

A decorative border of intricate, light gray mandala patterns surrounds the central text. The patterns consist of repeating floral and geometric motifs, including circles, spirals, and scalloped edges.

Circle of Jinn

Lori Goldstein



Feiweil and Friends
New York

*To all of my families, the “Montsteingos,”
for their love and support.*

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
An Imprint of Macmillan

CIRCLE OF JINN. Text copyright © 2016 by Lori Goldstein. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America by R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company,
Harrisonburg, Virginia. For information, address Feiweil and Friends,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.
Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium
Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at
MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-I-250-05540-8 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-I-250-08684-6 (ebook)

Book design by TK

Feiweil and Friends logo designed by Filomena Tuosto

First Edition—2016

I 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

macteenbooks.com

Zar Sisterhoods



Mothers

Nadia

Raina

Kalyssa

Samara

Jada

Isa



Hana

Yasmin

Azra

Laila

Mina

Farrah

Daughters





I'M SIXTEEN YEARS OLD, AND I LIVE WITH MY BOYFRIEND.

At least I think I do. I mean, I know where I live. I know I'm living with Nathan Reese. What I don't know is if Nathan Reese is my boyfriend.

Or if I want him to be.

Who said wishes don't come with tricks?

Oh, right, that was me. But what do I know? I've been a genie for less than two months. I've granted the sum total of six wishes, two of which I botched, one of which I would have botched had my mother not been there, and the last of which I'm currently in the process of botching. Not to mention I'm fresh off probation.

If one could be fired from becoming Jinn, I'd be rocking a pink slip right about now instead of this silver bangle. This intricately carved silver bangle doled out by the Afrit, the council—I mean *family*—that rules over our Jinn world. The family that I've just learned is my father's family. Which means it's my family.

The all-powerful, arguably sadistic Jinn who govern with not just a stick but a two-by-four are my "peeps."

A chunk of my long, dark hair falls across my eyes as a late-summer breeze wafts through the kitchen window. It's not even September and the hints of fall are already trespassing, igniting a row of goose bumps across my bare shoulders.

I gather my hair into a loose bun, using a strand to keep it in place. Of all the things I learned from my mother, this has turned out to be the simplest.

A stronger gust rattles the wood blinds inside and creaks the thick metal chains hanging from the swing set outside. The green plastic seat sways, and I'm back there, sitting on it, the day Nate said good-bye to his father and hello to a new life, a life he never wished for. At least, what with me being a genie and all, the life he did wish for—the one where he can take care of his little sister—I was able to give him. More or less.

I trace circles along the granite countertop as I stare out the window that frames the backyard swing set like a canvas painting. Except the picture I see, the one I see whether my eyes are open or closed, is from the day of Nate's father's funeral, almost two weeks ago.

Me on one seat and him on the other. Him planting his feet on the ground, seizing the chains above my head with one hand, spinning me, turning my body to face him, drawing me closer. His knees bumping against mine, his finger drying the wet tears on my cheeks, his breath warming my neck, his lips brushing my forehead, and then, before I could stop him, before I could think what it meant, what it might mean, his lips pressing on my lips.

Soft and then hard. Like the beating of my heart. Then and now.

“Something’s burning,” Goldie says, rounding the corner into the kitchen.

Something’s burning all right.

“Oh, the cookies,” I say. “Damn.” I look at Megan. “I mean, darn. I mean, oops.”

Megan pauses the hunt for split ends in her shoulder-length dark hair. “I’m twelve, not two. I’ve heard worse. Hell, I’ve said worse.”

“Not in this house, Meg,” Goldie says.

My gaze returns to the groaning swings as the harbingers of autumn make my sun-darkened olive skin shiver again. *Right, Azra, it’s the wind. And what are you going to blame when the windows are sealed up tight?*

A chocolate chip ricochets off my ear.

“Earth to Azra,” Megan says, popping a second semisweet morsel into her mouth. “Did you even set a timer?” The perfect roll of her eyes that answers my head shake makes me think she’s spent all twelve years of her life perfecting the move. “The batch in the oven’s going to burn.”

Goldie sniffs the air. “*Again,*” she says, sidling up next to me. “The batch in the oven’s going to burn again.” She moistens her thumb with her tongue and wipes a stripe of war paint made of flour off my cheek.

I do my best imitation of Megan’s eye roll, and Goldie winks at me. The warmth in more than the crinkles around her eyes screams “Grandma,” the name she refuses to be called.

I’m sixteen years old, and I live with my boyfriend. And his sister. And his grandmother.

A deep voice floats in through the screen door. “I’d take a gander at those puppies if I were you.”

And his grandfather. I live with the entire Reese family.

It's the first time I've ever had to share a bathroom.

For the past sixteen years, my mother's had hers and I've had mine. Though we may live in the human world, the Jinn world—my world—is mothers and daughters. Not that there aren't brothers, fathers, and grandfathers, there just aren't brothers, fathers, and grandfathers *here*.

All male Jinn live in the Afrit's underground world of Janna. Including Xavier Afrit. My father.

We've never met.

Because my job, my sole purpose for living here—for living *period*—is to grant wishes for the humans assigned to me by the Afrit council, a group unseen but plenty heard. Giving and taking away our magic, our freedom, our loved ones for infringements against their dictatorship-like rules. Rules I've just learned my father's been covertly working to change.

My mother's job is to teach me to use and control my powers, the magic that lives inside me, passed down from the generations of Jinn who've come before us. Her gold bangle symbolizes her retirement, allowing her to practice all magic save for the granting of wishes.

Granting wishes is for the young. For those of us with silver bangles. Bangles spelled to release our powers. Spelled so the Afrit can monitor us. Spelled so only the Afrit can remove them.

The upside is that I can conjure mint chocolate chip ice cream, levitate my sugary iced coffee from table to lips, and travel via Jinn teleportation, apportioning myself from blizzard to beach in an instant.

The downside? It's not exactly a shackle or handcuff, though

it might as well be. We grant wishes, nature allows us to keep our magic. We grant the wishes the Afrit order us to grant, we keep our lives. As fishy as it smells, the wishes the Afrit have ordered me to grant include ones for Nate and now Megan, my current assignment.

Though it feels like a long summer of learning to use my powers, of learning to grant wishes, my bangle's a relatively new accessory. Two months ago, the day of my birthday, the bangle silently locked around my wrist. I was sixteen. I was a genie. I was no longer free.

Or so I thought. I thought so much then. That like all other Jinn I needed this silver bangle in order to do magic. That the circle of Jinn daughters I was to be bonded with in the tradition of the Zar would never live up to the name we give one another—sister. That the Afrit's harsh punishments for refusing to grant wishes, for screwing up, for exposing our Jinn world to humans weren't real. That my mother never loved my father. That I'd never fall in love. That I'd never again have a best friend. That I'd never want to become Jinn.

I was wrong.

I half smile, half wince as I slip the red oven mitt embroidered with the words "Hot Mama" on one hand and open the oven door with the other. I also thought human families were more stable than Jinn ones.

Again, I was wrong.

The car accident that tore Nate's family apart has proven that. With Nate's father gone and his mother still in the hospital, I live with what now constitutes the entire Reese family.

I set the metal tray on the cooling rack. This is the third batch

of cookies that's come out of the oven like charcoal briquettes. If only I could use my magic, I could fix them. But I can't use my magic in front of humans. And lately, here, in the Reese home, I'm always with humans, one human in particular: Megan.

"Let me guess," Megan says, hopping off the center island and scraping the top of a blackened cookie with a fingernail I helped to paint blue. "You work the register, not the fryer at the snack bar at the beach."

Her voice chokes on the final *ch* sound. Immediately, Goldie spreads her arms wide, and the fabric hanging from her dolman-sleeved sweater shrouds Megan. She closes her own eyes against the tears forming.

Megan may have lost her father in the car crash on the road to the beach, but Goldie lost her son-in-law, almost lost her daughter.

