

The following pages are a preview of:

APPRENTICE

Olive Tree Academy:
Book One

By Sara Blake

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Thanks for reading!



PROLOGUE

Another pothole, and Sofia took a deep breath. She closed her book and set it down on the seat beside her, no longer able to concentrate. She was trying to find a position that put less pressure on her bladder when she saw a sign ahead: REST AREA 2 MILES

“Garrett?” she said. “Can we stop at the rest area? I need to go to the bathroom.”

“No.” He packed a world of hate and anger into the syllable.

Sofia felt all the unspoken, additional words slam into her like the jolts from the potholes. *<Stupid bitch, I watched you drink that whole bottle of water, what did you think was going to happen? Fucking kid. You can sit there and suffer, and maybe next time you'll think before you drink a gallon of water in my car.>*

Sofia's mother, Maria, sat in the passenger seat, saying nothing in her defense. *<Why does she always have to provoke him? She won't graduate for almost three more years. I don't know if I can handle three more years of this.>*

"Please?" She hated to use the pleading tone, hated to give his sadism something to latch onto, but if she peed on his seat it would be so much worse. "I really have to go. I won't drink anything else the rest of the way." She couldn't believe she was promising to dehydrate herself so they could get to Garrett's stupid car race 20 minutes sooner.

Her mother's taste in boyfriends had always been terrible. There had been Angel, who'd kept drugs in a hidden compartment behind the couch, his customers rapping their secret knock at the back door at all hours. After he was arrested, Maria had been

lucky to avoid prison herself. Next, she'd taken up with Tony, whom she'd met at the courthouse. Tony had taken a fourteen-year-old Sofia on B-and-E's with him, teaching her the tricks of his trade. She'd liked Tony, but he hadn't stuck around long.

After Tony had come Carl. He'd been okay too, until he'd noticed she had a maturing body under her baggy jeans and band t-shirts.

Garrett was the first one who'd hit. The first who was menacing and violent. Sofia didn't know whether Maria kept him around out of fear, or if by now she believed he was the best she could do.

Garrett turned to Maria. "I suppose you gotta piss, too?"

Maria put on her tough face. "I'm sure we could all use a break. We've been in the car for three hours."

Without another word, Garrett yanked on the wheel and they squealed into the entrance lane for the rest area. Sofia slammed into the car door, her bladder almost letting loose at the impact. She held her breath until the car jerked to a stop, straddling two parking

spots. She leapt out and ran toward the central building.

She emerged a few minutes later, dreading getting back in the car. She could see her mother and Garrett standing beside the beat-up Dodge Neon, arguing. She imagined her mom was fighting to defend her, but she knew better. Her mother hadn't done anything to defend her against Garrett since he'd moved in with them. When he yelled at her, Maria reminded her not to make him mad. When he hit Sofia, Maria told her he couldn't help it because he'd had a difficult life. When he hit Maria, she said nothing in her own defense. It was never going to get better.

She stopped walking, putting off the inevitable. It was at least another hour to the racetrack. At the opposite end of the parking area, a family milled around their minivan. There were two little kids, about four and six, and a teenager a year or two younger than Sofia. The kids were running around, squealing at the pure joy of being out of the car and moving. The teenager, a boy of fourteen or so, was petting a golden retriever. The mom and dad looked at a phone screen together, probably discussing their route.

She looked at her mom and Garrett again. Their argument had heated up. They were standing closer, shouting into one another's faces.

The happy family began piling back into their van. She toyed with the idea of running over there, begging them to rescue her from the misery her life had become. It could work. She could be free. There was nothing in her bedroom at home she couldn't do without or replace. She could start a new life with the boho bag over her shoulder and the clothes on her back.

She had taken the first few steps toward the van when she looked back. Garret's hand was raised, ready to connect with Maria's face, but he seemed to remember he was in public and pulled back.

Sofia stopped. If she ran away, there'd be nobody to protect Maria from her own bad judgment. She knew her mom wouldn't appreciate it. Maria didn't care whether her daughter was around, and she didn't believe she needed a buffer between herself and her maniac boyfriend. But Sofia's conscience

wouldn't let her abandon her all the same. She changed course.

By the time she reached the car, Maria had stormed away and was fiddling with her phone. Garrett had crossed the parking lot to the grassy space between the entrance ramp to the rest area and the freeway, and stood there, smoking a cigarette.

Sofia walked past the Neon, past the end of the sidewalk, and out along the shoulder by the entrance ramp. Garrett was ahead, near the end of the grassy space where the entrance lane first split off from the freeway.

Sofia walked until she was across from Garrett, the entry lane between them. There were dark skid marks on the pavement, probably made by Garrett slamming the car into the ramp lane without slowing down. Every moment with him, their lives were in danger.

A semi-truck pulled into the entrance lane, moving fast. She looked across the road at Garrett. He looked back, making eye contact. Again, she heard his unspoken words, and they made her even less eager to get back into a car with him.

She could hear the semi, barreling up the ramp. She maintained eye contact with

Sara Blake

Garrett. His thoughts washed over her, promising the remainder of the trip to Indianapolis would be even more hellish.

In response, she thought two words back: <*Come here.*>

PREVIEW



CHAPTER ONE

SOFIA

Did you ever see the episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* where Buffy's cursed with the ability to hear the thoughts of everyone around her? It sounds like a great talent to have, at first. The ability to know what people think, want, expect. Imagine taking a test and pulling the

answers right out of the teacher's head. How about going to a job interview, and knowing what the hiring manager wants to hear for every question?

Now consider going out to dinner and hearing every nasty thing your date would like to do to you when (not *if*, mind you) he gets you home. Or maybe try going to the movies, and by chance sitting behind a guy seeing it for the second time, who spends the whole time thinking about how it's going to end? Never mind the one up your row who's seen the thing a dozen times and is mentally reciting every single word along with the actors.

How would you enjoy walking into a bank and hearing the security guard thinking how he'd like to round up everyone who looks like you and throw you back across the border where you belong? That guy also wanted to take me home and do nasty things to me.

Yes, *me*. And like Buffy by the end of that episode, I spend much of my time fighting the urge to slam my hands over my useless ears and scream "shut the fuck up!" to the entire world.

My name is Sofia Ramirez, and this is my life.

Walking back from my last class on a Friday afternoon should have been a lovely thing. I had studying to do, and a paper to write, but the weekend was still something to look forward to. As I walked across the BCU campus, though, the voices in my head kept getting louder and louder. Fridays could be bad that way. Having been in class after class of people thinking at me all week long, it seemed like the more tired I got the clearer and louder I heard everyone. Other people were excited it was Friday, and their thoughts got louder and louder until, between their increased signal and my heightened receptivity, all I wanted to do was run away to a remote island and never approach civilization again.

My roommate had other ideas. "There you are!" Kerry shouted, bouncing me like Tigger.

"Here I am," I agreed, already not liking where this was going.

"We're going to Nebula tonight."

"Are you?" Three weeks into the semester, she knew me well enough to catch the pronoun switch.

And she was having none of it. “Yes, *we* are. You need a break as much as I do.”

