

PRAISE FOR THE  
**BEAUTIFUL CREATURES**  
NOVELS

*BEAUTIFUL CREATURES* ♦ *BEAUTIFUL DARKNESS*  
*BEAUTIFUL CHAOS* ♦ *BEAUTIFUL REDEMPTION*

“**Smart** plot and writing.”  
—*Teen Vogue*

“In the **Gothic** tradition of Anne Rice... Give this to fans of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* or HBO’s *True Blood* series.”  
—*SLJ*

★“The authors ground their Caster world in the concrete, skillfully juxtaposing the arcane, **magical** world with Gatlin’s normal southern lifestyle... [Fans will] plead for more.”  
—*VOYA* (starred review)

“A **lush** Southern gothic.”  
—**HOLLY BLACK**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Tithe: A Modern Faerie Tale* and *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown*

“**Magical, breathless.**”  
—*Just Jared Jr.*

“A southern **Gothic** tale...about self-empowerment.”  
—*New York* magazine



# DANGEROUS CREATURES



# DANGEROUS CREATURES

BY  
KAMI GARCIA &  
MARGARET STOHL



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
New York • Boston

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2014 by Kami Garcia, LLC, and Margaret Stohl, Inc.  
Excerpt from *Dangerous Deception* copyright © 2015 by Kami Garcia, LLC,  
and Margaret Stohl, Inc.

Excerpt from *Icons* copyright © 2013 by Margaret Stohl, Inc.  
Excerpt from *Unbreakable* copyright © 2013 by Kami Garcia, LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at [permissions@hbgusa.com](mailto:permissions@hbgusa.com). Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group  
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104  
Visit us at [lb-teens.com](http://lb-teens.com)

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.  
The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

First Paperback Edition: April 2015  
First published in hardcover in May 2014 by Little, Brown and Company

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Garcia, Kami, author.  
*Dangerous creatures* / by Kami Garcia & Margaret Stohl.  
pages cm

Summary: "Siren Ridley and her rocker boyfriend Link move to New York City to make it big with their supernatural band mates in Sirensong, but Caster trouble follows them in the form of Abraham Ravenwood's son Silas, who is looking to avenge his father's death"—  
Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-316-37031-8 (hc) — ISBN 978-0-316-37032-5 (pb) [1. Supernatural—Fiction.  
2. Sirens (Mythology)—Fiction. 3. Rock groups—Fiction. 4. Love—Fiction.] I. Stohl,  
Margaret, author. II. Title.

PZ7.G155627Dan 2014 [Fic]—dc23 2013048080

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

RRD-C

Printed in the United States of America

*For Link and Ridley,  
because we knew there  
was more to their story—  
and for our readers,  
because they asked to read it.*







*Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris?  
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*

I hate and I love. You ask why I do this?  
I do not know, but I feel and I am tormented.

— CATULLUS



✦ BEFORE ✦

## *Ridley*

There are only two kinds of Mortals in the backwater town of Gatlin, South Carolina—the stupid and the stuck. At least, that’s what they say.

As if there are other kinds of Mortals anywhere else.

*Please.*

Luckily, there’s only one kind of Siren, no matter where you go in this world or the Otherworld.

Stuck, no.

Stuck-*up*? Maybe.

Stupid?

It’s all a matter of perspective. Here’s mine: I’ve been called a lot of things, but what I really am is a survivor—and while there are more than a few stupid Sirens, there are zero stupid survivors.

Consider my record. I outlasted some of the Darkest Casters

and creatures alive. I withstood whole *months* of Stonewall Jackson High School. Beyond that, I survived a thousand terrible love songs written by one Wesley Lincoln, a clueless Mortal boy who became an equally clueless quarter Incubus. And who, by the way, is not the most gifted musician.

For a while, I survived wanting to write him a love song of my own.

That was harder.

This Siren gig is meant to be a one-way street. Ask Odysseus and two thousand years' worth of dead sailors if you don't believe me.

We didn't choose for it to be that way. It's the hand we were dealt, and you won't hear me whining about it. I'm not my cousin Lena.

Let's get something straight: I'm *supposed* to be the bad guy. I will always disappoint you. Your parents will hate me. You should not root for me. I am not your role model.

I don't know why everyone seems to forget that. I never do.

No matter what she says, Lena was meant to be Light. I was meant to be Dark. Respect the teams, people. At least learn the rules.

My own parents disowned me after the Dark Claimed me as a Siren on my Sixteenth Moon. Since then, nothing rattles me—nothing and no one.

I always knew my incarceration in the sanitarium that my Uncle Macon called Ravenwood Manor was a temporary pit stop on the way to *bigger* and *better*, my two favorite words. Actually, that's a lie.

My two favorite words are my name, *Ridley Duchannes*.

Why wouldn't they be?

Sure, Lena gets the credit for being the most powerful Caster of all time.

Whatever. It doesn't make *me* any less excellent. Neither does her too-good-to-be-true Mortal boyfriend, Ethan "the Wayward" Wate, who defeats Darkness in the name of true love every day of the week.

So what?

I was never going for perfect. I think that should be clear by now.

I've done my part, played my hand, even thrown in my cards when I had to. I've bet what I didn't have and bluffed until I had it. Link once said: *Ridley Duchannes is always playing a game*. I never told him, but he was right.

What's so bad about that? I always knew I'd rather play than watch from the sidelines.

Except once.

There was one game I regretted. At least, one that I regretted losing. And one Dark Caster I regretted losing to.

Lennox Gates.

Two markers. That's all I owed him, and it was enough to change everything. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It all started long before that. There were blood debts to be paid—though this time it wasn't up to my cousin and her boyfriend to pay them.

Ethan and Lena? Liv and John? Macon and Marian? This wasn't about them anymore.

This was about Link and me.

