

INTO THE DARK

# THE SHADOW PRINCE



BREE DESPAIN

AUTHOR OF THE DARK DIVINE TRILOGY

INTO THE DARK

THE  
SHADOW  
PRINCE

BREE DESPAIN

EGMONT  
USA  
NEW YORK

# EGMONT

*We bring stories to life*

First published by Egmont USA, 2014  
443 Park Avenue South, Suite 806  
New York, NY 10016

Copyright © Bree Despain, 2014  
All rights reserved

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

[www.egmontusa.com](http://www.egmontusa.com)  
[www.breedespain.com](http://www.breedespain.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Despain, Bree, 1979-

The shadow prince / Bree Despain.

pages cm. -- (Into the dark ; book 1)

Summary: In this modern retelling of the Persephone myth, Haden Lord, the disgraced prince of the Underrealm, has been sent to the mortal world to entice a girl into returning with him to the land of the dead.

ISBN 978-1-60684-247-8 (hardback) -- ISBN 978-1-60684-406-9 (ebook)

[1. Gods--Fiction. 2. Princes--Fiction. 3. Fate and fatalism--Fiction. 4. Love--Fiction. 5. Mythology, Greek--Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.D4518Sh 2014

[Fic]--dc23

2013033192

Printed in the United States of America

Typography by Torborg Davern

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher and copyright owner.

*In loving memory of Audrey Biesinger.*

*A woman for whom there was no quest too daunting,  
no task too hard, and no journey too far to undertake  
for faith, family, friends—or even just the sake of a really  
good story.*

*I miss you, Grandma!*

*Bree*

# THE SHADOW PRINCE



*chapter one*

# HADEN

I did the unforgivable the day my mother died, and for that I've been punished every moment of my life.

*He's too weak-minded.*

*Impulsive.*

*He's too much like her.*

*He's too human.*

It has been ten years, and regardless of everything I've done to try to change their minds, the Court still speaks of me as if I am unworthy of my birthright.

I try to lock away my doubtful thoughts as I watch the Oracle make her way up and down the ranks of Underlords. She is here to help Choose the Champions, and despite the fact that Rowan and the other Elites make it a point to tell me that I will *never* be Chosen, I intend to be one of them. This moment is what I've been preparing for. It's what I've lived for.

The Oracle has passed two entire rows of Underlords without stopping to inspect a single one. Her presence is accompanied by a buzz of energy and excitement that flows through the crowd of spectators. Most of us have never seen an Oracle before, and to hear one speak is a rarity usually reserved for kings and priests. To

be Chosen by the Oracle would be an honor unparalleled by any other in this realm. One collective question occupies everyone's mind: *Why would the Oracle deign to participate in the annual Choosing of the Champions?*

Perhaps the rumors are true.

Something more important is going on—this year's Champions will be required to do more than procure new Boons for the Court's harem.

The Oracle passes two more Elites without even glancing their way, and then stops abruptly beside Rowan, King Ren's prized son, and the favored of the Court. Surely he would be their first choice for one of the Champions if the decision were left solely to them. The Oracle reaches out her pale blue fingers and touches Rowan's forehead. He looks stunned for a moment, blinking his eyes. As the Oracle pulls her hand away, she pinches her fingertips together as if she were pulling a thread out of Rowan's skull. She cups the invisible thread in her hand. Her face is shrouded in layers of gauzy veils to protect her holy visage from our unclean eyes, but I can tell that she's studying what she holds with great interest. Master Crue told us that an Oracle can draw memories and thoughts from a man's brain—take a sample of his soul, so to speak—with only her touch.

Rowan's surprised expression slips away and a smug smile plays on his lips. Whatever thought or memory of his the Oracle tasted is one that makes him feel even more confident in his position. No doubt one of his many victories—like the time he slaughtered the gladiator, an untrained sap, before the man had even had a chance to draw his sword.

I ache to knock that smug look off Rowan's face, but then the Oracle brushes her hands as if wiping his memory from her fingers.

She leaves his side and proceeds on with her task. I catch his eye and smirk. What did he think, she was going to stop the Choosing Ceremony right then and declare him the sole Champion? Rowan glares back at me and starts to make a crude gesture in my direction. Master Crue must have caught our exchange, because I hear him clear his throat. He makes a stern, “eyes forward” gesture. I snap to attention, with my shoulders back and my arms straight at my sides, one of them resting against the ceremonial sword in my scabbard. As much as I want to keep watching the Oracle as she makes her rounds, I keep my focus trained on the back of the Underlord standing directly in front of me.

I notice that one of the leather straps holding up his bronze breastplate is twisted, as if clumsy hands had put it on. He’s shaking, too. I wonder if it is nerves. Is he anxious about being Chosen? Or anxious about being passed over? I don’t recognize him from behind, but from his size, I guess he is only fourteen. He has two more chances to be selected after this year—unlike myself. I am almost seventeen. I’ve been passed over twice before, and this is the last year I am even eligible for Champion. Anger creeps up inside of me. How dare this boy be nervous?

