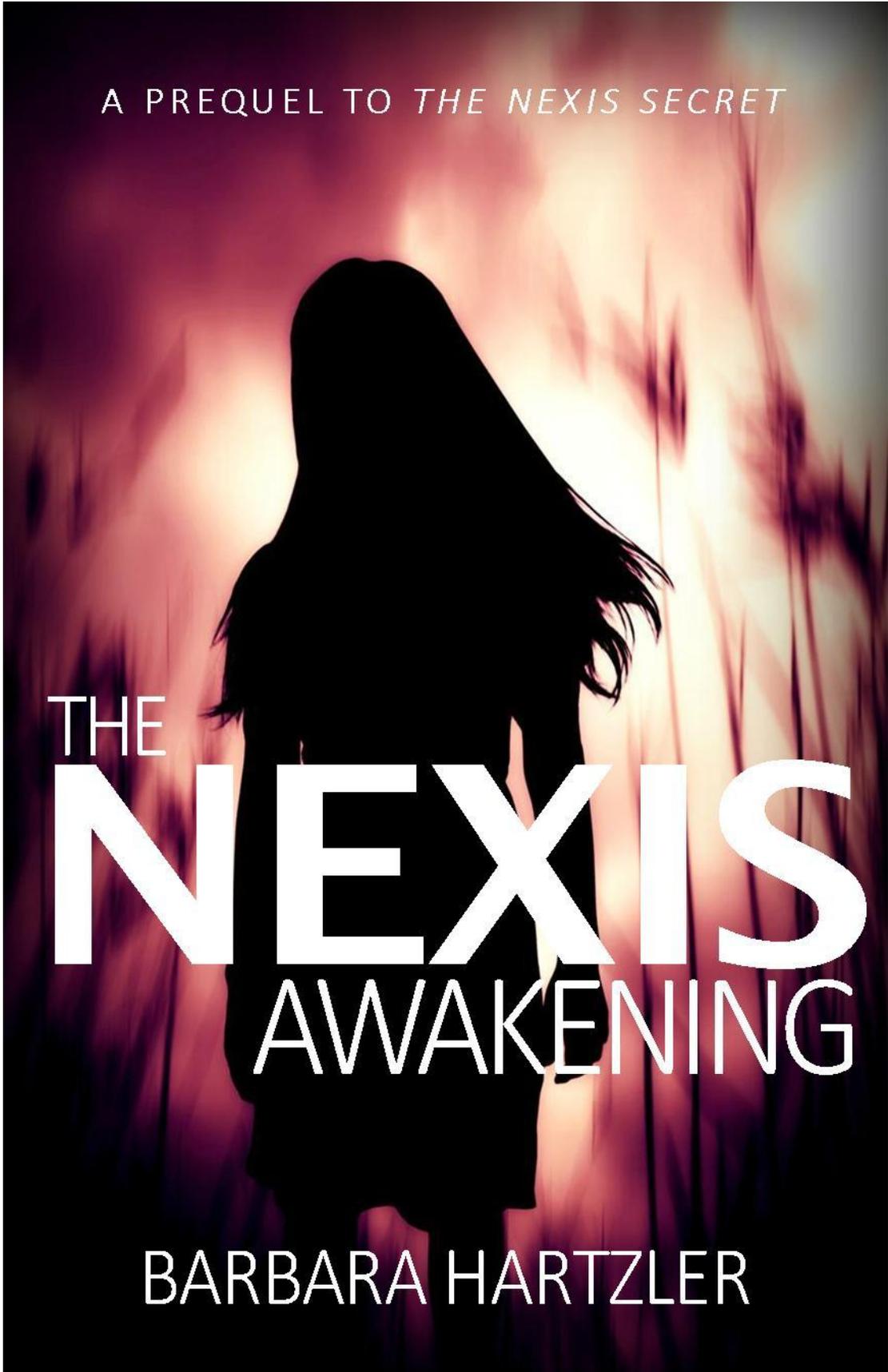


A PREQUEL TO *THE NEXIS SECRET*



THE
NEXIS
AWAKENING

BARBARA HARTZLER

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THE NEXIS AWAKENING

A Prequel to *The Nexis Secret*

Nexis Angel Series, Book 1.5

by Barbara Hartzler

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For all the fans of *The Nexis Secret*, here is the story of how the Nexis Society banished James McAllen. A story worthy of a prequel. I hope you enjoy his perspective as much as I do.

BTW, if you haven't read *The Nexis Secret* and plan to—beware. Spoilers dead ahead. Read at your own risk.

Chapter 1

JAMES

Here's the funny thing. I was never that guy. The responsible guy. No, I was the guy who froze his sister's training bra. The guy who paintballed the Guardian floor of Denby Hall for Halloween open dorms.

Sure, I've been on my own for four years living it up at Riverdale, New York's finest boarding school. And I'm still president of the Nexis Society, for at least another day. Until they find out what I'm about to do.

Because here I was, sitting on the subway, about to break into a church in Harlem.

I told the heir apparent it was his initiation mission. That's right. I lied to the great Will Stanton, Jr. Golden Adonis of the Nexis Society. The boy wonder who'd usher in the Utopian society Nexis had been engineering for centuries.

It was easy to lie to this kid. But it was hard lying to all of my friends, even my girlfriend, for two months now.

Here's the truth. I was doing the most responsible thing I'd ever done in my life.

I had a plan to protect my kid sister, Lucy. Even if I had to break into a church to do it. You think the cops would buy it? Yeah, me neither. *Let's pray we don't get caught.*

Cocking my head, I glanced across the subway bench at the kid who'd replace me soon. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week. But right now, Will Stanton didn't know what I knew. He thought this was a Nexis mission like any other.

The corners of my mouth curled. Good. That's what I wanted him to think. It was his family against mine. And I wouldn't let them win. *If I'm going down, he's going down with me.*

The brakes squealed as we slowed to a stop. I zipped up my black hoodie and stood up.

“You ready for this?” I asked, the doors sliding open.

“You bet,” he said with a grin plastered across his face. “I’m always ready for a secret mission.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Only a handful of bleary-eyed people walked out with us. Still, every hair on the back of my neck stood up. My blood pumped double-time, but no one seemed to notice two black-clad teenagers on the subway platform. It was midnight on a Thursday, after all. Only in New York.

We booked it up the steps, two at a time, and made it out to the street without any more naive freshman comments that might give us away. I led our two-man crew around the corner to the next stoplight.

Will pressed the button and we waited our turn. When the Walk sign lit up, we crossed Third Avenue, ducking into the shadows of the residential side of 104th. Distant sirens and the clunk of our footsteps were the only sounds in the night. Almost in the clear now.

“So, what’s this mission anyway?” he asked, breaking up the silence.

“You’ll see,” I whispered. We had to make it past the Harlem projects without being seen. Didn’t he get that?

The street was darker now. Twenty more feet and we’d be there.

“C’mon man.” Will was whining now. “Tell me what’s up.”

Shaking my head, I kept walking. Five more steps, and I stopped. “Here we are.”

Will backed up. “No way. I can’t break into a church.”

“Some pampered Nexis president you’ll be, mama’s boy,” I hissed at him.

Pivoting around to face the wimp, I glared him down. *Think. Make something up.*

“Listen, man. This is my last mission as Nexis president. And your first. It’s a long-standing tradition to initiate the new guy. But hey, if you can’t handle it, I’m sure they’ll find someone else.” There, that should shut him up.

Sure enough, his eyes went wide. “Are you serious? I’m the next Nexis president? Awesome. Let’s do this.”

“Welcome aboard.” I shook his hand, all official-like and everything. See what I mean? Responsible. Turning back to the church, I pulled my lock pick out of my pocket.

Bing. Bong. Bing. Bong. The church bells dinged as I jimmied the lock. Not helping.

“St. Lucy’s Church,” Will said slowly as if he just learned how to read. “We’re breaking into a church named after the first Seer?”

My hands quaked. *Please God, don’t let him figure it out. Not yet.* But I kept working the lock. I had to get those documents. My own Lucy needed protection from the likes of people like him. And she needed that stone.

“Don’t you have a sister? Her name’s Lucy, right?” Will asked.

I flinched and hunched my shoulders, refusing to give anything away. “Yeah, so what?”

“A funny coincidence I guess.” He started whistling to himself.

“Yeah, funny.” I tuned him out. Thank God he was fifteen and completely clueless. Back to business. I was so close. My palms were sweating now. My heart thumped in my ears. I could feel the lock about to give way. I needed to relax.

Pop. Like magic, the lock clicked and the door cracked open.

“You’ve gotta teach me how to do that,” he said as we tiptoed into the dark building.

“Shh.” I put one finger to my lips.

Darkness draped the cavernous foyer in eerie silence like it knew we were here. And it was watching our every move.

My sneakers squeaked across the marble. I slid up against the wall, motioning Will to do the same. He followed my lead as we turned the corner and trekked up a long hallway. Two doors down was the library. I knew because Responsible James had already cased the place.

At the library door, I jimmied the lock again. This one popped open in only a few twists. These guys needed to up their security, especially in this town.

“Nice,” Will whispered.

I opened the door, yanked him by the collar, and dragged him inside. Ever-so-slowly, I closed the door until it clicked. Locking it behind me.

“Keep it down,” I growled at him. “Try to remember we’re on a covert mission.”

“Soor-ry.” He hoisted his hands in the air. “What’re we looking for anyway?”

Gripping his hoodie tighter, I stared him down. “This stays between us, past president to future prez. Can I trust you?”

His eyes were wide, but he didn't flinch or look away. "Of course you can trust me. I won't tell anyone."

"You can't tell a soul. Not Nexis, not even your parents. No one, got it?" I narrowed my eyes at him. "You swear? This is life or death stuff here."

"I swear, James." With one nod he clapped a hand on my shoulder. "I know I'm a Stanton and everything that's supposed to mean in the Nexis world. But I'm your friend first. You can trust me. Tell me what's going on."

I scrunched up my face, trying to tell if he was lying or not. For some reason, I believed him.

The Stantons had ruled the Nexis Semigod Nations for a century, with no end in sight. But this guy seemed different. I'd watched him all year. He wasn't like every other Nexis freshman looking to climb the ladder. Maybe Will's family didn't tell him about their plans. Maybe he was in the dark like I was once. So I decided to take a chance on this guy.

Pulling two flashlights from my hoodie pocket, I handed him one. "Here's the deal. I'm looking for documents on the sacred stones and their current locations. Think you can handle that, rookie?"

"So that's what this is about." A slow grin curled his mouth. "You're looking for a leg up. Can't say I blame you, either. If I was next in line to be the Seer I'd want to find the Watcher's Sapphire, too. So everyone would take me seriously. But I doubt we'll find a treasure map to their secret hideout in here."

