discharge process.

"You were attacked at Archives? No, I can't let you leave this hospital in your condition if you insist on going back to work."

"Archives has to be the least threatening place for a pregnant woman on the planet," Anabel said.

"Oh, is that why you are in a hospital? Because you were bored into bleeding into a faint?"

"Fine, where do you propose I work, then? I will have to provide for this baby."

"Your department will provide for your expenses while you recover. When I clear you for work, there is a file clerk position available right here in this hospital," the doctor said.

"I'm sure I'll be able to find employment on my own, doctor. Just give me a list of tasks I am fit to perform, and I'll take it from here."

Anabel would starve before she willingly set foot in another hospital.

"I'll have a clerk forward the information to your address," she said.

"Thank you, doctor," Anabel said.

"Please you are always so formal. I am Laniga. You don't have to keep calling me doctor. Now I've arranged for transport. Don't argue. You are still not in any fit state to take public transit."

"Yes, doct- Laniga," she said.

"Good." With a decisive nod Laniga walked away to continue her rounds.

"Astrig!" Anabel said.

"Anabel, what are you doing out of bed?" The other woman exclaimed as she stepped into the room.

"I've been discharged. The hospital arranged for transport."



"Nonsense. I'm taking you home myself. Imagine being assaulted at an Archives station. That is just unheard of! You must have been so frightened!"

"I can admit to being terrified without a qualm," Anabel said.

"Listen to you. You'd think this happens all the time. Don't tell me you're going home in hospital grays?"

"Okay, I won't," Anabel said.

"Stop that. I brought you a change of clothes just in case, and now I'm glad I did. Here go change. I'll wait out here."

Astrig handed over a canvas bag with a pair of black fibrose pants and a soft synthetic teal top along with fresh under clothes and even a pair of shoes. Touched, Anabel surreptitiously wiped the moisture from her eyes.

"Go on!" Astrig said. She shooed her away towards the water closet.

Feeling better now that she was wearing her own clothes, Anabel stepped out into the hospital room to find Astrig speaking with an orderly.

"Don't worry about a thing. I'm her neighbor. I'll make sure she gets home and that she follows everything on this list to the letter."

"Oh, no what have you promised?" Anabel said.

"No, I don't want to hear it. We are taking you home and into bed," Astrig said. She began steering Anabel into the transport chair.

"I can walk," Anabel tried to argue.

"Silence, young lady. Don't make me call my sister."

Astrig's sister was a homestay nurse. She had a reputation among her patients even Anabel did not want to encounter. They say most people get well just to avoid her harassment.

"Fine, Astrig. I will follow the doctor's instructions to the letter."

Anabel went meekly into the transport chair, allowing Astrig to take her out to the waiting medical air van. As her voluntary caregiver, Astrig was allowed to board the van. Astrig kept up a scintillating one way conversation about her day down to the minutest detail. Of course Anabel knew her neighbor was only trying to distract her from what had happened to her. Unfortunately, it had the opposite affect. She could not concentrate on one word the woman was saying, letting her mind wander.

"Why was he after the archives?" Anabel said.

"What?" Astrig said cutting off mid-stream.

Anabel was startled for a moment. She had not realized she had spoken aloud.

"Nothing, go on," Anabel said.

She did not want to have this discussion in a government transport vehicle. After giving Anabel a strange look that Anabel could not quite interpret, Astrig continued with her verbal stream of consciousness. Anabel let the words wash over her careful to remain conscious of her thoughts.

Perhaps it was ironic she had been thinking that there was no resistance to such a heavily controlling society when she had been attacked by the very embodiment of a rebel. Whether part of a movement or the act of an individual she would have to determine. It made sense. Why else were records reviewed and changed before they were presented to a member of the public? Indeed, the Archives had better security and more procedures than most banks. Archives and such were probably attacked every day but went unreported. What would be said of her attack?

"How did you know I was in the hospital? They could not find my information. I didn't give them your contact information either," Anabel said.

This time she had not interrupted Astrig. The woman had stopped speaking ages ago but Anabel had not noticed.

"It was all over the news screens, Annie."

"Don't call me that," Anabel said automatically.

"Sorry, Anabel," Astrig said.

"What do the reports say?"

"That you were assaulted outside of the Archives by sexual pervert. It must have been terrible," Astrig said. She had taken Anabel's hand in one hand and was now patting it with the other.

"That it was," Anabel agreed.

The rest of the ride to their apartment complex finished in silence. Anabel even managed to doze for a little while. Astrig reassured her that she would get Anabel to her room on the medical lift. The lifts were never supposed to be used by residents unless given permission. He handed over two medical passes for the use of both women during Anabel's confinement. Thanking him, they bid the driver goodbye.

Armed with their passes, the doctor's instructions, and a satchel of medical supplies so they would not have to stop at a pharmacy, Astrig led her neighbor to the lift and then into her apartment.

"Astrig, thank you-"

"Not another word. You're not going to back to your apartment, so you might as well get comfortable. I messaged ahead to Ilda next door. She will get your clothes from your apartment."

"Astrig, please," she said before the other woman could interrupt. "I have no intention of making a liar of you. I am staying put. I just wanted to thank you for all your help."

"Oh! Well, of course! Don't say another word about it. Imagine me leaving a young thing like yourself to fend for herself and in your condition!"

Anabel smiled a little smile. The two were sitting in Astrig's guestroom. Anabel was already in bed having borrowed a sleeping gown from her neighbor. Astrig stood by the dresser facing away from Anabel while she arranged the medical supplies.

"Astrig?"

"What is it?"

Astrig turned to look at her over her shoulder.

"I wasn't attacked outside the Archives."

"What? Of course you were! It's all over the screens. You're just confused. You've been through so much."

"Astrig, please listen to me. I was not attacked outside the Archives building. He managed to get in while I was inside the stacks. He was waiting for me in the lounge."

"That's impossible. Everyone knows you can't get in when the clerk is in the vault." Astrig had now turned fully to look at Anabel. She could see her grasping the edge of the dresser even as she saw incredulity in every line of her expression.

"I'm telling you the truth, Astrig. That man was no sexual pervert or if he was, I was not his goal. He tried to get into the stacks," Anabel said. Her voice was even, reasonable. She wanted no misunderstanding. Although why it was important Astrig believe her, she could not say.

"Why would anyone want to break into an archive vault? All the information is freely available. All you have to do is ask."

"Did you know that the files are altered before they're handed over to a petitioner?" Anabel said it in a conversational tone, as if what she said was quite irrelevant. Her head was turned down as she made a pretense of studying the pattern of the quilt covering her legs.

"What are you saying, Anabel?"

"Wouldn't you want to see the original files?"

"Why? I would want the most up to date information. Everyone one knows that's why the originals are altered."

"Everyone? I'm surprised you knew that. Most petitioners have no idea that the file I hand over is nothing more than a duplicate of the file I pulled from the vault as you call it. Why is that? Why do you call it the vault? I've never heard it referred to that way."

"I'm used to calling secure places like that vaults. I worked in a bank before I retired."

"That is something I find odd, Astrig. Most people don't retire so young. You can't be more than fifty, still very young."

"Yes, well I wanted to pursue a career change. You know that. I've gone back to school."

"Yes I remember. I haven't had a memory lapse in weeks. You never talk about your classes or assignments. You talk about everything, but never about school. I've even spoken to some of the neighbors. They never see you go out. Why is that?"

"I take courses from home. Its all the rage now."

"Oh, is the compu- I mean the wave machines been allocated to retirees? Is it in your bedroom? I didn't see it on the way in."

"The wave machine hasn't arrived. I receive the course materials via message. What's with the interrogation, Annie?"

"It's weird. That nickname you keep insisting on giving me. People from around here would normally have shortened my name to Ang or even Belga, I've heard both. They're both hideous, mind you. Although not quite as hideous as Annie. That sounds more like something I'd here back home."

"Home? I thought you couldn't remember where you were from."

"Oh, I remember the people, customs and even the language. None of that has seemed to help me remember the location. I look at a map and can't make sense of it, but I never told you that I couldn't remember where I was from. That's something I only told Pegga and Donnar during my interrogation."

Astrig had fallen silent. She looked pale, almost stricken. Her shoulders slumped as she rested her weight against the dresser.

"What is it you're accusing me of, Anabel?"

"I don't know. What is it you're hiding? I thought we were becoming friends."

"We are."

"Then? How do you know so much about me? Have you been watching me? Who do you work for?"

Anabel was now leaning forward on the bed, her elbows on her thighs as she held her hands clasped together loosely.

"I managed to steal a look at your file before it was destroyed."

"Destroyed? My file? At the hospital?"

"No, not at the hospital at least not at this hospital."

"Then where?"

"Anabel, you've been through a great deal. You weren't supposed to get hurt."

"Supposed to get hurt? What do you know? Did you send that man to get into the stacks-" she shook her head angrily as she corrected herself, "the vault?"

"Calm down. Remember the baby," Astrig said. She waved her hands in a downward motion, trying to pacify her.

"Oh yes, the baby," Anabel said. Her tone was caustic, but then with her hands on her stomach, the derisive expression disappeared. Wonder replaced it. She looked down at the protective way her hands cradled her abdomen.

"My baby," she said in a hushed voice.

"Yes, think of your baby. We can talk about all of this in the morning. You need to rest. You promised."

"Oh yes or you'll subject me to your sister's tender mercies. That is if you even have a sister," she said with an arched eyebrow.

"I do have a sister who is indeed a formidable nurse."

"Fine, we will talk about this in the morning, and not because I failed to notice that you didn't

threaten me with summoning your sister."

Astrig smiled. She did not exactly relax, but she no longer seemed ready to snap under the tension. She walked over to the bed as Anabel settled in. Once Anabel was fully reclined, Astrig drew the covers up to the younger woman's chin.

"Good night, Astrid."

Astrig froze at the name.

"What did you call me?"

"Hmm? Oh, I'm sorry. Astrid is the way you would say your name where I'm from."

"I see. Don't go around using that version of my name. It is a rather rude word here," Astrig said.

"Oh, then I am doubly sorry. Be careful with your lies, Astrig, especially the ones easily checked on."

With a knowing look, Anabel closed her eyes. She did not think she would be able to sleep, especially with a woman who she did not trust standing so close. Her tired body did not last five seconds once she had closed her eyes. She did not miss the stricken look return to Astrig face before she closed them. The woman was a terrible spy.

# Chapter Eighteen

"I received a message from the hospital. They are sending a transition nurse tomorrow to make sure you're following the doctor's instructions," Astrig said.

Astrig passed on the message as she leaned in through the door to the bedroom Anabel was resting in.

"Seriously? I seem to spend a great deal of time being visited by nurses. Isn't your word good enough?"

"Don't get testy, Anabel. I told them you were laying in bed like a good girl. They still have to take some scans to make sure you are mending and that the baby is safe."

"I know. I don't have to like it."

"No, but you do have to deal with it."

"When did they say they would be here?"

"Some time in afternoon."

"Then we have time to go to my room and get a few things."

"Just tell me what they are. We can't have to bending and stretching and aggravating that torn blood vessel."

"Astrig, I'm sure you understand that I don't feel comfortable having anyone going through my things."

"Don't you trust me?"

"It's not a matter of trust, Astrid."

Astrig grimaced at the name.