I almost want to bring the flaw in his armor to the attention of one of the Heirs. The boy would receive a beating for sure for his ineptitude. But then I realize that the way his muscles tremble isn’t from nerves, but from strain. It seems he is unaccustomed to wearing the heavy bronze armor of the Underlords. That’s when I know that boy must be a Lesser—a second- or third-born son of an Heir, bred purely to serve the Court. The only time they wear the armor of the Underlords is during the annual Choosing—when they get to pretend they’re like the rest of us for the night. I don’t know why the Heirs allow it; it’s not

like a Lesser has ever been chosen as Champion.

Then again, it is not as if anyone expects me to be Chosen, either.

The Lesser boy must've noticed my gaze on his twisted strap, because he turns slightly and tries to adjust it. Something about the side of his face makes me feel as though I should know him, but I do not make it a habit to associate with many Lessers. His green-stained fingers fumble with the twisted strap. I know he won't be able to fix it on his own. He looks at me for a second, seemingly asking for my help. I snap my gaze above his head, pretending I didn't see him. *Helping a Lesser*. Like I need that on my record.

A nagging pain twists in my gut and I am suddenly reminded that I would have had the same life as a Lesser if it hadn't been for the oath my mother had made my father swear when I was born. That oath was the only reason I had not been cast out of the ranks of the Underlords completely when my father disowned me. *The day I lost my honor . . .*

The Lesser boy gives up on fixing his strap just as the Oracle glides into view again. She starts up our row, and I see now that she doesn't walk but floats slightly above the ground. I try to forget about my bad memories and focus my thoughts on something that would impress the Oracle if she chooses to look inside my head. I run through my accomplishments and land on the memory of my hunting down and killing the hydra for the Feast of Return last spring. It had eluded even Master Crue and my other teachers, but I had tracked it into the cliffs above the river Styx. I was the one who had carried it into the Great Hall on my shoulders . . . only to have it taken from me by Rowan and his cronies before the Court witnessed my victory.

*I was so angry. Almost as angry as the day my mother collapsed and I sent a Lesser to fetch my father. He was so slow in coming, I . . .*

I shake my head and try to find an untainted memory as I watch the Oracle pass Underlord after Underlord, drawing nearer. I cannot let her see my shame. I silently curse the boy in front of me for dredging up memories of my darkest moment, when the Oracle comes to a sudden halt beside him. Her face is still veiled but I can tell that she is staring at him. He twitches under her inspection. I watch the way he tries to make himself appear bigger in his oversized armor. She tilts her shrouded head as if listening for something, and stands there for so long, I feel the crowd straining with anticipation.

The Oracle is so close to me now that I can feel the icy chill that emanates off her body. Gooseflesh prickles up on the parts of my arms that are not bound by the leather and bronze of my armor. She is only two steps away from deciding my fate. I can't bare to watch her. I glance at King Ren while he sits waiting at the edge of his ebony throne. He looks annoyed and expectant. Then I notice Moira, Ren's latest queen, sitting beside him. She is draped in a gown made from shimmering fabric and jewels, but it does not hide how pale and withered she has become—like a bony shadow of her former self. She holds a silver scepter—the weight of it looks like it might rip her thin arms from her body. *She will die soon, just like every other Boon who has been brought to the Underrealm. Just like my mother . . .*

*No, no, no, I scream silently at my mind's betrayal. I cannot think of this now. I will not.*

I suck in a deep breath and rack my brain, searching for my proudest moment. The Oracle steps abruptly away from the Lesser boy's side and closes in on me. I shake as her glittering blue

hand reaches toward my face. I close my eyes and concentrate on the image of myself slaying a chimera in the arena in just thirty-one seconds, besting the other Underlords in my age group by half a minute. Surely that was my proudest moment. My greatest victory. The crowd had even cheered for me. . . .

*All except for my father and the Court . . . They did not see my accomplishments because they did not care to look. No matter how hard I tried, they will not forget what I did to earn my disgrace. . . .*

I feel the Oracle's icy touch land lightly on my skin, just between my eyes. My vision flickers black for a moment and then I see myself at the age of seven—as if gazing into a mirror from the past—sitting in my bedchamber. *I hear my mother's hollow voice as she cries out. . . .*

I feel a sharp, stinging sensation in my forehead, like someone is pulling a string through my skull, and I am snapped back into reality. My vision focuses and I see the Oracle drawing her pinched fingers away from my forehead. And I know what memory of mine she holds.

"No! You can't see that!" I try to grasp the Oracle's blue hands, but as I reach for her, she disappears, and all I clutch at is the air. The ranks of Underlords gape at me for trying to touch the Oracle. Master Crue begins to stand. The Oracle reappears next to the altar in front of the throne, cupping my most shameful memory in her hands. I am too far away to stop her from watching the scene that she has stolen from my mind.

She holds her pinched fingers out in front of her veiled face. My heart feels as though it might break through my rib cage. Will she demand that I be cast from the ceremony after what she sees? I want nothing more than to stop her from seeing, but before I can even think of what to do, she drops her hand, and her body

goes as rigid as the marble statues that line the perimeter of the throne room. Her priest, a short, balding man in a red tunic, steps forward.