"No, that's not it," I said, shaking my flashlight. "I don't want just *anyone* to be able to see the unseen world of angels and demons. It's not a gift. It's an incredible burden." I had to give this kid credit, though. He knew more than I did at his age.
Figures.

"So what are you looking for?" he asked. "You know where we keep the Nexis Ruby."

"Do I seriously have to spell it out for you?" I shook my head at him. "There are only three sacred stones. I'm looking for the Guardian Amethyst."

"Whoa." He sucked in a breath. "You've got some balls man. That could start a war, you know."

“Maybe,” I said, gnawing on my lip. Now was the time for some major BS. “But not if we go about it the right way. If I shave off a little piece for protection and report its location to Nexis—”

“Nice,” he said. “That way no one can touch you and you’ll score some major points.”

“Exactly.” I shrugged as if it was no big deal. “You’ll get credit, too. For helping and all.”

“Say no more. I got your back, buddy. Let’s see what we can find.” He aimed his flashlight at a bookshelf in the far corner and walked over to it, thumbing through the titles.

Now I was the one following Will’s lead. Ironic. Maybe he’d been on a few covert missions after all. Flashlights in hand, we searched the cedar shelves, pulled out enormous parchment tomes with interesting titles, and stacked them on a mahogany table in the middle of the dark room. We opened the most promising books first.

Blowing off dust. Poring over yellowed parchment. Page after page after page of nothingness. Pure Nexis propaganda. Outlines for their Utopian world order, aka global domination. Blah, blah, blah. The usual Nexis garbage.

At last, I’d found the two words I’d been searching for. *Sacred stones*.

This section was an overview of the twelve sacred stones of the twelve tribes of Israel. Apparently, it was taken from some passage in Exodus. Each gemstone was reported to have its own unique properties—four rubies, four amethysts, and four sapphires. These stones were what each secret society based their beliefs on.

Nexis started with an obsession to find the rubies because they have the power to give fallen angels human-like bodies. And the ability to mate with the women of earth and create Nephilim. Yeah, crazy stuff.

This book documented how Nexis found all four rubies by the 13th century. For nine hundred years they’ve been protecting their precious stones and hunting down the other three components of their plan. They still needed the Seer. Plus at least one amethyst and one sapphire.

A chill slithered down my back. They’ve been trying to get the Seer on their side for years. This was the closest they’d ever come. I could feel their grip circling me.

Slowly tightening the noose around my neck. Waiting until I turned eighteen to reveal their true plan.

Tomorrow, Nexis would know the truth. I wasn't the Seer. I couldn't be. It was almost a relief, actually. Except the part about Mom having an affair and the fact that Dad wasn't my biological father. I wasn't James McAllen after all. It's a sad story. Pathetic, really.

Two months ago I needed a passport for the senior ski trip to Canada. Mom wouldn't give me my birth certificate. Said she lost it. So I played the responsible card and went through all the red tape to get it myself. Only to find out I wasn't who I thought I was.

If I wasn't the Seer, then Lucy was next in line. I had to protect her, even if she was only my half-sister. Because tomorrow was my eighteenth birthday. The day that everyone would find out the truth. A truth I'd known for a long time. Longer than two months, if I were truly honest.

I never had the Awakenings, not like the legends say you're supposed to. I laughed it off when people talked about it. Like it was no big deal. I told myself I'd probably be the Seer's dad or grandpa or something. Deep down, though, something always felt off.

I wanted to run, start a new life somewhere. But I couldn't. Not yet. Not until I knew my sister would be safe. If I wasn't the Seer, at least I could be the Guardian of the Seer. Has a nice ring to it, right?

I read on. The next passage was about the purple stone. The stone of protection. Finally. It was all there in black and white. Nexis knew where all four amethysts were—under Guardian control, of course.

Centuries ago, when Nexis started organizing, there was opposition. Naturally, because their plan was crazy. The Guardians came together to protect the world from Nexis. While Nexis combed the earth for rubies, the Guardians searched for the amethysts. From this record, Nexis believed they'd hidden one stone in each of their four primary locations, America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Over the centuries Nexis tried to steal the amethysts, without success. They'd sent spies into the Guardian ranks, learning approximate locations for each stone. In the 1900's, a spy reported the American amethyst was in New York. Nexis hadn't found it

yet. The last search was dated a year ago. A spy heard rumors that the amethyst was hidden in the neutral zone, Montrose Academy. He searched the chapel but found nothing. No notes about any more rumors.

“I’ve got something,” Will said a little too loudly.

“Quiet,” I hissed at him. “There could be someone here.” Nonetheless, I rounded the table and read over his shoulder.

“Look here,” he pointed at a passage. “It’s a record of the amethyst at Montrose. Crazy, huh?”

“Yeah, crazy,” I whispered. My eyes landed on the passage. Sure enough, a record of the American amethyst. I stopped in my tracks.

My heart punched against my ribcage. I was so close to finding it, but I had to be sure.

I skipped to the most recent entry—from six months ago. A rumor of the amethyst buried somewhere in the Montrose chapel library, or a hidden tunnel below it. The next entry was the Nexis plan to dig under the chapel. To get permits.

“A hidden tunnel?” I asked silently.

Click, clack, click.

I froze. Looked at Will. “Go to the door,” I whispered. “Check if someone’s coming.”

My fingers itched. I knew this page was important, so I kept reading. Nexis bribed cable companies and city officials, but each time the city denied their permit. At the end, there was a strange note. A reference to another page in another book.

“Someone’s coming,” he hissed across the room. “Let’s get out of here.”

Voices floated down the hall. They sounded far away. Far enough to do what I knew I had to do.

Sticking the flashlight in my mouth I scanned all the titles on the table until I found the book I needed. Adrenaline pumped through my body as I sliced through the pages at lightning speed, looking for the right one.

The voices were louder now. Closer. My heartbeat skyrocketed, fingers flying in overdrive.

“Hurry up,” Will said, hands flailing like a madman. “C’mon already.”

Eureka! I found it. Something about St. Lucia and the stones. *This better be it.*

No time to read. I grabbed a few pages...and ripped. I ran toward the door, stuffing the pages in my hoodie.

“What did you do that for?” Will held the door open, staring at me.

I ran past him. “No time. Let’s go.” I took off running up the hall. Churned my legs as fast as they would go.

Will was right behind me. But he wasn’t the only one. Someone chased us in the dark.

My brain kicked into panic mode as my legs found a new gear. I rounded the corner and sprinted for the front door.

Then Will yelped. “Hey, get off me.”

A priest had the hem of his jacket.

“Keep going.” I yanked on Will’s arm so hard the priest dropped it.

In a flash, we took off down the steps and raced up the street.

Footsteps echoed behind us. Slowed, then stopped.

Two seconds later we rounded the block. I caught a glimpse of the priest in his black garb, keeled over, hands on his slacks.

“That was close, man,” Will gasped between breaths.

“Too close,” I breathed as we jogged up the sidewalk to the nearest subway station. Tumbling down the stairs, we hopped on the next train.

“I can’t believe we didn’t get caught,” he slumped lower on the bench across from me, “*and* you ripped the pages out of a hundred-year-old book. Must be something good, right?”

“I hope so,” I said, stuffing the crumpled pages deeper into my hoodie.

When I saw Lucy tomorrow, I’d warn her. Tell her everything. Until then, I had twelve hours to come up with a plan. Before I turned eighteen and her cover was officially blown.

Chapter 2

LUCY

Tick, tock. Tick, tock. The rhythm pounded into my brain until I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to look. My eyes popped open and I glanced at the clock. Midnight. It was only midnight.

Huff. Burrowing under the covers, I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. For the umpteenth time tonight. A nervous energy coursed through my body at the thought of tomorrow.

Tomorrow I'd fly to New York City and see James graduate from Montrose Academy. The same prep school I'd be attending next fall.

I could almost picture it now. Against the backs of my eyelids, the scenario played out like a movie. James smiling at me with his big goofy grin as he showed me around campus, all around New York City.

The scene disappeared, cut to black, and morphed into something else. An inky fog that moved and breathed with a life of its own.

Hazy shapes emerged from the shadows. I tried to pry my eyes open. But I couldn't. They were made of lead.

Two figures came into focus, in some sort of library. One of them was James. I stood across from him with a giant mahogany table between us, a wall of bookshelves behind him.

"Since when do you like to read?" I asked. James didn't look at me, didn't respond. Neither did his friend. "Hey, guys. Can't you see me? Am I invisible or something?"

Quick as lightning, they split up, scrambling to the opposite ends of the dark library. They yanked books from the shelves, piling them on the table. The stack grew higher and higher. I reached for the top book, but my fingers swiped through thin air. Like a ghost.

“Okay, this is getting weird now,” I said to their backs. “Isn’t this *my* dream? I’ll admit, I do have a strange love of books and libraries. But c’mon, if it were up to me I’d be swinging around the stacks on a rolling ladder with enough daylight to at least *read* the books.”

James sat down and pulled out a flashlight. Maybe he could hear me after all. He opened an ancient text, scanning each page with one finger. Finally, he stopped and read a passage.

Words sprang off the page, like an invisible sparkler drawing in the air.

Sacred stones. Guardians. The Seer.

What could that mean? The words swirled around James as he read. Flickers of flame reflected off the mahogany, lighting up the darkness with tendrils of fire.

And suddenly I *could* see.

A strange purple light emerged from the center as the flaming words swirled around. The light took shape, budding into a gemstone. Like a raw, uncut amethyst nestled in a bed of rock.

It glowed with a light of its own. Growing bigger and brighter as its smooth planes glittered.

The other guy said something, and James looked his way.

The glowing stone disappeared. Leaving only blackness in its wake.

“Where’d it go?” I asked.

James walked over to his friend and read over his shoulder. Still ignoring me, of course.

Cold crept in, wrapping icy tendrils around my limbs. I shivered as if those fiery words and that glowing amethyst were the only way I’d ever be warm again.

Letters danced from the pages again. Tracing fire in the sky. Another chrysalis formed, birthing the gleaming amethyst again. My body tingled—alive and warm. Welcoming back an old friend. Except this time the words were different.

Gratiam Coram Domino.

The burning words reflected in his eyes. Then he looked directly at me.

“*Gratiam coram domino,*” he whispered. “Maybe that will keep her safe.”

Whoosh. The blazing amethyst rocketed straight toward me. I pedaled my feet, dodged, ducked, and tried to run away. But the stone zinged behind me. Tracked my every movement. Hurtling toward me.

“Someone’s coming,” James said behind me.

Riiiiip. My jaw dropped. I couldn’t believe it. Did he just rip the pages out of a hundred-year-old book?

With a blinding flash of light, the gemstone barreled straight into my chest.

Bam! It knocked me flat on my back, exploding in a great ball of purple sparkles.

Patting my chest, I glanced down. Nothing.

Phew, I breathed, dropping my hand. And my t-shirt lit up. With the imprint of an amethyst glowing through the white cotton.