I hang back, trying not to make a sound, but it's not easy for me to swallow past the golf ball wedged in my throat. Once again, I'm intruding on a private family moment. By now, it should feel less awkward.

It doesn't. Because I can't shake the suspicion that, one way or another, this is all my fault. Either the Afrit assigning Nate as my wish candidate on the night Mr. and Mrs. Reese's car went off the side of the road was a total coincidence, or I should have started the wish-granting ritual with Nate sooner. Early enough to save his father.

So what if Jinn can't heal humans? There has to be something I could have done. Because why else would I have been tapped to grant Nate a wish that day? I'm not buying the coincidence thing. Which leaves only one other alternative: that the Afrit somehow

knew or maybe even caused the accident that killed Nate and Megan's father and seriously injured their mother.

I can't breathe if I think about that for too long. Because that would mean not only is this all my fault, but that I could have prevented it. It would mean that my selfish need to have Nate in my life cost someone theirs. The Afrit warn against getting too close to humans. Even with all I've recently discovered about my father's family, I still have a hard time believing something this cruel could be their punishment.

Call it a perverse loyalty to the family, to the father I used to think I'd give anything to meet.

Goldie releases Megan, whose sun-freckled nose is red and runny. I hand her a napkin, but instead of taking it, she takes me. Grabs me with the force of someone twice her size and burrows into my neck.

The pained but grateful smile on Goldie's face twists my stomach into a pretzel. How much I'm to blame for Mr. Reese's death may be a question I'll never know the answer to, but this, right here, Megan's anguish, that's something I'm 100 percent responsible for. Because that I can end.

That is something my powers can do. If only I could figure out how.



THE HOCKEY PUCKS LAND ON TOP OF THE FIRST TWO BATCHES OF burned cookies in the kitchen trash. I wedge the dirty cookie sheet in one side of the double sink and run the hot water until steam puffs, hoping to dislodge the charred remains.

Megan exaggerates a sigh and scoops out a handful of chocolate chips that she drops in my palm before nabbing the entire bag on her way into the living room.

“Where are you going?” Goldie and I say at the same time.

We both want to make sure she’s okay, but I have another reason for asking. I need to know where Megan is going because when I don’t, it hurts—a lot. It’s like my internal organs are hitched to a semi barreling down the highway at top speed.

It’s a curse in every sense of the word.

One that started on the day of the funeral when the Afrit left me their calling card with Megan’s name on it. She was to become my next assignment. I could have—*I should have*—waited.

But after the funeral, I was overcome by emotion, both Megan’s and mine, and rushed into conducting the wish-granting

ritual for her right upstairs in Nate's bedroom. The wish she made, to no longer see the pain in Nate's eyes, is not an easy one. Short of going the literal and gruesome eye-gouging route, mind control is the only way to achieve it. Though this power is beyond the reach of most Jinn, it seems to be an inherent Afrit perk. I've used it once, though I have no idea how. Even if I did, I'd still be cautious. Because mind control is dangerous, bringing with it the very real risk of permanent brain damage.

Which is why I still haven't taken any steps to grant Megan's wish. With the twenty-four-hour grace period to get the wish-granting ball rolling long since past, I'm now bound by the circulus curse, magically compelled to stay within one hundred and fifty feet of Megan until I complete her wish. As curses go, it's not so bad. At least mine binds me to Megan. And, as a side effect, to Nate.

But, see, this is why it's tough to be on board with the coincidence theory. Megan being my wish candidate on the heels of Nate is too much coinky dink for me.

"We still on to go to Mrs. Pucher's later?" I call to Megan, who's nestled into the corner of the couch with the mermaid book I loaned her and the bag of chocolate chips. So she's on the Azra diet of mainlining sugar. At least she's eating again.

She gives a thumbs-up and pulls the afghan hanging off the back of the couch over her bare feet. The afghan knit by her mother. More evidence of what's been lost and what's been left behind. It doesn't take an experienced tracker to follow the trail of Mr. and Mrs. Reese that fills this home.

Goldie nudges me aside with her pleasantly plump hip. Her Rubenesque figure, round face, and naturally jet-black hair make

her look more like a 1940s pinup girl than a grandmother. She's right to stick with "Goldie."

"I've got this," she says, jamming her pudgy hands into a pair of too-tight hot-pink dishwashing gloves. "You take Meg." She yanks the cuffs up to her elbows. "Although I've been trying, it's you and your magic that's finally gotten her off her tush and out of her own head. One step closer to walking through those hospital doors and visiting her mom, which they both need. You might not be able to bake 'em, but you're as smart as one, Azra Nadira."

I turn my flinching at her casual use of the word "magic" into a dismissive shrug. "Mrs. Pucher's the smart one, not me."

Goldie flings a soap bubble at my head. "Nonsense. Meg and Nate . . . Oh, let's be honest, Georgie and I wouldn't have half as many reasons to smile without you. Why do you think we're having you stay here?"

Because my mom used a spell to make you think it was a brilliant idea.

Goldie pushes her pink-gloved fingers through her barrel-curved bangs. "We'd be lost without you, love."

A blustering whoosh sends prickles down my spine. Not trusting the strength in my voice, I simply nod to Goldie. I then reach around her to close the window above the sink, pausing when I notice the blinds inside are still. The swings hover outside, motionless.

But, again, a tingling like pins and needles trails across my shoulders.

I focus on the window, and though Goldie's kind words make it feel like a betrayal, I let myself revisit the scene once more. The green plastic seats, the twisting metal chains, the pair of friends, best friends, entwined in a way that best friends usually aren't.

Which is why I need to see him. Henry, my best friend, my *human* best friend, the only human to know I'm a Jinn.

I shut the window and close the blinds.

Enough.

I know every stroke of the painting I call *Henry's Kiss*. A discussion with the artist is long overdue.



"Hey hey, where's the fire?"

At the top of the stairs, Nate cups my shoulders and pries me off his chest. His chest that can't be touched, seen, or thought about without the word "chiseled" coming along for the ride. All three of which I know from firsthand experience.

"Sorry," I say, unusually quick to remove my fingertips from his biceps, getting harder by the day from his amped-up lacrosse training. If Megan went inward to cope, Nate went outward, mostly to the gym. "I wasn't looking."

"Well, that's better than the alternative." Nate extends his neck toward the stairs and breathes in deeply. "I was afraid you were running from an out-of-control kitchen fire."

"Nope, perfectly contained in the oven." I start to inch toward the bedrooms. We've been avoiding each other all day. At least I assume he's been avoiding me, but since I've been avoiding him, I guess I can't be sure.

"So," he says, "no need to call the fire department, but I'm assuming this also means no cookies?"

Like me, Nate has a sweet tooth. All the Reeses do.

"Maybe I can pick some up on the way home," I say. "I mean,

back.” A mutual love of sugar is one of the many things making it easier and easier to think of this place as my home. “I’m taking Megan to Mrs. Pucher’s again.”

“Third day in a row? You’re . . . That’s really sweet, Azra. You’ve been so good to her. And to me.” His eyes find his feet, which are shuffling against the white carpet that blankets the second floor. “Which is exactly why I should . . . What I mean is, why I need to . . . About last night—”

“Don’t,” I say, pressing my hand against his forearm. In response to my touch, his eyes flicker to mine before lowering again, this time settling on my neck, on the *A* pendant I wear because I know how much he likes it.

Talking to my exposed collarbone, Nate says, “I’ve made things weird between us.”

Things are already weird between us for so many reasons: me being Jinn, my ability to read human minds including his, the wish I granted for him to be able to take care of Megan that leaves me connected to a piece of his soul—*his soul*. Oh, yeah, and let’s not forget my little lip-lock with Henry.

Fortunately, Nate doesn’t know any of this. Unfortunately, that does little to ease my guilt.

I stroke his cheek before lifting his chin, forcing his chocolate ganache eyes to meet my gold ones. We hold each other’s gaze, which, despite all that’s between us, including what happened last night, turns out not to be weird at all.