*“One Champion only can complete this task,”* the priest says, but his voice echoes like wind whipping through a long chamber, and I realize the Oracle is speaking through him, using his voice as her own. *“The son of King Ren is he.”*

Rowan stands tall and begins to take a step forward to the altar, but then the Oracle raises her blue hand and points one of her long, glittering fingers, not in the direction of Rowan, my twin brother, but toward me.

*“Your Champion is Lord Haden,”* the priest says—my name echoing in the chamber, which has fallen as still as death.

Elation rises in my hammering chest.

That is, until a cry of outrage rushes through the Court of Heirs with a force akin to the wake of Charon’s mighty boat.

“This is absurd,” Lord Lex, the king’s chief advisor, says, rising from his seat among the Court. “The boy lacks proper training. He is not one of the Elite. He’s too emotional. We all know that.”

My hands tingle with heat. I ball them into fists but keep them tight against my sides. An outburst would only prove him right.

“It should be Rowan,” Lord Killian, my father’s second advisor, demands. “The Court agreed on Rowan. He should be . . .”

“The decision has been taken out of the Court’s hands,” the Oracle’s priest says, using his own raspy voice. “The Oracle was brought here to make it for you. She has made her decree; it is now your pleasure to listen and obey.”

“It is you who must obey!” another one of the Heirs demands, but his blasphemous comment is almost drowned out by the other members of the Court who add their protestations to the din.

I have heard rumors of strain between the members of the Court—I have even heard of whisperings against my father’s rule among the Heirs—but there seems to be one thing that still unites them: their disdain for me.

I don’t know why I didn’t realize that this is exactly how it would play out.

The elation I couldn’t help feeling when the Oracle said my name twists inside me until it becomes something darker. Perhaps this is more than the usual scorn of the Court against me? Perhaps this is all some kind of sick joke? Something orchestrated to humiliate me for hoping that I could rise above the lot I have been cast? Hope is a shameful emotion after all—another useless thing my mother must have taught me.

I keep my eyes trained on the Oracle. She is unmoving, swathed in her many veils. I wish I could see her face. I ache to know what she was thinking when she made her decision.

I need to know *why*.

“Silence!”

All voices cut off at once, and all eyes turn toward the towering throne.

King Ren Hades rises from his ebony seat. His long black hair is plaited in a ceremonial braid like mine and the other Underlords’. The firelight from the torches surrounding the altar reflects in the polished gold of his breastplate. He holds his open hand out in front of him. Threads of blue lightning hiss up from his palm and encircle his hand. It is meant to be a warning.

“Oracle,” he begins, “I brought you here to predict the best possible outcome, but you have obviously chosen wrong. The boy is unfit. . . .”

“You dare question an Oracle?” the priest asks.

"I am king here," Ren says.

*"And I am the infallible voice of the universe,"* the priest says, his voice that of the Oracle. *"I have chosen my Champion. The boy is the one who can save you."* The Oracle's bluish skin pulses purple and then deep red when she turns toward King Ren, her veils rustling about her as if blown by an invisible gale. The ground beneath my feet trembles, and I know I am not the only one who feels it. *"Only ruin lies in wait for those who disobey the words of fate."*

The ranks of Underlords behind me jostle for a better view. Even the Lessers have dared to fall out of position.

The lightning in Ren's hand pulses brighter and coils its way up his arm. "Is that a threat?"

*"I speak only the truth,"* responds the Oracle. *"You are the one who summoned me here. You and I both know why."*

King Ren's face grows dark. He advances upon the Oracle, with the lightning crackling in his raised hand. The ground shifts again, and I almost lose my footing when I leave my place in the ranks. The Oracle's words have emboldened me, and I don't think about what I am doing before I throw myself down on my knees between her and King Ren.

"Stop!" I say. "I can do this. I have lived and breathed preparing for this. I am more than ready for wherever this quest shall take me. Let me prove myself to you." I look up at King Ren and see his shock that I have dared to address him directly. His jaw is hard set and orange rings of fire pulsate around his pupils. "Allow me to do this. Please, *Father . . .*"

King Ren looks down at me, meeting my eyes for the first time since the day he told me I was no longer his son.

Gasps of surprise ripple through the crowd of Underlords

behind us. My father breaks his gaze with me as someone else comes to stand before him. My brother Rowan lowers to only one knee beside me.

“Send me, Father. I am loyal, and I am no *nursling*.” He casts a pointed glare in my direction. “I will not fail you.” Rowan has left behind our ancient dialect and spoken each sentence in a different language used in the Overrealm—French, Arabic, Cantonese—probably thinking that because I am not an Elite, I will be unable to follow his words.

“I am not a *nursling*,” I say to Rowan in perfectly accented American English. “You have stolen honor from me before, but I will not allow you to take this from me as well.”

The Oracle moves to my father’s side. She has turned icy blue once again, and the cold wind that swirls her veils about her body makes me feel chilled to my soul. My father snuffs out the bolt of lightning that had been building in his hand. He squares his shoulders and stares at the Oracle like he’s trying to see past her shroud, into her mind.

“You are absolutely certain this boy is the right choice for Champion? We’ve been preparing for this particular quest for almost eighteen years. Surely Rowan, or one of the Elite, would be better suited. . . .”

