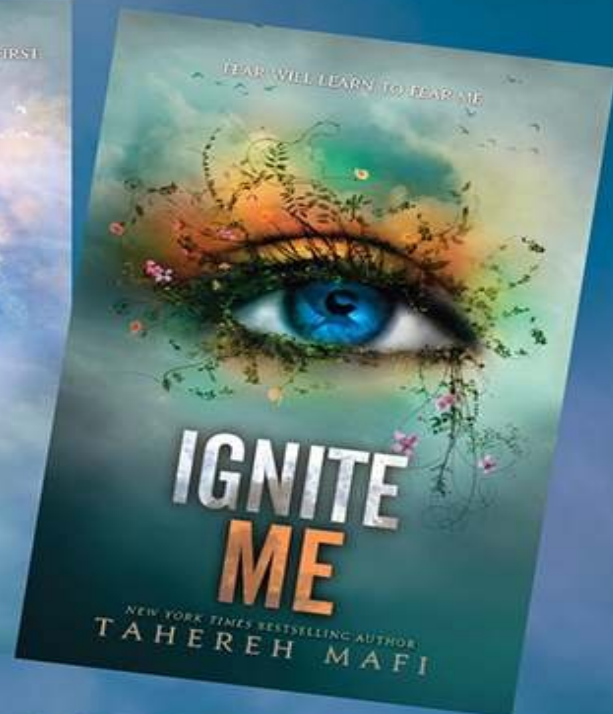
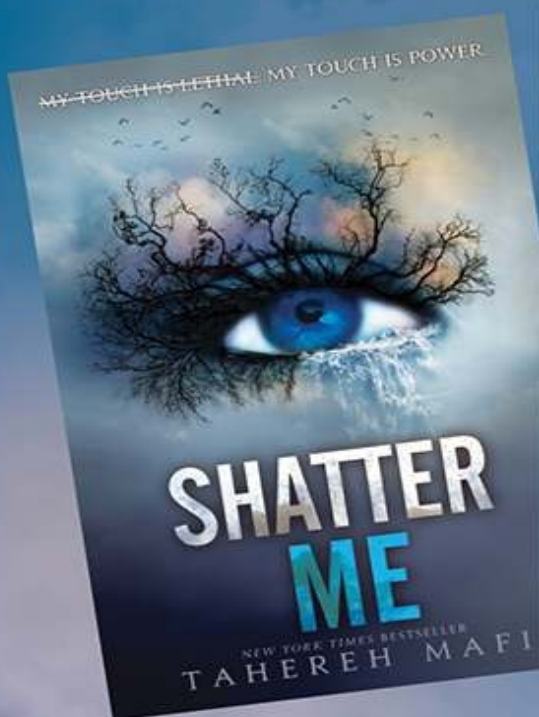


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SHATTER ME

COMPLETE COLLECTION



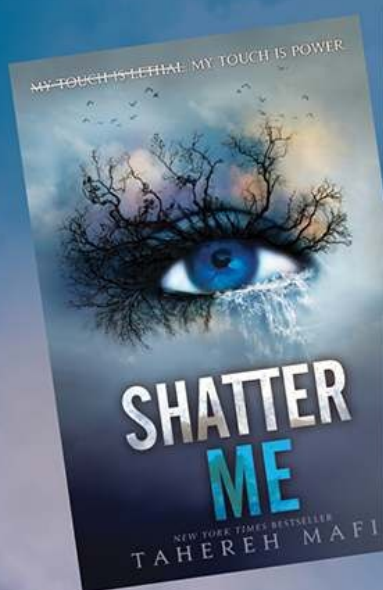
PLUS
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NOVELLAS!



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~~MY TOUCH IS LETHAL.~~ MY TOUCH IS POWER.



SHATTER ME

TAHEREH MAFI

Shatter Me

Tahereh Mafi

HARPER

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

For my parents, and for my husband, because when I said I wanted to touch the moon you took my hand, held me close, and taught me how to fly.

Epigraph

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
and that has made all the difference.*

—ROBERT FROST, “The Road Not Taken”

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Chapter One

I've been locked up for 264 days.

I have nothing but a small notebook and a broken pen and the numbers in my head to keep me company. 1 window. 4 walls. 144 square feet of space. 26 letters in an alphabet I haven't spoken in 264 days of isolation.

6,336 hours since I've touched another human being.

"You're getting a cellmate roommate," they said to me.

~~"We hope you rot to death in this place~~ For good behavior," they said to me.

~~"Another psycho just like you~~ No more isolation," they said to me.

They are the minions of The Reestablishment. The initiative that was supposed to help our dying society. The same people who pulled me out of my parents' home and locked me in an asylum for something outside of my control. No one cares that I didn't know what I was capable of. That I didn't know what I was doing.

I have no idea where I am.

I only know that I was transported by someone in a white van who drove 6 hours and 37 minutes to get me here. I know I was handcuffed to my seat. I know I was strapped to my chair. ~~I know my parents never bothered to say good-bye.~~ I know I didn't cry as I was taken away.

I know the sky falls down every day.

The sun drops into the ocean and splashes browns and reds and yellows and oranges into the world outside my window. A million leaves from a hundred different branches dip in the wind, fluttering with the false promise of flight. The gust catches their withered wings only to force them downward, forgotten, left to be trampled by the soldiers stationed just below.

There aren't as many trees as there were before, is what the scientists say. They say our world used to be green. Our clouds used to be white. Our sun was always the right kind of light. But I have very faint memories of that world. I don't remember much from before. The only existence I know now is the one I was given. An echo of what used to be.

I press my palm to the small pane of glass and feel the cold clasp my hand in a familiar embrace. We are both alone, both existing as the absence of something

else.

I grab my nearly useless pen with the very little ink I've learned to ration each day and stare at it. Change my mind. Abandon the effort it takes to write things down. Having a cellmate might be okay. Talking to a real human being might make things easier. I practice using my voice, shaping my lips around the familiar words unfamiliar to my mouth. I practice all day.

I'm surprised I remember how to speak.

I roll my little notebook into a ball I shove into the wall. I sit up on the cloth-covered springs I'm forced to sleep on. I wait. I rock back and forth and wait.

I wait too long and fall asleep.

My eyes open to 2 eyes 2 lips 2 ears 2 eyebrows.

I stifle my scream my urgency to run the crippling horror gripping my limbs.

"You're a b-b-b-b—"

"And you're a girl." He cocks an eyebrow. He leans away from my face. He grins but he's not smiling and I want to cry, my eyes desperate, terrified, darting toward the door I'd tried to open so many times I'd lost count. They locked me up with a boy. A boy.

Dear God.

They're trying to kill me.

They've done it on purpose.

To torture me, to torment me, to keep me from sleeping through the night ever again. His arms are tatted up, half sleeves to his elbows. His eyebrow is missing a ring they must've confiscated. Dark blue eyes dark brown hair sharp jawline strong lean frame. ~~Gorgeous~~ Dangerous. Terrifying. Horrible.

He laughs and I fall off my bed and scuttle into the corner.

He sizes up the meager pillow on the spare bed they shoved into the empty space this morning, the skimpy mattress and threadbare blanket hardly big enough to support his upper half. He glances at my bed. Glances at his bed.

Shoves them both together with one hand. Uses his foot to push the two metal frames to his side of the room. Stretches out across the two mattresses, grabbing my pillow to fluff up under his neck. I've begun to shake.

I bite my lip and try to bury myself in the dark corner.

He's stolen my bed my blanket my pillow.

I have nothing but the floor.

I will have nothing but the floor.

I will never fight back because I'm too petrified too paralyzed too paranoid.

“So you’re—what? Insane? Is that why you’re here?”

~~I’m not insane.~~

He props himself up enough to see my face. He laughs again. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

~~I want to believe him~~ I don’t believe him.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

~~None of your business. What’s your name?~~

I hear his irritated exhalation of breath. I hear him turn over on the bed that used to be half mine. I stay awake all night. My knees curled up to my chin, my arms wrapped tight around my small frame, my long brown hair the only curtain between us.

I will not sleep.

I cannot sleep.

I cannot hear those screams again.

Chapter Two

It smells like rain in the morning.

The room is heavy with the scent of wet stone, upturned soil; the air is dank and earthy. I take a deep breath and tiptoe to the window only to press my nose against the cool surface. Feel my breath fog up the glass. Close my eyes to the sound of a soft pitter-patter rushing through the wind. Raindrops are my only reminder that clouds have a heartbeat. That I have one, too.

I always wonder about raindrops.

I wonder about how they're always falling down, tripping over their own feet, breaking their legs and forgetting their parachutes as they tumble right out of the sky toward an uncertain end. It's like someone is emptying their pockets over the earth and doesn't seem to care where the contents fall, doesn't seem to care that the raindrops burst when they hit the ground, that they shatter when they fall to the floor, that people curse the days the drops dare to tap on their doors.

I am a raindrop.

~~My parents emptied their pockets of me and left me to evaporate on a concrete slab.~~

The window tells me we're not far from the mountains and definitely near the water, but everything is near the water these days. I just don't know which side we're on. Which direction we're facing. I squint up at the early morning light. Someone picked up the sun and pinned it to the sky again, but every day it hangs a little lower than the day before. It's like a negligent parent who only knows one half of who you are. It never sees how its absence changes people. How different we are in the dark.

A sudden rustle means my cellmate is awake.

I spin around like I've been caught stealing food again. That only happened once and my parents didn't believe me when I said it wasn't for me. I said I was just trying to save the stray cats living around the corner but they didn't think I was human enough to care about a cat. Not me. Not ~~something~~ someone like me. But then, they never believed anything I said. That's exactly why I'm here.

Cellmate is studying me.

He fell asleep fully clothed. He's wearing a navy blue T-shirt and khaki cargo pants tucked into shin-high black boots.

I'm wearing dead cotton on my limbs and a blush of roses on my face.

His eyes scan the silhouette of my structure and the slow motion makes my heart race. I catch the rose petals as they fall from my cheeks, as they float around the frame of my body, as they cover me in something that feels like the absence of courage.

Stop looking at me, is what I want to say.

Stop touching me with your eyes and keep your hands to your sides and please and please and please—

"What's your name?" The tilt of his head cracks gravity in half.

I'm suspended in the moment. I blink and bottle my breaths.

He shifts and my eyes shatter into thousands of pieces that ricochet around the room, capturing a million snapshots, a million moments in time. Flickering images faded with age, frozen thoughts hovering precariously in dead space, a whirlwind of memories that slice through my soul. ~~He reminds me of someone I used to know.~~

One sharp breath and I'm shocked back to reality.

~~No more daydreams.~~

"Why are you here?" I ask the cracks in the concrete wall. 14 cracks in 4 walls a thousand shades of gray. The floor, the ceiling: all the same slab of stone. The pathetically constructed bed frames: built from old water pipes. The small square of a window: too thick to shatter. My hope is exhausted. My eyes are unfocused and aching. My finger is tracing a lazy path across the cold floor.

I'm sitting on the ground where it smells like ice and metal and dirt. Cellmate sits across from me, his legs folded underneath him, his boots just a little too shiny for this place.

"You're afraid of me." His voice has no shape.

My fingers find their way to a fist. "I'm afraid you're wrong."

I might be lying, but that's none of his business.

He snorts and the sound echoes in the dead air between us. I don't lift my head. I don't meet the eyes he's drilling in my direction. I taste the stale, wasted oxygen and sigh. My throat is tight with something familiar to me, something I've learned to swallow.

2 knocks at the door startle my emotions back into place.

He's upright in an instant.

"No one is there," I tell him. "It's just our breakfast." 264 breakfasts and I

still don't know what it's made of. It smells like too many chemicals; an amorphous lump always delivered in extremes. Sometimes too sweet, sometimes too salty, always disgusting. Most of the time I'm too starved to notice the difference.

I hear him hesitate for only an instant before edging toward the door. He slides open a small slot and peers through to a world that no longer exists.

"*Shit!*" He practically flings the tray through the opening, pausing only to slap his palm against his shirt. "*Shit, shit.*" He curls his fingers into a tight fist and clenches his jaw. He's burned his hand. I would've warned him if he would've listened.

"You should wait at least three minutes before touching the tray," I tell the wall. I don't look at the faint scars gracing my small hands, at the burn marks no one could've taught me to avoid. "I think they do it on purpose," I add quietly.

"Oh, so you're talking to me today?" He's angry. His eyes flash before he looks away and I realize he's more embarrassed than anything else. He's a tough guy. Too tough to make stupid mistakes in front of a girl. Too tough to show pain.

I press my lips together and stare out the small square of glass they call a window. There aren't many animals left, but I've heard stories of birds that fly. Maybe one day I'll get to see one. The stories are so wildly woven these days there's very little to believe, but I've heard more than one person say they've actually seen a flying bird within the past few years. So I watch the window.

There will be a bird today. It will be white with streaks of gold like a crown atop its head. It will fly. There will be a bird today. It will be white with streaks of gold like a crown atop its head. It will fly. There will be a—

His hand.

On me.

2 tips

of 2 fingers graze my cloth-covered shoulder for less than a second and every muscle every tendon in my body is fraught with tension and tied into knots that clench my spine. I stay very still. I don't move. I don't breathe. Maybe if I don't move, this feeling will last forever.

~~No one has touched me in 264 days.~~

Sometimes I think the loneliness inside of me is going to explode through my skin and sometimes I'm not sure if crying or screaming or laughing through the hysteria will solve anything at all. Sometimes I'm so desperate to touch to be touched *to feel* that I'm almost certain I'm going to fall off a cliff in an alternate

universe where no one will ever be able to find me.

It doesn't seem impossible.

I've been screaming for years and no one has ever heard me.

"Aren't you hungry?" His voice is lower now, a little worried now.

~~I've been starving for 264 days.~~ "No." The word is little more than a broken breath as it escapes my lips and I turn and I shouldn't but I do and he's staring at me. Studying me. His lips are only barely parted, his limbs limp at his side, his lashes blinking back confusion.

Something punches me in the stomach.

His eyes. Something about his eyes.

~~It's not him not him not him not him not him.~~

I close the world away. Lock it up. Turn the key so tight.

Blackness buries me in its folds.

"Hey—"

My eyes break open. 2 shattered windows filling my mouth with glass.

"What is it?" His voice is a failed attempt at flatness, an anxious attempt at apathy.

~~Nothing.~~

I focus on the transparent square wedged between me and my freedom. I want to smash this concrete world into oblivion. I want to be bigger, better, stronger.

~~I want to be angry angry angry.~~

I want to be the bird that flies away.

"What are you writing?" Cellmate speaks again.

~~These words are vomit.~~

~~This shaky pen is my esophagus.~~

~~This sheet of paper is my porcelain bowl.~~

"Why won't you answer me?" He's too close too close too close.

No one is ever close enough.

I suck in my breath and wait for him to walk away like everyone else in my life. My eyes are focused on the window and the promise of what could be. The promise of something grander, something greater, some reason for the madness building in my bones, some explanation for my inability to do anything without ruining everything. There will be a bird. It will be white with streaks of gold like a crown atop its head. It will fly. There will be a bird. It will be—

"Hey—"

"You can't touch me," I whisper. I'm lying, is what I don't tell him. He can

touch me, is what I'll never tell him. Please touch me, is what I want to tell him.

But things happen when people touch me. Strange things. Bad things.

Dead things.

I can't remember the warmth of any kind of embrace. My arms ache from the inescapable ice of isolation. My own mother couldn't hold me in her arms. My father couldn't warm my frozen hands. I live in a world of nothing.

Hello.

World.

You will forget me.

Knock knock.

Cellmate jumps to his feet.

It's time to shower.

Chapter Three

The door opens to an abyss.

There's no color, no light, no promise of anything but horror on the other side. No words. No direction. Just an open door that means the same thing every time.

Cellmate has questions.

"What the hell?" He looks from me to the illusion of escape. "They're letting us out?"

~~They'll never let us out.~~ "It's time to shower."

"Shower?" His voice loses inflection but it's still threaded with curiosity.

"We don't have much time," I tell him. "We have to hurry."

"Wait, what?" He reaches for my arm but I pull away. "But there's no light—we can't even see where we're going—"

"Quickly." I focus my eyes on the floor. "Take the hem of my shirt."

"What are you talking about—"

An alarm sounds in the distance. A buzzing hums closer by the second. Soon the entire cell is vibrating with the warning and the door is slipping back into place. I grab his shirt and pull him into the blackness beside me. "Don't. Say. Anything."

"Bu—"

"*Nothing*," I hiss. I tug on his shirt and command him to follow me as I feel my way through the maze of the mental institution. ~~It's a home, a center for troubled youth, for neglected children from broken families, a safe house for the psychologically disturbed.~~ It's a prison. They feed us nothing and our eyes never see each other except in the rare bursts of light that steal their way through cracks of glass they pretend are windows. Nights are punctured by screams and heaving sobs, wails and tortured cries, the sounds of flesh and bone breaking by force or choice I'll never know. I spent the first 3 months in the company of my own stench. No one ever told me where the bathrooms and showers were located. No one ever told me how the system worked. No one speaks to you unless they're delivering bad news. No one touches you ever at all. Boys and girls never find each other.

Never but yesterday.

It can't be coincidence.

My eyes begin to readjust in the artificial cloak of night. My fingers feel their way through the rough corridors, and Cellmate doesn't say a word. I'm almost proud of him. He's nearly a foot taller than me, his body hard and solid with the muscle and strength of someone close to my age. The world has not yet broken him. Such freedom in ignorance.

"Wha—"

I tug on his shirt a little harder to keep him from speaking. We've not yet cleared the corridors. I feel oddly protective of him, this person who could probably break me with 2 fingers. He doesn't realize how his ignorance makes him vulnerable. He doesn't realize that they might kill him for no reason at all.

I've decided not to be afraid of him. I've decided his actions are more immature than genuinely threatening. ~~He looks so familiar so familiar so familiar to me.~~ I once knew a boy with the same blue eyes and my memories won't let me hate him.

Perhaps I'd like a friend.

6 more feet until the wall goes from rough to smooth and then we make a right. 2 feet of empty space before we reach a wooden door with a broken handle and a handful of splinters. 3 heartbeats to make certain we're alone. 1 foot forward to edge the door inward. 1 soft creak and the crack widens to reveal nothing but what I imagine this space to look like. "This way," I whisper.

I tug him toward the row of showers and scavenge the floor for any bits of soap lodged in the drain. I find 2 pieces, one twice as big as the other. "Open your hand," I tell the darkness. "It's slimy. But don't drop it. There isn't much soap and we got lucky today."

He says nothing for a few seconds and I begin to worry.

"Are you still there?" I wonder if this was the trap. If this was the plan. If perhaps he was sent to kill me under the cover of darkness in this small space. I never really knew what they were going to do to me in the asylum, I never knew if they thought locking me up would be good enough but I always thought they might kill me. It always seemed like a viable option.

I can't say I wouldn't deserve it.

But I'm in here for something I never meant to do and no one seems to care that it was an accident.

~~My parents never tried to help me.~~

I hear no showers running and my heart stops in place. This particular room is rarely full, but there are usually others, if only 1 or 2. I've come to realize that the asylum's residents are either legitimately insane and can't find their way to the showers, or they simply don't care.

I swallow hard.

"What's your name?" His voice splits the air and my stream of consciousness in one movement. I can feel him breathing much closer than he was before. My heart is racing and I don't know why but I can't control it. "Why won't you tell me your name?"

"Is your hand open?" I ask, my mouth dry, my voice hoarse.

He inches forward and I'm almost scared to breathe. His fingers graze the starchy fabric of the only outfit I'll ever own and I manage to exhale. As long as he's not touching my skin. As long as he's not touching my skin. As long as he's not touching my skin. This seems to be the secret.

My thin T-shirt has been washed in the harsh water of this building so many times it feels like a burlap sack against my skin. I drop the bigger piece of soap into his hand and tiptoe backward. "I'm going to turn the shower on for you," I explain, anxious not to raise my voice lest others should hear me.

"What do I do with my clothes?" His body is still too close to mine.

I blink 1,000 times in the blackness. "You have to take them off."

He laughs something that sounds like an amused breath. "No, I know. I meant what do I do with them while I shower?"

"Try not to get them wet."

He takes a deep breath. "How much time do we have?"

"Two minutes."

"Jesus, why didn't you say somethi—"

I turn on his shower at the same time I turn on my own and his complaints drown under the broken bullets of the barely functioning spigots.

My movements are mechanical. I've done this so many times I've already memorized the most efficient methods of scrubbing, rinsing, and rationing soap for my body as well as my hair. There are no towels, so the trick is trying not to soak any part of your body with too much water. If you do you'll never dry properly and you'll spend the next week nearly dying of pneumonia. I would know.

In exactly 90 seconds I've wrung my hair and I'm slipping back into my tattered outfit. My tennis shoes are the only things I own that are still in fairly

good condition. We don't do much walking around here.

Cellmate follows suit almost immediately. I'm pleased that he learns quickly.

"Take the hem of my shirt," I instruct him. "We have to hurry."

His fingers skim the small of my back for a slow moment and I have to bite my lip to stifle the intensity. I nearly stop in place. No one ever puts their hands anywhere near my body.

I have to hurry forward so his fingers will fall back. He stumbles to catch up.

When we're finally trapped in the familiar 4 walls of claustrophobia, Cellmate won't stop staring at me.

I curl into myself in the corner. He still has my bed, my blanket, my pillow. I forgive him his ignorance, but perhaps it's too soon to be friends. Perhaps I was too hasty in helping him. Perhaps he really is only here to make me miserable. But if I don't stay warm I will get sick. My hair is too wet and the blanket I usually wrap it in is still on his side of the room. Maybe I'm still afraid of him.

I breathe in too sharply, look up too quickly in the dull light of the day. Cellmate has draped 2 blankets over my shoulders.

1 mine.

1 his.

"I'm sorry I'm such an asshole," he whispers to the wall. He doesn't touch me and I'm ~~disappointed~~ happy he doesn't. ~~I wish he would.~~ He shouldn't. No one should ever touch me.

"I'm Adam," he says slowly. He backs away from me until he's cleared the room. He uses one hand to push my bed frame back to my side of the space.

Adam.

Such a nice name. Cellmate has a nice name.

It's a name I've always liked but I can't remember why.

I waste no time climbing onto the barely concealed springs of my mattress and I'm so exhausted I can hardly feel the metal coils threatening to puncture my skin. I haven't slept in more than 24 hours. *Adam is a nice name* is the only thing I can think of before exhaustion cripples my body.

Chapter Four

[illegible]

Horror rips my eyelids open.

My body is drenched in a cold sweat, my brain swimming in unforgotten waves of pain. My eyes settle on circles of black that dissolve in the darkness. I have no idea how long I've slept. I have no idea if I've scared my cellmate with my dreams. Sometimes I scream out loud.

Adam is staring at me.

I'm breathing hard and I manage to heave myself upright. I pull the blankets closer to my body only to realize I've stolen his only means for warmth. It never even occurred to me that he might be freezing just as much as I am. I'm shivering in place but his body is unflinching in the night, his silhouette a strong form against the backdrop of black. ~~I have no idea what to say.~~ There's nothing to say.

“The screams never stop in this place, do they?”

~~The screams are only the beginning.~~ “No,” I mouth almost mutely. A faint blush flushes my face and I’m happy it’s too dark for him to notice. He must have heard my cries.

Sometimes I wish I never had to sleep. Sometimes I think that if I stay very, very still, if I never move at all, things will change. I think if I freeze myself I can freeze the pain. Sometimes I won’t move for hours. I will not move an inch.

If time stands still nothing can go wrong.

“Are you okay?” Adam’s voice is concerned. I study the balled fists at his sides, the furrow buried in his brow, the tension in his jaw. This same person who stole my bed and my blanket is the same one who went without tonight. So cocky and careless so few hours ago; so careful and quiet right now. It scares me that this place could have broken him so quickly. I wonder what he heard while I was sleeping.

I wish I could save him from the horror.

Something shatters; a tortured cry sounds in the distance. These rooms are buried deep in concrete, walls thicker than the floors and ceilings combined to keep sounds from escaping too far. If I can hear the agony it must be insurmountable. Every night there are sounds I don’t hear. Every night I wonder if I’m next.

“You’re not insane.”

My eyes snap up. His head is cocked, his eyes focused and clear despite the shroud that envelops us. He takes a deep breath. “I thought everyone in here was insane,” he continues. “I thought they’d locked me up with a psycho.”

I take a sharp hit of oxygen. “Funny. So did I.”

1

2

3 seconds pass.

He cracks a grin so wide, so amused, so refreshingly sincere it’s like a clap of thunder through my body. Something pricks at my eyes and breaks my knees. I haven’t seen a smile in 265 days.

Adam is on his feet.

I offer him his blanket.

He takes it only to wrap it more tightly around my body and something is suddenly constricting in my chest. My lungs are skewered and strung together and I’ve just decided not to move for an eternity when he speaks.

“What’s wrong?”

~~My parents stopped touching me when I was old enough to crawl. Teachers made me work alone so I wouldn't hurt the other children. I've never had a friend. I've never known the comfort of a mother's hug. I've never felt the tenderness of a father's kiss. I'm not insane. "Nothing."~~

5 more seconds. "Can I sit next to you?"

~~That would be wonderful.~~ "No." I'm staring at the wall again.

He clenches and unclenches his jaw. He runs a hand through his hair and I realize for the first time that he's not wearing a shirt. It's so dark in this room I can only catch the curves and contours of his silhouette; the moon is allowed only a small window to light this space but I watch as the muscles in his arms tighten with every movement and I'm suddenly on fire. Flames are licking at my skin and there's a burst of heat clawing through my stomach. Every inch of his body is raw with power, every surface somehow luminous in the darkness. In 17 years I've never seen anything like him. In 17 years I've never talked to a boy my own age. ~~Because I'm a monster.~~

I close my eyes until I've sewn them shut.

I hear the creak of his bed, the groan of the springs as he sits down. I unstitch my eyes and study the floor. "You must be freezing."

"No." A strong sigh. "I'm actually burning up."

I'm on my feet so quickly the blankets fall to the floor. "Are you sick?" My eyes scan his face for signs of a fever but I don't dare inch closer. "Do you feel dizzy? Do your joints hurt?" I try to remember my own symptoms. I was chained to my bed by my own body for 1 week. I could do nothing more than crawl to the door and fall face-first into my food. I don't even know how I survived.

"What's your name?"

He's asked the same question 3 times already. "You might be sick," is all I can say.

"I'm not sick. I'm just hot. I don't usually sleep with my clothes on."

Butterflies catch fire in my stomach. An inexplicable humiliation is searing my flesh. I don't know where to look.

A deep breath. "I was a jerk yesterday. I treated you like crap and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

I dare to meet his gaze.

His eyes are the perfect shade of cobalt, blue like a blossoming bruise, clear and deep and decided. His jaw is set and his features are carved into a careful expression. He's been thinking about this all night.

“Okay.”

“So why won’t you tell me your name?” He leans forward and I freeze.

I thaw.

I melt. “Juliette,” I whisper. “My name is Juliette.”

His lips soften into a smile that cracks apart my spine. He repeats my name like the word amuses him. Entertains him. Delights him.

~~In 17 years no one has said my name like that.~~

Chapter Five

I don't know when it started.

I don't know why it started.

I don't know anything about anything except for the screaming.

My mother screaming when she realized she could no longer touch me. My father screaming when he realized what I'd done to my mother. My parents screaming when they'd lock me in my room and tell me I should be grateful. For their food. For their humane treatment of this thing that could not possibly be their child. For the yardstick they used to measure the distance I needed to keep away.

I ruined their lives, is what they said to me.

I stole their happiness. Destroyed my mother's hope for ever having children again.

Couldn't I see what I'd done, is what they'd ask me. Couldn't I see that I'd ruined everything.

I tried so hard to fix what I'd ruined. I tried every single day to be what they wanted. I tried all the time to be better but I never really knew how.

I only know now that the scientists are wrong.

The world is flat.

I know because I was tossed right off the edge and I've been trying to hold on for 17 years. I've been trying to climb back up for 17 years but it's nearly impossible to beat gravity when no one is willing to give you a hand.

When no one wants to risk touching you.

It's snowing today.

The concrete is icy and stiffer than usual, but I prefer these freezing temperatures to the stifling humidity of summer days. Summer is like a slow-cooker bringing everything in the world to a boil 1 degree at a time. It promises a million happy adjectives only to pour stench and sewage into your nose for dinner. I hate the heat and the sticky, sweaty mess left behind. I hate the lackadaisical ennui of a sun too preoccupied with itself to notice the infinite hours we spend in its presence. The sun is an arrogant thing, always leaving the

world behind when it tires of us.

The moon is a loyal companion.

It never leaves. It's always there, watching, steadfast, knowing us in our light and dark moments, changing forever just as we do. Every day it's a different version of itself. Sometimes weak and wan, sometimes strong and full of light. The moon understands what it means to be human.

Uncertain. Alone. Cratered by imperfections.

I stare out the window for so long I forget myself. I hold out my hand to catch a snowflake and my fist closes around the icy air. Empty.

I want to put this fist attached to my wrist right through the window.

Just to feel something.

Just to feel human.

“What time is it?”

My eyes flutter for a moment. His voice pulls me back down to a world I keep trying to forget. “I don't know,” I tell him. I have no idea what time it is. I have no idea which day of the week it is, what month we're in, or even if there's a specific season we're supposed to be in.

We don't really have seasons anymore.

The animals are dying, birds don't fly, crops are hard to come by, flowers almost don't exist. The weather is unreliable. Sometimes our winter days hit 92 degrees. Sometimes it snows for no reason at all. We can't grow enough food anymore, we can't sustain enough vegetation for the animals anymore, and we can't feed the people what they need. Our population was dying off at an alarming rate before The Reestablishment took over and they promised us they had a solution. Animals were so desperate for food they were willing to eat anything and people were so desperate for food they were willing to eat poisoned animals. We were killing ourselves by trying to stay alive. The weather, the plants, the animals, and our human survival are all inextricably linked. The natural elements were at war with one another because we abused our ecosystem. Abused our atmosphere. Abused our animals. Abused our fellow man.

The Reestablishment promised they would fix things. But even though human health has found a modicum of relief under the new regime, more people have died at the end of a loaded gun than from an empty stomach. It's progressively getting worse.

“Juliette?”

My head snaps up.

His eyes are wary, worried, analyzing me.

I look away.

He clears his throat. "So, uh, they only feed us once a day?"

His question sends both our eyes toward the small slot in the door.

I curl my knees to my chest and balance my bones on the mattress. If I hold myself very, very still, I can almost ignore the metal digging into my skin. "There's no system to the food," I tell him. My finger traces a new pattern down the rough material of the blanket. "There's usually something in the morning, but there are no guarantees for anything else. Sometimes . . . we get lucky." My eyes flick up to the pane of glass punched into the wall. Pinks and reds filter into the room and I know it's the start of a new beginning. The start of the same end. Another day.

~~Maybe I will die today.~~

Maybe a bird will fly today.

"So that's it? They open the door once a day for people to do their business and maybe if we're *lucky* they feed us? That's it?"

The bird will be white with streaks of gold like a crown atop its head. It will fly. "That's it."

"There's no . . . group therapy?" He almost laughs.

"Until you arrived, I hadn't spoken a single word in two hundred sixty-four days."

His silence says so much. I can almost reach out and touch the guilt growing on his shoulders. "How long are you in for?" he finally asks.

~~Forever.~~ "I don't know." A mechanical sound creaks/groans/cranks in the distance. My life is 4 walls of missed opportunities poured into concrete molds.

"What about your family?" There's a serious sorrow in his voice, almost like he already knows the answer to that question.

~~Here is what I know about my parents: I have no idea where they are.~~ "Why are you here?" I talk to my fingers to avoid his gaze. I've studied my hands so thoroughly I know exactly where each bump cut and bruise has ravaged my skin. Small hands. Slim fingers. I curl them into a fist and release them to lose the tension. He still hasn't responded.

I look up.

"I'm not insane," is all he says.

"That's what we all say." I cock my head only to shake it a fraction of an inch. I bite my lip. My eyes can't help but steal glances out the window.

“Why do you keep looking outside?”

I don't mind his questions, I really don't. It's just strange to have someone to talk to. It's strange to have to exert energy to move my lips to form words necessary to explain my actions. No one has cared for so long. No one's watched me closely enough to wonder why I stare out a window. No one has ever treated me like an equal. Then again, he doesn't know ~~I'm a monster~~ my secret. I wonder how long this will last before he's running for his life.

I've forgotten to answer and he's still studying me.

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear only to change my mind. “Why do you stare so much?”

His eyes are careful, curious. “I figured the only reason they would lock me up with a girl was because you were crazy. I thought they were trying to torture me by putting me in the same space as a psychopath. I thought you were my punishment.”

“That's why you stole my bed.” To exert power. To stake a claim. To fight first.

He drops his eyes. Clasps and unclasps his hands before rubbing the back of his neck. “Why'd you help me? How'd you know I wouldn't hurt you?”

I count my fingers to make sure they're still there. “I didn't.”

“You didn't help me or you didn't know if I'd hurt you?”

“Adam.” My lips curve around the shape of his name. I'm surprised to discover how much I love the easy, familiar way the sound rolls off my tongue.

He's sitting almost as still as I am. His eyes are pulled together with a new kind of emotion I can't place. “Yeah?”

“What's it like?” I ask, each word quieter than the one before. “Outside?” ~~In the real world.~~ “Is it worse?”

An ache mars the features of his finely chiseled face. It takes him a few heartbeats to answer. He glances out the window. “Honestly? I'm not sure if it's better to be in here or out there.”

I follow his eyes to the pane of glass separating us from reality and I wait for his lips to part; I wait to listen to him speak. And then I try to pay attention as his words bounce around in the haze of my head, fogging my senses, misting my eyes, clouding my concentration.

Did you know it was an international movement? Adam asks me.

No I did not, I tell him. I do not tell him I was dragged from my home 3 years ago. I do not tell him that I was dragged away exactly 7 years after The Reestablishment began to preach and 4 months after they took control of

everything. I do not tell him how little I know of our new world.

Adam says The Reestablishment had its hands in every country, ready for the moment to bring its leaders into a position of control. He says the inhabitable land left in the world has been divided into 3,333 sectors and each space is now controlled by a different Person of Power.

Did you know they lied to us? Adam asks me.

Did you know that The Reestablishment said someone had to take control, that someone had to save society, that someone had to restore the peace? Did you know that they said killing all the voices of opposition was the only way to find peace?

Did you know this? is what Adam asks me.

And this is where I nod. This is where I say yes.

This is the part I remember: The anger. The riots. The rage.

My eyes close in a subconscious effort to block out the bad memories, but the effort backfires. Protests. Rallies. Screams for survival. I see women and children starving to death, homes destroyed and buried in rubble, the countryside a burnt landscape, its only fruit the rotting flesh of casualties. I see dead dead dead red and burgundy and maroon and the richest shade of your mother's favorite lipstick all smeared into the earth.

So much everything all the things dead.

The Reestablishment is struggling to maintain its hold over the people, Adam says. He says The Reestablishment is struggling to fight a war against the rebels who will not acquiesce to this new regime. The Reestablishment is struggling to root itself as a new form of government across all international societies.

And then I wonder what has happened to the people I used to see every day. What's become of their homes, their parents, their children. I wonder how many of them have been buried in the ground.

How many of them were murdered.

"They're destroying everything," Adam says, and his voice is suddenly a solemn sound in the silence. "All the books, every artifact, every remnant of human history. They're saying it's the only way to fix things. They say we need to start fresh. They say we can't make the same mistakes of previous generations."

2

knocks

at the door and we're both on our feet, abruptly startled back into this bleak world.

Adam raises an eyebrow at me. "Breakfast?"

"Wait three minutes," I remind him. We're so good at masking our hunger until the knocks at the door cripple our dignity.

They starve us on purpose.

"Yeah." His lips are set in a soft smile. "I wouldn't want to burn myself." The air shifts as he steps forward.

I am a statue.

"I still don't understand," he says, so quietly. "Why are you here?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

He leaves less than a foot of space between us and I'm 10 inches away from spontaneous combustion. "Your eyes are so deep." He tilts his head. "So calm. I want to know what you're thinking."

"You shouldn't." My voice falters. "You don't even know me."

He laughs and the action gives life to the light in his eyes. "I don't know you."

"No."

He shakes his head. Sits on his bed. "Right. Of course not."

"What?"

"You're right." His breath catches. "Maybe I am insane."

I take 2 steps backward. "Maybe you are."

He's smiling again and I'd like to take a picture. I'd like to stare at the curve of his lips for the rest of my life. "I'm not, you know."

"But you won't tell me why you're here," I challenge.

"And neither will you."

I fall to my knees and tug the tray through the slot. Something unidentifiable is steaming in 2 tin cups. Adam folds himself onto the floor across from me.

"Breakfast," I say as I push his portion forward.

Chapter Six

1 word, 2 lips, 3 4 5 fingers form 1 fist.

1 corner, 2 parents, 3 4 5 reasons to hide.

1 child, 2 eyes, 3 4 17 years of fear.

A broken broomstick, a pair of wild faces, angry whispers, locks on my door.

Look at me, is what I wanted to say to you. Talk to me every once in a while.

Find me a cure for these tears, I'd really like to exhale for the first time in my life.

It's been 2 weeks.

2 weeks of the same routine, 2 weeks of nothing but routine. 2 weeks with the cellmate ~~who has come too close to touching me~~ who does not touch me. Adam is adapting to the system. He never complains, he never volunteers too much information, he continues to ask too many questions.

He's nice to me.

I sit by the window and watch the rain and the leaves and the snow collide. They take turns dancing in the wind, performing choreographed routines for unsuspecting masses. The soldiers stomp stomp stomp through the rain, crushing leaves and fallen snow under their feet. Their hands are wrapped in gloves wrapped around guns that could put a bullet through a million possibilities. They don't bother to be bothered by the beauty that falls from the sky. They don't understand the freedom in feeling the universe on their skin. They don't care.

I wish I could stuff my mouth full of raindrops and fill my pockets full of snow. I wish I could trace the veins in a fallen leaf and feel the wind pinch my nose.

Instead, I ignore the desperation sticking my fingers together and watch for the bird I've only seen in my dreams. Birds used to fly, is what the stories say. Before the ozone layer deteriorated, before the pollutants mutated the creatures into something ~~horrible~~ different. They say the weather wasn't always so unpredictable. They say there were birds who used to soar through the skies like planes.

It seems strange that a small animal could achieve anything as complex as

human engineering, but the possibility is too enticing to ignore. I've dreamt about the same bird flying through the same sky for exactly 10 years. White with streaks of gold like a crown atop its head.

It's the only dream I have that gives me peace.

"What are you writing?"

I squint up at his strong stature, the easy grin on his face. I don't know how he manages to smile in spite of everything. I wonder if he can hold on to that shape, that special curve of the mouth that changes lives. I wonder how he'll feel in 1 month and I shudder at the thought.

I don't want him to end up like me.

Empty.

"Hey—" He grabs the blanket off my bed and crouches next to me, wasting no time wrapping the thin cloth around my thinner shoulders. "You okay?"

I try to smile. Decide to avoid his question. "Thank you for the blanket."

He sits down next to me and leans against the wall. His shoulders are so close too close ~~never close enough~~. His body heat does more for me than the blanket ever will. Something in my joints aches with an acute yearning, a desperate need I've never been able to fulfill. My bones are begging for something I cannot allow.

~~Touch me.~~

He glances at the little notebook tucked in my hand, at the broken pen clutched in my fist. I close the book and roll it into a little ball. I shove it into a crack in the wall. I study the pen in my palm. I know he's staring at me.

"Are you writing a book?"

"No." No I am not writing a book.

"Maybe you should."

I turn to meet his eyes and regret it immediately. There are less than 3 inches between us and I can't move because my body only knows how to freeze. Every muscle every movement tightens, every vertebra in my spinal column is a block of ice. I'm holding my breath and my eyes are wide, locked, caught in the intensity of his gaze. I can't look away. I don't know how to retreat.

Oh.

God.

His eyes.

I've been lying to myself, determined to deny the impossible.

I know him I know him I know him I know him

The boy ~~who does not remember me~~ I used to know.

“They’re going to destroy the English language,” he says, his voice careful, quiet.

I fight to catch my breath.

“They want to re-create everything,” he continues. “They want to redesign everything. They want to destroy anything that could’ve been the reason for our problems. They think we need a new, universal language.” He drops his voice. Drops his eyes. “They want to destroy everything. Every language in history.”

“No.” My breath hitches. Spots cloud my vision.

“I know.”

“No.” This I did not know.

He looks up. “It’s good that you’re writing things down. One day what you’re doing will be illegal.”

I’ve begun to shake. My body is suddenly fighting a maelstrom of emotions, my brain plagued by the world I’m losing and pained by this boy who does not remember me. The pen stumbles its way to the floor and I’m gripping the blanket so hard I’m afraid it’s going to tear. Ice slices my skin, horror clots my veins. I never thought it would get this bad. I never thought The Reestablishment would take things so far. They’re incinerating culture, the beauty of diversity. The new citizens of our world will be reduced to nothing but numbers, easily interchangeable, easily removable, easily destroyed for disobedience.

We have lost our humanity.

I wrap the blanket around my shoulders until I’m cocooned in the tremors that won’t stop terrorizing my body. I’m horrified by my lack of self-control. I can’t make myself still.

His hand is suddenly on my back.

His touch is scorching my skin through the layers of fabric and I inhale so fast my lungs collapse. I’m caught in colliding currents of confusion, so desperate ~~so desperate so desperate~~ to be close so desperate to be far away. I don’t know how to move away from him. ~~I don’t want to move away from him.~~

I don’t want him to be afraid of me.

“Hey.” His voice is soft so soft so soft. His arms are stronger than all the bones in my body. He pulls my swaddled figure close to his chest and I shatter. Two three four fifty thousand pieces of feeling stab me in the heart, melt into drops of warm honey that soothe the scars in my soul. The blanket is the only barrier between us and he pulls me closer, tighter, stronger, until I hear the beats humming deep within his chest and the steel of his arms around my body severs all ties to tension in my limbs. His heat melts the icicles propping me up from

the inside out and I thaw I thaw I thaw, my eyes fluttering fast until they fall closed, until silent tears are streaming down my face and I've decided the only thing I want to freeze is his frame holding mine. "It's okay," he whispers. "You'll be okay."

Truth is a jealous, vicious mistress that never ever sleeps, is what I don't tell him. I'll never be okay.

It takes every broken filament in my being to pull away from him. I do it because I have to. ~~Because it's for his own good.~~ Someone is sticking forks in my back as I trip away. The blanket catches my foot and I nearly fall before Adam reaches out to me again. "Juliette—"

"You can't t-touch me." My breathing is shallow and hard to swallow, my fingers shaking so fast I clench them into a fist. "You can't touch me. You can't." My eyes are trained on the door.

He's on his feet. "Why not?"

"You just can't," I whisper to the walls.

"I don't understand—why won't you talk to me? You sit in the corner all day and write in your book and look at everything but my face. You have so much to say to a piece of paper but I'm standing right here and you don't even acknowledge me. Juliette, *please*—" He reaches for my arm and I turn away. "Why won't you at least *look* at me? I'm not going to hurt you—"

~~You don't remember me. You don't remember that we went to the same school for 7 years.~~

You don't remember me.

"You don't know me." My voice is even, flat; my limbs numb, amputated. "We've shared one space for two weeks and you think you know me but you don't know anything about me. Maybe I *am* crazy."

"You're not," he says through clenched teeth. "You *know* you're not."

"Then maybe it's you," I say carefully, slowly. "Because one of us is."

"That's not true—"

"Tell me why you're here, Adam. What are you doing in an insane asylum if you don't belong here?"

"I've been asking you the same question since I got here."

"Maybe you ask too many questions."

I hear his hard exhalation of breath. He laughs a bitter laugh. "We're practically the only two people who are *alive* in this place and you want to shut me out, too?"

I close my eyes and focus on breathing. "You can talk to me. Just don't

touch me.”

7 seconds of silence join the conversation. “Maybe I want to touch you.”

There are 15,000 feelings of disbelief hole-punched in my heart. I’m tempted by recklessness, aching aching aching, desperate forever for what I can never have. I turn my back on him but I can’t keep the lies from spilling out of my lips. “Maybe I don’t want you to.”

He makes a harsh sound. “I disgust you that much?”

I spin around, so caught off guard by his words I forget myself. He’s staring at me, his face hard, his jaw set, his fingers flexing by his sides. His eyes are 2 buckets of rainwater: deep, fresh, clear.

Hurt.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I can’t breathe.

“You can’t just answer a simple question, can you?” He shakes his head and turns to the wall.

My face is cast in a neutral mold, my arms and legs filled with plaster. I feel nothing. I am nothing. I am empty of everything I will never move. I’m staring at a small crack near my shoe. I will stare at it forever.

The blankets fall to the floor. The world fades out of focus, my ears outsource every sound to another dimension. My eyes close, my thoughts drift, my memories kick me in the heart.

I know him.

I’ve tried so hard to stop thinking about him.

I’ve tried so hard to forget his face.

I’ve tried so hard to get those blue blue blue eyes out of my head but I know him I know him I know him it’s been 3 years since I last saw him.

I could never forget Adam.

But he’s already forgotten me.

Chapter Seven

I remember televisions and fireplaces and porcelain sinks. I remember movie tickets and parking lots and SUVs. I remember hair salons and holidays and window shutters and dandelions and the smell of freshly paved driveways. I remember toothpaste commercials and ladies in high heels and old men in business suits. I remember mailmen and libraries and boy bands and balloons and Christmas trees.

I remember being 10 years old when we couldn't ignore the food shortages anymore and things got so expensive no one could afford to live.

Adam is not speaking to me.

Maybe it's for the best. Maybe there was no point hoping he and I could be friends, maybe it's better he thinks I don't like him than that I like him too much. He's hiding a lot of something that might be pain, but his secrets scare me. He won't tell me why he's here. Though I don't tell him much, either.

~~And yet and yet and yet.~~

Last night the memory of his arms around me was enough to scare away the screams. The warmth of a kind embrace, the strength of firm hands holding all of my pieces together, the relief and release of so many years' loneliness. This gift he's given me I can't repay.

Touching Juliette is nearly impossible.

I'll never forget the horror in my mother's eyes, the torture in my father's face, the fear etched in their expressions. Their child ~~was~~ is a monster. Possessed by the devil. Cursed by darkness. Unholy. An abomination. Drugs, tests, medical solutions failed. Psychological cross-examinations failed.

She is a walking weapon in society, is what the teachers said. *We've never seen anything like it*, is what the doctors said. *She should be removed from your home*, is what the police officers said.

~~No problem at all, is what my parents said.~~ I was 14 years old when they finally got rid of me. When they stood back and watched as I was dragged away for a murder I didn't know I could commit.

Maybe the world is safer with me locked in a cell. Maybe Adam is safer if he

hates me. He's sitting in the corner with his fists in his face.

I never wanted to hurt him.

I never wanted to hurt the only person who never wanted to hurt me.

The door crashes open and 5 people swarm into the room, rifles pointed at our chests.

Adam is on his feet and I'm made of stone. I've forgotten to inhale. I haven't seen so many people in so long I'm momentarily stupefied. I should be screaming.

"HANDS UP, FEET APART, MOUTHS SHUT. DON'T MOVE AND WE WON'T SHOOT YOU."

I'm still frozen in place. I should move, I should lift my arms, I should spread my feet, I should remember to breathe. Someone is cutting off my neck.

The one barking orders slams the butt of his gun into my back and my knees crack as they hit the floor. I finally taste oxygen and a side of blood. I think Adam is yelling but there is an acute agony ripping through my body unlike anything I've experienced before. I'm utterly immobilized.

"What don't you understand about keeping your mouth SHUT?" I squint sideways to see the barrel of the gun 2 inches away from Adam's face.

"GET UP." A steel-toed boot kicks me in the ribs, fast, hard, hollow. I'm swallowing nothing but the strangled gasps choking my body. "I said GET UP." Harder, faster, stronger, another boot in my gut. I can't even cry out.

~~Get up, Juliette. Get up. If you don't, they'll shoot Adam.~~

I heave myself up to my knees and fall back on the wall behind me, stumbling forward to catch my balance. Lifting my hands is more torture than I knew I could endure. My organs are dead, my bones are cracked, my skin is a sieve, punctured by pins and needles of pain. They've finally come to kill me.

That's why they put Adam in my cell.

Because I'm leaving. Adam is here because I'm leaving, because they forgot to kill me on time, because my moments are over, because my 17 years were too many for this world. They're going to kill me.

I always wondered how it would happen. ~~I wonder if this will make my parents happy.~~

Someone is laughing. "Well aren't you a little shit?"

I don't even know if they're talking to me. I can hardly focus on keeping my arms upright.

"She's not even crying," someone adds. "The girls are usually begging for

mercy by now.”

The walls are beginning to bleed into the ceiling. I wonder how long I can hold my breath. I can't distinguish words I can't understand the sounds I'm hearing the blood is rushing through my head and my lips are 2 blocks of concrete I can't crack open. There's a gun in my back and I'm tripping forward. The floors are falling up. My feet are dragging in a direction I can't decipher.

I hope they kill me soon.

Chapter Eight

It takes me 2 days to open my eyes.

There's a tin of water and a tin of food set off to the side and I inhale the cold contents with trembling hands, a dull ache creaking through my bones, a desperate drought suffocating my throat. Nothing seems to be broken, but one glance under my shirt proves the pain was real. The bruises are discolored blossoms of blue and yellow, torture to touch and slow to heal.

Adam is nowhere.

I am alone in a block of solitude, 4 walls no more than 10 feet in every direction, the only air creeping in through a small slot in the door. I've just begun to terrorize myself with my imagination when the heavy metal door slams open. A guard with 2 rifles strung across his chest looks me up and down.

"Get up."

This time I don't hesitate.

I hope Adam, at least, is safe. I hope he doesn't come to the same end I do.

"Follow me." The guard's voice is thick and deep, his gray eyes unreadable. He looks about 25 years old, blond hair cropped close to the crown, shirtsleeves rolled up to his shoulders, military tattoos snaking up his forearms just like Adam's.

Oh.

God.

No.

Adam steps into the doorway beside the blond and gestures with his weapon toward a narrow hallway. "Move."

~~Adam is pointing a gun at my chest.~~

~~Adam is pointing a gun at my chest.~~

Adam is pointing a gun at my chest.

His eyes are foreign to me, glassy and distant, far, far away.

I am nothing but novocaine. I am numb, a world of nothing, all feeling and emotion gone forever.

I am a whisper that never was.

Adam is a soldier. ~~Adam wants me to die.~~

I stare at him openly now, every sensation amputated, my pain a distant scream disconnected from my body. My feet move forward of their own accord; my lips remain shut because there will never be words for this moment.

Death would be a welcome release from these earthly joys I've known.

I don't know how long I've been walking before another blow to my back cripples me. I blink against the brightness of light I haven't seen in so long. My eyes begin to tear and I'm squinting against the fluorescent bulbs illuminating the large space. I can hardly see anything.

"Juliette Ferrars." A voice detonates my name. There's a heavy boot pressed into my back and I can't lift my head to distinguish who's speaking to me. "Weston, dim the lights and release her. I want to see her face." The command is cool and strong like steel, dangerously calm, effortlessly powerful.

The brightness is reduced to a level I'm able to tolerate. The imprint of a boot is carved into my back but no longer settled on my skin. I lift my head and look up.

I'm immediately struck by his youth. He can't be much older than me.

It's obvious he's in charge of something, though I have no idea what. His skin is flawless, unblemished, his jawline sharp and strong. His eyes are the palest shade of emerald I've ever seen.

He's beautiful.

His crooked smile is calculated evil.

He's sitting on what he imagines to be a throne but is nothing more than a chair at the front of an empty room. His suit is perfectly pressed, his blond hair expertly combed, his soldiers the ideal bodyguards.

I hate him.

"You're so stubborn." His green eyes are almost translucent. "You never want to cooperate. You wouldn't even play nice with your cellmate."

I flinch without intending to. The burn of betrayal blushes up my neck.

Green Eyes looks unexpectedly amused and I'm suddenly mortified. "Well isn't that interesting." He snaps his fingers. "Kent, would you step forward, please."

My heart stops beating when Adam comes into view. ~~Kent. His name is Adam Kent.~~

I am aflame from head to toe. Adam flanks Green Eyes in an instant, but only offers a curt nod of his head as a salute. Perhaps the leader isn't nearly as important as he thinks.

“Sir,” he says.

So many thoughts are tangling in my head I can’t untie the insanity knotting itself together. I should’ve known. I’d heard rumors of soldiers living among the public in secret, reporting to the authorities if things seemed suspicious. Every day people disappeared. No one ever came back.

Though I still can’t understand why Adam was sent to spy on me.

“It seems you made quite an impression on her.”

I squint closer at the man in the chair only to realize his suit has been adorned with tiny colored patches. Military mementos. His last name is etched into the lapel: Warner.

Adam says nothing. He doesn’t look in my direction. His body is erect, 6 feet of gorgeous lean muscle, his profile strong and steady. The same arms that held my body are now holsters for lethal weapons.

“You have nothing to say about that?” Warner glances at Adam only to tilt his head in my direction, his eyes dancing in the light, clearly entertained.

Adam clenches his jaw. “Sir.”

“Of course.” Warner is suddenly bored. “Why should I expect you to have something to say?”

“Are you going to kill me?” The words escape my lips before I have a chance to think them through and someone’s gun slams into my spine all over again. I fall to the floor with a broken whimper, wheezing into the filthy floor.

“That wasn’t necessary, Roland.” Warner’s voice is saturated with mock disappointment. “I suppose I’d be wondering the same thing if I were in her position.” A pause. “Juliette?”

I manage to lift my head.

“I have a proposition for you.”

Chapter Nine

I'm not sure I'm hearing him correctly.

"You have something I want." Warner is still staring at me.

"I don't understand," I tell him.

He takes a deep breath and stands up to pace the length of the room. Adam has not yet been dismissed. "You are kind of a pet project of mine." Warner smiles to himself. "I've studied your records for a very long time."

I can't handle his pompous, self-satisfied strut. I want to break the grin off his face.

Warner stops walking. "I want you on my team."

"What?" A broken whisper of surprise.

"We're in the middle of a war," he says a little impatiently. "Maybe you can put the pieces together."

"I don't—"

"I know your secret, Juliette. I know why you're in here. Your entire life is documented in hospital records, complaints to authorities, messy lawsuits, public demands to have you locked up." His pause gives me enough time to choke on the horror caught in my throat. "I'd been considering it for a long time, but I wanted to make sure you weren't *actually* psychotic. Isolation wasn't exactly a good indicator, though you did fend for yourself quite well." He offers me a smile that says I should be grateful for his praise. "I sent Adam to stay with you as a final precaution. I wanted to make sure you weren't volatile, that you were capable of basic human interaction and communication. I must say I'm quite pleased with the results."

Someone is ripping my skin off.

"Adam, it seems, played his part a little too excellently. He is a fine soldier. One of the best, in fact." Warner spares him a glance before smiling at me. "But don't worry, he doesn't know what you're capable of. Not yet, anyway."

I claw at the panic, I swallow the agony, I beg myself not to look in his direction but I fail ~~I fail I fail~~. Adam meets my eyes in the same split second I meet his but he looks away so quickly I'm not sure if I imagined it.

~~I am a monster.~~

"I'm not as cruel as you think," Warner continues, a musical lilt in his voice. "If you're so fond of his company I can make this"—he gestures between myself and Adam—"a permanent assignment."

"No," I breathe.

Warner curves his lips into a careless grin. "Oh yes. But be careful, pretty girl. If you do something . . . *bad* . . . he'll have to shoot you."

There are wire cutters carving holes in my heart. Adam doesn't react to anything Warner says.

He is doing a job.

I am a number, a mission, an easily replaceable object; I am not even a memory in his mind.

I am nothing.

I didn't expect his betrayal to bury me so deep.

"If you accept my offer," Warner interrupts my thoughts, "you will live like I do. You will be one of *us*, and not one of *them*. Your life will change forever."

"And if I do not accept?" I ask, catching my voice before it cracks in fear.

Warner looks genuinely disappointed. His hands are clasped together in dismay. "You don't really have a choice. If you stand by my side you will be rewarded." He presses his lips together. "But if you choose to disobey? Well . . . I think you look rather lovely with all your body parts intact, don't you?"

I'm breathing so hard my frame is shaking. "You want me to torture people for you?"

His face breaks into a brilliant smile. "That would be wonderful."

The world is bleeding.

I don't have time to form a response before he turns to Adam. "Show her what she's missing, would you?"

Adam answers a beat too late. "Sir?"

"That is an order, soldier." Warner's eyes are trained on me, his lips twitching with suppressed amusement. "I'd like to break this one. She's a little too feisty for her own good."

"You can't touch me," I spit through clenched teeth.

"Wrong," he singsongs. He tosses Adam a pair of black gloves. "You're going to need these," he says with a conspiratorial whisper.

"You're a monster." My voice is too even, my body filled with a sudden rage. "Why don't you just *kill* me?"

"That, my dear, would be a waste." He steps forward and I realize his hands are carefully sheathed in white leather gloves. He tips my chin up with one

finger. “Besides, it’d be a shame to lose such a pretty face.”

I try to snap my neck away from him but the same steel-toed boot slams into my spine and Warner catches my face in his grip. I suppress a scream. “Don’t struggle, love. You’ll only make things more difficult for yourself.”

“I hope you rot in hell.”

Warner flexes his jaw. He holds up a hand to stop someone from shooting me, kicking me in the spleen, cracking my skull open, I have no idea. “You’re a fighter for the wrong team.” He stands up straight. “But we can change that. Adam,” he calls. “Don’t let her out of your sight. She’s your charge now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter Ten

Adam puts on the gloves but he doesn't touch me. "Let her up, Roland. I'll take it from here."

The boot disappears. I struggle to my feet and stare at nothing. I won't think about the horror that awaits me. Someone kicks in the backs of my knees and I nearly stumble to the ground. "Get *going*," a voice growls from behind. I look up and realize Adam is already walking away. I'm supposed to be following him.

Only once we're back in the familiar blindness of the asylum hallways does he stop walking.

"Juliette." ~~One soft word and my joints are made of air.~~

I don't answer him.

"Take my hand," he says.

"I will never," I manage between broken bites of oxygen. "Not ever."

A heavy sigh. I feel him shift in the darkness and soon his body is too close so disarmingly close to mine. His hand is on my lower back and he's guiding me through the corridors toward an unknown destination. Every inch of my skin is blushing. I have to hold myself upright to keep from falling backward into his arms.

The distance we're walking is much longer than I expected. When Adam finally speaks I suspect we're close to the end. "We're going to go outside," he says near my ear. I have to ball my fists to control the thrills tripping my heart. I'm almost too distracted by the feel of his voice to understand the significance of what he's saying. "I just thought you should know."

An audible intake of breath is my only response. I haven't been outside in almost a year. I'm painfully excited but I haven't felt natural light on my skin in so long I don't know if I'll be able to handle it. I have no choice.

The air hits me first.

Our atmosphere has little to boast of, but after so many months in a concrete corner even the wasted oxygen of our dying Earth tastes like heaven. I can't inhale fast enough. I fill my lungs with the feeling; I step into the slight breeze and clutch a fistful of wind as it weaves its way through my fingers.

Bliss unlike anything I've ever known.

The air is crisp and cool. A refreshing bath of tangible nothing that stings my eyes and snaps at my skin. The sun is high today, blinding as it reflects the small patches of snow keeping the earth frozen. My eyes are pressed down by the weight of the bright light and I can't see through more than two slits, but the warm rays wash over my body like a jacket fitted to my form, like the hug of something greater than a human. I could stand still in this moment forever. For one infinite second I feel free.

Adam's touch shocks me back to reality. I nearly jump out of my skin and he catches my waist. I have to beg my bones to stop shaking. "Are you okay?" His eyes surprise me. They're the same ones I remember, blue and bottomless like the deepest part of the ocean. His hands are ~~gentle so gentle~~ around me.

"I don't want you to touch me," I lie.

"You don't have a choice." He won't look at me.

"I always have a choice."

He runs a hand through his hair and swallows the nothing in his throat. "Follow me."

We're in a blank space, an empty acre filled with dead leaves and dying trees taking small sips from melted snow in the soil. The landscape has been ravaged by war and neglect and it's still the most beautiful thing I've seen in so long. The stomping soldiers stop to watch as Adam opens a car door for me.

It's not a car. It's a tank.

I stare at the massive metal body and attempt to climb my way up the side when Adam is suddenly behind me. He hoists me up by the waist and I gasp as he settles me into the seat.

Soon we're driving in silence and I have no idea where we're headed.

I'm staring out the window at everything.

I'm eating and drinking and absorbing every infinitesimal detail in the debris, in the skyline, in the abandoned homes and broken pieces of metal and glass sprinkled in the scenery. The world looks naked, stripped of vegetation and warmth. There are no street signs, no stop signs; there is no need for either. There is no public transportation. Everyone knows that cars are now manufactured by only one company and sold at a ridiculous rate.

Very few people are allowed a means of escape.

~~My parents~~ The general population has been distributed across what's left of the country. Industrial buildings form the spine of the landscape: tall, rectangular metal boxes stuffed full of machinery. Machinery intended to strengthen the army, to strengthen The Reestablishment, to destroy mass quantities of human

civilization.

Carbon/Tar/Steel

Gray/Black/Silver

Smoky colors smudged into the skyline, dripping into the slush that used to be snow. Trash is heaped in haphazard piles everywhere, patches of yellowed grass peeking out from under the devastation.

Traditional homes of our old world have been abandoned, windows shattered, roofs collapsing, red and green and blue paint scrubbed into muted shades to better match our bright future. Now I see the compounds carelessly constructed on the ravaged land and I begin to remember. I remember how these were supposed to be temporary. I remember the few months before I was locked up when they'd begun building them. These small, cold quarters would suffice just until they figured out all the details of this new plan, is what The Reestablishment had said. Just until everyone was subdued. Just until people stopped protesting and realized that this change was *good* for them, *good* for their children, *good* for their future.

I remember there were rules.

No more dangerous imaginations, no more prescription medications. A new generation comprised of only healthy individuals would sustain us. The sick must be locked away. The old must be discarded. The troubled must be given up to the asylums. Only the strong should survive.

Yes.

Of course.

No more stupid languages and stupid stories and stupid paintings placed above stupid mantels. No more Christmas, no more Hanukkah, no more Ramadan and Diwali. No talk of religion, of belief, of personal convictions. Personal convictions were what nearly killed us all, is what they said.

Convictions priorities preferences prejudices and ideologies divided us. Deluded us. Destroyed us.

Selfish needs, wants, and desires needed to be obliterated. Greed, overindulgence, and gluttony had to be expunged from human behavior. The solution was in self-control, in minimalism, in sparse living conditions; one simple language and a brand-new dictionary filled with words everyone would understand.

These things would save us, save our children, save the human race, is what they said.

Reestablish Equality. Reestablish Humanity. Reestablish Hope, Healing, and

Happiness.

SAVE US!

JOIN US!

REESTABLISH SOCIETY!

The posters are still plastered on the walls.

The wind whips their tattered remains, but the signs are determinedly fixed, flapping against the steel and concrete structures they're stuck to. Some are still pasted to poles sprung right out of the ground, loudspeakers now affixed at the very top. Loudspeakers that alert the people, no doubt, to the imminent dangers that surround them.

But the world is eerily quiet.

Pedestrians pass by, ambling along in the cold, frigid weather to do factory work and find food for their families. Hope in this world bleeds out of the barrel of a gun.

No one really cares for the concept anymore.

People used to want hope. They wanted to think things could get better. They wanted to believe they could go back to worrying about gossip and holiday vacations and going to parties on Saturday nights, so The Reestablishment promised a future too perfect to be possible and society was too desperate to disbelieve. They never realized they were signing away their souls to a group planning on taking advantage of their ignorance. Their fear.

Most civilians are too petrified to protest but there are others who are stronger. There are others who are waiting for the right moment. There are others who have already begun to fight back.

I hope it's not too late to fight back.

I study every quivering branch, every imposing soldier, every window I can count. My eyes are 2 professional pickpockets, stealing everything to store away in my mind.

I lose track of the minutes we trample over.

We pull up to a structure 10 times larger than the asylum and suspiciously central to civilization. From the outside it looks like a bland building, inconspicuous in every way but its size, gray steel slabs comprising 4 flat walls, windows cracked and slammed into the 15 stories. It's bleak and bears no marking, no insignia, no proof of its true identity.

Political headquarters camouflaged among the masses.

The inside of the tank is a convoluted mess of buttons and levers I'm at a loss to operate, and Adam is opening my door before I have a chance to identify the pieces. His hands are in place around my waist and my feet are now firmly on the ground but my heart is pounding so fast I'm certain he can hear it. He hasn't let go of me.

I look up.

His eyes are tight, his forehead pinched, his lips ~~his lips his lips~~ are 2 pieces of frustration forged together.

I step backward and 10,000 tiny particles shatter between us. He drops his eyes. He turns away. He inhales and 5 fingers on one hand form a fickle fist. "This way." He nods toward the building.

I follow him inside.

Chapter Eleven

I'm so prepared for unimaginable horror that the reality is almost worse.

Dirty money is dripping from the walls, a year's supply of food wasted on marble floors, hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical aid poured into fancy furniture and Persian rugs. I feel the artificial heat pouring in through air vents and think of children screaming for clean water. I squint through crystal chandeliers and hear mothers begging for mercy. I see a superficial world existing in the midst of a terrorizing reality and I can't move.

I can't breathe.

So many people must've died to sustain this luxury. So many people had to lose their homes and their children and their last 5 dollars in the bank for promises promises promises so many promises to save them from themselves. They *promised* us—The Reestablishment promised us hope for a better future. They said they would fix things, they said they would help us get back to the world we knew—the world with movie dates and spring weddings and baby showers. They said they would give us back our homes, our health, our sustainable future.

But they stole everything.

They took everything. ~~My life. My future. My sanity. My freedom.~~

They filled our world with weapons aimed at our foreheads and smiled as they shot 16 candles right through our future. They killed those strong enough to fight back and locked up the freaks who failed to live up to their utopian expectations. ~~People like me.~~

Here is proof of their corruption.

My skin is cold-sweat, my fingers trembling with disgust, my legs unable to withstand ~~the waste the waste the waste~~ the selfish waste in these 4 walls. I'm seeing red everywhere. The blood of bodies spattered against the windows, spilled across the carpets, dripping from the chandeliers.

"Juliette—"

I break.

I'm on my knees, my body cracking from the pain I've swallowed so many times, heaving with sobs I can no longer suppress, my dignity dissolving in my

tears, the agony of this past week ripping my skin to shreds.

I can't ever breathe.

I can't catch the oxygen around me and I'm dry-heaving into my shirt and I hear voices and see faces I don't recognize, wisps of words wicked away by confusion, thoughts scrambled so many times I don't know if I'm even conscious anymore.

I don't know if I've officially lost my mind.

I'm in the air. I'm a bag of feathers in his arms and he's breaking through soldiers crowding around for a glimpse of the commotion and for a moment I don't want to care that I shouldn't want this so much. I want to forget that I'm supposed to hate him, that he betrayed me, that he's working for the same people who are trying to destroy the very little that's left of humanity and my face is buried in the soft material of his shirt and my cheek is pressed against his chest and he smells like strength and courage and the world drowning in rain. I don't want him to ~~ever ever ever~~ ever let go of my body. I wish I could touch his skin, I wish there were no barriers between us.

Reality slaps me in the face.

Mortification muddles my brain, desperate humiliation clouds my judgment; red paints my face, bleeds through my skin. I clutch at his shirt.

"You can kill me," I tell him. "You have guns—" I'm wriggling out of his grip and he tightens his hold around my body. His face shows no emotion but a sudden strain in his jaw, an unmistakable tension in his arms. "You can just *kill me*—" I plead.

"*Juliette.*" His voice is solid with an edge of desperation. "*Please.*"

I'm numb again. Powerless all over again. Melting from within, life seeping out of my limbs.

We're standing in front of a door.

Adam takes a key card and swipes it against a black pane of glass fitted into the small space beside the handle, and the stainless steel door slides out of place. We step inside.

We're all alone in a new room.

"Please ~~don't let go of me~~ put me down," I tell him.

There's a queen-size bed in the middle of the space, lush carpet gracing the floors, an armoire flush against the wall, light fixtures glittering from the ceiling. The beauty is so tainted I can't stand the sight of it. Adam gentles me onto the soft mattress and takes a small step backward.

“You’ll be staying here for a while, I think,” is all he says.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I don’t want to think about the inevitable torture awaiting me. “Please,” I tell him. “I’d like to be left alone.”

A deep sigh. “That’s not exactly an option.”

“What do you mean?” I spin around.

“I have to watch you, Juliette.” He says my name like a whisper. ~~My heart~~ ~~my heart my heart~~. “Warner wants you to understand what he’s offering you, but you’re still considered . . . a threat. He’s made you my assignment. I can’t leave.”

~~I don’t know whether to be thrilled or horrified.~~ I’m horrified. “You have to live with me?”

“I live in the barracks on the opposite end of this building. With the other soldiers. But, yeah.” He clears his throat. He’s not looking at me. “I’ll be moving in.”

There’s an ache in the pit of my stomach that’s gnawing on my nerves. I want to hate him and judge him and scream forever but I’m failing because all I see is an 8-year-old boy who doesn’t remember that he used to be the kindest person I ever knew.

I don’t want to believe this is happening.

I close my eyes and curl my head into my knees.

“You have to get dressed,” he says after a moment.

I pop my head up. I blink at him like I can’t understand what he’s saying. “I am dressed.”

He clears his throat again but tries to be quiet about it. “There’s a bathroom through here.” He points. I see a door connected to the room and I’m suddenly curious. I’ve heard stories about people with bathrooms in their bedrooms. I guess they’re not exactly *in* the bedroom, but they’re close enough. I slip off the bed and follow his finger. As soon as I open the door he resumes speaking. “You can shower and change in here. The bathroom . . . it’s the only place there are no cameras,” he adds, his voice trailing off.

There are cameras in my room.

Of course.

“You can find clothes in there.” He nods to the armoire. He suddenly looks uncomfortable.

“And you can’t leave?” I ask.

He rubs his forehead and sits down on the bed. He sighs. “You have to get

ready. Warner will be expecting you for dinner.”

“*Dinner?*” My eyes are the size of the moon.

Adam looks grim. “Yeah.”

“He’s not going to hurt me?” I’m ashamed at the relief in my voice, at the unexpected tension I’ve released, at the fear I didn’t know I was harboring. “He’s going to give me *dinner*?” ~~I’m starving my stomach is a tortured pit of starvation I’m so hungry so hungry so hungry~~ I can’t even imagine what real food must taste like.

Adam’s face is inscrutable again. “You should hurry. I can show you how everything works.”

I don’t have time to protest before he’s in the bathroom and I’ve followed him inside. The door is still open and he’s standing in the middle of the small space with his back to me and I can’t understand why. “I already know how to use the bathroom,” I tell him. ~~I used to live in a regular home. I used to have a family.~~

He turns around very, very slowly and I begin to panic. He finally lifts his head but his eyes are darting in every direction. When he looks at me his eyes narrow; his forehead is tight. His right hand curls into a fist and his left hand lifts one finger to his lips. He’s telling me to be quiet.

Every organ in my body falls to the floor.

I knew something was coming but I didn’t know it’d be Adam. I didn’t think he’d be the one to hurt me, to torture me, to make me wish for death more than I ever have before. I don’t even realize I’m crying until I hear the whimper and feel the silent tears stream down my face and I’m ~~ashamed so ashamed~~ so ashamed of my weakness but a part of me doesn’t care. I’m tempted to beg, to ask for mercy, to steal his gun and shoot myself first. Dignity is the only thing I have left.

He seems to register my sudden hysteria because his eyes snap open and his mouth falls to the floor. “No, God, Juliette—I’m not—” He swears under his breath. He pumps his fist against his forehead and turns away, sighing heavily, pacing the length of the small space. He swears again.

He walks out the door and doesn’t look back.

Chapter Twelve

5 full minutes under piping hot water, 2 bars of soap both smelling of lavender, a bottle of shampoo meant only for my hair, and the touch of soft, plush towels I dare to wrap around my body and I begin to understand.

They want me to forget.

They think they can wash away my memories, my loyalties, my priorities with a few hot meals and a room with a view. They think I am so easily purchased.

Warner doesn't seem to understand that I grew up with nothing and I didn't hate it. I didn't want the clothes or the perfect shoes or the expensive anything. I didn't want to be draped in silk. All I ever wanted was to reach out and touch another human being not just with my hands but with my heart. I saw the world and its lack of compassion, its harsh, grating judgment, and its cold, resentful eyes. I saw it all around me.

I had so much time to listen.

To look.

To study people and places and possibilities. All I had to do was open my eyes. All I had to do was open a book—to see the stories bleeding from page to page. To see the memories etched onto paper.

I spent my life folded between the pages of books.

In the absence of human relationships I formed bonds with paper characters. I lived love and loss through stories threaded in history; I experienced adolescence by association. My world is one interwoven web of words, stringing limb to limb, bone to sinew, thoughts and images all together. I am a being comprised of letters, a character created by sentences, a figment of imagination formed through fiction.

They want to delete every point of punctuation in my life from this earth and I don't think I can let that happen.

I slip back into my old clothes and tiptoe into the bedroom only to find it abandoned. Adam is gone even though he said he would stay. I don't understand him I don't understand his actions I don't understand my disappointment. I wish I didn't love the freshness of my skin, the feel of being perfectly clean after so

long; I don't understand why I still haven't looked in the mirror, why I'm afraid of what I'll see, why I'm not sure if I'll recognize the face that might stare back at me.

I open the armoire.

It's bursting with dresses and shoes and shirts and pants and clothing of every kind, colors so vivid they hurt my eyes, material I've only ever heard of, the kind I'm almost afraid to touch. The sizes are perfect too perfect.

They've been waiting for me.

The sky is raining bricks right into my skull.

I've been neglected abandoned ostracized and dragged from my home. I've been poked prodded tested and thrown in a cell. I've been studied. I've been starved. I've been tempted with friendship only to be left betrayed and trapped into this nightmare I'm expected to be grateful for. My parents. My teachers. Adam. Warner. The Reestablishment. I am expendable to all of them.

They think I'm a doll they can dress up and twist into prostration.

But they're wrong.

"Warner is waiting for you."

I spin around and fall back against the armoire, slamming it closed in the craze of panic clutching my heart. I steady myself and fold away my fear when I see Adam standing at the door. His mouth moves for a moment but he says nothing. Eventually he steps forward so forward until he's close enough to touch.

He reaches past me to reopen the door hiding the things I'm embarrassed to know exist. "These are all for you," he says without looking at me, his fingers touching the hem of a purple dress, a rich plum color good enough to eat.

"I already have clothes." My hands smooth out the wrinkles in my dirty, ragged outfit.

He finally decides to look at me, but when he does his eyebrows trip, his eyes blink and freeze, his lips part in surprise. I wonder if I've washed off a new face for myself and I flush, hoping he's not disgusted by what he might see. I don't know why I care.

He drops his gaze. Takes a deep breath. "I'll be waiting outside."

~~I stare at the purple dress with Adam's fingerprints~~ I study the inside of the armoire for only a moment before I abandon it. I comb anxious fingers through my wet hair and steel myself.

I am no one's property.

And I don't care what Warner wants me to look like.

I step outside and Adam stares at me for a small second. He rubs the back of his neck and says nothing. He shakes his head. He starts walking. He doesn't touch me and I shouldn't notice but I do. I have no idea what to expect I have no idea what my life will be like in this new place and I'm being nailed in the stomach by every exquisite embellishment, every lavish accessory, every superfluous painting, molding, lighting, coloring of this building. I hope the whole thing catches fire.

I follow Adam down a long carpeted corridor to an elevator made entirely of glass. He swipes the same key card he used to open my door and we step inside. I didn't even realize we'd taken an elevator to get up this many floors. I realize I must've made a horrible scene when I arrived and I'm almost happy.

I hope I disappoint Warner in every possible way.

The dining room is big enough to feed thousands of orphans. Instead, there are 7 banquet tables draped across the room, blue silk spilling across the tabletops, crystal vases bursting with orchids and stargazer lilies, glass bowls filled with gardenias. ~~It's enchanting.~~ I wonder where they got the flowers from. They must not be real. I don't know how they could be real. I haven't seen real flowers in years.

Warner is positioned at the table directly in the middle, seated at the head. As soon as he sees me Adam he stands up. The entire room stands in turn.

I realize almost immediately that there is an empty seat on either side of him and I don't intend to stop moving but I do. I take quick inventory of the attendees and can't count any other women.

Adam brushes the small of my back with 3 fingertips and I'm startled out of my skin. I hurry forward and Warner beams at me. He pulls out the chair on his left and gestures for me to sit down. I do.

I try not to look at Adam as he sits across from me.

"You know . . . there are clothes in your armoire, my dear." Warner sits down beside me; the room reseats itself and resumes a steady stream of chatter. He's turned almost entirely in my direction but somehow the only presence I'm aware of is directly across from me. I focus on the empty plate 2 inches from my fingers. I drop my hands in my lap. "And you don't have to wear those dirty tennis shoes anymore," Warner continues, stealing another glance before pouring something into my cup. It looks like water.

~~I'm so thirsty I could inhale a waterfall.~~

I hate his smile.

Hate looks just like everybody else until it smiles. Until it spins around and lies with lips and teeth carved into the semblance of something too passive to punch.

“Juliette?”

I inhale too quickly. A stifled cough is ballooning in my throat.

His glassy green eyes glint in my direction.

“Are you not hungry?” Words dipped in sugar. His gloved hand touches my wrist and I nearly sprain it in my haste to distance myself from him.

~~I could eat every person in this room.~~ “No, thank you.”

He licks his bottom lip into a smile. “Don’t confuse stupidity for bravery, love. I know you haven’t eaten anything in days.”

Something in my patience snaps. “I’d really rather die than eat your food and listen to you call me *love*,” I tell him.

Adam drops his fork.

Warner spares him a swift glance and when he looks my way again his eyes have hardened. He holds my gaze for a few infinitely long seconds before he pulls a gun out of his jacket pocket. He fires.

The entire room screams to a stop.

My heart is flapping wings against my throat.

I turn my head very, very slowly to follow the direction of Warner’s gun only to see he’s shot some kind of meat right through the bone. The platter of food is slightly steaming across the room, the meal heaped less than a foot away from the guests. He shot it without even looking. He could’ve killed someone.

It takes all of my energy to remain very, very still.

Warner drops the gun on my plate. The silence gives it space to clatter around the universe and back. “Choose your words very wisely, Juliette. One word from me and your life here won’t be so easy.”

I blink.

Adam pushes a plate of food in front of me; the strength of his gaze is like a white-hot poker pressed against my skin. I look up and he cocks his head the tiniest millimeter. His eyes are saying *Please*.

I pick up my fork.

Warner doesn’t miss a thing. He clears his throat a little too loudly. He laughs with no humor as he cuts into the meat on his plate. “Do I have to get Kent to do all my work for me?”

“Excuse me?”

“It seems he’s the only one you’ll listen to.” His tone is breezy but his jaw is

unmistakably set. He turns to Adam. “I’m surprised you didn’t tell her to change her clothes like I asked you to.”

Adam sits up straighter. “I did, sir.”

“I like my clothes,” I tell him. I’d like to punch you in the eye, is what I don’t tell him.

Warner’s smile slides back into place. “No one asked what *you* like, love. Now eat. I need you to look your best when you stand beside me.”

Chapter Thirteen

Warner insists on accompanying me to my room.

After dinner Adam disappeared with a few of the other soldiers. He disappeared without a word or glance in my direction and I don't have any idea what to anticipate. At least I have nothing to lose but my life.

"I don't want you to hate me," Warner says as we make our way toward the elevator. "I'm only your enemy if you want me to be."

"We will always be enemies." My voice is cracked into chips of ice. The words melt on my tongue. "I will never be what you want me to be."

Warner sighs as he presses the button for the elevator. "I really think you'll change your mind." He glances at me with a small smile. A shame, really, that such striking looks should be wasted on such a miserable human being. "You and I, Juliette—together? We could be unstoppable."

I will not look at him though I feel his gaze touching every inch of my body. "No, thank you."

We're in the elevator. The world is whooshing past us and the walls of glass make us a spectacle to every person on every floor. There are no secrets in this building.

He touches my elbow and I pull away. "You might reconsider," he says softly.

"How did you figure it out?" The elevator dings open but I'm not moving. I finally turn to face him because I can't contain my curiosity. I study his hands, so carefully sheathed in leather, his sleeves thick and crisp and long. Even his collar is high and regal. He's dressed impeccably from head to toe and covered everywhere except his face. Even if I wanted to touch him I'm not sure I'd be able to. He's protecting himself.

From me.

"Perhaps a conversation for tomorrow night?" He cocks a brow and offers me his arm. I pretend not to notice it as we walk off the elevator and down the hall. "Maybe you could wear something nice."

"What's your first name?" I ask him.

We're standing in front of my door.

He stops. Surprised. Lifts his chin almost imperceptibly. Focuses his eyes on my face until I begin to regret my question. “You want to know my name.”

I don’t do it on purpose, but my eyes narrow just a bit. “Warner is your last name, isn’t it?”

He almost smiles. “You want to know my name.”

“I didn’t realize it was a secret.”

He steps forward. His lips twitch. His eyes fall, his lips draw in a tight breath. He drops a gloved finger down the apple of my cheek. “I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours,” he whispers, too close to my neck.

I inch backward. Swallow hard. “You already know my name.”

He’s not looking at my eyes. “You’re right. I should rephrase that. What I meant to say was I’ll tell you mine if you show me yours.”

“What?” I’m breathing too fast too suddenly.

He begins to pull off his gloves and I begin to panic. “Show me what you can do.”

My jaw is too tight and my teeth have begun to ache. “I won’t touch you.”

“That’s all right.” He tugs off the other glove. “I don’t exactly need your help.”

“No—”

“Don’t worry.” He grins. “I’m sure it won’t hurt *you* at all.”

“No,” I gasp. “No, I won’t—I can’t—”

“Fine,” Warner snaps. “That’s fine. You don’t want to hurt me. I’m so utterly flattered.” He almost rolls his eyes. Looks down the hall. Spots a soldier. Beckons him over. “Jenkins?”

Jenkins is swift for his size and he’s at my side in a second.

“Sir.” He bows his head an inch even though he’s clearly Warner’s senior. He can’t be more than 27; stocky, sturdy, packed with bulk. He spares me a sidelong glance. His brown eyes are warmer than I’d expect them to be.

“I’m going to need you to accompany Ms. Ferrars back downstairs. But be warned: she’s incredibly uncooperative and will try to break free from your grip.” He smiles too slowly. “No matter what she says or does, soldier, you cannot let go of her. Are we clear?”

Jenkins’ eyes widen; he blinks, his nostrils flare, his fingers flex at his sides. He takes a short breath. Nods.

Jenkins is not an idiot.

I start running.

I'm bolting down the hallway and running past a series of stunned soldiers too scared to stop me. I don't know what I'm doing, why I think I can run, where I think I could possibly go. I'm straining to reach the elevator if only because I think it will buy me time. I don't know what else to do.

Warner's commands are bouncing off the walls and exploding in my eardrums. He doesn't need to chase me. He's getting others to do the work for him.

Soldiers are lining up before me.

Beside me.

Behind me.

I can't breathe.

I'm spinning in a circle of my own stupidity, panicked, pained, petrified by the thought of what I'm going to do to Jenkins against my will. What he will do to me against his will. What will happen to both of us despite our best intentions.

"Seize her," Warner says softly. Silence has stuffed itself into every corner of this building. His voice is the only sound in the room.

Jenkins steps forward.

My eyes are flooding and I squeeze them shut. I pry them open. I blink back at the crowd and spot a familiar face. Adam is staring at me, horrified.

Shame has covered every inch of my body.

Jenkins offers me his hand.

My bones begin to buckle, snapping in synchronicity with the beats of my heart. I crumble to the floor, folding into myself like a flimsy crepe. My arms are so painfully bare in this ragged T-shirt.

"Don't—" I hold up a tentative hand, pleading with my eyes, staring into the face of this innocent man. "Please don't—" My voice breaks. "You don't want to touch me—"

"I never said I did." Jenkins's voice is deep and steady, full of regret. Jenkins who has no gloves, no protection, no preparation, no possible defense.

"That was a direct order, soldier," Warner barks, trains a gun at his back.

Jenkins grabs my arms.

NO NO NO

I gasp.

My blood is surging through my veins, rushing through my body like a raging river, waves of heat lapping against my bones. I can hear his anguish, I can feel the power pouring out of his body, I can hear his heart beating in my ear and my head is spinning with the rush of adrenaline fortifying my being.

I feel alive.

I wish it hurt me. I wish it maimed me. I wish it repulsed me. I wish I hated the potent force wrapping itself around my skeleton.

But I don't. My skin is pulsing with someone else's life and I don't hate it.

I hate myself for enjoying it.

I enjoy the way it feels to be brimming with more life and hope and human power than I knew I was capable of. His pain gives me a pleasure I never asked for.

And he's not letting go.

But he's not letting go because he can't. Because I have to be the one to break the connection. Because the agony incapacitates him. Because he's caught in my snares.

Because I am a Venus flytrap.

And I am lethal.

I fall on my back and kick at his chest, willing him away from me, willing his weight off of my small frame, his limp body collapsed against my own. I'm suddenly screaming and struggling to see past the sheet of tears obscuring my vision; I'm hiccupping, hysterical, horrified by the frozen look on this man's face, his paralyzed lips wheezing gasps through his lungs.

I break free and stumble backward. The sea of soldiers parts behind me. Every face is etched in astonishment and pure, unadulterated fear. Jenkins is lying on the floor and no one dares approach him.

"Somebody help him!" I scream. "Somebody *help* him! He needs a doctor—he needs to be taken—he needs—he—oh God—what have I done—"

"Juliette—"

"DON'T TOUCH ME—DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH ME—"

Warner's gloves are back in place and he's trying to hold me together, he's trying to smooth back my hair, he's trying to wipe away my tears and I want to murder him.

"Juliette, you need to calm down—"

"HELP HIM!" I cry, falling to my knees, my eyes glued to the figure lying on the floor. The other soldiers are finally creeping closer, cautious as though he might be contagious. "Please—you have to help him! *Please—*"

"Kent, Curtis, Soledad—TAKE CARE OF THIS!" Warner shouts to his men before scooping me up into his arms.

I'm still kicking when the world goes black.

Chapter Fourteen

The ceiling is fading in and out of focus.

My head is heavy, my vision is blurry, my heart is strained. There is a distinct flavor of panic lodged somewhere underneath my tongue and I'm fighting to remember where it came from. I try to sit up and can't understand why I was lying down.

Someone's hands are on my shoulders.

"How are you feeling?" Warner is peering down at me.

Suddenly my memories are burning in my eyes and Jenkins' face is swimming in my consciousness and I'm swinging my fists and screaming for Warner to get away from me and struggling to wriggle out of his grip but he just smiles. Laughs a little. Gently my hands down beside my torso.

"Well, at least you're awake," he sighs. "You had me worried for a moment."

I try to control my trembling limbs. "Get your hands away from me."

He waves sheathed fingers in front of my face. "I'm all covered up. Don't worry."

"I *hate* you."

"So much passion." He laughs again. He looks so calm, so genuinely amused. He stares at me with eyes softer than I ever expected them to be.

I turn away.

He stands up. Takes a short breath. "Here," he says, reaching for a tray on a small table. "I brought you food."

I take advantage of the moment to sit up and look around. I'm lying on a bed draped in damask golds and burgundies the darkest shade of blood. The floor is covered in thick, rich carpet the color of a setting summer sun. It's warm in this room. It's the same size as the one I occupy, its furniture standard enough: bed, armoire, side tables, chandelier glittering from the ceiling. The only difference is there's an extra door in this room and there's a candle burning quietly on a small table in the corner. I haven't seen fire in so many years I've lost count. I have to stifle an impulse to reach out and touch the flame.

I prop myself up against the pillows and try to pretend I'm not comfortable.

“Where am I?”

Warner turns around holding a plate with bread and cheese on it. His other hand is gripping a glass of water. He looks around the room as if seeing it for the first time. “This is my bedroom.”

If my head weren’t splitting into pieces I’d be tempted to run. “Take me to my own room. I don’t want to be here.”

“And yet, here you are.” He sits at the foot of the bed, a few feet away. Pushes the plate in front of me. “Are you thirsty?”

I don’t know if it’s because I can’t think straight or if it’s because I’m genuinely confused, but I’m struggling to reconcile Warner’s polarizing personalities. Here he is, offering me a glass of water after he forced me to torture someone. I lift my hands and study my fingers as if I’ve never seen them before. “I don’t understand.”

He cocks his head, inspecting me as though I might’ve seriously injured myself. “I only asked if you were thirsty. That shouldn’t be difficult to understand.” A pause. “Drink this.”

I take the glass. Stare at it. Stare at him. Stare at the walls.

I must be insane.

Warner sighs. “I’m not sure, but I think you fainted. And I think you should probably eat something, though I’m not entirely sure about that, either.” He pauses. “You’ve probably had too much exertion your first day here. My mistake.”

“Why are you being nice to me?”

The surprise on his face surprises me even more. “Because I care about you,” he says simply.

“You *care* about me?” The numbness in my body is beginning to dissipate. My blood pressure is rising and anger is making its way to the forefront of my consciousness. “I almost killed Jenkins because of you!”

“You didn’t kill—”

“Your soldiers beat me! You keep me here like a prisoner! You threaten me! You threaten to kill me! You give me no freedom and you say you *care* about me?” I nearly throw the glass of water at his face. “You are a *monster*!”

Warner turns away so I’m staring at his profile. He clasps his hands. Changes his mind. Touches his lips. “I am only trying to help you.”

“Liar.”

He seems to consider that. Nods, just once. “Yes. Most of the time, yes.”

“I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be your experiment. Let me go.”

“No.” He stands up. “I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t. I just—” He tugs at his fingers. Clears his throat. His eyes touch the ceiling for a brief moment. “Because I need you.”

“You need me to kill people!”

He doesn’t answer right away. He walks to the candle. Pulls off a glove. Tickles the flame with his bare fingers. “You know, I am very capable of killing people on my own, Juliette. I’m actually very good at it.”

“That’s disgusting.”

He shrugs. “How else do you think someone my age is able to control so many soldiers? Why else would my father allow me to take charge of an entire sector?”

“Your *father*?” I sit up, suddenly curious in spite of myself.

He ignores my question. “The mechanics of fear are simple enough. People are intimidated by me, so they listen when I speak.” He waves a hand. “Empty threats are worth very little these days.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “So you kill people for power.”

“As do you.”

“How *dare* you—”

He laughs, loud. “You’re free to lie to yourself, if it makes you feel better.”

“I am not lying—”

“Why did it take you so long to break your connection with Jenkins?”

My mouth freezes in place.

“Why didn’t you fight back right away? Why did you allow him to touch you for as long as he did?”

My hands have begun to shake and I grip them, hard. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“And yet you claim to know me so well.”

I clench my jaw, not trusting myself to speak.

“At least I’m honest,” he adds.

“You just agreed you’re a liar!”

He raises his eyebrows. “At least I’m honest about being a liar.”

I slam the glass of water on the side table. Drop my head in my hands. Try to stay calm. Take a steadying breath. “Well,” I rasp, “why do you need me, then? If you’re such an excellent murderer?”

A smile flickers and fades across his face. “One day I’ll introduce you to the answer to that question.”

I try to protest but he stops me with one hand. Picks up a piece of bread from the plate. Holds it under my nose. “You hardly ate anything at dinner. That can’t possibly be healthy.”

I don’t move.

He drops the bread on the plate and drops the plate beside the water. Turns to me. Studies my eyes with such intensity I’m momentarily disarmed. There are so many things I want to say and scream but somehow I’ve forgotten all about the words waiting patiently in my mouth. I can’t make myself look away.

“Eat something.” His eyes abandon me. “Then go to sleep. I’ll be back for you in the morning.”

“Why can’t I sleep in my own room?”

He gets to his feet. Dusts off his pants for no real reason. “Because I want you to stay here.”

“But why?”

He barks out a laugh. “So many questions.”

“Well if you’d give me a straight answer—”

“Good night, Juliette.”

“Are you going to let me go?” I ask, this time quietly, this time timidly.

“No.” He takes 6 steps into the corner with the candle. “And I won’t promise to make things easier for you, either.” There is no regret, no remorse, no sympathy in his voice. He could be talking about the weather.

“You could be lying.”

“Yes, I could be.” He nods, as if to himself. Blows out the candle.

And disappears.

I try to fight it

I try to stay awake

I try to find my head but I can’t.

I collapse from sheer exhaustion.

Chapter Fifteen

Why don't you just kill yourself? someone at school asked me once.

I think it was the kind of question intended to be cruel, but it was the first time I'd ever contemplated the possibility. I didn't know what to say. Maybe I was crazy to consider it, but I'd always hoped that if I were a good enough girl, if I did everything right, if I said the right things or said nothing at all—I thought my parents would change their minds. I thought they would finally listen when I tried to talk. I thought they would give me a chance. I thought they might finally love me.

I always had that ~~stupid~~ hope.

“Good morning.”

My eyes snap open with a start. I've never been a heavy sleeper.

Warner is staring at me, sitting at the foot of his own bed in a fresh suit and perfectly polished boots. Everything about him is meticulous. Pristine. His breath is cool and fresh in the crisp morning air. I can feel it on my face.

It takes me a moment to realize I'm tangled in the same sheets Warner himself has slept in. My face is suddenly on fire and I'm fumbling to free myself. I nearly fall off the bed.

I don't acknowledge him.

“Did you sleep well?” he asks.

I look up. His eyes are such a strange shade of green: bright, crystal clear, piercing in the most alarming way. His hair is thick, the richest slice of gold; his frame is lean and unassuming, but his grip is effortlessly strong. I notice for the first time that he wears a jade ring on his left pinkie finger.

He catches me staring and stands up. Slips his gloves on and clasps his hands behind his back.

“It's time for you to go back to your room.”

I blink. Nod. Stand up and nearly fall down. I catch myself on the side of the bed and try to steady my dizzying head. I hear Warner sigh.

“You didn't eat the food I left for you last night.”

I grab the water with trembling hands and force myself to eat some of the

bread. My body has gotten so used to hunger I don't know how to recognize it anymore.

Warner leads me out the door once I find my footing. I'm still clutching a piece of cheese in my hand.

I nearly drop it when I step outside.

There are even more soldiers here than there are on my floor. Each is equipped with at least 4 different kinds of guns, some slung around their necks, some strapped to their belts. All of them betray a look of terror when they see my face. It flashes in and out of their features so quickly I might've missed it, but it's obvious enough: everyone grips their weapons a little tighter as I walk by.

Warner seems pleased.

"Their fear will work in your favor," he whispers in my ear.

My humanity is lying in a million pieces on this carpeted floor. "I never wanted them to be afraid of me."

"You should." He stops. His eyes are calling me an idiot. "If they don't fear you, they will hunt you."

"People hunt things they fear all the time."

"At least now they know what they're up against." He resumes walking down the hall, but my feet are stitched into the ground. Realization is ice-cold water and it's dripping down my back.

"You made me do that—what I did—to Jenkins? *On purpose?*"

Warner is already 3 steps ahead but I can see the smile on his face. "Everything I do is done on purpose."

"You wanted to make a spectacle out of me." My heart is racing in my wrist, pulsing in my fingers.

"I was trying to protect you."

"From your own soldiers?" I'm running to catch up to him now, burning with indignation. "At the expense of a man's *life*—"

"Get inside." Warner has reached the elevator. He's holding the doors open for me.

I follow him in.

He presses the right buttons.

The doors close.

I turn to speak.

He corners me.

I'm backed into the far edge of this glass receptacle and I'm suddenly

nervous. His hands are holding my arms and his lips are dangerously close to my face. His gaze is locked into mine, his eyes flashing; dangerous. He says one word: “Yes.”

It takes me a moment to find my voice. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, from my own soldiers. Yes, at the expense of one man’s life.” He tenses his jaw. Speaks through his teeth. “There is very little you understand about my world, Juliette.”

“I’m trying to understand—”

“No you’re not,” he snaps. His eyelashes are like individual threads of spun gold lit on fire. I almost want to touch them. “You don’t understand that power and control can slip from your grasp at any moment and even when you think you’re most prepared. These two things are not easy to earn. They are even harder to retain.” I try to speak and he cuts me off. “You think I don’t know how many of my own soldiers hate me? You think I don’t know that they’d like to see me fall? You think there aren’t others who would love to have the position I work so hard to have—”

“Don’t *flatter* yourself—”

He closes the last few inches between us and my words fall to the floor. I can’t breathe. The tension in his entire body is so intense it’s nearly palpable and I think my muscles have begun to freeze. “You are naive,” he says to me, his voice harsh, low, a grating whisper against my skin. “You don’t realize that you’re a threat to everyone in this building. They have every reason to harm you. You don’t see that I am trying to help you—”

“By hurting me!” I explode. “By hurting others!”

His laugh is cold, mirthless. He backs away from me, suddenly disgusted. The elevator slides open but he doesn’t step outside. I can see my door from here. “Go back to your room. Wash up. Change. There are dresses in your armoire.”

“I don’t like dresses.”

“I don’t think you like seeing *that*, either,” he says with a tilt of his head. I follow his gaze to see a hulking shadow across from my door. I turn to him for an explanation but he says nothing. He’s suddenly composed, his features wiped clean of emotion. He takes my hand, squeezes my fingers, says, “I’ll be back for you in exactly one hour,” and closes the elevator doors before I have a chance to protest. I begin to wonder if it’s coincidence that the one person most unafraid to touch me is a monster himself.

I step forward and dare to peer closer at the soldier standing in the dark.

Adam.

Oh Adam.

Adam who now knows exactly what I'm capable of.

My heart is a water balloon exploding in my chest. My lungs are swinging from my rib cage. I feel as though every fist in the world has decided to punch me in the stomach. I shouldn't care so much, but I do.

He'll hate me forever now. He won't even look at me.

I wait for him to open my door but he doesn't move.

"Adam?" I venture, tentative. "I need your key card."

I watch him swallow hard and take a tiny breath and immediately I sense something is wrong. I move closer and a quick, stiff shake of his head tells me not to. ~~I do not touch people I do not get close to people I am a monster.~~ He doesn't want me near him. Of course he doesn't. I should never forget my place.

He opens my door with immense difficulty and I realize someone's hurt him where I can't see it. Warner's words come back to me and I recognize his airy good-bye as a warning. A warning that severs every nerve ending in my body.

Adam will be punished for my mistakes. For my disobedience.

I want to bury my tears in a bucket of regret.

I step through the door and glance back at Adam one last time, unable to feel any kind of triumph in his pain. Despite everything he's done I don't know if I'm capable of hating him. Not Adam. Not the boy I used to know.

"The purple dress," he says, his voice broken and a little breathy like it hurts to inhale. I have to wring my hands to keep from running to him. "Wear the purple dress." He coughs. "Juliette."

I will be the perfect mannequin.

Chapter Sixteen

As soon as I'm in the room I open the armoire and yank the purple dress off the hanger before I remember I'm being watched. *The cameras*. I wonder if Adam was punished for telling me about the cameras, too. I wonder if he's taken any other risks with me. I wonder why he would.

I touch the stiff, modern material of the plum dress and my fingers find their way to the hem, just as Adam's did yesterday. I can't help but wonder why he likes this dress so much. Why it has to be this one. Why I even have to wear a dress.

I am not a doll.

My hand comes to rest on the small wooden shelf beneath the hanging clothes and an unfamiliar texture brushes my skin. It's rough and foreign but familiar at the same time. I step closer to the armoire and hide between the doors. My fingers feel their way around the surface and a surge of sunshine rushes through my stomach until I'm certain I'm bursting with hope and feeling and a force of stupid happiness so strong I'm surprised there aren't tears streaming down my face.

My notebook.

He saved my notebook. ~~Adam saved the only thing I own.~~

I grab the purple dress and tuck the paper pad into its folds before stealing away to the bathroom.

~~The bathroom where there are no cameras.~~

~~The bathroom where there are no cameras.~~

~~The bathroom where there are no cameras.~~

He was trying to tell me, I realize. Before, in the bathroom. He was trying to tell me something and I was so scared I scared him away.

I scared him away.

I close the door behind me and my hands are shaking as I unfurl the familiar papers bound together by old glue. I flip through the pages to make sure they're all there and my eyes land on my most recent entry. At the very bottom there is a shift. A new sentence not written in my handwriting.

A new sentence that must've come from him.

It's not what you think.

I stand perfectly still.

Every inch of my skin is taut with tension, fraught with feeling and the pressure is building in my chest, pounding louder and faster and harder, overcompensating for my stillness. I do not tremble when I'm frozen in time. I train my breaths to come slower, I count things that do not exist, I make up numbers I do not have, I pretend time is a broken hourglass bleeding seconds through sand. I dare to believe.

I dare to hope Adam is trying to reach out to me. I'm crazy enough to consider the possibility.

I rip the page out of the small notebook and clutch it close, actively swallowing the hysteria tickling every broken moment in my mind.

I hide the notebook in a pocket of the purple dress. The pocket Adam must've slipped it into. The pocket it must've fallen out of. ~~The pocket of the purple dress. The pocket of the purple dress.~~

Hope is a pocket of possibility.

I'm holding it in my hand.

Warner is not late.

He doesn't knock, either.

I'm slipping on my shoes when he walks in without a single word, without even an effort to make his presence known. His eyes are falling all over my frame. My jaw tightens on its own.

"You hurt him," I find myself saying.

"You shouldn't care," he says with a tilt of his head, gesturing to my dress. "But it's obvious you do."

I zip my lips and pray my hands aren't shaking too much. I don't know where Adam is. I don't know how badly he's hurt. I don't know what Warner will do, how far he'll go in the pursuit of what he wants but the prospect of Adam in pain is like a cold hand clutching my esophagus. I can't catch my breath. I feel like I'm struggling to swallow a toothpick. If Adam is trying to help me it could cost him his life.

I touch the piece of paper tucked into my pocket.

Breathe.

Warner's eyes are on my window.

Breathe.

“It’s time to go,” he says.

Breathe.

“Where are we going?”

He doesn’t answer.

We step out the door. I look around. The hallway is abandoned; empty.
“Where is ~~Adam~~ everyone . . . ?”

“I really like that dress,” Warner says as he slips an arm around my waist. I jerk away but he pulls me along, guiding me toward the elevator. “The fit is spectacular. It helps distract me from all your questions.”

“Your poor mother.”

Warner almost trips over his own feet. His eyes are wide; alarmed. He stops a few feet short of our goal. Spins around. “What do you mean?”

My stomach falls over.

The look on his face: the unguarded strain, the flinching terror, the sudden apprehension in his features.

I was trying to make a joke, is what I don’t say to him. I feel sorry for your poor mother, is what I was going to say to him, that she has to deal with such a miserable, pathetic son. But I don’t say any of it.

He grabs my hands, focuses my eyes. Urgency is pulsing at his temples. “What do you mean?” he insists.

“N-nothing,” I stammer. My voice breaks in half. “I didn’t—it was just a joke—”

Warner drops my hands like they’ve burned him. He looks away. Charges toward the elevator and doesn’t wait for me to catch up.

I wonder what he’s not telling me.

Only once we’ve gone down several floors and are making our way down an unfamiliar hall toward an unfamiliar exit does he finally look at me. He offers me 4 words.

“Welcome to your future.”

Chapter Seventeen

I'm swimming in sunlight.

Warner is holding open a door that leads directly outside and I'm so unprepared for the experience I can hardly see straight. He grips my elbow to steady my path and I glance back at him.

"We're going outside." I say it because I have to say it out loud. Because the outside world is a treat I'm so seldom offered. Because I don't know if Warner is trying to be nice again. I look from him to what looks like a concrete courtyard and back to him again. "What are we doing outside?"

"We have some business to take care of." He tugs me toward the center of this new universe and I'm breaking away from him, reaching out to touch the sky like I'm hoping it will remember me. The clouds are gray like they've always been, but they're sparse and unassuming. The sun is high high high, lounging against a backdrop propping up its rays and redirecting its warmth in our general direction. I stand on tiptoe and try to touch it. The wind folds itself into my arms and smiles against my skin. Cool, silky-smooth air braids a soft breeze through my hair. This square courtyard could be my ballroom.

I want to dance with the elements.

Warner grabs my hand. I turn around.

He's smiling.

"This," he says, gesturing to the cold gray world under our feet, "this makes you happy?"

I look around. I realize the courtyard is not quite a roof, but somewhere between two buildings. I edge toward the ledge and can see dead land and naked trees and scattered compounds stretching on for miles. "Cold air smells so clean," I tell him. "Fresh. Brand-new. It's the most wonderful smell in the world."

His eyes look amused, troubled, interested, and confused all at once. He shakes his head. Pats down his jacket and reaches for an inside pocket. He pulls out a gun with a gold hilt that glints in the sunlight.

I pull in a sharp breath.

He inspects the gun in a way I wouldn't understand, presumably to check

whether or not it's ready to fire. He slips it into his hand, his finger poised directly over the trigger. He turns and finally reads the expression on my face.

He almost laughs. "Don't worry. It's not for you."

"Why do you have a gun?" I swallow, hard, gripping my arms tight across my chest. "What are we doing up here?"

Warner slips the gun back into his pocket and walks to the opposite end of the ledge. He motions for me to follow him. I creep closer. Follow his eyes. Peer over the barrier.

Every soldier in the building is standing not 15 feet below.

I distinguish almost 50 lines, each perfectly straight, perfectly spaced, so many soldiers standing single file I lose count. ~~I wonder if Adam is in the crowd. I wonder if he can see me.~~

~~I wonder what he thinks of me now.~~

The soldiers are standing in a square space almost identical to the one Warner and I occupy, but they're one organized mass of black: black pants, black shirts, shin-high black boots; not a single gun in sight. Each is standing with his left fist pressed to his heart. Frozen in place.

Black and gray
and
black and gray
and
black and gray
and
bleak.

Suddenly I'm acutely aware of my impractical outfit. Suddenly the wind is too callous, too cold, too painful as it slices its way through the crowd. I shiver and it has nothing to do with the temperature. I look for Warner but he has already taken his place at the edge of the courtyard; it's obvious he's done this many times before. He pulls a small square of perforated metal out of his pocket and presses it to his lips; when he speaks, his voice carries over the crowd like it's been amplified.

"Sector 45."

One word. One number.

The entire group shifts: left fists released, dropped to their sides; right fists planted in place on their chests. They are an oiled machine, working in perfect collaboration with one another. If I weren't so apprehensive I think I'd be impressed.

“We have two matters to deal with this morning.” Warner’s voice penetrates the atmosphere: crisp, clear, unbearably confident. “The first is standing by my side.”

Thousands of eyes snap up in my direction. I feel myself flinch.

“Juliette, come here, please.” 2 fingers bend in 2 places to beckon me forward.

I inch into view.

Warner slips his arm around me. I cringe. The crowd starts. My heart careens out of control. I’m too scared to back away from him. His gun is too close to my body.

The soldiers seem stunned that Warner is willing to touch me.

“Jenkins, would you step forward, please?”

My fingers are running a marathon down my thigh. I can’t stand still. I can’t calm the palpitations crashing my nervous system. Jenkins steps out of line; I spot him immediately.

He’s okay.

Dear God.

He’s okay.

“Jenkins had the pleasure of meeting Juliette just last night,” he continues. The tension among the men is very nearly tangible. No one, it seems, knows where this speech is headed. And no one, it seems, hasn’t already heard Jenkins’ story. My story. “I hope you’ll all greet her with the same sort of kindness,” Warner adds, his lips laughing without a sound. “She will be with us for some time, and will be a very valuable asset to our efforts. The Reestablishment welcomes her. I welcome her. You should welcome her.”

The soldiers drop their fists all at once, all at exactly the same time.

They shift as one, 5 steps backward, 5 steps forward, 5 steps standing in place. They raise their left arms high and curl their fingers into a fist.

And fall on one knee.

I run to the edge, desperate to get a closer look at such a strangely choreographed routine. I’ve never seen anything like it.

Warner makes them stay like that, bent like that, fists raised in the air like that. He doesn’t speak for at least 30 seconds. And then he does.

“Good.”

The soldiers rise and rest their right fists on their chests again.

“The second matter at hand is even more pleasant than the first,” Warner continues, though he seems to take no pleasure in saying it. His eyes are

sharpening over the soldiers below, shards of emerald flickering like green flames over their bodies. “Delalieu has a report for us.”

He spends an eternity simply staring at the soldiers, letting his few words marinate in their minds. Letting their own imaginations drive them insane. Letting the guilty among them tremble in anguish.

Warner says nothing for so long.

No one moves for so long.

I begin to fear for my life despite his earlier reassurances. I begin to wonder if perhaps I am the guilty one. If perhaps the gun in his pocket is destined for me. I finally dare to turn in his direction. He glances at me for the first time and I have no idea how to read him.

His face is 10,000 possibilities staring straight through me.

“Delalieu,” he says, still looking at me. “You may step forward.”

A thin, balding sort of man in a slightly more decorated outfit steps out from the very front of the fifth line. He doesn’t look entirely stable. He ducks his head an inch. His voice warbles when he speaks. “Sir.”

Warner finally unshackles my eyes and nods, almost imperceptibly, in the balding man’s direction.

Delalieu recites: “We have a charge against Private 45B-76423. Fletcher, Seamus.”

The soldiers are all frozen in line, frozen in relief, frozen in fear, frozen in anxiety. Nothing moves. Nothing breathes. Even the wind is afraid to make a sound.

“Fletcher.” One word from Warner and several hundred necks snap in the same direction.

Fletcher steps out of line.

He looks like a gingerbread man. Ginger hair. Ginger freckles. Lips almost artificially red. His face is blank of every possible emotion.

I’ve never been more afraid for a stranger in my life.

Delalieu speaks again. “Private Fletcher was found on unregulated grounds, fraternizing with civilians believed to be rebel party members. He had stolen food and supplies from storage units dedicated to Sector 45 citizens. It is not known whether he betrayed sensitive information.”

Warner levels his gaze at the gingerbread man. “Do you deny these accusations, soldier?”

Fletcher’s nostrils flare. His jaw tenses. His voice cracks when he speaks. “No, sir.”

Warner nods. Takes a short breath. Licks his lips.

And shoots him in the forehead.

Chapter Eighteen

No one moves.

Fletcher's face is etched in permanent horror as he crumbles to the ground. I'm so struck by the impossibility of it all that I can't decide whether or not I'm dreaming, I can't determine whether or not I'm dying, I can't figure out whether or not fainting is a good idea.

Fletcher's limbs are bent at odd angles on the cold, concrete floor. Blood is pooling around him and still no one moves. No one says a single word. No one betrays a single look of fear.

I keep touching my lips to see if my screams have escaped.

Warner tucks his gun back into his jacket pocket. "Sector 45, you are dismissed."

Every soldier falls on one knee.

Warner slips the metal amplification device back into his suit and has to yank me free from the spot where I'm glued to the ground. I'm tripping over myself, my limbs weak and aching through the bone. I feel nauseous, delirious, incapable of holding myself upright. I keep trying to speak but the words are sticking to my tongue. I'm suddenly sweating and suddenly freezing and suddenly so sick I see spots clouding my vision.

Warner is trying to get me through the door. "You really must eat more," he says to me.

I am gaping with my eyes, gaping with my mouth, gaping wide open because I feel holes everywhere, punched into the terrain of my body.

My heart must be bleeding out of my chest.

I look down and can't understand why there's no blood on my dress, why this pain in my heart feels so real.

"You killed him," I manage to whisper. "You just killed him—"

"You're very astute."

"Why did you *kill him* why would you *kill him* how could you *do* something like that—"

"Keep your eyes open, Juliette. Now's not the time to fall asleep."

I grab his shirt. I stop him before he gets inside. A gust of wind slaps me

across the face and I'm suddenly in control of my senses. I push him hard, slamming his back up against the door. "You disgust me." I stare hard into his crystal-cold eyes. "You *disgust* me—"

He twists me around, pinning me against the door where I just held him. He cups my face in his gloved hands, holding my eyes in place. The same hands he just used to kill a man.

I'm trapped.

Transfixed.

Slightly terrified.

His thumb brushes my cheek.

"Life is a bleak place," he whispers. "Sometimes you have to learn how to shoot first."

Warner follows me into my room.

"You should probably sleep," he says to me. It's the first time he's spoken since we left the rooftop. "I'll have food sent up to your room, but other than that I'll make sure you're not disturbed."

~~"Where is Adam? Is he safe? Is he healthy? Are you going to hurt him?"~~

Warner flinches before finding his composure. "Why do you care?"

~~I've cared about Adam Kent since I was in third grade.~~ "Isn't he supposed to be watching me? Because he's not here. Does that mean you're going to kill him, too?" I'm feeling stupid. I'm feeling brave because I'm feeling stupid. My words wear no parachutes as they fall out of my mouth.

"I only kill people if I need to."

"Generous."

"More than most."

I laugh a sad laugh, sharing it with only myself.

"You can have the rest of the day to yourself. Our real work will begin tomorrow. Adam will bring you to me." He holds my eyes. Suppresses a smile. "In the meantime, try not to kill anyone."

"You and I," I tell him, anger coursing through my veins, "you and I are not the same—"

"You don't really believe that."

"You think you can compare my—my *disease*—with your insanity—"

"*Disease?*" He rushes forward, abruptly impassioned, and I struggle to hold my ground. "You think you have a *disease?*" he shouts. "You have a gift! You have an extraordinary ability that you don't care to understand! Your *potential* —"

“I have no potential!”

“You’re wrong.” He’s glaring at me. There’s no other way to describe it. I could almost say he hates me in this moment. Hates me for hating myself.

“Well you’re the murderer,” I tell him. “So you must be right.”

His smile is laced with dynamite. “Go to sleep.”

“Go to hell.”

He works his jaw. Walks to the door. “I’m working on it.”

Chapter Nineteen

The darkness is choking me.

My dreams are bloody and bleeding and blood is bleeding all over my mind and I can't sleep anymore. The only dreams that ever used to give me peace are gone and I don't know how to get them back. I don't know how to find the white bird. I don't know if it will ever fly by. All I know is that now when I close my eyes I see nothing but devastation. Fletcher is being shot over and over and over again and Jenkins is dying in my arms and Warner is shooting Adam in the head and the wind is singing outside my window but it's high-pitched and off-key and I don't have the heart to tell it to stop.

I'm freezing through my clothes.

The bed under my back is filled with broken clouds and freshly fallen snow; it's too soft, too comfortable. It reminds me too much of sleeping in Warner's room and I can't stand it. I'm afraid to slip under these covers.

I can't help but wonder if Adam is okay, if he'll ever come back, if Warner is going to keep hurting him whenever I disobey. I really shouldn't care so much.

Adam's message in my notebook might just be a part of Warner's plan to drive me insane.

I crawl onto the hard floor and check my fist for the crumpled piece of paper I've been clutching for 2 days. It's the only hope I have left and I don't even know if it's real.

I'm running out of options.

"What are you doing here?"

I bite down on a scream and stumble up, over, and sideways, nearly slamming into Adam where he's lying on the floor next to me. I didn't even see him.

"Juliette?" He doesn't move an inch. His gaze is fixed on me: calm, unflappable; 2 buckets of river water at midnight. I'd like to cry into his eyes.

I don't know why I tell him the truth. "I couldn't sleep up there."

He doesn't ask me why. He pulls himself up and coughs back a grunt and I remember how he's been hurt. I wonder what kind of pain he's in. I don't ask questions as he grabs a pillow and the blanket off my bed. He puts the pillow on

the floor. "Lie down," is all he says to me. Quietly, is how he says it to me.

~~All day every day forever is when I want him to say it to me.~~

They're just 2 words and I don't know why I'm blushing. I lie down despite the sirens spinning in my blood and rest my head on the pillow. He drapes the blanket over my body. I let him do it. I watch as his arms curve and flex in the shadow of night, the glint of the moon peeking in through the window, illuminating his figure in its glow. He lies down on the floor leaving only a few feet of space between us. He requires no blanket. He uses no pillow. He still sleeps without a shirt on and I've discovered I don't know how to breathe. I've realized I'll probably never exhale in his presence.

"You don't need to scream anymore," he whispers.

Every breath in my body escapes me.

I curl my fingers around the possibility of Adam in my hand and sleep more soundly than I have in my life.

My eyes are 2 windows cracked open by the chaos in this world.

A cool breeze startles my skin and I sit up, rub the sleep from my eyes, and realize Adam is no longer beside me. I blink and crawl back up to the bed, where I replace the pillow and the blanket.

I glance at the door and wonder what's waiting for me on the other side.

I glance at the window and wonder if I'll ever see a bird fly by.

I glance at the clock on the wall and wonder what it means to be living according to numbers again. I wonder what 6:30 in the morning means in this building.

I decide to wash my face. The idea exhilarates me and I'm a little ashamed.

I open the bathroom door and catch Adam's reflection in the mirror. His fast hands pull his shirt down before I have a chance to latch on to details but I saw enough to see what I couldn't see in the darkness.

He's covered in bruises.

My legs feel broken. I don't know how to help him. I wish I could help him.

"I'm sorry," he says quickly. "I didn't know you were awake." He tugs on the bottom of his shirt like it's not long enough to pretend I'm blind.

I nod at nothing at all. I look at the tile under my feet. I don't know what to say.

"Juliette." His voice hugs the letters in my name so softly I die 5 times in that second. His face is a forest of emotion. He shakes his head. "I'm sorry," he says, so quietly I'm certain I imagined it. "It's not . . ." He clenches his jaw and runs a nervous hand through his hair. "All of this—it's not—"

I open my palm to him. The paper is a crumpled wad of possibility. “I know.”

Relief washes over every feature on his face and suddenly his eyes are the only reassurance I’ll ever need. Adam did not betray me. I don’t know why or how or what or anything at all except that he is still my friend.

He is still standing right in front of me and he doesn’t want me to die.

I step forward and close the door.

I open my mouth to speak.

“No!”

My jaw falls off.

“Wait,” he says with one hand. His lips move but make no sound. I realize in the absence of cameras there might still be microphones in the bathroom. Adam looks around and back and forth and everywhere.

He stops looking.

The shower is 4 walls of marbled glass and he’s sliding the glass open before I have any idea what’s happening. He flips the spray on at full power and the sound of water is rushing through, rumbling through the room, muffling everything as it thunders into the emptiness around us. The mirror is already fogging up on account of the steam and just as I think I’m beginning to understand his plan he pulls me into his arms and lifts me into the shower.