It was long after dark when a shaking woke me. I had expected it to be my roommate, Megan, who, since the night I arrived, has started each night in her own twin bed but finished it in mine. Goldie knows, and I think it’s this, even more than the spell my

mother used, that ultimately convinced her to let me stay. But last night, for the first time, Megan was curled up in her own bed. I knew before I flipped onto my side that it was Nate.

Tears had finally broken through the brave front he's been pushing himself to maintain. Words, even if I knew the right ones, didn't seem necessary. I simply pulled his head to mine and we lay there, squished together side by side, until his tremors no longer rocked the bed.

When I woke up this morning, he was gone.

I took my cue from him, not tracking him down, worried that he might be embarrassed even though he shouldn't be.

I slide my hand down his arm and lace my fingers between his.

If anything, I feel even closer to him. And as I can tell from reading his mind, he feels it too. Spending the night in the same bed will do that to you, which I should know since it's happened before. Except it was me, upon having just discovered my Afrit heritage, in need of comfort, and Henry was the one giving it, not Nate.

And you're surprised by the kiss?

I was . . . and I am. With two strides, Nate presses me into the wall, nearly knocking the wind out of me. He hears my gasp and pulls away, but I clutch his other hand and pull him right back. He starts at my necklace, at my collarbone, a whisper of a touch so light it could be a breeze. But when his lips travel the length of my neck and his teeth graze the tip of my earlobe, the only breeze this could be is a tornado.

It feels both right and wrong for this kiss to be every bit as intense as the one on the beach the night of our second date, the night his father was killed.

Lost in Nate, it's only when my fingertips hit warm skin that I realize I inadvertently unbuttoned his shirt with my magic. I skim my hands up and down his torso, rumpling and twisting the fabric, to cover for what I've done. Not trusting myself or my powers, I playfully break away and roll down the wall into Megan's seafoam-green bedroom, leaning with my hands behind me against the hand-painted emerald vine that winds its way across this side of the room.

Nate follows but hangs back, his fingers toying with one of the paper flowers attached to the vine that gives the whole mural a killer 3-D effect. Mrs. Reese was—is—Mrs. Reese *is* something of an artist.

“Was that not okay?” Nate asks, self-consciously raking his hand through his cropped black hair.

I allow myself a nod, but my breath is too short for verbal communication. And my mind is too jumbled, juxtaposing *this* kiss with *that* kiss, for me to trust what may spill from my lips anyway.

Then, for the third time this morning, a tingling floods me like head-to-toe pins and needles, but the only part of me that's numb are my lips.

Nate's an extraordinary kisser, but this is more like walking out into a nor'easter. No, that's not quite right. It's more like the sensation we Jinn get when another member of our species is about to apport in. But this doesn't feel like any Jinn I know—not the five lifelong friends who make up my mother's Zar sisterhood and not their sixteen-year-old daughters who now make up mine.

From the sting of a wasp (my Zar sister Yasmin) to a stereo vibration (my Zar sister Hana) to the tickle of a feather (my mother's

best friend and Zar sister Samara), apporting Jinn have their own signature. Funny, I've never asked anyone what mine is.

With my back to Nate, I toss sweaters for myself and Megan into a backpack and tap into my abundance of adrenaline to strengthen my magic. I don't sense another Jinn in the house. As nonchalantly as I can, I move to the windows and survey the backyard.

When my mother stops by to check up on me, she comes by car. She knows better than to magically teleport herself here. Besides, if she did decide to apport, she'd be more careful than this. Apporting Jinn can detect the presence of humans, and my mother wouldn't risk apping in with people this close. Neither would any of my Zar sisters, especially Laila, Samara's daughter and my former best Jinn friend. Since she's the only one whose apporting signature I have yet to feel, this could be hers. But I know it's not. As much as I want to see her, she's not ready to see me. I'm up to three texts a day and still not a peep from her. Not even an angry-faced emoticon. There's no way she'd app here.

I turn around to find Nate buttoning his shirt. The sensation of my fingers on his abs lingers. I shake out my arms as I fling the backpack onto one shoulder. I'm being paranoid. There's no reason for me to be tingling.

Nodding to my bag, Nate starts walking backward out of his sister's bedroom. "Now you really are running from something too hot to handle."

He winks and there's ample reason for me to be tingling.



A BOWLING BALL—SIZED WATERMELON SOMEHOW HIDDEN UNDER the leaves of her squash plants has Mrs. Pucher gushing the moment we arrive.

My next-door neighbor deserves the credit for drawing Megan out of the cocoon she's been in since the accident. As much as I understand Megan's need to cloister herself, the circulus curse means I'm cooped up right alongside her. Three days ago, the combination of stir-craziness and wanting to see Henry led to me feigning a severe case of homesickness. Even so, Megan only agreed to come when I sweetened the pot by telling her she could raid my bookshelves.

Henry's house across the street was empty save for a living room full of Carwyn moving boxes, but the trip proved more than worth it thanks to Mrs. Pucher, my neighbor, my childhood babysitter, and my very first wish candidate. In order to practice before we receive our official assignments, the Afrit allow us to grant a wish for three candidates of our own choosing. Though I was initially peeved that my mother chose Mrs. Pucher for me,

granting her wish to reconcile with her sister was the first time I realized (admitted) that being Jinn can actually help people.

And someone as kind as Mrs. Pucher definitely deserves to be helped. Three days ago, as Megan and I were waving good-bye to my mother, Mrs. Pucher pushed herself up from her gardening kneeler and waddled over to us. She shoved a cherry tomato into Megan's mouth and a pair of clippers into her hand.

Like much of our small coastal town, Mrs. Pucher knew about the accident. And, somehow, she also knew that by occupying Megan's hands, she'd occupy her mind. In pruning the dead roses that first day, the pink in Megan's own cheeks came back, just a little. In planting the line of arugula seeds yesterday, a bit more of her pain was buried. Whatever task Mrs. Pucher has planned for today will tend Megan more than the garden.

"Do you think it's ripe?" Megan asks as Mrs. Pucher squats in front of her camouflaged watermelon. "We could maybe make that sorbet I was telling you my mom makes, you know, the one with the mini chocolate chips for the seeds?"

My lungs deflate as she says this, but the usual crack in her voice is missing. Mrs. Pucher doesn't skip a beat and simply rattles off the ingredients she suspects we need. As Megan whips out her phone to search for the recipe, Mrs. Pucher picks up the watermelon. The watermelon with the sticker from the grocery store still attached. She scrapes it off and gives me a wink.

"Heavens, dear," Mrs. Pucher says to Megan, "those contraptions aren't meant for the eyes of someone with this much gray in her hair." She takes Megan by the hand and the two go inside to look up the recipe on the Jumbotron-sized iMac Mrs. Pucher's sister recently gave her.

And just like that, I'm alone. I sink into the Adirondack chair on the stone patio and toss my head back, soaking up the late August sun. Between my magical attachment to Megan, my magical-of-another-kind attachment to Nate, and George and Goldie's attachment to us all, I've had little opportunity to be alone. Which translates to having little opportunity to use my magic.

Not that I've minded. If a thirst for power and control runs in my Afrit bloodline, maybe being careful in my use of magic will stall my own conversion to the dark side.

I stretch out my legs and breathe in, relishing the familiar scent of the lilacs my mother's magic keeps in perpetual bloom that mixes with the briny notes from the nearby beach. My second home, a place I miss even more than my first. A place I haven't been to since the accident.

I should use this time to check in with my mother next door or Henry across the street or even to leave yet another voice mail for Laila that she'll probably delete without listening to.

The breeze rustles my hair, but the rest of me is still, savoring this bouquet custom-made for me.

Until a wet mop rams itself into my stomach.

Pom-Pom. Mrs. Pucher's Pomeranian, whose usually fluffy fur is plastered to his body and dripping muddy water all over my white shorts. Apparently the sprinklers are on.

