



After
She
Falls

CARMEN SCHOBER

"Schober delivers a knockout debut . . . I loved it."

RACHEL HAUCK, *New York Times* bestselling author

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To my younger, fear-filled self:
You will fall sometimes, and it will hurt.
But God is fighting alongside you.
Trust Him.

A DRI DOESN'T TURN ON THE RADIO or pull up Eva's playlist on her phone. For once, she drives in silence. Past crumbling apartment buildings and palm trees and the ice cream parlor with the pink neon sign. She drives until everything becomes less familiar.

Adri circles the old limestone chapel and tells herself not to go in. She and Eva aren't dressed right. They don't know anyone who goes to the church. They'll mess up the hymns. Adri hasn't been inside a church in years, and Owen's voice reminds her that she's never been a very good Catholic.

Still, she parks the car. She takes her daughter's hand, and they walk inside. They're late, but there are plenty of empty pews facing the heavy wooden pulpit. Eva watches curiously as a woman plays a slow song on the organ. A man appears, dressed in a black robe. He reads from the Bible. Eva's face scrunches in confusion, but Adri listens.

"And King David, a warrior poet, cried out to God, 'Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free.'"

Tears burn the corners of her eyes. She fights back thoughts of Owen—his eyes, his hands, his voice, the rare times when he was gentle. Even then, she never felt free.

“It’s time to go, Mama.”

Adri blinks when Eva tugs on her arm. Around them, people talk. A few smile at Adri, but she and Eva quickly slip out. The sunlight is bright, even though it’s a dreary December morning in Miami.

Adri’s mind races as she drives in circles again. In the back seat, Eva studies a coloring page she was handed by one of the greeters.

“Mama, why does Jesus carry the lamb around his head? Doesn’t it itch his neck?”

“I don’t know, butterfly. Maybe the lamb likes being carried like that?”

Eva colors in silence, leaving Adri alone to war with her strange feelings. She felt a temporary calm inside the church, but her fears are returning. Owen walked out two nights ago, saying he needed space, or time, or air—she can’t keep track anymore—so he won’t be back for another day or two. Part of her wants him to come back.

She hates that part.

She parks, ignoring the knot in her stomach, and she and Eva climb the stairs to their apartment. Adri finds her key and opens the door, expecting Rocky, her old German Shepherd, to greet them with his usual low bark, but he doesn’t. She flips on the light.

“Rocky?”

She suddenly hears whimpering. Alarmed, she tells Eva to stay put and follows the sound. Her heart stops when she opens the bathroom door.

Water pools on the yellow linoleum as Owen kneels by the tub, his body hunched over as he forces Rocky’s head underwater. Rocky fights wildly, but Owen holds him down.

When he sees Adri in the doorway, his face darkens. “I hate this dog.”

Instinctively, she shoves him, barely knocking him back, but it gives Rocky just enough time to burst from the water. Owen wraps his hands around her neck.

“Where have you been? Where did you go?”

She tries to wrench his wet fingers from her neck, but her hands slip over his.

“Eva . . .” she says, choking. “Eva will see.”

He lets go, and she gasps for air as he rushes from the bathroom. She tries to follow him, but Rocky blocks the way, determined to protect her.

“Come on, boy,” she whispers, her throat stinging. “Come with me.” She pulls him with her and finds Owen in the living room with his arm around Eva. His voice is cheerful, but Eva looks afraid as she glances between a shaken Adri and a soaked Rocky.

“Why is Rocky all wet?”

“I was giving him a bath,” Owen says smoothly, ushering her into the kitchen. “Are you hungry? Where did you and Mama go this morning?”

Shaking, Adri waits as Owen makes Eva a grilled cheese. He’s dressed in clean clothes, and his sandy hair is slicked back, but there’s a fresh cut under his eye. She listens as Eva tells him about the church service. He pretends to be interested, but when he looks at her again, his eyes are full of fury.

God, please. Help me.

“Why don’t you go to Minnie’s apartment for a few minutes?” he says when she is finished. “I need to talk to Mama.”