My screams are vapor, wisps of gasps I can’t grasp.

Hot water is puddling in my clothes. It’s pelting my hair and pouring down my neck but all I feel are his hands around my waist. I want to cry out for all the wrong reasons.

His eyes pin me in place. His urgency ignites my bones. Rivulets of water snake their way down the polished planes of his face and his fingers press me up against the wall.

His lips his lips his lips his lips his lips

My eyes are fighting not to flutter

My legs have won the right to tremble

My skin is scorched everywhere he’s not touching me.

His lips are so close to my ear I’m water and nothing and everything and melting into a wanting so desperate it burns as I swallow it down.

“I can touch you,” he says, and I wonder why there are hummingbirds in my heart. “I didn’t understand until the other night,” he murmurs, and I’m too drunk to digest the weight of anything but his body hovering so close to mine.

“Juliette—” His body presses closer and I realize I’m paying attention to

nothing but the dandelions blowing wishes in my lungs. My eyes snap open and he licks his bottom lip for the smallest second and something in my brain bursts to life.

I gasp. I gasp. I gasp. “What are you *doing*—”

“Juliette, *please*—” His voice is anxious and he glances behind him like he’s not sure we’re alone. “The other night—” He presses his lips together. He closes his eyes for half of a second and I marvel at the drop drop drops of hot water caught in his eyelashes like pearls forged from pain. His fingers inch up the sides of my body like he’s struggling to keep them in one place, like he’s struggling not to touch me everywhere everywhere everywhere and his eyes are drinking in the 63 inches of my frame and I’m so I’m so I’m so caught.

“I finally get it now,” he says into my ear. “I know—I know why Warner wants you.” His fingertips are 10 points of electricity killing me with something I’ve never known before. ~~Something I’ve always wanted to feel.~~

“Then why are you here?” I whisper, broken, dying in his arms. “Why . . .” 1, 2 attempts at inhalation. “Why are you touching me?”

“Because I *can*.” He almost cracks a smile and I almost sprout a pair of wings. “I already have.”

“What?” I blink, suddenly sobered. “What do you mean?”

“That first night in the cell,” he sighs. He looks down. “You were screaming in your sleep.”

I wait.

I wait.

I wait forever.

“I touched your face.” He speaks into the shape of my ear. “Your hand. I brushed the length of your arm. . . .” He pulls back and his eyes rest at my shoulder, trail down to my elbow, land on my wrist. I’m suspended in disbelief. “I didn’t know how to wake you up. You wouldn’t wake up. So I sat back and watched you. I waited for you to stop screaming.”

“That’s. Not. Possible.” 3 words are all I manage.

But his hands become arms around my waist his lips become a cheek pressed against my cheek and his body is flush against mine, his skin touching me touching me touching me and he’s not screaming he’s not dying he’s not running away from me and I’m crying

I’m choking

I’m shaking shuddering splintering into teardrops

and he's holding me the way no one has ever held me before.

Like he wants me.

"I'm going to get you out of here," he says, and his mouth is moving against my hair and his hands are traveling to my arms and I'm leaning back and he's looking into my eyes and I must be dreaming.

"Why—why do you—I don't—" I'm shaking my head and shaking because this can't be happening and shaking off the tears glued to my face. This can't be real.

His eyes gentle, his smile unhinges my joints and I wish I knew the taste of his lips. I wish I had the courage to touch him. "I have to go," he says. "You have to be dressed and downstairs by eight o'clock."

I'm drowning in his eyes and I don't know what to say.

He peels off his shirt and I don't know where to look.

I catch myself on the glass panel and press my eyes shut and blink when something flutters too close. His fingers are a moment from my face and I'm dripping burning melting in anticipation.

"You don't have to look away," he says. He says it with a small smile the size of Jupiter.

I peek up at his features, at the crooked grin I want to savor, at the color in his eyes I'd use to paint a million pictures. I follow the line of his jaw down his neck to the peak of his collarbone; I memorize the sculpted hills and valleys of his arms, the perfection of his torso. The bird on his chest.

The bird on his chest.

A tattoo.

A white bird with streaks of gold like a crown atop its head. It's flying.

"Adam," I try to tell him. "Adam," I try to choke out. "Adam," I try to say so many times and fail.

I try to find his eyes only to realize he's been watching me study him. The pieces of his face are pressed into lines of emotion so deep I wonder what I must look like to him. He touches 2 fingers to my chin, tilts my face up just enough and I'm a live wire in water. "I'll find a way to talk to you," he says, and his hands are reeling me in and my face is pressed against his chest and the world is suddenly brighter, bigger, beautiful. The world suddenly means something to me, the possibility of humanity means something to me, the entire universe stops in place and spins in the other direction and I'm the bird.

I'm the bird and I'm flying away.

Chapter Twenty

It's 8:00 in the morning and I'm wearing a dress the color of dead forests and old tin cans.

The fit is tighter than anything I've worn in my life, the cut modern and angular, almost haphazard; the material is stiff and thick but somehow breathable. I stare at my legs and wonder that I own a pair.

I feel more exposed than I ever have in my life.

For 17 years I've trained myself to cover every inch of exposed skin and Warner is forcing me to peel the layers away. I can only assume he's doing it on purpose. My body is a carnivorous flower, a poisonous houseplant, a loaded gun with a million triggers and he's more than ready to fire.

Touch me and suffer the consequences. There have never been exceptions to this rule.

Never but Adam.

He left me standing sopping wet in the shower, soaking up a torrential downpour of hot tears. I watched through the blurred glass as he dried himself off and slipped into his standard uniform.

I watched as he slipped away, wondering every moment why why why

Why can he touch me?

Why would he help me?

~~Does he remember me?~~

My skin is still steaming.

My bones are bandaged in the tight folds of this strange dress, the zipper the only thing holding me together. That, and the prospect of something I've always never dared to dream of.

My lips will stay stitched shut with the secrets of this morning forever but my heart is so full of confidence and wonder and peace and possibility that it's about to burst and I wonder if it will rip the dress.

Hope is hugging me, holding me in its arms, wiping away my tears and telling me that today and tomorrow and two days from now I will be just fine and I'm so delirious I actually dare to believe it.

I am sitting in a blue room.

The walls are wallpapered in cloth the color of a perfect summer sky, the floor tucked into a carpet 2 inches thick, the entire room empty but for 2 velvet chairs punched out of a constellation. Every varying hue is like a bruise, like a beautiful mistake, like a reminder of what they did to Adam ~~because of me~~.

I am sitting all alone in a velvet chair in a blue room wearing a dress made of olives. The weight of the notebook in my pocket feels like I'm balancing a bowling ball on my knee.

"You look lovely."

Warner whisks into the room like he treads air for a living. He's accompanied by no one.

My eyes involuntarily peek down at my tennis shoes and I wonder if I've broken any rules by avoiding the stilts in my closet I'm sure are not for feet. I look up and he's standing right in front of me.

"Green is a great color on you," he says with a stupid smile. "It really brings out the color of your eyes."

"What color are my eyes?" I ask the wall.

He laughs. "You're not serious."

"How old are you?"

He stops laughing. "You care to know?"

"I'm curious."

He takes the seat beside me. "I won't answer your questions if you won't look at me when I speak to you."

"You want me to torture people against my will. You want me to be a weapon in your war. You want me to become a monster for you." I pause. "Looking at you makes me sick."

"You're far more stubborn than I thought you'd be."

"I'm wearing your dress. I ate your food. I'm here." I lift my eyes to look at him and he's already staring straight at me. I'm momentarily caught off guard by the power in his gaze.

"You did none of that for me," he says quietly.

I nearly laugh out loud. "Why would I?"

His eyes are fighting his lips for the right to speak. I look away.

"What are we doing in this room?"

"Ah." He takes a deep breath. "Breakfast. Then I give you your schedule."

He presses a button on the arm of his chair and almost instantly, carts and trays are wheeled into the room by men and women who are clearly not soldiers. Their faces are hard and cracked and too thin to be healthy.

It breaks my heart right in half.

"I usually eat alone," Warner continues, his voice like an icicle piercing the flesh of my memories. "But I figured you and I should be more thoroughly acquainted. Especially since we'll be spending so much time together."

The ~~servants~~ ~~maids~~ people-who-are-not-soldiers leave and Warner offers me something on a dish.

"I'm not hungry."

"This is not an option."

I look up and realize he's very, very serious.

"You are not allowed to starve yourself to death. You don't eat enough and I need you to be healthy. You are not allowed to commit suicide. You are not allowed to harm yourself. You are too valuable to me."

"I am not your *toy*," I nearly spit.

He drops his plate onto the rolling cart and I'm surprised it doesn't shatter into pieces. He clears his throat and I might actually be scared. "This process would be so much easier if you would just cooperate," he says, enunciating every word.

Five Five Five Five Five heartbeats.

"The world is disgusted by you," he says, his lips twitching with humor. "Everyone you've ever known has hated you. Run from you. Abandoned you. Your own parents gave up on you and *volunteered* your existence to be given up to the authorities. They were so desperate to get rid of you, to make you someone else's problem, to convince themselves the abomination they raised was not, in fact, their child."

My face has been slapped by a hundred hands.

"And yet—" He laughs openly now. "You insist on making *me* the bad guy." He meets my eyes. "I am trying to *help* you. I'm giving you an opportunity no one would ever offer you. I'm willing to treat you as an equal. I'm willing to give you everything you could ever want, and above all else, I can put power in your hands. I can make them suffer for what they did to you." He leans in just enough. "I can change your world."

He's wrong he's so wrong he's more wrong than an upside-down rainbow.

But everything he said is right.

"Don't dare to hate me so quickly," he continues. "You might find yourself enjoying this situation a lot more than you anticipated. Lucky for you, I'm willing to be patient." He grins. Leans back. "Though it certainly doesn't hurt that you're so alarmingly beautiful."

I'm dripping red paint on the carpet.

He's a liar and a horrible, horrible, horrible human being and I don't know if I care because he's right, or because it's so wrong, or because I'm so desperate for some semblance of recognition in this world. No one has ever said anything like that to me before.

It makes me want to look in the mirror.

"You and I are not as different as you might hope." His grin is so cocky I want to twist it with my fist.

"You and I are not as similar as you might hope."

He smiles so wide I'm not sure how to react. "I'm nineteen, by the way."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm nineteen years old," he clarifies. "I'm a fairly impressive specimen for my age, I know."

I pick up my spoon and poke at the edible matter on my plate. I don't know what food really is anymore. "I have no respect for you."

"You will change your mind," he says easily. "Now hurry up and eat. We have a lot of work to do."

Chapter Twenty-One

Killing time isn't as difficult as it sounds.

I can shoot a hundred numbers through the chest and watch them bleed decimal points in the palm of my hand. I can rip the numbers off a clock and watch the hour hand tick tick tick its final tock just before I fall asleep. I can suffocate seconds just by holding my breath. I've been murdering minutes for hours and no one seems to mind.

It's been one week since I've spoken a word to Adam.

I turned to him once. Opened my mouth just once but never had a chance to say anything before Warner intercepted me. "You are not allowed to speak to the soldiers," he said. "If you have questions, you can find *me*. I am the only person you need to concern yourself with while you're here."

Possessive is not a strong enough word for Warner.

He escorts me everywhere. Talks to me too much. My schedule consists of meetings with Warner and eating with Warner and listening to Warner. If he is busy, I am sent to my room. If he is free, he finds me. He tells me about the books they've destroyed. The artifacts they're preparing to burn. The ideas he has for a new world and how I'll be a great help to him just as soon as I'm ready. Just as soon as I realize how much I want *this*, how much I want *him*, how much I want this new, glorious, powerful life. He is waiting for me to harness my *potential*. He tells me how grateful I should be for his patience. His kindness. His willingness to understand that this transition must be difficult.

I cannot look at Adam. I cannot speak to him. He sleeps in my room but I never see him. He breathes so close to my body but does not part his lips in my direction. He does not follow me into the bathroom. He does not leave secret messages in my notebook.

I'm beginning to wonder if I imagined everything he said to me.

I need to know if something has changed. I need to know if I'm crazy for holding on to this hope blossoming in my heart and I need to know what Adam's message meant but every day that he treats me like a stranger is another day I begin to doubt myself.

I need to talk to him but I can't.

Because now Warner is watching me.
The cameras are watching everything.

“I want you to take the cameras out of my room.”

Warner stops chewing the food/garbage/breakfast/nonsense in his mouth. He swallows carefully before leaning back and looking me in the eye. “Absolutely not.”

“If you treat me like a prisoner,” I tell him, “I’m going to act like one. I don’t like to be watched.”

“You can’t be trusted on your own.” He picks up his spoon again.

“Every breath I take is monitored. There are guards stationed in five-foot intervals in all the hallways. I don’t even have access to my own room,” I protest. “Cameras aren’t going to make a difference.”

A strange kind of amusement dances on his lips. “You’re not exactly stable, you know. You’re liable to kill someone.”

“No.” I grip my fingers. “No—I wouldn’t—I didn’t kill Jenkins—”

“I’m not talking about Jenkins.” His smile is a vat of acid seeping into my skin.

He won’t stop looking at me. Smiling at me. Torturing me with his eyes.

This is me, screaming silently into my fist.

“That was an accident.” The words tumble out of my mouth so quietly, so quickly I don’t even know if I’ve actually spoken or if I’m actually still sitting here or if I’m actually 14 years old all over again all over again all over again and I’m screaming and dying and diving into a pool of memories I never ever ever ever ever

I can’t seem to forget.

I saw her at the grocery store. Her legs were standing crossed at the ankles, her child was on a leash she thought he thought was a backpack. She thought he was too dumb/too young/too immature to understand that the rope tying him to her wrist was a device designed to trap him in her uninterested circle of self-sympathy. She’s too young to have a kid, to have these responsibilities, to be buried by a child who has needs that don’t accommodate her own. Her life is so incredibly unbearable so immensely multifaceted too glamorous for the leashed legacy of her loins to understand.

Children are not stupid, was what I wanted to tell her.

I wanted to tell her that his seventh scream didn’t mean he was trying to be obnoxious, that her fourteenth admonishment in the form of brat/you’re such a

brat/you're embarrassing me you little brat/don't make me tell Daddy you were being a brat was uncalled for. I didn't mean to watch but I couldn't help myself. His 3-year-old face puckered in pain, his little hands tried to undo the chains she'd strapped across his chest and she tugged so hard he fell down and cried and she told him he deserved it.

I wanted to ask her why she would do that.

I wanted to ask her so many questions but I didn't because we don't talk to people anymore because saying something would be stranger than saying nothing to a stranger. He fell to the floor and writhed around until I'd dropped everything in my hands and every feature on my face.

I'm so sorry, is what I never said to her son.

I thought my hands were helping

I thought my heart was helping

I thought so many things

I never

never

never

never

never thought

"You killed a little boy."

I'm nailed into my velvet chair by a million memories and I'm haunted by a horror my bare hands created and I'm reminded in every moment that I am unwanted for good reason. My hands can kill people. My hands can destroy everything.

I should not be allowed to live.

"I want," I gasp, struggling to swallow the fist lodged in my throat, "I want you to get rid of the cameras. Get rid of them or I will die fighting you for the right."

"Finally!" Warner stands up and clasps his hands together as if to congratulate himself. "I was wondering when you'd wake up. I've been waiting for the fire I know must be eating away at you every single day. You're buried in hatred, aren't you? Anger? Frustration? Itching to do *something*? To be *someone*?"

"No."

"Of course you are. You're just like me."

"I hate you more than you will ever understand."

“We’re going to make an excellent team.”

“We are *nothing*. You are *nothing* to me—”

“I know what you want.” He leans in, drops his voice. “I know what your little heart has always longed for. I can give you the acceptance you seek. I can be your *friend*.”

I freeze. Falter. Fail to speak.

“I know *everything* about you, love.” He grins. “I’ve wanted you for a very long time. I’ve waited forever for you to be ready. I’m not going to let you go so easily.”

“I don’t want to be a monster,” I say, perhaps more for my sake than his.

“Don’t fight what you’re born to be.” He grasps my shoulders. “Stop letting everyone else tell you what’s wrong and right. Stake a claim! You cower when you could conquer. You have so much more power than you’re aware of and quite frankly I’m”—he shakes his head—“fascinated.”

“I am not your *freak*,” I snap. “I will not *perform* for you.”

He tightens his hold around my arms and I can’t squirm away from him. He leans in dangerously close to my face and I don’t know why but I can’t breathe. “I’m not afraid of you, my dear,” he says softly. “I’m absolutely enchanted.”

“Either you get rid of the cameras or I will find and break every single one of them.” I’m a liar. I’m lying through my teeth but I’m angry and desperate and horrified. Warner wants to morph me into an animal who preys on the weak. On the innocent.

If he wants me to fight for him, he’s going to have to fight me first.

A slow smile spreads across his face. He touches gloved fingers to my cheek and tilts my head up, catching my chin in his grip when I flinch away. “You’re absolutely delicious when you’re angry.”

“Too bad my taste is poisonous for your palate.” I’m vibrating in disgust from head to toe.

“That detail makes this game so much more appealing.”

“You’re sick, you’re so *sick*—”

He laughs and releases my chin only to take inventory of my body parts. His eyes draw a lazy trail down the length of my frame and I feel the sudden urge to rupture his spleen. “If I get rid of your cameras, what will you do for me?” His eyes are wicked.

“Nothing.”

He shakes his head. “That won’t do. I might agree to your proposition if you agree to a condition.”

I clench my jaw. “What do you want?”

The smile is bigger than before. “That is a dangerous question.”

“What is your *condition*?” I clarify, impatient.

“Touch me.”

“What?” My gasp is so loud it catches in my throat only to race around the room.

“I want to know exactly what you’re capable of.” His voice is steady, his eyebrows taut, tense.

“I won’t do it again!” I explode. “You saw what you made me do to Jenkins —”

“Screw Jenkins,” he spits. “I want you to touch *me*—I want to feel it *myself* —”

“No—” I’m shaking my head so hard it makes me dizzy. “No. Never. You’re crazy—I won’t—”

“You will, actually.”

“I will NOT—”

“You will have to . . . *work* . . . at one point or another,” he says, making an effort to moderate his voice. “Even if you were to forgo my condition, you are here for a reason, Juliette. I convinced my father that you would be an asset to The Reestablishment. That you’d be able to restrain any rebels we—”

“You mean *torture*—”

“Yes.” He smiles. “Forgive me, I mean torture. You will be able to help us torture anyone we capture.” A pause. “Inflicting pain, you see, is an incredibly efficient method of getting information out of anyone. And with you?” He glances at my hands. “Well, it’s cheap. Fast. Effective.” He smiles wider. “And as long as we keep you alive, you’ll be good for at least a few decades. It’s very fortunate that you’re not battery-operated.”

“You—you—” I sputter.

“You should be thanking me. I saved you from that sick hole of an asylum—I brought you into a position of power. I’ve given you everything you could possibly need to be comfortable.” He levels his gaze at me. “Now I need you to focus. I need you to relinquish your hopes of living like everyone else. You are *not* normal. You never have been, and you never will be. Embrace who you *are*.”

“I”—I swallow—“I am not—I’m not—I’m—”

“A murderer?”

“NO—”

“An instrument of torture?”

“STOP—”

“You’re lying to yourself.”

I’m ready to destroy him.

He cocks his head and presses back a smile. “You’ve been on the edge of insanity your entire life, haven’t you? So many people called you crazy you actually started to believe it. You wondered if they were right. You wondered if you could fix it. You thought if you could just try a little harder, be a little better, smarter, nicer—you thought the world would change its mind about you. You blamed yourself for everything.”

I gasp.

My bottom lip trembles without my permission. I can hardly control the tension in my jaw.

~~I don’t want to tell him he’s right.~~

“You’ve suppressed all your rage and resentment because you wanted to be loved,” he says, no longer smiling. “Maybe I understand you, Juliette. Maybe you should trust me. Maybe you should accept the fact that you’ve tried to be someone you’re not for so long and that no matter what you did, those bastards were never happy. They were never satisfied. They never gave a damn, did they?” He looks at me and for a moment he seems almost human. For a moment I want to believe him. For a moment I want to sit on the floor and cry out the ocean lodged in my throat.

“It’s time you stopped pretending,” he says, so softly. “Juliette—” He takes my face in his gloved hands, so unexpectedly gentle. “You don’t have to be nice anymore. You can destroy all of them. You can take them down and own this whole world and—”

A steam engine hits me in the face.

“I don’t want to destroy anyone,” I tell him. “I don’t want to *hurt* people—”

“But they *deserve* it!” He pushes away from me, frustrated. “How could you not want to retaliate? How could you not want to *fight back*—”

I stand up slowly, shaking with anger, hoping my legs won’t collapse beneath me. “You think that because I am unwanted, because I am neglected and—and *discarded*—” My voice inches higher with every word, the unrestrained emotions suddenly screaming through my lungs. “You think I don’t have a heart? You think I don’t *feel*? You think that because I *can* inflict pain, that I should? You’re just like everyone else. You think I’m a monster just like everyone else. You don’t understand me at all—”

“Juliette—”

“No.”

I don’t want this. I don’t want his life.

I don’t want to be anything for anyone but myself. I want to make my own choices and I’ve never wanted to be a monster. My words are slow and steady when I speak. “I value human life a lot more than you do, Warner.”

He opens his mouth to speak before he stops. Laughs out loud and shakes his head.

Smiles at me.

“What?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“You just said my name.” He grins even wider. “You’ve never addressed me directly before. That must mean I’m making progress with you.”

“I just told you I don’t—”

He cuts me off. “I’m not worried about your moral dilemmas. You’re just stalling for time because you’re in denial. Don’t worry,” he says. “You’ll get over it. I can wait a little longer.”

“I’m not in *denial*—”

“Of course you are. You don’t know it yet, Juliette, but you are a very bad girl,” he says, clutching his heart. “Just my type.”

This conversation is impossible.

“There is a soldier *living* in my room.” I’m breathing hard. “If you want me to be here, you need to get rid of the cameras.”

Warner’s eyes darken for just an instant. “Where *is* your soldier, anyway?”

“I wouldn’t know.” I hope to God I’m not blushing. “You assigned him to me.”

“Yes.” He looks thoughtful. “I like watching you squirm. He makes you uncomfortable, doesn’t he?”

I think about Adam’s hands on my body and his lips so close to mine and the scent of his skin drenched in a steaming downpour soaking the two of us together and suddenly my heart is two fists pounding on my ribs demanding escape. “Yes.” *God*. “Yes. He makes me very . . . uncomfortable.”

“Do you know why I chose him?” Warner asks, and I’m run over by a tractor trailer.

Adam was *chosen*.

Of course he was. He wasn’t just any soldier sent to my cell. Warner does nothing without reason. He must know Adam and I have a history. He is more cruel and calculative than I gave him credit for.

“No.” Inhale. “I don’t know why.” Exhale. I can’t forget to breathe.

“He volunteered,” Warner says simply, and I’m momentarily dumbstruck. “He said he’d gone to school with you so many years ago. He said you probably wouldn’t remember him, that he looks a lot different now than he did back then. He put together a very convincing case.” A beat of breath. “He said he was thrilled to hear you’d been locked up.” Warner finally looks at me.

My bones are like cubes of ice clinking together, chilling me to my core.

“I’m curious,” he continues, tilting his head as he speaks. “Do you remember him?”

“No,” I lie, and I’m not sure I’m alive. I’m trying to untangle the truth from the false from assumptions from the postulations but run-on sentences are twisting around my throat.

Adam knew me when he walked into that cell.

He knew exactly who I was.

He already knew my name.

Oh

Oh

Oh

This was all a trap.

“Does this information make you . . . angry?” he asks, and I want to sew his smiling lips into a permanent scowl.

I say nothing and somehow it’s worse.

Warner is beaming. “I never told him, of course, why it was that you’d been locked up—I thought the experiment in the asylum should remain untainted by extra information—but he said you were always a threat to the students. That everyone was always warned to stay away from you, though the authorities never explained why. He said he wanted to get a closer look at the freak you’ve become.”

My heart cracks. My eyes flash. I’m so hurt so angry so horrified so humiliated and burning with indignation so raw that it’s like a fire raging within me, a wildfire of decimated hopes. I want to crush Warner’s spine in my hand. I want him to know what it’s like to wound, to inflict such unbearable agony on others. I want him to know my pain and Jenkins’ pain and Fletcher’s pain and I want him to *hurt*. Because maybe Warner is right.

Maybe some people do deserve it.

“Take off your shirt.”

For all his posturing, Warner looks genuinely surprised, but he wastes no

time unbuttoning his jacket, slipping off his gloves, and peeling away the thin cotton shirt clinging closest to his skin.

His eyes are bright, sickeningly eager; he doesn't mask his curiosity.

Warner drops his clothes to the floor and looks at me almost intimately. I have to swallow back the revulsion bubbling in my mouth. His perfect face. His perfect body. His eyes as hard and beautiful as frozen gemstones. He repulses me. I want his exterior to match his broken black interior. I want to cripple his cockiness with the palm of my hand.

He walks up to me until there's less than a foot of space between us. His height and build make me feel like a fallen twig. "Are you ready?" he asks, arrogant and foolish.

I contemplate breaking his neck.

"If I do this you'll get rid of all the cameras in my room. All the bugs. Everything."

He steps closer. Dips his head. He's staring at my lips, studying me in an entirely new way. "My promises aren't worth much, love," he whispers. "Or have you forgotten?" 3 inches forward. His hand on my waist. His breath sweet and warm on my neck. "I'm an exceptional liar."

Realization slams into me like 200 pounds of common sense. I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't be making deals with him. I shouldn't be contemplating torture dear God I have lost my mind. My fists are balled at my sides and I'm shaking everywhere. I can hardly find the strength to speak. "You can go to hell."

I'm limp.

I trip backward against the wall and slump into a heap of uselessness; desperation. I think of Adam and my heart deflates.

I can't be here anymore.

I fly to the double doors facing the room and yank them open before Warner can stop me. But Adam stops me instead. He's standing just outside. Waiting. Guarding me wherever I go.

I wonder if he heard everything and my eyes fall to the floor, the color flushed from my face, my heart in pieces in my hand. Of course he heard everything. Of course he now knows I'm a murderer. A monster. A worthless soul stuffed into a poisonous body.

Warner did this on purpose.

And I'm standing between them. Warner with no shirt on. Adam looking at his gun.

“Soldier.” Warner speaks. “Take her back up to her room and disable all the cameras. She can have lunch alone if she wants, but I’ll expect her for dinner.”

Adam blinks for a moment too long. “Yes, sir.”

“Juliette?”

I freeze. My back is to Warner and I don’t turn around.

“I do expect you to hold up your end of the bargain.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

It takes 5 years to walk to the elevator. 15 more to ride it up. I'm a million years old by the time I walk into my room. Adam is still, silent, perfectly put together and mechanical in his movements. There's nothing in his eyes, in his limbs, in the motions of his body that indicate he even knows my name.

I watch him move quickly, swiftly, carefully around the room, finding the little devices meant to monitor my behavior and disabling them one by one. If anyone asks why my cameras aren't working, Adam won't get in trouble. This order came from Warner. This makes it official.

This makes it possible for me to have some privacy.

I thought I would need privacy.

I'm such a fool.

Adam is not the boy I remember.

I was in third grade.

I'd just moved into town after being ~~thrown out of~~ asked to leave my old school. My parents were always moving, always running away from the messes I made, from the playdates I'd ruined, from the friendships I never had. No one ever wanted to talk about my "problem," but the mystery surrounding my existence somehow made things worse. The human imagination is often disastrous when left to its own devices. I only heard bits and pieces of their whispers.

"Freak!"

"Did you hear what she *did*—?"

"What a loser."

"—got kicked out of her old school—"

"Psycho!"

"She's got some kind of disease—"

No one talked to me. Everyone stared. I was young enough that I still cried. I ate lunch alone by a chain-link fence and never looked in the mirror. I never wanted to see the face everyone hated so much. Girls used to kick me and run away. Boys used to throw rocks at me. I still have scars somewhere.

I watched the world pass by through those chain-link fences. I stared out at the cars and the parents dropping off their kids and the moments I'd never be a part of. This was before the diseases became so common that death was a natural part of conversation. This was before we realized the clouds were the wrong color, before we realized all the animals were dying or infected, before we realized everyone was going to starve to death, and fast. This was back when we still thought our problems had solutions. Back then, Adam was the boy who used to walk to school. Adam was the boy who sat 3 rows in front of me. His clothes were worse than mine, his lunch nonexistent. I never saw him eat.

One morning he came to school in a car.

I know because I saw him being pushed out of it. His father was drunk and driving, yelling and flailing his fists for some reason. Adam stood very still and stared at the ground like he was waiting for something, steeling himself for the inevitable. I watched a father slap his 8-year-old son in the face. I watched Adam fall to the floor and I stood there, motionless as he was kicked repeatedly in the ribs.

"It's all your fault! It's *your* fault, you worthless piece of shit," his father screamed over and over and over again until I threw up right there, all over a patch of dandelions.

Adam didn't cry. He stayed curled up on the ground until his father gave up, until he drove away. Only once he was sure everyone was gone did his body break into heaving sobs, his small face smeared into the dirt, his arms clutching at his bruised abdomen. I couldn't look away.

I could never get that sound out of my head, that scene out of my head.

That's when I started paying attention to Adam Kent.

"Juliette."

I suck in my breath and wish my hands weren't trembling. I wish I had no eyes.

"Juliette," he says again, this time even softer and my body is in a blender and I'm made of mush. My bones are aching aching aching for his warmth.

I won't turn around.

"You always knew who I was," I whisper.

He says nothing and I'm suddenly desperate to see his eyes. I suddenly need to see his eyes. I turn to face him despite everything only to see he's staring at his hands. "I'm sorry," is all he says.

I lean back against the wall and press my lids shut. Everything was a

performance. Stealing my bed. Asking for my name. Asking me about my family. He was performing for Warner. For the guards. For whoever was watching. I don't even know what to believe anymore.

I need to say it. I need to get it out. I need to rip my wounds open and bleed fresh for him. "It's true," I tell him. "About the little boy." My voice is shaking so much more than I thought it would. "I did that."

He's quiet for so long. "I never understood before. When I first heard about it. I didn't realize until just now what must've happened."

"What?" I never knew I could blink so much.

"It never made sense to me," he says, and each word kicks me in the gut. He looks up and looks more agonized than I ever want him to be. "When I heard about it. We all heard about it. The whole school—"

"It was an accident," I choke out, failing not to fall apart. "He—h-he fell—and I was trying to help him—and I just—I didn't—I thought—"

"I know."

"What?" I gasp so loud I've swallowed the entire room in one breath.

"I believe you," he says to me.

"What . . . why?" My eyes are blinking back tears, my hands unsteady, my heart filled with nervous hope.

He bites his bottom lip. Looks away. Walks to the wall. Opens and closes his mouth several times before the words rush out. "Because I *knew* you, Juliette—I—God—I just—" He covers his mouth with his hand, drops his fingers to his neck. Rubs his forehead, closes his eyes, presses his lips together. Pries them open. "That was the day I was going to talk to you." A strange sort of smile. A strange sort of laugh. He runs a hand through his hair. Looks up at the ceiling. Turns his back to me. "I was finally going to talk to you. I was finally going to talk to you and I—" He shakes his head, hard, and attempts another painful laugh. "God, you don't remember me."

Hundreds of thousands of seconds pass and I can't stop dying.

I want to laugh and cry and scream and run and I can't choose which to do first.

I confess.

"Of course I remember you." My voice is a strangled whisper. I squeeze my eyes shut. ~~I remember you every day forever in every single broken moment of my life.~~ "You were the only one who ever looked at me like a human being."

He never talked to me. He never spoke a single word to me, but he was the only one who dared to sit close to my fence. He was the only one who stood up

for me, the only person who fought for me, the only one who'd punch someone in the face for throwing a rock at my head. I didn't even know how to say thank you.

He was the closest thing to a friend I ever had.

I open my eyes and he's standing right in front of me. My heart is a field of lilies blooming under a pane of glass, pitter-pattering to life like a rush of raindrops. His jaw is as tight as his eyes as tight as his fists as tight as the strain in his arms.

"You've always known?" 3 whispered words and he's broken my dam, unlocked my lips and stolen my heart all over again. I can hardly feel the tears streaming down my face.

"Adam." I try to laugh and my lips trip on a stifled sob. "I'd recognize your eyes anywhere in the world."

And that's it.

This time there's no self-control.

This time I'm in his arms and against the wall and I'm trembling everywhere and he's so gentle, so careful, touching me like I'm made of porcelain and I want to shatter.

He's running his hands down my body running his eyes across my face running laps with his heart and I'm running marathons with my mind.

Everything is on fire. My cheeks my hands the pit of my stomach and I'm drowning in waves of emotion and a storm of fresh rain and all I feel is the strength of his silhouette against mine and I never ever ever ever want to forget this moment. I want to stamp him into my skin and save him forever.

He takes my hands and presses my palms to his face and I know I never knew the beauty of feeling human before this. I know I'm still crying when my eyes flutter closed.

I whisper his name.

And he's breathing harder than I am and suddenly his lips are on my neck and I'm gasping and dying and clutching at his arms and he's touching me touching me touching me and I'm thunder and lightning and wondering when the hell I'll be waking up.

Once, twice, a hundred times his lips taste the nape of my neck and I wonder if it's possible to die of euphoria. He meets my eyes only to cup my face in his hands and I'm blushing through these walls from pleasure and pain and impossibility.

"I've wanted to kiss you for so long." His voice is husky, uneven, deep in my

ear.

I'm frozen in anticipation in expectation and I'm so worried he'll kiss me, so worried he won't. I'm staring at his lips and I don't realize how close we are until we're pulled apart.

3 distinct electronic screeches reverberate around the room and Adam looks past me like he can't understand where he is for a moment. He blinks. And runs toward an intercom to press the appropriate buttons. I notice he's still breathing hard.

I'm shaking in my skin.

"Name and number," the voice of the intercom demands.

"Kent, Adam. 45B-86659."

A pause.

"Soldier, are you aware the cameras in your room have been deactivated?"

"Yes, sir. I was given direct orders to dismantle the devices."

"Who cleared this order?"

"Warner, sir."

A longer pause.

"We'll verify and confirm. Unauthorized tampering with security devices may result in your immediate dishonorable discharge, soldier. I hope you're aware of that."

"Yes, sir."

The line goes quiet.

Adam slumps against the wall, his chest heaving. I'm not sure but I could've sworn his lips twitched into the tiniest smile. He closes his eyes and exhales.

I'm not sure what to do with the relief tumbling into my hands.

"Come here," he says, his eyes still shut.

I tiptoe forward and he pulls me into his arms. Breathes in the scent of my hair and kisses the side of my head and I've never felt anything so incredible in my life. I'm not even human anymore. I'm so much more. The sun and the moon have merged and the earth is upside down. I feel like I can be exactly who I want to be in his arms.

He makes me forget the terror I'm capable of.

"Juliette," he whispers in my ear. "We need to get the hell out of here."

Chapter Twenty-Three

I'm 14 years old again and I'm staring at the back of his head in a small classroom. I'm 14 years old and I've been in love with Adam Kent for years. I made sure to be extra careful, to be extra quiet, to be extra cooperative because I didn't want to move away again. I didn't want to leave the school with the one friendly face I'd ever known. I watched him grow up a little more every day, grow a little taller every day, a little stronger, a little tougher, a little more quiet every day. He eventually got too big to get beat up by his dad, but no one really knows what happened to his mother. The students shunned him, harassed him until he started fighting back, until the pressure of the world finally cracked him.

But his eyes always stayed the same.

Always the same when he looked at me. Kind. Compassionate. Desperate to understand. But he never asked questions. He never pushed me to say a word. He just made sure he was close enough to scare away everyone else.

I thought maybe I wasn't so bad. Maybe.

I thought maybe he saw something in me. I thought maybe I wasn't as horrible as everyone said I was. I hadn't touched anyone in years. I didn't dare get close to people. I couldn't risk it.

Until one day I did, and I ruined everything.

I killed a little boy in a grocery store simply by helping him to his feet. By grabbing his little hands. I didn't understand why he was screaming. It was my first experience ever touching someone for such a long period of time and I didn't understand what was happening to me. The few times I'd ever accidentally put my hands on someone I'd always pulled away. I'd pull away as soon as I remembered I wasn't supposed to be touching anyone. As soon as I heard the first scream escape their lips.

The little boy was different.

I wanted to help him. I felt such a surge of sudden anger toward his mother for neglecting his cries. Her lack of compassion as a parent devastated me ~~and it reminded me too much of my own mother.~~ I just wanted to help him. I wanted him to know that someone else was listening—that someone else cared. I didn't understand why it felt so strange and exhilarating to touch him. I didn't know

that I was draining his life and I couldn't comprehend why he'd grown limp and quiet in my arms. I thought maybe the rush of power and positive feeling meant that I'd been cured of my horrible disease. I thought so many stupid things and I ruined everything.

I thought I was helping.

I spent the next 3 years of my life in hospitals, law offices, juvenile detention centers, and suffered through pills and electroshock therapy. Nothing worked. Nothing helped. Outside of killing me, locking me up in an institution was the only solution. The only way to protect the public from the terror of Juliette.

Until he stepped into my cell, I hadn't seen Adam Kent in 3 years.

And he does look different. Tougher, taller, harder, sharper, tattooed. He's muscle, mature, quiet and quick. It's almost like he can't afford to be soft or slow or relaxed. He can't afford to be anything but muscle, anything but strength and efficiency. The lines of his face are smooth, precise, carved into shape by years of hard living and training and trying to survive.

He's not a little boy anymore. He's not afraid. He's in the army.

But he's not so different, either. He still has the most unusually blue eyes I've ever seen. Dark and deep and drenched in passion. I always wondered what it'd be like to see the world through such a beautiful lens. I wondered if your eye color meant you saw the world differently. If the world saw you differently as a result.

I should have known it was him when he showed up in my cell.

A part of me did. But I'd tried so hard to repress the memories of my past that I refused to believe it could be possible. Because a part of me didn't want to remember. A part of me was too scared to hope. A part of me didn't know if it would make any difference to know that it was him, after all.

I often wonder what I must look like.

I wonder if I'm just a punctured shadow of the person I was before. I haven't looked in the mirror in 3 years. I'm so scared of what I'll see.

Someone knocks on the door.

I'm catapulted across the room by my own fear. Adam locks eyes with me before opening the door and I decide to retreat into a far corner of the room.

I sharpen my ears only to hear muted voices, hushed tones, and someone clearing his throat. I'm not sure what to do.

"I'll be down in a minute," Adam says a little loudly. I realize he's trying to end the conversation.

“C’mon, man, I just wanna see her—”

“She’s not a goddamn spectacle, Kenji. Get the hell out of here.”

“Wait—just tell me: Does she light shit on fire with her eyes?” Kenji laughs and I cringe, slumping to the floor behind the bed. I curl into myself and try not to hear the rest of the conversation.

I fail.

Adam sighs. I can picture him rubbing his forehead. “Just get out.”

Kenji struggles to muffle his laughter. “Damn you’re sensitive all of a sudden, huh? Hangin’ out with a girl is changin’ you, man—”

Adam says something I can’t hear.

The door slams shut.

I peek up from my hiding place. Adam looks embarrassed.

My cheeks go pink. I study the intricate threads of the finely woven carpet under my feet. I touch the cloth wallpaper and wait for him to speak. I stand up to stare out the small square of a window only to be met by the bleak backdrop of a broken city. I lean my forehead against the glass.

Metal cubes are clustered together off in the distance: compounds housing civilians wrapped in multiple layers, trying to find refuge from the cold. A mother holding the hand of a small child. Soldiers standing over them, still like statues, rifles poised and ready to fire. Heaps and heaps and heaps of trash, dangerous scraps of iron and steel glinting on the ground. Lonely trees waving at the wind.

Adam’s hands slip around my waist.

His lips are at my ear and he says nothing at all, but I melt until I’m a handful of hot butter dripping down his body. I want to eat every minute of this moment.

I allow my eyes to shut against the truth outside my window. Just for a little while.

Adam takes a deep breath and pulls me even closer. I’m molded to the shape of his silhouette; his hands are circling my waist and his cheek is pressed against my head. “You feel incredible.”

I try to laugh but seem to have forgotten how. “Those are words I never thought I’d hear.”

Adam spins me around so I’m facing him and suddenly I’m looking and not looking at his face, I’m licked by a million flames and swallowing a million more. He’s staring at me like he’s never seen me before. I want to wash my soul

in the bottomless blue of his eyes.

He leans in until his forehead rests against mine and our lips still aren't close enough. He whispers, "How are you?" and I want to kiss every beautiful beat of his heart.

How are you? 3 words no one ever asks me.

"I want to get out of here," is all I can think of.

He squeezes me against his chest and I marvel at the power, the glory, the wonder in such a simple movement. He feels like 1 block of strength, 6 feet tall.

Every butterfly in the world has migrated to my stomach.

"Juliette."

I lean back to see his face.

"Are you serious about leaving?" he asks me. His fingers brush the side of my cheek. He tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Do you understand the risks?"

I take a deep breath. I know that the only real risk is death. "Yes."

He nods. Drops his eyes, his voice. "The troops are mobilizing for some kind of attack. There have been a lot of protests from groups who were silent before, and our job is to obliterate the resistance. I think they want this attack to be their last one," he adds quietly. "There's something huge going on, and I'm not sure what, not yet. But whatever it is, we have to be ready to go when they are."

I freeze. "What do you mean?"

"When the troops are ready to deploy, you and I should be ready to run. It's the only way out that will give us time to disappear. Everyone will be too focused on the attack—it'll buy us some time before they notice we're missing or can get enough people together to search for us."

"But—you mean—you'll come with me . . . ? You'd be willing to do that for me?"

He smiles a small smile. His lips twitch like he's trying not to laugh. His eyes soften as they study my own. "There's very little I wouldn't do for you."

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, touching my fingers to his chest, imagining the bird soaring across his skin, and I ask him the one question that scares me the most. "Why?"

"What do you mean?" He steps back.

"Why, Adam? Why do you care? Why do you want to help me? I don't understand—I don't know why you'd be willing to risk your life—"

But then his arms are around my waist and he's pulling me so close and his lips are at my ear and he says my name, once, twice and I had no idea I could

catch on fire so quickly. His mouth is smiling against my skin. “You don’t?”

I don’t know anything, is what I would tell him if I had any idea how to speak.

He laughs a little and pulls back. Takes my hand and studies it. “Do you remember in fourth grade,” he says, “when Molly Carter signed up for the school field trip too late? All the spots were filled, and she stood outside the bus, crying because she wanted to go?”

He doesn’t wait for me to answer.

“I remember you got off the bus. You offered her your seat and she didn’t even say thank you. I watched you standing on the sidewalk as we pulled away.”

I’m no longer breathing.

“Do you remember in fifth grade? That week Dana’s parents nearly got divorced? She came to school every day without her lunch. And you offered to give her yours.” He pauses. “As soon as that week was over she went back to pretending you didn’t exist.”

I’m still not breathing.

“In seventh grade Shelly Morrison got caught cheating off your math test. She kept screaming that if she failed, her father would kill her. You told the teacher that you were the one cheating off of *her* test. You got a zero on the exam, and detention for a week.” He lifts his head but doesn’t look at me. “You had bruises on your arms for at least a month after that. I always wondered where they came from.”

My heart is beating too fast. Dangerously fast. I clench my fingers to keep them from shaking. I lock my jaw in place and wipe my face clean of emotion but I can’t slow the thrumming in my chest no matter how hard I try.

“A million times,” he says, his voice so quiet now. “I saw you do things like that a million times. But you never said a word unless it was forced out of you.” He laughs again, this time a hard, heavy sort of laugh. He’s staring at a point directly past my shoulder. “You never asked for anything from anyone.” He finally meets my eyes. “But no one ever gave you a chance.”

I swallow hard, try to look away but he catches my face.

He whispers, “You have no idea how much I’ve thought about you. How many times I’ve dreamt”—he takes a tight breath—“how many times I’ve dreamt about being this close to you.” He moves to run a hand through his hair before he changes his mind. Looks down. Looks up. “God, Juliette, I’d follow you anywhere. You’re the only good thing left in this world.”

I’m begging myself not to burst into tears and I don’t know if it’s working.

I'm everything broken and glued back together and blushing everywhere and I can hardly find the strength to meet his gaze.

His fingers find my chin. Tip me up.

"We have three weeks at the most," he says. "I don't think they can control the mobs for much longer."

I nod. I blink. I rest my face against his chest and pretend I'm not crying.

3 weeks.

Chapter Twenty-Four

2 weeks pass.

2 weeks of dresses and showers and food I want to throw across the room. 2 weeks of Warner smiling and touching my waist, laughing and guiding the small of my back, making sure I look my best as I walk beside him. He thinks I'm his trophy. His secret weapon.

I have to stifle the urge to crack his knuckles into concrete.

But I offer him 2 weeks of cooperation because in 1 week we'll be gone.

Hopefully.

But then, more than anything else, I've found I don't hate Warner as much as I thought I did.

I feel sorry for him.

He finds a strange sort of solace in my company; he thinks I can relate to him and his twisted notions, his cruel upbringing, his absent and simultaneously demanding father.

But he never says a word about his mother.

Adam says that no one knows anything about Warner's mother—that she's never been discussed and no one has any idea who she is. He says that Warner is only known to be the consequence of ruthless parenting, and a cold, calculated desire for power. He hates happy children and happy parents and their happy lives.

I think Warner thinks that I understand. That I understand him.

And I do. And I don't.

Because we're not the same.

I want to be better.

Adam and I have little time together but nighttime. And even then, not so much. Warner watches me more closely every day; disabling the cameras only made him more suspicious. He's always walking into my room unexpectedly, taking me on unnecessary tours around the building, talking about nothing but his plans and his plans to make more plans and how together we'll conquer the world. I don't pretend to care.

Maybe it's me who's making this worse.

"I can't believe Warner actually agreed to get rid of your cameras," Adam said to me one night.

"He's insane. He's not rational. He's sick in a way I'll never understand."

Adam sighed. "He's obsessed with you."

"What?" I nearly snapped my neck in surprise.

"You're all he ever talks about." Adam was silent a moment, his jaw too tight. "I heard stories about you before you even got here. That's why I got involved—it's why I volunteered to go get you. Warner spent months collecting information about you: addresses, medical records, personal histories, family relations, birth certificates, blood tests. The entire army was talking about his new project; everyone knew he was looking for a girl who'd killed a little boy in a grocery store. A girl named Juliette."

I held my breath.

Adam shook his head. "I knew it was you. It had to be. I asked Warner if I could help with the project—I told him I'd gone to school with you, that I'd heard about the little boy, that I'd seen you in person." He laughed a hard laugh. "Warner was thrilled. He thought it would make the experiment more interesting," he added, disgusted. "And I knew that if he wanted to claim you as some kind of sick project—" He hesitated. Looked away. Ran a hand through his hair. "I just knew I had to do something. I thought I could try to help. But now it's gotten worse. Warner won't stop talking about what you're capable of or how valuable you are to his efforts and how excited he is to have you here. Everyone is beginning to notice. Warner is ruthless—he has no mercy for anyone. He loves the power, the thrill of destroying people. But he's starting to crack, Juliette. He's so desperate to have you . . . *join* him. And for all his threats, he doesn't want to force you. He wants you to want it. To choose *him*, in a way." He looked down, took a tight breath. "He's losing his edge. And whenever I see his face I'm always about two inches away from doing something stupid. I'd love to break his jaw."

Yes. Warner is losing his edge.

He's paranoid, though with good reason. But then he's patient and impatient with me. Excited and nervous all the time. He's a walking oxymoron.

He disables my cameras, but some nights he orders Adam to sleep outside my door to make sure I don't escape. He says I can eat lunch alone, but always ends up summoning me to his side. The few hours Adam and I would've had together are stolen from us, but the fewer nights Adam is allowed to sleep inside

my room I manage to spend huddled in his arms.

We both sleep on the floor now, wrapped up in each other for warmth even with the blanket covering our bodies. Every time he touches me it's like a burst of fire and electricity that ignites my bones in the most amazing way. It's the kind of feeling I wish I could hold in my hand.

Adam tells me about new developments, whispers he's heard around the other soldiers. He tells me how there are multiple headquarters across what's left of the country. How Warner's dad is at the capital, how he's left his son in charge of this entire sector. He says Warner hates his father but loves the power. The destruction. The devastation. He strokes my hair and tells me stories and tucks me close like he's afraid I'll disappear. He paints pictures of people and places until I fall asleep, until I'm drowning in a drug of dreams to escape a world with no refuge, no relief, no release but his reassurances in my ear. Sleep is the only thing I look forward to these days. I can hardly remember why I used to scream.

Things are getting too comfortable and I'm beginning to panic.

"Put these on," Warner says to me.

Breakfast in the blue room has become routine. I eat and don't ask where the food comes from, whether or not the workers are being paid for what they do, how this building manages to sustain so many lives, pump so much water, or use so much electricity. I bide my time now. I cooperate.

Warner hasn't asked me to touch him again, and I don't offer.

"What are they for?" I eye the small pieces of fabric in his hands and feel a nervous twinge in my gut.

He smiles a slow, sneaky smile. "An aptitude test." He grabs my wrist and places the bundle in my hand. "I'll turn around, just this once."

I'm almost too nervous to be disgusted by him.

My hands shake as I change into the outfit that turns out to be a tiny tank top and tinier shorts. I'm practically naked. I'm practically convulsing in fear of what this might mean. I clear my throat just the tiniest bit and Warner spins around.

He takes too long to speak; his eyes are busy traveling the road map of my body. I want to rip up the carpet and sew it to my skin. He smiles and offers me his hand.

I'm granite and limestone and marbled glass. I don't move.

He drops his hand. He cocks his head. "Follow me."

Warner opens the door. Adam is standing outside. He's gotten so good at masking his emotions that I hardly register the look of shock that shifts in and out of his features. Nothing but the strain in his forehead, the tension in his temples, gives him away. He knows something's not right. He actually turns his neck to take in my appearance. He blinks. "Sir?"

"Remain where you are, soldier. I'll take it from here."

Adam doesn't answer doesn't answer doesn't answer— "Yes, sir," he says, his voice suddenly hoarse.

I feel his eyes on me as I turn down the hall.

Warner takes me somewhere new. We're walking through corridors I've never seen, blacker and bleaker and more narrow as we go. I realize we're heading downward.

Into a basement.

We pass through 1, 2, 4 metal doors. Soldiers everywhere, their eyes everywhere, appraising me with both fear and something else I'd rather not consider. I've realized there are very few females in this building.

If there were ever a place to be grateful for being untouchable, it'd be here.

It's the only reason I have asylum from the preying eyes of hundreds of lonely men. It's the only reason Adam is staying with me—because Warner thinks Adam is a cardboard cutout of vanilla regurgitations. He thinks Adam is a machine oiled by orders and demands. He thinks Adam is a reminder of my past, and he uses it to make me uncomfortable. He'd never imagine Adam could lay a finger on me.

No one would. Everyone I meet is absolutely petrified.

The darkness is like a black canvas punctured by a blunt knife, with beams of light peeking through. It reminds me too much of my old cell. My skin ripples with uncontrollable dread.

I'm surrounded by guns.

"In you go," Warner says. I'm pushed into an empty room smelling faintly of mold. Someone hits a switch and fluorescent lights flicker on to reveal pasty yellow walls and carpet the color of dead grass. The door slams shut behind me.

There's nothing but cobwebs and a huge mirror in this room. The mirror is half the size of the wall. Instinctively I know Warner and his accomplices must be watching me. I just don't know why.

There are secrets everywhere.

There are answers nowhere.

Mechanical clinks/cracks/creaks and shifts shake the space I'm standing in.

The ground rumbles to life. The ceiling trembles with the promise of chaos. Metal spikes are suddenly everywhere, scattered across the room, puncturing every surface at all different heights. Every few seconds they disappear only to reappear with a sudden jolt of terror, slicing through the air like needles.

I realize I'm standing in a torture chamber.

Static and feedback from speakers older than my dying heart crackle to life. I'm a racehorse galloping toward a false finish line, breathing hard for someone else's gain.

"Are you ready?" Warner's amplified voice echoes around the room.

"What am I supposed to be ready for?" I yell into the empty space, certain that someone can hear me. ~~I'm calm. I'm calm. I'm calm.~~ I'm petrified.

"We had a deal, remember?" the room responds.

"Wha—"

"I disabled your cameras. Now it's your turn to hold up your end of the bargain."

"I won't touch you!" I shout, spinning in place, terrified, horrified, worried I might faint at any moment.

"That's all right," he says. "I'm sending in my replacement."

The door squeals open and a toddler waddles in wearing nothing but a diaper. He's blindfolded and hiccupping sobs, shuddering in fear.

One pin pops my entire existence into nothing.

"If you don't save him," Warner's words crackle through the room, "we won't, either."

This child.

He must have a mother a father someone who loves him this child this child this child stumbling forward in terror. He could be speared through by a metal stalagmite at any second.

Saving him is simple: I need to pick him up, find a safe spot of ground, and hold him in my arms until the experiment is over.

There's only one problem.

If I touch him, he might die.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Warner knows I don't have a choice. He wants to force me into another situation where he can see the impact of my abilities, and he has no problem torturing an innocent child to get exactly what he wants.

Right now I have no options.

I have to take a chance before this little boy steps forward in the wrong direction.

I quickly memorize as much as I can of the traps and dodge/hop/narrowly avoid the spikes until I'm as close as possible.

I take a deep, shaky breath and focus on the shivering limbs of the boy in front of me and pray to God I'm making the right decision. I'm about to pull off my shirt to use as a barrier between us when I notice the slight vibration in the ground. The tremble that precedes the terror. I know I have half of a second before the spikes slice up through the air and even less time to react.

I yank him up and into my arms.

His screams pierce through me like I'm being shot to death, one bullet for every second. He's clawing at my arms, my chest, kicking my body as hard as he can, crying out in agony until the pain paralyzes him. He goes weak in my grip and I'm being ripped to pieces, my eyes, my bones, my veins all tumbling out of place, all turning on me to torture me forever with memories of the horrors I'm responsible for.

Pain and power are bleeding through his body into mine, jolting through his limbs and crashing into me until I nearly drop him. ~~It's like reliving a nightmare I've spent 3 years trying to forget.~~

"Absolutely amazing," Warner sighs through the speakers, and I realize I was right. He must be watching through a 2-way mirror. "Brilliant, love. I'm thoroughly impressed."

I'm too desperate to be able to focus on Warner right now. I have no idea how long this sick game is going to last, and I need to lessen the amount of skin I'm exposing to this little boy's body.

My skimpy outfit makes so much sense now.

I rearrange him in my arms and manage to grab hold of his diaper. I'm

holding him up with the palm of my hand. I'm desperate to believe I couldn't have touched him long enough to cause serious damage.

He hiccups once; his body quivers back to life.

I could cry from happiness.

But then the screams start back up again, no longer cries of torture but of fear. He's desperate to get away from me and I'm losing my grip, my wrist nearly breaking from the effort. I don't dare remove his blindfold. I'd rather die than allow him to see this space, to see my face.

I clench my jaw so fast I'm afraid I'm going to break my teeth. If I put him down, he'll start running. And if he starts running, he's finished. I have to keep holding on.

The roar of an old mechanical wheeze revives my heart. The spikes slip back into the ground, one by one until they've all disappeared. The room is harmless again so swiftly I fear I may have imagined the danger. I drop the boy back onto the floor and bite down on my lip to swallow the pain welling in my wrist.

The child starts running and accidentally bumps my bare legs.

He screams and shudders and falls to the floor, curled up into himself, sobbing until I consider destroying myself, ridding myself of this world. Tears are streaming fast down my face and I want nothing more than to reach out to him and help him, hug him close, kiss his beautiful cheeks and tell him I'll take care of him forever, that we'll run away together, that I'll play games with him and read him stories at night and I know I can't. I know I never will. I know it will never be possible.

And suddenly the world shifts out of focus.

I'm overcome by a rage, an intensity, an anger so potent I'm almost elevated off the ground. I'm boiling with blind hatred and disgust. I don't even understand how my feet move in the next instant. I don't understand my hands and what they're doing or how they decided to fly forward, fingers splayed, charging toward the window. I only know I want to feel Warner's neck snap between my own two hands. I want him to experience the same terror he just inflicted upon a child. I want to watch him die. I want to watch him beg for mercy.

I catapult through the concrete walls.

I crush the glass with 10 fingers.

I'm clutching a fistful of gravel and a fistful of fabric at Warner's neck and there are 50 different guns pointed at my head. The air is heavy with cement and sulfur, the glass falling in an agonized symphony of shattered hearts.

I slam Warner into the corroded stone.

“Don’t you *dare* shoot her,” Warner wheezes at the guards. I haven’t touched his skin yet, but I have the strangest suspicion that I could smash his rib cage into his heart if I just pressed a little harder.

“I should kill you.” My voice is one deep breath, one uncontrolled exhalation.

“You—” He tries to swallow. “You just—you just broke through concrete with your bare hands.”

I blink. I don’t dare look behind me. But I know without looking backward that he can’t be lying. I must have. My mind is a maze of impossibility.

I lose focus for one instant.

The guns

click

click

click

Every moment is loaded.

“If any of you hurt her I will shoot you myself,” Warner barks.

“But sir—”

“STAND DOWN, SOLDIER—”

The rage is gone. The sudden uncontrollable anger is gone. My mind has already surrendered to disbelief. Confusion. I don’t know what I’ve done. I obviously don’t know what I’m capable of because I had no idea I could destroy anything at all and I’m suddenly so terrified so terrified so terrified of my own two hands. I stumble backward, stunned, and catch Warner watching me hungrily, eagerly, his emerald eyes bright with boyish fascination. He’s practically trembling in excitement.

There’s a snake in my throat and I can’t swallow it down. I meet Warner’s gaze. “If you ever put me in a position like that again, I *will* kill you. And I will enjoy it.”

I don’t even know if I’m lying.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Adam finds me curled into a ball on the shower floor.

I've been crying for so long I'm certain the hot water is made of nothing but my tears. My clothes are stuck to my skin, wet and useless. I want to wash them away. I want to drown in ignorance. I want to be stupid, dumb, mute, completely devoid of a brain. I want to cut off my own limbs. I want to be rid of this skin that can kill and these hands that destroy and this body I don't even know how to understand.

Everything is falling apart.

"Juliette . . ." He presses his hand against the glass. I can hardly hear him.

When I don't respond he opens the shower door. He's pelted with rebel raindrops and kicks his boots off before falling to his knees on the tile floor. He reaches in to touch my arms and the feeling only makes me more desperate to die. He sighs and pulls me up, just enough to lift my head. His hands trap my face and his eyes search me, search through me until I look away.

"I know what happened," he says softly.

My throat is a reptile, covered in scales. "Someone should just kill me," I croak, cracking with every word.

Adam's arms wrap around me until he's tugged me up and I'm wobbling on my legs and we're both standing upright. He steps into the shower and slides the door shut behind him.

I gasp.

He holds me up against the wall and I see nothing but his white T-shirt soaked through, nothing but the water dancing down his face, nothing but his eyes full of a world I'm dying to be a part of.

"It wasn't your fault," he whispers.

"It's what I *am*," I choke.

"No. Warner's wrong about you," Adam says. "He wants you to be someone you're not, and you can't let him break you. Don't let him get into your head. He *wants* you to think you're a monster. He wants you to think you have no choice but to join him. He wants you to think you'll never be able to live a normal life —"

“But I won’t live a normal life.” I swallow a hiccup. “Not ever—I’ll n-never —”

Adam is shaking his head. “You will. We’re going to get out of here. I won’t let this happen to you.”

“H-how could you possibly care about someone . . . like *me*?” I’m barely breathing, nervous and petrified but somehow staring at his lips, studying the shape, counting the drops of water tumbling over the hills and valleys of his mouth.

“Because I’m in love with you.”

I swallow my stomach. My eyes snap up to read his face but I’m a mess of electricity, humming with life and lightning, hot and cold and my heart is erratic. I’m shaking in his arms and my lips have parted for no reason at all.

His mouth softens into a smile. My bones have disappeared.

I’m spinning with delirium.

His nose is touching my nose, his lips one breath away, his eyes devouring me already and I’m a puddle with no arms and no legs. I can smell him everywhere; I feel every point of his figure pressed against mine. His hands at my waist, gripping my hips, his legs flush against my own, his chest overpowering me with strength, his frame built by bricks of desire. The taste of his words lingers on my lips.

“Really . . . ?” I have one whisper of incredulity, one conscious effort to believe what’s never been done. I’m flushed through my feet, filled with unspoken everything.

He looks at me with so much emotion I nearly crack in half.

“God, Juliette—”

And he’s kissing me.

Once, twice, until I’ve had a taste and realize I’ll never have enough. He’s everywhere up my back and over my arms and suddenly he’s kissing me harder, deeper, with a fervent urgent need I’ve never known before. He breaks for air only to bury his lips in my neck, along my collarbone, up my chin and cheeks and I’m gasping for oxygen and he’s destroying me with his hands and we’re drenched in water and beauty and the exhilaration of a moment I never knew was possible.

He pulls back with a low groan and I want him to take his shirt off.

I need to see the bird. I need to tell him about the bird.

My fingers are tugging at the hem of his wet clothes and his eyes widen for only a second before he rips the material off himself. He grabs my hands and

lifts my arms above my head and pins me against the wall, kissing me until I'm sure I'm dreaming, drinking in my lips with his lips and he tastes like rain and sweet musk and I'm about to explode.

My knees are knocking together and my heart is beating so fast I don't understand why it's still working. He's kissing away the pain, the hurt, the years of self-loathing, the insecurities, the dashed hopes for a future I always pictured as obsolete. He's lighting me on fire, burning away the torture of Warner's games, the anguish that poisons me every single day. The intensity of our bodies could shatter these glass walls.

It nearly does.

For a moment we're just staring at each other, breathing hard until I'm blushing, until he closes his eyes and takes one ragged, steadying breath and I place my hand on his chest. I dare to trace the outline of the bird soaring across his skin, I dare to trail my fingers down the length of his abdomen.

"You're my bird," I tell him. "You're my bird and you're going to help me fly away."

Adam is gone by the time I get out of the shower.

He wrung his clothes out and dried himself off and granted me privacy to change. Privacy I'm not sure I care about anymore. I touch 2 fingers to my lips and taste him everywhere.

But when I step into the room he's not anywhere. He had to report downstairs.

I stare at the clothes in my closet.

I always choose a dress with pockets because I don't know where else to store my notebook. It doesn't carry any incriminating information, and the one piece of paper that bore Adam's handwriting has since been destroyed and flushed down the toilet, but I like to keep it close to me. It represents so much more than a few words scribbled on paper. It's a small token of my resistance.

I tuck the notebook into a pocket and decide I'm finally ready to face myself. I take a deep breath, push the wet strands of hair away from my eyes, and pad into the bathroom. The steam from the shower has clouded the mirror. I reach out a tentative hand to wipe away a small circle. Just big enough.

A scared face stares back at me.

I touch my cheeks and study the reflective surface, study the image of a girl who's simultaneously strange and familiar to me. My face is thinner, paler, my cheekbones higher than I remember them, my eyebrows perched above 2 wide

eyes not blue not green but somewhere in between. My skin is flushed with heat and something named Adam. My lips are too pink. My teeth are unusually straight. My finger is trailing down the length of my nose, tracing the shape of my chin when I see a movement in the corner of my eye.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says to me.

I’m pink and red and maroon all at once. I duck my head and trip away from the mirror only to have him catch me in his arms. “I’d forgotten my own face,” I whisper.

“Just don’t forget who you *are*,” he says.

“I don’t even know.”

“Yes you do.” He tilts my face up. “I do.”

I stare at the strength in his jaw, in his eyes, in his body. I try to understand the confidence he has in who he thinks I am and realize his reassurance is the only thing stopping me from diving into a pool of my own insanity. He’s always believed in me. Even soundlessly, silently, he fought for me. Always.

He’s my only friend.

I take his hand and hold it to my lips. “I’ve loved you forever,” I tell him.

The sun rises, rests, shines in his face and he almost smiles, almost can’t meet my eyes. His muscles relax, his shoulders find relief in the weight of a new kind of wonder and he exhales. He touches my cheek, touches my lips, touches the tip of my chin and I blink and he’s kissing me, he’s pulling me into his arms and into the air and somehow we’re on the bed and tangled in each other and I’m drugged with emotion, drugged by each tender moment. His fingers skim my shoulder, trail down my silhouette, rest at my hips. He pulls me closer, whispers my name, drops kisses down my throat and struggles with the stiff fabric of my dress. His hands are shaking so slightly, his eyes brimming with feeling, his heart thrumming with pain and affection and I want to live here, in his arms, in his eyes for the rest of my life.

I slip my hands under his shirt and he chokes on a moan that turns into a kiss that needs me and wants me and has to have me so desperately it’s like the most acute form of torture. His weight is pressed into mine, on top of mine, infinite points of feeling for every nerve ending in my body and his right hand is behind my neck and his left hand is reeling me in and his lips are falling down my shirt and I don’t understand why I need to wear clothes anymore and I’m a cumulonimbus existence of thunder and lightning and the possibility of exploding into tears at any inopportune moment. Bliss Bliss Bliss is beating through my chest.

I don't remember what it means to breathe.
I never
ever
ever
knew
what it meant to *feel*.

An alarm is hammering through the walls.

The room beeps and blares to life and Adam stiffens, pulls back; his face collapses.

"This is a CODE SEVEN. All soldiers must report to the Quadrant immediately. This is a CODE SEVEN. All soldiers must report to the Quadrant immediately. This is a CODE SEVEN. All soldiers must report to the Quadra—"

Adam is on his feet and pulling me up and the voice is still shouting orders through a speaker system wired into the building. "There's been a breach," he says, his voice broken and breathy, his eyes darting between me and the door. "Jesus. I can't just leave you here—"

"Go," I tell him. "You have to go—I'll be fine—"

Footsteps are thundering through the halls and soldiers are barking at each other so loudly I can hear it through the walls. Adam is still on duty. He has to perform. He has to keep up appearances until we can leave. I know this.

He pulls me close. "This isn't a joke, Juliette—I don't know what's happening—it could be anything—"

A metal click. A mechanical switch. The door slides open and Adam and I jump 10 feet apart.

Adam rushes to exit just as Warner is walking in. They both freeze.

"I'm pretty sure that alarm has been going off for at least a minute, soldier."

"Yes sir. I wasn't sure what to do about her." He's suddenly composed, a perfect statue. He nods at me like I'm an afterthought but I know he's just slightly too stiff in the shoulders. Breathing just a beat too fast.

"Lucky for you, I'm here to take care of that. You may report to your commanding officer."

"Sir." Adam nods, pivots on one heel, and darts out the door. I hope Warner didn't notice his hesitation.

Warner turns to face me with a smile so calm and casual I begin to question whether the building is actually in chaos. He studies my face. My hair. Glances

at the rumpled sheets behind me and I feel like I've swallowed a spider. "You took a nap?"

"I couldn't sleep last night."

"You've ripped your dress."

"What are you doing here?" I need him to stop staring at me, I need him to stop drinking in the details of my existence.

"If you don't like the dress, you can always choose a different one, you know. I picked them out for you myself."

"That's okay. The dress is fine." I glance at the clock for no real reason. It's already 4:30 in the afternoon. "Why won't you tell me what's going on?"

He's too close. He's standing too close and he's looking at me and my lungs are failing to expand. "You should really change."

"I don't want to change." I don't know why I'm so nervous. Why he's making me so nervous. Why the space between us is closing too quickly.

He hooks a finger in the rip close to the drop-waist of my dress and I bite back a scream. "This just won't do."

"It's fine—"

He tugs so hard on the rip that it splits open the fabric and creates a slit up the side of my leg. "That's a bit better."

"What are you *doing*—"

His hands snake up my waist and clamp my arms in place and I know I need to defend myself but I'm frozen and I want to scream but my voice is broken broken broken. I'm a ragged breath of desperation.

"I have a question," he says, and I try to kick him in this worthless dress and he just squeezes me up against the wall, the weight of his body pressing me into place, every inch of him covered in clothing, a protective layer between us. "I said I have a question, Juliette."

His hand slips into my pocket so quickly it takes me a moment to realize what he's done. I'm panting up against the wall, shaking and trying to find my head.

"I'm curious," he says. "What is *this*?"

He's holding my notebook between 2 fingers.

Oh God.

This dress is too tight to hide the outline of the notebook and I was too busy looking at my face to check the dress in the mirror. ~~This is all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault~~ I can't believe it. This is all my fault. I should've known better.

I say nothing.

He cocks his head. "I don't recall giving you a notebook. I certainly don't remember granting you allowance for any possessions, either."

"I brought it with me." My voice catches.

"Now you're lying."

"What do you want from me?" I panic.

"That's a stupid question, Juliette."

The soft sound of smooth metal slipping out of place. Someone has opened my door.

Click.

"Get your hands off of her before I bury a bullet in your head."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Warner's eyes close very slowly. He steps away very slowly. His lips twitch into a dangerous smile. "Kent."

Adam's hands are steady, the barrel of his gun pressed into the back of Warner's skull. "You're going to clear our exit out of here."

Warner actually laughs. He opens his eyes and whips a gun out of his inside pocket only to point it directly at my forehead. "I will kill her right now."

"You're not that stupid," Adam says.

"If she moves even a millimeter, I will shoot her. And then I will rip you to pieces."

Adam shifts quickly, slamming the butt of his gun into Warner's head. Warner's gun misfires and Adam catches his arm and twists his wrist until his grip on the weapon wavers. I grab the gun from Warner's limp hand and slam the butt of it into his face. I'm stunned by my own reflexes. I've never held a gun before but I guess there's a first time for everything.

I point it at Warner's eyes. "Don't underestimate me."

"Holy *shit*." Adam doesn't bother hiding his surprise.

Warner coughs through a laugh, steadies himself, and tries to smile as he wipes the blood from his nose. "I never underestimate you," he says to me. "I never have."

Adam shakes his head for less than a second before his face splits into an enormous grin. He's beaming at me as he presses the gun harder into Warner's skull. "Let's get out of here."

I grab the two duffel bags stowed away in the armoire and toss one to Adam. We've been packed for a week already. If he wants to make a break for it earlier than expected, I have no complaints.

Warner's lucky we're showing him mercy.

But we're lucky the entire building has been evacuated. He has no one to rely on.

Warner clears his throat. He's staring straight at me when he speaks. "I can assure you, soldier, your triumph will be short-lived. You may as well kill me now, because when I find you, I will thoroughly enjoy destroying every bone in

your body. You're a fool if you think you can get away with this."

"I am not your soldier." Adam's face is stone. "I never have been. You've been so caught up in the details of your own fantasies you failed to notice the dangers right in front of your face."

"We can't kill you yet," I add. "You have to get us out of here."

"You're making a huge mistake, Juliette," he says to me. His voice actually softens. "You're throwing away an entire future." He sighs. "How do you know you can trust him?"

I glance at Adam. Adam, the boy who's always defended me, even when he had nothing to gain. I shake my head to clear it. I remind myself that Warner is a liar. A crazed lunatic. A psychotic murderer. He would never try to help me.

I think.

"Let's go before it's too late," I say to Adam. "He's just trying to stall us until the soldiers get back."

"He doesn't even care about you!" Warner explodes. I flinch at the sudden, uncontrolled intensity in his voice. "He just wants a way out of here and he's *using* you!" He steps forward. "I could love you, Juliette—I would treat you like a *queen*—"

Adam puts him in a swift headlock and points the gun at his temple. "You obviously don't understand what's happening here," he says very carefully.

"Then educate me, soldier," Warner wheezes out. His eyes are dancing flames; dangerous. "Tell me what I'm failing to understand."

"Adam." I'm shaking my head.

He meets my eyes. Nods. Turns to Warner. "Make the call," he says, squeezing his neck a little tighter. "Get us out of here *now*."

"Only my dead body would allow her to walk out that door." Warner exercises his jaw and spits blood on the floor. "You I would kill for pleasure," he says to Adam. "But Juliette is the one I want forever."

"I'm not yours to *want*." I'm breathing too hard. I'm anxious to get out of here. I'm angry he won't stop talking but as much as I'd love to break his face, he's no good to us unconscious.

"You could love me, you know." He's smiling a strange sort of smile. "We would be unstoppable. We would change the world. I could make you happy," he says to me.

Adam looks like he might snap Warner's neck. His face is so taut, so tense, so angry. I've never seen him like this before. "You have nothing to offer her, you sick bastard."

Warner presses his eyes shut for one second. “Juliette. Don’t be hasty. Don’t make a rash decision. Stay with me. I’ll be patient with you. I’ll give you time to adjust. I’ll take care of you—”

“You’re insane.” My hands are shaking but I hold the gun up to his face again. I need to get him out of my head. I need to remember what he’s done to me. “You want me to be a *monster* for you—”

“I want you to live up to your *potential*!”

“Let me go,” I say quietly. “I don’t want to be your creature. I don’t want to hurt people.”

“The world has already hurt *you*,” he counters. “The world *put* you here. You’re here because of them! You think if you leave they’re going to accept you? You think you can run away and live a normal life? No one will care for you. No one will come near you—you’ll be an outcast like you’ve always been! Nothing has changed! You belong with me!”

“She belongs with *me*.” Adam’s voice could cut through steel.

Warner flinches. For the first time he seems to be understanding what I thought was obvious. His eyes are wide, horrified, unbelieving, staring at me with a new kind of anguish. “No.” A short, crazed laugh. “Juliette. Please. Please. Don’t tell me he’s filled your head with romantic notions. Please don’t tell me you fell for his false proclamations—”

Adam slams his knee into Warner’s spine. Warner falls to the floor with a muffled crack and a sharp intake of breath. Adam has thoroughly overpowered him. I feel like I should be cheering.

But I’m too anxious. I’m too suspended in disbelief. I’m too insecure to be confident in my own decisions. I need to pull myself together.

“Adam—”

“I *love* you,” he says to me, his eyes just as earnest as I remember them, his words just as urgent as they should be. “Don’t let him confuse you—”

“You *love* her?” Warner practically spits. “You don’t even—”

“Adam.” The room shifts in and out of focus. I’m staring at the window. I glance back at him.

His eyes touch his eyebrows. “You want to *jump* out?”

I nod.

“But we’re fifteen stories up—”

“What choice do we have if he won’t cooperate?” I look at Warner. Cock my head. “There is no Code Seven, is there?”

Warner’s lips twitch. He says nothing.

“Why would you do that?” I ask him. “Why would you pull a false alarm?”

“Why don’t you ask the soldier you’re so suddenly fond of?” Warner snaps, disgusted. “Why don’t you ask yourself why you’re trusting your life to someone who can’t even differentiate between a real and an imaginary threat?”

Adam swears under his breath.

I lock eyes with him and he tosses me his gun.

He shakes his head. Swears again. Clenches and unclenches his fist. “It was just a drill.”

Warner actually laughs.

Adam glances at the door, the clock, my face. “We don’t have much time.”

I’m holding Warner’s gun in my left hand and Adam’s gun in my right and pointing them both at Warner’s forehead, doing my best to ignore the eyes he’s drilling in my direction. Adam uses his free hand to dig in his pockets for something. He pulls out a pair of plastic zip ties and kicks Warner onto his back just before binding his limbs together. Warner’s boots and gloves have been discarded on the floor. Adam keeps one boot pressed on his stomach.

“A million alarms are going to go off the minute we jump through that window,” he tells me. “We’ll have to run, so we can’t risk breaking our legs. We can’t jump.”

“So what do we do?”

He runs a hand through his hair and bites down on his bottom lip and for one delirious moment all I want to do is taste him. I force myself back into focus.

“I have rope,” he says. “We’ll have to climb down. And fast.”

He sets to work pulling out a coil of cord attached to a small clawlike anchor. I’d asked him a million times what on earth he would need it for, why he would pack it in his escape bag. He told me a person could never have too much rope. Now, I almost want to laugh.

He turns to me. “I’m going to go down first so I can catch you on the other side—”

Warner laughs loud, too loud. “You can’t *catch* her, you fool.” He squirms in his plastic shackles. “She’s wearing next to nothing. She’ll kill you and kill herself from the fall!”

My eyes dart between Warner and Adam. I don’t have time to entertain Warner’s charades any longer. I make a hasty decision. “Do it. I’ll be right behind you.”

Warner looks crazed, confused. “What are you doing?”

I ignore him.

“Wait—”

I ignore him.

“Juliette.”

I ignore him.

“Juliette!” His voice is tighter, higher, laced with anger and terror and denial and betrayal. Realization is a new piece in his puzzled mind. “He can *touch* you?”

Adam is wrapping his fist in the bedsheet.

“Goddamn it, Juliette, answer me!” Warner is writhing on the floor, unhinged in a way I never thought possible. He looks wild, his eyes disbelieving, horrified. “Has he *touched* you?”

I can’t understand why the walls are suddenly on the ceiling. Everything is stumbling sideways.

“Juliette—”

Adam breaks through the glass with one swift crack, one solid punch, and instantly the entire room is ringing with the sound of hysteria like no alarm I’ve heard before. The room is rumbling under my feet, footsteps are thundering down the halls, and I know we’re about one minute from being discovered.

Adam throws the cord through the window and slings his pack over his back. “Throw me your bag!” he shouts and I can barely hear him. I toss my duffel and he catches it right before slipping through the window. I run to join him.

Warner tries to grab my leg.

His failed attempt nearly trips me but I manage to stumble my way to the window without losing much time. I glance back at the door and feel my heart racing through my bones. The sound of soldiers running and yelling is getting louder, closer, clearer by the second.

“Hurry!” Adam is calling to me.

“Juliette, *please*—”

Warner swipes for my leg again and I gasp so loud I almost hear it through the sirens shattering my eardrums. ~~I won’t look at him. I won’t look at him. I won’t look at him.~~

I swing one leg through the window and latch on to the cord. My bare legs are going to make this an excruciating ordeal. Both legs are through. My hands are in place. Adam is calling to me from below, and I don’t know how far down he is. Warner is screaming my name and I look up despite my best efforts.

His eyes are two shots of green punched through a pane of glass. Cutting through me.

I take a deep breath and hope I won't die.

I take a deep breath and inch my way down the rope.

I take a deep breath and hope Warner doesn't realize what just happened.

I hope he doesn't know he just touched my leg.

And nothing happened.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I'm burning.

The cord is chafing my legs into a fiery mass so painful I'm surprised there's no smoke. I bite back the pain because I have no choice. The mass hysteria of the building is bulldozing my senses, raining down danger all around us. Adam is shouting to me from below, telling me to jump, promising he'll catch me. I'm too ashamed to admit I'm afraid of the fall.

I never have a chance to make my own decision.

Soldiers are already pouring into what used to be my room, shouting and confused, probably shocked to find Warner in such a feeble position. It was really too easy to overpower him. It worries me.

It makes me think we did something wrong.

A few soldiers pop their heads out of the shattered window and I'm frantic to shimmy down the rope but they're already moving to unlatch the anchor. I prepare myself for the nauseating sensation of free fall only to realize they're not trying to drop me. They're trying to reel me back inside.

Warner must be telling them what to do.

I glance down at Adam below me and finally give in to his calls. I squeeze my eyes shut and let go.

And fall right into his open arms.

We collapse onto the ground, but the breath is knocked out of us for only a moment. Adam grabs my hand and then we're running.

There's nothing but empty, barren space stretching out ahead of us. Broken asphalt, uneven pavement, dirt roads, naked trees, dying plants, a yellowed city abandoned to the elements drowning in dead leaves that crunch under our feet. The civilian compounds are short and squat, grouped together in no particular order, and Adam makes sure to stay as far away from them as possible. The loudspeakers are already working against us. The sound of a young, smoothly mechanical female voice drowns out the sirens.

"Curfew is now in effect. Everyone return to their homes immediately. There are rebels on the loose. They are armed and ready to fire. Curfew is now in effect. Everyone return to their homes immediately. There are rebels on the

loose. They are armed and ready to fi—”

My sides are cramping, my skin is tight, my throat dry, desperate for water. I don't know how far we've run. All I know is the sound of boots pounding the pavement, the screech of tires peeling out of underground storage units, alarms wailing in our wake.

I look back to see people screaming and running for shelter, ducking away from the soldiers rushing through their homes, pounding down doors to see if we've found refuge somewhere inside. Adam pulls me away from civilization and heads toward the abandoned streets of an earlier decade: old shops and restaurants, narrow side streets and abandoned playgrounds. The unregulated land of our past lives has been strictly off-limits. It's forbidden territory. Everything closed down. Everything broken, rusted shut, lifeless. No one is allowed to trespass here. Not even soldiers.

And we're charging through these streets, trying to stay out of sight.

The sun is slipping through the sky and tripping toward the edge of the earth. Night will be coming quickly, and I have no idea where we are. I never expected so much to happen so quickly and I never expected it all to happen on the same day. I just have to hope to survive but I haven't the faintest idea where we might be headed. It never occurred to me to ask Adam where we might go.

We're darting in a million directions. Turning abruptly, going forward a few feet only to head back in an opposite path. My best guess is that Adam is trying to confuse and/or distract our followers as much as possible. I can do nothing but attempt to keep up.

And I fail.

Adam is a trained soldier. He's built for exactly these kinds of situations. He understands how to flee, how to stay inconspicuous, how to move soundlessly in any space. I, on the other hand, am a broken girl who's known no exercise for too long. My lungs are burning with the effort to inhale oxygen, wheezing with the effort to exhale carbon dioxide.

I'm suddenly gasping so desperately Adam is forced to pull me into a side street. He's breathing a little harder than usual, but I've acquired a full-time job choking on the weakness of my limp body.

Adam takes my face in his hands and tries to focus my eyes. "I want you to breathe like I am, okay?"

I wheeze a bit more.

"Focus, Juliette." His eyes are so determined. Infinitely patient. He looks fearless and I envy him his composure. "Calm your heart," he says. "Breathe

exactly as I do.”

He takes 3 small breaths in, holds it for a few seconds, and releases it in one long exhalation. I try to copy him. I’m not very good at it.

“Okay. I want you to keep breathing like—” He stops. His eyes dart up and around the abandoned street for a split second. I know we have to move.

Gunshots shatter the atmosphere. I’d never realized just how loud they are or just how much that sound fractures every functioning bone in my body. An icy chill seeps through my blood and I know immediately that they’re not trying to kill me. They’re trying to kill Adam.

I’m suddenly asphyxiated by a new kind of anxiety. I can’t let them hurt him. Not for me.

But Adam doesn’t have time for me to catch my breath and find my head. He flips me up and into his arms and takes off in a diagonal dash across another alleyway.

And we’re running.

And I’m breathing.

And he shouts, “Wrap your arms around my neck!” and I release the choke hold I have on his T-shirt and I’m stupid enough to feel shy as I slip my arms around him. He readjusts me against him so I’m higher, closer to his chest. He carries me like I weigh less than nothing.

I close my eyes and press my cheek against his neck.

The gunshots are somewhere behind us, but even I can tell from the sound that they’re too far away and too far in the wrong direction. We seem to have momentarily outmaneuvered them. Their cars can’t even find us, because Adam has avoided all main streets. He seems to have his own map of this city. He seems to know exactly what he’s doing—like he’s been planning this for a very long time.

After inhaling exactly 594 times Adam drops me to my feet in front of a stretch of chain-link fence. I realize he’s struggling to swallow oxygen, but he doesn’t pant like I do. He knows how to regulate his breathing. He knows how to steady his pulse, calm his heart, maintain control over his organs. He knows how to survive. I hope he’ll teach me, too.

“Juliette,” he says after a breathless moment. “Can you jump this fence?”

I’m so eager to be more than a useless lump that I nearly sprint up and over the metal barrier. But I’m reckless. And too hasty. I practically rip my dress off and scratch my legs in the process. I wince against the stinging pain, and in the moment it takes me to reopen my eyes, Adam is already standing next to me.

He looks down at my legs and sighs. He almost laughs. I wonder what I must look like, tattered and wild in this shredded dress. The slit Warner created now stops at my hip bone. I must look like a crazed animal.

Adam doesn't seem to mind.

He's slowed down, too. We're moving at a brisk walk now, no longer barreling through the streets. I realize we must be closer to some semblance of safety, but I'm not sure if I should ask questions now, or save them for later. Adam answers my silent thoughts.

"They won't be able to track me out here," he says, and it dawns on me that all soldiers must have some kind of tracking device on their person. I wonder why I never got one.

It shouldn't be this easy to escape.

"Our trackers aren't tangible," he explains. We make a left into another alleyway. The sun is just dipping below the horizon. I wonder where we are. How far away from Reestablished settlements we must be that there are no people here. "It's a special serum injected into our bloodstream," he continues, "and it's designed to work with our bodies' natural processes. It would know, for example, if I died. It's an excellent way to keep track of soldiers lost in combat." He glances at me out of the corner of his eye. He smiles a crooked smile I want to kiss.

"So how did you confuse the tracker?"

His grin grows bigger. He waves one hand around us. "This space we're standing in? It was used for a nuclear power plant. One day the whole thing exploded."

My eyes are as big as my face. "When did that happen?"

"About five years ago. They cleaned it up pretty quickly. Hid it from the media, from the people. No one really knows what happened here. But the radiation alone is enough to kill." He pauses. "It already has."

He stops walking. "I've been through this area a million times already, and I haven't been affected by it. Warner used to send me up here to collect samples of the soil. He wanted to study the effects." He runs a hand through his hair. "I think he was hoping to manipulate the toxicity into a poison of some kind."

"The first time I came up here, Warner thought I'd died. The tracker is linked to all of our main processing systems—an alert goes off whenever a soldier is lost. He knew there was a risk in sending me, so I don't think he was too surprised to hear I'd died. He was more surprised to see me return." He shrugs, as though his death would've been an insignificant detail. "There's something

about the chemicals here that counteracts the molecular composition of the tracking device. So basically—right now everyone thinks I’m dead.”

“Won’t Warner suspect you might be here?”

“Maybe.” He squints up at the fading sunlight. Our shadows are long and unmoving. “Or I could’ve been shot. In any case, it buys us some time.”

He takes my hand and grins at me before something slams into my consciousness.

“What about *me*?” I ask. “Can’t this radiation kill me?” I hope I don’t sound as nervous as I feel. I’ve never wanted to be alive so much in my life. I don’t want to lose everything so soon.

“Oh—no.” He shakes his head. “Sorry, I forgot to tell you—one of the reasons why Warner wanted me collecting these samples? Is because you’re immune to it, too. He was studying you. He said he found the information in your hospital records. That you’d been tested—”

“But no one ever—”

“—probably without your knowledge, and despite testing positive for the radiation, you were entirely whole, biologically. There was nothing inherently wrong with you.”

Nothing inherently wrong with you.

The observation is so blatantly false I actually start laughing. I try to stifle my incredulity. “There’s nothing wrong with me? You’re kidding, right?”

Adam stares at me so long I begin to blush. He tips my chin up so I meet his eyes. Blue blue blue boring into me. His voice is deep, steady. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you laugh.”

He’s so excruciatingly correct I don’t know how to respond except with the truth. My smile is tucked into a straight line. “Laughter comes from living.” I shrug, try to sound indifferent. “I’ve never really been alive before.”

His eyes haven’t wavered in their focus. He’s holding me in place with the strength of one powerful pull coming from deep within him. I can almost feel his heart beating against my skin. I can almost feel his lips breathing against my lungs. I can almost taste him on my tongue.

He takes a shaky breath and pulls me close. Kisses the top of my head.

“Let’s go home,” he whispers.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Home.

Home.

What does he mean?

I part my lips to ask the question and his sneaky smile is the only answer I receive. I'm embarrassed and excited and anxious and eager. My stomach is filled with beating drums pounded into synchronicity by my heart. I'm practically humming with electric nerves.

Every step is a step away from the asylum, away from Warner, away from the futility of the existence I've always known. Every step is one I take because I *want* to. For the first time in my life, I walk forward because I *want* to, because I feel hope and love and the exhilaration of beauty, because I want to know what it's like to *live*. I could jump up to catch a breeze and live in its windblown ways forever.

I feel like I've been fitted for wings.

Adam leads me into an abandoned shed on the outskirts of this wild field, overgrown by rogue vegetation and crazed bushlike tentacles, scratchy and hideous, likely poisonous to ingest. I wonder if this is where Adam meant for us to stay. I step into the dark space and squint. An outline comes into focus.

There's a car inside.

I blink.

Not just a car. A tank.

Adam almost can't control his own eagerness. He looks at my face for a reaction and seems pleased with my astonishment. His words tumble out. "I convinced Warner I'd managed to break one of the tanks I brought up here. These things are designed to run on electricity—so I told him the main unit fried on contact with the chemical traces. That it was corrupted by something in the atmosphere. He arranged for a car to deliver and collect me after that, and said we should leave the tank where it is." He almost smiles. "Warner was sending me up here against his father's wishes, and didn't want anyone to find out he'd broken a 500-thousand-dollar tank. The official report says it was hijacked by rebels."

“Couldn’t someone else have come up and seen the tank sitting here?”

Adam opens the passenger door. “The civilians stay far, far away from this place, and no other soldier has been up here. No one else wanted to risk the radiation.” He cocks his head. “It’s one of the reasons why Warner trusted me with you. He liked that I was willing to die for my *duty*.”

“He never thought you’d step out of line,” I murmur, comprehending.

Adam shakes his head. “Nope. And after what happened with the tracking serum, he had no reason to doubt that crazy things were possible up here. I deactivated the tank’s electrical unit myself, just in case he wanted to check.” He nods back to the monstrous vehicle. “I had a feeling it would come in handy one day. It’s always good to be prepared.”

Prepared. He was always prepared. To run. To escape.

I wonder why.

“Come here,” he says, his voice noticeably gentler. He reaches for me in the dim light and I pretend it’s a happy coincidence that his hands brush my bare thighs. I pretend it doesn’t feel incredible to have him struggle with the rips in my dress as he helps me into the tank. I pretend I can’t see the way he’s looking at me as the last of the sun falls below the horizon.

“I need to take care of your legs,” he says, a whisper against my skin, electric in my blood. For a moment I don’t even understand what he means. I don’t even care. My thoughts are so impractical I surprise myself. I’ve never had the freedom to touch anyone before. Certainly no one has ever *wanted* my hands on them. Adam is an entirely new experience.

Touching him is all I want to think about.

“The cuts aren’t too bad,” he continues, the tips of his fingers running across my calves. I suck in my breath. “But we’ll have to clean them up, just in case. Sometimes it’s safer being cut by a butcher knife than being scratched by a random scrap of metal. You don’t want it to get infected.”

He looks up. His hand is now on my knee.

I’m nodding and I don’t know why. I wonder if I’m trembling on the outside as much as I am on the inside. I hope it’s too dark for him to see just how flushed my face is, just how embarrassing it is that he can’t touch my knee without making me crazy. I need to say something. “We should probably get going, right?”

“Yeah.” He takes a deep breath and seems to return to himself. “Yeah. We have to go.” He peers through the evening light. “We have some time before they realize I’m still alive. And we have to use it to our advantage.”

“But once we leave this place—won’t the tracker start back up again? Won’t they know you’re not dead?”

“No.” He jumps into the driver’s side and fumbles for the ignition. There’s no key, just a button. I wonder if it recognizes Adam’s thumbprint as authorization. A small sputter and the machine roars to life. “Warner had to renew my tracker serum every time I got back. Once it’s gone? It’s gone.” He grins. “So now we can really get the hell out of here.”

“But where are we going?” I finally ask.

He shifts into gear before he responds.

“My house.”

Chapter Thirty

“You have a *house*?” I’m too shocked for manners.

Adam laughs and pulls out of the field. The tank is surprisingly fast, surprisingly swift and stealthy. The engine has quieted to a soothing hum, and I wonder if that’s why they switched their tanks from gas to electric. It’s certainly less conspicuous this way. “Not exactly,” he answers. “But a home of sorts. Yeah.”

I want to ask and don’t want to ask and need to ask and never want to ask. I have to ask. I steel myself. “Your father—”

“He’s been dead for a while now.” Adam’s not smiling anymore. His voice is tight with something only I would know how to place. Pain. Bitterness. Anger.

“Oh.”

We drive in silence, each of us absorbed in our own thoughts. I don’t dare ask what became of his mother. I only wonder how he turned out so well despite having such a despicable father. And I wonder why he ever joined the army if he hates it so much. Right now, I’m too shy to ask. I don’t want to infringe on his emotional boundaries.

God knows I have a million of my own.

I peer out the window and strain my eyes to see what we’re passing through, but I can’t make out much more than the sad stretches of deserted land I’ve grown accustomed to. There are no civilians where we are: we’re too far from Reestablished settlements and civilian compounds. I notice another tank patrolling the area not 100 feet away, but I don’t think it sees us. Adam is driving without headlights, presumably to draw as little attention to us as possible. I wonder how he’s even able to navigate. The moon is the only lamp to light our way.

It’s eerily quiet.

For a moment I allow my thoughts to drift back to Warner, wondering what must be going on right now, wondering how many people must be searching for me, wondering what lengths he’ll go to until he has me back. He wants Adam dead. He wants me alive. He won’t stop until I’m trapped beside him.

He can never never never know that I can touch him.

I can only imagine what he'd do if he had access to my body.

I breathe in one quick, sharp, shaky breath and contemplate telling Adam what happened. No. No. No. No. I squeeze my eyes shut and consider I may have misjudged the situation. It was chaotic. My brain was distracted. Maybe I imagined it. Yes.

Maybe I imagined it.

It's strange enough that Adam can touch me. The likelihood of there being 2 people in this world who are immune to my touch doesn't seem possible. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I'm determined I must have made a mistake. It could've been anything brushing my leg. Maybe a piece of the sheet Adam abandoned after using it to punch through the window. Maybe a pillow that'd fallen from the bed. Maybe Warner's gloves lying, discarded, on the floor. Yes.

There's no way he could've touched me, because if he had, he would've cried out in agony.

Just like everyone else.

Adam's hand slips silently into mine and I grip his fingers in both my hands, suddenly desperate to reassure myself that he has immunity from me. I'm suddenly desperate to drink in every drop of his being, desperate to savor every moment I've never known before. I suddenly worry that there's an expiration date on this phenomenon. A clock striking midnight. A pumpkin carriage.

The possibility of losing him

The possibility of losing him

The possibility of losing him is 100 years of solitude I don't want to imagine. I don't want my arms to be devoid of his warmth. His touch. His lips, God his lips, his mouth on my neck, his body wrapped around mine, holding me together as if to affirm that my existence on this earth is not for nothing.

Realization is a pendulum the size of the moon. It won't stop slamming into me.

"Juliette?"

I swallow back the bullet in my throat. "Yes?"

"Why are you crying . . . ?" His voice is almost as gentle as his hand as it breaks free from my grip. He touches the tears rolling down my face and I'm so humiliated I almost don't know what to say.

"You can *touch* me," I say for the first time, recognize out loud for the first time. My words fade to a whisper. "You can touch me. You care and I don't know why. You're kind to me and you don't have to be. My own mother didn't care enough to—t-to—" My voice catches and I press my lips together. Glue

them shut. Force myself to be still.

I am a rock. A statue. A movement frozen in time. Ice feels nothing at all.

Adam doesn't answer, doesn't say a single word until he pulls off the road and into an old underground parking garage. I realize we've reached some semblance of civilization, but it's pitch-black belowground. I can see next to nothing and once again wonder at how Adam is managing. My eyes fall on the screen illuminated on his dashboard only to realize the tank has night vision. *Of course.*

Adam shuts off the engine. I hear him sigh. I can hardly distinguish his silhouette before I feel his hand on my thigh, his other hand tripping its way up my body to find my face. Warmth spreads through my limbs like molten lava. The tips of my fingers and toes are tingling to life and I have to bite back the shiver aching to rock my frame.

"Juliette," he whispers, and I realize just how close he is. I'm not sure why I haven't evaporated into nothingness. "It's been me and you against the world forever," he says. "It's always been that way. It's my fault I took so long to do something about it."

"No." I'm shaking my head. "It's not your fault—"

"It is. I fell in love with you a long time ago. I just never had the guts to act on it."

"Because I could've killed you."

He laughs a quiet laugh. "Because I didn't think I deserved you."

I'm one piece of astonishment forged into being. "What?"

He touches his nose to mine. Leans into my neck. Wraps a piece of my hair around his fingers and I can't I can't I can't breathe. "You're so . . . *good*," he whispers.

"But my hands—"

"Have never done anything to hurt anyone."

I'm about to protest when he corrects himself. "Not on purpose." He leans back. I can just barely see him rubbing the side of his neck. "You never fought back," he says after a moment. "I always wondered why. You never yelled or got angry or tried to say anything to anyone," he says, and I know we're both back in third fourth fifth sixth seventh eighth ninth grade all over again. "But damn, you must've read a million books." I know he's smiling when he says it. A pause. "You bothered no one, but you were a moving target every day. You could've fought back. You could've hurt everyone if you wanted to."

"I don't want to hurt anyone." My voice is less than a whisper. I can't get the

image of 8-year-old Adam out of my head. Lying on the floor. Broken. Abandoned. Crying into the dirt.

The things people will do for power.

“That’s why you’ll never be what Warner wants you to be.”

I’m staring at a point in the blackness, my mind tortured by possibilities. “How can you be sure?”

His lips are so close to mine. “Because you still give a damn about the world.”

I gasp and he’s kissing me, deep and powerful and unrestrained. His arms wrap around my back, dipping my body until I’m practically horizontal and I don’t care. My head is on the seat, his frame hovering over me, his hands gripping my hips from under my tattered dress and I’m licked by a million flames of wanting so desperate I can hardly inhale. He’s a hot bath, a short breath, 5 days of summer pressed into 5 fingers writing stories on my body. I’m an embarrassing mess of nerves crashing into him, controlled by one current of electricity coursing through my core. His scent is assaulting my senses.

His eyes

His hands

His chest

His lips

are at my ear when he speaks. “We’re here, by the way.” He’s breathing harder now than when he was running for his life. I feel his heart pounding against my ribs. His words are a broken whisper. “Maybe we should go inside. It’s safer.” But he doesn’t move.

I almost don’t understand what he’s talking about. I just nod, my head bobbing on my neck, until I remember he can’t see me. I try to remember how to speak, but I’m too focused on the fingers he’s running down my thighs to form sentences. There’s something about the absolute darkness, about not being able to see what’s happening that makes me drunk with a delicious dizziness. “Yes,” is all I manage.

He helps me back up to a seated position, leans his forehead against mine. “I’m sorry,” he says. “It’s so hard for me to stop myself.” His voice is dangerously husky; his words tingle on my skin.

I allow my hands to slip up under his shirt and feel him stiffen, swallow. I trace the perfectly sculpted lines of his body. He’s nothing but lean muscle. “You don’t have to,” I tell him.

His heart is racing so fast I can’t distinguish it from my own. It’s 5,000

degrees in the air between us. His fingers are at the dip right below my hip bone, teasing the small piece of fabric keeping me halfway decent. “Juliette . . .”

“Adam?”

My neck snaps up in surprise. Fear. Anxiety. Adam stops moving, frozen in front of me. I’m not sure he’s breathing. I look around but can’t find a face to match the voice that called his name and begin to panic before Adam is slamming open the door, flying out before I hear it again.

“Adam . . . is that you?”

It’s a boy.

“James!”

The muffled sound of impact, 2 bodies colliding, 2 voices too happy to be dangerous.

“I can’t believe it’s really you! I mean, well, I thought it was you because I thought I heard something and at first I figured it was nothing but then I decided I should probably check just to be sure because what if it was you and—” He pauses. “Wait—what are you doing here?”

“I’m home.” Adam laughs a little.

“Really?” James squeaks. “Are you home for good?”

“Yeah.” He sighs. “Damn it’s good to see you.”

“I missed you,” James says, suddenly quiet.

One deep breath. “Me too, kid. Me too.”

“Hey, so, have you eaten anything? Benny just delivered my dinner package, and I could share some with y—”

“James?”

He pauses. “Yeah?”

“There’s someone I want you to meet.”

My palms are sweaty. My heart is in my throat. I hear Adam walk back toward the tank and don’t realize he’s popped his head inside until he hits a switch. A faint emergency light illuminates the cabin. I blink a few times and see a young boy standing about 5 feet away, dirty-blond hair framing a round face with blue eyes that look too familiar. He’s pressed his lips together in concentration. He’s staring at me.

Adam is opening my door. He helps me to my feet, barely able to control the smile on his face and I’m stunned by the level of my own nervousness. I don’t know why I’m so nervous but God I’m nervous. This boy is obviously important to Adam. I don’t know why but I feel like this *moment* is important, too. I’m so worried I’m going to ruin everything. I try to fix the ripped folds of my dress, try

to soften the wrinkles ironed into the fabric. I run haphazard fingers through my hair. It's useless.

The poor kid will be petrified.

Adam leads me forward. James is a handful of inches short of my height, but it's obvious in his face that he's young, unblemished, untouched by most of the world's harsh realities. I want to revel in the beauty of his innocence.

"James? This is Juliette." Adam glances at me.

"Juliette, this is my brother, James."

Chapter Thirty-One

His brother.

I try to shake off the nerves. I try to smile at the boy studying my face, studying the pathetic pieces of fabric barely covering my body. How did I not know Adam had a brother? How could I have never known?

James turns to Adam. “*This* is Juliette?”

I’m standing here like a lump of nonsense. I don’t remember my manners. “You know who I am?”

James spins back in my direction. “Oh yeah. Adam talks about you *a lot*.”

I flush and can’t help but glance at Adam. He’s staring at a point on the floor. He clears his throat.

“It’s really nice to meet you,” I manage.

James cocks his head. “So do you always dress like that?”

I’d like to die a little.

“Hey, kid,” Adam interrupts. “Juliette is going to be staying with us for a little while. Why don’t you go make sure you don’t have any underwear lying on the floor, huh?”

James looks horrified. He darts into the darkness without another word.

It’s quiet for so many seconds I lose count. I hear some kind of drip in the distance.

I take a deep breath. Bite my bottom lip. Try to find the right words. Fail. “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

Adam hesitates. “Is it okay . . . that I do? We’ll all be sharing the same space and I—”

My stomach drops onto my knees. “Of *course* it’s okay! I just—I mean—are you sure it’s okay—for *him*? If I’m here?”

“There’s no underwear *anywhere*,” James announces, marching forward into the light. I wonder where he disappeared to, where the house is. He looks at me. “So you’re going to be staying with us?”

Adam intervenes. “Yeah. She’s going to crash with us for a bit.”

James looks from me to Adam back to me again. He sticks out his hand. “Well, it’s nice to finally meet you.”

All the color drains from my face. My heart is pounding in my ears. My knees are about to break. I can't stop staring at his small hand outstretched, offered to me.

"*James*," Adam says a little curtly.

James starts laughing. "I was only kidding." He drops his hand.

"What?" I can barely breathe. My head is spinning, confused.

"Don't worry," James says, still chuckling. "I won't touch you. Adam told me all about your magical powers." He rolls his eyes.

"Adam—told—he—*what*?"

"Hey, maybe we should go inside." Adam clears his throat a little too loudly. "I'll just grab our bags real quick—" And he jogs off toward the tank. I'm left staring at James. He doesn't conceal his curiosity.

"How old are you?" he asks me.

"Seventeen."

He nods. "That's what Adam said."

I bristle. "What else did Adam tell you about me?"

"He said you don't have parents, either. He said you're like us."

My heart is a stick of butter, melting recklessly on a hot summer day. My voice softens. "How old are *you*?"

"I'll be eleven next year."

I grin. "So you're ten years old?"

He crosses his arms. Frowns. "I'll be twelve in two years."

I think I already love this kid.

The cabin light shuts off and for a moment we're immersed in absolute darkness. A soft *click* and a faint circular glow illuminates the view. Adam has a flashlight.

"Hey, James? Why don't you lead the way for us?"

"Yes, sir!" He skids to a halt in front of Adam's feet, offers us an exaggerated salute, and runs off so quickly there's no possible way to follow him. I can't help the smile spreading across my face.

Adam's hand slips into mine as we move forward. "You okay?"

I squeeze his fingers. "You told your ten-year-old brother about my magical powers?"

He laughs. "I tell him a lot of things."

"Adam?"

"Yeah?"

"Isn't your *house* the first place Warner will go looking for you? Isn't this

dangerous?”

“It would be. But according to public records, I don’t have a home.”

“And your brother?”

“Would be Warner’s first target. It’s safer for him where I can watch over him. Warner knows I have a brother, he just doesn’t know where. And until he figures it out—which he will—we have to prepare.”

“To fight?”

“To fight back. Yeah.” Even in the dim light of this foreign space I can see the determination holding him together. It makes me want to sing.

I close my eyes. “Good.”

“What’s taking you so long?” James shouts in the distance.

And we’re off.

The parking garage is located underneath an old abandoned office building buried in the shadows. A fire exit leads directly up to the main floor.

James is so excited he’s jumping up and down the stairs, running forward a few steps only to run back to complain we’re not coming fast enough. Adam catches him from behind and lifts him off the floor. He laughs. “You’re going to break your neck.”

James protests but only halfheartedly. He’s all too happy to have his brother back.

A sharp pang of some distant kind of emotion hits me in the heart. It hurts in a bittersweet way I can’t place. I feel oddly warm and numb at the same time.

Adam punches a pass code into a keypad by a massive steel door. There’s a soft *click*, a short *beep*, and he turns the handle.

I’m stunned by what I see inside.

Chapter Thirty-Two

It's a full living room, open and plush. A thick rug, soft chairs, one sofa stretched across the wall. Green and red and orange hues, warm lamps softly lit in the large space. It feels more like a home than anything I've ever seen. The cold, lonely memories of my childhood can't even compare. I feel so safe so suddenly it scares me.

"You like it?" Adam is grinning at me, amused no doubt by the look on my face. I manage to pick my jaw up off the floor.

"I love it," I say, out loud or in my head I'm unsure.

"Adam did it," James says, proud, puffing his chest out a little more than necessary. "He made it for me."

"I didn't *make* it," Adam protests, chuckling. "I just . . . cleaned it up a bit."

"You live here by yourself?" I ask James.

He shoves his hands into his pockets and nods. "Benny stays with me a lot, but mostly I'm here alone. I'm lucky, though."

Adam is dropping our bags onto the couch. He runs a hand through his hair and I watch as the muscles in his back flex, tight, pulled together. I watch as he exhales the tension from his body.

I know why, but I ask anyway. "Why are you lucky?"

"Because I have a visitor. None of the other kids have visitors."

"There are other kids here?" I hope I don't look as horrified as I feel.

James is nodding so quickly his head is wobbling on his neck. "Oh yeah. This whole street. All the kids are here. I'm the only one with my own room, though." He gestures around the space. "This is all mine because Adam got it for me. But everyone else has to share. We have school, sort of. And Benny brings me my food packages. Adam says I can play with the other kids but I can't bring them inside." He shrugs. "It's okay."

The reality of what he's saying spreads like poison in the pit of my stomach.

A street dedicated to orphaned children.

I wonder how their parents died. I don't wonder for long.

I take inventory of the room and notice a tiny refrigerator and a tiny microwave perched on top, both nestled into a corner, see some cabinets set

aside for storage. Adam brought as much stuff as he could—all sorts of canned food and nonperishable items. We both brought our toiletries and multiple sets of clothes. We packed enough to survive for at least a little while.

James pulls a tinfoil package out of the fridge and sticks it in the microwave.

“Wait—James—don’t—” I try to stop him.

His eyes are wide, frozen. “What?”

“The tinfoil—you can’t—you can’t put metal in the microwave—”

“What’s a microwave?”

I blink so many times the room spins. “What . . . ?”

He pulls the lid off the tinfoil container to reveal a small square. It looks like a bouillon cube. He points to the cube and then nods at the microwave. “It’s okay. I always put this in the Automat. Nothing happens.”

“It takes the molecular composition of the food and multiplies it.” Adam is standing beside me. “It doesn’t add any extra nutritional value, but it makes you feel fuller, longer.”

“And it’s cheap!” James says, grinning as he sticks it back in the contraption.

It astounds me how much has changed. People have become so desperate they’re faking *food*.

I have so many questions I’m liable to burst. Adam squeezes my shoulder, gently. He whispers, “We’ll talk later, I promise.” But I’m an encyclopedia with too many blank pages.

James falls asleep with his head in Adam’s lap.

He talked nonstop once he finished his food, telling me all about his sort-of school, and his sort-of friends, and Benny, the elderly lady who takes care of him because “I think she likes Adam better than me but she sneaks me sugar sometimes so it’s okay.” Everyone has a curfew. No one but soldiers are allowed outside after sunset, each soldier armed and instructed to fire at their own discretion. “Some people get more food and stuff than other people,” James said, but that’s because the people are sorted based on what they can provide to The Reestablishment, and not because they’re human beings with the right not to starve to death.

My heart cracked a little more with every word he shared with me.

“You don’t mind that I talk a lot, huh?” He bit down on his bottom lip and studied me.

“I don’t mind at all.”

“Everyone says I talk a lot.” He shrugged. “But what am I supposed to do

when I have so much to say?"

"Hey—about that—" Adam interrupted. "You can't tell anyone we're here, okay?"

James' mouth stopped midmovement. He blinked a few times. He stared hard at his brother. "Not even Benny?"

"No one," Adam said.

For one infinitesimal moment I saw something that looked like raw understanding flash in his eyes. A 10-year-old who can be trusted absolutely. He nodded again and again. "Okay. You were never here."

Adam brushes back wayward strands of hair from James' forehead. He's looking at his brother's sleeping face as if trying to memorize each brushstroke of an oil painting. I'm staring at him staring at James.

I wonder if he knows he's holding my heart in his hand. I take a shaky breath.

Adam looks up and I look down and we're both embarrassed for different reasons.

He whispers, "I should probably put him in bed," but doesn't make an effort to move. James is sound sound sound asleep.

"When was the last time you saw him?" I ask, careful to keep my voice down.

"About six months ago." A pause. "But I talked to him on the phone a lot." Smiles a little. "Told him a lot about you."

I flush. Count my fingers to make sure they're all there. "Didn't Warner monitor your calls?"

"Yeah. But Benny has an untraceable line, and I was always careful to keep it to official reporting, only. In any case, James has known about you for a long time."

"Really . . . ?" I hate that I have to know, but I can hardly help myself. I'm a tangle of butterflies.

He looks up, looks away. Locks eyes with me. Sighs. "Juliette, I've been searching for you since the day you left."

My eyelashes trip into my eyebrows; my jaw drops into my lap.

"I was worried about you," he says quietly. "I didn't know what they were going to do to you."

"Why," I gasp, I swallow, I stumble on words. "Why would you possibly care?"

He leans back against the couch. Runs a free hand over his face. Seasons change. Stars explode. Someone is walking on the moon. “You know I still remember the first day you showed up at school?” He laughs a soft, sad laugh. “Maybe I was too young, and maybe I didn’t know much about the world, but there was something about you I was immediately drawn to. It’s like I just wanted to be near you, like you had this—this *goodness* I never found in my life. This sweetness that I never found at home. I just wanted to hear you talk. I wanted you to see me, to smile at me. Every single day I promised myself I would talk to you. I wanted to *know* you. But every day I was a coward. And one day you just disappeared.

“I’d heard the rumors, but I knew better. I knew you’d never hurt anyone.” He looks down. The earth cracks open and I’m falling into the fissure. “It sounds crazy,” he says finally, so quietly. “To think that I cared so much without ever talking to you.” He hesitates. “But I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I couldn’t stop wondering where you went. What would happen to you. I was afraid you’d never fight back.”

He’s silent for so long I want to bite through my tongue.

“I had to find you,” he whispers. “I asked around everywhere and no one had answers. The world kept falling apart. Things were getting worse and I didn’t know what to do. I had to take care of James and I had to find a way to live and I didn’t know if joining the army would help but I never forgot about you. I always hoped,” he falters, “that one day I would see you again.”

I’ve run out of words. My pockets are full of letters I can’t string together and I’m so desperate to say something that I say nothing and my heart is about to burst through my chest.

“Juliette . . . ?”

“You found me.” 3 syllables. 1 whisper of astonishment.

“Are you . . . upset?”

I look up and for the first time I realize he’s nervous. Worried. Uncertain how I’ll react to this revelation. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry or kiss every inch of his body. I want to fall asleep to the sound of his heart beating in the atmosphere. I want to know he’s alive and well, breathing in and out, strong and sane and healthy forever. “You’re the only one who ever cared.” My eyes are filling with tears and I’m blinking them back and feeling the burn in my throat and everything everything everything hurts. The weight of the entire day crashes into me, threatens to break my bones. I want to cry out in happiness, in agony, in joy and the absence of justice. I want to touch the heart of the only

person who ever gave a damn.

“I love you,” I whisper. “So much more than you will ever know.”

His eyes are a midnight moment filled with memories, the only windows into my world. His jaw is tight. His mouth is tight. He looks up and tries to clear his throat and I know he needs a moment to pull himself together. I tell him he should probably put James in bed. He nods. Cradles his brother to his chest. Gets to his feet and carries James to the storage closet that’s become his bedroom.

I watch him walk away with the only family he has left and I know why Adam joined the army.

I know why he suffered through being Warner’s whipping boy. I know why he dealt with the horrifying reality of war, why he was so desperate to run away, so ready to run away as soon as possible. Why he’s so determined to fight back.

He’s fighting for so much more than himself.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Why don’t I take a look at those cuts?”

Adam is standing in front of James’ door, his hands tucked into his pockets. He’s wearing a dark red T-shirt that hugs his torso. His arms are expertly chiseled, professionally painted with tattoos I now know how to recognize. He catches me staring.

“I didn’t really have a choice,” he says, now examining the consecutive black bands of ink etched into his forearms. “We had to survive. It was the only job I could get.”

I meet him across the room, touch the designs on his skin. Nod. “I understand.”

He almost laughs, nearly smiles. Shakes his head just a millimeter.

“What?” I jerk my hand away.

“Nothing.” He grins. Slips his arms around my waist. “It just keeps hitting me. You’re really here. In my house.”

Heat rushes up my neck and I fall off a ladder holding a paintbrush dipped in red. Compliments are not things I know how to process. I bite my lip. “Where’d you get your tattoo from?”

“These?” He looks at his arms again.

“No.” I reach for his shirt, tugging it up so unsuccessfully he nearly loses his balance. He stumbles back against the wall. I push the material up toward his collar. Fight back a blush. Touch his chest. Touch the bird. “Where’d you get *this* from?”

“Oh.” He’s looking at me but I’m suddenly distracted by the beauty of his body and the cargo pants set a little too low on his hips. I realize he must’ve taken his belt off. I force my eyes upward. Allow my fingers to fumble down his abs. He takes a tight breath. “I don’t know,” he says. “I just—I kept dreaming about this white bird. Birds used to fly, you know.”

“You used to dream about it?”

“Yeah. All the time.” He smiles a little, exhales a little, remembering. “It was nice. It felt good—hopeful. I wanted to hold on to that memory because I wasn’t sure it would last. So I made it permanent.”

I cover the tattoo with the palm of my hand. "I used to dream about this bird all the time."

"*This* bird?" His eyebrows could touch the sky.

I nod. "This exact one." Something like realization slides into place. "Until the day you showed up in my cell. I haven't dreamt of it ever since." I peek up at him.

"You're kidding." But he knows I'm not.

I drop his shirt and lean my forehead on his chest. Breathe in the scent of him. He wastes no time pulling me closer. Rests his chin on my head, his hands on my back.

And we stand like that until I'm too old to remember a world without his warmth.

Adam cleans my cuts in a bathroom set a little off to the side of the space. It's a miniature room with a toilet, a sink, a small mirror, and a tiny shower. I love all of it. By the time I get out of the bathroom, finally changed and washed up for bed, Adam is waiting for me in the dark. There are blankets and pillows laid out on the floor and it looks like heaven. I'm so exhausted I could sleep through a few centuries.

I slip in beside him and he scoops me into his arms. The temperature is significantly lower in this place, and Adam is the perfect furnace. I bury my face in his chest and he pulls me tight. I trail my fingers down his naked back, feel the muscles tense under my touch. I rest my hand on the waist of his pants. Hook my finger into a belt loop. Test the taste of the words on my tongue. "I meant it, you know."

His breath is a beat too late. His heart just a beat too fast. "Meant what . . . ?" Though he knows exactly what I mean.

I feel so shy so suddenly. So blind, so unnecessarily bold. I know nothing about what I'm venturing into. All I know is I don't want anyone's hands on me but his. Forever.

Adam leans back and I can just make out the outline of his face, his eyes always shining in the darkness. I stare at his lips when I speak. "I've never asked you to stop." My fingers rest on the button holding his pants together. "Not once."

He's staring at me, his chest rising and falling a few times a second. He seems almost numb with disbelief.

I lean into his ear. "Touch me."

And he's nearly undone.

My face is in his hands and my lips are at his lips and he's kissing me and I'm oxygen and he's dying to breathe. His body is almost on top of mine, one hand in my hair, the other feeling its way down my silhouette, slipping behind my knee to pull me closer, higher, tighter. He drops kisses down my throat like ecstasy, electric energy searing into me, setting me on fire. I'm on the verge of combusting from the sheer thrill of every moment. I want to dive into his being, experience him with all 5 senses, drown in the waves of wonder enveloping my existence.

I want to taste the landscape of his body.

He takes my hands and presses them against his chest, guides my fingers as they trail down the length of his torso before his lips meet mine again and again and again drugging me into a delirium I never want to escape. But it's not enough. It's still not enough. I want to melt into him, trace the form of his figure with my lips alone. My heart is racing through my blood, destroying my self-control, spinning everything into a cyclone of intensity. He breaks for air and I pull him back, aching, desperate, dying for his touch. His hands slip up under my shirt, skirting my sides, touching me like he's never dared to before, and my top is nearly over my head when a door squeaks open. We both freeze.

"Adam . . . ?"

He can hardly breathe. He tries to lower himself onto the pillow beside me but I can still feel his heat, his figure, his heart pounding in my ears. I'm swallowing back a million screams. Adam leans his head up, just a little. Tries to sound normal. "James?"

"Can I come sleep out here with you?"

Adam sits up. He's breathing hard but he's suddenly alert. "Of course you can." A pause. His voice slows, softens. "You have bad dreams?"

James doesn't answer.

Adam is on his feet.

I hear the muffled hiccup of 10-year-old tears, but can barely distinguish the outline of Adam's body holding James together. "I thought you said it was getting better," I hear him whisper, but his words are kind, not accusing.

James says something I can't hear.

Adam picks him up, and I realize how tiny James seems in comparison. They disappear into the bedroom only to return with bedding. Only once James is tucked securely in place a few feet from Adam does he finally give in to exhaustion. His heavy breathing is the only sound in the room.