Serves me right, since what I really should be doing is practicing. Despite all my trying over the past two days, I haven't gotten Mrs. Pucher's beloved Pom-Pom to do so much as fetch a tennis ball. Aren't dogs supposed to *want* to do that?

If I don't figure out how to get the mangy thing to follow one of my telepathic commands soon, I'll be cramming my lanky

sixteen-year-old body behind a seventh-grade desk next to Megan instead of an eleventh-grade one.

It's not like I want to fry any furry creatures' brains (not even Pom-Pom's), but practicing mind control on animals is better than hot-wiring a human's brain without having any clue what I'm doing. And so I practice with squirrels, birds, and Pom-Pom. More accurately, I fail with squirrels, birds, and Pom-Pom. And no, I'm not even sure this power works on nonhuman critters.

I sigh and haul myself out of the Adirondack. I force myself to try to get Pom-Pom to stop gnawing on the hose for five minutes before I give up and walk across the street to Henry's house. Well, halfway across the street. Because that's as far as I can go without my spleen being sucked through my belly button.

Standing in the middle of the road, I hear a thunk and see Henry dragging a round lump of a black garbage bag to the curb.

We haven't seen each other since the day of the funeral. He looks up and our eyes meet. My muscles pull taut like a rubber band, but the tension releases as soon as his dimples appear. He drops the bag and rushes to the middle of the street, where the hug that appears imminent dies abruptly.

"I'm here for you, Azra, always."

That's what Henry said after I finished telling him how I was going to have to use mind control on Nate and Megan and risk hurting them, maybe even hurting myself. He dug the heels of the dress shoes I had magically shined into the patch of dirt under the swing to come to a complete stop.

"You know that, don't you?"

That's what he said after he grasped the metal chains above my head with one hand. He turned me toward him and tugged,

gently closing the gap between us. The plastic seats met with a soft tap.

“I need for you to know that.”

That’s what he said as his light-green eyes bored into mine, chilling me like a gust of wind in a snowstorm, but then his thumb was on my cheek, his breath was on my neck, his lips were on my forehead, and I was whisked inside to a crackling fire, and that’s what I felt, warm and safe and home, and that’s what I was thinking and that’s where I wanted to be in that moment, home, my home, away from all the pain and hurt and tears and wishes to be granted and then . . . all of that was gone.

Because he was kissing me. I no longer knew where I was, let alone where I wanted to be.

Henry pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and I shove my hands into my back pockets, casually shifting my weight from one foot to the other to hide my nerves.

“Megan at Mrs. Pucher’s?” he asks.

I nod, pushing past the memory to match his nonchalant tone. “So you do read my texts. You just don’t reply.”

“I replied.”

“Three times. In ten days.”

He flicks the top of his head toward his house. “Things have been busy with the move. Back and forth. We’re doing it ourselves.”

Because they couldn’t afford movers, which is why they’re defecting to New Hampshire to live with Henry’s grandparents in the first place. After more than six months of being unemployed, his father finally found a job near where Mrs. Carwyn’s mother and father live. So even though it’s Henry’s last year of high

school—he and Nate are both a year older and incoming seniors—he’s . . . leaving.

“So,” he says. “How is . . . ? How are . . . ? You okay?”

This is not my Henry. He’s being so distant. He’s been distant since the day of the funeral. Why? Oh, I don’t know, choose one:

We went to a funeral. We kissed. I told him I’m the spawn of Jinn Satan. We kissed. I’m living with Nate. We kissed.

Staring through the lenses of his glasses and into his eyes, I’m about to read his mind, which he’s explicitly asked me not to do. Unlike most Jinn, but very much like the Afrit side of my family, I can read human minds outside the confines of the wish-granting ritual.

I’ve gotten a better handle on dipping in at will. Living with my maybe-boyfriend Nate and his grieving family provided excellent incentive to rein in the involuntary nature of my mind-reading skills. But here, in the middle of the street, where Henry and I stood not long ago, with him basically saying he thought I was so pretty he didn’t have a shot with me, temptation tugs at me.

Reading his thoughts would be simpler, and less mortifying, than having to actually *ask* him what that little swing-set rendezvous meant . . . not to mention having to hear him answer . . . and hear me answer.

No, I can’t. He has a right to privacy.

To distract myself, I say, “What’s up with the glasses?”

He adjusts the arms that are tucked behind his ears. “I ran out of contacts.”

“You should have told me, I’d have conjured you more.” I gesture toward his messy hair, back to its normal sandy color

without all the goop he's been adding lately. "Run out of gel too? Not sure I can conjure that."

I can, I just don't want to.

He raises his palms. "I don't want you getting into trouble on account of me."

I snort. "Contacts and styling products are not on the Afrit's radar."

He crosses his arms in front of his chest. "Which you know for a fact? Because you know everything there is to know about the Afrit? Because your mom's been so forthcoming?"

She hasn't. He knows she hasn't.

Henry knows as much about being Jinn as I do. I smile, remembering the string of questions that followed the shocked, then mesmerized look on his face when he caught me in the act of granting a wish at the start of the summer. I had no choice but to tell him I was a Jinn.

That's not true. I did have a choice, but I made the selfish one. I chose to break the Afrit's biggest rule and out the Jinn world to a human because I wanted to. Granted, when I made that decision I wasn't in possession of all the facts about becoming Jinn.

Since then, Henry's become my confidant, my best friend, and the one I trust most in this world. Just like his sister Jenny. My best friend for the first nine years of my life. Before she fell from the swing in my backyard. That was the day I learned magic has its limits. It can't heal humans, and it can't bring someone back from the dead.

Though, in a way, it has. It's magic, it's becoming Jinn, that brought Henry and me together this summer. Before my sixteenth birthday, I didn't have friends. I thought it was a side effect of being

Jinn, of having to hide who we are. But it wasn't a side effect of being Jinn. It was a side effect of being me.

"Azra," Henry says with frustration in his voice, "you found out about your father from your mom's *diary*. A diary that she hid from you. Haven't you stopped to think what else you don't know?"

What else I don't know has been all I've been thinking about for the past two weeks. Because, as it turns out, my mother's been keeping secrets from me about the Afrit my entire life. Not just that I was one of them, but that threats and coercion are how they keep us Jinn in line. Tortura cavea, a jail, literally of our worst nightmares, awaits not just me, but my mother, her Zar sisters, and my own if I screw up, and maybe even that or worse for Henry. Because if the Afrit find out I told Henry about our world, they'll use mind control to make him forget. And this power I'm struggling to learn is tricky even for them. Done improperly, it can leave humans as amnesiacs or in a vegetative state or even . . . even dead. Maybe by accident. And maybe not.

Still, despite all the secrets, something about Henry's attitude and that family loyalty thing makes me push back my shoulders and defend my mother.

"She's only trying to protect me. And besides, Lalla Samara wouldn't lie to me."

I purposely use the "lalla," a term of love and respect similar to the "aunt" and "uncle" that humans use for close family friends unrelated by blood.

Henry tosses his head back and laughs. "Your mother's best friend? Believe me, she's in on whatever your mom's got cooking."

It's like flares have been lit inside my cheeks. My chest tightens, and all I'm thinking is where my Henry went. Why he's being so . . .

mean. Especially after our lips did their little meet-and-greet. I pivot to return to Mrs. Pucher's. If he wants to move away like this, then fine, don't let the Massachusetts border hit him on the way out.

Henry seizes my elbow and draws me to him. His sweaty shirt sticks to my bare arm.

"I won't let you risk it," he says. "Not for me. I won't let you risk so much as magically swatting a fly away. Not with what's at stake. Not after everything else you've done for me and my family."

He's talking about granting his sister Lisa's wish—my third and final practice one—to be rid of her stutter. And more. More that I have to . . . need to ask him about.

Beepity beep beep!

