

PART I – GATHERING COURAGE

Prologue

Jasmine tucked her books under her arm and turned down the hall. In the year since she'd started taking classes at Heaford Community College, she'd grown accustomed to having the wayward eyes of the college-age boys ('men' was too generous a description for them) following her around most places. She had learned to wear certain types of clothing so as not to stand out too much, but also enough to make herself not seem like an easy target for guys whose only intent was to get to know her on the outside and not on the inside. It was easy to tell if a boy was looking at her in a way that she didn't appreciate – something about the eyes that she couldn't put her finger on, but nevertheless was there. It disgusted her. Being single her entire life didn't seem so bad in light of that.

But the way the two older men had looked at her a second before was different. It stirred something deep inside her. The look in their eyes was not the lazy, casual observer look she got from so many of the college boys. Their eyes focused on her like lasers, never averting or turning their piercing gaze on anyone else. Out of the one hundred plus people in the entire student cafeteria, they had singled her out. Without a word, they rose from their seat, both keeping their right hands in the pockets of their jackets as they followed her out of the cafeteria and through the doors that led to the densely populated rotunda just outside the building. A few trees here and there, some bushes, and enough students so that Jasmine felt comfortable enough suspecting that the two men wouldn't try anything in front of so many. What did they want?

Her mind raced through the terrible, awful possibilities as she walked, but she tried to push them away and instead focus on what she was doing. Atlas and Mary Anne had both stressed the idea of keeping her mind clear in a scenario like this, but it was Quint's voice that she heard most clearly in her memory.

"Your power is all about control and focus. Your internal thoughts and desires have an effect on the world around you. It's absolutely a fascinating gift, especially since you can affect the world without even physically touching it. But if you aren't focused and calm, there is no way you can use it – your mind is the muscle of your power and if it isn't trained and strong, it weakens to the point where even the smallest effort is exhausting."

Jasmine tried her best to focus, but her fear began to overwhelm her and instead she looked around frantically as she walked to make sure she was always in the thickest part of the crowds of students. She realized that she had started walking a lot faster and she hoped that to everyone around her it appeared that she was rushing to class like a good college student. She cast a quick glance back and saw the two men, their hands still in their jackets, keeping pace with her, about ten feet behind. They didn't come any closer, but they didn't let her get any farther away either. All the while, they never took their eyes off her, not even for one second. They were young, but still clearly old enough that they were probably not students at the college. What was in their pockets? Guns? Tasers? Something unspeakably more awful than anything she could dream up?

Deep down, among the myriad other horrors they might want to do to her, Jasmine's biggest fear, greater than anything else, was that they were after her because they knew about her telekinetic abilities. Government agents, local authorities, two punks who knew more than

they ought, she didn't care who they were. She only feared that they knew of her powers and were going to try to expose her. If they tried to get her alone, maybe she could take them down, but she would have to overcome her fear and focus her mind first. Or...worse...they would attack her in front of the students, her classmates, and she would be forced to defend herself and reveal her power to everyone. One of other students would pull out their phone or tablet and take pictures and videos and post it to the web and then her secret would be up there for the world to see! She felt her mouth dry up at the thought of it.

She had to get to her car and get back to the house. Atlas and Mary Anne would know how to handle these two. Even if these two had powers of their own, Atlas and Mary Anne would keep Jasmine safe. And if Quint was there, and Jason, too, nothing could get to her. All she had to do was get home.

But what if, somehow, this was all K's doing? She knew she would be safe, most likely, with her new family, but what if that was what K WANTED her to do? What if K was trying to lure her home and strike at all of them at once? But K already knew where they lived...if he wanted to tell the authorities where they were, he could have done it any time. Jasmine immediately felt guilty suspecting K for being involved, but she knew deep down that she didn't trust him completely even though she desperately wanted to. She didn't really think that he would let something as silly as an argument with her adoptive parents go this far. He had more sense than that...didn't he? He'd probably be furious at her for even thinking such a thing.

Jasmine entered the college quad and made straight for the parking lot. Her blue jeep was waiting for her, but she realized that in order to get to it, she would have to break away from the crowd and isolate herself.

