If you want to know who your enemies are,
show them that you are weak and without potential,
they will become bolder with you.
Let them dare more...
Then strike them like lightning.
~ *The Godfather*



Before streets had names and iron knew the hand,
The witnesses gathered breath and told one story.

Truth buried in ash bears high cost.
What survives is forever changed.

Fire tests us. Truth transforms us.
The shadows never die.
They only change their name.

~ From *Origin of Legend*, "The City"



CHAPTER 1

JAEL

Detroit, Michigan
July 3, 1962

I should've just kept my stupid mouth shut. Instead I'm sprinting down an alley before sunrise with a bag full of newspapers bouncing against my hip and some dude chasing me.

With his twisted nose and massive shoulders tucked into a loose jacket, he looks every inch like one of Hoffa's goons, which, considering the pictures in my pocket, is very bad for me.

As I skid around the corner, my sneakers slip on the gravel, and my bag smacks the brick wall, nearly spinning me to the ground. I grab the edge of the dented dumpster to steady myself and cram into the dark corner, praying my white-blond hair won't give me away.

Footsteps pound toward the alley. Still haunting me as they had on my paper route down Linwood. How did the mob find out what I have?

I suck in a breath, trying to calm my breathing, but the stench of yesterday's hamburgers makes me gag.

This is the part in my comics where the Fates open a hidden door, and the bad men pass the heroine by. But this isn't a comic, and I'm no heroine.

The footsteps slow, and I peek through the little gap between the wall and the dumpster. A shadow looms at the end of the alley.

I want to curse long and loud. All I did was ask a question or two. But asking questions about what Jimmy Hoffa may or may not have done is always a bad idea.

I should've minded my own business and delivered my papers like always. Should've given Aunt Georgia her photographs right when I picked them up. But then I saw something strange in them…

I shut my eyes against what's likely coming.

If I beg for my life, maybe the mob won't kill me.

The shadow stops at the end of the alley, and I press deeper into the darkness, the cool brick wrapping me in shadow. I wish Dad were here. Ain't no way he'd let anything happen. My best hope is to pretend none of this happened, that I didn't ask about Hoffa or what was in my aunt's photos.

Red brake lights fill the alley, reaching for me just as the man hollers, "Sorry I'm late, sir!"

I open my eyes and watch the shadow man scurry across the street, away from the alley, tying his apron as he runs. The door to the diner across the street bangs open and slams shut.

I let out a shaky laugh of relief. He's the one who'd been running.

Not some mob goon chasing me.

Still.

The red lights flicker off, and I count to ten just to make sure I'm alone.

I toss the newspaper bag back over my shoulder and step out of the alley.

In Detroit, it pays to be careful. Hoffa's like the god of the underworld from the myths Aunt Georgia loves.

Watching eyes are everywhere, and nobody who sees the truth in Detroit survives.



CHAPTER 2

GEORGIA

"I thought the reason you came was so you'd be here when I'm at work." My brother-in-law stands there, broad shoulders filling the doorway. His good hand grips the doorframe and effectively traps me inside the steaming hot square of a kitchen. "I need to be able to rely on you."

If it were anyone but Eli, the statement would feel like a threat. But Elisha Cunningham is…well, Eli. Strong and tall as a willow tree, and just as flexible and inviting. At least to most people.

And maybe that's where the rub is. Eli never asks anyone to go out of their way if he can help it. Unfortunately, in my case, he can't help it. He's stuck in the middle of the proverbial ocean and can't get out on his own.

The gurgle of the coffeepot gives me an excuse to turn my back on his dark, simmering eyes. By this point, I've lost track of whether it's my fourth cup or fifth. And that, combined with the fact that I was up most of the night studying for today's nurse practitioner licensure examination, explains why I'm shaking. I've dealt with worse than Eli has ever dished out.

I stir in a spoonful of sugar, then scrub the spoon and set it on the drying rack Eli made for me. "Eli." My voice vibrates with the tension tied taut between my frustration with the man in front of me and the need to not wake his daughter and ailing father. "You see the little things and miss everything else."