And just like the last time we were standing in the middle of the street, Chelsea appears.

A gleaming Fiat convertible weaves around us and pulls into the Carwyn driveway. Chelsea the cheerleader, Chelsea the bikini-clad lifeguard who used to make fun of little girls who stutter and ignore me closes the door of her brand-new car. Red. The same color of the lip gloss she always wears at the beach and in the Reese kitchen. True to her word, Chelsea has been helping me with Nate, coming by several times to help cook food and even clean the house for Goldie, which is why my teeth shouldn't be grinding the way they are right now.

"Hey, guys!" Chelsea says, skipping toward us and popping up on tiptoes to peck Henry on the cheek.

Right. Chelsea the maybe-girlfriend of Henry.

A summer in the sun (and perhaps a visit to the salon) has added shimmery gold highlights to her buttery blond hair. She's practically glowing.

“You here to help us paint, Azra?” she says.

“No,” I say. Henry didn’t ask me to help paint. Even if he doesn’t want me using my magic, which could paint the entire house in seconds, I do know how to use a paintbrush. Well, not *know* know, but how hard can it be?

“I’ve got extra brushes.” Chelsea rests her fancy yoga bag on the ground and bends over. “Let me find you one. With three of us, we’ll get it ready for those lucky renters in no time.”

She may be in downward dog, but Henry’s the one on the leash. My teeth grate against one another. If I don’t leave right now, I won’t have any enamel left.



Stupid bike. I don’t have a car, or a license, so I’m riding behind Megan, who happens to be as good at biking as she is at sailing, not that Nate can get her to the beach and out on the ocean. I had to quit my job at the snack bar early because Megan refuses to even pass by the road to the beach where the car accident occurred.

I used to like biking—when I could go at my own pace. But by the time we roll into the Reeses’ driveway, I’m wheezing and Megan’s barely broken a sweat.

I miss apping.

She hops off, unhooks her helmet, and is texting before the wheels on her bike stop rotating. The “Thanks, Azra” and teary embrace that followed our last outings are replaced with a backward wave. The running to Nate or Goldie after inching past her mother’s sedan is exchanged for a diet soda and a flop on the couch.

The sadness in her eyes? That’s still there.

Even so, it's progress. Unfortunately, no one else is home to see it. Dropping my backpack with the container of Mrs. Pucher's homemade fudge on the counter, I pick up the note from Nate. He's at the gym, naturally, and George and Goldie are out for a walk. It doesn't say "at the beach," but I know that's where they go when they need to escape. They're drawn to it as much as Megan is repelled by it.

The screech of two squirrels heralds their arrival in the backyard. Prime test subjects. Which, considering my dismal performance with Pom-Pom, I can't exactly turn away from.

One check on Megan confirms she's engrossed in her phone and her book at the same time. When I tell her I'm going outside, she grunts instead of looking up. Definitely progress.

I trudge through the kitchen and slide the glass door open. I'd like to be able to sit in the sun and read. I'd like to be able to walk on the beach and swim in the ocean before the New England cold takes it away for another year. I'd like to be able to apport to see my Zar sisters, especially Laila, whose constant presence in my life I feel most acutely only now in its absence.

But I can't do any of those things. Not until I grant Megan's wish. And, considering last night, not seeing the pain in Nate's eyes anymore ranks pretty high on my wish list too.

Slipping out of my flip-flops, I dig my toes into the dirt beneath the grass and focus. Nothing. Again. How am I supposed to delve into Nate's mind and ease his pain when I can't even get this squirrel to jump from one tree limb to the other?

Concentrate, Azra. Nate's wish was an intricate, complicated one, and yet you managed to successfully grant that just two weeks ago.

Legally, financially, if anything impedes his mother's recovery,

all the paperwork's in place for Nate to be able to take care of Megan when he turns eighteen in a few weeks. But I went further. As big and strong as Nate is, even without his renewed dedication to pumping iron, he lacks confidence. The spell I did to boost it seems to be working. I've seen the results of my handiwork in person these past few days. And felt it this morning. I liked feeling it this morning.

Which makes the lingering memory of Henry's kiss that much harder to reconcile. Though it's a bit easier after seeing him with Chelsea.

"Jump, you stupid rodent!" I shout.

And it does. It jumps! But not to the maple tree I intended. To the swing set. It's running along the top as if mocking me.

I kick the cedar frame. I should use my powers to burn this thing to the ground and the memory of Henry's kiss right along with it.

A kiss that was probing, searching, just like Henry himself.

Suddenly, a twitch starts in my big toe. Then full on, the pins and needles are back. My body is wracked with an electric charge.

I'm not being paranoid; someone's coming.

I whirl around to see a silhouette materialize out of thin air amid the trees lining the edge of the backyard. My heart beats like a tribal drum when my eyes see what they cannot possibly be seeing.

The telltale signs are all there: tall, thin, thick shiny hair, and of course, gold eyes. The gold eyes of the Jinn. But this isn't just any Jinn.

This is a male Jinn.



A MALE JINN. DISBELIEF KEEPS ME FROZEN IN PLACE. MALE JINN live in Janna. With the Afrit. Not here in the human world. With us.

The figure, wearing a tan leather waistcoat over a long white tunic and what looks like 1980s baggy parachute pants, ducks under a branch and emerges from the trees.

He—it's most definitely a he—squints as the sun hits his face. The bulk of his costumey getup can't hide his muscular form underneath. He glides gracefully across the yard until he's standing directly in front of me.

The color of his eyes steals my breath. Gold, with a touch of red. Copper. Around his neck is a chain made of elongated, barrel-shaped silver beads engraved with the same design that's etched into the silver bangle around my wrist.

He's definitely a Jinn.

He touches his right hand to his heart and says, "Hello, Azra."

My name from his lips snaps me awake like a shot of adrena-

line to my heart. Goldie, George, Megan, Nate—*Nate*—could come out any second. See him. See me with him. See him do whatever it is he's going to do to me.

I grab his wrist, but before my fingers curl all the way around, a mixture of Pop Rocks and Coke explodes in my veins and I drop his hand like it's a grenade.

Ping, ping, ping. Not a sound in my ears, but a feeling under my skin. Rebounding off the walls of my veins, the ricochets echo the strange sensations I've had all day. Only stronger. *Ping.* And more painful.

A car door shuts with a slam that echoes all the way out here. Which means it's close. Too close. Goldie? Nate? Doesn't matter. We can't be seen.

I seize the hem of the male Jinn's tunic—soft, so unworldly . . . unearthly . . . soft—and drag him back into the woods, as far as I can go without the circulus curse stopping me.

Rubbing my forearms and trying to calm the eruption under my skin, a million questions—a million fears—hurl themselves against the walls of my heart and head, but the one that comes out first is the simple, "What were you thinking?"

His smooth brow creases, his copper eyes grow quizzical, his small smile turns . . . sheepish. *Sheepish?*

"I thought I was greeting you," he says. "Is that not how you do it here?"

"No, I mean, yes, well, sort of." *Social graces? That's his most pressing concern?* "That was fine. You did fine." I wave. "Hi." *And mine, apparently?*

The bubbling spreads through my every limb like it's my

heart's job to manufacture Pop Rocks and Coke. I broaden my shoulders and lengthen my torso to eke out as much height as possible. He's still got at least three inches on me.

I steady myself. "What I mean is, how could you risk apportioning here? What are you doing here? *How* are you here? And who . . . who are you?"

"Here?" There's a mischievous glint in his copper eyes.

I cock my head. "Here? Where?" I flex my fingers, trying to push through the pings. "I mean, what?"

"Here. You ended every other question with a 'here,' I was simply finishing for you."

Ping.

What a cheeky, cocky ass—

"Apologies," he says. "I'm afraid this isn't going quite as planned. Shall we start over?" He places his hand over his heart again. "*Hala.* My name is Zakaria Anemissary."

"Anemissary? What kind of last name is that?"

