

**Part I**

**Selene**

## Chapter 1

Pattering footsteps and hurried panting echoed through tight city alleys, as eighteen-year-old Ella Gant dashed through the brick and mortar jungle that was Selene. She leapt over piles of garbage and splashed through pools of stale water, all while sprinting as fast as her weary legs would take her. Meanwhile, the mid-day sun peeked over rooftops like a nosy neighbor, casting long shadows on the ground that obscured all but the most obvious obstacles. She cursed the way they forced her to watch her every step, because a single slip up now would spell disaster. At the same time, her burning lungs screamed for mercy but she responded by pushing them even harder. She pushed them so hard that they all but shriveled up, until they eventually *forced* her to stop. Only then did she finally pull her tie and collar loose, double over, and gasp for air; these stuffy school clothes just left no room to breathe!

“Where’d she go!?”

“Split up! She’s around here somewhere!”

Furious shouts echoed from nearby, sending chills up Ella’s spine. She immediately twisted around in search of pursuit, but it was no use. While Selene’s labyrinth-like alleys had done well to hide her so far, now they did exactly the same for her pursuers. No matter where she looked or listened, their shadows and voices seemed to come from every crooked corner or

snaking throughway at once. Wherever they were though, they sounded pissed – hardly a surprise, given what she did to them recently. She shuddered to think of how they might return the favor, which provided all the motivation she needed to get going.

Injected with fresh adrenaline, Ella took off again – around one corner and then another, under one archway and then over the next. She twisted and turned like a hare dodging hounds, even going so far as to squeeze through dank narrow spaces, or crawl across the uneven ground to get under fences. Yet despite her best efforts, she just couldn't shake them. Her pursuers' footsteps and voices continued to close in like a noose, until their towering silhouettes crisscrossed across all the walls surrounding her. At that point, all she could do was stick to the shadows and hope that she didn't catch an errant glance or turn a wrong corner. She would never lose them like this – not without some sort of cover at least!

Ella turned a few more corners, where she then came screeching to a stop. Lo and behold, before her suddenly stood exactly the sort of cover that she'd been hoping for! It came in the form of a dense cloud of steam being fueled by a cracked pipe. The cloud was thick enough to mask anything inside, though it did have an off-putting sour odor. That, combined with the foreboding hiss of the pipe itself, gave her cause for suspicion. Even without

these warning signs, there was something a little *too* convenient about all this – almost as if some unseen person *wanted* her to run into a place where she would have no way of seeing what lay ahead. That said though, could it really be as bad as what lay behind?

“Quick! She went this way!”

Quickly deciding that the answer to that was *no*, Ella doubled-down and dove headlong into the unknown. Just as she expected, her senses were immediately overcome by the thick white haze. Not only did it block both sight and sound, but also disoriented her with its sickly scents of grease and spoiled meat. She gagged reflexively, but somehow managed to hold her lunch down. Still, she was unable to see even a foot in front of her, which forced her to stumble blindly just to get a hand on the alley wall. It was slimy to the touch, again testing her gag reflex, but was still the best way forward. In fact, she was able to follow it quite a ways – at a pretty good pace too – before suddenly smacking into something right in front of her. Reeling in pain, she reached out and felt around, only to discover the exact same solid brick she’d been following now directly ahead of her too.

“Great,” she muttered to herself.

Ella tried following the wall to her left, but ran into another wall there as well. There was no doubt about it; this was a dead end. Without anywhere left

to go, she then turned to scan the rest of her surroundings, but could only make out vague shapes in the mist: a bunch of half-filled trashcans, a pile of old rags, and a fire escape bolted to one side of the alley. Maybe if she doubled-back now then she'd still have enough time to find another way around, she thought. But before she could retrace even a single step, voices began taunting her from the other side.

“My, my, my – would you look at that, boys? It seems that somebody doesn't know these corridors quite as well as she thought she did!”

Those sinister snickers were soon followed by the sound of approaching footsteps. So much for doubling-back. Ella instinctively pressed herself against the wall at her back, but it wasn't like she was going to go *through* it anytime soon. She was a caged rat, with only the fog to buy her time now. It wouldn't be long before those bigger, meaner, stronger boys found her, and once they did it would be all over. After all, they were the only other ones in these alleys, and anyone watching wouldn't have been able to see through this thick fog anyway. That meant that she was on her own; there was nobody to scare these boys away, nobody to stop their advance, and nobody to come to her rescue.

*Finally.*

Ella licked her lips as she felt the goosebumps crawl up her skin. After all the running and hiding, *finally* it had come to this. At last, the stakes were at the level she wanted – high enough to prove what she could *really* do, with a little help of course. So after forcing herself into a couple of deep calming breaths, Ella got to work. Reaching into her waist pouch, she produced a deck of palm-sized cards – her tarot cards. Brushing aside a lock of sweat-soaked hair, she then flipped through them in search of a specific one: The Chariot. She pulled the card out, touched it to her forehead, and then closed her eyes and let the outside world fall to murmurs. “Fate, guide me,” she whispered, before throwing the card out in front of her. Then she waited – one second, two seconds – before finally daring to peek.