Slowly, with no sudden movements, I touched the spotlight on my chest. The light dimmed. When I peeled back my hand, the light shined purple again. As if the stone was now lodged in my chest. Forever.

James and his friend started running. So I ran, too.

Voices hissed in the darkness. I couldn’t see James anymore. Shadows blew in like storm clouds, chasing me with their fury. My legs churned, running and running and running. But I couldn’t outrun the darkness.

Suddenly, a light bloomed in the darkness, tinged with purple. A spotlight directed right at me. I wiggled my fingers in the beam. They were lavender, too.

The light surrounded me now, warm and comforting. So I stopped running. That’s when the real picture came into focus.

Around me, the light had its own shape, with crystalline planes on every side. Like a multi-faceted piece of quartz encasing me in its epicenter.

Eeooww. Eeooww. Eeooww. The darkness screeched and shrieked.

I dropped to my knees, slapping my hands over my ears.

The ground beneath me was translucent—an amethyst hexagon glistening below me. Wraiths flung themselves at the hexagon, only to bounce off the outer rim. Exploding into a thousand orange sparks. Gone a puff of smoke.

My heart slammed against my ribcage. I stood up, my legs shaking.

More shadows pounded against the sides of my laser-light crystal, only to burst into fireworks. Shooting straight back to the hell they came from. Never touching me.

I blinked and blinked, not sure what to make of it. A lump lodged in my throat. Relief and wonderment and confusion choked me up inside, mixed with utter gratitude to the great power that stood between me and the hounds of hell.

“Thank you, James,” I whispered into the darkness as tears trickled down my face. “I don’t know what just happened. But thank you.” It was truly awe-inspiring.

With a start, I woke up. Hands shaking, clutching my pillow. Tears damp on my cheeks.

I yanked the covers back and clawed at my t-shirt. My breath hung from a trapeze in my throat. No glowing purple symbol emblazoned on my chest. I sank back onto my pillow. Disappointment tasted bitter in my mouth.

It was only a dream. One I’d remember for the rest of my life.

Chapter 3

LUCY

The day had finally come. My big brother's high school graduation. *Pomp and Circumstance* played in my head as we drove through to Riverdale, New York. I couldn't even help it. Pride, joy, and excitement duked it out for first prize.

James was one step closer to having it all—freedom, independence, ear-marked for success. Such a bright future ahead.

Our chauffeur parked in the circle drive and opened my door. Montrose Academy greeted me draped in blue and gold banners for the occasion. My little black dress paled in comparison.

Planting both feet on the cobblestone sidewalk, I flung my arms wide to embrace my new school. Next semester, of course.

James and I had one last summer together before everything changed and he ditched us for Yale in the fall. The thought of it choked me up a little. Things were changing too fast. The world spun around me, literally.

"Lucy, are you okay?" Paige asked her arm suddenly around my waist. "You're all wobbly."

Quaking in my black flats, I put a hand on my sister's shoulder to steady myself. "Got up too fast, I guess." It was more than that. A strange energy buzzed through my whole body like a tuning fork.

"C'mon girls," Dad said as the town car pulled away. "Let's get a move on."

"Stop dawdling, you two. We've got a schedule to keep." Mom rushed right by us and caught up with Dad in two strides. Heels click-clacking all the way.

The afternoon sun rained bright buttercream light across the campus. All a part of the grand design, right? A path veered off toward the left and up the hill to the main campus.

Stately brick and stone-columned buildings were lined up in a U shape, decked to the nines in school colors. The ornate spires of a Gothic chapel peeked up from the far side of the campus.

“C’mon, Lucy, stop gawking. I’m sure James will give you the tour later.” Mom tugged on my arm like she was my little sister instead of Paige. Apparently, she had some mental schedule to keep. And I wasn’t playing along.

I glared at her. “I thought we were supposed to meet him at his dorm.”

“Not anymore,” she said with a huff. “Your brother texted me on the way over. I guess he had too much to do before the ceremony. We’ll rendezvous with him afterward.”

“She just wanted to say rendezvous,” Paige whispered to me.

I laughed under her breath.

Luckily Mom didn’t hear me. She was talking to Dad. “Are they still holding the ceremony in the chapel? I thought the graduating class was too large for that by now.”

We followed them down the cobblestone path. Yep, I was gawking at the huge brick building coming up on our left. Blue and gold banners ruffled against white columns as a soft spring breeze blew across my face. I inhaled the scent of hawthorn blooms and freshly cut grass. The smell of Riverdale in the spring. This place would be my new home in August. Might as well check it out now.

“There’s only a few hundred students enrolled here. I think James’ class is about sixty or seventy.” Dad tugged on my hand.

Mom tisked her tongue. “They need to do something about enrollment.”

Paige and I glanced at each other. We knew exactly what that tisk meant. Mom wasn’t happy and someone was going to hear about it.

“Now Natalie,” Dad said, “don’t go making this into a big deal at the council meeting later. It’s just a quarterly meeting.”

“We’ll see about that,” she said, tucking her dark bob behind her ears.

I followed Dad's lead and kept walking. She could champion all the crusades she wanted. I'd be on my own in a few short months, out from under her thumb. The corners of my mouth curled.

As we approached the chapel, more families filed in from all directions. A jumbled line formed at the entrance. We stopped and waited with everyone else. Fine by me. I had a great view of the chapel. Its hand-chiseled curlicues gave the stone façade an impression of another era. Like it got zapped here from the seventeen hundreds. All that was missing was a bell tower and maybe a few gargoyles.

Marching up the flagstone steps two-by-two, we walked through ancient wooden doors and into a marble-tiled foyer. Prayer candles in gold votive holders lined the walls of the vestibule. Two students in blue Montrose blazers handed out programs at the entrance. We were almost there.

With only a few more steps across the marbled floors, we got our first glimpse of the sanctuary. Soaring twenty-foot ceilings. Giant carved-limestone archways. Stained glass windows. In a word...brehtaking.

Mom and Dad led the way down the aisle of wooden pews. We found a seat in the middle, five rows back. I leaned back to take it all in. Yep, still gawking over here.

Eeek. The ancient pew squeaked, giving me away. Traitor.

"Sit up straight." Mom tisked at me.

I cringed and buried my face in the program. Skimming the list of names, I found his; James McAllen, Summa Cum Laude. He definitely set the bar high.

The lights dimmed. Everyone hushed their murmurs.

Two doors opened at once, on either side of the stage area. Clad in blue and yellow robes, the students streamed out. Waving to their families. Posing for pictures. With a cacophony of hoots and cheers, they trickled into a section of reserved pews.

Then two dozen grown-ups in black gowns marched up to center stage, taking their seats in the choir section. Probably the school board or something. An older black man stood at the podium, tapping the mic.

"Hello and welcome to Montrose Academy's one hundred and fifty-first commencement ceremony. My name is Dr. Alton Garrett, president of Montrose Academy." The good doctor droned on about all the amazing Montrose alumni over the years. But I tuned him out.

Instead, I scanned the crowd of blue robes, searching for my scruffy, dark-haired brother. At last, I spotted him checking out the crowd. I gave him a small wave. He paused, then looked away in an instant. How weird.

The president called the first row of graduating students to stand, and I lost sight of James.

A chill slithered across my arm and crept up my neck. I shuddered.

I closed my eyes and in an instant, *Poof*, I was transported back to the strange dream from last night.

It replayed it all over again, except different this time. The dark room wasn't the same. Still a library, only bigger, with a dozen stacks of books. And a turret.

Eeooww. Darkness twisted all around me. Light blended into shadow. Wind shrieking. Howling. *Eeooww*.

A tiny glow winked at me from the turret tower. Its warmth surged through me, drawing me in like a tractor beam. I headed to the dark corner.

The shadows closed in on me. A black swamp, thick and soupy, wrapped around my ankles. Making each step harder than the last.

The light flamed brighter, beckoning me closer. My heart beat faster. My fingers itched to touch it.

At last, I reached the depths of the turret. Where the blackness was the blackest.

Yet the light shone brightest and took shape, transfiguring into a stone. A glowing amethyst, nestled in the corner on a shelf.

My heart cracked a little. Nobody puts My Amethyst in the corner.

I reached for it, but my hands bounced off like it wasn't there. Maybe it was hidden behind the shelf somehow. This time I lunged for it.

"Lucy, wake up." Paige elbowed me in the ribs. "They just called the M's."

Shaking my head, I sat up straighter. The daydream faded away as I waited to hear my brother's name. But my heart still hurt a little, as if it needed that purple stone.

"James Stanley McAllen, Summa Cum Laude."

We all stood up, whooping and cheering. He smiled that great big happy smile. Mom snapped a zillion photos. Then it was on to the next kid.

I blinked, clearing out the strange images still floating around in my head. It all felt so real. Who daydreams about libraries and glowing stones anyway? Like I was Lora

Croft or something. Yeah, right. It was only a memory from my dream last night. I shrugged it off.

The late afternoon sun slanted across the campus as people streamed out of the chapel onto the quad.

We huddled in the shade of a huge brick building. With one hand I shielded my face from the sun's rays, searching the crowd for my big brother. Trying to discard the images that lingered in the corners of my mind—and the nagging voice in my head, telling me, *"You're crazy."*

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not crazy," I mumbled under my breath.

"What'd you say, Luce?" Paige asked.

"Nothing. Just looking for James," I said. If anyone would understand the strange nightmares and daydreams, my big bro would.

Apparently, every other family had the same idea. They glommed up in clusters on the lawn, waiting for their graduate to find them.

"Rosalyn," Mom said, more like yelled, into the crowd. "Over here."

"Mom," I hissed. "What are you doing? You're embarrassing us."

"Pipe down, Lucy. My old friends the Stantons are here. They have a son about your age. I want you to meet them." She waved her hands in the air like a crazed fangirl.

"Save me, Dad." I huddled behind him. Lucky for me, my dad was a big, broad-shouldered teddy bear. The perfect shield.

A tall blond couple made their way toward us through the crowd. The women hugged. The men shook hands. I stood still, waiting for the inane chitchat.

"Rosalyn, William, these are my daughters, Lucy and Paige." Mom patted each of our heads, respectively. Goody. Now I wanted my treat.

"Nice to meet you, girls." Rosalyn Stanton's voice was as smooth as her golden hair. "My boy's around here somewhere. He's finishing up his first year at Montrose."

"That's right," Mom said as if she didn't already know. "Lucy, here, is starting this fall. Maybe he could give her some advice."

I. Could. Die. I curled up into myself and shrank behind Dad again.

"I'm sure he could, if we could find him," William Stanton said. He was a tall man like my dad, except with sandy hair grayed at the temples. He had kind eyes. "Son, over here."

I risked a peek over Dad's shoulder. The golden couple's son strode confidently through the crowd.