“But I—”

She put up a hand. “I’m not hearing it. You’re going out.”

“I’m not, though,” I said, pretending this was a reasonable debate.

The discussion continued into our building, up the stairs, and down the hall. It was approaching *wabbit season-duck season* proportions by the time we entered our room. “Please?” She’d shifted from pushing to pleading.

Which, I hated to admit, tended to work better. “I don’t want to get all dressed up. I’m tired.”

She smirked, knowing once I started making excuses, my resolve was weakening. “You don’t have to. Nebula’s full of people in jeans and t-shirts. It’s very come-as-you-are. Well, *almost* as you are. You’ll need to put the books down.”

Easy for her to say. Even in jeans and a t-shirt, she was dressed to draw attention. Not that she was glamorous, but she brought off the hot nerd girl thing

with zero effort. Today her ensemble was a pair of purple Converse, faded jeans, and a black t-shirt declaring *No, I will not fix your computer* in plain white text. Her long hair was its usual Cookie Monster blue, though the dark brown roots needed a touch up. Her makeup was mostly worn off by this time of day, but her black eyeliner and some sparkly eyeshadow remained. The necklace she always wore hung in front of the shirt, a circle cut out from a computer's motherboard, green with a white raspberry printed on it.

"So," I said, my tone dripping with sarcasm. "You're saying this is acceptable club attire?" I gestured to my own outfit, which consisted of a pair of khakis and a baby blue twin set.

No, seriously.

"So, change," Kerry said, unmoved. "You can change clothes without getting 'all dressed up.'"

"Into what?" I didn't have much money for new clothes when I'd come to school, but I'd been determined to make a fresh start. My old clothes were thrift store finds and clearance items from Wal-Mart. I'd left the bulk of them behind in exchange for a small,

but new, wardrobe consisting of the sort of things I'd imagined would allow me to blend into an academic setting. And I might have succeeded, had I been coming to BCU as a professor or librarian. Turns out, most college freshmen don't dress like middle aged white ladies. Who knew?

Kerry didn't have a ready response; she'd seen all my clothes. She was quite a bit skinnier and a whole lot taller than me, so she couldn't offer to let me wear something of hers.

"Look," I said, as she dove into my closet with unfounded optimism. "I'm not going out. You go. Have fun. You don't need me with you, and I really don't want to—"

"How about this?" she asked, turning around to hold up two of the very few old items I'd brought with me. A pair of no-name jeans and a green, embroidered peasant blouse. These were things I'd only brought along to hang out in my room in; I'd never intended to wear them in public. But I had to admit, they looked better than the JCPenney nightmares filling my closet.

Before I'd come up with a new argument, the fire alarm blared. We poked our heads out our door to hear the R.A. shouting as he moved up the hall. "There's a burst water pipe on the second floor. We need to evacuate the building. It should be fixed by late tonight, but everyone needs to go somewhere else until midnight or so."

Kerry's grin made me want to flick her in the ear. Looked like I was going out after all. Dammit.

SOFIA

It was far too early to head straight to Nebula, so Kerry and I stopped at Dorie's for tacos, then hung out at Sky Street Coffee for a while before heading to the club. We were still so early the lights were partway up when we walked inside.

There were a few other early arrivals milling around, in groups of two or three like us. I wondered how many of them were from our building, kicked out into the world far too early for a Friday night. We went to the bar, but we were both too young to buy alcohol. She got a Coke and I got a ginger ale, and we

found a spot to plant ourselves. Kerry was jittery and bored, eager to start dancing and socializing, but I was fine with the thin crowd and lack of activity. Fun fact: loud music doesn't drown out voices inside your head.

After a while, they turned the house lights down and the flashing, reflecting, glowing things on. Within the hour, there were enough people to count, and Kerry dragged me onto the dance floor. I had a good time for a while, though I'd never have admitted it, lest she start dragging me out of the dorm on a regular basis. There were scores of voices in my head by this point, but they all combined into a dull, wordless roar.

We danced until a sweaty, panting Kerry said, "I need another Coke." She led the way across the club and up a set of wrought iron stairs to a loft level I hadn't seen before. There was a small bar along the back wall, where we got our drinks. The club had filled up since we'd arrived, but the loft was empty. Either people didn't like it for some reason, or I wasn't the only one who hadn't known it was there.

We leaned against a waist-high railing that overlooked the dance floor. Well, it was waist high on Kerry. It came closer to my chest. Looking over the edge, I was fine with this; it was a long way down.

The downside to being up here away from people was I could make out individual thoughts again. I always tried not to pay attention to the thoughts of my friends, out of respect for their privacy, but couldn't always help it. Kerry was a computer and tech genius, and she spent a lot of time thinking about math so far beyond me it wouldn't have mattered how much attention I paid. Even so, after a few weeks of sharing a dorm room with her, I already knew way more about her than either of us would have wanted.

Right now, for example, Kerry was thinking about getting laid. She had her eyes on a pale, skinny boy at the edge of the dance floor, wondering what her chances were. Unless he was gay or asexual, her chances were one hundred percent. She had no idea how hot she was, and this kid looked like he'd wandered in here by accident, chasing Pokémon on his phone.

My attention was drawn from Kerry's naughty ponderings by a mental presence. I didn't hear any words, but I got the image of Kerry and I from behind, focused on our asses. I turned around to deflect whatever unwanted attention we were about to receive.

The two guys approaching us looked as out of place in the club as I would have in my khakis. They were dressed outdated country, sort of like Garth Brooks on the covers of Garrett's old CDs. Blocky shirts, tight jeans, just-for-show cowboy boots. They were missing the hats, but they'd probably just left them in the car. I nudged Kerry. "We're about to get hit on."

She turned around, and the look on her face would have let me read her mind had I not already been able to. I tried hard not to laugh. There was no reason to be mean, but I don't think she could have looked more incredulous had Winston Churchill been standing there. She made a show of looking down at their boots and back up to their faces. "No."

"Oh, c'mon baby," said one of them, stepping close. He grabbed Kerry's

computer chip necklace as though he was looking at it, but he didn't let go.

My eyes flicked to the other one, who'd moved closer to me. He wore an earring in his left ear, a clear stone far too big to be anything but cubic zirconia. I still wasn't picking up words from their minds, but their general intention wasn't anything good. "We're fine on our own." I looked around, but the loft was still empty. I didn't even see the bartender anymore.

"That don't sound right." His slow drawl dripped threat in every syllable. "Do it, Clay?"

Clay turned to face us, but stayed super close to Kerry. "What's that?"

"These girls say they're fine on their own."

"Pretty things like this? Naw, that ain't right. Girls as pretty as y'all can get a man easy."

"Maybe they don't want no man," Earring said. "Maybe they's pussy lickens."

"Look," I said, failing miserably at not showing fear. "We're going to go now." I considered adding *we're meeting our boyfriends*, but these guys would see right through it. Plus, it was just gross to perpetuate the idea that women needed men to protect them.

I took a step forward but, as expected, Earring didn't move.

"Now, don't be like that," Clay said. He'd turned, but was still staying super close to Kerry. She moved next to me, so all four of us were clustered tight. "We're tryin' to help y'all. You pussy lickers don't know what you're missing."