I should've known we wouldn't get off easy. No Caster goes

down without a fight, even when you think the fight is over. No Caster lets you ride off into the sunset on some lame white unicorn or in your boyfriend's beat-up excuse for a car.

What's a Caster fairy-tale ending?

I don't know, because Casters don't get to have fairy tales—especially not Dark Casters. Forget the sunset—the whole castle burns to the ground, taking Prince Charming down with it. Then the seven dwarves go all ninja and drop-kick your butt straight out of the kingdom.

That's what a Dark Caster fairy tale looks like.

What can I say? Payback's a bitch.

But here's the thing:

So am I.

❖ CHAPTER 1 ❖

## *Home Sweet Home*

It was their last night of summer, their last night of freedom, their last night of being frozen in time together in Gatlin, South Carolina—and technically speaking, Ridley Duchannes and Wesley Lincoln were in a fight.

*When are we ever not?* Ridley wondered. But this wasn't just any fight. It was the knockdown, drag-out, mother-of-all supernatural takedowns—*Siren Predator versus Hybrid Incubus Alien*. That was what Link had called it, behind her back. Which was about the same as saying it to her face, at least in Gatlin.

It had started right after graduation, and three months later, it was still going strong. Not that you'd know from looking at them.

If Link and Ridley openly admitted that they were still fighting, it would mean openly admitting that they still cared. If they

openly admitted that they still cared, it would mean openly admitting to things like feelings. Feelings implied all sorts of gushy, messy, fuzzy complications.

Feelings were how they'd gotten into this fight in the first place.  
*Disgusting.*

Ridley would rather have Link stab her through the heart with a pair of gardening shears than admit to any of those things. She'd rather fall on her face like Abraham Ravenwood did, in His Garden of Perpetual Peace, drawing his last breath unloved and alone—a far fall for the most powerful Blood Incubus in the Caster world.

At least Ridley understood Abraham Ravenwood. She was an expert on being unloved and alone.

Worshipped and obeyed? Great. Feared and hated? She'd take it.

But loved and together? That was harder.

That was Lena's territory.

So Ridley wasn't about to admit that she and Link were still fighting. Not tonight, or any other night. You couldn't hit one relationship domino without toppling all the others. And if they couldn't discuss whether they were in a fight, she didn't even want to *think* about what else might come toppling down.

It wasn't worth the risk.

Which was the reason Ridley didn't mention anything she was thinking as she trudged through Gatlin's stickiest marsh, heading for Lake Moultrie in her mile-high snakeskin platforms.

"I should have worn kitten heels," Rid lamented.

"Pretty sure kittens don't have heels." Link grinned.

Rid had caved and asked him for a ride to the stupid farewell party her cousin had organized. It was the first time the two



of them had been alone together for longer than five minutes, ever since that night at the beginning of the summer when Link made the mistake of telling Rid he loved her at the Dar-ee Keen.

“Meow,” Ridley said, annoyed.

Link looked amused. “I don’t really think a you as a cat person, Rid.”

“I love cats,” she said, wrenching one foot out of a patch of drying mud. “Half my closet is leopard.” Her shoe made a gross sucking sound that reminded Ridley of her little sister, Ryan, slurping on an ICEE.

“And the rest is leather, Greenpeace.” Link’s spiky hair stood straight up, as usual—more bed head than boy band. But you could see what he was going for. His faded T-shirt said GRANNY BROKE BOTH HIPSTERS, and the chain hanging from his wallet made him sound like a puppy on a leash. In other words, Link looked like he’d looked every day of his life, hybrid Incubus or not. Gaining supernatural powers had done nothing to improve his sense of style.

*Just like the boy I fell for, Ridley thought. Even if everything else between us is different.*

She yanked her foot up out of the muck again and went toppling over backward. Link caught her on her way to a full-body mud bath. Before Rid could say a word, he hoisted her over his shoulder and bounded across the marsh, all the way to the edge of the lake.

“Put me down.” Rid squirmed, tugging her miniskirt back into place.

“Fine. You’re a real brat sometimes.” Link laughed. “Want me to put you down again? ’Cause I gotta whole lotta blond jokes...”

“Oh my god, stop it—” She hit his back, kneeing his chest in the process, but deep down, she didn’t mind the ride. Or the jokes. Or the superstrength. There were some perks to having a quarter Incubus for an ex-boyfriend. Hanging upside down wasn’t one of them, though, and Rid tried to push her way back upright in his arms.

Lena waved them over from her spot at the campsite, a make-shift fire pit at the water’s edge. Macon’s massive black dog, Boo Radley, was curled at her feet. Ethan and John were still working on the fire itself, the Mortal way, under Liv’s direction—not that she’d ever made a fire before. Which was probably why it was still only smoking.

“Hey, Rid.” Lena smiled. “Nice ride.”

“I have a name,” Link said, holding Ridley with one arm.

“Hey, Link.” Lena’s black curls were pulled up into a loose knot, and her familiar charm necklace hung from her neck. Even her old black Chucks never changed. Ridley noticed that the ornament from Lena’s graduation had already joined her charm collection. *Meaningless Mortal ceremonies*. Rid smirked at the memory of Emily Asher’s diploma turning into a live snake, right as Emily shook Principal Harper’s hand. *Some of my better work*, Ridley thought. *Nothing like a few snakes to end a boring graduation, and fast*. But Lena looked a thousand times happier now that Ethan was back.

“Down. Now.” Ridley gave Link one last kick for good measure.

Link dumped Ridley back on her feet, grinning. “Don’t ever say I didn’t do anything for you.”

“Aw, Shrinky Dink. If it’s the thought that counts, you didn’t.” She smiled sweetly back at him. She reached up and patted his head. “That thing’s like an air mattress.”

