

SHIMMER

(Continued...)

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CHAPTER 7

Heaving a prolonged sigh of relief at the school day's end, Logan passed through Hadenford Regional High School's front entrance and descended the wide, staggered concrete steps with his backpack slung over one shoulder. With the heavy glass doors flung open, the school seemed to expel the jostling mass of students, as if no longer able to contain the pressure they had created, an idea seemingly supported by the extensive network of spider web cracks eroding the stairs.

Logan managed to slip free of the mass exodus with a series of judiciously timed sidesteps. All he wanted was a few moments to absorb the welcome afternoon sunshine before climbing on the crowded bus for the long ride home.

"Care to explain this?"

The voice was familiar, but Logan needed a moment to locate her, perched on the low concrete wall to his right. As soon as she had his attention, she tossed a notebook at him. Not a notebook, he discovered, more like a sketch pad or an unlined journal. He looked at the open page and frowned. "I'm... flattered."

"Don't be," Fallon said. She hopped down beside him and brushed off the seat of her cargo pants. "It's not you."

"Too bad," he said with a slight nod, "it's a good likeness."

"I met you *today*, Logan," she said before jabbing the page with her index finger. "I drew that portrait two weeks ago."

Logan sighed before continuing down the steps. He shook his head. "Should have seen this coming."

She caught his arm, confused. "Excuse me?"

"It's hard to explain."

"How could you know about this?"

"I didn't," he admitted. "Well, not specifically this. Look, it's a long story and my bus is about to leave. Can we talk about this some other—?"

She was shaking her head. "Let's take the long way home."

"What are you talking about? I live—"

"Three, maybe four miles away max, right?"

"About—"

"You're young. No infirmities?"

"No..."

"Good," she said with a vigorous nod. "So, healthy walk. Long story. No sweat."

Suddenly the prospect of a crowded, noisy bus seemed downright enticing to Logan. As the bus driver pushed the lever to close the folding door, Logan sighed and turned to Fallon. "Okay, we'll walk."

"That's the spirit," Fallon said. "Let's go."

She set a brisk pace, striding along the horseshoe-shaped sidewalk that wound away from the school's entrance, harboring no doubt he would follow her. With a shrug, he sprinted to close the distance between them and fell in step beside her.

Smiling, she slipped her backpack off her shoulder and passed him the strap. "Carry this for me, won't you?"

"Hey, this was your idea," he reminded her. "Why should I—?"

"You said you were spry."

"No, I—"

"It was implied," she interrupted, flashing him a mischievous grin. "Besides, chivalry's due for a comeback. Join the revolution."

With each long stride, the backpacks slammed against his ribs with the bruising regularity of punches from a weary but determined boxer. Other than Logan's occasional grunts of discomfort, silence fell between them. He was in no hurry to explain his earlier comments, and maybe Fallon, despite her initial bravado, wasn't quite ready to hear what he had to say. Long after the fleet of yellow school buses had disappeared down the narrow streets of the neighboring developments and their gritty exhaust fumes had dissipated on the warm humid breeze, Fallon crossed her arms and glanced over at him. "It's basic physics, you know."

"What is?"

“Effect follows cause,” Fallon said. “Cause precedes effect. Without cause, there should be no effect. Simple physics.”

“Ah, physics,” Logan said. “Cause and effect. You’re right.”

“Of course, I’m right,” she said, but caught her lower lip between her teeth, on the verge of a frown. “So what’s wrong?”

She already has some doubts, Logan thought. That’s a beginning.

“I wouldn’t say anything is wrong... exactly.”

“How could I draw your portrait days before I ever met you? Wait—were you on the news?” He shook his head. “Damn! Then how...?”

“You won’t find metaphysical answers in your physics textbook.”

“Metaphysical, huh?” Fallon asked with a frown. After Logan gave a curt nod, she said, “Hence the walking. Now, care to enlighten me?”

“This wasn’t my idea,” Logan said. “I hardly know you.”

“And you’d rather not cut to the chase?”

“It’s... not the kind of thing you blurt out.”

Her gaze intent on Logan’s face, Fallon stumbled on the pavement where the branch of an old oak tree had ruptured and raised a slab of concrete. She flashed a grimace as she twisted her ankle, a moment before Logan caught her arm to steady her. “Thanks...” she said, her voice trailing off. “Mind if we sit for a moment?”

