

Chapter 1

Present Day

“It’s my nineteenth birthday!” Mirissa shouted to the unseen people she knew were watching.

Mirissa Colson was sitting in the same small white room she’d been in for what felt like hours. Of course, she really had no idea how long she’d been there or what time of the day or night it might be. There were no windows, no clocks, and they’d taken her Mickey Mouse watch, along with all of her other personal items. Whatever drug they’d used to subdue her hadn’t completely knocked her out – one of the benefits of being her – but it had made her groggy for long enough to ensure she couldn’t fight back. After she had screamed herself hoarse, Mirissa had given up that tactic and replaced it with the guilt trip tactic. Maybe if they knew it was her birthday, they’d feel bad enough to just let her go. *Sure, that could happen. And then the Tooth Fairy could blow a hole through the wall with special fairy dust and that would be the end of it.*

For lack of anything better to do, Mirissa once again searched the room for clues as to her location, who had brought her here, and how the hell she was going escape. She sat on a black metal chair, in front of a gray metal table, both securely bolted to the floor. *No points for style or originality.*

The only other feature of this stark white prison cell was the unusual door. At first glance, she hadn’t even noticed it was there, but for the small biometric scanner

conveniently located at eye level. Under close inspection, Mirissa saw the faint outline of a door, but no handle or hinges could be seen.

This wasn't the first time Mirissa Colson had been held against her will. In the last year, she'd been kidnapped twice (three times if you include her current predicament) and had twice barely escaped with her life. This time seemed different.

Her captors hadn't hurt her. They had failed to put her in some nasty cesspool, full of every disease-carrying rodent known to man. They didn't shackle her to the wall or bind her in any manner. They'd simply put her in this room and walked out without saying a word. The phrase "the calm before the storm" crossed her mind.

How had this become her life? Was it really only a year ago that she'd prepared for her senior prom and looked forward to college? If she hadn't answered that damn door, her life could have been...

Chapter 2

One Year Ago

Steve Colson tried to hold a straight face as he watched his daughter impatiently pacing back and forth.

“Come on, Dad!” Mirissa wailed in her very best spoiled brat impression. Today Mirissa celebrated her eighteenth birthday and, Steve knew, it had to be perfect. She had been waiting for this day her whole life – literally – and obviously had absolutely no intention of waiting any longer.

“What’s the rush, sweetheart? The store doesn’t even open for another half hour.” The grin on Steve’s face said he planned on torturing Mirissa until she was climbing the walls. “Are you sure you want to go shopping today? It’ll be really busy out there and I was thinking maybe we could just hang out here and watch old movies with Henry or something.” Henry was Mirissa’s pet turtle and her oldest friend. “He might get upset if he misses your big birthday.”

“Henry’s fine. I told him we’d bring him a new basking rock when we came back. I’ll be waiting in the car. And just in case you have any ideas of putting this off again, know that I have your credit card in my purse and will go without you if you are not in the car in the next thirty seconds.”

Steve Colson had to give his daughter her due. She knew exactly how to get him moving. Just the thought of what his next Visa statement would look like if she went

unsupervised, not to mention what the prom dress would look like, was enough to have him running to his car.

It had been a long time since Steve had seen his daughter this happy. Too long. It wasn't that she'd had some horribly bad life or anything; it was just that he hadn't seen that spark in her eyes since her mother left. She'd closed herself off from everyone, even him. That was when Steve decided to get her a pet. He thought it would help her come out of her shell. What he hadn't expected was Mirissa to choose a pet that had a shell of its own—a red-eared slider turtle. After some research, he soon understood her reasoning. That turtle had a life span almost as long as Mirissa's which meant she would never have to worry about it leaving her. They purchased Henry the very next day.

Today, Mirissa had chosen a gown shop that was, as she put it, the best in the entire city, and by the time they walked through the front door, she beamed a smile that warmed his heart. Steve anticipated the trouble he would be in shortly.

For the next hour Steve squished his six-foot-two-inch frame into a plush armchair while Mirissa paraded around in dress after dress. She was a virtual whirlwind of taffeta and lace. Keeping a smile plastered on his face, Steve cringed inwardly when the more revealing dresses were modeled and applauded every time she walked out in full coverage. She might be eighteen now, but she would always be his little girl.

Finally, Mirissa settled on an elegant peach-colored full-length fitted gown with a sweetheart neckline and spaghetti straps. It looked beautiful against her olive

complexion and long, wavy brown hair. Steve had to admit that she looked stunning. She would surely be the envy of all the girls at the prom, which was pretty much exactly what she was going for.