Adri watches helplessly as he walks Eva to their neighbor’s apartment, and Minnie happily invites Eva in and turns on the television. Minnie is charmed by Owen, like most people are. As soon as her door closes, he charges back inside and grabs Adri’s arm, pulling her toward the bedroom.

“Ouch!”

“We have one stupid fight, and you go running to church—”

“That hurts, Owen.”

He tightens his grip.

“I said that hurts!”

Rocky growls and bares his fangs.

Owen looks at the dog with narrowed eyes. “I should’ve killed you a long time ago.”

“Don’t hurt him!”

“Shut up! Why are you screaming?” Owen snaps, his own voice dropping to a whisper. “Lower your voice.” He glances at the door. Rocky tries to move closer, but Owen kicks him, making him yelp.

“Rocky, stay,” she pleads, forcing herself to whisper. “Please, boy. Stay there—”

“Shut up about the dog, Adri.”

She falls silent. Thankfully, Rocky lowers his head in defeat.

Owen grabs her chin and yanks her face toward his. “I came home wanting to make up with you, and you’re off at church.”

She braces herself. He’s wearing cologne, but it doesn’t hide the alcohol.

“Instead, I come home to him.” Owen jerks his head toward Rocky. “Growling and barking like an idiot.”

Adri stays silent, repeating her prayer.

“You broke your promise, Adri.”

“I thou—”

He slaps her. Rocky growls as Owen grabs her chin again.

“You don’t just disappear like that. I apologized, didn’t I? You’re not perfect either, even though I know you like to think you are.”

She bites her tongue. He *apologized*? More like she discovered his latest affair and cussed him out as he mumbled some lame excuse. He’d almost hit her, but then he stormed out instead.

Now, she wants to wrench his hand from her face, but she forces herself to be still. She’s fought back too many times before. Owen knows all her weaknesses.

“Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free.”

Owen’s eyes move over her and settle on the marks on her neck where he grabbed her in the bathroom. His blue eyes darken like heavy storm clouds.

“I don’t want to see this, Adri,” he says, motioning toward the flooded bathroom, then her neck. “You make me do this stuff, and I hate it.” His eyes move to Rocky again, who defiantly meets his

gaze. “And I don’t want *him* anywhere near me. Do you understand? I want him gone, or I—”

“I’ll clean up the bathroom, and I’ll take care of the dog,” she says quickly, making her voice reassuring as she looks up at him, willing her face to hide her emotions. “I’ll take care of all of it, okay?”

He glares at her, tortured, and she knows he wants to hit her. “I need air,” he says finally.

Keep nodding, she tells herself. Don’t stop. Nod. Nod. Nod. Let him disappear. Let him, Adri. Let him go.

Moments later, when the door slams behind him, she breathes again. She kneels to hug Rocky, who licks away her tears as it hits her all at once. Owen Anders, the man she fell in love with when she was eighteen years old, is just like her father, and she’s just like her mother. She knows this because Owen’s absence hurts more than his hands.

What’s even worse is she knows he isn’t going to disappear. He always comes back, and she always lets him. She leans against Rocky.

Please, God. Set me free.

Hands shaking, Adri dials the almost-forgotten number, reciting the words she practiced.

“Hello?”

Adri hesitates. It’s a woman’s voice.

“Hello?” the woman repeats. Her voice is soft and familiar, almost like her aunt’s—but her aunt is dead.

“Hello,” Adri says, forcing herself to speak. “Is . . . Roman Rivera available?”

“Who’s this?”

“It’s . . . Adri.”

Silence.

“Adri Rivera?” the woman asks.

“Yes.”

She gasps. “Adri? It’s Yvonne, honey. Yvonne Turner. Oh my goodness. What are you . . . what’s going on, dear?”

Adri feels like crying all over again. Yvonne Turner, her Aunt Dalila’s best friend and old business partner. Adri wants to tell Yvonne everything but doesn’t. Instead, she asks the question she should’ve asked five years ago—the *first* time Owen hit her.