Stunned speechless, Logan shook his head. When he’d touched her arm, he’d felt something akin to a static shock. His heart was racing and he was having trouble getting enough air. *It must be true*, he thought. If he’d needed more proof, the physical contact eased the last uncertainty in his mind. *No turning back now. Did she feel it? She was distracted by momentary pain, but...*

Fallon lowered herself to the curb and massaged her sore ankle.

“Bad?”

“Stung for a moment, that’s all.”

“Good,” Logan said, dropping to the curb beside her. “Otherwise I’d have to carry you *and* the backpacks.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said with a wry grin. “If you had to carry me, I’d carry the backpacks.”

“That’s settled then,” Logan said with mock seriousness as he started to climb to his feet. “Are you familiar with the fireman’s carry?”

“Not on your life, pal!” Laughing, Fallon caught his forearm and tugged him down again. But her laughter fell away as she stared at the

hand on his arm. Finally, she pulled it away, glancing at her palm as if she expected to find something there. “That was weird?”

“You felt it too?”

“Like I was... falling into you,” Fallon said, her voice laced with wonder. “Falling... through you.”

“Hmm.” He’d had a similar reaction with the longer contact, a sensation that the ground had swayed and dipped under him.

She stared at his face as if seeing—or sensing—something beneath the surface. “It wasn’t... awful.”

Logan grinned. “No. Not at all.”

“Makes me wonder, though...”

“What?”

“No,” she said with a vigorous headshake. “You’ll think it’s silly.”

“I won’t.”

“I’d be embarrassed to say...” She worried her lower lip in a moment of indecision. “No. No, it’s crazy.” She laughed. “Extremely weird impulse.”

Logan shrugged. “If you say so.”

“Unless... tell me what it means first.”

“First?”

“Before I say—do anything—totally embarrassing.”

“It’s a sign, I guess,” Logan said. “Confirmation. That your sketch wasn’t a coincidence. That my attrac—that I was right about you.” Logan felt the heat rising to his cheeks and looked away from her, clearing his throat to cover his slip of the tongue.

“Attraction,” Fallon said. “Ah! You’re attracted to me.”

“It’s—uh—I mean, well—”

Fallon caught his chin and turned his face back to hers, through a slow blink as if riding out the momentary sensation of falling. “Admit it.”

“Naturally you’re—I mean, obviously, I’m—but that’s not what I meant... exactly.”

“Glad there’s enough embarrassment to go around.”

“No, you never said—”

“Earlier,” Fallon interrupted. “When I had that... sensation, I was wondering what it would feel like...to kiss you.”

“Ah,” Logan said and cleared his throat again. “That’s a natural, um, consequence of the...”

“Would you mind if...?”

“No,” Logan said quickly. “Of course not. It’s—”

“Shh,” she whispered as she leaned in and placed her lips tentatively against his. The kiss might have lasted moments or hours. Logan couldn’t be sure. When it was over the sun seemed to hold the same position in the sky. But during the kiss, the ground had dropped away from him, spiraling away in a sudden and prolonged rush of tingling warmth. This time he’d closed his eyes against the feeling of weightlessness, but that only made it worse. At some point, he’d draped his hand on her hip, and she’d placed her palm against the nape of his neck. His eyes blinked open at her startled gasp. “Wow!”

“Yeah,” Logan said. “Exactly what I was thinking.”

“Did you know that would happen?”

“Thought it might, if we...”

“And that was just a harmless little peck.”

“More than a peck.”

“True...” Fallon arched her eyebrow. “Jeez, can you imagine what would happen if we ever...” Now it was her turn to flush red. “Not that I’m saying we should hop in...”

“No.”

“Still...aren’t you the least bit curious?”

Logan grinned. “I’m always curious.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him. “You have these... sparks a lot, do you?”

“Oh, no,” he said. “It’s rare. Very, very rare. It’s only because you’re special—”

“Ha!”

“I’m serious,” Logan said. “When this happens... trust me, it’s rare.”

“Like the dream portrait?”

“Yes,” Logan said. “Do you remember the circumstances?”

“I saw that face—your face—in a dream. That sketch pad is my dream journal.”

“An altered state of consciousness,” Logan said. “Makes sense.”

“To you, maybe,” Fallon said. “Help me up.” Logan braced her arm as she stood and tested her ankle. “Okay, I think I can walk on it. Let’s go.”