"If you don't want to be here, I'm not making you stay." Never mind the fact that Eli's jaw flexes like the words cost him. Never mind that his voice is as wistful as it is brittle. The rejection spikes my core.

The heat of the coffee burns through the mug, matching the anger brewing in my gut. "I never said I didn't want to help or that I don't want to be here. I know work asked you to come in, but I can't—"

"Mr. Fredericks will fire me if I don't show up." Eli grinds the words out. "And I can't leave Jael and Pop alone, right? That's what we agreed to."

The sharp edges of the worn counter dig into my palms and remind me to hold my temper. "That's not fair, Eli."

"Fair?" Eli sucks in a breath and glances over his shoulder where his family is hopefully still sleeping after his outburst. "You know what isn't fair? Because I did the right thing, thugs killed my mother and nearly burned me alive too, succeeding in making it near impossible for me to work." He lifts his mangled right hand, and I wince, knowing the rest of his legitimate litany. "Then my wife died, my dad is losing his ever-loving mind, and I'm here, working my tail off to be a disposable cog in the system. Someone no one cares about. If I disappear, who would notice except the people who depend on me?"

I force myself to meet Eli's fire with my stone-gray gaze, to not back down, to not remember. I don't have the luxury of feelings. I lean against the counter and sip my coffee, stalling, trying to scrape together patience. Except I haven't slept in a week and… "Self-pity doesn't suit you," I snap.

Eli flinches, a blast furnace of helpless temper brewing in his face. "You're indispensable. The hospital will understand if you call a sub. They're not going to fire you."

"There's more to it than—"

"And what will we do if I get fired? Have you thought of that? I need someone I can count on. That will be here when

needed. If you can't handle that, then maybe you should go back to Kentucky."

"Of all the nerve!" I push away from the counter. "I realize you didn't ask me to abandon my life and be cooped up in this apartment taking care of your sorry self. But my best friend did. It was, in fact, her dying request. I watched out for Savannah my entire childhood and couldn't say no to her in death either. It has always been my life for hers, even with you." I fling up a hand to forestall Eli's objection. "Well, today, after two years of sacrificing myself on her altar, I have nothing left to give, and that means you're going to have to figure it out." My earthenware mug clangs against the counter, sloshing scalding coffee onto my hand.

I suck in air through my clenched teeth and spin to the sink.

Eli reaches across me, the heat of his nearness making me flinch as he cranks on the cold water to soothe my burn. I know he means the concern, but he might as well be orbiting earth with John Glenn for all his stony ministrations help.

He steps closer. Close, but not touching. Not anymore. From the minute he stepped into my childhood home, we were planets pulled together by gravity, but years ago, life reversed our polarity, so we push apart despite ourselves.

Savannah, what do I do? I'm thirty-two years old, and I'm all withered and dying, and I have nowhere else to go.

My back to Eli, I let the cold water run and barely contain my desperate laugh. We're both backed into a corner and lashing out. There aren't many jobs, and even less help, available for a blue-collar worker with a twisted right hand, who has a catalog of folks depending on him—especially when he's knee-deep in medical bills.

I swipe at the spreading coffee. Worse, he's right. He can't afford to lose his job…we can't afford him to lose his job.

No. I straighten. I cannot allow his need to draw me in again, no matter what—not today. More than likely, Eli forgot

about my exam today. But my passing means an easier time for him, so he'd never ask me to miss it. And yet, his head is jammed so far up his own panic that he's blinded to his stupidity.

"We worked out the schedule weeks ago." I drop the tattered cloth in the sink. "Things haven't changed just because Mr. Fredericks called you to the library for a couple of extra hours. Jael is back from her route with breakfast in her belly and already sleeping again, no doubt. Clementine is home and can help today if needed. It's what you'd have to do if I wasn't here anyway."

I scrub out my favorite mug—awkward and handmade—and set it alongside the drying spoon. There, Mother. Clean. Everything else is cooked, cleaned, and put away—everything in its place. Except me.