*“Sending him is the only way. He is the one.”*

*The one? The only way? His quest has been eighteen years in the making? What exactly is going on here?*

Lord Lex steps forward. “What if we did away with him?” he asks. “Would the Fates choose another in his place? Rowan is ready and willing.”

My mouth goes dry.

The Oracle’s skin turns bright red. “*Your words are insulting to*

*the Fates. They will punish this Court for your hubris.*"

"Be still," Ren says. "Lord Lex does not speak for me."

"Forgive me, Your Excellence." Lex bows his head, but a cross look plays on his face. "I only speak in your best interest. Need I remind you what the consequences are for *you* personally, if the boy fails?"

"No, you do not," King Ren says with a quiet forcefulness.

He turns and says something to his guards that I cannot hear, but I guess their meaning when two of them advance toward me. One guard grabs me by the arm, yanking me to my feet, while the other one pulls my ceremonial sword from my scabbard. He jabs the blunted point into my back, between my shoulder blades. I don't try to resist, but as they propel me toward the torch-lit altar, I feel as though I am a prisoner headed toward execution.

I search the faces in the crowd of servants who flank the Court and find the one person who might care about what happens to me. My cousin Dax tries to give me a reassuring look, but his face has grown as pale as the marble floor beneath my feet. I look away from him and concentrate on the carvings that adorn the alabaster altar I'm being propelled toward. The stony personages of the first Hades and the original Boon, Persephone, stare forlornly back at me. When we reach the altar, one of the soldiers sends a swift kick to the back of my legs, forcing me to fall to my knees.

"I would have knelt on my own, harpy mouth," I snarl at him.

He responds by slamming my head against the altar. My jaws smash together when my temple hits the hard stone. Strange bursts of light cloud my vision, and the black, oily smoke from the torches chokes my lungs, but I make it a point not to show any signs of pain. I stay perfectly still, with the side of my face pressed

to the cold altar, and watch my father advance on me.

I hear the ring of metal against metal as King Ren draws his sword from the scabbard at his hip. His is not a ceremonial blade—its sharp edges gleam in the torchlight. I try to look up and meet his eyes once more, but he does not return my gaze.

The fear that my father has chosen to listen to Lex's suggestion strikes into my heart. *I am to be done away with so they can choose another.*

I grip the edge of the altar to stop my hands from shaking and wish desperately I had something more to offer to prove my worthiness of this assignment. My father glares down at me. And I see it. Behind the fresh anger that flashes in his eyes, it's still there: that look he used to give my mother before she died—the look that transferred to me after what I did all those years ago—like what he saw before him was the embodiment of every failure, disappointment, and shame he had ever experienced.

As swiftly as fear had struck me a moment ago, a sudden calm replaces it. Resignation. I will not beg as he expects. I will not plead my case again. Instead, I look at him undaunted and ask a final question. "Is your hatred for me so great, Father, that you would risk bringing down the wrath of the Fates on the entire Underrealm in order to deny me my destiny?"

Ren's jaw tightens. He lifts his sword, grabs me by the hair at the back of my neck, and yanks my head up from the altar's cold surface. I say nothing more. If this is what he wants, then so be it. Let it come.

Ren swings his blade at my neck.

I will it to be quick and clean.

The sharp edge of the sword slices into my thick braid until it cuts all the way through. The blade nicks the back of my neck

just above my shoulders. My skin stings from the shallow cut but I do not flinch.

“Do not call me that again,” he says calmly and lets go of my head. My temple bashes into the altar once more. A cut breaks open above my eyebrow. My blood drips onto the alabaster, staining the cream-colored stone with beads of red.

I am slow to follow what happens next, but I try to focus as King Ren drops the braid he has cut from my head into a large silver bowl. He snaps his fingers and a young servant scurries forward from somewhere in the throne room and lifts the bowl. The boy follows Ren while he approaches the Oracle, the heavy vessel straining his small arms.

My mind is muddled and I almost miss the moment when the Oracle pours some type of shimmering liquid into the bowl with my hair, and then dips a dagger into the mixture. The priest whispers what sounds like an incantation, and then the Oracle hands the knife to King Ren, her blue skin darkening to a turquoise green as he takes the blade from her.

He hesitates. Or perhaps my brain is working too slowly.

“Make the vow,” the Oracle’s priest says.

King Ren holds the dagger out in front of him. I can barely hear anything over the sound of my pulse pounding in my head and my heavy breaths huffing against the stone altar. I make out something he says about the water from the river Styx, the river of unbreakable vows. . . .

I blink. When my eyes flutter open, the Oracle is standing in front of me.

“Show him,” King Ren says.

The Oracle’s glittering blue hand reaches for me, her icy touch lands once again between my eyes. Her fingers are so cold. I

wonder what memory she will steal from me this time, but instead, my thoughts coil inside my brain and my vision flickers black for a moment. A string of images enters my thoughts, layering upon each other until they form one fluid, moving picture.

At first, the images tell a story I already know. It's the old myth we Underlords are raised on. It's stitched into every tapestry and carved into every door I have passed in my lifetime, even on the altar I lean upon now, but then the pictures shift and I see the silhouette of a girl standing in a bright light.