Adam turns to me. I've been a slice of silence, struck, shocked, cut deep by this reminder. I have no idea what James has witnessed at such a tender age. I have no idea what Adam has had to endure in leaving him behind. I have no idea how people live anymore. How they survive.

~~I don't know what's become of my parents.~~

Adam brushes my cheek. Slips me into his arms. Says, "I'm sorry," and I kiss the apology away.

"When the time is right," I tell him.

He swallows. Leans into my neck. Inhales. His hands are under my shirt. Up my back.

I bite back a gasp. "Soon."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Adam and I forced ourselves 5 feet apart last night, but somehow I wake up in his arms. He's breathing softly, evenly, steadily, a warm hum in the morning air. I blink, peering into the daylight only to be met by a set of big blue eyes on a 10-year-old's face.

"How come you can touch *him*?" James is standing over us with his arms crossed, back to the stubborn boy I remember. There's no trace of fear, no hint of tears threatening to spill down his face. It's like last night never happened. "*Well?*" His impatience startles me.

I jump away from Adam's uncovered upper half so quickly it jolts him awake. A little.

He reaches for me. "Juliette . . . ?"

"You're touching a *girl*!"

Adam sits up so quickly he tangles in the sheets and falls back on his elbows. "Jesus, James—"

"You were sleeping next to a *girl*!"

Adam opens and closes his mouth several times. He glances at me. Glances at his brother. Shuts his eyes and finally sighs. Runs a hand through his morning hair. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"I thought you said she couldn't touch anyone." James is staring at me now, suspicious.

"She can't."

"Except for you?"

"Right. Except for me."

~~And Warner.~~

"She can't touch anyone except for you."

~~And Warner.~~

"Right."

"That seems awfully *convenient*." James narrows his eyes.

Adam laughs out loud. "Where'd you learn to talk like that?"

James frowns. "Benny says that a lot. She says my excuses are 'awfully convenient.'" He makes air quotes with two fingers. "She says it means I don't

believe you. And I don't believe you."

Adam gets to his feet. The early morning light filters through the small windows at the perfect angle, the perfect moment. He's bathed in gold, his muscles taut, his pants still a little low on his hips and I have to force myself to think straight. I'm shocked by my own lack of self-control, but I'm not sure I know how to contain these feelings. Adam makes me hungry for things I never knew I could have.

I watch as he drapes an arm over his brother's shoulders before squatting down to meet his gaze. "Can I talk to you about something?" he says. "Privately?"

"Just me and you?" James glances at me out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah. Just me and you."

"Okay."

I watch the two of them disappear into James' room and wonder what Adam is going to tell him. It takes me a moment to realize James must feel threatened by my sudden appearance. He finally sees his brother after nearly 6 months only to have him come home with a strange girl with crazy magical powers. I nearly laugh at the idea. If only it were magic that made me this way.

I don't want James to think I'm taking Adam away from him.

I slip back under the covers and wait. The morning is cool and brisk and my thoughts begin to wander to Warner. I need to remember that we're not safe. Not yet, maybe not ever. I need to remember never to get too comfortable. I sit up. Pull my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around my ankles.

I wonder if Adam has a plan.

James' door squeaks open. The two brothers step out, the younger before the older. James looks a little pink and he can hardly meet my eyes. He looks embarrassed and I wonder if Adam punished him.

My heart fails for a moment.

Adam claps James on the shoulder. Squeezes. "You okay?"

"I know what a *girlfriend* is—"

"I never said you didn't—"

"So you're his *girlfriend*?" James crosses his arms, looks at me.

There are 400 cotton balls caught in my windpipe. I look at Adam because I don't know what else to do.

"Hey, maybe you should be getting ready for school, huh?" Adam opens the refrigerator and hands James a new foil package. I assume it's his breakfast.

"I don't *have* to go," James protests. "It's not like a *real* school, no one *has*

to—”

“I want you to,” Adam cuts him off. He turns back to his brother with a small smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll be here when you get back.”

James hesitates. “You promise?”

“Yeah.” Another grin. Nods him over. “Come here.”

James runs forward and clings to Adam like he’s afraid he’ll disappear. Adam pops the foil food into the Automat and presses a button. He musses James’ hair. “You need to get a haircut, kid.”

James wrinkles his nose. “I like it.”

“It’s a little long, don’t you think?”

James lowers his voice. “I think *her* hair is really long.”

James and Adam glance back at me and I melt into pink Play-Doh. I touch my hair without intending to, suddenly self-conscious. I look down. I’ve never had a reason to cut my hair. I’ve never even had the tools. No one offers me sharp objects.

I chance a peek and see Adam is still staring at me. James is staring at the Automat.

“I like her hair,” Adam says, and I’m not sure who he’s talking to.

I watch the two of them as Adam helps his brother get ready for school. James is so full of life, so full of energy, so excited to have his brother around. It makes me wonder what it must be like for a 10-year-old to live on his own. What it must be like for all the kids who live on this street.

I’m itching to get up and change, but I’m not sure what I should do. I don’t want to take up the bathroom in case James needs it, or if Adam needs it. I don’t want to take up any more space than I already have. It feels so private, so personal, this relationship between Adam and James. It’s the kind of bond I’ve never had, will never have. But being around so much love has managed to thaw my frozen parts into something human. I *feel* human. Like maybe I could be a part of this world. Like maybe I don’t have to be a monster. Maybe I’m not a monster.

Maybe things can change.

Chapter Thirty-Five

James is at school, Adam is in the shower, and I'm staring at a bowl of granola Adam left for me to eat. It feels so wrong to be eating this food when James has to eat the unidentifiable substance in the foil container. But Adam says James is allocated a certain portion for every meal, and he's required to eat it by law. If he's found wasting it or discarding it, he could be punished. All the orphans are expected to eat the foil food that goes in their Automat. James claims it "doesn't taste too bad."

I shiver slightly in the cool morning air and smooth a hand over my hair, still damp from the shower. The water here isn't hot. It isn't even warm. It's freezing. Warm water is a luxury.

Someone is pounding on the door.

I'm up.

Spinning.

Scanning.

Scared.

They found us is the only thing I can think of. My stomach is a flimsy crepe, my heart a raging woodpecker, my blood a river of anxiety.

Adam is in the shower.

James is at school.

~~I'm absolutely defenseless.~~

I rummage through Adam's duffel bag until I find what I'm looking for. 2 guns, 1 for each hand. 2 hands, just in case the guns fail. I'm finally wearing the kind of clothes that would be comfortable to fight in. I take a deep breath and beg my hands not to shake.

The pounding gets harder.

I point the guns at the door.

"Juliette . . . ?"

I spin back to see Adam staring at me, the guns, the door. His hair is wet. His eyes are wide. He nods toward the extra gun in my hand and I toss it to him

without a word.

“If it were Warner he wouldn’t be knocking,” he says, though he doesn’t lower his weapon.

I know he’s right. Warner would’ve shot down the door, used explosives, killed a hundred people to get to me. He certainly wouldn’t wait for me to open the door. Something calms inside of me but I won’t allow myself to get comfortable. “Who do you think—?”

“It might be Benny—she usually checks up on James—”

“But wouldn’t she know he’d be at school right now?”

“No one else knows where I live—”

The pounding is getting weaker. Slower. There’s a low, guttural sound of agony.

Adam and I lock eyes.

One more fist flailing into the door. A slump. Another moan. The thud of a body against the door.

I flinch.

Adam rakes a hand through his hair.

“Adam!” someone cries. Coughs. “Please, man, if you’re in there—”

I freeze. The voice sounds familiar.

Adam’s spine straightens in an instant. His lips are parted, his eyes astonished. He punches in the pass code and turns the latch. Points his gun toward the door as he eases it open.

“Kenji?”

A short wheeze. A muffled groan. “Shit, man, what took you so long?”

“What the hell are you *doing here*?” Click. I can hardly see through the small slit of the door, but it’s clear Adam isn’t happy to have company. “Who sent you here? Who are you with?”

Kenji swears a few more times under his breath. “*Look at me*,” he demands, though it sounds more like a plea. “You think I came up here to kill you?”

Adam pauses. Breathes. Doubts. “I have no problem putting a bullet in your back.”

“Don’t worry, bro. I already have a bullet in my back. Or my leg. Or some shit. I don’t even know.”

Adam opens the door. “Get up.”

“It’s all right, I don’t mind if you drag my ass inside.”

Adam works his jaw. “I don’t want your blood on my carpet. It’s not something my brother needs to see.”

Kenji stumbles up and staggers into the room. I'd heard his voice once before, but never seen his face. Though this probably isn't the best time for first impressions. His eyes are puffy, swollen, purple; there's a huge gash in the side of his forehead. His lip is split, slightly bleeding, his body slumped and broken. He winces, takes short breaths as he moves. His clothes are ripped to shreds, his upper body covered by nothing but a tank top, his well-developed arms cut and bruised. I'm amazed he didn't freeze to death. He doesn't seem to notice me until he does.

He stops. Blinks. Breaks into a ridiculous smile dimmed only by a slight grimace from the pain. "Holy shit," he says, still drinking me in. "Holy *shit*." He tries to laugh. "Dude, you're *insane*—"

"The bathroom is over here." Adam is set in stone.

Kenji moves forward but keeps looking back. I point the gun at his face. He laughs harder, flinches, wheezes a bit. "Dude, you ran off with the crazy chick! You ran off with the psycho girl!" he's calling after Adam. "I thought they made that shit up. What the hell were you thinking? What are you going to do with the psycho chick? No *wonder* Warner wants you dead—OW, MAN, what the *hell* —"

"She's not crazy. And she's not *deaf*, asshole."

The door slams shut behind them and I can only make out their muffled argument. I have a feeling Adam doesn't want me to hear what he has to say to Kenji. Either that, or it's the screaming.

I have no idea what Adam is doing, but I assume it has something to do with dislodging a bullet from Kenji's body and generally repairing the rest of his wounds as best he can. Adam has a pretty extensive first aid supply and strong, steady hands. I wonder if he picked up these skills in the army. Maybe for taking care of himself. Or maybe his brother. It would make sense.

Health insurance was a dream we lost a long time ago.

I've been holding this gun in my hand for nearly an hour. I've been listening to Kenji scream for nearly an hour and I only know that because I like counting the seconds as they pass by. I have no idea what time it is. I think there's a clock in James' bedroom but I don't want to go into his room without permission.

I stare at the gun in my hand, at the smooth, heavy metal, and I'm surprised to find that I enjoy the way it feels in my grip. Like an extension of my body. It doesn't frighten me anymore.

It frightens me more that I might use it.

The bathroom door opens and Adam walks out. He has a small towel in his hands. I get to my feet. He offers me a small smile. He reaches into the tiny fridge for the even tinier freezer section. Grabs a couple of ice cubes and drops them into the towel. Disappears into the bathroom again.

I sit back on the couch.

It's raining today. The sky is weeping for us.

Adam comes out of the bathroom, this time empty-handed, still alone.

I stand back up.

He rubs his forehead, the back of his neck. Meets me on the couch. "I'm sorry," he says.

My eyes are wide. "For what?"

"Everything." He sighs. "Kenji was a sort of friend of mine back on base. Warner had him tortured after we left. For information."

I swallow a gasp.

"He says he didn't say anything—didn't have anything to say, really—but he got messed up pretty bad. I have no idea if his ribs are broken or just bruised, but I managed to get the bullet out of his leg."

I take his hand. Squeeze.

"He got shot running away," Adam says after a moment.

And something slams into my consciousness. I panic. "The tracker serum—"

Adam nods, his eyes heavy, distraught. "I think it might be dysfunctional, but I have no way of knowing for sure. I do know that if it were working as it should, Warner would be here by now. But we can't risk it. We have to get out, and we have to get rid of Kenji before we go."

I'm shaking my head, caught between colliding currents of disbelief. "How did he even *find* you?"

Adam's face hardens. "He started screaming before I could ask."

"And James?" I whisper, almost afraid to wonder.

Adam drops his head into his hands. "As soon as he gets home, we have to go. We can use this time to prepare." He meets my eyes. "I can't leave James behind. It's not safe for him here anymore."

I touch his cheek and he leans into my hand, holds my palm against his face. Closes his eyes.

"*Son of a motherless goat—*"

Adam and I break apart. I'm blushing past my hairline. Adam looks annoyed. Kenji is leaning against the wall in the bathroom hallway, holding the makeshift ice pack to his face. Staring at us.

“You can *touch* her? I mean—shit, I just *saw* you touch her but that’s not even—”

“You have to go,” Adam says to him. “You’ve already left a chemical trace leading right to my home. We need to leave, and you can’t come with us.”

“Oh hey—whoa—hold on.” Kenji stumbles into the living room, wincing as he puts pressure on his leg. “I’m not trying to slow you down, man. I know a place. A safe place. Like, a legit, super-safe place. I can take you. I can show you how to get there. I know a guy.”

“Bullshit.” Adam is still angry. “How did you even find me? How did you manage to show up at my *door*, Kenji? I don’t trust you—”

“I don’t know, man. I swear I don’t remember what happened. I don’t know where I was running after a certain point. I was just jumping fences. I found a huge field with an old shed. Slept in there for a while. I think I blacked out at one point, either from the pain or from the cold—it is cold as *hell* out here—and the next thing I know, some dude is carrying me. Drops me off at your door. Tells me to shut up about Adam, because Adam lives right here.” He grins. Tries to wink. “I guess I was dreaming about you in my sleep.”

“Wait—what?” Adam leans forward. “What do you mean some guy was carrying you? What guy? What was his name? How did he know *my* name?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me, and it’s not like I had the presence of mind to ask. But dude was *huge*. I mean, he had to be if he was going to lug my ass around.”

“You can’t honestly expect me to believe you.”

“You have no choice.” Kenji shrugs.

“Of course I have a choice.” Adam is on his feet. “I have no reason to trust you. No reason to believe a word that’s coming out of your mouth.”

“Then why am I here with a bullet in my leg? Why hasn’t Warner found you yet? Why am I *unarmed*—”

“This could be a part of your plan!”

“And you helped me anyway!” Kenji dares to raise his voice. “Why didn’t you just let me die? Why didn’t you shoot me dead? Why did you *help* me?”

Adam falters. “I don’t know.”

“You *do* know. You *know* I’m not here to mess you up. I took a goddamn beating for you—”

“You weren’t protecting any information of mine.”

“Well, shit, man, what the hell do you want me to say? They were going to *kill* my ass. I had to run. It wasn’t my fault some dude dropped me off at your

door—”

“This isn’t just about *me*, don’t you understand? I’ve worked so hard to find a safe place for my brother and in one morning you ruined *years* of planning. What the hell am I supposed to do now? I have to run until I can find a way to keep him safe. He’s too young to have to deal with this—”

“We’re *all* too young to have to deal with this shit.” Kenji is breathing hard. “Don’t fool yourself, bro. No one should have to see what we’ve seen. No one should have to wake up in the morning and find dead bodies in their living room, but shit happens. We deal with it, and we find a way to *survive*. You’re not the only one with problems.”

Adam sinks into the sofa. 80 pounds of worry weigh down his shoulders. He leans forward with his head in his hands.

Kenji stares at me. I stare back.

He grins and hobbles forward. “You know, you’re pretty sexy for a psycho chick.”

Click.

Kenji is backing up with his hands in the air. Adam is pressing a gun to his forehead. “Show some respect, or I will burn it into your skull.”

“I was *kidding*—”

“Like hell you were.”

“Damn, Adam, calm the hell down—”

“Where’s the ‘super-safe place’ you can take us?” I’m up, gun still gripped in my hand. I move into position next to Adam. “Or are you making that up?”

Kenji lights up. “No, that’s real. Very real. In fact, I may or may not have mentioned something about you. And the dude who runs the place may or may not be ridiculously interested in meeting you.”

“You think I’m some kind of freak you can show off to your friends?” Locked. Loaded.

Kenji clears his throat. “Not a freak. Just . . . interesting.”

I point my gun at his nose. “I’m so interesting I can kill you with my bare hands.”

A barely perceptible flash of fear flickers in his eyes. He swallows a few gallons of humility. Tries to smile. “You sure you’re not crazy?”

“No.” I cock my head. “I’m not sure.”

Kenji grins. Looks me up and down. “Well damn. But you make crazy sound so *good*.”

“I’m about five inches from breaking your face,” Adam warns him, his voice

like steel, his body stiff with anger, his eyes narrowed, unflinching. There's no hint of humor in his expression. "I don't need another reason."

"What?" Kenji laughs, undeterred. "I haven't been this close to a chick in *way too long*, bro. And crazy or not—"

"I'm not interested."

Kenji turns to face me. "Well I'm not sure I blame you. I look like hell right now. But I clean up okay." He attempts a grin. "Give me a couple days. You might change your mind—"

Adam elbows him in the face and doesn't apologize.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Kenji is swearing, bleeding, running out of expletives and tripping his way toward the bathroom, holding his nose together.

Adam pulls me into James' bedroom.

"Tell me something," he says. He stares up at the ceiling, takes a hard breath. "Tell me anything—"

I try to focus his eyes, grasp his hands, gentle gentle gentle. I wait until he's looking at me. "Nothing is going to happen to James. We'll keep him safe. I promise."

His eyes are full of pain like I've never seen them before. He parts his lips. Presses them together. Changes his mind a million times until his words tumble through the air between us. "He doesn't even know about our dad." It's the first time he's acknowledged the issue. It's the first time he's acknowledged that I know anything about it. "I never wanted him to know. I made up stories for him. I wanted him to have a chance to be *normal*." His lips are spelling secrets and my ears are spilling ink, staining my skin with his stories. "I don't want anyone to touch him. I don't want to screw him up. I can't—God I can't let it happen," he says to me. Hushed. Quiet.

I've searched the world for all the right words and my mouth is full of nothing.

"It's never enough," he whispers. "I can never do enough. He still wakes up screaming. He still cries himself to sleep. He sees things I can't control." He blinks a million times. "So many people, Juliette."

I hold my breath.

"Dead."

I touch the word on his lips and he kisses my fingers. His eyes are two pools of perfection, open, honest, humble. "I don't know what to do," he says, and it's like a confession that costs him so much more than I can understand. Control is slipping through his fingers and he's desperate to hold on. "*Tell me what to do.*"

I can hear our heartbeats in the silence between us. I study the shape of his lips, the strong lines of his face, the eyelashes any girl would kill for, the deep dark blue of the eyes I've learned to swim in. I offer him the only possibility I

have. “Kenji’s plan might be worth considering.”

“You trust him?” Adam leans back, surprised.

“I don’t think he’s lying about knowing a place we can go.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why not . . . ?”

Something that might not be a laugh. “I might kill him before we even get there.”

My lips twist into a sad smile. “There isn’t any other place for us to hide, is there?”

The sun is revolving around the moon when he responds. He shakes his head. Once. Fast. Tight.

I squeeze his hand. “Then we have to try.”

“What the hell are you doing in there?” Kenji shouts through the door. Pounds it a couple times. “I mean, shit, man, I don’t think there’s *ever* a bad time to get naked, but now is probably not the best time for a nooner. So unless you want to get killed, I suggest you get your ass out here. We have to get ready to go.”

“I might kill him right now,” Adam changes his mind.

I take his face in my hands, tip up on my toes and kiss him. His lips are 2 pillows, so soft, so sweet. “I love you.”

He’s looking into my eyes and looking at my mouth and his voice is a husky whisper. “Yeah?”

“Absolutely.”

The 3 of us are packed and ready to go before James comes home from school. Adam and I collected the most important basic necessities: food, clothes, money Adam saved up. He keeps looking around the small space like he can’t believe he’s lost it so easily. I can only imagine how much work he put into it, how hard he tried to make a home for his little brother. My heart is in pieces for him.

His friend is an entirely different species.

Kenji is nursing new bruises, but seems in reasonable spirits, excited for reasons I can’t fathom. He’s oddly resilient and upbeat. It seems impossible to discourage him and I can’t help but admire his determination. But he won’t stop staring at me.

“So how come you can touch Adam?” he says after a moment.

“I don’t know.”

He snorts. “Bull.”

I shrug. I don't feel the need to convince him that I have absolutely no idea how I got so lucky.

"How'd you even know you could touch him? Some kind of sick experiment?"

I hope I'm not blushing. "Where's this place you're taking us?"

"Why are you changing the subject?" He's grinning. I'm sure he's grinning. I refuse to look at him, though. "Maybe you can touch *me*, too. Why don't you try?"

"You don't want me to touch you."

"Maybe I do." He's definitely grinning.

"Maybe you should leave her alone before I put that bullet back in your leg," Adam offers.

"I'm sorry—is a lonely man not allowed to make a move, Kent? Maybe I'm actually interested. Maybe you should back the hell off and let her speak for herself."

Adam runs a hand through his hair. Always the same hand. Always through his hair. He's flustered. Frustrated. Maybe even embarrassed.

"I'm still not interested," I remind him, an edge to my voice.

"Yes, but let's not forget that *this*"—he motions to his battered face—"is not permanent."

"Well, I'm permanently uninterested." I want so badly to tell him that I'm unavailable. I want to tell him that I'm in a serious relationship. I want to tell him that Adam's made me promises.

But I can't.

I have no idea what it means to be in a relationship. I don't know if saying "I love you" is code for "mutually exclusive," and I don't know if Adam was serious when he told James I was his girlfriend. Maybe it was an excuse, a cover, an easy answer to an otherwise complicated question. I wish he would say something to Kenji—I wish he would tell him that we're together officially, exclusively.

But he doesn't.

And I don't know why.

"I don't think you should decide until the swelling goes down," Kenji continues matter-of-factly. "It's only fair. I have a pretty spectacular face."

Adam chokes on a cough that I think was a laugh.

"You know, I could've sworn we used to be cool," Kenji says, leveling his gaze at Adam.

“I can’t remember why.”

Kenji bristles. “Is there something you want to say to me?”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Then why am I still here?”

“Because I trust *her*.”

Kenji turns to look at me. He manages a goofy smile. “Aw, you trust me?”

“As long as I have a clear shot.” I tighten my hold on the gun in my hand.

His grin is crooked. “I don’t know why, but I kind of like it when you threaten me.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot.”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “You’ve got a sexy voice. Makes everything sound naughty.”

Adam stands up so suddenly he nearly knocks over the coffee table.

Kenji bursts out laughing, wheezing against the pain of his injuries. “Calm down, Kent, *damn*. I’m just messing with you guys. I like seeing psycho chick get all intense.” He glances at me, lowers his voice. “I mean that as a compliment—because, you know”—he waves a haphazard hand in my direction—“psycho kind of works for you.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Adam turns on him.

“What the hell is wrong with *you*?” Kenji crosses his arms, annoyed. “Everyone is so uptight in here.”

Adam squeezes the gun in his hand. Walks to the door. Walks back. He’s pacing.

“And don’t worry about your brother,” Kenji adds. “I’m sure he’ll be here soon.”

Adam doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t stop pacing. His jaw twitches. “I’m not worried about my brother. I’m trying to decide whether to shoot you now or later.”

“Later,” Kenji says, collapsing onto the couch. “You still need me right now.”

Adam tries to speak but he’s out of time.

The door clicks, beeps, unlatches open.

James is home.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“I’m really happy you’re taking it so well—I am—but James, this really isn’t something to be excited about. We’re running for our lives.”

“But we’re doing it *together*,” he says for the fifth time, a huge grin overcrowding his face. He took a liking to Kenji almost too quickly, and now the pair of them are conspiring to turn our predicament into some kind of elaborate mission. “And I can *help*!”

“No, it’s not—”

“Of course you can—”

Adam and Kenji speak at the same time. Kenji recovers first. “Why can’t he help? Ten years old is old enough to help.”

“That’s not your call,” Adam says, careful to control his voice. I know he’s staying calm for his brother’s sake. “And it’s none of your business.”

“I’ll finally get to come *with* you,” James says, undeterred. “And I want to help.”

James took the news in stride. He didn’t even flinch when Adam explained the real reason why he was home, and why we were together. I thought seeing Kenji’s bruised and battered face would scare him, unnerve him, instill a sense of fear in his heart, but James was eerily unmoved. It occurred to me he must’ve seen much worse.

Adam takes a few deep breaths before turning to Kenji. “How far?”

“By foot?” Kenji looks uncertain for the first time. “At least a few hours. If we don’t do anything stupid, we should be there by nightfall.”

“And if we take a car?”

Kenji blinks. His surprise dissolves into an enormous grin. “Well, shit, Kent, why didn’t you say so sooner?”

“Watch your mouth around my brother.”

James rolls his eyes. “I hear worse stuff than that *every day*. Even Benny uses bad words.”

“*Benny*?” Adam’s eyebrows stumble up his forehead.

“Yup.”

“What does she—” He stops. Changes his mind. “That doesn’t mean it’s

okay for you to keep hearing it.”

“I’m almost eleven!”

“Hey, little man,” Kenji interrupts. “It’s okay. It’s my fault. I should be more careful. Besides, there are ladies present.” Kenji winks at me.

I look away. Look around.

It’s difficult for *me* to leave this humble home, so I can only imagine what Adam must be experiencing right now. I think James is too excited about the dangerous road ahead of us to realize what’s happening. To truly understand that he’ll never be coming back here.

We’re all fugitives running for our lives.

“So, what—you stole a car?” Kenji asks.

“A tank.”

Kenji barks out a laugh. “NICE.”

“It’s a little conspicuous for daytime, though.”

“What’s *conspicuous* mean?” James asks.

“It’s a little too . . . noticeable.” Adam cringes.

“*SHIT*.” Kenji stumbles up to his feet.

“I told you to watch your mouth—”

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what—?”

Kenji’s eyes are darting in every direction. “Is there another way out of here?”

Adam is up. “JAMES—”

James runs to his brother’s side. Adam checks his gun. I’m slinging bags over my back, Adam is doing the same, his attention diverted by the front door.

“HURRY—”

“How close—?”

“THERE’S NO TIME—”

“What do you—”

“KENT, RUN—”

And we’re running, following Adam into James’ room. Adam rips a curtain off of one wall to reveal a hidden door just as 3 beeps sound from the living room.

Adam shoots the lock on the exit door.

Something explodes not 15 feet behind us. The sound shatters in my ears, vibrates through my body. I nearly collapse from the impact. Gunshots are everywhere. Footsteps are pounding into the house but we’re already running

through the exit. Adam hauls James up and into his arms and we're flying through the sudden burst of light blinding our way through the streets. The rain has stopped. The roads are slick and muddy. There are children everywhere, bright colors of small bodies suddenly screaming at our approach. There's no point being inconspicuous anymore.

They've already found us.

Kenji is lagging behind, stumbling his way through the last of his adrenaline rush. We turn into a narrow alleyway and he slumps against the wall. "I'm sorry," he pants, "I can't—you can leave me—"

"We can't leave you—," Adam shouts, looking everywhere, drinking in our surroundings.

"That's sweet, bro, but it's okay—"

"We need you to show us where to go!"

"Well, *shit*—"

"You said you would help us—"

"I thought you said you had a *tank*—"

"If you hadn't noticed, there's been an unexpected change of plans—"

"I can't keep up, Kent. I can barely walk—"

"You have to *try*—"

"There are rebels on the loose. They are armed and ready to fire. Curfew is now in effect. Everyone return to their homes immediately. There are rebels on the loose. They are armed and ready to fi—"

The loudspeakers sound around the streets, drawing attention to our bodies huddled together in the narrow alley. A few people see us and scream. Boots are getting louder. Gunshots are getting wilder.

I take a moment to analyze the surrounding buildings and realize we're not in a settled compound. The street James lives on is unregulated turf: a series of abandoned office buildings crammed together, leftovers from our old lives. I don't understand why he's not living in a compound like the rest of the population. I don't have time to figure out why I only see two age groups represented, why the elderly and the orphaned are the only residents, why they've been dumped on illegal land with soldiers who are not supposed to be here. I'm afraid to consider the answers to my own questions and in a panicked moment I fear for James' life. I spin around as we run, glimpsing his small body bundled in Adam's arms.

His eyes are squeezed shut so tight I'm sure it hurts.

Adam swears under his breath. He kicks down the first door we can find of a

deserted building and yells for us to follow him inside.

“I need you to stay here,” he says to Kenji. “And I’m out of my mind, but I need to leave James with you. I need you to watch out for him. They’re looking for Juliette, and they’re looking for *me*. They won’t even expect to find you two.”

“What are you going to do?” Kenji asks.

“I need to steal a car. Then I’ll come back for you.” James doesn’t even protest as Adam puts him down. His little lips are white. His eyes wide. His hands trembling. “I’ll come back for you, James,” Adam says again. “I promise.”

James nods over and over and over again. Adam kisses his head, once, hard, fast. Drops our duffel bags on the floor. Turns to Kenji. “If you let anything happen to him, I will kill you.”

Kenji doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t scowl. He takes a deep breath. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Juliette?”

He takes my hand, and we disappear into the streets.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The roads are packed with pedestrians trying to escape. Adam and I hide our guns in the waistbands of our pants, but our wild eyes and jerky movements seem to give us away. Everyone stays away from us, darting in opposite directions, some squeaking, shouting, crying, dropping the things in their hands. But for all the people, I don't see a single car in sight. They must be hard to come by, especially in this area.

Adam pushes me to the ground just as a bullet flies past my head. He shoots down another door and we run through the ruins toward another exit, trapped in the maze of what used to be a clothing store. Gunshots and footsteps are close behind. There must be at least a hundred soldiers following us through these streets, clustered in different groups, dispersed in different areas of the city, ready to capture and kill.

But I know they won't kill me.

It's Adam I'm worried about.

I try to stay as close as possible to his body because I'm certain Warner has given them orders to bring me back alive. My efforts, however, are weak at best. Adam has enough height and muscle to dwarf me. Anyone with an excellent shot would be able to target him. They could shoot him right in the head.

Right in front of me.

He turns to fire two shots. One falls short. Another elicits a strangled cry. We're still running.

Adam doesn't say anything. He doesn't tell me to be brave. He doesn't ask me if I'm okay, if I'm scared. He doesn't offer me encouragement or assure me that we'll be just fine. He doesn't tell me to leave him behind and save myself. He doesn't tell me to watch his brother in case he dies.

He doesn't need to.

We both understand the reality of our situation. Adam could be shot right now. I could be captured at any moment. This entire building might suddenly explode. Someone could've discovered Kenji and James. We might all die today. The facts are obvious.

But we know we need to take the chance just the same.

Because moving forward is the only way to survive.

The gun is growing slick in my hands, but I hold on to it anyway. My legs are screaming against the pain, but I push them faster anyway. My lungs are sawing my rib cage in half, but I force them to process oxygen anyway. I have to keep moving. There's no time for human deficiencies.

The fire escape in this building is nearly impossible to find. Our feet pound the tiled floors, our hands searching through the bleak light for some kind of outlet, some kind of access to the streets. This building is larger than we anticipated, massive, with hundreds of possible directions. I realize it must have been a *warehouse* and not just a store. Adam ducks behind an abandoned desk, pulling me down with him.

"Don't be stupid, Kent—you can only run for so long!" someone shouts. The voice isn't more than 10 feet away.

Adam swallows. Clenches his jaw. The people trying to kill him are the same ones he used to eat lunch with. Train with. Live with. He *knows* these guys. I wonder if that knowledge makes this worse.

"Just give us the girl," a new voice adds. "Just give us the girl and we won't shoot you. We'll pretend we lost you. We'll let you go. Warner only wants the girl."

Adam is breathing hard. He grips the gun in his hand. Pops his head out for a split second and fires. Someone falls to the floor, screaming.

"KENT, YOU SON OF A—"

Adam uses the moment to run. We jump out from behind the desk and fly toward a stairwell. Gunshots miss us by millimeters. I wonder if these two men are the only ones who followed us inside.

The spiral staircase winds into a lower level, a basement of some kind. Someone is trying to aim for Adam, but our erratic movements make it almost impossible. The chance of him hitting me instead are too high. He's unleashing a mass of expletives in our wake.

Adam knocks things over as we run, trying to create any kind of distraction, any kind of hazard to slow down the soldier behind us. I spot a pair of storm cellar doors and realize this area must've been ravaged by tornadoes. The weather is turbulent; natural disasters are common. Cyclones must have ripped this city apart. "Adam—" I tug on his arm. We hide behind a low wall. I point to our only possible escape route.

He squeezes my hand. "Good eye." But we don't move until the air shifts around us. A misstep. A muffled cry. It's almost blindingly black down here; it's

obvious the electricity was disconnected a long time ago. The soldier has tripped on one of the obstacles Adam left behind.

Adam holds the gun close to his chest. Takes a deep breath. Turns and takes a swift shot.

His aim is excellent.

An uncontrolled explosion of curse words confirms it. Adam takes a hard breath. "I'm only shooting to disable," he says. "Not to kill."

"I know," I tell him. Though I wasn't sure.

We run for the doors and Adam struggles to pull the latch open. It's nearly rusted shut. We're getting desperate. I don't know how long it'll be until we're discovered by another set of soldiers. I'm about to suggest we shoot it open when Adam finally manages to break it free.

He kicks open the doors and we stumble out onto the street. There are 3 cars to choose from.

I'm so happy I could cry.

"It's about time," he says.

But it's not Adam who says it.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

There's blood everywhere.

Adam is on the ground, clutching his body, but I don't know where he's been shot. There are soldiers swarming around him and I'm clawing at the arms holding me back, kicking the air, crying out into the emptiness. Someone is dragging me away and I can't see what they've done to Adam. Pain is seizing my limbs, cramping my joints, breaking every single bone in my body. I want to shriek through the sky, I want to fall to my knees and sob into the earth. I don't understand why the agony isn't finding escape in my screams. Why my mouth is covered with someone else's hand.

"If I let go, you have to promise not to scream," he says to me.

He's touching my face with his bare hands and I don't know where I dropped my gun.

Warner drags me into a still-functioning building and kicks open a door. Hits a switch. Fluorescent lights flicker on with a dull hum. There are paintings taped to the walls, alphabet rainbows stapled to corkboards. Small tables scattered across the room. We're in a classroom.

I wonder if this is where James goes to school.

Warner drops his hand. His glassy green eyes are so delighted I'm petrified. "God I missed you," he says to me. "You didn't actually think I'd let you go so easily?"

"You shot Adam," are the only words I can think of. My mind is muddled with disbelief. I keep seeing his beautiful body crumpled on the ground, red red red. I need to know if he's alive. He has to be alive.

Warner's eyes flash. "Kent is dead."

"No—"

Warner backs me into a corner and I realize I've never been so defenseless in my life. Never so vulnerable. 17 years I spent wishing my curse away, but in this moment I'm more desperate than ever to have it back. Warner's eyes warm unexpectedly. His constant shifts in emotion are difficult to anticipate. Difficult to counter.

"Juliette," he says. He touches my hand so gently it startles me. "Did you

notice? It seems I am immune to your gift.” He studies my eyes. “Isn’t that incredible? Did you notice?” he asks again. “When you tried to escape? Did you feel it . . . ?”

Warner who misses absolutely nothing. Warner who absorbs every single detail.

Of course he knows.

But I’m shocked by the tenderness in his voice. The sincerity with which he wants to know. He’s like a feral dog, crazed and wild, thirsty for chaos, simultaneously aching for recognition and acceptance.

Love.

“We can really be together,” he says to me, undeterred by my silence. He pulls me close, too close. I’m frozen in five hundred layers of fear. Stunned in grief, in disbelief.

His hands reach for my face, his lips for mine. My brain is on fire, ready to explode from the impossibility of this moment. I feel like I’m watching it happen, detached from my own body, incapable of intervening. More than anything else, I’m shocked by his gentle hands, his earnest eyes.

“I want you to choose me,” he says. “I want you to choose to be with me. I want you to *want* this—”

“You’re insane,” I choke. “You’re psychotic—”

“You’re only afraid of what you’re capable of.” His voice is soft. Easy. Slow. Deceptively persuasive. I’d never realized before just how attractive his voice is. “Admit it,” he says. “We’re perfect for each other. You want the power. You love the feel of a weapon in your hand. You’re . . . attracted to me.”

I try to swing my fist but he catches my arms. Pins them to my sides. Presses me up against the wall. He’s so much stronger than he looks. “Don’t lie to yourself, Juliette. You’re going to come back with me whether you like it or not. But you can choose to want it. You can choose to enjoy it—”

“I will *never*,” I breathe, broken. “You’re sick—you’re a sick, twisted monster—”

“That’s not the right answer,” he says, and seems genuinely disappointed.

“It’s the only answer you’ll ever get from me.”

His lips come too close. “But I love you.”

“No you don’t.”

His eyes close. He leans his forehead against mine. “You have no idea what you do to me.”

“I hate you.”

He shakes his head very slowly. Dips down. His nose brushes the nape of my neck and I stifle a horrified shiver that he misunderstands. His lips touch my skin and I actually whimper. "God I'd love to just take a bite out of you."

I notice the gleam of silver in his inside jacket pocket.

I feel a thrill of hope. A thrill of horror. Brace myself for what I need to do. Spend a moment mourning the loss of my dignity.

And I relax.

He feels the tension seep out of my limbs and responds in turn. He smiles, loosens his clamp on my shoulders. Slips his arms around my waist. I swallow the vomit threatening to give me away.

His military jacket has a million buttons and I wonder how many I'll have to undo before I can get my hands on the gun. His hands are exploring my body, slipping down my back to feel the form of my figure and it's all I can do to keep from doing something reckless. I'm not skilled enough to overpower him and I have no idea why he's able to touch me. I have no idea why I was able to crash through concrete yesterday. I have no idea where that energy came from.

Today he's got every advantage and it's not time to give myself away.

Not yet.

I place my hands on his chest. He presses me into the curve of his body. Tilts my chin up to meet his eyes. "I'll be good to you," he whispers. "I'll be so good to you, Juliette. I promise."

I hope I'm not visibly shaking.

And he kisses me. Hungrily. Desperately. Eager to break me open and taste me. I'm so stunned, so horrified, so cocooned in insanity I forget myself. I stand there frozen, disgusted. My hands slip from his chest. All I can think about is Adam and blood and Adam and the sound of gunshots and Adam lying in a pool of blood and I nearly shove him off of me. But Warner will not be discouraged.

He breaks the kiss. Whispers something in my ear that sounds like nonsense. Cups my face in his hands and this time I remember to pretend. I pull him closer, grab a fistful of his jacket and kiss him as hard as I can, my fingers already attempting to release the first of his buttons. Warner grips my hips and allows his hands to conquer my body. He tastes like peppermint, smells like gardenias. His arms are strong around me, his lips soft, almost sweet against my skin. There's an electric charge between us I hadn't anticipated.

My head is spinning.

His lips are on my neck, tasting me, devouring me, and I force myself to think straight. I force myself to understand the perversion of this situation. I

don't know how to reconcile the confusion in my mind, my hesitant repulsion, my inexplicable chemical reaction to his lips. I need to get this over with. Now.

I reach for his buttons.

And he's unnecessarily encouraged.

Warner lifts me by the waist, hoists me up against the wall, his hands cupping my backside, forcing my legs to wrap around him. He doesn't realize he's given me the perfect angle to reach into his coat.

His lips find my lips, his hands slip under my shirt and he's breathing hard, tightening his grip around me, and I practically rip open his jacket in desperation. I can't let this go on much longer. I have no idea how far Warner wants to push things, but I can't keep encouraging his insanity.

I need him to lean forward just an inch more—

My hands wrap around the gun.

I feel him freeze. Pull back. I watch his face phase through frames of confusion/dread/anguish/horror/anger. He drops me to the floor just as my fingers pull the trigger for the very first time.

The power and strength of the weapon is disarming, the sound so much louder than I anticipated. The reverberations are vibrating through my ears and every pulse in my body.

It's a sweet sort of music.

A small sort of victory.

Because this time the blood is not Adam's.

Chapter Forty

Warner is down.

I am up and running away with his gun.

I need to find Adam. I need to steal a car. I need to find James and Kenji. I need to learn how to drive. I need to drive us to safety. I need to do everything in exactly that order.

Adam can't be dead.

Adam is not dead.

Adam will not be dead.

My feet slap the pavement to a steady rhythm, my shirt and face spattered with blood, my hands still shaking slightly in the setting sun. A sharp breeze whips around me, jolting me out of the crazed reality I seem to be swimming in. I take a hard breath, squint up at the sky, and realize I don't have much time before I lose the light. The streets, at least, have long since been evacuated. But I have exactly zero idea where Warner's men might be.

I wonder if Warner has the tracker serum as well. I wonder if they'd know if he were dead.

I duck into dark corners, try to read the streets for clues, try to remember where Adam fell to the ground, but my memory is too weak, too distracted, my brain too broken to process these kinds of details. That horrible instant is one mess of insanity in my mind. I can't make any sense of it and Adam could be anywhere by now. They could've done anything to him.

I don't even know what I'm looking for.

~~I might be wasting my time.~~

I hear sudden movement and dart into a side street, my fingers tightening around the weapon slick in my grip. Now that I've actually fired a gun, I feel more confident with it in my hands, more aware of what to expect, how it functions. But I don't know if I should be happy or horrified that I'm so comfortable so quickly with something so lethal.

Footsteps.

I slide up against the wall, my arms and legs flat against the rough surface. I hope I'm buried in the shadows. I wonder if anyone's found Warner yet.

I watch a soldier walk right past me. He has rifles slung across his chest, a smaller sort of automatic weapon in his hands. I glance down at the gun in my own hand and realize I have no idea how many different kinds there are. All I know is some are bigger than others. Some have to be reloaded constantly. Some, like the one I'm holding, do not. Maybe Adam can teach me the differences.

Adam.

I suck in my breath and move as stealthily as I can through the streets. I spot a particularly dark shadow on a stretch of the sidewalk ahead of me and make an effort to avoid it. But as I get closer I realize it's not a shadow. It's a stain.

Adam's blood.

I squeeze my jaw shut until the pain scares away the screams. I take short, tiny, too-quick breaths. I need to focus. I need to use this information. I need to pay attention—

I need to follow the trail of blood.

Whoever dragged Adam away still hasn't come back to clean the mess. There's a steady spattered drip that leads away from the main roads and into the poorly lit side streets. The light is so dim I have to bend down to search for the spots on the ground. I'm losing sight of where they lead. There are fewer here. I think they've disappeared entirely. I don't know if the dark spots I'm finding are blood or old gum pounded into the pavement or drops of life from another person's flesh. Adam's path has disappeared.

I back up several steps and retrace the line.

I have to do this 3 times before I realize they must've taken him inside. There's an old steel structure with an older rusted door that looks like it's never been opened. It looks like it hasn't been used in years. I don't see any other options.

I wiggle the handle. It's locked.

I shift my entire weight into breaking it open, slamming it open, but I've only managed to bruise my body. I could shoot it down like I've seen Adam do, but I'm not certain of my aim nor my skill with this gun, and I'm not sure I can afford the noise. I can't make my presence known.

There has to be another way into this building.

There is no other way into this building.

My frustration is escalating. My desperation is crippling. My hysteria is threatening to break me and I want to scream until my lungs collapse. Adam is in this building. He has to be in this building.

I'm standing right outside this building and I can't get inside.

This can't be happening.

I clench my fists, try to beat back the maddening futility enveloping me in its embrace but I feel crazed. Wild. Insane. The adrenaline is slipping away, my focus is slipping away, the sun is setting on the horizon and I remember James and Kenji and Adam Adam Adam and Warner's hands on my body and his lips on my mouth and his tongue tasting my neck and all the blood

everywhere

everywhere

everywhere

and I do something stupid.

I punch the door.

In one instant my mind catches up to my muscle and I brace myself for the impact of steel on skin, ready to feel the agony of shattering every bone in my right arm. But my fist flies through 12 inches of steel like it's made of butter. I'm stunned. I harness the same volatile energy and kick my foot through the door. I use my hands to rip the steel to shreds, clawing my way through the metal like a wild animal.

It's incredible. Exhilarating. Completely feral.

This must be how I broke through the concrete in Warner's torture chamber. Which means I still have no idea how I broke through the concrete in Warner's torture chamber.

I climb through the hole I've created and slip into the shadows. It's not hard. The entire place is cloaked in darkness. There are no lights, no sounds of machines or electricity. Just another abandoned warehouse left to the elements.

I check the floors but there's no sign of blood. My heart soars and plummets at the same time. I need him to be okay. I need him to be alive. Adam is not dead. He can't be.

Adam promised James he'd come back for him.

He'd never break that promise.

I move slowly at first, wary, worried that there might be soldiers around, but it doesn't take long for me to realize there's no sound of life in this building. I decide to run.

I tuck caution in my pocket and hope I can reach for it if I need to. I'm flying through doors, spinning around turns, drinking in every detail. This building wasn't just a warehouse. It was a factory.

Old machines clutter the walls, conveyor belts are frozen in place, thousands

of boxes of inventory stacked precariously in tall heaps. I hear a small breath, a stifled cough.

I'm bolting through a set of swinging double doors, searching out the feeble sound, fighting to focus on the tiniest details. I strain my ears and hear it again.

Heavy, labored breathing.

The closer I get, the more clearly I can hear him. It has to be him. My gun is up and aimed to fire, my eyes careful now, anticipating attackers. My legs move swiftly, easily, silently. I nearly shoot a shadow the boxes have cast on the floor. I take a steadying breath. Round another corner.

And nearly collapse.

Adam is hanging from bound wrists, shirtless, bloodied and bruised everywhere. His head is bent, his neck limp, his left leg drenched in blood despite the tourniquet wrapped around his thigh. I don't know how long the weight of his entire body has been hanging from his wrists. I'm surprised he hasn't dislocated his shoulders. He must still be fighting to hold on.

The rope wrapped around his wrists is attached to some kind of metal rod running across the ceiling. I look more closely and realize the rod is a part of a conveyor belt. That Adam is on a conveyor belt.

That this isn't just a factory.

It's a slaughterhouse.

I'm too poor to afford the luxury of hysteria right now.

I need to find a way to get him down, but I'm afraid to approach. My eyes search the space, certain that there are guards around here somewhere, soldiers prepared for this kind of ambush. But then it occurs to me that perhaps I was never really considered a threat. Not if Warner managed to drag me away.

No one would expect to find me here.

I climb onto the conveyor belt and Adam tries to lift his head. I have to be careful not to look too closely at his wounds, not to let my imagination cripple me. Not here. Not now.

"Adam . . . ?"

His head snaps up with a sudden burst of energy. His eyes find me. His face is almost unscathed; there are only minor cuts and bruises to account for. Focusing on the familiar gives me a modicum of calm.

"Juliette—?"

"I need to cut you down—"

"Jesus, Juliette—how did you find me?" He coughs. Wheezes. Takes a tight breath.

“Later.” I reach up to touch his face. “I’ll tell you everything later. First, I need to find a knife.”

“My pants—”

“What?”

“In”—he swallows—“in my pants—”

I reach for his pocket and he shakes his head. I look up. “Where—”

“There’s an inside pocket *in* my pants—”

I practically rip his clothes off. There’s a small pocket sewn into the lining of his cargo pants. I slip my hand inside and retrieve a compact pocketknife. A butterfly knife. I’ve seen these before.

They’re illegal.

I start stacking boxes on the conveyor belt. Climb my way up and hope to God I know what I’m doing. The knife is extremely sharp, and it works quickly to undo the bindings. I realize a little belatedly that the rope holding him together is the same cord we used to escape.

Adam is cut free. I’m climbing down, refolding the knife and tucking it into my pocket. I don’t know how I’m going to get Adam out of here. His wrists are rubbed raw, bleeding, his body pounded into one piece of pain, his leg bloodied through with a bullet.

He nearly falls over.

I try to hold on as tenderly as possible, try to hold him close as best I can without hurting him. He doesn’t say a word about the pain, tries so hard to hide the fact that he’s having trouble breathing. He’s wincing against the torture of it all, but doesn’t whisper a word of complaint. “I can’t believe you found me,” is all he says.

And I know I shouldn’t. I know now isn’t the time. I know it’s impractical. But I kiss him anyway.

“You are not going to die,” I tell him. “We are going to get out of here. We are going to steal a car. We are going to find James and Kenji. And then we’re going to get safe.”

He stares at me. “Kiss me again,” he says.

And I do.

It takes a lifetime to make it back to the door. Adam had been buried deep in the recesses of this building, and finding our way to the front is even more difficult than I expected. Adam is trying so hard, moving as fast as he can, but he still isn’t fast at all. “They said Warner wanted to kill me himself,” he explains. “That he shot me in the leg on purpose, just to disable me. It gave him a chance

to drag you away and come back for me later. Apparently his plan was to torture me to death.” He winces. “He said he wanted to enjoy it. Didn’t want to rush through killing me.” A hard laugh. A short cough.

~~His hands on my body his hands on my body his hands on my body~~

“So they just tied you up and abandoned you here?”

“They said no one would ever find me. They said the building is made entirely of concrete and reinforced steel and no one can break in. Warner was supposed to come back for me when he was ready.” He stops. Looks at me. “God, I’m so happy you’re okay.”

I offer him a smile. Try to keep my organs from falling out. Hope the holes in my head aren’t showing.

He pauses when we reach the door. The metal is a mangled mess. It looks like a wild animal attacked it and lost. “How did you—”

“I don’t know,” I admit. Try to shrug, be indifferent. “I just punched it.”

“You just punched it.”

“And kicked it a little.”

He’s smiling and I want to sob into his arms. I have to focus on his face. I can’t let my eyes digest the travesty of his body.

“Come on,” I tell him. “Let’s go do something illegal.”

I leave Adam in the shadows and dart up to the edge of the main road, searching for abandoned vehicles. We have to travel up 3 different side streets until we finally find one.

“How are you holding up?” I ask him, afraid to hear the answer.

He presses his lips together. Does something that looks like a nod. “Okay.”

That’s not good.

“Wait here.”

It’s pitch-black, not a single street lamp in sight. This is good. Also bad. It gives me an extra edge, but makes me extra vulnerable to attack. I have to be careful. I tiptoe up to the car.

I’m fully prepared to smash the glass open, but check the handle first. Just in case.

The door is unlocked.

The keys are in the ignition.

There’s a bag of groceries in the backseat.

Someone must’ve panicked at the sound of the alarm and unexpected curfew. They must’ve dropped everything and run for cover. Unbelievable. This would be absolutely perfect if I had any idea how to drive.

I run back for Adam and help him hobble into the passenger side. As soon as he sits down I can tell just how much pain he's in. Bending his body in any way at all. Putting pressure on his ribs. Straining his muscles. "It's okay," he tells me, he lies to me. "I can't stand on my feet for much longer."

I reach into the back and rummage through the grocery bags. There's real food inside. Not just strange bouillon cubes designed to go into Automats, but fruit and vegetables. Even Warner never gave us bananas.

I hand the yellow fruit to Adam. "Eat this."

"I don't think I can eat—" He pauses. Stares at the form in his hands. "Is this what I think it is?"

"I think so."

We don't have time to process the impossibility. I peel it open for him. Encourage him to take a small bite. I hope it's a good thing. I heard bananas have potassium. I hope he can keep it down.

I try to focus on the machine under my feet.

"How long do you think we'll have until Warner finds us?" Adam asks.

I take a few bites of oxygen. "I don't know."

A pause. "How did you get away from him . . . ?"

I'm staring straight out the windshield when I answer. "I shot him."

"No." Surprise. Awe. Amazement.

I show him Warner's gun. It has a special engraving in the hilt.

Adam is stunned. "So he's . . . dead?"

"I don't know," I finally admit, ashamed. I drop my eyes, study the grooves in the steering wheel. "I don't know for sure." I took too long to pull the trigger. It was stiffer than I expected it to be. Harder to hold the gun between my hands than I'd imagined. Warner was already dropping me when the bullet flew into his body. I was aiming for his heart.

I hope to God I didn't miss.

We're both too quiet.

"Adam?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't know how to drive."

Chapter Forty-One

“You’re lucky this isn’t a stick shift.” He tries to laugh.

“Stick shift?”

“Manual transmission.”

“What’s that?”

“A little more complicated.”

I bite my lip. “Do you remember where we left James and Kenji?” I don’t even want to consider the possibility that they’ve moved. Been discovered. Anything. I can’t fathom the idea.

“Yes.” I know he’s thinking exactly what I’m thinking.

“How do I get there?”

Adam tells me the right pedal is for gas. The left is to brake. I have to shift into *D* for *drive*. I use the steering wheel to turn. There are mirrors to help see behind me. I can’t turn on my headlights and will have to rely on the moon to light my way.

I turn on the ignition, press the brake, shift into drive. Adam’s voice is the only navigation system I need. I release the brake. Press the gas. Nearly crash into a wall.

This is how we finally get back to the abandoned building.

Gas. Brake. Gas. Brake. Too much gas. Too much brake. Adam doesn’t complain and it’s almost worse. I can only imagine what my driving is doing for his injuries. I’m grateful that at least we’re not dead, not yet.

I don’t know why no one has spotted us. I wonder if maybe Warner really is dead. I wonder if everything is in chaos. I wonder if that’s why there are no soldiers in this city. They’ve all disappeared.

I think.

I almost forget to put the car in park when we reach the vaguely familiar broken building. Adam has to reach over and do it for me. I help him transition into the backseat, and he asks me why.

“Because I’m making Kenji drive, and I don’t want your brother to have to see you like this. It’s dark enough that he won’t see your body. I don’t think he should have to see you hurt.”

He nods after an infinite moment. “Thank you.”

And I’m running toward the broken building. Pulling the door open. I can only barely make out two figures in the dark. I blink and they come into focus. James is asleep with his head in Kenji’s lap. The duffel bags are open, cans of food discarded on the floor. They’re okay.

Thank God they’re okay.

I could die of relief.

Kenji pulls James up and into his arms, struggling a little under the weight. His face is smooth, serious, unflinching. He doesn’t smile. He doesn’t say anything stupid. He studies my eyes like he already knows, like he already understands why it took us so long to get back, like there’s only one reason why I must look like hell right now, why I have blood all over my shirt. Probably on my face. All over my hands. “How is he?”

And I nearly lose it right there. “I need you to drive.”

He takes a tight breath. Nods several times. “My right leg is still good,” he says to me, but I don’t think I’d care even if it weren’t. We need to get to his safe place, and my driving isn’t going to get us anywhere.

Kenji settles a sleeping James into the passenger side, and I’m so happy he’s not awake for this moment.

I grab the duffel bags and carry them to the backseat. Kenji slides in front. Looks in the rearview mirror. “Good to see you alive, Kent.”

Adam almost smiles. Shakes his head. “Thank you for taking care of James.”

“You trust me now?”

A small sigh. “Maybe.”

“I’ll take a *maybe*.” He grins. Turns on the car. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Adam is shaking.

His bare body is finally cracking under the cold weather, the hours of torture, the strain of holding himself together for so long. I’m scrambling through the duffel bags, searching for a coat, but all I find are shirts and sweaters. I don’t know how to get them on his body without causing him pain.

I decide to cut them up. I take the butterfly knife to a few of his sweaters and slice them open, draping them around his figure like a blanket. I glance up. “Kenji—does this car have a heater?”

“It’s on, but it’s pretty crappy. It’s not working very well.”

“How much longer until we get there?”

“Not too much.”

“Have you seen anyone that might be following us?”

“No.” He pauses. “It’s weird. I don’t understand why no one has noticed a car flying through these streets after curfew. Something’s not right.”

“I know.”

“And I don’t know what it is, but obviously my tracker serum isn’t working. Either they really just don’t give a shit about me, or it’s legit not working, and I don’t know why.”

A tiny detail sits on the outskirts of my consciousness. I examine it. “Didn’t you say you slept in a shed? That night you ran away?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Where was it . . . ?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Some huge field. It was weird. Crazy shit growing in that place. I almost ate something I thought was fruit before I realized it smelled like ass.”

My breath catches. “It was an empty field? Barren? Totally abandoned?”

“Yeah.”

“The nuclear field,” Adam says, a dawning realization in his voice.

“What nuclear field?” Kenji asks.

I take a moment to explain.

“Holy crap.” Kenji grips the steering wheel. “So I could’ve died? And I didn’t?”

I ignore him. “But then how did they find us? How did they figure out where you live—?”

“I don’t know,” Adam sighs. Closes his eyes. “Maybe Kenji is lying to us.”

“Come on, man, what the hell—”

“Or,” Adam interrupts, “maybe they bought out Benny.”

“No.” I gasp.

“It’s possible.”

We’re all silent for a long moment. I try to look out the window but it’s very nearly useless. The night sky is a vat of tar suffocating the world around us.

I turn to Adam and find him with his head tilted back, his hands clenched, his lips almost white in the blackness. I wrap the sweaters more tightly around his body. He stifles a shudder.

“Adam . . .” I brush a strand of hair away from his forehead. His hair has gotten a little long and I realize I’ve never really paid attention to it before. It’s been cropped short since the day he stepped into my cell. I never would’ve

thought his dark hair would be so soft. Like melted chocolate. I wonder when he stopped cutting it.

He flexes his jaw. Pries his lips open. Lies to me over and over again. “I’m okay.”

“Kenji—”

“Five minutes, I promise—I’m trying to gun this thing—”

I touch his wrists, trace the tender skin with my fingertips. The bloodied scars. I kiss the palm of his hand. He takes a broken breath. “You’re going to be okay,” I tell him.

His eyes are still closed. He tries to nod.

“Why didn’t you tell me you two were together?” Kenji asks unexpectedly. His voice is even, neutral.

“What?” Now is not the time to be blushing.

Kenji sighs. I catch a glimpse of his eyes in the rearview mirror. The swelling is almost completely gone. His face is healing. “I’d have to be *blind* to miss something like that. I mean, hell, just the way he looks at you. It’s like the guy has never seen a woman in his life. Like putting food in front of a starving man and telling him he can’t eat it.”

Adam’s eyes fly open. I try to read him but he won’t look at me.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” Kenji says again.

“I never had a chance to ask,” Adam answers. His voice is less than a whisper. His energy levels are dropping too fast. I don’t want him to have to talk. He needs to conserve his strength.

“Wait—are you talking to me or her?” Kenji glances back at us.

“We can discuss this later—,” I try to say, but Adam shakes his head.

“I told James without asking you. I made . . . an assumption.” He stops. “I shouldn’t have. You should have a choice. You should always have a choice. And it’s your choice if you want to be with me.”

“Hey, so, I’m just going to pretend like I can’t hear you guys anymore, okay?” Kenji makes a random motion with his hand. “Go ahead and have your moment.”

But I’m too busy studying Adam’s eyes, his soft soft lips. His furrowed brow.

I lean into his ear, lower my voice. Whisper the words so only he can hear me.

“You’re going to get better,” I promise him. “And when you do, I’m going to show you exactly what choice I’ve made. I’m going to memorize every inch of

your body with my lips.”

He exhales suddenly, shaky, uneven. Swallows hard.

His eyes are burning into me. He looks almost feverish, and I wonder if I’m making things worse.

I pull back and he stops me. Rests his hand on my thigh. “Don’t go,” he says. “Your touch is the only thing keeping me from losing my mind.”

Chapter Forty-Two

“We’re here, and it’s nighttime. So according to my calculations, we must not have done anything stupid.”

Kenji shifts into park. We’re underground again, in some kind of elaborate parking garage. One minute we were aboveground, the next we’ve disappeared into a ditch. It’s next to impossible to locate, much less to spot in the darkness. Kenji was telling the truth about this hideout.

I’ve been busy trying to keep Adam awake for the past few minutes. His body is fighting exhaustion, blood loss, hunger, a million different points of pain. I feel so utterly useless.

“Adam has to go straight to the medical wing,” Kenji announces.

“They have a medical wing?” My heart is parasailing in the springtime.

Kenji grins. “This place has everything. It will blow your goddamn mind.” He hits a switch on the ceiling. A faint light illuminates the old sedan. Kenji steps out the door. “Wait here—I’ll get someone to bring out a stretcher.”

“What about James?”

“Oh.” Kenji’s mouth twitches. “He, uh—he’s going to be asleep for a little while longer.”

“What do you mean . . . ?”

He clears his throat. Once. Twice. Smooths out the wrinkles in his shirt. “I, uh, may or may not have given him something to . . . ease the pain of this journey.”

“You gave a ten-year-old a *sleeping pill*?” I’m afraid I’m going to break his neck.

“Would you rather he were awake for all of this?”

“Adam is going to kill you.”

Kenji glances at Adam’s drooping lids. “Yeah, well, I guess I’m lucky he won’t be able to kill me tonight.” He hesitates. Ducks into the car to run his fingers through James’s hair. Smiles a little. “The kid is a saint. He’ll be perfect in the morning.”

“I can’t *believe* you—”

“Hey, hey—” He holds up his hands. “Trust me. He’s going to be just fine. I

just didn't want him to be any more traumatized than he had to be." He shrugs. "Hell, maybe Adam will agree with me."

"I'm going to murder you." Adam's voice is a soft mumble.

Kenji laughs. "Keep it together, bro, or I'll think you don't really mean it."

Kenji disappears.

I watch Adam, encourage him to stay awake. Tell him he's almost safe. Touch my lips to his forehead. Study every shadow, every outline, every cut and bruise of his face. His muscles relax, his features lose their tension. He exhales a little more easily. I kiss his top lip. Kiss his bottom lip. Kiss his cheeks. His nose. His chin.

Everything happens so quickly after that.

4 people run out toward the car. 2 older than me, 2 older than them. A pair of men. A pair of women. "Where is he?" the older woman asks. They're all looking around, anxious. I wonder if they can see me staring at them.

Kenji opens Adam's door. Kenji is no longer smiling. In fact, he looks . . . different. Stronger. Faster. Taller, even. He's in control. A figure of authority. These people *know* him.

Adam is lifted onto the stretcher and assessed immediately. Everyone is talking at once. Something about broken ribs. Something about losing blood. Something about airways and lung capacity and *what happened to his wrists?* Something about checking his pulse and *how long has he been bleeding?* The young male and female glance in my direction. They're all wearing strange outfits.

Strange suits. All white with gray stripes down the side. I wonder if it's a medical uniform.

They're carrying Adam away.

"Wait—" I trip out of the car. "Wait! I want to go with him—"

"Not now." Kenji stops me. Softens. "You can't be with him for what they need to do. Not now."

"What do you mean? What are they going to do to him?" The world is fading in and out of focus, shades of gray flickering as stilted frames, broken movements. Suddenly nothing makes sense. Suddenly everything is confusing me. Suddenly my head is a piece of pavement and I'm being trampled to death. I don't know where we are. I don't know who Kenji is. Kenji was Adam's friend. Adam knows him. Adam. My Adam. Adam who is being taken away from me and I can't go with him and I want to go with him but they won't let me go with him and I don't know why—

“They’re going to help him—*Juliette*—I need you to focus. You can’t fall apart right now. I know it’s been a crazy day—but I need you to stay calm.” His voice. So steady. So suddenly articulate.

“Who *are* you . . . ?” I’m beginning to panic. I want to grab James and run but I can’t. He’s done something to James and even if I knew how to wake him up, I can’t touch him. I want to rip my nails out. “*Who are you—*”

Kenji sighs. “You’re starving. You’re exhausted. You’re processing shock and a million other emotions right now. Be logical. I’m not going to hurt you. You’re safe now. Adam is safe. James is safe.”

“I want to be with him—I want to see what they’re going to do to him—”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“What are you going to do to me? Why did you bring me here . . . ?” My eyes are wide, darting in every direction. I’m spinning, stranded in the middle of the ocean of my own imagination and I don’t know how to swim. “What do you want from me?”

Kenji looks down. Rubs his forehead. Reaches into his pocket. “I really didn’t want to have to do this.”

I think I’m screaming.

Chapter Forty-Three

I'm an old creaky staircase when I wake up.

Someone has scrubbed me clean. My skin is like satin. My eyelashes are soft, my hair is smooth, brushed out of its knots; it gleams in the artificial light, a chocolate river lapping the pale shore of my skin, soft waves cascading around my collarbone. My joints ache; my eyes burn from an insatiable exhaustion. My body is naked under a heavy sheet. I've never felt so pristine.

I'm too tired to be bothered by it.

My sleepy eyes take inventory of the space I'm in, but there's not much to consider. I'm lying in bed. There are 4 walls. 1 door. A small table beside me. A glass of water on the table. Fluorescent lights humming above me. Everything is white.

Everything I've ever known is changing.

I reach for the glass of water and the door opens. I pull the sheet up as high as it will go.

"How are you feeling?"

A tall man is wearing plastic glasses. Black frames. A simple sweater. Pressed pants. His sandy-blond hair falls into his eyes.

He's holding a clipboard.

"Who are you?"

He grabs a chair I hadn't noticed was sitting in the corner. Pushes it forward. Sits down beside my bed. "Do you feel dizzy? Disoriented?"

"Where's Adam?"

He's holding his pen to a sheet of paper. Writing something down. "Do you spell your last name with two rs? Or just one?"

"What did you do with James? Where's Kenji?"

He stops. Looks up. He can't be more than 30. He has a crooked nose. A day of scruff. "Can I at least make sure you're doing all right? Then I'll answer your questions. I promise. Just let me get through the basic protocol here."

I blink.

How do I feel. I don't know.

Did I have any dreams. I don't think so.

Do I know where I am. No.

Do I think I'm safe. I don't know.

Do I remember what happened. Yes.

How old am I. 17.

What color are my eyes. I don't know.

"You don't know?" He puts down his pen. Takes off his glasses. "You can remember exactly what happened yesterday, but you don't know the color of your own eyes?"

"I think they're green. Or blue. I'm not sure. Why does it matter?"

"I want to be sure you can recognize yourself. That you haven't lost sight of your person."

"I've never really known my eye color, though. I've only looked in the mirror once in the last three years."

The stranger stares at me, his eyes crinkled in concern. I finally have to look away.

"How did you touch me?" I ask.

"I'm sorry?"

"My body. My skin. I'm so . . . clean."

"Oh." He bites his thumb. Marks something on his papers. "Right. Well, you were covered in blood and filth when you came in, and you had some minor cuts and bruises. We didn't want to risk infection. Sorry for the personal intrusion—but we can't allow anyone to bring that kind of bacteria in here. We had to do a superficial detox."

"That's fine—I understand," I hurry on. "But *how*?"

"Excuse me?"

"How did you touch me?" Surely he must know. How could he not know? God I hope he knows.

"Oh—" He nods, distracted by the words he's scribbling on his clipboard. Squints at the page. "Latex."

"What?"

"Latex." He glances up for a second. Sees my confusion. "Gloves?"

"Right." Of course. Gloves. Even Warner used gloves until he figured it out.

~~Until he figured it out. Until he figured it out. Until he figured it out.~~

I replay the moment over and over and over in my mind. The split second I took too long to jump from the window. The moment of hesitation that changed everything. The instant I lost all control. All power. Any point of dominance. He's never going to stop until he finds me and it's my own fault.

I need to know if he's dead.

I have to force myself to be still. I have to force myself not to shake, shudder, or vomit. I need to change the subject. "Where are my clothes?" I toy with the perfect white sheet hiding my bones.

"They've been destroyed for the same reasons you needed to be sanitized." He picks up his glasses. Slips them on. "We have a special suit for you. I think it'll make your life a lot easier."

"A special suit?" I look up. Part my lips in surprise.

"Yes. We'll get to that part a bit later." He pauses. Smiles. There's a dimple in his chin. "You're not going to attack me like you did Kenji, are you?"

"I attacked Kenji?" I cringe.

"Just a little bit." He shrugs. "At least now we know he's not immune to your touch."

"I *touched* him?" I sit up straight and nearly forget to pull my sheet up with me. I'm burning from head to toe, blushing through my mind, clutching at the sheet like a lifeline. "I'm so sorry—"

"I'm sure he'll appreciate the apology." Blondie is studying his notes religiously, suddenly fascinated by his own handwriting. "But it's all right. We've been expecting some destructive tendencies. You've been having one hell of a week."

"Are you a psychologist?"

"Sort of." He brushes the hair away from his forehead.

"Sort of?"

He laughs. Pauses. Rolls the pen between his fingers. "Yes. For all intents and purposes, I am a psychologist. Sometimes."

"What is that supposed to mean . . . ?"

He parts his lips. Presses them shut. Seems to consider answering me but examines me instead. He stares for so long I feel my face go hot. He starts scribbling furiously.

"What am I doing here?" I ask him.

"Recovering."

"How long have I been here?"

"You've been asleep for almost fourteen hours. We gave you a pretty powerful sedative." Looks at his watch. "You seem to be doing well." Hesitates. "You look very well, actually. Stunning, really."

I have a handful of scrambled words in my mouth. A blush flushing up my face. "Where's Adam?"

He takes a deep breath. Underlines something on his papers. His lips twitch into a smile.

“Where is he?”

“Recovering.” He finally looks up.

“He’s okay?”

Nods. “He’s okay.”

I stare at him. “What does that mean?”

2 knocks at the door.

The bespectacled stranger doesn’t move. He rereads his notes. “Come in,” he calls.

Kenji walks inside, a little hesitant at first. He peeks at me, his eyes cautious. I never thought I’d be so happy to see him. But while it’s a relief to see a face I recognize, my stomach immediately twists into a knot of guilt, knocking me over from the inside. I wonder how badly I must’ve hurt him. He steps forward.

My guilt disappears.

I look more closely and realize he’s perfectly unharmed. His leg is working fine. His face is back to normal. His eyes are no longer puffy, his forehead is repaired, smooth, untouched. He was right.

He does have a spectacular face.

A defiant jawline. Perfect eyebrows. Eyes as pitch-black as his hair. Sleek. Strong. A bit dangerous.

“Hey, beautiful.”

“I’m sorry I almost killed you,” I blurt out.

“Oh.” He startles. Shoves his hands into his pockets. “Well. Glad we got that out of the way.” I notice he’s wearing a destroyed T-shirt. Dark jeans. I haven’t seen anyone wear jeans in such a long time. Army uniforms, cotton basics, and fancy dresses are all I’ve known lately.

I can’t really look at him. “I panicked,” I try to explain. I clasp and unclasp my fingers.

“I figured.” He cocks an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

I nod. “You look better.”

He cracks a grin. Stretches. Leans against the wall, arms crossed at his chest, legs crossed at the ankles. “This must be difficult for you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Looking at my face. Realizing I was right. Realizing you made the wrong

decision.” He shrugs. “I understand. I’m not a proud man, you know. I’d be willing to forgive you.”

I gape at him, unsure whether to laugh or throw something. “Don’t make me touch you.”

He shakes his head. “It’s incredible how someone can look so right and feel so wrong. Kent is a lucky bastard.”

“I’m sorry—” Psychologist-man stands up. “Are you two finished here?” He looks to Kenji. “I thought you had a purpose.”

Kenji pushes off the wall. Straightens his back. “Right. Yeah. Castle wants to meet her.”

Chapter Forty-Four

“Now?” Blondie is more confused than I am. “But I’m not done examining her.”

Kenji shrugs. “He wants to meet her.”

“Who’s Castle?” I ask.

Blondie and Kenji look at me. Kenji looks away. Blondie doesn’t.

He cocks his head. “Kenji didn’t tell you anything about this place?”

“No.” I falter, uncertain, glancing at Kenji, who won’t look at me. “He never explained anything. He said he knew someone who had a safe place and thought he could help us—”

Blondie gapes. Laughs so hard he snorts. Stands up. Cleans his glasses with the hem of his shirt. “You’re such an ass,” he says to Kenji. “Why didn’t you just tell her the truth?”

“She never would’ve come if I told her the truth.”

“How do you know?”

“She nearly *killed* me—”

My eyes are darting from one face to the other. Blond hair to black hair and back again. “What is going *on*?” I demand. “I want to see Adam. I want to see James. And I want a set of *clothes*—”

“You’re naked?” Kenji is suddenly studying my sheet and not bothering to be subtle about it.

I flush despite my best efforts, flustered, frustrated. “Blondie said they destroyed my clothes.”

“*Blondie*?” Blond man is offended.

“You never told me your name.”

“Winston. My name is Winston.” He’s not smiling anymore.

“Didn’t you say you had a suit for me?”

He frowns. Checks his watch. “We won’t have time to go through that right now.” Sighs. “Get her something to wear temporarily, will you?” He’s talking to Kenji. Kenji who is still staring at me.

“I want to see Adam.”

“Adam isn’t ready to see you yet.” ~~Blondie~~ Winston tucks his pen into a pocket. “We’ll let you know when he’s ready.”

“How am I supposed to trust any of you if you won’t even let me see him? If you won’t let me see James? I don’t even have my basic things. I want to get out of this bed and I need something to wear.”

“Go fetch, Moto.” Winston is readjusting his watch.

“I’m not your dog, *Blondie*,” Kenji snaps. “And I told you not to call me Moto.”

Winston pinches the bridge of his nose. “No problem. I’ll also tell Castle it’s your fault she’s not meeting with him right now.”

Kenji mutters something obscene under his breath. Stalks off. Almost slams the door.

A few seconds pass in a strained sort of silence.

I take a deep breath. “So what’s *moto* mean?”

Winston rolls his eyes. “Nothing. It’s just a nickname—his last name is Kishimoto. He gets mad when we chop it in half. Gets sensitive about it.”

“Well why do you chop it in half?”

He snorts. “Because it’s hard as hell to pronounce.”

“How is that an excuse?”

He frowns. “What?”

“You got mad that I called you Blondie and not Winston. Why doesn’t he have the right to be mad that you’re calling him Moto instead of Kenji?”

He mumbles something that sounds like, “It’s not the same thing.”

I slide down a little. Rest my head on the pillow. “Don’t be a hypocrite.”

Chapter Forty-Five

I feel like a clown in these oversized clothes. I'm wearing someone else's T-shirt. Someone else's pajama pants. Someone else's slippers. Kenji says they had to destroy the clothes in my duffel bag, too, so I have no idea whose outfit is currently hanging on my frame. I'm practically swimming in the material.

I try to knot the extra fabric and Kenji stops me. "You're going to mess up my shirt," he complains.

I drop my hands. "You gave me *your* clothes?"

"Well what did you expect? It's not like we have extra dresses just lying around." He shoots me a look, like I should be grateful he's even sharing.

Well. I guess it's better than being naked. "So who's Castle again?"

"He's in charge of everything," Kenji tells me. "The head of this entire movement."

My ears snap off. "*Movement?*"

Winston sighs. He seems so uptight. I wonder why. "If Kenji hasn't already told you anything, you should probably wait to hear it from Castle himself. Hang tight. I promise we're going to answer your questions."

"But what about Adam? Where is *James*—"

"Wow." Winston runs a hand through his floppy hair. "You're just not going to give it up, huh?"

"He's fine, Juliette," Kenji intervenes. "He needs a little more time to recover. You have to start trusting us. No one here is going to hurt you, or Adam, or James. They're both fine. Everything is fine."

But I don't know if *fine* is good enough.

We're walking through an entire city underground, hallways and passageways, smooth stone floors, rough walls left untouched. There are circular disks drilled into the ground, glowing with artificial light every few feet. I notice computers, all kinds of gadgets I don't recognize, doors cracked open to reveal rooms filled with nothing but technological machinery.

"How do you find the electricity necessary to run this place?" I look more closely at the unidentifiable machines, the flickering screens, the unmistakable

humming of hundreds of computers built into the framework of this underground world.

Kenji tugs on a stray strand of my hair. I spin around. “We steal it.” He grins. Nods down a narrow path. “This way.”

People both young and old and of all different shapes and ethnicities shuffle in and out of rooms, all along the halls. Many of them stare, many of them are too distracted to notice us. Some of them are dressed like the men and women who rushed out to our car last night. It’s an odd kind of uniform. It seems unnecessary.

“So . . . everyone dresses like that?” I whisper, gesturing to the passing strangers as inconspicuously as possible.

Kenji scratches his head. Takes his time answering. “Not everyone. Not all the time.”

“What about you?” I ask him.

“Not today.”

I decide not to indulge his cryptic tendencies, and instead ask a more straightforward question. “So are you ever going to tell me how you healed so quickly?”

“Yes,” Kenji says, unfazed. “We’re going to tell you a lot of things, actually.” We make an abrupt turn down an unexpected hallway. “But first—” Kenji pauses outside of a huge wooden door. “Castle wants to meet you. He’s the one who requested you.”

“*Requested—?*”

“Yeah.” Kenji looks uncomfortable for just a wavering second.

“Wait—what do you mean—”

“I mean it wasn’t an accident that I ended up in the army, Juliette.” He sighs. “It wasn’t an accident that I showed up at Adam’s door. And I wasn’t supposed to get shot or get beaten half to death, but I did. Only I wasn’t dropped off by some random dude.” He almost grins. “I’ve always known where Adam lived. It was my job to know.” A pause. “We’ve all been looking for you.”

My mouth is sitting on my kneecaps.

“Go ahead.” Kenji pushes me inside. “He’ll be out when he’s ready.”

“Good luck,” is all Winston says to me.

1,320 seconds walk into the room before he does.

He moves methodically, his face a mask of neutrality as he brushes wayward dreadlocks into a ponytail and seats himself at the front of the room. He’s thin,

fit, impeccably dressed in a simple suit. Dark blue. White shirt. No tie. There are no lines on his face, but there's a streak of silver in his hair and his eyes confess he's lived at least 100 years. He must be in his 40s. I look around.

It's an empty space, impressive in its sparseness. The floors and ceilings are built by bricks carefully pieced together. Everything feels old and ancient, but somehow modern technology is keeping this place alive. Artificial lighting illuminates the cavernous dimensions, small monitors are built into the stone walls. I don't know what I'm doing here. I don't know what to expect. I have no idea what kind of person Castle is but after spending so much time with Warner, I'm trying not to get my hopes up. I don't even realize I've stopped breathing until he speaks.

"I hope you're enjoying your stay so far."

My neck snaps up to meet his dark eyes, his smooth voice, silky and strong. His eyes are glinting with genuine curiosity, a smattering of surprise. I've forgotten I know how to speak.

"Kenji said you wanted to meet me," is the only response I offer.

"Kenji would be correct." He takes his time breathing. He takes his time shifting in his seat. He takes his time studying my eyes, choosing his words, touching two fingers to his lips. He seems to have dominated the concept of time. *Impatience* is likely not a word in his vocabulary. "I've heard . . . stories. About you." Smiles. "I simply wanted to know if they were true."

"What have you heard?"

He smiles with teeth so white it looks like snow falling on the chocolate valleys of his face. He opens his hands. Studies them for a moment. Looks up. "You can kill a man with nothing but your bare skin. You can crush five feet of concrete with the palm of your hand."

I'm climbing a mountain of air and my feet keep slipping. I need to get a grip on something.

"Is it true?" he asks.

"Rumors are more likely to kill you than I am."

He studies me for too long. "I'd like to show you something," he says after a moment.

"I want answers to my questions." This has gone on too long. I don't want to be lulled into a false sense of security. I don't want to assume Adam and James are okay. I don't want to trust anyone until I have proof. I can't pretend like any of this is all right. Not yet. "I want to know that I'm safe," I tell him. "And I want to know that my friends are safe. There was a ten-year-old boy with us

when we arrived and I want to see him. I need to make certain he is healthy and unharmed. I won't cooperate otherwise."

His eyes inspect me a few moments longer. "Your loyalty is refreshing," he says, and he means it. "You will do well here."

"My friends—"

"Yes. Of course." He's on his feet. "Follow me."

This place is far more complex, far more organized than I'd ever imagined it to be. There are hundreds of different directions to get lost in, almost as many rooms, some bigger than others, each dedicated to different pursuits.

"The dining hall," Castle says to me.

"The dormitories." On the opposite wing.

"The training facilities." Down that hall.

"The common rooms." Right through here.

"The bathrooms." On either end of the floor.

"The meeting halls." Just past that door.

Each space is buzzing with bodies, each body adapted to a particular routine. People look up when they see us. Some wave, smile, delighted. I realize they're all looking at Castle. He nods his head. His eyes are kind, humble. His smile is strong, reassuring.

He's the leader of this entire *movement*, is what Kenji said. These people are depending on him for something more than basic survival. This is more than a fallout shelter. This is much more than a hiding space. There is a greater goal in mind. A greater purpose.

"Welcome," Castle says to me, gesturing with one hand, "to Omega Point."

Chapter Forty-Six

“Omega Point?”

“The last letter in the Greek alphabet. The final development, the last in a series.” He stops in front of me and for the first time I notice the omega symbol stitched into the back of his jacket. “We are the only hope our civilization has left.”

“But how—with such small numbers—how can you possibly hope to compete—”

“We’ve been building for a long time, Juliette.” It’s the first time he’s said my name. His voice is strong, smooth, stable. “We’ve been planning, organizing, mapping out our strategy for many years now. The collapse of our human society should not come as a surprise. We brought it upon ourselves.

“The question wasn’t *whether* things would fall apart,” he continues. “Only *when*. It was a waiting game. A question of who would try to take power and how they would try to use it. Fear,” he says to me, turning back for just a moment, his footsteps silent against the stone, “is a great motivator.”

“That’s pathetic.”

“I agree. Which is why part of my job is reviving the stalled hearts that’ve lost all hope.” We turn into another corridor. “And to tell you that almost everything you’ve learned about the state of our world is a lie.”

I stop in place. Nearly fall over. “What do you mean?”

“I mean things are not nearly as bad as The Reestablishment wants us to think they are.”

“But there’s no food—”

“That they give *you* access to.”

“The animals—”

“Are kept hidden. Genetically modified. Raised on secret pastures.”

“But the air—the seasons—the *weather*—”

“Is not as bad as they’ll have us believe. It’s probably our only real problem—but it’s one caused by the perverse manipulations of Mother Earth. *Man-made* manipulations that we can still fix.” He turns to face me. Focuses my mind with one steady gaze.

“There is still a chance to change things. We can provide fresh drinking water to all people. We can make sure crops are not regulated for profit; we can ensure that they are not genetically altered to benefit manufacturers. Our people are dying because we are feeding them poison. Animals are dying because we are forcing them to eat waste, forcing them to live in their own filth, caging them together and abusing them. Plants are withering away because we are dumping chemicals into the earth that make them hazardous to our health. But these are things we can fix.

“We are fed lies because believing them makes us weak, vulnerable, malleable. We depend on others for our food, health, sustenance. This cripples us. Creates cowards of our people. Slaves of our children. It’s time for us to fight back.” His eyes are bright with feeling, his fists clenched in fervor. His words are powerful, heavy with conviction, articulate and meaningful. I have no doubt he’s swayed many people with such fanciful thoughts. Hope for a future that seems lost. Inspiration in a bleak world with nothing to offer. He is a natural leader. A talented orator.

I have a hard time believing him.

“How can you know for certain that your theories are correct? Do you have proof?”

His hands relax. His eyes quiet down. His lips form a small smile. “Of course.” He almost laughs.

“Why is that funny?”

He shakes his head. Just a bit. “I’m amused by your skepticism. I admire it, actually. It’s never a good idea to believe everything you hear.”

I catch his double meaning. Acknowledge it. “Touché, Mr. Castle.”

A pause. “You are French, Ms. Ferrars?”

~~“My mother, perhaps.”~~ I look away. “So where is your proof?”

“This entire movement is proof enough. We survive because of these truths. We seek out food and supplies from the various storage compounds The Reestablishment has constructed. We’ve found their fields, their farms, their animals. They have hundreds of acres dedicated to crops. The farmers are slaves, working under the threat of death to themselves or their family members. The rest of society is either killed or corralled into sectors, sectioned off to be monitored, carefully surveyed.”

I keep my face blank, smooth, neutral. I still haven’t decided whether or not I believe him. “And what do you need with me? Why do you care if I’m here?”

He stops at a glass wall. Points through to the room beyond. Doesn’t answer

my question. “Your Adam is healing because of our people.”

I nearly trip in my haste to see him. I press my hands against the glass and peer into the brightly lit space. Adam is asleep, his face perfect, peaceful. This must be the medical wing.

“Look closely,” Castle tells me. “There are no needles attached to his body. No machines keeping him alive. He arrived with three broken ribs. Lungs close to collapsing. A bullet in his thigh. His kidneys were bruised along with the rest of his body. Broken skin, bloodied wrists. A sprained ankle. He’d lost more blood than most hospitals would be able to replenish.”

My heart is about to fall out of my body. I want to break through the glass and cradle him in my arms.

“There are close to two hundred people at Omega Point,” Castle says. “Less than half of whom have some kind of gift.”

I spin around, stunned.

“I brought you here,” he says to me carefully, quietly, “because this is where you belong. Because you need to know that you are not alone.”

Chapter Forty-Seven

My jaw is dangling from my shoelace.

“You would be invaluable to our resistance,” he tells me.

“There are others . . . like me?” I can hardly breathe.

Castle offers me eyes that empathize with my soul. “I was the first to realize my affliction could not be mine alone. I sought out others, following rumors, listening for stories, reading the newspapers for abnormalities in human behavior. At first it was just for companionship.” He pauses. “I was tired of the insanity. Of believing I was inhuman; a monster. But then I realized that what seemed a weakness was actually a strength. That together we could be something extraordinary. Something *good*.”

I can’t catch my breath. I can’t find my feet. I can’t cough up the impossibility caught in my throat.

Castle is waiting for my reaction.

I feel so nervous so suddenly. “What is your . . . gift?” I ask him.

His smile disarms my insecurity. He holds out his hand. Cocks his head. I hear the creak of a distant door opening. The sound of air and metal; movement. I turn toward the sound only to see something hurtling in my direction. I duck. Castle laughs. Catches it in his hand.

I gasp.

He shows me the key now caught between his fingers.

“You can move things with your mind?” I don’t even know where I found the words to speak.

“I have an impossibly advanced level of psychokinesis.” He twists his lips into a smile. “So yes.”

“There’s a *name* for it?” I think I’m squeaking. I try to steady myself.

“For my condition? Yes. For yours?” He pauses. “I’m uncertain.”

“And the others—what—they’re—”

“You can meet them, if you’d like.”

“I—yes—I’d like that,” I stammer, excited, 4 years old and still believing in fairies.

I freeze at a sudden sound.

Footsteps are pounding the stone. I catch the pant of strained breathing.

“Sir—” someone shouts.

Castle starts. Stills. Pivots around a corner toward the runner. “Brendan?”

“Sir!” he pants again.

“You have news? What have you seen?”

“We’re hearing things on the radio,” he begins, his broken words thick with a British accent. “Our cameras are picking up more tanks patrolling the area than usual. We think they may be getting closer—”

The sound of static energy. Static electricity. Garbled voices croaking through a weak radio line.

Brendan curses under his breath. “Sorry, sir—it’s not usually this distorted—I just haven’t learned to contain the charges lately—”

“Not to worry. You just need practice. Your training is going well?”

“Very well, sir. I have it almost entirely under my command.” Brendan pauses. “For the most part.”

“Excellent. In the meantime, let me know if the tanks get any closer. I’m not surprised to hear they’re getting a little more vigilant. Try to listen for any mention of an attack. The Reestablishment has been trying to pinpoint our whereabouts for years, but now we have someone particularly valuable to their efforts and I’m certain they want her back. I have a feeling things are going to develop rather quickly from now on.”

A moment of confusion. “Sir?”

“There’s someone I’d like for you to meet.”

Silence.

Brendan and Castle step around the corner. Come into view. And I have to make a conscious effort to keep my jaw from unhinging. I can’t stop staring.

Castle’s companion is white from head to toe.

Not just his strange uniform, which is a blinding shade of shimmering white, but his skin is paler than mine. Even his hair is so blond it can only be accurately described as white. His eyes are mesmerizing. They’re the lightest shade of blue I’ve ever seen. Piercing. Practically transparent. He looks to be my age.

He doesn’t seem *real*.

“Brendan, this is Juliette,” Castle introduces us. “She arrived just yesterday. I was giving her an overview of Omega Point.”

Brendan’s smile is so bright I nearly flinch. He sticks out his hand and I almost panic before he frowns. Pulls back, says, “Er, wait—sorry—,” and flexes his hands. Cracks his knuckles. A few sparks fly out of his fingers. I’m gaping at

him.

He shrinks back. Smiles a bit sheepishly. "Sometimes I electrocute people by accident."

Something in my heavy armor snaps off. Melts away. I feel suddenly understood. Unafraid of being myself. I can't help my grin. "Don't worry," I tell him. "If I shake your hand I might kill you."

"Blimey." He blinks. Stares. Waits for me to take it back. "You're serious?"

"Very."

He laughs. "Right then. No touching." Leans in. Lowers his voice. "I have a bit of a problem with that myself, you know. Girls are always talking about electricity in their romance, but none are too happy to actually *be* electrocuted, apparently. Bloody confusing, is what it is." He shrugs.

My smile is wider than the Pacific Ocean. My heart is so full of relief, comfort, acceptance. Adam was right. Maybe things can be okay. Maybe I don't have to be a monster. Maybe I do have a choice.

I think I'm going to like it here.

Brendan winks. "It was very nice meeting you, Juliette. I'll be seeing you?"

I nod. "I think so."

"Brilliant." He shoots me another smile. Turns to Castle. "I'll let you know if I hear anything, sir."

"Perfect."

And Brendan disappears.

I turn to the glass wall keeping me from the other half of my heart. Press my head against the cool surface. Wish he would wake up.

"Would you like to say hello?"

I look up at Castle, who is still studying me. Always analyzing me. Somehow his attention doesn't make me uncomfortable. "Yes," I tell him. "I want to say hello."

Chapter Forty-Eight

Castle uses the key in his hand to open the door.

“Why does the medical wing have to be locked?” I ask him.

He turns to me. He’s not very tall, I realize for the first time. “If you’d known where to find him—would you have waited patiently behind this door?”

I drop my eyes. Don’t answer. Hope I’m not blushing.

He tries to be encouraging. “Healing is a delicate process. It can’t be interrupted or influenced by erratic emotions. We’re lucky enough to have two healers among us—a set of twins, in fact. But most fascinating is that they each focus on a different element—one on the physical incapacitations, and one on the mental. Both facets must be addressed, otherwise the healing will be incomplete, weak, insufficient.” He turns the door handle. “But I think it’s safe for Adam to see you now.”

I step inside and my senses are almost immediately assaulted by the scent of jasmine. I search the space for the flowers but find none. I wonder if it’s a perfume. It’s intoxicating.

“I’ll be just outside,” Castle says to me.

The room is filled with a long row of beds, simply made. All 20 or so of them are empty except for Adam’s. There’s a door at the end of the room that probably leads to another space, but I’m too nervous to be curious right now.

I pull up an extra chair and try to be as quiet as possible. I don’t want to wake him, I just want to know he’s okay. I clasp and unclasp my hands. I’m too aware of my racing heart. And I know I probably shouldn’t touch him, but I can’t help myself. I cover his hand with mine. His fingers are warm.

His eyes flutter for just a moment. They don’t open. He takes a sudden breath and I freeze.

I almost collapse into tears.

“What are you *doing*?”

My neck snaps at the sound of Castle’s panicked voice.

I drop Adam’s hand. Push away from the bed, eyes wide, worried. “What do you mean?”

“Why are you—you just—you can *touch* him—?” I never thought I’d see

Castle so confused, so perplexed. He's lost his composure, one arm half extended in an effort to stop me.

"Of course I can tou—" I stop. Try to stay calm. "Kenji didn't tell you?"

"This young man has immunity from your touch?" Castle's words are whispered, astonished.

"Yes." I look from him to Adam, still sound asleep. ~~So does Warner.~~

"That's . . . *astounding*."

"Is it?"

"Very." Castle's eyes are bright, so eager. "It certainly isn't coincidence. There is no coincidence in these kinds of situations." He pauses. Paces. "Fascinating. So many possibilities—so many theories—" He's not even talking to me anymore. His mind is working too quickly for me to keep up. He takes a deep breath. Seems to remember I'm still in the room. "My apologies. Please, carry on. The girls will be out soon—they're assisting James at the moment. I must report this new information as soon as possible."

"Wait—"

He looks up. "Yes?"

"You have theories?" I ask him. "You—you know why these things are happening . . . to me?"

"You mean to *us*?" Castle offers me a gentle smile.

I try not to blush. I manage to nod.

"We have been doing extensive research for years," he says. "We think we have a pretty good idea."

"And?" I can hardly breathe.

"If you should decide to stay at Omega Point, we'll have that conversation very soon, I promise. Besides, I'm sure now is probably not the best time." He nods at Adam.

"Oh." I feel my cheeks burn. "Of course."

Castle turns to leave.

"But do you think that Adam—" The words tumble out of my mouth too quickly. I try to pace myself. "Do you think he's . . . like *us*, too?"

Castle pivots back around. Studies my eyes. "I think," he says carefully, "that it is entirely possible."

I gasp.

"My apologies," he says, "but I really must get going. And I wouldn't want to interrupt your time together."

I want to say yes, sure, of course, absolutely. I want to smile and wave and

tell him it's no problem. But I have so many questions, I think I might explode; I want him to tell me everything he knows.

"I know this is a lot of information to take in at once." Castle pauses at the door. "But we'll have plenty of opportunities to talk. You must be exhausted and I'm sure you'd like to get some sleep. The girls will take care of you—they're expecting you. In fact, they'll be your new roommates at Omega Point. I'm sure they'll be happy to answer any questions you might have." He clasps my shoulders before he goes. "It's an honor to have you with us, Ms. Ferrars. I hope you will seriously consider joining us on a permanent basis."

I nod, numb.

And he's gone.

We have been doing extensive research for years, he said. We think we have a pretty good idea, he said. We'll have that conversation very soon, I promise.

For the first time in my life I might finally understand what I am and it doesn't seem possible. And Adam. *Adam*. I shake myself and take my seat next to him. Squeeze his fingers. Castle could be wrong. Maybe this is all coincidence.

I have to focus.

I wonder if anyone has heard from Warner lately.

"Juliette?"

His eyes are half open. He's staring at me like he's not sure if I'm real.

"Adam!" I have to force myself to be still.

He smiles and the effort seems to exhaust him. "God it's good to see you."

"You're *okay*." I grip his hand, resist pulling him into my arms. "You're really okay."

His grin gets bigger. "I'm so tired. I feel like I could sleep for a few years."

"Don't worry, the sedative will wear off soon."

I spin around. Two girls with exactly the same green eyes are staring at us. They smile at the same time. Their long brown hair is thick and stick-straight in high ponytails on their heads. They're wearing matching silver bodysuits. Gold ballet flats.

"I'm Sonya," the girl on the left says.

"I'm Sara," her sister adds.

I have no idea how to tell them apart.

"It's so nice to meet you," they say at exactly the same time.

"I'm Juliette," I manage. "It's a pleasure to meet you, too."

"Adam is almost ready for release," one says to me.

“Sonya is an excellent healer,” the other one chimes in.

“Sara is better than I am,” says the first.

“He should be okay to leave just as soon as the sedative is out of his system,” they say together, smiling.

“Oh—that’s great—thank you so much—” I don’t know who to look at. Who to answer. I glance back at Adam. He seems thoroughly amused.

“Where’s James?” he asks.

“He’s playing with the other children.” I think it’s Sara who says it.

“We just took him on a bathroom break,” says the other.

“Would you like to see him?” Back to Sara.

“There are other children?” My eyes are as wide as my face.

The girls nod at the same time.

“We’ll go get him,” they chorus. And disappear.

“They seem nice,” Adam says after a moment.

“Yeah. They do.” This whole place seems nice.

Sonya and Sara come back with James, who seems happier than I’ve ever seen him, almost happier than seeing Adam for the first time. He’s thrilled to be here. Thrilled to be with the other kids, thrilled to be with “the pretty girls who take care of me because they’re so nice and there’s so much food and they gave me *chocolate*, Adam—have you ever tasted *chocolate*?” and he has a big bed and tomorrow he’s going to class with the other kids and he’s already excited.

“I’m so happy you’re awake,” he says to Adam, practically jumping up and down on his bed. “They said you got sick and that you were resting and now you’re awake so that means you’re better, right? And we’re safe? I don’t really remember what happened on our way here,” he admits, a little embarrassed. “I think I fell asleep.”

I think Adam is looking to break Kenji’s neck at this point.

“Yeah, we’re safe,” Adam tells him, running a hand through his messy blond hair. “Everything is okay.”

James runs back to the playroom with the other kids. Sonya and Sara invent an excuse to leave so we have some privacy. I’m liking them more and more.

“Has anyone told you about this place yet?” Adam asks me. He manages to sit up. His sheet slides down. His chest is exposed. His skin is perfectly healed—I can hardly reconcile the image I have in my memory with the one in front of me. I forget to answer his question.

“You have no scars.” I touch his skin like I need to feel it for myself.

He tries to smile. “They’re not very traditional in their medical practices around here.”

I look up, startled. “You . . . know?”

“Did you meet Castle yet?”

I nod, bewildered.

He shifts. Sighs. “I’ve heard rumors about this place for a long time. I got really good at listening to whispers, mostly because I was looking out for myself. But in the army we hear things. Any and all kinds of enemy threats. Possible ambushes. There was talk of an unusual underground movement from the moment I enlisted. Most people said it was crap. That it was some kind of garbage concocted to scare people—that there was no way it could be real. But I always hoped it had some basis in truth, especially after I found out about you—I hoped we’d be able to find others with similar abilities. But I didn’t know who to ask. I had no connections—no way of knowing how to find them.” He shakes his head. “And all this time, Kenji was working undercover.”

“He said he was looking for me.”

Adam nods. Laughs. “Just like I was looking for you. Just like Warner was looking for you.”

“I don’t understand,” I mumble. “Especially now that I know there are others like me—stronger, even—why did Warner want *me*?”

“He discovered you before Castle did,” Adam says. “He felt like he claimed you a long time ago.” Adam leans back. “Warner’s a lot of things, but he’s not stupid. I’m sure he knew there was some truth to those rumors—and he was fascinated. Because as much as Castle wanted to use his abilities for good, Warner wanted to manipulate those abilities for his own cause. He wanted to become some kind of superpower.” A pause. “He invested a lot of time and energy just studying you. I don’t think he wanted to let that effort go to waste.”

“Adam,” I whisper.

He takes my hand. “Yeah?”

“I don’t think he’s dead.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

“He’s not.”

Adam turns. Frowns at the voice. “What are you doing here?”

“Wow. What a greeting, Kent. Be careful not to pull a muscle thanking me for saving your ass.”

“You lied to all of us.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You sedated my ten-year-old brother!”

“You’re still welcome.”

“Hey, Kenji.” I acknowledge him.

“My clothes look good on you.” He steps a bit closer, smiles.

I roll my eyes. Adam examines my outfit for the first time.

“I didn’t have anything else to wear,” I explain.

Adam nods a little slowly. Looks at Kenji. “Did you have a message to deliver?”

“Yeah. I’m supposed to show you where you’ll be staying.”

“What do you mean?”

Kenji grins. “You and James are going to be my new roommates.”

Adam swears under his breath.

“Sorry, bro, but we don’t have enough rooms for you and Hot Hands over here to have your own private space.” He winks at me. “No offense.”

“I have to leave right now?”

“Yeah, man. I want to go to sleep soon. I don’t have all day to wait around for your lazy ass.”

“*Lazy—?*”

I hurry to interrupt before Adam has a chance to fight back. “What do you mean, you want to go to sleep? What time is it?”

“It’s almost ten at night,” Kenji tells me. “It’s hard to tell underground, but we all try to be aware of the clocks. We have monitors in the hallways, and most of us try to wear watches. Losing track of night and day can screw us up pretty quickly. And now is not the time to be getting too comfortable.”

“How do you know Warner isn’t dead?” I ask, nervous.

“We just saw him on camera,” Kenji says. “He and his men are patrolling this area pretty heavily. I managed to hear some of their conversation. Turns out Warner got shot.”

I suck in my breath, try to silence my heartbeats.

“That’s why we got lucky last night—apparently the soldiers got called back to base because they *thought* Warner was dead. There was a shift in power for a minute. No one knew what to do. What orders to follow. But then it turned out he wasn’t dead. Just wounded pretty bad. His arm was all patched up and in a sling,” Kenji adds.

Adam finds his voice before I do. “How safe is this place from attack?”

Kenji laughs. “Safe as *hell*. I don’t even know how they managed to get as close as they did. But they’ll never be able to find our exact location. And even if they do, they’ll never be able to break in. Our security is just about impenetrable. Plus we have cameras everywhere. We can see what they’re doing before they even plan it.

“It doesn’t really matter, though,” he goes on. “Because they’re looking for a fight, and so are we. We’re not afraid of an attack. Besides, they have no idea what we’re capable of. And we’ve been training for this shit forever.”

“Do you—” I pause. Flush. “Can you—I mean, do you have a . . . gift, too?”

Kenji smiles. And disappears.

He’s really gone.

I stand up. Try to touch the space he was just standing in.

He reappears just in time to jump out of reach. “HEY—whoa, careful—just because I’m invisible doesn’t mean I can’t feel anything—”

“Oh!” I pull back. Cringe. “I’m sorry—”

“You can make yourself *invisible*?” Adam looks more irritated than interested.

“Just blew your mind, didn’t I?”

“How long have you been spying on me?” Adam narrows his eyes.

“As long as I needed to.” But his grin is laced with mischief.

“So you’re . . . corporeal?” I ask.

“Look at you, using big fancy words.” Kenji crosses his arms. Leans against the wall.

“I mean—you can’t, like, walk through walls or anything, can you?”

He snorts. “Nah, I’m not a ghost. I can just . . . blend, I guess is the best word. I can blend into the background of any space. Shift myself to match my surrounds. It’s taken me a long time to figure it out.”

“Wow.”

“I used to follow Adam home. That’s how I knew where he lived. And that’s how I was able to run away—because they couldn’t really see me. They tried to shoot at me anyway,” he adds, bitter, “but I managed not to die, at least.”

“Wait, but why were you following Adam home? I thought you were looking for *me*?” I ask him.

“Yeah—well, I enlisted shortly after we got wind of Warner’s big project.” He nods in my direction. “We’d been trying to find you, but Warner had more security clearance and access to more information than we did—we were having a hard time tracking you down. Castle thought it would be easier to have someone on the inside paying attention to all the crazy shit Warner was planning. So when I heard that Adam was the main guy involved in this particular project and that he had this history with you, I sent the information to Castle. He told me to watch out for Adam, too—you know, in case Adam turned out to be just as psycho as Warner. We wanted to make sure he wasn’t a threat to you or our plans. But I had no idea you’d try to run away together. Messed me the hell up.”

We’re all silent for a moment.

“So how much did you spy on me?” Adam asks him.

“Well, well, well.” Kenji cocks his head. “Is Mr. Adam Kent suddenly feeling a little intimidated?”

“Don’t be a jackass.”

“You hiding something?”

“Yeah. My gun—”

“Hey!” Kenji claps his hands together. “So! Are we ready to get out of here, or what?”

“I need a pair of pants.”

Kenji looks abruptly annoyed. “Seriously, Kent? I don’t want to hear that shit.”

“Well, unless you want to see me naked, I suggest you do something about it.”

Kenji shoots Adam a dirty look and stalks off, grumbling something about lending people all of his clothes. The door swings shut behind him.

“I’m not really naked,” Adam tells me.

“Oh,” I gasp. Look up. My eyes betray me.

He can’t bite back his grin in time. His fingers graze my cheek. “I just wanted him to leave us alone for a second.”

I'm blushing through my bones. Fumbling for something to say. "I'm so happy you're okay."

He says something I don't hear.

Takes my hand. Pulls me up beside him.

He's leaning in and I'm leaning in until I'm practically on top of him and he's slipping me into his arms and kissing me with a new kind of desperation, a new kind of passion, a burning need. His hands are threaded in my hair, his lips so soft, so urgent against mine, like fire and honey exploding in my mouth. My whole body is steaming.

Adam pulls back just a tiny bit. Kisses my bottom lip. Bites it for just a second. His skin is 100 degrees hotter than it was a moment ago. His lips are pressed against my neck and my hands are on a journey down his upper body and I'm wondering why there are so many freight trains in my heart, why his chest is a broken harmonica. I'm tracing the bird caught forever in flight on his skin and I realize for the first time that he's given me wings of my own. He's helped me fly away and now I'm stuck in centripetal motion, soaring right into the center of everything. I bring his lips back up to mine.

"Juliette," he says. 1 breath. 1 kiss. 10 fingers teasing my skin. "I need to see you tonight."

Yes.

Please.

2 hard knocks send us flying apart.

Kenji slams open the door. "You do realize this wall is made of *glass*, don't you?" He looks like he's bitten the head off a worm. "No one wants to see that."

He throws a pair of pants at Adam.

Nods to me. "Come on, I'll take you to Sonya and Sara. They'll set you up for tonight." Turns to Adam. "And don't *ever* give those pants back to me."

"What if I don't want to sleep?" Adam asks, unabashed. "I'm not allowed to leave my room?"

Kenji presses his lips together. Narrows his eyes. "I will not use this word often, Kent, but *please* don't try any fancy secret-sneaking-away shit. We have to regulate things around here for a reason. It's the only way to survive. So do everyone a favor and keep your pants on. You'll see her in the morning."

But morning feels like a million years from now.

Chapter Fifty

The twins are still asleep when someone knocks. Sonya and Sara showed me where the girls' bathrooms are so I had a chance to shower last night, but I'm still wearing Kenji's oversized clothes. I feel a little ridiculous as I pad my way toward the door.

I open it.

Blink. "Hey, Winston."

He looks me up and down. "Castle thought you might like to change out of those clothes."

"You have something for me to wear?"

"Yeah—remember? We made you something custom."

"Oh. Wow. Yeah, that sounds great."

I slip outside silently, following Winston through the dark halls. The underground world is quiet, its inhabitants still asleep. I ask Winston why we're up so early.

"I figured you'd want to meet everyone at breakfast. This way you can jump into the regular routine of things around here—even get started on your training." He glances back. "We all have to learn how to harness our abilities in the most effective manner possible. It's no good having no control over your body."

"Wait—you have an *ability*, too?"

"There are exactly fifty-six of us who do. The rest are our family members, children, or close friends who help out with everything else. So yes, I'm one of those fifty-six. So are you."

I'm nearly stepping on his feet in an effort to keep up with his long legs. "So what can you do?"

He doesn't answer. And I can't be sure, but I think he's blushing.

"I'm sorry—" I backpedal. "I don't mean to pry—I shouldn't have asked—"

"It's okay," he cuts me off. "I just think it's kind of stupid." He laughs a short, hard laugh. "Of all the things I should be able to do," he sighs. "At least you can do something *interesting*."

I stop walking, stunned. Horrified. "You think this is a competition? To see

which magic trick is more twisted? To see who can inflict the most pain?”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“I don’t think it’s *interesting* to be able to kill someone by accident. I don’t think it’s *interesting* to be afraid to touch a living thing.”

His jaw is tense. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just . . . I wish I were more useful. That’s all.”

I cross my arms. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

He rolls his eyes. Runs a hand through his hair. “I’m just—I’m very . . . flexible,” he says.

It takes me a moment to process his admission. “Like—you can bend yourself into a pretzel?”

“Sure. Or stretch myself if I need to.”

I’m gawking so openly I must be embarrassing myself. “Can I see?”

He bites his lip. Readjusts his glasses. Looks both ways down the empty hall. And loops one arm around his waist. Twice.

I’m gaping like a dead fish. “Wow.”

“It’s stupid,” he grumbles. “And useless.”

“Are you insane?” I lean back to look at him. “That’s *incredible*.”

But his arm is back to normal and he’s walking away again. I have to run to catch up.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” I try to tell him. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.” But he’s not listening and I’m wondering when I became a motivational speaker. When I made the switch from hating myself to accepting myself. When it became okay for me to choose my own life.

Winston leads me to the room I met him in. The same white walls. The same small bed. Only this time, Adam and Kenji are waiting inside. My heart kicks into gear and I’m suddenly nervous.

Adam is up. He’s standing on his own and he looks perfect. Beautiful. Unharmed. There’s not a single drop of blood on his body. He walks forward with only a slight discomfort, smiles at me with no difficulty. His skin is a little paler than normal, but positively radiant compared to his complexion the night we arrived. His natural tan offsets a pair of eyes a shade of blue in a midnight sky.

“Juliette,” he says.

I can’t stop staring at him. Marveling at him. Amazed by how incredible it feels to know that he’s all right. “Hey.” I manage to smile.

“Good morning to you, too,” Kenji interjects.

I startle. I’m pinker than a summer sunset, and shrinking just as quickly. “Oh, hi.” I wave a limp hand in his direction.

He snorts.

“All right. Let’s get this over with, shall we?” Winston walks toward one of the walls, which turns out to be a closet. There’s one pop of color inside. He pulls it off the hanger.

“Can I, uh, have a moment alone with her?”

Winston takes off his glasses. Rubs his eyes. “I need to follow protocol. I have to explain everything—”

“I know—that’s fine,” Adam says. “You can do it after. I just need a minute, I promise. I haven’t really had a chance to talk to her since we got here.”

Winston frowns. Looks at me. Looks at Adam. Sighs.

“All right. But then we’ll be back. I need to make sure everything fits and I have to check the—”

“Perfect. That sounds great. Thanks, man—” And he’s shoving them out the door.

“Wait!” Winston slams the door back open. “At least get her to put the suit on while we’re outside. That way it won’t be a complete waste of my time.”

Adam stares at the material in Winston’s outstretched hand. Winston rubs his forehead and mumbles something about people always wasting his time, and Adam suppresses a grin. Glances at me. I shrug. “Okay,” he says, grabbing the suit. “But now you have to get out—” And pushes them both back into the hallway.

“We’re going to be *right outside*,” Kenji shouts. “Like five seconds away—”

Adam closes the door behind them. Turns around. His eyes are burning into me.

I don’t know how to calm my heart. I try to speak and fail.

He finds his voice first. “I never had a chance to say thank you,” he says.

I drop my eyes. Pretend heat isn’t fighting its way up my face. Pinch myself for no real reason.

He steps forward. Leans in. Takes my hands. “Juliette.”

I peek up at him.

“*You saved my life.*”

I bite the inside of my cheek. It seems so silly to say “You’re welcome” for saving someone’s life. I don’t know what to do. “I’m just so happy you’re okay,” is all I manage.

He's staring at my lips and I'm aching everywhere. If he kisses me right now I don't think I'll let him stop. He takes a sharp breath. Seems to remember he's holding something. "Oh. Maybe you should put this on?" He hands me a slinky piece of something purple. It looks tiny. Like a jumpsuit that could fit a small child. It weighs less than nothing.

I offer Adam a blank stare.

He grins. "Try it on."

I stare differently.

"Oh." He jumps back, a little bashful. "Right—I'll just—I'll turn around—"

I wait until his back is to me before I exhale. I look around. There don't seem to be any mirrors in this room. I shed the oversized outfit. Drop each piece on the floor. I'm standing here, completely naked, and for a moment I'm too petrified to move. But Adam doesn't turn around. He doesn't say a word. I examine the shiny purple material. I imagine it's supposed to stretch.

It does.

In fact, it's unexpectedly easy to slip on—like it was designed specifically for my body. There's built-in lining for where underwear is supposed to be, extra support for my chest, a collar that goes right up to my neck, sleeves that touch my wrists, legs that touch my ankles, a zipper that pulls it all together. I examine the ultrathin material. It feels like I'm wearing nothing. It's the richest shade of purple, skintight but not tight at all. It's breathable, oddly comfortable.

"How does it look . . . ?" Adam asks. He sounds nervous.

"Can you help me zip it up?"

He turns around. His lips part, falter, form an incredible smile. His eyebrows are touching the ceiling. I'm blushing so hard I don't even know where to look. He steps forward and I turn around, only too eager to hide my face, the butterflies racing through my chest. Adam touches my hair and I realize it's almost all the way down my back. Maybe it's time I cut it.

His fingers are so careful. He pushes the waves over my shoulder so they won't get caught in the zipper. Trails a line from the base of my neck down to the start of the seam, down to the dip in my lower back. I can hardly keep myself upright. My spine is conducting enough electricity to power a city. He takes his time zipping me up. Runs his hands down the length of my silhouette. "God you look incredible," is the first thing he says to me.

I turn around. He's pressing his fist to his mouth, trying to hide his smile, trying to stop the words from tumbling out of his lips.

I touch the material. Decide I should probably say something. "It's very . . .

comfortable.”

“Sexy.”

I look up.

He’s shaking his head. “It’s sexy as hell.”

He steps forward. Slips me into his arms.

“I look like a gymnast,” I mumble.

“No,” he whispers, hot hot hot against my lips. “You look like a superhero.”

Epilogue

I'm still tingling when Kenji and Winston burst back into the room.

"So how is this suit supposed to make my life easier?" I ask anyone who'll answer.

But Kenji is frozen in place, staring without apology. Opens his mouth. Closes it. Shoves his hands into his pockets.

Winston steps in. "It's supposed to help with the touching issue," he tells me. "You don't have to worry about being covered from head to toe in this unpredictable weather. The material is designed to keep you cool or keep you warm based on the temperature. It's light and breathable so your skin doesn't suffocate. It will keep you safe from hurting someone unintentionally, but offers you the flexibility of touching someone . . . intentionally, too. If you ever needed to."

"That's amazing."

He smiles. Big. "You're welcome."

I study the suit more closely. Realize something. "But my hands and feet are totally exposed. How's that supposed to—"

"Oh—shoot," Winston interrupts. "I almost forgot." He runs over to the closet and pulls out a pair of flat-heeled black ankle boots and a pair of black gloves that stop right before the elbow. He hands them to me. I study the soft leather of the accessories and marvel at the springy, flexible build of the boots. I could do ballet and run a mile in these shoes. "These should fit you," he says. "They complete the outfit."

I slip them on and tip up on my toes, luxuriate in the feeling of my new outfit. I feel invincible. I really wish I had a mirror for once in my life. I look from Kenji to Adam to Winston. "What do you think? Is it . . . okay?"

Kenji makes a strange noise.

Winston looks at his watch.

Adam can't stop smiling.

He and I follow Kenji and Winston out of the room, but Adam pauses to slip off my left glove. He takes my hand. Intertwines our fingers. Offers me a smile that manages to kiss my heart.

And I look around.

Flex my fist.

Touch the material hugging my skin.

I feel incredible. My bones feel rejuvenated; my skin feels vibrant, healthy. I take big lungfuls of air and savor the taste.

Things are changing, but this time I'm not afraid. This time I know who I am. This time I've made the right choice and I'm fighting for the right team. I feel safe. Confident.

Excited, even.

Because this time?

I'm ready.

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SHATTER ME

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SHE WILL CHOOSE ME.

DESTROY ME

A SHATTER ME
NOVELLA

TAHEREH MAFI

DESTROY ME

TAHEREH MAFI

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Excerpt from Warner's Files

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Prologue

I've been shot.

And, as it turns out, a bullet wound is even more uncomfortable than I had imagined.

My skin is cold and clammy; I'm making a herculean effort to breathe. Torture is roaring through my right arm and making it difficult for me to focus. I have to squeeze my eyes shut, grit my teeth, and force myself to pay attention.

The chaos is unbearable.

Several people are shouting and too many of them are touching me, and I want their hands surgically removed. They keep shouting "Sir!" as if they're still waiting for me to give them orders, as if they have no idea what to do without my instruction. The realization exhausts me.

"Sir, can you hear me?" Another cry. But this time, a voice I don't detest.

"Sir, please, can you hear me—"

"I've been shot, Delalieu," I manage to say. I open my eyes. Look into his watery ones. "I haven't gone deaf."

All at once the noise disappears. The soldiers shut up. Delalieu looks at me. Worried.

I sigh.

"Take me back," I tell him, shifting, just a little. The world tilts and steadies all at once. "Alert the medics and have my bed prepared for our arrival. In the meantime, elevate my arm and continue applying direct pressure to the wound. The bullet has broken or fractured something, and this will require surgery."

Delalieu says nothing for just a moment too long.

"Good to see you're all right, sir." His voice is a nervous, shaky thing. "Good to see you're all right."

"That was an order, Lieutenant."

"Of course," he says quickly, head bowed. "Certainly, sir. How should I direct the soldiers?"

"Find her," I tell him. It's getting harder for me to speak. I take a small breath and run a shaky hand across my forehead. I'm sweating in an excessive way that isn't lost on me.

“Yes, sir.” He moves to help me up, but I grab his arm.

“One last thing.”

“Sir?”

“Kent,” I say, my voice uneven now. “Make sure they keep him alive for me.”

Delalieu looks up, his eyes wide. “Private Adam Kent, sir?”

“Yes.” I hold his gaze. “I want to deal with him myself.”

One

Delalieu is standing at the foot of my bed, clipboard in hand.

His is my second visit this morning. The first was from my medics, who confirmed that the surgery went well. They said that as long as I stay in bed this week, the new drugs they've given me should accelerate my healing process. They also said that I should be fit to resume daily activities fairly soon, but I'll be required to wear a sling for at least a month.

I told them it was an interesting theory.

"My slacks, Delalieu." I'm sitting up, trying to steady my head against the nausea of these new drugs. My right arm is essentially useless to me now.

I look up. Delalieu is staring at me, unblinking, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

I stifle a sigh.

"What is it?" I use my left arm to steady myself against the mattress and force myself upright. It takes every ounce of energy I have left, and I'm clinging to the bed frame. I wave away Delalieu's effort to help; I close my eyes against the pain and dizziness. "Tell me what's happened," I say to him. "There's no point in prolonging bad news."

His voice breaks twice when he says, "Private Adam Kent has escaped, sir."

My eyes flash a bright, dizzying white behind my eyelids.

I take a deep breath and attempt to run my good hand through my hair. It's thick and dry and caked with what must be dirt mixed with my own blood. I'm tempted to punch my remaining fist through the wall.

Instead I take a moment to collect myself.

I'm suddenly too aware of everything in the air around me, the scents and small noises and footsteps outside my door. I hate these rough cotton pants they've put me in. I hate that I'm not wearing socks. I want to shower. I want to change.

I want to put a bullet through Adam Kent's spine.

"Leads," I demand. I move toward my bathroom and wince against the cold air as it hits my skin; I'm still without a shirt. Trying to remain calm. "Tell me you have not brought me this information without leads."

My mind is a warehouse of carefully organized human emotions. I can almost see my brain as it functions, filing thoughts and images away. I lock away the things that do not serve me. I focus only on what needs to be done: the basic components of survival and the myriad things I must manage throughout the day.

“Of course,” Delalieu says. The fear in his voice stings me a little; I dismiss it. “Yes, sir,” he says, “we do think we know where he might’ve gone—and we have reason to believe that Private Kent and the—and the girl—well, with Private Kishimoto having run off as well—we have reason to believe that they are all together, sir.”

The drawers in my mind are rattling to break open. Memories. Theories. Whispers and sensations.

I shove them off a cliff.

“Of course you do.” I shake my head. Regret it. Close my eyes against the sudden unsteadiness. “Do not give me information I’ve already deduced for myself,” I manage to say. “I want something concrete. Give me a solid lead, Lieutenant, or leave me until you have one.”