Take what you can get and be grateful, Mother's words echo, dark and otherworldly.

"Georgia?" There's a growl in Eli's voice, but unlike some, he will burn himself out before he scorches too much.

"They'll be as fine as we can make them." I cross my arms. "And we both need me to pass this exam."

Recognition flickers in his eyes. He'd forgotten about the exam, which explains a lot, but doesn't excuse his arrogant assumptions. His square jaw works. When I lift an eyebrow, he nods and lets his hand trail down the grimy white doorframe until it slaps against his leg. Resignation.

No, Eli didn't ask for my help, but he needs it all the same. Everyone knows it about kills a man to admit he can't do something...especially when he's been told he's practically worthless so many times he believes the lie. And the fact is, if he is late, he might lose his job. But I cannot miss the exam, not after we both scraped and saved to pay for my training.

In the second bedroom, Woodrow, Eli's father, calls out, his voice mingling with Jael's scratchy response. I wonder how long

it will be until one of them asks for help. Though she'll probably sprout past my height in the next few months, Jael is skinny as a maple sapling and not strong enough to help her grandfather to the bathroom if he's having a bad day. At least she hasn't woken with another twisted nightmare.

Ignoring the twinge of guilt for abandoning my favorite child in the world, I squeeze past Eli, close enough to see the gold specks in his tormented eyes, close enough to reach out in apology that I can't do more. When I hesitate, he sags like he might break and apologize himself.

But then he stiffens, the bellows blowing on the embers. He drags a hand across his mouth to keep in the words, the need. We've argued more than once about how we're going to survive. We're both exhausted and overwhelmed, and who wants to fight like an old married couple when they are neither married nor old? And yet survival is all we have...all so many folks have when they've been tossed from the heights and left to make do where they land.

While he turns toward the bedrooms, I veer away, keeping my mouth shut so I won't say anything else I'll regret. I snatch my nurse's cap, lunch box, and sturdy satchel with a beautiful daffodil stitched into the side. After a moment's hesitation, I drop my Leica camera into the bag, a reminder of the good man Eli really is. He found the camera for me, traded house repairs for it, gave it to me for my fifteenth birthday, and never once asked what I planned to do with it.

He's endured unspeakable pain and sacrificed, and I hate where we are right now. I hate that I can't save him. I hate that he is no longer the man who would sit on the roof and stare at the stars with me. I hate this in-between limbo—not just an old friend, not just a sister-in-law, but not more than that either. The fact is that, despite being a good man, Eli has given up fighting for anything better and doesn't see how that hurts everyone else. Eli is so careful that we might both

disappear in the space gaping between us. And I can no longer stay when I cannot be what he needs, let alone what he wants.

I extract the little turtle-shaped stone I've kept with me ever since the first time I met Eli. Once, it had been a promise between us that we'd walk through the muck together. But sometimes folks need to drag themselves through their own mess to stand strong on the other side. When I drop it on the little table under the phone, it clunks with a desperate finality.

Escaping the apartment, I clatter down the twisted stairs. I have a partial shift to work and then the licensure exam to take before finishing out my sub's shift. I'll be gone sixteen hours. I can only pray Jael will be okay. Woodrow isn't always easy to deal with and has a tendency to wander where he shouldn't. If anything happens to either of them…

I rub at my neck, trying to dislodge the dragon-sized headache clawing into my skull.

Maybe I really should leave Detroit entirely in the rearview mirror. In my absence, I suspect any number of women would take them all in. I've seen how our landlady looks at him.

I yank open the sticky apartment building door, praying for a breeze to miraculously appear. But like most days, I am disappointed by the lack of answer from the heavens. Not even six in the morning, and already the humidity rolls off the Detroit River, choking the city with oppressive heat like Hades himself is parading through the streets.

Good gracious, I sound as bitter as Mama spouting about Daddy letting me "cavort with one of those people." "Those people" being Eli and his dirt-poor dad.

Attitude readjusted, I launch off the bottom porch stair into the open palm of the city. My hurried footsteps echo on the sidewalk as goosebumps prickle down my arms, screaming at me to be aware. I glance behind me.