“Can I come home?”

“You mean . . . come back to Sparta?” Yvonne can’t keep the shock out of her voice.

Adri closes her eyes. She promised herself she’d never go back and stare her failures in the face, but what choice does she have? Her life is a nightmare. “If Uncle Roman will have me.” Her heart races as new tears fall. “And my daughter. Eva.” Her uncle has never met Eva. He’d tried, but Adri always made up an excuse because she didn’t want him to see her with Owen. One look at Adri’s face, and he’d know how weak she really was.

“Of course you can come home, honey.” Yvonne’s voice breaks through her thoughts. “I’ll tell Roman to call you as soon as he gets back from the church.”

When Yvonne hangs up, Adri sinks into her bed, her thoughts racing haphazardly. At least she and Eva have somewhere to go, and it’s far away from Owen, tucked away in the mountains of Pennsylvania, just a few hours outside of Philadelphia. That’s something, right? There is so much more she’ll have to figure out, but, for now, there is Sparta. She wipes her tears away as nostalgia hits her like a kick to the chest.

For years, she’d told herself that she didn’t miss what she left behind, convincing herself that what she and Owen had was imperfect but still less suffocating than Sparta. Owen, too, frequently reminded her of her humble, boring beginnings. But she did miss Sparta and its smallness, its jagged blue mountains, her uncle and aunt, Yvonne, and . . . more.

Most of all, she missed her freedom.

“Are we going on a vacation?” Eva asks as they walk to the train.

Adri thinks fast and makes her voice steady. “We’re going to visit someone. He lives by the mountains.”

Eva’s eyes light up. They’re light blue, just like Owen’s. “Is Daddy coming?”

Adri tucks a strand of dark hair behind her daughter’s ear and fights back tears. Eva’s only four. “No, butterfly. Just us.”

They step onto the train and settle into a booth. Rocky snuggles against Eva, but he keeps his eyes fixed on Adri with a look of fatherly concern. When the train starts moving, Adri’s heart finally slows down a little. She watches the city blur into the falling darkness, and her thoughts drift into dangerous territory.

Owen is her most powerful addiction, and distance between them strengthens her withdrawal. She knows he’ll be furious when he realizes they’re gone, and there’s no limit to what he’s willing to do when he’s angry. Her stomach tightens with fear, but she decides to pray again. That seems to help.

God, please keep us safe. Please help Eva understand. Please let me be free.

She waits for some kind of clear answer but doesn’t get one. The train just keeps moving as the changing world beyond her window turns wilder and more unknown.

Ivan the Terrible watches as Roman cleans Adri’s old bedroom. It is cluttered with forgotten boxes and coated with dust, but Roman works fast and hums Sinatra. He still can’t quite believe that Adri called him. He’d resigned himself to the idea that she was just a memory now, like most of the people he loved—until he saw her message saying she was on her way.

Thank you, Lord.

He moves another box and finds forgotten photographs. He pauses to flip through a few and sees himself and Dalila, back when they both had thick black hair and no wrinkles. One picture is at a fancy seafood restaurant, another at the beach, another in

their backyard. Roman stares at it. Eighteen-year-old Adri smiles shyly for the camera, wearing a gold cap and gown.

Curious now, Roman finds more photos of Adri. Little Adri in grass-stained white dresses, teenage Adri wrestling, Adri smiling next to a handsome boy with a shy smile, both of them wearing worn red boxing gloves. He finds one of Adri at prom with the same young man, and Roman smiles. Her prom dress—long, black, and cut by Yvonne to show off her back and shoulders—had caused a small-town scandal.

Toward the back of the stack, he finds a photo of Adri with a different man. “The Hammer,” people called him. Owen Anders. He’s years older than Adri and handsome in a severe kind of way, with sharp angles and light hair. Roman scowls. He’s only met him twice.