"Of course not. I'll still have to go with you to make sure you follow doctor's orders."

"Fine," Anabel said curtly.

Anabel drew back the covers and made to get up.

"Not so fast, Ana girl. The hospital sent this along by courier. I was only supposed to use to move you around the apartment. A few feet more shouldn't make much of a difference."

"Are you serious? I walked into the apartment without any help last night!"

"Sorry kid. I got new instructions when this arrived. They must have changed their mind. I wouldn't be surprised if they ask you to check back into the hospital."

"Don't even joke about that. I never want to see the inside of another of this country's hospitals."

"How do you expect to give birth to the little one, then?"

"What no home births?"

"They happen, but again it takes special permission and a textbook pregnancy. You're not off to a good start."

"Great. I'll think of something when the time comes. Maybe my memory will return before then and I can go home."

"There is that option. Except, if you had anyone to go home to wouldn't they have come looking for you by now?"

"I'm sure my family is worried that I haven't communicated, but they weren't expecting me back for months."

"You remembered something?"

Anabel scooted over into the portable wheelchair-like machine Astrig brought to the side of the bed.

"Not really. Something you said about becoming a student made me realize that I was suppose to come here to start classes. What I was doing on that mountain is beyond me."

"Have you given it any more thought?"

"Why don't we wait until the social worker arrives to go over my plans? I would still prefer working to collecting a student's stipend."

"What's wrong with a student stipend?"

"Nothing, but you already know how I feel. If I could earn my way, I'd prefer it."

"I really don't understand you. How are you going to improve yourself if you don't go to school? You have no skills. Wouldn't you prefer to be doing something more than minding the store?"

"Of course I do, but I have a feeling I already have those skills. I just need to remember



them, and I'm not going to if everyone insists on coddling."

"So you know better than the entire medical establishment of the capitol?"

"Why am I arguing with you? I'll just do as I please and so will you. Is the social worker supposed to be here today?"

"Social worker?"

"The community support specialist that is going to get me set up with a new job?"

"Oh, um, I got a message about that. It's being rescheduled until after you talk to the transition nurse."

"Huh, that's weird. Did you get a name for who is supposed to be coming? I really hope it's Elgina."

"Elgina was transferred after she placed you here."

"What? Why?"

They had finally made it to Anabel's bedroom.

"I don't know, Anabel. She never said."

"Are you still able to contact her?" Anabel turned to look at the older woman.

"Sure. It takes a while to get a response, though."

"Why?"

"She's in a remote area. Wave messaging has to go to paper before it reaches her. It takes a long time to transcribe."

"Seriously?"

"Truly."

"Can you give me some privacy? I'm assuming I can rifle through drawers without getting into too much trouble."

"I have to stay and make sure you don't leave that chair."

"Astrig, you're being ridiculous. I don't need a babysitter."

"I don't want to give them any excuse to send you back to the hospital."

"Astrig, can't you just go wait in the living room? I'll leave the door open. You'll still be able to see me, okay?"

Astrig studied the younger woman's earnest expression before she nodded.

"Alright, Ana girl. Just stay in sight."

"Yes, Mother."

"Don't make me regret this, Anabel."

"What is it that you're not telling me, Astrid?"

"Just be quick."

Anabel hesitated before she turned away to the dresser behind her. She lifted clothes from the middle drawer and sorted through them until she sensed Astrig had left the room. With a quick glance under her shoulder to make sure Astrig was no longer watching before she reached into the drawer cavity to find the communicator and beacon. She typed a quick message to Ella before releasing the tiny metallic ball. With another furtive look over her shoulder, she unlatched the window to let the communicator escape. Latching the window again, she replaced the beacon in its hiding spot.

Taking a few more articles of clothing from the drawer, she called back to Astrig that she was ready to go.

"Ms. Cardenas?" the transition nurse said.

"No, I'm her neighbor. Anabel is resting."

"That's good to hear." The nurse nodded to someone out of sight out in the hall.

The nurse stepped aside to allow two security officers to enter the apartment. Astrig with obvious alarm walked backwards away from the security guards.

"What is this about?" Astrig said.

"Please do not interfere," the transition nurse said.

"But I don't understand. I've followed the doctor's instructions. She's been on bed rest since I brought her home," she protested.

"Please, Astrig, we thank you for your service, but Miss Cardenas needs to come with us."

"Astrig?" Anabel said.

She had heard the commotion and had climbed on the transport chair to investigate. She now waited in the doorway of the guest bedroom surrounded by the two security officers.

"Miss Cardenas? We need you to come with us. Your lab results have come back. We need to re-admit you into the hospital."

"But why? I'm fine. Astrig is taking good care of me."

"Miss Cardenas, we can discuss this once the doctors have had a chance to examine you for themselves."

"Anabel, you should have been more forthcoming with the Dr. Costas. She was so incensed that we failed to perform a routine pregnancy test, she kept digging into your medical history."

Anabel only glared at Pegga across the interrogation room.

"Anabel, do yourself a favor and tell me what you were doing in the woods. We have your readings from that day. Why don't you tell us why your heart rate spiked when you reached this spot."

Pegga slid across an aerial view of a wooded area with a red circle in the middle of it.

"I don't recognize the area," Anabel said. She injected as much sincerity into her voice as she could. It was the truth. From above, the wooded area may as well been on another continent. She could not tell the difference.

"Perhaps from this angle."

Another picture was placed in front of Anabel. This time a shot from the ground. The leaves on the ground were obviously disturbed, deep grooves were visible in the dirt.

"This is where I fell." Anabel shrugged and slid the picture back across the table.

"You showed no signs of injury when you were examined on your return."

"I did not fall on that occasion. I remembered tripping over something and falling the night you found me. I was excited that some of my memories were returning."

"What else did you remember?"

Anabel released a defeated sigh. She placed an elbow on the table and rested her head on her hand. Looking at the picture she said a quiet, "Nothing."

"Anabel, you stayed in this area a long time. Are you telling me you remembered nothing? That you found nothing?"

Anabel looked at Pegga trying to assess what it was the woman was after.

"I stayed there in the hopes that I would jog my memory further, but I remembered nothing!"

"Care to tell us who you left these for then?"

Pegga snapped a picture of a pile of gray sweats covered in dried leaves almost angrily on the table.

"Left what? Hospital grays? What makes you think those are mine?" Anabel stalled for time to think. They had not guessed that she had found something out in the woods which was a relief. Unfortunately, she was having trouble coming up with a reasonable explanation for why she had left them there.

"They are covered in your biological material. Unless you found them in the woods and rubbed the clothes all over yourself, they could be no one's but yours."

"My carryall was getting heavy. I grabbed it and in my excitement for the outing didn't bother to check if I had anything else in there. I shoved a few bottles of water and emergency kit and walked out the door. I dumped them there to lighten my pack."

The lie had come in time and hopefully convincing. It was partially true. She had dumped the clothes to lighten the weight of the carryall before she added the things from the pack she had found.

"Then why hide them? Why not just bring them back with you to the camp site?"

"I was tired and it was heavy. I didn't think beyond getting rid of them immediately. I hid them because I was fairly certain it was illegal to dump things in the middle of a National Forest. There was some joy in burying what those clothes represented."

Anabel allowed some of the bitterness she felt at being incarcerated once again to seep into her voice.

"Stop lying to us, Anabel. You think we can't tell your lying? Your heart beat has betrayed you."

Pegga slammed her palm into the table.

"Pegga, I'm not lying to you. Whatever physiological readings you have are due to nothing more than the stress of being locked up again. What were you expecting me to say? That I left clothes out for someone out in the woods and it's taken them seven months to collect them?"

"We found it, Anabel, we found-"

Anabel's heart began to pound. Could this be the way to warn these people of the coming invasion without ending up locked up in a state hospital for the rest of her natural life? Had they found the gateway?

"Pegga, that's enough. You're both becoming over excited. We have to remember her condition," Donnar said.

"Donnar-

"I said that is enough. Security officers will escort you to your room, Anabel."

He grabbed Pegga by the upper arm and marched her out of the room. Anabel slumped back in her chair. This could have been the moment that would have redeemed her entire mission. Raised voices were filtering back in through the open door. Anabel stood and made her way as silently as she could to listen at the doorway.

"...we would have all the intelligence we needed if you hadn't sent her into the woods prematurely. We needed that week to set up proper surveillance and now you're about to botch the biggest interview of our career!"

"She was desperate and grateful. I was sure she would make a mistake..."

Anabel drew away from the door at the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. She sat staring pensively at the pictures Pegga left on the table. What did they suspect her of and why have did they wait three weeks before interrogating her? She followed the security officers lost in thought. She was not sure why she felt so betrayed by Pegga's and Donnar's conversation. They had always been her jailers or her stalkers. If she could not turn to them, she was stuck here until at least the birth of her baby.

She had no idea what they would do with her after that.

# Chapter Nineteen

"Gabriel?" Anabel said tremulously.

"What are you doing here?"

"Anabela!" he said softly with equal parts relief and elation.

Grinning excitedly he stepped into the room and stopped mid-stride.

"Anabel?" he said, hurt dripping from every syllable. His voice shook just a little bit.

Before she could respond the look of misery slipped from his face replaced with a cold mask of indifference.

"Who is the father?" he said with little inflection.

"You are, you idiot!" she said, insulted by his assumption.

"But how?"

"The old-fashioned way," she said echoing Dr. Costas long ago response to the same question she had posed oh so many months ago.

"I realize that, but we never, I mean I don't remember us..." he stopped at a rare loss for words.

"How long have you been here? You don't look like you stepped through today. The disorientation and memory loss isn't supposed to last that long," she said sitting up in her hospital bed.

"Disorientation? No, I'm immune to that stuff. It's why I chose Earth Prime."

"Then how could you have forgotten the last time we saw each other?" she said genuinely confused.

"Anabel, the last time I saw you was the day before we all split up. You didn't want to say good-bye, and took off the next morning before I could say anything."

"I couldn't face you the morning after, well after that night," she said blushing.

"What do you mean after that night? Are you telling me you and Ivan..." he began, his voice becoming colder.

"What? No! I've never felt that way about him. I mean after what you and I... did that night.

You practically seduced me!" she said her cheeks now further inflamed.

"Are you saying, that I..." he paused, "and I don't remember?!" he said incredulously.

"What? You think I'm making this up? How do you think I feel? I give myself to you and you don't even remember?"

"This can't be right..." he said shaking his head.

"Well, considering you're not even supposed to be here, do you think we can take up this conversation somewhere a little safer?" she said struggling to get out of the bed.

The monitors would have noted her elevated heart rate and general agitation by now. If a nurse had not noticed yet, one soon would and come to investigate.

"Do you have something to fool the monitors?" she said as she finally managed to get to her feet. She was dressed in sweats, unappealing but serviceable. If she could only find shoes. Gabriel handed her a pair rubber soled shoes.

"What? Yeah, I do. You're right we can talk later," he said finally snapping out of his moment of shock and taking control of the situation.

He brought out a thick tablet from his bag, typed a few commands and quickly bypassed the monitoring feeds attached to Anabel replacing them with stable readings. He nodded and Anabel began removing the seemingly endless devices adhered to various parts of her body.

"Do you have a plan on getting me out of here?" she asked as she removed the last device.