*We've found her—the Cypher. I hear the Oracle's words inside my head and not with my ears. We have found the one who can restore what has been taken from the Underlords. You are the Champion whom fate has chosen to bring her to us. The outline of the girl grows more defined but I still can't make out her face. You will have six months to convince her to return to the Underrealm with you. But she must come willingly. No human can pass through Persephone's Gate without the mortal's consent. This quest is your destiny. The fate of the Underrealm lies on your shoulders, young Haden.*

I nod and the Oracle's icy touch lifts off my skin. The images in my head flicker to black. I open my eyes and look up at her covered face.

"Do you understand what you have been shown?" the priest asks.

I don't know if I do—I have never heard anything about a *Cypher* in any of my lessons—but the entire *living* population of the Underrealm is watching me, and I dare not say that I don't understand.

"Yes."

"Very good."

"What is her name?" I ask the Oracle. *I need to know her name.*

The Oracle takes three steps away from me and then turns to

King Ren. She indicates the knife in his hand.

*“Finish it. Seal the will of fate,”* the priest says for her.

Blue wisps of lightning crackle forth from Ren’s hand and wind their way up the dagger he holds.

I have been struck by lightning several times in my nearly seventeen years—in training and in fights—but I am unprepared for the jolt of pain that sears through my body as my father stabs the electrified dagger into my tricep. I go limp against the altar.

Ren pulls the knife from my arm and then makes several small, burning incisions into my skin—cutting and cauterizing my flesh at the same time. I cannot see what he is doing but it feels as though he is carving letters into my skin.

“You want to call me Father?” he says. “To be my heir? To have your honor restored?”

“Yes,” I hiss through gritted teeth.

“Then you bring this girl to me,” he says, squeezing the wound he’s carved into my arm. It takes every last bit of strength I have not to scream. “You return victorious, and I will crown you as my heir and allow you to call me *Father* once again. But if you do not bring her to me when the gate between the Underrealm and the mortal world reopens in six months’ time, then mark my words, your hair is not the only thing you will lose.”

He slides his knife up to my throat to illustrate his point, then stalks away to his throne, gesturing to the ranks of Underlords who stand behind me and the crowds of onlookers beyond them. “Out!” he demands. “Everybody, out!”

The crowd quickly snaps back into its lines and begins to leave the throne room, following his order. I start to rise, but my head swims and I steady myself against the altar. I am stuck in a position that looks as though I am half bowing, half standing as the

bystanders file out around me. I do not understand what is happening. After all the protestations, I have finally been Chosen. Which means the ceremony is supposed to go on. I am supposed to be endowed with the blessing of the Court. A wreath of laurel leaves is supposed to be placed upon my head, crowning me with glory. There is supposed to be a feast of celebration in honor of the Champions. The servants have been preparing it for weeks.

Instead, everyone is being sent away.

Ren looks in my direction. "I said for *everybody* to get out." He speaks with a quiet composure that makes me shiver more than if he had shouted with rage.

I stumble through the now-empty throne room. My head aches, my arm throbs, and my neck feels naked and exposed without my hair. All I want to do is return to my bedchambers and collapse, but I know the challenges of this day aren't over yet, and I'm not quite ready to face them.

The aftereffects of the lightning that ravaged through my body make it hard to concentrate on staying upright, let alone anything else. Knowing I can't be seen by anyone at this point, I lean against one of the golden doors at the end of the torch-lit corridor. The strangest mixture of grief, relief, and pride grips me, and I let out the smallest of sobs.

When I regain my composure, I inspect the cauterized scars on my arm and discover the words that Ren has carved there.

It's the name of the girl I have six months to convince to return with me to the Underrealm. The girl who can give me the status to be elevated over Rowan and the other Elite. The girl who holds the key to restoring everything that has been taken from me:

Daphne Raines.



*chapter two*

## DAPHNE

“It’s do or die, Daphne,” CeCe says, with a sassy, almost devious tone as she wades through the sea of red balloons that separate her workstation from mine. Despite her flame red hair and freckled skin, she always reminds me of Billie Holiday with her warm, old-school, jazzy vibe. “Ask him while you have the chance.”

I know she’s right. Mom could be back any minute, and I am more likely to get a positive answer from Jonathan than her. Especially after the look Mom had made when she answered the phone call that came about ten minutes ago. I figured it must be the bank again, considering she took the handset outside and then all the way into the bungalow she and I live in behind the flower shop. It is calls like this that make me so determined to do what I have in mind.

“Go for it, Daph,” CeCe says, and pushes me through the bouquets of red and orange balloons we’ve been inflating for Ellis High’s September Social. Jonathan and his magenta apron come into view.

I clear my throat. It’s not that I’m reluctant to do what I need to do—it’s that I know I’m a terrible liar. But is it lying if you’re just omitting a small portion—okay, about 56.2 miles’ worth—of the truth? “Hey, Uncle Jonathan . . .,” I start to say, but the loud

clank of the bell over the front door of the shop interrupts me.

Jonathan looks up from the ribbons he's been cutting into balloon strings. "Can you get that?" he asks, referring to the customer who must have just entered the shop.