“My mom says balloon.” Link was unfazed.

“Pound it, Pudding Head.” Ethan dropped a last log on the smoking pile of sticks. He bumped fists with Link.

Liv sighed. “There’s plenty of oxygen going to all the logs. I used a classic tepee structure. Unless the laws of physics have changed, I don’t know why—”

“Do we have to do this the Mortal way?” Ethan looked at Lena.

She nodded. “More fun.”

John struck another match. “For who?”

Ridley held up her hand. “Hold on. That sounds like camping. Is this camping? Am I *camping*?”

Link moved across the fire pit. “You may not know this, but Rid is not a happy camper.”

“Sit.” Lena gave her the Look. “Because I’m about to make you all very happy. Camping or not.” She fluttered her fingers, and the fire ignited.

“Are you kidding me?” Liv looked from Lena to the crackling fire, insulted, while the boys laughed.

“You want me to put it out?” Lena raised an eyebrow. Liv sighed but reached for the marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers. Between her love of snack foods, her faded Grateful Dead T-shirts, and her messy braids, Liv seemed like she should be heading back to high school, not college. Once Liv opened her mouth, though, she seemed like she should be one of the professors.

“I’d pay serious money to see Rid campin’ for real.” Link flopped down next to Ethan.

“Your allowance isn’t serious enough to get me to go camping, Shrinky Dink.” Rid tried to figure out a way to sit down on

a stone near the fire pit without ripping the thin black spandex skirt she was rocking.

“Havin’ a little trouble with your nano-skirt, there?” Link patted the makeshift seat next to him.

“No.” Ridley twirled the pink stripe in her hair. Lena speared a marshmallow on a stick, laughing as Ridley took another pass at sitting on the rock.

“Can’t rest your dogs while you’re strapped in that butt Band-Aid?” Link was enjoying himself.

Ridley was not. “It’s a micro-mini. From Miu Miu. And what would you know? You can’t even dress a salad.”

“I’ve got my own kind of flair, Babe. And I don’t need to buy mine at Meow Meow.”

Ridley gave up on the rock, squatting instead at the edge of a log just down from Link. “Flair? You? You wash your face with shampoo and brush your teeth with a washcloth.”

“What’s your point?” Link raised an eyebrow.

Lena looked up. “Enough. Don’t tell me you two are still going at it. This has to be some kind of record, even for you.” She waved her stick and her marshmallow caught on fire.

“I mean, if you’re referring to that one night—” Rid began.

“It was more of a conversation,” Link said. “And she did blow me off—”

“I said I was sorry,” Rid countered. “But you know what they say. Once a Mortal...”

Link snorted. “Mortal? I wouldn’t believe a Siren if she—”

Lena held up her hand. “I said not to tell me.” Ridley and Link looked away from each other, embarrassed.

“It’s all good,” Link said stiffly.

“Camping.” Ridley changed the subject.

Lena shook her head. “No, this is not camping. This is...I don’t actually know the verb for it. S’moring?” Lena caught a glop of brown and white goo between two graham crackers, shoving the whole thing into Ethan’s mouth.

Ethan made a sound like he was trying to say something, but he couldn’t open his mouth enough to make any actual words.

“I take it you like my s’moring?” Lena smiled at him.

Ethan nodded. Tonight, in his oldest Harley-Davidson T-shirt and ratty jeans, he looked the same as he had the day Ridley first met him, after basketball practice at the Stop & Steal. Which was crazy, if you thought about everything that had happened to him since then. *The things that boy has been through in the name of my cousin. And people think Sirens are hard on the opposite sex. He’d do anything for her.*

A little voice in Ridley’s head pointed out the obvious: *Loved and together is the opposite of unloved and alone.* Ridley could barely stand to watch a relationship that functional.

She shuddered and shook her head, recovering. “S’moring? Don’t you mean snoring? Because this is no way to spend our last night together. There are enemies to be made. Laws to be broken. Cheerleaders to—”

“Not tonight.” Lena shook her head, spearing another marshmallow.

Rid gave up, grabbing a bag of chocolate bars to console herself. Sirens loved their sugar, especially this one.

“Speak for yourself. I think this is brilliant,” said Liv, stuffing her face with a gooey chocolate-marshmallow-graham cracker mess. “Melted chocolate and warm marshmallow coming together as one—on the same graham cracker? That’s democracy at its best. This is why I love America. S’mores.”

“Is that the only reason?” John nudged her.

“The only reason? Yes. No,” Liv teased, licking a finger. “S’mores, the Dar-ee Keen, and the CW.” She shot him a playful look and he smiled, tossing a marshmallow into Boo Radley’s open mouth. Boo thumped his tail appreciatively.



Twenty-five marshmallows later, Boo was a little less appreciative and the fire was burning down to embers, but the night was far from over.

“See? No tears. No good-byes,” Lena said, breaking up the ash with her burnt-black stick. “And when we go, no one is allowed to say anything you’d read in a cheesy greeting card.”

Ethan drew his arm around her. Lena was trying, but all the sugar in the world wasn’t going to make this good-bye go down any easier.

Not for the six of them.

Ridley made a face. “If you want to boss people around, Cuz, start a sorority.” She rummaged through a bag of empty chocolate wrappers. “It’s our last night together. So what? Accept it and move on. Tough love, people.” Ridley talked a good game, but deep down she knew her own tough love wasn’t all that much tougher than her cousin’s marshmallow meltdown.

They just had different ways of showing it.

Lena grew still, gazing into the dying fire. “I can’t.” She shook her head. “I’ve left too many people behind too many times. I won’t do it again. Not to you guys. I don’t want everything to change.” She reached for Boo, burying her hands deep in his dark fur. His head dropped down to his paws.

The six friends fell silent, until only the crackling remnants of the campfire could be heard.