The next photo is Adri again—barely twenty—in a hospital, holding a tiny black-haired baby in her arms. Roman stares at that one for a long time. Next, Adri and Owen standing in a courthouse. Adri holds white lilies and smiles, but it looks tight and small.

That’s the last picture she ever sent him.

“All that time and all that money, wasted,” people always said when they found out she wasn’t fighting anymore. *“She wasted everyone’s time, Roman. Especially yours.”*

Roman stayed silent whenever Spartans complained about Adri. He wasn’t annoyed like they were. He was in mourning. The time he spent training Adri wasn’t time he wanted back.

He finds another photo of Dalila in the back of the stack. She smiles from a hospital bed, cheerful despite the tubes and wires connected to her heart and wrists. Roman misses that smile more than all the other memories combined. He tosses the photos in a box, suddenly tired.

“Time for coffee. Come on, Ivan.”

The old chihuahua follows Roman to the kitchen and watches him grind coffee beans. Roman looks down at the dog, who stares back at him with a woeful expression.

“Cheer up, buddy.” He stoops to pat Ivan’s head. “You’ll survive a couple guests. It’ll be good for you in your old age.”

Ivan closes his eyes wearily.

Roman finishes the coffee and busies himself with more preparations. He grabs a lemon candy from the breadbox, pours the coffee into two thermoses, and checks the clock on the wall again, anxious to see his niece and meet her daughter. Maybe Eva looks like Adri, or maybe she favors her father. Roman smiles faintly. It’s hard to imagine Adri as a mother, but he imagines she’s a fiercely good one. Mostly, he’s just ready to learn why, after so many years of asking, God is finally answering his most repeated prayer.

Adri is coming home.

Adri jolts awake. After hours of restlessness, she fell into a deep sleep, and she’d been dreaming about Owen’s fingers—first caressing her, then closing around her throat, pressing her into darkness—when the train came to a sharp stop. Her heart thuds as she reorients herself, but then reality slowly sinks in. Owen is more than a thousand miles away, and that makes her feel safe and terrible at the same time.

The sun has barely risen outside. Eva and Rocky snooze in the booth across from hers, using their bags as makeshift pillows. Nervous, she glances at her phone and exhales. Nothing but a text from Roman asking how close they are. Owen must be drinking, and for once she’s thankful for that.

She stands to stretch as the train rumbles into motion again but stops when she hears the rustle of a newspaper a few booths ahead. A stooped elderly man—the only other passenger—is reading the sports section of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Sensing her gaze, he looks up. She turns away but feels his eyes linger.

“I know you, don’t I?”

Surprised, Adri turns back to him. “Sorry?”

He squints. “You’re Roman Rivera’s girl.”

Heat floods Adri’s face.

“That’s it. *La Tormenta*,” he says. “I used to read about you, all your tournaments. You still fighting?” His cloudy eyes move over her, and Adri senses his skepticism. Her body is still lean and athletic, but age and motherhood have softened her.

She shakes her head. “Not anymore.”

He frowns and returns to his paper. “Too bad.”

Adri sits down again and faces the window, her pride stinging. Even though six years have passed since she left Sparta, the unexpected reminder of her failure still hurts. She tried, but she hasn’t forgotten who she used to be—a local legend in mixed martial arts, a professional fighter in the making. She closes her eyes, trying to remember and forget at the same time.

Her uncle started training her when she was just eight years old, a few months after her mother dropped her off on his porch. She was always smaller than other girls her age, but Roman turned her into a fierce fighter, despite her petite frame. He’s the one who said Adri moved like a storm, sealing her nickname—*La Tormenta*.

“I knew you were a fighter the moment I saw you,” he told her, after she won her first tournament. *“When your mom left, you didn’t say a single word to me or your aunt for three months, but I saw the fire in you. You’re a Rivera. You were born to fight.”*

For years, he and Adri had the same dream—that she would become a professional and fight in front of the whole world, not just Sparta. They worked tirelessly for that dream, and it was within Adri’s reach. And then . . .

She met Owen.