Looked like we were staying with that one. I elbowed Kerry, hard, before the comment she was thinking made it out of her mouth. She wouldn't know I knew what she was going to say, of course, but the jolt would give her a second to think before her well-honed sarcasm slipped out on autopilot. There wasn't much we could say or do to make things better, but I was certain *if you boys were willing to do some quality pussy licking yourselves, maybe you wouldn't have to intimidate women to get them to sleep with you would make them much, much worse.*

If I could have heard *their* thoughts, I might have known if there was some weakness I could exploit. A bad knee I could kick, a sensitive topic I could distract with, anything to give us an edge. But the only things I was getting from

either of them were wordless menace and the occasional, terrifying, image.

Images like Kerry being grabbed and held, screaming.

I'd been worried about Kerry's autopilot, which was her laser-precise sarcasm. My *own* autopilot, however, was different.

I locked eyes with Earring, who was closest to me. It only took a couple of seconds to connect, and I could finally hear his thoughts. His name was Aaron. *<What is this bitch doing?>* He wondered. *<What is she? Fuck! Oh fuck, she's a goddamned witch! Fuck, fuck, fuck!>* He stepped back a bit. I held eye contact, hoping I could get this done before Clay figured out what was happening and intervened.

At my mental direction, Aaron took Clay by the arm and pulled him back a few steps, giving Kerry and I a bit of breathing room. I hoped Aaron would be spooked and leave, taking Clay with him.

We had no such luck. *<I know what you are, witch.>* He thought it right at me, knowing I could hear him. I tried to school my face, but he had to have seen my shock. *<Do you know what I am?>*

He pushed against my mind, but I managed to keep my hold. I had very little experience doing this, but nobody had ever pushed back before. Nobody had ever been aware I could hear their thoughts and spoken directly to me. What had I gotten us into?

So far, neither Clay nor Kerry had any idea what was happening. Getting us out of this was going to require a lot more force. I could hear Kerry's thoughts beside me, and she was losing her shit. I didn't blame her, but I couldn't help her at the moment, either.

"She's a fuckin' witch," Aaron said out loud, filling Clay in. "She's tryin' to Sway me."

Clay's expression changed; he was taking me seriously now. After a brief hesitation, he came at me. Kerry screamed, but I ducked out of his way; I had plenty of experience avoiding Garrett. I locked eyes with Clay this time, connecting more easily than I had with Aaron.

I hadn't been missing much, not being able to hear Clay's thoughts. He was the bigger of the two, but he was also

the dumber. He was a lot easier to control.

I took Kerry by the wrist and pulled her as far away as I dared, maintaining my eye contact with Clay. I hoped it wouldn't occur to Aaron to shake him and make him look away.

As soon as Kerry and I were out of the way, I made my move. Clay grabbed hard onto Aaron, his beefy arm wrapping around the other man's back as though he were about to take him down in some sort of wrestling hold. Then he ran forward, dragging Aaron with him. My control stopped as soon as our eye contact broke, but I trusted momentum to finish the job. The two of them hit the railing and flipped over it, dropping the 20 or so feet to the dance floor below.

"Come on," I yelled, grabbing Kerry by the hand. I ran, not looking, not wanting to see them land.

Kerry's mind was full of questions, but she didn't ask me any of them as we flew down the stairs. We ignored the commotion on the dance floor behind us as we ran out of the club and into the night.

SOFIA

My triple shot latte was not the most brilliant idea I'd ever had. I hadn't slept all night, but I was way too jumpy for so much caffeine. By the time it was half gone, I felt like I wanted to claw my way out of my own skin.

Kerry, on the other hand, had downed her four-shot mocha and was shooting regular glances at the counter. There's something about tech geeks and caffeine.

She looked at me, opened her mouth to say something, closed it again. She picked up her empty paper cup and shook it, making sure a last sip hadn't missed her notice. She started to say something again, hesitated, then said, "fuck it," and headed for the counter.

While she was ordering, I looked around. Sky Street Coffee on a Saturday morning was very different than on a Friday night. Pretty much everyone was buried in a book, a laptop, or both. Kerry and I had spent every Saturday morning here, studying, since the semester had begun. We hadn't even brought any

books with us today, making zero pretense this was a normal weekend.

The majority of the people in the café were students, but there was one middle aged man who appeared to be a professor grading papers. A couple of people were reading novels or debating animatedly about politics or philosophy. A few stared into space while drinking black coffee, battling hangovers.

Kerry stood by the bar waiting for her coffee rather than coming back to the table and listening for her name. She wasn't exactly avoiding me, but she had a lot of questions she wasn't asking. I'd already heard them all, of course, rattling around in her traumatized mind, but answering questions she hadn't asked would only make things worse.

I went back to people-watching, and my eyes landed on a handsome black man who was probably in his forties. His conservative, blue suit contrasted with the dreadlocks hanging almost to his waist, pulled back with a fat ponytail holder. He wasn't studying, reading, or grading papers. He was probably just a townie who wanted a latte, but until Kerry got back, my only options were

speculate about this stranger or obsess about what had happened the night before.

Kerry returned, and I shifted my attention from the mystery man to face her. She took a long drink of her coffee, as though steeling herself with a shot of whiskey. Then she looked me in the eye. “What the fuck was that, Sofia?”

I didn’t need to ask what she meant, and I didn’t need to be a mind reader to know. “Those guys were going to hurt us,” I said. It was, of course, the reason for what happened, and not the thing itself.

She nodded, her face thoughtful. “Yes, they were. But...”

I couldn’t tell her. I hadn’t told anyone about my abilities—any of them—since I was six years old. I’d learned fast most people didn’t believe me, and the few who did fell into one of two camps: the ones who wanted to take advantage, and the ones who wanted to burn me at the stake. Kerry was a science nerd. She’d doubtless be among the disbelievers. “And they didn’t.”

She wanted to ask me outright what I'd done but was afraid to. And I couldn't tell her. I'd been so happy to have landed a roommate I got along with, too. Damn.

"Did you look online?" she asked. She was twitchy. For the first time, she looked like she was feeling the caffeine. But it wasn't the caffeine, and I knew it.

"Look online for what?"

"To see what happened. Those guys jumped right over the railing. Did they..."

"I didn't." Neither of us had brought our laptops this morning, but we had our phones. I held mine up. "Do you want to look now?"

"I don't know," she said, looking a bit like her mocha and a half were going to come back up.

I pulled up Google and typed in NEBULA BARROW CITY. If those guys had been seriously injured, or died, it would be the first story to come up. Likewise, if they'd landed on any dancers and injured them, a possibility I hadn't considered until just then. My own coffee suddenly felt a bit jumpy in my stomach, too.

The first result was the website for the club itself, followed by articles from local

entertainment papers, conversations on social media, and the like. I tapped on the NEWS heading, but there was nothing recent. There was something about a small fire they'd had in their entryway when their old sign had shorted out, an article from a conservative website alleging the club played music intended to turn their patrons gay, and a story from the Barrow City Gazette about people protesting the club for not attracting a diverse enough crowd. I rolled my eyes at people in general, but sighed in relief. "Nothing," I said.