"Indie's up there," I say. "She can handle it."

Jonathan balks. "You know she doesn't have cash register privileges yet."

I give CeCe a stricken look. I don't want to lose my chance.

"I'm on it," she says, and then mouths to me, "Do it!" as she disappears into the balloons on her way out of the back-room workshop to the storefront.

"Welcome to Paradise Plants!" I hear Indie say so enthusiastically, I can imagine the unsuspecting customer jumping at the sound of her voice.

"So . . . Uncle Jonathan," I try to say so nonchalantly that it ends up sounding pained instead. I turn away slightly so he can't see the blush that hits my cheeks. I grab a stray balloon by its string and twist it into the nearest bouquet of red and orange. *No big deal. Just doing my work and striking up a conversation with my favorite uncle, who isn't actually related to me.* "Um . . . so . . . when I'm done with this, do you think I could get off early? I mean, the decorations are being picked up in a few minutes, and I know we still have some cleanup, but CeCe said she'd stay later so I could beg off a little early. If that's okay with you?"

Jonathan cuts one more ribbon and then squints his eyes in a way that makes me worried that my not-quite-lying omission of the truth came tripping off my tongue so fast that he didn't comprehend my words and I'm going to have to start over again. Then he gives me a jolly grin. "Need extra time to get ready for your dance date, eh?"

“Yeah,” I say, concentrating a little too hard on tying the strings of my balloon bouquet into a big knot. “You know me. Gotta look my best for that big date!”

“Daphne,” Jonathan says, his tone shifting ever so slightly lower.

I glance at him and see that his grin has disappeared.

He shakes the spool of ribbon in my direction. “Cut the crap, honey. I do know you. Enough to know you rejected *both* the boys who asked you. Even after that sweet Richards kid sent you a chocolate-dipped-fruit arrangement from that store in Hurricane. You threw it in the trash.”

“Because I’m allergic to strawberries. You know that.”

“Yes, but you could have let me eat them,” Jonathan says with a pout and drops the spool on his worktable. He reaches into the front pocket of his bright magenta apron. “And I also know where you *plan* on going this evening instead of the dance.” He pulls out a folded-up flyer and splays it out on the worktable. He stabs one of his large fingers at the words: ALL-AMERICAN TEEN TALENT COMPETITION HOSTED BY SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY. ONE NIGHT ONLY!

*Oh.*

*Crap.*

The flyer must have dropped out of my apron when I hung it up during my break. I’d been keeping it in my pocket for good luck. Load of good that had done me.

“Jonathan, I can—”

He holds up his hand in a *stop* gesture. “Just be glad I found this and not your mother. You know the conniption she would have if she found out you were planning on sneaking off to Cedar City for the evening. You made a deal with your mother not to

leave Ellis Fields again without her permission.”

Yes. I know all too well. In my almost seventeen years, I had been on one, and only one, trip outside of my hometown.

Ellis Fields is a tiny speck that you can only see on a Google map of southern Utah if you zoom in real close, tucked into Apollo Canyon and surrounded by miles and miles of nothing but desert and red-rock formations in every direction. My mom is so rooted here that the town legend goes that her ancestors were here even before Ellis was founded. And leaving it isn't exactly easy, especially when your mom forbids it and you don't have a driver's license yet. A lesson I'd learned the hard way when I was almost thirteen years old. After fighting with my mom for, like, the ten thousandth time about how she never let me go on class field trips or even to the Zion outlet malls, which are a forty-five-minute drive outside town, I'd tried to run away to Saint George on my bike. But I crashed while careening down Canyon Road. I ended up sitting on the side of the remote highway, dehydrated, with a flat tire, a broken arm, and a concussion until Mom and Jonathan found me an hour later, merely one hundred yards from the **NOW LEAVING ELLIS FIELDS—COME BACK SOON!** sign. I did eventually make it to Saint George that day, but it was to spend the weekend at Dixie Regional Medical Center.

That's when the infamous deal had been struck. While hopped up on painkillers and still freaked out about my near-death experience in the desert, I'd agreed to stop pressing my mom about leaving Ellis—and not run off again—and she'd agreed to give me a longer leash once I got my driver's license. I'd been dreaming of ultimate freedom, but at just over two months shy of my seventeenth birthday, with *still* no license in hand (no thanks to my mom), I was beginning to think I'd been duped into a really bogus deal.

“But look”—I point at the flyer—“second prize is *twenty-five hundred dollars*. That’s exactly what Mom needs to replace the flower cooler in the front of the shop—and you know the bank isn’t going to give her another loan. It’s *one night*, Jonathan. Please?”

“But what about first prize?”

“What about it?”

“It says here”—he practically stabs the flyer with his ribbon scissors—“that if you win first prize, they’ll haul you off to Las Vegas for the next round of competition, and then possibly New York City after that. It won’t just be one night *then*. Your mother would never stand for it, and I’d be a dead man for letting you get into this mess.”

“Who says I’m going to win first prize?”

Jonathan rolls his eyes. “One thing you don’t need to be is modest, Daphne. You and I both know you’ve got first place in the bag.”