After paying an exorbitant amount for what Mirissa swore was “the absolute best prom dress EVER,” they drove home, making several stops along the way to pick up shoes, the necessary accessories to complete her outfit, and, of course, a new basking rock for Henry.

Chapter 3

At home, she tried on everything they had purchased one more time, modeling the outfit for Henry, when the doorbell rang. Eager to show off her gown to whomever was lucky enough to be on their front porch, Mirissa swung open the door with an ear-to-ear smile on her face. It quickly faded when the Federal Express man shoved a package in her hand, and without giving her a second look, trotted off the porch, down the sidewalk, and to his truck.

Unwilling to let a deliveryman sour her mood, she looked at the package to see who had sent her the birthday gift that she knew it must be. It was addressed to Mirissa Colson, but the only information under “Sender” was a P.O Box in Atlanta, Georgia. Odd, she couldn’t remember ever meeting anyone who lived there.

Undaunted, Mirissa tore open the paper and found a small green velvet box inside with a folded notecard. With a feeling of apprehension, she opened it.

My Dearest Mirissa,

I know it has been far too long since we last saw each other and that you must be filled with questions. Please know that you have been in my heart every minute of every day since I left and that I have longed for the day that we could be together again. I know I have much to explain and I promise that I will soon.

For now, I am sending you this very special gift. It has been passed down through the generations of my family for centuries, and now, it belongs to you.

I had hoped that I would be able to give this to you in person and share all of the history of our family with you, but that is just not possible right now. So in my place a guardian has been sent to guide you. He will arrive at 2:00 pm. Please wait until then to open your gift. It is important that your guardian be with you when you do.

Happy birthday, my darling. I will see you soon.

Love,

Mom

Dumbfounded, Mirissa stared at the note from her long-lost mother. It had been eleven years since she had walked out of their lives with not so much as a word of explanation. Now, on Mirissa's eighteenth birthday, she decided to walk right back in? Mirissa didn't know what to think or how to feel. She felt anger at her mother for leaving both her and her father the way she had. She'd always regretted her mom missing all of the important events in her young. But she was also excited at the prospect of seeing her again and learning the answers to all of the questions that had plagued her for over a decade.

And what was this business about a guardian? What could she possibly need with a guardian? It wasn't like they were rich and famous and needed bodyguards to fend off the thousands of fans trying to get close. What kind of gift had she given her that would require a guide?

After looking at the clock, Mirissa realized her new guardian wouldn't be there for another hour. She eyed the beautiful green velvet box and told herself to wait. *Wait, hell.* Within ten seconds the box was open on her lap, revealing an unusual—and expensive—looking ring.

Embedded in the gold oval of the ring, was a picture made of inlaid stones. Two swords made of diamonds were laid out in the shape of a T. A long snake of emeralds wound its way around the upright sword, its head resting where the two swords met. Its eyes were tiny rubies that seemed to look right at her.

Snakes and swords? Really, Mom? This ring was handed down in our family through the centuries? Why? What did all of this mean? And where the hell have you been all this time?

Mirissa took out the ring and slid it on the ring finger of her right hand, surprised that it fit her perfectly. Then she heard her dad come in from the backyard and felt a surge of guilt overwhelm her. How could she be trying on a ring sent to her by a woman who had deserted them? Without another thought, she grabbed the ring to pull it off and put it back in its box. It didn't budge. Although it had slipped easily onto her finger, it was not coming off that way. Listening to her dad walk through the kitchen toward the living room made Mirissa panic and she yanked on the ring until her finger was red and raw, but it still would not come off. Just then, her father walked in the room and saw the look of terror on her face.

“What's wrong, Birthday Girl? You look like you just saw a ghost!”

At a loss for words, Mirissa held out her right hand and watched the color bleed from her beloved father's face. Just as she was about to ask him if he was alright, she felt a pinprick on her finger, just below the snake-and-swords depiction on the ring. Then everything went black.

Chapter 4

Present Day

After hours of nothing but the hum of the florescent lights in the ceiling, Mirissa heard voices in what must have been a hallway outside her room. People were walking toward her door and speaking in hushed tones. About what, she didn't know. For a moment there was silence, then came clicking noises and the sound of air escaping as the door slowly eased out of the room. It didn't swing on hinges like all of the other doors Mirissa was accustomed to. Instead, it pushed out in one piece and then slid completely away behind the wall. *Nifty*, she thought.