"It's not."

"Not what?"

"A last name."

Did a male Jinn apport all the way here just to bicker with me? The flaring of my nostrils I feel, he sees.

He laughs. There's something eerily familiar in it.

"Third time's the charm, isn't that what you say?" He claps his feet together and bows. "Greetings. My name is Zakaria. I am an emissary sent to investigate the unusually lengthy delay between the invocation of the circulus incantation with a Ms. Megan Reese and the completion of the wish she expressed."

My face is one big empty slate.

He rolls his eyes. “No wonder you haven’t granted the damn wish yet.” He flings his head back toward the sky, sending the espresso-colored hair parted over his right eye bouncing against his forehead. “Look, I’m Zak. I’m here to light a fire under your little Jinn butt to grant the freakin’ wish before—instead of me—it’s the Afrit coming for you.”

My stomach flips at his words. Too close to ones I will never forget.

“They’ll come for her, you know they will.”

Words said to my mother by a speaker I heard but didn’t see, though a feeling in my blood—my Afrit blood—makes me 99.9 percent certain the voice belonged to another male Jinn. To my father, who somehow, though I have no proof, must have been visiting my mother in secret for who knows how long. My mother and not me.

“It’s time, Kal. If not now, when? How much longer does she have, really? They’ll come for her, you know they will.”

And have they? Is this a trick? Am I in danger? My mother? Megan?

I inch backward, away from Zak, and a rock scrapes the bottom of my bare foot, giving me an idea. With my hands behind my back, I do something I haven’t done in days: use my magic. The icy tingle that accompanies conjuring snakes up my spine as I conjure a rock. A big, heavy one. So big and heavy it’s a struggle to hold on to it while keeping my hands hidden from view.

I turn the mammoth beast end over end, trying to get a better grasp, but it’s so smooth I can’t get any traction, and it’s now pinning my thumb to my spine and . . . *Whump!* It slips to the ground.

I retreat faster and faster but I lose my footing, and with a harsh smack, I land on the ground right alongside it.

Zak rushes forward, dropping to one knee beside me. “Are you hurt?”

Like a reflex, his hand reaches out to touch my forehead. And all of a sudden the ricocheting in my veins stops. Replaced by . . . nothing. But a good—a welcome—nothing. When our eyes meet, he quickly retracts his hand, picking up my conjured rock instead.

He runs his fingers along it. “It’s so shiny. And dense. What is this made of? Lead?”

I rub my lower back and mutter, “Could be anything. Guess I should have paid more attention in geology class.”

Oops, I just admitted I conjured a weapon. But that’s not the part that surprises Zak.

“You can conjure?” he says.

“Of course.” I wiggle my wrist and point to his matching necklace. “Can’t you?”

A rosy undertone blossoms under his olive skin.

“But your necklace,” I say. “Don’t you have your powers? Of course, you must if you apped here.”

He says slowly, “We have the powers the Afrit allow us to have.”

The bitterness in his tone ignites a kinship between us.

I let him help me to my feet and magically brush the dirt from the backs of my legs.

“Where were we?” he says.

“I’m not really sure.” That’s an understatement. My head is telling me to conjure a machete this time, while my heart wants to take him in like a stray puppy.

He leans against a large pine tree. “We don’t have these,” he says.

“Pine trees?”

“Trees.”

“Why not?”

He shrugs. “Because that’s the way the Afrit want it. Which, if I had a mescouta cookie for every time that’s the answer to a question in Janna, I’d be a fat Jinn.”

I laugh despite not knowing what a mescouta cookie is. “Sounds about the same here. But we don’t have any fat Jinn.”

“Neither do we.” There’s an impish look in his widening eyes. “Aha, common ground.”

The smile comes too easily to my face. *This is a male Jinn. From Janna.* Here to check up on me.

I begin to picture a baseball bat.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” he says softly.

My belief, from a place deep inside, swells. I feel it so strongly in my Afrit blood. That I can trust him. Then again, anything having to do with the Afrit can’t be trusted.

Even me.

With a deep inhale, I summon my jaded side, well honed from years of not wanting to become a Jinn. “Why should I believe you?”

His shoulders inch down and he clasps his hands in front of his stomach. “Because I swear on my life. I swear on my family’s . . . on my father’s life.”

I study his copper eyes. “For all I know you two are bitter enemies.”

“He has enemies, but I am not one of them.”

Sadness and fear darken his eyes.

“Azra,” he says. “I know how hard it must be, but I hope you can give me a chance to earn your trust. I’m here on behalf of someone who has your best interests at heart.”

My father. It has to be. My mother used the exact same words the last time I was in a wish-granting mess and someone she refused to name helped bail me out.

Like a tidal wave, my million questions rise back up, flooding my brain. Is he part of the potential uprising I read about in my mother’s diary? Is that why he’s here? What about Raina, Yasmin’s mother? The Afrit took her from this world just a few weeks ago. Is she okay? Will she ever come back? Does he know who I am? Does he know who my father is? Does he *know* my father?

Fighting against asking, fighting against trusting him to ask him, forces a battle between my heart and my head. But my head wins. It knows the facts. This is a male Jinn, from Janna, who apported here. The only question to ask is why.

I clear my throat. “So you’re like, what, the advance team?”

“In a way.”

“Sent by the Afrit?”

“In a way.”

“Are you going to tell me exactly in what ways?”

“That’s not really important.”

“And what is?”

“The reason you haven’t granted your candidate’s wish.”

“Megan.”

“A little girl.”

My hackles rise. “That doesn’t mean her wish isn’t important.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t.” He closes his eyes and shakes his head.

“You don’t make it easy, do you?”

“What?”

“Helping you.”

“Who says I need help?”

He tugs me forward, out of range of Megan, and I yelp.

“Fine,” I grumble, “but it’s not something you can help me with.”

“How do you know if you don’t ask?”

My head’s spinning from the pain of having my kidneys wrenched, not to mention from this entire conversation, and I almost blurt out what I need, because I do need help. Help my Zar sisters can’t give because none of them are part Afrit; none of them have the ability to do mind control. And me telling them that I can, that I’m an Afrit, will reveal a secret my mother’s been keeping my entire life—a secret that, though it’s about me, doesn’t quite feel like mine to share.

I can’t ask my mother for help because she’ll say the risk is too great and shut me down, force me to find some other way. But there is no other way. I need to ease Nate and Megan’s pain. And their need comes before mine.

But what are the odds of Zak actually being able to help me with this?

If he can, wouldn’t that mean—since this is something only Afrit can do—that he’s one of them?

If he’s not, and I ask for help with this—something only Afrit can do—won’t I be revealing something that might put me in danger?

Then again, if he’s telling the truth, I’m already in danger. I have to give him a chance, but asking Zak for help isn’t the same as trusting Zak. Not by a long shot.

My voice trembles despite my opposite intentions as I say, “Mind control. That’s what I need help with.”

He doesn’t flinch and simply taps his baby-smooth, hairless chin. “Aha, dragooning.”

“Dragons? I need to conjure a dragon to use mind control?”

Zak laughs that familiar laugh. “You Jinn girls really do lead sheltered lives, don’t you?”

His know-it-all tone irks me, and I conjure a miniature cage. “Not so sheltered that we can’t do this. And don’t doubt that I can make one big enough for you. Bummer that you won’t even be able to conjure the key . . .”

More amused than unnerved, he says, “Dragooning is the technique you refer to as mind control.”

Technique? As in there’s a method I can learn?

“You can do it?” I ask.

His face tells me he can’t, and the hope I didn’t realize had built up inside me deflates like one of Samara’s conjured soufflés. At least this means he’s not an Afrit.

“But,” he says, “that doesn’t mean I can’t teach you. All I need from you is one thing.”

“What’s that?” I ask tentatively.

“Jeans,” he says, plucking the fabric of his baggy pants. “I’ve felt like an idiot in these things all day.”