Air clogged in my throat. I gulped. Did he have to be super hot? All sandy-haired with piercing gray eyes and a chiseled jaw. Not to mention a chin cleft. I knew I was staring, but I couldn't stop. He looked familiar, somehow.

"Will, meet the McAllens," his dad said.

A smile curled across his gorgeous face. "You're James' family, right? Can't believe he graduated today. We're gonna miss him around here."

Mom blushed. She actually blushed. "That's so kind of you to say, Will. It's lovely to meet you. My daughter, Lucy, will be starting next semester."

Then Will turned that thousand-watt smile on me. "Really? Nice to meet you, Lucy." He held out his hand.

"You, too." I extended my arm oh-so-gracefully, like my ballet teacher taught me, and shook his hand. As soon as I touched him, time slowed down. Or stopped entirely.

The world spun like a merry-go-round. Then everything turned black. Morphed back into the dream again.

I finally remembered where I'd seen this guy before. He was the one standing next to James in the dark library, their heads hunkered over a book.

This time, a red stone emerged from the book. A glowing ruby. Hisses of smoke and shadow coiled around it, forming chain-like links. James handed the book to Will.

Clunk. Shadows unhinged from my brother's back as the red-hot bauble passed to Will. James slumped over and heaved a huge sigh as if an unbearable burden just lifted off his shoulders.

The ruby sparked as the darkness coiled up again, clamping its shadowy chain around Will's neck.

Whoosh. The red stone dimmed, the blackness faded. Green lawn and reality returned.

I gripped the hot boy's hand like a lifeline.

"You okay?" He quirked his lips at me. As if he knew the effect he had on me.

"I...uh—" Cocky one, huh? Big turn-off. I dropped his hand, narrowing my eyes at him. "Have we met before?" Yeah, I know. Lame save.

He scratched his chin. “I don’t think so, but I feel like we have, too. Probably because James talks about you so much.” This guy was a smooth one.

And still, my lips curved at the charmer. Traitors.

“Hey, guys. How’d I do up there?” James materialized at my side. Where’d he come from? Was I *that* focused on his friend? Bad sign.

“Great job, son. We’re so proud of you.” Dad clapped his hand on James’ shoulder. Like we wouldn’t notice him getting all choked up.

“I can’t believe this day is here already,” Mom gushed, throwing her arms around him. Tears glistened in her eyes.

“Oh, Mom.” James rolled his eyes at me.

“Congratulations, James. We’ll leave you alone to have some family time. Nice seeing you, Natalie.” Rosalyn gave the tiniest finger wave and turned quickly on her heel.

“Gonna miss you, man. Thanks for getting me on the inside track. See ya later.” Will high-fived my brother.

“You bet,” James said with that trademark grin on his face.

Will turned to me. “Nice meeting you, Lucy. I’ll look out for you next year.” With that, he did a one-eighty and walked away.

James narrowed his eyes at Will’s back. What was that about? Did he shift into Big Brother Protector Mode, or was it something else?

“James!” I wrapped him in a bear hug as soon as the golden family left. “We missed you, buddy.”

“Missed you, too, Lucy girl.” The corners of his mouth curled as he ruffled my hair. But the smile didn’t reach his eyes. They were stagnant. My gut churned. Something was going on here.

As soon as I let go, Paige ran up and hugged his other side.

“Hey, Peanut,” James said, with that same lopsided smile. “You’re getting so big.” He picked her up with one arm. She squealed in delight. “You guys ready for lunch? I know a great place.” His patented goofy grin came back. Maybe everything was okay after all.

“Now don’t be silly.” Mom patted his arm. “I’ve made reservations at the Four Seasons. It’s not every day my only son graduates from high school.”

“True that, Mom. Let’s live it up right.” James pumped his fist in the air. “I did it. I graduated!” he yelled into the crowd.

A cheer went up. Blue and gold caps erupted into the sky.

Now that was the big brother I knew. Life of the party.

As we walked to the car, James grabbed my hand. Slowed the pace.

“Lucy, what’s going on? You’re acting weird,” James said, still with his goofy smile pasted on.

“I’m acting weird? You’re the one pretending like everything’s fine when it’s not. You just graduated. What could possibly be wrong?” I asked.

“How did you know?” For an instant, his smile drooped.

“You’re my brother. I know you. Something’s up.”

“It’s just,” he paused, eyes scanning the lawn, “I’m not sure I should tell you this, but I don’t think you should come to Montrose in the fall. Stay in Indiana.” He grabbed both of my hands and whispered, “It’s not safe for you here.”

“Not safe?” I asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Ssshhh,” he hissed. “Not here. It’s too public. When Mom and Dad go to their council meeting, you and Paige meet me at the bridge tonight. Sunset. Tell Mom and Dad I’m giving you a campus tour or something. Okay?”

He stared at me with a look I’d never seen before. I couldn’t place it.

I shook my head at him. “No. Why can’t you tell me now? It can’t be that big of a deal.”

“You’re wrong about that, little sis. Just trust me okay?” His eyes flitted over my head. He froze, jaw twitching. Looking at something behind me.

I whirled around. Nothing was there. The crowd had thinned out, except for a flash of gold. I sucked in a breath. The Stantons lurked at the far side of the campus, hawking us. Maybe James had a point.

He pulled me into a hug. Whispered in my ear. “Don’t forget. Sunset.”

“Okay.” I nodded. Now I couldn’t wait for sunset.

“C’mon. Let’s get out of here.” He yanked on my arm, pulling me down the sidewalk. Not giving me time to ask any more questions.

We picked up the pace to catch up with our parents. And it clicked. That look in his eyes. Fear. Unmistakable fear. I shuddered. What in the world could make my fun-loving brother so afraid?

Chapter 4

JAMES

“Think. Think.” I paced up and down the length of my dorm room for the last time. My mind ticked through the checklist for the thousandth time.

Bags packed. Check.

Go bag stashed somewhere Nexis would never find it. Check.

Meetup scheduled with little sisters. Check.

Guardian negotiation scheduled after that. Double check.

I couldn’t believe what I was about to do. I had to avoid Nexis for another few hours—and warn Lucy in a few minutes.

I was forgetting something, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

Maria. My girlfriend had no idea what I was about to do. She’d freak when I went missing. I couldn’t warn her in person, there was no time. How could I leave her a clue?

I glanced out the window. The sun was already setting. Time to meet Lucy. The clock was ticking.

Unhooking the leather necklace she made me, I slung it over the bedpost. Right as a shadow darkened my dorm room.

My shoulders slumped. It was too late, and I knew it. I turned on my heel.

Sure enough, twin Nexis goons stood in the doorway. Dressed head-to-toe in black.

My heart hammered against my ribcage, waiting for the verdict.

After eons of silence, one of them spoke. “You’ve been summoned by the Grand Council.”

Bring, Bring. My phone blared from my pocket. Lucy. My heart sank into the Hudson, along with any hopes I had to tell my sister the truth.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” Goon One asked.

“Whoever it is, get rid of ‘em,” Goon Two said. “Don’t go making this worse or anything.”

Turning back to the window, I answered on the last ring. “Hey, sorry I’m late.” The sun was beyond the horizon. How could I warn her now?

“James, where are you?” she asked. “It’s way after sunset. I thought you wanted to talk.”

“Well, um...” I racked my brain for any breadcrumb I could pass on without the dopey twins catching on. “I can’t make it tonight. Something came up.”

She huffed into the phone. “Are you joking? This whole thing was your idea. What am I supposed to tell Mom and Dad?”

“I don’t know.” The guards were at my back now. “Make something up. Lie if you have to. Just cover for me okay?”

“Okay.” Her voice wobbled like she was about ready to cry.

“Hey, I’ll see you tomorrow. It’s gonna be okay.” My Adam’s apple ballooned into a beach ball. I couldn’t leave it like this. “I love you.”

“Say wha—” she screeched as I ended the call.

The corners of my mouth curled. That should tip her off. She already knew something was wrong, now she’d be even more suspicious. We never said I love you to each other unless something catastrophic was going down. And boy was it going down. Right now.

“Isn’t that nice?” Goon One clamped onto my arm and yanked me out of my dorm room.

Goon Two followed at our six, as his buddy dragged me down the hallway and out the back stairwell.

Night descended on Montrose. I surveyed the empty campus. Not a soul within shouting distance.

“Don’t even think about it.” Goon Two hissed behind me. “Or we’ll put you in the hole until the Council’s ready for you.”

The hole had to be ten times better than whatever these guys had in store for me. Without a second thought, I balled up my fist and clocked Goon One square in the jaw.

One slight problem. He barely flinched.

“Help!” I bellowed into the night as loud as I possibly could.

“Told ya not to do that,” Goon Two said.

Bam! Something hard smashed into the back of my skull. For a few seconds, I saw stars. Then nothing.

The world was black. No gray. Okay, mostly black. With a couple of shadowy figures standing over me.

“Wakey, wakey, Sunshine,” someone said to me, but they seemed so far away. “I told you not to resist, but you had to do it anyway. The Council is ready for you now.”

“Where am I? What time is it?” I croaked out. My voice didn’t sound like my own. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, geez. This guy’s a mess.” His face came into focus. Right, these guys.

A black-clad thug hoisted me up from the ground. Back on my own two feet, I brushed the grass off my black jeans. Stalling, of course. Desperate to get my bearings.

The full moon hovered high in the dark sky overhead. I stood in the middle of a field, but I wasn’t alone. And the moon wasn’t the only light I saw. In front of me, six flaming torches protruded from the ground in a circle, blazing in the night. The epicenter of a Nexis tribunal.

Nope, this wasn’t a dream. It was really happening.

The goons pushed me into the middle of the torch circle. I lost my balance. Landed on my knees.

Six figures in matching black robes stepped forward, hoods over their heads. Pillars of torchlight flickered around me, mixing light and shadow on each shrouded face. Never enough to reveal their true identities.

I pushed myself up. Stubby grass sliced into my palms. Long reeds rustled in the wind. Something gurgled in the distance, the faint burble of rushing water.

In a flash, I knew where I was. On the Montrose practice field, by the Hudson River.

Oh. boy. This is not good.

So it'd come down to this. A bunch of cloaked Nexis members surrounded me, glaring fireballs at me. No one could save me now. A cold shiver rippled down my back.

Dead ahead, Robe One asked. "Do you know why you're here?"

I rubbed my sneaker into the dirt. Shrugged. Nodded.

"We know the truth," came a woman's voice on my left. "You are not next in the line of the Seer. You're an illegitimate McAllen."

"Did you think you could keep it from us forever?" a man hissed behind me.

I whirled my head around, but he receded into the shadows. "I didn't know. I just found out."

"That much I believe," the woman said. Her velvety voice sounded familiar. "But I wish you would've come to us sooner. We could've helped you."

"I doubt that," I muttered to the ground.

"You would've been demoted, yes." It was Will's mom. Perfect. "But right now you're facing a far worse sentence," Mrs. Stanton said. Then silence.