“Well, I’ll never know if you don’t let me go.” I give him a teasing smile. “I might stink at singing and nobody in this tiny town knows the difference.” Ellis High School is so small, we don’t even have a real music department.

“Please, Daph. I’m from Manhattan. Don’t tell me I don’t know amazing singing when I hear it.”

“Then let me go and prove it to myself. If I win first, then I’ll bow out and take second place and the prize money.”

Jonathan takes a swig of Diet Mountain Dew from his ginormous *Jersey Boys* mug. I can tell he’s swishing the soda in his cheeks like he does when he’s contemplating a difficult floral design. He swallows hard. “Sorry, honey. No way, no how. Your mother would kill me if I let you leave Ellis and something bad happened to you out there.”

I wrap my fingers through the strings of the balloon bouquet I'd forgotten I was even holding until now, and bite back the urge to make a frustrated *urrrrrrg*.

"How were you even planning on getting to SUU in the first place? Don't tell me you were planning on driving without a license?" Jonathan asks with an accusatory tone.

"No." I've had a driver's permit for over a year, but state law requires forty hours of driving time behind the wheel with a parent or guardian before I can apply for a license. Since Ellis is only 4.6 square miles and my mom won't let me take the car out on the highway, it was taking an eternity to rack up the hours needed to get my license. *There's nowhere in Ellis you can't get to on your bike*, she always says, but I know she's dragging her feet on the issue so she won't have to fulfill her end of our bargain. And the more I point this out to her, the more excuses she comes up with for not being able to take me driving. At this rate, I won't have a license until I'm eighteen and can get it without her consent. "There's this new senior at school who has a boyfriend at SUU. She says I can hitch a ride with her to Cedar City and back. That's why I need to get off early."

A very cross-sounding tone comes off Jonathan. Telling him I am hitching a ride with someone I barely know isn't helping the situation, but I don't have many options. Most of my school friends haven't had licenses long enough to be legal to drive with another teen in the car, and CeCe, who claims to be night-blind, wasn't too keen on the idea of navigating the canyon roads after dark. Not that she'd be excited to drive me out of town in the daytime, either. I swear, it's like half of the adults I know are just as reluctant to leave Ellis as my mother. Despite being from *the* big city, even Jonathan rarely leaves town other than his yearly pilgrimage

to the designer outlets in Primm, Nevada. It's, like, once people come here, they never want to go anywhere else. Mom calls Ellis an oasis in the desert and our own private paradise—hence the name of our shop—but at an average temperature of 105 degrees in the summer and the looming walls of red-rock mountains on every side, this town feels more like a stifling prison to me sometimes.

“But what if *you* took me instead? That way, you know I'd be safe. Maybe I could even get an hour of driving time on the way? We'll tell Mom we're going to movie night. She'll never even know we were gone.” I smile. “I'll let you give her the prize money. We'll tell her you won it from a design contest or something.”

Jonathan shakes his head while making a *nub-uh-uh* kind of noise, which reminds me of the way Frankie Valli sings. But behind the scolding tone, I catch something else. Just a hint of sympathy. Just a little bit of give, maybe?

That was something I could work with. I say in a singsong voice, “You'd be both of our heroes, Uncle Jonathan.”

A smile starts to edge at Jonathan's lips as though he likes the idea of being a hero. Then he quickly shakes his head as if trying to get water out of his ear, and the happy look is gone. Along with the tone of sympathy. “Sorry, sister. Not happening.” He picks up his scissors and cuts a ribbon with a snip so abrupt that I know I've pushed it too far with that one.

I didn't want it to come to this, but I know what tactic I need to try now. The truth.

“Fine, Jonathan. You want to know the real reason I need to go to this competition—besides winning the money for Mom, that is?”

Jonathan makes another sharp snip. “If it will explain why you’d break your deal with your mother over some silly teen idol contest.”

“Mrs. Arlington, the cashier at the music shop on Main, who gave me this flyer, said that there would be talent scouts from SUU, the University of Utah, and other colleges at the competition,” I tell him, knowing this tactic may very well backfire. College is another one of those topics my mother and I don’t see eye to eye on.

“Daphne, you and your mother will discuss this when you’re older. . . .”

“Yeah, right. Mom’s big plan for my postgraduation future probably involves me getting some online associate’s degree in business management, and then inheriting the flower shop from her. But I’ve got bigger dreams than making corsages for other girls to wear to dances and wrapping up ‘I’m sorry’ flowers for every dog-house-ditching guy who comes into this place. I graduate in less than two years and I want to go to college. A real college.”

Assuming Jonathan is right about my voice and I can manage to land a scholarship somewhere—*anywhere*—that is.

Getting a scholarship was step number two on my “prove to the world I can become a music star all on my own” master plan. (Step one being two hours of self-imposed music practice a day, no matter my homework load.)

“Opportunities like this competition don’t exactly come this close to Ellis very often. But if I can’t even get fifty miles away from here for *one evening*, how am I ever going to convince Mom to let me go away for school?”

Jonathan puts down his scissors. “Your mother has her reasons for wanting to protect you.”