"You're sure?"

"Positive." I handed over my phone, which was easier than making her repeat the same search. "If anything bad had happened, it would be in the top search results by now."

She nodded. "I guess." She downed the rest of her second mocha, then looked at her watch. "Shit!" she exclaimed. "I was supposed to be at robotics club 20 minutes ago!"

She grabbed her bag and hurried out the door. I watched her go, still not sure

where our friendship was going to end up.

When I turned back, the handsome, dreadlocked stranger was sitting in the chair Kerry had just vacated.

PREVIEW



CHAPTER TWO

SOFIA

I hadn't heard the man pull out the chair or sit down. Nor had I heard his thoughts which, after the night before, was unsettling. Even now, his mind was a total blank to me. My heart was going a thousand miles an hour, but despite the sudden approach and the muscles straining the fabric of his expensive-looking suit, I

didn't feel a threat from him like I had from the guys at Nebula. "Um... hi?" I said.

"Hello, Ms. Ramirez," he said. His eyes flicked up to meet mine, then turned away again. His skin was deep brown, while his eyes were light and sparkling, almost gold. It was a striking combination. I could see why he avoided eye contact; people were probably always staring at his eyes and not paying attention to anything he said.

But... what he'd said was *my name*. How the hell did he know my name?

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to frighten you by using your name. I'm Lennox Grey. I've been sent here to talk to you."

Oh, shit. "Did something... I mean. Last night. Those guys were threaten—"

"It's okay," he said in a calm voice, favoring me with another flick of eye contact. "I *am* here because of what happened last night, but I'm not with the police. You're not in any trouble."

"Who are—"

He interrupted me with a slight chuckle. "I apologize again." His voice was deep and soothing. Too soothing. I felt an instinct to trust him, which was all kinds of stupid when dealing with a total stranger who was

capable of sneaking up on me and knew my name. “I keep telling the Dean I’m terrible at these meetings, but she keeps sending me on them.”

The Dean of BCU was Armand Wayland. A man. This person, Lennox Grey, had said *she*. “Dean Wayland is—”

“See what I mean? Terrible. Let’s start over. Hello. My name is Professor Lennox Grey. I’m here representing Olive Tree Academy for Supernatural Studies. We—”

It was my turn to interrupt. “Supernatural studies?”

“Yes.”

“That’s... not a thing.”

He raised his eyebrows, and looked me in the eye again, a bit longer this time. Some of his mannerisms reminded me of my cousin José, who was on the autism spectrum. “Not a thing? What, then, do you call the things you can do?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He nodded. “You can call it by whatever word you’re comfortable with, but you have to admit telepathy and

mind control aren't exactly common talents."

"But I didn't... I mean, I can't..."

"It's all right," he said. "This is what we do. We find people with talent, and we teach them. Most of the time, this outreach is done in the summer, before the fall semester begins, but you're something of a special case."

"Special how?"

"We had you on our list in June, but the scout we sent determined you had no exceptional talent."

"Scout?"

He smiled. "Yes. Do you remember Brian, who you worked with at—"

"The Cannery." It was a pub I'd worked at before starting at BCU. "Yeah, I remember him. He was... weird."

"He was one of ours. A graduate student we sent to observe you."

"Observe me?"

"It's not as creepy as it sounds. He wasn't spying on you in your sleep. Our scouts work strictly in public places. We position them as co-workers, customers, fellow students. They watch to see if the potential student demonstrates any striking abilities. According to Brian, you didn't."

Good. That meant I'd been doing a good job keeping a lid on things. *Until last night*, I thought.

"Until last night." I was beginning to think he could read minds like I could. "Last night, you did the thing we sent Brian to look for. I suspect you exert a tremendous amount of effort toward suppressing your abilities."

He wasn't wrong.

"The two men who accosted you are fine. You did nothing wrong. What you did almost certainly saved the lives of both you and your friend. Both men stood and walked away, unharmed."

"How could they fall 20 feet onto a cement dance floor and be fine?"

"Because they were vampires."

"Oh, come on." We'd gone from strange to full-on crazy town.

Lennox smiled. "Most vampires aren't killers, but I believe those two were. You and I would not be sitting here talking had you not acted. Also, it takes an incredible talent to do what you did to a vampire. But vampires have nothing to do with joining the Psychic Arts program at our school"

“Joining the what?”

“The Psychic Arts program. Olive Tree Academy has programs in Psychic Arts and Magickal Arts, as well as Academic programs and a few others. You’ve been accepted into the Psychic Arts program. You’ll be coming in a bit late, but I’m confident you’ll be able catch up with little diffi—”

“No.”

“I’m sorry?”

“No. *En-oh*. I spend every minute of my life trying not to use my abilities. I sure as hell don’t want to go to Hogwarts and become even more psychic.”

“It’s more like Brakebills, really.”

I couldn’t even tell if he was making a joke.

“I understand your reservations,” he said, resuming his reassuring tone. “But studying won’t make you *more* psychic. It will give you the control to choose when, and how, you use your abilities.”

I still didn’t like the idea. I’d started a new life at BCU, was almost a month into the semester. I wasn’t going to drop it all and start over again. Plus, school was expensive, and you couldn’t just switch colleges midstream. “I couldn’t even if I wanted to. I

have scholarships specific to BCU, and loans, and—”

“There’s no tuition at OTA.”

“That’s ridiculous. There has to be.”

“OTA is privately funded, by people and organizations with an interest in seeing the supernatural community thrive.”

Oh, that didn’t sound ominous at all.

He reached into his jacket. “Take my card. I’m here to offer you a place at our school, not to bully you into it. Take all the time you need, but I do hope you’ll consider it. Call me anytime, whether it’s soon or down the road. We can help.”

I took the card to shut him up, then stood to leave.

“One last thing,” he said.

I waited, humoring him.

“What you did last night was both justified and necessary. What you did when you were sixteen was also warranted self-defense. But one day, you might perceive a threat where none is intended, and act out of instinct. One day, you might indeed cause the harm you were worried you might have caused

last night. We can give you the control you need so that doesn't happen."

I wanted to refuse him again but didn't seem to have enough air in my lungs. I walked away without saying anything else. I looked to make sure he wasn't watching, and tossed his card in the trash on the way out.

SOFIA

"You should remember from last time, and from the reading, neurotransmitters are chemicals that carry messages between the synapses. A large number of chemicals act as neurotransmitters."

I remembered that. Maybe. The word *neurotransmitter* was familiar, anyway, though maybe just from commercials for depression drugs. I'd done the reading before class, but none of it had really penetrated. Maybe I needed some neurotransmitters myself.

"You'll have heard of a few of them, if only from television commercials."

Ha!

"Dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine..."

The word *dopamine* had always sounded like *dope* to me, which was funny. Did dopamine have anything to do with the effects of drugs on the brain? Was that where the slang term *dope* came from? How did I even know that word, *dope*? It wasn't like it was current to my generation. I didn't think even my mom would have used that word. My abuela, maybe. Abuela. Why did I call her that? We didn't speak much Spanish in our house. I hadn't even learned more than a few words of Spanish until high school, unless you counted the smattering I learned from Sesame Street. Grover had been my favorite character on Sesame Street. Was he ever in the Spanish-speaking segments? Did he call *his* grandmother abuela?

