

## Chapter 1: Running

Jayde sprinted across the wet rooftops of Haynis; three men in black pursued her through the darkness. An arrow smashed into the nearby stone wall, causing sparks of light in the rainy night. The flat-topped buildings were separated by only a few feet. One slip and she would fall three stories to the street. Her mind raced as fast as her feet.

She glanced back and saw the trio of silhouettes against the horizon fifty paces behind her. They had fallen back, less reckless in their jumps from rooftop to rooftop. She needed a plan. Over the sound of rain, Jayde heard a clank of metal as another arrow whizzed past her head and collided into the stone building. She had a small lead. Only three buildings were left till the end of the street.

Jayde saw some buildings with rope ladders but not on the buildings she had passed. She looked down and saw none of the canvas awnings that appeared on the streets during the day. Only the hard-packed ground below would break her fall. The town of Haynis was made of clay, stone, and broken dreams. The buildings and houses were built quickly and close together, with an overriding color scheme of brown, gray-brown, and tan. She heard the *thoomp* of another arrow disappear past her into the darkness, and she sprinted on.

Jayde jumped to the second-to-last building on the block. She glanced back at the ground. Nothing. Not even a hay pile to break her fall. She sprinted onward to the last building, much farther away, but Jayde had no intention of stopping. She leaped. As soon as she left the edge of the roof, she realized the distance was too great. She flailed between buildings, reaching as far as she could. Her palms collided with the roof's hanging edge at full speed, but her desperation allowed her to maintain her grasp on the slippery, wet roof. She thought about crying for help, but there was no one on the street. It was the middle of night in Haynis.

She tried to pull herself over the edge, but her arms were not strong enough. With her arms extended, Jayde slowly slid herself along the edge of the roof.

Hands cramping and in pain, Jayde focused on survival as she worked her way along the edge. The corner seemed impossibly far away, but she gritted her teeth and kept sliding. She looked behind her. The men had not caught up to her yet. They had to be close. Hanging in midair, with her back to her pursuers, she forced her hands to move.

Jayde felt a rush of wind pass right above her. She looked and saw nothing. Jayde expected the men to appear any minute.

With aching arms, Jayde made it to the corner and was able to look along the edge of the building.

No ladder.

Jayde looked down. Still nothing below but bone-breaking ground. She tried again to pull herself up, but her arms were rubber. Jayde closed her eyes, willing a ladder to simply appear.

A growl of conversation came from above, followed by the metallic clash of weapons. Could they not know where she was?

A horrible scream erupted, followed by more sounds of weapons colliding. Jayde strained for a glimpse of the building behind her. She saw a figure in a billowing long black coat standing at the edge of the other building. One of the pursuers had finally caught up.

Jayde braced herself for an arrow in the back, but it did not come.

“C’mon, Jayde, think!” she muttered, hoping she could conjure a miracle. Somehow the man in black had not seen her. Yet.

She closed her eyes tightly. A *pop* came from the edge of the roof, away from the action occurring above. Jayde opened her eyes and saw a glint of metal through the rain. A ladder had appeared, where before there was nothing. She could not will her arms to move one more inch, much less the entire distance of the roof.

“Need a hand?” a voice said from above.

Jayde dared a look. Her arms were burning. She glared at the man.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Jayde felt her body being pulled upward. Relief flooded her. She allowed herself to be laid on the roof, as she caught her breath.

The figure hid in the shadows. He blended into the darkness and sat on a squat bench, oblivious of the rain. His hair was jet black and pulled into a long ponytail. His angular pale face was outlined in the occasional lightning strike. He drank from a wineskin, a small amount dribbling from the corner of his mouth. In the wet blackness it looked like he was drinking blood.

“You’re fine,” said the figure, more of a statement than a question.

Jayde did not answer. He had just saved her life, but she was not sure if she liked what she saw. He appeared relaxed, but he had moved like a wraith. He watched her. She stared back.

Jayde glanced again at the ladder she had somehow missed. She turned back to look at the man and yelped. He was right in front of her, gliding to her, though she had not even realized he had moved. He sat next to her for a full minute, apparently comfortable in the awkward silence. His smooth angular face made his age difficult to guess—possibly late thirties.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Lisa,” said Jayde, the lie already prepared.

“Real name?”

“Lisa **is** my name,” said Jayde. Few people knew her in town, since she spent most of her life in the shadows. She had learned long ago to have aliases at the tip of her tongue with a different backup story for each. Rarely did she give her real name.

“Fine,” the figure said. His tone made it clear he knew she was lying.

Jayde stared at him.

“I figured we could drop the act, considering you were about to give the street a three-story hug. My nurse is coming, and I have to return to work.”

“What about the bounty hunters?” Jayde asked.

“You won’t have to worry about them anymore.”

“Right. I’m sure they’ll just go home and forget everything. I might have been better off on the ledge.”

“That could still be arranged. For what it’s worth, they weren’t bounty hunters. Why were they after you?”

Jayde frowned. “I don’t know.”

“Fair enough.”

They sat in silence. The rain had resolved, and lightning flickered on the horizon.

“So what did you steal?”

“Who said I stole anything?” Jayde answered.

“Men were chasing you, and you assumed they were bounty hunters. What else? I suppose you could have killed someone, but you’re not the type.”

“No. I’ve snitched a few things. I once made amulets out of clay and sold them to travelers, claiming they had protective magic. I don’t think that someone would hire bounty hunters over that though.”

“Either way, you’re safe for now.”

“How can you be sure?” Jayde asked.

He stood up and nodded at a heap on the ground; three shapes created a motionless mound.

Jayde yelped in surprise. “You killed them!”

“I merely did what they planned to do to you.”

He stood up and walked to the middle of the roof. A hatch appeared directly in front of him. A middle-aged female popped her head out the trapdoor. She wore a simple gray robe, but Jayde could see

muscular arms hiding in the sleeves. The trapdoor appeared heavy to Jayde, yet this woman lifted it effortlessly.

“Hey, Cam. There’s an idiot here whining about his foot. He looks like a nobleman of some kind, so I figured—” She stopped midsentence when she noticed Jayde. Immediately her voice and demeanor changed.

“Oh, my! Who is this? What are you doing on the rooftop in this weather? And how did you even get here? You’re soaked! Cam, why didn’t you get her inside? No matter. I’m Marie. Come here right now, and let’s get you warmed up.”

Jayde grinned. The woman had a stern face and commanding voice, but her smile came easily.

The man had already started down the hatch.

“I hope he didn’t scare you or, even worse, talked about philosophy or some other drivel. Once you get him going, I tell you, he can be impossible to stop.”

Jayde then looked at the man in black. “Wait! What’s your name?”

“Cameron. Cameron Sangre.”

Jayde made her way to the trapdoor on the roof of the building. She normally would be hesitant to follow someone unknown anywhere, but, unless she wanted to jump across rooftops again, she had no other choice. She looked over the city before heading down. In the distance she saw a door open, the light from inside the house illuminating a man about to start his day. He kissed his wife good-bye, and Jayde saw a small child behind the woman wave as he headed out. The man smiled and waved back. They were just a normal family on another normal day. Jayde sighed and headed down the ladder.