“A car,” he says quickly. “A car was reported stolen, sir, and we were able to track it to an unidentified location, but then it disappeared off the map. It’s as if it ceased to exist, sir.”

I look up. Give him my full attention.

“We followed the tracks it left in our radar,” he says, speaking more calmly now, “and they led us to a stretch of isolated, barren land. But we’ve scoured the area and found nothing.”

“This is something, at least.” I rub the back of my neck, fighting the weakness I feel deep in my bones. “I will meet you in the L Room in one hour.”

“But sir,” he says, eyes trained on my arm, “you’ll need assistance—there’s a process—you’ll require a convalescent aide—”

“You are dismissed.”

He hesitates.

Then, “Yes, sir.”

Two

I manage to bathe without losing consciousness.

It was more of a sponge bath, but I feel better nonetheless. I have an extremely low threshold for disorder; it offends my very being. I shower regularly. I eat six small meals a day. I dedicate two hours of each day to training and physical exercise. And I detest being barefoot.

Now, I find myself standing naked, hungry, tired, and barefoot in my closet. This is not ideal.

My closet is separated into various sections. Shirts, ties, slacks, blazers, and boots. Socks, gloves, scarves, and coats. Everything is arranged according to color, then shades within each color. Every article of clothing it contains is meticulously chosen and custom made to fit the exact measurements of my body. I don't feel like myself until I'm fully dressed; it's part of who I am and how I begin my day.

Now I haven't the faintest idea how I'm supposed to dress myself.

My hand shakes as I reach for the little blue bottle I was given this morning. I place two of the square-shaped pills on my tongue and allow them to dissolve. I'm not sure what they do; I only know they help replenish the blood I've lost. So I lean against the wall until my head clears and I feel stronger on my feet.

This, such an ordinary task. It wasn't an obstacle I was anticipating.

I put socks on first; a simple pleasure that requires more effort than shooting a man. Briefly, I wonder what the medics must've done with my clothes. *The clothes*, I tell myself, *only the clothes*; I'm focusing only on the clothes from that day. Nothing else. No other details.

Boots. Socks. Slacks. Sweater. My military jacket with its many buttons.

The many buttons she ripped open.

It's a small reminder, but it's enough to spear me.

I try to fight it off but it lingers, and the more I try to ignore the memory, it multiplies into a monster that can no longer be contained. I don't even realize I've fallen against the wall until I feel the cold climbing up my skin; I'm breathing too hard and squeezing my eyes shut against the sudden wash of mortification.

I knew she was terrified, horrified, even, but I never thought those feelings were directed toward me. I'd seen her evolve as we spent time together; she seemed more comfortable as the weeks passed. Happier. At ease. I allowed myself to believe she'd seen a future for us; that she wanted to be with me and simply thought it impossible.

I'd never suspected that her newfound happiness was a consequence of Kent.

I run my good hand down the length of my face; cover my mouth. The things I said to her.

A tight breath.

The way I touched her.

My jaw tenses.

If it were nothing but sexual attraction I'm sure I would not suffer such unbearable humiliation. But I wanted so much more than her body.

All at once I implore my mind to imagine nothing but walls. Walls. White walls. Blocks of concrete. Empty rooms. Open space.

I build walls until they begin to crumble, and then I force another set to take their place. I build and build and remain unmoving until my mind is clear, uncontaminated, containing nothing but a small white room. A single light hanging from the ceiling.

Clean. Pristine. Undisturbed.

I blink back the flood of disaster pressing against the small world I've built; I swallow hard against the fear creeping up my throat. I push the walls back, making more space in the room until I can finally breathe. Until I'm able to stand.

Sometimes I wish I could step outside of myself for a while. I want to leave this worn body behind, but my chains are too many, my weights too heavy. This life is all that's left of me. And I know I won't be able to meet myself in the mirror for the rest of the day.

I'm suddenly disgusted with myself. I have to get out of this room as soon as possible, or my own thoughts will wage war against me. I make a hasty decision and for the first time, pay little attention to what I'm wearing. I tug on a fresh pair of pants and go without a shirt. I slip my good arm into the sleeve of a blazer and allow the other shoulder to drape over the sling carrying my injured arm. I look ridiculous, exposed like this, but I'll find a solution tomorrow.

First, I have to get out of this room.

Three

Delalieu is the only person here who does not hate me.

He still spends the majority of his time in my presence cowering in fear, but somehow he has no interest in overthrowing my position. I can feel it, though I don't understand it. He's likely the only person in this building who's pleased that I'm not dead.

I hold up a hand to keep away the soldiers who rush forward as I open my door. It takes an intense amount of concentration to keep my fingers from shaking as I wipe the slight sheen of perspiration off my forehead, but I will not allow myself a moment of weakness. These men do not fear for my safety; they only want a closer look at the spectacle I've become. They want a first look at the cracks in my sanity. But I have no wish to be wondered at.

My job is to lead.

I've been shot; it will not be fatal. There are things to be managed; I will manage them.

This wound will be forgotten.

Her name will not be spoken.

My fingers clench and unclench as I make my way toward the L Room. I never before realized just how long these corridors are and just how many soldiers line the halls. There's no reprieve from their curious stares and their disappointment that I did not die. I don't even have to look at them to know what they're thinking. But knowing how they feel only makes me more determined to live a very long life.

I will give no one the satisfaction of my death.

"No."

I wave away the tea and coffee service for the fourth time. "I do not drink caffeine, Delalieu. Why do you always insist on having it served at my meals?"

"I suppose I always hope you will change your mind, sir."

I look up. Delalieu is smiling that strange, shaky smile. And I'm not entirely certain, but I think he's just made a joke.

"Why?" I reach for a slice of bread. "I am perfectly capable of keeping my

eyes open. Only an idiot would rely on the energy of a bean or a leaf to stay awake throughout the day.”

Delalieu is no longer smiling.

“Yes,” he says. “Certainly, sir.” And stares down at his food. I watch as his fingers push away the coffee cup.

I drop the bread back onto my plate. “My opinions,” I say to him, quietly this time, “should not so easily break your own. Stand by your convictions. Form clear and logical arguments. Even if I disagree.”

“Of course, sir,” he whispers. He says nothing for a few seconds. But then I see him reach for his coffee again.

Delalieu.

He, I think, is my only course for conversation.

He was originally assigned to this sector by my father, and has since been ordered to remain here until he’s no longer able. And though he’s likely forty-five years my senior, he insists on remaining directly below me. I’ve known Delalieu’s face since I was a child; I used to see him around our house, sitting in on the many meetings that took place in the years before The Reestablishment took over.

There was an endless supply of meetings in my house.

My father was always planning things, leading discussions and whispered conversations I was never allowed to be a part of. The men of those meetings are running this world now, so when I look at Delalieu I can’t help but wonder why he never aspired to more. He was a part of this regime from the very beginning, but somehow seems content to die just as he is now. He chooses to remain subservient, even when I give him opportunities to speak up; he refuses to be promoted, even when I offer him higher pay. And while I appreciate his loyalty, his dedication unnerves me. He does not seem to wish for more than what he has.

I should not trust him.

And yet, I do.

But I’ve begun to lose my mind for a lack of companionable conversation. I cannot maintain anything but a cool distance from my soldiers, not only because they all wish to see me dead, but also because I have a responsibility as their leader to make unbiased decisions. I have sentenced myself to a life of solitude, one wherein I have no peers, and no mind but my own to live in. I looked to build myself as a feared leader, and I’ve succeeded; no one will question my authority or posit a contrary opinion. No one will speak to me as anything but

the chief commander and regent of Sector 45. Friendship is not a thing I have ever experienced. Not as a child, and not as I am now.

Except.

One month ago, I met the exception to this rule. There *has* been one person who's ever looked me directly in the eye. The same person who's spoken to me with no filter; someone who's been unafraid to show anger and real, raw feeling in my presence; the only one who's ever dared to challenge me, to raise her voice to me—

I squeeze my eyes shut for what feels like the tenth time today. I unclench my fist around this fork, drop it to the table. My arm has begun to throb again, and I reach for the pills tucked away in my pocket.

"You shouldn't take more than eight of those within a twenty-four-hour period, sir."

I open the cap and toss three more into my mouth. I really wish my hands would stop shaking. My muscles feel too tight, too tense. Stretched thin.

I don't wait for the pills to dissolve. I bite down on them, crunching against their bitterness. There's something about the foul, metallic taste that helps me focus. "Tell me about Kent."

Delalieu knocks over his coffee cup.

The dining aides have left the room at my request; Delalieu receives no assistance as he scrambles to clean up the mess. I sit back in my chair, staring at the wall just behind him, mentally tallying up the minutes I've lost today.

"Leave the coffee."

"I—yes, of course, sorry, sir—"

"Stop."

Delalieu drops the sopping napkins. His hands are frozen in place, hovering over his plate.

"Speak."

I watch his throat move as he swallows, hesitates. "We don't know, sir," he whispers. "The building should've been impossible to find, much less to enter. It'd been bolted and rusted shut. But when we found it," he says, "when we found it, it was . . . the door had been destroyed. And we're not sure how they managed it."

I sit up. "What do you mean, *destroyed*?"

He shakes his head. "It was . . . very odd, sir. The door had been . . . mangled. As if some kind of animal had clawed through it. There was only a gaping, ragged hole in the middle of the frame."

I stand up entirely too fast, gripping the table for support. I'm breathless at the thought of it, at the possibility of what must've happened. And I can't help but allow myself the painful pleasure of recalling her name once more, because I know it must've been her. She must've done something extraordinary, and I wasn't even there to witness it.

"Call for transport," I tell him. "I will meet you in the Quadrant in exactly ten minutes."

"Sir?"

I'm already out the door.

Four

Clawed through the middle. Just like an animal. It's true.

To an unsuspecting observer it would be the only explanation, but even then it wouldn't make any sense. No animal alive could claw through this many inches of reinforced steel without amputating its own limbs.

And she is not an animal.

She is a soft, deadly creature. Kind and timid and terrifying. She's completely out of control and has no idea what she's capable of. And even though she hates me, I can't help but be fascinated by her. I'm enchanted by her pretend-innocence; jealous, even, of the power she wields so unwittingly. I want so much to be a part of her world. I want to know what it's like to be in her mind, to feel what she feels. It seems a tremendous weight to carry.

And now she's out there, somewhere, unleashed on society.

What a beautiful disaster.

I run my fingers along the jagged edges of the hole, careful not to cut myself. There's no design to it, no premeditation. Only an anguished fervor so readily apparent in the chaotic ripping-apart of this door. I can't help but wonder if she knew what she was doing when this happened, or if it was just as unexpected to her as it was the day she broke through that concrete wall to get to me.

I have to stifle a smile. I wonder how she must remember that day. Every soldier I've worked with has walked into a simulation knowing exactly what to expect, but I purposely kept those details from her. I thought the experience should be as undiluted as possible; I hoped the spare, realistic elements would lend authenticity to the event. More than anything else, I wanted her to have a chance to explore her true nature—to exercise her strength in a safe space—and given her past, I knew a child would be the perfect trigger. But I never could've anticipated such revolutionary results. Her performance was more than I had hoped for. And though I wanted to discuss the effects with her afterward, by the time I found her she was already planning her escape.

My smile falters.

"Would you like to step inside, sir?" Delalieu's voice jolts me back to the present. "There's not much to see within, but it is interesting to note that the hole

is just big enough for someone to easily climb through. It seems clear, sir, what the intent was.”

I nod, distracted. My eyes carefully catalog the dimensions of the hole; I try to imagine what it must’ve been like for her, to be here, trying to get through. I want so much to be able to talk to her about all of this.

My heart twists so suddenly.

I’m reminded, all over again, that she’s no longer with me. She does not live on base anymore.

It’s my fault she’s gone. I allowed myself to believe she was finally doing well and it affected my judgment. I should’ve been paying closer attention to details. To my soldiers. I lost sight of my purpose and my greater goal; the entire reason I brought her on base. I was stupid. Careless.

But the truth is, I was distracted.

By her.

She was so stubborn and childish when she first arrived, but as the weeks passed she’d seemed to settle; she felt less anxious to me, somehow less afraid. I have to keep reminding myself that her improvements had nothing to do with me.

They had to do with Kent.

A betrayal that somehow seemed impossible. That she would leave me for a robotic, unfeeling idiot like Kent. His thoughts are so empty, so mindless; it’s like conversing with a desk lamp. I don’t understand what he could’ve offered her, what she could’ve possibly seen in him except a tool for escape.

She still hasn’t grasped that there’s no future for her in the world of common people. She doesn’t belong in the company of those who will never understand her. And I have to get her back.

I only realize I’ve said that last bit out loud when Delalieu speaks.

“We have troops all across the sector searching for her,” he says. “And we’ve alerted the neighboring sectors, just in case the group of them should cross over—”

“What?” I spin around, my voice a quiet, dangerous thing. “What did you just say?”

Delalieu has turned a sickly shade of white.

“I was unconscious for all of one night! And you’ve already alerted the other sectors to this *catastrophe*—”

“I thought you would want to find them, sir, and I thought, if they should try to seek refuge elsewhere—”

I take a moment to breathe, to gather my bearings.

“I’m sorry, sir, I thought it would be safest—”

“She is with two of my own soldiers, Lieutenant. Neither one of them are stupid enough to guide her toward another sector. They have neither the clearance nor the tools to obtain said clearance in order to cross the sector line.”

“But—”

“They’ve been gone one day. They are badly wounded and in need of aid. They’re traveling on foot and with a stolen vehicle that is easily trackable. How far,” I say to him, frustration breaking into my voice, “could they have gone?”

Delalieu says nothing.

“You have sent out a national alert. You’ve notified multiple sectors, which means the entire country now knows. Which means the capitals have received word. Which means what?” I curl my only working hand into a fist. “What do you think that means, Lieutenant?”

For a moment, he seems unable to speak.

Then

“Sir,” he gasps. “Please forgive me.”

Five

Delalieu follows me to my door.

“Gather the troops in the Quadrant tomorrow at ten hundred hours,” I say to him by way of good-bye. “I’ll have to make an announcement about these recent events as well as what’s to come.”

“Yes, sir,” Delalieu says. He doesn’t look up. He hasn’t looked at me since we left the warehouse.

I have other matters to worry about.

Not counting Delalieu’s stupidity, there are an infinite number of things I must take care of right now. I can’t afford any more difficulties, and I cannot be distracted. Not by her. Not by Delalieu. Not by anyone. I have to focus.

This is a terrible time to be wounded.

News of our situation has already hit a national level. Civilians and neighboring sectors are now aware of our minor uprising, and we have to tamp down the rumors as much as possible. I have to somehow defuse the alerts Delalieu has already sent out, and simultaneously suppress any hope of rebellion among the citizens. They’re already too eager to resist, and any spark of controversy will reignite their fervor. Too many have died already, and they still don’t seem to understand that standing against The Reestablishment is asking for more destruction. The civilians *must* be pacified.

I do not want war in my sector.

Now more than ever, I need to be in control of myself and my responsibilities. But my mind is scattered, my body fatigued and wounded. All day I’ve been inches from collapsing, and I don’t know what to do. I have no idea how to fix it. This weakness is foreign to my being.

In just two days, one girl has managed to cripple me.

I’ve taken even more of these disgusting pills, but I feel weaker than I did this morning. I thought I could ignore the pain and inconvenience of a wounded shoulder, but the complication refuses to diminish. I am now wholly dependent on whatever will carry me through these next weeks of frustration. Medicine, medics, hours in bed.

All this for a kiss.

It's almost unbearable.

"I'll be in my office for the rest of the day," I tell Delalieu. "Have my meals sent to my room, and do not disturb me unless there are any new developments."

"Yes, sir."

"That'll be all, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

I don't even realize how ill I feel until I close the bedroom door behind me. I stagger to the bed and grip the frame to keep from falling over. I'm sweating again and decide to strip the extra coat I wore on our outside excursion. I yank off the blazer I'd carelessly tossed over my injured shoulder this morning and fall backward onto my bed. I'm suddenly freezing. My good hand shakes as I reach for the medic call button.

I need to get the dressing on my shoulder changed. I need to eat something substantial. And more than anything else, I desperately need to take a real shower, which seems altogether impossible.

Someone is standing over me.

I blink several times but can only make out the general outline of their figure. A face keeps coming in and out of focus until I finally give up. My eyes fall closed. My head is pounding. Pain is searing through my bones and up my neck; reds and yellows and blues blur together behind my eyelids. I catch only clips of the conversation around me.

—seems to have developed a fever—

—probably sedate him—

—how many did he take?—

They're going to kill me, I realize. This is the perfect opportunity. I'm weak and unable to fight back, and someone has finally come to kill me. This is it. My moment. It has arrived. And somehow I can't seem to accept it.

I take a swipe at the voices; an inhuman sound escapes my throat. Something hard hits my fist and crashes to the floor. Hands clamp down on my right arm and pin it in place. Something is being tightened around my ankles, my wrist. I'm thrashing against these new restraints and kicking desperately at the air. The blackness seems to be pressing against my eyes, my ears, my throat. I can't breathe, can't hear or see clearly, and the suffocation of the moment is so terrifying that I'm almost certain I've lost my mind.

Something cold and sharp pinches my arm.

I have only a moment to reflect on the pain before it engulfs me.

Six

“Juliette,” I whisper. “What are you doing here?”

I’m half-dressed, getting ready for my day, and it’s too early for visitors. These hours just before the sun rises are my only moments of peace, and no one should be in here. It seems impossible she gained access to my private quarters.

Someone should’ve stopped her.

Instead, she’s standing in my doorway, staring at me. I’ve seen her so many times, but this is different—it’s causing me physical pain to look at her. But somehow I still find myself drawn to her, wanting to be near her.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, and she’s wringing her hands, looking away from me. “I’m so, so sorry.”

I notice what she’s wearing.

It’s a dark-green dress with fitted sleeves; a simple cut made of stretch cotton that clings to the soft curves of her figure. It complements the flecks of green in her eyes in a way I couldn’t have anticipated. It’s one of the many dresses I chose for her. I thought she might enjoy having something nice after being caged as an animal for so long. And I can’t quite explain it, but it gives me a strange sense of pride to see her wearing something I picked out myself.

“I’m sorry,” she says for the third time.

I’m again struck by how impossible it is that she’s here. In my bedroom. Staring at me without my shirt on. Her hair is so long it falls to the middle of her back; I have to clench my fists against this unbidden need to run my hands through it. She’s so beautiful.

I don’t understand why she keeps apologizing.

She shuts the door behind her. She’s walking over to me. My heart is beating quickly now, and it doesn’t feel natural. I do not react this way. I do not lose control. I see her every day and manage to maintain some semblance of dignity, but something is off; this isn’t right.

She’s touching my arm.

She’s running her fingers along the curve of my shoulder, and the brush of her skin against mine is making me want to scream. The pain is excruciating, but I can’t speak; I’m frozen in place.

I want to tell her to stop, to leave, but parts of me are at war. I'm happy to have her close even if it hurts, even if it doesn't make any sense. But I can't seem to reach for her; I can't hold her like I've always wanted to.

She looks at me.

She searches me with those odd, blue-green eyes and I feel guilty so suddenly, without understanding why. But there's something about the way she looks at me that always makes me feel insignificant, as if she's the only one who's realized I'm entirely hollow inside. She's found the cracks in this cast I'm forced to wear every day, and it petrifies me.

That this girl would know exactly how to shatter me.

She rests her hand against my collarbone.

And then she grips my shoulder, digs her fingers into my skin like she's trying to tear off my arm. The agony is so blinding that this time I actually scream. I fall to my knees before her and she wrenches my arm, twisting it backward until I'm heaving from the effort to stay calm, fighting not to lose myself to the pain.

"Juliette," I gasp, "please—"

She runs her free hand through my hair, tugs my head back so I'm forced to meet her eyes. And then she leans into my ear, her lips almost touching my cheek. "Do you love me?" she whispers.

"What?" I breathe. "What are you doing—"

"Do you still love me?" she asks again, her fingers now tracing the shape of my face, the line of my jaw.

"Yes," I tell her. "Yes I still do—"

She smiles.

It's such a sweet, innocent smile that I'm actually shocked when her grip tightens around my arm. She twists my shoulder back until I'm sure it's being ripped from the socket. I'm seeing spots when she says, "It's almost over now."

"What is?" I ask, frantic, trying to look around. "What's almost over—"

"Just a little longer and I'll leave."

"No—no, don't go—where are you going—"

"You'll be all right," she says. "I promise."

"No," I'm gasping, "no—"

All at once she yanks me forward, and I'm awake so quickly I can't breathe.

I blink several times only to realize I've woken up in the middle of the night. Absolute blackness greets me from the corners of my room. My chest is heaving; my arm is bound and pounding, and I realize my pain medication has worn off. There's a small remote wedged under my hand; I press the button to replenish

the dosage.

It takes a few moments for my breathing to stabilize. My thoughts slowly retreat from panic.

Juliette.

I can't control a nightmare, but in my waking moments her name is the only reminder I will permit myself.

The accompanying humiliation will not allow me much more than that.

Seven

“Well, isn’t this embarrassing. My son, tied down like an animal.”

I’m half-convinced I’m having another nightmare. I blink my eyes open slowly; I stare up at the ceiling. I make no sudden movements, but I can feel the very real weight of restraints around my left wrist and both ankles. My injured arm is still bound and slung across my chest. And though the pain in my shoulder is present, it’s dulled to a light hum. I feel stronger. Even my head feels clearer, sharper somehow. But then I taste the tang of something sour and metal in my mouth and wonder how long I’ve been in bed.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out?” he asks, amused.

He moves closer to my bed, his footsteps reverberating right through me. “You have Delalieu whimpering apologies for disturbing me, begging my men to blame him for the inconvenience of this unexpected visit. No doubt you terrified the old man for doing his job, when the truth is, I would’ve found out even without his alerts. This,” he says, “is not the kind of mess you can conceal. You’re an idiot for thinking otherwise.”

I feel a light tugging on my legs and realize he’s undoing my restraints. The brush of his skin against mine is abrupt and unexpected, and it triggers something deep and dark within me, enough to make me physically ill. I taste vomit at the back of my throat. It takes all my self-control not to jerk away from him.

“Sit up, son. You should be well enough to function now. You were too stupid to rest when you were supposed to, and now you’ve overcorrected. Three days you’ve been unconscious, and I arrived twenty-seven hours ago. Now get up. This is ridiculous.”

I’m still staring at the ceiling. Hardly breathing.

He changes tactics.

“You know,” he says carefully, “I’ve actually heard an interesting story about you.” He sits down on the edge of my bed; the mattress creaks and groans under his weight. “Would you like to hear it?”

My left hand has begun to tremble. I clench it fast against the bedsheets.

“Private 45B-76423. Fletcher, Seamus.” He pauses. “Does that name sound

familiar?”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Imagine my surprise,” he says, “when I heard that my son had finally done something right. That he’d finally taken initiative and dispensed with a traitorous soldier who’d been stealing from our storage compounds. I heard you shot him right in the forehead.” A laugh. “I congratulated myself—told myself you’d finally come into your own, that you’d finally learned how to lead properly. I was almost proud.

“That’s why it came as an even greater shock to me to hear Fletcher’s family was still alive.” He claps his hands together. “Shocking, of course, because you, of all people, should know the rules. Traitors come from a family of traitors, and one betrayal means death to them all.”

He rests his hand on my chest.

I’m building walls in my mind again. White walls. Blocks of concrete. Empty rooms and open space.

Nothing exists inside of me. Nothing stays.

“It’s funny,” he continues, thoughtful now, “because I told myself I’d wait to discuss this with you. But somehow, *this* moment seems so right, doesn’t it?” I can hear him smile. “To tell you just how tremendously . . . *disappointed* I am. Though I can’t say I’m surprised.” He sighs. “In a single month you’ve lost two soldiers, couldn’t contain a clinically insane girl, upended an entire sector, and encouraged rebellion among the citizens. And somehow, I’m not surprised at all.”

His hand shifts; lingers at my collarbone.

White walls, I think.

Blocks of concrete.

Empty rooms. Open space.

Nothing exists inside of me. Nothing stays.

“But what’s worse than all this,” he says, “is not that you’ve managed to humiliate me by disrupting the order I’d finally managed to establish. It’s not even that you somehow got yourself shot in the process. But that you would show sympathy to the family of a *traitor*,” he says, laughing, his voice a happy, cheerful thing. “This is unforgivable.”

My eyes are open now, blinking up at the fluorescent lights above my head, focused on the white of the bulbs blurring my vision. I will not move. I will not speak.

His hand closes around my throat.

The movement is so rough and violent I'm almost relieved. Some part of me always hopes he'll go through with it; that maybe this time he'll actually let me die. But he never does. It never lasts.

Torture is not torture when there's any hope of relief.

He lets go all too soon and gets exactly what he wants. I jerk upward, coughing and wheezing and finally making a sound that acknowledges his existence in this room. My whole body is shaking now, my muscles in shock from the assault and from remaining still for so long. My skin is cold sweat; my breaths are labored and painful.

"You're very lucky," he says, his words too soft. He's up now, no longer inches from my face. "So lucky I was here to make things right. So lucky I had time to correct the mistake."

I freeze.

The room spins.

"I was able to track down his wife," he says. "Fletcher's wife and their three children. I hear they sent their regards." A pause. "Well, this was before I had them killed, so I suppose it doesn't really matter now, but my men told me they said hello. It seems she remembered you," he says, laughing softly. "The wife. She said you went to visit them before all this . . . unpleasantness occurred. You were always visiting the compounds, she said. Asking after the civilians."

I whisper the only two words I can manage.

"Get out."

"This is my boy!" he says, waving a hand in my direction. "A meek, pathetic fool. Some days I'm so disgusted by you I don't know whether to shoot you myself. And then I realize you'd probably like that, wouldn't you? To be able to blame me for your downfall? And I think no, best to let him die of his own stupidity."

I stare blankly ahead, fingers flexing against the mattress.

"Now tell me," he says, "what happened to your arm? Delalieu seemed as clueless as the others."

I say nothing.

"Too ashamed to admit you were shot by one of your own soldiers, then?"

I close my eyes.

"And what about the girl?" he asks. "How did she escape? Ran off with one of your men, didn't she?"

I grip the bedsheet so hard my fist starts shaking.

"Tell me," he says, leaning into my ear. "How would you deal with a traitor

like that? Are you going to go visit his family, too? Make nice with his wife?"

And I don't mean to say it out loud, but I can't stop myself in time. "I'm going to kill him."

He laughs out loud so suddenly it's almost a howl. He claps a hand on my head and musses my hair with the same fingers he just closed around my throat. "Much better," he says. "So much better. Now get up. We have work to do."

And I think yes, I wouldn't mind doing the kind of work that would remove Adam Kent from this world.

A traitor like him does not deserve to live.

Eight

I'm in the shower for so long I actually lose track of time.

This has never happened before.

Everything is off, unbalanced. I'm second-guessing my decisions, doubting everything I thought I didn't believe in, and for the first time in my life, I am genuinely, bone-achingly tired.

My father is here.

We are sleeping under the same godforsaken roof; a thing I'd hoped never to experience again. But he's here, staying on base in his own private quarters until he feels confident enough to leave. Which means he'll be fixing our problems by wreaking havoc on Sector 45. Which means I will be reduced to becoming his puppet and messenger, because my father never shows his face to anyone except those he's about to kill.

He is the supreme commander of The Reestablishment, and prefers to dictate anonymously. He travels everywhere with the same select group of soldiers, communicates only through his men, and only in extremely rare circumstances does he ever leave the capital.

News of his arrival at Sector 45 has probably spread around base by now, and has likely terrified my soldiers. Because his presence, real or imagined, has only ever signified one thing: torture.

It's been so long since I've felt like a coward.

But this, this is bliss. This protracted moment—this illusion—of strength. Being out of bed and able to bathe: it's a small victory. The medics wrapped my injured arm in some kind of impermeable plastic for the shower, and I'm finally well enough to stand on my own. My nausea has settled, the dizziness is gone. I should finally be able to think clearly, and yet, my choices still seem so muddled.

I've forced myself not to think about her, but I'm beginning to realize I'm still not strong enough; not just yet, and especially not while I'm still actively searching for her. It's become a physical impossibility.

Today, I need to go back to her room.

I need to search her things for any clues that might help me find her. Kent's

and Kishimoto's bunks and lockers have already been cleared out; nothing incriminating was found. But I'd ordered my men to leave her room—*Juliette's* room—exactly as it was. No one but myself is allowed to reenter that space. Not until I've had the first look.

And this, according to my father, is my first task.

"That'll be all, Delalieu. I'll let you know if I require assistance."

He's been following me around even more than usual lately. Apparently he came to check on me when I didn't show for the assembly I'd called two days ago, and had the pleasure of finding me completely delirious and half out of my mind. He's somehow managed to lay the blame for all this on himself.

If he were anyone else, I would've had him demoted.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir. And please forgive me—I never meant to cause additional problems—"

"You are in no danger from me, Lieutenant."

"I'm so sorry, sir," he whispers. His shoulders fall. His head bows.

His apologies are making me uncomfortable. "Have the troops reassemble at thirteen hundred hours. I still need to address them about these recent developments."

"Yes, sir," he says. He nods once, without looking up.

"You are dismissed."

"Sir." He drops his salute and disappears.

I'm left alone in front of her door.

Funny, how accustomed I'd become to visiting her here; how it gave me a strange sense of comfort to know that she and I were living in the same building. Her presence on base changed everything for me; the weeks she spent here became the first I ever enjoyed living in these quarters. I looked forward to her temper. Her tantrums. Her ridiculous arguments. I wanted her to yell at me; I would've congratulated her had she ever slapped me in the face. I was always pushing her, toying with her emotions. I wanted to meet the real girl trapped behind the fear. I wanted her to finally break free of her own carefully constructed restraints.

Because while she might be able to feign timidity within the confines of isolation, out here—amid chaos, destruction—I knew she'd become something entirely different. I was just waiting. Every day, patiently waiting for her to understand the breadth of her own potential; never realizing I'd entrusted her to

the one soldier who might take her away from me.

I should shoot myself for it.

Instead, I open the door.

The panel slides shut behind me as I cross the threshold. I find myself alone, standing here, in the last place she touched. The bed is messy and unmade, the doors to her armoire hanging open, the broken window temporarily taped shut. There's a sinking, nervous pain in my stomach that I choose to ignore.

Focus.

I step into the bathroom and examine the toiletries, the cabinets, even the inside of the shower.

Nothing.

I walk back over to the bed and run my hand over the rumpled comforter, the lumpy pillows. I allow myself a moment to appreciate the evidence that she was once here, and then I strip the bed. Sheets, pillowcases, comforter, and duvet; all tossed to the floor. I scrutinize every inch of the pillows, the mattress, and the bed frame, and again find nothing.

The side table. Nothing.

Under the bed. Nothing.

The light fixtures, the wallpaper, each individual piece of clothing in her armoire. Nothing.

It's only as I'm making my way toward the door that something catches my foot. I look down. There, caught just under my boot, is a thick, faded rectangle. A small, unassuming notebook that could fit in the palm of my hand.

And I'm so stunned that for a moment I can't even move.

Nine

How could I have forgotten?

This notebook was in her pocket the day she was making her escape. I'd found it just before Kent put a gun to my head, and at some point in the chaos, I must've dropped it. And I realize I should've been looking for this all along.

I bend down to pick it up, carefully shaking out bits and pieces of glass from the pages. My hand is unsteady, my heart pounding in my ears. I have no idea what this might contain. Pictures. Notes. Scrambled, half-formed thoughts.

It could be anything.

I flip the notebook over in my hands, my fingers memorizing its rough, worn surface. The cover is a dull shade of brown, but I can't tell if it's been stained by dirt and age, or if it was always this color. I wonder how long she's had it. Where she might've acquired it.

I stumble backward, the backs of my legs hitting her bed. My knees buckle, and I catch myself on the edge of the mattress. I take in a shaky breath and close my eyes.

I'd seen footage from her time in the asylum, but it was essentially useless. The lighting was always too dim; the small window did little to illuminate the dark corners of her room. She was often an indistinguishable form; a dark shadow one might never even notice. Our cameras were only good at detecting movement—and maybe a lucky moment when the sun hit her at the right angle—but she rarely moved. Most of her time was spent sitting very, very still, on her bed or in a dark corner. She almost never spoke. And when she did, it was never in words. She spoke only in numbers.

Counting.

There was something so unreal about her, sitting there. I couldn't even see her face; couldn't discern the outline of her figure. Even then she fascinated me. That she could seem so calm, so still. She would sit in one place for hours at a time, unmoving, and I always wondered where she was in her mind, what she might be thinking, how she could possibly exist in that solitary world. More than anything else, I wanted to hear her speak.

I was desperate to hear her voice.

I'd always expected her to speak in a language I could understand. I thought she'd start with something simple. Maybe something unintelligible. But the first time we ever caught her talking on camera, I couldn't look away. I sat there, transfixed, nerves stretched thin, as she touched one hand to the wall and counted.

4,572.

I watched her count. To 4,572.

It took five hours.

Only afterward did I realize she was counting her breaths.

I couldn't stop thinking about her after that. I was distracted long before she arrived on base, constantly wondering what she might be doing and whether she'd speak again. If she wasn't counting out loud, was she counting in her head? Did she ever think in letters? Complete sentences? Was she angry? Sad? Why did she seem so serene for a girl I'd been told was a volatile, deranged animal? Was it a trick?

I'd seen every piece of paper documenting the critical moments in her life. I'd read every detail in her medical records and police reports; I'd sorted through school complaints, doctors' notes, her official sentencing by The Reestablishment, and even the asylum questionnaire submitted by her parents. I knew she'd been pulled out of school at fourteen. I knew she'd been through severe testing and was forced to take various—and dangerous—experimental drugs, and had to undergo electroshock therapy. In two years she'd been in and out of nine different juvenile detention centers and had been examined by more than fifty different doctors. All of them described her as a monster. They called her a danger to society and a threat to humanity. A girl who would ruin our world and had already begun by murdering a small child. At sixteen, her parents suggested she be locked away. And so she was.

None of it made sense to me.

A girl cast off by society, by her own family—she had to contain so much feeling. Rage. Depression. Resentment. Where was it?

She was nothing like the other inmates at the asylum—the ones who were truly disturbed. Some would spend hours hurling themselves at the wall, breaking bones and fracturing skulls. Others were so deranged they would claw at their own skin until they drew blood, literally ripping themselves to pieces. Some had entire conversations with themselves out loud, laughing and singing and arguing. Most would tear their clothes off, content to sleep and stand naked in their own filth. She was the only one who showered regularly or even washed

her clothes. She would take her meals calmly, always finishing whatever she was given. And she spent most of her time staring out the window.

She'd been locked up for almost a year and had not lost her sense of humanity. I wanted to know how she could suppress so much; how she'd achieved such outward calm. I'd asked for profiles on the other prisoners because I wanted comparisons. I wanted to know if her behavior was normal.

It wasn't.

I watched the unassuming outline of this girl I could not see and did not know, and I felt an unbelievable amount of respect for her. I admired her, envied her composure—her steadiness in the face of all she'd been forced to endure. I don't know that I understood what it was, exactly, I was feeling at the time, but I knew I wanted her all to myself.

I wanted to know her secrets.

And then one day, she stood up in her cell and walked over to the window. It was early morning, just as the sun was rising; I caught a glimpse of her face for the very first time. She pressed her palm to the window and whispered two words, just once.

Forgive me.

I hit rewind too many times.

I could never tell anyone I'd developed a newfound fascination with her. I had to effect a pretense, an outward indifference—an arrogance—toward her. She was to be our weapon and nothing more, just an innovative instrument of torture.

A detail I cared very little about.

My research had led me to her files by pure accident. Coincidence. I did not seek her out in search of a weapon; I never had. Far before I'd ever seen her on film, and far, far before I ever spoke a word to her, I had been researching something else. For something else.

My motives were my own.

Utilizing her as a weapon was a story I fed to my father; I needed an excuse to have access to her, to gain the necessary clearance to study her files. It was a charade I was forced to maintain in front of my soldiers and the hundreds of cameras that monitor my existence. I did not bring her on base to exploit her ability. And I certainly did not expect to fall for her in the process.

But these truths and my real motivations will be buried with me.

I fall hard onto the bed. Clap a hand over my forehead, drag it down the length of my face. I never would've sent Kent to stay with her if I could've taken the time to go myself. Every move I made was a mistake. Every calculated effort

was a failure. I only wanted to watch her interact with someone. I wondered if she'd seem different; if she'd shatter the expectations I'd already formed in my mind by simply having a normal conversation. But watching her talk to someone else made me crazy. I was jealous. Ridiculous. I wanted her to know *me*; I wanted her to talk to *me*. And I felt it then: this strange, inexplicable sense that she might be the only person in the world I could really care about.

I force myself to sit up. I hazard a glance at the notebook still clutched in my hand.

I lost her.

She hates me.

She hates me and I repulse her and I might never see her again, and it is entirely my own doing. This notebook might be all I have left of her. My hand is still hovering over the cover, tempting me to open it and find her again, even if it's only for a short while, even if it's only on paper. But part of me is terrified. This might not end well. This might not be anything I want to see. And so help me, if this turns out to be some kind of diary concerning her thoughts and feelings about Kent, I might just throw myself out the window.

I pound my fist against my forehead. Take a long, steadying breath.

Finally, I flip it open. My eyes fall to the first page.

And only then do I begin to understand the weight of what I've found.

I keep thinking I need to stay calm, that it's all in my head, that everything is going to be fine and someone is going to open the door now, someone is going to let me out of here. I keep thinking it's going to happen. I keep thinking it has to happen, because things like this don't just happen. This doesn't happen. People aren't forgotten like this. Not abandoned like this.

This doesn't just happen.

My face is caked with blood from when they threw me on the ground, and my hands are still shaking even as I write this. This pen is my only outlet, my only voice, because I have no one else to speak to, no mind but my own to drown in and all the lifeboats are taken and all the life preservers are broken and I don't know how to swim I can't swim I can't swim and it's getting so hard. It's getting so hard. It's like there are a million screams caught inside of my chest but I have to keep them all in because what's the point of screaming if you'll never be heard and no one will ever hear me in here. No one will ever hear me again.

I've learned to stare at things.

The walls. My hands. The cracks in the walls. The lines on my fingers. The shades of gray in the concrete. The shape of my fingernails. I pick one thing and stare at it for what must be hours. I keep time in my head by counting the seconds as they pass. I keep days in my head by writing them down. Today is day two. Today is the second day. Today is a day.

Today.

It's so cold. It's so cold it's so cold.

Please please please

I slam the cover shut.

I'm shaking again, and this time I can't stop it. This time the shaking is coming from deep within my core, from a profound realization of what I'm holding in my hands. This journal is not from her time spent here. It has nothing to do with me, or Kent, or anyone at all. This journal is a documentation of her days spent in the asylum.

And suddenly this small, battered notebook means more to me than anything I've ever owned.

Ten

I don't even know how I manage to get myself back to my own rooms so quickly. All I know is that I've locked the door to my bedroom, unlocked the door to my office only to lock myself inside, and now I'm sitting here, at my desk, stacks of papers and confidential material shoved out of the way, staring at the tattered cover of something I'm very nearly terrified to read. There's something so personal about this journal; it looks as if it's been bound together by the loneliest feelings, the most vulnerable moments of one person's life. She wrote whatever lies within these pages during some of the darkest hours of her seventeen years, and I'm about to get exactly what I've always wanted.

A look into her mind.

And though the anticipation is killing me, I'm also acutely aware of just how badly this might backfire. I'm suddenly not sure I even want to know. And yet I do. I definitely do.

So I open the book, and turn to the next page. Day three.

I started screaming today.

And those four words hit me harder than the worst kind of physical pain.

My chest is rising and falling, my breaths coming in too hard. I have to force myself to keep reading.

I soon realize there's no order to the pages. She seems to have started back at the beginning after she came to the end of the notebook and realized she'd run out of space. She's written in the margins, over other paragraphs, in tiny and nearly illegible fonts. There are numbers scrawled all over everything, sometimes the same number repeating over and over and over again. Sometimes the same word has been written and rewritten, circled and underlined. And nearly every page has sentences and paragraphs almost entirely crossed out.

It's complete chaos.

My heart constricts at this realization, at this proof of what she must've experienced. I'd hypothesized about what she might've suffered in all that time, locked up in such dark, horrifying conditions. But seeing it for myself—I wish I

weren't right.

And now, even as I try to read in chronological order, I find I'm unable to keep up with the method she's used to number everything; the system she created on these pages is something only she'd be able to decipher. I can only flip through the book and seek out the bits that are most coherently written.

My eyes freeze on a particular passage.

It's a strange thing, to never know peace. To know that no matter where you go, there is no sanctuary. That the threat of pain is always a whisper away. I'm not safe locked into these 4 walls, I was never safe leaving my house, and I couldn't even feel safe in the 14 years I lived at home. The asylum kills people every day, the world has already been taught to fear me, and my home is the same place where my father locked me in my room every night and my mother screamed at me for being the abomination she was forced to raise.

She always said it was my face.

There was something about my face, she said, that she couldn't stand. Something about my eyes, the way I looked at her, the fact that I even existed. She'd always tell me to stop looking at her. She'd always scream it. Like I might attack her. Stop looking at me, she'd scream. You just stop looking at me, she'd scream.

She put my hand in the fire once.

Just to see if it would burn, she said. Just to check if it was a regular hand, she said.

I was 6 years old then.

I remember because it was my birthday.

I knock the notebook to the floor.

I'm upright in an instant, trying to steady my heart. I run a hand through my hair, my fingers caught at the roots. These words are too close to me, too familiar. The story of a child abused by its parents. Locked away and discarded. It's too close to my mind.

I've never read anything like this before. I've never read anything that could speak directly to my bones. And I know I shouldn't. I know, somehow, that it won't help, that it won't teach me anything, that it won't give me clues about where she might've gone. I already know that reading this will only make me crazy.

But I can't stop myself from reaching for her journal once more.
I flip it open again.

~~*Am I insane yet?*~~

~~*Has it happened yet?*~~

~~*How will I ever know?*~~

My intercom screeches so suddenly that I trip over my own chair and have to catch myself on the wall behind my desk. My hands won't stop shaking; my forehead is beaded with sweat. My bandaged arm has begun to burn, and my legs are suddenly too weak to stand on. I have to focus all my energy on sounding normal as I accept the incoming message.

"What?" I demand.

"Sir, I only wondered, if you were still—well, the assembly, sir, unless of course I got the time wrong, I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have bothered you—"

"Oh for the love of God, Delalieu." I try to shake off the tremble in my voice.
"Stop apologizing. I'm on my way."

"Yes, sir," he says. "Thank you, sir."

I disconnect the line.

And then I grab the notebook, tuck it in my pocket, and head out the door.

Eleven

I'm standing at the edge of the courtyard above the Quadrant, looking out at the thousands of faces staring back at me. These are my soldiers. Standing single-file line in their assembly uniforms. Black shirts, black pants, black boots.

No guns.

Left fists pressed against their hearts.

I make an effort to focus on—and care about—the task at hand; but somehow I can't help but be hyperaware of the notebook tucked away in my pocket, the shape of it pressing against my leg and torturing me with its secrets.

I am not myself.

My thoughts are tangled in words that are not my own. I have to take a sharp breath to clear my head; I clench and unclench my fist.

"Sector 45," I say, speaking directly into the square of microphonic mesh.

They shift at once, dropping their left hands and instead placing their right fists on their chests.

"We have a number of important things to discuss today," I tell them, "the first of which is readily apparent." I gesture to my arm. Study their carefully crafted emotionless faces.

Their traitorous thoughts are so obvious.

They think of me as little more than a deranged child. They do not respect me; they are not loyal to me. They are disappointed that I stand before them; angry; disgusted, even, that I am not dead of this wound.

But they do fear me.

And that is all I require.

"I was injured," I say, "while in pursuit of two of our defecting soldiers. Private Adam Kent and Private Kenji Kishimoto collaborated their escape in an effort to abduct Juliette Ferrars, our newest transfer and critical asset to Sector 45. They have been charged with the crime of unlawfully seizing and detaining Ms. Ferrars against her will. But, and most importantly, they have been rightly convicted of treason against The Reestablishment. When found, they will be executed on sight."

Terror, I realize, is one of the easiest feelings to read. Even on a soldier's stoic

face.

“Second,” I say, more slowly this time, “in an effort to expedite the process of stabilizing Sector 45, its citizens, and the ensuing chaos resulting from these recent disruptions, the supreme commander of The Reestablishment has joined us on base. He arrived,” I tell them, “not thirty-six hours ago.”

Some men have dropped their fists. Forgotten themselves. Their eyes are wide.

Petrified.

“You will welcome him,” I say.

They drop to their knees.

It’s strange, wielding this kind of power. I wonder if my father is proud of what he’s created. That I’m able to bring thousands of grown men to their knees with only a few words; with only the sound of his title. It’s a horrifying, addicting kind of thing.

I count five beats in my head.

“Rise.”

They do. And then they march.

Five steps backward, forward, standing in place. They raise their left arms, curl their fingers into fists, and fall on one knee. This time, I do not let them up.

“Prepare yourselves, gentlemen,” I say to them. “We will not rest until Kent and Kishimoto are found and Ms. Ferrars has returned to base. I will confer with the supreme commander in these next twenty-four hours; our newest mission will soon be clearly defined. In the interim you are to understand two things: first, that we will defuse the tension among the citizens and take pains to remind them of their promises to our new world. And second, be certain that we will find Privates Kent and Kishimoto.” I stop. Look around, focusing on their faces. “Let their fates serve as an example to you. We do not welcome traitors in The Reestablishment. And we do not forgive.”

Twelve

One of my father's men is waiting for me outside my door.

I glance in his direction, but not long enough to discern his features. "State your business, soldier."

"Sir," he says, "I've been instructed to inform you that the supreme commander requests your presence in his quarters for dinner at twenty-hundred hours."

"Consider your message received." I move to unlock my door.

He steps forward, blocking my path.

I turn to face him.

He's standing less than a foot away from me: an implicit act of disrespect; a level of comfort even Delalieu does not allow himself. But unlike my men, the sycophants who surround my father consider themselves lucky. Being a member of the supreme commander's elite guard is considered a privilege and an honor. They answer to no one but him.

And right now, this soldier is trying to prove he outranks me.

He's jealous of me. He thinks I'm unworthy of being the son of the supreme commander of The Reestablishment. It's practically written on his face.

I have to stifle my impulse to laugh as I take in his cold gray eyes and the black pit that is his soul. He wears his sleeves rolled up above his elbows, his military tattoos clearly defined and on display. The concentric black bands of ink around his forearms are accented in red, green, and blue, the only sign on his person to indicate that he is a soldier highly elevated in rank. It's a sick branding ritual I've always refused to be a part of.

The soldier is still staring at me.

I incline my head in his direction, raise my eyebrows.

"I am required," he says, "to wait for verbal acceptance of this invitation."

I take a moment to consider my choices, which are none.

I, like the rest of the puppets in this world, am entirely subservient to my father's will. It's a truth I'm forced to contend with every day: that I've never been able to stand up to the man who has his fist clenched around my spine.

It makes me hate myself.

I meet the soldier's eyes again and wonder, for a fleeting moment, if he has a name, before I realize I couldn't possibly care less. "Consider it accepted."

"Yes, s—"

"And next time, soldier, you will not step within five feet of me without first asking permission."

He blinks, stunned. "Sir, I—"

"You are confused." I cut him off. "You assume your work with the supreme commander grants you immunity from rules that govern the lives of other soldiers. Here, you are mistaken."

His jaw tenses.

"Never forget," I say, quietly now, "that if I wanted your job, I could have it. And never forget that the man you so eagerly serve is the same man who taught me how to fire a gun when I was nine years old."

His nostrils flare. He stares straight ahead.

"Deliver your message, soldier. And then memorize this one: do not ever speak to me again."

His eyes are focused on a point directly behind me now, his shoulders rigid.

I wait.

His jaw is still tight. He slowly lifts his hand in salute.

"You are dismissed," I say.

I lock my bedroom door behind me and lean against it. I need just a moment. I reach for the bottle I left on my nightstand and shake out two of the square pills; I toss them into my mouth, closing my eyes as they dissolve. The darkness behind my eyelids is a welcome relief.

Until the memory of her face forces itself into my consciousness.

I sit down on my bed and drop my head into my hand. I shouldn't be thinking about her right now. I have hours of paperwork to sort through and the additional stress of my father's presence to contend with. Dinner with him should be a spectacle. A soul-crushing spectacle.

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter and make a weak effort to build the walls that would surely clear my mind. But this time, they don't work. Her face keeps cropping up, her journal taunting me from its place in my pocket. And I begin to realize that some small part of me doesn't want to wish away the thoughts of her. Some part of me enjoys the torture.

This girl is destroying me.

A girl who has spent the last year in an insane asylum. A girl who would try to

shoot me dead for kissing her. A girl who ran off with another man just to get away from me.

Of course this is the girl I would fall for.

I close a hand over my mouth.

I am losing my mind.

I tug off my boots. Pull myself up onto my bed and allow my head to hit the pillows behind me.

She slept here, I think. She slept in my bed. She woke up in my bed. She was here and I let her get away.

I failed.

I lost her.

I don't even realize I've tugged her notebook out of my pocket until I'm holding it in front of my face. Staring at it. Studying the faded cover in an attempt to understand where she might've acquired such a thing. She must've stolen it from somewhere, though I can't imagine where.

There are so many things I want to ask her. So many things I wish I could say to her.

Instead, I open her journal, and read.

Sometimes I close my eyes and paint these walls a different color.

I imagine I'm wearing warm socks and sitting by a fire. I imagine someone's given me a book to read, a story to take me away from the torture of my own mind. I want to be someone else somewhere else with something else to fill my mind. I want to run, to feel the wind tug at my hair. I want to pretend that this is just a story within a story. That this cell is just a scene, that these hands don't belong to me, that this window leads to somewhere beautiful if only I could break it. I pretend this pillow is clean, I pretend this bed is soft. I pretend and pretend and pretend until the world becomes so breathtaking behind my eyelids that I can no longer contain it. But then my eyes fly open and I'm caught around the throat by a pair of hands that won't stop suffocating suffocating suffocating

My thoughts, I think, will soon be sound.

My mind, I hope, will soon be found.

The journal drops out of my hand and onto my chest. I run my only free hand

across my face, through my hair. I rub the back of my neck and haul myself up so fast that my head hits the headboard and I'm actually grateful. I take a moment to appreciate the pain.

And then I pick up the book.

And turn the page.

I wonder what they're thinking. My parents. I wonder where they are. I wonder if they're okay now, if they're happy now, ~~if they finally got what they wanted~~. I wonder if my mother will ever have another child. I wonder if someone will ever be kind enough to kill me, and I wonder if hell is better than here. I wonder what my face looks like now. I wonder if I'll ever breathe fresh air again.

I wonder about so many things.

Sometimes I'll stay awake for days just counting everything I can find. I count the walls, the cracks in the walls, my fingers and toes. I count the springs in the bed, the threads in the blanket, the steps it takes to cross the room and back. I count my teeth and the individual hairs on my head and the number of seconds I can hold my breath.

But sometimes I get so tired that I forget I'm not allowed to wish for things anymore, and I find myself wishing for the one thing I've always wanted. The only thing I've always dreamt about.

I wish all the time for a friend.

I dream about it. I imagine what it would be like. To smile and be smiled upon. To have a person to confide in; someone who wouldn't throw things at me or stick my hands in the fire or beat me for being born. Someone who would hear that I'd been thrown away and would try to find me, who would never be afraid of me.

Someone who'd know I'd never try to hurt them.

I fold myself into a corner of this room and bury my head in my knees and rock back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and I wish and I wish and I wish and I dream of impossible things until I've cried myself to sleep.

I wonder what it would be like to have a friend.

And then I wonder who else is locked in this asylum. I wonder where the other screams are coming from.

I wonder if they're coming from me.

I'm trying to focus, telling myself these are just empty words, but I'm lying. Because somehow, just reading these words is too much; and the thought of her in pain is causing me an unbearable amount of agony.

To know that she experienced this.

She was thrown into this by her own parents, cast off and abused her entire life. Empathy is not an emotion I've ever known, but now it's drowning me, pulling me into a world I never knew I could enter. And though I've always believed she and I shared many things in common, I did not know how deeply I could feel it.

It's killing me.

I stand up. Start pacing the length of my bedroom until I've finally worked up the nerve to keep reading. Then I take a deep breath.

And turn the page.

~~There's something simmering inside of me.~~

~~Something I've never dared to tap into, something I'm afraid to acknowledge. There's a part of me clawing to break free from the cage I've trapped it in, banging on the doors of my heart, begging to be free.~~

~~Begging to let go.~~

~~Every day I feel like I'm reliving the same nightmare. I open my mouth to shout, to fight, to swing my fists, but my vocal cords are cut, my arms are heavy and weighted down as if trapped in wet cement and I'm screaming but no one can hear me, no one can reach me and I'm caught. And it's killing me.~~

~~I've always had to make myself submissive, subservient, twisted into a pleading, passive mop just to make everyone else feel safe and comfortable. My existence has become a fight to prove I'm harmless, that I'm not a threat, that I'm capable of living among other human beings without hurting them.~~

~~And I'm so tired I'm so tired I'm so tired I'm so tired and sometimes I get so angry~~

~~I don't know what's happening to me.~~

"God, Juliette," I gasp.

And fall to my knees.

"Call for transport immediately." I need to get out. I need to get out right now.

“Sir? I mean, yes, sir, of course—but where—”

“I have to visit the compounds,” I say. “I should make my rounds before my meeting this evening.” This is both true and false. But I’m willing to do anything right now that might get my mind off this journal.

“Oh, certainly, sir. Would you like me to accompany you?”

“That won’t be necessary, Lieutenant, but thank you for the offer.”

“I—s-sir,” he stammers. “Of course, it’s m-my pleasure, sir, to assist you—”

Good God, I have taken leave of my senses. I never thank Delalieu. I’ve likely given the poor man a heart attack.

“I will be ready to go in ten minutes.” I cut him off.

He stutters to a stop. Then, “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

I’m pressing my fist to my mouth as the call disconnects.

Thirteen

We had homes. Before.

All different kinds.

1-story homes. 2-story homes. 3-story homes.

We bought lawn ornaments and twinkle lights, learned to ride bikes without training wheels. We purchased lives confined within 1, 2, 3 stories already built, stories caught inside of structures we could not change.

We lived in those stories for a while.

We followed the tale laid out for us, the prose pinned down in every square foot of space we'd acquired. We were content with the plot twists that only mildly redirected our lives. We signed on the dotted line for the things we didn't know we cared about. We ate the things we shouldn't, spent money when we couldn't, lost sight of the Earth we had to inhabit and wasted wasted wasted everything. Food. Water. Resources.

Soon the skies were gray with chemical pollution, and the plants and animals were sick from genetic modification, and diseases rooted themselves in our air, our meals, our blood and bones. The food disappeared. The people were dying. Our empire fell to pieces.

The Reestablishment said they would help us. Save us. Rebuild our society.

Instead they tore us all apart.

I enjoy coming to the compounds.

It's an odd place to seek refuge, but there's something about seeing so many civilians in such a vast, open space that reminds me of what I'm meant to be doing. I'm so often confined within the walls of Sector 45 headquarters that I forget the faces of those we're fighting and those we're fighting for.

I like to remember.

Most days I visit each cluster on the compounds; I greet the residents and ask about their living conditions. I can't help but be curious about what life must be like for them now. Because while the world changed for everyone else, it always

stayed the same for me. Regimented. Isolated. Bleak.

There was a time when things were better, when my father wasn't always so angry. I was about four years old then. He used to let me sit on his lap and search his pockets. I'd get to keep anything I wanted as long as my argument was convincing enough. It was his idea of a game.

But this was all before.

I wrap my coat more tightly around my body, feel the material press against my back. I flinch without meaning to.

The life I know now is the only one that matters. The suffocation, the luxury, the sleepless nights, and the dead bodies. I've always been taught to focus on power and pain, gaining and inflicting.

I grieve nothing.

I take everything.

It's the only way I know how to live in this battered body. I empty my mind of the things that plague me and burden my soul, and I take all that I can from what little pleasantness comes my way. I do not know what it is to live a normal life; I do not know how to sympathize with the civilians who've lost their homes. I do not know what it must've been like for them before The Reestablishment took over.

So I enjoy touring the compounds.

I enjoy seeing how other people live; I like that the law requires them to answer my questions. I would have no way of knowing, otherwise.

But my timing is off.

I paid little attention to the clock before I left base and didn't realize how soon the sun would be setting. Most civilians are returning home to retire for the evening, their bodies bowed, huddled against the cold as they shuffle toward the metal clusters they share with at least three other families.

These makeshift homes are built from forty-foot shipping containers; they're stacked side by side and on top of one another, lumped together in groups of four and six. Each container has been insulated; fitted with two windows and one door. Stairs to the upper levels are attached on either side. The roofs are lined with solar panels that provide free electricity for each grouping.

It's something I'm proud of.

Because it was my idea.

When we were seeking temporary shelter for the civilians, I suggested refurbishing the old shipping containers that line the docks of every port around the world. Not only are they cheap, easily replicated, and highly customizable,

but they're stackable, portable, and built to withstand the elements. They'd require minimal construction, and with the right team, thousands of housing units could be ready in a matter of days.

I'd pitched the idea to my father, thinking it might be the most effective option; a temporary solution that would be far less cruel than tents; something that would provide true, reliable shelter. But the result was so effective that The Reestablishment saw no need to upgrade. Here, on land that used to be a landfill, we've stacked thousands of containers; clusters of faded, rectangular cubes that are easy to monitor and keep track of.

The people are still told that these homes are temporary. That one day they will return to the memories of their old lives, and that things will be bright and beautiful again. But this is all a lie.

The Reestablishment has no plans to move them.

Civilians are caged on these regulated grounds; these containers have become their prisons. Everything has been numbered. The people, their homes, their level of importance to The Reestablishment.

Here, they've become a part of a huge experiment. A world wherein they work to support the needs of a regime that makes them promises it will never fulfill.

This is my life.

This sorry world.

Most days I feel just as caged as these civilians; and that's likely why I always come here. It's like running from one prison to another; an existence wherein there is no relief, no refuge. Where even my own mind is a traitor.

I should be stronger than this.

I've been training for just over a decade. Every day I've worked to hone my physical and mental strengths. I'm five feet, nine inches and 170 pounds of muscle. I've been built to survive, to maximize endurance and stamina, and I'm most comfortable when I'm holding a gun in my hand. I can fieldstrip, clean, reload, disassemble, and reassemble more than 150 different types of firearms. I can shoot a target through the center from almost any distance. I can break a person's windpipe with only the edge of my hand. I can temporarily paralyze a man with nothing but my knuckles.

On the battlefield, I'm able to disconnect myself from the motions I've been taught to memorize. I've developed a reputation as a cold, unfeeling monster who fears nothing and cares for less.

But this is all very deceiving.

Because the truth is, I am nothing but a coward.

Fourteen

The sun is setting.

Soon I'll have no choice but to return to base, where I'll have to sit still and listen to my father speak instead of shooting a bullet through his open mouth.

So I stall for time.

I watch from afar as the children run around while their parents herd them home. I wonder about how one day they'll get old enough to realize that the Reestablishment Registration cards they carry are actually tracking their every movement. That the money their parents make from working in whichever factories they were sorted into is closely monitored. These children will grow up and finally understand that everything they do is recorded, every conversation dissected for whispers of rebellion. They don't know that profiles are created for every citizen, and that every profile is thick with documentation on their friendships, relationships, and work habits; even the ways in which they choose to spend their free time.

We know everything about everyone.

Too much.

So much, in fact, that I seldom remember we're dealing with real, live people until I see them on the compounds. I've memorized the names of nearly every person in Sector 45. I like to know who lives within my jurisdiction, soldiers and civilians alike.

That's how I knew, for example, that Private Seamus Fletcher, 45B-76423, was beating his wife and children every night.

I knew he was spending all his money on alcohol; I knew he'd been starving his family. I monitored the REST dollars he spent at our supply centers and carefully observed his family on the compounds. I knew his three children were all under the age of ten and hadn't eaten in weeks; I knew that they'd repeatedly been to the compounds' medic for broken bones and stitches. I knew he'd punched his nine-year-old daughter in the mouth and split her lip, fractured her jaw, and broken her two front teeth; and I knew his wife was pregnant. I also knew that he hit her so hard one night she lost the child the following morning.

I knew, because I was there.

I'd been stopping by each residence, visiting with the civilians, asking questions about their health and overall living situations. I'd wanted to know about their work conditions and whether any members of their family were ill and needed to be quarantined.

She was there that day. Fletcher's wife. Her nose was broken so badly that both her eyes had swollen shut. Her frame was so thin and frail, her color so sallow that I thought she might snap in half just by sitting down. But when I asked about her injuries, she wouldn't look me in the eye. She said she'd fallen down; that because of her fall, she'd lost the pregnancy and managed to break her nose in the process.

I nodded. Thanked her for her cooperation in answering my questions.

And then I called for an assembly.

I'm well aware that the majority of my soldiers steal from our storage compounds. I oversee our inventory closely, and I know that supplies go missing all the time. But I allow these infractions because they do not upset the system. A few extra loaves of bread or bars of soap keep my soldiers in better spirits; they work harder if they are healthy, and most are supporting spouses, children, and relatives. So it is a concession I allow.

But there are some things I do not forgive.

I don't consider myself a moral man. I do not philosophize about life or bother with the laws and principles that govern most people. I do not pretend to know the difference between right and wrong. But I do live by a certain kind of code. And sometimes, I think, you have to learn how to shoot first.

Seamus Fletcher was murdering his family. And I shot him in the forehead because I thought it'd be kinder than ripping him to pieces by hand.

But my father picked up where Fletcher left off. My father had three children and their mother shot dead, all because of the drunken bastard they'd depended on to provide for them. He was their father, her husband, and the reason they all died a brutal, untimely death.

And some days I wonder why I insist on keeping myself alive.

Fifteen

Once I'm back on base, I head straight down.

I ignore the soldiers and their salutes as I pass by, paying little attention to the blend of curiosity and suspicion in their eyes. I didn't even realize I was headed this way until I arrived at headquarters; but my body seems to know more about what I need right now than my mind does. My footfalls are heavy; the steady, clipping sound of my boots echoes along the stone path as I reach the lower levels.

I haven't been here in nearly two weeks.

The room has been rebuilt since my last visit; the glass panel and the concrete wall have been replaced. And as far as I'm aware, she was the last person to use this room.

I brought her here myself.

I push through a set of swinging double doors into the locker room that sits adjacent to the simulation deck. My hand searches for a switch in the dark; the light beeps once before it flickers to life. A dull hum of electricity vibrates through these vast dimensions. Everything is quiet, abandoned.

Just as I like it.

I strip as quickly as this injured arm will allow me to. I still have two hours before I'm expected to meet my father for dinner, so I shouldn't be feeling so anxious, but my nerves are not cooperating. Everything seems to be catching up with me at once. My failures. My cowardice. My stupidity.

Sometimes I'm just so tired of this life.

I'm standing barefoot on this concrete floor in nothing but an arm sling, hating the way this injury constantly slows me down. I grab the shorts stashed in my locker and pull them on as quickly as I can, leaning against the wall for support. When I'm finally upright, I slam the locker shut and make my way into the adjoining room.

I hit another switch, and the main operational deck whirs to life. The computers beep and flash as the program recalibrates; I run my fingers along the keyboard.

We use these rooms to generate simulations.

We manipulate the technology to create environments and experiences that exist entirely in the human mind. Not only are we able to create the framework, but we can also control minute details. Sounds, smells, false confidence, paranoia. The program was originally designed to help train soldiers for specific missions, as well as aid them in overcoming fears that would otherwise cripple them on the battlefield.

I use it for my own purposes.

I used to come here all the time before she arrived on base. This was my safe space; my only escape from the world. I only wish it didn't come with a uniform. These shorts are starchy and uncomfortable, the polyester itchy and irritating. But the shorts are lined with a special chemical that reacts with my skin and feeds information to the sensors; it helps place me in the experience, and will enable me to run for miles without ever running into actual, physical walls in my true environment. And in order for the process to be as effective as possible, I have to be wearing next to nothing. The cameras are hypersensitive to body heat, and work best when not in contact with synthetic materials.

I'm hoping this detail will be fixed in the next generation of the program.

The mainframe prompts me for information; I quickly enter an access code that grants me clearance to pull up a history of my past simulations. I look up and over my shoulder as the computer processes the data; I glance through the newly repaired two-way mirror that sees into the main chamber. I still can't believe she broke down an entire wall of glass and concrete and managed to walk away uninjured.

Incredible.

The machine beeps twice; I spin back around. The programs in my history are loaded and ready to be executed.

Her file is at the top of the list.

I take a deep breath; try to shake off the memory. I don't regret putting her through such a horrifying experience; I don't know that she would've ever allowed herself to finally lose control—to finally inhabit her own body—if I hadn't found an effective method of provoking her. Ultimately, I really believe it helped her, just as I intended it to. But I do wish she hadn't pointed a gun at my face and jumped out a window shortly afterward.

I take another slow, steadying breath.

And select the simulation I came here for.

Sixteen

I'm standing in the main chamber.

Facing myself.

This is a very simple simulation. I didn't change my clothes or my hair or even the room's carpeted floors. I didn't do anything at all except create a duplicate of myself and hand him a gun.

He won't stop staring at me.

One.

He cocks his head. "Are you ready?" A pause. "Are you scared?"

My heart kicks into gear.

He lifts his arm. Smiles a little. "Don't worry," he says. "It's almost over now."

Two.

"Just a little longer and I'll leave," he says, pointing the gun directly at my forehead.

My palms are sweating. My pulse is racing.

"You'll be all right," he lies. "I promise."

Three.

Boom.

Seventeen

“You sure you’re not hungry?” my father asks, still chewing. “This is really quite good.”

I shift in my seat. Focus on the ironed creases in these pants I’m wearing.

“Hm?” he asks. I can actually hear him smiling.

I’m acutely aware of the soldiers lining the walls of this room. He always keeps them close, and always in constant competition with one another. Their first assignment was to determine which of the eleven of them was the weakest link. The one with the most convincing argument was then required to dispose of his target.

My father finds these practices amusing.

“I’m afraid I’m not hungry. The medicine,” I lie, “destroys my appetite.”

“Ah,” he says. I hear him put his utensils down. “Of course. How inconvenient.”

I say nothing.

“Leave us.”

Two words and his men disperse in a matter of seconds. The door slides shut behind them.

“Look at me,” he says.

I look up, my eyes carefully devoid of emotion. I hate his face. I can’t stand to look at him for too long; I don’t like experiencing the full impact of how very inhuman he is. He is not tortured by what he does or how he lives. In fact, he enjoys it. He loves the rush of power; he thinks of himself as an invincible entity.

And in some ways, he’s not wrong.

I’ve come to believe that the most dangerous man in the world is the one who feels no remorse. The one who never apologizes and therefore seeks no forgiveness. Because in the end it is our emotions that make us weak, not our actions.

I turn away.

“What did you find?” he asks, with no preamble.

My mind immediately goes to the journal I’ve stowed away in my pocket, but

I make no movement. I do not dare flinch. People seldom realize that they tell lies with their lips and truths with their eyes all the time. Put a man in a room with something he's hidden and then ask him where he's hidden it; he'll tell you he doesn't know; he'll tell you you've got the wrong man; but he'll almost always glance at its exact location. And right now I know my father is watching me, waiting to see where I might look, what I might say next.

I keep my shoulders relaxed and take a slow, imperceptible breath to steady my heart. I do not respond. I pretend to be lost in thought.

"Son?"

I look up. Feign surprise. "Yes?"

"What did you find? When you searched her room today?"

I exhale. Shake my head as I lean back in my chair. "Broken glass. A disheveled bed. Her armoire, hanging open. She took only a few toiletries and some extra pairs of clothes and undergarments. Nothing else was out of place." None of this is a lie.

I hear him sigh. He pushes away his plate.

I feel the outline of her notebook burning against my upper leg.

"And you say you do not know where she might've gone?"

"I only know that she, Kent, and Kishimoto must be together," I tell him. "Delalieu says they stole a car, but the trace disappeared abruptly at the edge of a barren field. We've had troops on patrol for days now, searching the area, but they've found nothing."

"And where," he says, "do you plan on searching next? Do you think they might've crossed over into another sector?" His voice is off. Entertained.

I glance up at his smiling face.

He's only asking me these questions to test me. He has his own answers, his own solution already prepared. He wants to watch me fail by answering incorrectly. He's trying to prove that without him, I'd make all the wrong decisions.

He's mocking me.

"No," I tell him, my voice solid, steady. "I don't think they'd do something as idiotic as cross into another sector. They don't have the access, the means, or the capacity. Both men were severely wounded, rapidly losing blood, and too far from any source of emergency aid. They're probably dead by now. The girl is likely the only survivor, and she can't have gone far because she has no idea how to navigate these areas. She's been blind to them for too long; everything in this environment is foreign to her. Furthermore, she does not know how to drive,

and if she'd somehow managed to commandeer a vehicle, we would've received word of stolen property. Considering her overall health, her propensity toward physical inactivity, and her general lack of access to food, water, and medical attention, she's probably collapsed within a five-mile radius of this supposed barren field. We have to find her before she freezes to death."

My father clears his throat.

"Yes," he says, "those are interesting theories. And perhaps under ordinary circumstances, they might actually hold true. But you are failing to recall the most important detail."

I meet his gaze.

"She is not normal," he says, leaning back in his chair. "And she is not the only one of her kind."

My heartbeat quickens. I blink too fast.

"Oh come now, surely you'd suspected? You'd hypothesized?" He laughs. "It seems statistically impossible that she'd be the only mistake manufactured by our world. You knew this, but you didn't want to believe it. And I came here to tell you that it's true." He cocks his head at me. Smiles a big, vibrant smile. "There are more of them. And they've recruited her."

"No," I breathe.

"They infiltrated your troops. Lived among you in secret. And now they've stolen your toy and run away with it. God only knows how they hope to manipulate her for their own benefit."

"How can you be certain?" I ask. "How do you know they've succeeded in taking her with them? Kent was half-dead when I left him—"

"Pay attention, son. I'm telling you that they are not normal. They do not follow your rules; there is no logic that binds them. You have no idea what oddities they might be capable of." A pause. "Furthermore, I have known for some time now that a group of them exists undercover in this area. But in all these years they've always kept to themselves. They did not interfere with my methods, and I thought it best to allow them to die off on their own without infecting in our civilians unnecessary panic. You understand, of course," he says. "After all, you could hardly contain even one of them. They're freakish things to behold."

"You knew?" I'm on my feet now. Trying to stay calm. "You knew of their existence, all this time, and yet you did nothing? You said nothing?"

"It seemed unnecessary."

"And now?" I demand.

“Now it seems pertinent.”

“Unbelievable!” I throw my hands in the air. “That you would withhold such information from me! When you knew of my plans for her—when you knew what pains I’d taken to bring her here—”

“Calm yourself,” he says. He stretches out his legs; rests the ankle of one on the knee of the other. “We are going to find them. This barren field Delalieu speaks of—the area where the car was no longer traceable? That is our target location. They must be located underground. We must find the entrance and destroy them quietly, from within. Then we will have punished the guilty among them, and kept the rest from rising up and inspiring rebellion in our people.”

He leans forward.

“The civilians hear everything. And right now they are vibrating with a new kind of energy. They’re feeling inspired that anyone was able to run away, and that you’ve been wounded in the process. It makes our defenses seem weak and easily penetrable. We must destroy this perception by righting the imbalance. Fear will return everything to its proper place.”

“But they’ve been searching,” I tell him. “My men. Every day they’ve scoured the area and found nothing. How can we be sure we’ll find anything at all?”

“Because,” he says, “you will lead them. Every night. After curfew, while the civilians are asleep. You will cease your daylight searches; you will not give the citizens anything else to talk about. Act quietly, son. Do not show your moves. I will remain on base and oversee your responsibilities through my men; I will dictate to Delalieu as necessary. And in the interim, you shall find them, so that I may destroy them as swiftly as possible. This nonsense has gone on long enough,” he says, “and I’m no longer feeling gracious.”

Eighteen

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry I'm so sorry I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I'm so sorry. I'm so so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry. I'm sorry I'm so sorry please forgive me.

It was an accident.

Forgive me

Please forgive me

There is little I allow anyone to discover about me. There's even less I'm willing to share about myself. And of the many things I've never discussed, this is one of them.

I like to take long baths.

I've had an obsession with cleanliness for as long as I can remember. I've always been so mired in death and destruction that I think I've overcompensated by keeping myself pristine as much as possible. I take frequent showers. I brush and floss three times a day. I trim my own hair every week. I scrub my hands and nails before I go to bed and just after I wake up. I have an unhealthy preoccupation with wearing only freshly laundered clothes. And whenever I'm experiencing any extreme level of emotion, the only thing that settles my nerves is a long bath.

So that's what I'm doing right now.

The medics taught me how to bind my injured arm in the same plastic they used before, so I'm able to sink beneath the surface without a problem. I submerge my head for a long while, holding my breath as I exhale through my nose. I feel the small bubbles rise to the surface.

The warm water makes me feel weightless. It carries my burdens for me,

understanding that I need a moment to relieve my shoulders of this weight. To close my eyes and relax.

My face breaks the surface.

I don't open my eyes; only my nose and lips meet the oxygen on the other side. I take small, even breaths to help steady my mind. It's so late that I don't know what time it is; all I know is that the temperature has dropped significantly, and the cold air is tickling my nose. It's a strange sensation, to have 98 percent of my body floating at a warm, welcome temperature, while my nose and lips twitch from the cold.

I sink my face below the water again.

I could live here, I think. Live where gravity does not know my name. Here I am unbound, untethered by the chains of this life. I am a different body, a different shell, and my weight is carried by the hands of friends. So many nights I've wished I could fall asleep under this sheet.

I sink deeper.

In one week my entire life has changed.

My priorities, shifted. My concentration, destroyed. Everything I care about right now revolves around one person, and for the first time in my life, it's not myself. Her words have been burned into my mind. I can't stop picturing her as she must've been, can't stop imagining what she must've experienced. Finding her journal has crippled me. My feelings for her have spiraled out of control. I've never been so desperate to see her, to talk to her.

I want her to know that I understand now. That I didn't understand before. She and I really are the same; in so many more ways than I could've known.

But now she's out of reach. She's gone somewhere with strangers who do not know her and would not care for her as I would. She's been dropped into another foreign environment with no time to transition, and I'm worried about her. A person in her situation—with her past—does not recover overnight. And now, one of two things is bound to happen: She's either going to completely shut down, or she's going to explode.

I sit up too fast, breaking free of the water, gasping for air.

I push my wet hair out of my face. I lean back against the tiled wall, allowing the cool air to calm me, to clear my thoughts.

I have to find her before she breaks.

I've never wanted to cooperate with my father before, never wanted to agree with his motives or his methods. But in this instance, I'm willing to do just about anything to get her back.

And I'm eager for any opportunity to snap Kent's neck.

That traitorous bastard. The idiot who thinks he's won himself a pretty girl. He has no idea who she is. No idea what she's about to become.

And if he thinks he's even remotely suited to match her, he's even more of an idiot than I gave him credit for.

Nineteen

“Where’s the coffee?” I ask, my eyes scanning the table.

Delalieu drops his fork. The silverware clangs against the china plates. He looks up, eyes wide. “Sir?”

“I’d like to try it,” I tell him, attempting to spread butter on my toast with my left hand. I toss a look in his direction. “You’re always going on about your coffee, aren’t you? I thought I—”

Delalieu jumps up from the table without a word. Bolts out the door.

I laugh silently into my plate.

Delalieu carts the tea and coffee tray in himself and stations it by my chair. His hands shake as he pours the dark liquid into a teacup, places it on a saucer, sets it on the table, and pushes it in my direction.

I wait until he’s finally sitting down again before I take a sip. It’s a strange, obscenely bitter sort of drink; not at all what I expected. I glance up at him, surprised to discover that a man like Delalieu would begin his day by bracing himself with such a potent, foul-tasting liquid. I find I respect him for it.

“This isn’t terrible,” I tell him.

His face splits into a smile so wide, so beatific, I wonder if he’s misheard me. He’s practically beaming when he says, “I take mine with cream and sugar. The taste is far better than w—”

“Sugar.” I put my cup down. Press my lips together, fight back a smile. “You add sugar to it. Of course you do. That makes so much more sense.”

“Would you like some, sir?”

I hold up my hand. Shake my head. “Call back the troops, Lieutenant. We’re going to halt daytime missions and instead launch in the evening, after curfew. You will remain on base,” I tell him, “where the supreme will dictate orders through his men; carry out any demands as they are required. I shall lead the group myself.” I stop. Hold his eyes. “There will be no more talk of what has transpired. Nothing for the civilians to see or speak of. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” he says, his coffee forgotten. “I’ll issue the orders at once.”

“Good.”

He stands up.

I nod.

He leaves.

I'm beginning to feel real hope for the first time since she left. We're going to find her. Now, with this new information—with an entire army against a group of clueless rebels—it seems impossible we won't.

I take a deep breath. Take another sip of this coffee.

I'm surprised to discover how much I enjoy the bitter taste of it.

Twenty

He's waiting for me when I return to my room.

"The orders have been issued," I tell him without looking in his direction. "We will mobilize tonight." I hesitate. "So if you'll excuse me, I have other matters to contend with."

"What's it like," he asks, "to be so crippled?" He's smiling. "How can you stand to look at yourself, knowing that you've been disabled by your own subordinates?"

I pause outside the adjoining door to my office. "What do you want?"

"What," he says, "is your fascination with that girl?"

My spine goes rigid.

"She is more to you than just an experiment, isn't she?" he says.

I turn around slowly. He's standing in the middle of my room, hands in his pockets, smiling at me like he might be disgusted.

"What are you talking about?"

"Look at yourself," he says. "I haven't even said her name and you fall apart." He shakes his head, still studying me. "Your face is pale, your only working hand is clenched. You're breathing too fast, and your entire body is tense." A pause. "You have betrayed yourself, son. You think you're very clever," he says, "but you're forgetting who taught you your tricks."

I go hot and cold all at once. I try to unclench my fist and I can't. I want to tell him he's wrong, but I'm suddenly feeling unsteady, wishing I'd eaten more at breakfast, and then wishing I'd eaten nothing at all.

"I have work to do," I manage to say.

"Tell me," he says, "that you would not care if she died along with the others."

"What?" The nervous, shaky word escapes my lips too soon.

My father drops his eyes. Clasps and unclasps his hands. "You have disappointed me in so many ways," he says, his voice deceptively soft. "Please don't let this be another."

For a moment I feel as though I exist outside of my body, as if I'm looking at myself from his perspective. I see my face, my injured arm, these legs that

suddenly seem unable to carry my weight. Cracks begin to form along my face, all the way down my arms, my torso, my legs.

I imagine this is what it's like to fall apart.

I don't realize he's said my name until he repeats it twice more.

"What do you want from me?" I ask, surprised to hear how calm I sound. "You've walked into my room without permission; you stand here and accuse me of things I don't have time to understand. I am following your rules, your orders. We will leave tonight; we will find their hideout. You can destroy them as you see fit."

"And your girl," he says, cocking his head at me. "Your Juliette?"

I flinch at the sound of her name. My pulse is racing so fast it feels like a whisper.

"If I were to shoot three holes in her head, how would that make you feel?" He stares at me. Watches me. "Disappointed, because you'd have lost your pet project? Or devastated, because you'd have lost the girl you love?"

Time seems to slow down, melting all around me.

"It would be a waste," I say, ignoring the tremble I feel deep inside me, threatening to tip me over, "to lose something I've invested so much time in."

He smiles. "It's good to know you see it that way," he says. "But projects are, after all, easily replaced. And I'm certain we'll be able to find a better, more practical use of your time."

I blink at him so slowly. Part of my chest feels as if it's collapsed.

"Of course," I hear myself say.

"I knew you'd understand." He claps me on my injured shoulder as he leaves. My knees nearly buckle. "It was a good effort, son. But she's cost us too much time and expense, and she's proven completely useless. This way we'll be disposing of many inconveniences all at once. We'll just consider her collateral damage." He shoots me one last smile before walking past me and out the door.

I fall back against the wall.

And crumble to the floor.

Twenty-One

Swallow the tears back often enough and they'll start feeling like acid dripping down your throat.

It's that terrible moment when you're sitting still so still so still because ~~you don't want them to see you cry~~ you don't want to cry but your lips won't stop trembling and your eyes are filled to the brim with please and I beg you and please and I'm sorry and please and have mercy and maybe this time it'll be different but it's always the same. There's no one to run to for comfort. No one on your side.

Light a candle for me, I used to whisper to no one.

Someone

Anyone

If you're out there

Please tell me you can feel this fire.

It's day five of our patrols, and still, nothing.

I lead the group every night, marching into the silence of these cold, winter landscapes. We search for hidden passageways, camouflaged manholes—any indication that there might be another world under our feet.

And every night we return to base with nothing.

The futility of these past few days has washed over me, dulling my senses, settling me into a kind of daze I haven't been able to claw my way out of. Every day I wake up searching for a solution to the problems I've forced upon myself, but I have no idea how to fix this.

If she's out there, he will find her. And he will kill her.

Just to teach me a lesson.

My only hope is to find her first. Maybe I could hide her. Or tell her to run. Or pretend she's already dead. Or maybe I'll convince him that she's different, better than the others; that she's worth keeping alive.

I sound like a pathetic, desperate idiot.

I am a child all over again, hiding in dark corners and praying he won't find me. Hoping he'll be in a good mood today. That maybe everything will be all

right. That maybe my mother won't be screaming this time.

How quickly I revert back to another version of myself in his presence.

I've gone numb.

I've been performing my tasks with a sort of mechanical dedication; it requires minimal effort. Moving is simple enough. Eating is something I've grown accustomed to.

I can't stop reading her notebook.

My heart actually hurts, somehow, but I can't stop turning the pages. I feel as if I'm pounding against an invisible wall, as if my face has been bandaged in plastic and I can't breathe, can't see, can't hear any sound but my own heart beating in my ears.

I've wanted few things in this life.

I've asked for nothing from no one.

And now, all I'm asking for is another chance. An opportunity to see her again. But unless I can find a way to stop him, these words will be all I'll ever have of her.

These paragraphs and sentences. These letters.

I've become obsessed. I carry her notebook with me everywhere I go, spending all my free moments trying to decipher the words she's scribbled in the margins, developing stories to go along with the numbers she's written down.

I've also noticed that the last page is missing. Ripped out.

I can't help but wonder why. I've searched through the book a hundred times, looking for other sections where pages might be gone, but I've found none. And somehow I feel cheated, knowing there's a piece I might've missed. It's not even my journal; it's none of my business at all, but I've read her words so many times now that they feel like my own. I can practically recite them from memory.

It's strange being in her head without being able to see her. I feel like she's here, right in front of me. I feel like I now know her so intimately, so privately. I'm safe in the company of her thoughts; I feel welcome, somehow. Understood. So much so that some days I manage to forget that she's the one who put this bullet hole in my arm.

I almost forget that she still hates me, despite how hard I've fallen for her.

And I've fallen.

So hard.

I've hit the ground. Gone right through it. Never in my life have I felt this. Nothing like this. I've felt shame and cowardice, weakness and strength. I've

known terror and indifference, self-hate and general disgust. I've seen things that cannot be unseen.

And yet I've known nothing like this terrible, horrible, paralyzing feeling. I feel crippled. Desperate and out of control. And it keeps getting worse. Every day I feel sick. Empty and somehow aching.

Love is a heartless bastard.

I'm driving myself insane.

I fall backward onto my bed, fully dressed. Coat, boots, gloves. I'm too tired to take them off. These late-night shifts have left me very little time to sleep. I feel as though I've been existing in a constant state of exhaustion.

My head hits the pillow and I blink once. Twice.

I collapse.

Twenty-Two

“No,” I hear myself say. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

She’s sitting on my bed. She’s leaning back on her elbows, legs outstretched in front of her, crossed at the ankles. And while some part of me understands I must be dreaming, there’s another, overwhelmingly dominant part of me that refuses to accept this. Part of me wants to believe she’s really here, inches away from me, wearing this short, tight black dress that keeps slipping up her thighs. But everything about her looks different, oddly vibrant; the colors are all wrong. Her lips are a richer, deeper shade of pink; her eyes seem wider, darker. She’s wearing shoes I know she’d never wear. And strangest of all: she’s smiling at me.

“Hi,” she whispers.

It’s just one word, but my heart is already racing. I’m inching away from her, stumbling back and nearly slamming my skull against the headboard, when I realize my shoulder is no longer wounded. I look down at myself. My arms are both fully functional. I’m wearing nothing but a white T-shirt and my underwear.

She shifts positions in an instant, propping herself up on her knees before crawling over to me. She climbs onto my lap. She’s now straddling my waist. I’m suddenly breathing too fast.

Her lips are at my ear. Her words are so soft. “Kiss me,” she says.

“Juliette—”

“I came all the way here.” She’s still smiling at me. It’s a rare smile, the kind she’s never honored me with. But somehow, right now, she’s mine. She’s mine and she’s perfect and she wants me, and I’m not going to fight it.

I don’t want to.

Her hands are tugging at my shirt, pulling it up over my head. Tossing it to the floor. She leans forward and kisses my neck, just once, so slowly. My eyes fall closed.

There aren’t enough words in this world to describe what I’m feeling.

I feel her hands move down my chest, my stomach; her fingers run along the edge of my underwear. Her hair falls forward, grazing my skin, and I have to

clench my fists to keep from pinning her to my bed.

Every nerve ending in my body is awake. I've never felt so alive or so desperate in my life, and I'm sure if she could hear what I'm thinking right now, she'd run out the door and never come back.

Because I want her.

Now.

Here.

Everywhere.

I want nothing between us.

I want her clothes off and the lights on and I want to study her. I want to unzip her out of this dress and take my time with every inch of her. I can't help my need to just stare; to know her and her features: the slope of her nose, the curve of her lips, the line of her jaw. I want to run my fingertips across the soft skin of her neck and trace it all the way down. I want to feel the weight of her pressed against me, wrapped around me.

I can't remember a reason why this can't be right or real. I can't focus on anything but the fact that she's sitting on my lap, touching my chest, staring into my eyes like she might really love me.

I wonder if I've actually died.

But just as I lean in, she leans back, grinning before reaching behind her, never once breaking eye contact with me. "Don't worry," she whispers. "It's almost over now."

Her words seem so strange, so familiar. "What do you mean?"

"Just a little longer and I'll leave."

"No." I'm blinking fast, reaching for her. "No, don't go—where are you going —"

"You'll be all right," she says. "I promise."

"No—"

But now she's holding a gun.

And pointing it at my heart.

Twenty-Three

These letters are all I have left.

26 friends to tell my stories to.

26 letters are all I need. I can stitch them together to create oceans and ecosystems. I can fit them together to form planets and solar systems. I can use letters to construct skyscrapers and metropolitan cities populated by people, places, things, and ideas that are more real to me than these 4 walls.

I need nothing but letters to live. Without them I would not exist.

Because these words I write down are the only proof I have that I'm still alive.

It's extraordinarily cold this morning.

I suggested we make a smaller, more low-key trip to the compounds earlier in the day today, just to see if any of the civilians seemed suspicious or out of place. I'm beginning to wonder if Kent and Kishimoto and all the others are living among the people in secret. They must, after all, have to have some source for food and water—something that ties them to society; I doubt they can grow anything underground. But of course, these are all assumptions. They might very well have a person who can grow food out of thin air.

I quickly address my men; instruct them to disperse and remain inconspicuous. Their job is to watch everyone today, and report their findings directly to me.

Once they're gone, I'm left to look around and be alone with my thoughts. It's a dangerous place to be.

God, she seemed so real in my dream.

I close my eyes, dragging a hand down my face; my fingers linger against my lips. I could feel her. I could really *feel* her. Even thinking about it now makes my heart race. I don't know what I'm going to do if I keep having such intense dreams about her. I won't be able to function at all.

I take a deep, steadying breath and focus. I allow my eyes to wander naturally, and I can't help but be distracted by the children running around. They seem so

spirited and carefree. In a strange way, it makes me sad that they've been able to find happiness in this life. They have no idea what they've missed; no idea what the world used to be like.

Something barrels into the backs of my legs.

I hear a strange, labored sort of panting; I turn around.

It's a dog.

A tired, starving dog, so thin and frail it looks like it could be knocked over by the wind. But it's staring at me. Unafraid. Mouth open. Tongue lolling.

I want to laugh out loud.

I glance around quickly before scooping the dog into my arms. I don't need to give my father any more reasons to castrate me, and I don't trust my soldiers not to report something like this.

That I would play with a dog.

I can already hear the things my father would say to me.

I carry the whimpering creature over to one of the recently vacated housing units—I just saw all three families leave for work—and duck down behind one of the fences. The dog seems smart enough to understand that now is not the time to bark.

I tug off my glove and reach into my pocket for the Danish I grabbed at breakfast this morning; I hadn't had a chance to eat anything before our early start today. And though I haven't the faintest idea what dogs eat, exactly, I offer the Danish anyway.

The dog practically bites off my hand.

It chokes down the Danish in two bites and starts licking my fingers, jumping against my chest in excitement, finally plowing into the warmth of my open coat. I can't control the easy laughter that escapes my lips; I don't want to. I haven't felt like laughing in so long. And I can't help but be amazed at the power such small, unassuming animals wield over us; they so easily break down our defenses.

I run my hand along its shabby fur, feeling its ribs jut out at sharp, uncomfortable angles. But the dog doesn't seem to mind its starved state, at least not right now. Its tail is wagging hard, and it keeps pulling back from my coat to look me in the eye. I'm starting to wish I'd stuffed all the Danishes in my pocket this morning.

Something snaps.

I hear a gasp.

I spin around.

I jump up, alert, searching for the sound. It seemed close by. Someone saw me. Someone—

A civilian. She's already darting away, her body pressed against the wall of a nearby unit.

"Hey!" I shout. "You there—"

She stops. Looks up.

I nearly collapse.

Juliette.

She's staring at me. She's actually here, staring at me, her eyes wide and panicked. My legs are suddenly made of lead. I'm rooted to the ground, unable to form words. I don't even know where to start. There's so much I want to say to her, so much I've never told her, and I'm just so happy to see her—God, I'm so *relieved*—

She's disappeared.

I spin around, frantic, wondering whether I've actually begun to lose my grip on reality. My eyes land on the little dog still sitting there, waiting for me, and I stare at it, dumbfounded, wondering what on earth just happened. I keep looking back at the place I thought I saw her, but I see nothing.

Nothing.

I run a hand through my hair, so confused, so horrified and angry with myself that I'm tempted to rip it out of my head.

What is happening to me.

Excerpt from Warner's Files

XXXXXX LOG: DAY 1 XXXXXX

She is currently sleeping in my bed.

I finally provided her with the perfect opportunity to display her abilities and she fainted. The tiny, frail thing-I must make sure she eats more-just collapsed in my arms. I've seen my fair share of horrified persons in my nineteen years-emotions competing on the faces of my dying enemies, my own men, even myself. But the kind of terror and paralyzing fear on her face was so unexpected as to be remarkable. Jenkins, yes, I expected him to be perhaps mildly concerned for his own welfare. But this girl. The insanity I've been told about was all over her face only in that moment.

She perplexes me.

Every account I've read of her-every record, report, every incident on file-claims that she is vicious and delusional. But she is neither. She does not seem to understand the breadth of her abilities; she can't see the limitless potential in who she could become; she doesn't even seem interested. She is not at all like how she was described. I thought I was enlisting a willing warrior-someone eager to unleash herself-and I was wildly mistaken. This is going to be much more difficult than I anticipated.

It should also be noted that the photos I found in her medical records are ridiculous. They are such a misrepresentation of this girl as to be laughable. She is scared and broken, yes. But she is also angry-and stunningly beautiful. I'm certain I've never seen such a beautiful creature in my life. This comes as a great surprise, actually, as I was prepared to be at

least mildly repulsed by her. Unfortunately, not only did her beauty immediately distract me--such odd blue-green eyes--but I noticed a sweetness in her features that I'm afraid might actually be sincere. I'm not sure yet if it's just a clever facade designed to fool her enemies (I doubt it), but I can't take any chances with her safety.

I've decided that she cannot, under any circumstances, be allowed to communicate with my men. They've been isolated for too long; a generous smile from a beautiful girl would ruin the best of them. And this is precisely why I decided her incident with Jenkins had to be public. I needed to make sure the men knew exactly what she was capable of; they cannot be allowed to think of her as a meek and vulnerable girl--I do not want her to be harassed while she's here. I'm confident that it will be much safer for her if she is feared, if they think she is a wild, uncontrollable monster. It's better for her that way. I don't think she'd listen if I were to simply instruct her to be unkind to the soldiers.

~~A belated--~~ (*See below*)

She is a very stubborn creature.

She fights me over dresses and shoes and refuses to eat her food, like some kind of petulant child. She falls apart at the sight of lavish decor and doesn't seem pleased to have an actual bed to sleep in. It's absurd. Who but a child would fight over food and outfits? What rational being refuses a warm meal and an armoire full of clothes? It's becoming increasingly apparent

to me that not only does she not know how to fight but she doesn't even know how to fight for the right things. Food and clothing are staples, necessary items; it didn't once occur to me that she would be unhappy to eat solid meals or be unwilling to change out of the same ragged outfit she's worn for almost a year.

This is not the mind of a vicious human being.

This is the mind of a broken girl who thinks she is showing strength by refusing the very basic components of survival. Food to give her energy. Clothes to protect her body. Sleep to revive her spirit. She does not think like a fighter. She does not know how to equip herself, how to take advantage of her surroundings in order to dominate her opponents. If she were thinking like a predator, she'd be attempting to break out of here-she would've used dinner as an opportunity to kill or disarm as many of my men as possible. She would not have sat at a table laden with food, refusing to speak, refusing to eat, refusing to answer my questions, as though she were a wounded little girl mortally offended to be ordered to eat her vegetables and wear a pretty dress to dinner.

She is, in a word, harmless.

I've only known her for less than one day, so I hope my later observations will prove these early hypotheses wrong, but it seems abundantly clear that she has no idea what she's capable of. So much so, in fact, that I'm confused as to how she even got to this point. She is no more

of a danger to society than a pair of scissors locked in a drawer. How could her parents look at her in fear? How could they-why would they-give her up to the authorities? How could the doctors not see that she is probably more afraid of herself than they are? She has been outrageously wronged in her life. Misjudged. Mistreated. Locked away and labeled insane for no reason. She may have killed that little boy, but even I can see now that it was very likely an accident. I tested her-I gave her an opportunity to embrace her true nature, to be the terror she's accused of being, and instead she stood screaming in front of me, tears streaming down her face, looking like the pain she's been carrying might actually kill her-

I'm surprised by my reaction to her.

Surprised that my hands shake just a bit as I type this, that I want to give in to my own rage, this blind anger I feel in knowing that there's been a great injustice done to her. She is so innocent. So small. But I see the hurt, the pain simmering just under the surface of her skin, this fierce stubbornness that gives me hope. In time, I'm sure I can coax the emotion out of her. I can help her. She can be so much more than what they've done to her. Years of abuse and neglect and unfounded cruelty created this cowering girl, but I can attempt to undo the damage. It will be more work than I had anticipated, but I think in the end it will be worth it. She has so much potential-such tremendous, extraordinary power she's unaware of-and I will teach her how to use it. She's been wronged by the world, and

the anger she undoubtedly feels (and that I will endeavor to provoke out of her) will be the fuel she'll require in order to fight back, to exact revenge in a satisfying manner. She will be perfect, and perfectly suited to my needs. I know it.

But I have a lot of work to do.

**(A belated, slightly irrelevant observation, but one that occurred to me nonetheless: It doesn't seem possible that she's had any experience with the opposite gender. This, compounded by a lifetime of degradation and isolation, leads me to believe that she has no grasp on the extent of her physical attractions. This is a weakness that must be remedied somehow; she could use this information to her advantage. She must be able to understand—and harness—every tool in her arsenal. I'll find a way to work on this.)*

THE
(RE)ESTABLISHMENT
our future, our freedom

THE REESTABLISHMENT
ARMED FORCES
Department of Police

Section One, DEFENDANT

CASE SUMMARY		DEFENDANT:	
Case No.: 188415		Juliette Ferrars	
HOME ADDRESS:		DOB:	
162 Forest Road		5/18/	
BUSINESS ADDRESS:		BUSINESS PH:	
SEX:	RACE:	HT.:	WT.:
F	W	5'3"	102 lb.
HAIR:		EYES:	
Brown/long		Blue-green	
CORN. LENSES:		FACIAL HAIR:	
☐ Hard Contacts ☐ Soft Contacts		☐ Full Beard ☐ Mustache	
DRIVER'S LICENSE N:		REVOCATION:	
STATE:		☐ YES ☐ NO	

Section Two, VEHICLE

VEH. MAKE:	VEH.:	STYLE:	COLOR:
MODEL:	VEH. LIC. N:	TIME:	VIN:
VEH. PA:	TOWEL:	THIRD EC:	KEYS:
☐ YES ☐ NO	☐ YES ☐ NO		
VEH. LOC.:		REL. TO:	

Section Three, OFFENSE

OFFENSE (REASON FOR CONTACT):	
Domestic disturbance.	
LOC. OF OFFENSE: 162 Forest Road	
END OF INV.:	OFFENSE DATE:
☒ YES ☐ NO	4/22/
TIME:	DAY OF WEEK:
22:30	Saturday

THE (RE)ESTABLISHMENT

THE REESTABLISHMENT
ARMED FORCES
Department of Police

Section Four: TEST

VISUAL SOBRIETY:		BY:
☐ YES	☐ NO	WITNESS:
BREATHALYZER TEST:		BY:
☐ YES	☐ NO	TIME:
B.A. BY (PRINT NAME):		RESULT:
BLOOD DRAWN FROM (PART OF BODY):		TIME:
		RESULT:

Section Five: NARRATIVE

FACTS OF THE CASE (WHAT OCCURRED?):

Received call about a domestic disturbance, neighbors complaining about screaming and fighting going on at Defendant's home. They feared violence; D is known to be volatile and combative. Spoke to parents of D and they confirmed she was being violent and the mother said, "she's sick. She has some kind of problem and we don't know how to deal with her." I asked if D is mentally unstable and both parents said yes. I suggested they send her to a Facility if the situation got worse. They thanked me and said they were looking into it. I asked if there was anything else I could do for them and they thanked me again and said goodnight. I did not enter the home of D. I did not see the D in person, but the parents seemed genuinely afraid.

Section Six: ADMINISTRATION

INV. OFFICER: J. Campbell	SER. #: 00027	ASSIGNMENT: 857
INV. OFFICER:	SER. #:	ASSIGNMENT:
DET. ASSIGNED:	SER. #:	ASSIGNMENT:
CASE FILED BY:	SER. #:	ASSIGNMENT:

SECTOR 45
REHABILITATION CENTER QUESTIONNAIRE

Parent(s)/Guardian(s) surrendering custody of individuals to the care of the Sanitarium please fill out this intake form to the best of your abilities for the records of our psychiatric attendants and staff members.

Name of Patient: Juliette Ferrars

Date of Birth: 5/18/1900

Today's Date: 6/24/1900

Name(s) of Parent(s)/Guardian(s): Eric Ferrars

Evelyn Ferrars

Residence (town, county): 162 Forest Road

Place of Birth (town, state, nation if foreign born):

Sex: F

Single, married, divorced, or widowed: Single

Children: None

Occupation: Student

Education (collegiate, academic or common school, read or write) or none: High School

Religious belief or denomination: None

MEDICAL HISTORY

Please assist us in providing your dependent with the most up-to-date care available by providing health history information.

HEIGHT: 5' 3" WEIGHT: 102 lbs BLOOD TYPE: AB-

Check YES below if your dependent currently has any of the following or NO if your dependent does not.

CONSTITUTIONAL

Yes No

- ☐ ☒ Fever
☒ ☐ Weight loss/gain

CARDIOVASCULAR

Yes No

- ☒ ☐ Heart pain
☐ ☒ High blood pressure
☒ ☐ Low blood pressure
☒ ☐ Chest pains
☒ ☐ Heart murmur

MUSCULOSKELETAL

Yes No

- ☐ ☒ Muscle pain
☐ ☒ Joint pain

HEMATOLOGIC/LYMPHATIC

Yes No

- ☒ ☐ Anemia
☐ ☒ Bleeding problems

ALLERGIC/IMMUNOLOGIC

Yes No

- ☐ ☒ Lupus
☐ ☒ Allergies

NEUROLOGICAL

Yes No

- ☒ ☐ Headaches
☐ ☒ Migraines
☒ ☐ Fainting/Seizures
☒ ☐ Frequently tired
☒ ☐ Difficulty sleeping

EYES

Yes No

- ☐ ☒ Glaucoma
☐ ☒ Cataracts
☐ ☒ Blindness
☐ ☒ Eye pain
☒ ☐ Light flashes
☐ ☒ Double vision
☐ ☒ History of eye surgeries
☐ ☒ Retinal detachment
☐ ☒ Eye/head injury
☐ ☒ Tired eyes

RESPIRATORY

Yes No

- ☒ ☐ Asthma
☐ ☒ Chronic bronchitis
☐ ☒ Emphysema

PSYCHIATRIC

Yes No

- ☒ ☐ Symptoms of depression, anxiety
☒ ☐ Symptoms of bipolar disorder
☒ ☐ Symptoms of schizophrenia

GENITOURINARY

Yes No

- ☐ ☒ Dialysis, kidney failure

ENDOCRINE

Yes No

- ☐ ☒ Diabetes
☐ ☒ Hyper-/Hypothyroid

MEDICAL HISTORY (continued)

1. Is there any family history of mental illness? None

2. Is there any family history of epilepsy, convulsions, or delusions?

None

3. Is there any family history of addiction or substance abuse?

None

4. Does the patient present any signs of addiction or substance abuse?

No

5. Does the patient have suicidal thoughts or tendencies?

possibly

6. Is the patient taking any medications at present? Paroxetine

for anxiety, Olanzapine for unusual thinking

and emotion suppression, Valproic acid for

mania and convulsions

7. Does the patient suffer from recurring hallucinations?

YES she claims to suffer from severe

nightmares where she claims she's being

suffocated to death. Wakes up gasping for air

MEDICAL HISTORY (continued)

8. Does the patient have any delusions? She is entirely.....
delusional. Thinks she has some kind of.....
"power" to harm others.....

9. Has the patient ever exhibited violent tendencies or attempted
to harm or injure others? Yes. Murdered a small child.....
in a grocery store by choking him to death. Claims.....
"insane" - blames her "tough".....

10. Are there any physical manifestations of the patient's psychological
illness? ... Claims paralysis during.....
"fainting" fits.....

Mode of Patient Admission

Voluntary? ☒ N

Please explain: she murdered a little boy.....
she is clinically insane. Doctor's/palace.....
recommended locking her away.....

THE
(RE)ESTABLISHMENT

our future, redefined.

ARMED FORCES
CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

 ARMED FORCES
PERSON OF INTEREST
CONDENSED FACT SHEET

PROFILE

FULL LEGAL NAME (last, first, middle, suffix)			AGE	BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy)	
Kent, Adam			18	12/02/####	
GENDER	HEIGHT	WEIGHT	EYE COLOR		HAIR COLOR
M	5'11"	180 lbs	Blue		Dark Brown
STREET NAME		COMPOUND NO.		SECTOR NO.	
N/A		none assigned		45	
TITLE			IDENTIFICATION NO.		
Private First Class, Level 4, R.A.F.			45B-86659		

RELATIONS

PARENTS (list name(s), if any)	SIBLINGS (name/age/gender)
deceased	James Kent / 10 / male

NOTES

COMMENTS, NOTABLE INFRACTIONS, ETC.

Private Adam Kent has been placed on special assignment to guard the focus of Experiment 5H-A773RM3, alias Juliette Ferrara. His past history (verified through school records) with JF may prove integral to the success and/or failure of said experiment and, as a result, his interactions with the test subject must be monitored closely.

Note: There exists no record of registration for either Adam Kent or younger sibling, James Kent, in The Reestablishment's regulated territory. Whereabouts of sibling are unknown.

 ARMED FORCES
PERSON OF INTEREST
CONDENSED FACT SHEET

PROFILE

FULL LEGAL NAME (last, first, middle, suffix) Warner, [REDACTED]			AGE 19	BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy) 04/24/####	
GENDER M	HEIGHT 5'9"	WEIGHT 170 lbs	EYE COLOR Green		HAIR COLOR Blond
STREET NAME N/A		COMPOUND NO. resides on base		SECTOR NO. 45	
TITLE Colonel, Chief Regent, R.A.F.			IDENTIFICATION NO. 45B-00001		

RELATIONS

PARENTS (list name(s), if any)	SIBLINGS (name/age/gender)
Supreme Commander Anderson, R.A.F.	
Leila Warner	

NOTES

COMMENTS, NOTABLE INFRACTIONS, ETC.

Colonel, Chief Regent Warner is the son of Supreme Commander Anderson, and the head of Sector 45. Most notable of his many responsibilities: He oversees all 3,700 soldiers currently housed on base and communicates with other H.O.S. (Heads of Sectors) on defense strategies, R.A.F. rules and regulations, work and housing concerns for citizens, and the further development of every stage in our evolving world.

Currently he is at work on Experiment 5H-A773RM3, which he hopes to utilize as a weapon of mass destruction in securing our future.

 ARMED FORCES
PERSON OF INTEREST
CONDENSED FACT SHEET

PROFILE

FULL LEGAL NAME (last, first, middle, suffix) Kishimoto, Kenji			AGE 20	BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy) 08/26/####	
GENDER M	HEIGHT 5'10"	WEIGHT 175 lbs	EYE COLOR Black		HAIR COLOR Black
STREET NAME N/A			COMPOUND NO. none assigned		DISTRICT NO. 45
TITLE Private First Class, Level 1, R.A.F.			IDENTIFICATION NO. 45B-67999		

RELATIONS

PARENTS (list name(s), if any)	SIBLINGS (name/age/gender)
father deceased	
mother unknown	

NOTES

COMMENTS, NOTABLE INFRACTIONS, ETC.

Note: Private Kenji Kishimoto has received 17 demerits since enlisting.

Repeat offenses include:

- wandering around base after curfew
- quarreling with other soldiers
- asking for larger portions at meals
- failing to uphold R.A.F. (Reestablishment Armed Forces) standards for personal hygiene and uniform.

 ARMED FORCES
PERSON OF INTEREST
CONDENSED FACT SHEET

PROFILE

FULL LEGAL NAME (last, first, middle, suffix) Ferrars, Juliette			AGE 17	BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy) 05/18/####	
GENDER F	HEIGHT 5'3"	WEIGHT 102 lbs	EYE COLOR Blue/Green		HAIR COLOR Dark Brown
STREET NAME N/A			COMPOUND NO. none assigned		SECTOR NO. 45
TITLE Experiment 5H-A773RM3			IDENTIFICATION NO. 45B-11111		

RELATIONS

PARENTS (list name(s), if any)	SIBLINGS (name/age/gender)
Eric Ferrars	
Evelyn Ferrars	

NOTES

COMMENTS, NOTABLE INFRACTIONS, ETC.

Juliette Ferrars is the focus of Experiment 5H-A773RM3, a new project initiated and monitored by Colonel, Chief Regent Warner. Details of the experiment are not readily available, but the subject is classified as an abnormal human specimen with a genetic deviation. She is known to be volatile and lethal; all interaction with JF must first be approved by C.C.R. Warner.

Note: Unless otherwise directed by C.C.R. Warner, no soldier should touch Experiment 5H-A773RM3.

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DESTROY ME

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FIRST EDITION

~~THEY WANT TO FIND ME.~~ I WILL FIND THEM FIRST.



UNRAVEL ME

TAHEREH MAFI

UNRAVEL ME

TAHEREH MAFI

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DEDICATION

For my mother. The best person I've ever known.

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Acknowledgments

Credits

Copyright

ONE

The world might be sunny-side up today.

The big ball of yellow might be spilling into the clouds, runny and yolky and blurring into the bluest sky, bright with cold hope and false promises about fond memories, real families, hearty breakfasts, stacks of pancakes drizzled in maple syrup sitting on a plate in a world that doesn't exist anymore.

Or maybe not.

Maybe it's dark and wet today, whistling wind so sharp it stings the skin off the knuckles of grown men. Maybe it's snowing, maybe it's raining, I don't know maybe it's freezing it's hailing it's a hurricane slip slipping into a tornado and the earth is quaking apart to make room for our mistakes.

I wouldn't have any idea.

I don't have a window anymore. I don't have a view. It's a million degrees below zero in my blood and I'm buried 50 feet underground in a training room that's become my second home lately. Every day I stare at these 4 walls and remind myself *I'm not a prisoner I'm not a prisoner I'm not a prisoner* but sometimes the old fears streak across my skin and I can't seem to break free of the claustrophobia clutching at my throat.

I made so many promises when I arrived here.

Now I'm not so sure. Now I'm worried. Now my mind is a traitor because my thoughts crawl out of bed every morning with darting eyes and sweating palms and nervous giggles that sit in my chest, build in my chest, threaten to burst through my chest, and the pressure is tightening and tightening and *tightening*

Life around here isn't what I expected it to be.

My new world is etched in gunmetal, sealed in silver, drowning in the scents of stone and steel. The air is icy, the mats are orange; the lights and switches beep and flicker, electronic and electric, neon bright. It's busy here, busy with bodies, busy with halls stuffed full of whispers and shouts, pounding feet and thoughtful footsteps. If I listen closely I can hear the sounds of brains working and foreheads pinching and fingers tap tapping at chins and lips and furrowed brows. Ideas are carried in pockets, thoughts propped up on the tips of every

tongue; eyes are narrowed in concentration, in careful planning I should want to know about.

But nothing is working and all my parts are broken.

I'm supposed to harness my Energy, Castle said. Our gifts are different forms of Energy. Matter is never created or destroyed, he said to me, and as our world changed, so did the Energy within it. Our abilities are taken from the universe, from other matter, from other Energies. We are not anomalies. We are inevitabilities of the perverse manipulations of our Earth. Our Energy came from somewhere, he said. And somewhere is in the chaos all around us.

It makes sense. I remember what the world looked like when I left it.

I remember the pissed-off skies and the sequence of sunsets collapsing beneath the moon. I remember the cracked earth and the scratchy bushes and the used-to-be-greens that are now too close to brown. I think about the water we can't drink and the birds that don't fly and how human civilization has been reduced to nothing but a series of compounds stretched out over what's left of our ravaged land.

This planet is a broken bone that didn't set right, a hundred pieces of crystal glued together. We've been shattered and reconstructed, told to make an effort every single day to pretend we still function the way we're supposed to. But it's a lie, it's all a lie.

I do not function properly.

I am nothing more than the consequence of catastrophe.

2 weeks have collapsed at the side of the road, abandoned, already forgotten. 2 weeks I've been here and in 2 weeks I've taken up residence on a bed of eggshells, wondering when something is going to break, when I'll be the first to break it, wondering when everything is going to fall apart. In 2 weeks I should've been happier, healthier, sleeping better, more soundly in this safe space. Instead I worry about what will happen ~~when~~ if I can't get this right, if I don't figure out how to train properly, if I hurt someone ~~on purpose~~ by accident.

We're preparing for a bloody war.

That's why I'm training. We're all trying to prepare ourselves to take down Warner and his men. To win one battle at a time. To show the citizens of our world that there is hope yet—that they do not have to acquiesce to the demands of The Reestablishment and become slaves to a regime that wants nothing more than to exploit them for power. And I agreed to fight. To be a warrior. To use my power against my better judgment. But the thought of laying a hand on someone brings back a world of memories, feelings, a flush of power I experience only

when I make contact with skin not immune to my own. It's a rush of invincibility; a tormented kind of euphoria; a wave of intensity flooding every pore in my body. I don't know what it will do to me. I don't know if I can trust myself to take pleasure in someone else's pain.

All I know is that Warner's last words are caught in my chest and I can't cough out the cold or the truth hacking at the back of my throat.

Adam has no idea that Warner can touch me.

No one does.

Warner was supposed to be dead. Warner was supposed to be dead because I was supposed to have shot him but no one supposed I'd need to know how to fire a gun so now I suppose he's come to find me.

He's come to fight.

For me.

TWO

A sharp knock and the door flies open.

“Ah, Ms. Ferrars. I don’t know what you hope to accomplish by sitting in the corner.” Castle’s easy grin dances into the room before he does.

I take a tight breath and try to make myself look at Castle but I can’t. Instead I whisper an apology and listen to the sorry sound my words make in this large room. I feel my shaking fingers clench against the thick, padded mats spread out across the floor and think about how I’ve accomplished nothing since I’ve been here. It’s humiliating, so humiliating to disappoint one of the only people who’s ever been kind to me.

Castle stands directly in front of me, waits until I finally look up. “There’s no need to apologize,” he says. His sharp, clear brown eyes and friendly smile make it easy to forget he’s the leader of Omega Point. The leader of this entire underground movement dedicated to fighting The Reestablishment. His voice is too gentle, too kind, and it’s almost worse. ~~Sometimes I wish he would just yell at me.~~ “But,” he continues, “you do have to learn how to harness your Energy, Ms. Ferrars.”

A pause.

A pace.

His hands rest on the stack of bricks I was supposed to have destroyed. He pretends not to notice the red rims around my eyes or the metal pipes I threw across the room. His gaze carefully avoids the bloody smears on the wooden planks set off to the side; his questions don’t ask me why my fists are clenched so tight and whether or not I’ve injured myself again. He cocks his head in my direction but he’s staring at a spot directly behind me and his voice is soft when he speaks. “I know this is difficult for you,” he says. “But you must learn. You have to. Your life will depend upon it.”

I nod, lean back against the wall, welcome the cold and the pain of the brick digging into my spine. I pull my knees up to my chest and feel my feet press into the protective mats covering the ground. I’m so close to tears I’m afraid I might scream. “I just don’t know how,” I finally say to him. “I don’t know any of this. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to be doing.” I stare at the ceiling and

blink blink blink. My eyes feel shiny, damp. “I don’t know how to make things happen.”

“Then you have to think,” Castle says, undeterred. He picks up a discarded metal pipe. Weighs it in his hands. “You have to find links between the events that transpired. When you broke through the concrete in Warner’s torture chamber—when you punched through the steel door to save Mr. Kent—what happened? Why in those two instances were you able to react in such an extraordinary way?” He sits down some feet away from me. Pushes the pipe in my direction. “I need you to analyze your abilities, Ms. Ferrars. You have to focus.”

Focus.

It’s one word but it’s enough, it’s all it takes to make me feel sick. Everyone, it seems, needs me to focus. First Warner needed me to focus, and now Castle needs me to focus.

I’ve never been able to follow through.

Castle’s deep, sad sigh brings me back to the present. He gets to his feet. He smooths out the only navy-blue blazer he seems to own and I catch a glimpse of the silver Omega symbol embroidered into the back. An absent hand touches the end of his ponytail; he always ties his dreads in a clean knot at the base of his neck. “You are resisting yourself,” he says, though he says it gently. “Maybe you should work with someone else for a change. Maybe a partner will help you work things out—to discover the connection between these two events.”

My shoulders stiffen, surprised. “I thought you said I had to work alone.”

He squints past me. Scratches a spot beneath his ear, shoves his other hand into a pocket. “I didn’t actually want you to work alone,” he says. “But no one volunteered for the task.”

I don’t know why I suck in my breath, why I’m so surprised. I shouldn’t be surprised. Not everyone is Adam.

Not everyone is safe from me the way he is. No one but Adam has ever touched me and enjoyed it. ~~No one except for Warner.~~ But despite Adam’s best intentions, he can’t train with me. He’s busy with other things.

Things no one wants to tell me about.

But Castle is staring at me with hopeful eyes, generous eyes, eyes that have no idea that these new words he’s offered me are so much worse. Worse because as much as I know the truth, it still hurts to hear it. It hurts to remember that though I might live in a warm bubble with Adam, the rest of the world still sees me as a threat. A monster. An abomination.

~~Warner was right. No matter where I go, I can't seem to run from this.~~

"What's changed?" I ask him. "Who's willing to train me now?" I pause. "You?"

Castle smiles.

It's the kind of smile that flushes humiliated heat up my neck and spears my pride right through the vertebrae. I have to resist the urge to bolt out the door.

~~Please please please do not pity me, is what I want to say.~~

"I wish I had the time," Castle says to me. "But Kenji is finally free—we were able to reorganize his schedule—and he said he'd be happy to work with you." A moment of hesitation. "That is, if that's all right with you."

Kenji.

I want to laugh out loud. Kenji *would* be the only one willing to risk working with me. I injured him once. By accident. But he and I haven't spent much time together since he first led our expedition into Omega Point. It was like he was just doing a task, fulfilling a mission; once complete, he went back to his own life. Apparently Kenji is important around here. He has a million things to do. Things to regulate. People seem to like him, respect him, even.

I wonder if they've ever known him as the obnoxious, foul-mouthed Kenji I first met.

"Sure," I tell Castle, attempting a pleasant expression for the first time since he arrived. "That sounds great."

Castle stands up. His eyes are bright, eager, easily pleased. "Perfect. I'll have him meet you at breakfast tomorrow. You can eat together and go from there."

"Oh but I usually—"

"I know." Castle cuts me off. His smile is pressed into a thin line now, his forehead creased with concern. "You like to eat your meals with Mr. Kent. I know this. But you've hardly spent any time with the others, Ms. Ferrars, and if you're going to be here, you need to start trusting us. The people of Omega Point feel close to Kenji. He can vouch for you. If everyone sees you spending time together, they'll feel less intimidated by your presence. It will help you adjust."

Heat like hot oil spatters across my face; I flinch, feel my fingers twitch, try to find a place to look, try to pretend I can't feel the pain caught in my chest. "They're—they're afraid of me," I tell him, I whisper, I trail off. "I don't—I didn't want to bother anyone. I didn't want to get in their way...."

Castle sighs, long and loud. He looks down and up, scratches the soft spot beneath his chin. "They're only afraid," he says finally, "because they don't know you. If you just tried a little harder—if you made even the smallest effort

to get to know anyone—” He stops. Frowns. “Ms. Ferrars, you have been here two weeks and you hardly even speak to your roommates.”

“But that’s not—I think they’re great—”

“And yet you ignore them? You spend no time with them? Why?”