She stopped cold – there was another man standing by her car, right by the driver's side door! He seemed to sense when she got within sight, because the moment she spotted him he looked up. It was as if he had picked her out of the big crowd of students – there was no possible way he could see her from that far away, was there? But, then, why did she get the feeling that he was staring at her just like the two men that were following her?

Who were these guys?! And, more importantly, how was she going to get away now?

Her knees became weak and she felt nauseous. Suddenly, she heard a familiar voice say her name from off to her right.

“Jas!”

Jasmine, startled, turned and saw one of the most welcome sights she had ever seen. It was Nate and Jenny, two of her friends that she'd known since day one of her college arrival. This semester they were all together in a biology class, a subject in which she and Jenny both excelled and in which Nate...well, Nate didn't. Seeing the couple coming toward her made her almost cry with relief.

“Hey, Jas! Wanna go for a ride in Nate's new convertible?” Jenny hollered cheerfully, her blonde ponytail bobbing along with her body in her typical, excited demeanor.

Jasmine, too relieved to speak, felt the words catch in her throat, so she simply nodded affirmatively. She glanced down and saw that her knuckles had turned white from grabbing her books so tightly. She looked back to see if she could find the two men who'd been following her, but she didn't see them where they had last been and Nate and Jenny swiftly fell in on either side of her. That was something she hadn't expected – Nate and Jenny had been dating for

nearly a year now, and nothing came between them. Jasmine usually found herself walking beside Jenny while the blonde bombshell and Nate held hands everywhere they went, so finding herself in between the two was unusual.

Almost as unusual as having them both throw an arm over each of her shoulders. She would have expected affection like that from Jenny, but Nate doing that made her slightly uneasy. But then he leaned over and spoke in a low voice into her ear.

“We saw the two guys following you,” he said in all seriousness. “Bad news, those two, and the third guy down by your car, too.”

Jasmine pulled away and looked at him in surprise.

“You saw them?” she gasped, continuing to walk in between them. Nate and Jenny both nodded.

“Wow...uh...well, thanks, I guess,” she stuttered.

“Don’t thank us yet,” Nate said. “We still need to get you home in one piece.”

Jasmine stopped dead in her tracks.

“What?” she said, a little more loudly than she intended.

“We know they’re watching you,” Jenny confessed.

“H-how?”

“It doesn’t matter right now,” Nate said. “Come on, we have to go before more of them show up.”

“More of them?!”

She started to back away, and Nate reached out to stop her, but Jenny touched his arm.

“Nate, go bring the car around. I’ll talk to her.”

Jasmine looked away. She felt betrayed. Were Nate and Jenny really her friends? Were they actually the people she thought they were? What sort of people did they have to be to be able to know who those men were?

“Jas,” Jenny called, walking up to her slowly. Jasmine was aware that they were drawing confused or intrigued looks from some passing students, but she didn’t care.

“What are you trying to do?” Jasmine asked defensively. Jenny held up her hands, her painted eyes shining with utmost concern.

“Please believe me, we want to help you,” she said.

“Help me with what?” Jasmine asked, trying to sound genuine but fearing above everything what she thought was coming.

“We know, alright? We know.”

The words hit Jasmine like a brick had been thrown at her stomach. Jenny came close and lowered her voice so that no one passing them could hear.

“We’ve kept it a secret for a long time, but somehow those people found out and now they’re coming for you.”

Jasmine’s eyes widened in terror. She looked at Jenny and found it hard to catch her breath.

“Who...who are they?!” she begged to know. She heard tires squeal as Nate’s car came to a halt at the curb just a few feet away.

“We’re not sure, but we have to leave **now**.”

Jasmine stared at the car, seeing Nate wave expectantly from inside. She didn't know what to say and didn't know what to do. She felt Jenny's warm hand on her arm and wanted to recoil, but also wanted so badly to go with her friend.

"Please, Jas. Will you trust us just this once?"