They walked in silence along the sun-dappled sidewalk. Several times Fallon seemed about to speak but held her tongue. Logan wanted to give her time to adjust to the idea that what she had done, what they

had experienced together, was something beyond what passed for normal. Finally, instead of speaking, she laughed and shook her head.

“What?”

“I have this... goofy urge to hold your hand,” she said. “Crazy, right?”

“Crazier than kissing me?”

“Well, I hardly know you.”

“And yet with the kissing.”

“That was different,” she said. “That was a moment. But holding hands?” She shook her head incredulously. “I mean, you’re not my boyfriend or anything.”

“No,” Logan said. “Think maybe you’re stalling?”

Fallon sighed. “Probably. But that doesn’t mean the urge isn’t real.”

“Our kiss notwithstanding,” Logan said. “I don’t really know your comfort level with...”

“With what?”

“The unknown,” Logan said. “The boundaries beyond which science can’t or won’t explore, beyond what is generally known or understood.”

“I catch an occasional episode of *The X-Files* in syndication,” Fallon said with a half-hearted grin. “That count?”

“Would you say you have an open mind?”

“Mostly,” Fallon said. “Are you trying to tell me that my drawing that dream portrait was some kind of psychic experience?”

“Precognition. Prescient dreaming,” Logan said. “Clairvoyance.”

“And you don’t think that’s crazy?”

Logan was surprised by the question. “No. Why would I?”

“Most people would,” Fallon said quickly, almost defensively. “Aren’t all those psychics, palm readers and fortune tellers a bunch of frauds?”

Logan smiled. “I think most of them are in the business of telling people what they want to hear.”

“For a fee.”

“They provide a service.”

Fallon stopped walking, turned to him, started to reach for his arm, then simply pointed at him with an accusatory finger. “Wait a minute,” she said. “You said you thought something like this would happen—had happened! Correct?”

“Close enough.”

“So you’re a psychic too?”

“Not in the classic sense,” Logan said. “I occasionally get... vibes. Bad vibes. Nausea-inducing, nightmare-producing vibes.”

“Oh,” Fallon said, frowning. “Kinda hard to find a compliment in there.”

“What?”

“You just said I make you sick.”

“No,” Logan said. “That’s not what I meant. My... dominant talent is the vibe thing. I have another talent. Underdeveloped... sort of the flip side.”

“Good vibrations?” she asked with a wry smile.

“I wish,” Logan said. “Oops! Sorry. That came out wrong. What I meant was, I have the ability to locate others with special abilities.”

As Fallon mulled this over, they started walking again. “That’s what you meant by *special*. And here I thought you were intrigued by my feminine charms.”

“Never said I wasn’t,” Logan replied quickly, smiling. “I sensed you before we came to this town.”

“Do you keep a dream journal too?”

“Not how it works for me,” Logan said. “I sensed you in a general way. Then, in Claridge’s class, when I looked at you, it clicked into place, like the tumblers in a combination lock.”

“Your ability,” Fallon said. “Does it have a name?”

“My great-grandfather calls me a douser.”

“Like using a divining rod to find underground water?”

“Yes,” Logan said. “But my talent operates on a different... frequency than water. I sense spikes in the psychic ether.”

“Quite a coincidence,” Fallon said. “Your family moving here and you sensing me, meeting me, while I had, um, dreamed about you.”

“The Walkers don’t believe in coincidence,” Logan said.

“What are you saying?”

“I brought my family here,” Logan said. “It’s what I do... it’s why I’m always the new guy.”

“You brought your family here, to Hadenford, just because of little old me?” Fallon asked, pressing her index finger against the center of her collarbone. “Decent pick-up line. Suppose I should be flattered.”

Logan flashed a wry grin. “You were a bonus,” he said. “The real reason I brought my family here was because of...”

“The bad vibes?” she asked. Logan nodded. “You think something bad is going to happen in Hadenford?”

“It’s already started.”

“Then why are you here? I mean, jeez, if you knew in advance something awful was about to happen here, why come at all?”

“We came to stop it.”

CHAPTER 8

Barrett's cure for impatience was to exhaust himself through physical training. He'd set up four free-standing heavy bag platforms, cycling through various configurations, taking care each time to lock the wheeled bases before pounding the bags with combination blows from his bare fists and feet. Despite the intense physical effort, his mind began to drift...