“...Substance P is related to the sensation of pain...”

Whoa, Professor Brown's voice got loud all of a sudden. Had I almost fallen asleep? Or maybe I *had* fallen asleep. Had I been thinking about Grover from Sesame Street? I shook my head, trying to clear it, and sat up straighter. I picked

up my pen. Maybe taking notes would keep me awake.

I hadn't slept since what happened at Nebula Friday night. Now it was Monday afternoon, and things were getting sort of surreal. Pretty soon, an odd stranger was going to sit down next to me and ask if I'd like to learn how to make soap.

I shook my head again, took a deep breath. I needed to wake up.

I'd been exhausted since Saturday, but every time I lay down and tried to sleep, my heart raced and my eyes locked open, staring at the ceiling. I couldn't stop thinking about those guys at Nebula, and that I'd have killed them had they not been vampires.

Vampires! How was that even something I had to seriously consider? There was no such thing as vampires. That was ridiculous. Lennox Grey was just some crazy person. But, if he was a crazy person, how had he known my name? How had he blocked his thoughts from me?

Psychic Arts Program. How was that a thing? That couldn't be a thing. I mean, obviously I knew psychic ability was real. My whole life had been a battle with it. But who makes a school for it? And then sends creepy,

well-dressed men out into the world trying to recruit psychics?

And had he said there was a magical arts program, too? Magic? What was my life all of a sudden?

BANG!

A book had fallen off a desk, but I shrieked like someone was shooting at me. Things always seem extra loud when they wake you up, don't they?

It was a short scream, at least. I hoped nobody had noticed, but when I looked up, every single person in the room, including Professor Brown, was staring at me. "Sorry," I said, beyond humiliated.

Professor Brown resumed his lecture, which by now I'd lost all track of. Most of the class turned back to listen again, but a few lingering lookie-loos continued to gawk at me. What? Never saw an exhausted lunatic before?

I wasn't getting anything out of the class, and was at risk of causing further disruption, so I decided to get out while I still had maybe one shred of dignity left. I gathered up my books and slunk out the door.

It felt cooler and easier to breathe as soon as I hit the hallway. I still had an English Comp class that afternoon. I needed to either wake the hell up or go take a nap for real. Figuring I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway, I opted for waking up.

There was a coffee cart tucked into a corner at the end of the hall. It was small, but they had espresso and sugary pastries. A voice behind me called out "Hey!"

I ignored the shout, carrying on with my Quest for Caffeine.

"Hey, you! Sorry, I don't know your name! Are you okay?" *<I hope she's okay. She's really pretty.>*

Seriously? He didn't know my name, but he felt it was his place to chase me out of class and check on me? Maybe he'd follow me all the way to the coffee cart and mansplain espresso. "I'm fine," I said, not slowing down and not turning around.

He didn't say anything else, but I could hear him back there, worrying about pretty little me. To his credit, he wasn't having thoughts about my ass, or how he could take advantage of my agitated state to get me into bed. But he did believe I needed to be protected and taken care of, based on my

gender and level of attractiveness. “Fuck off, back there,” I said, too low for him to hear.

I reached my destination and ordered a triple shot vanilla latte and a chocolate croissant.

My shadow didn’t order anything. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Dude!” I whirled around. “What is your deal? I don’t need your help. I don’t even know you.”

“I’m just making sure you’re all right. You left class.”

“And?”

“You seemed upset.”

“And you were going to do what, exactly?” Because I can hear people’s thoughts, I know most guys who think they’re required to take care of women don’t think of themselves as sexist. They sincerely believe treating women like helpless children is a form of respect. Usually because their mothers taught them that.

He had no answer for me, but he kept talking anyway. “I was going to see if you were okay.”

“And then?”

“Sofia!” The barista sat my drink on the counter next to my croissant. I took both and turned to leave.

He blocked my way. He didn’t mean it as a threat, but he was determined to keep me from going off on my own. Because I was a girl. I was done with this shit now. “Move.”

“You shouldn’t be alone.”

“Fuck. Off.” He could hear it that time.

“See?” *<If she was okay, she wouldn’t be so combative. Happy girls smile and are polite.>*

“See what?”

He knew better than to voice his thought, at least. “You’re obviously not all right. You’re mad about something.”

Was he kidding? He hadn’t even asked my name before plowing forward with his assumption that I needed someone in possession of a penis to soothe my female hysteria. “I was fine until someone started harassing me.”

He perked up. “Who? Do you need me to—”

I’d always thought it was a metaphor when people talked about seeing red, but either it’s a real thing or I had a little bit of a stroke. I dropped my food, the coffee

splashing up and burning my ankles as it soaked into the bottoms of my jeans and through my socks. I locked eyes with the idiot. His own eyes went wide when he felt me inside his mind. <Back off.>

He took a step backwards.

<Keep going.>

He took two more steps, eyes still locked with mine. Neither of us noticed when he crossed the imaginary line into the employees-only area behind the coffee cart. His foot caught on a heavy-duty extension cord stretched across the floor and he stumbled.

The cord was attached to a bagel toaster sitting on a tall, metal shelf. The toaster slid forward, then caught on one of the upright poles of the shelf. As the guy fell, the shelf fell with him. It hit the opposite wall and stayed there, leaning at an angle. The toaster hit the floor, along with a hail of mugs, plates, and silverware. Empty glass coffee carafes shattered. A large bread knife landed six inches from the guy's face, its tip stuck in the linoleum of the floor.

"Oh, my god!" the barista shouted, turning toward to the sudden chaos.

I backed away a few paces, then turned and ran.

SOFIA

OLIVE TREE ACADEMY FOR SUPERNATURAL STUDIES.

I scrolled through three pages of unhelpful search results before concluding I wasn't going to find anything useful. I went back to the main page and this time typed LENNOX GREY.

Again, nothing. Well, not nothing, but as I wasn't looking for musicians or floor tiles... nothing.

I tried searching PSYCHIC SCHOOL, MAGIC SCHOOL, and even VAMPIRES. Those searches went exactly the way you're imagining they did.

I couldn't get the image of that knife out of my head. That guy was a meddling, sexist idiot, but he didn't deserve to be stabbed in the head. Lennox Grey had been right; I had to learn how to control what I could do.

After an hour staring at Google, I admitted defeat. I hoped he visited me again, except he'd said he wasn't going to try to bully me into coming to his school. He wasn't

coming back any time soon, if at all. I needed to find him. I had to get that card back.

The alley behind Sky Street Coffee was narrow and filthy. The dumpster was piled full, so the truck hadn't likely been here since Saturday morning. I couldn't believe I was considering doing this, but I didn't see any other way. I had to find Lennox and his school; I couldn't keep putting people at risk because I couldn't control my ability.

At five feet nothing, getting myself over the edge and into the dumpster seemed impossible. I looked around for something I could use to step up on, and found a big, plastic bucket beside the back door of Dorie's. The inside of the bucket was stained with something greasy I chose not to contemplate. I flipped it upside down and climbed up.