The train starts to slow, making her glance up. Her heart skips as she realizes that they’re close. The man with the folded newspaper gives her a quick wave before he ambles off, and Eva stirs a moment later, waking Rocky with her. Adri digs through her duffel bag and finds two granola bars. She gives one to Eva and splits the other with Rocky. He crunches his half noisily.

“Are we there, Mama?” Eva asks sleepily.

“Almost.”

“I want to see a mountain lion.”

Adri smiles. She points out the window at Mount Minsi in the distance. “There might be one up there.” Mountain lions and memories—some she’d like to forget.

The train screeches to a stop in Sparta, and Adri steels herself. She’s not ready to face her past yet, but she has no choice.

Adri and Eva approach Roman, Rocky trailing behind them. The station is empty, besides a yawning security guard huddled on a bench. Roman moves to embrace her, but she extends her hand. He shakes it before pulling her into a tight, long hug. She stiffens at first, but then she relaxes in his arms.

“Hi, Adri.”

“Hi, Uncle Roman,” she says quietly against his coat. She breathes in the familiar smell of Aladdin cologne and cinnamon gum, and tears almost rise to the surface.

When he finally releases her, he wipes his eyes quickly and studies her while she studies him. He’s still trim and well-dressed—she’d never seen him leave the house in anything less than a pressed button-down and slacks—and he still sports a neatly trimmed mustache, but he looks startlingly old. She frowns as it sinks in just how long she’s been gone.

She watches his gaze move to the finger-shaped bruises on her neck, and his brows crease. Adri’s heart races, but, thankfully, he doesn’t press her for information. Not yet. Instead, he turns his attention to Eva. She stares back at him from behind Rocky.

Adri nudges her. “Eva, say hello to your Great-Uncle Roman.”

“Hello,” she says shyly.

“Hello,” Roman says back.

“I like your name. I know a lot about the Romans. They invented calendars and laws.”

Roman raises an eyebrow. “You know about all that? You must be pretty smart.”

Eva nods, her shyness fading.

“Do you like lemon drops?” He holds out the candy, and she takes it.

Adri gently pokes her. “What do you say?”

“Thank you, sir, but I like cherry candy more.”

Adri fights back a smile. “No. You just say thank you.”

Roman laughs. “Well, we just met. I’ll get it right next time.” He turns to Rocky. “And who’s this lug?”

Rocky’s tail wags, and Adri’s heart sinks as she realizes she didn’t mention him on the phone. “Oh, shoot. This is Rocky. Sorry, I meant to ask you.”

Roman bends to pet Rocky, whose tail wags faster. “Hey, Rock-O,” he says, rubbing the dog’s ears. “I don’t sweat you.” He looks up at Adri again. “The more the merrier.”

Roman leads them all to his car, with Eva gripping Adri’s hand in the cold. As Adri carefully buckles her into the back seat, she realizes she’ll have to buy a booster seat at some point. In her rush to escape, she only grabbed what she could carry.

“I’ve got coffee,” Roman says, turning on the car. “Figured you might need some.”

Adri clasps the thermos gratefully. “Thanks.” A heavy crucifix hangs from his rearview mirror—the same one that’s been there since she was eight. “You’re still driving the Charger?”

“What else? His birthday is coming up. Twenty-one.”

“Mine too.”

“Twenty-five for you?”

She nods slowly. She hasn’t celebrated her birthday in years.

Roman whistles. “That means I must be ancient.”

She laughs. As he drives through Sparta, she sips his too-strong coffee and worries about Owen. Has he realized they left yet? What will he do? Will he figure out where she is? She took every step to hide their trail, but fear still claws at her. She can feel her uncle looking at her again, so she turns to the window, wondering what he must think about her sudden appearance. Luckily, Eva chatters happily in the back seat, temporarily distracting them both.

“Is this where you were a kid, Mama?”