The suits that walked through the door were definitely not what Mirissa had been expecting. A leather-clad behemoth with more fingers than teeth was more in line with her experiences. But not this pair of Park Avenue Barbie and Ken look-alikes. The woman was several inches shorter than Mirissa's six feet and wore a simple blue blouse and black trousers with sensible shoes. Her blond hair was pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail that screamed "Don't mess with me!" Her partner looked a little softer, with short brown hair that was receding a little at the crowns. About the same height as Mirissa, he wore stylish slacks and a button-down shirt.

Walking into the room, they stood at the table, directly across from where Mirissa sat, and dropped a manila folder in front of her. Still no words, just the sound of the door sliding back into place and the clicking sound of whatever locking mechanism it possessed engaging.

Mirissa eyed Barbie, then the folder, and then sat back with her arms crossed over her chest. Two could play at this game.

With a smirk just forming at the corners of his mouth, Ken spoke first. “Mirissa, my name is Ken Hodges, and this,” he motioned to Barbie, “is Jackie Barns.”

“Thank God you didn’t say Barbie,” Mirissa mumbled.

“Mirissa,” Ken started, “we brought you here because we believe you are uniquely suited to our... organization, and we’d like to discuss with you how your talents might be utilized on a grander scale.”

“What could you possibly know about me or my *talents*?”

This time it was Barbie, or Jackie. “Mirissa Colson, age eighteen. Born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida. Mother, Myrine, left when you were seven years old and your father, Steve, raised you. An exceptional student throughout your school career, although, according to your high school guidance counselor, you showed a lack of social skills and didn’t participate in extracurricular activities.”

“At age seven you began training in Tae Kwon Do. Two years later you added Aikido, and Shotokan Karate two years after that. At age thirteen you started training in the Keysi Fighting Method, and now you hold black belts in all four.”

“Close,” Mirissa said. “I’m nineteen, not eighteen, and KFM uses bracelets, not belts.”

“You have never been sick a day in your life,” Jackie continued as if there hadn’t been any interruption, “and the physical exams you underwent throughout your martial

arts career showed your respiratory and cardio vascular systems are extraordinarily efficient.”

Pointing at the file on the table, Ken said, “In short, Mirissa, we know everything about you.”

Feeling more than a little unsettled by the amount of information these two seemed to have, Mirissa opened the file in front of her. What struck her first was the photo on the inside cover. Not the five by seven school photo of her from her last year in high school, but the small wallet size picture of her ring.

What do they know about my ring that would make them have a picture of it in my file?

As Mirissa flipped through the pages, she saw copies of her high school transcripts (straight A’s, of course) and medical reports from her family doctor detailing her unique abilities to metabolize oxygen and food into incredibly high amounts of energy. Even at the tender age of seven, she’d had the metabolism of a highly trained Olympic athlete. What made her system unique were the large amounts of adenosine triphosphate, or ATP, stored in her muscles and her ability to break it down and re-synthesize it at an alarmingly quick rate. In short, Mirissa’s body could create enough energy to allow her to go full throttle and sustain it for as long as she required.

Along with the information on her, there were also pages on her father. His old military files from his time as a Navy SEAL, and his medical records. Nothing unusual there.

Then, when Mirissa turned to the last page of the folder, she found a single sheet on her mother. Other than her picture and few vital statistics, there wasn't much. It would seem the investigative skills of these people, whoever they were, weren't as good as they thought.

It was then that Ken took his turn at speaking. "As you can see, we have been watching you for quite some time. We are fully aware of your abilities, your history, and your current *employment*, if you will."

Mirissa's thoughts whirled a mile a minute. How could anyone know this much about her? And to what purpose? Were they going to arrest her for something she'd done in the past year? Were they going to keep her locked up to study her? What was their endgame?

Outwardly, Mirissa appeared relaxed and disinterested in her surroundings. She looked bored, something she had trained herself to do in unknown situations since she was thirteen. But the truth was quite the opposite. Every sense Mirissa possessed was on high alert. She had sized up her captors the moment they entered the room and had already chosen her moves to incapacitate them when the time came. The question was, when would that be? Even if she took them down now there would still be the problem of getting out that unique door. She had to bide her time and wait for the right opportunity.

Ken continued, completely oblivious to Mirissa's thoughts and the serious danger he was in. "We represent a group of extraordinary people, much like yourself, and would like for you to meet them. I can't go into too much detail before you have the proper

clearance, but let's just say that these people have their own set of unique abilities and they use those abilities for the greater good of all mankind."

As Mirissa waited for him to continue, Barbie (the nickname seemed to have stuck) walked over to the door, placed her right eye in front of the scanner, and waited for it to open and slide behind the wall.