Ridley was uncomfortable with the silence, but more uncomfortable with all the feelings talk that had preceded it, so she kept her mouth shut.

It was finally Link who spoke up. "Yeah, well, change happens. I used to really love these things," he said, squeezing a marshmallow between his fingers. He shoved John, who was sitting on a rock between Link and Liv. "Dude. When you turned me into an Incubus, you shoulda warned me about the whole we-don't-need-to-eat-and-everything-tastes-like-crap thing. I would've eaten a bunch a stuff for my last meal."

John held up a fist. "You're only a quarter Incubus, you big stud, and I did you a favor. No one would've ever called you a big stud if you'd kept eating those things."

"No one calls him that now," Ethan said.

"What are you saying?" Link was indignant.

"I'm saying, you used to be kinda sorry, Stay Puft, and now the chicks are lining up. You're welcome." John sat back.

"Oh, please," Ridley said. "As if his head could get any bigger."

"That's not the only thing that's bigger." Link winked, and everyone groaned. Ridley rolled her eyes, but he didn't care. "Oh, come on. Like you didn't see that one comin'."

Lena sat up straight, looking over the fire at the faces of her five closest friends in the world.

"All right. Forget this. Forget good-bye. So what if we're going to college tomorrow?" Lena glanced at Ethan.

"And England." Liv sighed, taking John's hand.

"And Hell," Link added, "if you ask my mother."

“Which no one is,” Rid said.

“What I mean is, we don’t have to do this the Mortal way,” Lena said. Ethan stared at her strangely, but Lena kept going. “Let’s make a pact instead.”

“Just no blood oaths,” John said. “Which would be the Blood Incubus way.”

Link perked up at the thought. “Is that another camp thing? ’Cause we definitely didn’t get to do that at church camp.”

Lena shook her head. “Not blood.”

“Maybe like a spit promise?” Link looked hopeful.

“Eww,” Rid said, shoving him off his log.

“Not a spit promise.” Lena leaned in, holding her hand over the fire. The flames reflected against her palm, turning orange and red and even blue.

Rid shivered. Her cousin was up to something, and with powers as unpredictable as Lena’s, that wasn’t always a good idea.

The embers glowed under Lena’s fingertips. “We need to mark this occasion with something a little stronger than s’mores. We don’t need to say good-bye. We just need a Cast.”



❖ CHAPTER 2 ❖

## *Symptom of the Universe*

The six friends had talked circles around the idea, until the moon had risen and the fire had all but died, and even then Link wasn't really sure what was going on.

*They're just feeling low, he thought. Don't think there's a Cast for that.* Still, he wasn't going to be the one to break the news. If Lena and Liv wanted to pretend there was something anyone could do to change the fact that they were all getting the hell out of Gatlin tomorrow, Link wasn't going to pop that bubble. He'd learned to stay out of the way when it came to Casters and their Casts.

"Here's what we want: something that says that no matter where we go, no matter what we do, we will always, always be there for each other." Lena nudged Ethan in the moonlight. "Right?"

“Do you really have to ask?” Ethan mumbled, sleepily nuzzling her neck. “We don’t need a Cast for that.”

“Anywhere? Even across an ocean?” Liv asked, squeezing John’s hand.

Link looked away. It was a long-established fact that John was basically following Liv halfway across the world like a whipped dog so Liv could finish studying at Oxford while completing her Keeper training. It was nothing like what Link had ever had with Rid, even back when they did have something.

But tonight John and Liv were happy as clams because they were staying together, while you couldn’t chisel Ethan and Lena apart with a spatula the size of Link’s Beater. They were headed to schools in the same state but different cities; that was the compromise they had reached with their families. Link couldn’t even remember the names, though he’d pretended to listen to a thousand conversations about them—the schools, their dorms, their reading lists. *Blah, blah, blah.* All he knew was they’d be at rival schools in sleepy old towns up in Massachusetts (or Michigan, or maybe Minnesota—heck, what was the difference?) ninety minutes apart. *You would think it was nine hundred miles, the way they’re acting.*

*Whipped as Thanksgiving potatoes.*

Still, Link smiled at the sweet stupidity of it all. Who was he to judge? If anybody had a shot, it was Ethan and Lena. Even John and Liv had managed to keep it together. It was only Link and Ridley who were Gatlin’s biggest basket case of a relationship.

*Ex-relationship*, he reminded himself.

“Nothing’s going to change.” Lena’s tone turned serious.

“We won’t let it. We’ve been through enough together to know that the people you care about are the only thing that matters.”

Link caught Ridley’s eye in the flickering firelight, in spite of everything. Ridley looked away, pretending to listen to what Lena was saying, as if she cared. *Anything to ignore me*, Link thought. *That’s her trick, same as always, and she still thinks I don’t know what she’s up to.*

*Just like the old days.*

“So, you think a Cast will keep us together?” Ridley asked, pretending to listen. “Can’t we just, I don’t know, send postcards?”

Lena ignored her. “Maybe Marian would have an idea.”

“Or maybe she wouldn’t. Because it’s a bad idea,” Ridley said.

“No, wait. I think I’ve got it.” Liv’s braids were coming undone, and she sounded exhausted. But the sparks in her eyes burned as bright as the remnants of the campfire. “A Binding Cast. It’s how Ravenwood protects itself and keeps those who would do harm out, right? Binds a person to a place? Couldn’t it also Bind six people together? Theoretically.”

Lena shrugged. “A Binding Cast for people? It could work. I can’t think of a reason why it wouldn’t.”

Link scratched his head. “Work how? Like, our hands are permanently stuck together in a group hug? Or like, we can read each other’s minds? Can you get a little more specific?” *Not that I’d mind being Bound to Rid*, he thought. *At least, it wouldn’t suck.*

Lena stared into the glowing embers. “Who knows? We’re kind of winging it here. There aren’t a whole lot of Casts about Binding people.”