~~Because I’ve never had girl friends before. Because I’m afraid I’ll do something wrong, say something wrong and they’ll end up hating me like all the other girls I’ve known. And I like them too much, which will make their inevitable rejection so much harder to endure.~~

I say nothing.

Castle shakes his head. “You did so well the first day you arrived. You seemed almost *friendly* with Brendan. I don’t know what happened,” Castle continues. “I thought you would do well here.”

Brendan. The thin boy with platinum-blond hair and electric currents running through his veins. I remember him. He was nice to me. “I like Brendan,” I tell Castle, bewildered. “Is he upset with me?”

“*Upset?*” Castle shakes his head, laughs out loud. He doesn’t answer my question. “I don’t understand, Ms. Ferrars. I’ve tried to be patient with you, I’ve tried to give you time, but I confess I’m quite perplexed. You were so different when you first arrived—you were excited to be here! But it took less than a week for you to withdraw completely. You don’t even look at anyone when you walk through the halls. What happened to conversation? To friendship?”

Yes.

It took 1 day for me to settle in. 1 day for me to look around. 1 day for me to get excited about a different life and 1 day for everyone to find out who I am and what I’ve done.

Castle doesn’t say anything about the mothers who see me walking down the hall and yank their children out of my way. He doesn’t mention the hostile stares and the unwelcoming words I’ve endured since I’ve arrived. He doesn’t say anything about the kids who’ve been warned to stay far, far away, and the handful of elderly people who watch me too closely. I can only imagine what they’ve heard, where they got their stories from.

Juliette.

A girl with a lethal touch that saps the strength and energy of human beings until they’re limp, paralyzed carcasses wheezing on the floor. A girl who spent most of her life in hospitals and juvenile detention centers, a girl who was cast off by her own parents, labeled as certifiably insane, and sentenced to isolation in an asylum where even the rats were afraid to live.

A girl.

So power hungry that she killed a small child. She tortured a toddler. She brought a grown man gasping to his knees. She doesn't even have the decency to kill herself.

None of it is a lie.

So I look at Castle with spots of color on my cheeks and unspoken letters on my lips and eyes that refuse to reveal their secrets.

He sighs.

He almost says something. He tries to speak but his eyes inspect my face and he changes his mind. He only offers me a quick nod, a deep breath, taps his watch, says, "Three hours until lights-out," and turns to go.

Pauses in the doorway.

"Ms. Ferrars," he says suddenly, softly, without turning around. "You've chosen to stay with us, to fight with us, to become a member of Omega Point." A pause. "We're going to need your help. And I'm afraid we're running out of time."

I watch him leave.

I listen to his departing footsteps and lean my head back against the wall. Close my eyes against the ceiling. Hear his voice, solemn and steady, ringing in my ears.

We're running out of time, he said.

As if time were the kind of thing you could run out of, as if it were measured into bowls that were handed to us at birth and if we ate too much or too fast or right before jumping into the water then our time would be lost, wasted, already spent.

But time is beyond our finite comprehension. It's endless, it exists outside of us; we cannot run out of it or lose track of it or find a way to hold on to it. Time goes on even when we do not.

We have plenty of time, is what Castle should have said. We have all the time in the world, is what he should have said to me. But he didn't because what he meant *tick tock* is that our time *tick tock* is shifting. It's hurtling forward heading in an entirely new direction slamming face-first into something else and

tick

tick

tick

tick

tick

it's almost

time for war.

THREE

I could touch him from here.

His eyes, dark blue. His hair, dark brown. His shirt, too tight in all the right places and his lips, his lips twitch up to flick the switch that lights the fire in my heart and I don't even have time to blink and exhale before I'm caught in his arms.

Adam.

"Hey, you," he whispers, right up against my neck.

I bite back a shiver as the blood rushes up to blush my cheeks and for a moment, just for this moment, I drop my bones and allow him to hold me together. "Hey." I smile, inhaling the scent of him.

Luxurious, is what this is.

We rarely ever see each other alone. Adam is staying in Kenji's room with his little brother, James, and I bunk with the healer twins. We probably have less than 20 minutes before the girls get back to this room, and I intend to make the most of this opportunity.

My eyes fall shut.

Adam's arms wrap around my waist, pulling me closer, and the pleasure is so tremendous I can hardly keep myself from shaking. It's like my skin and bones have been craving contact, warm affection, human interaction for so many years that I don't know how to pace myself. I'm a starving child trying to stuff my stomach, gorging my senses on the decadence of these moments as if I'll wake up in the morning and realize I'm still sweeping cinders for my stepmother.

But then Adam's lips press against my head and my worries put on a fancy dress and pretend to be something else for a while.

"How are you?" I ask, and it's so embarrassing because my words are already unsteady even though he's hardly held me but I can't make myself let go.

Laughter shakes the shape of his body, soft and rich and indulgent. But he doesn't respond to my question and I know he won't.

We've tried so many times to sneak off together, only to be caught and

chastised for our negligence. We are not allowed outside of our rooms after lights-out. Once our grace period—a leniency granted on account of our very abrupt arrival—ended, Adam and I had to follow the rules just like everyone else. And there are a lot of rules to follow.

These security measures—cameras everywhere, around every corner, in every hallway—exist to prepare us in the case of an attack. Guards patrol at night, looking for any suspicious noise, activity, or sign of a breach. Castle and his team are vigilant in protecting Omega Point, and they’re unwilling to take even the slightest risks; if trespassers get too close to this hideout, someone has to do anything and everything necessary to keep them away.

Castle claims it’s their very vigilance that’s kept them from discovery for so long, and if I’m perfectly honest, I can see his rationale in being so strict about it. But these same strict measures keep me and Adam apart. He and I never see each other except during mealtimes, when we’re always surrounded by other people, and any free time I have is spent locked in a training room where I’m supposed to “harness my Energy.” Adam is just as unhappy about it as I am.

I touch his cheek.

He takes a tight breath. Turns to me. Tells me too much with his eyes, so much that I have to look away because I feel it all too acutely. My skin is hypersensitive, finally finally finally awake and thrumming with life, humming with feelings so intense it’s almost indecent.

I can’t even hide it.

He sees what he does to me, what happens to me when his fingers graze my skin, when his lips get too close to my face, when the heat of his body against mine forces my eyes to close and my limbs to tremble and my knees to buckle under pressure. I see what it does to him, too, to know that he has that effect on me. He tortures me sometimes, smiling as he takes too long to bridge the gap between us, reveling in the sound of my heart slamming against my chest, in the sharp breaths I fight so hard to control, in the way I swallow a hundred times just before he moves to kiss me. I can’t even look at him without reliving every moment we’ve had together, every memory of his lips, his touch, his scent, his skin. It’s too much for me, too much, so much, so new, so many exquisite sensations I’ve never known, never felt, never even had access to before.

~~Sometimes I’m afraid it will kill me.~~

I break free of his arms; I’m hot and cold and feeling unsteady, hoping I can get myself under control, hoping he’ll forget how easily he affects me, and I know I need a moment to pull myself together. I stumble backward; I cover my

face with my hands and try to think of something to say but everything is shaking and I catch him looking at me, looking like he might inhale the length of me in one breath.

No is the word I think I hear him whisper.

All I know next are his arms, the desperate edge to his voice when he says my name, and I'm unraveling in his embrace, I'm frayed and falling apart and I'm making no effort to control the tremors in my bones and he's so hot his skin is so hot and I don't even know where I am anymore.

His right hand slides up my spine and tugs on the zipper holding my suit together until it's halfway down my back and I don't care. I have 17 years to make up for and I want to feel everything. I'm not interested in waiting around and risking the who-knows and the what-ifs and the huge regrets. I want to feel all of it because what if I wake up to find this phenomenon has passed, that the expiration date has arrived, that my chance came and went and would never return. That these hands will feel this warmth never again.

I can't.

I won't.

I don't even realize I've pressed myself into him until I feel every contour of his frame under the thin cotton of his clothes. My hands slip up under his shirt and I hear his strained breath; I look up to find his eyes squeezed shut, his features caught in an expression resembling some kind of pain and suddenly his hands are in my hair, desperate, his lips so close. He leans in and gravity moves out of his way and my feet leave the floor and I'm floating, I'm flying, I'm anchored by nothing but this hurricane in my lungs and this heart beating a skip a skip a skip too fast.

Our lips

touch

and I know I'm going to split at the seams. He's kissing me like he's lost me and he's found me and I'm slipping away and he's never going to let me go. I want to scream, sometimes, I want to collapse, sometimes, I want to die knowing that I've known what it was like to live with this kiss, this heart, this soft soft explosion that makes me feel like I've taken a sip of the sun, like I've eaten clouds 8, 9, and 10.

This.

This makes me ache everywhere.

He pulls away, he's breathing hard, his hands slip under the soft material of my suit and he's so hot his skin is so hot and I think I've already said that but I

can't remember and I'm so distracted that when he speaks I don't quite understand.

But it's something.

Words, deep and husky in my ear but I catch little more than an unintelligible utterance, consonants and vowels and broken syllables all mixed together. His heartbeats crash through his chest and topple into mine. His fingers are tracing secret messages on my body. His hands glide down the smooth, satiny material of this suit, slipping down the insides of my thighs, around the backs of my knees and up and up and up and I wonder if it's possible to faint and still be conscious at the same time and I'm betting this is what it feels like to hyper, to hyperventilate when he tugs us backward. He slams his back into the wall. Finds a firm grip on my hips. Pulls me hard against his body.

I gasp.

His lips are on my neck. His lashes tickle the skin under my chin and he says something, something that sounds like my name and he kisses up and down my collarbone, kisses along the arc of my shoulder, and his lips, his lips and his hands and his lips are searching the curves and slopes of my body and his chest is heaving when he swears and he stops and he says *God you feel so good*

and my heart has flown to the moon without me.

I love it when he says that to me. I love it when he tells me that he likes the way I feel because it goes against everything I've heard my entire life and I wish I could put his words in my pocket just to touch them once in a while and remind myself that they exist.

"Juliette."

I can hardly breathe.

I can hardly look up and look straight and see anything but the absolute perfection of this moment but none of that even matters because he's smiling. He's smiling like someone's strung the stars across his lips and he's looking at me, looking at me like I'm *everything* and I want to weep.

"Close your eyes," he whispers.

And I trust him.

So I do.

My eyes fall closed and he kisses one, then the other. Then my chin, my nose, my forehead. My cheeks. Both temples.

Every

inch

of my neck

and

he pulls back so quickly he bangs his head against the rough wall. A few choice words slip out before he can stop them. I'm frozen, startled and suddenly scared. "What happened?" I whisper, and I don't know why I'm whispering. "Are you okay?"

Adam fights not to grimace but he's breathing hard and looking around and stammering "S-sorry" as he clutches the back of his head. "That was—I mean I thought—" He looks away. Clears his throat. "I—I think—I thought I heard something. I thought someone was about to come inside."

Of course.

Adam is not allowed to be in here.

The guys and the girls stay in different wings at Omega Point. Castle says it's mostly to make sure the girls feel safe and comfortable in their living quarters—especially because we have communal bathrooms—so for the most part, I don't have a problem with it. It's nice not to have to shower with old men. But it makes it hard for the two of us to find any time together—and during whatever time we do manage to scrounge up, we're always hyperaware of being discovered.

Adam leans back against the wall and winces. I reach up to touch his head.

He flinches.

I freeze.

"Are you okay ...?"

"Yeah." He sighs. "I just—I mean—" He shakes his head. "I don't know." Drops his voice. His eyes. "I don't know what the hell is wrong with me."

"Hey." I brush my fingertips against his stomach. The cotton of his shirt is still warm from his body heat and I have to resist the urge to bury my face in it. "It's okay," I tell him. "You were just being careful."

He smiles a strange, sad sort of smile. "I'm not talking about my head."

I stare at him.

He opens his mouth. Closes it. Pries it open again. "It's—I mean, *this*—" He motions between us.

He won't finish. He won't look at me.

"I don't understand—"

"I'm losing my *mind*," he says, but whispers it like he's not sure he's even saying it out loud.

I look at him. I look and blink and trip on words I can't see and can't find and can't speak.

He's shaking his head.

He grips the back of his skull, hard, and he looks embarrassed and I'm struggling to understand why. Adam doesn't get embarrassed. Adam never gets embarrassed.

His voice is thick when he finally speaks. "I've waited so long to be with you," he says. "I've wanted this—I've wanted *you* for so long and now, after everything—"

"Adam, what are y—"

"I can't *sleep*. I can't sleep and I think about you all—all the time and I can't —" He stops. Presses the heels of his hands to his forehead. Squeezes his eyes shut. Turns toward the wall so I can't see his face. "You should know—you have to know," he says, the words raw, seeming to drain him, "that I have never wanted anything like I've wanted you. Nothing. Because this—this—I mean, God, I *want* you, Juliette, I want—I want—"

His words falter as he turns to me, eyes too bright, emotion flushing up the planes of his face. His gaze lingers along the lines of my body, long enough to strike a match to the lighter fluid flowing in my veins.

I ignite.

I want to say something, something right and steady and reassuring. I want to tell him that I understand, that I want the same thing, that I want him, too, but the moment feels so charged and urgent that I'm half convinced I'm dreaming. It's like I'm down to my last letters and all I have are Qs and Zs and I've only just remembered that someone invented a dictionary when he finally rips his eyes away from me.

He swallows, hard, his eyes down. Looks away again. One of his hands is caught in his hair, the other is curled into a fist against the wall. "You have no idea," he says, his voice ragged, "what you do to me. What you make me feel. When you *touch* me—" He runs a shaky hand across his face. He almost laughs, but his breathing is heavy and uneven; he won't meet my eyes. He steps back, swears under his breath. Pumps his fist against his forehead. "Jesus. What the hell am I saying. Shit. *Shit*. I'm sorry—forget that—forget I said anything—I should go—"

I try to stop him, try to find my voice, try to say, It's all right, it's okay, but I'm nervous now, so nervous, so confused, because none of this makes any sense. I don't understand what's happening or why he seems so uncertain about me and us and him and me and he and I and all of those pronouns put together. I'm not rejecting him. I've never rejected him. My feelings for him have always

been so clear—he has no reason to feel unsure about me or around me and I don't know why he's looking at me like something is *wrong*—

"I'm so sorry," he says. "I'm—I shouldn't have said anything. I'm just—I'm—*shit*. I shouldn't have come. I should go—I have to go—"

"What? Adam, what happened? What are you talking about?"

"This was a bad idea," he says. "I'm so stupid—I shouldn't have even been here—"

"You are *not* stupid—it's okay—everything is okay—"

He laughs, loud, hollow. The echo of an uncomfortable smile lingers on his face as he stops, stares at a point directly behind my head. He says nothing for a long time, until finally he does. "Well," he says. He tries to sound upbeat. "That's not what Castle thinks."

"What?" I breathe, caught off guard. I know we're not talking about our relationship anymore.

"Yeah." His hands are in his pockets.

"No."

Adam nods. Shrugs. Looks at me and looks away. "I don't know. I think so."

"But the testing—it's—I mean"—I can't stop shaking my head—"has he found something?"

Adam won't look at me.

"Oh my God," I say, and I whisper it like if I whisper, it'll somehow make this easier. "So it's true? Castle's right?" My voice is inching higher and my muscles are beginning to tighten and I don't know why this feels like fear, this feeling slithering up my back. I shouldn't be afraid if Adam has a gift like I do; I should've known it couldn't have been that easy, that it couldn't have been so simple. This was Castle's theory all along—that Adam can touch me because he too has some kind of Energy that allows it. Castle never thought Adam's immunity from my ability was a happy coincidence. He thought it had to be bigger than that, more scientific than that, more specific than that. ~~I always wanted to believe I just got lucky.~~

And Adam wanted to know. He was excited about finding out, actually.

But once he started testing with Castle, Adam stopped wanting to talk about it. He's never given me more than the barest status updates. The excitement of the experience faded far too fast for him.

Something is wrong.

Something is *wrong*.

~~Of course it is.~~

“We don’t know anything conclusive,” Adam tells me, but I can see he’s holding back. “I have to do a couple more sessions—Castle says there are a few more things he needs to ... examine.”

I don’t miss the mechanical way Adam is delivering this information. Something isn’t right and I can’t believe I didn’t notice the signs until just now. I haven’t wanted to, I realize. I haven’t wanted to admit to myself that Adam looks more exhausted, more strained, more tightly wound than I’ve ever seen him. Anxiety has built a home on his shoulders.

“Adam—”

“Don’t worry about me.” His words aren’t harsh, but there’s an undercurrent of urgency in his tone I can’t ignore, and he pulls me into his arms before I find a chance to speak. His fingers work to zip up my suit. “I’m fine,” he says. “Really. I just want to know you’re okay. If you’re all right here, then I am too. Everything is fine.” His breath catches. “Okay? Everything is going to be fine.” The shaky smile on his face is making my pulse forget it has a job to do.

“Okay.” It takes me a moment to find my voice. “Okay sure but—”

The door opens and Sonya and Sara are halfway into the room before they freeze, eyes fixed on our bodies wound together.

“Oh!” Sara says.

“Um.” Sonya looks down.

Adam swears under his breath.

“We can come back later—,” the twins say together.

They’re headed out the door when I stop them. I won’t kick them out of their own room.

I ask them not to leave.

They ask me if I’m sure.

I take one look at Adam’s face and know I’m going to regret forfeiting even a minute of our time together, but I also know I can’t take advantage of my roommates. This is their personal space, and it’s almost time for lights-out. They can’t be wandering the corridors.

Adam isn’t looking at me anymore, but he’s not letting go, either. I lean forward and leave a light kiss on his heart. He finally meets my eyes. Offers me a small, pained smile.

“I love you,” I tell him, quietly, so only he can hear me.

He exhales a short, uneven breath. Whispers, “You have no idea,” and pulls himself away. Pivots on one heel. Heads out the door.

My heart is beating in my throat.

The girls are staring at me. Concerned.
Sonya is about to speak, but then

a switch
a click
a flicker

and the lights are out.

FOUR

The dreams are back.

They'd left me for a while, shortly after I'd been freshly imprisoned on base with Warner. I thought I'd lost the bird, the white bird, the bird with streaks of gold like a crown atop its head. It used to meet me in my dreams, flying strong and smooth, sailing over the world like it knew better, like it had secrets we'd never suspect, like it was leading me somewhere safe. It was my one piece of hope in the bitter darkness of the asylum, just until I met its twin tattooed on Adam's chest.

It was like it flew right out of my dreams only to rest atop his heart. I thought it was a signal, a message telling me I was finally safe. That I'd flown away and finally found peace, sanctuary.

I didn't expect to see the bird again.

But now it's back and looks exactly the same. It's the same white bird in the same blue sky with the same yellow crown. Only this time, it's frozen. Flapping its wings in place like it's been caught in an invisible cage, like it's destined to repeat the same motion forever. The bird *seems* to be flying: it's in the air; its wings work. It looks as if it's free to soar through the skies. But it's stuck.

Unable to fly upward.

Unable to fall.

I've had the same dream every night for the past week, and all 7 mornings I've woken up shaking, shuddering into the earthy, icy air, struggling to steady the bleating in my chest.

Struggling to understand what this means.

I crawl out of bed and slip into the same suit I wear every day; the only article of clothing I own anymore. It's the richest shade of purple, so plum it's almost black. It has a slight sheen, a bit of a shimmer in the light. It's one piece from neck to wrists to ankles and it's skintight without being tight at all.

I move like a gymnast in this outfit.

I have springy leather ankle boots that mold to the shape of my feet and render me soundless as I pad across the floor. I have black leather gloves that

prevent me from touching something I'm not supposed to. Sonya and Sara lent me one of their hair ties and for the first time in years I've been able to pull my hair out of my face. I wear it in a high ponytail and I've learned to zip myself up without help from anyone. This suit makes me feel extraordinary. It makes me feel invincible.

It was a gift from Castle.

He had it custom-made for me before I arrived at Omega Point. He thought I might like to finally have an outfit that would protect me from myself and others while simultaneously offering me the option of *hurting* others. If I wanted to. Or needed to. The suit is made of some kind of special material that's supposed to keep me cool in the heat and keep me warm in the cold. So far it's been perfect.

~~So far so far so far~~

I head to breakfast by myself.

Sonya and Sara are always gone by the time I'm awake. Their work in the medical wing is never-ending—not only are they able to heal the wounded but they also spend their days trying to create antidotes and ointments. The one time we ever had a conversation, Sonya explained to me how some Energies can be depleted if we exert ourselves too much—how we can exhaust our bodies enough that they'll just break down. The girls say that they want to be able to create medicines to use in the case of multiple injuries they can't heal all at once. They are, after all, only 2 people. And war seems imminent.

Heads still spin in my direction when I walk into the dining hall.

I am a spectacle, an anomaly even among the anomalies. I should be used to it by now, after all these years. I should be tougher, jaded, indifferent to the opinions of others.

~~I should be a lot of things.~~

I clear my eyes and keep my hands to my sides and pretend I'm unable to make eye contact with anything but that spot, that little mark on the wall 50 feet from where I'm standing.

I pretend I'm just a number.

No emotions on my face. Lips perfectly still. Back straight, hands unclenched. I am a robot, a ghost slipping through the crowds.

6 steps forward. 15 tables to pass. 42 43 44 seconds and counting.

~~I am scared~~

~~I am scared~~

~~I am scared~~

I am strong.

Food is served at only 3 times throughout the day: breakfast from 7:00 to 8:00 a.m., lunch from 12:00 to 1:00 p.m., and dinner from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. Dinner is an hour longer because it's at the end of the day; it's like our reward for working hard. But mealtimes aren't a fancy, luxurious event—the experience is very different from dining with Warner. Here we just stand in a long line, pick up our prefilled bowls, and head toward the eating area—which is nothing more than a series of rectangular tables arranged in parallel lines across the room. Nothing superfluous so nothing is wasted.

I spot Adam standing in line and head in his direction.

68 69 70 seconds and counting.

“Hey, gorgeous.” Something lumpy hits me in the back. Falls to the floor. I turn around, my face flexing the 43 muscles required to frown before I see him.

Kenji.

Big, easy smile. Eyes the color of onyx. Hair even darker, sharper, stick-straight and slipping into his eyes. His jaw is twitching and his lips are twitching and the impressive lines of his cheekbones are applied up into a smile struggling to stay suppressed. He's looking at me like I've been walking around with toilet paper in my hair and I can't help but wonder why I haven't spent time with him since we got here. He did, on a purely technical level, save my life. And Adam's life. James', too.

Kenji bends down to pick up what looks like a wadded ball of socks. He weighs them in his hand like he's considering throwing them at me again. “Where are you going?” he says. “I thought you were supposed to meet me here? Castle said—”

“Why did you bring a pair of socks in here?” I cut him off. “People are trying to eat.”

He freezes for only a split second before he rolls his eyes. Pulls up beside me. Tugs on my ponytail. “I was running late to meet *you*, your highness. I didn't have time to put my socks on.” He gestures to the socks in his hand and the boots on his feet.

“That's so gross.”

“You know, you have a really strange way of telling me you're attracted to me.”

I shake my head, try to bite back my amusement. Kenji is a walking paradox of Unflinchingly Serious Person and 12-Year-Old Boy Going Through Puberty all rolled into one. But I'd forgotten how much easier it is to breathe around him; it seems natural to laugh when he's near. So I keep walking and I'm careful not

to say a word, but a smile is still tugging at my lips as I grab a tray and head into the heart of the kitchen.

Kenji is half a step behind me. "So. We're working together today."

"Yup."

"So, what—you just walk right past me? Don't even say hello?" He clutches the socks to his chest. "I'm crushed. I saved us a table and everything."

I glance at him. Keep walking.

He catches up. "I'm serious. Do you have any idea how awkward it is to wave at someone and have them ignore you? And then you're just looking around like a jackass, trying to be all, 'No, really, I swear, I know that girl' and no one believes y—"

"Are you kidding?" I stop in the middle of the kitchen. Spin around. My face is pulled together in disbelief. "You've spoken to me maybe *once* in the two weeks I've been here. I hardly even notice you anymore."

"Okay, hold up," he says, turning to block my path. "We *both* know there's no way you haven't noticed all of *this*"—he gestures to himself—"so if you're trying to play games with me, I should let you know up front that it's not going to work."

"What?" I frown. "What are you talking about—"

"You can't play hard to get, kid." He raises an eyebrow. "I can't even *touch* you. Takes 'hard to get' to a whole new level, if you know what I mean."

"Oh my God," I mouth, eyes closed, shaking my head. "You are *insane*."

He falls to his knees. "Insane for your sweet, sweet love!"

"*Kenji!*" I can't lift my eyes because I'm afraid to look around, but I'm desperate for him to stop talking. To put an entire room between us at all times. I know he's joking, but I might be the only one.

"What?" he says, his voice booming around the room. "Does my love embarrass you?"

"Please—*please* get up—and lower your voice—"

"Hell no."

"Why not?" I'm pleading now.

"Because if I lower my voice, I won't be able to hear myself speak. And that," he says, "is my favorite part."

I can't even look at him.

"Don't deny me, Juliette. I'm a lonely man."

"What is *wrong* with you?"

"You're breaking my heart." His voice is even louder now, his arms making

sad, sweeping gestures that almost hit me as I back away, panicked. But then I realize everyone is watching him.

Entertained.

I manage an awkward smile as I glance around the room and I'm surprised to find that no one is looking at me now. They're all grinning, clearly accustomed to Kenji's antics, staring at him with a mixture of adoration and something else.

Adam is staring, too. He's standing with his tray in his hands, his head cocked and his eyes confused. He smiles a tentative sort of smile when our gazes meet.

I head toward him.

"Hey—wait up, kid." Kenji jumps up to grab my arm. "You know I was just messing with—" He follows my eyes to where Adam is standing. Slaps a palm to his forehead. "Of *course*! How could I forget? You're in love with my roommate."

I turn to face him. "Listen, I'm grateful you're going to help me train now—really, I am. Thank you for that. But you can't go around proclaiming your fake love to me—especially not in front of Adam—and you have to let me cross this room before the breakfast hour is over, okay? I hardly ever get to see him."

Kenji nods very slowly, looks a little solemn. "You're right. I'm sorry. I get it."

"Thank you."

"Adam is jealous of our love."

"Just go get your food!" I push him, hard, fighting back an exasperated laugh.

Kenji is one of the only people here—with the exception of Adam, of course—who isn't afraid to touch me. In truth, no one really has anything to fear when I'm wearing this suit, but I usually take my gloves off when I eat and my reputation is always walking 5 feet ahead of me. People keep their distance. And even though I accidentally attacked Kenji once, he's not afraid. I think it would take an astronomical amount of something horrible to get him down.

I admire that about him.

Adam doesn't say much when we meet. He doesn't have to say more than "Hey," because his lips quirk up on one side and I can already see him standing a little taller, a little tighter, a little tenser. And I don't know much about anything in this world but I do know how to read the book written in his eyes.

The way he looks at me.

His eyes are heavy now in a way that worries me, but his gaze is still so

tender, so focused and full of feeling that I can hardly keep myself out of his arms when I'm around him. I find myself watching him do the simplest things—shifting his weight, grabbing a tray, nodding good morning to someone—just to track the movement of his body. My moments with him are so few that my chest is always too tight, my heart too spastic. He makes me want to be impractical all the time.

He never lets go of my hand.

“You okay?” I ask him, still feeling a little apprehensive about the night before.

He nods. Tries to smile. “Yeah. I, uh ...” Clears his throat. Takes a deep breath. Looks away. “Yeah, I’m sorry about last night. I kind of ... I freaked out a little.”

“About what, though?”

He’s looking over my shoulder. Frowning.

“Adam ...?”

“Yeah?”

“Why were you freaked out?”

His eyes meet mine again. Wide. Round. “What? Nothing.”

“I don’t understa—”

“Why the hell are you guys taking so long?”

I spin around. Kenji is standing just behind me, so much food piled on his tray I’m surprised no one said anything. He must’ve convinced the cooks to give him extra.

“Well?” Kenji is staring, unblinking, waiting for us to respond. He finally cocks his head backward, in a motion that says *follow me*, before walking away.

Adam blows out his breath and looks so distracted that I decide to drop the subject of last night. Soon. We’ll talk soon. I’m sure it’s nothing. I’m sure it’s nothing at all.

We’ll talk soon and everything is going to be fine.

FIVE

Kenji is waiting for us at an empty table.

James used to join us at mealtimes, but now he's friends with the handful of younger kids at Omega Point, and prefers sitting with them. He seems the happiest of all of us to be here—and I'm happy he's happy—but I have to admit I miss his company. I'm afraid to mention it though; sometimes I'm not sure if I want to know why he doesn't spend time with Adam when I'm around. ~~I don't think I want to know if the other kids managed to convince him that I'm dangerous. I mean, I *am* dangerous, but I just~~

Adam sits down on the bench seat and I slide in next to him. Kenji sits across from us. Adam and I hide our linked hands under the table and I allow myself to enjoy the simple luxury of his proximity. I'm still wearing my gloves but just being this close to him is enough; flowers are blooming in my stomach, the soft petals tickling every inch of my nervous system. It's like I've been granted 3 wishes: to touch, to taste, to feel. It's the strangest phenomenon. A crazy happy impossibility wrapped in tissue paper, tied with a bow, tucked away in my heart.

~~It often feels like a privilege I don't deserve.~~

Adam shifts so the length of his leg is pressed against mine.

I look up to find him smiling at me, a secret, tiny sort of smile that says so many things, the kinds of things no one should be saying at a breakfast table. I force myself to breathe as I suppress a grin. I turn to focus on my food. Hope I'm not blushing.

Adam leans into my ear. I feel the soft whispers of his breath just before he begins to speak.

"You guys are disgusting, you know that, right?"

I look up, startled, and find Kenji frozen midmovement, his spoon halfway to his mouth, his head cocked in our direction. He gestures with his spoon at our faces. "What the hell is this? You guys playing footsie under the table or someshit?"

Adam moves away from me, just an inch or 2, and exhales a deep, irritated sigh. "You know, if you don't like it, you can leave." He nods at the tables around us. "No one asked you to sit here."

This is Adam making a concerted effort to be nice to Kenji. The 2 of them were friends back on base, but somehow Kenji knows exactly how to provoke Adam. I almost forget for a moment that they're roommates.

I wonder what it must be like for them to live together.

"That's bullshit and you know it," Kenji says. "I told you this morning that I had to sit with you guys. Castle wants me to help the two of you *adjust*." He snorts. Nods in my direction. "Listen, I don't have a clue what you see in this guy," he says, "but you should try living with him. The man is moody as hell."

"I am not *moody*—"

"Yeah, bro." Kenji puts his utensils down. "You are *moody*. It's always 'Shut up, Kenji.' 'Go to sleep, Kenji.' 'No one wants to see you naked, Kenji.' When I know for a *fact* that there are thousands of people who would love to see me naked—"

"How long do you have to sit here?" Adam looks away, rubs his eyes with his free hand.

Kenji sits up straighter. Picks up his spoon only to stab it through the air again. "*You* should consider yourself lucky that I'm sitting at your table. I'm making you cool by association."

I feel Adam tense beside me and decide to intervene. "Hey, can we talk about something else?"

Kenji grunts. Rolls his eyes. Shovels another spoonful of breakfast into his mouth.

I'm worried.

Now that I'm paying closer attention, I can see the weariness in Adam's eyes, the heaviness in his brow, the stiff set of his shoulders. I can't help but wonder what he's going through. What he's not telling me. I tug on Adam's hand a little and he turns to me.

"You sure you're okay?" I whisper. I feel like I keep asking him the same question over and over and over

His eyes immediately soften, looking tired but slightly amused. His hand releases mine under the table just to rest on my lap, just to slip down my thigh, and I almost lose control of my vocabulary before he leaves a light kiss in my hair. I swallow too hard, almost drop my fork on the floor. It takes me a moment to remember that he hasn't actually answered my question. It's not until he's looked away, staring at his food, when he finally nods, says, "I'm okay." But I'm not breathing and his hand is still tracing patterns on my leg.

"Ms. Ferrars? Mr. Kent?"

I sit up so fast I slam my knuckles under the table at the sound of Castle's voice. There's something about his presence that makes me feel like he's my teacher, like I've been caught misbehaving in class. Adam, on the other hand, doesn't seem remotely startled.

I cling to Adam's fingers as I lift my head.

Castle is standing over our table and Kenji is leaving to deposit his bowl in the kitchen. He claps Castle on the back like they're old friends and Castle flashes Kenji a warm smile as he passes.

"I'll be right back," Kenji shouts over his shoulder, twisting to flash us an overly enthusiastic thumbs-up. "Try not to get naked in front of everyone, okay? There are kids in here."

I cringe and glance at Adam but he seems oddly focused on his food. He hasn't said a word since Castle arrived.

I decide to answer for the both of us. Paste on a bright smile. "Good morning."

Castle nods, touches the lapel of his blazer; his stature is strong and poised. He beams at me. "I just came to say hello and to check in. I'm so happy to see that you're expanding your circle of friends, Ms. Ferrars."

"Oh. Thank you. But I can't take credit for the idea," I point out. "You're the one who told me to sit with Kenji."

Castle's smile is a little too tight. "Yes. Well," he says, "I'm happy to see that you took my advice."

I nod at my food. Rub absently at my forehead. Adam looks like he's not even breathing. I'm about to say something when Castle cuts me off. "So, Mr. Kent," he says. "Did Ms. Ferrars tell you she'll be training with Kenji now? I'm hoping it will help her progress."

Adam doesn't answer.

Castle soldiers on. "I actually thought it might be interesting for her to work with you, too. As long as I'm there to supervise."

Adam's eyes snap up to attention. Alarmed. "What are you talking about?"

"Well—" Castle pauses. I watch his gaze shift between the two of us. "I thought it would be interesting to run some tests on you and her. Together."

Adam stands up so quickly he almost bangs his knee into the table. "Absolutely not."

"Mr. Kent—," Castle starts.

"There's no chance in *hell*—"

"It's her choice to make—"

“I don’t want to discuss this here—”

I jump to my feet. Adam looks ready to set something on fire. His fists are clenched at his sides, his eyes narrowed into a tight glare; his forehead is taut, his entire frame shaking with energy and anxiety.

“What is going on?” I demand.

Castle shakes his head. He’s not addressing me when he speaks. “I only want to see what happens when she touches you. That’s it.”

“Are you *insane*—”

“This is for *her*,” Castle continues, his voice careful, extra calm. “It has nothing to do with your progress—”

“What progress?” I cut in.

“We’re just trying to help her figure out how to affect nonliving organisms,” Castle is saying. “Animals and humans we’ve figured out—we know one touch is sufficient. Plants don’t seem to factor into her abilities at all. But everything else? It’s ... different. She doesn’t know how to handle that part yet, and I want to help her. That’s all we’re doing,” he says. “Helping Ms. Ferrars.”

Adam takes a step closer to me. “If you’re helping her figure out how to destroy nonliving things, why do you need me?”

For a second Castle actually looks defeated. “I don’t really know,” he says. “The unique nature of your relationship—it’s quite fascinating. Especially with everything we’ve learned so far, it’s—”

“What have you learned?” I jump in again.

“—entirely possible,” Castle is still saying, “that everything is connected in a way we don’t yet understand.”

Adam looks unconvinced. His lips are pressed into a thin line. He doesn’t look like he wants to answer.

Castle turns to me. Tries to sound excited. “What do you think? Are you interested?”

“Interested?” I look at Castle. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about. And I want to know why no one is answering my questions. What have you discovered about Adam?” I ask. “What’s wrong? Is something wrong?” Adam is breathing extra hard and trying not to show it; his hands keep clenching and unclenching. “Someone, please, tell me what’s going on.”

Castle frowns.

He’s studying me, confused, his eyebrows pulled together. “Mr. Kent,” he says, still looking at me. “Am I to understand that you have not yet shared our discoveries with Ms. Ferrars?”

“What discoveries?” My heart is racing hard now, so hard it’s beginning to hurt.

“Mr. Kent—”

“That’s none of your business,” Adam snaps.

“She should *know*—”

“We don’t know anything yet!”

“We know enough.”

“Bullshit. We’re not done yet—”

“The only thing left is to test the two of you together—”

Adam steps directly in front of Castle, grabbing his breakfast tray with a little too much strength. “Maybe,” he says very, very carefully, “some other time.”

He turns to leave.

I touch his arm.

He stops. Drops his tray, pivots in my direction. There’s less than half an inch between us and I almost forget we’re standing in a crowded room. His breath is hot and his breathing shallow and the heat from his body is melting my blood only to splash it across my cheeks.

Panic is doing backflips in my bones.

“Everything is fine,” he says. “Everything is going to be fine. I promise.”

“But—”

“I promise,” he says again, grabbing my hand. “I swear. I’m going to fix this —”

“Fix this?” I think I’m dreaming. I think I’m dying. “Fix what?” Something is breaking in my brain and something is happening without my permission and I’m lost, I’m so lost, I’m so much everything confused and I’m drowning in confusion. “Adam, I don’t underst—”

“I mean, really though?” Kenji is making his way back to our group. “You’re going to do that here? In front of everyone? Because these tables aren’t as comfortable as they look—”

Adam pulls back and slams into Kenji’s shoulder on his way out.

“*Don’t.*”

Is all I hear him say before he disappears.

SIX

Kenji lets out a low whistle.

Castle is calling Adam's name, asking him to slow down, to speak to him, to discuss things in a rational manner. Adam never looks back.

"I told you he was moody," Kenji mutters.

"He's not moody," I hear myself say, but the words feel distant, disconnected from my lips. I feel numb, like my arms have been hollowed out.

Where did I leave my voice I can't find my voice I can't find my

"So! You and me, huh?" Kenji claps his hands together. "Ready to get your ass kicked?"

"Kenji."

"Yeah?"

"I want you to take me to wherever they went."

Kenji is looking at me like I've just asked him to kick himself in the face. "Uh, yeah—how about a warm *hell no* to that request? Does that work for you? Because it works for me."

"I need to know what's going on." I turn to him, desperate, feeling stupid. "You know, don't you? You know what's wrong—"

"Of course I know." He crosses his arms. Levels a look at me. "I *live* with that poor bastard and I practically run this place. I know everything."

"So why won't you tell me? Kenji, *please*—"

"Yeah, um, I'm going to pass on that, but you know what I will do? I *will* help you to remove yourself the hell out of this dining hall where everyone is listening to *everything we say*." This last bit he says extra loudly, looking around at the room, shaking his head. "Get back to your breakfasts, people. Nothing to see here."

It's only then that I realize what a spectacle we've made. Every eye in the room is blinking at me. I attempt a weak smile and a twitchy wave before allowing Kenji to shuffle me out of the room.

"No need to wave at the people, princess. It's not a coronation ceremony." He pulls me into one of the many long, dimly lit corridors.

"Tell me what's happening." I have to blink several times before my eyes

adjust to the lighting. “This isn’t fair—everyone knows what’s going on except for me.”

He shrugs, leans one shoulder against the wall. “It’s not my place to tell. I mean, I like to mess with the guy, but I’m not an asshole. He asked me not to say anything. So I’m not going to say anything.”

“But—I mean—is he okay? Can you at least tell me if he’s okay?”

Kenji runs a hand over his eyes; exhales, annoyed. Shoots me a look. Says, “All right, like, have you ever seen a train wreck?” He doesn’t wait for me to answer. “I saw one when I was a kid. It was one of those big, crazy trains with a billion cars all hitched up together, totally derailed, half exploded. Shit was on fire and everyone was screaming and you just *know* people are either dead or they’re about to die and you really don’t want to watch but you just can’t look away, you know?” He nods. Bites the inside of his cheek. “This is kind of like that. Your boy is a freaking train wreck.”

I can’t feel my legs.

“I mean, I don’t know,” Kenji goes on. “Personally? I think he’s overreacting. Worse things have happened, right? Hell, aren’t we up to our earlobes in crazier shit? But no, Mr. Adam Kent doesn’t seem to know that. I don’t even think he sleeps anymore. And you know what,” he adds, leaning in, “I think he’s starting to freak James out a little, and to be honest it’s starting to piss me off because that kid is way too nice and way too cool to have to deal with Adam’s drama—”

But I’m not listening anymore.

I’m envisioning the worst possible scenarios, the worst possible outcomes. Horrible, terrifying things that all end with Adam dying in some miserable way. He must be sick, or he must have some kind of terrible affliction, or something that causes him to do things he can’t control or oh, God, *no*

“You have to tell me.”

I don’t recognize my own voice. Kenji is looking at me, shocked, wide-eyed, genuine fear written across his features and it’s only then that I realize I’ve pinned him against the wall. My 10 fingers are curled into his shirt, fistfuls of fabric clenched in each hand, and I can only imagine what I must look like to him right now.

The scariest part is that I don’t even care.

“You’re going to tell me *something*, Kenji. You have to. I need to know.”

“You, uh”—he licks his lips, looks around, laughs a nervous laugh—“you want to let go of me, maybe?”

“Will you help me?”

He scratches behind his hear. Cringes a little. “No?”

I slam him harder into the wall, recognize a rush of some wild kind of adrenaline burning in my veins. It’s strange, but I feel as though I could rip through the ground with my bare hands.

It seems like it would be easy. So easy.

“Okay—all right—*goddamn*.” Kenji is holding his arms up, breathing a little fast. “Just—how about you let me go, and I’ll, uh, I’ll take you to the research labs.”

“The research labs.”

“Yeah, that’s where they do the testing. It’s where we do all of our testing.”

“You promise you’ll take me if I let go?”

“Are you going to bash my brain into the wall if I don’t?”

“Probably,” I lie.

“Then yeah. I’ll take you. *Damn*.”

I drop him and stumble backward; make an effort to pull myself together. I feel a little embarrassed now that I’ve let go of him. Some part of me feels like I must’ve overreacted.

“I’m sorry about that,” I tell him. “But thank you. I appreciate your help.” I try to lift my chin with some dignity.

Kenji snorts. He’s looking at me like he has no idea who I am, like he’s not sure if he should laugh or applaud or run like hell in the opposite direction. He rubs the back of his neck, eyes intent on my face. He won’t stop staring.

“What?” I ask.

“How much do you weigh?”

“Wow. Is that how you talk to every girl you meet? That explains so much.”

“I’m about one hundred seventy-five pounds,” he says. “Of muscle.”

I stare at him. “Would you like an award?”

“Well, well, well,” he says, cocking his head, the barest hint of a smile flickering across his face. “Look who’s the smart-ass now.”

“I think you’re rubbing off on me,” I say.

But he’s not smiling anymore.

“Listen,” he says. “I’m not trying to flatter myself by pointing this out, but I could toss you across the room with my pinkie finger. You weigh, like, less than nothing. I’m almost twice your body mass.” He pauses. “So how the hell did you pin me against the wall?”

“What?” I frown. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about *you*”—he points at me—“pinning *me*”—he points at himself—“against the wall.” He points at the wall.

“You mean you *actually* couldn’t move?” I blink. “I thought you were just afraid of touching me.”

“No,” he says. “I legit could not move. I could hardly breathe.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Have you ever done that before?”

“No.” I’m shaking my head. “I mean I don’t think I ...” I gasp, as the memory of Warner and his torture chamber rushes to the forefront of my mind; I have to close my eyes against the influx of images. The barest recollection of that event is enough to make me feel unbearably nauseous; I can already feel my skin break into a cold sweat. Warner was testing me, trying to put me in a position where I’d be forced to use my power on a toddler. I was so horrified, so enraged that I crashed through the concrete barrier to get to Warner, who was waiting on the other side. I’d pinned *him* against the wall, too. Only I didn’t realize he was cowed by my strength. I thought he was afraid to move because I’d gotten too close to touching him.

I guess I was wrong.

“Yeah,” Kenji says, nodding at something he must see on my face. “Well. That’s what I thought. We’ll have to remember this juicy tidbit when we get around to our real training sessions.” He throws me a loaded look. “Whenever that actually happens.”

I’m nodding, not really paying attention. “Sure. Fine. But first, take me to the research rooms.”

Kenji sighs. Waves his hand with a bow and a flourish. “After you, princess.”

SEVEN

We're trailing down a series of corridors I've never seen before.

We're passing all of the regular halls and wings, past the training room I normally occupy, and for the first time since I've been here, I'm really paying attention to my surroundings. All of a sudden my senses feel sharper, clearer; my entire being feels like it's humming with a renewed kind of energy.

I am electric.

This entire hideout has been dug out of the ground—it's nothing but cavernous tunnels and interconnected passageways, all powered by supplies and electricity stolen from secret storage units belonging to The Reestablishment. This space is invaluable. Castle told us once that it took him at least a decade to design it, and a decade more to get the work done. By then he'd also managed to recruit all of the other members of this underground world. I can understand why he's so relentless about security down here, why he's not willing to let anything happen to it. I don't think I would either.

Kenji stops.

We reach what looks like a dead end—what could be the very end of Omega Point.

Kenji pulls out a key card I didn't know he was hiding, and his hand fumbles for a panel buried in the stone. He slides the panel open. Does something I can't see. Swipes the key card. Hits a switch.

The entire wall rumbles to life.

The pieces are coming apart, shifting out of place until they reveal a hole big enough for our bodies to clamber through. Kenji motions for me to follow his lead and I scramble through the entryway, glancing back to watch the wall close up behind me.

My feet hit the ground on the other side.

It's like a cave. Massive, wide, separated into 3 longitudinal sections. The middle section is the most narrow and serves as a walkway; square glass rooms fit with slim glass doors make up the left and right sections. Each clear wall acts as a partition to rooms on either side—everything is see-through. There's an electric aura engulfing the entire space; each cube is bright with white light and

blinking machinery; sharp and dull hums of energy pulse through the vast dimensions.

There are at least 20 rooms down here.

10 on either side, all of them unobstructed from view. I recognize a number of faces from the dining hall down here, some of them strapped to machines, needles stuck in their bodies, monitors beeping about some kind of information I can't understand. Doors slide open and closed open and closed open and closed; words and whispers and footsteps, hand gestures and half-formed thoughts collect in the air.

This.

This is where everything happens.

Castle told me 2 weeks ago—the day after I arrived—that he had a pretty good idea why we are the way we are. He said that they'd been doing research for years.

Research.

I see figures running, gasping on what resemble inordinately fast treadmills. I see a woman reloading a gun in a room bursting with weapons and I see a man holding something that emits a bright blue flame. I see a person standing in a chamber full of nothing but water and there are ropes stacked high and strung across the ceiling and all kinds of liquids, chemicals, contraptions I can't name and my brain won't stop screaming and my lungs keep catching fire and it's too much too much too much too much

Too many machines, too many lights, too many people in too many rooms taking notes, talking amongst themselves, glancing at the clocks every few seconds and I'm stumbling forward, looking too closely and not closely enough and then I hear it. I try so hard not to but it's barely contained behind these thick glass walls and there it is again.

The low, guttural sound of human agony.

It hits me right in the face. Punches me right in the stomach. Realization jumps on my back and explodes in my skin and rakes its fingernails down my neck and I'm choking on impossibility.

Adam.

I see him. He's already here, in one of the glass rooms. Shirtless. Strapped down to a gurney, arms and legs clamped in place, wires from a nearby machine taped to his temples, his forehead, just below his collarbone. His eyes are pressed shut, his fists are clenched, his jaw is tight, his face too taut from the effort not to scream.

I don't understand what they're doing to him.

I don't know what's happening I don't understand *why* it's happening or why he needs a machine or why it keeps blinking or beeping and I can't seem to move or breathe and I'm trying to remember my voice, my hands, my head, and my feet and then he jerks.

He convulses against the stays, strains against the pain until his fists are pounding the padding of the gurney and I hear him cry out in anguish and for a moment the world stops, everything slows down, sounds are strangled, colors look smeared and the floor seems set on its side and I think wow, I think I'm actually going to die. I'm going to drop dead or

I'm going to kill the person responsible for this.

It's one or the other.

That's when I see Castle. Castle, standing in the corner of Adam's room, watching in silence as this 18-year-old boy rages in agony while he does nothing. Nothing except watch, except to take notes in his little book, to purse his lips as he tilts his head to the side. To glance at the monitor on the beeping machine.

And the thought is so simple when it slips into my head. So calm. So easy.

So, so easy.

I'm going to kill him.

"Juliette—*no*—"

Kenji grabs me by the waist, arms like bands of iron around me and I think I'm screaming, I think I'm saying things I've never heard myself say before and Kenji is telling me to calm down, he's saying, "This is *exactly* why I didn't want to bring you in here—you don't understand—it's not what it looks like—"

And I decide I should probably kill Kenji, too. Just for being an idiot.

"LET GO OF ME—"

"Stop *kicking* me—"

"I'm going to *murder* him—"

"Yeah, you should really stop saying that out loud, okay? You're not doing yourself any favors—"

"LET GO OF ME, KENJI, I SWEAR TO GOD—"

"Ms. Ferrars!"

Castle is standing at the end of the walkway, a few feet from Adam's glass room. The door is open. Adam isn't jerking anymore, but he doesn't appear to be conscious, either.

White, hot rage.

It's all I know right now. The world looks so black-and-white from here, so easy to demolish and conquer. This is anger like nothing I've known before. It's an anger so raw, so potent it's actually calming, like a feeling that's finally found its place, a feeling that finally sits comfortably as it settles into my bones.

I've become a mold for liquid metal; thick, searing heat distributes itself throughout my body and the excess coats my hands, forging my fists with a strength so breathtaking, an energy so intense I think it might engulf me. I'm light-headed from the rush of it.

I could do anything.

Anything.

Kenji's arms drop away from me. I don't have to look at him to know that he's stumbling back. Afraid. Confused. Probably disturbed.

I don't care.

"So this is where you've been," I say to Castle, and I'm surprised by the cool, fluid tone of my voice. "This is what you've been doing."

Castle steps closer and appears to regret it. He looks startled, surprised by something he sees on my face. He tries to speak and I cut him off.

"What have you done to him?" I demand. "What have you been *doing to him* ___"

"Ms. Ferrars, please—"

"He is not your *experiment!*" I explode, and the composure is gone, the steadiness in my voice is gone and I'm suddenly so unstable again I can hardly keep my hands from shaking. "You think you can just use him for your *research* ___"

"Ms. Ferrars, please, you must calm yourself—"

"Don't tell me to calm down!" I can't imagine what they must have done to him down here, testing him, treating him like some kind of specimen.

They're *torturing* him.

"I would not have expected you to have such an adverse reaction to this room," Castle says. He's trying to be conversational. Reasonable. Charismatic, even. It makes me wonder what I must look like right now. I wonder if he's afraid of me. "I thought you understood the importance of the research we do at Omega Point," he says. "Without it, how could we possibly hope to understand our origins?"

"You're hurting him—you're *killing* him! What have you done—"

"Nothing he hasn't asked to be a part of." Castle's voice is tight and his lips

are tight and I can see his patience is starting to wear thin. “Ms. Ferrars, if you are insinuating that I’ve used him for my own personal experimentation, I would recommend you take a closer look at the situation.” He says the last few syllables with a little too much emphasis, a little too much fire, and I realize I’ve never seen him angry before.

“I know that you’ve been struggling here,” Castle continues. “I know you are unaccustomed to seeing yourself as part of a group, and I’ve made an effort to understand where you might be coming from—I’ve tried to help you adjust. But you must look around!” He gestures toward the glass walls and the people behind them. “We are all the same. We are working on the same team! I have subjected Adam to nothing I have not undergone myself. We are simply running tests to see where his supernatural abilities lie. We cannot know for certain what he is capable of if we do not test him first.” His voice drops an octave or 2. “And we do not have the luxury of waiting several years until he accidentally discovers something that might be useful to our cause right now.”

And it’s strange.

Because it’s like a real thing, this anger.

I feel it wrapping itself around my fingers like I could fling it at his face. I feel it coiling itself around my spine, planting itself in my stomach and shooting branches down my legs, up my arms, through my neck. It’s choking me. Choking me because it needs release, needs relief. Needs it now.

“You,” I tell him, and I can hardly spit the words out. “You think you’re any better than The Reestablishment if you’re just *using us*—experimenting on us to further your cause—”

“MS. FERRARS!” Castle bellows. His eyes are flashing bright, too bright, and I realize everyone in this underground tunnel is now staring at us. His fingers are in fists at his sides and his jaw is unmistakably set and I feel Kenji’s hand on my back before I realize the earth is vibrating under my feet. The glass walls are beginning to tremble and Castle is planted right in the middle of everything, rigid, raw with anger and indignation and I remember that he has an impossibly advanced level of psychokinesis.

I remember that he can move things with his mind.

He lifts his right hand, palm splayed outward, and the glass panel not a few feet away begins to shake, shudder, and I realize I’m not even breathing.

“You do not want to upset me.” Castle’s voice is far too calm for his eyes. “If you have a problem with my methods, I would gladly invite you to state your claims in a rational manner. I will not tolerate you speaking to me in such a

fashion. My concerns for the future of our world may be more than you can fathom, but you should not fault me for your own ignorance!" He drops his right hand and the glass buckles back just in time.

"My *ignorance*?" I'm breathing hard again. "You think because I don't understand why you would subject anyone to—to *this*—" I wave a hand around the room. "You think that means I'm *ignorant*—?"

"Hey, Juliette, it's okay—," Kenji starts.

"Take her away," Castle says. "Take her back to her training quarters." He shoots an unhappy look at Kenji. "And you and I—we will discuss this later. What were you *thinking*, bringing her here? She's not ready to see this—she can hardly even handle *herself* right now—"

He's right.

I can't handle this. I can't hear anything but the sounds of machines beeping, screeching in my head, can't see anything but Adam's limp form lying on a thin mattress. I can't stop imagining what he must've been going through, what he had to endure just to understand what he might be and I realize it's all my fault.

It's my fault he's here, it's my fault he's in danger, it's my fault Warner wants to kill him and Castle wants to test him and if it weren't for me he'd still be living with James in a home that hasn't been destroyed; he'd be safe and comfortable and free from the chaos I've introduced to his life.

I brought him here. If he'd never touched me none of this would've happened. He'd be healthy and strong and he wouldn't be suffering, wouldn't be hiding, wouldn't be trapped 50 feet underground. He wouldn't be spending his days strapped to a gurney.

~~It's my fault it's my fault it's my fault it's all my fault it's all my fault~~

I snap.

It's like I've been stuffed full of twigs and all I have to do is bend and my entire body will break. All the guilt, the anger, the frustration, the pent-up aggression inside of me has found an outlet and now it can't be controlled. Energy is coursing through me with a vigor I've never felt before and I'm not even thinking but I have to do *something* I have to touch *something* and I'm curling my fingers and bending my knees and pulling back my arm and

punching

my

fist

right

through

the
floor.

The earth fissures under my fingers and the reverberations surge through my being, ricocheting through my bones until my skull is spinning and my heart is a pendulum slamming into my rib cage. My eyesight fades in and out of focus and I have to blink a hundred times to clear it only to see a crack creaking under my feet, a thin line splintering the ground. Everything around me is suddenly off-balance. The stone is groaning under our weight and the glass walls are rattling and the machines are shifting out of place and the water is sloshing against its container and the people—

The people.

The people are frozen in terror and horror and the fear in their expressions rips me apart.

I fall backward, cradling my right fist to my chest and try to remind myself I am not a monster, I do not have to be a monster, I do not want to hurt people I do not want to hurt people *I do not want to hurt people*

and it's not working.

Because it's all a lie.

Because this was me, trying to help.

I look around.

At the ground.

At what I've done.

And I understand, for the first time, that I have the power to destroy everything.

EIGHT

Castle is limp.

His jaw is unhinged. His arms are slack at his sides, his eyes wide with worry and wonder and a sliver of intimidation and though he moves his lips he can't seem to make a sound.

I feel like now might be a good time to jump off a cliff.

Kenji touches my arm and I turn to face him only to realize I'm petrified. I'm always waiting for him and Adam and Castle to realize that being kind to me is a mistake, that it'll end badly, that I'm not worth it, that I'm nothing more than a tool, a weapon, a closet murderer.

But he takes my right fist in his hand so gently. Takes care not to touch my skin as he slips off the now-tattered leather glove and sucks in his breath at the sight of my knuckles. The skin is torn and blood is everywhere and I can't move my fingers.

I realize I am in *agony*.

I blink and stars explode and a new torture rages through my limbs in such a hurry I can no longer speak.

I gasp
and
the
world

d i s a p p e a r s

NINE

My mouth tastes like death.

I manage to pry my eyes open and immediately feel the wrath of hell ripping through my right arm. My hand has been bandaged in so many layers of gauze it's rendered my 5 fingers immobile and I find I'm grateful for it. I'm so exhausted I don't have the energy to cry.

I blink.

Try to look around but my neck is too stiff.

Fingers brush my shoulder and I discover myself wanting to exhale. I blink again. Once more. A girl's face blurs in and out of focus. I turn my head to get a better view and blink blink blink some more.

"How're you feeling?" she whispers.

"I'm okay," I say to the blur, but I think I'm lying. "Who are you?"

"It's me," she says. Even without seeing her clearly I can hear the kindness in her voice. "Sonya."

Of course.

Sara is probably here, too. I must be in the medical wing.

"What happened?" I ask. "How long have I been out?"

She doesn't answer and I wonder if she didn't hear me.

"Sonya?" I try to meet her eyes. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"You've been really sick," she says. "Your body needed time—"

"How long?" My voice drops to a whisper.

"Three days."

I sit straight up and know I'm going to be sick.

Luckily, Sonya's had the foresight to anticipate my needs. A bucket appears just in time for me to empty the meager contents of my stomach into it and then I'm dry-heaving into what is not my suit but some kind of hospital gown and someone is wiping a hot, damp cloth across my face.

Sonya and Sara are hovering over me, the hot cloths in their hands, wiping down my bare limbs, making soothing sounds and telling me I'm going to be

fine, I just need to rest, I'm finally awake long enough to eat something, I shouldn't be worried because there's nothing to worry about and they're going to take care of me.

But then I look more closely.

I notice their hands, so carefully sheathed in latex gloves; I notice the IV stuck in my arm; I notice the urgent but cautious way they approach me and then I realize the problem.

The healers can't touch me.

TEN

They've never had to deal with a problem like me before.

Injuries are always treated by the healers. They can set broken bones and repair bullet wounds and revive collapsed lungs and mend even the worst kinds of cuts—I know this because Adam had to be carried into Omega Point on a stretcher when we arrived. He'd suffered at the hands of Warner and his men after we escaped the military base and I thought his body would be scarred forever. But he's perfect. Brand-new. It took all of 1 day to put him back together; it was like magic.

But there are no magic medicines for me.

No miracles.

Sonya and Sara explain that I must've suffered some kind of immense shock. They say my body overloaded on its own abilities and it's a miracle I even managed to survive. They also think my body has been passed out long enough to have repaired most of the psychological damage, though I'm not so sure that's true. I think it'd take quite a lot to fix that sort of thing. ~~I've been psychologically damaged for a very long time.~~ But at least the physical pain has settled. It's little more than a steady throbbing that I'm able to ignore for short periods of time.

I remember something.

"Before," I tell them. "In Warner's torture rooms, and then with Adam and the steel door—I never—this never happened—I never injured myself—"

"Castle told us about that," Sonya tells me. "But breaking through one door or one wall is very different from trying to split the earth in two." She attempts a smile. "We're pretty sure this can't even compare to what you did before. This was a lot stronger—we all felt it when it happened. We actually thought explosives had gone off. The tunnels," she says. "They almost collapsed in on themselves."

"No." My stomach turns to stone.

"It's okay," Sara tries to reassure me. "You pulled back just in time."

I can't catch my breath.

"You couldn't have known—," Sonya starts.

“I almost killed—I almost killed all of you—”

Sonya shakes her head. “You have an amazing amount of power. It’s not your fault. You didn’t know what you were capable of.”

“I could’ve killed you. I could’ve killed Adam—I could’ve—” My head whips around. “Is he here? Is Adam here?”

The girls stare at me. Stare at each other.

I hear a throat clear and I jerk toward the sound.

Kenji steps out of the corner. He waves a half wave, offers me a crooked smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Sorry,” he says to me, “but we had to keep him out of here.”

“Why?” I ask, but I’m afraid to know the answer.

Kenji pushes his hair out of his eyes. Considers my question. “Well. Where should I begin?” He counts off on his fingers. “After he found out what happened, he tried to *kill* me, he went ballistic on Castle, he refused to leave the medical wing, and then he wou—”

“Please.” I stop him. I squeeze my eyes shut. “Never mind. Don’t. I can’t.”

“You asked.”

“Where is he?” I open my eyes. “Is he okay?”

Kenji rubs the back of his neck. Looks away. “He’ll be all right.”

“Can I see him?”

Kenji sighs. Turns to the girls. Says, “Hey, can we get a second alone?” and the 2 of them are suddenly in a hurry to go.

“Of course,” Sara says.

“No problem,” Sonya says.

“We’ll give you some privacy,” they say at the same time.

And they leave.

Kenji grabs 1 of the chairs pushed up against the wall and carries it over to my bed. Sits down. Props the ankle of 1 foot on the knee of the other and leans back. Links his hands behind his head. Looks at me.

I shift on the mattress so I’m better seated to see him. “What is it?”

“You and Kent need to talk.”

“Oh.” I swallow. “Yes. I know.”

“Do you?”

“Of course.”

“Good.” He nods. Looks away. Taps his foot too fast against the floor.

“What?” I ask after a moment. “What are you not telling me?”

His foot stops tapping but he doesn’t meet my eyes. He covers his mouth

with his left hand. Drops it. “That was some crazy shit you pulled back there.”

All at once I feel humiliated. “I’m sorry, Kenji. I’m so sorry—I didn’t think—I didn’t know—”

He turns to face me and the look in his eyes stops me in place. He’s trying to read me. Trying to figure me out. Trying, I realize, to decide whether or not he can trust me. Whether or not the rumors about the monster in me are true.

“I’ve never done that before,” I hear myself whisper. “I swear—I didn’t mean for that to happen—”

“Are you sure?”

“What?”

“It’s a question, Juliette. It’s a legitimate question.” I’ve never seen him so serious. “I brought you here because Castle wanted you here. Because he thought we could help you—he thought we could provide you with a safe place to live. To get you away from the assholes trying to use you for their own benefit. But you come here and you don’t even seem to want to be a part of anything. You don’t talk to people. You don’t make any progress with your training. You do nothing, basically.”

“I’m sorry, I really—”

“And then I believe Castle when he says he’s worried about you. He tells me you’re not adjusting, that you’re having a hard time fitting in. That people heard negative things about you and they’re not being as welcoming as they should be. And I should kick my own ass for it, but I feel sorry for you. So I tell him I’ll help. I rearrange my entire goddamn schedule just to help you deal with your issues. Because I think you’re a nice girl who’s just a little misunderstood. Because Castle is the most decent guy I’ve ever known and I want to help him out.”

My heart is pounding so hard I’m surprised it’s not bleeding.

“So I’m wondering,” he says to me. He drops the foot he was resting on his knee. Leans forward. Props his elbows on his thighs. “I’m wondering if it’s possible that all of this is just *coincidence*. I mean, was it just some crazy *coincidence* that I ended up working with you? Me? One of the very few people here who have access to that room? Or was it coincidence that you managed to threaten me into taking you down to the research labs? That you then, somehow, accidentally, coincidentally, unknowingly punched a fist into the ground that shook this place so hard we all thought the walls were caving in?” He stares at me, hard. “Was it a coincidence,” he says, “that if you’d held on for just a few more seconds, this entire place would’ve collapsed in on itself?”

My eyes are wide, horrified, caught.

He leans back. Looks down. Presses 2 fingers to his lips.

“Do you actually want to be here?” he asks. “Or are you just trying to bring us down from the inside?”

“What?” I gasp. “No—”

“Because you either know *exactly* what you’re doing—and you’re a hell of a lot sneakier than you pretend to be—or you really have no *clue* what you’re doing and you just have really shitty luck. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Kenji, I swear, I never—I n-never—” I have to bite back the words to blink back the tears. It’s crippling, this feeling, this not knowing how to prove your own innocence. It’s my entire life replayed over and over and over again, trying to convince people that I’m not dangerous, that I never meant to hurt anyone, that I didn’t intend for things to turn out this way. That I’m not a bad person.

~~But it never seems to work out.~~

“I’m so sorry,” I choke, the tears flowing fast now. I’m so disgusted with myself. I tried so hard to be different, to be better, to be *good*, and I just went and ruined everything and lost everything all over again and I don’t even know how to tell him he’s wrong.

~~Because he might be right.~~

I knew I was angry. I knew I wanted to hurt Castle and I didn’t care. In that moment, I meant it. In the anger of that moment, I really, truly meant it. I don’t know what I would’ve done if Kenji hadn’t been there to hold me back. I don’t know. I have no idea. I don’t even understand what I’m capable of.

~~How many times, I hear a voice whisper in my head, how many times will you apologize for who you are?~~

I hear Kenji sigh. Shift in his seat. I don’t dare lift my eyes.

“I had to ask, Juliette.” Kenji sounds uncomfortable. “I’m sorry you’re crying but I’m not sorry I asked. It’s my job to constantly be thinking of our safety—and that means I have to look at every possible angle. No one knows what you can do yet. Not even you. But you keep trying to act like what you’re capable of isn’t a big deal, and it’s not helping anything. You need to stop trying to pretend you’re not dangerous.”

I look up too fast. “But I’m not—I’m n-not trying to hurt anyone—”

“That doesn’t matter,” he says, standing up. “Good intentions are great, but they don’t change the facts. You *are* dangerous. Shit, you’re *scary* dangerous. More dangerous than me and everyone else in here. So don’t ask me to act like that knowledge, in and of itself, isn’t a threat to us. If you’re going to stay here,”

he says to me, “you have to learn how to control what you do—how to contain it. You have to deal with who you are and you have to figure out how to live with it. Just like the rest of us.”

3 knocks at the door.

Kenji is still staring at me. Waiting.

“Okay,” I whisper.

“And you and Kent need to sort out your drama ASAP,” he adds, just as Sonya and Sara walk back into the room. “I don’t have the time, the energy, or the interest to deal with your problems. I like to mess with you from time to time because, well, let’s face it”—he shrugs—“the world is going to hell out there and I suppose if I’m going to be shot dead before I’m twenty-five, I’d at least like to remember what it’s like to laugh before I do. But that does not make me your clown or your babysitter. At the end of the day I do not give two shits about whether or not you and Kent are going steady. We have a million things to take care of down here, and less than none of them involve your love life.” A pause. “Is that clear?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

“So are you in?” he says.

Another nod.

“I want to hear you say it. If you’re in, you’re all in. No more feeling sorry for yourself. No more sitting in the training room all day, crying because you can’t break a metal pipe—”

“How did you kn—”

“Are you *in*?”

“I’m in,” I tell him. “I’m in. I promise.”

He takes a deep breath. Runs a hand through his hair. “Good. Meet me outside of the dining hall tomorrow morning at six a.m.”

“But my hand—”

He waves my words away. “Your hand, nothing. You’ll be fine. You didn’t even break anything. You messed up your knuckles and your brain freaked out a little and basically you just fell asleep for three days. I don’t call that an injury,” he says. “I call that a goddamn vacation.” He stops to consider something. “Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I’ve gone on *vacation*—”

“But aren’t we training?” I interrupt him. “I can’t do anything if my hand is wrapped up, can I?”

“Trust me.” He cocks his head. “You’ll be fine. This ... is going to be a little different.”

I stare at him. Wait.

“You can consider it your official welcome to Omega Point,” he says.

“But—”

“Tomorrow. Six a.m.”

I open my mouth to ask another question but he presses a finger to his lips, offers me a 2-finger salute, and walks backward toward the exit just as Sonya and Sara head over to my bed.

I watch as he nods good-bye to both of them, pivots on 1 foot, and strides out the door.

6:00 a.m.

ELEVEN

I catch a glimpse of the clock on the wall and realize it's only 2:00 in the afternoon.

Which means 6:00 a.m. is 16 hours from now.

Which means I have a lot of hours to fill.

Which means I have to get dressed.

Because I need to get out of here.

And I really need to talk to Adam.

“Juliette?”

I jolt out of my own head and back to the present moment to find Sonya and Sara staring at me. “Can we get you anything?” they ask. “Are you feeling well enough to get out of bed?”

But I look from one set of eyes to another and back again, and instead of answering their questions, I feel a crippling sense of shame dig into my soul and I can't help but revert back to another version of myself. A scared little girl who wants to keep folding herself in half until she can't be found anymore.

I keep saying, “Sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry about everything, for all of this, for all the trouble, for all the damage, really, I'm so, so sorry—”

I hear myself go on and on and on and I can't get myself to stop.

It's like a button in my brain is broken, like I've developed a disease that forces me to apologize for everything, for existing, for wanting more than what I've been given, and I can't stop.

It's what I do.

I'm always apologizing. Forever apologizing. For who I am and what I never meant to be and for this body I was born into, this DNA I never asked for, this person I can't unbecome. 17 years I've spent trying to be different. Every single day. Trying to be someone else for someone else.

And it never seems to matter.

But then I realize they're talking to me.

“There's nothing to apologize for—”

“Please, it’s all right—”

Both of them are trying to speak to me, but Sara is closer.

I dare to meet her eyes and I’m surprised to see how soft they are. Gentle and green and squinty from smiling. She sits down on the right side of my bed. Pats my bare arm with her latex glove, unafraid. Unflinching. Sonya stands just next to her, looking at me like she’s worried, like she’s sad for me, and I don’t have long to dwell on it because I’m distracted. I smell the scent of jasmine filling the room, just as it did the very first time I stepped in here. When we first arrived at Omega Point. When Adam was injured. Dying.

He was dying and they saved his life. These 2 girls in front of me. They saved his life and I’ve been living with them for 2 weeks and I realize, right then, exactly how selfish I’ve been.

So I decide to try a new set of words.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

I feel myself begin to blush and I wonder at my inability to be so free with words and feelings. I wonder at my incapacity for easy banter, smooth conversation, empty words to fill awkward moments. I don’t have a closet filled with umms and ellipses ready to insert at the beginnings and ends of sentences. I don’t know how to be a verb, an adverb, any kind of modifier. I’m a noun through and through.

Stuffed so full of people places things and ideas that I don’t know how to break out of my own brain. How to start a conversation.

I want to trust but it scares the skin off my bones.

But then I remember my promise to Castle and my promise to Kenji and my worries over Adam and I think maybe I should take a risk. Maybe I should try to find a new friend or 2. And I think of how wonderful it would be to be friends with a girl. A girl, just like me.

I’ve never had one of those before.

So when Sonya and Sara smile and tell me they’re “happy to help” and they’re here “anytime” and that they’re always around if I “need someone to talk to,” I tell them I’d love that.

I tell them I’d really appreciate that.

I tell them I’d love to have a friend to talk to.

Maybe sometime.

TWELVE

“Let’s get you back into your suit,” Sara says to me.

The air down here is cool and cold and often damp, the winter winds relentless as they whip the world above our heads into submission. Even in my suit I feel the chill, especially early in the morning, especially right now. Sonya and Sara are helping me out of this hospital dress and back into my normal uniform and I’m shaking in my skin. Only once they’ve zipped me up does the material begin to react to my body temperature, but I’m still so weak from being in bed for so long that I’m struggling to stay upright.

“I really don’t need a wheelchair,” I tell Sara for the third time. “Thank you—really—I-I appreciate it,” I stammer, “but I need to get the blood flowing in my legs. I have to be strong on my feet.” I have to be strong, period.

Castle and Adam are waiting for me in my room.

Sonya told me that while I was talking to Kenji, she and Sara went to notify Castle that I was awake. So. Now they’re there. Waiting for me. In the room I share with Sonya and Sara. And I’m so afraid of what is about to happen that I’m worried I might conveniently forget how to get to my own room. Because I’m fairly certain that whatever I’m about to hear isn’t going to be good.

“You can’t walk back to the room by yourself,” Sara is saying. “You can hardly stand on your own—”

“I’m okay,” I insist. I try to smile. “Really, I should be able to manage as long as I can stay close to the wall. I’m sure I’ll be back to normal just as soon as I start moving.”

Sonya and Sara glance at each other before scrutinizing my face. “How’s your hand?” they ask at the same time.

“It’s okay,” I tell them, this time more earnestly. “It feels a lot better. Really. Thank you so much.”

The cuts are practically healed and I can actually move my fingers now. I inspect the brand-new, thinner bandage they’ve wrapped across my knuckles. The girls explained to me that most of the damage was internal; it seems I traumatized whatever invisible bone in my body is responsible for my ~~curse~~ “gift.”

“All right. Let’s go,” Sara says, shaking her head. “We’re walking you back to the room.”

“No—please—it’s okay—” I try to protest but they’re already grabbing my arms and I’m too feeble to fight back. “This is unnecessary—”

“You’re being ridiculous,” they chorus.

“I don’t want you to have to go through the trouble—”

“You’re being ridiculous,” they chorus again.

“I—I’m really not—” But they’re already leading me out of the room and down the hall and I’m hobbling along between them. “I promise I’m fine,” I tell them. “Really.”

Sonya and Sara share a loaded look before they smile at me, not unkindly, but there’s an awkward silence between us as we move through the halls. I spot people walking past us and immediately duck my head. I don’t want to make eye contact with anyone right now. I can’t even imagine what they must’ve heard about the damage I’ve caused. I know I’ve managed to confirm all of their worst fears about me.

“They’re only afraid of you because they don’t know you,” Sara says quietly.

“Really,” Sonya adds. “We barely know you and we think you’re great.”

I’m blushing fiercely, wondering why embarrassment always feels like ice water in my veins. It’s like all of my insides are freezing even though my skin is burning hot too hot.

~~I hate this.~~

~~I hate this feeling.~~

Sonya and Sara stop abruptly. “Here we are,” they say together.

We’re in front of our bedroom door. I try to unlatch myself from their arms but they stop me. Insist on staying with me until they’re sure I’ve gotten inside okay.

So I stay with them.

And I knock on my own door, because I’m not sure what else to do.

Once.

Twice.

I’m waiting just a few seconds, just a few moments for fate to answer when I realize the full impact of Sonya’s and Sara’s presence beside me. They’re offering me smiles that are supposed to be encouraging, bracing, reinforcing. They’re trying to lend me their strength because they know I’m about to face something that isn’t going to make me happy.

And this thought makes me happy.

If only for a fleeting moment.

Because I think wow, I imagine this is what it's like to have friends.

"Ms. Ferrars."

Castle opens the door just enough for me to see his face. He nods at me. Glances down at my injured hand. Back up at my face. "Very good," he says, mostly to himself. "Good, good. I'm happy to see you're doing better."

"Yes," I manage to say. "I—th—thank you, I—"

"Girls," he says to Sonya and Sara. He offers them a bright, genuine smile. "Thank you for all you've done. I'll take it from here."

They nod. Squeeze my arms once before letting go and I sway for just a second before I find my footing. "I'm all right," I tell them as they try to reach for me. "I'll be fine."

They nod again. Wave, just a little, as they back away.

"Come inside," Castle says to me.

I follow him in.

THIRTEEN

1 bunk bed on one side of the wall.

1 single bed on the other side.

That's all this room consists of.

That, and Adam, who is sitting on my single bed, elbows propped up on his knees, face in his hands. Castle shuts the door behind us, and Adam startles. Jumps up.

"Juliette," he says, but he's not looking at me; he's looking at all of me. His eyes are searching my body as if to ensure I'm still intact, arms and legs and everything in between. It's only when he finds my face that he meets my gaze; I step into the sea of blue in his eyes, dive right in and drown. I feel like someone's punched a fist into my lungs and snatched up all my oxygen.

"Please, have a seat, Ms. Ferrars." Castle gestures to Sonya's bottom bunk, the bed right across from where Adam is sitting. I make my way over slowly, trying not to betray the dizziness, the nausea I'm feeling. My chest is rising and falling too quickly.

I drop my hands into my lap.

I feel Adam's presence in this room like a real weight against my chest but I choose to study the careful wrapping of my new bandage—the gauze stretched tight across the knuckles of my right hand—because I'm too much of a coward to look up. I want nothing more than to go to him, to have him hold me, to transport me back to the few moments of bliss I've ever known in my life but there's something gnawing at my core, scraping at my insides, telling me that something is wrong and it's probably best if I stay exactly where I am.

Castle is standing in the space between the beds, between me and Adam. He's staring at the wall, hands clasped behind his back. His voice is quiet when he says, "I am very, very disappointed in your behavior, Ms. Ferrars."

Hot, terrible shame creeps up my neck and forces my head down again.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

Castle takes a deep breath. Exhales very slowly. "I have to be frank with you," he says, "and admit that I'm not ready to discuss what happened just yet. I am still too upset to be able to speak about the matter calmly. Your actions," he

says, “were childish. Selfish. *Thoughtless!* The damage you caused—the years of work that went into building and planning that room, I can’t even begin to tell you—”

He catches himself, swallows hard.

“That will be a subject,” he says steadily, “for another time. Perhaps just between the two of us. But I am here today because Mr. Kent asked me to be here.”

I look up. Look at Castle. Look at Adam.

Adam looks like he wants to run.

I decide I can’t wait any longer. “You’ve learned something about him,” I say, and it’s less of a question than it is a fact. It’s so obvious. There’s no other reason why Adam would bring Castle here to talk to me.

Something terrible has already happened. Something terrible is about to happen.

I can feel it.

Adam is staring at me now, unblinking, his hands in fists pressed into his thighs. He looks nervous; scared. I don’t know what to do except to stare back at him. I don’t know how to offer him comfort. I don’t even know how to smile right now. I feel like I’m trapped in someone else’s story.

Castle nods, once, slowly.

Says, “Yes. Yes, we’ve discovered the very intriguing nature of Mr. Kent’s ability.” He walks toward the wall and leans against it, allowing me a clearer view of Adam. “We believe we now understand why he’s able to touch you, Ms. Ferrars.”

Adam turns away, presses one of his fists to his mouth. His hand looks like it might be shaking but he, at least, seems to be doing better than I am. Because my insides are screaming and my head is on fire and panic is stepping on my throat, suffocating me to death. Bad news offers no returns once received.

“What is it?” I fix my eyes on the floor and count stones and sounds and cracks and nothing.

1

2, 3, 4

1

2, 3, 4

1

2, 3, 4

“He ... can disable things,” Castle says to me.

5, 6, 7, 8 million times I blink, confused. All my numbers crash to the floor, adding and subtracting and multiplying and dividing. “What?” I ask him.

This news is wrong. This news doesn’t sound horrible at all.

“The discovery was quite accidental, actually,” Castle explains. “We weren’t having much luck with any of the tests we’d been running. But then one day I was in the middle of a training exercise, and Mr. Kent was trying to get my attention. He touched my shoulder.”

Wait for it.

“And ... suddenly,” Castle says, pulling in a breath, “I couldn’t perform. It was as if—as if a wire inside of my body had been cut. I felt it right away. He wanted my attention and he inadvertently shut me off in an attempt to redirect my focus. It was unlike anything I’ve ever seen.” He shakes his head. “We’ve now been working with him to see if he can control his ability at will. And,” Castle adds, excited, “we want to see if he can *project*.”

“You see, Mr. Kent does not need to make contact with the skin—I was wearing my blazer when he touched my arm. So this means he’s already projecting, if only just a little bit. And I believe, with some work, he’ll be able to extend his gift to a greater surface area.”

I have no idea what that means.

I try to meet Adam’s eyes; I want him to tell me these things himself but he won’t look up. He won’t speak and I don’t understand. This doesn’t seem like bad news. In fact, it sounds quite good, which can’t be right. I turn to Castle. “So Adam can just make someone else’s power—their *gift*—whatever it is—he can just make it stop? He can turn it off?”

“It appears that way, yes.”

“Have you tested this on anyone else?”

Castle looks offended. “Of course we have. We’ve tried it on every gifted member at Omega Point.”

But something isn’t making sense.

“What about when he arrived?” I ask. “And he was injured? And the girls were able to heal him? Why didn’t he cut off their abilities?”

“Ah.” Castle nods. Clears his throat. “Yes. Very astute, Ms. Ferrars.” He paces the length of the room. “This ... is where the explanation gets a little tricky. After much study, we’ve been able to conclude that his ability is a kind of ... *defense* mechanism. One that he does not yet know how to control. It’s something that’s been working on autopilot his entire life, even though it only works to disable other preternatural abilities. If there was ever a risk, if Mr. Kent

was ever in any state of danger, in any situation where his body was on high alert, feeling threatened or at risk of injury, his ability automatically set in.”

He stops. Looks at me. Really looks at me.

“When you first met, for example, Mr. Kent was working as a soldier, on guard, always aware of the risks in his surroundings. He was in a constant state of *electricum*—a term we use to define when our Energy is ‘on,’ so to speak—because he was always in a state of danger.” Castle tucks his hands into his blazer pockets. “A series of tests have further shown that his body temperature rises when he is in a state of *electricum*—just a couple of degrees higher than normal. His elevated body temperature indicates that he is exerting more energy than usual to sustain this. And, in short,” Castle says, “this constant exertion has been exhausting him. Weakening his defenses, his immune system, his self-control.”

His elevated body temperature.

That’s why Adam’s skin was always so hot when we were together. Why it was always so intense when he was with me. His ability was working to fight mine. His energy was working to *defuse* mine.

It was exhausting him. Weakening his defenses.

Oh.

God.

“Your physical relationship with Mr. Kent,” Castle says, “is, in truth, none of my business. But because of the very unique nature of your gifts, it’s been of great interest to me on a purely scientific level. But you must know, Ms. Ferrars, that though these new developments no doubt fascinate me, I take absolutely no pleasure in them. You’ve made it clear that you do not think much of my character, but you must believe that I would never find joy in your troubles.”

My troubles.

My troubles have arrived fashionably late to this conversation, inconsiderate beasts that they are.

“Please,” I whisper. “Please just tell me what the problem is. There’s a problem, isn’t there? Something is wrong.” I look at Adam but he’s still staring away, at the wall, at everything but at my face, and I feel myself rising to my feet, trying to get his attention. “Adam? Do you know? Do you know what he’s talking about? *Please—*”

“Ms. Ferrars,” Castle says quickly. “I beg you to sit down. I know this must be difficult for you, but you must let me finish. I’ve asked Mr. Kent not to speak until I’m done explaining everything. Someone needs to deliver this information

in a clear, rational manner, and I'm afraid he is in no position to do so."

I fall back onto the bed.

Castle lets out a breath. "You brought up an excellent point earlier—about why Mr. Kent was able to interact with our healer twins when he first arrived. But it was different with them," Castle says. "He was weak; he knew he needed help. His body would not—and, more importantly, could not—refuse that kind of medical attention. He was vulnerable and therefore unable to defend himself even if he wanted to. The last of his Energy was depleted when he arrived. He felt safe and he was seeking aid; his body was out of immediate danger and therefore unafraid, not primed for a defensive strategy."

Castle looks up. Looks me in the eye.

"Mr. Kent has begun having a similar problem with you."

"What?" I gasp.

"I'm afraid he doesn't know how to control his abilities yet. It's something we're hoping we can work on, but it will take a lot of time—a lot of energy and focus—"

"What do you mean," I hear myself ask, my words heavy with panic, "that he has *already begun* having a similar problem with me?"

Castle takes a small breath. "It—it seems that he is weakest when he is with you. The more time he spends in your company, the less threatened he feels. And the more ... intimate you become," Castle says, looking distinctly uncomfortable, "the less control he has over his body." A pause. "He is too open, too vulnerable with you. And in the few moments his defenses have slipped thus far, he's already felt the very distinct pain associated with your touch."

There it is.

There's my head, lying on the floor, cracked right open, my brain spilling out in every direction and I can't I don't I can't even I'm sitting here, struck, numb, slightly dizzy.

Horrified.

Adam is *not* immune to me.

Adam has to *work* to defend himself against me and I'm exhausting him. I'm making him sick and I'm weakening his body and if he ever slips again. If he ever forgets. If he ever makes a mistake or loses focus or becomes too aware of the fact that he's using his *gift* to control what I might do—

I could hurt him.

I could *kill* him.

FOURTEEN

Castle is staring at me.

Waiting for my reaction.

I haven't been able to spit the chalk out of my mouth long enough to string a sentence together.

"Ms. Ferrars," he says, rushing to speak now, "we are working with Mr. Kent to help him control his abilities. He's going to train—just as you are—to learn how to exercise this particular element of who he is. It will take some time until we can be certain he'll be safe with you, but it will be all right, I assure you —"

"No." I'm standing up. "No no no no no." I'm tripping sideways. "NO."

I'm staring at my feet and at my hands and at these walls and I want to scream. I want to run. I want to fall to my knees. I want to curse the world for cursing me, for torturing me, for taking away the only good thing I've ever known and I'm stumbling toward the door, searching for an outlet, for escape from this nightmare that is my life and

"Juliette—please—"

The sound of Adam's voice stops my heart. I force myself to turn around. To face him.

But the moment he meets my eyes his mouth falls closed. His arm is outstretched toward me, trying to stop me from 10 feet away and I want to sob and laugh at the same time, at the terrible hilarity of it all.

He will not touch me.

I will not allow him to touch me.

Never again.

"Ms. Ferrars," Castle says gently. "I'm sure it's hard to stomach right now, but I've already told you this isn't permanent. With enough training—"

"When you touch me," I ask Adam, my voice breaking, "is it an effort for you? Does it exhaust you? Does it drain you to have to constantly be fighting me and what I am?"

Adam tries to answer. He tries to say something but instead he says nothing and his unspoken words are so much worse.

I spin in Castle's direction. "That's what you said, isn't it?" My voice is even shakier now, too close to tears. "That he's using his Energy to extinguish mine, and that if he ever forgets—if he ever gets c-carried away or t-too vulnerable—that I could hurt him—that I've *already* h-hurt him—"

"Ms. Ferrars, please—"

"Just answer the question!"

"Well yes," he says, "for now, at least, that's all we know—"

"Oh, God, I—I can't—" I'm tripping to reach the door again but my legs are still weak, my head is still spinning, my eyes are blurring and the world is being washed of all its color when I feel familiar arms wrap around my waist, tugging me backward.

"Juliette," he says, so urgently, "please, we have to talk about this—"

"Let go of me." My voice is barely a breath. "Adam, please—I can't—"

"Castle." Adam cuts me off. "Do you think you can give us some time alone?"

"Oh." He startles. "Of course," he says, just a beat too late. "Sure, yes, yes, of course." He walks to the door. Hesitates. "I will—well, right. Yes. You know where to find me when you're ready." He nods at both of us, offers me a strained sort of smile, and leaves the room. The door clicks shut behind him.

Silence pours into the space between us.

"Adam, please," I finally say, and hate myself for saying it. "Let go of me."

"No."

I feel his breath on the back of my neck and it's killing me to be so close to him. It's killing me to know that I have to rebuild the walls I'd so carelessly demolished the moment he came back into my life.

"Let's talk about this," he says. "Don't go anywhere. Please. Just talk to me."

I'm rooted in place.

"Please," he says again, this time more softly, and my resolve runs out the door without me.

I follow him back to the beds. He sits on one side of the room. I sit on the other.

He stares at me. His eyes are too tired, too strained. He looks like he hasn't been eating enough, like he hasn't slept in weeks. He hesitates, licks his lips before pressing them tight, before he speaks. "I'm sorry," he says. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you. I never meant to upset you."

And I want to laugh and laugh and laugh until the tears dissolve me.

"I understand why you didn't tell me," I whisper. "It makes perfect sense."

You wanted to avoid all of *this*.” I wave a limp hand around the room.

“You’re not mad?” His eyes are so terribly hopeful. He looks like he wants to walk over to me and I have to hold out a hand to stop him.

The smile on my face is literally killing me.

“How could I be mad at you? You were torturing yourself down there just to figure out what was happening to you. You’re torturing yourself right now just trying to find a way to fix this.”

He looks relieved.

Relieved and confused and afraid to be happy all at the same time. “But something’s wrong,” he says. “You’re crying. Why are you crying if you’re not upset?”

I actually laugh this time. Out loud. Laugh and hiccup and want to die, so desperately. “Because I was an idiot for thinking things could be different,” I tell him. “For thinking you were a fluke. For thinking my life could ever be better than it was, that *I* could ever be better than I was.” I try to speak again but instead clamp a hand over my mouth like I can’t believe what I’m about to say. I force myself to swallow the stone in my throat. I drop my hand. “Adam.” My voice is raw, aching. “This isn’t going to work.”

“What?” He’s frozen in place, his eyes too wide, his chest rising and falling too fast. “What are you talking about?”

“You can’t touch me,” I tell him. “You can’t touch me and I’ve already hurt you—”

“No—Juliette—” Adam is up, he’s cleared the room, he’s on his knees next to me and he reaches for my hands but I have to snatch them back because my gloves were ruined, ruined in the research lab and now my fingers are bare.

Dangerous.

Adam stares at the hands I’ve hidden behind my back like I’ve slapped him across the face. “What are you doing?” he asks, but he’s not looking at me. He’s still staring at my hands. Barely breathing.

“I can’t do this to you.” I shake my head too hard. “I don’t want to be the reason why you’re hurting yourself or weakening yourself and I don’t want you to always have to worry that I might accidentally *kill* you—”

“No, Juliette, listen to me.” He’s desperate now, his eyes up, searching my face. “I was worried too, okay? I was worried too. Really worried. I thought—I thought that maybe—I don’t know, I thought maybe it would be bad or that maybe we wouldn’t be able to work through it but I talked to Castle. I talked to him and explained everything and he said that I just have to learn to control it.

I'll learn how to turn it on and off—"

"Except when you're with me? Except when we're together—"

"No—what? No, *especially* when we're together!"

"Touching me—being with me—it takes a physical toll on you! You run a *fever* when we're together, Adam, did you realize that? You'd get sick just trying to fight me off—"

"You're not hearing me—please—I'm telling you, I'll learn to control all of that—"

"When?" I ask, and I can actually feel my bones breaking, 1 by 1.

"What? What do you mean? I'll learn now—I'm learning *now*—"

"And how's it going? Is it easy?"

His mouth falls closed but he's looking at me, struggling with some kind of emotion, struggling to find composure. "What are you trying to say?" he finally asks. "Are you"—he's breathing hard—"are you—I mean—you don't want to make this work?"

"Adam—"

"What are you *saying*, Juliette?" He's up now, a shaky hand caught in his hair. "You don't—you don't want to be with me?"

I'm on my feet, blinking back the tears burning my eyes, desperate to run to him but unable to move. My voice breaks when I speak. "Of course I want to be with you."

He drops his hand from his hair. Looks at me with eyes so open and vulnerable but his jaw is tight, his muscles are tense, his upper body is heaving from the effort to inhale, exhale. "Then what's happening right now? Because something is happening right now and it doesn't feel okay," he says, his voice catching. "It doesn't feel okay, Juliette, it feels like the opposite of whatever the hell okay is and I really just want to hold you—"

"I don't want to h-hurt you—"

"You're not going to hurt me," he says, and then he's in front of me, looking at me, pleading with me. "I swear. It'll be fine—we'll be fine—and I'm better now. I've been working on it and I'm stronger—"

"It's too dangerous, Adam, please." I'm begging him, backing away, wiping furiously at the tears escaping down my face. "It's better for you this way. It's better for you to just stay away from me—"

"But that's not what I want—you're not asking me what *I* want—," he says, following me as I dodge his advances. "I want to be with you and I don't give a damn if it's hard. I still want it. I still want you."

I'm trapped.

I'm caught between him and the wall and I have nowhere to go and I wouldn't want to go even if I could. I don't want to have to fight this even though there's something inside of me screaming that it's wrong to be so selfish, to allow him to be with me if it'll only end up hurting him. But he's looking at me, looking at me like I'm *killing* him and I realize I'm hurting him more by trying to stay away.

I'm shaking. Wanting him so desperately and knowing now, more than ever, that what I want will have to wait. And I hate that it has to be this way. I hate it so much I could scream.

But maybe we can try.

"Juliette." Adam's voice is hoarse, broken with feeling. His hands are at my waist, trembling just a little, waiting for my permission. "Please."

And I don't protest.

He's breathing harder now, leaning into me, resting his forehead against my shoulder. He places his hands flat against the center of my stomach, only to inch them down my body, slowly, so slowly and I gasp.

There's an earthquake happening in my bones, tectonic plates shifting from panic to pleasure as his fingers take their time moving around my thighs, up my back, over my shoulders and down my arms. He hesitates at my wrists. This is where the fabric ends, where my skin begins.

But he takes a breath.

And he takes my hands.

For a moment I'm paralyzed, searching his face for any sign of pain or danger but then we both exhale and I see him attempt a smile with new hope, a new optimism that maybe everything is going to work out.

But then he blinks and his eyes change.

His eyes are deeper now. Desperate. Hungry. He's searching me like he's trying to read the words etched inside of me and I can already feel the heat of his body, the power in his limbs, the strength in his chest and I don't have time to stop him before he's kissing me.

His left hand is cupping the back of my head, his right tightening around my waist, pressing me hard against him and destroying every rational thought I've ever had. It's deep. So strong. It's an introduction to a side of him I've never known before and I'm gasping gasping gasping for air.

It's hot rain and humid days and broken thermostats. It's screaming teakettles and raging steam engines and wanting to take your clothes off just to

feel a breeze.

It's the kind of kiss that makes you realize oxygen is overrated.

And I know I shouldn't be doing this. I know it's probably stupid and irresponsible after everything we've just learned but someone would have to shoot me to make me want to stop.

I'm pulling at his shirt, desperate for a raft or a life preserver or something, anything to anchor me to reality but he breaks away to catch his breath and rips off his shirt, tosses it to the floor, pulls me into his arms and we both fall onto my bed.

Somehow I end up on top of him.

He reaches up only to pull me down and he's kissing me, my throat, my cheeks, and my hands are searching his body, exploring the lines, the planes, the muscle and he pulls back, his forehead is pressed against my own and his eyes are squeezed shut when he says, "How is it possible," he says, "that I'm this close to you and it's killing me that you're still so far away?"

And I remember I promised him, 2 weeks ago, that once he got better, once he'd healed, I would memorize every inch of his body with my lips.

I figure now is probably a good time to fulfill that promise.

I start at his mouth, move to his cheek, under his jawline, down his neck to his shoulders and his arms, which are wrapped around me. His hands are skimming my suit and he's so hot, so tense from the effort to remain still but I can hear his heart beating hard, too fast against his chest.

Against mine.

I trace the white bird soaring across his skin, a tattoo of the one impossible thing I hope to see in my life. A bird. White with streaks of gold like a crown atop its head.

It will fly.

Birds don't fly, is what the scientists say, but history says they used to. And one day I want to see it. I want to touch it. I want to watch it fly like it should, like it hasn't been able to in my dreams.

I dip down to kiss the yellow crown of its head, tattooed deep into Adam's chest. I hear the spike in his breathing.

"I love this tattoo," I tell him, looking up to meet his eyes. "I haven't seen it since we got here. I haven't seen you without a shirt on since we got here," I whisper. "Do you still sleep without your shirt on?"

But Adam answers with a strange smile, like he's laughing at his own private joke.

He takes my hand from his chest and tugs me down so we're facing each other, and it's strange, because I haven't felt a breeze since we got here, but it's like the wind has found a home in my body and it's funneling through my lungs, blowing through my blood, mingling with my breath and making it hard for me to breathe.

"I can't sleep at all," he says to me, his voice so low I have to strain to hear it. "It doesn't feel right to be without you every night." His left hand is threaded in my hair, his right wrapped around me. "God I've missed you," he says, his words a husky whisper in my ear. "Juliette."

I am
lit
on fire.

It's like swimming in molasses, this kiss, it's like being dipped in gold, this kiss, it's like I'm diving into an ocean of emotion and I'm too swept up in the current to realize I'm drowning and nothing even matters anymore. Not my hand which no longer seems to hurt, not this room that isn't entirely mine, not this war we're supposed to be fighting, not my worries about who or what I am and what I might become.

This is the only thing that matters.

This.

This moment. These lips. This strong body pressed against me and these firm hands finding a way to bring me closer and I know I want so much more of him, I want all of him, I want to feel the beauty of this love with the tips of my fingers and the palms of my hands and every fiber and bone in my being.

I want all of it.

My hands are in his hair and I'm reeling him in until he's practically on top of me and he breaks for air but I pull him back, kissing his neck, his shoulders, his chest, running my hands down his back and the sides of his torso and it's incredible, the energy, the unbelievable power I feel in just *being* with him, touching him, holding him like this. I'm alive with a rush of adrenaline so potent, so euphoric that I feel rejuvenated, indestructible—

I jerk back.

Push away so quickly that I'm scrambling and I fall off the bed only to slam my head into the stone floor and I'm swaying as I attempt to stand, struggling to hear the sound of his voice but all I hear are wheezing, paralyzed breaths and I can't think straight, I can't see anything and everything is blurry and I can't, I refuse to believe this is actually happening—

“J-Jul—” He tries to speak. “I-I c-ca—”

And I fall to my knees.

Screaming.

Screaming like I’ve never screamed in my entire life.

FIFTEEN

I count everything.

Even numbers, odd numbers, multiples of 10. I count the ticks of the clock I count the tocks of the clock I count the lines between the lines on a sheet of paper. I count the broken beats of my heart I count my pulse and my blinks and the number of tries it takes to inhale enough oxygen for my lungs. I stay like this I stand like this I count like this until the feeling stops. Until the tears stop spilling, until my fists stop shaking, until my heart stops aching.

There are never enough numbers.

Adam is in the medical wing.

He is in the medical wing and I have been asked not to visit him. I have been asked to give him space, to give him time to heal, ~~to leave him the hell alone~~. He is going to be okay, is what Sonya and Sara told me. They told me not to worry, that everything would be fine, but their smiles were a little less exuberant than they usually are and I'm beginning to wonder if they, too, are finally beginning to see me for what I truly am.

A horrible, selfish, pathetic monster.

I took what I wanted. I knew better and I took it anyway. Adam couldn't have known, he could never have known what it would be like to really suffer at my hands. He was innocent of the depth of it, of the cruel reality of it. He'd only felt bursts of my power, according to Castle. He'd only felt small stabs of it and was able and aware enough to let go without feeling the full effects.

But I knew better.

I knew what I was capable of. I knew what the risks were and I did it anyway. I allowed myself to forget, to be reckless, to be greedy and stupid because I wanted what I couldn't have. I wanted to believe in fairy tales and happy endings and pure possibility. I wanted to pretend that I was a better person than I actually am but instead I managed to out myself as the terror I've always been accused of being.

~~My parents were right to get rid of me.~~

Castle isn't even speaking to me.

Kenji, however, still expects me to show up at 6:00 a.m. for whatever it is we're supposed to be doing tomorrow, and I find I'm actually kind of grateful for the distraction. I only wish it would come sooner. Life will be solitary for me from now on, just as it always has been, and it's best if I find a way to fill my time.

To forget.

It keeps hitting me, over and over and over again, this complete and utter loneliness. This absence of him in my life, this realization that I will never know the warmth of his body, the tenderness of his touch ever again. This reminder of who I am and what I've done and where I belong.

But I've accepted the terms and conditions of my new reality.

I cannot be with him. I will not be with him. I won't risk hurting him again, won't risk becoming the creature he's always afraid of, too scared to touch, to kiss, to hold. I don't want to keep him from having a normal life with someone who isn't going to accidentally kill him all the time.

So I have to cut myself out of his world. Cut him out of mine.

It's much harder now. So much harder to resign myself to an existence of ice and emptiness now that I've known heat, urgency, tenderness, and passion; the extraordinary comfort of being able to touch another being.

It's humiliating.

That I thought I could slip into the role of a regular girl with a regular boyfriend; that I thought I could live out the stories I'd read in so many books as a child.

Me.

Juliette with a dream.

Just the thought of it is enough to fill me with mortification. How embarrassing for me, that I thought I could change what I'd been dealt. That I looked in the mirror and actually liked the pale face staring back at me.

How sad.

I always dared to identify with the princess, the one who runs away and finds a fairy godmother to transform her into a beautiful girl with a bright future. I clung to something like hope, to a thread of maybes and possibly's and perhapses. But I should've listened when my parents told me that things like me aren't allowed to have dreams. ~~Things like me are better off destroyed, is what my mother said to me.~~

And I'm beginning to think they were right. I'm beginning to wonder if I

should just bury myself in the ground before I remember that technically, I already am. I never even needed a shovel.

It's strange.

How hollow I feel.

Like there might be echoes inside of me. Like I'm one of those chocolate rabbits they used to sell around Easter, the ones that were nothing more than a sweet shell encapsulating a world of nothing. I'm like that.

I encapsulate a world of nothing.

Everyone here hates me. The tenuous bonds of friendship I'd begun to form have now been destroyed. Kenji is tired of me. Castle is disgusted, disappointed, angry, even. I've caused nothing but trouble since I arrived and the 1 person who's ever tried to see good in me is now paying for it with his life.

The 1 person who's ever dared to touch me.

Well. 1 of 2.

I find myself thinking about Warner too much.

I remember his eyes and his odd kindness and his cruel, calculating demeanor. I remember the way he looked at me when I first jumped out the window to escape and I remember the horror on his face when I pointed his own gun at his heart and then I wonder at my preoccupation with this person who is nothing like me ~~and still so similar~~.

I wonder if I will have to face him again, sometime soon, and I wonder how he will greet me. I have no idea if he wants to keep me alive anymore, especially not after I tried to kill him, and I have no idea what could propel a 19-year-old man boy person into such a miserable, murderous lifestyle and then I realize I'm lying to myself. Because I do know. Because I might be the only person who could ever understand him.

And this is what I've learned:

I know that he is a tortured soul who, like me, never grew up with the warmth of friendship or love or peaceful coexistence. I know that his father is the leader of The Reestablishment and applauds his son's murders instead of condemning them and I know that Warner has no idea what it's like to be normal.

~~Neither do I.~~

He's spent his life fighting to fulfill his father's expectations of global domination without questioning why, without considering the repercussions, without stopping long enough to weigh the worth of a human life. He has a power, a strength, a position in society that enables him to do too much damage

and he owns it with pride. He kills without remorse or regret and he wants me to join him. He sees me for what I am and expects me to live up to that potential.

Scary, monstrous girl with a lethal touch. Sad, pathetic girl with nothing else to contribute to this world. Good for nothing but a weapon, a tool for torture and taking control. That's what he wants from me.

And lately I'm not sure if he's wrong. Lately, I'm not sure of anything. Lately, I don't know anything about anything I've ever believed in, not anymore, and I know the least about who I am. Warner's whispers pace the space in my head, telling me I could be more, I could be stronger, I could be everything; I could be so much more than a scared little girl.

He says I could be power.

But still, I hesitate.

Still, I see no appeal in the life he's offered. I see no future in it. I take no pleasure in it. Still, I tell myself, despite everything, I know that I do not *want* to hurt people. It's not something I crave. And even if the world hates me, even if they never stop hating me, I will never avenge myself on an innocent person. If I die, if I am killed, if I am murdered in my sleep, I will at least die with a shred of dignity. A piece of humanity that is still entirely mine, entirely under my control. And I will not allow anyone to take that from me.

So I have to keep remembering that Warner and I are 2 different words.

We are synonyms but not the same.

Synonyms know each other like old colleagues, like a set of friends who've seen the world together. They swap stories, reminisce about their origins and forget that though they are similar, they are entirely different, and though they share a certain set of attributes, one can never be the other. Because a quiet night is not the same as a silent one, a firm man is not the same as a steady one, and a bright light is not the same as a brilliant one because the way they wedge themselves into a sentence changes everything.

They are not the same.

I've spent my entire life fighting to be better. Fighting to be stronger. Because unlike Warner I don't want to be a terror on this Earth. I don't want to hurt people.

I don't want to use my power to cripple anyone.

But then I look at my own 2 hands and I remember exactly what I'm capable of. I remember exactly what I've done and I'm too aware of what I might do. Because it's so difficult to fight what you cannot control and right now I can't even control my own imagination as it grips my hair and drags me into the dark.

SIXTEEN

Loneliness is a strange sort of thing.

It creeps up on you, quiet and still, sits by your side in the dark, strokes your hair as you sleep. It wraps itself around your bones, squeezing so tight you almost can't breathe. It leaves lies in your heart, lies next to you at night, leaches the light out from every corner. It's a constant companion, clasping your hand only to yank you down when you're struggling to stand up.

You wake up in the morning and wonder who you are. You fail to fall asleep at night and tremble in your skin. You doubt you doubt you doubt

do I

don't I

should I

why won't I

And even when you're ready to let go. When you're ready to break free. When you're ready to be brand-new. Loneliness is an old friend standing beside you in the mirror, looking you in the eye, challenging you to live your life without it. You can't find the words to fight yourself, to fight the words screaming that you're not enough never enough never ever enough.

Loneliness is a bitter, wretched companion.

Sometimes it just won't let go.

"Helloooooo?"

I blink and gasp and flinch away from the fingers snapping in front of my face as the familiar stone walls of Omega Point come back into focus. I manage to spin around.

Kenji is staring at me.

"What?" I shoot him a panicked, nervous look as I clasp and unclasp my ungloved hands, wishing I had something warm to wrap my fingers in. This suit does not come with pockets and I wasn't able to salvage the gloves I ruined in the research rooms. I haven't received any replacements, either.

"You're early," Kenji says to me, cocking his head, watching me with eyes

both surprised and curious.

I shrug and try to hide my face, unwilling to admit that I hardly slept through the night. I've been awake since 3:00 a.m., fully dressed and ready to go by 4:00. I've been dying for an excuse to fill my mind with things that have nothing to do with my own thoughts. "I'm excited," I lie. "What are we doing today?"

He shakes his head a bit. Squints at something over my shoulder as he speaks to me. "You, um"—he clears his throat—"you okay?"

"Yes, of course."

"Huh."

"What?"

"Nothing," he says quickly. "Just, you know." A haphazard gesture toward my face. "You don't look so good, princess. You look kind of like you did that first day you showed up with Warner back on base. All scared and dead-looking and, no offense, but you look like you could use a shower."

I smile and pretend I can't feel my face shaking from the effort. I try to relax my shoulders, try to look normal, calm, when I say, "I'm fine. Really." I drop my eyes. "I'm just—it's a little cold down here, that's all. I'm not used to being without my gloves."

Kenji is nodding, still not looking at me. "Right. Well. He's going to be okay, you know."

"What?" Breathing. I'm so bad at breathing.

"Kent." He turns to me. "Your boyfriend. *Adam*. He's going to be fine."

1 word, 1 simple, stupid reminder of him startles the butterflies sleeping in my stomach before I remember that Adam is not my boyfriend anymore. He's not my anything anymore. He can't be.

And the butterflies drop dead.

~~This.~~

~~I can't do this.~~

"So," I say too brightly. "Shouldn't we get going? We should get going, right?"

Kenji shoots me an odd look but doesn't comment. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, sure. Follow me."

SEVENTEEN

Kenji leads me to a door I've never seen before. A door belonging to a room I've never been in before.

I hear voices inside.

Kenji knocks twice before turning the handle and all at once the cacophony overwhelms me. We're walking into a room bursting with people, faces I've only ever seen from far away, people sharing smiles and laughter I've never been welcome to. There are individual desks with individual chairs set up in the vast space so that it resembles a classroom. There's a whiteboard built into the wall next to a monitor blinking with information. I spot Castle. Standing in the corner, looking over a clipboard with such focus that he doesn't even notice our entry until Kenji shouts a greeting.

Castle's entire face lights up.

I'd noticed it before, the connection between them, but it's now becoming increasingly apparent to me that Castle harbors a special kind of affection for Kenji. A sweet, proud sort of affection that's usually reserved for parents. It makes me wonder about the nature of their relationship. Where it began, how it began, what must've happened to bring them together. It makes me wonder at how little I know about the people of Omega Point.

I look around at their eager faces, men and women, youthful and middle-aged, all different ethnicities, shapes, and sizes. They're interacting with one another like they're part of a family and I feel a strange sort of pain stabbing at my side, poking holes in me until I deflate.

It's like my face is pressed up against the glass, watching a scene from far, far away, wishing and wanting to be a part of something I know I'll never really be a part of. I forget, sometimes, that there are people out there who still manage to smile every day, despite everything.

They haven't lost hope yet.

Suddenly I feel sheepish, ashamed, even. Daylight makes my thoughts look dark and sad and I want to pretend I'm still optimistic, I want to believe that I'll find a way to live. That maybe, somehow, there's still a chance for me somewhere.

Someone whistles.

“All right, everyone,” Kenji calls out, hands cupped around his mouth. “Everyone take a seat, okay? We’re doing another orientation for those of you who’ve never done this before, and I need all of you to get settled for a bit.” He scans the crowd. “Right. Yeah. Everyone just take a seat. Wherever is fine. Lily—you don’t have to—okay, fine, that’s fine. Just settle down. We’re going to get started in five minutes, okay?” He holds up an open palm, fingers splayed. “Five minutes.”

I slip into the closest empty seat without looking around. I keep my head down, my eyes focused on the individual grains of wood on the desk as everyone collapses into chairs around me. Finally, I dare to glance to my right. Bright white hair and snow-white skin and clear blue eyes blink back at me.

Brendan. The electricity boy.

He smiles. Offers me a 2-finger wave.

I duck my head.

“Oh—hey,” I hear someone say. “What are you doing here?”

I jerk toward my left to find sandy-blond hair and black plastic glasses sitting on a crooked nose. An ironic smile twisted onto a pale face. *Winston.* I remember him. He interviewed me when I first arrived at Omega Point. Said he was some kind of psychologist. But he also happens to be the one who designed the suit I’m wearing. The gloves I destroyed.

I think he’s some kind of genius. I’m not sure.

Right now, he’s chewing on the cap of his pen, staring at me. He uses an index finger to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose. I remember he’s asked me a question and I make an effort to answer.

“I’m not actually sure,” I tell him. “Kenji brought me here but didn’t tell me why.”

Winston doesn’t seem surprised. He rolls his eyes. “Him with the freaking mysteries all the time. I don’t know why he thinks it’s such a good idea to keep people in suspense. It’s like the guy thinks his life is a movie or something. Always so dramatic about everything. It’s irritating as hell.”

I have no idea what I’m supposed to say to that. ~~I can’t help thinking that Adam would agree with him and then I can’t help thinking about Adam and then I~~

“Ah, don’t listen to him.” An English accent steps into the conversation. I turn around to see Brendan still smiling at me. “Winston’s always a bit beastly this early in the morning.”

“Jesus. How early is it?” Winston asks. “I would kick a soldier in the crotch for a cup of coffee right now.”

“It’s your own fault you never sleep, mate,” Brendan counters. “You think you can survive on three hours a night? You’re mad.”

Winston drops his chewed-up pen on the desk. Runs a tired hand through his hair. Tugs his glasses off and rubs at his face. “It’s the freaking patrols. Every goddamn night. Something is going on and it’s getting intense out there. So many soldiers just walking around? What the hell are they doing? I have to actually be *awake* the whole time—”

“What are you talking about?” I ask before I can stop myself. My ears are perked and my interest is piqued. News from the outside is something I’ve never had the opportunity to hear before. Castle was so intent on me focusing all my energy on training that I never heard much more than his constant reminders that *we’re running out of time* and that *I need to learn before it’s too late*. I’m beginning to wonder if things are worse than I thought.

“The patrols?” Brendan asks. He waves a knowing hand. “Oh, it’s just, we work in shifts, right? In pairs—take turns keeping watch at night,” he explains. “Most of the time it’s no problem, just routine, nothing too serious.”

“But it’s been weird lately,” Winston cuts in. “It’s like they’re *really* searching for us now. Like it’s not just some crazy theory anymore. They know we’re a real threat and it’s like they actually have a clue where we are.” He shakes his head. “But that’s impossible.”

“Apparently not, mate.”

“Well, whatever it is, it’s starting to freak me out,” Winston says. “There are soldiers all over the place, way too close to where we are. We see them on camera,” he says to me, noticing my confusion. “And the weirdest part,” he adds, leaning in, lowering his voice, “is that Warner is always with them. Every single night. Walking around, issuing orders I can’t hear. And his arm is still injured. He walks around with it in a sling.”

“Warner?” My eyes go wide. “He’s with them? Is that—is that ... unusual?”

“It’s quite odd,” Brendan says. “He’s CCR—chief commander and regent—of Sector 45. In normal circumstances he would delegate this task to a colonel, a lieutenant, even. His priorities should be on base, overseeing his soldiers.” Brendan shakes his head. “He’s a bit daft, I think, taking a risk like that. Spending time away from his own camp. Seems strange that he’d be able to get away so many nights.”

“Right,” Winston says, nodding his head. “Exactly.” He points at the 2 of us,

stabbing at the air. “And it makes you wonder who he’s leaving in charge. The guy doesn’t trust anyone—he’s not known for his delegation skills to begin with—so for him to leave the base behind every night?” A pause. “It doesn’t add up. Something is going on.”

“Do you think,” I ask, feeling scared and feeling brave, “that maybe he’s looking for ~~someone~~ something?”

“Yup.” Winston exhales. Scratches the side of his nose. “That’s exactly what I think. And I’d love to know what the hell he’s looking for.”

“Us, obviously,” Brendan says. “He’s looking for us.”

Winston seems unconvinced. “I don’t know,” he says. “This is different. They’ve been searching for us for years, but they’ve never done anything like this. Never spent so much manpower on this kind of a mission. And they’ve never gotten this close.”

“Wow,” I whisper, not trusting myself to posit any of my own theories. Not wanting to think too hard about ~~who~~ what it is, exactly, Warner is searching for. And all the time wondering why these 2 guys are speaking to me so freely, as if I’m trustworthy, as if I’m one of their own.

I don’t dare mention it.

“Yeah,” Winston says, picking up his chewed-up pen again. “Crazy. Anyway, if we don’t get a fresh batch of coffee today, I am seriously going to lose my shit.”

I look around the room. I don’t see coffee anywhere. No food, either. I wonder what that means for Winston. “Are we going to have breakfast before we start?”

“Nah,” he says. “Today we get to eat on a different schedule. Besides, we’ll have plenty to choose from when we get back. We get first picks. It’s the only perk.”

“Get back from where?”

“Outside,” Brendan says, leaning back in his chair. He points up at the ceiling. “We’re going up and out.”

“What?” I gasp, feeling true excitement for the first time. “Really?”

“Yup.” Winston puts his glasses back on. “And it looks like you’re about to get your first introduction to what it is we do here.” He nods at the front of the room, and I see Kenji hauling a huge trunk onto a table.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “What are we doing?”

“Oh, you know.” Winston shrugs. Clasps his hands behind his head. “Grand larceny. Armed robbery. That sort of thing.”

I begin to laugh when Brendan stops me. He actually puts his hand on my shoulder and for a moment I'm mildly terrified. Wondering if he's lost his mind.

"He's not joking," Brendan says to me. "And I hope you know how to use a gun."

EIGHTEEN

We look homeless.

Which means we look like civilians.

We've moved out of the classroom and into the hallway, and we're all wearing a similar sort of ensemble, tattered and grayish and frayed. Everyone is adjusting their outfits as we go; Winston slips off his glasses and shoves them into his jacket only to zip up his coat. The collar comes up to his chin and he huddles into it. Lily, one of the other girls among us, wraps a thick scarf around her mouth and pulls the hood of her coat over her head. I see Kenji pull on a pair of gloves and readjust his cargo pants to better hide the gun tucked inside.

Brendan shifts beside me.

He pulls a skullcap out of his pocket and tugs it on over his head, zipping his coat up to his neck. It's startling the way the blackness of the beanie offsets the blue in his eyes to make them even brighter, sharper than they looked before. He flashes me a smile when he catches me watching. Then he tosses me a pair of old gloves 2 sizes too big before bending down to tighten the laces on his boots.

I take a small breath.

I try to focus all my energy on where I am, on what I'm doing and what I'm about to do. I tell myself not to think of Adam, not to think about what he's doing or how he's healing or what he must be feeling right now. I beg myself not to dwell on my last moments with him, the way he touched me, how he held me, his lips and his hands and his breaths coming in too fast—

I fail.

I can't help but think about how he always tried to protect me, how he nearly lost his life in the process. He was always defending me, always watching out for me, never realizing that it was *me*, it was always *me* who was the biggest threat. The most dangerous. He thinks too highly of me, places me on a pedestal I've never deserved.

I definitely don't need protection.

I don't need anyone to worry for me or wonder about me or risk falling in love with me. I am unstable. ~~I need to be avoided. It's right that people fear me.~~

~~They should.~~

“Hey.” Kenji stops beside me, grabs my elbow. “You ready?”

I nod. Offer him a small smile.

The clothes I’m wearing are borrowed. The card hanging from my neck, hidden under my suit, is brand-new. Today I was given a fake RR card—a Reestablishment Registration card. It’s proof that I work and live on the compounds; proof that I’m registered as a citizen in regulated territory. Every legal citizen has one. I never did, because I was tossed into an asylum; it was never necessary for someone like me. In fact, I’m fairly certain they just expected me to die in there. Identification was not necessary.

But this RR card is special.

Not everyone at Omega Point receives a counterfeit card. Apparently they’re extremely difficult to replicate. They’re thin rectangles made out of a very rare type of titanium, laser-etched with a bar code as well as the owner’s biographical data, and contain a tracking device that monitors the whereabouts of the citizen.

“RR cards track everything,” Castle explained. “They’re necessary for entering and exiting compounds, necessary for entering and exiting a person’s place of work. Citizens are paid in REST dollars—wages based on a complicated algorithm that calculates the difficulty of their profession, as well as the number of hours they spend working, in order to determine how much their efforts are worth. This electronic currency is dispensed in weekly installments and automatically uploaded to a chip built into their RR cards. REST dollars can then be exchanged at Supply Centers for food and basic necessities. Losing an RR card,” he said, “means losing your livelihood, your earnings, your legal status as a registered citizen.

“If you’re stopped by a soldier and asked for proof of identification,” Castle continued, “you must present your RR card. Failure to present your card,” he said, “will result in ... very unhappy consequences. Citizens who walk around without their cards are considered a threat to The Reestablishment. They are seen as purposely defying the law, as characters worthy of suspicion. Being uncooperative in any way—even if that means you simply do not want your every movement to be tracked and monitored—makes you seem sympathetic to rebel parties. And that makes you a threat. A threat,” he said, “that The Reestablishment has no qualms about removing.

“Therefore,” he said, taking a deep breath, “you cannot, and you will not, lose your RR card. Our counterfeit cards do not have the tracking device nor the chip necessary for monitoring REST dollars, because we don’t have the need for either. But! That does not mean they are not just as valuable as decoys,” he said.

“And while for citizens on regulated territory, RR cards are part of a life sentence, at Omega Point, they are considered a privilege. And you will treat them as such.”

A privilege.