Now we're getting somewhere, Mirissa thought. Twenty-five seconds to put the two of them on the floor and then she would be out. But out to where? What was on the other side of that door? And how many other people were out there? Best to wait, she thought, until she had a better idea of where she was and what she was up against.

Ken grabbed the file from the desk and started toward the door. "You coming?" he asked.

Well, duh, Mirissa thought, as she slowly rose from her chair. Sitting for so long had made her butt numb, but not to worry. She could take out these two with a numb butt and both arms tied behind her back.

Once they were out of the room, Mirissa followed Ken and Barbie down a long white corridor with no windows or artwork of any kind. Their complete lack of decorating skills seemed to be a theme and was starting to get on her nerves. At the end of the hall, Ken used another retinal scanner to open another hidden door, and they entered an office that looked completely out of place in this building. The walls were a warm coffee color and most were covered with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves made of oak. The one empty wall held two rows of photographs of people Mirissa didn't know. Below each picture were two sets of dates – one birth and one death. On the large oak desk sat

a phone and a computer set-up that NASA would envy. There were no papers or personal items strewn across it as you might expect, but the sheer tidiness of the room put Mirissa's heart at rest. This was the kind of office that she would be comfortable in, if she ever had an office, that is. The overly large leather chair behind the desk was turned around, its back facing her, but she could feel the strength and power it radiated.

When the chair spun around, Mirissa realized her mistake. It wasn't the chair that radiated power. It was its occupant.

Her mother stared straight at her.

Chapter 5

One Year Ago

Mirissa tried to take in her surroundings and make sense of it all, but just couldn't wrap her head around any of it. One minute she was in her living room dressed in her prom gown, and the next she was standing in a clearing in some woods wearing – what? A Xena Warrior Princess costume?

Dozens of women, all wearing similar costumes, were in the midst of some sort of battle training. Off to her right stood a twenty-foot-tall statue of a beautiful woman.

The stone woman wore a tunic that came down to her knees along with a quiver of arrows strapped to her back. The statue sported a hunting knife at its waist and in her hands, she held a bow with an arrow at the ready. Her long, braided hair hung over her shoulder to her belt line. She looked regal and powerful and more than a little intimidating.

“Welcome to Tritonia, Mirissa.”

The sound of the woman's voice quickly brought Mirissa back from her study of the statue and without thinking she took her fighting stance, ready for whatever might come her way.

“Fear not, young warrior. No harm will come to you in this place. This has always been, and will always be, your home.”

Although she had no reason to believe this stranger, Mirissa found herself relaxing. Some part of her instinctively trusted this woman. She had brown eyes, much like Mirissa's, which showed kindness, and her shoulder-length black hair perfectly framed her friendly face.

Mirissa thought back to what had happened in her living room. The ring must have been laced with some kind of drug, causing her to have hallucinations the caliber of which Hollywood would be proud. Mirissa focused on slowing her breathing until she felt centered – something years of martial arts training had taught her. When she had her mind settled and felt in complete control, she opened her eyes, only to find the same woman staring back at her with a smile on her face.

“Where am I?” Mirissa asked.

“That is a question that is not so easily answered. Right now, your body is exactly where you last left it. It is only your consciousness that has travelled here. This is the island of Tritonia, birth place of all Amazon Warriors.”

*Amazons? As in the mythical warrior women from two thousand years ago?
Those Amazons?*

This wasn't the first time Mirissa had heard that name. For as long as she could remember, her classmates had made fun of her height. She'd been a head taller than everyone else in her class since kindergarten, including some of her teachers. Although most tall girls tried to hide their height by slouching, Mirissa had never seen the point. She was always going to be tall; she felt no need to add hunchbacked.

In the eighth grade, a particularly nasty girl name Cindy Fossler had made it her life's mission to destroy Mirissa's confidence and had given her the nickname "Mirissazon", which had unfortunately stuck with her throughout high school. At almost six feet tall by the time she was fifteen, there was no hope of ever getting rid of that name.

As Mirissa looked around the clearing at the other women, she noticed for the first time that she wasn't the tallest person there. In fact, every woman present, including the woman standing with her, was around the same height as her. Wow, she was actually average height for the first time in her life. She could get used to this.

"My name is Myrine and I am queen of the Amazons," said her self-appointed welcoming committee.

"That's my mother's name," Mirissa said. "I don't understand what's happening. How did I get here?"

"Did your guardian not explain this journey to you?" Myrine asked with a slightly confused look on her face.

"Uh, well, I haven't actually met my guardian yet," said Mirissa, feeling a little like she'd just gotten caught passing a note in class.