Dum, dum, dum. Judgment time.

"James Stanley McAllen." Her emotionless voice reverberated into the night. "You are charged with theft of sacred documents and conspiracy against the Nexis Society."

"That little rat," I hissed under my breath. I'd deal with Will later. If there was a later. "I plead guilty to theft, but not guilty to conspiracy against Nexis." Ha. They couldn't possibly know about my meeting with Abby later, right?

"Silence, boy," a gravelly voice boomed behind me.

All my bravado dissipated in a puff of smoke. I whirled around to face him. This guy was obviously the man in charge.

Though hidden in shadow, I caught a glimpse of his weathered hands. The Stanton patriarch, for sure. The Stantons had ruled over the Nexis Council for the past three generations. It only made sense. Why had I ever trusted their little minion?

"We already have proof you've traded secrets to your girlfriend," he said.

"Maria? She has nothing to do with this." Now I was confused. I steeled my gaze and stared at him head on. "What are you accusing her of?"

"As if you didn't know," a second woman said. "You can't fool us. Not anymore."

“Hey,” I stomped my foot into the ground. I wouldn’t drag Maria down with me. “I’m still a Nexis member and the current president of this sect. I know my rights.”

Cynical laughter rippled around the circle. “You’re crazy.”

“You’ve been corrupted.” A screech cut across the sphere.

“Do you seriously think you’re still one of us?” One of the Cloak Heads sneered. As if I even cared about that now.

Mr. Stanton held his hand up. “As of yesterday, you’re no longer president of any Nexis sect. You’re an illegitimate McAllen. We’re about to remedy your membership status. For your crimes against Nexis, you are banished.”

“Banished,” someone hissed.

“Banished.”

“Banished.” The word echoed three more times. Each figure nodded as they pronounced my sentence.

I crumpled to the ground. My head started spinning. They were right, I didn’t even know my own name. My true father. A choked scream lodged in my throat. Only silence came out.

Two guys grabbed me by the shoulders and hauled my writhing body out of the ring of fire.

But I wasn’t alone.

A girl whimpered somewhere in the darkness. “I’m sorry, James.”

“Maria, is that you?” I lunged for her, but my captors held me back. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but I’m scared.” A tear trickled down her cheek as she rubbed something around her neck. The necklace she made for my birthday last year.

My breath hitched. She must’ve found it in my room. Did she come here looking for me?

Suddenly two cloaked figures flanked Maria. Dragged her into the circle of hell I’d just come from.

“Don’t tell them anything,” I screamed into the night.

A fist pummeled my cheek. I bit my tongue, tasting blood. But it was worth it.

I had to stall, had to think of something. Whatever they had on her, it was probably because of me. I wasn’t about to leave her alone to face her sentence. No way.

“What exactly do you think they meant by banished?” I asked my two goons. “Does that mean I’m out of the group and I can go along my way? Because if that’s the case, you can let me go now and I’ll be out of your hair.”

They stood there for a few minutes. Stared at each other.

I shrugged and tried to look casual. But every muscle in my body tensed, on high alert, as I listened to Maria’s tribunal.

The words were faint at first. “The Nexis Council finds you guilty of espionage. The sentence is death.”

“Death.” The word echoed around the circle. Five times.

My jaw dropped. I couldn’t believe it. Were they *really* about to kill my girlfriend for something she didn’t do?

She screamed. A high-pitched, ear-piercing screech. It echoed across the field, ripping my heart clean out of my ribcage. My whole body came alive at that sound. I slipped free from my guards, sprinting straight for her.

Grabbing her hand, I yelled one word. “Run!”

With that, we took off on a fifty-yard dash. Headed for the river’s edge. If we could make it to the woods, we might have a chance.

“James!” she screamed, looking behind her.

I turned. Goon One clamped onto her free hand. In an instant, I let go. Clawed at the guard with all my might. Maria was free. But the guard had me now.

“They’ll get you, Maria. Run!” I screamed.

But it was too late.

Goon Two had already caught up. He reached out to grab her. Then suddenly... She. Was. Gone.

Plunk. A sickening splash. My heart stopped.

“Maria!” I fought like a wild animal. Kicking. Clawing. Biting. Until I wrestled myself free. I had to save her. Without a second thought, I dove straight for the Hudson.

This time, there was no splash.

Beefy arms caught me mid-air. “She’s gone, man. She’s gone.” Goon One had me by the waist.

“No,” I choked out the word, tears streaming down my face. “She can’t be gone. Did you see her? She could still make it.”

“No way. I never even saw her come up.” Goon Two’s face said it all.

Footsteps thundered in the darkness behind us. Nexis scrambling and shouting. They were going to kill her anyway. What did they care?

Stupid. How could I be so stupid? I should’ve known Nexis had their own plans. Despicable plans. I sank to my knees and sobbed. Maria was somewhere at the bottom of the Hudson and I was stuck here on dry land. Stomach churning. About ready to hurl on the grass.

Anger burned in my belly. I curled my fingers into fists. Nexis would pay for this. No one else was going to die on my watch.

If I could fight off ten Nexis morons at once, I would. But that wasn’t a fight I could win. There was only one choice now.

So I rose to my feet and took off running.

Not for my dorm. I ran straight to the gym. For my go bag, and the backup evidence I’d stored in my locker. If I couldn’t make Nexis pay, the Guardians would have to do the job for me.

Chapter 5

JAMES

In the dead of night, I tore across the campus. Plunged into the woods, arms pumping. Face damp. Lips salty.

Branches smacked me in the face. Warm blood oozed down my cheek, but I didn't care. Maria just died in front of my eyes and I couldn't do a thing to stop it. But I could do something to stop another girl I loved from suffering the same fate.

Lights shimmered up ahead. I was so close now. Tightening my go bag, I slowed my pace, edging the treeline with silent steps, until I arrived at my destination. Then I stopped. Listened.

Crick. Crack. Every sound in the night made me flinch. But I couldn't wait anymore. *Fifty yards to freedom.*

In a mad dash, I broke free of the trees. Pounded across open lawn then cobblestone sidewalk. Nothing could stand in my way now. I raced up the flagstone steps and pulled open the chapel doors, sneakers skidding on the marble tiles I'd walked only hours before.

It was well after midnight now. The sanctuary sat black and silent, only one sliver of light to guide me down the long hallway.

I barreled through the library door—smack dab into Abby Cooper. We went sprawling to the floor.

“James, what on earth?” she asked, propping herself up. Her blonde mane swishing. “You're late, it's after midnight. And you're bleeding.”

“Maria...” I said between breaths. “She's dead. Nexis banished us both. She fell in the river and they just let her drown.”

“What?” she gasped, glancing at her Guardian friends in the corner. “You can’t be serious.”

“Abbs, I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t serious.” I helped her up. Looked her in the eye. “They’re after me now. You guys have to protect me.”

Her blue eyes went wide as her hands flew to her face. “But how could they do this? You’re the Seer. You’re the chosen one. Nexis would never—”

“No, it’s not true.” I grabbed her arm. “I’m not the Seer. There’s been a mistake.”

“Okay, so maybe you’re not the Seer now. But you’re next in line. Your children or grandchildren could be...” She trailed off, glancing out the lead-paned window. “Who are those guys?”

Sure enough, two meat-heads waddled across the quad like lumberjacks, headed our way. About to come inside, treaty or no treaty.

“Hey, they can’t do that,” Derek, the head guard, said.

“Listen, Abbs. You’re still President, right?” I asked.

“Ye-eess,” she said, drawing out the word. Nodding slowly.

“I’ve got evidence for you. Nexis evidence.” I pulled the ancient pages from my hoodie pocket. “I want to defect to the Guardians. I invoke Sanctuary.”

Goons One and Two walked in, right on cue. “I believe this little Nexis brat belongs to us.”

I stared Abby down, pleading with my eyes. My heart jangled a new rhythm. Body bracing for impact.

She gawked at me for a long time, mouth dangling open.

I could practically feel the seconds peeling off my skin one layer at a time. One, two. Seventy-five. *Tick, tock, Abbs.*

With one nod she stepped between me and the goons. “He doesn’t belong to you anymore. James McAllen is under provisional Guardian protection according to the ancient code of Sanctuary.”

“Yeah?” Goon Two asked. “Under whose authority?”

“Mine,” she said, pointing at her chest. “I am the acting president of this Guardian chapter. Now, if you’ll kindly leave, you are both in violation of the most recent Nexis-Guardian treaty.”

“We ain’t leaving without him,” Goon Two said, pointing at me.

“You heard the lady. Out you go.” Derek and his two beefy friends took the goons by the arm and escorted them from the chapel.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Abbs. You probably saved my life. You have no idea.”

She glared at me, crossing her arms over her chest. “Your evidence better be good.”

“Yeah, it’s real good.” A thin smile quirked my mouth. “How about sacred stone locations?”

“Are you serious?” Threading her fingers through her hair, she gaped at me. “It must be the end of the world for you to give that up.”

“Believe me, it is.” Every ounce of fight drained from my body in one breath. It was the truth. The ground buckled beneath my feet.

“Hey, you’re exhausted. C’mon.” Abby swung her arm across my back, led me over to an empty table, and sat me down in a chair.

My backpack slid to the floor. I didn’t have the strength to reach for it.

Derek and his two guards marched back into the library. They cased the room, then pulled up chairs around the table.

“Those guys won’t leave. They’re hanging out there on the lawn. Pacing.” Derek glanced at Abby, then me.

“It might be a long night, guys,” I said, letting my head crash into my hands.

“James, you’re safe here.” Abby’s hand rubbed little circles on my back. Soothing circles. “We’ll do whatever we have to. We’ll get you out of the country if necessary. But first, you have to tell us what happened.”

“No.” I glanced up. “I can’t leave the country. I still have to warn Lucy.”

“Your little sister? What’s she got to do with this?” Abby asked.

I chewed on my thumbnail. Stared at the ceiling. They’d know the truth soon enough. These were the only people who could help her now.

“Okay, here goes.” I sucked in a huge breath and let it all ride. “I’m not next in line to be the Seer. I’m not even in the Seer’s line at all. My mom had an affair and forgot to tell anyone.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Abby gasped, hand dropping from my back. “I’m sorry, James. I really am. That’s a terrible secret to find out from somebody else.”

“Yeah, especially from your own birth certificate.” I couldn’t even look at her anymore. The shame washed over me. I’d done plenty of things wrong, tonight especially, but this one was out of my control.

“Your birth certificate?” she asked.

I rubbed one grass-stained sneaker into the dingy carpet. “Remember the ski trip we took to Canada? Mom wouldn’t give me my birth certificate, said she lost it and didn’t have time to get a new one. So I had the state of Indiana mail me a new one. Surprise. Surprise.” I dared to glance up at her.