“Yep,” she says, watching familiar scenes pass by her window. She lets Roman answer most of Eva’s questions about the small steel-and-oil town. They pass the famous German bakery and the aging redbrick high school, where banners emblazoned with Adri’s name used to hang in every hallway. In the distance, the mountains pierce the cloud-covered sky. She never imagined she could feel like a stranger in a place where she had so many memories, but she did.

Roman turns a corner, and Adri squints at an unfamiliar sign in front of the old community center. The sign is new—all spiked metal and blue glass—and looks unlike anything else in Sparta. *Lyons Training Center* glows in bold red letters. She stares at it. She reads it again, more slowly this time.

“Max has a gym now,” Roman says, noting her gaze.

Adri turns toward her uncle. “Max Lyons?”

Roman nods. “He bought the community center and renovated it a few years ago.”

Her eyes widen.

“You didn’t know that?”

“Why would I know that?” she snaps, her heart picking up its pace. Last she’d heard—secondhand from Owen, since she would shut off the television whenever Max’s name was mentioned—was that he’d retired after a long winning streak and moved on to coaching at some of the high-profile training camps.

Her uncle raises his brows.

“Sorry,” she says, regretting the outburst. “It’s just . . .” She fumbles for an explanation. “Max and I . . . don’t talk.”

“Who’s Max, Mama?”

“He’s . . . someone who used to be my friend.” Adri frowns. It’s been six years, but it feels like sixty.

“You don’t like him anymore?”

Her cheeks flush. “No, butterfly, I just . . . haven’t seen him in a long time.” She turns to Roman again. “I thought he was coaching?”

“He was. Big-time stuff. Fights in Vegas, New York, Atlanta, all those places. He quit when Danny died.”

Adri's skin turns cold, and for a brief, hopeful moment, she wonders if she misheard him. "What?" Her last memory of Danny Lyons flashes before her eyes—he'd brought a basket of her favorite junk foods, all arranged beautifully in a basket, to her graduation party. "Danny died?"

Roman sighs heavily, realizing he blundered again. "Sorry, kiddo. I figured Max would've called you about that, at least, but I guess not."

Her chest tightens. "When?"

"Coming up on three years ago now. That's when Max bought the community center."

Adri falls silent, staggered by the news. She knows her uncle never lies, but Danny Lyons can't be dead. She can't think of anyone more alive.

"I know you loved him, Adri. Everyone did. He was a good man."

"I just . . . didn't know."

"Why would you? My mistake."

She winces. She knows her uncle doesn't mean anything by it, but his words sting. They remind her that she's the one who abandoned everyone—not the other way around.

"Anyway, I think Max is doing good. The gym is always busy."

She stares out the window, not wanting to talk about Max and his success, but her uncle doesn't seem to notice.

"They do a little bit of everything. Judo and self-defense for the kids, boxing and mixed stuff for amateur fighters. One of their girls won a tournament in New Jersey." Roman smiles. "I always said Max would make a good coach, didn't I?"

They pass a small salon with a bright pink door and suddenly Adri remembers Yvonne. "Why did Yvonne answer your phone?" She's been curious ever since her conversation with her aunt's old friend.

Roman's cheeks redden slightly, surprising her. "She's been helping me go through some of your aunt's things. I put it off for too long."

She nods, though she suspects there's more to it. "That's nice of her," she says, leaving it at that for now. "I'd like to see her sometime."

"You want a haircut?"

Adri smiles. She hasn't cut her hair, aside from the occasional trim, since she was a child. Her aunt Dalila, Sparta's most in-demand hairdresser, never let her. Adri frowns at the memory as regret fills her. Dalila died shortly after Adri moved to Miami—another funeral she didn't attend.

A few minutes later, Roman pulls into a winding cul-de-sac of small Craftsman-style houses. He parks in front of the one with the tidiest yard, and they file out of the car. A neighbor stops and stares as Adri grabs their bags out of the trunk.

Roman waves cheerfully. "I hope you're ready to be the talk of the town, kiddo," he says, chuckling. "Adriana Rivera back in Sparta. People aren't going to let that one go for a while."

Adri sighs. She definitely wasn't ready for that.