Myrine let out a short breath, smiled, and said, "You are very much like your mother. Walk with me and I will explain everything."

As they walked out of the clearing, they passed the statue that had captured Mirissa's attention earlier. Myrine told her that it was a statue of Artemis, the Greek Goddess of the Hunt.

"Amazons have worshipped Artemis for millennia," she said. "She is the reason that we exist, and she has blessed us with all of the attributes we need to accomplish our task."

After seeing the doubt in Mirissa's eyes, Myrine stopped walking and placed her hands on Mirissa's shoulders. "There is much in the world that is kept hidden. This place, for example, no longer exists in your dimension. Tritonia was a large, beautiful island country off of Africa's northwest coast. The Amazon tribe lived and flourished there for hundreds of years. Unfortunately, our beautiful home was destroyed almost two thousand years ago during our volcano's eruption. In your dimension, all that is left of Tritonia is seven small islands you call the Canary Islands. Now, Amazons must travel here in the same manner you have."

Before Mirissa could open her mouth to let out the litany of questions that were running through her head, Myrine simply walked away, looking over her shoulder to ensure that Mirissa was following.

"Although history has many stories about the Amazons, the truth has been kept well hidden. As with all ancient hidden truths, great tales have been woven over the centuries that may have had a seed of truth in them, but that seed grew into a mighty oak of lies. We were, and are, warriors. Our tribe has only women, but not because we murdered our male children, as many tales profess. We simply don't have any male

children. We have fought many battles over the last two and a half millennia, but none of those battles were for territory or riches. Our battles have always been to save mankind from the demons that wish to destroy or enslave it.”

This was all too much for Mirissa to take. Ancient Amazon warriors, demons bent on killing humanity, and, oh yeah, a Greek goddess. What kind of drug was on that damned ring?

“OK,” Mirissa said. “This has been really interesting, in a crazy sort of way, but right now I’d like to go back to my house and my father, please.”

With an understanding smile, Myrine grasped Mirissa’s hand and spoke with an authoritative tone. “This is not a choice that you can make, Mirissa. It is a destiny that has already been written for you, as it was with your mother and her mother before her. You cannot change your destiny. You must embrace it.”

With that, Myrine was on her way again and Mirissa had no choice but to follow. They were almost back at the clearing where they started and, she thought, that would be her best chance at getting home.

The other women were still doing battle practice when they returned but as Myrine and Mirissa entered the clearing everyone stopped to look at them. A woman that appeared to be only a year or two older than Mirissa came over to introduce herself.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Asteria. Why don’t you come practice with me?”

“Sure. Why not?” Mirissa said. She’d had about all she could take of talk right now and thought a little sparring might do her some good. She hoped that it might help clear her head.

Asteria took her by the arm as they started toward the center of the clearing. “How many black belts do you have?” she asked. “I’ve got five, right now, but should have my sixth by the end of the year. Then I’ll really be able to kick some Kakos butt! Oh, that’s right, you don’t know about the Kakos yet. Not to worry, your Guardian will teach you everything you ever wanted to know about Kakos, and a whole bunch you didn’t want to know. For now, let’s have some fun.”

Mirissa didn’t know why, but she really liked Asteria, and before she even had a chance to question her judgment, she was on the receiving end of an expertly wielded roundhouse kick.

Oh, it’s on.

This was amazing. Mirissa had never sparred like this in all of the years she’d been training. Asteria stayed with her strike for strike, blocking her punches and kicks quickly and easily. Her speed was astonishing, going from a wheel kick to an elbow strike then a spinning back kick in the time it took most of Mirissa’s opponents to just get into ready stance.

Round and round they went. Fists, feet and elbows in a constant flurry of movement. Lost in the pure joy of giving everything she had to a fight, Mirissa almost failed to notice that Myrine had walked over to the statue of Artemis and was in the midst of conversation. She could barely hear the voices over the sounds of battle.

“She will do well, Myrine.”

“Yes, I believe she will, but I am concerned that her unusual upbringing will hinder her. She has been trained well and obviously has the natural talent we hoped she would, but she has had no knowledge of who she is and what lies ahead of her. Can we really expect her to be ready?”

“Are any of us ever truly ready when the time arises? Mirissa’s destiny is a different one than our other Amazons and the upbringing you speak of might just be exactly what she needs. Only time will tell, but as of now we will give her everything she needs to succeed. Have you assigned her an appropriate Guardian?”

Myrine allowed a smile to grace her lips. “Yes,” she said. “I believe I have chosen her Guardian well, Artemis.”