"Yes, come on. We have another five minutes before the nurse starts her rounds down at this end. Can you take the stairs?" he said as the thought stopped him in his tracks.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said dismissively.

"Alright, then let's go."

He slowly opened the door to the hall. Seeing the hallway empty, he signaled for Anabel to follow. A few furtive steps later, they were at the door to the stairs. He had disabled the alarm on his way in, but was still careful to avoid making any noise as he opened the door. Anabel scuttled into the stairwell as quickly as she could in her condition. Waiting a beat, she moved to start descending the stairs when Gabriel stopped her. His hand on her elbow, he shook his head and pointed up.

With wrinkled brow she indicated her confusion even as she moved to comply.

Mouthing, "Later," he moved to follow. Their soft soled shoes made little noise on the concrete steps as they quickly ascended.

Anabel paused at the next level, but Gabriel only shook his head once more. They ascended two more levels before they came across a sign for the sky bridge that led into the next wing of the hospital. With a questioning glance over her shoulder, Anabel caught his nod of ascent. He jerked his head in the direction of the sky bridge. When they reached the door, he once again stopped her with a hand to her elbow. He put his hand up as if to say wait one more moment.

With care, Gabriel slowly opened the door once again checking the way was clear. He nodded once more to Anabel, ushering her through the second door. The sky bridge was eerily lit with low bluish light. Anabel avoided looking over the edge. She had never been afraid of heights, but the lights and and the night sky made were too disorienting. With a hand to her growing belly, she stepped across the silent bridge quickly.

Once on the other side, Gabriel ushered them into a restroom. He pulled out a change of clothes for Anabel from his pack. He handed the clothes over, indicating with his chin that she should change in the stall closest to them.

Feeling a little safer now that they were out of the maternity wing, he explained the rest of the plan in a quiet voice as he listened to the rustle of clothes as she changed.

They made their way to the out patient tower and descended the all purpose elevator without incident. As they stepped out of the hospital, Anabel could not suppress a relieved sign.

"Do you have a vehicle nearby?" Anabel asked.

"No, I wasn't expecting that you were actually incapacitated," he said sheepishly.

"You were taking me out of a hospital. Did it not occur to you that something could have actually been wrong?" she said in exasperation.

"I believed they were holding you prisoner, not that you were actually in need of care. Should you even be out of the hospital?" he said as the thought dawned on him.

"I wouldn't have let you take me out of there if I still needed care," she said still exasperated.

"Well, it isn't far. Come on, we'll take it slow. If we find transport, we'll take it, okay?" he said displaying his own exasperation.

"Fine," she said slinging her pack more firmly unto her shoulder.

"Which way?" she asked, her brows raised.

"This way," he said nodding east.

"How can you be sure the baby is mine?" he said after they had walked for an hour in silence.



"Because I remember our night together," she answered tersely.

"What if your mind just invented the memory to explain your pregnancy? What if someone else had come into your room?" he said, keeping his voice even and reasonable.

"And who else would that be? My sister's boyfriend, your best friend? Do you think so little of Ivan? Of me?" she asked. Her words were halting as her breathing became more labored.

He did not notice and continued the discussion.

"I know he fell first for you. Only when he realized you only had eyes for me, did he notice your sister."

"What? He's been in love with my sister for eons!" she scoffed even as she fought to keep from panting.

"He wasn't about to advertise this to you, but I'm not blind. I can see how you two look at each other when you think I'm not looking," he said grimly.

"Now, I'm suppose to have the hots for him? Weren't you just saying that I had eyes only for you?" she said as she stopped walking.

Gabriel turned to look at her, stopping a few feet away.

"Look, I'm just saying that its possible you're remembering things differently because you felt guilty. The trip through the gate can be disorienting. It scrambles your memories a little," he said matter-of-factly.

"Yes, I know. I went through it. You're supposedly immune. Have you thought that just maybe you're not actually immune? That maybe you just have a slightly higher tolerance, so you don't experience the disorientation but your memory is still affected?" she said with a raised brow.

"You could be right," he said even as his tone implied the exact opposite.

"Then, let's pick up a paternity test. They're quite accurate and you can find one anywhere. We'll have to wait until the baby is born, but that isn't that long a wait."

"We don't have time for that, Anabel. We can discuss this when we get to the safe house."

# Chapter Twenty

"We have to go through the gate tonight," Gabriel said.

"Wait - What? Are you insane? Did it escape your notice that I am eight months pregnant?" she said incredulously.

"No, and that's why we have to go through the gate tonight," he replied his voice never changing inflection.

"You're not making any sense, Gabriel. How can I walk through the gate without harming my baby?" she said trying very hard to stay calm even as her voice began quaver on the last word.

"There is a risk yes but its nothing compared to the risk of losing you both!" he said nearly yelling.

Anabel stared at him in stunned silence. Gabriel never yelled, hell he never raised his voice. His anger was always cold and biting. Her surprise faded as his words finally sunk in.

"What do you mean, lose us both? What aren't you telling me?"

She watched as he pulled himself together.

With a deep breath he said, "If we wait until the baby is born, he will not be able to cross through until he is much older. An infant would never survive the trip."

"So we would have to stay here?" she said, questioningly. There was more that he was not saying. She could sense it.

"No, you would have to leave. That's even if you survive the birth," he answered. The words dropped nearly soundless into the silence of the rustic dwelling.

"What are you saying, Gabriel?" she said tremulously.

"I'm saying that the time limit I gave you all wasn't just to protect our mission," he took another deep breath. His words were so quiet, she was straining to hear him, yet the words felt huge as they insinuated into her mind. They dropped terrible thoughts in their wake.

"Are you saying you sent my sister on what could potentially be a suicide mission?" she said evenly.

"As long as she returned within the six months, no it was not a suicide mission. The trip through the gate takes something from you. Without it, you would slowly wither away and die inexplicably."

"Wouldn't the return visit just accelerate the process, exacerbating the condition?"

"No, it reverses the process. That bit of you left behind... It's almost as if you pick it back up or maybe its returned to you as you step back into your home dimension. I'm not really sure how the mechanism works."

Anabel looked around her as if she could find something that made sense hanging on a wall in the tiny room.

"Don't you see," he said striding the short distance to her and grabbed Anabel by the forearms.

"If we wait until the baby is born, he would be utterly alone. You could die giving birth to our baby. Even if you survived, you would only have to abandon him here as we crossed over to your dimension or die a few weeks later."

"No!" she said pushing him away as she shook her head violently.

She stopped to look him directly in the eye.

"You said you were immune to the effects of the gate. Why couldn't you stay with him? Why couldn't you raise our baby here?" she asked.

She was no longer looking at him though, missing the change in his expression.

"How do you know all this? You told us that the first time you traveled through the gate was last summer when you accidentally found the soft spot near your cabin. That wouldn't be enough time to know any of this. And how do you know what effect it would have on a newborn?" she was looking at him again, searching his face for something to tell her what she suspected could not possibly be true.

"I managed to get recruited into the Dimension Jumpers," he said. "They kidnap people from each dimension, so they can question them for intel."

"Oh just like that?" she said sarcastically.

"They recruit those who like me are immune," he said.

"How did you know where to find me? If you're immune, why don't you remember that night in the cabin? Just who the hell are you?" she said backing away from him.

"Anabel, please it's me Gabriel. I learned everything I'm telling you as a new recruit."

"Why would they tell new recruits about pregnant women?" she asked, her voice brimming with suspicion.

He sighed.

"The answer is not going to lead you to trust me, Anabel," he said with resignation.

"I already don't trust you, whoever you are. Tell me," she said, her jaw set in stubborn resolve.

"They encourage the female recruits to get pregnant once they cross over and to return through the gate before giving birth. They encourage the male recruits to impregnate women from the other world and kidnap them before they deliver. They say the process creates more people who are immune. The children are being corralled into facilities all over their world to be indoctrinated and trained... as an army."

He wanted so badly to look away, to bow his head so that he did not see the disgust and fear in her eyes.

"You're one of those children, aren't you?" she said, the sob trapped in throat made her voice husky with unshed tears.

"No, Anabel, I'm me. I was born in the Bronx. My parents were born New Jersey. Do you think I would admit that if it weren't true?" he tried to joke even though he knew it was futile.

"What happens to the babies once they are born?" she said refusing to believe that this man in front of her was her Gabriel.

"I don't know," he said.

"So let me make sure I've got this right. You're telling me I have two choices, I either cross through your goddamn gate risking God knows what damage to my unborn child or I wait until he is full term and leave him an orphan to be raised by strangers? Is that right? Is that what you're telling me?" her anger was a living thing now. She held on to it with all the control she could muster.

"Yes," he said defeat vibrating in that single word.

He finally bowed his head. She would not trust him, not now.

"Why can't you remember that night?" she whispered, even through her anger she held on to a wisp of hope.

"I don't know," he said as the last bit of hope he may have harbored extinguished.

"You don't know because he never reported it," she said.

His head snapped up. He looked directly into her eyes.

"What did you say?" he breathed.

"You're not Gabriel. You have all his mannerisms, even his voice, but you don't have all of his memories."

"No," he said shaking his in utter denial.

"I AM Gabriel," he said with little conviction.

"What do I like on my pizza?" she asked gently. Her arms were crossed over her abdomen holding herself protectively.

"What?" he said as he grappled with the implications of her words.

"Answer the question. What color was my mother's dress at Christmas?"

"I don't know! How could anyone remember that?" he said angrily, his voice loud on the verge of yelling.

His eyes were wide with panic.

"What is my sister's favorite movie?"

The questions kept coming until he was crouching in a corner with his hands over his ears.

"Gabriel would know the answers. Gabriel notices everything and forgets nothing. You are not Gabriel," she said without any heat. Her anger was gone. She felt hollow, all that anger had scooped her emotions right out of her soul.

"Where is he?" she said after what seemed an interminable silence.

He closed his eyes. He had finally accepted the truth in her words. He slowly raised himself until he was standing completely upright.

"How did you know? How could you? There aren't replicants here, are there?" he said ignoring her question.

"Yes, anyone with enough money grows them as organ donors for their children. You rarely see one outside of the hospital, though. Most are rough copies, no memories from their double. They wouldn't survive outside of their containment units. I figured if the world Gabriel went to was the most advanced of the four worlds, their clones would be a perfect match to their doubles."

They stared at each other from their respective corners. The silence stretched into forever as each dealt with the repercussions of what had been revealed.

"Where is he?" the words fell again into the abyss of their silence.

"I don't know," he said quietly. He was afraid to speak much above a whisper as if a loud word would shatter them both into a million pieces.

"Is it true? Will my baby die if I wait to cross until he's born?"

"Yes," he said simply.

"I don't feel any differently. Maybe I'm immune," she said hopefully.

She would hate to stay there, to never see her family again. If it meant that her baby would live, though, she was willing to risk it.

"No, Anabela, you are most definitely not immune," he said the endearment escaping before he could stop himself.

"Don't call me that," she said fiercely.

He flinched at the harshness of her tone, but nodded his ascent.

"So we cross tonight?" she said anxious but determined.

She knew it was selfish, but she could not bear to be separated from her baby even if he could live a long happy life here without her, not if there was another alternative.