Among the many things I learned in our meeting this morning, I discovered that these cards are only granted to those who go on missions outside of Omega Point. All of the people in that room today were hand-selected as being the best, the strongest, the most trustworthy. Inviting me to be in that room was a bold move on Kenji's part. I realize now that it was his way of telling me he trusts me. Despite everything, he's telling me—and everyone else—that I'm welcome here. Which explains why Winston and Brendan felt so comfortable opening up to me. Because they trust the system at Omega Point. And they trust Kenji if he says he trusts me.

So now I am one of them.

And as my first official act as a member?

I'm supposed to be a thief.

NINETEEN

We're heading up.

Castle should be joining us any moment now to lead our group out of this underground city and into the real world. It will be my first opportunity to see what's happened to our society in almost 3 years.

I was 14 when I was dragged away from home for killing an innocent child. I spent 2 years bouncing from hospital to law office to detention center to psych ward until they finally decided to put me away for good. Sticking me in the asylum was worse than sending me to prison; ~~smarter, according to my parents.~~ If I'd been sent to prison, the guards would've had to treat me like a human being; instead, I spent the past year of my life treated like a rabid animal, trapped in a dark hole with no link to the outside world. Most everything I've witnessed of our planet thus far has been out of a window or while running for my life. And now I'm not sure what to expect.

But I want to see it.

I need to see it.

I'm tired of being blind and I'm tired of relying on my memories of the past and the bits and pieces I've managed to scrape together of our present.

All I really know is that The Reestablishment has been a household name for 10 years.

I know this because they began campaigning when I was 7 years old. I'll never forget the beginning of our falling apart. I remember the days when things were still fairly normal, when people were only sort-of dying all the time, when there was enough food for those with enough money to pay for it. This was before cancer became a common illness and the weather became a turbulent, angry creature. I remember how excited everyone was about The Reestablishment. I remember the hope in my teachers' faces and the announcements we were forced to watch in the middle of the school day. I remember those things.

And just 4 months before my 14-year-old self committed an unforgivable crime, The Reestablishment was elected by the people of our world to lead us into a better future.

Hope. They had so much hope. My parents, my neighbors, my teachers and classmates. Everyone was hoping for the best when they cheered for The Reestablishment and promised their unflagging support.

Hope can make people do terrible things.

I remember seeing the protests just before I was taken away. I remember seeing the streets flooded with angry mobs who wanted a refund on their purchase. I remember how The Reestablishment painted the protesters red from head to toe and told them they should've read the fine print before they left their houses that morning.

All sales are final.

Castle and Kenji are allowing me on this expedition because they're trying to welcome me into the heart of Omega Point. They want me to join them, to really accept them, to understand why their mission is so important. Castle wants me to fight against The Reestablishment and what they have planned for the world. The books, the artifacts, the language and history they plan on destroying; the simple, empty, monochromatic life they want to force upon the upcoming generations. He wants me to see that our Earth is still not so damaged as to be irreparable; he wants to prove that our future is salvageable, that things can get better as long as power is put in the right hands.

He wants me to trust.

I want to trust.

But I get scared, sometimes. In my very limited experience I've already found that people seeking power are not to be trusted. People with lofty goals and fancy speeches and easy smiles have done nothing to calm my heart. Men with guns have never put me at ease no matter how many times they promised they were killing for good reason.

It has not gone past my notice that the people of Omega Point are very excellently armed.

But I'm curious. I'm so desperately curious.

So I'm camouflaged in old, ragged clothes and a thick woolen hat that nearly covers my eyes. I wear a heavy jacket that must've belonged to a man and my leather boots are almost hidden by the too-large pants puddling around my ankles. I look like a civilian. A poor, tortured civilian struggling to find food for her family.

A door clicks shut and we all turn at once. Castle beams. Looks around at the group of us.

Me. Winston. Kenji. Brendan. The girl named Lily. 10 other people I still

don't really know. We're 16 altogether, including Castle. A perfectly even number.

"All right, everyone," Castle says, clapping his hands together. I notice he's wearing gloves, too. Everyone is. Today, I'm just a girl in a group wearing normal clothes and normal gloves. Today, I'm just a number. No one of significance. Just an ordinary person. Just for today.

It's so absurd I feel like smiling.

And then I remember how I nearly killed Adam yesterday and suddenly I'm not sure how to move my lips.

"Are we ready?" Castle looks around. "Don't forget what we discussed," he says. A pause. A careful glance. Eye contact with each one of us. Eyes on me for a moment too long. "Okay then. Follow me."

No one really speaks as we follow Castle down these corridors, and I'm left to wonder how easy it would be to just disappear in this inconspicuous outfit. I could run away, blend into the background and never be found again.

~~Like a coward.~~

I search for something to say to shake the silence. "So how are we getting there?" I ask anyone.

"We walk," Winston says.

Our feet pound the floors in response.

"Most civilians don't have cars," Kenji explains. "And we sure as hell can't be caught in a tank. If we want to blend in, we have to do as the people do. And walk."

I lose track of which tunnels break off in which directions as Castle leads us toward the exit. I'm increasingly aware of how little I understand about this place, how little I've seen of it. Although if I'm perfectly honest, I'll admit I haven't made much of an effort to explore anything.

I need to do something about that.

It's only when the terrain under my feet changes that I realize how close we are to getting outside. We're walking uphill, up a series of stone stairs stacked into the ground. I can see what looks like a small square of a metal door from here. It has a latch.

I realize I'm a little nervous.

Anxious.

Eager and afraid.

Today I will see the world as a civilian, really see things up close for the very first time. I will see what the people of this new society must endure now.

~~See what my parents must be experiencing wherever they are.~~

Castle pauses at the door, which looks small enough to be a window. Turns to face us. "Who are you?" he demands.

No one answers.

Castle draws himself up to his full height. Crosses his arms. "Lily," he says. "Name. ID. Age. Sector and occupation. Now."

Lily tugs the scarf away from her mouth. She sounds slightly robotic when she says, "My name is Erica Fontaine, 1117-52QZ. I'm twenty-six years old. I live in Sector 45."

"Occupation," Castle says again, a hint of impatience creeping into his voice.

"Textile. Factory 19A-XC2."

"Winston," Castle orders.

"My name is Keith Hunter, 4556-65DS," Winston says. "Thirty-four years old. Sector 45. I work in Metal. Factory 15B-XC2."

Kenji doesn't wait for a prompt when he says, "Hiro Yamasaki, 8891-11DX. Age twenty. Sector 45. Artillery. 13A-XC2."

Castle nods as everyone takes turns regurgitating the information etched into their fake RR cards. He smiles, satisfied. Then he focuses his eyes on me until everyone is staring, watching, waiting to see if I screw it up.

"Delia Dupont," I say, the words slipping from my lips more easily than I expected.

We're not planning on being stopped, but this is an extra precaution in the event that we're asked to identify ourselves; we have to know the information on our RR cards as if it were our own. Kenji also said that even though the soldiers overseeing the compounds are from Sector 45, they're always different from the guards back on base. He doesn't think we'll run into anyone who will recognize us.

But.

Just in case.

I clear my throat. "ID number 1223-99SX. Seventeen years old. Sector 45. I work in Metal. Factory 15A-XC2."

Castle stares at me for just a second too long.

Finally, he nods. Looks around at all of us. "And what," he says, his voice deep and clear and booming, "are the three things you will ask yourself before you speak?"

Again, no one answers. Though it's not because we don't know the answer.

Castle counts off on his fingers. "First! *Does this need to be said?* Second! *Does this need to be said by me?* And third! *Does this need to be said by me right now?*"

Still, no one says a word.

"We do not speak unless absolutely necessary," Castle says. "We do not laugh, we do not smile. We do not make eye contact with one another if we can help it. We will not act as if we know each other. We are to do nothing at all to encourage extra glances in our direction. We do not draw attention to ourselves." A pause. "You understand this, yes? This is clear?"

We nod.

"And if something goes wrong?"

"We scatter." Kenji clears his throat. "We run. We hide. We think of only ourselves. And we never, ever betray the location of Omega Point."

Everyone takes a deep breath at the same time.

Castle pushes the small door open. Peeks outside before motioning for us to follow him, and we do. We scramble through, one by one, silent as the words we don't speak.

I haven't been aboveground in almost 3 weeks. It feels like it's been 3 months.

The moment my face hits the air, I feel the wind snap against my skin in a way that's familiar, admonishing. It's as if the wind is scolding me for being away for so long.

We're in the middle of a frozen wasteland. The air is icy and sharp, dead leaves dancing around us. The few trees still standing are waving in the wind, their broken, lonely branches begging for companionship. I look left. I look right. I look straight ahead.

There is nothing.

Castle told us this area used to be covered in lush, dense vegetation. He said when he first sought out a hiding place for Omega Point, this particular stretch of ground was ideal. But that was so long ago—decades ago—that now everything has changed. Nature itself has changed. And it's too late to move this hideout.

So we do what we can.

This part, he said, is the hardest. Out here, we're vulnerable. Easy to spot even as civilians because we're out of place. Civilians have no business being anywhere outside of the compounds; they do not leave the regulated grounds deemed safe by The Reestablishment. Being caught anywhere on unregulated

turf is considered a breach of the laws set in place by our new pseudogovernment, and the consequences are severe.

So we have to get ourselves to the compounds as quickly as possible.

The plan is for Kenji—whose gift enables him to blend into any background—to travel ahead of the pack, making himself invisible as he checks to make sure our paths are clear. The rest of us hang back, careful, completely silent. We keep a few feet of distance between ourselves, ready to run, to save ourselves if necessary. It's strange, considering the tight-knit nature of the community at Omega Point, that Castle wouldn't encourage us to stay together. But this, he explained, is for the good of the majority. It's a sacrifice. One of us has to be willing to get caught in order for the others to escape.

Take one for the team.

Our path is clear.

We've been walking for at least half an hour and no one seems to be guarding this deserted piece of land. Soon, the compounds come into view. Blocks and blocks and blocks of metal boxes, cubes clustered in heaps across the ancient, wheezing ground. I clutch my coat closer to my body as the wind flips on its side just to fillet our human flesh.

It's too cold to be alive today.

I'm wearing my suit—which regulates my body heat—under this outfit and I'm still freezing. I can't imagine what everyone else must be going through right now. I glance at Brendan only to find him already doing the same. Our eyes meet for less than a second but I could swear he smiled at me, his cheeks slapped into pinks and reds by a wind jealous of his wandering eyes.

Blue. So blue.

Such a different, lighter, almost transparent shade of blue but still, so very, very blue. Blue eyes will always remind me of Adam, I think. And it hits me again. Hits me so hard, right in the core of my very being.

The ache.

"Hurry!" Kenji's voice reaches us through the wind, but his body is nowhere in sight. We're not 5 feet from setting foot in the first cluster of compounds, but I'm somehow frozen in place, blood and ice and broken forks running down my back.

"MOVE!" Kenji's voice booms again. "Get close to the compounds and keep your faces covered! Soldiers at three o'clock!"

We all jump up at once, rushing forward while trying to remain inconspicuous and soon we've ducked behind the side of a metal housing unit; we get low, each pretending to be one of the many people picking scraps of steel and iron out from the heaps of trash stacked in piles all over the ground.

The compounds are set in one big field of waste. Garbage and plastic and mangled bits of metal sprinkled like craft confetti all over a child's floor. There's a fine layer of snow powdered over everything, as if the Earth was making a weak attempt to cover up its ugly bits just before we arrived.

I look up.

Look over my shoulder.

Look around in ways I'm not supposed to but I can't help it. I'm supposed to keep my eyes on the ground like I live here, like there's nothing new to see, like I can't stand to lift my face only to have it stung by the cold. I should be huddled into myself like all the other strangers trying to stay warm. But there's so much to see. So much to observe. So much I've never been exposed to before.

So I dare to lift my head.

And the wind grabs me by the throat.

TWENTY

Warner is standing not 20 feet away from me.

His suit is tailor-made and closely fitted to his form in a shade of black so rich it's almost blinding. His shoulders are draped in an open peacoat the color of mossy trunks 5 shades darker than his green, green eyes; the bright gold buttons are the perfect complement to his golden hair. He's wearing a black tie. Black leather gloves. Shiny black boots.

He looks immaculate.

Flawless, especially as he stands here among the dirt and destruction, surrounded by the bleakest colors this landscape has to offer. He's a vision of emerald and onyx, silhouetted in the sunlight in the most deceiving way. He could be glowing. That could be a halo around his head. This could be the world's way of making an example out of irony. Because Warner is beautiful in ways even Adam isn't.

Because Warner is not human.

Nothing about him is normal.

He's looking around, eyes squinting against the morning light, and the wind blows open his unbuttoned coat long enough for me to catch a glimpse of his arm underneath. Bandaged. Bound in a sling.

So close.

I was so close.

The soldiers hovering around him are waiting for orders, waiting for something, and I can't tear my eyes away. I can't help but experience a strange thrill in being so close to him, and yet so far away. It feels almost like an advantage—being able to study him without his knowledge.

He is a strange, strange, twisted boy.

I don't know if I can forget what he did to me. What he made me do. How I came so close to killing all over again. I will hate him forever for it even though I'm sure I'll have to face him again.

One day.

I never thought I'd see Warner on the compounds. I had no idea he even visited the civilians—though, in truth, I never knew much about how he spent

his days unless he spent them with me. I have no idea what he's doing here.

He finally says something to the soldiers and they nod, once, quickly. Then disappear.

I pretend to be focused on something just to the right of him, careful to keep my head down and cocked slightly to the side so he can't catch a glimpse of my face even if he does look in my direction. My left hand reaches up to tug my hat down over my ears, and my right hand pretends to sort trash, pretends to pick out pieces of scraps to salvage for the day.

This is how some people make their living. Another miserable occupation.

Warner runs his good hand over his face, covering his eyes for just a moment before his hand rests on his mouth, pressing against his lips as though he has something he can't bear to say.

His eyes look almost ... worried. Though I'm sure I'm just reading him wrong.

I watch him as he watches the people around him. I watch him closely enough to be able to notice that his gaze lingers on the small children, the way they run after each other with an innocence that says they have no idea what kind of world they've lost. This bleak, dark place is the only thing they've ever known.

I try to read Warner's expression as he studies them, but he's careful to keep himself completely neutral. He doesn't do more than blink as he stands perfectly still, a statue in the wind.

A stray dog is heading straight toward him.

I'm suddenly petrified. I'm worried for this scrappy creature, this weak, frozen little animal probably seeking out small bits of food, something to keep it from starving for the next few hours. My heart starts racing in my chest, the blood pumping too fast and too hard and

I don't know why I feel like something terrible is about to happen.

The dog bolts right into the backs of Warner's legs, as if it's half blind and can't see where it's going. It's panting hard, tongue lolling to the side like it doesn't know how to get it back in. It whines and whimpers a little, slobbering all over Warner's very exquisite pants and I'm holding my breath as the golden boy turns around. I half expect him to take out his gun and shoot the dog right in the head.

I've already seen him do it to a human being.

But Warner's face breaks apart at the sight of the small dog, cracks forming in the perfect cast of his features, surprise lifting his eyebrows and widening his

gaze for just a moment. Long enough for me to notice.

He looks around, his eyes swift as they survey his surroundings before he scoops the animal into his arms and disappears around a low fence—one of the short, squat fences that are used to section off squares of land for each compound. I'm suddenly desperate to see what he's going to do and I'm feeling anxious, so anxious, still unable to breathe.

I've seen what Warner can do to a person. I've seen his callous heart and his unfeeling eyes and his complete indifference, his cool, collected demeanor unshaken after killing a man in cold blood. I can only imagine what he has planned for an innocent dog.

I have to see it for myself.

I have to get his face out of my head and this is exactly what I need. It's proof that he's sick, twisted, that he's wrong, and will always be wrong.

If only I could stand up, I could see him. I could see what he's doing to that poor animal and maybe I could find a way to stop him before it's too late but I hear Castle's voice, a loud whisper calling us. Telling us the coast is clear to move forward now that Warner is out of sight. "We all move, and we move separately," he says. "Stick to the plan! No one trails anyone else. We all meet at the drop-off. If you don't make it, we will leave you behind. You have thirty minutes."

Kenji is tugging on my arm, telling me to get to my feet, to focus, to look in the right direction. I look up long enough to see that the rest of the group has already dispersed; Kenji, however, refuses to budge. He curses under his breath until finally I stand up. I nod. I tell him I understand the plan and motion for him to move on without me. I remind him that we can't be seen together. That we cannot walk in groups or pairs. We cannot be conspicuous.

Finally, finally, he turns to go.

I watch Kenji leave. Then I take a few steps forward only to spin around and dart back to the corner of the compound, sliding my back up against the wall, hidden from view.

My eyes scan the area until I spot the fence where I last saw Warner; I tip up on my toes to peer over.

I have to cover my mouth to keep from gasping out loud.

Warner is crouched on the ground, feeding something to the dog with his good hand. The animal's quivering, bony body is huddled inside of Warner's open coat, shivering as its stubby limbs try to find warmth after being frozen for so long. The dog wags its tail hard, pulling back to look Warner in the eye only

to plow into the warmth of his jacket again. I hear Warner laugh.

I see him smile.

It's the kind of smile that transforms him into someone else entirely, the kind of smile that puts stars in his eyes and a dazzle on his lips and I realize I've never seen him like this before. I've never even seen his teeth—so straight, so white, nothing less than perfect. A flawless, flawless exterior for a boy with a black, black heart. It's hard to believe there's blood on the hands of the person I'm staring at. He looks soft and vulnerable—so human. His eyes are squinting from all his grinning and his cheeks are pink from the cold.

He has *dimples*.

He's easily the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

And I wish I'd never seen it.

Because something inside of my heart is ripping apart and it feels like fear, it tastes like panic and anxiety and desperation and I don't know how to understand the image in front of me. I don't want to see Warner like this. I don't want to think of him as anything other than a monster.

This isn't right.

I shift too fast and too far in the wrong direction, suddenly too stupid to find my footing and hating myself for wasting time I could've used to escape. I know Castle and Kenji would be ready to kill me for taking such a risk but they don't understand what it's like in my head right now, they don't understand what I'm —

“Hey!” he barks. “You there—”

I look up without intending to, without realizing that I've responded to Warner's voice until it's too late. He's up, frozen in place, staring straight into my eyes, his good hand paused midmovement until it falls limp at his side, his jaw slack; stunned, temporarily stupefied.

I watch as the words die in his throat.

I'm paralyzed, caught in his gaze as he stands there, his chest heaving so hard and his lips ready to form the words that will surely sentence me to my death, all because of my stupid, senseless, idiotic—

“Whatever you do, don't scream.”

Someone closes a hand over my mouth.

TWENTY-ONE

I don't move.

"I'm going to let go of you, okay? I want you to take my hand."

I reach out without looking down and feel our gloved hands fit together. Kenji lets go of my face.

"You are such an *idiot*," he says to me, but I'm still staring at Warner. Warner who's now looking around like he's just seen a ghost, blinking and rubbing his eyes like he's confused, glancing at the dog like maybe the little animal managed to bewitch him. He grabs a tight hold of his blond hair, mussing it out of its perfect state, and stalks off so fast my eyes don't know how to follow him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Kenji is saying to me. "Are you even listening to me? Are you *insane*?"

"What did you just do? Why didn't he—oh my God," I gasp, sparing a look at my own body.

I'm completely invisible.

"You're welcome," Kenji snaps, dragging me away from the compound. "And keep your voice down. Being invisible doesn't mean the world can't hear you."

"You can *do* that?" I try to find his face but I might as well be speaking to the air.

"Yeah—it's called projecting, remember? Didn't Castle explain this to you already?" he asks, eager to rush through the explanation so he can get back to yelling at me. "Not everyone can do it—not all abilities are the same—but maybe if you manage to stop being a *dumbass* long enough not to *die*, I might be able to teach you one day."

"You came back for me," I say to him, struggling to keep up with his brisk pace and not at all offended by his anger. "Why'd you come back for me?"

"Because you're a *dumbass*," he says again.

"I know. I'm so sorry. I couldn't help it."

"Well, help it," he says, his voice gruff as he yanks me by the arm. "We're going to have to run to recover all the time you just wasted."

“Why’d you come back, Kenji?” I ask again, undeterred. “How’d you know I was still here?”

“I was watching you,” he says.

“What? What do you—”

“I watch you,” he says, his words rushing out again, impatient. “It’s part of what I do. It’s what I’ve been doing since day one. I enlisted in Warner’s army for you and only you. It’s what Castle sent me for. You were my job.” His voice is clipped, fast, unfeeling. “I already told you this.”

“Wait, what do you mean, you *watch* me?” I hesitate, tugging on his invisible arm to slow him down a little. “You follow me around everywhere? Even now? Even at Omega Point?”

He doesn’t answer right away. When he does, his words are reluctant. “Sort of.”

“But why? I’m here. Your job is done, isn’t it?”

“We’ve already had this conversation,” he says. “Remember? Castle wanted me to make sure you were okay. He told me to keep an eye on you—nothing serious—just, you know, make sure you weren’t having any psychotic breakdowns or anything.” I hear him sigh. “You’ve been through a lot. He’s a little worried about you. Especially now—after what just happened? You don’t look okay. You look like you want to throw yourself in front of a tank.”

“I would never do something like that,” I say to him.

“Yeah,” he says. “Fine. Whatever. I’m just pointing out the obvious. You only function on two settings: you’re either moping or you’re making out with Adam—and I have to say, I kind of prefer the moping—”

“Kenji!” I nearly yank my hand out of his. His grip tightens around my fingers.

“Don’t let go,” he snaps at me again. “You can’t let go or it breaks the connection.” Kenji is dragging me through the middle of a clearing. We’re far enough from the compounds now that we won’t be overheard, but we’re still too far from the drop-off to be considered safe just yet. Luckily the snow isn’t sticking enough for us to leave tracks.

“I can’t believe you spied on us!”

“I was not *spying* on you, okay? Damn. Calm down. Hell, both of you need to calm down. Adam was already all up in my face about it—”

“What?” I feel the pieces of this puzzle finally beginning to fit together. “Is that why he was being mean to you at breakfast last week?”

Kenji slows our pace a little. He takes a deep, long breath. “He thought I

was, like, taking *advantage* of the situation.” He says *advantage* like it’s a strange, dirty word. “He thinks I get invisible just to see you naked or something. Listen—I don’t even know, okay? He was being an idiot about it. I’m just doing my job.”

“But—you’re not, right? You’re not trying to see me naked or anything?”

Kenji snorts, chokes on his laughter. “Listen, Juliette,” he says through another laugh, “I’m not blind, okay? On a purely physical level? Yeah, you’re pretty sexy—and that suit you have to wear all the time doesn’t hurt. But even if you didn’t have that whole ‘I kill you if I touch you’ thing going on, you are *definitely* not my type. And more importantly, I’m not some perverted asshole,” he says. “I take my job seriously. I get real shit done in this world, and I like to think people respect me for it. But your boy Adam is a little too blinded by his pants to think straight. Maybe you should do something about that.”

I drop my eyes. Say nothing for a moment. Then: “I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that anymore.”

“Ah, shit.” Kenji sighs, like he can’t believe he got stuck listening to problems about my love life. “I just walked right into that, didn’t I?”

“We can go, Kenji. We don’t have to talk about this.”

An irritated breath. “It’s not that I don’t *care* about what you’re going through,” he says. “It’s not like I want to see you all depressed or whatever. It’s just that this life is messed up enough as it is,” he says. “And I’m sick of you being so caught up in your own little world all the time. You act like this whole thing—everything we do—is a joke. You don’t take any of it seriously—”

“What?” I cut him off. “That’s not true—I do take this seriously—”

“*Bullshit.*” He laughs a short, sharp, angry laugh. “All you do is sit around and think about your *feelings*. You’ve got *problems*. Boo-freaking-hoo,” he says. “Your parents hate you and it’s so hard but you have to wear gloves for the rest of your life because you kill people when you touch them. Who *gives* a shit?” He’s breathing hard enough for me to hear him. “As far as I can tell, you’ve got food in your mouth and clothes on your back and a place to pee in peace whenever you feel like it. Those aren’t problems. That’s called living like a king. And I’d really appreciate it if you’d grow the hell up and stop walking around like the world crapped on your only roll of toilet paper. Because it’s stupid,” he says, barely reining in his temper. “It’s stupid, and it’s ungrateful. You don’t have a clue what everyone else in the world is going through right now. You don’t have a clue, Juliette. And you don’t seem to give a damn, either.”

I swallow, so hard.

“Now I am *trying*,” he says, “to give you a chance to fix things. I keep giving you opportunities to do things differently. To see past the sad little girl you used to be—the sad little girl you keep clinging to—and stand up for yourself. Stop crying. Stop sitting in the dark counting out all your individual feelings about how sad and lonely you are. Wake up,” he says. “You’re not the only person in this world who doesn’t want to get out of bed in the morning. You’re not the only one with daddy issues and severely screwed-up DNA. You can be whoever the hell you want to be now. You’re not with your shitty parents anymore. You’re not in that shitty asylum, and you’re no longer stuck being Warner’s shitty little experiment. So make a choice,” he says. “Make a choice and stop wasting everyone’s time. Stop wasting your own time. Okay?”

Shame is pooling in every inch of my body.

Heat has flamed its way up my core, singeing me from the inside out. I’m so horrified, so terrified to hear the truth in his words.

“Let’s go,” he says, but his voice is just a tiny bit gentler. “We have to run.”

And I nod even though he can’t see me.

I nod and nod and nod and I’m so happy no one can see my face right now.

TWENTY-TWO

“Stop throwing boxes at me, jackass. That’s my job.” Winston laughs and grabs a package heavily bandaged in cellophane only to chuck it at another guy’s head. The guy standing right next to me.

I duck.

The other guy grunts as he catches the package, and then grins as he offers Winston an excellent view of his middle finger.

“Keep it classy, Sanchez,” Winston says as he tosses him another package.

Sanchez. His name is Ian Sanchez. I just learned this a few minutes ago when he and I and a few others were grouped together to form an assembly line.

We are currently standing in one of the official storage compounds of The Reestablishment.

Kenji and I managed to catch up to everyone else just in time. We all congregated at the drop-off (which turned out to be little more than a glorified ditch), and then Kenji gave me a sharp look, pointed at me, grinned, and left me with the rest of the group while he and Castle communicated about the next part of our mission.

Which was getting into the storage compound.

The irony, however, is that we traveled aboveground for supplies only to have to go back underground to get them. The storage compounds are, for all intents and purposes, invisible.

They’re underground cellars filled with just about everything imaginable: food, medicine, weapons. All the things needed to survive. Castle explained everything in our orientation this morning. He said that while having supplies buried underground is a clever method of concealment against the civilians, it actually worked out in his favor. Castle said he can sense—and move—objects from a great distance, even if that distance is 25 feet belowground. He said that when he approaches one of the storage facilities he can feel the difference immediately, because he can recognize the energy in each object. This, he explained, is what allows him to move things with his mind: he’s able to touch the inherent energy in everything. Castle and Kenji have managed to track down 5 compounds within 20 miles of Omega Point just by walking around; Castle

sensing, Kenji projecting to keep them invisible. They've located 5 more within 50 miles.

The storage compounds they access are on a rotation. They never take the same things and never in the same quantity, and they take from as many different facilities as possible. The farther the compound, the more intricate the mission becomes. This particular compound is closest, and therefore the mission is, relatively speaking, the easiest. That explains why I was allowed to come along.

All the legwork has already been done.

Brendan already knows how to confuse the electrical system in order to deactivate all the sensors and security cameras; Kenji acquired the pass code simply by shadowing a soldier who punched in the right numbers. All of this gives us a 30-minute window of time to work as quickly as possible to get everything we need into the drop-off, where we'll spend most of the day waiting to load our stolen supplies into vehicles that will carry the items away.

The system they use is fascinating.

There are 6 vans altogether, each slightly different in appearance, and all scheduled to arrive at different times. This way there are fewer chances of everyone being caught, and there's a higher probability that at least 1 of the vans will get back to Omega Point without a problem. Castle outlined what seemed like 100 different contingency plans in case of danger.

I'm the only one here, however, who appears even remotely nervous about what we're doing. In fact, with the exception of me and 3 others, everyone here has visited this particular compound several times, so they're walking around like it's familiar territory. Everyone is careful and efficient, but they feel comfortable enough to laugh and joke around, too. They know exactly what they're doing. The moment we got inside, they split themselves into 2 groups: 1 team formed the assembly line, and the other collected the things we need.

Others have more important tasks.

Lily has a photographic memory that puts photographs to shame. She walked in before the rest of us and immediately scanned the room, collecting and cataloging every minute detail. She's the one who will make sure that we leave nothing behind when we exit, and that, aside from the things we take, nothing else is missing or out of place. Brendan is our backup generator. He's managed to shut off power to the security system while still lighting the dark dimensions of this room. Winston is overseeing our 2 groups, mediating between the givers and the takers, making sure we're securing the right items and the right

quantities. His arms and legs have the elastic ability to stretch at will, which enables him to reach both sides of the room quickly and easily.

Castle is the one who moves our supplies outside. He stands at the very end of the assembly line, in constant radio contact with Kenji. And as long as the area is clear, Castle needs to use only one hand to direct the hundreds of pounds of supplies we've hoarded into the drop-off.

Kenji, of course, is standing as lookout.

If it weren't for Kenji, the rest of this wouldn't even be possible. He's our invisible eyes and ears. Without him, we'd have no way of being so secure, so sure that we'll be safe on such a dangerous mission.

Not for the first time today, I'm beginning to realize why he's so important.

"Hey, Winston, can you get someone to check if they have any chocolate in here?" Emory—another guy on my assembly team—is smiling at Winston like he's hoping for good news. But then, Emory is always smiling. I've only known him for a few hours, but he's been smiling since 6:00 a.m., when we all met in the orientation room this morning. He's super tall, super bulky, and he has a super-huge afro that somehow manages to fall into his eyes a lot. He's moving boxes down the line like they're full of cotton.

Winston is shaking his head, trying not to laugh as he passes the question along. "Seriously?" He shoots a look at Emory, nudging his plastic glasses up his nose at the same time. "Of all the things in here, you want *chocolate*?"

Emory's smile vanishes. "Shut up, man, you know my mom loves that stuff."

"You say that every time."

"That's because it's true every time."

Winston says something to someone about grabbing another box of soap before turning back to Emory. "You know, I don't think I've ever seen your mom eat a piece of chocolate before."

Emory tells Winston to do something very inappropriate with his preternaturally flexible limbs, and I glance down at the box Ian has just handed to me, pausing to study the packaging carefully before passing it on.

"Hey, do you know why these are all stamped with the letters *R N W*?"

Ian turns around. Stunned. Looks at me like I've just asked him to take his clothes off. "Well, I'll be damned," he says. "She speaks."

"Of course I speak," I say, no longer interested in speaking at all.

Ian passes me another box. Shrugs. "Well, now I know."

"Now you do."

"The mystery has been solved."

“You really didn’t think I could speak?” I ask after a moment. “Like, you thought I was mute?” I wonder what other things people are saying about me around here.

Ian looks over his shoulder at me, smiles like he’s trying not to laugh. Shakes his head and doesn’t answer me. “The stamp,” he says, “is just regulation. They stamp everything RNW so they can track it. It’s nothing fancy.”

“But what does RNW mean? Who’s stamping it?”

“RNW,” he says, repeating the 3 letters like I’m supposed to recognize them. “Reestablished Nations of the World. Everything’s gone global, you know. They all trade commodities. And that,” he says, “is something no one really knows. It’s another reason why the whole Reestablishment thing is a pile of crap. They’ve monopolized the resources of the entire planet and they’re just keeping it all for themselves.”

I remember some of this. I remember talking to Adam about this when he and I were locked in the asylum together. ~~Back before I knew what it was like to touch him. To be with him. To hurt him.~~ The Reestablishment has always been a global movement. I just didn’t realize it had a name.

“Right,” I say to Ian, suddenly distracted. “Of course.”

Ian pauses as he hands me another package. “So is it true?” he asks, studying my face. “That you really have no clue what’s happened to everything?”

“I know some things.” I bristle. “I’m just not clear on all the details.”

“Well,” Ian says, “if you still remember how to speak when we get back to Point, maybe you should join us at lunch sometime. We can fill you in.”

“Really?” I turn to face him.

“Yeah, kid.” He laughs, tosses me another box. “Really. We don’t bite.”

TWENTY-THREE

Sometimes I wonder about glue.

No one ever stops to ask glue how it's holding up. If it's tired of sticking things together or worried about falling apart or wondering how it will pay its bills next week.

Kenji is kind of like that.

He's like glue. He works behind the scenes to keep things together and I've never stopped to think about what his story might be. Why he hides behind the jokes and the snark and the snide remarks.

But he was right. Everything he said to me was right.

Yesterday was a good idea. I needed to get away, to get out, to be productive. And now I need to take Kenji's advice and get over myself. I need to get my head straight. I need to focus on my priorities. I need to figure out what I'm doing here and how I can help. And if I care at all about Adam, I'll try to stay out of his life.

Part of me wishes I could see him; I want to make sure he's really going to be okay, that he's recovering well and eating enough and getting sleep at night. But another part of me is afraid to see him now. Because seeing Adam means saying good-bye. It means really recognizing that I can't be with him anymore and knowing that I have to find a new life for myself. Alone.

But at least at Omega Point I'll have options. And maybe if I can find a way to stop being scared, I'll actually figure out how to make friends. To be strong. To stop wallowing in my own problems.

Things have to be different now.

I grab my food and manage to lift my head; I nod hello to the faces I recognize from yesterday. Not everyone knows about my being on the trip—the invitations to go on missions outside of Omega Point are exclusive—but people, in general, seem to be a little less tense around me. I think.

I might be imagining it.

I try to find a place to sit down but then I see Kenji waving me over. Brendan and Winston and Emory are sitting at his table. I feel a smile tug at my lips as I approach them.

Brendan scoots over on the bench seat to make room for me. Winston and Emory nod hello as they shovel food into their mouths. Kenji shoots me a half smile, his eyes laughing at my surprise to be welcomed at his table.

I'm feeling okay. Like maybe things are going to be okay.

"Juliette?"

And suddenly I'm going to tip over.

I turn very, very slowly, half convinced that the voice I'm hearing belongs to a ghost, because there's no way Adam could've been released from the medical wing so soon. I wasn't expecting to have to face him so soon. I didn't think we'd have to have this talk so soon. Not here. Not in the middle of the dining hall.

I'm not prepared. I'm not *prepared*.

Adam looks terrible. He's pale. Unsteady. His hands are stuffed in his pockets and his lips are pressed together and his eyes are weary, tortured, deep and bottomless wells. His hair is messy. His T-shirt is straining across his chest, his tattooed forearms more pronounced than ever.

I want nothing more than to dive into his arms.

Instead, I'm sitting here, reminding myself to breathe.

"Can I talk to you?" he says, looking like he's half afraid to hear my answer. "Alone?"

I nod, still unable to speak. Abandon my food without looking back at Kenji or Winston or Brendan or Emory so I have no idea what they must be thinking right now. I don't even care.

Adam.

Adam is here and he's in front of me and he wants to talk to me and I have to tell him things that will surely be the death of me.

But I follow him out the door anyway. Into the hall. Down a dark corridor.

Finally we stop.

Adam looks at me like he knows what I'm going to say so I don't bother saying it. I don't want to say anything unless it becomes absolutely necessary. I'd rather just stand here and stare at him, shamelessly drink in the sight of him one last time without having to speak a word. Without having to say anything at all.

He swallows, hard. Looks up. Looks away. Blows out a breath and rubs the back of his neck, clasps both hands behind his head and turns around so I can't see his face. But the effort causes his shirt to ride up his torso and I have to actually clench my fingers to keep from touching the sliver of skin exposed low on his abdomen, his lower back.

He's still looking away from me when he says, "I really—I really need you to say something." And the sound of his voice—so wretched, so agonized—makes me want to fall to my knees.

Still, I do not speak.

And he turns.

Faces me.

"There has to be something," he says, his hands in his hair now, gripping his skull. "Some kind of compromise—something I can say to convince you to make this work. Tell me there's *something*."

And I'm so scared. So scared I'm going to start sobbing in front of him.

"Please," he says, and he looks like he's about to crack, like he's done, like this is it he's about to fall apart and he says, "say something, I'm begging you —"

I bite my trembling lip.

He freezes in place, watching me, waiting.

"Adam," I breathe, trying to keep my voice steady. "I will always, a-always love you—"

"No," he says. "No, don't say that—don't say that—"

And I'm shaking my head, shaking it fast and hard, so hard it's making me dizzy but I can't stop. I can't say another word unless I want to start screaming and I can't look at his face, I can't bear to see what I'm doing to him—

"No, Juliette—*Juliette*—"

I'm backing away, stumbling, tripping over my own feet as I reach blindly for the wall when I feel his arms around me. I try to pull away but he's too strong, he's holding me too tight and his voice is choked when he says, "It was my fault—this is my fault—I shouldn't have kissed you—you tried to tell me but I didn't listen and I'm so—I'm so sorry," he says, gasping the words. "I should've listened to you. I wasn't strong enough. But it'll be different this time, I swear," he says, burying his face in my shoulder. "I'll never forgive myself for this. You were willing to give it a shot and I screwed everything up and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—"

I have officially, absolutely collapsed inside.

I hate myself for what happened, hate myself for what I have to do, hate that I can't take his pain away, that I can't tell him we can try, that it'll be hard but we'll make it work anyway. Because this isn't a normal relationship. Because our problems aren't fixable.

Because my skin will never change.

All the training in the world won't remove the very real possibility that I could hurt him. Kill him, if we ever got carried away. I will always be a threat to him. Especially during the most tender moments, the most important, vulnerable moments. The moments I want most. Those are the things I can never have with him, and he deserves so much more than me, than this tortured person with so little to offer.

But I'd rather stand here and feel his arms around me than say a single thing. Because I'm weak, I'm so weak and I want him so much it's killing me. I can't stop shaking, I can't see straight, I can't see through the curtain of tears obscuring my vision.

And he won't let go of me.

He keeps whispering "Please" and I want to die.

But I think if I stay here any longer I will actually go insane.

So I raise a trembling hand to his chest and feel him stiffen, pull back, and I don't dare look at his eyes, I can't stand to see him looking hopeful, even if it's for only a second.

I take advantage of his momentary surprise and slackened arms to slip away, out of the shelter of his warmth, away from his beating heart. And I hold out my hand to stop him from reaching for me again.

"Adam," I whisper. "Please don't. I can't—I c-can't—"

"There's never been anyone else," he says, not bothering to keep his voice down anymore, not caring that his words are echoing through these tunnels. His hand is shaking as he covers his mouth, as he drags it across his face, through his hair. "There's never going to be anyone else—I'm never going to want anyone else—"

"Stop it—you have to stop—" I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't *breathe* "You don't want this—you don't want to be with someone like me—someone who will only end up h-hurting you—"

"*Dammit*, Juliette"—he turns to slam his palms against the wall, his chest heaving, his head down, his voice broken, catching on every other syllable—"you're hurting me *now*," he says. "You're *killing* me—"

"Adam—"

"Don't walk away," he says, his voice tight, his eyes squeezed shut like he already knows I'm going to. Like he can't bear to see it happen. "Please," he whispers, tormented. "Don't walk away from this."

"I-I wish," I tell him, shaking violently now, "I wish I d-didn't have to. I wish I could love you less."

And I hear him call after me as I bolt down the corridor. I hear him shouting my name but I'm running, running away, running past the huge crowd gathered outside the dining hall, watching, listening to everything. I'm running to hide even though I know it will be impossible.

I will have to see him every single day.

Wanting him from a million miles away.

And I remember Kenji's words, his demands for me to wake up and stop crying and make a change, and I realize fulfilling my new promises might take a little longer than I expected.

Because I can't think of anything I'd rather do right now than find a dark corner and cry.

TWENTY-FOUR

Kenji finds me first.

He's standing in the middle of my training room. Looking around like he's never seen the place before, even though I'm sure that can't be true. I still don't know exactly what he does, but it's at least become clear to me that Kenji is one of the most important people at Omega Point. He's always on the move. Always busy. No one—except for me, and only lately—really sees him for more than a few moments at a time.

It's almost as if he spends the majority of his days ... invisible.

"So," he says, nodding his head slowly, taking his time walking around the room with his hands clasped behind his back. "That was one hell of a show back there. That's the kind of entertainment we never really get underground."

Mortification.

I'm draped in it. Painted in it. Buried in it.

"I mean, I just have to say—that last line? 'I wish I could love you less'? That was genius. Really, really nice. I think Winston actually shed a tear—"

"SHUT UP, KENJI."

"I'm serious!" he says to me, offended. "That was, I don't know. It was kind of beautiful. I had no idea you guys were so intense."

I pull my knees up to my chest, burrow deeper into the corner of this room, bury my face in my arms. "No offense, but I really don't want to t-talk to you right now, okay?"

"Nope. Not okay," he says. "You and me, we have work to do."

"No."

"Come on," he says. "Get. *Up*." He grabs my elbow, tugging me to my feet as I try to take a swipe at him.

I wipe angrily at my cheeks, scrub at the stains my tears left behind. "I'm not in the mood for your jokes, Kenji. Please just go away. Leave me alone."

"No one," he says, "is joking." Kenji picks up one of the bricks stacked against the wall. "And the world isn't going to stop waging war against itself just because you broke up with your boyfriend."

I stare at him, fists shaking, wanting to scream.

He doesn't seem concerned. "So what do you do in here?" he asks. "You just sit around trying to ... what?" He weighs the brick in his hand. "Break this stuff?"

I give up, defeated. Fold myself onto the floor.

"I don't know," I tell him. I sniff away the last of my tears. Try to wipe my nose. "Castle kept telling me to 'focus' and 'harness my Energy.'" I use air quotes to illustrate my point. "But all I know about myself is that I *can* break things—I don't know why it happens. So I don't know how he expects me to replicate what I've already done. I had no idea what I was doing then, and I don't know what I'm doing now, either. Nothing's changed."

"Hold up," Kenji says, dropping the brick back onto the stack before falling on the mats across from me. He splays out on the ground, body stretched out, arms folded behind his head as he stares up at the ceiling. "What are we talking about again? What events are you supposed to be replicating?"

I lie back against the mats, too; mimic Kenji's position. Our heads are only a few inches apart. "Remember? The concrete I broke back in Warner's psycho room. The metal door I attacked when I was looking for A-Adam." My voice catches and I have to squeeze my eyes shut to quell the pain.

~~I can't even say his name right now.~~

Kenji grunts. I feel him nodding his head on the mats. "All right. Well, what Castle told me is that he thinks there's more to you than just the touching thing. That maybe you also have this weird superhuman strength or something." A pause. "That sound about right to you?"

"I guess."

"So what happened?" he asks, tilting his head back to get a good look at me. "When you went all psycho-monster on everything? Do you remember if there was a trigger?"

I shake my head. "I don't really know. When it happens, it's like—it's like I really am completely out of my mind," I tell him. "Something changes in my head and it makes me ... it makes me crazy. Like, really, legitimately insane." I glance over at him but his face betrays no emotion. He just blinks, waiting for me to finish. So I take a deep breath and continue. "It's like I can't think straight. I'm just so paralyzed by the adrenaline and I can't stop it; I can't control it. Once that crazy feeling takes over, it *needs* an outlet. I have to touch something. I have to release it."

Kenji props himself up on one elbow. Looks at me. "So what gets you all crazy, though?" he asks. "What were you feeling? Does it only happen when

you're really pissed off?"

I take a second to think about it before I say, "No. Not always." I hesitate. "The first time," I tell him, my voice a little unsteady, "I wanted to kill Warner because of what he made me do to that little kid. I was so devastated. I was angry—I was *really* angry—but I was also ... so sad." I trail off. "And then when I was looking for Adam?" Deep breaths. "I was desperate. Really desperate. I had to save him."

"And what about when you went all Superman on me? Slamming me into the wall like that?"

"I was scared."

"And then? In the research labs?"

"Angry," I whisper, my eyes unfocused as I stare up at the ceiling, remembering the rage of that day. "I was angrier than I've ever been in my entire life. I never even knew I could feel that way. To be so mad. And I felt guilty," I add, so quietly. "Guilty for being the reason why Adam was in there at all."

Kenji takes a deep, long breath. Pulls himself up into a sitting position and leans against the wall. He says nothing.

"What are you thinking ...?" I ask, shifting to sit up and join him.

"I don't know," Kenji finally says. "But it's obvious that all of these incidents were the result of really intense emotions. Makes me think the whole system must be pretty straightforward."

"What do you mean?"

"Like there has to be some kind of trigger involved," he says. "Like, when you lose control, your body goes into automatic self-protect mode, you know?"

"No?"

Kenji turns so he's facing me. Crosses his legs underneath him. Leans back on his hands. "Like, listen. When I first found out I could do this invisible thing? I mean, it was an accident. I was nine years old. Scared out of my mind. Fast-forward through all the shitty details and my point is this: I needed a place to hide and couldn't find one. But I was so freaked out that my body, like, automatically did it for me. I just disappeared into the wall. Blended or whatever." He laughs. "Tripped me the hell out, because I didn't realize what'd happened for a good ten minutes. And then I didn't know how to turn myself back to normal. It was crazy. I actually thought I was dead for a couple of days."

"No way," I gasp.

"Yup."

"That's *crazy*."

“That’s what I said.”

“So ... so, what? You think my body taps into its defense mode when I freak out?”

“Pretty much.”

“Okay.” I think. “Well, how am I supposed to tap into my defense mode? How did you figure yours out?”

He shrugs. “Once I realized I wasn’t some kind of ghost and I wasn’t hallucinating, it actually became kind of cool. I was a kid, you know? I was excited, like I could tie on a cape and kill bad guys or something. I liked it. And it became this part of me that I could access whenever I wanted. But,” he adds, “it wasn’t until I really started training that I learned how to control and maintain it for long periods of time. That took a lot of work. A lot of focus.”

“A lot of work.”

“Yeah—I mean, all of this takes a lot of work to figure out. But once I accepted it as a part of me, it became easier to manage.”

“Well,” I say, leaning back again, blowing out an exasperated breath, “I’ve already accepted it. But it definitely hasn’t made things easier.”

Kenji laughs out loud. “My ass you’ve accepted it. You haven’t accepted anything.”

“I’ve been like this my entire *life*, Kenji—I’m pretty sure I’ve accepted it—”

“No.” He cuts me off. “*Hell* no. You hate being in your own skin. You can’t stand it. That’s not called acceptance. That’s called—I don’t know—the opposite of acceptance. You,” he says, pointing a finger at me, “you are the *opposite* of acceptance.”

“What are you trying to say?” I shoot back. “That I have to *like* being this way?” I don’t give him a chance to respond before I say, “You have no *idea* what it’s like to be stuck in my skin—to be trapped in my body, afraid to breathe too close to anything with a beating heart. If you did, you’d never ask me to be *happy* to live like this.”

“Come on, Juliette—I’m just saying—”

“No. Let me make this clear for you, Kenji. I *kill* people. I *kill* them. That’s what my ‘special’ power is. I don’t blend into backgrounds or move things with my mind or have really stretchy arms. You touch me for too long and you *die*. Try living like that for seventeen years and then tell me how easy it is to accept myself.”

I taste too much bitterness on my tongue.

It’s new for me.

“Listen,” he says, his voice noticeably softer. “I’m not trying to judge, okay? I’m just trying to point out that because you don’t *want* it, you might subconsciously be sabotaging your efforts to figure it out.” He puts his hands up in mock defeat. “Just my two cents. I mean, obviously you’ve got some crazy powers going on. You touch people and bam, done. But then you can crush through walls and shit, too? I mean, hell, I’d want to learn how to do *that*, are you kidding me? That would be insane.”

“Yeah,” I say, slumping against the wall. “I guess that part wouldn’t be so bad.”

“Right?” Kenji perks up. “That would be awesome. And then—you know, if you leave your gloves on—you could just crush random stuff without actually killing anyone. Then you wouldn’t feel so bad, right?”

“I guess not.”

“So. Great. You just need to relax.” He gets to his feet. Grabs the brick he was toying with earlier. “Come on,” he says. “Get up. Come over here.”

I walk over to his side of the room and stare at the brick he’s holding. He gives it to me like he’s handing over some kind of family heirloom. “Now,” he says. “You have to let yourself get comfortable, okay? Allow your body to touch base with its core. Stop blocking your own Energy. You’ve probably got a million mental blocks in your head. You can’t hold back anymore.”

“I don’t have *mental blocks*—”

“Yeah you do.” He snorts. “You definitely do. You have severe mental constipation.”

“Mental *what*—”

“Focus your anger on the brick. On the *brick*,” he says to me. “Remember. Open mind. You *want* to crush the brick. Remind yourself that this is what you want. It’s *your* choice. You’re not doing this for Castle, you’re not doing it for me, you’re not doing it to fight anyone. This is just something you feel like doing. For fun. Because you feel like it. Let your mind and body take over. Okay?”

I take a deep breath. Nod a few times. “Okay. I think I’m—”

“Holy *shit*.” He lets out a low whistle.

“What?” I spin around. “What happened—”

“How did you not just feel that?”

“Feel what—”

“Look in your hand!”

I gasp. Stumble backward. My hand is full of what looks like red sand and

brown clay pulverized into tiny particles. The bigger chunks of brick crumble to the floor and I let the debris slip through the cracks between my fingers only to lift the guilty hand to my face.

I look up.

Kenji is shaking his head, shaking with laughter. “I am so jealous right now you have no idea.”

“Oh my God.”

“I know. I KNOW. So badass. Now think about it: if you can do that to a *brick*, imagine what you could do to the human *body*—”

That wasn’t the right thing to say.

Not now. Not after Adam. Not after trying to pick up the pieces of my hopes and dreams and fumbling to glue them back together. Because now there’s nothing left. Because now I realize that somewhere, deep down, I was harboring a small hope that Adam and I would find a way to work things out.

Somewhere, deep down, I was still clinging to possibility.

And now that’s gone.

Because now it’s not just my skin Adam has to be afraid of. It’s not just my touch but my grip, my hugs, my hands, a kiss—anything I do could injure him. I’d have to be careful just holding his *hand*. And this new knowledge, this new information about just exactly how deadly I am—

It leaves me with no alternative.

I will forever and ever and ever be alone because no one is safe from me.

I fall to the floor, my mind whirring, my own brain no longer a safe space to inhabit because I can’t stop thinking, I can’t stop wondering, I can’t stop anything and it’s like I’m caught in what could be a head-on collision and I’m not the innocent bystander.

I’m the train.

I’m the one careening out of control.

Because sometimes you see yourself—you see yourself the way you *could* be—the way you *might* be if things were different. And if you look too closely, what you see will scare you, it’ll make you wonder what you might do if given the opportunity. You know there’s a different side of yourself you don’t want to recognize, a side you don’t want to see in the daylight. You spend your whole life doing everything to push it down and away, out of sight, out of mind. You pretend that a piece of yourself doesn’t exist.

You live like that for a long time.

For a long time, you’re safe.

And then you're not.

TWENTY-FIVE

Another morning.

Another meal.

I'm headed to breakfast to meet Kenji before our next training session.

He came to a conclusion about my abilities yesterday: he thinks that the inhuman power in my touch is just an evolved form of my Energy. That skin-to-skin contact is simply the rawest form of my ability—that my true gift is actually a kind of all-consuming strength that manifests itself in every part of my body.

My bones, my blood, my skin.

I told him it was an interesting theory. I told him I'd always seen myself as some sick version of a Venus flytrap and he said, "OH MY GOD. Yes. YES. You are exactly like that. Holy shit, yes."

Beautiful enough to lure in your prey, he said.

Strong enough to clamp down and destroy, he said.

Poisonous enough to digest your victims when the flesh makes contact.

"You *digest* your prey," he said to me, laughing as though it was amusing, as though it was funny, as if it was perfectly acceptable to compare a girl to a carnivorous plant. Flattering, even. "Right? You said that when you touch people, it's, like, you're taking their energy, right? It makes you feel stronger?"

I didn't respond.

"So you're *exactly* like a Venus flytrap. You reel 'em in. Clamp 'em down. Eat 'em up."

I didn't respond.

"Mmmmmmm," he said. "You're like a sexy, super-scary plant."

I closed my eyes. Covered my mouth in horror.

"Why is that so wrong?" he said. Bent down to meet my gaze. Tugged on a lock of my hair to get me to look up. "Why does this have to be so horrible? Why can't you see how *awesome* this is?" He shook his head at me. "You are seriously missing out, you know that? This could be so cool if you would just own it."

Own it.

Yes.

How easy it would be to just clamp down on the world around me. Suck up its life force and leave it dead in the street just because someone tells me I should. Because someone points a finger and says “Those are the bad guys. Those men over there.” Kill, they say. Kill because you trust us. Kill because you’re fighting for the right team. Kill because they’re bad, and we’re good. Kill because we tell you to. Because some people are so stupid that they actually think there are thick neon lines separating good and evil. That it’s easy to make that kind of distinction and go to sleep at night with a clear conscience. Because it’s okay.

It’s okay to kill a man if someone else deems him unfit to live.

What I really want to say is who the hell are you and who are you to decide who gets to die. Who are you to decide who should be killed. Who are you to tell me which father I should destroy and which child I should orphan and which mother should be left without her son, which brother should be left without a sister, which grandmother should spend the rest of her life crying in the early hours of the morning because the body of her grandchild was buried in the ground before her own.

What I really want to say is who the hell do you think you are to tell me that it’s awesome to be able to kill a living thing, that it’s interesting to be able to ensnare another soul, that it’s fair to choose a victim simply because I’m capable of killing without a gun. I want to say mean things and angry things and hurtful things and I want to throw expletives in the air and run far, far away; I want to disappear into the horizon and I want to dump myself on the side of the road if only it will bring me toward some semblance of freedom but I don’t know where to go. I have nowhere else to go.

And I feel responsible.

Because there are times when the anger bleeds away until it’s nothing but a raw ache in the pit of my stomach and I see the world and wonder about its people and what it’s become and I think about hope and maybe and possibly and possibility and potential. I think about glasses half full and glasses to see the world clearly. I think about sacrifice. And compromise. I think about what will happen if no one fights back. I think about a world where no one stands up to injustice.

And I wonder if maybe everyone here is right.

If maybe it’s time to fight.

I wonder if it’s ever actually possible to justify killing as a means to an end and then I think of Kenji. I think of what he said. And I wonder if he would still

call it awesome if I decided to make *him* my prey.

I'm guessing not.

TWENTY-SIX

Kenji is already waiting for me.

He and Winston and Brendan are sitting at the same table again, and I slide into my seat with a distracted nod and eyes that refuse to focus in front of me.

“He’s not here,” Kenji says, shoving a spoonful of breakfast into his mouth.

“What?” Oh how fascinating look at this fork and this spoon and this table. “What do y—”

“Not here,” he says, his mouth still half full of food.

Winston clears his throat, scratches the back of his head. Brendan shifts in his seat beside me.

“Oh. I—I, um—” Heat flushes up my neck as I look around at the 3 guys sitting at this table. I want to ask Kenji where Adam is, why he isn’t here, how he’s doing, if he’s okay, if he’s been eating regularly. I want to ask a million questions I shouldn’t be asking but it’s blatantly clear that none of them want to talk about the awkward details of my personal life. And I don’t want to be that sad, pathetic girl. I don’t want pity. I don’t want to see the uncomfortable sympathy in their eyes.

So I sit up. Clear my throat.

“What’s going on with the patrols?” I ask Winston. “Is it getting any worse?”

Winston looks up midchew, surprised. He swallows down the food too quickly and coughs once, twice. Takes a sip of his coffee—tar black—and leans forward, looking eager. “It’s getting weirder,” he says.

“Really?”

“Yeah, so, remember how I told you guys that Warner was showing up every night?”

~~Warner. I can’t get the image of his smiling, laughing face out of my head.~~

We nod.

“Well.” He leans back in his chair. Holds up his hands. “Last night? Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Brendan’s eyebrows are high on his forehead. “What do you mean, nothing?”

“I mean no one was there.” He shrugs. Picks up his fork. Stabs at a piece of

food. “Not Warner, not a single soldier. Night before last?” He looks around at us. “Fifty, maybe seventy-five soldiers. Last night, zero.”

“Did you tell Castle about this?” Kenji isn’t eating anymore. He’s staring at Winston with a focused, too-serious look on his face. It’s worrying me.

“Yeah.” Winston nods as he takes another sip of his coffee. “I turned in my report about an hour ago.”

“You mean you haven’t gone to sleep yet?” I ask, eyes wide.

“I slept yesterday,” he says, waving a haphazard hand at me. “Or the day before yesterday. I can’t remember. God, this coffee is disgusting,” he says, gulping it down.

“Right. Maybe you should lay off the coffee, yeah?” Brendan tries to grab Winston’s cup.

Winston slaps at his hand, shoots him a dark look. “Not all of us have electricity running through our veins,” he says. “I’m not a freaking powerhouse of energy like you are.”

“I only did that once—”

“Twice!”

“—and it was an emergency,” he says, looking a little sheepish.

“What are you guys talking about?” I ask.

“This guy”—Kenji jerks a thumb at Brendan—“can, like, *literally* recharge his own body. He doesn’t need to sleep. It’s insane.”

“It’s not fair,” Winston mutters, ripping a piece of bread in half.

I turn to Brendan, jaw unhinged. “No way.”

He nods. Shrugs. “I’ve only done it once.”

“Twice!” Winston says again. “And he’s a freaking fetus,” he says to me. “He’s already got way too much energy as it is—shit, all of you kids do—and yet he’s the one who comes with a rechargeable battery life.”

“I am not a *fetus*,” Brendan says, spluttering, glancing at me as heat colors his cheeks. “He’s—that’s not—you’re *mad*,” he says, glaring at Winston.

“Yeah,” Winston says, nodding, his mouth full of food again. “I am mad. I’m pissed off.” He swallows. “And I’m cranky as hell because I’m tired. And I’m hungry. And I need more coffee.” He shoves away from the table. Stands up. “I’m going to go get more coffee.”

“I thought you said it was disgusting.”

He levels a look at me. “Yes, but I am a sad, sad man with very low standards.”

“It’s true,” Brendan says.

“Shut up, fetus.”

“You’re only allowed one cup,” Kenji points out, looking up to meet Winston’s eyes.

“Don’t worry, I always tell them I’m taking yours,” he says, and stalks off.

Kenji is laughing, shoulders shaking.

Brendan is mumbling “I am *not* a fetus” under his breath, stabbing at his food with renewed vigor.

“How old *are* you?” I ask, curious. He’s so white-blond and pale-blue-eyed that he doesn’t seem real. He looks like the kind of person who could never age, who would remain forever preserved in this ethereal form.

“Twenty-four,” he says, looking grateful for a chance at validation. “Just turned twenty-four, actually. Had my birthday last week.”

“Oh, wow.” I’m surprised. He doesn’t look much older than 18. I wonder what it must be like to celebrate a birthday at Omega Point. “Well, happy birthday,” I say, smiling at him. “I hope—I hope you have a very good year. And”—I try to think of something nice to say—“and a lot of happy days.”

He’s staring back at me now, amused, looking straight into my eyes. Grinning. He says, “Thanks.” Smiles a bit wider. “Thanks very much.” And he doesn’t look away.

My face is hot.

I’m struggling to understand why he’s still smiling at me, why he doesn’t stop smiling even when he finally looks away, why Kenji keeps glancing at me like he’s trying to hold in a laugh and I’m flustered, feeling oddly embarrassed and searching for something to say.

“So what are we going to do today?” I ask Kenji, hoping my voice sounds neutral, normal.

Kenji drains his water cup. Wipes his mouth. “Today,” he says, “I’m going to teach you how to shoot.”

“A gun?”

“Yup.” He grabs his tray. Grabs mine, too. “Wait here, I’m gonna drop these off.” He moves to go before he stops, turns back, glances at Brendan and says, “Put it out of your head, bro.”

Brendan looks up, confused. “What?”

“It’s not going to happen.”

“Wha—”

Kenji stares at him, eyebrows raised.

Brendan’s mouth falls closed. His cheeks are pink again. “I know that.”

“Uh-huh.” Kenji shakes his head, and walks away.

Brendan is suddenly in a hurry to go about his day.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“Juliette? Juliette!”

“Please wake up—”

I gasp as I sit straight up in bed, heart pounding, eyes blinking too fast as they try to focus. I blink blink blink. “What’s going on? What’s happening?”

“Kenji is outside,” Sonya says.

“He says he needs you,” Sara adds, “that something happened—”

I’m tripping out of bed so fast I pull the covers down with me. I’m groping around in the dark, trying to find my suit—I sleep in a pajama set I borrowed from Sara—and making an effort not to panic. “Do you know what’s going on?” I ask. “Do you know—did he tell you anything—”

Sonya is shoving my suit into my arms, saying, “No, he just said that it was urgent, that something happened, that we should wake you up right away.”

“Okay. I’m sure it’s going to be okay,” I tell them, though I don’t know why I’m saying it, or how I could possibly be of any reassurance to them. I wish I could turn on a light but all the lights are controlled by the same switch. It’s one of the ways they conserve power—and one of the ways they manage to maintain the semblance of night and day down here—by only using it during specific hours.

I finally manage to slip into my suit and I’m zipping it up, heading for the door when I hear Sara call my name. She’s holding my boots.

“Thank you—thank you both,” I say.

They nod several times.

And I’m tugging on my boots and running out the door.

I slam face-first into something solid.

Something human. Male.

I hear his sharp intake of breath, feel his hands steady my frame, feel the blood in my body run right out from under me. “Adam,” I gasp.

He hasn’t let go of me. I can hear his heart beating fast and hard and loud in the silence between us and he feels too still, too tense, like he’s trying to

maintain some kind of control over his body.

“Hi,” he whispers, but it sounds like he can’t really breathe.

My heart is failing.

“Adam, I—”

“I can’t let go,” he says, and I feel his hands shake, just a little, as if the effort to keep them in one place is too much for him. “I can’t let go of you. I’m trying, but I—”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m here then, isn’t it?” Kenji yanks me out of Adam’s arms and takes a deep, uneven breath. “Jesus. Are you guys done here? We have to go.”

“What—what’s going on?” I stammer, trying to cover up my embarrassment. I really wish Kenji weren’t always catching me in the middle of such vulnerable moments. I wish he could see me being strong and confident. And then I wonder when I began caring about Kenji’s opinion of me. “Is everything okay?”

“I have no idea,” Kenji says as he strides down the dark halls. He must have these tunnels memorized, I think, because I can’t see a thing. I have to practically run to keep up with him. “But,” he says, “I’m assuming some kind of shit has officially hit the fan. Castle sent me a message about fifteen minutes ago—said to get me and you and Kent up to his office ASAP. So,” he says, “that’s what I’m doing.”

“But—now? In the middle of the night?”

“Shit hitting the fan doesn’t work around your schedule, princess.”

I decide to stop talking.

We follow Kenji to a single solitary door at the end of a narrow tunnel.

He knocks twice, pauses. Knocks 3 times, pauses. Knocks once.

I wonder if I need to remember that.

The door creaks open on its own and Castle waves us in.

“Close the door, please,” he says from behind his desk. I have to blink several times to readjust to the light in here. There’s a traditional reading lamp on Castle’s desk with just enough wattage to illuminate this small space. I use the moment to look around.

Castle’s office is nothing more than a room with a few bookcases and a simple table that doubles as a workstation. Everything is made of recycled metal. His desk looks like it used to be a pickup truck.

There are heaps of books and papers stacked all over the floor; diagrams,

machinery, and computer parts shoved onto the bookcases, thousands of wires and electrical units peeking out of their metal bodies; they must either be damaged or broken or perhaps part of a project Castle is working on.

In other words: his office is a mess.

Not something I was expecting from someone so incredibly put-together.

“Have a seat,” he says to us. I look around for chairs but only find two upside-down garbage cans and a stool. “I’ll be right with you. Give me one moment.”

We nod. We sit. We wait. We look around.

Only then do I realize why Castle doesn’t care about the disorganized nature of his office.

He seems to be in the middle of something, but I can’t see what it is, and it doesn’t really matter. I’m too focused on watching him work. His hands shift up and down, flick from side to side, and everything he needs or wants simply gravitates toward him. A particular piece of paper? A notepad? The clock buried under the pile of books farthest from his desk? He looks for a pencil and lifts his hand to catch it. He’s searching for his notes and lifts his fingers to find them.

He doesn’t need to be organized. He has a system of his own.

Incredible.

He finally looks up. Puts his pencil down. Nods. Nods again. “Good. Good; you’re all here.”

“Yes, sir,” Kenji says. “You said you needed to speak with us.”

“Indeed I do.” Castle folds his hands over his desk. “Indeed I do.” Takes a careful breath. “The supreme commander,” he says, “has arrived at the headquarters of Sector 45.”

Kenji swears.

Adam is frozen.

I’m confused. “Who’s the supreme commander?”

Castle’s gaze rests on me. “Warner’s father.” His eyes narrow, scrutinizing me. “You didn’t know that Warner’s father is the supreme commander of The Reestablishment?”

“Oh,” I gasp, unable to imagine the monster that must be Warner’s father. “I—yes—I knew that,” I tell him. “I just didn’t know what his title was.”

“Yes,” Castle says. “There are six supreme commanders around the world, one for each of the six divisions: North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. Each section is divided into 555 sectors for a total of 3,330 sectors around the globe. Warner’s father is not only in charge of this continent,

he is also one of the founders of The Reestablishment, and currently our biggest threat.”

“But I thought there were 3,333 sectors,” I tell Castle, “not 3,330. Am I remembering that wrong?”

“The other three are capitals,” Kenji says to me. “We’re pretty sure that one of them is somewhere in North America, but no one knows for certain where any of them are located. So yeah,” he adds, “you’re remembering right. The Reestablishment has some crazy fascination with exact numbers. 3,333 sectors altogether and 555 sectors each. Everyone gets the same thing, regardless of size. They think it shows how equally they’ve divided everything, but it’s just a bunch of bullshit.”

“Wow.” Every single day I’m floored by how much I still need to learn. I look at Castle. “So is this the emergency? That Warner’s dad is here and not at one of the capitals?”

Castle nods. “Yes, he ...” He hesitates. Clears his throat. “Well. Let me start from the beginning. It is imperative that you be aware of all the details.”

“We’re listening,” Kenji says, back straight, eyes alert, muscles tensed for action. “Go on.”

“Apparently,” Castle says, “he’s been in town for some time now—he arrived very quietly, very discreetly, a couple of weeks ago. It seems he heard what his son has been up to lately, and he wasn’t thrilled about it. He ...” Castle takes a deep, steady breath. “He is ... particularly angry about what happened with you, Ms. Ferrars.”

“Me?” Heart pounding. Heart pounding. Heart pounding.

“Yes,” Castle says. “Our sources say that he’s angry Warner allowed you to escape. And, of course, that he lost two of his soldiers in the process.” He nods in Adam and Kenji’s direction. “Worse still, rumors are now circulating among the citizens about this defecting girl and her strange ability and they’re starting to put the pieces together; they’re starting to realize there’s another movement—*our movement*—preparing to fight back. It’s creating unrest and resistance among the civilians, who are all too eager to get involved.

“So.” Castle clasps his hands. “Warner’s father has undoubtedly arrived to spearhead this war and remove all doubt of The Reestablishment’s power.” He pauses to look at each of us. “In other words, he’s arrived to punish us and his son at the same time.”

“But that doesn’t change our plans, does it?” Kenji asks.

“Not exactly. We’ve always known that a fight would be inevitable, but this

... changes things. Now that Warner's father is in town, this war is going to happen a lot sooner than we hoped," Castle says. "And it's going to be a lot bigger than we anticipated." He levels his gaze at me, looking grave. "Ms. Ferrars, I'm afraid we're going to need your help."

I'm staring at him, struck. "Me?"

"Yes."

"Aren't—aren't you still angry with me?"

"You are not a child, Ms. Ferrars. I would not fault you for an overreaction. Kenji says he believes that your behavior lately has been the result of ignorance and not malicious intent, and I trust his judgment. I trust his word. But I do want you to understand that we are a team," he says, "and we need your strength. What you can do—your power—it is unparalleled. Especially now that you've been working with Kenji and have at least some knowledge of what you're capable of, we're going to need you. We'll do whatever we can to support you—we'll reinforce your suit, provide you with weapons and armor. And Winston—" He stops. His breath catches. "Winston," he says, quieter now, "just finished making you a new pair of gloves." He looks into my face. "We want you on our team," he says. "And if you cooperate with me, I promise you will see results."

"Of course," I whisper. I match his steady, solemn gaze. "Of course I'll help."

"Good," Castle says. "That is very good." He looks distracted as he leans back in his chair, runs a tired hand across his face. "Thank you."

"Sir," Kenji says, "I hate to be so blunt, but would you please tell me what the hell is going on?"

Castle nods. "Yes," he says. "Yes, yes, of course. I—forgive me. It's been a difficult night."

Kenji's voice is tight. "What happened?"

"He ... has sent word."

"Warner's father?" I ask. "Warner's father sent word? To us?" I glance around at Adam and Kenji. Adam is blinking fast, lips just barely parted in shock. Kenji looks like he's about to be sick.

I'm beginning to panic.

"Yes," Castle says to me. "Warner's father. He wants to meet. He wants ... to talk."

Kenji jumps to his feet. His entire face is leached of color. "No—sir—this is a setup—he doesn't want to *talk*, you must know he's lying—"

"He's taken four of our men hostage, Kenji. I'm afraid we don't have

another choice.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

“*What?*” Kenji has gone limp. His voice is a horrified rasp. “Who? *How—*”

“Winston and Brendan were patrolling topside tonight.” Castle shakes his head. “I don’t know what happened. They must’ve been ambushed. They were too far out of range and the security footage only shows us that Emory and Ian noticed a disturbance and tried to investigate. We don’t see anything in the tapes after that. Emory and Ian,” he says, “never came back either.”

Kenji is back in his chair again, his face in his hands. He looks up with a sudden burst of hope. “But Winston and Brendan—maybe they can find a way out, right? They could do something—they have enough power between the two of them to figure something out.”

Castle offers Kenji a sympathetic smile. “I don’t know where he’s taken them or how they’re being treated. If he’s beaten them, or if he’s already”—he hesitates—“if he’s already tortured them, shot them—if they’re bleeding to death—they certainly won’t be able to fight back. And even if the two of them could save themselves,” he says after a moment, “they wouldn’t leave the others behind.”

Kenji presses his fists into his thighs.

“So. He wants to talk.” It’s the first time Adam has said a word.

Castle nods. “Lily found this package where they’d disappeared.” He tosses us a small knapsack and we take turns rummaging through it. It contains only Winston’s broken glasses and Brendan’s radio. Smeared in blood.

I have to grip my hands to keep them from shaking.

I was just getting to know these guys. I’d only just met Emory and Ian. I was just learning to build new friendships, to feel comfortable with the people of Omega Point. I just had *breakfast* with Brendan and Winston. I glance at the clock on Castle’s wall; it’s 3:31 a.m. I last saw them about 20 hours ago.

Brendan’s birthday was last week.

“Winston knew,” I hear myself say out loud. “He knew something was wrong. He knew there was something weird about all those soldiers everywhere —”

“I know,” Castle says, shaking his head. “I’ve been reading and rereading all

of his reports.” He pinches the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger. Closes his eyes. “I’d only just begun to piece it all together. But it was too late. I was too late.”

“What do you think they were planning?” Kenji asks. “Do you have a theory?”

Castle sighs. Drops his hand from his face. “Well, now we know why Warner was out with his soldiers every night—how he was able to leave the base for as long as he did for so many days.”

“His father,” Kenji says.

Castle nods. “Yes. It’s my opinion that the supreme sent Warner out himself. That he wanted Warner to begin hunting us more aggressively. He’s always known about us,” Castle says to me. “He’s never been a stupid man, the supreme. He’s always believed the rumors about us, always known that we were out here. But we’ve never been a threat to him before. Not until now,” he says. “Because now that the civilians are talking about us, it’s upsetting the balance of power. The people are reenergized—looking for hope in our resistance. And that’s not something The Reestablishment can afford right now.

“Anyway,” he goes on, “I think it’s clear that they couldn’t find the entrance to Omega Point, and settled for taking hostages, hoping to provoke us to come out on our own.” Castle retrieves a piece of paper from his pile. Holds it up. It’s a note. “But there are conditions,” he says. “The supreme has given us very specific directions on how next to proceed.”

“And?” Kenji is rigid with intensity.

“The three of you will go. Alone.”

Holy crap.

“What?” Adam gapes at Castle, astonished. “Why us?”

“He hasn’t asked to see me,” Castle says. “I’m not the one he’s interested in.”

“And you’re just going to agree to that?” Adam asks. “You’re just going to throw us at him?”

Castle leans forward. “Of course not.”

“You have a plan?” I ask.

“The supreme wants to meet with you at exactly twelve p.m. tomorrow—well, today, technically—at a specific location on unregulated turf. The details are in the note.” He takes a deep breath. “And, even though I know this is exactly what he wants, I think we should all be ready to go. We should move together. This is, after all, what we’ve been training for. I’ve no doubt he has bad

intentions, and I *highly* doubt he's inviting you to chat over a cup of tea. So I think we should be ready to defend against an offensive attack. I imagine his own men will be armed and ready to fight, and I'm fully prepared to lead mine into battle."

"So we're the *bait*?" Kenji asks, his eyebrows pulled together. "We don't even get to fight—we're just the distraction?"

"Kenji—"

"This is bullshit," Adam says, and I'm surprised to see such emotion from him. "There *has* to be another way. We shouldn't be playing by his rules. We should be using this opportunity to ambush them or—I don't know—create a diversion or a distraction so we can attack offensively! I mean, hell, doesn't anyone burst into flames or something? Don't we have anyone who can do something crazy enough to throw everything off? To give us an advantage?"

Castle turns to stare at me.

Adam looks like he might punch Castle in the face. "You are *out* of your mind—"

"Then no," he says. "No, we don't have anyone else that can do something so ... earth-shattering."

"You think that's *funny*?" Adam snaps.

"I'm afraid I'm not trying to be funny, Mr. Kent. And your anger is not helping our situation. You may opt out if you like, but I *will*—respectfully—request Ms. Ferrars' assistance in this matter. She is the only one the supreme actually wants to see. Sending the two of you with her was my idea."

"What?"

All 3 of us are stunned.

"Why me?"

"I really wish I could tell you," Castle says to me. "I wish I knew more. As of right now, I can only do my best to extrapolate from the information I have, and all I've concluded thus far is that Warner has made a glaring error that needs to be set right. Somehow you managed to get caught in the middle." A pause. "Warner's father," he says, "has asked very specifically for *you* in exchange for the hostages. He says if you do not arrive at the appointed time, he will kill our men. And I have no reason to doubt his word. Murdering the innocent is something that comes very naturally to him."

"And you were just going to let her walk into that!" Adam knocks over his garbage can as he jumps to his feet. "You weren't even going to say anything? You were going to let us assume that she wasn't a *target*? Are you insane?"

Castle rubs his forehead. Takes a few calming breaths. “No,” he says, his voice carefully measured. “I was not going to let her walk right into anything. What I’m saying is that we will *all* fight together, but you two will go with Ms. Ferrars. The three of you have worked together before, and both you and Kenji have military training. You’re more familiar with the rules, the techniques, the strategy they might employ. You would help keep her safe and embody the element of surprise—your presence could be what gives us an advantage in this situation. If he wants her badly enough, he’ll have to find a way to juggle the three of you—”

“Or—you know, I don’t know,” Kenji says, affecting nonchalance, “maybe he’ll just shoot us both in the face and drag Juliette away while we’re too busy being dead to stop him.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “I’ll do it. I’ll go.”

“What?” Adam is looking at me, panic forcing his eyes wide. “Juliette—no —”

“Yeah, you might want to think about this for a second,” Kenji cuts in, sounding a little nervous.

“You don’t have to come if you don’t want to,” I tell them. “But I’ll go.”

Castle smiles, relief written across his features.

“This is what we’re here for, right?” I look around. “We’re supposed to fight back. This is our chance.”

Castle is beaming, his eyes bright with something that might be pride. “We will be with you every step of the way, Ms. Ferrars. You can count on it.”

I nod.

And I realize this is probably what I’m meant to do. Maybe this is exactly why I’m here.

Maybe I’m just supposed to die.

TWENTY-NINE

The morning is a blur.

There's so much to do, so much to prepare for, and there are so many people getting ready. But I know that ultimately this is *my* battle; I have unfinished business to deal with. I know this meeting has nothing to do with the supreme commander. He has no reason to care so much about me. I've never even met the man; I should be nothing more than expendable to him.

This is Warner's move.

It has to be Warner who asked for me. This has something and everything to do with him; it's a smoke signal telling me he still wants me and he's not yet given up. And I have to face him.

I only wonder how he managed to get his father to pull these strings for him. I guess I'll find out soon enough.

Someone is calling my name.

I stop in place.

Spin around.

James.

He runs up to me just outside the dining hall. His hair, so blond; his eyes, so blue, just like his older brother's. But I've missed his face in a way that has nothing to do with how much he reminds me of Adam.

James is a special kid. A sharp kid. The kind of 10-year-old who is always underestimated. And he's asking me if we can talk. He points to one of the many corridors.

I nod. Follow him into an empty tunnel.

He stops walking and turns away for a moment. Stands there looking uncomfortable. I'm stunned he even wants to talk to me; I haven't spoken a single word to him in 3 weeks. He started spending time with the other kids at Omega Point shortly after we arrived, and then things somehow got awkward between us. He stopped smiling when he'd see me, stopped waving hello from

across the dining hall. I always imagined he'd heard rumors about me from the other kids and decided he was better off staying away. And now, after everything that's happened with Adam—after our very public display in the tunnel—I'm shocked he wants to say anything to me.

His head is still down when he whispers, "I was really, really mad at you."

And the stitches in my heart begin to pop. One by one.

He looks up. Looks at me like he's trying to gauge whether or not his opening words have upset me, whether or not I'm going to yell at him for being honest with me. And I don't know what he sees in my face but it seems to disarm him. He shoves his hands into his pockets. Rubs his sneaker in circles on the floor. Says, "You didn't tell me you killed someone before."

I take an unsteady breath and wonder if there will ever be a proper way to respond to a statement like that. I wonder if anyone other than James will ever even say something like that to me. I think not. So I just nod. And say, "I'm really sorry. I should've told y—"

"Then why didn't you?" he shouts, shocking me. "Why didn't you tell me? Why did everyone else know except for me?"

And I'm floored for a moment, floored by the hurt in his voice, the anger in his eyes. I never knew he considered me a friend, and I realize I should have. James hasn't known many people in his life; Adam is his entire world. Kenji and I were 2 of the only people he'd ever really met before we got to Omega Point. And for an orphaned child in his circumstances, it must've meant a lot to have new friends. But I've been so concerned with my own issues that it never occurred to me that James would care so much. I never realized my omission would've seemed like a betrayal to him. That the rumors he heard from the other children must've hurt him just as much as they hurt me.

So I decide to sit down, right there in the tunnel. I make room for him to sit down beside me. And I tell him the truth. "I didn't want you to hate me."

He glares at the floor. Says, "I don't hate you."

"No?"

He picks at his shoelaces. Sighs. Shakes his head. "And I didn't like what they were saying about you," he says, quieter now. "The other kids. They said you were mean and nasty and I told them you weren't. I told them you were quiet and nice. And that you have nice hair. And they told me I was lying."

I swallow, hard, punched in the heart. "You think I have nice hair?"

"Why did you kill him?" James asks me, eyes so open, so ready to be understanding. "Was he trying to hurt you? Were you scared?"

I take a few breaths before I answer.

“Do you remember,” I say to him, feeling unsteady now, “what Adam told you about me? About how I can’t touch anyone without hurting them?”

James nods.

“Well, that’s what happened,” I say. “I touched him and he died.”

“But why?” he asks. “Why’d you touch him? Because you wanted him to die?”

My face feels like cracked china. “No,” I tell him, shaking my head. “I was young—only a couple of years older than you, actually. I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t know that I could kill people by touching them. He’d fallen down at the grocery store and I was just trying to help him get to his feet.” A long pause. “It was an accident.”

James is silent for a while.

He takes turns looking at me, looking at his shoes, at the knees he’s tucked up against his chest. He’s staring at the ground when he finally whispers, “I’m sorry I was mad at you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth,” I whisper back.

He nods. Scratches a spot on his nose. Looks at me. “So can we be friends again?”

“You want to be friends with me?” I blink hard against the stinging in my eyes. “You’re not afraid of me?”

“Are you going to be mean to me?”

“Never.”

“Then why would I be afraid of you?”

And I laugh, mostly because I don’t want to cry. I nod too many times. “Yes,” I say to him. “Let’s be friends again.”

“Good,” he says, and gets to his feet. “Because I don’t want to eat lunch with those other kids anymore.”

I stand up. Dust off the back of my suit. “Eat with us,” I tell him. “You can always sit at our table.”

“Okay.” He nods. Looks away again. Tugs on his ear a little. “So did you know Adam is really sad all the time?” He turns his blue eyes on me.

I can’t speak. Can’t speak at all.

“Adam says he’s sad because of you.” James looks at me like he’s waiting for me to deny it. “Did you hurt him by accident too? He was in the medical wing, did you know that? He was sick.”

And I think I’m going to fall apart, right there, but somehow I don’t. I can’t

lie to him. “Yes,” I tell James. “I hurt him by accident, but now—n-now I stay away from him. So I can’t hurt him anymore.”

“Then why’s he still so sad? If you’re not hurting him anymore?”

I’m shaking my head, pressing my lips together because I don’t want to cry and I don’t know what to say. And James seems to understand.

He throws his arms around me.

Right around my waist. Hugs me and tells me not to cry because he believes me. He believes I only hurt Adam by accident. And the little boy, too. And then he says, “But be careful today, okay? And kick some ass, too.”

I’m so stunned that it takes me a moment to realize that not only did he use a bad word, he just touched me for the very first time. I try to hold on for as long as I can without making things awkward between us, but I think my heart is still in a puddle somewhere on the floor.

And that’s when I realize: everyone knows.

James and I walk into the dining hall together and I can already tell that the stares are different now. Their faces are full of pride, strength, and acknowledgment when they look at me. No fear. No suspicion. I’ve officially become one of them. I will fight with them, for them, against the same enemy.

I can see what’s in their eyes because I’m beginning to remember what it feels like.

Hope.

It’s like a drop of honey, a field of tulips blooming in the springtime. It’s fresh rain, a whispered promise, a cloudless sky, the perfect punctuation mark at the end of a sentence.

And it’s the only thing in the world keeping me afloat.

THIRTY

“This isn’t how we wanted it to happen,” Castle says to me, “but these things never usually go according to plan.” Adam and Kenji and I are being fitted for battle. We’re camped out in one of the larger training rooms with 5 others I’ve never met before. They’re in charge of weapons and armor. It’s incredible how every single person at Omega Point has a job. Everyone contributes. Everyone has a task.

They all work together.

“Now, we still don’t know yet *exactly* why or how you can do what you do, Ms. Ferrars, but I’m hoping that when the time comes, your Energy will present itself. These kinds of high-stress situations are perfect for provoking our abilities—in fact, seventy-eight percent of Point members reported initial discovery of their ability while in critical, high-risk circumstances.”

Yup, I don’t say to him. That sounds about right.

Castle takes something from one of the women in the room—Alia, I think is her name. “And you shouldn’t worry about a thing,” he says. “We’ll be right there in case something should happen.”

I don’t point out that I never once said I was worried. Not out loud, anyway.

“These are your new gloves,” Castle says, handing them to me. “Try them on.”

These new gloves are shorter, softer: they stop precisely at my wrist and fasten with a snap-button. They feel thicker, a little heavier, but they fit my fingers perfectly. I curl my hand into a fist. Smile a little. “These are incredible,” I tell him. “Didn’t you say Winston designed them?”

Castle’s face falls. “Yes,” he says quietly. “He finished them just yesterday.” Winston.

His was the very first face I saw when I woke up at Omega Point. His crooked nose, his plastic glasses, his sandy-blond hair and his background in psychology. His need for disgusting coffee.

I remember the broken glasses we found in the knapsack.

I have no idea what’s happened to him.

Alia returns with a leather contraption in her hands. It looks like a harness.

She asks me to lift my arms and helps me slip into the piece, and I recognize it as a holster. There are thick leather shoulder straps that intersect in the center of my back, and 50 different straps of very thin black leather overlapping around the highest part of my waist—just underneath my chest—like some kind of incomplete bustier. It's like a bra with no cups. Alia has to buckle everything together for me and I still don't really understand what I'm wearing. I'm waiting for some kind of explanation.

Then I see the guns.

"There was nothing in the note about arriving unarmed," Castle says as Alia passes him two automatic handguns in a shape and size I've come to recognize. I practiced shooting with these just yesterday.

I was terrible at it.

"And I see no reason for you to be without a weapon," Castle is saying. He shows me where the holsters are on either side of my rib cage. Teaches me how the guns fit, how to snap the holder into place, where the extra cartridges go.

I don't bother to mention that I have no idea how to reload a weapon. Kenji and I never got to that part in our lesson. He was too busy trying to remind me not to use a gun to gesticulate while asking questions.

"I'm hoping the firearms will be a last resort," Castle says to me. "You have enough weapons in your personal arsenal—you shouldn't need to shoot anyone. And, just in case you find yourself using your gift to destroy something, I suggest you wear these." He holds up a set of what look like elaborate variations on brass knuckles. "Alia designed these for you."

I look from her to Castle to the foreign objects in his hand. He's beaming. I thank Alia for taking the time to create something for me and she stammers out an incoherent response, blushing like she can't believe I'm talking to her.

I'm baffled.

I take the pieces from Castle and inspect them. The underside is made up of 4 concentric circles welded together, big enough in diameter to fit like a set of rings, snug over my gloves. I slip my fingers through the holes and turn my hand over to inspect the upper part. It's like a mini shield, a million pieces of gunmetal that cover my knuckles, my fingers, the entire back of my hand. I can curl my fist and the metal moves with the motion of my joints. It's not nearly as heavy as it looks.

I slip the other piece on. Curl my fingers. Reach for the guns now strapped to my body.

Easy.

I can do this.

“Do you like it?” Castle asks. I’ve never seen him smile so wide before.

“I love it,” I tell him. “Everything is perfect. Thank you.”

“Very good. I’m so pleased. Now,” he says, “if you’ll excuse me, I must attend to a few other details before we leave. I will return shortly.” He offers me a curt nod before heading out the door. Everyone but me, Kenji, and Adam leaves the room.

I turn to see how the guys are doing.

Kenji is wearing a suit.

Some kind of bodysuit. He’s black from head to toe, his jet-black hair and eyes a perfect match for the outfit molded to every contour of his body. The suit seems to have a synthetic feel to it, almost like plastic; it gleams in the fluorescent lighting of the room and looks like it’d be too stiff to move around in. But then I see him stretching his arms and rolling back and forth on the balls of his feet and the suit suddenly looks fluid, like it moves with him. He’s wearing boots but no gloves, and a harness, just like me. But his is different: it has simple holsters that sling over his arms like the straps of a backpack.

And Adam.

Adam is ~~gorgeous~~ wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt, dark blue and dangerously tight across his chest. I can’t help but linger over the details of his outfit, can’t help but remember what it was like to be held against him, in his arms. ~~He’s standing right in front of me and I miss him like I haven’t seen him in years.~~ His black cargo pants are tucked into the same pair of black boots he was wearing when I first met him in the asylum, shin-high and sleek, created from smooth leather that fits him so perfectly it’s a surprise they weren’t made for his body. But there are no weapons on his person.

And I’m curious enough to ask.

“Adam?”

He lifts his head to look up and freezes. Blinks, eyebrows up, lips parted. His eyes travel down every inch of my body, pausing to study the harness framing my chest, the guns slung close to my waist.

He says nothing. He runs a hand through his hair, presses the heel of his palm to his forehead and says something about being right back. He leaves the room.

I feel sick.

Kenji clears his throat, loud. Shakes his head. Says, “Wow. I mean, really, are you trying to kill the guy?”

“What?”

Kenji is looking at me like I’m an idiot. “You can’t just go around all ‘Oh, Adam, look at me, look at how sexy I am in my new outfit’ and bat your eyelashes—”

“*Bat my eyelashes?*” I balk at him. “What are you talking about? I’m not *batting* my eyelashes at him! And this is the same outfit I’ve worn every day—”

Kenji grunts. Shrugs and says, “Yeah, well, it looks different.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I am just *saying*,” he says, hands up in mock surrender, “that if I were him? And you were my girl? And you were walking around looking like that, and I couldn’t touch you?” He looks away. Shrugs again. “I am just saying I do not envy the poor bastard.”

“I don’t know what to do,” I whisper. “I’m not trying to hurt him—”

“Oh hell. Forget I said anything,” he says, waving his hands around. “Seriously. It is *none* of my business.” He shoots me a look. “And do *not* consider this an invitation for you to start telling me all of your secret feelings now.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “I’m not going to tell you anything about my feelings.”

“Good. Because I don’t want to know.”

“Have you ever had a girlfriend, Kenji?”

“What?” He looks mortally offended. “Do I *look* like the kind of guy who’s never had a girlfriend? Have you even *met* me?”

I roll my eyes. “Forget I asked.”

“I can’t even believe you just said that.”

“You’re the one who’s always going on about not wanting to talk about your feelings,” I snap.

“No,” he says. “I said I don’t want to talk about *your* feelings.” He points at me. “I have zero problem talking about my own.”

“So do you want to talk about your feelings?”

“Hell no.”

“Bu—”

“No.”

“Fine.” I look away. Pull at the straps tugging at my back. “So what’s up with your suit?” I ask him.

“What do you mean, *what’s up with it?*” He frowns. He runs his hands down his outfit. “This suit is badass.”

I bite back a smile. “I just meant, why are you wearing a suit? Why do you get one and Adam doesn’t?”

He shrugs. “Adam doesn’t need one. Few people do—it all depends on what kind of gift we have. For me, this suit makes my life a hell of a lot easier. I don’t always use it, but when I need to get serious about a mission, it really helps. Like, when I need to blend into a background,” he explains, “it’s less complicated if I’m shifting one solid color—hence, the black. And if I have too many layers and too many extra pieces floating around my body, I have to focus that much more on making sure I blend all the details. If I’m one solid piece and one solid color, I’m a much better chameleon. Besides,” he adds, stretching out the muscles in his arms, “I look sexy as hell in this outfit.”

It takes all the self-control I have not to burst into laughter.

“So, but what about Adam?” I ask him. “Adam doesn’t need a suit or guns? That doesn’t seem right.”

“I do have guns,” Adam says as he walks back into the room. His eyes are focused on the fists he’s clenching and unclenching in front of him. “You just can’t see them.”

I can’t stop looking at him, can’t stop staring.

“Invisible guns, huh?” Kenji smirks. “That’s cute. I don’t think I ever went through that phase.”

Adam glares at Kenji. “I have nine different weapons concealed on my body right now. Would you like to choose the one I use to shoot you in the face? Or should I?”

“It was a *joke*, Kent. Damn. I *was* joking—”

“All right, everyone.”

We all spin around at the sound of Castle’s voice.

He examines the 3 of us. “Are you ready?”

I say, “Yes.”

Adam nods.

Kenji says, “Let’s do this shit.”

Castle says, “Follow me.”

THIRTY-ONE

It's 10:32 a.m.

We have exactly 1 hour and 28 minutes before we're supposed to meet the supreme commander.

This is the plan:

Castle and every able body from Omega Point are already in position. They left half an hour ago. They're hiding in the abandoned buildings skirting the circumference of the meeting point indicated in the note. They will be ready to engage in an offensive strike just as soon as Castle gives the signal—and Castle will only give that signal if he senses we're in danger.

Adam and Kenji and I are going to travel by foot.

Kenji and Adam are familiar with unregulated turf because as soldiers, they were required to know which sections of land were strictly off-limits. No one is allowed to trespass on the grounds of our past world. The strange alleyways, side streets, old restaurants and office buildings are forbidden territory.

Kenji says our meeting point is in one of the few suburban areas still standing; he says he knows it well. Apparently as a soldier he was sent on several errands in this area, each time required to drop off unmarked packages in an abandoned mailbox. The packages were never explained, and he wasn't stupid enough to ask.

He says it's odd that any of these old houses are even functional, especially considering how strict The Reestablishment is about making sure the civilians never try to go back. In fact, most of the residential neighborhoods were torn down immediately after the initial takeover. So it's very, very rare to find sections left untouched. But there it is, written on the note in too-tight capital letters:

1542 SYCAMORE

We're meeting the supreme commander inside of what used to be someone's home.

“So what do you think we should do? Just ring the doorbell?” Kenji is leading us

toward the exit of Omega Point. I'm staring straight ahead in the dim light of this tunnel, trying not to focus on the woodpeckers in my stomach. "What do you think?" Kenji asks again. "Would that be too much? Maybe we should just knock?"

I try to laugh, but the effort is halfhearted at best.

Adam doesn't say a word.

"All right, all right," Kenji says, all seriousness now. "Once we get out there, you know the drill. We link hands. I project to blend the three of us. One of you on either side of me. Got it?"

I'm nodding, trying not to look at Adam as I do.

This is going to be one of the first tests for him and his ability; he'll have to be able to turn off his Energy just as long as he's linked to Kenji. If he can't manage it, Kenji's projection won't work on Adam, and Adam will be exposed. In danger.

"Kent," Kenji says, "you understand the risks, right? If you can't pull this off?"

Adam nods. His face is unflinching. He says he's been training every day, working with Castle to get himself under control. He says he's going to be fine.

He looks at me as he says it.

My emotions jump out of a plane.

I hardly even notice we're nearing the surface when Kenji motions for us to follow him up a ladder. I climb and try to think at the same time, going over and over the plan we spent the early hours of the morning strategizing.

Getting there is the easy part.

Getting inside is where things get tricky.

We're supposed to pretend we're doing a swap—our hostages are supposed to be with the supreme commander, and I'm supposed to oversee their release. It's supposed to be an exchange.

Me for them.

But the truth is that we have no idea what will actually happen. We don't know, for example, who will answer the door. We don't know if *anyone* will answer the door. We don't even know if we're actually meeting inside the house or if we're simply meeting outside of it. We also don't know how they'll react to seeing Adam and Kenji and the makeshift armory we have strapped to our bodies.

We don't know if they'll start shooting right away.

This is the part that scares me. I'm not worried for myself as much as I am

for Adam and Kenji. They are the twist in this plan. They are the element of surprise. They're either the unexpected pieces that give us the only advantage we can afford right now, or they're the unexpected pieces that end up dead the minute they're spotted. And I'm starting to think this was a very bad idea.

I'm starting to wonder if I was wrong. If maybe I can't handle this.

But it's too late to turn back now.

THIRTY-TWO

“Wait here.”

Kenji tells us to lie low as he pops his head out of the exit. He’s already disappeared from sight, his figure blending into the background. He’s going to let us know if we’re clear to surface.

I’m too nervous to speak.

Too nervous to think.

I can do this we can do this we have no choice but to do this, is all I keep saying to myself.

“Let’s go.” I hear Kenji’s voice from above our heads. Adam and I follow him up the last stretch of the ladder. We’re taking one of the alternate exit routes out of Omega Point—one that only 7 people know about, according to Castle. We’re taking as many precautions as necessary.

Adam and I manage to haul our bodies aboveground and I immediately feel the cold and Kenji’s hand slip around my waist. Cold cold cold. It cuts through the air like little knives slicing across our skin. I look down at my feet and see nothing but a barely perceptible shimmer where my boots are supposed to be. I wiggle my fingers in front of my face.

Nothing.

I look around.

No Adam and no Kenji except for Kenji’s invisible hand, now resting at the small of my back.

It worked. Adam made it work. I’m so relieved I want to sing.

“Can you guys hear me?” I whisper, happy no one can see me smiling.

“Yup.”

“Yeah, I’m right here,” Adam says.

“Nice work, Kent,” Kenji says to him. “I know this can’t be easy for you.”

“It’s fine,” Adam says. “I’m fine. Let’s go.”

“Done.”

We’re like a human chain.

Kenji is between me and Adam and we're linked, holding hands as Kenji guides us through this deserted area. I have no idea where we are, and I'm starting to realize that I seldom do. This world is still so foreign to me, still so new. Spending so much time in isolation while the planet crumbled to pieces didn't do me any favors.

The farther we go, the closer we get to the main road and the closer we get to the compounds that are settled not a mile from here. I can see the boxy shape of their steel structures from where we're standing.

Kenji jerks to a halt.

Says nothing.

"Why aren't we moving?" I ask.

Kenji shushes me. "Can you hear that?"

"What?"

Adam pulls in a breath. "Shit. Someone's coming."

"A tank," Kenji clarifies.

"More than one," Adam adds.

"So why are we still standing here—"

"Wait, Juliette, hold on a second—"

And then I see it. A parade of tanks coming down the main road. I count 6 of them altogether.

Kenji unleashes a series of expletives under his breath.

"What is it?" I ask. "What's the problem?"

"There was only one reason Warner ever ordered us to take more than two tanks out at a time, on the same route," Adam says to me.

"What—"

"They're preparing for a fight."

I gasp.

"He knows," Kenji says. "Dammit! Of course he knows. Castle was right. He knows we're bringing backup. *Shit.*"

"What time is it, Kenji?"

"We have about forty-five minutes."

"Then let's move," I tell him. "We don't have time to worry about what's going to happen afterward. Castle is prepared—he's anticipating something like this. We'll be okay. But if we don't get to that house on time, Winston and Brendan and everyone else might die today."

"We might die today," he points out.

"Yeah," I tell him. "That, too."

We're moving through the streets quickly now. Swiftly. Darting through the clearing toward some semblance of civilization and that's when I see it: the remnants of an achingly familiar universe. Little square houses with little square yards that are now nothing more than wild weeds decaying in the wind. The dead grass crunches under our feet, icy and uninviting. We count down the houses.

1542 Sycamore.

It must be this one. It's impossible to miss.

It's the only house on this entire street that looks fully functional. The paint is fresh, clean, a beautiful shade of robin's-egg blue. A small set of stairs leads up to the front porch, where I notice 2 white wicker rocking chairs and a huge planter full of bright blue flowers I've never seen before. I see a welcome mat made of rubber, wind chimes hanging from a wooden beam, clay pots and a small shovel tucked into a corner. It's everything we can never have anymore.

Someone *lives* here.

It's impossible that this exists.

I'm pulling Kenji and Adam toward the home, overcome with emotion, almost forgetting that we're no longer allowed to live in this old, beautiful world.

Someone is yanking me backward.

"This isn't it," Kenji says to me. "This is the wrong street. *Shit*. This is the wrong street—we're supposed to be two streets down—"

"But this house—it's—I mean, Kenji, someone *lives* here—"

"No one lives here," he says. "Someone probably set this up to throw us off—in fact, I bet that house is lined with C4. It's probably a trap designed to catch people wandering unregulated turf. Now come on"—he yanks at my hand again—"we have to hurry. We have seven minutes!"

And even though we're running forward, I keep looking back, waiting to see some sign of life, waiting to see someone step outside to check the mail, waiting to see a bird fly by.

And maybe I'm imagining it.

Maybe I'm insane.

But I could've sworn I just saw a curtain flutter in an upstairs window.

THIRTY-THREE

90 seconds.

The real 1542 Sycamore is just as dilapidated as I'd originally imagined it would be. It's a crumbling mess, its roof groaning under the weight of too many years' negligence. Adam and Kenji and I are standing just around the corner, out of sight even though we're technically still invisible. There is not a single person anywhere, and the entire house looks abandoned. I'm beginning to wonder if this was all just an elaborate joke.

75 seconds.

"You guys stay hidden," I tell Kenji and Adam, struck by sudden inspiration. "I want him to think I'm alone. If anything goes wrong, you guys can jump in, okay? There's too much of a risk that your presence will throw things off too quickly."

They're both quiet a moment.

"*Damn.* That's a good idea," Kenji says. "I should've thought of that."

I can't help but grin, just a little. "I'm going to let go now."

"Hey—good luck," Kenji says, his voice unexpectedly soft. "We'll be right behind you."

"Juliette—"

I hesitate at the sound of Adam's voice.

He almost says something but seems to change his mind. He clears his throat. Whispers, "Promise you'll be careful."

"I promise," I say into the wind, fighting back emotion. Not now. I can't deal with this right now. I have to focus.

So I take a deep breath.

Step forward.

Let go.

10 seconds and I'm trying to breathe

9

and I'm trying to be brave

8

but the truth is I'm scared out of my mind

7

and I have no idea what's waiting for me behind that door

6

and I'm pretty sure I'm going to have a heart attack

5

but I can't turn back now

4

because there it is

3

the door is right in front of me

2

all I have to do is knock

1

but the door flies open first.

“Oh good,” he says to me. “You’re right on time.”

THIRTY-FOUR

“It’s refreshing, really,” he says. “To see that the youth still value things like punctuality. It’s always so frustrating when people waste my time.”

My head is full of missing buttons and shards of glass and broken pencil tips. I’m nodding too slowly, blinking like an idiot, unable to find the words in my mouth either because they’re lost or because they never existed or simply because I have no idea what to say.

I don’t know what I was expecting.

Maybe I thought he’d be old and slumped and slightly blind. Maybe he’d be wearing a patch on one eye and have to walk with a cane. Maybe he’d have rotting teeth and ragged skin and coarse, balding hair and maybe he’d be a centaur, a unicorn, an old witch with a pointy hat anything anything anything but this. Because this isn’t possible. This is so hard for me to understand and whatever I was expecting was wrong so utterly, incredibly, horribly wrong.

I’m staring at a man who is absolutely, breathtakingly beautiful.

And he is a *man*.

He has to be at least 45 years old, tall and strong and silhouetted in a suit that fits him so perfectly it’s almost unfair. His hair is thick, smooth like hazelnut spread; his jawline is sharp, the lines of his face perfectly symmetrical, his cheekbones hardened by life and age. But it’s his eyes that make all the difference. His eyes are the most spectacular things I’ve ever seen.

They’re almost aquamarine.

“Please,” he says, flashing me an incredible smile. “Come in.”

And it hits me then, right in that moment, because everything suddenly makes sense. His look; his stature; his smooth, classy demeanor; the ease with which I nearly forgot he was a villain—*this man*.

This is Warner’s father.

I step into what looks like a small living room. There are old, lumpy couches settled around a tiny coffee table. The wallpaper is yellowed and peeling from age. The house is heavy with a strange, moldy smell that indicates the cracked

glass windows haven't been opened in years, and the carpet is forest green under my feet, the walls embellished with fake wood panels that don't make sense to me at all. This house is, in a word, ugly. It seems ridiculous for a man so striking to be found inside of a house so horribly inferior.

"Oh wait," he says, "just one thing."

"Wha—"

He's pinned me against the wall by the throat, his hands carefully sheathed in a pair of leather gloves, already prepared to touch my skin to cut off my oxygen, choke me to death and I'm so sure I'm dying, I'm so sure that this is what it feels like to die, to be utterly immobilized, limp from the neck down. I try to claw at him, kicking at his body with the last of my energy until I'm giving up, forfeiting to my own stupidity, my last thoughts condemning me for being such an idiot, for thinking I could actually come in here and accomplish anything until I realize he's undone my holsters, stolen my guns, put them in his pockets.

He lets me go.

I drop to the floor.

He tells me to have a seat.

I shake my head, coughing against the torture in my lungs, wheezing into the dirty, musty air, heaving in strange, horrible gasps, my whole body in spasms against the pain. I've been inside for less than 2 minutes and he's already overpowered me. I have to figure out how to do something, how to get through this alive. Now's not the time to hold back.

I press my eyes shut for a moment. Try to clear my airways, try to find my head. When I finally look up I see he's already seated himself on one of the chairs, staring at me as though thoroughly entertained.

I can hardly speak. "Where are the hostages?"

"They're fine." This man whose name I do not know waves an indifferent hand in the air. "They'll be just fine. Are you sure you won't sit down?"

"What—" I try to clear my throat and regret it immediately, forcing myself to blink back the traitorous tears burning my eyes. "What do you want from me?"

He leans forward in his seat. Clasps his hands. "You know, I'm not entirely sure anymore."

"What?"

"Well, you've certainly figured out that all of this"—he nods at me, around the room—"is just a distraction, right?" He smiles that same incredible smile. "Surely you've realized that my ultimate goal was to lure your people out into

my territory? My men are waiting for just one word. One word from me and they will seek out and destroy all of your little friends waiting so patiently within this half-mile radius.”

Terror waves hello to me.

He laughs a little. “If you think I don’t know exactly what’s going on in my own *land*, young lady, you are quite mistaken.” He shakes his head. “I’ve let these freaks live too freely among us, and it was my mistake. They’re causing me too much trouble, and now it’s time to take them out.”

“I am one of those freaks,” I tell him, trying to control the tremble in my voice. “Why did you bring me here if all you want is to kill us? Why me? You didn’t have to single me out.”

“You’re right.” He nods. Stands up. Shoves his hands into his pockets. “I came here with a purpose: to clean up the mess my son made, and to finally put an end to the naive efforts of a group of idiotic aberrations. To erase the lot of you from this sorry world. But then,” he says, laughing a little, “just as I began drafting my plans, my son came to me and begged me not to kill you. Just you.” He stops. Looks up. “He actually *begged me* not to kill you.” Laughs again. “It was just as pathetic as it was surprising.

“Of course then I knew I had to meet you,” he says, smiling, staring at me like he might be enchanted. “‘I must meet the girl who’s managed to bewitch my boy!’ I said to myself. This girl who’s managed to make him lose sight of his pride—his *dignity*—long enough to beg me for a favor.” A pause. “Do you know,” he says to me, “when my son has ever asked me for a favor?” He cocks his head. Waits for me to answer.

I shake my head.

“Never.” He takes a breath. “Never. Not once in nineteen years has he ever asked me for anything. Hard to believe, isn’t it?” His smile is wider, brilliant. “I take full credit, of course. I raised him well. Taught him to be entirely self-reliant, self-possessed, unencumbered by the needs and wants that break most other men. So to hear these disgraceful, pleading words come out of his mouth?” He shakes his head. “Well. Naturally, I was intrigued. I had to see you for myself. I needed to understand what he’d seen, what was so special about you that it could’ve caused such a colossal lapse in judgment. Though, to be perfectly honest,” he says, “I really didn’t think you’d show up.” He takes one hand out of his pocket, gestures with it as he speaks. “I mean I certainly hoped you would. But I thought if you did, you’d at least come with support—some form of backup. But here you are, wearing this spandex monstrosity”—he laughs

out loud—"and you're all alone." He studies me. "Very stupid," he says. "But brave. I like that. I can admire bravery."

"Anyhow, I brought you here to teach my son a lesson. I had every intention of killing you," he says, assuming a slow, steady walk around the room. "And I preferred to do it where he would be sure to see it. War is messy," he adds, waving his hand. "It's easy to lose track of who's been killed and how they died and who killed whom, et cetera, et cetera. I wanted this particular death to be as clean and simple as the message it would convey. It's not good for him to form these kinds of attachments, after all. It's my duty as his father to put an end to that kind of nonsense."

I feel sick, so sick, so tremendously sick to my stomach. This man is far worse than I ever could have imagined.

My voice is one hard breath, one loud whisper when I speak. "So why don't you just kill me?"

He hesitates. Says, "I don't know. I had no idea you were going to be quite so lovely. I'm afraid my son never mentioned how beautiful you are. And it's always so difficult to kill a beautiful thing," he sighs. "Besides, you surprised me. You arrived on time. Alone. You were actually willing to sacrifice yourself to save the worthless creatures stupid enough to get themselves caught."

He takes a sharp breath. "Maybe we could keep you. If you don't prove useful, you might prove entertaining, at the very least." He tilts his head, thoughtful. "Though if we did keep you, I suppose you'd have to come back to the capital with me, because I can't trust my son to do anything right anymore. I've given him far too many chances."

"Thanks for the offer," I tell him. "But I'd really rather jump off a cliff."

His laughter is like a hundred little bells, happy and wholesome and contagious. "Oh my." He smiles, bright and warm and devastatingly sincere. He shakes his head. Calls over his shoulder toward what looks like it might be another room—maybe the kitchen, I can't be sure—and says, "Son, would you come in here, please?"

And all I can think is that sometimes you're dying, sometimes you're about to explode, sometimes you're 6 feet under and you're searching for a window when someone pours lighter fluid in your hair and lights a match on your face.

I feel my bones ignite.

Warner is here.

THIRTY-FIVE

He appears in a doorway directly across from where I'm now standing and he looks exactly as I remember him. Golden hair and perfect skin and eyes too bright for their faded shade of emerald. His is an exquisitely handsome face, one I now realize he's inherited from his father. It's the kind of face no one believes in anymore; lines and angles and easy symmetry that's almost offensive in its perfection. No one should ever want a face like that. It's a face destined for trouble, for danger, for an outlet to overcompensate for the excess it stole from an unsuspecting innocent.

It's overdone.

It's too much.

~~It frightens me.~~

Black and green and gold seem to be his colors. His pitch-black suit is tailored to his frame, lean but muscular, offset by the crisp white of his shirt underneath and complemented by the simple black tie knotted at his throat. He stands straight, tall, unflinching. To anyone else he would look imposing, even with his right arm still in a sling. He's the kind of boy who was only ever taught to be a man, who was told to erase the concept of childhood from his life's expectations. His lips do not dare to smile, his forehead does not crease in distress. He has been taught to disguise his emotions, to hide his thoughts from the world and to trust no one and nothing. To take what he wants by whatever means necessary. I can see all of this so clearly.

But he looks different to me.

His gaze is too heavy, his eyes, too deep. His expression is too full of something I don't want to recognize. He's looking at me like I succeeded, like I shot him in the heart and shattered him, like I left him to die after he told me he loved me and I refused to think it was even possible.

And I see the difference in him now. I see what's changed.

He's making no effort to hide his emotions from me.

My lungs are liars, pretending they can't expand just to have a laugh at my expense and my fingers are fluttering, struggling to escape the prison of my bones as if they've waited 17 years to fly away.

Escape, is what my fingers say to me.

Breathe, is what I keep saying to myself.

Warner as a child. Warner as a son. Warner as a boy who has only a limited grasp of his own life. Warner with a father who would teach him a lesson by killing the one thing he'd ever be willing to beg for.

Warner as a human being terrifies me more than anything else.

The supreme commander is impatient. "Sit down," he says to his son, motioning to the couch he was just sitting on.

Warner doesn't say a word to me.

His eyes are glued to my face, my body, to the harness strapped to my chest; his gaze lingers on my neck, on the marks his father likely left behind and I see the motion in his throat, I see the difficulty he has swallowing down the sight in front of him before he finally rips himself away and walks into the living room. He's so like his father, I'm beginning to realize. The way he walks, the way he looks in a suit, the way he's so meticulous about his hygiene. And yet there is no doubt in my mind that he detests the man he fails so miserably not to emulate.

"So I would like to know," the supreme says, "how, exactly, you managed to get away." He looks at me. "I'm suddenly curious, and my son has made it very difficult to extract these details."

I blink at him.

"Tell me," he says. "How did you escape?"

I'm confused. "The first or the second time?"

"Twice! You managed to escape twice!" He's laughing heartily now; he slaps his knee. "Incredible. Both times, then. How did you get away both times?"

I wonder why he's stalling for time. I don't understand why he wants to talk when so many people are waiting for a war and I can't help but hope that Adam and Kenji and Castle and everyone else haven't frozen to death outside. And while I don't have a plan, I do have a hunch. I have a feeling our hostages might be hidden in the kitchen. So I figure I'll humor him for a little while.

I tell him I jumped out the window the first time. Shot Warner the second time.

The supreme is no longer smiling. "You *shot* him?"

I spare a glance at Warner to see his eyes are still fixed firmly on my face, his mouth still in no danger of moving. I have no idea what he's thinking and I'm suddenly so curious I want to provoke him.

"Yes," I say, meeting Warner's gaze. "I shot him. With his own gun." And

the sudden tension in his jaw, the eyes that drop down to the hands he's gripping too tightly in his lap—he looks as if he's wrenched the bullet out of his body with his own 5 fingers.

The supreme runs a hand through his hair, rubs his chin. I notice he seems unsettled for the first time since I've arrived and I wonder how it's possible he had no idea how I escaped.

I wonder what Warner must have said about the bullet wound in his arm.

“What's your name?” I ask before I can stop myself, catching the words just a moment too late. I shouldn't be asking stupid questions but I hate that I keep referring to him as “the supreme,” as if he's some kind of untouchable entity.

Warner's father looks at me. “My *name*?”

I nod.

“You may call me Supreme Commander Anderson,” he says, still confused. “Why does that matter?”

“*Anderson*? But I thought your last name was Warner.” I thought he had a first name I could use to distinguish between him and the Warner I've grown to know too well.

Anderson takes a hard breath, spares a disgusted glance at his son. “Definitely *not*,” he says to me. “My son thought it would be a good idea to take his mother's last name, because that's exactly the kind of stupid thing he'd do. The mistake,” he says, almost announcing it now, “that he always makes, time and time again—allowing his emotions to get in the way of his *duty*—it's pathetic,” he says, spitting in Warner's direction. “Which is why as much as I'd like to let you live, my dear, I'm afraid you're too much of a distraction in his life. I cannot allow him to protect a person who has attempted to *kill* him.” He shakes his head. “I can't believe I even have to have this conversation. What an embarrassment he's proven to be.”

Anderson reaches into his pocket, pulls out a gun, aims it at my forehead.

Changes his mind.

“I'm sick of always cleaning up after you,” he barks at Warner, grabbing his arm, pulling him up from the couch. He pushes his son directly across from me, presses the gun into his good hand.

“Shoot her,” he says. “Shoot her right now.”

THIRTY-SIX

Warner's gaze is locked onto mine.

He's looking at me, eyes raw with emotion and I'm not sure I even know him anymore. I'm not sure I understand him, I'm not sure I know what he's going to do when he lifts the gun with a strong, steady hand and points it directly at my face.

"Hurry up," Anderson says. "The sooner you do this, the sooner you can move on. Now *get this over with*—"

But Warner cocks his head. Turns around.

Points the gun at his father.

I actually gasp.

Anderson looks bored, irritated, annoyed. He runs an impatient hand across his face before he pulls out another gun—my other gun—from his pocket. It's unbelievable.

Father and son, both threatening to kill each other.

"Point the gun in the right direction, Aaron. This is ridiculous."

Aaron.

I almost laugh in the middle of this insanity.

Warner's first name is *Aaron*.

"I have no interest in killing her," ~~Warner Aaron~~ he says to his father.

"Fine." Anderson points the gun at my head again. "I'll do it then."

"Shoot her," Warner says, "and I will put a bullet through your skull."

It's a triangle of death. Warner pointing a gun at his father, his father pointing a gun at me. I'm the only one without a weapon and I don't know what to do.

If I move, I'm going to die. If I don't move, I'm going to die.

Anderson is smiling.

"How charming," he says. He's wearing an easy, lazy grin, his grip on the gun in his hand so deceptively casual. "What is it? Does she make you feel brave, boy?" A pause. "Does she make you feel strong?"

Warner says nothing.

"Does she make you wish you could be a better man?" A little chuckle. "Has

she filled your head with dreams about your future?" A harder laugh.

"You have lost your mind," he says, "over a stupid *child* who's too much of a coward to defend herself even with the barrel of a gun pointed straight at her face. This," he says, pointing the gun harder in my direction, "is the silly little girl you've fallen in love with." He exhales a short, hard breath. "I don't know why I'm surprised."

A new tightness in his breathing. A new tightness in his grip around the gun in his hand. These are the only signs that Warner is even remotely affected by his father's words.

"How many times," Anderson asks, "have you threatened to kill me? How many times have I woken up in the middle of the night to find you, even as a little boy, trying to shoot me in my sleep?" He cocks his head. "Ten times? Maybe fifteen? I have to admit I've lost count." He stares at Warner. Smiles again. "And how many times," he says, his voice so much louder now, "were you able to go through with it? How many times did you succeed? How many times," he says, "did you burst into tears, apologizing, clinging to me like some demented—"

"Shut your mouth," Warner says, his voice so low, so even, his frame so still it's terrifying.

"You are *weak*," Anderson spits, disgusted. "Too pathetically sentimental. Don't want to kill your own father? Too afraid it'll break your miserable heart?"

Warner's jaw tenses.

"Shoot me," Anderson says, his eyes dancing, bright with amusement. "I said *shoot me!*" he shouts, this time reaching for Warner's injured arm, grabbing him until his fingers are clenched tight around the wound, twisting his arm back until Warner actually gasps from the pain, blinking too fast, trying desperately to suppress the scream building inside of him. His grip on the gun in his good hand wavers, just a little.

Anderson releases his son. Pushes him so hard that Warner stumbles as he tries to maintain his balance. His face is chalk-white. The sling wrapped around his arm is seeping with blood.

"So much talk," Anderson says, shaking his head. "So much talk and never enough follow-through. You *embarrass* me," he says to Warner, face twisted in repulsion. "You make me *sick*."

A sharp crack.

Anderson backhands Warner in the face so hard Warner actually sways for a moment, already unsteady from all the blood he's losing. But he doesn't say a

word.

He doesn't make a sound.

He stands there, bearing the pain, blinking fast, jaw so tight, staring at his father with absolutely no emotion on his face; there's no indication he's just been slapped but the bright red mark across his cheek, his temple, and part of his forehead. But his arm sling is more blood than cotton now, and he looks far too ill to be on his feet.

Still, he says nothing.

"Do you want to threaten me again?" Anderson is breathing hard as he speaks. "Do you still think you can defend your little girlfriend? You think I'm going to allow your stupid infatuation to get in the way of everything I've built? Everything I've worked toward?" Anderson's gun is no longer pointed at me. He forgets me long enough to press the barrel of his gun into Warner's forehead, twisting it, jabbing it against his skin as he speaks. "Have I taught you *nothing*?" he shouts. "Have you learned *nothing* from me—"

I don't know how to explain what happens next.

All I know is that my hand is around Anderson's throat and I've pinned him to the wall, so overcome by a blind, burning, all-consuming rage that I think my brain has already caught on fire and dissolved into ash.

I squeeze a little harder.

He's sputtering. He's gasping. He's trying to get at my arms, clawing limp hands at my body and he's turning red and blue and purple and I'm enjoying it. I'm enjoying it so, so much.

I think I'm smiling.

I bring my face less than an inch away from his ear and whisper, "Drop the gun."

He does.

I drop him and grab the gun at the same time.

Anderson is wheezing, coughing on the floor, trying to breathe, trying to speak, trying to reach for something to defend himself with and I'm amused by his pain. I'm floating in a cloud of absolute, undiluted hatred for this man and all that he's done and I want to sit and laugh until the tears choke me into a contented sort of silence. I understand so much now. So much.