Inside the house, they're greeted by soft growls. Rocky tilts his head.

"Shut up, Ivan," Roman snaps.

She stares down at the little dog in disbelief. "He's still alive?"

Roman bends to pat the tiny growling menace on the head. "We just celebrated his sweet sixteen." He grins. "Ol' Ivan is immortal."

"Apparently." She bends to pet him, but Rocky quickly moves to block her.

"Uh-oh," Roman says, still smiling. "Looks like someone is jealous."

She rubs Rocky's ears as she looks around her uncle's house. The furnishings are still immaculately clean and overwhelmingly Cuban. A heavy floral-patterned couch sits beside a glass coffee table piled high with Spanish tabloids and a well-worn Bible. Framed paint-by-number landscapes and countless family photos, all freshly dusted, gleam in the sunlight. The tinsel-covered Christmas tree stands in the corner, but her aunt's beloved plants—draping ivies, African violets, orchids—are missing.

The shelf that displayed them is gone now, and nothing takes its place.

“They all started dying,” Roman says quietly, aware of Adri’s discovery. He clears his throat. “And I don’t have a green thumb like she did.”

Adri frowns. She wants to comfort him, but she can’t talk about her aunt yet. That would mean talking about her own absence too. “You’ve kept the place up though,” she says, trying to change the subject.

Roman shakes his head. “Nah, that’s all Yvonne. She checks on me.” His eyes are dry again when he beckons Adri and Eva toward the hallway. “Come see your room.”

They follow him to Adri’s old room, the dogs trailing. The small bedroom is untouched by time, except for a new crocheted blanket and a few pictures pinned to the wall. Adri’s numerous trophies and belts fill up a bookcase in the corner.

“That’s your mom when she was little, Eva,” Roman says, pointing at one of the photographs.

Eva is delighted by them, but Adri’s heart sinks as she looks at her younger, unfamiliar self. Her eyes are bright in every picture.

“Hey, E, you want to take the dogs outside?” Roman asks. “You can throw a tennis ball for ’em.”

Eva looks torn. “But Ivan’s not nice.”

Roman laughs as he picks up Ivan, who bares his tiny fangs. “He won’t hurt you, I promise. If he does, Rocky can eat him.” Roman walks her to the backyard while Adri watches through the window. Rocky immediately runs wild, racing to the fence, while Ivan stays in the shade. Eva sits down beside him and gives him a cautious pat on the head. When Roman returns, Adri knows what’s coming next.

“Ready to talk?”

She closes her eyes, aware that there’s no more stalling. Her uncle doesn’t wait for her to answer.

“Does Owen know you’re here?”

She lets her breath out slowly, aware that Roman already knows

more than she wants him to. She shakes her head. “No. I left without telling him.”

“Okay. . . . What happens when he realizes you’re gone?”

She stares at the carpet.

“I’m not trying to scare you, Adri, but it’s going to happen eventually. I’d just like to know what we’re up against.”

“He won’t come here,” she says quickly, knowing that Sparta is the last place Owen will expect her to go, since she was always so eager to escape it. She’s about to say more, but her voice catches in her throat. Part of her is stunned that her uncle is willing to help her after she spent the last six years avoiding him, but mostly she’s just grateful that someone in the world cares.

“He’ll be angry. He . . .” Her voice trails off as she realizes she has no idea what Owen will do. Until now, she never managed to leave him for more than a few hours. She searches for words until Roman gives her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Okay, kiddo. I got it from here. You’re safe, Eva’s safe. That’s all that matters.”

A tear falls before Adri can stop it. She wonders how many times he said something like that to his sister—her mother—before she finally took off. Probably too many to count.

“And when you want to talk about it, I’ll be ready to listen.” His eyes fall to her bruises again, and he sighs heavily. “You’ve been fighting all this time, haven’t you? I saw it when you stepped off the train—that same look I saw when you were eight.”

He waits for her to say something, but she doesn’t. She can’t.

“Let’s do something good with that fire, Adri.”