"No, we wait. I don't trust myself, my original plan. We'll go through a different gate, but its a few days ride south. We'll have to find transport and supplies. My original plan had us leaving tonight through the gate I came in from. I don't think the gate will drop us off outside the cabin in your world."

"You think you were supposed to bring me into your world?" she said worriedly.

"Wouldn't that have killed me?" she asked.

"No, it would only weaken you, or it would have if you hadn't been pregnant," he said perplexed.

"The bastards knew or at least suspected you were pregnant. They want the baby, Anabel," he said looking at her bitterly.

Her hand rested on her belly instinctively.

"My baby? They are not laying one finger on my child," she said with fierce determination.

"No, I won't let them. I'm sorry, Anabel. I may not be Gabriel, but I have his memories. I

know how much he loves you, how much I love you," he said earnestly, reaching a hand out to her.

She flinched at his words. He noticed it before she could hide the look of disgust that flickered across her features. He dropped his hand to his side, looking away so she would not see how devastated her rejection left him.

"We could go through the gate I arrived through. Wouldn't that be the safest gate for me and the baby?"

"It would be ideal, but that gate may be monitored now," he said cautiously.

"Its closer, only a day's ride from here. We could take public transport without raising too much suspicion. A pregnant woman with a medalert is common on public buses. You could play the role of the concerned husband. No one would even give us a second glance."

"We would have to disable that thing somehow. We'd have to ditch all the equipment I came with, too. I have no resources and no one I can trust," he said frustration making his voice sound harsh.

This version of Gabriel was definitely much more emotional, not nearly as controlled and cold as her Gabriel could be.

"I have a medalert bracelet that doesn't work," she said pulling the old silver bracelet from her pack.

"It broke the day of the attack," she explained. Her guard was down as it never was with Gabriel. She would never have mentioned the assault if he had been present. She only realized her mistake when she sensed his tension.

"What attack?" he said through nearly gritted teeth.

"We can talk about that later. All that matters is that this one doesn't transmit anymore and that while wearing it, no one will pay any attention to us."

"You would never have made the mistake of telling him about the attack, would you?" he said quietly.

"No," she said simply. It was obvious that she would say no more on the subject.

He nodded before saying, "Then let's get some rest. We'll head out in the morning. Let's get these bracelets switched out. I'll keep watch. Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to you," he said gently.

She searched his face for a moment before she nodded and wandered over to the old cot at the back of the room. She watched him through lidded eyes as he rifled through his pack,

removing everything that could possibly lead their enemies to them. He did not bother to hide any of the obviously high tech gear. When the authorities from this world found the shack, he wanted them to find all of it. Proof that their suspicions were well founded.



# Chapter Twenty-One

"Wake up," Gabriel said in a gentle voice.

Anabel came awake suddenly with a gasp.

"Gabriel?"

Confusion clouded her eyes until slowly it all started to trickle back into her memory.

"What's the matter?" she said. She swung her feet over the side to the ground, slipping her feet into the waiting shoes by the cot.

"We've been here too long. We need to move."

"Have you found transport?"

"I have an idea."

"What? We can't steal one and we don't have enough credits to rent one."

Anabel was now on her feet. She adjusted her clothing as she spoke.

"We just need to get out to the country. The restrictions on gas powered vehicles isn't as strictly enforced."

"How do you know that?"

"I've spent some time with other agents who have done recon missions here."

They were now outside in a nearly deserted part of town.

"We won't get very far with me dressed in these," she said.

"Why? What's wrong with your clothes?"

"This is worn by long term hospital patients. They don't do the gowns for those they have in custody."

"I thought you were in hospital because of your pregnancy."

He was scanning the alleyways as they hurried down the street.

"No, my pregnancy was an excuse to keep me in the hospital. They don't have prisons here. If you commit a crime, you're considered ill. If they can't prove you've committed a crime, they diagnose you with something and stick you in the same hospital."

"Terrific. Where are we going to get you fresh clothes?"

"We can't go back to my apartment. It's the first place they'll start looking for me. I could try one of my neighbors but they would just lead them straight here."

"Why don't you ask your neighbors to recommend someone who could help?"

"Of course! Ilda is always going on about her daughter. I hope she lives in the city. We need to find a public wave messenger."

"Coming right up."

At the corner, they found a bank of wave messengers. Only one seemed to be in working order. Dialing quickly, Anabel waited impatiently for the older woman to answer.

"Ilda!"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Ilda, listen very closely. Don't say my name. Do you recognize my voice?"

"Oh it's you! Of course, I recognize your voice. Why can't I say your name?"

"I don't have much time. I'm in a little bit of trouble. I need clothes and credits. My family has finally sent someone for me. I need help getting us out of town. Do you think your daughter will be able to help?"

Anabel held the earpiece tightly as she stared at Gabriel's tense features.

"Ilda?"

"Yes, I think she will. Give me a location where she can meet you."

"Thank you, Ilda. I'll never forget this."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, child. Now your location."

After ending the call, Anabel released a relieved sigh.

"Are you sure we can trust her?"

"I'm not sure of much. That's why neither one of us is going to meet her at the drop site. We'll keep watch and then fetch the clothes and credits once we determine the coast is clear."

"That sounds like a good plan. Let's go."

Hidden behind a tree, Anabel could see Gabriel keeping watch at a park bench across the street.

"I don't like this," she said into the communicator.

He flipped a page in the <newspaper equivalent> he was pretending to read. He answered in a low voice, "Be still."

They had observed a young woman who looked nothing like Ilda drop a canvas bag behind the designated tree and walk away an hour before. The young woman had not appeared nearly frightened enough for Anabel's tastes. This was a trap.

Anabel was wearing Gabriel's coat to disguise the prison uniform as best she could. It would not be enough to get them on public transport without raising a few eyebrows. No one wore gray on purpose, not in this town. If only Elgina had not been sent away. Astrig was under surveillance. She could not be of any help no matter how much she would prefer to be. Anabel did not even dare send her a wave.

She honestly had no one else she could trust. They waited another half hour, she hidden from view while Gabriel continued to flip through the <newspaper>.

Finally, Gabriel closed the <newspaper> and walked over to the refuse bin. He played a convincing role of someone coming across an unexpected parcel. He rummaged through it, pocketing the credits surreptitiously. Anabel watched him for a few more minutes. No one tried to stop him or question him about the canvas bag. She slipped away through the park to their rendezvous point. He would dump the bag and the clothes at the nearest donation station. With the unmarked credits he would then go and buy a dress for her and some supplies for the road. If questioned, he could tell the truth. He was buying somethings for his girlfriend for their trip to visit her parents. He found the credits in a bag out in the park.

They were free of the city and on their way out of town in a public air van. They received knowing smiles from the people around them as they held hands.

"How far along are you?" the woman sitting across from them said.

"About thirty-two weeks," Anabel said.

"Oh goodness! Did your doctor give you leave to travel?"

"Yes, as long as I wore this." Anabel held up her wrist to show the medalert bracelet.

"We're going to visit my parents. The baby will be a bit of a surprise."

"I'll bet," Gabriel said.

"Oh how exciting!"

"It truly is," Anabel said sharing a secret smile with Gabriel.

She was not used to this playful version of Gabriel. Even his temper is easier to deal with. For the first time since meeting him, she was not afraid of being subsumed by him.

It took only a few hours to escape the city. Anabel could hardly believe they had gotten this far without incident. The air van stopped to allow the passengers to disembark. From here, they would have to walk. Most of the passengers lived nearby preferring the relaxed lifestyle of countryside to the faster pace of the capitol.

"Good-bye!"

"Bye!" Anabel said. She waved at the older woman who struck up conversation on the air van.

"What now?" Anabel said. She turned to look at Gabriel. She had studied various maps, but she had no more idea now than she did when she arrived where the other gateways were nor had she ever managed to leave the city but the one time.

"I bought us a map when I got your clothes. Let's find a quiet place away from the main thoroughfare to study it and get our bearings."

"Okay," Anabel said.

"I was about to deliver you and your baby-"

"Our baby," Anabel interrupted.

"Yes, our baby, to Prime agents this morning. Why do trust me?"

"Honestly? I don't know. I just feel safe with you, the way I've always felt with Gabriel. If nothing else, they managed to give you the same protective streak that drew me to Gabriel in the first place."

"I know I could never knowingly hurt you Anabel."

"I know that too. Let's go."

Anabel smiled at him and patted his cheek before she walked into the bushes that bordered the road out of town. Gabriel followed after a moment of staring at her departing form.

They spent the night out in the woods. Gabriel prepared a makeshift tent from the blankets he had bought.

"Are you okay?"

"Hmm?" Anabel said. She had been staring at the fire lost in her own thoughts.

"How are you? Is the walking tiring you out?"

"I'm fine, a little tired, but fine. One thing about this place, I'm in the best shape of my life. My diet and exercise are monitored, pollutants are practically nonexistent and my system has been purged of toxins. I feel like I could walk for days."

"Well, some good came from all of this. If you were going to be pregnant and alone, at least you were in the best place for the baby."

"Yeah," she said in a whisper. She cradled her belly in her hands, a happy little smile played along her lips.

"Do you know what you're having?"

"A boy." She rested a hand on her belly as she looked back up at him.

"Have you picked out a name?" he said. Some unnamed emotion broke his voice mid-sentence.

"Yes. Aldo Ismael de la Cruz."

Gabriel tried manfully to contain his tears, but they escaped one by one.

"You're naming him after my father or rather after his father?"

Anabel placed a hand on his and squeezed.

"Of course, everything we've been through has been in his memory. I knew that would be his name the moment I learned our baby is a boy."

"I don't know what the real Gabriel would say. I know that I am moved beyond words and gratitude."

Anabel smiled before she could blurt out that she loved him. If her Gabriel had ever been this easy with his emotions, she would have eloped with him the moment he asked.

"How much further to this other gateway?" she said.

He withdrew the map from earlier.

"We're here," he pointed to a spot on the map. "The gateway is here. It's a little unpredictable, but it should get us back to our, I mean your dimension."

"Should? Gabriel, I'm trusting you when you tell me that Aldo will be safe when we jump

through the gate, but I don't like the sound of 'unpredictable'."

"It's static. The portal will take us to Earth. What is unpredictable is when it will appear on this side."

"So what do we do if we get there and the gateway is on vacation? Our supplies are limited and even though we've been lucky so far, we have government agents from this country looking for me right now."

"I know. I've done everything I can think of to keep us off their radar."

His eye was suddenly drawn to the medalert bracelet. For a moment he was certain he had seen its light flicker before dying down again.

"Anabel, you did say that the bracelet didn't function, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

Gabriel did not have to answer. The little red light flickered again.

"Take it off!"

Gabriel scrambled to release the bracelet from her wrist. He threw into the fire before dousing the flames.

"We have to move now." There was no more yelling.

He gathered their packs and made his way into the woods holding Anabel's hand. They traveled at a fast walk keeping silent while listening for the sounds of pursuit. Tension sat on their shoulders like a vulture eyeing its prey. Behind them their campsite lit up as bright as day. They dropped to the ground immediately. Their breathing sounded like air horns in their ears as they waited.

Suddenly Gabriel stood and with Anabel in tow dashed away again. He dodged and weaved around trees and bushes, somehow avoiding stepping on any dried branches. They dropped again and so the night went. Gabriel reacted to things Anabel could not hear or see. She held her belly as they ran moving beyond exhaustion. Gabriel had never said how much further they had to go. It could be days or it could be only hours away. She no longer cared. All Anabel wanted was to stop running and rest.