“Which are what? Her own paranoia that the outside world is some big, bad place? What does she think is going to happen to me ‘out there’ anyway? Is she afraid I’m going to sneak off with some guy and get pregnant, just like she did? Or is she more afraid that once I step foot outside town, I’m never coming back? Does she think I’ll abandon her, just like my father?”

Jonathan’s lips pull into a tight, thin frown and I know I’ve struck on something. A remorseful tone wafts off him as he sighs.

Truth is, I don’t know how to make it work. How do I go after my dreams and not end up leaving her in the red dust of southern Utah because she refuses to budge from this spot? “I love my mom, but someday I am going to have to leave. I need to know what else is out there in the world. I need to know if I can make it on my own.”

“Daphne. I know you can make it on your own—but this is a conversation you should have with your mother. Later when . . .”

“Later will be *too late*.” I place my hand over his large fingers before he can distract himself with cutting ribbons again. “Please, Jonathan. Let me go tonight—”

The shop’s bell interrupts me once more, only this time it’s much louder, like someone has opened the front door in a hurry. I wonder if Indie has sent another customer running.

But instead, a few seconds later, Indie comes bounding into the back room. Or at least she tries to before hitting the barricade of balloons.

“Hol-y amaze balls, Daph-ne,” she says, jumping up to see me over the balloons. “You will never guess who is in the shop—like, never, ever in a mil-lion freak-ing years!”

When Indie gets excited, she talks in short, staccato notes and acts like she’s had five espressos in the last half hour, even though

Mom says she's supposed to be on a strictly stimulant-free diet. I'm not sure where Mom got this information, nor where she found Indie. Despite being on a limited budget—because she flat-out refuses to accept any child support from “that man”—my mother has a tendency to bring home strays. Of both the animal and human variety. Most of her person rescues stay only long enough to collect their first paycheck, but others become part of the family and never leave. Like *Uncle Jonathan*, who's been with us for so long, I can't remember when my day wasn't greeted by one of his Technicolor aprons, and CeCe, who'd practically become my sister since my mom brought her to the shop five and a half years ago, looking like a drowned rat—CeCe, that is, not my mom. I still am not sure where Indie is going to fit into the mix.

“Come on. You have to see him!” she says when I don't follow her.

Jonathan and I glance at each other, and he chuckles. He always says that a flower shop is the worst place in town for meeting cute guys. You'd have better luck at the library. Because the guys who come in here already have someone to buy flowers for.

“She'll learn.” Jonathan laughs again with a merry tune, the tension between us melting away. The skin around his eyes wrinkles with his smile all the way up to the graying hair at his temples. I can't help thinking that I won't allow myself to grow old while waiting for my Prince Charming in a place like Ellis. My mom thought she'd found her prince once, but he'd hopped off like the frog he really was before I'd even been born.

As far as I'm concerned, no guy is worth waiting anywhere for, nor following, for that matter—prince or not.

“I'm ser-i-ous, you guys.” Indie grabs my arm through the balloons. “You have to see this or you will nev-er be-lieve me. Crap,

where did I put my phone?" She drags me, with that red and orange balloon bouquet still in my hands, to the front with her. Jonathan follows, making a bemused humming sound. I hope he doesn't think our discussion is over.

The first thing I notice is a long Hummer limousine idling in the no-parking zone in front of the shop entrance. But before I even have the chance to be irked by the illegal parking job, or wonder why or *how* someone had gotten a limo for the dance around here anyway, Indie jerks my attention to the flower cooler, whose motor is chugging and buzzing like it's about to die any second. Or rather, Indie turns my attention to the back of the man who is standing in front of the cooler.

"See," she whispers.

The shop's fluorescent bulbs reflect off the back of the man's leather jacket, and his boots are just as shiny. He wears dark wash skinny jeans that look far too tight for comfort. In fact, everything he wears looks stiff and perfect, like someone else picks out a new outfit for him every time he steps out of his house. Considering it's ninety-eight degrees outside, that person hadn't done a very good job. The woman next to him looks just as crisp in a black suit and a patent leather briefcase that coordinates with her glossy red heels. She clutches the briefcase to her chest as if she's afraid one of the potted azaleas is about to fling itself at her.

I glance at CeCe, who is ringing up a bundle of red roses and baby's breath for a very nonoriginal customer at the register. She shrugs to show she has no idea what Indie is going on about.

The leather-jacket man seems intent on a bunch of ranunculus blooms, which are wilting in the half-dead cooler. The glossy woman clears her throat. The man brushes his long, wavy hair over his shoulder and turns toward us.

Indie squeals.

CeCe swears.

"It's really him!" Indie says. "It's *the*—"

"Joe Vince," Jonathan says. He makes a move like he wants to block the man from my view with all three hundred pounds of himself.

I hold my hand up to stop him.

The man's lips part into a cheeky grin. He winks at Indie and then looks at me. "Ello, Daphne," he says. "It's been a long time."

I let go of the balloon strings.

"Dad," I say.

"What are you doing here?" Jonathan demands.

"Didn't your mother tell you?" Joe says to me in his British accent, which must have once charmed my mom off her feet. "A judge granted me custody. I'm taking you to live with me in California."

A loud bang echoes above my head as one of the red balloons bobbing against the rough popcorn ceiling bursts.