“Or, you know. Any.” Ridley sighed. “So why am I the only person who thinks we should get out the peach schnapps and go bowling instead?” No takers. “How about breakfast, then?”

Link kicked a clod of dirt toward the fire. When had Rid gotten so worried about using her powers? She’d been like that ever since the summer. Skittish as a new pup, and about as nervous.

“This isn’t black magic, Rid,” Lena said. “If we do something wrong, we’ll undo it.”

“When have those words ever *not* come back to haunt you?” Ridley shook her head at her cousin.

“Nothing big,” Lena said. “Just a little something so we don’t forget about each other. Like a Forget-Me-Not. A memento. I could do it in my sleep.”

Rid raised an eyebrow. “Someone’s gotten a little cocky since she brought Boyfriend back from the dead.”

Lena ignored the dig and held out her hand to Ridley. “Everyone join hands.”

Ridley sighed and took Lena’s hand, also taking Link’s warm and sweaty one.

He grinned and gave her a squeeze. “Is this gonna be kinky? Please let this be kinky.”

“Please let you shut up,” said Rid. But it was hard not to smile, and she had to make an effort to keep her bratty expression in place.

John took Liv’s hand, and Liv took Link’s. Ethan grabbed hands with John and Lena to complete the circle.

Lena closed her eyes and began to speak in a low tone. “*There is a time beyond mountains and men—*”

“Is that it?” Link asked. “The Cast? Or are you just makin’ it up? Because I thought all your Casts were in Lat—”

Lena opened her eyes and glared, one green eye and one gold flashing in the remaining firelight. Link's mouth shut and his voice was silenced for him, Caster-style. Link swallowed, hard. Lena might as well have slapped duct tape across his face.

He got the message.

Then she closed her eyes again. As she spoke, Link could almost see the words on the page, as if a scroll had opened itself for them.

*“There is a time beyond mountains and men  
When our six-faced moon must rise.  
If you call for me, I will come to you then,  
And our six-headed horse will ride.  
Though Sixteen Moons began our thread,  
And Nineteen Moons must end us,  
Let us always be Bound by the Southern Star,  
And when in grave danger—  
Send us.”*

Lightning flashed in the sky, ripping across the dark clouds and reflecting in the still surface of the lake. Boo growled.

A shiver rolled through all six of them—like a cold current coming from the lake itself—and they dropped hands, as if some invisible force had ripped them apart.

The circle was broken.

Link tried his voice and found to his relief that he could use it. Which was good, since he had something to say.

“Sweet buckets of crap! What was that?” Link opened his eyes. “‘Grave danger’? And ‘send us’? Send us where? What are you talkin’ about?” His voice was raspy, as if he’d just been yelling.

Lena looked uncomfortable. “Those are just the words that came to me.”

John sat up on his rock. “Wait, what?”

Lena squirmed. “I wasn’t expecting the danger part. But it’s all good, right?” She frowned as soon as she said it. “I guess it doesn’t sound that great, does it?”

“You think?” Ridley tried another position on her hard log seat. She didn’t look happy.

“Could it be an omen?” Liv’s face clouded. “A warning or a threat about something that’s going to end us?”

Lena shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s meant to be whatever it is. I mean, it’s just what came out when I tried to focus on the Binding.”

That was when Link lost it. “What do you mean, that’s what came out? How could you work a Cast without knowin’ what you’re Castin’? What if it’s somethin’ really bad? Because Lord knows that’s never happened to us before!”

Ethan punched Link’s arm. “Chill out, Mrs. Lincoln.”

Link shot him a dirty look, which Ethan deserved. It was basically the meanest thing you could say to Link.

Still.

*Get control of yourself, dude.*

“Lena knows what she’s doing.” Ridley tried to sound confident.

*If she says it enough times, maybe it will be true,* Link thought.

“Ridley’s right. It’s fine. Everything’s okay. No one panic.” But Liv didn’t look like she believed a word she was saying.

Lena didn’t look all that relieved, either. “Well, we should be Bound now. See? Something’s happening.” She motioned to the fire.

There, beneath the rising mound of gray ash and log, was a strange pulsing light. Lena leaned forward, blowing away the ash.

What remained were six glowing blue lumps of burning ember.

“Beautiful,” Liv said.

As everyone watched, the lumps—more like orbs—rose into the air, spinning and hovering above the flames. Boo whined at Lena’s feet.

“Whoa,” Link said.

Lena reached forward with a finger, closer and still closer, until the blue orbs burst into a shower of sparks and vanished.

“Is that it? The finale?” Ethan studied the dying embers.

“I don’t know.” Lena grabbed a stick and poked tentatively at the ash.

“Look. It’s still sparking.” Liv leaned closer.

Lena dug in the hot ash with her fingers. “There.” She held something up. “Six of them. One for each of us.”

“What is that thing?” Ethan was staring. Everyone was. It wasn’t an everyday sight, not in Gatlin County or the whole Mortal world. There was a tiny ring in Lena’s hand, delicate and translucent. If you looked at it from a distance, it resembled some sort of delicately blown glass.

Lena slipped the ring on her finger. It fit perfectly, and the light inside it flared brightly and then died out.

“Go on. It won’t hurt you.” She stared at her finger as she spoke.

Ethan reached for a ring, then paused. “You think.”

“I *know*,” Lena said. “The whole point of a Binding Cast is protection.” She didn’t sound sure.

Ethan took a breath and slipped a ring on his finger. John followed suit, then Liv.

Rid slowly did the same.

Five rings were on five fingers. The sixth just sat there, glowing in the embers. Waiting.

“Hey, man.” Ethan elbowed Link. “Take it.”