Gabriel began cursing softly under his breath. He could not see the gateway. They were out of options. It was too far to the next soft spot. Anabel would never make it.

"What is that?" Anabel whispered between panting breaths.

Gabriel followed her gaze. The gateway! He had been looking in the wrong dimension.

Anabel made a sudden sound of pain.

Gabriel turned to find that she had gone pale. She was clutching her belly.

"No, Ana baby, not yet. We only have a few more steps to go." His held his panic at bay as best he could.

"Hurry!" she squeezed between gritted teeth.

He picked her up and broke the cover of the trees to the gateway. In that moment she weighed nothing to him. All he could think of was protecting Anabel and his baby.

"Stop!"

Gabriel ignored the security officers. He was certain they would not risk harming the pregnant woman in his arms. He ran headlong for the gateway.

"Shoot him!"

"Hold your fire!"

Chaos reigned behind him, but he heard nothing but the pounding of his heart and Anabel's shuddering breathing.

"Gabriel, hurry..."

He did not bother to respond. They were almost there. Shots rang out. Someone had actually fired. He felt a sharp pain in his leg. He collapsed to the ground just short of the gate. He managed to fall to his knee to avoid crushing Anabel.

"Gabriel!"

"Run!"

"You idiots! I told you to hold your fire!"

"No!"

Another contraction speared through Anabel as she clutched her stomach.

"Anabel, run!"

"Gabriel, I'm not leaving without you. Get up!"

Security officers were closing in. Gabriel turned to look behind him. With a determined push, he leveraged himself to his feet. Grabbing Anabel by the waist, he ushered them through the gate.





# Chapter Twenty-Two

With a flash of white light they spilled to the ground on a grassy plain. Wind sailed across the grass creating the illusion of waves in the light of the fading sun.

"Gabriel? Gabriel!" Anabel felt another contraction.

"I'm here, Anabela. Lie down."

He cradled her into a sitting position. There under the fading light, Gabriel and Anabel welcomed little Aldo Ismael.

Covered in blood from the birth and from the gunshot wound in his leg, Gabriel fell into exhausted unconsciousness.

"Gabriel?" Anabel croaked.

Aldo wailed his indignation. She fed him as she stared at her little boy in absolute wonder.

"How am I going to get you two help?" she whispered to the beautiful baby in her arms.

A man walking his dog found them on the bluffs. Anabel did not bother to explain how they got there or how Gabriel had come to be injured. She was so happy to hear her native language again because it meant they were home. After a in an ambulance, Anabel and Aldo were declared the healthiest patients in the hospital. Anabel welcomed the antiseptic smell. She might hate hospitals now more than any rational person, but as long as there was that smell in the air, she could handle being there.

Gabriel's injuries took longer to explain. The police were called. Anabel pleaded exhaustion, while Gabriel remained unconscious. The doctors could not explain the injury to his leg. It almost looked like an incision from a laser scalpel. After running their names through their databases, they found no priors or outstanding warrants, so they let them go.

It took a while but eventually Gabriel regained consciousness.

"Where are we?"

Anabel stirred from her nap. Aldo lay in a wheeled bassinet beside her.

"In Washington state if you can believe it."

Gabriel groaned.

"How are we getting home?"

"I called Ivan. He's coming to the rescue. He should be here in a few hours."

"How long was I out?"

"A day. Doctors couldn't find anything wrong with you."

"Not even that I'm not human?"

"Not even that."

"Will we be able to go home once Ivan gets here?"

"Yes?"

"Good. How's Aldo?"

"He's fantastic."

Her smile lit up her entire face as she stared at her gorgeous infant son.

"That's great, really and truly great. Can I hold him?"

"He's sleeping..."

"Will it wake him if you pick him up?"

"No, here."

She handed him the sleeping child.

"He's gorgeous," he said with awe.

"Yeah."

Ivan found them like that. His heart stopped at seeing the baby in Gabriel's arms.

"Well, did we bring home an unexpected package?" Ivan said.

"Ivan!"

Anabel stood and ran to give him a hug. When he saw her, he knew that the baby was Anabel's.

Back at the cabin what seems a lifetime later the five friends exchanged war stories. Isobel had the easiest time of all of them. Gamma was already aware of the imminent threat posed by Prime. After she had gained their trust, she led expeditions all over the world negotiating with various lords, queens, grand overseers and local tribe elders to watch the gateways in

their lands. She was hailed a hero.

Ivan told only the funny stories at first. He didn't want to burden anyone with the truth, not yet. Until one night a week after Anabel and Gabriel returned from Washington. They were sitting in the living room enjoying a quiet moment after dinner.

"I brought this back with me. I don't know if you can get this to your contacts. It is chilling to say the least," Ivan said.

He placed the disc into his laptop. His friends gathered around the small screen while he stood back. He had listened to the man speak as he recorded it. The man's words haunted his nightmares.

A gaunt black man stared out at them from the screen for a brief moment before the intense brown eyes wandered away to stare into some internal landscape. The words he spoke were said softly, calmly. It was enough to send chills down more than one spine.

>They came brandishing weapons, tanks, and flying the colors of a hundred nations. They paraded down major streets of every large city of every country. Armies scrambled to respond as civilians scattered into the countryside. It was all too late. The rural areas had been conquered long before anyone knew what had happened. Key decision makers in the world's most powerful nations had been replaced by enemy infiltrators. The armed response to the invasion swatted easily aside. Our world was conquered long before Prime paraded their soldiers under our noses.

>We think it took them at least ten years to infiltrate so many nations. We believe there was a neurotoxin released into our water supply or into the air. Swaths of civilians collapsed only to awake hours or days later as docile sheep. Those of us who were immune to the behavioral effects suffered from insomnia and increased paranoia. We are still searching for a cure. It would help if we could discover how they continue to dose the general population. There have been reports of groups of people who would begin to snap out of their docility only to appear as sheep again in a matter of days.

>We believe the Prime agents are inoculated from the effects of the drug. They only dose the public in sections. They have some kind brain washing machines that eventually convert people into loyal subjects. A lot of us in the resistance were soldiers. We were overwhelmingly immune to the behavioral effects, but the insomnia and paranoia have taken a toll. We're not an effective fighting force. We believe that because military and medical personnel are inoculated against a variety of diseases, some combination of vaccines kept us from succumbing to the toxin. It's all conjecture at this point. Without access to the original drug, our researchers are spinning their wheels.

>Our military scientists were the first to be put through the machines. We only have university students at our disposal for research. It's like this all over the world. There are people who are completely immune, but they are captured almost as soon as they are

identified. A few have made it to a resistance camp. They speak in hushed tones of the horror of seeing entire cities populated by mindless automatons.

>The children, oh the children.

Here the man pauses a hand over his mouth as he tries to compose himself.

>The young children are rounded up into indoctrination camps taken from their parents and all they know. Few parents put up much of a resistance. Those who did, whose parental instincts were strong enough to break through the effects of the drug were killed instantly.

>The older children were shipped to labor camps. Their body chemistry made the drug's effects too unpredictable. We've spent a great deal of effort freeing these children. Our forces are made up of mostly the young. They have been stripped of their innocence. Only the oldest are asked to fight. The rest train, cook, mend, study and watch over the younger ones. The indoctrination camps are harder. We flood their signals with images of home, the sounds of our people and our language for weeks before we raid the compounds. Otherwise, we have learned to terrible losses, the children will actually fight to stay. We still only manage to get a fraction of them.

>I have witnessed a mother snap out of it and start screaming for her lost baby. I am ashamed to admit, I was almost relieved when a Prime agent blasted her with a heat gun. I have nightmares about that moment.

The video ended there. The man could not be brought to speak anymore.

"We can't stop here. I know everyone is just back home, but I know I can't let this happen here," Ivan said.

"We won't," Gabriel said.

"I'm in," Isobel said.

"Ella?" Gabriel said.

"You want me to jump now?" she said with a hint of sarcasm.

"You know it had to be you to stay behind. Besides, you got us all out one way or another," Ivan said.

"Yeah, I know. Sure I'm in."

Anabel remained silent. No one questioned her.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

After a month of healing and reconnecting, the five friends were again in the kitchen of the cabin. They had been discussing the next wave of Gabriel's plan. Anabel had no intention of leaving Earth again. With Aldo now in tow, no one expected her to.

"So when are we going to rescue the real Gabriel?" Isobel said.

Silence fell on the group. Anabel felt the anxiety well inside. She felt terrible, but she did not want the real Gabriel back.

"When I head back to Prime," Gabriel said grimly.

"When are you going to use that paternity test?" Ella said.

"Why? Aldo is my son or rather Gabriel's son," he said.

"I don't want to rake this all up again, Ella," Anabel said.

"Shouldn't you be sure? You had a great deal of confusion at the beginning. Isn't it possible that someone from Gamma could be the father?" Ella said.

"Short of my being attacked, I can't think who else would be the father."

"That's the problem, though, isn't it? You can't be sure of what you remember."

"Leave it be, Ella," Ivan said.

"No, wait a minute. What the hell are you implying?" Anabel said. She strains to keep her voice low to avoid waking the baby.

"Nothing that a paternity test wouldn't clear up," Ella said.

"Ella, why are you doing this?" Gabriel asked.

"I'm sorry, Gabriel, but don't you want to be sure?"

"Sure about what? That Aldo is not my - I mean, Gabriel's son? I know he is."

"Then, it wouldn't hurt to take the test. After all, if Aldo isn't yours, then it would stand to reason that your memory of that night is the true story?" Ella said.

Ivan's shoulders tightened. Lines of tension appeared on his forehead. Anabel was starting to pace trying to keep calm. She was angry and confused by Ella's questions. Gabriel's face held a thoughtful expression.

"I want to take the test," Gabriel said.

"What difference does it make?" Anabel said, frustration evident in every line of her face.

She paced away holding her sleepy baby close.

"Because he is Gabriel, our Gabriel," Ivan said grimly.

"What?" she exclaimed.

"What are you saying, Ivan?" Gabriel said with a quietly controlled voice.

Unconsciously holding her breath, Anabel waited for Ivan to speak.

"Gabriel doesn't remember that night because it didn't happen," Ivan said.

"Of course it happened! I remember very clearly," Anabel began heatedly.

"Just- stop, okay? Replicants from Prime are good, but they aren't this good," he said pointing at Gabriel.

"Ivan, will you just spit it out!" Gabriel said through gritted teeth.

"Fine. Whatever is wrong with Gabriel's memory had more to do with the Prime government's thought police than with him being some kind of clone," he explained.

"What about what you said, about that night?" Anabel said holding her baby a little tighter.

Ella, worried about the baby, decided to intervene. She stepped up to the worried mother and reached for the sleeping infant. Anabel momentarily distracted held the baby even tighter and away from Ella's reaching hands.

"Anabel, you're hurting him," Ella said quietly.

Anabel seeing that she was almost smothering her son, released him into Ella's waiting arms. The two moved out of the room followed by Isobel who had remained silent throughout their exchange. She gave one final look over her shoulder at the tableau in behind her. Ivan watched as she turned away resolutely. She knew. Had she always known? He sighed before turning to look at his best friend and the woman he loved.