After Gideon's disfigurement—and abrupt retirement—Barrett had joined the branch of the family in Hadenford for a fresh start, a chance to redeem himself. And last night had felt like a missed opportunity. Proving himself in battle seemed to Barrett to be the only way to show he was not at fault for Gideon's maiming.

It had been just the two of them in San Diego, sharing a small apartment. Two brothers, all that remained of their family unit, Gideon the elder by five years, and a survivor of several rift battles. Barrett had admired Gideon, had wanted to emulate him, but he'd missed his chance in San Diego. And lost Gideon as a result.

He waited, hoping Gideon would reconsider, but refused to pressure him. Eventually, he gave up hope that Gideon would ever return. And without Gideon, nothing remained for Barrett in San Diego. That could have been an ending...or a new beginning. But Barrett refused to abandon the family, which would amount to quitting. Eventually, he'd called Ambrose and received a heartfelt invitation to come to Hadenford.

Three thousand miles later...and for what? To watch and do nothing all over again! Failure heaped upon failure.

Barrett finished his heavy bag work with furious double-fisted club strikes—left-right, left-right, left-right—all power, no subtlety, until his fingers became numb from the vicious pounding.

After wheeling the platforms against the wall, he worked with his broadsword, weaving blurred patterns in the air first with a double-handed grip, then in a more freewheeling single-handed style, loping across the room, as if pursuing invisible foes, sword in his right hand, then his left, then back again. Equally proficient with either hand.

Unfortunately, the sword reminded him of Gideon as well. Gideon possessed the blade's brother, a twin, both forged almost two hundred years ago from ore embedded in a meteor whose strike had been foretold by Silas, the most renowned prophet in the family.

Although he carried a blade equal to Gideon's, Barrett learned in San Diego that his skill as a swordsman was no match for Gideon's. When Barrett finally had his chance to prove himself, he'd frozen. True, he'd been pinned beneath hundreds of pounds of lumber in the warehouse when the rift closed, but that was the result of his own hesitation, indecision and fear of the unknown.

With a sigh, Barrett laid down his sword, as if conceding he was unworthy.

He switched to gymnastics, performing back flips and bounding off walls to improve his ability to slip out of confined spaces, followed by splits and various yoga postures for flexibility.

An hour of weightlifting concluded his training. He'd worked all his muscle groups until he ached equally everywhere.

It was the least he could do.

CHAPTER 9

Fallon caught Logan's arm and began to swoon at the moment of physical contact. "Whoa," she said breathlessly. "Does that ever stop happening?"

"You get used to it."

"Really?"

"No," Logan said before shrugging in a slight concession.

"Maybe. About as much as you get used to static shocks."

"Oh." Fallon frowned. "Well, at least it's a pleasant sensation. I mean, as opposed to static shocks."

"Could be worse."

"Actually, I don't mind it a bit," she said, grinning. "But it *is* distracting."

"Sorry."

"That's okay," Fallon said. "Nothing you can do to control it. Is there?"

"No. Though I haven't had many occasions to try. As I mentioned, the phenomenon is rare."

"But you wouldn't mind a little experimentation, right?"

He smiled. "Who wouldn't?"

"Moving on, then," Fallon said. "Tell me how your family stops these bad things from happening? No—wait! First tell me what the bad things are. I mean, how bad is bad? Are we talking about car accidents? Bank robberies? Toxic waste dumping? Poodle-napping?"

"Poodle-napping?"

"God, this is too confusing."

"Sometimes," Logan said and winced. He took another step, then stumbled, grimacing in pain as his stomach performed the equivalent of a psychic somersault. He felt Fallon's hand touch his shoulder and

wondered if she was consciously avoiding flesh-to-flesh contact this time. "I'm... okay."

"Not blind here, Logan. You look like hell."

"Trust me," he said. "Hell would be worse."

"Would it help if you put your head between your knees?"

"Doubt it," Logan groaned.

"Sit down, then." After a quick nod of agreement, Logan let her guide him to the curb, where he sat with his head hanging, forearms dangling over his knees. "Do you have an ulcer?"

"Someday soon," he mumbled.

"What?"

Before he could answer, a young woman's voice called, "Hey, Fallon! Miss the bus?"

"Hi, Chelsea. No, we decided to walk today. Not like those buses are air conditioned."