“Give me a minute, Frodo. I gotta think about this.” Link ran his hand through his hair.

“Really? We’re going to start that now?” John shook his head.

But one look from Rid and the sixth ring went on before Link could say another word.



Personally, Ridley thought the whole ring thing was kind of stupid. She didn’t make Link wear his to please her cousin. To be honest, she didn’t remotely understand the concept of peer pressure that Mortals talked about all the time. *Who would ever do something because someone else wanted them to do it?* When someone wanted Ridley to do something, she almost automatically wanted to do the exact opposite.

Binding Rings included.

But given the brief history of her friends in Gatlin County, Ridley didn’t feel like taking any chances. Nobody could argue that lightning wouldn’t strike twice. Not for the Casters and Mortals of Gatlin County.

Not even Ridley.

If a stupid ring from a Natural would keep bad things from



happening, she'd wear it. She'd wear one on every finger if it helped her get out of the trouble she had gotten herself into this summer.

Everyone else was going off to start their future tomorrow. Ridley was going to try to undo her past.

❖ CHAPTER 3 ❖

## *Master of Puppets*

*In the shadows of the Underground, anything can look evil.*

That was what the guy standing on the edge of an ancient New York City subway platform thought. He was eighteen years old, and he still dreaded coming down here. He shook the unruly lengths of caramel-colored hair away from his gold-flecked eyes.

*It's impossible to know the difference between darkness and Darkness down here, even for a Dark Caster like me.*

And Lennox Gates was plenty Dark.

The pale girl sitting on the edge of the platform across the tracks from him was not plagued by the same philosophical questions. Slumping inside a fitted black leather jacket quilted in diagonal stripes, she looked like a futuristic criminal. Her hair was buzzed down to an inch, except for a stripe of spiky blue that ran down the center of her head. Only her baby face looked innocent.

*Dangerous, but innocent.*

Lennox thought about her future. He wished he hadn't seen it, but he couldn't stop himself from picking up on the things he did, every time he accidentally looked into a fireplace, a lit candle, or even a flickering lighter. Her future, like so many others, had come to him in bursts, like the flash on a camera, streaming a high-speed flood of information he couldn't control. He had seen anguish and guilt, blood and betrayal.

Love.

The Dark Caster Necromancer was in for a wild ride.

Leaning against one of the support beams, her eyes milky white and opaque instead of their normal Dark Caster gold, she didn't look conscious. He felt bad about their arrangement, though she'd agreed to the contract. It had been her idea to wipe it from her mind, for security reasons. Like so many Necromancers, she didn't want to know what she was saying or who was saying it. Though the girl wouldn't remember any of this, he would—every dull, wasted moment.

*Why did I have to inherit this mess, along with everything else they left me?*

The ring of candles surrounding her on three sides had burned down to waxy puddles. Spirals of smoke drifted up toward her blank face. Her legs dangled over the edge of the tracks, kicking involuntarily to an unknown rhythm.

*It's a good thing these tracks are abandoned. If a train came by, those legs would be cut from her body, Necromancer or not,* Lennox thought. As good as she was, she couldn't protect herself in this state. She relied on him, and he could never forget it.

*Occupational hazard of her job.*

He slid a cigar from the inside pocket of his black trench and considered it. He hated the smell of cigars—and the smell of this one in particular.

*Occupational hazard of mine.*

He stared at the cigar as if he wanted it to disappear—as if he wanted to disappear right along with it. But he couldn't. He was the last of his family line, and there was still work to be done, even if he didn't want any part of it.

*Do any of us really have control over our destinies? Maybe we're all just as helpless as little Mortals in the end.*

He heard a sound from across the tracks. The girl would wake up soon. No more time for self-pity.

Time for an offering.

So he held the cigar up in the air in front of him, raising his voice. “Barbadian. Your favorite. I'd give one to your *obeah* there, but I don't think she'd appreciate it.” He lit the cigar, letting the match burn out and drop onto the tracks. Nox didn't look directly at the flame, not even the burning cigar. Fire made him see things he didn't like to see. “I understand you want to talk. Here I am. What do you want from me?”

He looked over at the girl across the tracks.

She was still comatose, but she raised her head when the cigar smoke reached her, and her mouth opened like a puppet's. The voice that came out belonged to an old man—low and gravelly, with a distinct Southern accent. “What I want is to avenge my family's honor. For my blood debt to be paid.”

*His blood debt? After all the blood he's shed?*

Lennox tried to keep the rage out of his voice. “Some people say the ones who are to blame have paid over and over again.

Even their friends have paid. Your family got what was coming to them. At least, you did.”

“Accordin’ to who?” The girl’s face twisted into a sneer.

“Me,” Lennox said coldly.

“Think again, boy.”

*Careful*, Lennox thought. *He might be dead, but he’s still dangerous.*

Lennox shook his head at the possessed girl. “I did what you asked. I set certain events in motion. I’m knee-deep in a pile of bones and moldering bodies, as Homer would say.” He knocked the ash from the cigar without ever touching it to his lips. “I’m glad my mother isn’t here to see it.”

“I wouldn’t worry yourself. Your mamma never gave a thought to what you did.”

Lennox snapped. “She didn’t have a chance. You made sure of that.” *When you tortured her.*

“I make sure of everythin’.” The girl took a moment to savor the smoke, and smiled cruelly. “Your job isn’t close to done.”

Lennox wanted to hurl the cigar at her.

*At him.*

“The Wheel of Fate crushes us all. Isn’t that what they say, old man?” Lennox shook his head. “That’s a dangerous business. Messing with so many people’s fates at once. Are you sure it’s worth it?”

“Don’t be a coward, like your father,” the girl muttered. “I will have my vengeance.”