"That night didn't happen the way you remember it, Anabel. You were disoriented after walking through the gate. You had forgotten the entire night until you discovered you were pregnant. Grasping at half remembered images, you pieced together a memory you could live with. A memory in which you hadn't given your virginity to another man," he said. His breath hitched as he spoke the last word.

Gabriel refused to look at his Anabel. She was his entire world. Ivan was returning to him his identity, but he was ripping his soul out through his chest with every syllable.

"No, it's not true, Ivan," she said as silent tears slid down her ashen cheeks.

"It is, Anabel. Aldo is my son."

The three friends stood frozen for what seemed an eternity.

"You bastard!" Gabriel exploded out of his seat straight at his best friend. He had him pinned against the refrigerator, one arm at his throat the other reaching for the knife in his pocket.

"Gabriel! No!" Anabel screamed.

Ivan did not fight back. He knew he deserved this. He had endangered Anabel, his son, and betrayed the people he cared about more than anything Isobel and his brother.

"Stay out this Anabel!" Gabriel roared.

Her gasp, so filled with hurt astonishment, gave him pause, but only for a second. He had the knife in his hand. He should kill this man.

"Gabriel, please. He's your brother," she continued to plead.

He ignored her tears and her pleas.

"How could you do this?" Gabriel said in a harsh whisper.

"I love her," Ivan responded.

Gabriel swung back his knife arm with a roar.

"No!" Anabel shrieked.

Ivan closed his eyes, resigned to his fate.

The knife hit the fridge with a resounding ping before dropping with a clatter on the tile floor. Gabriel released another pained scream before he stormed outside.

Anabel collapsed to the floor, her red-rimmed eyes downcast as she stared unseeingly to the floor. Ivan ran to her side to check on her.

"Don't touch me!" she said. She reared back.

Ivan backed away still crouched on the floor. He held his hands up to show he had no intention of touching her. He could not hide the flinch that crossed his at her reaction. It was no better than he expected, even if he did not quite deserve it.

"There were two of us in that room that night, Anabel," he said in defeated voice.

"Don't you dare! Why didn't you tell me? Why did you let me believe that the man I loved had been replaced with a double? How could you seduce me?" her voice had been increasing in volume until her last question. Then her voice dropped to barely a whisper.

"Seduce you?" he said scornfully.

She flinched, but he did not care. He was going to get his say.

"You think it's been easy for me to realize that the most important night of my life had been twisted inside your memory to the point where you thought you'd slept someone else?" Ivan said in a strained voice. He was trying valiantly not to scream at her.

He stood up, extending his hand to help her stand. With one baleful glance and obvious reluctance, she relented. Standing face to face, he continued.

"Do even remember me in there?" he asked waving at her forehead.

"No," she whispered.

Sighing, Ivan closed his eyes. He knew what her answer was going to be. It should not have hurt this much.

"Of course not. I've loved you since the first moment I laid eyes on you, but you had eyes only for one man."

"Gabriel," she said brokenly.



# Chapter Twenty-Four

In her memory she had nodded agreement. Why? Anabel closed her eyes and let herself remember that night again from the beginning.

"Anabela, are you sure you want to go through with this? Maybe Ella can trade places with you-"

"Stop, Gabriel," she kissed him lightly.

"I am quite certain. I can't be afraid to go where I send my own sister, now can I?" she said with loving smile.

"I don't know what I would do if something happened to you, Anabela. I don't think I can let you go alone," he said holding both of her hands in his.

"Gabriel, I'll be fine. If we step through together, we'd only alert Prime gate agents. Only one person can cross at a time, remember?" she said looking him in the eye.

"I remember, dammit. Its my plan," he had said with mock severity.

"Then, do you want to call off this whole thing? You've been working on this for years now. Do you really want to abandon the mission before its even begun?"

"For you I would give up anything, but you're right. It all just seems so real."

He had gone silent. Anabel did not mind. For once she actually felt at peace in the silence with him. She waited for him to make a decision.

"Marry me," he said out of nowhere.

"What?" she said before she could recover it.

"Marry me, tonight. We'll drive down to New York City and be back in time to jump through the gate," he had sounded so excited and so desperate.

It was the desperation that had made her second guess herself.

"Gabriel, I will marry you, but not tonight not like this. I want a church wedding with my parents, my family there to witness it. You know that," she said chidingly.

"We can still have all of that, when we get back. We'll have a huge reception, but let's get married now. I want to be with you forever," he said.

The intensity shining in his eyes had made her uncomfortable. Something about what he was

saying sounded more like he was asking not marry her but own her utterly. She had stood her ground.

"I understand," he said. He had shut down completely. He had been so cold.

"Gabriel..." she had said not sure what to say. She was only sure that if he walked out that door, it would never be the same between them.

He kissed the knuckles of the hands he held and left. The door had closed so softly, the click of the latch hitting door strike struck like the sound of a bullet. She had jumped, startled despite herself. She did not know she had been crying. She had felt so numb as if his cold indifference had somehow frozen her too.

When the door re-opened moments later, she had looked expectantly not quite daring to hope that he had returned. Seeing Ivan instead, she had felt nothing. She remember staring at him, not quite comprehending what he was doing there in her room. When he had wrapped his arms around her, she remember clutching his shirt desperate for human contact to thaw ice running through her veins.

"Anabel," he had whispered with such anguish. She had looked up at him perplexed. That was when he had kissed her.

Anabel touched her hand to her lips back in the present as if she could deny what she had felt in that moment. She shook her head but it was too late. The memory had been unlocked and it would not be shoved aside again. She stifled a sob as a torrent of forgotten thoughts and sensations washed through her mind. Sinking into the deluge, she remembered.

She remembered heat at the first touch of his lips. She remembered the passion that curled her toes and had her returning that kiss wanting more. Why had she never seen him before? He had been there forever, but eclipsed by the bright sun of Gabriel, she had somehow missed the gentleness, the passion, the love that he had been offering her.

The truth floated there in the torrent of her memories.

She had fallen for Ivan that night. Unfortunately, her love for Gabriel only intensified since their return. Whatever the Prime government had done to him, it had softened him, melted his icy control. He was passionate and eloquent. He was warm, approachable. It no longer felt like he was trying to own her. She had fallen in love all over again with a man she had only this morning learned was not a double but her fiance.

What was she going to do now?

"My cover is blown. I need an extraction point," Gabriel spoke into the communicator.

"Standby."

Gabriel the crunching steps of someone approaching across the snow covered glen deep inside the woods.

"So, was it all an act?" Ivan said.

With a sigh, Gabriel turned to look at the man he once considered a brother.

"I could kill you," Gabriel replied, emotion making his voice rough.

"Why haven't you?" Ivan said as he leaned against a nearby tree and crossed his arms.

The stance left him vulnerable, but Gabriel understood that it was an invitation not a rookie mistake.

"Because Aldo is your baby, and I wouldn't leave a child fatherless."

"He would have you," Ivan offered.

"Don't tempt me. Besides it's too late now," Gabriel said. His stance was loose, hands by his side. He would not extend any such invitation to his friend.

"Bull," Ivan said succinctly.

Gabriel released a bark harsh laughter into silent woods. There was no humor in that laugh.

"Yeah, well..."

He paused before finally answering, "I'm not the man she fell in love with."

"Hate to tell you this, and believe me I can't even understand why I'm telling you this, but you're so far beyond wrong. She fell in love with you, this you. She was afraid of you before. Your possessiveness freaked her out. That's the only reason she refused to marry you that night."

His words were met with silence. Ivan could not read what the revelation affected his friend. His expression inscrutable, Gabriel only stared at him.

"Say something, dammit," Ivan muttered.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"There's no angle here, Gabriel. She loves you, this you. I won't stand in the way of her happiness even though I feel like she could be happy with me. I can't deny you her. You're my brother, Gabriel. I've betrayed you enough."

Ivan searched Gabriel's face once more and turned to go.

As he stepped away, he stopped and not quite turning said, "Just know that if you try to take Aldo away from me, there is no dimension vast enough that you would be able to escape me."

He was gone before Gabriel could say anything. What could he say? Aldo would be safe. He would ensure his safety personally. Perhaps the only way he could show his love would be to keep Anabel and Aldo safe from Prime. He was in charge of the task force to kidnap the child. They would have to wait several years while the infant grew up before they could take the baby through the gate safely. Even with the gate disruptor device, the baby would not survive the journey through the gate.

"Don't worry, Aldo will be safe."

He followed in his friend's footsteps back to the cabin to hide their numbers. It was difficult to let go of old habits. He had an exit plan to execute.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

"What's the matter, mija?" her father asked.

"Nada, (Nothing)," Isobel replied.

"Isobel, I know you. Aren't you happy for your sister?"

"No, papi, I'm not," her voice thick with emotion.

"Dime (tell me)," he nudged gently.

Concern evident in his warm brown eyes, he put an arm around his youngest daughter.

"You won't tell Mami?" she said, her face burrowed in her father's side.

"I won't tell," he said.

"Era mio (he was mine)," she whispered.

"Ivan?" he said in a low voice.

He felt her nod against his side.

"Ay, nena mia (Oh, my little girl)," he muttered, holding her completely in his arms. He ushered them into the kitchen away from the exuberant grandmother and happy couple.

"Hush, no llores (don't cry)," he said in a lulling, comforting voice.

"I'm not crying, papi. You can let me go now," she said push away.

"I don't think that will ever happen, preciosa (precious girl)," he said smiling.

Her smile was brief and so full of sadness, he felt his own constrict.

"What happened?" he said helplessly.

He could not imagine that Anabel would ever deliberately hurt her sister, and yet here was the proof in the sadness draped across his youngest daughter's shoulders.

"No, papi, Anabel didn't do anything. He was in love with her before he ever met me," she defended her sister.

"But she knew how you felt about him?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," her voice broke a little on the single word, but she resolved to get through it.

"She knew, but she didn't set out to steal him from me. When Gabriel- left, he hurt Anabel very badly. Ivan was there to console her. It didn't take them long to realize that she had been in love with Ivan all along," she said giving her father a very abbreviated version of events.

"And then there was the baby," he said.

"Yes, and then there was little Aldo. Even if Anabel wanted to, she would not leave her baby without a loving father. How could she deny her child what we both had?" Isobel said squeezing his wrist.

"Linda, (pretty girl), are they really in love or is it the baby?" he asked looking for any clue in Isobel's eyes as to the true relationship between his oldest daughter and the fulano Ivan.

Isobel smiled brightly if a touch sadly before she reassured her father.

"It's true love, papito. He worships the ground she walks on. She can't quite believe that everything turned out this well."

"And you?"

She knew what he was asking and wished she could give him the answer he wanted.

"No, papito, I'm not good with it. I am happy for my sister and for my nephew, but I feel like my insides will be ripped apart from mis celos (my jealousy)."

She shook her head as if to banish the poison from her thoughts.

"I have to go," she said feelingly.

"Can't you stay until the wedding? It would mean so much to your sister and your mother," he asked neutrally.

"No, papito. I would only ruin her happy day, and she deserves to be happy, papi. I won't be the one to mar her special day. Don't worry, I will stay for Christmas. I think I can pretend for just that much longer."

She patted his hand before she quickly stood and left the kitchen.