NOT AGAIN. MY LITTLE JINN BUTT'S GETTING A MASSAGE WORTHY of a luxury spa.

Though they apparently don't have smartphones in Janna, Zak's a quick learner. He's particularly fond of texting. All. The. Time.

"Seriously?" I raise an eyebrow at Chelsea and the pink crocheted sweater she's holding up. "Let's try baby steps, okay?"

When Chelsea stopped by this morning with a basket of homemade apple-cinnamon muffins, it took less than three minutes of her and Megan being alone for them to concoct a plan to force me to come here, to the mall.

I now understand why my mother opted to conjure my back-to-school clothes instead of taking me shopping. The clomping of too-high wedge sandals against the marble floor, the double-digit lines (fitting and restroom), and the three tussles over the last size in a skirt or short or skort we've witnessed so far have me cursing out my circulus curse.

Megan shoves a mint-green cowboy hat on my head. "You

could get away with wearing . . .” She scans my long-legged, curveless, A/B-cup body and scoffs at the shapeless black tee and white shorts I’ve put on it. “Well, that, and still have all the boys drooling, but aren’t you sick of the black and white?”

“You’re like a checkerboard,” Chelsea says, bouncing her head in agreement. She’s traded in her summer ponytail for a sleek reverse bob that better suits her petite face. “A hot one, but still.”

I tug on the end of the messy side braid Megan wound my hair in this morning and resist the urge to magically fling the cowboy hat in their direction. “I don’t want all the boys drooling.” Snorts from both of them. “I mean, any of the boys drooling.”

Chelsea reapplies her cherry-red lip gloss using the store mirror. “Except for Nate. And he already does.”

Megan wrinkles her freckled nose. “Gross, that’s my brother.”

Her brother, who asked Mrs. Pucher for her recipe and then made me the most lumpy, gritty, even-too-sweet-for-me batch of chocolate-peanut butter fudge that if I didn’t know better I’d say was laced with truth serum. Because once I managed to unstick it from the roof of my mouth, all I wanted to do was confess to what happened with Henry. Not to mention stop lying to him about what I’ve been doing for the past three nights. I stifle a yawn.

From the very first day that Zak arrived, the urgency with which he insists I master mind control has worked as well as caffeine to keep me and my magic burning the very real and magically, unnaturally bright candle.

Practicing mind control *with a male Jimm from Janna*, a place I wasn’t even sure actually existed for most of my life, has taken a backseat to the fact that I’m *practicing mind control*. There’s only so much one’s

brain can take in without exploding. Zak being so . . . normal makes it easy to accept the former while I adjust to the latter.

My mouth grows wide in another yawn. Megan shoves her finger in between my lips, making me gag. I shoot her the eye roll I've perfected by watching her.

Not that I can blame her, but it is technically her fault that the only time I have to practice *dragooning* undisturbed is after dark, when everyone else is asleep. When I should be asleep.

The few moments Zak and I have been able to steal during the day are, surprisingly, thanks to Chelsea. Though Megan still refuses to step even a pinky toe inside the hospital, she's come around to Chelsea's idea of writing letters to her mom. This way, when Mrs. Reese returns home, she'll feel less like she missed out on weeks or months (hopefully just weeks) of Nate and Megan's life. Lately, Nate's lacrosse practice consumes him, and George and Goldie spend their days at the hospital and their evenings walking the beach.

Still, it's only at night, when Megan is asleep, that I'm fully free (well, as free as one hundred and fifty feet allows me to be) to slip into the woods and practice with Zak.

Zak, who reminds me of myself when he marvels at the abundance of ice cream flavors in the local shop. Zak, who makes me feel guilty when he tells me he's never had a crush let alone a girlfriend. Zak, who has somehow managed to acquire a menagerie of animals to serve as my test subjects.

I didn't question the rabbit. I didn't want to go near let alone question the snake. But the pig? Apparently since this power *should* work on nonhumans—save for fellow Jinn—Zak's hoping size may be the key.

If it is, I'm still turning it the wrong way. I've never been good with locks.

In exchange for him helping me with mind control, I've been teaching him to conjure. Turns out, it's not that he can't, it's that he can't in Janna. Like me, he's a natural. Unlike me, he's a clothes-horse. I keep catching him fabricating new pieces. Ones not even in his size. When he returns to Janna, he's going to go into conjuring withdrawal.

The ricocheting in my veins that returns at the thought of Zak leaving doesn't surprise me. Even though it's only been three days, the rhythm Zak and I have fallen into has been almost effortless. Easier than anything I've had since Jenny.

Unfortunately, Zak's not exactly a fountain of information about the Afrit's underground world. It seems if the Afrit do *come for me*, he'd be punished for revealing secrets about Janna. So I haven't pushed him—much. I know Jinn there live with their family members much like we do here. Except for the Jinn locked away in *tortura cavea* for some infringement against the Afrit, but he won't talk about that.

What he won't stop talking about are the smartphones, apps, music, movies, and TV shows we have here. They occupy him during the day while I'm tied to Megan. His phone's going to meld into his hand by the time he leaves.

I've dropped hints about the uprising, but he hasn't picked up a single one. I have yet to figure out if he truly knows nothing or he's just as good at pretending as the rest of us Jinn.

"I'm so not ready for fall," Chelsea says, turning her nose up at a stack of turtleneck sweaters. "You know what that means, chickies. Clearance rack!"

Just as Chelsea slides her hand into mine to drag me to the back corner of the store, I spy someone who looks like Laila walking out of the frozen yogurt shop. But it can't be, because Laila doesn't live anywhere near here. Neither does Yasmin . . . but there she is too.

Which means, that someone doesn't just look like Laila. *It is Laila.* Laila, after her sixteenth birthday—the day she became a Jinn, received her own silver bangle, and magically reached the full maturity that amps us up to *va-va-vooms-ville*. The day I missed because I was still on probation, unable to apport to her. The day I missed because I broke her heart.

She disappears down another spoke in the mall, and I fight the ache that's causing tears to pool in my eyes. I can't go to her. She's too far away. Even if I could, what would I say besides, "I miss you. I'm sorry. And you're every bit as gorgeous as I knew you would be."

Standing beside Chelsea, I reach for a pair of aviator sunglasses stacked on the clearance table in front of us and hide my eyes behind them. Which only serves to elicit more moisture, for they're the same style of sunglasses that Laila wears.

Stealing her locket was wrong. I knew it when the gold chain coiled itself against the seam inside my pocket. But when I took it all those months ago, I was bitter, well, more bitter, about being Jinn. Being Jinn meant a life defined not by me but by the Afrit, and the picture of Laila's Jinn father inside the locket represented everything I wanted but couldn't have.

Back then, I didn't know how much my mother loved my father, that the Afrit ripping Jinn families apart as punishment for the last failed uprising scarred her as much, if not more, as it did me.

I didn't know the lengths my mother—and father—had gone to in order to protect me. I closed myself off from love, from life, all the while blaming magic, blaming being Jinn, for what I didn't have. Maybe it played a role. But I played a bigger one.

The irony is, I was just starting to figure all this out when Laila found the locket tucked away in my nightstand. It was the night of our official Zar initiation, just a single day before the Reeses' car accident.

The six of us—Laila, Yasmin, Hana, Mina, Farrah, and I—grew up thinking the Zar our mothers were in was nothing more than a declaration of lifelong friendship. We knew it was tradition for female Jinn to belong to a Zar.

We also knew their friendship was to become ours—whether we, which was mostly me, wanted it to or not. As Hana's red hair deepened, so did her obsession with Coco Chanel and Diane von Furstenberg and Tim Gunn. Take every fashion trend Hana studied like a scholar, sub in “teen heartthrob,” and you have Mina's academic—theoretical and real-world—pursuits. Her delicate features, mahogany hair, and soft pink lips are a front, camouflaging the inner party girl she was born to be. Lately, Farrah's caramel-colored bangs, sticking out of the headband she uses to hold back the rest of her pin-straight hair, flirt with her eyelashes as she bounces to the music she's constantly listening to, thinking about listening to, or talking about listening to when what she should be doing is practicing her magic. She's the least magically gifted of my Zar sisters. The opposite of Yasmin.