"Juliette—"

"Warner," I say, so softly, still staring at Anderson's body slumped on the floor in front of me, "I'm going to need you to leave me alone right now."

I weigh the gun in my hands. Test my finger on the trigger. Try to remember

what Kenji taught me about taking aim. About keeping my hands and arms steady. Preparing for the kickback—the recoil—of the shot.

I tilt my head. Take inventory of his body parts.

“You,” Anderson finally manages to gasp, “you—”

I shoot him in the leg.

He’s screaming. I think he’s screaming. I can’t really hear anything anymore. My ears feel stuffed full of cotton, like someone might be trying to speak to me or maybe someone is shouting at me but everything is muffled and I have too much to focus on right now to pay attention to whatever annoying things are happening in the background. All I know is the reverberation of this weapon in my hand. All I hear is the gunshot echoing through my head. And I decide I’d like to do it again.

I shoot him in the other leg.

There’s so much screaming.

I’m entertained by the horror in his eyes. The blood ruining the expensive fabric of his clothes. I want to tell him he doesn’t look very attractive with his mouth open like that but then I think he probably wouldn’t care about my opinion anyway. I’m just a silly girl to him. Just a silly little girl, a stupid child with a pretty face who’s too much of a coward, he said, too much of a coward to defend herself. And oh, wouldn’t he like to *keep* me. Wouldn’t he like to *keep* me as his little pet. And I realize no. I shouldn’t bother sharing my thoughts with him. There’s no point wasting words on someone who’s about to die.

I take aim at his chest. Try to remember where the heart is.

Not quite to the left. Not quite in the center.

Just—*there*.

Perfect.

THIRTY-SEVEN

I am a thief.

I stole this notebook and this pen from one of the doctors, from one of his lab coats when he wasn't looking, and I shoved them both down my pants. This was just before he ordered those men to come and get me. The ones in the strange suits with the thick gloves and the gas masks with the foggy plastic windows hiding their eyes. They were aliens, I remember thinking. I remember thinking they must've been aliens because they couldn't have been human, the ones who handcuffed my hands behind my back, the ones who strapped me to my seat. They stuck Tasers to my skin over and over for no reason other than to hear me scream but I wouldn't. I whimpered but I never said a word. I felt the tears streak down my cheeks but I wasn't crying.

I think it made them angry.

They slapped me awake even though my eyes were open when we arrived. Someone unstrapped me without removing my handcuffs and kicked me in both kneecaps before ordering me to rise. And I tried. I tried but I couldn't and finally 6 hands shoved me out the door and my face was bleeding on the concrete for a while. I can't really remember the part where they dragged me inside.

I feel cold all the time.

I feel empty, like there is nothing inside of me but this broken heart, the only organ left in this shell. I feel the bleats echo within me, I feel the thumping reverberate around my skeleton. I have a heart, says science, but I am a monster, says society. And I know it, of course I know it. I know what I've done. I'm not asking for sympathy.

But sometimes I think—sometimes I wonder—if I were a monster, surely, I would feel it by now?

I would feel angry and vicious and vengeful. I'd know blind rage and bloodlust and a need for vindication.

Instead I feel an abyss within me that's so deep, so dark I can't see within it; I can't see what it holds. I do not know what I am or what might happen to me.

I do not know what I might do again.

THIRTY-EIGHT

An explosion.

The sound of glass shattering.

Someone yanks me back just as I pull the trigger and the bullet hits the window behind Anderson's head.

I'm spun around.

Kenji is shaking me, shaking me so hard I feel my head jerk back and forth and he's screaming at me, telling me we have to go, that I need to drop the gun, he's breathing hard and he's saying, "I'm going to need you to walk away, okay? Juliette? Can you understand me? I need you to back off right now. You're going to be okay—you're going to be all right—you're going to be fine, you just have to—"

"No, Kenji—" I'm trying to stop him from pulling me away, trying to keep my feet planted where they are because he doesn't understand. He needs to understand. "I have to kill him. I have to make sure he dies," I'm telling him. "I just need you to give me another second—"

"No," he says, "not yet, not right now," and he's looking at me like he's about to break, like he's seen something in my face that he wishes he'd never seen, and he says, "We can't. We can't kill him yet. It's too soon, okay?"

But it's not okay and I don't understand what's happening but Kenji is reaching for my hand, he's prying the gun out of the fingers I didn't realize were wrapped so tightly around the handle. And I'm blinking. I feel confused and disappointed. I look down at my hands. At my suit. And I can't understand for a moment where all the blood came from.

I glance at Anderson.

His eyes are rolled back in his head. Kenji is checking his pulse. Looks at me, says, "I think he fainted." And my body has begun to shake so violently I can hardly stand.

What have I done.

I back away, needing to find a wall to cling to, something solid to hold on to and Kenji catches me, he's holding me so tightly with one arm and cradling my head with his other hand and I feel like I might want to cry but for some reason I

can't. I can't do anything but endure these tremors rocking the length of my entire frame.

"We have to go," Kenji says to me, stroking my hair in a show of tenderness I know is rare for him. I close my eyes against his shoulder, wanting to draw strength from his warmth. "Are you going to be okay?" he asks me. "I need you to walk with me, all right? We'll have to run, too."

"Warner," I gasp, ripping out of Kenji's embrace, eyes wild. "Where's—"
He's unconscious.

A heap on the floor. Arms bound behind his back, an empty syringe tossed on the carpet beside him.

"I took care of Warner," Kenji says.

Suddenly everything is slamming into me all at the same time. All the reasons why we were supposed to be here, what we were trying to accomplish in the first place, the reality of what I've done and what I was about to do. "Kenji," I'm gasping, "Kenji, where's Adam? What happened? Where are the hostages? Is everyone okay?"

"Adam is fine," he reassures me. "We slipped in the back door and found Ian and Emory." He looks toward the kitchen area. "They're in pretty bad shape, but Adam's hauling them out, trying to get them to wake up."

"What about the others? Brendan? A-and Winston?"

Kenji shakes his head. "I have no idea. But I have a feeling we'll be able to get them back."

"How?"

Kenji nods at Warner. "We're going to take this kid hostage."

"What?"

"It's our best bet," he says to me. "Another trade. A real one, this time. Besides, it'll be fine. You take away his guns, and this golden boy is harmless." He walks toward Warner's unmoving figure. Nudges him with the toe of his boot before hauling him up, flipping Warner's body over his shoulder. I can't help but notice that Warner's injured arm is now completely soaked through with blood.

"Come on," Kenji says to me, not unkindly, eyes assessing my frame like he's not sure if I'm stable yet. "Let's get out of here—it's insanity out there and we don't have much time before they move into this street—"

"What?" I'm blinking too fast. "What do you mean—"

Kenji looks at me, disbelief written across his features. "The *war*, princess. They're all fighting to the death out there—"

“But Anderson never made the call—he said they were waiting for a word from him—”

“No,” Kenji says. “Anderson didn’t make the call. Castle did.”

Oh

God.

“Juliette!”

Adam is rushing into the house, whipping around to find my face until I run forward and he catches me in his arms without thinking, without remembering that we don’t do this anymore, that we’re not together anymore, that he shouldn’t be touching me at all. “You’re okay—you’re *okay*—”

“LET’S GO,” Kenji barks for the final time. “I know this is an emotional moment or whatever, but we have to get our asses the hell out of here. I swear, Kent—”

But Kenji stops.

His eyes drop.

Adam is on his knees, a look of fear and pain and horror and anger and terror etched into every line on his face and I’m trying to shake him, I’m trying to get him to tell me what’s wrong and he can’t move, he’s frozen on the ground, his eyes glued to Anderson’s body, his hands reaching out to touch the hair that was so perfectly set almost a moment ago and I’m begging him to speak to me, begging him to tell me what happened and it’s like the world shifts in his eyes, like nothing will ever be right in this world and nothing can ever be good again and he parts his lips.

He tries to speak.

“My father,” he says. “This man is my father.”

THIRTY-NINE

“Shit.”

Kenji presses his eyes shut like he can’t believe this is happening. “Shit shit shit.” He shifts Warner against his shoulders, wavers between being sensitive and being a soldier and says, “Adam, man, I’m sorry, but we really have to get out of here—”

Adam gets up, blinking back what I can only imagine are a thousand thoughts, memories, worries, hypotheses, and I call his name but it’s like he can’t even hear it. He’s confused, disoriented, and I’m wondering how this man could possibly be his father when Adam told me his dad was dead.

Now is not the time for these conversations.

Something explodes in the distance and the impact rattles the ground, the windows, the doors of this house, and Adam seems to snap back to reality. He jumps forward, grabs my arm, and we’re bolting out the door.

Kenji is in the lead, somehow managing to run despite the weight of Warner’s body, limp, hanging over his shoulder, and he’s shouting at us to stay close behind. I’m spinning, analyzing the chaos around us. The sounds of gunshots are too close too close too close.

“Where are Ian and Emory?” I ask Adam. “Did you get them out?”

“A couple of our guys were fighting not too far from here and managed to commandeer one of the tanks—I got them to carry those two back to Point,” he tells me, shouting so I can hear him. “It was the safest transport possible.”

I’m nodding, gasping for air as we fly through the streets and I’m trying to focus on the sounds around us, trying to figure out who’s winning, trying to figure out if our numbers have been decimated. We round the corner.

You’d think it’d be a massacre.

50 of our people are fighting against 500 of Anderson’s soldiers, who are unloading round after round, shooting at anything that could possibly be a target. Castle and the others are holding their ground, bloody and wounded but fighting back as best they can. Our men and women are armed and storming forward to match the shots of the opposition; others are fighting the only way they know how: one man has his hands to the ground, freezing the earth beneath the

soldiers' feet, causing them to lose balance; another man is darting through the soldiers with such speed he's nothing but a blur, confusing the men and knocking them down and stealing their guns. I look up and see a woman hiding in a tree, throwing what must be knives or arrows in such rapid succession that the soldiers don't have a moment to react before they're hit from above.

Then there's Castle in the middle of it all, his hands outstretched over his head, collecting a whirlwind of particles, debris, scattered strips of steel and broken branches with nothing more than the coercion of his fingertips. The others have formed a human wall around him, protecting him as he forms a cyclone of such magnitude that even I can see he's straining to maintain control of it.

Then
he lets go.

The soldiers are shouting, screaming, running back and ducking for cover but most are too slow to escape the reach of so much destruction and they're down, impaled by shards of glass and stone and wood and broken metal but I know this defense won't last for long.

Someone has to tell Castle.

Someone has to tell him to go, to get out of here, that Anderson is down and that we have 2 of our hostages and Warner in tow. He has to get our men and women back to Omega Point before the soldiers get smart and someone throws a bomb big enough to destroy everything. Our numbers won't hold up for much longer and this is the perfect opportunity for them to get safe.

I tell Adam and Kenji what I'm thinking.

"But how?" Kenji shouts above the chaos. "How can we get to him? If we run through there we're dead! We need some kind of distraction—"

"What?" I yell back.

"A *distraction!*" he shouts. "We need something to throw off the soldiers long enough for one of us to grab Castle and give him the green light—we don't have much time—"

Adam is already trying to grab me, he's already trying to stop me, he's already begging me not to do what he thinks I'm going to do and I tell him it's okay. I tell him not to worry. I tell him to get the others to safety and promise him I'm going to be just fine but he reaches for me, he's pleading with his eyes and I'm so tempted to stay here, right next to him, but I break away. I finally know what I need to do; I'm finally ready to help; I'm finally kind of a little bit sure that maybe this time I might be able to control it and I have to try.

So I stumble back.
I close my eyes.
I let go.

I fall to my knees and press my palm to the ground and feel the power coursing through me, feel it curdling in my blood and mixing with the anger, the passion, the fire inside of me and I think of every time my parents called me a monster, a horrible terrifying mistake and I think of all the nights I sobbed myself to sleep and see all the faces that wanted me dead and then it's like a slide show of images reeling through my mind, men and women and children, innocent protesters run over in the streets; I see guns and bombs, fire and devastation, so much suffering suffering suffering and I steel myself. I flex my fist. I pull back my arm and

I
s h a t t e r
what's left of this earth.

FORTY

I'm still here.

I open my eyes and I'm momentarily astonished, confused, half expecting to find myself dead or brain-damaged or at the very least mangled on the ground, but this reality refuses to vanish.

The world under my feet is rumbling, rattling, shaking and thundering to life and my fist is still pressed into the ground and I'm afraid to let go. I'm on my knees, looking up at both sides of this battle and I see the soldiers slowing down. I see their eyes dart around. I see their feet slipping failing to stay standing and the snaps, the groans, the unmistakable cracks that are now creaking through the middle of the pavement cannot be ignored and it's like the jaws of life are stretching their joints, grinding their teeth, yawning themselves awake to witness our disgrace.

The ground looks around, its mouth gaping open at the injustice, the violence, the calculated ploys for power that stop for no one and nothing and are sated only by the blood of the weak, the screams of the unwilling. It's as if the earth thought to take a peek at what we've been doing all this time and it's terrifying just how disappointed it sounds.

Adam is running.

He's dashing through a crowd still gasping for air and an explanation for the earthquake under their feet and he tackles Castle, he pins him down, he's shouting to the men and the women and he ducks, he dodges a stray bullet, he pulls Castle to his feet and our people have begun to run.

The soldiers on the opposite side are stumbling over each other and tripping into a tangle of limbs as they try to outrun one another and I'm wondering how much longer I have to hold on, how much longer this must go on before it's sufficient, and Kenji shouts, "Juliette!"

And I spin around just in time to hear him tell me to let go.

So I do.

The wind the trees the fallen leaves all slip and slide back into place with one giant inhalation and everything stops and for a moment I can't remember what it's like to live in a world that isn't falling apart.

Kenji yanks me up by the arm and we're running, we're the last of our group to leave and he's asking me if I'm okay and I'm wondering how he's still carrying Warner, I'm thinking Kenji must be a hell of a lot stronger than he looks, and I'm thinking I'm too hard on him sometimes, I'm thinking I don't give him enough credit. I'm just beginning to realize that he's one of my favorite people on this planet and I'm so happy he's okay.

I'm so happy he's my friend.

I cling to his hand and let him lead me toward a tank abandoned on our side of the divide and suddenly I realize I can't see Adam, that I don't know where he's gone and I'm frantic, I'm screaming his name until I feel his arms around my waist, his words in my ear, and we're still diving for cover as the final shots sound in the distance.

We clamber into the tank.

We close the doors.

We disappear.

FORTY-ONE

Warner's head is on my lap.

His face is smooth and calm and peaceful in a way I've never seen it and I almost reach out to stroke his hair before I remember exactly how awkward this actually is.

~~Murderer on my lap~~

~~Murderer on my lap~~

~~Murderer on my lap~~

I look to my right.

Warner's legs are resting on Adam's knees and he looks just as uncomfortable as I am.

"Hang tight, guys," Kenji says, still driving the tank toward Omega Point. "I know this is about a million different kinds of weird, but I didn't exactly have enough time to think of a better plan."

He glances at the 2 3 of us but no one says a word until

"I'm so happy you guys are okay." I say it like those 9 syllables have been sitting inside of me for too long, like they've been kicked out, evicted from my mouth, and only then do I realize exactly how worried I was that the 3 of us wouldn't make it back alive. "I'm so, so happy you're okay."

Deep, solemn, steady breathing all around.

"How are you feeling?" Adam asks me. "Your arm—you're all right?"

"Yeah." I flex my wrist and try not to wince. "I'm okay. These gloves and this metal thing actually helped, I think." I wiggle my fingers. Examine my gloves. "Nothing is broken."

"That was pretty badass," Kenji says to me. "You really saved us back there."

I shake my head. "Kenji—about what happened—in the house—I'm really sorry, I—"

"Hey, how about let's not talk about that right now."

"What's going on?" Adam asks, alert. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Kenji says quickly.

Adam ignores him. Looks at me. "What happened? Are you all right?"

“I just—I j-just—” I struggle to speak. “What happened—with Warner’s da—”

Kenji swears very loudly.

My mouth freezes midmovement.

My cheeks burn as I realize what I’ve said. As I remember what Adam said just before we ran from that house. He’s suddenly pale, pressing his lips together and looking away, out the tiny window of this tank.

“Listen ...” Kenji clears his throat. “We don’t have to talk about that, okay? In fact, I think I might rather *not* talk about that? Because that shit is just too weird for me to—”

“I don’t know how it’s even possible,” Adam whispers. He’s blinking, staring straight ahead now, blinking and blinking and blinking and “I keep thinking I must be dreaming,” he says, “that I’m just hallucinating this whole thing. But then”—he drops his head in his hands, laughs a harsh laugh—“that is one face I will never forget.”

“Didn’t—didn’t you ever meet the supreme commander?” I dare to ask. “Or even see a picture of him ...? Isn’t that something you’d see in the army?”

Adam shakes his head.

Kenji speaks. “His whole kick was always being, like, invisible. He got some sick thrill out of being this unseen power.”

“Fear of the unknown?”

“Something like that, yeah. I heard he didn’t want his pictures anywhere—didn’t make any public speeches, either—because he thought if people could put a face on him, it would make him vulnerable. Human. And he always got his thrills from scaring the shit out of everyone. Being the ultimate power. The ultimate threat. Like—how can you fight something if you can’t even see it? Can’t even find it?”

“That’s why it was such a big deal for him to be here,” I realize out loud.

“Pretty much.”

“But you thought your dad was dead,” I say to Adam. “I thought you said he was dead?”

“Just so you guys know,” Kenji interjects, “I’m still voting for the *we don’t have to talk about this* option. You know. Just so you know. Just putting that out there.”

“I thought he was,” Adam says, still not looking at me. “That’s what they told me.”

“Who did?” Kenji asks. Catches himself. Winces. “Shit. Fine. *Fine*. I’m

curious.”

Adam shrugs. “It’s all starting to come together now. All the things I didn’t understand. How messed up my life was with James. After my mom died, my dad was never around unless he wanted to get drunk and beat the crap out of someone. I guess he was living a completely different life somewhere else. That’s why he used to leave me and James alone all the time.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Kenji says. “I mean, not the parts about your dad being a dick, but just, like, the whole scope of it. Because if you and Warner are brothers, and you’re eighteen, and Warner is nineteen, and Anderson has always been married to Warner’s mom—”

“My parents were never married,” Adam says, eyes widening as he speaks the last word.

“You were the love child?” Kenji says, disgusted. “I mean—you know, no offense to you—it’s just, I do not want to think about Anderson having some kind of passionate love affair. That is just sick.”

Adam looks like he’s been frozen solid. “Holy shit,” he whispers.

“But I mean, why even have a love affair?” Kenji asks. “I never understood that kind of crap. If you’re not happy, just leave. Don’t cheat. Doesn’t take a genius to figure that shit out. I mean”—he hesitates—“I’m *assuming* it was a love affair,” Kenji says, still driving and unable to see the look on Adam’s face. “Maybe it wasn’t a *love* affair. Maybe it was just another dude-being-a-jackass kind of th—” He catches himself, cringes. “Shit. See, this is why I do *not* talk to people about their personal problems—”

“It was,” Adam says, barely breathing now. “I have no idea why he never married her, but I know he loved my mom. He never gave a damn about the rest of us,” he says. “Just her. It was always about her. Everything was about her. The few times a month he was ever at home, I was always supposed to stay in my room. I was supposed to be very quiet. I had to knock on my own door and get permission before I could come out, even just to use the bathroom. And he used to get pissed whenever my mom would let me out. He didn’t want to see me unless he had to. My mom had to sneak me my dinner just so he wouldn’t go nuts about how she was feeding me too much and not saving anything for herself,” he says. He shakes his head. “And he was even worse when James was born.”

Adam blinks like he’s going blind.

“And then when she died,” he says, taking a deep breath, “when she died all he ever did was blame me for her death. He always told me it was my fault she

got sick, and it was my fault she died. That I needed too much, that she didn't eat enough, that she got weak because she was too busy taking care of us, giving food to us, giving ... everything to us. To me and James." His eyebrows pull together. "And I believed him for so long. I figured that was why he left all the time. I thought it was some kind of punishment. I thought I deserved it."

I'm too horrified to speak.

"And then he just ... I mean he was never around when I was growing up," Adam says, "and he was always an asshole. But after she died he just ... lost his mind. He used to come by just to get piss-drunk. He used to force me to stand in front of him so he could throw his empty bottles at me. And if I flinched—if I *flinched*—"

He swallows, hard.

"That's all he ever did," Adam says, his voice quieter now. "He would come over. Get drunk. Beat the shit out of me. I was fourteen when he stopped coming back." Adam stares at his hands, palms up. "He sent some money every month for us to survive on and then—" A pause. "Two years later I got a letter from our brand-new government telling me my father was dead. I figured he probably got wasted again and did something stupid. Got hit by a car. Fell into the ocean. Whatever. It didn't matter. I was happy he was dead, but I had to drop out of school. I enlisted because the money was gone and I had to take care of James and I knew I wouldn't find another job."

Adam shakes his head. "He left us with nothing, not a single penny, not even a piece of meat to live off of, and now I'm sitting here, in this tank, running from a global war my own *father* has helped orchestrate"—he laughs a hard, hollow laugh—"and the one other worthless person on this planet is lying unconscious in my lap." Adam is actually laughing now, laughing hard, disbelieving, his hand caught in his hair, tugging at the roots, gripping his skull. "And he's my *brother*. My own flesh and blood.

"My father had an entirely separate life I didn't know about and instead of being dead like he should be, he gave me a *brother* who almost tortured me to death in a *slaughterhouse*—" He runs an unsteady hand over the length of his face, suddenly cracking, suddenly slipping, suddenly losing control and his hands are shaking and he has to curl them into fists and he presses them against his forehead and says, "He has to die."

And I'm not breathing, not even a little bit, not even at all, when he says,

"My father," he says, "I have to kill him."

FORTY-TWO

I'm going to tell you a secret.

~~I don't regret what I did. I'm not sorry at all.~~

~~In fact, if I had a chance to do it again I know this time I'd do it right. I'd shoot Anderson right through the heart.~~

~~And I would enjoy it.~~

FORTY-THREE

I don't even know where to begin.

Adam's pain is like a handful of straw shoved down my throat. He has no parents but a father who beat him, abused him, abandoned him only to ruin the rest of the world and left him a brand-new brother who is exactly his opposite in every possible way.

Warner whose first name is no longer a mystery, Adam whose last name isn't actually Kent.

Kent is his middle name, Adam said to me. He said he didn't want to have anything to do with his father and never told people his real last name. He has that much, at least, in common with his brother.

That, and the fact that both of them have some kind of immunity to my touch.

Adam and Aaron Anderson.

Brothers.

I'm sitting in my room, sitting in the dark, struggling to reconcile Adam with his new sibling who is really nothing more than a boy, a child who hates his father and as a result, a child who made a series of very unfortunate decisions in life. 2 brothers. 2 very different sets of choices.

2 very different lives.

Castle came to me this morning—now that all the injured have been set up in the medical wing and the insanity has subsided—he came to me and he said, “Ms. Ferrars, you were very brave yesterday. I wanted to extend my gratitude to you, and thank you for what you did—for showing your support. I don't know that we would've made it out of there without you.”

I smiled, struggled to swallow the compliment and assumed he was finished but then he said, “In fact, I'm so impressed that I'd like to offer you your first official assignment at Omega Point.”

My first official assignment.

“Are you interested?” he asked.

I said yes yes yes of course I was interested, I was definitely interested, I was so very, very interested to finally have something to do—something to

accomplish—and he smiled and he said, “I’m so happy to hear it. Because I can’t think of anyone better suited to this particular position than you.”

I beamed.

The sun and the moon and the stars called and said, “Turn down the beaming, please, because you’re making it hard for us to see,” and I didn’t listen, I just kept on beaming. And then I asked Castle for the details of my official assignment. The one perfectly suited to me.

And he said

“I’d like you to be in charge of maintaining and interrogating our new visitor.”

And I stopped beaming.

I stared at Castle.

“I will, of course, be overseeing the entire process,” Castle continued, “so feel free to come to me with questions and concerns. But we’ll need to take advantage of his presence here, and that means trying to get him to speak.” Castle was quiet a moment. “He ... seems to have an odd sort of attachment to you, Ms. Ferrars, and—forgive me—but I think it would behoove us to exploit it. I don’t think we can afford the luxury of ignoring any possible advantages available to us. Anything he can tell us about his father’s plans, or where our hostages might be, will be invaluable to our efforts. And we don’t have much time,” he said. “I’m afraid I’ll need you to get started right away.”

And I asked the world to open up, I said, world, please open up, because I’d love to fall into a river of magma and die, just a little bit, but the world couldn’t hear me because Castle was still talking and he said, “Perhaps you can talk some sense into him? Tell him we’re not interested in hurting him? Convince him to help us get our remaining hostages back?”

I said, “Oh,” I said surely, “he’s in some kind of holding cell? Behind bars or something?”

But Castle laughed, amused by my sudden, unexpected hilarity and said don’t be silly, Ms. Ferrars, “We don’t have anything like that here. I never thought we’d need to keep anyone captive at Omega Point. But yes, he’s in his own room, and yes, the door is locked.”

“So you want me to go inside of his room?” I asked. “With him? Alone?”

Calm! Of course I was calm. I was definitely absolutely everything that is the opposite of calm.

But then Castle’s forehead tightened, concerned. “Is that a problem?” he asked me. “I thought—because he can’t touch you—I actually thought you

might not feel as threatened by him as the others do. He's aware of your abilities, is he not? I imagine he would be wise to stay away from you for his own benefit."

And it was funny, because there it was: a vat of ice, all over my head, dripping leaking seeping into my bones, and actually no, it wasn't funny at all, because I had to say, "Yes. Right. Yes, of course. I almost forgot. Of course he wouldn't be able to touch me," you're quite right, Mr. Castle, sir, what on earth was I thinking.

Castle was relieved, so relieved, as if he'd taken a dip in a warm pool he was sure would be frozen.

And now I'm here, sitting in exactly the same position I was in 2 hours ago and I'm beginning to wonder

how much longer

I can keep this secret to myself.

FORTY-FOUR

This is the door.

This one, right in front of me, this is where Warner is staying. There are no windows and there is no way to see inside of his room and I'm starting to think that this situation is the exact antonym of excellent.

Yes.

I am going to walk into his room, completely unarmed, because the guns are buried deep down in the armory and because I'm lethal, so why would I need a gun? No one in their right mind would lay a hand on me, no one but Warner, of course, whose half-crazed attempt at stopping me from escaping out of my window resulted in this discovery, his discovery that he can touch me without harming himself.

And I've said a word of this to exactly no one.

I really thought that perhaps I'd imagined it, just until Warner kissed me and told me he loved me and then, that's when I knew I could no longer pretend this wasn't happening. But it's only been about 4 weeks since that day, and I didn't know how to bring it up. I thought maybe I wouldn't have to bring it up. I really, quite desperately didn't *want* to bring it up.

And now, the thought of telling anyone, of making it known to Adam, of all people, that the one person he hates most in this world—second only to his own father—is the one other person who can touch me? That Warner has already touched me, that his hands have known the shape of my body and his lips have known the taste of my mouth—never mind that it wasn't something I actually wanted—I just can't do it.

Not now. Not after everything.

So this situation is entirely my own fault. And I have to deal with it.

I steel myself and step forward.

There are 2 men I've never met before standing guard outside Warner's door. This doesn't mean much, but it gives me a modicum of calm. I nod hello in the guards' direction and they greet me with such enthusiasm I actually wonder

whether they've confused me with someone else.

"Thanks so much for coming," one of them says to me, his long, shaggy blond hair slipping into his eyes. "He's been completely insane since he woke up—throwing things around and trying to destroy the walls—he's been threatening to kill all of us. He says you're the only one he wants to talk to, and he's only just calmed down because we told him you were on your way."

"We had to take out all the furniture," the other guard adds, his brown eyes wide, incredulous. "He was breaking *everything*. He wouldn't even eat the food we gave him."

The antonym of excellent.

The antonym of excellent.

The antonym of excellent.

I manage a feeble smile and tell them I'll see what I can do to sedate him. They nod, eager to believe I'm capable of something I know I'm not and they unlock the door. "Just knock to let us know when you're ready to leave," they tell me. "Call for us and we'll open the door."

I'm nodding yes and sure and of course and trying to ignore the fact that I'm more nervous right now than I was meeting his father. To be alone in a room with Warner—to be alone with him and to not know what he might do or what he's capable of and I'm so confused, because I don't even know who he is anymore.

He's 100 different people.

He's the person who forced me to torture a toddler against my will. He's the child so terrorized, so psychologically tormented that he'd try to kill his own father in his sleep. He's the boy who shot a defecting soldier in the forehead; the boy who was trained to be a cold, heartless murderer by a man he thought he could trust. I see Warner as a child desperately seeking his dad's approval. I see him as the leader of an entire sector, eager to conquer me, to use me. I see him feeding a stray dog. I see him torturing Adam almost to death. And then I hear him telling me he loves me, feel him *kissing* me with such unexpected passion and desperation that I don't know I don't know I don't know what I'm walking into.

I don't know who he'll be this time. Which side of himself he'll show me today.

But then I think this must be different. Because he's in my territory now, and I can always call for help if something goes wrong.

He's not going to hurt me.

I hope.

FORTY-FIVE

I step inside.

The door slams shut behind me but the Warner I find inside this room is not one I recognize at all. He's sitting on the floor, back against the wall, legs outstretched in front of him, feet crossed at the ankles. He's wearing nothing but socks, a simple white T-shirt, and a pair of black slacks. His coat, his shoes, and his fancy shirt are all discarded on the ground. His body is toned and muscular and hardly contained by his undershirt; his hair is a blond mess, disheveled for what's probably the first time in his life.

But he's not looking at me. He doesn't even look up as I take a step closer. He doesn't flinch.

I've forgotten how to breathe again.

Then

"Do you have any idea," he says, so quietly, "how many times I've read this?" He lifts his hand but not his head and holds up a small, faded rectangle between 2 fingers.

And I'm wondering how it's possible to be punched in the gut by so many fists at the same time.

My notebook.

He's holding my notebook.

Of course he is.

I can't believe I'd forgotten. He was the last person to touch my notebook; the last person to see it. He took it from me when he found that I'd hidden it in the pocket of my dress back on base. This was just before I escaped, just before Adam and I jumped out the window and ran away. Just before Warner realized he could touch me.

And now, to know that he's read my most painful thoughts, my most anguished confessions—the things I wrote while in complete and utter isolation, certain that I would die in that very cell, so certain no one would ever read the things I wrote down—to know that he's read these desperate whispers of my private mind.

I feel absolutely, unbearably naked.

Petrified.

So vulnerable.

He flips the notebook open at random. Scans the page until he stops. He finally looks up, his eyes sharper, brighter, a more beautiful shade of green than they've ever been and my heart is beating so fast I can't even feel it anymore.

And he begins to read.

"No—," I gasp, but it's too late.

"I sit here every day," he says. "175 days I've sat here so far. Some days I stand up and stretch and feel these stiff bones, these creaky joints, this trampled spirit cramped inside my being. I roll my shoulders, I blink my eyes, I count the seconds creeping up the walls, the minutes shivering under my skin, the breaths I have to remember to take. Sometimes I allow my mouth to drop open, just a little bit; I touch my tongue to the backs of my teeth and the seam of my lips and I walk around this small space, I trail my fingers along the cracks in the concrete and wonder, I wonder what it would be like to speak out loud and be heard. I hold my breath, listen closely for anything, any sound of life and wonder at the beauty, the impossibility of possibly hearing another person breathing beside me."

He presses the back of his fist to his mouth for just a moment before continuing.

"I stop. I stand still. I close my eyes and try to remember a world beyond these walls. I wonder what it would be like to know that I'm not dreaming, that this isolated existence is not caged within my own mind."

"And I do," he says, reciting the words from memory now, his head resting back against the wall, eyes pressed shut as he whispers, "I do wonder, I think about it all the time. What it would be like to kill myself. Because I never really know, I still can't tell the difference, I'm never quite certain whether or not I'm actually alive. So I sit here. I sit here every single day."

I'm rooted to the ground, frozen in my own skin, unable to move forward or backward for fear of waking up and realizing that this is actually happening. I feel like I might die of embarrassment, of this invasion of privacy, and I want to run and run and run and run and run

"Run, I said to myself." Warner has picked up my notebook again.

"Please." I'm begging him. *"Please s-stop—"*

He looks up, looks at me like he can really see me, see into me, like he wants *me* to see into *him* and then he drops his eyes, he clears his throat, he starts over, he reads from my journal.

“Run, I said to myself. Run until your lungs collapse, until the wind whips and snaps at your tattered clothes, until you’re a blur that blends into the background.

“Run, Juliette, run faster, run until your bones break and your shins split and your muscles atrophy and your heart dies because it was always too big for your chest and it beat too fast for too long and run.

“Run run run until you can’t hear their feet behind you. Run until they drop their fists and their shouts dissolve in the air. Run with your eyes open and your mouth shut and dam the river rushing up behind your eyes. Run, Juliette.

“Run until you drop dead.

“Make sure your heart stops before they ever reach you. Before they ever touch you.

“Run, I said.”

I have to clench my fists until I feel pain, anything to push these memories away. I don’t want to remember. I don’t want to think about these things anymore. I don’t want to think about what else I wrote on those pages, what else Warner knows about me now, what he must think of me. I can only imagine how pathetic and lonely and desperate I must appear to him. ~~I don’t know why I care.~~

“Do you know,” he says, closing the cover of the journal only to lay his hand on top of it. Protecting it. Staring at it. “I couldn’t sleep for days after I read that entry. I kept wanting to know which people were chasing you down the street, who it was you were running from. I wanted to find them,” he says, so softly, “and I wanted to rip their limbs off, one by one. I wanted to murder them in ways that would horrify you to hear.”

I’m shaking now, whispering, “Please, please give that back to me.”

He touches the tips of his fingers to his lips. Tilts his head back, just a little. Smiles a strange, unhappy smile. Says, “You must know how sorry I am. That I”—he swallows—“that I kissed you like that. I confess I had no idea you would shoot me for it.”

And I realize something. “Your arm,” I breathe, astonished. He wears no sling. He moves with no difficulty. There’s no bruising or swelling or scars I can see.

His smile is brittle. “Yes,” he says. “It was healed when I woke up to find myself in this room.”

Sonya and Sara. They helped him. I wonder why anyone here would do him such a kindness. I force myself to take a step back. “Please,” I tell him. “My notebook, I—”

"I promise you," he says, "I never would've kissed you if I didn't think you wanted me to."

And I'm so shocked that for a moment I forget all about my notebook. I meet his heavy gaze. Manage to steady my voice. "I told you I *hated* you."

"Yes," he says. He nods. "Well. You'd be surprised how many people say that to me."

"I don't think I would."

His lips twitch. "You tried to kill me."

"That amuses you."

"Oh yes," he says, his grin growing. "I find it fascinating." A pause. "Would you like to know why?"

I stare at him.

"Because all you ever said to me," he explains, "was that you didn't want to hurt anyone. You didn't want to *murder people*."

"I don't."

"Except for me?"

I'm all out of letters. Fresh out of words. Someone has robbed me of my entire vocabulary.

"That decision was so easy for you to make," he says. "So simple. You had a gun. You wanted to run away. You pulled the trigger. That was it."

He's right.

I keep telling myself I have no interest in killing people but somehow I find a way to justify it, to rationalize it when I want to.

Warner. Castle. Anderson.

I wanted to kill every single one of them. And I would have.

What is happening to me.

I've made a huge mistake coming here. Accepting this assignment. Because I can't be alone with Warner. Not like this. Being alone with him is making my insides hurt in ways I don't want to understand.

I have to leave.

"Don't go," he whispers, eyes on my notebook again. "Please," he says. "Sit with me. Stay with me. I just want to see you. You don't even have to say anything."

Some crazed, confused part of my brain actually wants to sit down next to him, actually wants to hear what he has to say before I remember Adam and what he would think if he knew, what he would say if he were here and could see I was interested in spending my time with the same person who shot him in

the leg, broke his ribs, and hung him on a conveyor belt in an abandoned slaughterhouse, leaving him to bleed to death one minute at a time.

I must be insane.

Still, I don't move.

Warner relaxes against the wall. "Would you like me to read to you?"

I'm shaking my head over and over and over again, whispering, "Why are you doing this to me?"

And he looks like he's about to respond before he changes his mind. Looks away. Lifts his eyes to the ceiling and smiles, just a tiny bit. "You know," he says, "I could tell, the very first day I met you. There was something about you that felt different to me. Something in your eyes that was so tender. Raw. Like you hadn't yet learned how to hide your heart from the world." He's nodding now, nodding to himself about something and I can't imagine what it is. "Finding this," he says, his voice soft as he pats the cover of my notebook, "was so"—his eyebrows pull together—"it was so extraordinarily painful." He finally looks at me and he looks like a completely different person. Like he's trying to solve a tremendously difficult equation. "It was like meeting a friend for the very first time."

~~Why are my hands trembling.~~

He takes a deep breath. Looks down. Whispers, "I am so tired, love. I'm so very, very tired."

~~Why won't my heart stop racing.~~

"How much time," he says after a moment, "do I have before they kill me?"

"Kill you?"

He stares at me.

I'm startled into speaking. "We're not going to kill you," I tell him. "We have no intention of hurting you. We just want to use you to get back our men. We're holding you hostage."

Warner's eyes go wide, his shoulders stiffen. "What?"

"We have no reason to kill you," I explain. "We only need to barter with your life—"

Warner laughs a loud, full-bodied laugh. Shakes his head. Smiles at me in that way I've only ever seen once before, looking at me like I'm the sweetest thing he's ever decided to eat.

~~Those dimples.~~

"Dear, sweet, beautiful girl," he says. "Your team here has greatly overestimated my father's affection for me. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but

keeping me here is not going to give you the advantage you were hoping for. I doubt my father has even noticed I'm gone. So I would like to request that you please either kill me, or let me go. But I beg you not to waste my time by confining me here."

I'm checking my pockets for spare words and sentences but I'm finding none, not an adverb, not a preposition or even a dangling participle because there doesn't exist a single response to such an outlandish request.

Warner is still smiling at me, shoulders shaking in silent amusement.

"But that's not even a viable argument," I tell him. "No one *likes* to be held hostage—"

He takes a tight breath. Runs a hand through his hair. Shrugs. "Your men are wasting their time," he says. "Kidnapping me will never work to your advantage. This much," he says, "I can guarantee."

FORTY-SIX

Time for lunch.

Kenji and I are sitting on one side of the table, Adam and James on the other.

We've been sitting here for half an hour now, deliberating over my conversation with Warner. I conveniently left out the parts about my journal, though I'm starting to wonder if I should've mentioned it. I'm also starting to wonder if I should just come clean about Warner being able to touch me. But every time I look at Adam I just can't bring myself to do it. I don't even know *why* Warner can touch me. Maybe Warner is the fluke I thought Adam was. Maybe all of this is some kind of cosmic joke told at my expense.

I don't know what to do yet.

But somehow the extra details of my conversation with Warner seem too personal, too embarrassing to share. I don't want anyone to know, for example, that Warner told me he loves me. I don't want anyone to know that he has my journal, or that he's read it. Adam is the only other person who even knows it exists, and he, at least, was kind enough to respect my privacy. He's the one who saved my journal from the asylum, the one who brought it back to me in the first place. But he said he never read the things I wrote. He said he knew they must've been very private thoughts and that he didn't want to intrude.

Warner, on the other hand, has ransacked my mind.

I feel so much more apprehensive around him now. Just thinking about being near him makes me feel anxious, nervous, so vulnerable. I hate that he knows my secrets. My secret thoughts.

It shouldn't be him who knows anything about me at all.

It should be *him*. The one sitting right across from me. The one with the dark-blue eyes and the dark-brown hair and the hands that have touched my heart, my body.

And he doesn't seem okay right now.

Adam's head is down, his eyebrows drawn, his hands clenched together on the table. He hasn't touched his food and he hasn't said a word since I summarized my meeting with Warner. Kenji has been just as quiet. Everyone's been a bit more solemn since our recent battle; we lost several people from

Omega Point.

I take a deep breath and try again.

“So what do you think?” I ask them. “About what he said about Anderson?” I’m careful not to use the word *dad* or *father* anymore, especially around James. I don’t know what, if anything, Adam has said to James about the issue, and it’s not my business to pry. Worse still, Adam hasn’t said a word about it since we got back, and it’s already been 2 days. “Do you think he’s right that Anderson won’t care if he’s been taken hostage?”

James squirms around in his seat, eyes narrowed as he chews the food in his mouth, looking at the group of us like he’s waiting to memorize everything we say.

Adam rubs his forehead. “That,” he finally says, “might actually have some merit.”

Kenji frowns, folds his arms, leans forward. “Yeah. It is kind of weird. We haven’t heard a single thing from their side, and it’s been over forty-eight hours.”

“What does Castle think?” I ask.

Kenji shrugs. “He’s stressed out. Ian and Emory were really messed up when we found them. I don’t think they’re conscious yet, even though Sonya and Sara have been working around the clock to help them. I think he’s worried we won’t get Winston and Brendan back at all.”

“Maybe,” Adam says, “their silence has to do with the fact that you shot Anderson in both his legs. Maybe he’s just recovering.”

I almost choke on the water I was attempting to drink. I chance a look at Kenji to see if he’s going to correct Adam’s assumption, but he doesn’t even flinch. So I say nothing.

Kenji is nodding. Says, “Right. Yeah. I almost forgot about that.” A pause. “Makes sense.”

“You shot him in the legs?” James asks, eyes wide in Kenji’s direction.

Kenji clears his throat but is careful not to look at me. I wonder why he’s protecting me from this. Why he thinks it’s better not to tell the truth about what really happened. “Yup,” he says, and takes a bite of his food.

Adam exhales. Pushes up his shirtsleeves, studies the series of concentric circles inked onto his forearms, military mementos of a past life.

“But why?” James asks Kenji.

“Why what, kid?”

“Why didn’t you kill him? Why just shoot him in the legs? Didn’t you say

he's the worst? The reason why we have all the problems we have now?"

Kenji is quiet for a moment. He's gripping his spoon, poking at his food. Finally he puts the spoon down. Motions for James to join him on our side of the table. I slide down to make room. "Come here," he says to James, pulling him tight against the right side of his body. James wraps his arms around Kenji's waist and Kenji drops his hand on James' head, mussing his hair.

I had no idea they were so close.

I keep forgetting that the 3 of them are roommates.

"So, okay. You ready for a little lesson?" he says to James.

James nods.

"It's like this: Castle always teaches us that we can't just cut off the head, you know?" He hesitates; collects his thoughts. "Like, if we just kill the enemy leader, then what? What would happen?"

"World peace," James says.

"Wrong. It would be mass chaos." Kenji shakes his head. Rubs the tip of his nose. "And chaos is a hell of a lot harder to fight."

"Then how do you win?"

"Right," Kenji says. "Well that's the thing. We can only take out the leader of the opposition when we're ready to take over—only when there's a new leader ready to take the place of the old one. People need someone to rally around, right? And we're not ready yet." He shrugs. "This was supposed to be a fight against Warner—taking *him* out wouldn't have been an issue. But to take out Anderson would be asking for absolute anarchy, all over the country. And anarchy means there's a chance someone else—someone even worse, possibly—could take control before we do."

James says something in response but I don't hear it.

Adam is staring at me.

He's staring at me and he's not pretending not to. He's not looking away. He's not saying a word. His gaze moves from my eyes to my mouth, focusing on my lips for a moment too long. Finally he turns away, just for a brief second before his eyes are fixed on mine again. Deeper. Hungrier.

My heart is starting to hurt.

I watch the hard movement in his throat. The rise and fall of his chest. The tense line of his jaw and the way he's sitting so perfectly still. He doesn't say anything, anything at all.

~~I want so desperately to touch him.~~

"Smartass." Kenji is chuckling, shaking his head as he reacts to something

James just said. “You know that’s not what I meant. Anyway,” he sighs, “we’re not ready to deal with that kind of insanity just yet. We take out Anderson when we’re ready to take over. That’s the only way to do this right.”

Adam stands up abruptly. He pushes away his untouched bowl of food and clears his throat. Looks at Kenji. “So that’s why you didn’t kill him when he was right in front of you.”

Kenji scratches the back of his head, uncomfortable. “Listen man, if I had any idea—”

“Forget it.” Adam cuts him off. “You did me a favor.”

“What do you mean?” Kenji asks. “Hey man—where’re you going—”

But Adam is already walking away.

FORTY-SEVEN

I go after him.

I'm following Adam down an empty corridor as he exits the dining hall even though I know I shouldn't. I know I shouldn't be talking to him like this, shouldn't be encouraging the feelings I have for him but I'm worried. I can't help it. He's disappearing into himself, withdrawing into a world I can't penetrate and I can't even blame him for it. I can only imagine what he must be experiencing right now. These recent revelations would be enough to drive a weaker person absolutely insane. And even though we've managed to work together lately, it's always been during such high-stress situations that there's hardly been any time for us to dwell on our personal issues.

And I need to know that he's all right.

I can't just stop caring about him.

"Adam?"

He stops at the sound of my voice. His spine goes rigid with surprise. He turns around and I see his expression shift from hope to confusion to worry in a matter of seconds. "What's wrong?" he asks. "Is everything okay?"

Suddenly he's in front of me, all 6 feet of him, and I'm drowning in memories and feelings I've made no effort to forget. I'm trying to remember why I wanted to talk to him. Why I ever told him we couldn't be together. Why I would ever keep myself from a chance at even 5 seconds in his arms and he's saying my name, saying, "Juliette—what's wrong? Did something happen?"

I want so desperately to say yes, yes, horrible things have happened, and I'm sick, I'm so sick and tired and I really just want to collapse in your arms and forget the rest of the world. Instead I manage to look up, manage to meet his eyes. They're such a dark, haunting shade of blue. "I'm worried about you," I tell him.

And his eyes are immediately different, uncomfortable, closed off. "You're worried about me." He blows out a hard breath. Runs a hand through his hair.

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay—"

He's shaking his head in disbelief. "What are you doing?" he says. "Are you mocking me?"

“What?”

He’s pounding a closed fist against his lips. Looking up. Looking like he’s not sure what to say and then he speaks, his voice strained and hurt and confused and he says, “You broke up with me. You gave up on us—on our entire future together. You basically reached in and ripped my heart out and now you’re asking me if I’m okay? How the hell am I supposed to be okay, Juliette? What kind of a question is that?”

I’m swaying in place.

“I didn’t mean—” I swallow, hard. “I-I was t-talking about your—your dad—I thought maybe—oh, God, I’m sorry—you’re right, I’m so stupid—I shouldn’t have come, I sh-shouldn’t—”

“Juliette,” he says, so desperately, catching me around the waist as I back away. His eyes are shut tight. “Please,” he says, “tell me what I’m supposed to do. How am I supposed to feel? It’s one shitty thing right after another and I’m trying to be okay—God, I’m trying so hard but it’s really freaking *difficult* and I miss”—his voice catches—“I miss you,” he says. “I miss you so much it’s killing me.”

My fingers are clenched in his shirt.

My heart is hammering in the silence.

I see the difficulty he has in meeting my eyes when he whispers, “Do you still love me?”

And I’m straining every muscle in my body just to keep myself from reaching forward to touch him. “Adam—of course I still love you—”

“You know,” he says, his voice rough with emotion, “I’ve never had anything like this before. I can barely remember my mom, and other than that it was just me and James and my piece-of-shit dad. And James has always loved me in his own way, but you—with *you*—” He falters. Looks down. “How am I supposed to go back?” he asks, so quietly. “How am I supposed to forget what it was like to be with you? To be loved by you?”

I don’t even realize I’m crying until it’s too late.

“You say you love me,” he says. “And I know I love you.” He looks up, meets my eyes. “So why the hell can’t we be together?”

And I don’t know how to say anything but “I’m s-sorry, I’m so sorry, you have no idea how sorry I am—”

“Why can’t we just try?” He’s gripping my shoulders now, his words urgent, anguished; our faces too dangerously close. “I’m willing to take whatever I can get, I swear, I just want to know I have you in my life—”

“We can’t,” I tell him. “It won’t be enough, Adam, and you know it. One day we’ll take a stupid risk or take a chance we shouldn’t. One day we’ll think it’ll be okay and it won’t. And it won’t end well.”

“But look at us now,” he says. “We can make this work—I can be close to you without kissing you—I just need to spend a few more months training—”

“Your training might never be enough.” I cut him off, knowing I need to tell him everything now. Knowing he has a right to know the same things I do. “Because the more I train, the more I learn exactly how dangerous I am. And you c-can’t be near me. It’s not just my skin anymore. I could hurt you just by holding your hand.”

“What?” He blinks several times. “What are you talking about?”

I take a deep breath. Press my palm flat against the side of the tunnel before digging my fingers in and dragging them right through the stone. I punch my fist into the wall and grab a handful of rough rock, crush it in my hand, allow it to sift as sand through my fingers to the floor.

Adam is staring at me. Astonished.

“I’m the one who shot your father,” I tell him. “I don’t know why Kenji was covering for me. I don’t know why he didn’t tell you the truth. But I was so blinded by this—this all-consuming *rage*—I just wanted to kill him. And I was torturing him,” I whisper. “I shot him in his legs because I was taking my time. Because I wanted to enjoy that last moment. That last bullet I was about to put through his heart. And I was so close. I was so close, and Kenji,” I tell him, “Kenji had to pull me away. Because he saw that I’d gone insane.”

“I’m out of control.” My voice is a rasp, a broken plea. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me or what’s happening to me and I don’t even know what I’m capable of yet. I don’t know how much worse this is going to get. Every day I learn something new about myself and every day it terrifies me. I’ve done terrible things to people,” I whisper. I swallow back the sob building in my throat. “And I’m not okay,” I tell him. “I’m not okay, Adam. I’m not okay and I’m not safe for you to be around.”

He’s staring at me, so stunned he’s forgotten how to speak.

“Now you know that the rumors are true,” I whisper. “I am crazy. And I am a monster.”

“No,” he breathes. “No—”

“Yes.”

“No,” he says, desperate now. “That’s not true—you’re stronger than this—I know you are—I know *you*,” he says. “I’ve known your heart for ten years,” he

says, “and I’ve seen what you had to live through, what you had to go through, and I’m not giving up on you now, not because of this, not because of something like this—”

“How can you say that? How can you still believe that, after everything—after all of this—”

“You,” he says to me, his hands gripping me tighter now, “are one of the bravest, strongest people I’ve ever met. You have the best heart, the best intentions—” He stops. Takes a tight, shaky breath. “You’re the best person I’ve ever known,” he says to me. “You’ve been through the worst possible experiences and you survived with your humanity still intact. How the hell,” he says, his voice breaking now, “am I supposed to let go of you? How can I walk away from you?”

“Adam—”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I refuse to believe that this is the end of us. Not if you still love me. Because you’re going to get through this,” he says, “and I will be waiting for you when you’re ready. I’m not going anywhere. There won’t be another person for me. You’re the only one I’ve ever wanted and that’s never,” he says, “that’s *never* going to change.”

“How touching.”

Adam and I freeze. Turn around slowly to face the unwelcome voice.

He’s right there.

Warner is standing right in front of us, his hands tied behind his back, his eyes blazing bright with anger and hurt and disgust. Castle comes up behind him to lead him in whatever whichever wherever direction and he sees where Warner is stuck, still, staring at us, and Adam is like one block of marble, not moving, not making any effort to breathe or speak or look away. I’m fairly certain I’m burning so bright I’ve burnt to a crisp.

“You’re so lovely when you’re blushing,” Warner says to me. “But I really wish you wouldn’t waste your affections on someone who has to beg for your love.” He cocks his head at Adam. “How sad for you,” he says. “This must be terribly embarrassing.”

“You sick bastard,” Adam says to him, his voice like steel.

“At least I still have my dignity.”

Castle shakes his head, exasperated. Pushes Warner forward. “Please get back to work—both of you,” he shouts at us as he and Warner make their way past. “You’re wasting valuable time standing out here.”

“You can go to hell,” Adam shouts at Warner.

“Just because I’m going to hell,” Warner says, “doesn’t mean you’ll ever deserve her.”

And Adam doesn’t answer.

He just watches, eyes focused, as Warner and Castle disappear around the corner.

FORTY-EIGHT

James joins us during our training session before dinner.

He's been hanging out with us a lot since we got back, and we all seem happier when he's around. There's something about his presence that's so disarming, so welcome. It's so good to have him back.

I've been showing him how easily I can break things now.

The bricks are nothing. It feels like crushing a piece of cake. The metal pipes bend in my hands like plastic straws. Wood is a little tricky because if I break it the wrong way I can catch a splinter, but just about nothing is difficult anymore. Kenji has been thinking of new ways to test my abilities; lately he's been trying to see if I can project—if I can focus my power from a distance.

Not all abilities are designed for projection, apparently. Lily, for example, has that incredible photographic memory. But she'd never be able to project that ability onto anyone else.

Projection is, by far, the most difficult thing I've ever attempted to do. It's extremely complicated and requires both mental and physical exertion. I have to be wholly in control of my mind, and I have to know exactly how my brain communicates with whichever invisible bone in my body is responsible for my gift. Which means I have to know how to locate the source of my ability—and how to focus it into one concentrated point of power I can tap into from anywhere.

It's hurting my brain.

"Can I try to break something, too?" James is asking. He grabs one of the bricks off the stack and weighs it in his hands. "Maybe I'm super strong like you."

"Have you ever *felt* super strong?" Kenji asks him. "Like, you know, abnormally strong?"

"No," James says, "but I've never tried to break anything, either." He blinks at Kenji. "Do you think maybe I could be like you guys? That maybe I have some kind of power, too?"

Kenji studies him. Seems to be sorting some things out in his head. Says, "It's definitely possible. Your brother's obviously got something in his DNA,

which means you might, too.”

“Really?” James is practically jumping up and down.

Kenji chuckles. “I have no idea. I’m just saying it might be *possi*—no,” he shouts, “James—”

“Oops.” James is wincing, dropping the brick to the floor and clenching his fist against the gash bleeding in the palm of his hand. “I think I pressed too hard and it slipped,” he says, struggling not to cry.

“You *think*?” Kenji is shaking his head, breathing fast. “Damn, kid, you can’t just go around slicing your hand open like that. You’re going to give me a freaking heart attack. Come here,” he says, more gently now. “Let me take a look.”

“It’s okay,” James says, cheeks flushed, hiding his hand behind his back. “It’s nothing. It’ll go away soon.”

“That kind of cut is not just going to go away,” Kenji says. “Now let me take a look at it—”

“Wait.” I interrupt him, caught by the intense look on James’ face, the way he seems to be so focused on the clenched fist he’s hiding. “James—what do you mean it’ll ‘go away’? Do you mean it’s going to get better? On its own?”

James blinks at me. “Well yeah,” he says. “It always gets better really quickly.”

“What does? What gets better really quickly?” Kenji is staring too now, already catching on to my theory and throwing looks at me, mouthing *Holy shit* over and over again.

“When I get hurt,” James says, looking at us like we’ve lost our minds. “Like if you cut yourself,” he says to Kenji, “wouldn’t it just get better?”

“It depends on the size of the cut,” Kenji tells him. “But for a gash like the one on your hand?” He shakes his head. “I’d need to clean it to make sure it didn’t get infected. Then I’d have to wrap it up in gauze and some kind of ointment to keep it from scarring. And then,” he says, “it would take at least a couple days for it to scab up. And then it would begin to heal.”

James is blinking like he’s never heard of something so absurd in his life.

“Let me see your hand,” Kenji says to him.

James hesitates.

“It’s all right,” I tell him. “Really. We’re just curious.”

Slowly, so slowly, James shows us his clenched fist. Even more slowly, he uncurls his fingers, watching our reactions the whole time. And exactly where just a moment ago there was a huge gash, now there’s nothing but perfect pink

skin and a little pool of blood.

“Holy shit on a cracker,” Kenji breathes. “Sorry,” he says to me, jumping forward to grab James’ arm, barely able to rein in his smiles, “but I need to get this guy over to the medical wing. That okay? We can pick up again tomorrow —”

“But I’m not hurt anymore,” James protests. “I’m okay—”

“I know, kid, but you’re going to want to come with me.”

“But why?”

“How would you like,” he says, leading James out the door, “to start spending some time with two very pretty girls....”

And they’re gone.

And I’m laughing.

Sitting in the middle of the training room all by myself when I hear 2 familiar knocks at my door.

I already know who it’s going to be.

“Ms. Ferrars.”

I whip around, not because I’m surprised to hear Castle’s voice, but because I’m surprised at the intonation. His eyes are narrowed, his lips tight, his eyes sharp and flashing in this light.

He is very, very angry.

Crap.

“I’m sorry about the hallway,” I tell him, “I didn’t—”

“We can discuss your public and wildly inappropriate displays of affection at a later time, Ms. Ferrars, but right now I have a very important question to ask you and I would advise you to be honest, as acutely honest as is physically possible.”

“What”—I can hardly breathe—“what is it?”

Castle narrows his eyes at me. “I have just had a conversation with Warner, who says he is able to touch you without consequence, and that this information is something you are well aware of.”

And I think, Wow, I did it. I actually managed to die of a stroke at age 17.

“I need to know,” Castle hurries on, “whether or not this information is true and I need to know right now.”

There’s glue all over my tongue, stuck to my teeth, my lips, the roof of my mouth, and I can’t speak, I can’t move, I’m pretty sure I just had a seizure or an aneurysm or heart failure or something equally as awful but I can’t explain any of this to Castle because I can’t move my jaw even an inch.

“Ms. *Ferrars*. I don’t think you understand how important this question is. I need an answer from you, and I need it thirty seconds ago.”

“I ... I—”

“Today, I need an answer *today, right now, this very moment—*”

“Yes,” I choke out, blushing through my skull, horribly ashamed, embarrassed, horrified in every possible way and the only thing I can think of is Adam Adam Adam how will Adam respond to this information *now*, why does this have to happen *now*, why did Warner say anything at all and I want to kill him for sharing the secret that was mine to tell, mine to hide, mine to hoard.

Castle looks like he’s a balloon that fell in love with a pushpin that got too close and ruined him forever. “So it’s true, then?”

I drop my eyes. “Yes, it’s true.”

He falls to the floor right across from me, astonished. “How is it even possible, do you think?”

Because Warner is Adam’s brother, I don’t tell him.

And I don’t tell him because it is *Adam’s* secret to tell and I will not talk about it until he does, even though I desperately want to tell Castle that the connection must be in their blood, that they both must share a similar kind of gift or Energy, or oh oh *oh*

Oh God.

Oh no.

Warner is one of us.

FORTY-NINE

“It changes everything.”

Castle isn’t even looking at me. “This—I mean—this means so many things,” he says. “We’ll have to tell him everything and we’ll have to test him to be sure, but I’m fairly positive it’s the only explanation. And he would be welcome to take refuge here if he wanted it—I would have to give him a regular room, allow him to live among us as an equal. I cannot keep him here as a prisoner, at the very least—”

“*What*—but, Castle—why? He’s the one who almost killed Adam! And Kenji!”

“You have to understand—this news might change his entire outlook on life.” Castle is shaking his head, one hand almost covering his mouth, his eyes wide. “He might not take it well—he might be thrilled—he might lose his mind completely—he might wake up a new man in the morning. You would be surprised what these kinds of revelations will do to people.

“Omega Point will always be a place of refuge for our kind,” he continues. “It’s an oath I made to myself many years ago. I cannot deny him food and shelter if, for example, his father were to cast him out entirely.”

This can’t be happening.

“But I don’t understand,” Castle says suddenly, looking up at me. “Why didn’t you say anything? Why not report this information? This is important for us to know and it doesn’t condemn you in any way—”

“I didn’t want Adam to know,” I admit out loud for the first time, my voice 6 broken bits of shame strung together. “I just ...” I shake my head. “I didn’t want him to know.”

Castle actually looks sad for me. He says, “I wish I could help you keep your secret, Ms. Ferrars, but even if I wanted to, I’m not sure Warner will.”

I focus on the mats laid out on the floor. My voice sounds tiny when I ask, “Why did he even tell you? How did that even come up in conversation?”

Castle rubs his chin, thoughtful. “He told me of his own accord. I volunteered to take him on his daily rounds—walking him to the restroom, et cetera—because I wanted to follow up and ask him questions about his father

and see what he knew about the state of our hostages. He seemed perfectly fine. In fact, he looked much better than he was when he first showed up. He was compliant, almost polite. But his attitude changed rather dramatically after we stumbled upon you and Adam in the hall....” His voice trails off, his eyes snap up, his mind working quickly to fit all the pieces together and he’s gaping at me, staring at me in a way that is entirely foreign to Castle, in a way that says he is utterly, absolutely baffled.

I’m not sure if I should be offended.

“He’s in love with you,” Castle whispers, a dawning, groundbreaking realization in his voice. He laughs, once, hard, fast. Shakes his head. “He held you captive and managed to fall in love with you in the process.”

I’m staring at the mats like they’re the most fascinating things I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Oh, Ms. Ferrars,” Castle says to me. “I do not envy you your predicament. I can see now why this situation must be uncomfortable for you.”

I want to say to him, You have no idea, Castle. You have no idea because you don’t even know the entire story. You don’t know that they’re *brothers*, brothers who *hate* each other, brothers who only seem to agree on one thing, and that one thing happens to be killing their own father.

But I don’t say any of those things. I don’t say anything, in fact.

I sit on these mats with my head in my hands and I’m trying to figure out what else could possibly go wrong. I’m wondering how many more mistakes I’ll have to make before things finally fall into place.

If they ever will.

FIFTY

I'm so humiliated.

I've been thinking about this all night and I came to a realization this morning. Warner must've told Castle on purpose. Because he's playing games with me, because he hasn't changed, because he's still trying to get me to do his bidding. He's still trying to get me to be his project and he's trying to hurt me.

I won't allow it.

I will not allow Warner to lie to me, to manipulate my emotions to get what he wants. I can't believe I felt pity for him—that I felt weakness, tenderness for him when I saw him with his father—that I believed him when he told me his thoughts about my journal. I'm such a gullible fool.

I was an idiot to ever think he might be capable of human emotion.

I told Castle that maybe he should put someone else on this assignment now that he knows Warner can touch me; I told him it might be dangerous now. But he laughed and he laughed and he laughed and he said, "Oh, Ms. Ferrars, I'm quite, *quite* certain you will be able to defend yourself. In fact, you're probably much better equipped against him than any of us. Besides," he added, "this is an ideal situation. If he truly is in love with you, you must be able to use that to our advantage somehow. We need your help," he said to me, serious again. "We need all the help we can find, and right now you're the one person who might be able to get the answers we need. Please," he said. "Try to find out anything you can. Anything at all. Winston and Brendan's lives are at risk."

And he's right.

So I'm shoving my own concerns aside because Winston and Brendan are out there, hurting somewhere, and we need to find them. And I'm going to do whatever I can to help.

Which means I have to talk to Warner again.

I have to treat him just like the prisoner that he is. No more side conversations. No falling for his efforts to confuse me. Not again and again and again. I'm going to be better. Smarter.

And I want my notebook back.

The guards are unlocking his room for me and I'm marching in, I'm sealing

the door shut behind me and I'm getting ready to give him the speech I've already prepared when I stop in place.

I don't know what I was expecting.

Maybe I thought I'd catch him trying to break a hole in the wall or maybe he'd be plotting the demise of every person at Omega Point or I don't know I don't know I don't know anything because I only know how to fight an angry body, an insolent creature, an arrogant monster, and I do not know what to do with this.

He's sleeping.

Someone put a mattress in here, a simple rectangle of average quality, thin and worn but better than the ground, at least, and he's lying on top of it in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs.

His clothes are on the floor.

His pants, his shirts, his socks are slightly damp, wrinkled, obviously hand-washed and laid out to dry; his coat is folded neatly over his boots, and his gloves are resting right next to each other on top of his coat.

He hasn't moved an inch since I stepped into this room.

He's resting on his side, his back to the wall, his left arm tucked under his face, his right arm against his torso, his entire body perfect bare, strong, smooth, and smelling faintly of soap. I don't know why I can't stop staring at him. I don't know what it is about sleep that makes our faces appear so soft and innocent, so peaceful and vulnerable, but I'm trying to look away and I can't. I'm losing sight of my own purpose, forgetting all the brave things I said to myself before I stepped in here. Because there's something about him—there's *always* been something about him that's intrigued me and I don't understand it. I wish I could ignore it but I can't.

Because I look at him and wonder if maybe it's just me? Maybe I'm naive?

But I see layers, shades of gold and green and a person who's never been given a chance to be human and I wonder if I'm just as cruel as my own oppressors if I decide that society is right, that some people are too far gone, that sometimes you can't turn back, that there are people in this world who don't deserve a second chance and I can't I can't I can't

I can't help but disagree.

I can't help but think that 19 is too young to give up on someone, that 19 years old is just the beginning, that it's too soon to tell anyone they will never amount to anything but evil in this world.

I can't help but wonder what my life would've been like if someone had

taken a chance on me.

So I back away. I turn to leave.

I let him sleep.

I stop in place.

I catch a glimpse of my notebook lying on the mattress next to his outstretched hand, his fingers looking as if they've only just let go. It's the perfect opportunity to steal it back if I can be stealthy enough.

I tiptoe forward, forever grateful that these boots I wear are designed to make no sound at all. But the closer I inch toward his body, the more my attention is caught by something on his back.

A little rectangular blur of black.

I creep closer.

Blink.

Squint.

Lean in.

It's a tattoo.

No pictures. Just 1 word. 1 word, typed into the very center of his upper back. In ink.

IGNITE

And his skin is shredded with scars.

Blood is rushing to my head so quickly I'm beginning to feel faint. I feel sick. Like I might actually, truly upturn the contents of my stomach right now. I want to panic, I want to shake someone, I want to know how to understand the emotions choking me because I can't even imagine, can't even imagine, can't even *imagine* what he must've endured to carry such suffering on his skin.

His entire back is a map of pain.

Thick and thin and uneven and terrible. Scars like roads that lead to nowhere. They're gashes and ragged slices I can't understand, marks of torture I never could have expected. They're the only imperfections on his entire body, imperfections hidden away and hiding secrets of their own.

And I realize, not for the first time, that I have no idea who Warner really is.
“Juliette?”

I freeze.

“What are you doing here?” His eyes are wide, alert.

“I—I came to talk to you—”

“Jesus,” he gasps, jumping away from me. “I’m very flattered, love, but you could’ve at least given me a chance to put my pants on.” He’s pulled himself up against the wall but makes no effort to grab his clothes. His eyes keep darting from me to the pants on the floor like he doesn’t know what to do. He seems determined not to turn his back to me.

“Would you mind?” he says, nodding to the clothes next to my feet and affecting an air of nonchalance that does little to hide the apprehension in his eyes. “It gets chilly in here.”

But I’m staring at him, staring at the length of him, awed by how incredibly flawless he looks from the front. Strong, lean frame, toned and muscular without being bulky. He’s fair without being pale, skin tinted with just enough sunlight to look effortlessly healthy. The body of a perfect boy.

What a lie appearances can be.

What a terrible, terrible lie.

His gaze is fixed on mine, his eyes green flames that will not extinguish and his chest is rising and falling so fast, so fast, so fast.

“What happened to your back?” I hear myself whisper.

I watch as the color drains from his face. He looks away, runs a hand across his mouth, his chin, down the back of his neck.

“Who hurt you?” I ask, so quietly. I’m beginning to recognize the strange feeling I get just before I do something terrible. Like right now. Right now I feel like I could kill someone for this.

“Juliette, please, my clothes—”

“Was it your father?” I ask, my voice a little sharper. “Did he do this to you —”

“It doesn’t matter.” Warner cuts me off, frustrated now.

“Of course it matters!”

He says nothing.

“That tattoo,” I say to him, “that word—”

“Yes,” he says, though he says it quietly. Clears his throat.

“I don’t ...” I blink. “What does it mean?”

Warner shakes his head, runs a hand through his hair.

“Is it from a book?”

“Why do you care?” he asks, looking away again. “Why are you suddenly so interested in my life?”

I don’t know, I want to tell him. I want to tell him I don’t know but that’s not true.

Because I feel it. I feel the clicks and the turns and the creaking of a million keys unlocking a million doors in my mind. It’s like I’m finally allowing myself to see what I really think, how I really feel, like I’m discovering my own secrets for the first time. And then I search his eyes, search his features for something I can’t even name. And I realize I don’t want to be his enemy anymore.

“It’s over,” I say to him. “I’m not on base with you this time. I’m not going to be your weapon and you’ll never be able to change my mind about that. I think you know that now.” I study the floor. “So why are we still fighting each other? Why are you still trying to manipulate me? Why are you still trying to get me to fall for your tricks?”

“I have no idea,” he says, looking at me like he’s not sure I’m even real, “no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Why did you tell Castle you could touch me? That wasn’t your secret to share.”

“Right.” He exhales a deep breath. “Of course.” Seems to return to himself. “Listen, love, could you at least toss me my jacket if you’re going to stay here and ask me all these questions?”

I toss him his jacket. He catches it. Slides down to the floor. And instead of putting his jacket on, he drapes it over his lap. Finally, he says, “Yes, I did tell Castle I could touch you. He had a right to know.”

“That wasn’t any of his business.”

“Of course it’s his business,” Warner says. “The entire world he’s created down here thrives on exactly that kind of information. And you’re here, living among them. He should know.”

“He doesn’t need to know.”

“Why is it such a big deal?” he asks, studying my eyes too carefully. “Why does it bother you so much for someone to know that I can touch you? Why does it have to be a secret?”

I struggle to find the words that won’t come.

“Are you worried about Kent? You think he’d have a problem knowing I can touch you?”

“I didn’t want him to find out like this—”

“But why does it matter?” he insists. “You seem to care so much about something that makes no difference in your personal life. It wouldn’t,” he says, “make any difference in your personal life. Not if you still claim to feel nothing but hatred for me. Because that’s what you said, isn’t it? That you hate me?”

I fold myself to the floor across from Warner. Pull my knees up to my chest. Focus on the stone under my feet. “I don’t hate you.”

Warner seems to stop breathing.

“I think I understand you sometimes,” I tell him. “I really do. But just when I think I finally get you, you surprise me. And I never really know who you are or who you’re going to be.” I look up. “But I know that I don’t hate you anymore. I’ve tried,” I say, “I’ve tried so hard. Because you’ve done so many terrible, terrible things. To innocent people. To *me*. But I know too much about you now. I’ve seen too much. You’re too human.”

His hair is so gold. His eyes so green. His voice is tortured when he speaks. “Are you saying,” he says, “that you want to be my friend?”

“I-I don’t know.” I’m so petrified, so, so petrified of this possibility. “I didn’t think about that. I’m just saying that I don’t know”—I hesitate, breathe—“I don’t know how to hate you anymore. Even though I want to. I really want to and I know I should but I just can’t.”

He looks away.

And he smiles.

It’s the kind of smile that makes me forget how to do everything but blink and blink and I don’t understand what’s happening to me. I don’t know why I can’t convince my eyes to find something else to focus on.

I don’t know why my heart is losing its mind.

He touches my notebook like he’s not even aware he’s doing it. His fingers run the length of the cover once, twice, before he registers where my eyes have gone and he stops.

“You wrote these words?” He touches the notebook again. “Every single one?”

I nod.

He says, “Juliette.”

I stop breathing.

He says, “I would like that very much. To be your friend,” he says. “I’d like that.”

And I don’t really know what happens in my brain.

Maybe it’s because he’s broken and I’m foolish enough to think I can fix

him. Maybe it's because I see myself, I see 3, 4, 5, 6, 17-year-old Juliette abandoned, neglected, mistreated, abused for something outside of her control and I think of Warner as someone who's just like me, someone who was never given a chance at life. I think about how everyone already hates him, how hating him is a universally accepted fact.

Warner is horrible.

There are no discussions, no reservations, no questions asked. It has already been decided that he is a despicable human being who thrives on murder and power and torturing others.

But I want to know. I need to know. I have to know.

If it's really that simple.

Because what if one day I slip? What if one day I fall through the cracks and no one is willing to pull me back? What happens to me then?

So I meet his eyes. I take a deep breath.

And I run.

I run right out the door.

FIFTY-ONE

Just a moment.

Just 1 second, just 1 more minute, just give me another hour or maybe the weekend to think it over it's not so much it's not so hard it's all we ever ask for it's a simple request.

But the moments the seconds the minutes the hours the days and years become one big mistake, one extraordinary opportunity slipped right through our fingers because we couldn't decide, we couldn't understand, we needed more time, we didn't know what to do.

We don't even know what we've done.

We have no idea how we even got here when all we ever wanted was to wake up in the morning and go to sleep at night and maybe stop for ice cream on the way home and that one decision, that one choice, that one accidental opportunity unraveled everything we've ever known and ever believed in and what do we do?

*What do we do
from here?*

FIFTY-TWO

Things are getting worse.

The tension among the citizens of Omega Point is getting tighter with each passing hour. We've tried to make contact with Anderson's men to no avail—we've heard nothing from their team or their soldiers, and we have no updates on our hostages. But the civilians of Sector 45—the sector Warner used to be in charge of, the sector he used to oversee—are beginning to grow more and more unsettled. Rumors about us and our resistance are spreading too quickly.

The Reestablishment tried to cover up the news of our recent battle by calling it a standard attack on rebel party members, but the people are getting smarter. Protests are breaking out among them and some are refusing to work, standing up to authority, trying to escape the compounds, and running back to unregulated territory.

It never ends well.

The losses have been too many and Castle is anxious to do something. We all have a feeling we're going to be heading out again, and soon. We haven't received any reports that Anderson is dead, which means he's probably just biding his time—or maybe Adam is right, and he's just recovering. But whatever the reason, Anderson's silence can't be good.

"What are you doing here?" Castle says to me.

I've just collected my dinner. I've just sat down at my usual table with Adam and Kenji and James. I blink at Castle, confused.

Kenji says, "What's going on?"

Adam says, "Is everything all right?"

Castle says, "My apologies, Ms. Ferrars, I didn't mean to interrupt. I confess I'm just a bit surprised to see you here. I thought you were currently on assignment."

"Oh." I startle. Glance at my food and back at Castle again. "I—well yes, I am—but I've talked to Warner twice already—I actually just saw him yesterday —"

“Oh, that’s excellent news, Ms. Ferrars. Excellent news.” Castle clasps his hands together; his face is the picture of relief. “And what have you been able to discover?” He looks so hopeful that I actually begin to feel ashamed of myself.

Everyone is staring at me and I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say.

I shake my head.

“Ah.” Castle drops his hands. Looks down. Nods to himself. “So. You’ve decided that your two visits have been more than sufficient?” He won’t look at me. “What is your professional opinion, Ms. Ferrars? Do you think it would be best to take your time in this particular situation? That Winston and Brendan will be relaxing comfortably until you find an opportunity in your busy schedule to interrogate the only person who might be able to help us find them? Do you think that y—”

“I’ll go right now.” I grab my tray and jump up from table, nearly tripping over myself in the process. “I’m sorry—I’m just—I’ll go right now. I’ll see you guys at breakfast,” I whisper, and run out the door.

Brendan and Winston

Brendan and Winston

Brendan and Winston, I keep telling myself.

I hear Kenji laughing as I leave.

I’m not very good at interrogation, apparently.

I have so many questions for Warner but none of them have to do with our hostage situation. Every time I tell myself I’m going to ask the right questions, Warner somehow manages to distract me. It’s almost like he knows what I’m going to ask and is already prepared to redirect the conversation.

It’s confusing.

“Do you have any tattoos?” he’s asking me, smiling as he leans back against the wall in his undershirt; pants on, socks on, shoes off. “Everyone seems to have tattoos these days.”

This is not a conversation I ever thought I’d have with Warner.

“No,” I tell him. “I’ve never had an opportunity to get one. Besides, I don’t think anyone would ever want to get that close to my skin.”

He studies his hands. Smiles. Says, “Maybe someday.”

“Maybe,” I agree.

A pause.

“So what about your tattoo?” I ask. “Why *IGNITE*?”

His smile is bigger now. Dimples again. He shakes his head, says, “Why not?”

“I don’t get it.” I tilt my head at him, confused. “You want to remind yourself to catch on fire?”

He smiles, presses back a laugh. “A handful of letters doesn’t always make a word, love.”

“I ... have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He takes a deep breath. Sits up straighter. “So,” he says. “You used to read a lot?”

I’m caught off guard. It’s a strange question, and I can’t help but wonder for a moment if it’s a trick. If admitting to such a thing might get me into trouble. And then I remember that Warner is *my* hostage, not the other way around. “Yes,” I say to him. “I used to.”

His smile fades into something a bit more serious, calculated. His features are carefully wiped clean of emotion. “And when did you have a chance to read?”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugs slowly, glances at nothing across the room. “It just seems strange that a girl who’s been so wholly isolated her entire life would have much access to literature. Especially in this world.”

I say nothing.

He says nothing.

I breathe a few beats before answering him.

“I ... I never got to choose my own books,” I tell him, and I don’t know why I feel so nervous saying this out loud, why I have to remind myself not to whisper. “I read whatever was available. My schools always had little libraries and my parents had some things around the house. And later ...” I hesitate. “Later, I spent a couple of years in ~~hospitals and psychiatric wards~~ and a juvenile d-detention center.” My face enflames as if on cue, always ready to be ashamed of my past, of who I’ve been and continue to be.

But it’s strange.

While one part of me struggles to be so candid, another part of me actually feels comfortable talking to Warner. Safe. Familiar.

Because he already knows everything about me.

He knows every detail of my 17 years. He has all of my medical records, knows all about my incidents with the police and the painful relationship I ~~have~~

had with my parents. And now he's read my notebook, too.

There's nothing I could reveal about my history that would surprise him; nothing about what I've done would shock or horrify him. I don't worry that he'll judge me or run away from me.

And this realization, perhaps more than anything else, rattles my bones.

~~And gives me some sense of relief.~~

"There were always books around," I continue, somehow unable to stop now, eyes glued to the floor. "In the detention center. A lot of them were old and worn and didn't have covers, so I didn't always know what they were called or who wrote them. I just read anything I could find. Fairy tales and mysteries and history and poetry. It didn't matter what it was. I would read it over and over and over again. The books ... they helped keep me from losing my mind altogether ..." I trail off, catching myself before I say much more. Horrified as I realize just how much I want to confide in him. In Warner.

Terrible, terrible Warner who tried to kill Adam and Kenji. Who made me his toy.

I hate that I should feel safe enough to speak so freely around him. I hate that of all people, Warner is the one person I can be completely honest with. I always feel like I have to protect Adam from me, from the horror story that is my life. I never want to scare him or tell him too much for fear that he'll change his mind and realize what a mistake he's made in trusting me; in showing me affection.

But with Warner there's nothing to hide.

I want to see his expression; I want to know what he's thinking now that I've opened up, offered him a personal look at my past, but I can't make myself face him. So I sit here, frozen, humiliation perched on my shoulders and he doesn't say a word, doesn't shift an inch, doesn't make a single sound. Seconds fly by, swarming the room all at once and I want to swat them all away; I want to catch them and shove them into my pockets just long enough to stop time.

Finally, he interrupts the silence.

"I like to read, too," he says.

I look up, startled.

He's leaned back against the wall, one hand caught in his hair. He runs his fingers through the golden layers just once. Drops his hand. Meets my gaze. His eyes are so, so green.

"You like to read?" I ask.

"You're surprised."

"I thought The Reestablishment was going to destroy all of those things. I

thought it was illegal.”

“They are, and it will be,” he says, shifting a little. “Soon, anyway. They’ve destroyed some of it already, actually.” He looks uncomfortable for the first time. “It’s ironic,” he says, “that I only really started reading when the plan was in place to destroy everything. I was assigned to sort through some lists—give my opinion on which things we’d keep, which things we’d get rid of, which things we’d recycle for use in campaigns, in future curriculum, et cetera.”

“And you think that’s okay?” I ask him. “To destroy what’s left of culture—all the languages—all those texts? Do you agree?”

He’s playing with my notebook again. “There ... are many things I’d do differently,” he says, “if I were in charge.” A deep breath. “But a soldier does not always have to agree in order to obey.”

“What would you do differently?” I ask. “If you were in charge?”

He laughs. Sighs. Looks at me, smiles at me out of the corner of his eye. “You ask too many questions.”

“I can’t help it,” I tell him. “You just seem so different now. Everything you say surprises me.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “You’re just ... so calm. A little less crazy.”

He laughs one of those silent laughs, the kind that shakes his chest without making a sound, and he says, “My life has been nothing but battle and destruction. Being here?” He looks around. “Away from duties, responsibilities. Death,” he says, eyes intent on the wall. “It’s like a vacation. I don’t have to think all the time. I don’t have to do anything or talk to anyone or be anywhere. I’ve never had so many hours to simply *sleep*,” he says, smiling. “It’s actually kind of luxurious. I think I’d like to get held hostage more often,” he adds, mostly to himself.

And I can’t help but study him.

I study his face in a way I’ve never dared to before and I realize I don’t have the faintest idea what it must be like to live his life. He told me once that I didn’t have a clue, that I couldn’t possibly understand the strange laws of his world, and I’m only just beginning to see how right he was. Because I don’t know anything about that kind of bloody, regimented existence. But I suddenly want to know.

I suddenly want to understand.

I watch his careful movements, the effort he makes to look unconcerned, relaxed. But I see how calculated it is. How there’s a reason behind every shift,

every readjustment of his body. He's always listening, always touching a hand to the ground, the wall, staring at the door, studying its outline, the hinges, the handle. I see the way he tenses—just a little bit—at the sound of small noises, the scratch of metal, muffled voices outside the room. It's obvious he's always alert, always on edge, ready to fight, to react. It makes me wonder if he's ever known tranquillity. Safety. If he's ever been able to sleep through the night. If he's ever been able to go anywhere without constantly looking over his own shoulder.

His hands are clasped together.

He's playing with a ring on his left hand, turning and turning and turning it around his pinkie finger. I can't believe it's taken me so long to notice he's wearing it; it's a solid band of jade, a shade of green pale enough to perfectly match his eyes. And then I remember, all at once, seeing it before.

Just one time.

The morning after I'd hurt Jenkins. When Warner came to collect me from his room. He caught me staring at his ring and quickly slipped his gloves on.

It's déjà vu.

He catches me looking at his hands and quickly clenches his left fist, covers it with his right.

"Wha—"

"It's just a ring," he says. "It's nothing."

"Why are you hiding it if it's nothing?" I'm already so much more curious than I was a moment ago, too eager for any opportunity to crack him open, to figure out what on earth goes on inside of his head.

He sighs.

Flexes and unflexes his fingers. Stares at his hands, palms down, fingers spread. Slips the ring off his pinkie and holds it up to the fluorescent light; looks at it. It's a little O of green. Finally, he meets my eyes. Drops the ring into the palm of his hand and closes a fist around it.

"You're not going to tell me?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"Why not?"

He rubs the side of his neck, massages the tension out of the lowest part, the part that just touches his upper back. I can't help but watch. Can't help but wonder what it would feel like to have someone massage the pain out of my body that way. His hands look so strong.

I've just about forgotten what we were talking about when he says, "I've had

this ring for almost ten years. It used to fit my index finger.” He glances at me before looking away again. “And I don’t talk about it.”

“Ever?”

“No.”

“Oh.” I bite down on my bottom lip. Disappointed.

“Do you like Shakespeare?” he asks me.

An odd segue.

I shake my head. “All I know about him is that he stole my name and spelled it wrong.”

Warner stares at me for a full second before he bursts into laughter—strong, unrestrained gales of laughter—trying to rein it in and failing.

I’m suddenly uncomfortable, nervous in front of this strange boy who laughs and wears secret rings and asks me about books and poetry. “I wasn’t trying to be funny,” I manage to tell him.

But his eyes are still full of smiles when he says, “Don’t worry. I didn’t know much about him until roughly a year ago. I still don’t understand half the things he says, so I think we’re going to get rid of most of it, but he did write a line I really liked.”

“What was it?”

“Would you like to see it?”

“See it?”

But Warner is already on his feet, unbuttoning his pants and I’m wondering what could possibly be happening, worried I’m being tricked into some new sick game of his when he stops. Catches the horrified look on my face. Says, “Don’t worry, love. I’m not getting naked, I promise. It’s just another tattoo.”

“Where?” I ask, frozen in place, wanting and not wanting to look away.

He doesn’t answer.

His pants are unzipped but hanging low on his waist. His boxer-briefs are visible underneath. He tugs and tugs on the elastic band of his underwear until it sits just below his hipbone.

I’m blushing through my hairline.

I’ve never seen such an intimate area of any boy’s body before, and I can’t make myself look away. My moments with Adam were always in the dark and always interrupted; I never saw this much of him not because I didn’t want to, but because I never had a chance to. And now the lights are on and Warner’s standing right in front of me and I’m so caught, so intrigued by the cut of his frame. I can’t help but notice the way his waist narrows into his hips and

disappears under a piece of fabric. I want to know what it would be like to understand another person without those barriers.

To know a person so thoroughly, so privately.

I want to study the secrets tucked between his elbows and the whispers caught behind his knees. I want to follow the lines of his silhouette with my eyes and the tips of my fingers. I want to trace rivers and valleys along the curved muscles of his body.

My thoughts shock me.

There's a desperate heat in the pit of my stomach I wish I could ignore. There are butterflies in my chest I wish I could explain away. There's an ache in my core that I'm unwilling to name.

~~Beautiful.~~

~~He's so beautiful.~~

I must be insane.

"It's interesting," he says. "It feels very ... relevant, I think. Even though it was written so long ago."

"What?" I rip my eyes away from his lower half, desperately trying to keep my imagination from drawing in the details. I look back at the words tattooed onto his skin and focus this time. "Oh," I say. "Yes."

It's 2 lines. Font like a typewriter inked across the very bottom of his torso.

hell is empty
and all the devils are here

Yes. Interesting. Yes. Sure.

I think I need to lie down.

"Books," he's saying, pulling his boxer-briefs up and reziping his pants, "are easily destroyed. But words will live as long as people can remember them. Tattoos, for example, are very hard to forget." He buttons his button. "I think there's something about the impermanence of life these days that makes it necessary to etch ink into our skin," he says. "It reminds us that we've been marked by the world, that we're still alive. That we'll never forget."

"Who *are* you?"

I don't know this Warner. I'd never be able to recognize this Warner.

He smiles to himself. Sits down again. Says, "No one else will ever need to know."

"What do you mean?"

"I know who I am," he says. "That's enough for me."

I'm silent a moment. I frown at the floor. "It must be great to go through life with so much confidence."

"You are confident," he says to me. "You're stubborn and resilient. So brave. So strong. So inhumanly beautiful. You could conquer the world."

I actually laugh, look up to meet his eyes. "I cry too much. And I'm not interested in conquering the world."

"That," he says, "is something I will never understand." He shakes his head. "You're just scared. You're afraid of what you're unfamiliar with. You're too worried about disappointing people. You stifle your own potential," he says, "because of what you think others expect of you—because you still follow the rules you've been given." He looks at me, hard. "I wish you wouldn't."

"I wish you'd stop expecting me to use my power to kill people."

He shrugs. "I never said you had to. But it will happen along the way; it's an inevitability in war. Killing is statistically impossible to avoid."

"You're joking, right?"

"Definitely not."

"You can always avoid killing people, Warner. You avoid killing them by *not* going to war."

But he grins, so brilliantly, not even paying attention. "I love it when you say my name," he says. "I don't even know why."

"Warner isn't your name," I point out. "Your name is Aaron."

His smile is wide, so wide. "God, I love that."

"Your name?"

"Only when you say it."

"Aaron? Or Warner?"

His eyes close. He tilts his head back against the wall. Dimples.

Suddenly I'm struck by the reality of what I'm doing here. Sitting here, spending time with Warner like we have so many hours to waste. Like there isn't a very terrible world outside of these walls. I don't know how I manage to keep getting distracted and I promise myself that this time I won't let the conversation veer out of control. But when I open my mouth he says

"I'm not going to give you your notebook back."

My mouth falls closed.

"I know you want it back," he says, "but I'm afraid I'm going to have to keep it forever." He holds it up, shows it to me. Grins. And then puts it in his pocket. The one place I'd never dare to reach.

“Why?” I can’t help but ask. “Why do you want it so much?”

He spends far too long just looking at me. Not answering my question. And then he says

“On the darkest days you have to search for a spot of brightness, on the coldest days you have to seek out a spot of warmth; on the bleakest days you have to keep your eyes onward and upward and on the saddest days you have to leave them open to let them cry. To then let them dry. To give them a chance to wash out the pain in order to see fresh and clear once again.”

“I can’t believe you have that memorized,” I whisper.

He leans back again. Closes his eyes again. Says, *“Nothing in this life will ever make sense to me but I can’t help but try to collect the change and hope it’s enough to pay for our mistakes.”*

“I wrote that, too?” I ask him, unable to believe it’s possible he’s reciting the same words that fell from my lips to my fingertips and bled onto a page. Still unable to believe he’s now privy to my private thoughts, feelings I captured with a tortured mind and hammered into sentences I shoved into paragraphs, ideas I pinned together with punctuation marks that serve no function but to determine where one thought ends and another begins.

This blond boy has my secrets in his mouth.

“You wrote a lot of things,” he says, not looking at me. “About your parents, your childhood, your experiences with other people. You talked about hope and redemption and what it would be like to see a bird fly by. You wrote about pain. And what it’s like to think you’re a monster. What it was like to be judged by everyone before you’d even spoken two words to them.” A deep inhale. “So much of it was like seeing myself on paper,” he whispers. “Like reading all the things I never knew how to say.”

And I wish my heart would just shut up shut up shut up shut up.

“Every single day I’m sorry,” he says, his words barely a breath now. “Sorry for believing the things I heard about you. And then for hurting you when I thought I was helping you. I can’t apologize for who I am,” he says. “That part of me is already done; already ruined. I gave up on myself a long time ago. But I am sorry I didn’t understand you better. Everything I did, I did because I wanted to help you to be stronger. I wanted you to use your anger as a tool, as a weapon to help harness the strength inside of you; I wanted you to be able to fight the world. I provoked you on purpose,” he says. “I pushed you too far, too hard, did things to horrify and disgust you and I did it all on purpose. Because that’s how I was taught to steel myself against the terror in this world. That’s how I was

trained to fight back. And I wanted to teach you. I knew you had the potential to be more, so much more. I could see greatness in you.”

He looks at me. Really, really looks at me.

“You’re going to go on to do incredible things,” he says. “I’ve always known that. I think I just wanted to be a part of it.”

And I try. I try so hard to remember all the reasons why I’m supposed to hate him, I try to remember all the horrible things I’ve seen him do. But I’m tortured because I understand too much about what it’s like to be tortured. To do things because you don’t know any better. To do things because you think they’re right because you were never taught what was wrong.

Because it’s so hard to be kind to the world when all you’ve ever felt is hate.

Because it’s so hard to see goodness in the world when all you’ve ever known is terror.

And I want to say something to him. Something profound and complete and memorable but he seems to understand. He offers me a strange, unsteady smile that doesn’t reach his eyes but says so much.

Then

“Tell your team,” he says, “to prepare for war. Unless his plans have changed, my father will be ordering an attack on civilians the day after tomorrow and it will be nothing short of a massacre. It will also be your only opportunity to save your men. They are being held captive somewhere in the lower levels of Sector 45 Headquarters. I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.”

“How did you—”

“I know why you’re here, love. I’m not an idiot. I know why you’re being forced to spend time with me.”

“But why offer the information so freely?” I ask him. “What reason do you have to help us?”

There’s a flicker of change in his eyes that doesn’t last long enough for me to examine it. And though his expression is carefully neutral, something in the space between us feels different all of a sudden. Charged.

“Go,” he says. “You must tell them now.”

FIFTY-THREE

Adam, Kenji, Castle, and I are camped out in his office trying to discuss strategy.

Last night I ran straight to Kenji—who then took me to Castle—to tell him what Warner told me. Castle was both relieved and horrified, and I think he still hasn't digested the information yet.

He told me he was going to meet with Warner in the morning, just to follow up, just to see if Warner would be willing to elaborate at all (he wasn't), and that Kenji, Adam, and I should meet him in his office at lunch.

So now we're all crammed into his small space, along with 7 others. The faces in this room are many of the same ones I saw when we journeyed into The Reestablishment's storage compound; that means they're important, integral to this movement. And it makes me wonder when I ever became a part of Castle's core group at Omega Point.

I can't help but feel a little proud. A little thrilled to be someone he relies on. To be contributing.

And it makes me wonder how much I've changed in such a short period of time. How different my life has become, how much stronger and how much weaker I feel now. It makes me wonder whether things would've turned out differently if Adam and I had found a way to stay together. If I ever would've ventured outside of the safety he introduced to my life.

I wonder about a lot of things.

But when I look up and catch him staring at me, my wonders disappear; and I'm left with nothing but the pains of missing him. Left wishing he wouldn't look away the moment I look up.

This was my miserable choice. I brought it upon myself.

Castle is sitting at his desk, elbows propped up on the table, chin resting on clasped hands. His eyebrows are furrowed, his lips pursed, his eyes focused on the papers in front of him.

He hasn't said a word in 5 minutes.

Finally, he looks up. Looks at Kenji, who is sitting right in front of him, between me and Adam. "What do you think?" he says. "Offensive or

defensive?”

“Guerrilla warfare,” Kenji says without hesitation. “Nothing else.”

A deep breath. “Yes,” Castle says. “I thought so too.”

“We need to be split up,” Kenji says. “Do you want to assign groups, or should I?”

“I’ll assign the preliminary groups. I’d like you to look them over and suggest changes, if any.”

Kenji nods.

“Perfect. And weapons—”

“I’ll oversee that,” Adam says. “I can make sure everything is clean, loaded, ready to go. I’m already familiar with the armory.”

I had no idea.

“Good. Excellent. We’ll assign one group to try and get on base to find Winston and Brendan; everyone else will spread out among the compounds. Our mission is simple: save as many civilians as possible. Take out only as many soldiers as is absolutely necessary. Our fight is not against the men, but against their leaders—we must never forget that. Kenji,” he says, “I’d like you to oversee the groups entering the compounds. Do you feel comfortable doing that?”

Kenji nods.

“I will lead the group onto base,” Castle says. “While you and Mr. Kent would be ideal for infiltrating Sector 45, I’d like you to stay with Ms. Ferrars; the three of you work well together, and we could use your strengths on the ground. Now,” he says, spreading out the papers in front of him, “I’ve been studying these blueprints all ni—”

Someone is banging on the glass window in Castle’s door.

He’s a youngish man I’ve never seen before, with bright, light-brown eyes and hair cropped so close to the crown I can’t even make out the color. His eyes are pulled together, his forehead tight, tense. “Sir!” he’s shouting, he’s *been* shouting, I realize, but his voice is muffled and only then does it dawn on me that this room must be soundproof, if only just a little bit.

Kenji jumps out of his chair, yanks the door open.

“Sir!” The man is out of breath. It’s clear he ran all the way here. “Sir, please —”

“Samuel?” Castle is up, around his desk, charging forward to grip this boy’s shoulders, trying to focus his eyes. “What is it—what’s wrong?”

“Sir,” Samuel says again, this time more normally, his breathing almost

within his grasp. “We have a—a situation.”

“Tell me everything—now is not the time to hold back if something has happened—”

“It’s nothing to do with anything topside, sir, it’s just—” His eyes dart in my direction for one split second. “Our ... visitor—he—he is not cooperating, sir, he’s—he’s giving the guards a lot of trouble—”

“What kind of trouble?” Castle’s eyes are two slits.

Samuel drops his voice. “He’s managed to make a dent in the door, sir. He’s managed to dent the *steel door*, sir, and he’s threatening the guards and they’re beginning to worry—”

“*Juliette.*”

No.

“I need your help,” Castle says without looking at me. “I know you don’t want to do this, but you’re the only one he’ll listen to and we can’t afford this distraction, not right now.” His voice is so thin, so stretched it sounds as if it might actually crack. “Please do what you can to contain him, and when you deem it safe for one of the girls to enter, perhaps we can find a way to sedate him without endangering them in the process.”

My eyes flick up to Adam almost accidentally. He doesn’t look happy.

“*Juliette.*” Castle’s jaw tightens. “Please. Go now.”

I nod. Turn to leave.

“Get ready,” Castle adds as I walk out the door, his voice too soft for the words he speaks next. “Unless we have been deceived, the supreme will be massacring unarmed civilians tomorrow, and we can’t afford to assume Warner has given us false information. We leave at dawn.”

FIFTY-FOUR

The guards let me into Warner's room without a single word.

My eyes dart around the now partially furnished space, heart pounding, fists clenching, blood racing racing racing. Something is wrong. Something has happened. Warner was perfectly fine when I left him last night and I can't imagine what could've inspired him to lose his mind like this but I'm scared.

Someone has given him a chair. I realize now how he was able to dent the steel door. No one should've given him a chair.

Warner is sitting in it, his back to me. Only his head is visible from where I'm standing.

"You came back," he says.

"Of course I came back," I tell him, inching closer. "What's wrong? Is something wrong?"

He laughs. Runs a hand through his hair. Looks up at the ceiling.

"What happened?" I'm so worried now. "Are you—did something happen to you? Are you okay?"

"I need to get out of here," he says. "I need to leave. I can't be here anymore."

"Warner—"

"Do you know what he said to me? Did he tell you what he said to me?"

Silence.

"He just walked into my room this morning. He walked right in here and said he wanted to have a conversation with me." Warner laughs again, loud, too loud. Shakes his head. "He told me I can change. He said I might have a *gift* like everyone else here—that maybe I have an *ability*. He said I can be different, love. He said he *believes* I can be *different* if I *want* to be."

Castle told him.

Warner stands up but doesn't turn around all the way and I see he's not wearing a shirt. He doesn't even seem to mind that I can see the scars on his back, the word *IGNITE* tattooed on his body. His hair is messy, untamed, falling into his face and his pants are zipped but unbuttoned and I've never seen him so disheveled before. He presses his palms against the stone wall, arms

outstretched; his body is bowed, his head down as if in prayer. His entire body is tense, tight, muscles straining against his skin. His clothes are in a pile on the floor and his mattress is in the middle of the room and the chair he was just sitting in is facing the wall, staring at nothing at all and I realize he's begun to lose his mind in here.

"Can you believe that?" he asks me, still not looking in my direction. "Can you believe he thinks I can just wake up one morning and be *different*? Sing happy songs and give money to the poor and beg the world to forgive me for what I've done? Do you think that's possible? Do you think I can change?"

He finally turns to face me and his eyes are laughing, his eyes are like emeralds glinting in the setting sun and his mouth is twitching, suppressing a smile. "Do you think I could be *different*?" He takes a few steps toward me and I don't know why it affects my breathing. Why I can't find my mouth.

"It's just a question," he says, and he's right in front of me and I don't even know how he got there. He's still looking at me, his eyes so focused and so simultaneously unnerving, brilliant, blazing with something I can never place.

My heart it will not be still it refuses to stop skipping skipping skipping

"Tell me, Juliette. I'd love to know what you really think of me."

"Why?" Barely a whisper in an attempt to buy some time.

Warner's lips flicker up and into a smile before they fall open, just a bit, just enough to twitch into a strange, curious look that lingers in his eyes. He doesn't answer. He doesn't say a word. He only moves closer to me, studying me and I'm frozen in place, my mouth stuffed full of the seconds he doesn't speak and I'm fighting every atom in my body, every stupid cell in my system for being so attracted to him.

Oh.

God.

~~I am so horribly attracted to him.~~

The guilt is growing inside of me in stacks, settling on my bones, snapping me in half. It's a cable twisted around my neck, a caterpillar crawling across my stomach. It's the night and midnight and the twilight of indecision. It's too many secrets I no longer contain.

~~I don't understand why I want this.~~

I am a terrible person.

And it's like he *sees* what I'm thinking, like he can feel the change happening in my head, because suddenly he's different. His energy slows down, his eyes are deep, troubled, tender; his lips are soft, still slightly parted and now

the air in this room is too tight, too full of cotton and I feel the blood rushing around in my head, crashing into every rational region of my brain.

I wish someone would remind me how to breathe.

“Why can’t you answer my question?” He’s looking so deeply into my eyes that I’m surprised I haven’t buckled under the intensity and I realize then, right in this moment I realize that everything about him is intense. Nothing about him is manageable or easy to compartmentalize. He’s too much. Everything about him is too much. His emotions, his actions, his anger, his aggression.

~~His love.~~

He’s dangerous, electric, impossible to contain. His body is rippling with an energy so extraordinary that even when he’s calmed down it’s almost palpable. It has a presence.

But I’ve developed a strange, frightening faith in who Warner really is and who he has the capacity to become. I want to find the 19-year-old boy who would feed a stray dog. I want to believe in the boy with a tortured childhood and an abusive father. I want to understand him. I want to unravel him.

I want to believe he is more than the mold he was forced into.

“I think you can change,” I hear myself saying. “I think anyone can change.”

And he smiles.

It’s a slow, delighted smile. The kind of smile that breaks into a laugh and lights up his features and makes him sigh. He closes his eyes. His face is so touched, so amused. “It’s just so sweet,” he says. “So unbearably sweet. Because you really believe that.”

“Of course I do.”

He finally looks at me when he whispers, “But you’re wrong.”

“What?”

“I’m heartless,” he says to me, his words cold, hollow, directed inward. “I’m a heartless bastard and a cruel, vicious being. I don’t care about people’s feelings. I don’t care about their fears or their futures. I don’t care about what they want or whether or not they have a family, and I’m not sorry,” he says. “I’ve never been sorry for anything I’ve done.”

It actually takes me a few moments to find my head. “But you apologized to me,” I tell him. “You apologized to me just last night—”

“You’re different,” he says, cutting me off. “You don’t count.”

“I’m not different,” I tell him. “I’m just another person, just like everyone else. And you’ve proven you have the capacity for remorse. For compassion. I know you can be kind—”

“That’s not who I am.” His voice is suddenly hard, suddenly too strong. “And I’m not going to change. I can’t erase the nineteen miserable years of my life. I can’t misplace the memories of what I’ve done. I can’t wake up one morning and decide to live on borrowed hopes and dreams. Someone else’s promises for a brighter future.

“And I won’t lie to you,” he says. “I’ve never given a damn about others and I don’t make sacrifices and I do not compromise. I am not good, or fair, or decent, and I never will be. I can’t be. Because to try to be any of those things would be *embarrassing*.”

“How can you think that?” I want to shake him. “How can you be ashamed of an attempt to be better?”

But he’s not listening. He’s laughing. He’s saying, “Can you even picture me? Smiling at small children and handing out presents at birthday parties? Can you picture me helping a stranger? Playing with the neighbor’s dog?”

“Yes,” I say to him. “Yes I can.” I’ve already seen it, I don’t say to him.

“No.”

“Why not?” I insist. “Why is that so hard to believe?”

“That kind of life,” he says, “is impossible for me.”

“But why?”

Warner clenches and unclenches 5 fingers before running them through his hair. “Because I feel it,” he says, quieter now. “I’ve always been able to feel it.”

“Feel what?” I whisper.

“What people think of me.”

“What ...?”

“Their feelings—their energy—it’s—I don’t know what it is,” he says, frustrated, stumbling backward, shaking his head. “I’ve always been able to tell. I know how everyone hates me. I know how little my father cares for me. I know the agony of my mother’s heart. I know that you’re not like everyone else.” His voice catches. “I know you’re telling the truth when you say you don’t hate me. That you want to and you can’t. Because there’s no ill will in your heart, not toward me, and if there was I would know. Just like I know,” he says, his voice husky with restraint, “that you felt something when we kissed. You felt the same thing I did and you’re ashamed of it.”

I’m dripping panic everywhere.

“How can you know that?” I ask him. “H-how—you can’t just *know* things like that—”

“No one has ever looked at me like you do,” he whispers. “No one ever talks

to me like you do, Juliette. You're different," he says. "You're so different. You would understand me. But the rest of the world does not want my sympathies. They don't want my smiles. Castle is the only man on Earth who's been the exception to this rule, and his eagerness to trust and accept me only shows how weak this resistance is. No one here knows what they're doing and they're all going to get themselves slaughtered—"

"That's not *true*—that can't be true—"

"Listen to me," Warner says, urgently now. "You must understand—the only people who matter in this wretched world are the ones with real power. And you," he says, "*you* have power. You have the kind of strength that could shake this planet—that could conquer it. And maybe it's still too soon, maybe you need more time to recognize your own potential, but I will always be waiting. I will always want you on my side. Because the two of us—the two of us," he says, he stops. He sounds breathless. "Can you imagine?" His eyes are intent on mine, eyebrows drawn together. Studying me. "Of course you can," he whispers. "You think about it all the time."

I gasp.

"You don't belong here," he says. "You don't belong with these people. They will drag you down with them and get you *killed*—"

"I have no other choice!" I'm angry now, indignant. "I'd rather stay here with those who are trying to help—trying to make a difference! At least they're not murdering innocent people—"

"You think your new friends have never killed before?" Warner shouts, pointing at the door. "You think Kent has never killed anyone? That Kenji has never put a bullet through a stranger's body? They were *my* soldiers!" he says. "I saw them do it with my own eyes!"

"They were trying to survive," I tell him, shaking, fighting to ignore the terror of my own imagination. "Their loyalties were never with The Reestablishment—"

"My loyalties," he says, "do not lie with The Reestablishment. My loyalties lie with those who know how to live. I only have two options in this game, love." He's breathing hard. "Kill. Or be killed."

"No," I tell him, backing away, feeling sick. "It doesn't have to be like that. You don't have to live like that. You could get away from your father, from that life. You don't have to be what he wants you to be—"

"The damage," he says, "is already done. It's too late for me. I've already accepted my fate."

“No—Warner—”

“I’m not asking you to worry about me,” he says. “I know exactly what my future looks like and I’m okay with it. I’m happy to live in solitude. I’m not afraid of spending the rest of my life in the company of my own person. I do not fear loneliness.”

“You don’t have to have that life,” I tell him. “You don’t have to be alone.”

“I will not stay here,” he says. “I just wanted you to know that. I’m going to find a way out of here and I’m going to leave as soon as I have the chance. My vacation,” he says, “has officially come to an end.”

FIFTY-FIVE

Tick tock.

Castle called an impromptu meeting to brief everyone on the details of tomorrow's fight; there are less than 12 hours until we leave. We've gathered in the dining hall because it's the easiest place to seat everyone at once.

We had 1 final meal, a handful of forced conversation, 2 tense hours filled with brief, spastic moments of laughter that sounded more like choking. Sara and Sonya were the last to sneak into the hall, both spotting me and waving a quick hello before they sat down on the other side of the room. Then Castle began to speak.

Everyone will need to fight.

All able-bodied men and women. The elderly unable to enter battle will stay back with the youngest ones, and the youngest ones will include James and his old group of friends.

James is currently crushing Adam's hand.

Anderson is going after the people, Castle says. The people have been rioting, raging against The Reestablishment now more than ever. Our battle gave them hope, Castle says to us. They'd only heard rumors of a resistance, and the battle concretized those rumors. They are looking to us to support them, to stand by them, and now, for the first time, we will be fighting with our gifts out in the open.

On the compounds.

Where the civilians will see us for what we are.

Castle is telling us to prepare for aggression on both sides. He says that sometimes, especially when frightened, people will not react positively to seeing our kind. They prefer the familiar terror as opposed to the unknown or the inexplicable, and our presence, our public display might create new enemies.

We have to be ready for that.

"Then why should we care?" someone shouts from the back of the room. She gets to her feet and I notice her sleek black hair, one heavy sheet of ink that stops at her waist. Her eyes are glittering under the fluorescent lights. "If they're only going to hate us," she says, "why should we even defend them? That's

ridiculous!”

Castle takes a deep breath. “We cannot fault them all for the foolishness of one.”

“But it’s not just one, is it?” a new voice chimes in. “How many of them are going to turn on us?”

“We have no way of knowing,” Castle says. “It could be one. It could be none. I am merely advising you to be cautious. You must never forget that these civilians are innocent and unarmed. They are being murdered for their disobedience—for merely speaking out and asking for fair treatment. They are starved and they’ve lost their homes, their families. Surely, you must be able to relate. Many of you still have family lost, scattered across the country, do you not?”

There’s a general murmur among the crowd.

“You must imagine that it is your mother. Your father. Your brothers and sisters among them. They are hurting and they are beaten down. We have to do what little we can to help. It’s the only way. We are their only hope.”

“What about our men?” Another person gets to his feet. He must be in his late 40s, round and robust, towering over the room. “Where is the guarantee that we will get Winston and Brendan back?”

Castle’s gaze drops for only a second. I wonder if I’m the only one who noticed the pain flit in and out of his eyes. “There is no guarantee, my friend. There never is. But we will do our best. We will not give up.”

“Then what good was it to take the kid hostage?” he protests. “Why not just kill him? Why are we keeping him alive? He’s done us no good and he’s eating our food and using resources that should go to the rest of us!”

The crowd bursts into an aggravated frenzy, angry, insane with emotions. Everyone is shouting at once, shouting things like, “Kill him!” and “That’ll show the supreme!” and “We have to make a statement!” and “He deserves to die!”

There’s a sudden constriction in my heart. I’ve almost begun to hyperventilate and I realize, for the very first time, that the thought of Warner dead is anything but appealing to me.

It horrifies me.

I look to Adam for a different kind of reaction but I don’t know what I was expecting. I’m stupid to be surprised at the tension in his eyes, his forehead, the stiff set of his lips. I’m stupid to have expected anything but hatred from Adam. Of course Adam hates Warner. Of course he does.

Warner tried to *murder* him.

Of course he, too, wants Warner dead.

I think I'm going to be sick.

"Please!" Castle shouts. "I know you're upset! Tomorrow is a difficult thing to face, but we can't channel our aggression onto one person. We have to use it as fuel for our fight and we have to remain united. We cannot allow anything to divide us. Not now!"

6 ticks of silence.

"I won't fight until he's dead!"

"We kill him tonight!"

"Let's get him now!"

The crowd is a roar of angry bodies, determined, ugly faces so scary, so savage, so twisted in inhuman rage. I hadn't realized that the people of Omega Point were harboring so much resentment.

"STOP!" Castle's hands are in the air, his eyes on fire. Every table and chair in the room has begun to rattle. People are looking around, scattered and scared, unnerved.

They're still unwilling to undermine Castle's authority. At least for now.

"Our hostage," Castle begins, "is no longer a hostage."

Impossible.

It's *impossible*.

It's not *possible*.

"He has come to me, just tonight," Castle says, "and asked for sanctuary at Omega Point."

My brain is screaming, raging against the 14 words Castle has just confessed.

It can't be true. Warner said he was going to leave. He said he was going to find a way to get *out*.

But Omega Point is even more shocked than I am. Even Adam is shaking with anger beside me. I'm afraid to look at his face.

"SILENCE! PLEASE!" Castle holds out another hand to quell the explosion of protests.

He says, "We have recently discovered that he, too, has a gift. And he says he wants to join us. He says he will fight with us tomorrow. He says he will fight against his father and help us find Brendan and Winston."

Chaos

Chaos

Chaos

explodes in every corner of the room.

“He’s a liar!”

“Prove it!”

“How can you believe him?”

“He’s a traitor to his own people! He’ll be a traitor to us!”

“I’ll never fight beside him!”

“I’ll kill him first!”

Castle’s eyes narrow, flashing under the fluorescent lights, and his hands move through the air like whisks, gathering up every plate, every spoon, every glass cup in the room and he holds them there, right in midair, daring someone to speak, to shout, to disagree.

“You will not touch him,” he says quietly. “I took an oath to help the members of our kind and I will not break it now. Think of yourselves!” he shouts. “Think of the day you found out! Think of the loneliness, the isolation, the terror that overcame you! Think of how you were cast off by your families and your friends! You don’t think he could be a changed man? How have *you* changed, friends? You judge him now! You judge one of your own who asks for amnesty!”

Castle looks disgusted.

“If he does anything to compromise any of us, if he does one single thing to disprove his loyalty—only then are you free to pass judgment upon his person. But we first give him a chance, do we not?” He is no longer bothering to hide his anger. “He says he will help us find our men! He says he will fight against his father! He has valuable information we can use! Why should we be unwilling to take a chance? He is no more than a child of nineteen! He is only one and we are many more!”

The crowd is hushed, whispering amongst itself and I hear snippets of conversation and things like “naive” and “ridiculous” and “he’s going to get all of us killed!” but no one speaks up and I’m relieved. I can’t believe what I’m feeling right now and I wish I didn’t care at all about what happens to Warner.

I wish I could want him dead. I wish I felt nothing for him.

But I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.

“How do you know?” someone asks. A new voice, a calm voice, a voice struggling to be rational.

The voice sitting right beside me.

Adam gets to his feet. Swallows, hard. Says, “How do you know he has a gift? Have you tested him?”

And he looks at me, Castle looks at me, he stares at me as if to will me to

speaking and I feel like I've sucked all of the air out of this room, like I've been thrown into a vat of boiling water, like I will never find my heartbeat ever again and I am begging praying hoping and wishing he will not say the words he says next but he does.

Of course he does.

"Yes," Castle says. "We know that he, like you, can touch Juliette."

FIFTY-SIX

It's like spending 6 months just trying to inhale.

It's like forgetting how to move your muscles and reliving every nauseous moment in your life and struggling to get all the splinters out from underneath your skin. It's like that one time you woke up and tripped down a rabbit hole and a blond girl in a blue dress kept asking you for directions but you couldn't tell her, you had no idea, you kept trying to speak but your throat was full of rain clouds and it's like someone has taken the ocean and filled it with silence and dumped it all over this room.

It's like this.

No one is speaking. No one is moving. Everyone is staring.

At me.

At Adam.

At Adam staring at me.

His eyes are wide, blinking too fast, his features shifting in and out of confusion and anger and pain and confusion so much confusion and a touch of betrayal, of suspicion, of so much more confusion and an extra dose of pain and I'm gaping like a fish in the moments before it dies.

I wish he would say something. I wish he would at least ask or accuse or demand *something* but he says nothing, he only studies me, stares at me, and I watch as the light goes out of his eyes, as the anger gives way to the pain and the extraordinary impossibility he must be experiencing right now and he sits down.

He does not look in my direction.

"Adam—"

He's up. He's up. He's up and he's charging out of the room and I scramble to my feet, I chase him out the door and I hear the chaos erupt in my wake, the crowd dissolving into anger all over again and I almost slam right into him, I'm gasping and he spins around and he says

"I don't understand." His eyes are so hurt, so deep, so blue.

"Adam, I—"

"He's touched you." It's not a question. He can hardly meet my eyes and he looks almost embarrassed by the words he speaks next. "He's touched your

skin.”

If only it were just that. If only it were that simple. If only I could get these currents out of my blood and Warner out of my head and *why am I so confused*

“Juliette.”

“Yes,” I tell him, I hardly move my lips. The answer to his nonquestion is yes.

Adam touches his fingers to his mouth, looks up, looks away, makes a strange, disbelieving sound. “When?”

I tell him.

I tell him when it happened, how it all began, I tell him how I was wearing one of the dresses Warner always made me wear, how he was fighting to stop me before I jumped out the window, how his hand grazed my leg and how he touched me and nothing happened.

I tell him how I tried to pretend it was all just a figment of my imagination until Warner caught us again.

I don’t tell him how Warner told me he missed me, how he told me he loved me and he kissed me, how he kissed me with such wild, reckless intensity. I don’t tell him that I pretended to return Warner’s affections just so I could slip my hands under his coat to get the gun out of his inside pocket. I don’t tell him that I was surprised, shocked, even, at how it felt to be in his arms, and that I pushed away those strange feelings because I hated Warner, because I was so horrified that he’d shot Adam that I wanted to kill him.

All Adam knows is that I almost did. That I almost killed Warner.

And now Adam is blinking, digesting the words I’m telling him, innocent of the things I’ve kept to myself.

~~I really am a monster.~~

“I didn’t want you to know,” I manage to say. “I thought it would complicate things between us—after everything we’ve had to deal with—I just thought it would be better to ignore it and I don’t know.” I fumble, fail for words. “It was stupid. I was stupid. I should have told you and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t want you to find out like this.”

Adam is breathing hard, rubbing the back of his head before running a hand through his hair and he says, “I don’t—I don’t get it—I mean—do we know why he can touch you? Is it like me? Can he do what I do? I don’t—*God*, Juliette, and you’ve been spending all that time alone with him—”

“Nothing happened,” I tell him. “All I did was talk to him and he never tried to touch me. And I have no idea why he can touch me—I don’t think anyone

does. He hasn't started testing with Castle yet."

Adam sighs and drags a hand across his face and says, so quietly only I can hear him, "I don't even know why I'm surprised. We share the same goddamn DNA." He swears under his breath. Swears again. "Am I ever going to catch a break?" he asks, raising his voice, talking to the air. "Is there ever going to be a time when some shitty thing isn't being thrown in my face? Jesus. It's like this insanity is never going to end."

I want to tell him that I don't think it ever will.

"Juliette."

I freeze at the sound of his voice.

I squeeze my eyes shut tight, so tight, refusing to believe my ears. Warner cannot be here. Of course he's not here. It's not even *possible* for him to be out here but then I remember. Castle said he's no longer a hostage.

Castle must've let him out of his room.

Oh.

Oh no.

This can't be happening. Warner is not standing so close to me and Adam right now, not again, not like this not after everything this *cannot* be happening

but Adam looks over my shoulder, looks behind me at the person I'm trying so hard to ignore and I can't lift my eyes. I don't want to see what's about to happen.

Adam's voice is like acid when he speaks. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"It's good to see you again, Kent." I can actually hear Warner smile. "We should catch up, you know. Especially in light of this new discovery. I had no idea we had so much in common."

You really, truly have no idea, I want to say out loud.

"You sick piece of shit," Adam says to him, his voice low, measured.

"Such unfortunate language." Warner shakes his head. "Only those who cannot express themselves intelligently would resort to such crude substitutions in vocabulary." A pause. "Is it because I intimidate you, Kent? Am I making you nervous?" He laughs. "You seem to be struggling to hold yourself together."

"I will *kill you*—" Adam charges forward to grab Warner by the throat just as Kenji slams into him, into both of them, shoving them apart with a look of absolute disgust on his face.

"What the *hell* do you two think you're doing?" His eyes are blazing. "I don't know if you've noticed but you're standing right in front of the doorway

and you're scaring the *shit* out of the little kids, Kent, so I'm going to have to ask you to calm your ass down." Adam tries to speak but Kenji cuts him off. "Listen, I don't have a clue what Warner is doing out of his room, but that's not my call to make. Castle is in charge around here, and we have to respect that. You can't go around killing people just because you feel like it."