Lennox only smiled. “So you’ve said.” *My father should’ve killed you when he had the chance.*

“What you grinnin’ at, boy?” The girl snarled at him from

across the darkness. “Until I find my rest, you won’t have any peace, either.”

Lennox waved the cigar in the air between them. “I’m glad we’re moving on to the threats. I was starting to feel slighted.”

“Not just a threat. A promise. I’ll see to it myself. That, and a whole lot more.”

The Dark Caster cocked an eyebrow. “No wonder I turned out to be a model citizen. Considering I was raised in such a loving community.”

“You are not my blood.” The animated girl spat.

“Thank god for that.” Lennox was tired of the old man. Even death hadn’t lifted the burden of his presence. “Why don’t you move on already? Cross over? You spent a lifetime exacting revenge on everyone you ever met. Aren’t you bored yet?”

“I’m not goin’ anywhere, boy.” She growled. “I want them all gone. Not just the hand that drove the blade. Not just the traitor who led me there. Everyone who got them to that point, to that hour of that day.”

“All of them?”

“Every last one. You hearin’ straight? Because I want to be perfectly clear. You. Kill them. For me.”

Lennox stared down the tracks. There was nothing but darkness.

What choice did he have, really?

When it came right down to it, there was only one answer. There was always only one answer. He sighed. “I’ll do what I can.”

The words sounded strange in his mouth, as if someone else was saying them.

“I take it that’s a yes?”

“If only in the name of family honor.”

The Necromancer smiled, raising her hands. “My family thanks you.”

Lennox looked repulsed. “I meant mine, not yours. Don’t flatter yourself.”

“But our families were so *close*, Lennox.” The voice echoed through the Tunnel. “Almost hard to tell where the one ended and the other began.”

*Not for me*, thought Lennox.

He tossed the empty matchbook down to the tracks. Six letters were printed on the crimson cover. One word.

SIRENE.

Above the tracks, the girl slumped to the ground like a rag doll. The old man was gone. As many times as he’d seen it, Lennox was still unsettled. He waited just long enough to make sure his Necromancer was coming out of it.

She would be sick in the morning. Sick, and stinking of cigars. He’d have to work harder to make her forget this one. Maybe put a little something extra in her paycheck. It wasn’t her fault she was particularly good at communicating with dead psychopaths, but it was one of the reasons she was so valuable.

*Another occupational hazard.*

Lennox walked away, disappearing into the deeper dark. There was always more darkness waiting for him. He’d lived his whole life in the shadow.

He couldn’t help but spread it around.

❖ CHAPTER 4 ❖

*Learning to Fly*

By the time the last burnt marshmallow dropped into the fire, no Mortal or Caster was still awake to see it. The two hybrid Incubuses watched in protective silence as their four friends slept around the campsite.

Ridley could hear them murmuring as she drifted off to sleep. Her last waking thought was of Link, just to know he was there.

Like the old days.

After that, Ridley's dreams were filled with old memories. She wasn't thinking of good-byes or boys or rings coming from the embers. She couldn't know that plans much more dangerous than any fire—and infinitely stickier than any marshmallow—had already been set in motion.

How could she?

Instead, she slept on, dreaming of things that were far eerier than a ring. Even eerier than an unknown Cast—forever Binding



a Siren, a Natural, a Keeper, a Wayward, and two Incubuses—  
under a full summer moon in a Caster county.

A full moon was for making magic.

Magic and memories.



*A little fair-haired girl sat tucked between the twisting branches of the oldest oak on the grounds of the infamous Ravenwood Plantation, reading a book that was even older than that. She hooked her scrawny legs around a bark-covered branch thicker than her waist, but all the same, it wasn't really the safest spot for either a little girl or a big book.*

*"You know you're not supposed to be reading that, Rid," a girlish voice called up from below.*

*"Baby," teased Ridley, without looking up from the book. "You know you're not supposed to change your own diaper."*

*"Auntie Del's going to skin you when she finds out you've been stealing things out of her closet again," Lena, with a dark mess of curls and bright green eyes, shouted up from the safety of the grass beneath the tree.*

*"Tattler," said Ridley, flipping another page. "Where's your tail?"*

*The pages were so enormous, they brushed against her faded blue jeans when she tried to turn them, nearly ripping. The book's spine was almost as long as hers.*

*"Your funeral." As she spoke, Lena flung herself down on the grass, sliding a notebook and a pen out of her pocket. She pulled the cap off the pen, flipping to a clean page in her book with a sigh. "Well, go on. What's happening now, Rid?"*

*“There’s a ship, Leanie-Beanie.” Ridley twisted a blond ringlet around one finger absentmindedly.*

*“Don’t call me that. And?”*

*“And three mermaids. Only they’re not mermaids, because they have wings. And they’re singing—at least, one is. And another one is playing a kind of strange flute. And the last one is playing a little gold harp.”*

*As Ridley watched, the figures on the page moved through the story, exactly as she had described.*

*“Go on, Rid,” breathed Lena, bright-eyed. “Tell the rest.”*

*A ship came into view. A ship with sails. Surrounded by waves and rocks.*

*“There are sailors. And they come to visit the mermaids. They think the mermaids are the most beautiful creatures they’ve ever seen. I think they want to marry them. I think they’re in love.”*

*“Eww.” Beneath the tree, Lena giggled. “And now?”*

*“Now the mermaids are singing more loudly. Can you hear them? Close your eyes.” Ridley closed her eyes. Beneath the tree, her cousin Lena did the same.*

*“Can you?”*

*Lyrical music blew up from the pages of the book and into Ridley’s face. It grew louder and louder, filling the whole tree with harmonies, until the branches began to shake and the leaves fluttered to the ground beneath it.*

*Ridley didn’t care. She felt like she was a million miles away.*

*Lena covered her head with her hands, but the leaves and branches pelted her all the same. “Rid! Are you okay?”*