Her retreat was halted by Ivan's large frame blocking the hallway leading into the living room.

"Can we talk?" Ivan said softly, not wanting his father-in-law to hear.

Isobel nodded pointing to the outdoor patio. At her questioning look, he said, "They went upstairs to put little Aldo in your bassinet."

Isobel smiled at the picture of the little boy in such a pink and frilly contraption.

"What do you want?" Isobel said wearily.

"Are you going after Gabriel, then?" he began.

"Eventually," she said relieved that he had not heard her conversation with her father.

"I don't think it's wise," he said.

"You have a better idea?" she said crossly.

"Yeah, finish your sister's mission in Delta. Let Ella go after Gabriel."

"What?" Isobel said in surprise.

"I thought you said we couldn't trust her," she said questioningly.

He shrugged, "Perhaps not. I'd rather we know before we send her into Beta and the resistance."

"Okay, I can do that."

"You'll have to be careful. Even though her presence helped increase that government's vigilance it wasn't enough. Unfortunately, it will make your job that much harder."

Isobel nodded her understanding.

"This will help," he said after studying her for moment. He handed over a GDD.

"It's a modified version of the gate disruptors Prime agents use. It should allow you to jump multiple gates without the nasty side effects and evade detection from Prime. It doesn't block Prime's ability to detect that a gate jump occurred, but they won't be able to track whoever it was."

He showed her how to use the device before strapping it on her wrist like a watch.

"We don't have many of these. Gabriel left me a few. That's one of them. Be careful with it."

She nodded. Seeing that his warnings had been received and taken to heart, he changed the subject.

"Will you stay for Aldo's baptism?" he asked.

"You heard?" she said, mortified. Her earlier relief evaporating into the frigid night air.

"No," he said questioningly.

"Then, how?"

"How do I know you're planning on disappearing before the wedding?" he shrugged.

"Call it a hunch. I spent a lot of time looking at you, Isobel," he said quietly.

He hated himself for the pain he glimpsed all too briefly in her eyes.

"Why, Ivan?" there was so much in that question.

He was silent for so long, she feared he would not answer. She wanted to run out into the snow covered woods at the back of her parents' property and bury her humiliation in the deepest, darkest point.

"I fell for Anabel the moment I met her," he began.

Isobel closed her eyes miserably.

"I'm not sure I want to hear this after all," she said trying to forestall the tale of unrequited love.

He continued as if he had not heard, "but she was in love with Gabriel. The way she looked at him, it was sickening, but I thought if she's with Gabriel than she is with the best man in the world."

He stopped again gathering his thoughts, his brow wrinkled as he searched his memories.

"Ivan-" Isobel said helplessly.

"Then I met you and I thought, here at last is the woman I didn't know I was waiting for. Anabel was happy. It was time for me to move on. I felt as if I had been wasting my time mooning over Anabel now that I had you," he said looking directly into her eyes.

"But then suddenly here comes Gabriel with his crazy plan," she said.

"Yes, and I realized I never stopped loving her. That my feelings for you were not strong enough to push Anabel from my heart."

"Thank you. At least I wasn't your consolation prize," Isobel said brushing the tears from her cheeks.

"Isobel, please. You could never be anyone's consolation prize. You were supposed to be the one," he said earnestly.

"But I wasn't. Yes, I will stay for the baptism."



With that she walked back inside. Ivan watched her go as he rubbed his arms for warmth. He hated himself for hurting her.

In the morning, Isobel hovered over a rapidly cooling cup of coffee. She hated the stuff. Isobel was not quite sure why she had poured herself a cup of the bitter brew that perpetually burbled in her parents' kitchen. She had the whole downstairs to herself at that early hour. Of course, she could be surrounded by her entire family and still feel this alone. She sighed as she dumped the coffee in the drain behind her.

"Don't let Mom see you do that," Anabel joked as she joined her sister in the kitchen.

"I didn't think anyone else was up," Anabel continued as she prepared herself a bowl of cold cereal.

At Isobel's continued silence, Anabel stopped what she was doing and sighed.

"I wish you would stay," Anabel said to Isobel's back.

Isobel's shoulders dropped as she turned to look at her sister.

"Am I that transparent or did Ivan spill?" Isobel said.

"Ivan? We really have to work on our communication," she said. Isobel suspected she meant Ivan needed to be a little more forthcoming even as Anabel continued to keep things to herself.

"So I guess it's just me. I must have taken out an ad in the paper advertising my intentions," Isobel said in frustration.

"Not quite, except I've known for a while that you aren't happy with the way things turned out for Ivan and me."

"Yeah, well, I wish I could be a little more mature about things, but I can't. I don't want to end up hating you, sis," Isobel said quietly.

Anabel sighed.

"I can't expect you to accept all this and be happy for me too."

"I am happy for you and Aldo, but I can't help feeling jealous. These ugly feelings will only make me hate you or Ivan or heaven forbid, Aldo who is so completely innocent it doesn't even bear thinking about."

"You could never hate Aldo. That kid has already made his first conquest with you," Anabel joked.

Isobel smiled at the lame joke.

"But it could happen if I don't get some distance. I don't blame you, Ana. I just wish you had figured things out a whole lot sooner. Maybe before I met him and fell for him too," she said even more quietly.

"I know that all of this is my fault. I could have done so many things differently, but I can't begin to regret Aldo. I was so afraid that I wouldn't feel anything for him when he was born. I felt trapped and resentful during much of my pregnancy. Now that I can hold him, I can't believe I ever worried."

"He's beautiful," Isobel said. She felt so wretched. How could she forget what Anabel had suffered.

"I know that in my misery and confusion I hurt you Izzy. I can't excuse it. I can't even ask you to forgive me, but I will because I can't not have you in my life. You're my best friend, Izzy," Anabel said clutching both hands to her chest even as she yearned to hug her sister.

"Oh Ana," Isobel said as she stepped up to Anabel who quickly wrapped the younger woman in her arms.

It was not enough, but it was a start.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

Of the five friends who set out to save the universe two years ago in a remote cabin in the woods of Upstate New York, only two remained in their original dimension. Their leader was lost to the enemy they had fought to expose. Their youngest member had disappeared into the network between dimensions. She no longer checked in with home base. The skeptic had also disappeared. Ivan and Anabel never knew where, although Ivan suspected.

For her part, after the utter failure of her mission, Anabel decided she would do what she could at home. She self published a book she classified as "Science Fiction because who would believe me?" It detailed the first hand account of a pregnant woman trapped by her condition in a world with state run medical care. It caught the attention of a few different groups. She was never certain which of the reporters she met with were actually government agents, but she played her role.

There were some who thought her book was an indictment of socialised medicine while others raised as a feminist essay against pro-life politics. In various interviews she insisted she had no political agenda.

In a recent interview on a nationally televised morning show, she was asked the same questions she had been bombarded with since the right wing media had hailed her book as the clarion call against a government run medical system.

"Many people have claimed that your book, "Clever Book Title Here," warns against the dangers of allowing the government to take control of our medical care. How do you respond to those allegations?"

"Lindsey, I've said several times that I had no political agenda outside of dealing with my fears during my own pregnancy. However, what people seem to miss entirely is the fact that in this alternate universe, people live in the safe and healthy world. The air is clean. No one is living on the streets. Crime is at a minimum and murder is the rarest and most heinous crime. Are there restrictions to living in a world run by doctors and health professionals? Definitely. I wouldn't espouse such a radical move. What I would say is that a world where the welfare of every person is elevated over the accumulation of personal wealth and power, could be a better place."

"What about your own pregnancy? You've said in a few interviews that you felt just as trapped as your character. Can you elaborate?"

"Like many women around the world, I felt like my choices were limited. I suffered a traumatic accident around the same time I conceived. The accident had affected my memory of the months leading up to the accident. I was distraught and confused, in and out of hospitals when one of my doctors casually mentioned I was pregnant. You can imagine the shock I experienced at the news. I was away from home in a country where there are no

choices for a woman who finds herself pregnant. I was in no condition to return home. I was terrified."

"That is all the time we have, Anabel. Thank you for speaking with us this morning. Back to you, Mike."

Removing the microphone from her lapel, Anabel stood to leave.

"Ms. Cardenas?" the reporter called out.

"Yes?" Anabel said turning around.

"Your book seems so visceral, so real. Some of what the things you mention in interviews parallel the story so closely. Aside from the science fiction elements, is it true that you didn't know who was the father of your baby that you believed that you might have been raped?"

"No, I was fairly certain my fiance was the father. I just couldn't remember how it happened," Anabel said before she turned again to go.

"Wait, do you think we can speak of the record? Your novel really affected me. I was hoping I could have a candid conversation. How long will you be in town?"

"I'll be in town for another day, but I don't think I can talk. I've made it a general rule to avoid conversations off the record. My material is very personal, as you have probably ascertained. I'm sorry, no," Anabel said.

"Oh is this your son?" the reporter practically cooed.

"Yes, this is my little man," she said her smile melting across her features at the sight of her son walked on his unsteady little legs towards her holding his father's hand.

"Oh, he's precious," Lindsey's voice had reached a pitch close to what only dogs could hear.

"Yeah," Ivan said looking on proudly as Anabel scooped up the giggling toddler.

"Mr. Cardenas, It's a pleasure to meet you," Lindsey said, her voice returning to normal. She extended her hand in greeting.

"It's Mr. Leandro. My wife kept her maiden name," he said taking the proffered hand in his much larger one.

"Of course, Mr. Leandro, I'm so sorry," Lindsey said doing a very good job of hiding her mortification at her faux pax.

"No problem, Lindsey. Are we ready to go?" he said turning to Anabel and his son.

"Yes, I do believe we are," she chuckled as she wiped the lipstick from her baby's cheek.

"You know the boy is much too young for make up," he said with mock severity.

"Indeed," Anabel said as she hefted the no longer tiny baby up into her arms.

"Ms. Cardenas, perhaps you and your family would like to join my family for dinner?" she tried again to extend an invitation.

Anabel and Ivan exchanged a glance. The morning show host had put them in awkward position.

"Please, it wouldn't be an interview. I just admire your writing so much. I promise nothing you say during dinner will end up in the evening news."

Feeling a little cornered, they agreed to stop by for dinner. Ivan gave Lindsey's assistant the name of the hotel where they were staying before leaving.

"You're doing good work, querida," Ivan said when they were finally out of the studio.

His hand made slow circles along her lower back. She allowed herself to lean into him for a moment before she straightened.

"It's exhausting. I figured there would be enough elements in the story to interest certain groups. I never thought it would garner so much media attention," Anabel said with a tired sigh.

"The more people are exposed to the book the better even they think it an improbable fiction," he said quoting from her favorite Shakespeare play.

The small smile the comment garnered was not enough to smooth the furrow in her brow.

"I know, I know. I just want the media attention to die down already," she said.

"Oh come on, you get to be on TV," he cajoled.

"I can't stand to listen to myself speak anymore. It all sounds so preachy," she grouched.

The couple continued in a similar vein once inside the taxi making sure to avoid any mention that her book was truly autobiographical. The taxi dropped them off in front of their hotel.

After a quick shower and change, the two rushed out again to find lunch for their increasingly cranky eighteen month old.

In the park, they were finally able to relax certain that there was no one listening. With Aldo fast asleep in his stroller, the adults were able to enjoy the beautiful spring day in relative

peace.