She searched Jenny's honest and caring face, afraid that if she looked too hard she would find something sinister in her expression, but happily surprised to find that it wasn't there. She swallowed her fear and took in a deep breath.

"Um...okay. Let's go."

Jenny smiled understandingly and walked side by side with her to the car, then got into the passenger side while Jasmine slipped into the back seat with her books and her backpack. She looked out the back window and her heart leapt into her throat as she saw all three men approaching the car, their eyes fixed on her. When she saw them she yelped, trying to cover her own mouth before she screamed out loud. The three men broke into a sprint right at them and Jenny slapped Nate's seat.

"AHH! GO!" she yelled in panic. Nate floored the accelerator and the car screeched forward. Jasmine's body was rigid, her petrified gaze fixed on the forms of the three men who were running as fast as they could to get to her, but then her heart began to beat normally again as they receded into the distance. Apparently, none of them had super-speed as their power and they weren't able to keep pace with the car as it turned out of the parking lot and onto the road that led away from the college campus.

"We taking her to her house?" Nate asked Jenny, who responded by nodding.

Jasmine's head was swimming with questions, but her adrenaline was flowing through her veins and she worked to slow her heartbeat by taking deep breaths. They rode in tense, awkward silence for a few moments that way, but after a minute she looked up and saw Jenny staring at her from the front passenger seat. Her face was unreadable – did she really know? Was her telekinetic ability the secret they had been keeping or did they mean something else? And how was she supposed to find out what they were talking about without giving herself away completely?

"Yes, that's what it is," Jenny said quietly. "It's your power. We do know about it."

Jasmine stared at her, her mouth hanging open.

"Wh—but, but—how—?"

"She can read your mind," Nate chimed in.

Jasmine looked back from Nate to Jenny, back and forth, but both of them appeared totally serious.

"Wait, you mean..."

"Yeah, literally, I can read your mind," Jenny told her. "I've always been able to read minds, ever since I was little. It's like I look into people's eyes and I can hear and see what they're thinking."

"And...all this time, you've been reading my mind?"

Jenny stayed silent, looking away. Jasmine was indignant and offended.

"Without my permission?!"

“No, no, not like that...” Jenny said in her own defense. “I didn’t do it very often. Once I found out that you had powers, too, it all started to make sense and I didn’t have to figure you out anymore.”

“But... what if I didn’t WANT you to know what I was thinking all those times?”

“Sorry, Jas, I... I didn’t do it on purpose. It isn’t something I can turn off, ya know? It’s like everyone is walking around broadcasting their thoughts and I try to stop from hearing them, but it’s not like I can put earplugs into my brain or anything.”

“Trust me, she does it to me all the time,” Nate said cheerfully. “It’s actually done wonders for our relationship.”

Jenny smiled. “Well, that’s true...”

“That’s how she found out that I have a sonic weapon in my throat,” he continued. “I have an extra organ in my throat that can make sound into a weapon. It’s like spitting out spears or arrows of sound. Crazy, right?”

Jasmine sat back and stared at her friends in amazement. All this time she had doubted the existence of other people with powers, but it made total sense. Before she had met Jason, Atlas, Mary Anne, Quint, and K, she had thought she was alone in the world. But the five of them had been brought together for some reason and allowed to know of one another’s existence, so it only made sense that there were far more people with these special abilities than she could ever have imagined. Knowing that her secret had been exposed to Nate and Jenny for almost a full year before they told her was terrifying, but at the same time it was so relieving to know that two of her only friends outside of her new family, aside from Jason Finnick, were basically just extended family themselves. But those three men from earlier...how had they known? She looked back up at Jenny, who was still watching her.

“Um...you said...”

“Yeah, we know who those guys are, or at least we know a little bit,” Jenny confessed. “We know that they’re part of some sort of secret group that targets people with powers, but we don’t know much else about them, other than what I can get by mind-reading. We’ve seen those three before – we assume they are assigned to this area or something, and that’s why they stick around here.”

“Jen, did you get a chance to read their minds this time?” Nate asked. Jenny turned around and rubbed the sides of her head, as if she was massaging sore muscles.

