

## Chapter One

Disguised in the signature black robe of the ancient assassin clan, Gabriel Hart pulled his hood lower around his face and remained still. Dread, dark as the robes and minds of the men surrounding him, pumped through his veins. Cheers that mutated into a low chanting erupted from the crowd, bouncing back and forth against the rock walls of the Jondi-Al-Haqq's underground chamber. Behind Emir, the leader of this clandestine group, the multitude parted as black-clad assassins came forward, dragging two frightened prisoners.

Abigail Weaver's dark skin lay shrunken against her emaciated body. Her eyes were hollowed-out orbs of fear. Months of torment and neglect hung on her like a shroud. Kiersten Dale appeared less gaunt, having been a more recent capture. Her blond hair lay tangled across her face. Splotches of dirt accented her cheeks. Raw terror radiated from her being, but she was still alert.

*Riley's sister and her best friend.* Gabe swallowed and took a step forward, knowing what their deaths would mean in the scope of this great mission.

The assassins strung the young women up on the posts and began pouring oil over the wood at their feet. Silent tears fell from Abby's vacant

eyes, and for a moment, Gabe felt them fall upon him. He looked back at her through the secrecy of his hood. The chanting grew louder.

“Abigail Weaver and Kiersten Dale, you will die today because of your friend and sister’s unwillingness to save you. Riley Dale was given the opportunity to turn herself over and take your places, but she refused that offer. It is not us who kill you today but the cowardice of your loved one. Your hate and anger are just. You two do not deserve death, but Riley has forced our hand. Direct these last moments of anger at the real one who has failed you. Godspeed to you both into whatever afterlife awaits you.”

A pair of assassins emerged from the chanting crowd, each carrying a flaming torch. As they walked to the center of the room, Gabe closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and prayed for strength beyond what he’d ever mustered in his long life.

“You? It can’t be. You Judas son of a bitch. You betrayed her.”

Gabe’s eyes snapped open at the sound of the familiar voice. He spun his gaze to the side and there she was: Riley Dale, or at least some version of her, storming forward. Rage and terror etched the creases of her face. Her golden-brown hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail. Fury swirled in her green eyes. He recognized one of the torchbearers and felt matching anger erupt through his body. Tariq Zaman, one of their good friends, turned his

back on Riley and touched the impatient flame of his torch to the waiting oil. Fire erupted across the wood. The screams of the girls twisted with the smoke into the air.

Riley sprinted toward Tariq, but as she jumped to attack him, Gabe flung his body forward, knocking her to the stone floor. Her head slammed into the ground, and as her image faded from sight, he locked eyes with her, hoping she caught his pleading stare before she vanished. For a split second, he gazed at the floor, but the piercing shrieks of the two girls yanked him back to the present.

The time to think had passed. Gabe shut his eyes and materialized at the base of Kiersten's pyre, grimacing as flames lapped onto his own robe and clawed hungrily at the flesh around his ankles. He grabbed Kiersten's hands and in an instant transported her from the hot breath of death's mouth to a vacant spot behind of the crowd of assassins.

The room fell silent, except for a few startled inhalations. Hooded faces stared at the empty stake in the center of the room where the black-robed figure consumed by flames had just snatched their prisoner before disappearing. As fire licked higher up Gabe's robes, he closed his eyes and reappeared next to the second stake, grabbing Abby's gaunt hands and

vanishing again, only to reappear on the far edge of the cavern, far from where he had left Riley's sister.

By now his entire robe was ablaze, and he threw it from his body, scattering the closest group of men. His white undershirt clung to his skin, soaked through with perspiration. Charred holes and flaps of fabric adorned his pants. Burns needled the flesh on his lower limbs. He winced.

“Gabe?” Abby's question came out in a dazed whisper.

“Stay down. I'll be back.” He shoved her to the ground and then disappeared as the first dagger flew, zinging through the emptiness he'd just vacated to clatter off the stone wall. As Gabe reemerged next to Riley's terrified sister, he felt something tear across the flesh of his back. Grabbing Kiersten's hands, he transported her up into the main entryway of the Jondi mansion, far above ground. He left Kiersten in the empty foyer and reentered the chamber below, where he'd left Riley's best friend. She was nowhere to be seen.

Desperately searching for Abby, Gabe ducked and rolled as more daggers flew. He heard Emir's booming voice echoing to “kill the Custos.” Exhausted, Gabe's mind flashed back to many years before when a mob of black had rained down upon him—black so heavy, it reduced him to nothingness. *Not the time for memory lane.*

He darted as the nearest assassin slashed at his abdomen. Twisting toward the edge of the cavern, Gabe spotted her. Despite months of captivity, Abby had found the strength to crawl along the edge of the wall, trying to avoid detection. And it seemed to be working, as every other pair of eyes was trained malevolently on Gabriel Hart.

Thinking of Kiersten alone in the hall above, Gabe offered a silent curse in his head to the man who was supposed to be protecting her. *If you're not already dead, Raphael, I'll kill you when I get out of here.* Another dagger found his flesh, this time at the back of his calf. He let out a frustrated grunt and then reappeared next to Abby's retreating form. He grabbed onto her as she let out her own scream of pain, and focused on the entryway above.

He'd been gone too long. Beneath the towering ceiling and marbled columns, two assassins stood with Kiersten between them, one with a dagger to her throat, the other with his dagger across her abdomen. Gabe held a wounded Abby, who clutched at the place in her ribs where red was spreading like an unwelcome rash. His heart pounded as blood pumped from his own wounds.

"You may save that girl," one of the men said in his thick Arabic accent. "But we will kill the other. As soon as you vanish to come for her,

our blades will move as well. Either way, this is the end for Riley Dale. You have failed, Custos. Once again, you have failed.”

Gabe set Abby gently on the floor, trying desperately to formulate a plan that ended in Kiersten reuniting with her sister. But exhaustion clouded his brain. Everything was just a little out of focus.

“Gabe,” Kiersten said, her green eyes sparkling with tears. “Save Abby. Please. I will be okay, but don’t let anything happen to her.”

“Riley will never forgive me.” Gabe’s heart tightened at Kiersten’s composure and bravery, and at the notion that even if he rescued one of these two girls, Riley would forever blame him for the loss of the other.

“Gabe.” This time Kiersten’s voice was higher, more urgent. “They’re coming. Get Abby out now!”

He spun around as what looked like a colony of rabid bats hurtled toward them from the hallway. Black fabric billowed in a deadly storm of assassins. Gabe bent down, picked up Abby, and turned a solemn face toward Kiersten. Their eyes met. He felt his own grow large. A figure appeared behind Kiersten and the two assassins, simultaneously plunging a knife through each of her captor’s throats. The daggers aimed at Riley’s sister clattered to the ground as the men holding them fell to their knees.

Gabe felt rage and relief as the newcomer grabbed Kiersten. But before he could act, the angry mob had reached his position and buried another dagger into his flesh. Gabe slammed his eyes shut, held Abby tightly, and focused on the Sham Al Basra hotel, praying Ezra would be waiting in the room, ready to help.