

WINGS OF PREY

CHAPTER ONE

Three weeks had passed since my mother learned that another world existed within her own. A world where the laws of gravity weren't so much laws as suggestions. A world where a select few who shared the right gene could dissipate into molecules too tiny for the human eye to see and then re-form, unaffected. A world of Fliers and Ghosts.

Years of hiding the truth from her were behind us, and yet I felt her doubt, her skepticism. It seemed as if she was waiting for me to say *just kidding* and then life would return to normal. Normal: the most overrated place in the world.

"Where's your mom?" James said, leaning against the kitchen door jamb. He raked his hand through still damp hair that touched his shoulders. Last night it had been my hands running through his hair. He was dressed in dark colours. They made him look leaner, lankier. Sexier. He stared at the belt of my robe.

I pulled my mind out of the bedroom and picked up the note she'd left. "At the university again. 'Back tonight,' it says. You know what she's doing, right?"

He pushed off from the jamb and sauntered over. "Looking for proof?"

"It's the scientist in her. She can't help herself."

James pulled two mugs from the cupboard and reached for the coffee pot. "There's always the hope the university will pull her library privileges."

"With her credentials? Fat chance." We took our coffees to the living room and settled on the sofa. Outside, the Pacific shimmered under a weak May sun.

"I did the same, you know," I said. "Before I knew. Back in Toronto."

"Did you find anything?"

"Not unless you include witchcraft and mystical rapture. Then there's always demonic possession and shamans. And let's not forget cults and alien space invaders."

James gave me the laugh I was looking for. "Abnormal behaviours are your mom's forte, are they not? Maybe she'll be the one to figure out the science behind the *gift*."

"More likely a drug to cure it." My mom, Laura Aberfoyle, was a respected behavioural research Ph.D. She'd resigned from her post at the University of Toronto a few weeks ago.

"Cure it?"

"It wouldn't be the first time she pioneered an anti-psychotic med. Mom's furious that Jolene did this, gifted me, put me in this position. She thinks the gift is dangerous." I traced a dribble of coffee up the side of my mug and licked my finger. "She doesn't know the half of it."

"When are you going to tell her?"

"I don't know. I'd hoped the gift would win her over. She should be curious, but she's resisted every offer to experience it for herself—from Stuart, from me. Without that cushion, it's going to be a blow when she learns about the Tribunal Novem and our enemies."

"I wish I could stay and help, but it's going to take from now until the caucus to set up the security."

Next week's caucus was a big deal. The entire Tribunal Novem, their families and allies would be in attendance. Security measures would be unprecedented.

"I have to tell you, I'm surprised Mason asked for your help."

"I sense Stuart had a hand in that."

"He tells me you two work well together."

"The guy's got balls. Pretty nimble for an old cowboy. I owe him."

That old cowboy was becoming more like the grandfather I never had with each passing day. He'd pressed James's right for revenge with Sebastian and then helped James track down and assassinate the two amoral vultures responsible for stealing our genetic material. He'd then helped dispatch James's handler, Tim Beale, the man at International Covert Operations who'd set James up.

I smiled. "Stuart's probably taking advantage of your new unemployed status."

"Unemployed. I like the sound of that. But I'm not idle. Took a private contract before I showed up on your doorstep."

James toyed with one of the lockets on my bracelet. Inside the locket was the RF transmitter International Covert Operations had implanted in my arm. James had one just like it—not the bracelet, the transmitter. ICO wasn't aware we'd found them, and we were counting on them not knowing we'd had them surgically removed. Now we were in control of how much they knew of our whereabouts.

James twisted the bracelet and checked the second locket—his locket. I'd agreed to keep his tracker with me while he was working with Mason on security for the caucus. We couldn't risk ICO knowing where the meeting was taking place.

"I'm glad you came."

"Me too." He took my hand in his. "I was worried your mom would toss me out when I showed up."

“Are you kidding? She thinks you can do no wrong. I was the one who kept her in the dark and insisted everyone else do the same. You, she loves.”

A playful smirk crossed his lips. “I *am* damn near perfect.” I rolled my eyes. He raised the back of my hand to his lips. “Thank you for saying yes.”

My smile faded. “We’re taking it slow, remember?”

“Like I’d forget that conversation.”

An awkward silence fell. He rubbed his thumb over my knuckles. “We aren’t the first couple to have to work out a few snags, Em.”

“Snags?”

“Tiny,” he said, squinting at the small gap between his thumb and forefinger. “My father’s law firm will work out the legal issues with me being American and you Canadian. And as far as the Reynoldses go, I’ve already made my peace with Stuart, and Mason will come around when we tell him.”

“And that little snag to do with children?”

He cocked his head to one side and frowned. “You want kids, right?”

“Eventually.”

“Then it’s just a matter of timing, that’s all.”

That’s all. He said it as if it were an easy fix, a little tweak. I wasn’t so sure. The thought of having kids sent me into cold-sweat territory.

“Speaking of kids, isn’t Short, Dark and Bubbly about to pop?”