I landed face down on the piles of garbage bags and immediately gagged. Only the knowledge that I'd be not only digging through garbage, but garbage

covered in vomit, gave me the strength to hold it down.

I tore open the first bag and began my search. I was looking for a needle in a haystack, except this haystack was made of drippy coffee cups, stale pastries, and used napkins.

That's what I expected it to be, at any rate. The reality turned out to be so much worse. Yes, there were a lot of empty cups in the bags, but I had no idea the sort of things people threw away in a coffee shop trash can. The cups half full of curdled milk were only the start. The rotting breakfast sandwiches with rancid bacon and putrid eggs were also bad. Dirty diapers, though, I hadn't seen coming. And used tampons, and cigarette butts, and so many other nasty things.

One of the bags contained a flowered bra.

When I found the first drug needle, I almost abandoned the search. But I could *not* carry on this way. I needed to find that school. I needed help. So, hoping they could cure hepatitis with magic at Olive Tree Academy, I continued my dumpster dive.

The next bag I tore into hit me with an intense wave of rotting fish. I hadn't considered that Dorie's used the same

dumpster. That had been the first weekend since arriving at BCU I hadn't had their Sunday fish and chips special, because I'd been too anxious to eat.

I wondered if I'd ever be able to eat fish and chips again as I puked over the side of the dumpster.

I learned the difference between the restaurant bags and the coffee shop bags fast, so I didn't have to open any more fish bombs. I grabbed another Sky Street bag and saw the rusted metal bottom of the dumpster. I was nearing the end, and still no card. I knew the card was likely so soaked through with horrible things it would be illegible, if not unrecognizable. But I had no other choice.

I tore through the bag and started tossing out the usual mess of dripping cups and crumpled pastry bags, always tensed for the next nasty thing lurking amongst the normal stuff. I couldn't even smell the spoiled milk anymore, but I think my body was still aware of it, because I'd had to throw up over the side of the dumpster two more times.

I thought the can was about halfway full when I threw out the card. I knew it

meant nothing in terms of where the card might have ended up, but I still felt my hopes rise a bit each time I neared the middle of a bag. I picked out what might have been my thousandth paper cup. I'd been skipping the cups with their lids still attached, figuring the card couldn't have gotten inside. This lid was half crushed in, though, so it was worth a look.

Something rattled as I pried the lid off. It was almost dry inside, stained dark brown with black coffee. And at the bottom was a business card.

I held my breath as I pulled it out. It was getting dark, and I had to hold the card up to catch the light of the setting sun. There was a logo of some sort at the top left corner. An olive? Maybe. It was too dark, and the card was too stained. I was going to go somewhere with more light.

I hauled myself out of the dumpster, which was even more awkward and difficult than getting in had been, and walked closer to the lamp post at the mouth of the alley, on Auburn Avenue. The logo was definitely a cluster of olives on a branch, and... yes! The card definitely had the name of the school and Lennox Grey's name on it.

I couldn't read one of the digits in the phone number, but that meant at most ten tries before I got it right. Looking back at the dumpster, I knew I was up for the simple challenge of dialing ten possible phone numbers. I tucked the filthy card into the back pocket of my filthy jeans and headed back to my dorm. I wished I'd thought to bring a change of clothes to walk home in. I felt really bad for whoever wound up having to clean up the mess I'd made in the alley.

Too bad, it turned out, to walk away. Eager as I was to take the longest shower of my life then start trying phone numbers, I sighed and headed back to the dumpster. I started throwing bags back in, one by one, as well as the loose items. It was going to be a long night.



CHAPTER THREE

CABOT

I walked into Professor Grey's classroom thanking any and all gods I'd ever heard of it was Friday. I dropped myself into my usual seat, sharing a table with Gillian, and waited to see what we were in for. So far, Intermediate Clairvoyance had not been my favorite class. Not that I had a favorite class

this semester. So far things had been pretty much shit.

“Hey, Cabot.” Gillian had been in most of my classes since I’d started at OTA last year.

“Hey, G. Any idea what we’re starting on today?”

“Nope. He didn’t give us any reading.”

Professor Grey, and some of the other professors, had a habit of making us do our first practical exercise on a topic with no advance warning. It was intended, I supposed, to help us develop our own natural talent and style. Lately, though, I felt like I had very little of either. I could have done with some preparation.

Before Gillian and I could speculate any further, Professor Grey appeared. I should clarify. He didn’t *appear*, like out of nowhere. At a school like OTA, you never know. But no, Grey’s classroom was laid out like most at OTA, with a long counter along the front of the room that acted as a lectern as well a place for displaying things. The door to his office was behind the counter, which is how he entered the room.

Today, the counter was lined with several banker's boxes. Grey looked around the room without making eye contact with anyone. "Ready to get started?" he asked.

There was a murmur of agreement from the few people who didn't know a rhetorical question when they heard one, and class began.

"In our last unit, we looked at the similarities and differences between clairvoyance and telepathy. We used the Zener cards to compare results between guessing the cards from a face-down pile versus those held by a partner concentrating on the symbol."

If you've ever seen Ghostbusters, you've seen Zener cards. That scene in the beginning, where they're testing college students for psychic ability using white cards printed with simple symbols? That's them. They're a standard tool of the trade for psychic testing and development.

There are five symbols in a Zener deck: a square, a circle, a star, an equal-armed cross, and a set of three wavy lines. The just-guessing average is expected to be about 20 percent. My average for our practices was 42 percent, which may sound good until I tell

you Gillian's was 73. That was face-down guessing. My average when Gillian was looking at the card? 19 percent. Less than would be expected by luck alone. Fuck my life.

Grey continued. "We'll be building on this with our next unit, working with everyday objects rather than testing cards." He turned and wrote the word CLAIRVOYANCE on the blackboard. "We tend to use the word *clairvoyance* as a blanket term for clairvoyance, clairsentience, and pre-cognition. However, the literal meaning of clairvoyance is 'clear seeing.' In this strict sense, clairvoyance refers to using the psychic arts to obtain *visual* information. Today, we're going to start exploring clairvoyance in this literal sense, using our minds to *see* psychic information."

I looked at Gillian. She looked excited. I felt dizzy.

"We're going to begin with a practice session, then we'll talk about things in more detail on Monday, after you've done the reading. These boxes each contain ten objects. You'll work in pairs, observing each item in your box and

writing down your impressions. The ultimate goal is to see the energy of the object, rather like viewing the human aura. Seeing this energy takes practice, though. If you can't see it right away, write down your mental impressions, what you think the energy might be. That will get you headed in the right direction. Each box has a pair of silicone tongs on top. Please use the tongs to handle the objects, as touching them with your bare hands may alter their energy."

"I'll go get our box," I told Gillian, not asking if she wanted to be my partner. I'd started asking when my class performance began to decline, in case she wanted to bail on the sinking ship that was me, but she'd told me to cut it out.