I used to think Yasmin and I were simply oil and water—actually, more gasoline and a lighter; one false move and we'd explode. She was bold, I was reserved. She was aggressive, I was

indifferent. She hated humans, my best friend for nine years was a human. Psychotherapy moment: I now know that's the root of our problems. For her, magic is everything. That it never was for me made me the target of her bold aggression.

Through it all, Laila stood (heads shorter) by my side.

For all their differences, they've always shared one thing: They've always wanted to become Jinn. The thing that unites them is what separates me. But not anymore.

Over the course of the sixteen years we've known one another, we've been close, not so close, and then, maybe, on the way to being close again. The Zar initiation was to cement our bond, but not in the way we thought.

That night, to our surprise, the six of us became magically linked, able to draw on one another to bolster our powers, able to feel one another's emotions, able to live and work as one if we so choose. But because of me, because of the locket I stole all those months ago, our Zar merged and then fractured within minutes of each other.

I've been trying to tap into each of my sisters since with no luck. I don't know if they're choosing sides between me and Laila. If they are, of course they'll choose Laila. I would.

As much as I don't want to feel Laila's emotions, I need to feel them. I need to know if I've finally succeeded in doing what my moody, mopey, egocentric self had been trying to do for years: push sweet, kind, loyal Laila away. And I need to find out if I have any shot at pulling her back.

"Ooh," Chelsea shrieks. "This."

I spin around to see her holding up a see-through lacy black shirt with a push-up bra sewn inside.

Groaning, I snatch it out of her hand and stick the hanger back on the rack. “You said no more black.”

She frowns and scoops it back up again. “Not for you. For me.”

The concrete’s barely set on this newly paved road of friendship Chelsea and I seem to be on, so I don’t know if telling her she needs to stop acting—and dressing—like someone I’m slowly discovering she’s not will cause a sinkhole.

With a click of metal against metal, Chelsea puts the shirt back.

“Not your size?” I ask.

“It is,” she says. “I’m just not sure it’s really me.”

Wait, what? That’s close—almost bull’s-eye close—to what I was thinking. I squish down my involuntarily rising eyebrows. *Was that . . . did I . . . can I . . .* Let’s try it again.

Selecting a floral cardigan with a lace collar that somehow seems to match Chelsea’s muffin-baking personality, I hold it up, and like Zak’s been saying, I stop thinking and start doing.

Instead of simply thinking of words in my mind that I want Chelsea to say or do, I picture her saying or doing those things. I picture *her* picturing her saying and doing them. I feel how she’d feel while saying and doing those things. The patterns in her brain that tie into thought and speech and muscle movement all require energy. I need to make that energy work for me, to draw on nature and connect with her. To tune myself to the tiny electrical signals that race along the neurons in her brain and power them myself. We need to move in sync, like award-winning tango dancers.

At first nothing happens. And then it does.

Chelsea stands in front of me, reaching out to touch the cardigan, fingering the lace, pausing, and studying. “Do you mind?”

She takes the hanger out of my hand. “I kinda think this might be more me.”

It worked. Fireworks rock my insides and I’m about to explode. Suddenly Chelsea starts jumping up and down.

Oops, we’re still connected. My deep breath works to extinguish the sparklers alit inside me. One final hop and Chelsea’s feet remain on the ground while I concentrate on breaking our link.

Back under her own control, she covers her mouth with her hand and squeaks out an embarrassed giggle. “I guess I love this even more than I thought.”

Zak’s going to flip when I tell him.

Zak? That’s my first thought? Not the wish I can finally grant and the curse I can finally end?

Chelsea leads us toward the now even longer line for the dressing room. My buzzing butt makes me crash into the redheaded girl in front of us. The fifteen hangers she had been so perfectly balancing fly from her grip and skid across the floor.

“Clumsy much?” she says with a scowl.

Before I can open my mouth, Chelsea flings herself between us, standing on top of the pile of strewn clothes. This gives her an extra half an inch, maybe. The other girl looms over her, but that doesn’t stop Chelsea’s flaming red lips.

“Rude much?” Chelsea rustles the pile of clothes with her platform sandal and snickers. “We’re actually doing you a favor. You might as well scoot right out of line, honey, because you . . .” She raises one eyebrow. “You can’t pull off any of this. *Any* of this.”

She sweeps the whole lot aside, grabs me with one hand and Megan with the other, and moves us all up in line.

“Damn,” Megan says.

I can't reprimand her. That's the only word that fits.

"Skank," Chelsea hisses at the redhead.

"Chelsea!" Her I have to reprimand.

She rounds her shoulders and clutches her floral cardigan to her chest. "Sorry."

Megan and I devolve into giggles when my butt vibrates again.

Seriously, Zak? Except now that I have actual news to report, I'm equally as anxious to connect with him. Since snails move faster than this line, he'll have to come to me. I pull out my phone and text Zak with the name of the store we're in, telling him I'm heading for the door.

I'm about to make an excuse (that has more than a nugget of truth in it) about needing some non-hairsprayed air so I can wait for Zak by the entrance when Laila comes up beside me.

I forget all about breathing.

Once only blond, her soft waves cascade past her shoulders in a hue that's a delicate mix of butterscotch, honey, and apricot. Her eyes shine the traditional Jinn gold but tiny speckles of her original powder blue remain. She's no longer the tiny Laila, always shorter than the rest of us, but she's not nearly as tall as Yasmin and I. My eyes float down to her bursting cleavage. I can't help but smile, remembering how eager she was to inherit the ample bustline that runs in her family. She must be thrilled.

Out of my mouth spills, "I miss you. I'm sorry. And you're every bit as gorgeous as I knew you would be."

I clasp a hand over my mouth and feel everyone's eyes on me: Chelsea, Megan, Laila, and Yasmin. Yasmin, whose uncharacteristically pale skin against her raven-black hair makes her look like she's aged years since the last time I saw her on the night of our

Zar initiation. I know from both Megan and Nate that losing a parent will do that to you.

And then, in strides Zak. In his conjured designer jeans, tight black T-shirt, and slightly crooked sunglasses (guess he's still having trouble conjuring metals). Like Henry, he's also discovered gel.

He approaches from the other side, coming to a halt when his eyes focus on Laila.

Speech eludes all of us. Except, of course, Chelsea. "Talk about every bit as—"

"Gorgeous," Laila finishes in a whisper.

Zak?

I spin my head around and see he's about to remove his lopsided sunglasses. But he can't. His eyes. Yasmin and Laila would see. Laila's preoccupation with his sprayed-on tee suggests the meaning might not register for her. But Yasmin, she'd know with one look at Zak's copper eyes that he's a Jinn.

And I can't have that. Too many questions whose answers put them in too much danger.

"Come on, Zak," I say, grabbing the hem of his so-soft-I-don't-know-how-he-could-have-possibly-conjured-it T-shirt.

"Not so fast." Yasmin flips my sunglasses to the top of my head and peers into my eyes. "Aren't you going to introduce us, Azra?"

My tongue goes limp.

Zak places his hand over his heart.

Oh, no, he better not do that weird speechy thing he did to me when we first met.

"I'm Zakaria, Azra's cousin."

Yasmin's almond-shaped eyes grow wide. "Really?" She pulls Laila toward her. "Because so are we."

Again, all eyes on Azra. To avoid confusion, in the outside world, my Zar sisters and I have always called one another “cousin.” Though Zak couldn’t have known this, why didn’t he just say “friend”?

With a shrug, I say, “Different sides of the family.”

The ticking of this time bomb is way too loud. And so even though it’s the last thing I want to do now that I’m finally face-to-face with Laila, I take Zak’s hand and walk away.