“You were so quiet, all spring break. No wonder.” Her eyes softened. Made my insides cringe. “But I don’t get it. How did Nexis find out? You only turned eighteen yesterday. It doesn’t make any sense.”

I shook my head. “Honestly, I have no idea. I thought Will turned me in for breaking into St. Lucy’s Church, but there’s no way he knew my secret. It had to be something else.”

“Maybe someone in the records office?” Derek’s young protégé chimed in. “If the Guardians have someone in the Registrar’s Office, Nexis must, too.”

“Shut up, Marco,” Derek said. “Or you’ll be the last Deluca the Guardians ever admit.”

“Sorry, man, I’m just saying. He graduated today. They must’ve pulled the records, put two and two together,” Marco said, hanging his head.

At that, I threw my hands up. “Whatever. I don’t care how they found out. All I care about is protecting Lucy. That’s all that matters now.”

“Okay, guys. Enough arguing. We’ve got to get to the bottom of this.” Abby turned my way, eyeballing the yellowed parchment in my hands. “So why the sacred stones? Once they found out about you, she’d be the next person they’d suspect in the line of the Seer.”

“I had a plan.” I spread the pages out on the table and smoothed out the wrinkles. “See, I wanted to find the amethyst. Maybe chip off a piece and give it to her as a present. So when they did figure it out...”

“She’d be protected.” Abby nodded as the light finally went on. “Glad you came to us then. We’ll protect you, and we’ll protect her when the time is right. But you’ve got to make it worth our while.”

“Okay, Abbs. It’s all there in black and white.” I leaned closer, pointing to the passage that would secure my Guardian membership. “Look here, Nexis knows about the hidden tunnel. They think that’s where the amethyst is. They even tried to bribe officials to dig it up.”

“What? How could they possibly know that? Let me see.” She reached for the page.

But I wouldn’t let go. Instead, I tightened my grip. “I figure, since I brought you the intel, you can negotiate for a tiny little piece of the amethyst. Just a sliver to protect Lucy. Then I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll join the Guardian army in Europe. I don’t care. But that’s my price.”

She whistled between her teeth. “It’s a steep price, James. I don’t know if I can pull it off.”

“C’mon, Abbs, I know you can make this deal. And I’ve got more intel, you know I do.” I pulled her hands into mine.

Time to amp up the charm. She’d always had a crush on me and I’d milk it if I had to.

“You know,” I turned my best Hamlet look her way, “this is only the beginning. With what I know, I can help the Guardians bring down Nexis. Isn’t that the ultimate prize?”

“Alright, James.” Her mouth curled up at me like I knew it would. “I’ll take this to the Guardian Council. See if you have any prayer of getting in.” Wringing her hands, her smile faded.

“I hope so.” I pressed my lips into her knuckles.

Her grin returned as she got up and walked into the hallway, cell phone in hand. She paused at the doorway. “What exactly happened to Maria?”

“I wish I knew. They thought she was helping me, I guess.” My heart sank like a rock to the depths of my chest. “They didn’t just banish her, they sentenced her to death. We tried to run, but before I knew it, she slipped and fell into the river.”

“Oh, no! How could they?” she gasped, all the color draining from her face.

“I tried to dive in after her, but they stopped me.” I doubled over like someone knocked the wind out of me. “It was too late anyway. And it’s all my fault.”

“No, James.” She shook her head, mouth pursing in a grim line. “That one’s on us.”

“How can you say that? You weren’t even there?” I asked, glancing up at her.

“She’s one of ours,” she said. Monotone.

“What? You can’t be serious? She was my girlfriend for three years. If I didn’t know, how could Nexis?” Was I pulling out my own hair? It sure felt that way.

“I don’t know how they found out, but believe me, we’ll get to the bottom of it. And we’ll make Nexis pay.” Abby gritted her teeth, staring straight into my eyes. “I can promise you that much.”

“You better,” I said, but I couldn’t look at her. All my limbs went limp. Numb. My world smashed into smithereens all around me and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

No. All the power was in someone else’s hands now. I could only sit back and wait until my fate, Lucy’s fate, was decided.

I slumped down in my chair and buried my face in my hands. Powerless. Again.

Chapter 6

LUCY

Rubbing my eyes, I rolled over in bed and turned off the pay-per-view movie. Paige and I had a fun night of Ray's Pizza and hotel movies, but it wasn't the same without James.

I checked my phone. Half past midnight and not a peep from my brother. Where was he anyway? Probably gallivanting around the city with his friends. Oh well, let him blow off some steam. He'd earned it. Soon he'd be home for the summer and things would be back to normal. Maybe then he could tell me why, exactly, I shouldn't go to Montrose. And why he said, "I love you," just to get out of giving me a tour.

My eyelids sank shut. The blackness weighed down on me like a soothing blanket, lulling me off to dreamland.

Then the darkness morphed into an inky blackness, twisting and howling with a roar as loud as a freight train. Strange winds swirled around me, tangling my hair across my face until I couldn't see.

Shivering, I clawed the snarled strands from my eyes. The wind was an invisible force. Cold and harsh. Holding me in place, so I couldn't move. Could barely breathe.

The scent of woodsmoke billowed on the wind. Shapes materialized on the horizon, zooming into focus like a movie.

A dark, empty field with torches planted in a circle. Six angry figures cloaked in black. Circling. Sneering. Shouting evil words at a lone figure huddled in the middle.

"James!" I screamed and reached for him, but my hands came back empty. Nothing but air.

No one heard me, no one saw me. I was invisible. His face said it all. Scared. Tortured. Yet, still defiant.

The robed vultures closed in on their prey.

“Crazy,” they shouted.

“Corrupted,” one spat.

“Banished,” they repeated, one after the other. Six times.

A lone cry ripped through the air. The tortured scream of a young girl.

Then the scene changed.

Flashed to James running in the dark, arms flailing. He raced across campus. Sprinted through the woods. Headed straight to the chapel.

Why would he go there? The thought rolled around my brain with no answer.

James wasn't alone. People chased him.

Two hulking thugs, dressed as black as the night. Muscles bulging as they ran. Gaining on James.

“Run, James. Faster,” I screamed, even though I knew he couldn't hear me. My lungs heaved for air as if I was running right beside him.

Together we pummeled up the stairs. He opened the chapel door and disappeared inside. Then everything faded away.

And the blackness enveloped me again, sucking all the air from my lungs.

I woke with a start. Gasping.

I shot straight up in bed. My heart thumped in my chest, forehead soaked with sweat.

“James,” I whispered into the dark hotel room.

Fumbling with my cell phone, I dialed his number. No answer. I dialed again, and again, and kept dialing. No answer.

Fear gripped me, its hot bile trickling down my throat. It seemed so real, I couldn't shake it. It wasn't just a dream. My brother might be in real trouble right now. Out there on his own.

Think, Lucy. Think.

I remembered his last words to me on the phone. And I knew there was only one person I could tell.

I flipped off the covers, raced to the door, and tumbled out into the suite, trying to navigate in bunny slippers. Without knocking, I let myself into Mom and Dad's room, took him by the shoulders, and started rocking.

"Dad, wake up. Dad." I said his name over and over, shaking him as hard as I could.

"Lucy girl?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. "What're you doing?"

"Finally." I dropped to my knees by the bed. "James is in trouble. You have to come quick."

"What? Where's James?" Dad shot up in bed, jostling Mom.

I rolled my eyes. "C'mon, get up. It's an emergency, I promise. Meet me in the living room." I padded out to the couch. After what seemed like decades, he emerged in his robe. Hair spiked every which way.

"Lucy," he said, yawning. "What's this all about?"

"I had a dream about James. In a field. Getting banished or something." I couldn't look at him when I said this, I just had to get through it. "The thing is, I've been having some weird dreams lately, about James. But I think this one's real, or something's wrong at least."

"Why would you think that?" He sat down on the couch beside me and slung one arm over my shoulders.

I relaxed my tense muscles, my heart softening. "James tried to warn me about something after graduation. Then he told me to meet him at sunset, but he didn't show. Told me to make up an excuse so you guys wouldn't worry. Now this dream. I called him like twenty times in a row. Something's really wrong."

"It's one-thirty in the morning. What exactly do you want me to do about it?" Dad's brow scrunched.

"I don't know, go be a Dad and rescue him? Fix things? Isn't that what you guys do?" I exhaled in a huff, running my hands through my own crazy hair.

"While I'd like to think so," he laughed like I was still five years old and seeing monsters in my closet, "I don't even know if there's even a problem here. And if there is, I have no clue where to start."

"That much I do know," I said, narrowing my eyes at him. "James is at the chapel."

“The chapel? Why would he be at the chapel?” His whole face furrowed up in the patented McAllen worried-bulldog look.

“I don’t know.” I gulped down an extra ounce of courage. In one long breath I said, “All I know is there were torches, six evil guys in robes who banished him, and he ran to the chapel. If any of that makes sense to you, I think you know exactly what to do.”

Dad gawked at me, eyes wide like a mega-watt light bulb suddenly switched on. “Okay, maybe that sounds a little bit plausible. But I’d have to make a few calls.”

“Good. Make them,” Relief sank into my bones. “I did my job. Now you do yours. If you find James and everything’s fine, no harm done, right?”

“Right, Lucy girl. Now back to bed with you.” He ruffled my hair, then pulled out his phone and started dialing.

“Okay.” I trudged back to the darkness of my room. Muscles I hadn’t even realized I’d clenched relaxed.

Yawning, I slipped into bed and pulled up the covers. I tried to listen to every word he said, but I could barely keep my eyes open.

I drifted right back to sleep knowing Dad was on the case now.

Chapter 7

JAMES

Rushing water roared in my ears. Darkness covered my eyes like thick smoke, filling my nostrils, clogging my breaths in and out.

“Help!” A shrill scream ripped through the black fog. Maria’s scream.

Even though I couldn’t see, I ran toward the cry. Toward the water. This time, I’d catch her if I pumped my legs fast enough.

“Help!” she shrieked again, a hot breath on my face.

I lunged for that breath. Ready to drown in the river, too. My fingertips grazed her soft flesh.

Splat. She hit the water.

This time I’d dive in after her. I leaned back on my heels, arms overhead, and jumped. Dove straight into darkness.

Bam. I bolted upright as a door slammed.

I was back in the chapel library. It was only a dream. Stupid to think I could ever reach her. She was gone.

Rubbing my eyes, I unraveled myself from my hoodie blanket and backpack pillow, wiping my mouth for drool.

From my dark hiding place under the tower ladder, the library seemed eerily quiet. And devoid of Guardians. My arm hairs bristled.

Noises clamored down the hall, voices argued. All was not right in the Guardian sanctuary.

The library door burst open. Footsteps stomped across the floor. I sprang to my feet and balled my fists, blood boiling in my veins.

Sneaking into the shadows of the turret, I coiled on the balls of my feet. Ready to pound on those two goons who let Maria drown.