*But Ridley was transfixed. She sat clutching the book with both hands, a golden light radiating from its depths onto her face.*

*The music was beautiful, even hypnotic. Until hypnotic became horrific.*

*The sopranos turned to screeching, and the operatic melodies might as well have been nails scratching against stone. The noise was deafening, growing louder by the second, until it hurt to hear.*

*Ridley still didn't move. She couldn't. It didn't even look like she was breathing.*

*Beneath the tree, Lena pressed her hands over her ears, as hard as she could. "Stop it. Make it go away, Rid. Stop it now!"*

*Ridley froze.*

*She opened her mouth and closed it again, without a word.*

*It was as if everything she'd ever wanted was trapped right there, in those pages—but the longer she listened to them, the more certain she became that she'd never have any of it.*

*The sorrow was more than she could bear. Her eyes brimmed with tears as her fingers curled even more tightly around the page.*

*The song intensified into a howl. The breeze became a fierce wind, blowing in circles around the golden-haired little girl.*

*"Hold on, Rid!"*

*Lena crawled slowly up the tree trunk, a finger in one ear, the other tucked down against her shoulder.*

*She pulled her finger from her ear, yelling like what their Gramma would call a banshee. "I can't hear you I can't hear you I can't hear anything and I especially can't hear you!"*

*She reached up and up until her fingers were scrabbling against the gold-edged paper. With one last burst of energy, she yanked on the book as hard as she could, knocking it out of*

Ridley's arms and sending it flying down and out of the tree in an explosion of bright blue sparks.

*It landed, facedown in the dirt, with a thud.*

*Then silence.*

Ridley opened her eyes to see Lena pulling herself up next to her. The girls clung to each other, trying to catch their breath, trying to slow their hammering hearts.

"What were those things?" Lena's face was pale. "And don't say mermaids."

"Sirens," breathed Ridley. Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper. "They're called Sirens. Dark. With wings and claws and fangs. They ripped the sailors' hearts right out of their chests." Her eyes were stricken. "I saw them."

Lena shook her head. "I would never, ever want to be one of those."

"Me neither," Ridley said. Her eyes were beginning to pool and prickle with tears.

"We won't be." Lena reached over, patting her cousin's cheek. "Don't worry, Rid. Gramma says if our hearts are good, we'll grow up that way, too. Light as sunshine."

"Yeah? How do you know if your heart's any good?" The tiniest wet streak wobbled past the corner of Ridley's eye.

"Yours is," Lena said solemnly. "I just know it." She drew a linty red lollipop out of her pocket and handed it to Ridley. "Promise."

For a minute, the younger cousin almost seemed like the older one.

They traded the lollipop back and forth, up in the branches of that old oak tree, until Ridley didn't remember the gnashing teeth or the jagged claws or the heartless sailors anymore.

*Not one bit.*  
*Promise.*



When Ridley woke up, she was crying and she didn't know why. She remembered that she'd been dreaming, but the details had already begun to fade.

"What's wrong, Rid?" Lena was next to her, hugging her close in the morning light.

"Nothing." She tried to think, but it felt like she was pressing on a raw nerve.

"You hate good-byes, you big ball of mush. You barely said a word last night." Lena frowned, pulling her faded blue quilt tightly around the two of them. "Is that the only thing bothering you?"

"I told you. It's nothing." Rid looked around, taking in the dead campfire and the abandoned blankets. Only Ethan was still there, his face half buried in Boo's fur. "Where is everyone?"

"Link still had packing to do. John and Liv, too. I told them not to wake you up." Lena smiled. "Knowing you."

Ridley was relieved.

Lena brushed a long pink strand behind Ridley's ear. "You know, it's not too late. Just because you didn't finish high school with us doesn't mean you can't finish it at all. You could get your GED, go to night school—"

*Mother of all that is holy in the world—*

Rid grabbed Lena's wrist with five dagger-like glitter nails. "Wait a minute. Are you suggesting that you think it bothers me that I haven't graduated from Stonewall Jackson High? Have you lost what little is left of your mind?"

Lena gently detached Ridley from her arm. “You just don’t seem like yourself.”

Rid was furious. “You mean I don’t seem like a cold witch? Or I do? Because last time I checked, that’s what I was.”

“Ridley.”

“I don’t know why everyone in Gat-dung has such a hard time remembering I’m not like them. I’m not even like you. I’m a heartless Siren.”

“You are not heartless.” Lena was matter-of-fact. They could replay this conversation all Ridley wanted, but she was never going to change her position on this particular matter.

“How do you know?” Ridley sounded as miserable as she felt.

“I just know.” Lena kissed her cousin’s cheek. “Trust me.”

Truthfully, Ridley didn’t trust anybody. But if she had, her cousin would’ve been first on her list.

They sat like that, arm in arm in the silence, for a long moment.

“Promise,” Ridley whispered. She hated herself for saying the word—for cracking like that, the moment she did it—like always.

“Promise,” Lena whispered back, reaching in the pocket of her sweatshirt and pulling out a bright green lollipop.

“Green?”

“Change is good. Live a little.”

Ridley took the lollipop, waving it in her cousin’s face. “You rebel.” She stood up, awkwardly stretching her long, bare legs. “So, yeah. I gotta jet.” It was as close as Rid could come to saying good-bye to her only real friend.

“I know,” Lena said. She knew everything. What Rid was

saying—and what she couldn't. She held out a set of car keys. "I just Cast a *Manifesto*. It's on the corner."

Ridley shook her head. "You're good."

"I know," shrugged Lena, her eyes twinkling.

"Say good-bye to Ethan for me. And you behave, Cuz." Ridley smiled, in spite of everything.

"I always do. I'm the good one, remember?"

Ridley never forgot.