“Next month if she can hold on, but I don’t think it’s contagious,” I said.

James laughed, knowing I’d caught his not-so-subtle play. Short, Dark and Bubbly was James’s nickname for Molly Connolly, though she was Molly Meyers now. She and I had been best buddies when we were kids. She was still my closest and dearest friend in the non-Gifted world.

“I’ve got to get moving,” James said.

“You’ll keep in touch?”

His gaze dropped to my hand. “As much as I can. Yes.”

James was a man of few words, but his habit of cutting off communication when he worked a case had moved beyond annoying. I had the same job, so I understood the risks, but not knowing if he was alive or dead, not being able to reach him or warn him, had cost us both—dearly. Now someone at ICO had a piece of us they shouldn’t have, and the Tribunal had issued a death warrant for the operatives within ICO who knew of our existence.

After breakfast, James put his Dopp kit in a black leather satchel that sat on the floor inside my bedroom door. I tried not to take offence that he kept it perpetually packed, ready to grab and go at a moment’s notice.

“If the Tribunal doesn’t deal with ICO before you head to the caucus, leave the trackers here.”

I nodded patiently at his reminder, the third one he’d given me since stringing his tracker on my bracelet.

He kissed me one last time and then left for the airport to board a plane headed to San Francisco, where he’d meet with Mason. The exact location of the caucus wouldn’t be disclosed until twenty-four hours beforehand. After the massacre at Cairabrae, no one on the Tribunal was taking any chances.

The home gym I’d set up in the third bedroom of the condo would feel too confined today. I needed space to burn off energy. I dressed in workout gear and ran a ten-kilometre circuit around the university.

At six o’clock that evening my mother still hadn’t returned. I ate a dinner of ham and scalloped potatoes alone and then dished her a plate. This felt like our old life in Toronto, when I was going to university and she worked at the lab. Once again we occupied the same home but rarely saw each other. I texted her but it went unanswered. If she was in the library, she probably had her phone turned off.

When Mom finally came home, it was eight thirty. I set my book aside and listened to her slow footsteps approaching from down the hall. She plodded into the living room and dumped her shoulder bag as if it weighed fifty pounds.

“Tough day at the office?” I asked.

She shrugged out of her trench coat. “Has James left?”

“This morning.”

Mom headed to the kitchen. I heard the creak of the oven door and the wrinkle of tinfoil. Moments later, she carried the plate I’d kept warm to the dining room table and took a seat. “This is good,” she said, swallowing a mouthful. “Thanks.”

“How was the library?”

“Good. I hired a grad student today. He starts tomorrow.”

“Why?”

She raised a sardonic eyebrow. “Have you seen UBC’s library?”

“Which one?”

“Exactly. I’m spending more time running around buildings and stacks than I am researching.”

Alarm pricked the back of my neck. “You haven’t told him anything . . . about the gift . . . have you?”

“No! You think he’d agree to work with a woman of questionable sanity?”

“Tell me what you’re looking for, Mom. Let me help.”

“Thanks, sweetheart, but the young man I hired is a master of library sciences student. He’ll be far more efficient than either of us, and I’m only here until the end of the week.”

Her avoidance of my question reinforced my belief that she was looking for evidence of the gift. I wanted to tell her she wouldn’t find it, but she’d learn that for herself soon enough. “You’re coming back, right?” I’d invited Mom to

move in with me, at least until she found her feet on the coast.

Mom screwed up her face as if I'd asked a ridiculous question. "Of course. I'm going to hand off my research and pack up the condo. Shouldn't be more than ten days."

"You planning on working late again tomorrow?"

"For a few more days, yes."

"How about I meet you tomorrow? Say eight o'clock? We'll go for dinner."

"Tired of cooking?"

"Tired of not seeing you. It feels a little too much like our time in Toronto."

"Well then, let's try to fix that. Dinner tomorrow it is."

The next night, I took the usual precautions to ensure I wasn't followed. ICO knew where I lived, but I'd gone to extreme measures to hide who my mother was. I didn't trust them not to use her to get to me. Koerner Library was a twenty-minute walk away. I pulled my collar close, stayed alert and made it there without incident.

"Impressive," I said, when I found Mom. She'd managed to commandeer a carousel in a study room on the first floor, two floors below the main entrance.

Mom jerked her head up from behind a stack of books and journals. "Is it eight o'clock already?"

I tilted my head to read the books' spines. Mom twisted the pile away from my quizzical gaze. "You're researching ocean tides?"

"You should have called. I'd have met you upstairs." She scraped her chair back and grabbed her coat and bag. "Let's go," she said, nudging me ahead of her.

How did ocean tides tie into the gift? Perhaps I'd been wrong about her research subject. I dismissed the matter and we started out for the Point Grill, a ten-minute walk away. James and I had eaten at the Point a few times. We liked the casual atmosphere, and most nights the restaurant was busy

enough to render us anonymous and mask our conversations.

After we were seated, Mom pulled out her tablet and showed me the real estate listing for the Toronto condo. “It went up this afternoon,” she said. “The agent’s showing it this weekend. She figures we’ll have offers by Sunday.”