“Where is he?” A familiar voice boomed in the silence. “Where is my son?”

“Dad, is that you?” I asked as I emerged from my hiding spot. “What’re you doing here? How’d you even know I was here?”

“Lucy sent me,” he growled under his breath. “She had some crazy dream about you getting banished. Woke me up in the middle of the night.”

“No way.” Surely my eyeballs popped out of my skull and were rolling around on the ground somewhere. “How could she possibly know?”

“Don’t tell me this is some kind of insanely elaborate senior prank.” Dad loomed over me like an angry linebacker.

“Afraid not.” I shrugged, shoving my hands in my pockets. Like my entire world wasn’t coming apart at the seams. “Two lunkheads dragged me to the practice field to face the Nexis Council. Where they banished me.”

“The same guys camped out in the quad? So you’re telling me it’s all true?” His jaw went slack.

“Yes, but there’s more.” I sucked in the biggest breath of my life and exhaled. “The craziest part is that maybe my little sister really is the Seer after all.”

Dad paused, wrinkled his eyebrows, and took two steps toward me. “What’re you saying?”

I gulped, staring down at my sneakers. Looking anywhere but at Dad when I said, “Apparently I’m not your real son.”

“What?” Dad roared. Grabbed me by the collar. “That’s not funny.”

“I agree.” I stepped back and pulled the crumpled photocopy out of my pocket. “Found this a few months ago. I guess Nexis did, too.”

He took the birth certificate from my hands and smoothed it out. Squinting, he adjusted his reading glasses.

“This can’t be right, son,” he said, head bobbling.

I held my breath and stared at him. The truth lurked on the tip of my tongue. *I’m not your son. You’re not my father.* All the angry protests that curdled my stomach and burned my throat. But I’d already said it once and it tore me up inside. I couldn’t say it. Not again.

“Don’t.” Dad held up his hand. Looked me straight in the eye. “Don’t even think about it. I don’t know who this guy is. I don’t care what this piece of paper says. I raised you. You’re my son and I love you. And that’s that. End of discussion.” He flung both arms around me, squeezing me hard.

“Okay, Dad,” I said around the lump lodged in my throat.

“Just give me a minute to wrap my head around this.” Then he walked off to the other side of the room and paced back and forth. Back and forth.

I rocked on my heels, watching him swing from one side of the library to the other like a pendulum. Not sure what to say.

Hushed whispers hissed from the hallway. My head swiveled to the door. Abby peeked her head in, mouthed *sorry*, and slowly closed it.

Thanks, I mouthed back as the door clicked shut.

“Good. They’re gone.” Just like that, Dad walked back my way. “So you’re here, under Guardian Sanctuary I presume. What Intel did you trade to get it?”

“Sacred stone locations,” I whispered. Those three terrible words resonated between us.

Dad whistled, the beginnings of a smile on his face. “I’m impressed. How on earth did you get that?”

My mouth curled. “I broke into St. Lucy’s Church in Harlem.”

“Well done. That’s my boy.” He clapped his hands, grinning now. “But surely you didn’t give them everything. What’s your backup intel?”

“How’d you know about that?” I asked.

“Because you’re my son, and I raised you to fight back.” Reaching over, he patted me on the back. “Don’t ever forget that. You are my son. Got it?”

“Got it.” I nodded, mashing my lips together. I glanced back at the turret, at my go bag. “I managed to steal a diary account from St. Lucia. It tells how Nexis tried to use her to track down the sacred stones.”

Dad gaped at me, jaw dangling. “You’ve got St. Lucia’s original diary?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s only a copy from a Nexis record. But there’s more. St. Lucia had visions, reoccurring visions, that in two thousand years a Seer with the same name would end the Nexis reign of terror.”

“My grandmother told me that story a long time ago,” he said. “I never thought that prophecy could be about my own daughter.”

I opened my mouth. Shut it again. Watched him as a strange expression clouded his face.

“How could I be so stupid?” he shouted and stormed off, headed straight for the turret.

“Wait.” I followed him, hot on his heels.

He wouldn’t get away this time. He was hiding something. I could feel it. As soon as we reached the tower, darkness enveloped us.

“Dad, I don’t know what’s going on.” I swallowed back the acid taste in my mouth and copped a squat on the floor. “But maybe I’m not the only one with secrets here.”

He slid down next to me, but I could barely see him in the darkness. “I should’ve told you sooner. I let them draw me into their web of lies. Now you’re the one paying the price.” He raked both hands through his thinning hair.

“What’re are you talking about?” I stared at the outline of his face, my eyes adjusting to the shadows.

“You can’t tell your sisters. Not yet.” He leaned in, forehead almost touching mine. “I’m a Guardian,” he whispered. “I come from a long line of Guardians. I’ve been a Guardian all my life.”

“Eee...uhh, huh?” I croaked. My brain couldn’t fathom the possibility. “You can’t be serious.”

With one finger Dad drew a line across his mouth. “You can’t tell Lucy or Paige. Especially not your mother. You promise me?”

I blinked in slow motion. Bobbed my head up and down. “Of course, I promise. But why?”

“Because,” he cleared his throat, “it could get them in a lot of trouble. Especially your mother...” he trailed off, glancing my way. “Well you know Nexis. They might—”

“Kill her?” Both hands flew to my face as my mind exploded. “Like they killed Maria? Tonight.” The cold stench of the grave hung in the air.

“Maria’s dead?” He looked at me with the same horror that rankled my insides.

“Nexis sentenced her to death, so we ran. And she fell into the Hudson.”
Darkness spun me around and I couldn’t breathe. I squeezed my eyes shut against the pain.

Dad’s warm hand landed on my neck, rubbing my shoulders, but it didn’t help. Couldn’t reach me. Maria was dead and it was all my fault.

“Hold up. I’m missing something.” The anger bubbled in my stomach. I glared at him. “Why in the world would you send me to Montrose? Let me join Nexis? If you knew they were capable of *this*.” I waved my arms around like a madman.

He winced like I’d stung him. “It was the Guardians’ plan. Once you graduated, they wanted to turn you into a double agent like me. But I never wanted that for you.”

I could only stare at him. There were no words.

A faraway look glazed over his eyes, the makings of a smile twitching his mouth. “I wanted you to join the Guardians from the start. Follow in my footsteps.” Then his face drooped. “I’m tired, so sick and tired, of these games,” he said. “These stupid societies that control every aspect of our lives. Moving us around like chess pieces to be sacrificed.”

“So why keep up the charade?” was all I could manage.

“Ever since your mother joined Nexis, I’ve been trying to find a way to get out. Or take them down trying,” he said lowering his voice.

He leaned back against the shelf. The old wood groaned against our weight, books wobbling.

“I’ve been collecting evidence for years. I thought once you graduated we could pool our resources. Maybe turn your mom, too. But now it seems so hopeless...” he said, words fading away in a whisper.

“We can still dig up dirt on these guys from the inside,” I couldn’t help the grin that curved up my lips, “but it’s going to take a bit longer. And I’ll have to make my own connections.”

He turned and faced me. “In Europe.”

“In Europe.” I nodded. “But Lucy...”

“I’ll take care of her.” He sat up straighter. “I’ve got just the thing, tucked away in my grandma’s jewelry box. You remember. She was the last McAllen Seer.”

“How’s Great-Grandma Lucinda’s jewelry box going to help Lucy?” I asked.

Dad's eyes lit up. "Granny had a ring set with stones from the sacred amethyst. It's a family heirloom. I'm sure it would protect Lucy."

"I wish I'd known that sooner." I slammed one fist on the ground. "I broke into the Nexis Chamber, the Broadway repository, *and* St. Lucy's Church looking for the amethyst. It only got me banished." I clenched and unclenched my fists, thinking up all the ways I'd bring Nexis down.

"You've been busy, haven't you?" he asked.

I glowered, grinding my teeth into oblivion.

When I didn't answer, he laid his hand over mine. "Pull yourself together, son. Don't let anger cloud your judgment. We've got to think our way out, and we're running out of time."

"You're right," I said, breathing in deep. The anger simmered to a low boil. "Now's the time to use *your* connections."

He nodded as his jaw jutted out. "Getting the European Guardians to give my Nexis-banished son asylum will be like squeezing water from a rock. But we've got key intel to negotiate with."

"Look, Dad, if they want more proof I'm on their side, I'm willing to join the Guardian army," I said, swallowing hard. "I've already told them that, but I have one condition. Lucy can't enroll next semester. Promise me that."

He nodded, eyes on the door. "We're on the same page here, son. Lucy won't step foot on Montrose soil till she's ready. But if she *is* the next Seer, she'll need training. Can we agree on that?" He extended his hand to me.

"Okay, fine." I gave him a firm handshake. "I can agree on that—after she turns sixteen."

"It's a deal." He pumped my arm up and down. "Let's talk about your army enlistment. I'd rather you enroll in officer training school. You'll get more dirt on them that way."

"I don't know," I said, glaring at him. "I wanna be in the trenches. Give the Nexis scum exactly what they deserve."

"James, I know you're mad at Nexis right now," he rose to his full height, two inches taller than me, "but the front line isn't the best place for you. Not if you want to protect Lucy."

“We’ll talk about it,” I said, standing to my feet, too.

“That’s all I’m asking,” he said.

“Thanks, Dad. For everything. I’m glad Lucy woke you up. I’m glad you’re here.”

I caught him in my sights one more time. “Take care of them.”

It wasn’t a question, it was a demand. I stared him down. Waiting. His head bobbed once. It was all I needed.

“It’s only a few hours till dawn,” he said, face contorted. “You get some sleep. I better begin negotiations.”

“Good luck.” I reached over and locked him in a bear hug. Even if he wasn’t my biological father, Dad still had my back.

I wanted to ask him the question I couldn’t ask him, if he could ever forgive Mom. But he was already walking toward the door—ready to do battle on my behalf.

As I settled down on my makeshift bed, I asked myself the same question. Could I ever forgive her? My muscles stiffened. The question bounced back at me as if it hit an invisible force field. No. I couldn’t forgive her. Not right now.

Just like I’d never forgive Nexis. The anger burned like napalm, a fire that might never be quenched. Somehow I’d make them pay. Expose the Nexis Society for what it truly was—pure evil.

For now, I had a new part to play. Guardian lackey by day, secret Guardian of the Seer by night. The next time I saw my sister, however many years from now, we’d have a way out. One day, we’d finally break free and live our own lives for a change. Wouldn’t that be nice?

With that thought, I drifted off to sleep. Maybe for the last time on American soil.

Chapter 8

LUCY

Bright light seeped through the flesh of my eyelids. I didn't want to get up, not yet. I burrowed deeper under the pillowy-soft hotel sheets.

Why was I so tired anyway? Something happened last night, something strange. I almost wrapped my mind around it, then it floated away on a cloud. Out of reach.