Some people were peeking into the boxes, deciding which one they wanted. I grabbed one at random. Gillian picked out the tongs, careful not to touch any of the objects with her fingers, then fished out our first target: an old-fashioned alarm clock, the kind with the big bells on top.

Once we were all staring at our first object, Professor Grey spoke again. "As you're looking at your object, relax your eyes and your mind, letting the vision come. You're

looking beyond the physical plane; this is far more difficult to do if you're focusing too much on the physical. If you've ever seen one of those 'magic eye' posters, where a three-dimensional image appears out of a mosaic of tiny pictures, you want to use the same sort of approach here. Allow your focus to drift and see beyond the surface."

I tried to take his advice, but all that happened was now I was looking at two alarm clocks instead of one. I tried taking off my glasses, to see if that did anything. And it did. The two clocks were now also blurry.

"Remember, you won't likely see anything right away. For now, concentrate on what the visible energy might be, and write down your thoughts."

The reminder must have helped Gillian, because she started scribbling in her notebook right away. I still had no impression at all. It was an alarm clock. What energy might it contain? A groaning unwillingness to get out of bed? Ear pain? I hated those types of alarms, with their too loud, punishing bells. They were the

worst possible way to wake up, and could ruin your entire day.

These were my own associations with alarm clocks in general, of course, but they were the only impressions I had, and I had to write something. Gillian was already done writing and was waiting on me, so we could move onto the next item. I dashed out something about tiredness and loud noises, then moved the clock aside with the tongs.

Next was an old skeleton key. Like with the clock, I wrote down my thoughts about skeleton keys in general, rather than anything I picked up about this particular key. This was a great exercise in creativity, if nothing else.

It took the whole 90-minute class to get through all ten objects in our box. Gillian was rubbing her temples by the time we fished out the final item, which was a Mother's Day card. Gillian's abilities were strong, and she tended to get headaches when she used them for too long. She sometimes got visions that knocked her right on her ass. I felt bad for her, but I also found myself, lately, feeling a bit jealous. At least her powers fucking worked.

I used the tongs to manipulate the card, so we could see the front, back, and inside. The card was used. There was a signature inside, just the name *Barry* written in blue ink.

Yet again, I found my mind making up a story. Who writes just their name inside a greeting card? Who bothered to give their mom a Mother's Day card and didn't at least write "love," before their name? Or "Happy Mother's Day"? I always wrote "Happy Birthday" next to my signature on a birthday card, even when the card already said it. Just writing your name was weird.

I'd seen a lot of cards in my life. I'd been sick as a kid and had received plenty of them. Cards from friends and immediate family, from more distant relatives like aunts and cousins, and even some from strangers. I remembered looking at those cards as a kid, and what they'd meant to me. Each one was different, depending on who it was from and why it was sent. And, of course, what the person had written inside. I remembered one in particular, from a boy who'd lived up the street. It had been

filled with writing on every available bit of unprinted cardboard, even the back. It had basically been a letter, not a card, telling me everything interesting I'd been missing in the neighborhood, and how it would have been even more interesting had I been there. His name was Liam. I still had the card. Cards could mean something, if you did them right.

"Time to start packing the boxes back up," Professor Grey said. I jumped. I'd almost forgotten I was in class. I dashed off *Barry's a dick*, then popped the card back into the box.

"Cabot?" Professor Grey called out, as Gillian used the tongs to put the last item, the alarm clock, back into the box. "Can you hang behind a minute?"

Did he know I'd made up all my answers? He was a Psychic Arts professor, after all. He didn't flaunt his abilities, but we all knew they were formidable. "Sure," I said, trying not to sound nervous.

"See you at dinner," Gillian said, heading out of the room.

I followed Professor Grey into his office.

"Sit," he said in an offhand way, as he dug through the piles of paper strewn across desk. I'd been in his office a few times, and

always wondered how he managed to find anything in it. Watching him search, I thought maybe sometimes he didn't.

While he shuffled through stacks of papers, my anxious mouth took control and started talking without my permission. "Professor Grey, I know I had terrible stats on the last unit. I just can't seem to do the things I could do before. I really am trying, but it isn't coming anymore. I know you're probably about to put me on probation, but if you'd just give me some more time to—"

"What?" He'd looked up from his desk, with a confused look on his face. He wasn't making eye contact, of course, but doing what I'd come to understand was his substitute, looking at my shoulder.

"I was saying, I'm trying. If you'll give me some more time—"

"You're fine," he said, with a tone like I wasn't making any sense. "It's early in the semester, and everyone has strengths and weaknesses. OTA isn't like a regular school, where you can learn anything if you study hard enough. Much of what we do here is talent based. You're never going to maintain an even level of success

in everything.” He moved aside a decorative gold box near the edge of the desk. “Ah! Here it is!”

I was so relieved by his words I thought I might melt out of my chair.

“You’ve been selected to be a cicerone.”

“A what?” So much for relief. Was I supposed to know what that was? Did I miss this in class at some point?

He chuckled. Guess not. “Cicerone,” he repeated. “It’s an old term we don’t use much anymore. Long ago, when the school was less structured, they were more common. A cicerone is an experienced student, paired with a new enrollee to be a sort of guide and mentor. We have a late enrolling student who needs someone to help her get acclimated. I put your name forward.”

“I— oh. So, what do I have to do?”

“Not much. She’ll be arriving tomorrow afternoon, so you’ll have the weekend to show her around campus, introduce her to people, explain how things work. I’ve got a course catalog... somewhere. You can go over it with her, help her decide which classes to take. She’ll be choosing her classes on Monday, then starting on Tuesday. You’ll

answer her questions, help her find her classrooms, things like that.”

“What track will she be?”

“Psychic Arts, like you. Her name is Sofia Ramirez.”

“Do I need to help her catch up in her classes?” I hoped not. I was definitely not qualified for that.

“It’s not an official part of the role of cicerone, no. But if it comes up and you want to, you can. Or you might help her find tutors.”

I nodded, picturing those conversations. She was the same track as me, and a year behind. Anyone I asked to tutor her would wonder why I wasn’t doing it myself. Oh, well. One crisis at a time. “She’s coming tomorrow?”

“Yes.” He handed over the paper he’d been looking for, with Sofia’s basic enrollment information. While I looked it over, he started going through drawers, presumably looking for the aforementioned course catalog.

I heard a drawer close, and Professor Grey spoke again. “I’ll be meeting her tomorrow at two o’clock at the Terrestrial Building, to take her through the portal.

I can bring her to wherever you plan to be on Saturday, or you can give me your number and I can text you when she's here." He held out the catalog for me to take.

The thought of Professor Grey sending a text was hilarious to me. "I need to study," I said. I definitely needed to do that. "Do you want to bring her to the library to meet me?"

"That'll work. What section?"

It was a valid question. The OTA library was enormous. Saying "meet me in the library," without further clarification, could lead to a day of searching and never finding each other. "The Athens room," I said, naming my preferred spot. "I'll try to find a table near the Hekate statue."

"Perfect. If it's crowded and you have to sit somewhere else, text me and let me know." He looked around the desk, then shrugged and tore the corner off a random sheet of paper. He wrote his cell number on the little torn-off triangle and handed it to me.