Through dinner, we talked about her upcoming trip and impending move. The gift was the impetus behind all of it and yet that very subject never crossed our conversational threshold. It wasn’t because of the public venue; the gift had somehow become a taboo topic. *Verboten*. As if talking about it made it more real.

We left the Point and stepped into a cool, starlit night. Mom tucked her hand in the crook of my arm as we strolled along the street, our footsteps the only sounds.

“I’ll head off at the next corner,” I said. She nodded, having gotten used to my routine. “Meet you back at—”

High-pitched yips startled us. A woman screamed. I dropped my mother’s arm and raced toward the ferocious snarling around the corner.

At the forested edge of a small greenspace, a coyote had cornered a small fluffball of a dog. The dog held its ground, but it had been hurt and the coyote smelled blood. The only things keeping the coyote at bay were the screams and cartwheeling arms of the young woman standing too close. She stood to my right gripping an empty leash. The coyote was on my left and the injured dog straight ahead.

Without a second thought, I drew on the gift and, with a toss of my head, drilled a potent *spark* into the coyote. It yelped and turned on me, baring its teeth.

“Go on! Git!” I said, and stomped my feet. But the coyote had a meal within reach and wasn’t keen to let it go. It lowered its head and snarled. I hurled another spark. It yelped again, and this time it charged me.

My next spark wasn’t a warning. Its hind end collapsed, stopping it in its tracks. I took a step forward and the animal

quickly righted itself and limped off into the bushes, abandoning its dinner. I bent over with relief.

The young woman raced for her dog and scooped it up. "Thank you," she said. Tears streamed down her face. Blood stained the white fur of the dog that quivered in her arms.

"He's probably in shock. Keep him warm," I said.

Mom appeared at my side. "I called campus security," she said, and to me she whispered, "We gotta go." She tugged my coat and I stumbled to follow. I stole a glance behind me. The woman ran to the street, where a vehicle with flashing lights approached. I turned and hurried after my mother into the shadows.

She marched west, opposite the direction of the condo. Neither of us said a word until we were across Northwest Marine Drive.

"What the hell was that?" she said, still marching forward.

Even with a brisk stride, I could barely keep up with her. "Have you not seen the warning signs around campus? About coyotes?"

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it!" Anger fuelled her pace.

"Mom, stop," I said, and halted in my tracks. The *no good deed* axiom ran through my mind. My actions had forced a conversation I'd been dreading, but there would be no stopping it now.

The moment Mom realized I wasn't following, she turned. "I thought you were done keeping secrets."

I closed the distance between us and blew out a breath. "It's another facet of the gift. It's called a spark."

She frowned. "Another facet? How many more *facets* haven't you told me about?"

"I can't change any of this, Mom. Only Fliers born with the gift can give it away. I don't have that option. There's no getting rid of it. It's part of me."

“None of that has any bearing on you lying to me. Again. Or should I say *still*?”

“It has everything to do with it. I know you hate Jolene and what she did to me, but it’s not curable. I can’t be fixed. This is me now, warts and all, and it would be a lot easier for me to tell you about the warts if you’d accept some of the good things about this damned gift.”

Mom stepped close. “There are no good things about that gift. Everything it allows you to do will get you killed.”

“That sweet dog would be dead if I hadn’t been able to scare off that coyote. That’s something good.”

She flung her arms into the air. “And what if you hadn’t been able to scare it off? It could have been rabid. What if it had attacked you or that young girl?”

I lowered my voice. “Then I would have killed it.”

My mother’s face went slack. I’d gone too far.

“How?”

I straightened, confused. “What? You want a demonstration?” She jutted her chin. Not once had she asked for a demonstration of the gift, and she was choosing this?

She jutted her chin. “Show me. I want to see.”

I knew that look. It meant there would be no escaping her stubborn determination. Exasperated, I blew out a breath. “All right. There,” I said, nodding toward a sign with a white *H* on a blue background; a directional sign for the hospital. I called on the crystal that powered my gift and gathered the strength I needed for a powerful *jolt*. Mom’s gaze turned slowly toward the intersection where the signpost stood. When the jolt was molten hot, I hurled it at the sign with a flick of my head. The post snapped and the sign blew loose and landed with a crash in the bushes.

Mom gasped and stared at the jagged stump of the post for a long minute. “I suppose that explains why your father was so fascinated with that second lens in Fliers’ eyes.”

“He never intended to share that information.” It was Mom who’d unwittingly passed on his research to one of her colleagues.

“I know that now.” She turned to face me. “We need to talk. I’ll meet you at home.” She stuffed her hands in her pockets and walked away.

I watched her until she crossed the street. Indeed, we needed to talk. Tonight she’d learn the rest of the terrible truth. For her, there would never be the awe and wonder of the gift to offset the Tribunal and what it did to protect us from those who would do us harm.

Unseen, I stepped off the path and into the forest, squeezed the crystal that lived alongside my soul, and ghosted.