Logan looked up, gritting his teeth as a fresh wave of nausea assaulted him. A young woman on a hybrid bike veered toward them. Her tiger-striped bike helmet caught his attention before he realized something was wrong.

"True," Chelsea said. "Who's your friend?"

"—Oh, God," Logan groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. *Christ, she's dead!*

"Logan?" Fallon said. "Is it worse? What's wrong?"

Her flesh is hanging off her face, Logan wanted to scream. I can see her fucking skull is what's wrong! Bile surged up his throat, burning his esophagus.

Chelsea's rubber-soled Skechers slapped down on the asphalt, but Logan heard only the rattle of bones. Something close to a whimper escaped his lips. *I hate this—hate this!—shit!*

"Chelsea, you have a cell phone?"

"Not on me."

"Then ride home," Fallon said urgently. "Call a doctor! An ambulance!"

"Right," Chelsea said nervously. "No problem."

She pushed off

Unbidden, tears leaked from Logan's clenched eyes. It always came back to the dark truth he couldn't ignore. No matter how bad it was for him, it would be so much worse for... "No!" Logan gasped, rising to his feet, pale and trembling. He had trouble making eye contact with her,

afraid of what would be staring back at him. “No doctor. I’m fine. I’m...”

Confused, Chelsea looked to Fallon, who frowned. “It’s okay, I’ll call—”

“You’re not listening!” Logan yelled, catching the handlebars of her bike. “I don’t want a *fucking* doctor.” He forced himself to look at her face... and it was a face, an intact face, not a bloody, ravaged skull. He registered dirty-blond hair, brown eyes, a spray of freckles across the bridge of a long nose, and thin, trembling lips. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she said quietly, then wrenched her handlebars from his weakened grip. Two revolutions of her tires later, she glanced over her shoulder and called, “If you ask me, you need medication.”

Not her fault, not her fault, Logan chided himself. *She’s a victim—will be a victim*. He staggered a few steps after her. “Wait, I’m sorry.”

“Asshole,” she yelled, pedaling faster.

“Damn it,” Logan said, shaking his head. “We have to follow her?”

“Are you nuts?” Fallon said. “She’ll call the police.”

“They can’t help her.”

“Shit, you *are* nuts!” Fallon tossed her hands in the air. “I’m walking home with a psychopath.”

Logan ran his hands through his hair. “Damn it,” he whispered again. “Damn, damn, damn!” He started to run after the bike, hoping only to keep her in sight, but he was losing ground fast. He dropped the backpacks in the middle of the street.

“Hey!”

Logan pulled up short, paused for a moment, then walked back toward Fallon.

“Never mind,” Fallon said, backing away from him, hands upraised. “Forget I said anything. Have your psychotic break without me.”

“You know where she lives, right?”

“Sure, but I—no!” Fallon shook her head. “Ain’t gonna happen, pal. I won’t be your accomplice.”

“Fallon...”

She stopped backing away, realization dawning. “It happened back there, didn’t it? Your...bad vibes.”

Logan’s shoulders slumped. He nodded. “It’s getting worse.”

“You saw something,” Fallon guessed. “When you looked at Chelsea.” Logan nodded. Fallon gulped, carefully weighing her next question. “What did you see?”

“You really want to know?”

“Chelsea’s a friend,” Fallon said. “You have to tell me.”

“No,” Logan said, bending down to grab the backpacks by their padded straps. “I can spare you.”

“I don’t want to be spared!”

“She’s...” Logan looked away from her intense gaze. “She died... *will* die, violently, unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless I stop it?”

“This is what you were talking about?”

“Yeah.” Logan became distracted, looking up and down the street, along the sidewalks and lawns, up the sides of houses.

“What are you looking for?”

“The darkness,” Logan said absently. “Any sign of the rift.” He shook his head. “I hate this. Never knowing...”

“What?”

“Wrong question,” Logan said with a bitter smirk. “The right question is ‘When?’ That’s what I never know. Could be three days from now... or it could already be too late.”

“She was fine a few minutes ago.”

“Things can change”—Logan snapped his fingers—“like that.”

“So what are you—are *we* gonna do?”

“Call for reinforcements.”

Logan shoved a hand into a side pouch on his backpack and removed his cell phone. He already had the new Walker home number on speed dial. Liana answered on the third ring. “I saw something,” Logan said without preamble. “Better send Barrett.”