A handful of people move purposefully, but no one pays me

any mind. I wipe my sweating palms against my uniform. Why am I jumpy as a hare?

In front of me, the sky glows behind the buildings as they march down 14th Street. I glance at my watch. 5:34. Stifling a curse, I pick up my pace, practically running down Chicago Boulevard. I dodge a man standing smack in the middle of the sidewalk. My sensible white sneakers squeak in protest as I pass row after row of dark houses turned into apartments. I'm going to miss the Linwood bus.

I don't relish walking to 12th to catch the bus to Henry Ford Hospital. As a lone woman dressed in a stark white uniform rushing through the predawn gray, I stick out like a fragile candle flame in a darkened room.

The city bus thunders by, and I break into a full sprint that would give Mother vapors. My feet slam against the pavement in a desperate rhythm. "Wait!" I wave my hand as exhaust billows, and the bus accelerates past my stop.

At least I can count on my boss, Nellie, to cover for me until I get to work.

Behind me, a glass bottle rattles, disturbed by some nocturnal creature, and I almost ignore the tickle of warning, the low hum in my ears, a flicker of movement. A shadow jumps, looming in the alleyway. A man running? Eli?

But no. This isn't the lope of long-legged Eli. It's a stranger headed straight for me.

I whip around, grateful now for my sensible shoes as I run in the opposite direction. My bag slams against my hip, tangling dangerously in my churning legs. The sound of galloping footsteps rebounds off the houses. A man's shadow careens to my left.

More than one?

I dart sideways, across the street, dashing between two cars, and slam into an unforgiving object. An arm clamps around my neck, collapsing my throat as I scratch and fight.

He's dragging me. My heels scramble for purchase.

"I won't hurt you. But you need to stop." As if he isn't hurting me already.

The straight-line edges of the city judder as white fabric smashes against my nose and covers my mouth.

A car door opens. Another man, in the front. Me, in the back.

No air. I have no air.

Eli, help.



THE CHORUS OF WITNESSES

We, the keepers of the city, have held together these streets longer than the smokestacks have breathed. We have watched, we have spoken, we have created, and still they have not learned. They refuse to see or to take into account that which has happened before.

A flare blazes in our streets, sputters, dies. Coal-black steeds careen from the sky even as thunder rolls.

And there is only so much we can do.

The woman's cries echo against the mountains of steel and cement. Our breath spreads the warning, sparking, calling those who will not look away, those who will come and do as much as they can. She is one of us. One who sees. We cannot stand idly by and watch the entire city be swallowed whole.

The god of the sky and the god of the depths can choke upon their verdict. We will not let this happen again. We will no longer remain silent.



CHAPTER 3

ELI

When the front door slammed, Eli was downright shocked the wood didn't splinter. As the Lord is his witness, that woman is going to drive him to move across the river to Canada. And he used to think of her as one of his best friends.

The blond-haired, apple-cheeked, smart-as-anything kid who'd been helpful without complaint, and always had a smile reserved for him, had turned into the very opposite of his sunshine. He didn't need a heap of guilt on top of everything else. He wraps a damp kitchen towel around his fist and yanks on the ends, transferring his anger into the fabric rather than shouting at the injustice of it all.

He can't help but think of Georgia's myths. The ones of a crippled god thrown away, who found ways to build and forge and make himself indispensable. Hephaestus thought he'd be taken seriously by the gods, and then was thrown into the sea. Eli had assumed he and Georgia would be together their entire lives. Assumed their friendship, the shape of things, would hold, that what they'd built would survive. They'd kissed, made promises...and then she traipsed off to boarding school without him. Nearly destroyed him when she never looked back.

Still, he will never abandon her if she needs him.

So he chucks the towel over the edge of the sink, and like

every morning, he leans forward, watching out the window to be sure Georgia arrives safely at the bus stop just down Chicago Boulevard. If anything happened to her, he'd never—

"Help!" Pop cries out, panicked, scared.