"I finally got a ping from Isobel," Ivan said.

"Izzy?" Anabel said trying valiantly to hide her distress behind a bland expression.

"She thinks she has been successful in finishing your original mission," he said. Even without fear of surveillance, he was still careful with his words. No telling who would overhear.

With a wry expression, "Does she say when she will be home?"

"She's not. I'm not sure where she's headed now."

At his wife's crestfallen expression, he continued, "but she did say she misses you and Aldo. She wants to come home."

Anabel nodded, compressing her lips to hold back the sob trapped in her lips, she continued along the path.

"That's good," she said her voice only breaking a little bit.

"My contacts have spotted Ella," he said after a brief silence.

"Ella?" she said in astonishment.

He nodded.

"Well?" she said turning to him impatiently, "care to elaborate?"

"They spotted her among suspected Prime agents," he said evenly.

"She was a double agent?" she said disbelievingly.

"It is looking likely," he said.

"What are the odds that an established Prime agent would end up my roommate?" she scoffed.

"Maybe she had been assigned to Gabriel," he postulated.

"Doesn't make sense. I met her parents. She grew up here. We even shared a love of a few cartoon shows from our childhood," she defended.

"I don't know what to tell you. The resist-" stopping short as a couple passed within earshot, "my contacts still aren't sure how they get their intel or how long their undercover agents have been in place. Who knows? Maybe Ella is one of those children from their earlier experiments."

"I don't know," Anabel said shaking her head doubtfully.

"Regardless, after my friends spotted her, they haven't seen her again. I'm wondering if maybe she returned to Prime."

"Why can't it be that she's just part of another cell of the resistance," she still defending her friend.

"Anabel, we've had this argument before," he said wearily.

"No we haven't. You've never mentioned even a hint of your suspicions concerning Ella," she said stubbornly.

"You're right. I had this same argument with your sister before she took off," he said rubbing the back of his neck.

"So? What makes you so sure she was always a Prime agent?" she continued.

"A lot of little things. She bought into Gabriel's crazy plan almost immediately. She seemed to grasp everything he explained too quickly almost impatiently like she had heard all of it before. Then there's how they were able to find Gabriel so quickly after crossing over. They even knew where to find you. Ella was the only one that knew you were pregnant. It would never even occur to Gabriel and Isobel and I were in the middle of our own missions. The only person privy to all of our communication was Ella."

"Was Isobel convinced after you presented all of your 'evidence'?" Anabel said, the hint of sarcasm palpable.

"I wasn't even convinced, but I was suspicious and yes after we spoke, Isobel started to suspect Ella too."

"Well, personally, I'd like to hear her side of the story," she said dismissively.

Ivan sighed knowing there was no way without incontrovertible proof, Anabel would never believe her best friend had been a spy. They walked in silence again, each lost in their own thoughts.

"What about Gabriel?" Anabel said in an almost inaudible voice.

Ivan tuned to her every nuance just barely caught her question. When the import of her query hit, his shoulders tensed. He did not want to answer her question. As irrational as it seemed considering he had won, Anabel was married to him. Aldo tied them together for the rest of their lives. He just could not shake the feel that if Gabriel returned, Anabel would return to his side without a backward glance taking their child with her.

She waited with baited breath. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest. She knew the topic of

Gabriel was a sensitive one; one that she tried to avoid if at all possible. She could not help the way she felt. It had been more than a year since she had seen him last, but her feelings for him had not changed, only grown more complicated. She was not sure he would answer. She hated that he was the only one with access to the interdimensional network communique.

After several beats of tense, uncomfortable silence, he finally answered.

"Reports out of Prime tend to be vague little snippets that could mean just about anything or nothing."

"I know," she said trying to keep the impatience from her voice.

"But, reports are that he and someone matching Ella's description have been seen together," he said.

At her questioning look, "None of my friends at Prime have ever seen Ella before."

"But what about your other 'friends'? They've never laid eyes on her before either," she questioned.

"She had to help with my extraction," he said.

No matter how she prodded, he would not elaborate. She had to find a way to access all the reports from two years ago. He was keeping too much to himself, and she needed answers.

"Alright fine. What are you getting at?" she asked.

"I suspect that she is either trying to extract Gabriel or the more likely scenario, that she has been assigned to him to garner his trust."

"Why are you so certain she is this terrible person?"

The anguish in her voice finally revealed what was really bothering her.

"Anabel, just because she could be working with Prime, doesn't mean that she's a terrible person," he said.

He searched her expression hoping she understood. With a frustrated sigh, her hands fell to her sides.

"Fine, I will concede that she might be a spy. I still think it's ridiculous, but if she is, what does it mean?"

"It could mean we might be getting Gabriel back or ..."



"Or, what?" She was valiantly trying to be patient with him, but she was ready to strangle her husband.

His expression was grim.

"Or it will take a great deal more time to get him out."

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

Anabel opened the front door to find two men dressed in black suits standing on her parents' front porch.

"Ms. Cardenas?" the shorter of the two men said.

"Can I help you?"

"Are you Ms. Anabel Cardenas?" he asked.

"Sir, I don't know who you are, so until you show some sort of ID I have other business to attend to." Anabel began closing the door.

"Ms. Cardenas, we're with Sector Seven," he said. They both flashed ID badges.

"I'm Anderson and this is my partner Agent Smith."

"I've never heard of Sector Seven. I'd like you both to leave."

"Ma'am, we are authorized to enter the premises without your permission."

"Don't you dare threaten me. I have the local police on speed dial. When they get here, you can sort out jurisdictional procedures. Good-bye," she said. This time she had managed to get the door almost closed before one of them pushed it open.

She glared at them through the opening, not impressed with the weapons they were now allowing to become visible.

"We're here about Gabriel de la Cruz. He has been missing for quite some time," he said.

Anabel although no less hostile allowed the door to open all the way.

"May we come in?" Agent Anderson said.

Saying nothing Anabel gave them both a once over before stepping away from the door and walking into the formal living room used only for guests her parents did not like. Following a few feet behind, Agents Anderson and Smith stepped through the front door, closing it quietly behind them.

She waited until they were seated before taking a seat at wing back chair. She arched an eyebrow to indicate that she was ready to listen.

"Ms. Cardenas, we are aware that you and Mr. de la Cruz were recently engaged to be married. Can you tell us when was the last time you spoke with him?"

"How long has he been missing?" she said. Emotion clogged her throat making her voice sound deeper than she had intended. Allowing her emotions to be apparent was a calculated risk.

"We are not exactly sure, but at least one year."

"And you are only now coming to speak with me?"

"When was the last time you spoke with Mr. de la Cruz?" Agent Smith finally spoke.

"Two years ago. He called me to say he would be travelling for some time."

"Was that when he broke off the engagement?"

Anabel flinched at his question. The two agents exchanged meaningful looks.

"No, Gabriel- He broke off the engagement when he discovered I had been unfaithful."

"Would that have been with Mr. Leandro, your husband?" Agent Smith said.

"Yes."

"How long after the end of your engagement did he contact you again?"

"A few months."

"Why do you think he would do that?"

"He might have heard that Ivan and I had married."

"I see. How was the relationship between your husband and Gabriel after that? Did the two remain in communication?"

"Not that I am aware of. My husband is a private man. He was not unaffected by the loss of his best friend's confidence."

"You don't seem overly concerned by his disappearance Ms. Cardenas?"

"Don't I? We did not part on the best of terms nor have we spoken much in the intervening time. I miss him, but I have no reason to believe that anything has happened to him. He did say he would be travelling for a while."

"You mentioned that. Is Mr. Leandro here? We would like to ask him a few questions."

"I'm sure you would, but my parents are due home any moment. I'd rather not upset them by finding two agents in their living room." Anabel stood. She was calling a close to this interview.

"Ms. Cardenas, it is important we speak to your husband. Gabriel has not checked in." Agent Anderson looked at Smith silently communicating to come to a decision. Smith nodded once.

"Ms. Cardenas, we know where Gabriel is supposedly traveling. He was supposed to check in every three months. When he missed the first one, no one was worried. It happens when you're out in the field, but when he failed to check in again, it raised a few red flags. That was six months ago. We've exhausted our conventional channels."

"Why do you think I would know more?" Anabel said. Her arms were crossed, her back to them.

"We believe that you and your husband might have an alternate means of contacting de la Cruz."

"I wish I did."

"Anabel?"

"Ivan!"

Anabel looked at her husband with a stricken expression. Had he heard? She tossed the thought aside. Where was Aldo?

"Who are these men?"

"Mr. Leandro. We're Agents Anderson and Smith with Sector Seven. We're here about your friend Gabriel de la Cruz. Do you have time to sit with us?"

Both agents were now standing. They presented Ivan with their badges.

"Gabriel? What's this about?"

"These men claim they know where Gabriel is and they need our help to contact him," Anabel said. She had one hand on his arm. He stopped to look at her. She mouthed, "Aldo?"

He blinked once slowly to show the baby was safe. Anabel breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"How can we be sure you are who you say? I'm sorry, but there is too much at stake to take you at your word," Ivan said. He stepped further into the room positioning himself between the agents and his wife keeping clear to allow himself room to maneuver. They noticed and exchanged another meaningful glance.

"De la Cruz started this whole endeavor because his father died, murdered by enemy combatants. What you don't know, what Gabriel only learned recently, is that his father was killed on Prime."

"Wait? What?" Ivan said.

"You've had agents jumping to Prime?"

"We've had agents jumping to all the dimensions, but we needed help. Gabriel is not the only one we contacted. He was just the only one who did something about it organizing your group convincing you to dimension jump. Your group has done a lot of good."

"We don't know how to contact him," Ivan said.

"If you could-"

"Agent Anderson, I appreciate your candor, but we can't help you. We haven't heard from Gabriel and we have no way of contacting him."

"We understand," Agent Smith said when Anderson would have spoken.

"Please, if you hear from him, you can contact us at this number."

He extended a business card, but neither made any move to take it. He placed the card on the coffee table. He ushered his partner out of the room.

"Thank you for your time Ms. Cardenas, Mr. Leandro."

Anabel nodded but remained seated. Ivan would see them out. She squelched the need to rush into Aldo's room to check on him. She needed to make sure that the agents were long gone before she dared approach the safe room.

"They're gone."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, they crossed the perimeter alarm."

"And there's no one else out in the woods?"

"Anabel, they came alone."

"Where's Aldo?"

"He's in the safe room with your parents. They're just waiting for the all clear."

She sagged in relief. She lived in fear that agents from the US government or from Prime would come looking for her son. Now that she knew for certain that her government was indeed aware of the crossroads, her fears were now realized.

She had rushed to the basement. Her trembling fingers fumbled the pass code.

"Stop it. Let me. You'll lock the entire system," Ivan said softly. He had followed her to the safe room door.

Anabel stepped aside and let him type in the sequence. She waited impatiently for the system to register Ivan's and then her code. The door had barely released the lock when Anabel was wrenching the door open to scoop her baby into her arms.

"Anabel, you're scaring him," Anabel's mother said softly.

Anabel released her tight hold on her son.

"Hey handsome. Were you good for your abuela and abuelo?"

He nodded his black haired head with such earnestness, Anabel could not help but laugh with delight. No matter what, she would keep this precious child safe.

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