My body twitched, jerking me awake. And I remembered...the dream. Rushing in to wake Dad, making him go out into the city at two a.m. to find my brother. Did all of that really happen, or was it just another dream?

I slid into my slippers, hopped out of bed, and padded out into the main suite.

Mom and Dad were already up, gesturing wildly at each other. A whisper-argument in pantomime. Mom's coffee sloshed onto the white tiles. This couldn't be good.

"Guys, what're you doing?" I asked as a yawn escaped. "Leave some coffee for the rest of us."

"Oh, right. Sorry, Lucy." Mom grabbed a paper towel and threw it in the air. It fluttered to the floor, where she stomped up the brown liquid with her foot. Like a commoner.

"What's going on here?" I blinked at her and poured myself a nice big cup of coffee with lots of cream.

My mind wasn't awake yet, but my body picked up Mom's not-so-subtle clues. I'd probably need all the fortification I could get today. "Is everything alright with James?"

"No, honey. I'm afraid it's not." Dad took my hand, led me to a dinette chair, and sat me down.

Butterflies emerged from their cocoons, buzzing like crazy inside me. “Oh, no, my dream. Is James okay?”

“Your dream?” Mom’s forehead furrowed up. She always told me I looked like a worried bulldog when I did that. I guess everyone had to be right sometime.

“Not now.” Dad waved Mom away as if she were an annoying fly. “Listen, sweetie. I did find James, packing. He’s leaving for Europe.”

“Ohmigosh!” I screeched, unable to control the volume of my voice. “You can’t be serious. That’s crazy. When is he coming back?”

“Here’s the thing. Your father,” Mom sat beside me, pointing her finger at Dad, “put your brother on a plane to Europe. This morning, in fact.”

“No, way. That can’t be right.” My bottom lip wobbled. “What about our summer together? And Yale?” Air clogged in my throat. “Surely he’s coming back for Yale.” A lone tear trickled down my cheek.

“I’ve never seen him more upset in my life. He didn’t even want your mom to see him like that.” Dad glanced away from Mom.

“Tom, I thought we weren’t going to discuss this in front of—” Mom said, standing up.

“What?” My jaw dropped. Somehow I was on my feet, too. “What can’t you tell me? You don’t think he’s coming home. Do you?” I morphed into a fire-breathing dragon, glaring a death stare at her before turning on Dad.

“Honey, I don’t know. I just don’t know.” He rose to his feet, wringing his hands. “I only did what James wanted. Apparently, he’s not sure what he wants to do with his life or if he even wants to go to college. Maybe he’ll come to his senses soon.”

“Yesterday he was fine, excited to graduate. And then he suddenly decides to go off to Europe the next day?” I took a giant swig of coffee, scalding the roof of my mouth. It barely registered. I was only getting started. “It doesn’t make any sense.” My heartbeat ramped up as I started pacing. “Why would he leave without saying goodbye to the rest of us?”

“Lucy, I’m sorry. I can’t answer that for you.” Dad shrugged and shook his head. “All I know is that he’s not thinking straight. When he is, I’m sure he’ll make things right with us. All of us.”

No matter what Dad said, I couldn’t make all the jigsaw pieces fit.

First, James wanted to meet me alone, but he didn't show. Then, his strange warning about Montrose and an unprovoked, "I love you." Now he suddenly had to flee the country?

"There's something you're not telling me," I said with a huff, the anger rising in my belly. "If you're not going to tell me, then I'll just figure it out for myself in August."

Dad leveled his gaze at me. "You're not going to Montrose next semester."

"Tom, you don't mean that," Mom gasped, a hand over her mouth. "What about her destiny?"

"Destiny?" I asked, rolling my eyes at Mom. "That's a bit of a stretch, isn't it?"

"Lucy, sweetie, you have no idea how special you are," she said, reaching out to smooth down my crazy hair no doubt.

I shrank back. "Special? You mean special enough for you to keep me in the dark. What did James tell you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Dad's face clouded over. He never was a good liar.

"Fine, pretend you don't know anything," I said, one hand flying to my hip. "But I know what I saw. James was scared and wanted to tell me about it, and now he's running off to Europe. Sounds fishy to me."

"Don't be silly," Mom said, batting away imaginary flies again. "Your brother isn't scared of anything. He's got his whole life ahead of him and a great standing in the Nexis Society. He's only going to Europe to blow off steam, that's all."

"Sure he is, Mom," I said, shaking my head at her. Even I wasn't *that* clueless. "And I'm going to Montrose this fall."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question." Dad's voice had lowered a full octave. "That's final."

"You can't be serious." The tears pooled up in my eyes. I couldn't think anymore. I ran back into my little bedroom and slammed the door.

Surely the words Drama Diva were bedazzled on my forehead right now, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to punch a wall. Or the bed. Anything. How could he do this to me? How could he just run away?

Lucky for me, Paige was in the shower. I flounced on the bed and started pummeling pillows.

Nothing made sense anymore. Except for one glaringly obvious fact—everyone was keeping secrets from me. Dad, James, Mom. Probably Paige, too, if an eleven-year-old even had secrets.

Once I'd punched everything in sight, I collapsed in a heap. Face down. And cried a river into my pillow-trench.

My brother, who was supposed to love me and be there for me, just abandoned me for another continent. I thought watching Ginger die was torture. This hurt even worse than burying our German shepherd in the backyard.

I wiped the tears from my eyes. Steeled my jaw shut.

There was one thing I couldn't understand. Why would my own brother keep secrets from me, and everyone else he loved?

Two days ago I'd come to New York excited to follow the path my big brother laid out for me. Now my parents wouldn't even let me go to Montrose in the fall. And I had no idea what to do next.

JAMES

Krrrr...krrrr. Walkie-talkie static buzzed in Abby's hip pocket. Grating the insides of my ears like a buzzsaw.

"Go for Bravo Team," she said into the annoying black box. Yeah, kind of overkill, I know. But Nexis wouldn't rest till they found me. And I was *this* close to leaving the country.

Some indistinguishable words crackled back. The sounds dissipated into the din of the eight a.m. crowd at JFK Airport. The terminal was jam-packed with business types in black suits and tourists with neon fanny packs.

My heart ticked in my chest as if it knew time was running out. I couldn't believe this was it. My last look at American soil.

"Roger, copy that." She turned to me. "Looks like we've got a situation. Apparently, Nexis tipped off the local police. Told them you're leaving the country from this airport. Since you're listed as a person of interest in Maria's death, they're coming to take you in."

“Of course they ratted me out.” I rolled my eyes at the entire terminal. “You can always count on Nexis to do the wrong thing. Now there’s probably a warrant out for my arrest. Perfect.”

“We’ve got our own security checkpoint on the other side of the airport.” She motioned to the handful of black-clad Guardian guards surrounding me. “But we have to move. Now.”

“Seriously? You guys have your own TSA?” I raised my eyebrows at her. “Can we hold off a few minutes? My family’s about to board a plane back home and I’d like to see them off.” *Even if they can’t see me.*

“No can do.” Abby shook her head, blonde hair gleaming in the fluorescent light. “Didn’t you hear me? I said the NYPD is on their way.”

“Abbs, c’mon. Five minutes.” I took her hand, stared deeply into her eyes, and turned on the charm. “That’s all I’m asking.”

“Don’t use my name,” she hissed at me. “And stop worrying about your sister. She’s protected. You’re the one being hunted. A Nexis fugitive, now a fugitive from the law. I’m sorry, but we have to go. Right. This. Minute.”

“Thanks for the reminder of who and what I am.” I dropped her hand. Crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m not leaving till they do.” I flicked my thumb at the departure gate for Indianapolis.

Then I saw her. My Lucy standing beside Dad, her dark hair swishing, lips scrunched in a scowl. She looked so cute when she was mad.

Planting my feet, I glued my gaze on my little sister as I said, “Nexis will figure it out soon enough. In the next few years, she’ll be the one in my shoes—the one being hunted. They’ll be sneaky with double agents and mind games. Because she’s the one who can change the world. Not me.”

I watched them line up to board the plane, silently hoping she’d turn and look my way. For an instant she did. And my heart. Stopped.

“So let me say goodbye to my little sister. Give me one last look at what I’m fighting for before I leave the country.” I lifted my hand and waved at Lucy. Of course, she couldn’t see me.

The next time she *did* see me she’d probably be in the same dire straits I was right now. On the run from Nexis.

Beside me, Abby nodded. “Okay. We’ll wait.”

They disappeared down the jetway, one by one. *I’ll miss you. Next time I see you, I’ll be ready.*

I turned to my friend and said, “Okay, now we can go.”

“Alright, guys, you heard him. Move. Move. Move,” she barked.

Off we went. Sprinting at top speed through the airport.

We made it through the security checkpoint without a pat down and my new bodyguards whisked us onto the plane. Then we were soaring in the air on our way to Switzerland, I think. But my heart was on a plane back home, with the little girl I could only protect from a distance now.

Because deep down, I knew exactly who she was. The signs were there. The Awakenings had already started. My little Lucy was the Seer—and there was nothing I could do for her now. Except bring down Nexis.

Every muscle in my body tensed, a tuning fork steeled to that one thought.

Yes, that’s exactly what I’d do. I’d bring down Nexis. First in Europe, then the rest of the world. When I saw Lucy again in four years, she’d have a way out.

I sat back against the scratchy airplane seat, tilting my face toward the window. Blue sky and white clouds floated by. How could I protect Lucy from three thousand miles away?

It wouldn’t be easy. No, it’d be nearly impossible. But I had to try. It was Lucy’s only shot, and I’d do anything to make sure Nexis didn’t get their hands on her.

Gritting my teeth, I gripped the armrests. Knuckles white.

All I had to do was focus. I had a job to do. No matter what happened, deep down I’d always be loyal to one person.

Because now, I was a Guardian. The Guardian of the Seer.

Dear Reader,

Thanks for reading this latest adventure in the Nexis series. I hope you enjoyed this new perspective on all things Nexis. Let me tell you, I had a blast writing this lil guy!

If you enjoyed this little book, please consider leaving a review on your preferred ebook retail site. Your honest reviews help indie authors more than you could ever know.

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Barbara Hartzler is the author of *The Nexis Secret*, the story of The Seer— a.k.a. one girl with a gift to see the unseen world of angels. Not to mention the two secret societies vying for her allegiance. *The Nexis Secret* is inspired by Barbara’s college experiences and peppered with anecdotes from her teen missions trip to New York City.

She’s always wanted to write, not necessarily about angels, but the idea was too good to pass up. As a former barista and graphic designer, she loves all things sparkly and purple and is always jonesing for a good cup of joe.

So grab a cup of coffee and peruse her website at www.barbarahartzler.com. You can read her blog, explore all the behind-the-scenes extras in The Seer's Vault, or learn more about her writing journey, fun facts, and The BARBARA awards for best fiction (mostly YA).