Eli's chin falls to his chest. He hasn't seen Georgia emerge from the side of the apartment yet, but he'll have to trust she's good. He runs a hand through his hair and down his neck, his fingers bumping against the old, gnarled scar and trailing down his useless right arm.

"Dad!" Jael pops around the corner, hand on her hip, eyebrows raised in half exasperation and half humor—a look her mama gave Eli more than a few times. Heaven knows he misses Savannah, and the empty spot leaves him all topsy-turvy.

"I'm a-coming." He rips his feet from the peeling linoleum where he's rooted and trudges toward the bedroom, hurting more than he has in months. Sleeping on the old couch isn't doing his back any favors, and neither is manual labor. But there isn't a thing he can do about the latter if he wants to feed his family. At least his back works fine most days, unlike his hand. Just before turning the corner, he pastes on a smile so he doesn't make anybody panic.

In the bedroom, Pop leans heavy on Jael, the pair of them making a desperate trek toward the restroom. Eli loops Pop's arm over his shoulders and near carries him one-handed around the corner just in time.

Eli leans on the wall outside the door to give Pop a little privacy. He doesn't rightly know when Pop went from older to downright old, but it was sudden and chaotic. Some days his body and mind work, and others...well, other days his mind is like a light socket wired in upside down and without a ground wire—on is off and off is on, and you might get a shock from the smallest movement. Eli suspects the breakdown is as hard

for Pop as it is for him. How does a person go from working two jobs and preaching on the weekends to forgetting their own child some days and struggling to walk to the toilet?

Shoving the questions down, Eli studies the photo on the wall opposite. Pop's standing with his arm slung around Jael, both of them grinning like the clowns they were. Georgia took the picture just a week or two after the funeral and just a handful of days before Pop fell and broke his hip. Savannah had been sick for so long, Eli hadn't known which way was which. But Georgia somehow sensed Pop's mind was as broken as his body, that they were all falling apart after Savannah passed. She dropped everything and extended her stay to help...and then never left.

Eli rubs a hand across his face. Two years. Georgia's been here two years, and they're worse off than before. No, he hadn't asked her to come. He had, in fact, hoped for so much more for her. But what would he actually do without her?

He needs to find a better way. Not just because his mama is likely to climb up from the other side and have his hide. She'd been so much like Georgia. A good woman in hard circumstances.

He lumbers down the hall and snags the pencil nub and paper next to the phone and first writes a note to Clementine thanking her for checking in on his family. He'll tape it to her door on his way out. Then he scribbles the beginning of an apology to Georgia. But he needs more. Something that acknowledges the arrangement needs to change for both their sakes. He doesn't know what that means, but she's right. It's his job to figure it out. And he writes that down. When he props the notepad up so she'll be sure to see it when she gets home, his eyes catch a little nondescript stone. He picks it up, smooths his thumb over the turtle-shaped rock, and goes soft with remembrance.

Had she kept that turtle all these years? But the fact she's left the stone behind now makes Eli's lungs go rigid. His fist tightens over the stone that's as cold as his former best friend. Her message is abundantly clear.

Pop hollers that he's finished, and Eli jerks away from the wall. Grateful for the distraction, he helps Pop wash his hands and settle on the recliner in front of the old television. Eli hands him the plate of eggs and grits Georgia left and props the antenna out the window. At least his jerry-rigging of the TV wiring seems to be holding.

Pop lifts a trembling spoon to his mouth and grins around the bite. The lines between his brows disappear, and his eyes clear a bit. "That girl swears she don't use anything but milk, butter, and salt in them grits, but they're even better than your Ma's. There's a reason Savannah loved Georgia like a sister."

Eli shoves his shaking fist in the pocket of his coveralls. The three of them had been inseparable. How naïve had they been to think it would never change?

"You might owe that gal more than an apology, son."

Sparse tufts of hair sprout from Pop's age-spotted scalp, and Eli wonders how, despite the disease eating his mind, Pop still knows what thoughts he's trying to stuff down.