"Will do. Anything else I need to know? Any preparation I should do?"

"No, that's all." But he immediately made a face that said he'd thought of something. "Well, there's one thing."

“Yes?”

“Her roommate.” He gestured to the paper in my hand, which I hadn’t read all the way through yet.

I scanned to her dorm assignment. “Shit. Oh, sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” he said. I could tell from his tone he was thinking along the same lines as I was. “Professor Markston will be warning Ms. Melon she’s getting a roommate, but you might want to talk to her as well, to get a feel for what to tell Sofia.”

“Yeah.” Suddenly I was less interested in being someone’s cicerone. Telling Davie she was getting a roommate, three weeks into the semester? Academic probation might have been preferable.

“See you tomorrow,” Grey said, by way of dismissal.

“Okay,” I agreed, standing to leave.

Davie Melon. Damn.

SOFIA

It turned out Olive Tree Academy was only a few miles north of Barrow City. It was so close, in fact, it was on the BCTA bus route. I got off the bus at the Greenvale stop, as directed by the page of information Lennox Grey had emailed me. When I saw where I was, though, I knew I had to be in the wrong place. Greenvale was a small village in the middle of nowhere. There was no college campus in evidence, and no signs suggesting there was one nearby.

The bus stop was at the edge of a small parking lot beside what looked like some sort of Irish pub. The sign over the door declared the place The Blessed Bean. I hoped someone inside would know where Olive Tree Academy was.

The Blessed Bean turned out to be a combination bar and coffee shop. There were student-aged people at several of the tables, drinking coffee and studying, which was encouraging. “Hey, there!” said the girl behind the bar. She was a bit plump, and even shorter than me, which was saying something. Her dark hair framed her pretty face, which was smiling. “What can I get for you?”

I approached the bar. “I was hoping you could help me with directions. I’m looking for a school called Olive Tree Academy?”

She continued to smile. “Sure thing, we get tons of OTA students in here.” She gestured to the people populating the tables. “It’s about half a mile up the road, on the other side of the highway. Bit of a hike, if you’re on foot, but not hard to find. You a new student?”

“Yeah. Late enrollment. I’m kind of dreading showing up so long after everyone else has started.” I hoped she wouldn’t ask me what I was going to be studying. I had no idea how much she may or may not know about the nature of the school, or what I was and wasn’t allowed to share.

“You’ll be fine. It’s a friendly place. You want a coffee for the walk?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“You sure? On the house.” Her tone was like my abuela trying to convince me to eat a second piece of tres leches cake.

I was never able to resist Abuela’s cake, either. “Okay, sure. Thanks.”

“Don’t tell me,” she said, before I could voice an order. She gave me an appraising look, then went to work at the espresso machine. “It’s sort of my thing,” she said. “Guessing a person’s perfect drink.” I tried to see what she was making, but too much of what she put into the cup was either out of view or didn’t have a clear label. After a couple of minutes, she placed a green paper cup on the counter. “There you go. What’s your name, by the way?”

“Sofia.”

“Then I declare this the Sofia Special.”

I picked up the cup. I usually waited at least ten minutes before starting on a coffee drink, not liking it super-hot, but I knew she wanted me to try it in front of her. To my surprise, the coffee was my perfect drinking temperature. I took a tentative sip, followed by a much bigger drink. “Wow, this is amazing.”

Her *I-told-you-so* smile was endearing.

“What’s in this?”

It’s an orange mocha with an extra shot, a half pump of vanilla, and a dash of cinnamon.

Interesting. Had she described that to me before I tried it, I’d have been revolted. “Your

talent is definitely as advertised.” I read the name tag on her shirt for the first time. “Thanks... Kara? Did I pronounce that right?”

She corrected me; the first syllable was pronounced *car*, as in automobile.

“Oh, that’s a cool name,” I said. “And this is the best coffee I’ve ever had. I’m sure I’ll be spending time here.”

“That’s what we like to hear. Have a great first day, Sofia.”

I left the pub and paused on the sidewalk in front. The street the Blessed Bean was on, High Street, appeared to be the main street through town. I didn’t spend time exploring beyond what I could see from the sidewalk in front of the pub, but everything I could see looked like something out of an Irish travel brochure.

All the buildings seemed to exist to the west of the highway, but High Street made a four way intersection with it and extended beyond. That was the direction Kara had said to go to find Olive Tree Academy. I carefully crossed the highway on foot, then headed up the road.

There were no more buildings, nothing to suggest I was still in

Greenvale, but there was still a sidewalk, and occasional trees and light posts lined the street. Not a single car passed as I walked.

I adjusted my duffel bag on my shoulder. This walk wouldn't be bad, were I not carrying everything I owned on my back. Then again, if I'd to be walking to the Blessed Bean to study, I'd be hauling heavy books all this way. Assuming a psychic school had textbooks, that was.

I walked for what felt like three hours, but the clock on my phone said was about fifteen minutes, when I saw what I assumed was the campus up ahead. It wasn't anywhere near as big as BCU, of course, but it was the biggest thing I'd seen since getting off the bus. I could see a patinaed copper fence, and a large building set far back on the grounds. It looked sort of like some seminaries or music schools I'd driven by.

After about five more minutes, I reached the fence. There was a sign on the gate with a stylized logo of three olives on a branch, and the name OLIVE TREE ACADEMY. I'd found the place.

But there was nobody here. I could see the grounds and the front of the building, and there wasn't a single person anywhere. I

wouldn't expect a small, private college to be as busy as BCU, but empty? In the middle of a Saturday afternoon?

I walked through the gate and toward the building. The grounds were pretty, with stone walkways, trees, and flowers, but there was no evidence whatsoever of student life. No fliers for clubs or bands or protests, no tables set up to promote clubs or political causes, not even any litter.

The building, like the grounds, was nice, but lacked personality. It was red brick with white stucco accents, concrete steps leading to main doors. I was relieved when the doors proved unlocked. I didn't start to panic until I discovered the inside was as empty as the outside.

I'd already dropped out of BCU. I couldn't go back to my mother's house. I had almost no money, and everything I owned in the world fit in the duffel bag slung over my shoulder. With room left over. I had nowhere else to go; this place had to be real. It had to be.

There were people studying in The Blessed Bean. Kara had heard of the place. It couldn't be a hoax, could it?

Were they all in on it? Was this some sort of bizarre cult thing? A reality TV show? Was that really any crazier than a school for psychics and magicians?

I opened a door, and looked in. It was a reception room of some sort, large and generic with a collection of folding chairs and a few cheap tables shoved along the walls. It was empty.

I took out my phone and pulled up the email from Lennox Grey. I confirmed I had the meeting time right, two o'clock. It was a couple of minutes after. Where was he? Where was anybody?

I tried another door. This one looked like an office. It was empty. Bathroom, empty. Auditorium, empty.

I dropped the duffel bag, sat down beside it. A huge sob was trying to get out of me. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, trying to figure out what the hell I was going to do next.

“Sofia!”

I whipped around. It was Lennox Grey. I tried to speak, but I couldn't yet.

“I'm so sorry I'm late.”

Sara Blake

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