Just as she’d hoped, the card had never hit the floor. Instead, it now dangled in front of her in mid-air, bobbing up and down as though suspended on a wire – or more accurately, a thread. With a satisfied grin she reached out to poke it, and a shimmering silver streak shot through the fog toward the fire escape at the right side of the alley. Of course! With a relieved sigh, she snatched the card up and then hurried over to climb up the metal ladder. But just as she got there she noticed another glimmer at the edge of her peripheral vision, followed by another, and then another. All around her, other tiny flashes – barely perceptible to the naked eye – began twinkling like stars. Her lip immediately quivered and her hands shook with excitement; was this fate

offering her an alternative to running away? The second she even considered it, the thread leading up to the fire escape vanished. That settled it then – she was going to find out.

Ella hopped off the fire escape and put away her tarot cards – she didn't have time for them anymore. Instead, she doubled her concentration, specifically on the twinkling points all around the alley. One-by-one, each of them stretched into their own silver threads – threads of fate – that cut through the fog and stitched together everything from dumpsters, to pipes, to windows, to even her pursuers themselves. At her peak concentration, about three dozen of the pulsing lines appeared to her – crossing, twisting, and weaving across the entire alley. Ella let her eyes dart between them, following their twists and turns while searching for any pattern that she might be able to exploit – all while her pursuers continued to close in.

“We know you're in here,” one of them growled, his voice growing irritated. “You might as well give up and save us the trouble!”

“I could say the same to you!” she fired back, trying to play for time as she continued to work the alley. “Tell you what? Why don't you give up and save me the trouble?”

He laughed. “Save you the trouble of what? There's three of us and only one of you!”

This time his taunts were backed by disturbing new sounds: the patter of a pipe against a palm, the shatter of a glass bottle, and the soft whir of a twirling chain. Right on cue, three new threads formed as well. They stretched out of the cloud to twist around her skull, arm, and neck respectively, causing Ella to swallow nervously. Maybe she should have just retreated up the fire escape after all.

Or maybe these were just the puzzle pieces she was looking for.

Inspired by that idea, Ella reached out and grabbed the thread wrapped around her neck. She then carefully snapped her wrist to hook it around the support beam of the fire escape. I better have read this right, she thought to herself, because the silhouettes of her pursuers were almost on top of her now. There was only one way to find out, so it was with a deep, steeling breath, that she took a few steps toward the man with the chain.

“I found her!” the shadowy brute shouted on sight, before snapping his weapon back like a rattlesnake preparing to strike. His excited bellow startled her briefly, nearly causing Ella to forget what she needed to do. However, as she watched that chain whip forward, she suddenly remembered the thread in her hand. She yanked it with all her might, and then reflexively flinched. But there was no need to be afraid anymore, because the weapon was no longer



bound for her throat. Instead, it wrapped itself around the fire escape's support beam, stopping her assailant in mid-swing.

“What the?” he exclaimed, while looking back and tugging on the chain in confusion.

The poor guy didn't even have a chance to contemplate his mistake, because before he knew it, Ella had already picked up a nearby trashcan and smashed it over his head. The blood curdling crunch echoed even through the cloud as her assailant went down like a ton of bricks. Meanwhile, the ruckus quickly summoned his accomplices, but it was too late now; events had already been set into motion.

Fate had already changed.

As the man with the chain went down, his weapon tugged on the fire escape. He was a big guy, and the fire escape was old and rickety, so the force of his fall ripped it rather easily off its hinges – exactly as Ella predicted. After that, only the screech of metal against brick and an ominous growing shadow could warn his poor friends, but they didn't notice nearly soon enough. Meanwhile, Ella took a big step back and plugged her ears, but even that wouldn't keep out the sound of wrenching metal or the sensation of shaking ground as the fire escape landed right on top of their heads. It crashed down in a glorious symphony of noise – like the entire orchestra was playing their

instruments for the first time ever – that lasted over several seconds. Once the ruckus finally settled down, Ella turned back around to discover the mist temporarily parted.

Now she could see the fallen fire escape in its entirety – or rather, the abstract sculpture of twisted metal that it had become. It lay barely half-a-foot from her toes, along with two fourth-year boys groaning underneath it. Meanwhile, a third boy – ponytailed upper-classman Demetri Yakov – stood flabbergasted on the opposite side of the wreckage.

“Hmm, that’s odd. I thought it was supposed to get you too,” she nonchalantly mused to him, while he struggled to comprehend the sight before him.

“Y-You... You can’t do that!” he eventually wailed back. He looked almost comical now, with those shaky knees and wide pupils – a far cry from the taunt-spewing bully just a few minutes earlier. Completely at a loss for words, all he could do now was point his broken bottle at her and let out a desperate war cry, before charging like an angry bull.

That’s when the whistle finally blew.