"Pop, we're doing the best we—"

"Maybe a day on Belle Isle?" His daughter's words near gut Eli. But her pale face is lit, no doubt with memories of laughing at the otters at the zoo, lazing on the beach, and walking the path through the cool woods.

She doesn't remember anything other than that. Whereas all Eli remembers is Savannah coughing up blood, Eli stretching over her as the shadow of death walked right up and took residence.

"Aunt Georgia would love everything about it."

Eli opens his mouth to suggest the regatta, or something

simple. Anything other than the island. But Pop looks like he might hop up right then and there and make his way to the Belle Isle Bridge. And Jael is right. Georgia would love everything about it. He can imagine the sparkle in her eye at the antics of the monkey, and he knows she's always wanted to see an elephant.

Heaven knows he owes her, and Jael needs new memories. He pastes on a smile. "Next weekend. I'll figure it out. But I really do need to go." He restrains from finishing the thought: or he will be fired. No need to worry his daughter. "Y'all going to be okay here?" He directs his question to Pop, but Jael's the one who nods. How had it come to leaving his child in charge of his hard-to-handle father? A kid whose active imagination still conjured weird drawings of Georgia's myths and nightmares about Trojan horses and shades crawling up the outside of the building. He misses acting out the stories with the three of them. When did they stop?

"I got Papaw," Jael says.

"Miss Clementine's next door and the Johnsons are downstairs. I'll lay out Papaw's pills."

Jael waves her dad off, clicks on the television, and shifts to Pop like Eli's already left. "What do you want to watch?"

Eli can near hear her brain cells shut down one after the other, but cartoons will keep them both inside and safe while he's at work. Jael has already finished her paper route and doesn't need to go out again. Despite how little she's paid, her being able to work again after the trucking strike a month back is a relief. At least she can buy her own school supplies and clothes...even if the dresses are a bit on the short side for his taste.

"How about we watch *Looney Tunes*?" Jael is already dialing in the local station. "Then tonight I'll listen to the Tigers game with you? I'll even make us popcorn with real butter."

Pop smacks his lips like he isn't quite sure he likes what Jael is selling, but then settles in his chair with a harrumph.

A smile as big as Lake Erie spreads across Jael's face. That girl's got insight no one else does and has a better knack for settling Pop than even Eli. Everything will be okay...at least today.

And Eli has a job to do. He glances at the clock. Though he won't if he doesn't light out sooner rather than later. Granted, he was called in last minute, and he hasn't been late in months —probably since before Georgia came to help—but Mr. Fredericks warned him more than a few times not to be late again. As if the library's woodwork won't still be there waiting for him.

In the kitchen, Eli rinses out the pot of grits and slaps together a sandwich for himself, Jael, and Pop. He carefully cuts off the crusts for Jael, then wraps them all in wax paper before laying out his father's pills and Jael's little pink chewable vitamin. Every few seconds, he glances through the cutout into the living room, gauging how bad the day might be.

Pop flips open the paper, content to read about the fool antics of Jimmy Hoffa's latest run-in with the FBI—something about beating some poor soul. Everybody in Detroit knows who Hoffa is. Head of the Teamsters union. Controller of who lives and who wears cement shoes at the bottom of the river.

And yet he's done more for the working man than most leaders combined. It makes for a fine kettle of fish, and Eli doesn't envy the prosecutor or any witness.

Eli shoves his sandwich and a bag of cut carrots into a lunch pail and swipes his hat from the closet.

Spinning one last time to be sure everything is as it should be, Eli stops to watch Jael sit on the couch with a bowl of sugared cereal. Eli shakes his head. His daughter will rot her teeth along with her mind.

"You stay out of trouble, you hear?"

Jael bobs her head like some loose-limbed doll. “Don’t worry, Dad. No one’s going to give me trouble.”

Eli snatches his wallet and keys and, after the door locks latch into place, he scrambles down the two flights of steps and out into the humid air. It isn’t until he’s sitting on the bus, rolling down 12th, that he realizes Jael didn’t promise to stay out of trouble. And those are two entirely different things for a fourteen-year-old girl…especially one as ambitious as Jael.

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