

Buzzing with a high from the concert, Arden and Nick walked slowly back to his car. Pulling on their joined hands, Nick tugged her into the gap between two buildings.

“Finally I get you alone,” he whispered against her lips.

“Oh no! What are you going to do now?” Arden wailed jokingly, walking backwards.

“Hmm...you’re at my mercy, so anything I want. Mwah, ha, ha, ha.” Nick smiled as he kissed her softly. Their lips met lightly, again and again, as their breath sped up.

“We should get going. It’s a long drive back and it’s already late,” Arden murmured, but made no move to disentangle herself.

“Yeah,” Nick mumbled, backing her up against the wall, holding their twined fingers against the bricks as he kissed her again and pressed their bodies together.

Lost in each other, the heightened sensation of skin against skin, they failed to notice stealthy movement behind them.

Like a sudden shout in her ear, Arden reacted instinctively. Spinning them, she moved in front of Nick before she consciously knew what she was doing. Facing down the dark alley before her, heart beating fast, she searched frantically for the danger. The alley looked empty. She strained her eyes, opening them until they ached, trying to see into the dark areas. Processing as fast as she could, it seemed like just an empty alley. Her instincts were screaming but she couldn’t find what was wrong. Breathing in and out, she waited, arms holding Nick back.

“Arden?” he asked and started to move around her.

“Hush,” she whispered, ushering him back towards the entrance. “There’s something here.”

“Where?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I can’t see anything.”

Body pumping with adrenaline, Arden stared down the still and silent alley. *Was there anything?* She started to second guess herself. But a sixth sense inside her was pounding, even though all she could see was an empty stretch of concrete and dirty brick walls. She started to turn away, but out of the corner of her eye she caught a flicker of movement. Eyes narrowing like a bird of prey, she saw a shadow move, covering a patch of light. Then more shadows rearranged themselves, seeming to move in a disjointed wave. The dark patches poured slowly and inexorably down the

alley, pooling in places on the cracked concrete, pausing as it amassed into one dark pool. The light shining into the alley hadn't changed, yet the shadow was steadily closing the distance between them. Pushing Nick backwards, Arden tried to move them away. She anticipated it rushing them, but whatever the shadows were, they kept pace with them as they moved. Stalking them.

Instinctively, Arden tried to gather her power, but of course, there was nothing there. The earrings prevented it. Fear welled up, making her wish desperately that she still had power to protect them. There was only one thing she could do. Reaching up to her ears, she started fumbling, trying to unscrew them.

"Arden, no!" Nick exclaimed trying to stop her hands. Realising they didn't have time anyway, Arden moved them faster.

"Nick, go!" She pushed him away from her, giving him a head start as she kept stepping backwards faster. They stumbled towards the street, Arden holding her arms out ready to defend them, even though she had no idea what she was protecting them from.

The shadows started moving faster, the light in the alley undulating like they were underwater. Spinning, Arden gave into the primal urge to run. Adrenaline squealed through her body as the flight instinct took over. Feet pounding, she hurried after Nick, waiting for the first touch of the shadows. *Would it burn or freeze?*

Catching up with Nick, who must have slowed for her, Arden pushed him hard and they stumbled as light broke over them. Realising they were on the street, Arden barely slowed, grabbing his arm and making him sprint away from the alley.

"What are you doing?" he asked after two blocks, holding onto her hand to slow them down.

"Didn't you see the shadows?" Arden panted, looking over her shoulder. Nothing seemed to be following them and the danger she had felt had lessened. Searching the deserted street around them, nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

"Umm...there were shadows but it's night, so that's normal," he answered slowly and carefully, not understanding.

"The shadows weren't just shadows."

"They weren't?" Nick's brows scrunched in confusion.

"No." Arden shook her head.

"Okay. What were they?"

Rubbing her arms to get rid of a sudden chill, Arden kept looking around for danger. "I don't know. But they weren't good."

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but are you sure?”

Arden levelled him with a stare.

“After everything that happened last year, you doubt me?”

“No. Sorry, I just didn’t...”

“It’s fine. But when it comes to the weird stuff, just believe me and if I tell you to run, run as fast as you can.”

“Sure. Will do.” He nodded, grabbing her hand in his as they walked. “So you have no idea what was in the alley?”

“No, but it was bad. Sticking around to find out wasn’t going to end well.”

“So what are we going to do about it?”

“Us?” Arden shrugged attempting to dislodge the tightness in her shoulders. She couldn’t help glancing back in the direction of the alley. “Nothing, I don’t think. Whatever that is, it has nothing to do with us.”

“Okay. Well, let’s get going then.” He led them back in the direction of the car.

“Good idea.” Arden tried to dismiss the feeling of foreboding, but it clung to her, dampening her mood.