“I did, but it was really weird,” she said. “I saw the eyes of the two who had been following Jas, but it was like looking at a blank piece of paper. There was nothing there. And all I could hear was a bunch of white noise, not even like static, but like there was just nothing to hear. I tried focusing as hard as I could, but...nothing.”

Nate’s eyes grew wide. “That doesn’t sound good. Maybe they’ve been trained to block mind-readers. Or maybe whoever they work for did that to them on purpose, you know? Erased their minds and made them slaves or something. *Tabula rasa.*”

Jenny rubbed him on the shoulder. “Oh, look at you, Mister College Words.”

“Hey, Psychology is more interesting than Biology *by far*,” he countered.

Jasmine, feeling her heart rate retuning to a more normal rhythm, sat back and took in a few more deep breaths. As much comfort as she took in knowing that friends like Nate and Jenny had her back, she couldn’t shake the fact that they had basically lied to her about

themselves this entire time, even knowing what she was going through as well. Nonetheless, Quint would be interested to hear about Jenny's and Nate's assessment of this shadowy group for sure, and when K heard about it, Jasmine was positive that he would return from wherever he was and drop whatever he was doing to come back home and hear about what was going on. She'd heard him talk about his suspicions that someone in the shadows was targeting people with superpowers, or at least searching for them, but she never suspected that she herself was a target. She didn't look forward to being present for another moral and ethical argument between K and Atlas, but she figured it would be worth it if it helped start to solve this mystery, and she couldn't argue with K's actions to protect the family. At least everyone was on the same page with that issue.

"What's that?" Jenny asked, leaning forward to look out the windshield at the sky.

"Looks like smoke," Nate said, doing the same.

Jasmine tried to see, but her seat in the back limited her view quite a bit. They were almost home – the quiet, almost-rural locale was the perfect place to put a big house like the one owned by Atlas and Mary Anne. There was always plenty of room, something that Jasmine really liked about her new home that she hadn't had in her college dorm when she had moved to Heaford.

"You smell that?" Nate asked. Jenny rolled down the window, and immediately it was clear to all three of them that something huge was burning. They turned onto Jasmine's street, past a field of soybeans, and the sight that awaited them shocked them to the core.

Jasmine gasped and her eyes filled with tears. Instinctively she grabbed the handle of the door and was out in a flash. She felt an arm wrap around her middle as Nate moved to hold her back and she suddenly became aware that she was yelling and flailing her arms.

"THE HOUSE! NO!"

Atlas and Mary Anne's house was a towering, blazing inferno. The firefighters and trucks were there, dumping gallons upon gallons of water onto the bright orange and yellow fire, but it had obviously caught on too quickly to be put out by a simple procedure. The entire two-story structure was engulfed in flames, belching smoke and ash like a sick child vomiting in the emergency room. The stench of burning wood, singed fabric, and melted plastic filled her nostrils as she collapsed on the street beside the car, sobbing.

"NO!" Images uncontrolled plastered themselves all over her mind of her beloved family members trapped inside and being roasted alive in their own rooms. But, no! That would never have happened! Mary Anne could never have been hurt by fire and Atlas could have taken on a material form that wasn't flammable. Quint would simply have punched his way through walls until he was outside, and K was probably not even back at home when the place caught fire. They were a family of super-powered human beings – they were definitely fine. And Ava was clairvoyant, so she probably saw it before it even happened. Plus, with Melinda and her ice powers, they were all definitely fine. But...

"...our house..." Jasmine cried, her tears staining the asphalt.

"Come on, Jas, we gotta go!" Nate said urgently. "We don't want anyone to find you here!"

"She can stay at my place," Jenny said as Nate lifted the crying girl to her feet.

Jasmine could only watch the front of the house fall in on itself as the car pulled away. Her life had changed so much in just one year, and now here she went again. She knew that Mary Anne and Atlas would try to find her. K, if he decided to help instead of take off again, would definitely be able to find her, and wherever Atlas and Mary Anne were, the others wouldn't be far behind.

"How did it come to this...?" Jasmine wondered with a shudder.

And what was in store for them next?