"This is the same guy who tried to torture me to death!" Adam shouts. "He had his men beat the shit out of you! And I have to live with him? Fight with him? Pretend everything is fine? Has Castle *lost his mind*—"

"Castle knows what he's doing," Kenji snaps. "You don't need to have an opinion. You will defer to his judgment."

Adam throws his hands in the air, furious. "I don't believe this. This is a *joke*! Who does this? Who treats hostages like they're on some kind of retreat?" he shouts again, making no effort to keep his voice down. "He could go back and give away every detail of this place—he could give away our exact location!"

"That's impossible," Warner says. "I have no idea where we are."

Adam turns on Warner so quickly that I spin around just as fast, just to catch the action. Adam is shouting, saying something, looking like he might attack Warner right here in this moment and Kenji is trying to restrain him but I can hardly hear what's going on around me. The blood is pounding too hard in my head and my eyes are forgetting to blink because Warner is looking at me, only me, his eyes so focused, so intent, so heart-wrenchingly deep it renders me completely still.

Warner's chest is rising and falling, strong enough that I can see it from where I'm standing. He's not paying attention to the commotion beside him, the chaos of the dining hall or Adam trying to pummel him into the ground; he's not moved a single inch. He will not look away and I know I have to do it for him.

I turn my head.

Kenji is yelling at Adam to calm down about something and I reach out, I grab Adam's arm, I offer him a small smile and he stills. "Come on," I tell him. "Let's go back inside. Castle isn't finished yet and we need to hear what he's saying."

Adam makes an effort to regain control of himself. Takes a deep breath. Offers me a quick nod and allows me to lead him forward. I'm forcing myself to focus on Adam so I can pretend Warner isn't here.

Warner isn't a fan of my plan.

He's now standing in front of us, blocking our path and I look at him despite

my best intentions only to see something I've never seen before. Not to this degree, not like this.

Pain.

"Move," Adam snaps at him, but Warner doesn't seem to notice.

He's looking at me. He's looking at my hand clenched around Adam's covered arm and the agony in his eyes is breaking my knees and I can't speak, I shouldn't speak, I wouldn't know what to say even if I could speak and then he says my name. He says it again. He says, "Juliette—"

"Move!" Adam barks again, this time losing restraint and pushing Warner with enough strength to knock him to the floor. Except Warner doesn't fall. He trips backward, just a little, but the movement somehow triggers something within him, some kind of dormant anger he's all too eager to unleash and he's charging forward, ready to inflict damage and I'm trying to figure out what to do to make it stop, I'm trying to come up with a plan and I'm stupid.

I'm stupid enough to step in the middle.

Adam grabs me to try and pull me back but I'm already pressing a palm to Warner's chest and I don't know what I'm thinking but I'm not thinking at all and that seems to be the problem. I'm here, I'm caught in the milliseconds standing between 2 brothers willing to destroy one another and it's not even me who manages to do anything at all.

It's Kenji.

He grabs both boys by the arms and tries to pry them apart but the sudden sound that rips through his throat is a torture and a terror I wish I could tear out of my skull.

He's down.

He's on the ground.

He's choking, gasping, writhing on the floor until he goes limp, until he can hardly breathe and then he's still, too still, and I think I'm screaming, I keep touching my lips to see where this sound is coming from and I'm on my knees. I'm trying to shake him awake but he's not moving, he's not responding and I have no idea what just happened.

I have no idea if Kenji is dead.

FIFTY-SEVEN

I'm definitely screaming.

Arms are pulling me up off the floor and I hear voices and sounds I don't care to recognize because all I know is that this can't happen, not to Kenji, not to my funny, complicated friend who keeps secrets behind his smiles and I'm ripping away from the hands holding me back and I'm blind, I'm bolting into the dining hall and a hundred blurry faces blend into the background because the only one I want to see is wearing a navy-blue blazer and headful of dreads tied into a ponytail.

"Castle!" I'm screaming. I'm still screaming. I may have fallen to the floor, I'm not sure, but I can tell my kneecaps are starting to hurt and I don't care I don't care I don't care—"Castle! It's Kenji—he's—*please*—"

I've never seen Castle run before.

He charges through the room at an inhuman speed, past me and into the hall. Everyone in the room is up, frantic, some shouting, panicked, and I'm chasing Castle back into the tunnel and Kenji is still there. Still limp. Still.

Too still.

"Where are the girls?" Castle is shouting. "Someone—get the girls!" He's cradling Kenji's head, trying to pull Kenji's heavy body into his arms and I've never heard him like this before, not even when he talked about our hostages, not even when he talked about what Anderson has done to the civilians. I look around and see the members of Omega Point standing all around us, pain carved into their features and so many of them have already started crying, clutching at each other and I realize I never fully recognized Kenji. I didn't understand the reach of his authority. I'd never really seen just how much he means to the people in this room.

How much they love him.

I blink and Adam is one of 50 different people trying to help carry Kenji and now they're running, they're hoping against hope and someone is saying, "They've gone to the medical wing! They're preparing a bed for him!" And it's like a stampede, everyone rushing after them, trying to find out what's wrong and no one will look at me, no one will meet my eyes and I pull myself away,

out of sight, around the corner, into the darkness. I taste the tears as they fall into my mouth, I count each salty drop because I can't understand what happened, how it happened, how this is even possible because I wasn't touching him, I couldn't have been touching him please please please I couldn't have touched him but then I freeze. Icicles form along my arms as I realize:

I'm not wearing my gloves.

I forgot my gloves. I was in such a rush to get here tonight that I just jumped out of the shower and left my gloves in my room and it doesn't seem real, it doesn't seem possible that I could've done this, that I could've forgotten, that I could be responsible for yet another life lost and I just I just I just

I fall to the floor.

"Juliette."

I look up. I jump up.

I say, "Stay away from me" and I'm shaking, I'm trying to push the tears back but I'm shrinking into nothingness because I'm thinking this must be it. This must be my ultimate punishment. I deserve this pain, I deserve to have killed one of my only friends in the world and I want to shrivel up and disappear forever. "Go away—"

"Juliette, *please*," Warner says, coming closer. His face is cast in shadow. This tunnel is only half lit and I don't know where it leads. All I know is that I do not want to be alone with Warner.

Not now. Not ever again.

"I said stay away from me." My voice is trembling. "I don't want to talk to you. Please—just leave me alone!"

"I can't abandon you like this!" he says. "Not when you're crying!"

"Maybe you wouldn't understand that emotion," I snap at him. "Maybe you wouldn't care because killing people means nothing to you!"

He's breathing hard. Too fast. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Kenji!" I explode. "I did that! It's my fault! It's my fault you and Adam were fighting and it's my fault Kenji came out to stop you and it's my fault—" My voice breaks once, twice. "It's my fault he's dead!"

Warner's eyes go wide. "Don't be ridiculous," he says. "He's not dead."

I'm agony.

I'm sobbing about what I've done and how of course he's dead, didn't you see him, he wasn't even moving and I killed him and Warner remains utterly silent. He doesn't say a single thing as I hurl awful, horrible insults at him and accuse him of being too coldhearted to understand what it's like to grieve. I

don't even realize he's pulled me into his arms until I'm nestled against his chest and I don't fight it. I don't fight it at all. I cling to him because I need this warmth, I miss feeling strong arms around me and I'm only just beginning to realize how quickly I came to rely on the healing properties of an excellent hug.

How desperately I've missed this.

And he just holds me. He smooths back my hair, he runs a gentle hand down my back, and I hear his heart beat a strange, crazy beat that sounds far too fast to be human.

His arms are wrapped entirely around me when he says, "You didn't kill him, love."

And I say, "Maybe you didn't see what I saw."

"You are misunderstanding the situation entirely. You didn't do anything to hurt him."

I shake my head against his chest. "What are you talking about?"

"It wasn't you. I know it wasn't you."

I pull back. Look up into his eyes. "How can you know something like that?"

"Because," he says. "It wasn't you who hurt Kenji. It was me."

FIFTY-EIGHT

“*What?*”

“He’s not dead,” Warner says, “though he is severely injured. I suspect they should be able to revive him.”

“What”—I’m panicking, panicking in my bones—“what are you talking about—”

“Please,” Warner says. “Sit down. I’ll explain.” He folds himself onto the floor and pats the place beside him. I don’t know what else to do and my legs are now officially too shaky to stand on their own.

My limbs spill onto the ground, both our backs against the wall, his right side and my left side divided only by a thin inch of air.

1

2

3 seconds pass.

“I didn’t want to believe Castle when he told me I might have a ... a *gift*,” Warner says. His voice is pitched so low that I have to strain to hear it even though I’m only inches away. “A part of me hoped he was trying to drive me mad for his own benefit.” A small sigh. “But it did make a bit of sense, if I really thought about it. Castle told me about Kent, too,” Warner says. “About how he can touch you and how they’ve discovered why. For a moment I wondered if perhaps I had a similar ability. One just as pathetic. Equally as useless.” He laughs. “I was extremely reluctant to believe it.”

“It’s not a useless ability,” I hear myself saying.

“Really?” He turns to face me. Our shoulders are almost touching. “Tell me, love. What can he do?”

“He can disable things. Abilities.”

“Right,” he says, “but how will that ever *help* him? How could it ever help him to disable the powers of his own people? It’s absurd. It’s *wasteful*. It won’t help at all in this war.”

I bristle. Decide to ignore that. “What does any of this have to do with Kenji?”

He turns away from me again. His voice is softer when he says, “Would you

believe me if I told you I could sense your energy right now? Sense the tone and weight of it?"

I stare at him, study his features and the earnest, tentative note in his voice. "Yes," I tell him. "I think I'd believe you."

Warner smiles in a way that seems to sadden him. "I can sense," he says, taking a deep breath, "the emotions you're feeling most strongly. And because I know you, I'm able to put those feelings into context. I know the fear you're feeling right now, for example, is not directed toward me, but toward yourself, and what you think you've done to Kenji. I sense your hesitation—your reluctance to believe that it wasn't your fault. I feel your sadness, your grief."

"You can really feel that?" I ask.

He nods without looking at me.

"I never knew that was possible," I tell him.

"I didn't either—I wasn't aware of it," he says. "Not for a very long time. I actually thought it was normal to be so acutely aware of human emotions. I thought perhaps I was more perceptive than most. It's a big factor in why my father allowed me to take over Sector 45," he tells me. "Because I have an uncanny ability to tell whenever someone is hiding something, or feeling guilty, or, most importantly, lying." A pause. "That," he says, "and because I'm not afraid to deliver consequences if the occasion calls for it."

"It wasn't until Castle suggested there might be something more to me that I really began to analyze it. I nearly lost my mind." He shakes his head. "I kept going over it, thinking of ways to prove and disprove his theories. Even with all my careful deliberation, I dismissed it. And while I am a bit sorry—for your sake, not for mine—that Kenji had to be stupid enough to interfere tonight, I think it was actually quite serendipitous. Because now I finally have proof. Proof that I was wrong. That Castle," he says, "was right."

"What do you mean?"

"I took your Energy," he tells me, "and I didn't know I could. I could feel it all very vividly when the four of us connected. Adam was inaccessible—which, by the way, explains why I never suspected him of being disloyal. His emotions were always hidden; always blocked off. I was naive and assumed he was merely robotic, devoid of any real personality or interests. He eluded me and it was my own fault. I trusted myself too much to be able to anticipate a flaw in my system."

And I want to say, Adam's ability isn't so useless after all, is it?

But I don't.

“And Kenji,” Warner says after a moment. He rubs his forehead. Laughs a little. “Kenji was ... very smart. A lot smarter than I gave him credit for—which, as it turns out, was exactly his tactic. Kenji,” he says, blowing out a breath, “was careful to be an obvious threat as opposed to a discreet one.”

“He was always getting into trouble—demanding extra portions at meals, fighting with the other soldiers, breaking curfew. He broke simple rules in order to draw attention to himself. In order to trick me into seeing him as an irritant and nothing more. I always felt there was something off about him, but I attributed it to his loud, raucous behavior and his inability to follow rules. I dismissed him as a poor soldier. Someone who would never be promoted. Someone who would always be recognized as a waste of time.” He shakes his head. Raises his eyebrows at the ground. “Brilliant,” he says, looking almost impressed. “It was brilliant. His only mistake,” Warner adds after a moment, “was being too openly friendly with Kent. And that mistake nearly cost him his life.”

“So—what? You were trying to finish him off tonight?” I’m still so confused, trying to make an attempt to refocus the conversation. “Did you hurt him on purpose?”

“Not on purpose.” Warner shakes his head. “I didn’t actually know what I was doing. Not at first. I’ve only ever just *sensed* Energy; I never knew I could *take* it. But I touched yours simply by touching you—there was so much adrenaline among the group of us that yours practically threw itself at me. And when Kenji grabbed my arm,” he says, “you and I, we were still connected. And I ... somehow I managed to redirect your power in his direction. It was quite accidental but I felt it happen. I felt your power rush into me. Rush out of me.” He looks up. Meets my eyes. “It was the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever experienced.”

I think I’d fall down if I weren’t already sitting.

“So you can take—you can just take other people’s powers?” I ask him.

“Apparently.”

“And you’re sure you didn’t hurt Kenji on purpose?”

Warner laughs, looks at me like I’ve just said something highly amusing. “If I had wanted to kill him, I would have. And I wouldn’t have needed such a complicated setup to accomplish it. I’m not interested in theatrics,” he says. “If I want to hurt someone, I won’t require much more than my own two hands.”

I’m stunned into silence.

“I’m actually amazed,” Warner says, “how you manage to contain so much

without finding ways to release the excess. I could barely hold on to it. The transfer from my body to Kenji's was not only immediate, it was necessary. I couldn't tolerate the intensity for very long."

"And I can't hurt you?" I blink at him, astonished. "At all? My power just goes *into* you? You just absorb it?"

He nods. Says, "Would you like to see?"

And I'm saying yes with my head and my eyes and my lips and I've never been more terrified to be excited in my life. "What do I have to do?" I ask him.

"Nothing," he says, so quietly. "Just touch me."

My heart is beating pounding racing running through my body and I'm trying to focus. Trying to stay calm. This is going to be fine, I say to myself. It's going to be fine. It's just an experiment. There's no need to get so excited about being able to touch someone again, I keep saying to myself.

~~But oh, I am so, so excited.~~

He holds out his bare hand.

I take it.

I wait to feel something, some feeling of weakness, some depletion of my Energy, some sign that a transfer is taking place from my body to his but I feel nothing at all. I feel exactly the same. But I watch Warner's face as his eyes close and he makes an effort to focus. Then I feel his hand tighten around mine and he gasps.

His eyes fly open and his free hand goes right through the floor.

I jerk back, panicked. I'm tipping sideways, my hands catching me from behind. I must be hallucinating. I must be hallucinating the hole in the floor not 4 inches from where Warner is still sitting on the ground. I must've been hallucinating when I saw his resting palm press too hard and go right through. I must be hallucinating everything. All of this. I'm dreaming and I'm sure I'm going to wake up soon. That must be it.

"Don't be afraid—"

"H-how," I stammer, "how did you d-do that—"

"Don't be frightened, love, it's all right, I promise—it's new for me, too—"

"My—my power? It doesn't—you don't feel any pain?"

He shakes his head. "On the contrary. It's the most incredible rush of adrenaline—it's unlike anything I've ever known. I actually feel a little light-headed," he says, "in the best possible way." He laughs. Smiles to himself. Drops his head into his hands. Looks up. "Can we do it again?"

"No," I say too quickly.

He's grinning. "Are you sure?"

"I can't—I just, I still can't believe you can touch me. That you really—I mean"—I'm shaking my head—"there's no catch? There are no conditions? You touch me and no one gets hurt? And not only does no one get hurt, but you *enjoy* it? You actually *like* the way it feels to touch me?"

He's blinking at me now, staring like he's not sure how to answer my question.

"Well?"

"Yes," he says, but it's a breathless word.

"Yes, what?"

I can hear how hard his heart is beating. I can actually hear it in the silence between us. "Yes," he says. "I like it."

Impossible.

"You never have to be afraid of touching me," he says. "It won't hurt me. It can only give me strength."

I want to laugh one of those strange, high-pitched, delusional laughs that signals the end of a person's sanity. Because this world, I think, has a terrible, terrible sense of humor. It always seems to be laughing at me. At my expense. Making my life infinitely more complicated all the time. Ruining all of my best-laid plans by making every choice so difficult. Making everything so confusing.

I can't touch the boy I love.

But I can use my touch to strengthen the boy who tried to kill the one I love.

No one, I want to tell the world, is laughing.

"Warner." I look up, hit with a sudden realization. "You have to tell Castle."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because he has to know! It would explain Kenji's situation and it could help us tomorrow! You'll be fighting with us and it might come in handy—"

Warner laughs.

He laughs and laughs and laughs, his eyes brilliant, gleaming even in this dim light. He laughs until it's just a hard breath, until it becomes a gentle sigh, until it dissolves into an amused smile. And then he grins at me until he's grinning to himself, until he looks down and his gaze drops to my hand, the one lying limp on my lap and he hesitates just a moment before his fingers brush the soft, thin skin covering my knuckles.

I don't breathe.

I don't speak.

I don't even move.

He's hesitant, like he's waiting to see if I'll pull away and I should, I know I should but I don't. So he takes my hand. Studies it. Runs his fingers along the lines of my palm, the creases at my joints, the sensitive spot between my thumb and index finger and his touch is so tender, so delicate and gentle and it feels so good it hurts, it actually hurts. And it's too much for my heart to handle right now.

I snatch back my hand in a jerky, awkward motion, face flushing, pulse tripping.

Warner doesn't flinch. He doesn't look up. He doesn't even seem surprised. He only stares at his now empty hands as he speaks. "You know," he says, his voice both strange and soft, "I think Castle is little more than an optimistic fool. He tries too hard to welcome too many people and it's going to backfire, simply because it's impossible to please everyone." A pause. "He is the perfect example of the kind of person who doesn't know the rules of this game. Someone who thinks too much with his heart and clings too desperately to some fantastical notion of hope and peace. It will never help him," he sighs. "In fact, it will be the end of him, I'm quite sure of it.

"But there is something about you," Warner says, "something about the way *you* hope for things." He shakes his head. "It's so naive that it's oddly endearing. You like to believe people when they speak," he says. "You prefer kindness." He smiles, just a little. Looks up. "It amuses me."

All at once I feel like an idiot. "You're not fighting with us tomorrow."

Warner is smiling openly now, his eyes so warm. "I'm going to leave."

"You're going to leave." I'm numb.

"I don't belong here."

I'm shaking my head, saying, "I don't understand—how can you leave? You told Castle you're going to fight with us tomorrow—does he know you're leaving? Does anyone know?" I ask him, searching his face. "What do you have planned? What are you going to do?"

He doesn't answer.

"What are you going to *do*, Warner—"

"Juliette," he whispers, and his eyes are urgent, tortured all of a sudden. "I need to ask you somethi—"

Someone is bolting down the tunnels.

Calling my name.

Adam.

FIFTY-NINE

I jump up, frantic, and tell Warner I'll be right back.

I'm saying don't leave yet, don't go anywhere just yet I'll be right back but I don't wait for his response because I'm on my feet and I'm running toward the lighted hallway and I almost slam right into Adam. He steadies me and pulls me tight, so close, always forgetting not to touch me like this and he's anxious and he says, "Are you okay?" and "I'm so sorry," and "I've been looking for you everywhere," and "I thought you'd come down to the medical wing," and "it wasn't your fault, I hope you know that—"

It keeps hitting me in the face, in the skull, in the spine, this knowledge of just how much I care about him. How much I know he cares about me. Being close to him like this is a painful reminder of everything I had to force myself to walk away from. I take a deep breath.

"Adam," I ask, "is Kenji okay?"

"He's not conscious yet," he says to me, "but Sara and Sonya think he's going to be okay. They're going to stay up with him all night, just to be sure he makes it through in one piece." A pause. "No one knows what happened," he says. "But it wasn't you." His eyes lock mine in place. "You know that, right? You didn't even touch him. I know you didn't."

And even though I open my mouth a million times to say, It was Warner. Warner did it. He's the one who did this to Kenji, you have to get him and catch him and stop him he is lying to all of you! He's going to escape tomorrow! I don't say any of it and I don't know why.

I don't know why I'm protecting him.

I think part of me is afraid to say the words out loud, afraid to make them true. I still don't know whether or not Warner is really going to leave or even how he's going to escape; I don't know if it's even possible. And I don't know if I can tell anyone about Warner's ability yet; I don't think I want to explain to Adam that while he and the rest of Omega Point were tending to Kenji, I was hiding in a tunnel with Warner—our enemy and hostage—holding his hand and testing out his new power.

I wish I weren't so confused.

I wish my interactions with Warner would stop making me feel so guilty. Every moment I spend with him, every conversation I have with him makes me feel like I've somehow betrayed Adam, even though technically we're not even together anymore. My heart still feels so tied to Adam; I feel bound to him, like I need to make up for already having hurt him so much. I don't want to be the reason for the pain in his eyes, not again, and somehow I've decided that keeping secrets is the only way to keep him from getting hurt. But deep down, I know this can't be right. Deep down, I know it could end badly.

But I don't know what else to do.

"Juliette?" Adam is still holding me tight, still so close and warm and wonderful. "Are you okay?"

And I'm not sure what makes me ask it, but suddenly I need to know.

"Are you ever going to tell him?"

Adam pulls back, just an inch. "What?"

"Warner. Are you ever going to tell him the truth? About the two of you?"

Adam is blinking, stunned, caught off guard by my question. "No," he finally says. "Never."

"Why not?"

"Because it takes a lot more than blood to be family," he says. "And I want nothing to do with him. I'd like to be able to watch him die and feel no sympathy, no remorse. He's the textbook definition of a monster," Adam says to me. "Just like my dad. And I'll drop dead before I recognize him as my brother."

Suddenly I'm feeling like I might fall over.

Adam grabs my waist, tries to focus my eyes. "You're still in shock," he says. "We need to get you something to eat—or maybe some water—"

"It's okay," I tell him. "I'm okay." I allow myself to enjoy one last second in his arms before I break away, needing to breathe. I keep trying to convince myself that Adam is right, that Warner has done terrible, awful things and I shouldn't forgive him. I shouldn't smile at him. I shouldn't even talk to him. And then I want to scream because I don't think my brain can handle the split personality I seem to be developing lately.

I tell Adam I need a minute. I tell him I need to stop by the bathroom before we head over to the medical wing and he says okay, he says he'll wait for me.

He says he'll wait for me until I'm ready.

And I tiptoe back into the dark tunnel to tell Warner that I have to leave, that I won't be coming back after all, but when I squint into the darkness I can't see a thing.

I look around.

He's already gone.

SIXTY

We don't have to do anything at all to die.

We can hide in a cupboard under the stairs our whole life and it'll still find us. Death will show up wearing an invisible cloak and it will wave a magic wand and whisk us away when we least expect it. It will erase every trace of our existence on this earth and it will do all this work for free. It will ask for nothing in return. It will take a bow at our funeral and accept the accolades for a job well done and then it will disappear.

Living is a little more complex. There's one thing we always have to do.
Breathe.

In and out, every single day in every hour minute and moment we must inhale whether we like it or not. Even as we plan to asphyxiate our hopes and dreams still we breathe. Even as we wither away and sell our dignity to the man on the corner we breathe. We breathe when we're wrong, we breathe when we're right, we breathe even as we slip off the ledge toward an early grave. It cannot be undone.

So I breathe.

I count all the steps I've climbed toward the noose hanging from the ceiling of my existence and I count out the number of times I've been stupid and I run out of numbers.

Kenji almost died today.

Because of me.

It's still my fault that Adam and Warner were fighting. It's still my fault that I stepped between them. It's still my fault that Kenji felt the need to pull them apart and if I hadn't been caught in the middle Kenji never would've been hurt.

And I'm standing here. Staring at him.

He's barely breathing and I'm begging him. I'm begging him to do the one thing that matters. The only thing that matters. I need him to hold on but he's not listening. He can't hear me and I need him to be okay. I need him to pull through. I need him to breathe.

I need him.

Castle didn't have much more to say.

Everyone was standing around, some wedged into the medical wing, others standing on the other side of the glass, watching silently. Castle gave a small speech about how we need to stick together, how we're a family and if we don't have each other then who do we have? He said we're all scared, sure, but now is the time for us to support one another. Now is the time to band together and fight back. Now is the time, he said, for us to take back our world.

"Now is the time for us to live," he said.

"We'll postpone tomorrow's departure just long enough for everyone to have a final breakfast together. We cannot go into battle divided," he said. "We have to have faith in ourselves and in each other. Take a little more time in the morning to find peace with yourselves. After breakfast we leave. As one."

"What about Kenji?" someone asked, and I was startled to hear the familiar voice.

James. He was standing there with his fists clenched, tearstains streaked across his face, his bottom lip trembling even as he fought to hide the pain in his voice.

My heart split clean in half.

"What do you mean?" Castle asked him.

"Will he fight tomorrow?" James demanded, sniffing back the last of his tears, fists beginning to shake. "He wants to fight tomorrow. He told me he wants to fight tomorrow."

Castle's face creased as it pulled together. He took his time responding. "I ... I'm afraid I don't think Kenji will be able to join us tomorrow. But perhaps," he said, "perhaps you could stay and keep him company?"

James didn't respond. He only stared at Castle. Then he stared at Kenji. He blinked several times before pushing through the crowd to clamber onto Kenji's bed. Burrowed into his side and promptly fell asleep.

We all took that as our cue to leave.

Well. Everyone but me, Adam, Castle, and the girls. I find it interesting that everyone refers to Sonya and Sara as "the girls," as if they're the only girls in this entire place. They're not. I don't even know how they got that nickname and while a part of me wants to know, another part of me is too exhausted to ask.

I curl into my seat and stare at Kenji, who is struggling to breathe in and out. I prop my head up on my fist, fighting the sleep weaving its way into my consciousness. I don't deserve to sleep. I should stay here all night and watch over him. I would, too, if I could touch him without destroying his life.

“You two should really get to bed.”

I jolt awake, jerking up, not realizing I’d actually dozed off for a second. Castle is staring at me with a soft, strange look on his face.

“I’m not tired,” I lie.

“Go to bed,” he says. “We have a big day tomorrow. You need to sleep.”

“I can walk her out,” Adam says. He moves to stand up. “And then I can be right back—”

“Please.” Castle cuts him off. “Go. I’ll be fine with the girls.”

“But you need to sleep more than we do,” I tell him.

Castle smiles a sad smile. “I’m afraid I won’t be getting any sleep tonight.”

He turns to look at Kenji, his eyes crinkling in happiness or pain or something in between. “Did you know,” Castle says to us, “that I’ve known Kenji since he was a small boy? I found him shortly after I’d built Omega Point. He grew up here. When I first met him he was living in an old shopping cart he’d found on the side of the highway.” Castle pauses. “Has he ever told you that story?”

Adam sits back down. I’m suddenly wide-awake. “No,” we both say at the same time.

“Ah—forgive me.” Castle shakes his head. “I shouldn’t waste your time with these things,” he says. “I think there’s too much on my mind right now. I’m forgetting which stories to keep to myself.”

“No—please—I want to know,” I tell him. “Really.”

Castle stares into his hands. Smiles a little. “There’s not much to it,” he says. “Kenji has never talked to me about what happened to his parents, and I try not to ask. All he ever had was a name and an age. I stumbled upon him quite accidentally. He was just a boy sitting in a shopping cart. Far from civilization. It was the dead of winter and he was wearing nothing but an old T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants a few sizes too big for him. He looked like he was freezing, like he could use a few meals and place to sleep. I couldn’t just walk away,” Castle says. “I couldn’t just leave him there. So, I asked him if he was hungry.”

He stops, remembering.

“Kenji didn’t say a single thing for at least thirty seconds. He simply stared at me. I almost walked away, thinking I’d frightened him. But then, finally, he reached out, grabbed my hand, placed it in his palm and shook it. Very hard. And then he said, ‘Hello, sir. My name is Kenji Kishimoto and I am nine years old. It’s very nice to meet you.’” Castle laughs out loud, his eyes shining with an emotion that betrays his smiles. “He must’ve been starving, the poor kid. He

always,” Castle says, blinking up at the ceiling now, “he always had a strong, determined sort of personality. So much pride.

Unstoppable, that boy.”

We’re all silent for a while.

“I had no idea,” Adam says, “that you two were so close.”

Castle stands up. Looks around at us and smiles too brightly, too tightly. Says, “Yes. Well, I’m sure he’s going to be just fine. He’ll be just fine in the morning, so you two should definitely get some sleep.”

“Are you su—”

“Yes, please, get to bed. I’ll be fine here with the girls, I promise.”

So we get up. We get up and Adam manages to lift James from Kenji’s bed and into his arms without waking him. And we walk out.

I glance back.

I see Castle fall into his chair and drop his head into his hands and rest his elbows on his knees. I see him reach out a shaky hand to rest on Kenji’s leg and I wonder at how much I still don’t know about these people I live with. How little I’ve allowed myself to become a part of their world.

And I know I want to change that.

SIXTY-ONE

Adam walks me to my room.

It's been lights-out for about an hour now, and, with the exception of faint emergency lights glowing every few feet, everything is, quite literally, out. It's absolute blackness, and even still, the guards on patrol manage to spot us only to warn us to go straight to our separate quarters.

Adam and I don't really speak until we reach the mouth of the women's wing. There's so much tension, so many unspoken worries between us. So many thoughts about today and tomorrow and the many weeks we've already spent together. So much we don't know about what's already happening to us and what will eventually happen to us. Just looking at him, being so close and being so far away from him—it's painful.

I want so desperately to bridge the gap between our bodies. I want to press my lips to every part of him and I want to savor the scent of his skin, the strength in his limbs, in his heart. I want to wrap myself in the warmth and reassurance I've come to rely on.

But.

In other ways, I've come to realize that being away from him has forced me to rely on myself. To allow myself to be scared and to find my own way through it. I've had to train without him, fight without him, face Warner and Anderson and the chaos of my mind all without him by my side. And I feel different now. I feel stronger since putting space between us.

And I don't know what that means.

All I know is that it'll never be safe for me to rely on someone else again, to *need* constant reassurance of who I am and who I might someday be. I can love him, but I can't depend on him to be my backbone. I can't be my own person if I constantly require someone else to hold me together.

My mind is a mess. Every single day I'm confused, uncertain, worried I'm going to make a new mistake, worried I'm going to lose control, worried I'm going to lose myself. But it's something I have to work through. Because for the rest of my life, I'll always, always be stronger than everyone around me.

But at least I'll never have to be scared anymore.

“Are you going to be okay?” Adam asks, finally dispelling the silence between us. I look up to find that his eyes are worried, trying to read me.

“Yes,” I tell him. “Yes. I’m going to be fine.” I offer him a tight smile, but it feels wrong to be this close to him without being able to touch him at all.

Adam nods. Hesitates. Says, “It’s been one hell of a night.”

“And it’ll be one hell of a day tomorrow, too,” I whisper.

“Yeah,” he says quietly, still looking at me like he’s trying to find something, like he’s searching for an answer to an unspoken question and I wonder if he sees something different in my eyes now. He grins a small grin. Says, “I should probably go,” and nods at James bundled in his arms.

I nod, not sure what else to do. What to say.

So much is uncertain.

“We’ll get through this,” Adam says, answering my silent thoughts. “All of it. We’re going to be okay. And Kenji will be fine.” He touches my shoulder, allows his fingers to trail down my arm and stop just short of my bare hand.

I close my eyes, try to savor the moment.

And then his fingers graze my skin and my eyes fly open, my heart racing in my chest.

He’s staring at me like he might’ve done much more than touch my hand if he weren’t holding James against his chest.

“Adam—”

“I’m going to find a way,” he says to me. “I’m going to find a way to make this work. I promise. I just need some time.”

I’m afraid to speak. Afraid of what I might say, what I might do; afraid of the hope ballooning inside of me.

“Good night,” he whispers.

“Good night,” I say.

I’m beginning to think of hope as a dangerous, terrifying thing.

SIXTY-TWO

I'm so tired when I walk into my room that I'm only half conscious as I change into the tank top and pajama pants I sleep in. They were a gift from Sara. It was her recommendation that I change out of my suit while I sleep; she and Sonya think it's important to give my skin direct contact with fresh air.

I'm about to climb under the covers when I hear a soft knock at my door.

Adam

is my first thought.

But then I open the door. And promptly close it.

I must be dreaming.

"Juliette?"

Oh. God.

"What are you *doing* here?" I shout-whisper through the closed door.

"I need to speak with you."

"Right now. You need to speak with me right now."

"Yes. It's important," Warner says. "I heard Kent telling you that those twin girls would be in the medical wing tonight and I figured it would be a good time for us to speak privately."

"You heard my conversation with Adam?" I begin to panic, worried he might've heard too much.

"I have zero interest in your conversation with Kent," he says, his tone suddenly flat, neutral. "I left just as soon as I heard you'd be alone tonight."

"Oh." I exhale. "How did you even get in here without guards stopping you?"

"Maybe you should open the door so I can explain."

I don't move.

"Please, love, I'm not going to do anything to hurt you. You should know that by now."

"I'm giving you five minutes. Then I have to sleep, okay? I'm exhausted."

"Okay," he says. "Five minutes."

I take a deep breath. Crack the door open. Peek at him.

He's smiling. Looking entirely unapologetic.

I shake my head.

He slips past me and sits down directly on my bed.

I close the door, make my way across the room from him, and sit on Sonya's bed, suddenly all too aware of what I'm wearing and how incredibly exposed I feel. I cross my arms over the thin cotton clinging to my chest—even though I'm sure he can't actually see me—and make an effort to ignore the cold chill in the air. I always forget just how much the suit does to regulate my body temperature so far belowground.

Winston was a genius to design it for me.

Winston.

Winston and Brendan.

Oh how I hope they're okay.

"So ... what is it?" I ask Warner. I can't see a single thing in this darkness; I can hardly make out the form of his silhouette. "You just left earlier, in the tunnel. Even though I asked you to wait."

A few beats of silence.

"Your bed is so much more comfortable than mine," he says quietly. "You have a pillow. And an actual blanket?" He laughs. "You're living like a queen in these quarters. They treat you well."

"Warner." I'm feeling nervous now. Anxious. Worried. Shivering a little and not from the cold. "What's going on? Why are you here?"

Nothing.

Still nothing.

Suddenly.

A tight breath.

"I want you to come with me."

The world stops spinning.

"When I leave tomorrow," he says. "I want you to come with me. I never had a chance to finish talking to you earlier and I thought asking you in the morning would be bad timing all around."

"You want me to come with you." I'm not sure I'm still breathing.

"Yes."

"You want me to run away with you." This can't possibly be happening.

A pause. "Yes."

"I can't believe it." I'm shaking my head over and over and over again. "You really have lost your mind."

I can almost hear him smile in the dark. "Where's your face? I feel like I'm

talking to a ghost.”

“I’m right here.”

“Where?”

I stand up. “I’m here.”

“I still can’t see you,” he says, but his voice is suddenly much closer than it was before. “Can you see me?”

“No,” I lie, and I’m trying to ignore the immediate tension, the electricity humming in the air between us.

I take a step back.

I feel his hands on my arms, I feel his skin against my skin and I’m holding my breath. I don’t move an inch. I don’t say a word as his hands drop to my waist, to the thin material making a poor attempt to cover my body. His fingers graze the soft skin of my lower back, right underneath the hem of my shirt and I’m losing count of the number of times my heart skips a beat.

I’m struggling to get oxygen in my lungs.

~~I’m struggling to keep my hands to myself.~~

“Is it even possible,” he whispers, “that you can’t feel this fire between us?” His hands are traveling up my arms again, his touch so light, his fingers slipping under the straps of my shirt and it’s ripping me apart, it’s aching in my core, it’s a pulse beating in every inch of my body and I’m trying to convince myself not to lose my head when I feel the straps fall down and everything stops.

The air is still.

My skin is scared.

Even my thoughts are whispering.

2

4

6 seconds I forget to breathe.

Then I feel his lips against my shoulder, soft and scorching and tender, so gentle I could almost believe it’s the kiss of a breeze and not a boy.

Again.

This time on my collarbone and it’s like I’m dreaming, reliving the caress of a forgotten memory and it’s like an ache looking to be soothed, it’s a steaming pan thrown in ice water, it’s a flushed cheek pressed to a cool pillow on a hot hot hot night and I’m thinking yes, I’m thinking *this*, I’m thinking *thank you thank you thank you*

before I remember his mouth is on my body and I’m doing nothing to stop him.

He pulls back.

My eyes refuse to open.

His finger t-touches my bottom lip.

He traces the shape of my mouth, the curves the seam the dip and my lips part even though I asked them not to and he steps closer. I feel him so much closer, filling the air around me until there's nothing but him and his body heat, the smell of fresh soap and something unidentifiable, something sweet but not, something real and hot, something that smells like *him*, like it belongs to him, like he was poured into the bottle I'm drowning in and I don't even realize I'm leaning into him, inhaling the scent of his neck until I find his fingers are no longer on my lips because his hands are around my waist and he says

"You," and he whispers it, letter by letter he presses the word into my skin before he hesitates.

Then.

Softer.

His chest, heaving harder this time. His words, almost gasping this time. "You *destroy* me."

I am falling to pieces in his arms.

My fists are full of unlucky pennies and my heart is a jukebox demanding a few nickels and my head is flipping quarters heads or tails heads or tails heads or tails heads or tails

"Juliette," he says, and he mouths the name, barely speaking at all, and he's pouring molten lava into my limbs and I never even knew I could melt straight to death.

"I want you," he says. He says "I want all of you. I want you inside and out and catching your breath and aching for me like I ache for you." He says it like it's a lit cigarette lodged in his throat, like he wants to dip me in warm honey and he says "It's never been a secret. I've never tried to hide that from you. I've never pretended I wanted anything less."

"You—you said you wanted f-friendship—"

"Yes," he says, he swallows, "I did. I do. I do want to be your friend." He nods and I register the slight movement in the air between us. "I want to be the friend you fall hopelessly in love with. The one you take into your arms and into your bed and into the private world you keep trapped in your head. I want to be that kind of friend," he says. "The one who will memorize the things you say as well as the shape of your lips when you say them. I want to know every curve, every freckle, every shiver of your body, *Juliette*—"

“No,” I gasp. “Don’t—don’t s-say that—”

I don’t know what I’ll do if he keeps talking I don’t know what I’ll do and I don’t trust myself

“I want to know where to touch you,” he says. “I want to know how to touch you. I want to know how to convince you to design a smile just for me.” I feel his chest rising, falling, up and down and up and down and “Yes,” he says. “I do want to be your friend.” He says “I want to be your best friend in the entire world.”

I can’t think.

I can’t *breathe*

“I want so many things,” he whispers. “I want your mind. Your strength. I want to be worth your time.” His fingers graze the hem of my top and he says “I want this up.” He tugs on the waist of my pants and says “I want these down.” He touches the tips of his fingers to the sides of my body and says, “I want to feel your skin on fire. I want to feel your heart racing next to mine and I want to know it’s racing because of me, because you want me. Because you never,” he says, he breathes, “never want me to stop. I want every second. Every inch of you. I want all of it.”

And I drop dead, all over the floor.

“Juliette.”

I can’t understand why I can still hear him speaking because I’m dead, I’m already dead, I’ve died over and over and over again

He swallows, hard, his chest heaving, his words a breathless, shaky whisper when he says “I’m so—I’m so desperately in love with you—”

I’m rooted to the ground, spinning while standing, dizzy in my blood and in my bones and I’m breathing like I’m the first human who’s ever learned to fly, like I’ve been inhaling the kind of oxygen only found in the clouds and I’m trying but I don’t know how to keep my body from reacting to him, to his words, to the ache in his voice.

He touches my cheek.

Soft, so soft, like he’s not sure if I’m real, like he’s afraid if he gets too close I’ll just oh, look she’s gone, she’s just disappeared. His 4 fingers graze the side of my face, slowly, so slowly before they slip behind my head, caught in that in-between spot just above my neck. His thumb brushes the apple of my cheek.

He keeps looking at me, looking into my eyes for help, for guidance, for some sign of a protest like he’s so sure I’m going to start screaming or crying or running away but I won’t. I don’t think I could even if I wanted to because I

don't want to. I want to stay here. Right here. I want to be paralyzed by this moment.

He moves closer, just an inch. His free hand reaches up to cup the other side of my face.

He's holding me like I'm made of feathers.

He's holding my face and looking at his own hands like he can't believe he's caught this bird who's always so desperate to fly away. His hands are shaking, just a little bit, just enough for me to feel the slight tremble against my skin. Gone is the boy with the guns and the skeletons in his closet. These hands holding me have never held a weapon. These hands have never touched death. These hands are perfect and kind and tender.

And he leans in, so carefully. Breathing and not breathing and hearts beating between us and he's so close, he's so close and I can't feel my legs anymore. I can't feel my fingers or the cold or the emptiness of this room because all I feel is him, everywhere, filling everything and he whispers

"Please."

He says "Please don't shoot me for this."

And he kisses me.

His lips are softer than anything I've ever known, soft like a first snowfall, like biting into cotton candy, like melting and floating and being weightless in water. It's sweet, it's so effortlessly sweet.

And then it changes.

"Oh *God*—"

He kisses me again, this time stronger, desperate, like he has to have me, like he's dying to memorize the feel of my lips against his own. The taste of him is making me crazy; he's all heat and desire and peppermint and I want more. I've just begun reeling him in, pulling him into me when he breaks away.

He's breathing like he's lost his mind and he's looking at me like something has broken inside of him, like he's woken up to find that his nightmares were just that, that they never existed, that it was all just a bad dream that felt far too real but now he's awake and he's safe and everything is going to be okay and

I'm falling.

I'm falling apart and into his heart and I'm a disaster.

He's searching me, searching my eyes for something, for yeses or nos or maybe a cue to keep going and all I want is to drown in him. I want him to kiss me until I collapse in his arms, until I've left my bones behind and floated up into a new space that is entirely our own.

No words.

Just his lips.

Again.

Deep and urgent like he can't afford to take his time anymore, like there's so much he wants to feel and there aren't enough years to experience it all. His hands travel the length of my back, learning every curve of my figure and he's kissing my neck, my throat, the slope of my shoulders and his breaths come harder, faster, his hands suddenly threaded in my hair and I'm spinning, I'm dizzy, I'm moving and reaching up behind his neck and clinging to him and it's ice-cold heat, it's an ache that attacks every cell in my body. It's a wanting so desperate, a need so exquisite that it rivals everything, every happy moment I ever thought I knew.

I'm against the wall.

He's kissing me like the world is rolling right off a cliff, like he's trying to hang on and he's decided to hold on to me, like he's starving for life and love and he's never known it could ever feel this good to be close to someone. Like it's the first time he's ever felt anything but hunger and he doesn't know how to pace himself, doesn't know how to eat in small bites, doesn't know how to do anything anything anything in moderation.

My pants fall to the floor and his hands are responsible.

I'm in his arms in my underwear and a tank top that's doing little to keep me decent and he pulls back just to look at me, to drink in the sight of me and he's saying "you're so beautiful" he's saying "you're so unbelievably beautiful" and he pulls me into his arms again and he picks me up, he carries me to my bed and suddenly I'm resting against my pillows and he's straddling my hips and his shirt is no longer on his body and I have no idea where it went. All I know is that I'm looking up and into his eyes and I'm thinking there isn't a single thing I would change about this moment.

He has a hundred thousand million kisses and he's giving them all to me.

He kisses my top lip.

He kisses my bottom lip.

He kisses just under my chin, the tip of my nose, the length of my forehead, both temples, my cheeks, all across my jawline. Then my neck, behind my ears, all the way down my throat and

his hands

slide

down

my body. His entire form is moving down my figure, disappearing as he shifts downward and suddenly his chest is hovering above my hips; suddenly I can't see him anymore. I can only make out the top of his head, the curve of his shoulders, the unsteady rise and fall of his back as he inhales, exhales. He's running his hands down and around my bare thighs and up again, up past my ribs, around my lower back and down again, just past my hip bone. His fingers hook around the elastic waist of my underwear and I gasp.

His lips touch my bare stomach.

It's just a whisper of a kiss but something collapses in my skull. It's a feather-light brush of his mouth against my skin in a place I can't quite see. It's my mind speaking in a thousand different languages I don't understand.

And I realize he's working his way up my body.

He's leaving a trail of fire along my torso, one kiss after another, and I really don't think I can take much more of this; I really don't think I'll be able to survive this. There's a whimper building in my throat, begging to break free and I'm locking my fingers in his hair and I'm pulling him up, onto me, on top of me.

I need to kiss him.

I'm reaching up only to slip my hands down his neck, over his chest and down the length of his body and I realize I've never felt this, not to this degree, not like every moment is about to explode, like every breath could be our last, like every touch is enough to ignite the world. I'm forgetting everything, forgetting the danger and the horror and the terror of tomorrow and I can't even remember *why* I'm forgetting, *what* I'm forgetting, that there's something I already seem to have forgotten. It's too hard to pay attention to anything but his eyes, burning; his skin, bare; his body, perfect.

He's completely unharmed by my touch.

He's careful not to crush me, his elbows propped up on either side of my head, and I think I must be smiling at him because he's smiling at me, but he's smiling like he might be petrified; he's breathing like he's forgotten he's supposed to, looking at me like he's not sure how to do this, hesitating like he's unsure how to let me see him like this. Like he has no idea how to be so vulnerable.

But here he is.

And here I am.

Warner's forehead is pressed against mine, his skin flushed with heat, his nose touching my own. He shifts his weight to one arm, uses his free hand to

softly stroke my cheek, to cup my face like it's spun from glass and I realize I'm still holding my breath and I can't even remember the last time I exhaled.

His eyes shift down to my lips and back again. His gaze is heavy, hungry, weighed down by emotion I never thought him capable of. I never thought he could be so full, so human, so real. But it's there. It's right there. Raw, written across his face like it's been ripped out of his chest.

He's handing me his heart.

And he says one word. He whispers one thing. So urgently.

He says, "Juliette."

I close my eyes.

He says, "I don't want you to call me Warner anymore."

I open my eyes.

"I want you to know me," he says, breathless, his fingers pushing a stray strand of hair away from my face. "I don't want to be Warner with you," he says. "I want it to be different now. I want you to call me Aaron."

And I'm about to say yes, of course, I completely understand, but there's something about this stretch of silence that confuses me; something about this moment and the feel of his name on my tongue that unlocks other parts of my brain and there's something there, something pushing and pulling at my skin and trying to remind me, trying to tell me and

it slaps me in the face

it punches me in the jaw

it dumps me right into the ocean.

"Adam."

My bones are full of ice. My entire being wants to vomit. I'm tripping out from under him and pulling myself away and I almost fall right to the floor and this feeling, this feeling, this overwhelming *feeling* of absolute self-loathing sticks in my stomach like the slice of a knife too sharp, too thick, too lethal to keep me standing and I'm clutching at myself, I'm trying not to cry and I'm saying no no no this can't happen this can't be *happening* I love Adam, my heart is with Adam, I can't do this to him

and Warner looks like I've shot him all over again, like I've wedged a bullet in his heart with my bare hands and he gets to his feet but he can hardly stand. His frame is shaking and he's looking at me like he wants to say something but every time he tries to speak he fails.

"I'm s-sorry," I stammer, "I'm so sorry—I never meant for this to happen—I wasn't *thinking*—"

But he's not listening.

He's shaking his head over and over and over and he's looking at his hands like he's waiting for the part where someone tells him this isn't real and he whispers "What's happening to me? Am I dreaming?"

And I'm so sick, I'm so confused, because I want him, I want him and I want Adam, too, and I want too much and I've never felt more like a monster than I have tonight.

The pain is so plain on his face and it's killing me.

I feel it. I feel it killing me.

I'm trying so hard to look away, to forget, to figure out how to erase what just happened but all I can think is that life is like a broken tire swing, an unborn child, a fistful of wishbones. It's all possibility and potential, wrong and right steps toward a future we're not even guaranteed and I, I am so wrong. All of my steps are wrong, always wrong. I am the incarnation of error.

Because this never should have happened.

This was a mistake.

"You're choosing him?" Warner asks, barely breathing, still looking as if he might fall over. "Is that what just happened? You're choosing Kent over me? Because I don't think I understand what just happened and I need you to say something, I need you to tell me what the hell is happening to me right now—"

"No," I gasp. "No, I'm not choosing anyone—I'm not—I'm n-not—"

But I am. And I don't even know how I got here.

"Why?" he says. "Because he's the safer choice for you? Because you think you owe him something? You are making a mistake," he says, his voice louder now. "You're scared. You don't want to make the difficult choice and you're running away from me."

"Maybe I just d-don't want to be with you."

"I know you want to be with me!" he explodes.

"You're wrong."

Oh my God what am I saying I don't even know where I'm finding these words, where they're coming from or which tree I've plucked them from. They just keep growing in my mouth and sometimes I bite down too hard on an adverb or a pronoun and sometimes the words are bitter, sometimes they're sweet, but right now everything tastes like romance and regret and liar liar pants on fire all the way down my throat.

Warner is still staring.

"Really?" He struggles to rein in his temper and takes a step closer, so much

closer, and I can see his face too clearly, I can see his lips too clearly, I can see the anger and the pain and the disbelief etched into his features and I'm not so sure I should be standing anymore. I don't think my legs can carry me much longer.

"Y-yes." I pluck another word from the tree lying in my mouth, lying lying lying on my lips.

"So I'm wrong." He says the sentence quietly, so, so quietly. "I'm wrong that you want me. That you want to be with me." His fingers graze my shoulders, my arms; his hands slide down the sides of my body, tracing every inch of me and I'm pressing my mouth shut to keep the truth from falling out but I'm failing and failing and failing because the only truth I know right now is that I'm mere moments from losing my mind.

"Tell me something, love." His lips are whispering against my jaw. "Am I blind, too?"

I am actually going to die.

"I will not be your clown!" He breaks away from me. "I will not allow you to make a mockery of my feelings for you! I could respect your decision to *shoot me*, Juliette, but doing this—doing—doing what you just did—" He can hardly speak. He runs a hand across his face, both hands through his hair, looking like he wants to scream, to break something, like he's really, truly about to lose his mind. His voice is a rough whisper when he finally speaks. "It's the play of a coward," he says. "I thought you were so much better than that."

"I'm not a coward—"

"Then be honest with yourself!" he says. "Be honest with me! Tell me the truth!"

My head is rolling around on the floor, spinning like a wooden top, circling around and around and around and I can't make it stop. I can't make the world stop spinning and my confusion is bleeding into guilt which quickly evolves into anger and suddenly it's bubbling raging rising to the surface and I look at him. I clench my shaking hands into fists. "The truth," I tell him, "is that I never know what to think of you! Your actions, your behavior—you're never consistent! You're horrible to me and then you're kind to me and you tell me you love me and then you hurt the ones I care most about!"

"And you're a liar," I snap, backing away from him. "You say you don't care about what you do—you say you don't care about other people and what you've done to them but I don't believe it. I think you're hiding. I think the real you is hiding underneath all of the destruction and I think you're better than this life

you've chosen for yourself. I think you can change. I think you could be different. And I feel sorry for you!"

These words these stupid stupid words they won't stop spilling from my mouth.

"I'm sorry for your horrible childhood. I'm sorry you have such a miserable, worthless father and I'm sorry no one ever took a chance on you. I'm sorry for the terrible decisions you've made. I'm sorry that you feel trapped by them, that you think of yourself as a monster who can't be changed. But most of all," I tell him, "most of all I'm sorry that you have no mercy for yourself!"

Warner flinches like I've slapped him in the face.

The silence between us has slaughtered a thousand innocent seconds and when he finally speaks his voice is barely audible, raw with disbelief.

"You pity me."

My breath catches. My resolve wavers.

"You think I'm some kind of broken project you can repair."

"No—I didn't—"

"You have no *idea* what I've done!" His words are furious as he steps forward. "You have no idea what I've seen, what I've had to be a part of. You have no idea what I'm capable of or how much mercy I deserve. I know my own heart," he snaps. "I know who I am. Don't you dare pity me!"

Oh my legs are definitely not working.

"I thought you could love me for *me*," he says. "I thought you would be the one person in this godforsaken world who would accept me as I am! I thought you, of all people, would understand." His face is right in front of mine when he says, "I was wrong. I was so horribly, horribly wrong."

He backs away. He grabs his shirt and he turns to leave and I should let him go, I should let him walk out the door and out of my life but I can't, I catch his arm, I pull him back and I say, "Please—that's not what I meant—"

He spins around and he says, "I do not want your *sympathy*!"

"I wasn't trying to hurt you—"

"The truth," he says, "is a painful reminder of why I prefer to live among the lies."

I can't stomach the look in his eyes, the wretched, awful pain he's making no effort to conceal. I don't know what to say to make this right. I don't know how to take my words back.

I know I don't want him to leave.

Not like this.

He looks as if he might speak; he changes his mind. He takes a tight breath, presses his lips together as if to stop the words from escaping and I'm about to say something, I'm about to try again when he pulls in a shaky breath, when he says, "Good-bye, Juliette."

And I don't know why it's killing me, I can't understand my sudden anxiety and I need to know, I have to say it, I have to ask the question that isn't a question and I say "I won't see you again."

I watch him struggle to find the words, I watch him turn to me and turn away and for one split second I see what's happened, I see the difference in his eyes, the shine of emotion I never would've dreamed him capable of and I know, I understand why he won't look at me and I can't believe it. I want to fall to the floor as he fights himself, fights to speak, fights to swallow back the tremor in his voice when he says, "I certainly hope not."

And that's it.

He walks out.

I'm split clean in half and he's gone.

He's gone forever.

SIXTY-THREE

Breakfast is an ordeal.

Warner has disappeared and he's left a trail of chaos in his wake.

No one knows how he escaped, how he managed to get out of his room and find his way out of here and everyone is blaming Castle. Everyone is saying he was stupid to trust Warner, to give him a chance, to believe he might have changed.

Angry is an insult to the level of aggression in here right now.

But I'm not going to be the one to tell everyone that Warner was already out of his room last night. I'm not going to be the one to tell them that he probably didn't have to do much to find the exit. I won't explain to them that he's not an idiot.

I'm sure he figured it out easily enough. I'm sure he found a way to get past the guards.

Now everyone is ready to fight, but for all the wrong reasons. They want to murder Warner: first for all he's done; second for betraying their trust. More frightening still, everyone is worried that he'll give away all of our most sensitive information. I have no idea what Warner managed to discover about this place before he left, but nothing that happens now can possibly be good.

No one has even touched their breakfasts.

We're all dressed, armed, ready to face what could be an almost instant death, and I'm feeling little more than entirely numb. I didn't sleep at all last night, my heart and mind plagued and conflicted and I can't feel my limbs, I can't taste the food I'm not eating and I can't see straight, I can't focus on the things I'm supposed to be hearing. All I can think about are all the casualties ~~and Warner's lips on my neck, his hands on my body, the pain and passion in his eyes~~ and the many possible ways I could die today. I can only think about ~~Warner touching me, kissing me, torturing me with his heart~~ and Adam sitting beside me, not knowing what I've done.

It probably won't even matter after today.

Maybe I'll be killed and maybe all the agony of these past 17 years will have been for naught. Maybe I'll just fall right off the face of the Earth, gone forever,

and all of my adolescent angst will have been a ridiculous afterthought, a laughable memory.

But maybe I'll survive.

Maybe I'll survive and I'll have to face the consequences of my actions. I'll have to stop lying to myself; I'll have to actually make a decision.

I have to face the fact that I'm battling feelings for someone who has no qualms about putting a bullet in another man's head. I have to consider the possibility that I might really be turning into a monster. A horrible, selfish creature who cares only about herself.

Maybe Warner was right all along.

Maybe he and I really are perfect for each other.

Just about everyone has filed out of the dining hall. People are saying last-minute good-byes to the old and the young ones they're leaving behind. James and Adam had a lengthy good-bye just this morning. Adam and I have to head out in about 10 minutes.

"Well damn. Who died?"

I spin around at the sound of his voice. Kenji is up. He's in this room. He's standing next to our table and he looks like he's about to fall right over but he's *awake*. He's alive.

He's breathing.

"Holy crap." Adam is gaping. "Holy *shit*."

"Good to see you too, Kent." Kenji grins a crooked grin. He nods at me. "You ready to kick some ass today?"

I tackle him.

"WHOA—hey—thank you, yeah—that's—uh—" He clears his throat. Tries to shift away from me and I flinch, pull back. I'm covered everywhere except for my face; I'm wearing my gloves and my reinforced knuckles, and my suit is zipped up to my neck. Kenji never usually shies away from me.

"Hey, uh, maybe you should hold off on touching me for a little while, yeah?" Kenji tries to smile, tries to make it sound like he's joking, but I feel the weight of his words, the tension and the sliver of fear he's trying so hard to hide. "I'm not too steady on my feet just yet."

I feel the blood rush out of me, leaving me weak in the knees and needing to sit down.

"It wasn't her," Adam says. "You know she didn't even touch you."

“I *don’t* know that, actually,” Kenji says. “And it’s not like I’m blaming her—I’m just saying maybe she’s projecting and doesn’t know it, okay? Because last I checked, I don’t think we have any other explanations for what happened last night. It sure as hell wasn’t you,” he says to Adam, “and shit, for all we know, Warner being able to touch Juliette could just be a fluke. We don’t know anything about him yet.” A pause. He looks around. “Right? Unless Warner pulled some kind of magical rabbit out of his ass while I was busy being dead last night?”

Adam scowls. I don’t say a word.

“Right,” Kenji says. “That’s what I thought. So. I think it’s best if, unless absolutely necessary, I stay away.” He turns to me. “Right? No offense, right? I mean, I did nearly just die. I think you could cut me some slack.”

I can hardly hear my own voice when I say, “Yeah, of course.” I try to laugh. I try to figure out why I’m not telling them about Warner. Why I’m still protecting him. ~~Probably because I’m just as guilty as he is.~~

“So *anyway*,” Kenji says. “When are we leaving?”

“You’re insane,” Adam tells him. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Bullshit I’m not.”

“You can barely stand up on your own!” Adam says.

And he’s right. Kenji is clearly leaning on the table for support.

“I’d rather die out there than sit in here like some kind of idiot.”

“Kenji—”

“Hey,” Kenji says, cutting me off. “So I heard through the very loud grapevine that Warner got his ass the hell out of here last night. What’s that about?”

Adam makes a strange sound. It’s not quite a laugh. “Yeah,” he says. “Who even knows. I never thought it was a good idea to keep him hostage here. It was an even stupider idea to trust him.”

“So first you insult my idea, and then you insult Castle’s, huh?” Kenji’s eyebrow is cocked.

“They were bad calls,” Adam says. “Bad ideas. Now we have to pay for it.”

“Well how was I supposed to know Anderson would be so willing to let his own son rot in hell?”

Adam flinches and Kenji backpedals.

“Oh, hey—I’m sorry, man—I didn’t mean to say it like that—”

“Forget it.” Adam cuts him off. His face is suddenly hard, suddenly cold, closed off. “Maybe you should get back to the medical wing. We’re leaving

soon.”

“I’m not going anywhere but *out of here*.”

“Kenji, please—”

“Nope.”

“You’re being unreasonable. This isn’t a joke,” I tell him. “People are going to die today.”

But he laughs at me. Looks at me like I’ve said something obliquely entertaining. “I’m sorry, are you trying to teach *me* about the realities of war?” He shakes his head. “Are you forgetting that I was a soldier in Warner’s army? Do you have any idea how much crazy shit we’ve seen?” He gestures between himself and Adam. “I know exactly what to expect today. Warner was *insane*. If Anderson is even twice as bad as his son, then we are diving right into a bloodbath. I can’t leave you guys hanging like that.”

But I’m caught on one sentence. One word. I just want to ask. “Was he really that bad ... ?”

“Who?” Kenji is staring at me.

“Warner. Was he really that ruthless?”

Kenji laughs out loud. Laughs louder. Doubles over. He’s practically wheezing when he says, “Ruthless? Juliette, the guy is sick. He’s an animal. I don’t think he even knows what it means to be human. If there’s a hell out there, I’m guessing it was designed especially for him.”

It’s so hard to pull this sword out of my stomach.

A rush of footsteps.

I turn around.

Everyone is supposed to exit the tunnels in a single-file line in an attempt to maintain order as we leave this underground world. Kenji and Adam and I are the only fighters who haven’t joined the group yet.

We all get to our feet.

“Hey—so, does Castle know what you’re doing?” Adam is looking at Kenji. “I don’t think he’d be okay with you going out there today.”

“Castle wants me to be happy,” Kenji says matter-of-factly. “And I won’t be happy if I stay here. I’ve got work to do. People to save. Ladies to impress. He’d respect that.”

“What about everyone else?” I ask him. “Everyone was so worried about you—have you even seen them yet? To at least tell them you’re okay?”

“Nah,” Kenji says. “They’d probably shit a brick if they knew I was going up. I thought it’d be safer to keep it quiet. I don’t want to freak anyone out. And

Sonya and Sara—poor kids—they’re passed the hell out. It’s my fault they’re so exhausted, and they’re still talking about heading out today. They want to fight even though they’re going to have a lot of work to do once we’re done with Anderson’s army. I’ve been trying to convince them to stay here but they can be so damn stubborn. They need to save their strength,” he says, “and they’ve already wasted too much of it on me.”

“It’s not a *waste*—,” I try to tell him.

“Anyways,” Kenji says. “Can we please get going? I know you’re all about hunting down Anderson,” he says to Adam, “but personally? I would love to catch Warner. Put a bullet through that worthless piece of crap and be done with it.”

Something punches me in the gut so hard I’m afraid I’m actually going to be sick. I’m seeing spots, struggling to keep myself standing, fighting to ignore the image of Warner dead, his body crumpled in red.

“Hey—you okay?” Adam pulls me to the side. Takes a good look at my face.

“I’m okay,” I lie to him. Nod too many times. Shake my head once or twice. “I just didn’t get enough sleep last night, but I’ll be fine.”

He hesitates. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive,” I lie again. I pause. Grab his shirt. “Hey—just be careful out there, okay?”

He exhales a heavy breath. Nods once. “Yeah. You too.”

“Let’s go let’s go let’s go!” Kenji interrupts us. “Today is our day to die, ladies.”

Adam shoves him. A little.

“Oh, so now you’re abusing the crippled kid, huh?” Kenji takes a moment to steady himself before punching Adam in the arm. “Save your angst for the battlefield, bro. You’re going to need it.”

A shrill whistle sounds in the distance.

It’s time to go.

SIXTY-FOUR

It's raining.

The world is weeping at our feet in anticipation of what we're about to do.

We're all supposed to split off into clusters, fighting in tight groups so we can't all be killed at once. We don't have enough people to fight offensively so we have to be stealthy. And though I feel a pang of guilt for admitting it, I'm so happy Kenji decided to come with us. We would've been weaker without him.

But we have to get out of the rain.

We're already soaked through, and while Kenji and I are wearing suits that offer at least a modicum of protection against the natural elements, Adam is wearing nothing but crisp cotton basics, and I'm worried we won't last long like this. All members of Omega Point have already scattered. The immediate area above the Point is still nothing but a barren stretch of land that leaves us vulnerable upon exiting.

Lucky for us, we have Kenji. The 3 of us are already invisible.

Anderson's men aren't far from here.

All we know is that ever since Anderson arrived, he's been going out of his way to make a point about his power and the iron grip of The Reestablishment. Any voice of opposition, no matter how weak or feeble, no matter how unthreatening or innocuous, has been silenced. He's angry that we've inspired rebellion and now he's trying to make a statement. What he really wants is to destroy all of *us*.

The poor civilians are just caught in his friendly fire.

Gunshots.

We automatically move toward the sound echoing in the distance. We aren't saying a word. We understand what we need to do and how we have to operate. Our only mission is to get as close as possible to the devastation and then to take out as many of Anderson's men as we can. We protect the innocent. We support our fellow Point men and women.

We try very hard not to die.

I can make out the compounds creeping closer in the distance, but the rain is making it difficult to see. All the colors are bleeding together, melting into the

horizon, and I have to strain to discern what lies ahead of us. I instinctively touch the guns attached to the holsters on my back and I'm momentarily reminded of my last encounter with Anderson—my *only* encounter with the horrible, despicable man—and I wonder what's happened to him. I wonder if maybe Adam was right when he said that Anderson might be severely wounded, that perhaps he's still struggling to recuperate. I wonder if Anderson will make an appearance on the battlefield. I wonder if perhaps he's too much of a coward to fight in his own wars.

The screams tell us we're getting closer.

The world around us is a blurry landscape of blues and grays and mottled hues and the few trees still standing have a hundred shaky, quivering arms ripping through their trunks, reaching up to the sky as if in prayer, begging for relief from the tragedy they've been rooted in. It's enough to make me feel sorry for the plants and animals forced to bear witness to what we've done.

They never asked for this.

Kenji guides us toward the outskirts of the compounds and we slip forward to stand flush against the wall of one of the little square houses, huddled under the extra bit of roof that, at least for a moment, grants us reprieve from the clenched fists falling from the sky.

Wind is gnawing at the windows, straining against the walls. Rain is popping against the roof like popcorn against a pane of glass.

The message from the sky is clear: we are pissed.

We are pissed and we will punish you and we will make you pay for the blood you spill so freely. We will not sit idly by, not anymore, not ever again. We will *ruin* you, is what the sky says to us.

How could you do this to me? it whispers in the wind.

I gave you everything, it says to us.

Nothing will ever be the same again.

I'm wondering why I still can't see any sign of the army. I don't see anyone else from Omega Point. I don't see anyone at all. In fact, I'm starting to feel like this compound is a little too peaceful.

I'm about to suggest we move when I hear a door slam open.

"This is the last of them," someone shouts. "She was hiding out over here." A soldier is dragging a crying woman out from the compound we're huddled against and she's screaming, she's begging for mercy and asking about her

husband and the soldier barks at her to shut up.

I have to keep the emotions from spilling out of my eyes, my mouth.

I do not speak.

I do not breathe.

Another soldier jogs over from somewhere I can't see. He shouts some kind of approving message and makes a motion with his hands that I don't understand. I feel Kenji stiffen beside me.

Something is wrong.

"Toss her in with everyone else," the second soldier shouts. "And then we'll call this area clear."

The woman is hysterical. She's screeching, clawing at the soldier, telling him she's done nothing wrong, she doesn't understand, where is her husband, she's been looking for her daughter everywhere and what is happening, she cries, she screams, she flails her fists at the man gripping her like an animal.

He presses the barrel of his gun to her neck. "If you don't shut up, I'll shoot you right now."

She whimpers once, twice, and then she's limp. She's fainted in his arms and the soldier looks disgusted as he pulls her out of sight toward wherever they're keeping everyone else. I have no idea what's happening. I don't understand what's happening.

We follow them.

The wind and the rain pick up in pace and there's enough noise in the air and distance between us and the soldiers that I feel safe to speak. I squeeze Kenji's hand. He's still the glue between me and Adam, projecting his powers to keep us all invisible. "What do you think is going on?" I ask.

He doesn't answer right away.

"They're rounding them up," he says after a moment. "They're creating groups of people to kill all at once."

"The woman—"

"Yeah." I hear him clear his throat. "Yeah, she and whoever else they think might be connected to the protests. They don't just kill the inciters," he tells me. "They kill the friends and the family members, too. It's the best way to keep people in line. It never fails to scare the shit out of the few left alive."

I have to swallow back the vomit threatening to overpower me.

"There has to be a way to get them out of there," Adam says. "Maybe we can take out the soldiers in charge."

"Yeah, but listen, you guys know I'm going to have to let go of you, right?"

I'm already kind of losing strength; my Energy is fading faster than normal. So you'll be visible," Kenji says. "You'll be a clearer target."

"But what other choice do we have?" I ask.

"We could try to take them out sniper-style," Kenji says. "We don't have to engage in direct combat. We have that option." He pauses. "Juliette, you've never been in this kind of situation before. I want you to know I'd respect your decision to stay out of the direct line of fire. Not everyone can stomach what we might see if we follow those soldiers. There's no shame or blame in that."

I taste metal in my mouth as I lie. "I'll be okay."

He's quiet a moment. "Just—all right—but don't be afraid to use your abilities to defend yourself," he says to me. "I know you're all weird about not wanting to hurt people or whatever, but these guys aren't messing around. They *will* try to kill you."

I nod even though I know he can't see me. "Right," I say. "Yeah." But I'm panicked through my mind.

"Let's go," I whisper.

SIXTY-FIVE

I can't feel my knees.

There are 27 people lined up, standing side by side in the middle of a big, barren field. Men and women and children of all different ages. All different sizes. All standing before what could be called a firing squad of 6 soldiers. The rain is rushing down around us, hard and angry, pelting everything and everyone with teardrops as hard as my bones. The wind is absolutely frantic.

The soldiers are deciding what to do. How to kill them. How to dispose of the 27 sets of eyes staring straight ahead. Some are sobbing, some are shaking from fear and grief and horror, others still are standing perfectly straight, stoic in the face of death.

One of the soldiers fires a shot.

The first man crumples to the ground and I feel like I've been whipped in the spine. So many emotions rush in and out of me in the span of a few seconds that I'm afraid I might faint; I'm clinging to consciousness with an animal desperation and trying to swallow back the tears, trying to ignore the pain spearing through me.

I can't understand why no one is moving, why we're not moving, why none of the civilians are moving even just to jump out of the way and it occurs to me, it dawns on me that running, trying to escape or trying to fight back is simply not a viable option. They are utterly overpowered. They have no guns. No ammunition of any kind.

But I do.

I have a gun.

I have 2, in fact.

This is the moment, this is where we have to let go, this is where we fight alone, just the 3 of us, 3 ancient kids fighting to save 26 faces or we die trying. My eyes are locked on a little girl who can't be much older than James, her eyes so wide, so terrified, the front of her pants already wet from fear and it rips me to pieces, it *kills* me, and my free hand is already reaching for my gun when I tell Kenji I'm ready.

I watch the same soldier focus his weapon on the next victim when Kenji

releases us.

3 guns are up, aimed to fire, and I hear the bullets before they're released into the air; I see one find its mark in a soldier's neck and I have no idea if it's mine.

It doesn't matter now.

There are still 5 soldiers left to face, and now they can see us.

We're running.

We're dodging the bullets aimed in our direction and I see Adam dropping to the ground, I see him shooting with perfect precision and still failing to find a target. I look around for Kenji only to find that he's disappeared and I'm so happy for it; 3 soldiers go down almost instantly. Adam takes advantage of the remaining soldiers' distraction and takes out a fourth. I shoot the fifth from behind.

I don't know whether or not I've killed him.

We're screaming for the people to follow us, we're herding them back to the compounds, yelling for them to stay down, to stay out of sight; we tell them help is coming and we'll do whatever we can to protect them and they're trying to reach out to us, to touch us, to thank us and take our hands but we don't have time. We have to hurry them to some semblance of safety and move on to wherever the rest of this decimation is taking place.

I still haven't forgotten the one man we weren't able to save. I haven't forgotten number 27.

I never want that to happen again.

We're bolting across the many miles of land dedicated to these compounds now, not bothering to keep ourselves hidden or to come up with a definitive plan. We still haven't spoken. We haven't discussed what we've done or what we might do and we only know that we need to keep moving.

We follow Kenji.

He weaves his way through a demolished cluster of compounds and we know something has gone horribly wrong. There's no sign of life anywhere. The little metal boxes that used to house civilians are completely destroyed and we don't know if there were people inside when this happened.

Kenji tells us we have to keep looking.

We move deeper through the regulated territory, these pieces of land dedicated to human habitation, until we hear a rush of footsteps, the sound of a softly churning mechanical sound.

The tanks.

They run on electricity so they're less conspicuous as they move through the streets, but I'm familiar enough with these tanks to be able to recognize the electric thrum. Adam and Kenji do too.

We follow the noise.

We're fighting against the wind trying push us away and it's almost as if it knows, as if the wind is trying to protect us from whatever is waiting on the other side of this compound. It doesn't want us to have to see this. It doesn't want us to have to die today.

Something explodes.

A raging fire rips through the atmosphere not 50 feet from where we're standing. The flames lick the earth, lapping up the oxygen, and even the rain can't douse the devastation all at once. The fire whips and sways in the wind, dying down just enough, humbled into submission by the sky.

We need to be wherever that fire is.

Our feet fight for traction on the muddy ground and I don't feel the cold as we run, I don't feel the wet, I only feel the adrenaline coursing through my limbs, forcing me to move forward, gun clenched too tight in my fist, too ready to aim, too ready to fire.

But when we reach the flames I almost drop my weapon.

I almost fall to the floor.

I almost can't believe my eyes.

SIXTY-SIX

Dead dead dead is everywhere.

So many bodies mixed and meshed into the earth that I have no idea whether they're ours or theirs and I'm beginning to wonder what it means, I'm beginning to doubt myself and this weapon in my hand and I can't help but wonder about these soldiers, I wonder how they could be just like Adam, just like a million other tortured, orphaned souls who simply needed to survive and took the only job they could get.

My conscience has declared war against itself.

I'm blinking back tears and rain and horror and I know I need to move my legs, I know I need to push forward and be brave, I have to fight whether I like it or not because we can't let this happen.

I'm tackled from behind.

Someone pins me down and my face is buried in the ground and I'm kicking, I'm trying to scream but I feel the gun wrenched out of my grip, I feel an elbow in my spine and I know Adam and Kenji are gone, they're deep in battle and I know I'm about to die. I know it's over and it doesn't feel real, somehow, it feels like this is a story someone else is telling, like death is a strange, distant thing you've only ever seen happen to people you've never known and surely it doesn't happen to me, to you, to any of the rest of us.

But here it is.

It's a gun in the back of my head and a boot pressed down on my back and it's my mouth full of mud and it's a million worthless moments I never really lived and it's all right in front of me. I see it so clearly.

Someone flips me over.

The same someone who held a gun to my head is now pointing it at my face, inspecting me as if trying to read me and I'm confused, I don't understand his angry gray eyes or the stiff set of his mouth because he's not pulling the trigger. He's not killing me and this, this more than anything else is what petrifies me.

I need to take off my gloves.

My captor shouts something I don't catch because he's not talking to me, he's not looking in my direction because he's calling to someone else and I use

his moment of distraction to yank off the steel knuckle brace on my left hand only to toss it to the ground. I have to get my glove off. I have to get my glove off because it's my only chance for survival but the rain has made the leather too wet and it's sticking to my skin, refusing to come off easily and the soldier spins back too soon. He sees what I'm trying to do and he yanks me to my feet, pulls me into a headlock and presses the gun to my skull. "I know what you're trying to do, you little freak," he says. "I've heard about you. You move even an inch and I will kill you."

Somehow, I don't believe him.

I don't think he's supposed to shoot me, because if he wanted to, he would've done it already. But he's waiting for something. He's waiting for something I don't understand and I need to act fast. I need a plan but I have no idea what to do and I'm only clawing at his covered arm, at the muscle he's bound around my neck and he shakes me, shouts at me to stop squirming and he pulls me tighter to cut off my air supply and my fingers are clenched around his forearm, trying to fight the viselike grip he has around me and I can't breathe and I'm panicked, I'm suddenly not so sure he's not going to kill me and I don't even realize what I've done until I hear him scream.

I've crushed all the bones in his arm.

He falls to the floor, he drops his gun to grab at his arm, and he's screaming with a pain so excruciating I'm almost tempted to feel remorse for what I've done.

Instead, I run.

I've only gotten a few feet before 3 more soldiers slam into me, alerted by what I've done to their comrade, and they see my face and they're alight with recognition. One of them appears vaguely familiar, almost as if I've seen his shaggy brown hair before, and I realize: they know me. These soldiers knew me when Warner held me captive. Warner had made a complete spectacle out of me. Of course they'd recognize my face.

And they're not letting me go.

The 3 of them are pushing me face-first into the ground, pinning down my arms and legs until I'm fairly certain they've decided to rip my limbs off. I'm trying to fight back, I'm trying to get my mind in the right place to focus my Energy, and I'm just about to knock them back but then

a sharp blow to my head and I'm rendered almost entirely unconscious.

Sounds are mixing together, voices are becoming one big mess of noise and I can't see colors, I don't know what's happening to me because I can't feel my

legs anymore. I don't even know if I'm walking or if I'm being carried but I feel the rain. I feel it fall fast down the planes of my face until I hear the sound of metal on metal, I hear a familiar electric thrum and then the rain stops, it disappears from the sky and I only know 2 things and I only know 1 of those things for certain.

I am in a tank.

I am going to die.

SIXTY-SEVEN

I hear wind chimes.

I hear wind chimes being blown into hysteria by a wind so violent as to be a legitimate threat and all I can think is that the tinkling sounds seem so incredibly familiar to me. My head is still spinning but I have to stay as aware as possible. I have to know where they're taking me. I have to have some idea of where I am. I need to have a point of reference and I'm struggling to keep my head straight without making it known that I'm not unconscious.

The soldiers don't speak.

I was hoping to at least glean a bit of information from the conversations they might have but they do not say a word to one another. They are like machines, like robots programmed to follow through with a specific assignment, and I wonder, I'm so curious, I can't figure out why I had to be dragged away from the battlefield to be killed. I wonder why my death has to be so special. I wonder why they're carrying me out of the tank toward the chaos of an angry wind chime and I dare to open my eyes just a sliver and I nearly gasp.

It's the house.

It's the house, the house on unregulated turf, the one painted the perfect shade of robin's-egg blue and the only traditional, functioning home within a 500-mile radius. It's the same house Kenji told me must be a trap, it's the house where I was so sure I'd meet Warner's father, and then it hits me. A sledgehammer. A bullet train. A rush of realization crushing my brain.

Anderson must be here. He must want to kill me himself.

I am a special delivery.

They even ring the doorbell.

I hear feet shuffling. I hear creaks and groans. I hear the wind snapping through the world and then I see my future, I see Anderson torturing me to death in every possible way and I wonder how I'm going to get myself out of this. Anderson is too smart. He will probably chain me to the floor and cut off my hands and feet one at a time. He is likely going to want to enjoy this.

He answers the door.

"Ah! Gentlemen. Thank you very much," he says. "Please follow me." And I

feel the soldier carrying me shift his weight under my damp, limp, suddenly heavy body. I'm starting to feel a cold chill seep into my bones and I realize I've been running through the pouring rain for too long.

I'm shaking and it's not from fear.

I'm burning and it's not from anger.

I'm so delirious that even if I had the strength to defend myself I'm not sure I'd be able to do it right. It's amazing how many different ways I could meet my end today.

Anderson smells rich and earthy; I can smell him even though I'm being carried in someone else's arms, and the scent is disturbingly pleasant. He closes the front door behind us just after advising the waiting soldiers to return to work. Which is essentially an order for them to go kill more people.

I think I'm starting to hallucinate.

I see a warm fireplace like the kind I've only ever read about. I see a cozy living room with soft, plush couches and a thick oriental rug gracing the floor. I see a mantel with pictures on it that I can't recognize from here and Anderson is telling me to wake up, he's saying you need to take a bath, you've gotten yourself quite dirty haven't you, and that won't do, will it? I'm going to need you to be awake and fully coherent or this won't be much fun at all, he says, and I'm fairly certain I'm losing my mind.

I feel the thud thud thud of heavy footsteps climbing a stairwell and realize my body is moving with it. I hear a door whine open, I hear the shuffle of other feet and there are words being spoken that I can't distinguish anymore. Someone says something to someone and I'm dropped onto a cold, hard floor.

I hear myself whimper.

"Be careful not to touch her skin," is the only sentence I can make out in a single thread. Everything else is "bathe" and "sleep" and "in the morning" and "no, I don't think so" and "very good," and I hear another door slam shut. It's the one right next to my head.

Someone is trying to take my suit off.

I snap up so quickly it's painful; I feel something sear through me, through my head until it hits me square in the eye and I know I'm a mix of so many things right now. I can't remember the last time I ate anything and I haven't truly slept in over 24 hours. My body is soaked through, my head is pounding with pain, my body has been twisted and stepped on, and I'm aching in a million different ways. But I will not allow any strange man to take my clothes off. I'd rather be dead.

But the voice I hear isn't male at all. It sounds soft and gentle, motherly. She's speaking to me in a language I don't understand but maybe it's just my head that can't understand anything at all. She makes soothing noises, she rubs her hands in small circles on my back. I hear a rush of water and feel the heat rise up around me and it's so warm, it feels like steam and I think this must be a bathroom, or a tub, and I can't help but think that I haven't taken a hot shower since I was back at the headquarters with Warner.

I try to open my eyes and fail.

It's like two anvils are sitting on my eyelids, like everything is black and messy and confusing and exhausting and I can only make out the general circumstances of my situation. I see through little more than slits; I see only the gleaming porcelain of what I assume is a bathtub and I crawl over despite the protests in my ear and clamber up.

I topple right into the hot water fully clothed, gloves and boots and suit intact and it's an unbelievable pleasure I didn't expect to experience.

My bones begin to thaw and my teeth are slowing their chatter and my muscles are learning to relax. My hair floats up around my face and I feel it tickle my nose.

I sink beneath the surface.

I fall asleep.

SIXTY-EIGHT

I wake up in a bed made of heaven and I'm wearing clothes that belong to a boy.

I'm warm and comfortable but I can still feel the creak in my bones, the ache in my head, the confusion clouding my mind. I sit up. I look around.

I'm in someone's bedroom.

I'm tangled in blue-and-orange bedsheets decorated with little baseball mitts. There's a little desk with a little chair set off to the side and there's a set of drawers, a collection of plastic trophies in perfectly straight rows on top. I see a simple wooden door with a traditional brass knob that must lead outside; I see a sliding set of mirrors that must be hiding a closet. I look to my right to find a little bedside table with an alarm clock and a glass of water and I grab it.

It's almost embarrassing how quickly I inhale the contents.

I climb out of bed only to find that I'm wearing a pair of navy gym shorts that are hanging so low on my hips I'm afraid they're going to fall off. I'm wearing a gray T-shirt with some kind of logo on it and I'm swimming in the extra material. I have no socks. No gloves. No underwear.

I have nothing.

I wonder if I'm allowed to step outside and I decide it's worth a shot. I have no idea what I'm doing here. I have no idea why I'm not dead yet.

I freeze in front of the mirrored doors.

My hair has been washed well and it falls in thick, soft waves around my face. My skin is bright and, with the exception of a few scratches, relatively unscathed. My eyes are wide; an odd, vibrant mix of green and blue blinking back at me, surprised and surprisingly unafraid.

But my neck.

My neck is one mess of purple, one big bruise that discolors my entire appearance. I hadn't realized just how tightly I was being choked to death yesterday—I think it was yesterday—and I only now realize just how much it hurts to swallow. I take a sharp breath and push past the mirrors. I need to find a way to get out of here.

The door opens at my touch.

I look around the hallway for any sign of life. I don't have any idea what time of day it is or what I've gotten myself into. I don't know if anyone exists in this house except for Anderson—and whoever it was that helped me in the bathroom—but I have to assess my situation. I have to figure out exactly how much danger I'm in before I can devise a plan to fight my way out.

I try to tiptoe quietly down the stairs.

It doesn't work.

The stairs creak and groan under my weight and I hardly have a chance to backpedal before I hear him call my name. He's downstairs.

Anderson is downstairs.

"Don't be shy," he says. I hear the rustle of something that sounds like paper. "I have food for you and I know you must be starving."

My heart is suddenly beating in my throat. I wonder what choices I have, what options I have to consider and I decide I can't hide from him in his own hideout.

I meet him downstairs.

He's the same beautiful man he was before. Hair perfect and polished, clothing crisp, clean, expertly pressed. He's sitting in the living room in an overstuffed chair with a blanket draped over his lap. I notice a gorgeous, rustic-looking, intricately carved walking stick leaning against the armrest. He has a stack of papers in his hand.

I smell coffee.

"Please," he says to me, not at all surprised by my strange, wild appearance. "Have a seat."

I do.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

I look up. I don't answer him.

He nods. "Yes, well, I'm sure you're very surprised to see me here. It's a lovely little house, isn't it?" He looks around. "I had this preserved shortly after I moved my family to what is now Sector 45. This sector was supposed to be mine, after all. It turned out to be the ideal place to store my wife." He waves a hand. "Apparently she doesn't do very well in the compounds," he says, as if I'm supposed to have any idea what he's talking about.

Store his wife?

I don't know why I allow anything out of his mouth to surprise me.

Anderson seems to catch my confusion. He looks amused. "Am I to understand that my love-struck boy didn't tell you about his beloved mother? He

didn't go on and on and on about his pathetic love for the creature that gave birth to him?"

"What?" is the first word I speak.

"I am truly shocked," Anderson says, smiling like he's not shocked at all. "He didn't bother to mention that he has a sick, ailing mother who lives in this house? He didn't tell you that's why he wanted the post here, in this sector, so desperately? No? He didn't tell you anything about that?" He cocks his head. "I am just so shocked," he lies again.

I'm trying to keep my heart rate down, trying to figure out why on earth he's telling me this, trying to stay one step ahead of him, but he's doing a damn good job of confusing the hell out of me.

"When I was chosen as supreme commander," he goes on, "I was going to leave Aaron's mother here and take him with me to the capital. But the boy didn't want to leave his mother behind. He wanted to take care of her. He didn't want to leave her. He needed to *be* with her like some stupid *child*," he says, raising his voice at the end, forgetting himself for a moment. He swallows. Regains his composure.

And I'm waiting.

Waiting for the anvil he's preparing to drop on my head.

"Did he tell you how many other soldiers wanted be in charge of Sector 45? How many fine candidates we had to choose from? He was only eighteen years old!" He laughs. "Everyone thought he'd gone mad. But I gave him a chance," Anderson says. "I thought it might be good for him to take on that kind of responsibility."

Still waiting.

A deep, contented sigh. "Did he ever tell you," Anderson says, "what he had to do to prove he was worthy?"

There it is.

"Did he ever tell you what I made him do to earn it?"

I feel so dead inside.

"No," Anderson says, eyes bright, too bright. "I suspect he didn't want to mention that part, did he? I bet he didn't include that part of his past, did he?"

I don't want to hear this. I don't want to know this. I don't want to listen anymore—

"Don't worry," Anderson says. "I won't spoil it for you. Best to let him share those details with you himself."

I'm not calm anymore. I'm not calm and I've officially begun to panic.

“I’ll be heading back to base in just a bit,” Anderson says, sorting through his papers, not seeming to mind having an entirely one-sided conversation with me. “I can’t stand to be under the same roof as his mother for very long—I do not get on well with the ill, unfortunately—but this has turned out to be a convenient little camp under the present circumstances. I’ve been using it as a base from which to oversee all that’s going on at the compounds.”

The battle.

The fighting.

The bloodshed and Adam and Kenji and Castle and everyone I’ve left behind

How could I forget

The horrifying, terrifying possibilities are flashing through my mind. I have no idea what’s happened. If they’re okay. If they know I’m still alive. If Castle managed to get Brendan and Winston back.

If anyone I know has died.

My eyes are crazed, darting around. I get to my feet, convinced that this is all just an elaborate trap, that perhaps someone is going to maul me from behind or someone is waiting in the kitchen with a cleaver, and I can’t catch my breath, I’m wheezing and I’m trying to figure out what to do what to do what to do and I say “What am I doing here? Why did you bring me here? Why haven’t you killed me yet?”

Anderson looks at me. He cocks his head. He says, “I am very upset with you, Juliette. Very, very unhappy.” He says, “You have done a very bad thing.”

“What?” seems to be the only question I know how to ask. “What are you talking about?” For one crazy moment I wonder if he knows about what happened with Warner. I almost feel myself blush.

But he takes a deep breath. Grabs the cane resting against his chair. He has to use his entire upper body to get to his feet. He’s shaking, even with the cane to support him.

He’s crippled.

He says, “You did this to me. You managed to overpower me. You shot me in my legs. You almost shot me in the heart. And you kidnapped my son.”

“No,” I gasp, “that wasn’t—”

“You did this to me.” He cuts me off. “And now I want compensation.”

SIXTY-NINE

Breathing. I have to remember to keep breathing.

“It’s quite extraordinary,” Anderson says, “what you were able to do entirely on your own. There were only three people in that room,” he says. “You, me, and my son. My soldiers were watching that entire area for anyone else who might’ve come with you, and they said you were utterly alone.” A pause. “I actually thought you’d come with a team, you see. I didn’t think you’d be brave enough to meet me by yourself. But then you single-handedly disarmed me and stole back your hostages. You had to carry two men—not including my son—out to safety. How you managed to do it is entirely beyond my comprehension.”

And it hits me: this choice is simple.

I either tell him the truth about Kenji and Adam and risk having Anderson go after them, or I take the fall.

So I meet Anderson’s eyes.

I nod. I say, “You called me a stupid little girl. You said I was too much of a coward to defend myself.”

He looks uncomfortable for the very first time. Seems to realize that I could probably do the same thing to him again, right now if I wanted.

And I think, yes, I probably could. What an excellent idea.

But for now, I’m still strangely curious to see what he wants from me. Why he’s talking to me. I’m not worried about attacking him right away; I know that I have an advantage over him now. I should be able to overtake him easily.

Anderson clears his throat.

“I was planning on returning to the capital,” he says. He takes a deep breath. “But it’s clear that my work here is not yet finished. Your people are making things infinitely more complicated and it’s becoming harder and harder to simply kill all the civilians.” A pause. “Well, no, actually, that’s not true. It’s not hard to kill them, it’s only that it’s becoming impractical.” He looks at me. “If I were to kill them all, I wouldn’t have any left to rule over, would I?”

He actually laughs.Laughs as if he’s said something funny.

“What do you want with me?” I ask him.

He takes a deep breath. He’s smiling. “I must admit, Juliette—I’m

thoroughly impressed. You alone were able to overpower me. You had enough foresight to think of taking my son hostage. You saved two of your own men. You caused an *earthquake* to save the rest of your team!" He laughs. He laughs and laughs and laughs.

I don't bother telling him that only 2 of those things are true.

"I see now that my son was right. You *could* be invaluable to us, especially right now. You know the inside of their headquarters better than anything Aaron is able to remember."

So Warner has been to see his father.

He's shared our secrets. Of course he has. I can't imagine why I'm so surprised.

"You," Anderson says to me, "could help me destroy all of your little friends. You could tell me everything I need to know. You could tell me all about the other freaks, what they're capable of, what their strengths and weaknesses are. You could take me to their hideout. You would do whatever I asked you to do."

I want to spit in his face.

"I would sooner *die*," I tell him. "I'd rather be burned alive."

"Oh, I highly doubt that," he says. He shifts his weight onto the cane to better hold himself up. "I think you'd change your mind if you actually had the opportunity to feel the skin melt off your face. But," he says, "I am not unkind. I certainly won't rule it out as an option, if you're really that interested."

Horrible, horrible man.

He smiles, wide, satisfied by my silence. "Yes, I didn't think so."

The front door flies open.

I don't move. I don't turn around. I don't know if I want to see what's about to happen to me but then I hear Anderson greet his visitor. Invite him in. Ask him to say hello to their new guest.

Warner steps into my line of vision.

I'm suddenly weak through the bone, sick and slightly mortified. Warner doesn't say a word. He's wearing his perfect suit with his perfect hair and he looks exactly like the Warner I first met; the only difference now is the look in his eyes. He's staring at me in a state of shock so debilitating he actually looks ill.

"You kids remember each other, right?" Anderson is the only one laughing.

Warner is breathing like he's hiked several mountains, like he can't understand what he's seeing or why he's seeing it and he's staring at my neck, at

what must be the ugly blotchy bruise staining my skin and his face twists into something that looks like anger and horror and heartbreak. His eyes drop to my shirt, to my shorts, and his mouth falls open just enough for me to notice before he's reining himself in, wiping the emotions off his face. He's struggling to stay composed but I can see the rapid motions of his chest rising and falling. His voice isn't nearly as strong as it could be when he says, "What is she doing here?"

"I've had her collected for us," Anderson says simply.

"For what?" Warner asks. "You said you didn't want her—"

"Well," Anderson says, considering. "That's not entirely true. I could certainly benefit from having her around, but I decided at the last moment that I wasn't interested in her company anymore." He shakes his head. Looks down at his legs. Sighs. "It's just so *frustrating* to be crippled like this," he says, laughing again. "It's just so unbelievably *frustrating*. But," he says, smiling, "at least I've found a fast and easy way to fix it. To put it all back to normal, as they say. It'll be just like magic."

Something about his eyes, the sick smile in his voice, the way he says that last line makes me feel ill. "What do you mean?" I ask, almost afraid to hear his response.

"I'm surprised you even have to ask, my dear. I mean, honestly—did you really think I wouldn't notice my son's brand-new shoulder?" He laughs. "Did you think I wouldn't find it strange to see him come home not only unharmed, but entirely *healed*? No scars, no tenderness, no weakness—as if he'd never been shot at all! It's a miracle," he says. "A miracle, my son informs me, that was performed by two of your little freaks."

"No."

Horror is building inside of me, blinding me.

"Oh yes." He glances at Warner. "Isn't that right, son?"

"No," I gasp. "Oh, God—what have you done—WHERE ARE THEY—"

"Calm yourself," Anderson says to me. "They are perfectly unharmed. I simply had them collected, just as I had you collected. I need them to stay alive and healthy if they're going to heal me, don't you think?"

"Did you know about this?" I turn to Warner, frantic. "Did you do this? Did you know—"

"No—Juliette," he says, "I swear—this wasn't my idea—"

"You are both getting agitated over nothing," Anderson says, waving a lazy hand in our direction. "We have more important things to focus on right now."

More pressing issues to deal with.”

“What,” Warner asks, “are you talking about?” He doesn’t seem to be breathing.

“Justice, son.” Anderson is staring at me now. “I’m talking about justice. I like the idea of setting things right. Of putting order back into the world. And I was waiting for you to arrive so I could show you exactly what I mean. This,” he says, “is what I should’ve done the first time.” He glances at Warner. “Are you listening? Pay close attention now. Are you watching?”

He pulls out a gun.

And shoots me in the chest.

SEVENTY

My heart has exploded.

I'm thrown backward, tripping over my own feet until I hit the floor, my head slamming into the carpeted ground, my arms doing little to break my fall. It's pain like I've never known it, pain I never thought I could feel, never would have even imagined. It's like dynamite has gone off in my chest, like I've been lit on fire from the inside out, and suddenly everything slows down.

So this, I think, is what it feels like to die.

I'm blinking and it seems to take forever. I see an unfocused series of images in front of me, colors and bodies and lights swaying, stilted movements all blurred together. Sounds are warped, garbled, too high and too low for me to hear clearly. There are icy, electric bursts surging through my veins, like every part of my body has fallen asleep and is trying to wake up again.

There's a face in front of me.

I try to concentrate on the shape, the colors, try to bring everything into focus but it's too difficult and suddenly I can't breathe, suddenly I feel like there are knives in my throat, holes punched into my lungs, and the more I blink, the less clearly I'm able to see. Soon I'm only able to take in the tightest breaths, tiny little gasps that remind me of when I was a child, when the doctors told me I suffered from asthma attacks. They were wrong, though; my shortness of breath had nothing to do with asthma. It had to do with panic and anxiety and hyperventilation. But this feeling I'm feeling right now is very similar to what I experienced then. It's like trying to take in oxygen by breathing through the thinnest straw. Like your lungs are just closing up, gone for the holidays. I feel the dizziness take over, the light-headed feeling take over. And the pain, the pain, the *pain*. The pain is terrible. The pain is the worst. The pain never seems to stop.

Suddenly I'm blind.

I feel rather than see the blood, feel it leaking out of me as I blink and blink and blink in a desperate attempt to regain my vision. But I can see nothing but a haze of white. I hear nothing but the pounding in my eardrums and the short, the short, the short frantic gasp gasp gasps of my own breath and I feel hot, so hot,

the blood of my body still so fresh and warm and pooling underneath me, all around me.

Life is seeping out of me and it makes me think about death, makes me think about how short a life I lived and how little I lived it. How I spent most of my years cowering in fear, never standing up for myself, always trying to be what someone else wanted. For 17 years I tried to force myself into a mold that I hoped would make other people feel comfortable, safe, unthreatened.

And it never helped.

I will have died having accomplished nothing. I am still no one. I am nothing more than a silly little girl bleeding to death on a psychotic man's floor.

And I think, if I could do it over again, I'd do it so differently.

I'd be better. I'd make something of myself. I'd make a difference in this sorry, sorry world.

And I'd start by killing Anderson.

It's too bad I'm already so close to dead.

SEVENTY-ONE

My eyes open.

I'm looking around and wondering at this strange version of an afterlife. Odd, that Warner is here, that I still can't seem to move, that I still feel such extraordinary pain. Stranger still to see Sonya and Sara in front of me. I can't even pretend to understand their presence in this picture.

I'm hearing things.

Sounds are beginning to come in more clearly, and, because I can't lift my head to look around, I try instead to focus on what they're saying.

They're arguing.

"You have to!" Warner shouts.

"But we can't—we can't t-touch her," Sonya is saying, choking back tears. "There's no way for us to help her—"

"I can't believe she's actually dying," Sara gasps. "I didn't think you were telling the truth—"

"She's not dying!" Warner says. "She is not going to die! Please, listen, I'm telling you," he says, desperate now, "you can help her—I've been trying to explain to you," he says, "all you have to do is touch me and I can take your power—I can be the transfer, I can control it and redirect your Energy—"

"That's not possible," Sonya says. "That's not—Castle never said you could do that—he would've told us if you could do that—"

"Jesus, please, just listen to me," he says, his voice breaking. "I'm not trying to trick you—"

"You kidnapped us!" they both shout at the same time.

"That wasn't me! I wasn't the one who kidnapped you—"

"How are we supposed to trust you?" Sara says. "How do we know you didn't do this to her yourself?"

"Why don't you care?" He's breathing so hard now. "How can you not care? Why don't you care that she's bleeding to death—I thought you were her friends —"

"Of course we care!" Sara says, her voice catching on the last word. "But how can we help her now? Where can we take her? Who can we take her to? No

one can touch her and she's lost so much blood already—just look at he—”

A sharp intake of breath.

“Juliette?”

Footsteps stomp stomp stomp the ground. Rushing around my head. All the sounds are banging into each other, colliding again, spinning around me. I can't believe I'm not dead yet.

I have no idea how long I've been lying here.

“Juliette? JULIETTE—”

Warner's voice is a rope I want to cling to. I want to catch it and tie it around my waist and I want him to haul me out of this paralyzed world I'm trapped in. I want to tell him not to worry, that it's fine, that I'm going to be okay because I've accepted it, I'm ready to die now, but I can't. I can't say anything. I still can't breathe, can hardly shape my lips into words. All I can do is take these torturous little gasps and wonder why the hell my body hasn't given up yet.

All of a sudden Warner is straddling my bleeding body, careful not to allow any of his weight to touch me, and he shoves up my shirtsleeves. Grabs ahold of my bare arms and says, “You are going to be okay. We're going to fix this—they're going to help me fix this and you—you're going to be fine.” Deep breaths. “You're going to be perfect. Do you hear me? Juliette, can you hear me?”

I blink at him. I blink and blink and blink at him and find I'm still fascinated by his eyes. Such a startling shade of green.

“Each one of you, grab my arms,” he shouts to the girls, his hands still gripped firmly around my shoulders. “Now! Please! I'm *begging* you—”

And for some reason they listen.

Maybe they see something in him, see something in his face, in his features. Maybe they see what I see from this disjointed, foggy perspective. The desperation in his expression, the anguish carved into his features, the way he looks at me, like he might die if I do.

And I can't help but think this is an interesting parting gift from the world.

That at least, in the end, I didn't die alone.

SEVENTY-TWO

I'm blind again.

Heat is pouring into my being with such intensity it's literally taken over my vision. I can't feel anything but hot, hot, searing hot heat flooding my bones, my nerves, my skin, my cells.

Everything is on fire.

At first I think it's the same heat in my chest, the same pain from the hole where my heart used to be, but then I realize this heat doesn't actually hurt. It's a soothing kind of heat. So potent, so intense, but somehow it's welcome. My body does not want to reject it. Does not want to flinch away from it, is not looking for a way to protect itself from it.

I actually feel my back lift off the floor when the fire hits my lungs. I'm suddenly gasping in huge, raging hyperventilated breaths, taking in lungfuls of air like I might cry if I don't. I'm drinking oxygen, devouring it, choking on it, taking it in as quickly as possible, my entire body heaving as it strains to return to normal.

My chest feels like it's being stitched back together, like the flesh is regenerating itself, healing itself at an inhuman rate and I'm blinking and breathing and I'm moving my head and trying to see but it's still so blurry, still unclear but it's getting easier. I can feel my fingers and my toes and the life in my limbs and I can actually hear my heart beating again and suddenly the faces above me come into focus.

All at once the heat is gone.

The hands are gone.

I collapse back onto the floor.

And everything goes black.

SEVENTY-THREE

Warner is sleeping.

I know this because he's sleeping right next to me. It's dark enough that it takes me several tries to blink my eyes open and understand that I'm not blind this time. I catch a glimpse out the window and find the moon filled to the brim, pouring light into this little room.

I'm still here. In Anderson's house. In what probably used to be Warner's bedroom.

And he's asleep on the pillow right next to me.

His features are so soft, so ethereal in the moonlight. His face is deceptively calm, so unassuming and innocent. And I think of how impossible it is that he's here, lying next to me. That I'm here, lying next to him.

That we're lying in his childhood bed together.

That he saved my life.

Impossible is such a stupid word.

I shift hardly at all and Warner reacts immediately, sitting straight up, chest heaving, eyes blinking. He looks at me, sees that I'm awake, that my eyes are open, and he freezes in place.

There are so many things I want to say to him. So many things I have to tell him. So many things I need to do now, that I need to sort through, that I have to decide.

But for now, I only have one question.

"Where's your father?" I whisper.

It takes Warner a moment to find his voice. He says, "He's back on base. He left right after"—he hesitates, struggles for a second—"right after he shot you."

Incredible.

He left me bleeding all over his living room floor. What a nice little present for his son to clean up. What a nice little lesson for his son to learn. Fall in love, and you get to watch your love get shot.

"So he doesn't know I'm here?" I ask Warner. "He doesn't know I'm alive?"

Warner shakes his head. "No."

And I think, *Good*. That's very good. It'll be so much better if he thinks I'm

dead.

Warner is still looking at me. Looking and looking and looking at me like he wants to touch me but he's afraid to get too close. Finally, he whispers, "Are you okay, love? How do you feel?"

And I smile to myself, thinking of all the ways I could answer that question.

I think of how my body is more exhausted, more defeated, more drained than it's ever been in my life. I think about how I've had nothing but a glass of water in 2 days. How I've never been more confused about people, about who they seem to be and who they actually are, and I think about how I'm lying here, sharing a bed in a house we were told doesn't exist anymore, with one of the most hated and feared people of Sector 45. And I think about how that terrifying creature has the capacity for such tenderness, how he saved my life. How his own father shot me in the chest. How only hours earlier I was lying in a pool of my own blood.

I think about how my friends are probably still locked in battle, how Adam must be suffering not knowing where I am or what's happened to me. How Kenji is still pulling the weight of so many. How Brendan and Winston might still be lost. How the people of Omega Point might all be dead. And it makes me think.

I feel better than I ever have in my entire life.

I'm amazed by how different I feel now. How different I know things will be now. I have so many things to do. So many scores to settle. So many friends who need my help.

Everything has changed.

Because once upon a time I was just a child.

Today I'm still just a child, but this time I've got an iron will and 2 fists made of steel and I've aged 50 years. Now I finally have a clue. I've finally figured out that I'm strong enough, that maybe I'm a touch brave enough, that maybe this time I can do what I was meant to do.

This time I am a force.

A deviation of human nature.

I am living, breathing proof that nature is officially screwed, afraid of what it's done, what it's become.

And I'm stronger. I'm angrier.

I'm ready to do something I'll definitely regret and this time I don't care. I'm done being nice. I'm done being nervous. I'm not afraid of anything anymore.

Mass chaos is in my future.

And I'm leaving my gloves behind.

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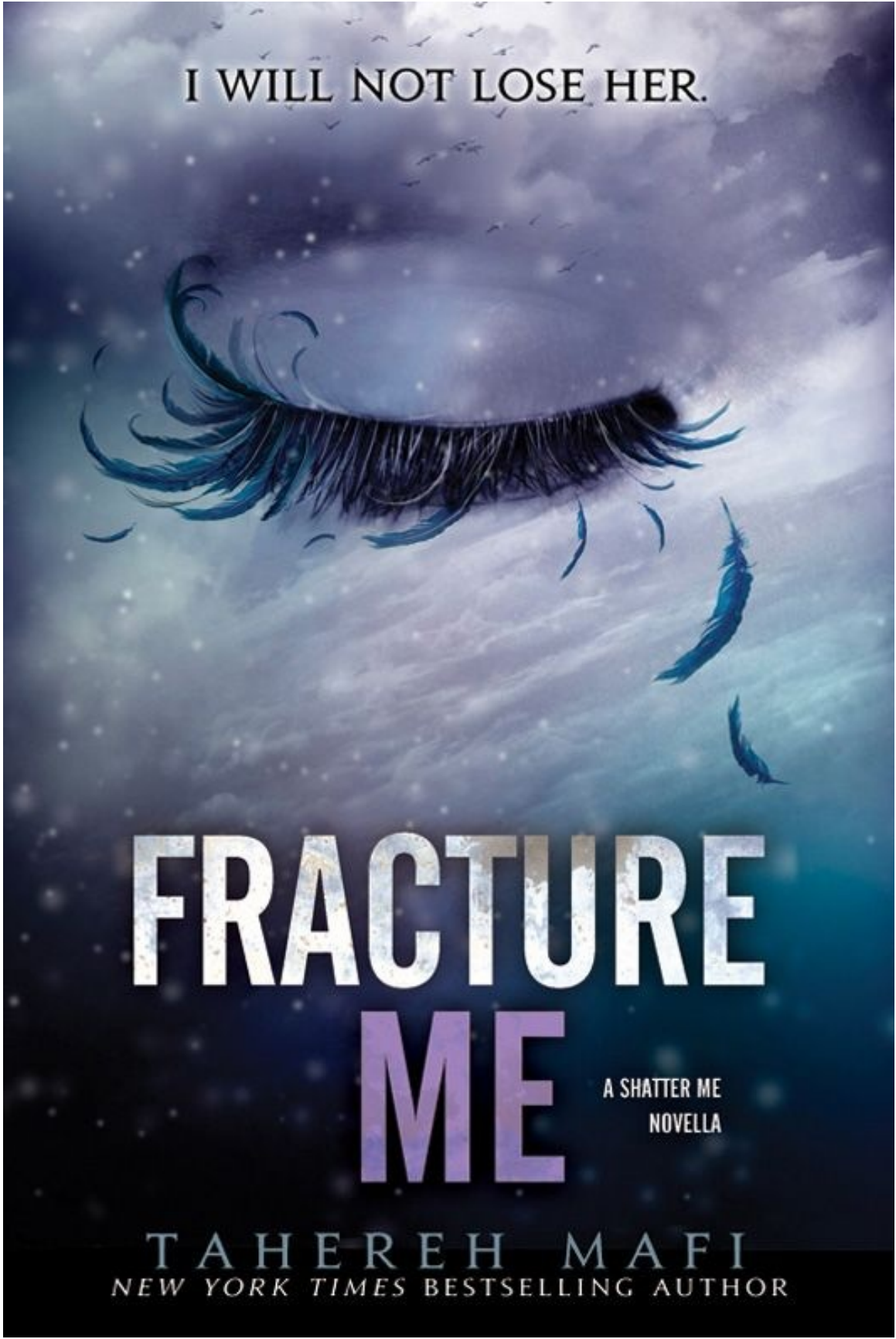
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ONE

“Addie? Addie, wake up. *Addie*—”

I roll over with a groan and stretch, rubbing both eyes with the heel of my hand. It’s too early for this shit.

“Addie—”

Still half asleep, I grab James by the collar and yank him down, shoving his head under the blanket. He shouts and I laugh, wrapping him up in the sheets until he can’t get out.

“Stoooooop iiiiiiit,” he whines, little fists pounding against the sheets. “Addie, let me out—”

“Hey—how many times have I told you to stop calling me that?”

James tries to punch me through the blanket. I pick him up and flip him over in my arms and he screams, his legs kicking wildly.

“You’re so mean,” he cries, wriggling around in my grip. “If Kenji were here, he would never let y—”

At that, I freeze, and James can feel it. He goes quiet in my arms, and I let him go. He untangles himself from my sheets, and we stare at each other.

James blinks. His bottom lip trembles and he bites down on it. “Do you know if he’s okay?”

I shake my head.

Kenji is still in the medical wing. No one knows for sure what happened yet, but people have been talking. Whispering.

I look toward the wall. James is still speaking, but I’m too distracted to pay attention.

It’s hard for me to believe Juliette could hurt anyone like that.

“Everyone says he’s gone,” James is saying now.

This, I catch.

“What?” I turn back, alarmed. “How?”

James shrugs. “I don’t know. They said he broke out of his room.”

“What are you talking about? How could he break out of his room—?”

James shrugs again. “I don’t think he wanted to be here anymore.”

“But—what?” I screw up my face, confused. “Does that mean he’s feeling

better? Did someone tell you he was feeling better?"

James frowns. "Did you want him to feel better? I thought you didn't like him."

I sigh. Run a hand through the back of my hair. "Of course I like him. I know we don't always get along, but it's really close quarters in here, and he's always got so many damn opinions—"

James shoots me a strange look. "So . . . you don't want to kill him? You're always saying you want to kill him."

"I'm not serious when I say stuff like that." I try not to roll my eyes. "He and I have been friends for a long time. I'm actually worried about him."

"Okay," James says carefully. "You're weird, Addie."

I can't help but laugh a little. "Why am I weird? And hey, stop calling me Addie—you know how much I hate that—"

"Yeah, and I still don't know why." He cuts me off. "Mom always used to call you Addie—"

"Well Mom's dead, isn't she?" My voice has gone hard. My hands are clenched. And when I see the look on James's face, I'm instantly sorry for being so harsh. I release my fists. Take a deep breath.

James swallows hard. "Sorry," he says quietly.

I nod, look away. "Yeah. Me too." I pull a shirt on over my head. "So Kenji's gone then, huh? I can't believe he'd just leave like that."

"Why would Kenji be gone?" James asks. "I thought you said you didn't even know if he w—"

"But I thought *you* said—"

We stop. Stare at each other.

James is the first to speak. "I said *Warner* is gone. Everyone is saying he escaped last night."

Just the sound of his name and I'm already pissed off. "Stay here," I say, pointing at James and grabbing my boots.

"But—"

"Don't move until I get back!" I shout before bolting out the door.

That bastard. I can't believe this.

I'm pounding on Castle's door when Ian spots me on his way down the hall.

"He's not in there," Ian says, still walking.

I catch his arm. "Is it true? Did Warner really get out?"

Ian sighs. Shoves his hands into his pockets. Finally, he nods.

I want to put my fist through the wall.

"I gotta go suit up," Ian says, breaking away. "And you should, too. We're heading out after breakfast."

"Are you serious?" I say. "We're still heading out to fight—even with all this shit going on?"

"Of course we are," Ian snaps at me. "You know we can't wait any longer. The supreme isn't going to reschedule his plans to launch an attack on the civilians. It's too late to back out now."

"But what about Warner?" I demand. "We're not going to try and find him?"

"Maybe." Ian shrugs. "See if you can find him on the battlefield."

"Jesus." I'm so filled with rage I can hardly see straight. "I could kill Castle for letting this happen—for being so goddamn soft with him—"

"Rein it in, man." Ian cuts me off. "We've got other problems. And hey"—he grabs my shoulder, looks me in the eye—"you're not the only one who's pissed at Castle. But now's not the time."

I shake him off, shoot him a dark look, and charge back down the hall.

James has all sorts of questions when I get back, but I'm still so angry I'm not ready to deal with him. It doesn't seem to matter; James is stubborn as hell. I'm strapping on holsters and locking my weapons into place and he won't back down.

"But then what did he say?" James is asking. "After you said we should find Warner?"

I adjust my pants, tighten the laces on my boots.

James taps my arm. "Adam." He taps my arm again. "Did he know where Castle was?" Another tap. "Did he say what time you guys had to leave today?" More tapping. "Adam when are y—"

I pick him up and he squeaks; I place him in a far corner of the room.

"*Addie—*"

I throw a blanket over his head.

James shouts and struggles with the blanket until he manages to pull it off and throw it down. He's red in the face and his fists are clenched and he's finally mad.

I start laughing. I can't help it.

James is so frustrated he has to spit the words out when he speaks. "Kenji said that I have as much right to know what's happening down here as everyone else. Kenji never gets mad when I ask questions. He never ignores me. He's

never mean to me, and you're being m-mean to me, and I don't like it when you l-laugh at me—"

James's voice breaks, and it's only then that I look up. I notice the tears streaked across his cheeks.

"Hey," I say, meeting him across the room. "Hey, hey." I grip his shoulders, drop to one knee. "What's going on? Why the tears? What happened?"

"You're leaving." James hiccups.

"Aw, c'mon," I sigh. "You knew I was leaving, remember? Remember when we talked about this?"

"You're going to die." Another hiccup.

I raise an eyebrow at him. "I didn't know you could tell the future."

"Addie—"

"Hey—"

"I don't call you Addie in front of anyone else!" James says, protesting before I have a chance to. "I don't know why it makes you so mad. You said you loved it when Mom called you Addie. Why can't I?"

I sigh again as I get to my feet, mussing his hair on my way up. James makes a strangled sound and jerks away. "What's the problem?" I ask. I pull up my pants leg to attach a semiautomatic to the holster underneath. "I've been a soldier for a long time now. You've always known the risks. What's different all of a sudden?"

James is quiet long enough for me to notice. I look up.

"I want to come with you," he says, wiping his nose with a shaky hand. "I want to fight, too."

My body goes rigid. "We're not having that conversation again."

"But Kenji said—"

"I don't give a rat's ass what Kenji said! You are a ten-year-old *child*," I say. "You are not fighting in any war. Not walking onto any battlefield. Do you understand me?"

James stares at me.

"I said, *Do you understand me?*" I walk right up to him, grab his arms.

James flinches a little. "Yes," he whispers.

"Yes, *what?*"

"Yes, sir," he says, staring at the ground now.

I'm breathing so hard my chest is heaving. "Never again," I say quietly now. "We are never having this conversation. Not ever again."

"Okay, Addie."

I swallow hard.

“I’m sorry, Addie.”

“Get your shoes on.” I stare at the wall. “It’s time for breakfast.”

TWO

“Hi.”

Juliette is standing next to my table, staring at me like she might be nervous. Like we’ve never done this before.

“Hey,” I say.

Just seeing her face still makes my chest ache, but the truth is, I have no idea what’s going on between us anymore. I promised her I would find a way through this—and I’ve been training like hell, I really have—but after last night, I’m not gonna lie: I’m a little freaked out. Touching her is more serious than I ever thought it was.

She could’ve killed Kenji. I’m still not sure she hasn’t.

But even after all this, I still want a future with her. I want to know that one day we’ll be able to settle somewhere safe and be together in peace. I’m not ready to give up on that dream yet. I’m not ready to give up on us.

I nod at an empty seat. “You want to sit down?”

She does.

We sit in silence a little while, her poking at her food, me at mine. We usually eat the same thing every morning: a spoonful of rice, a bowl of vegetable broth, a chunk of rock-hard bread, and, on good days, a little cup of pudding. It’s not amazing, but it gets the job done, and we’re usually grateful for it. But today neither one of us seems to have an appetite.

Or a voice.

I sigh and look away. I don’t know why it’s so hard to talk to her this morning—maybe it’s the lack of Kenji—but things feel different between us lately. I want to be with her so badly, but being with her has never felt more dangerous than it does now. Every day we feel further apart. And sometimes I think the harder I try to hold on, the more she tries to break away.

I wish James would hurry up and grab his breakfast. Having him here might make this easier. I sit up and look around the room, only to spot him talking with a group of his friends. I try to wave him over, but he’s laughing at something and doesn’t even notice me. The kid is kind of amazing. He’s such a social guy—and so popular around here—that sometimes I wonder where he got it from. In many

ways he's the exact opposite of me. He likes to let a lot of people in; I like to keep most people out.

Juliette's the only real exception to that rule.

I look back at her and notice the red rims around her eyes as they dart across the dining hall. She looks both wide awake and crazy tired and she can't seem to sit still; her foot is tapping fast under the table and her hands are trembling a little.

"Hey are you okay?" I ask.

"Yes, absolutely," she says too quickly. But she's shaking her head.

"Did you, um, get enough sleep last night?"

"Yes," she says, repeating the word a few times. She does that occasionally—repeats the same word over and over again. I'm not sure she's even aware of it.

"Did you sleep well?" she asks. Her fingers drum against the table, then against her arms. She keeps glancing around the room. She doesn't even wait for me to respond before she says, "Have you heard anything about Kenji yet?"

That's when I understand.

Of course she's not okay. Of course she didn't get any sleep last night. Last night she almost killed one of her closest friends. She'd just started trusting herself and not being afraid of herself; now she's back to where she started. Shit. I'm already sorry I even brought it up.

"No, not yet." I cringe. "But," I say, hoping to change the subject, "I have heard that people are pretty pissed at Castle about what happened with Warner." I clear my throat. "Did you hear about him breaking out of here?"

Juliette drops her spoon.

It clatters to the floor and she doesn't seem to notice. "Yes," she says quietly. She's blinking at her water cup, holding her napkin in her hands, folding and refolding it. "People were talking about it in the halls. Do they know how he escaped?"

"I don't think so." I frown at her.

"Oh." She says that a few times, too.

She sounds strange. Scared, even. Juliette has always been a little different from everyone else—she was like a crazed, skittish kitten when I first saw her in that cell—but she'd been getting a lot better over the last few months. Once she finally started trusting me, things changed. She evolved. She started talking (and eating) more and even got a little cocky. I loved seeing her come back to life. I loved being with her, watching her find herself.

I think this experience with Kenji really set her back.

I can tell she's only halfway here, because her eyes are unfocused and her hands are moving mechanically. She does this a lot. It's like sometimes she just disappears, retreats into a corner of her brain and stays there awhile, thinking about something she'll never talk about. She's acting a lot like her old self right now, and right now she's eating the cold rice on her plate one grain at a time, counting each bite under her breath.

I'm about to try speaking to her again when James finally comes back to the table. I stand up immediately, grateful for the opportunity to shake off the awkward. "Hey buddy—why don't we go have a proper good-bye?"

"Oh," James says, sliding his tray onto the table. "Okay, sure." He glances at me before glancing at Juliette, who's now chewing a grain of rice very carefully.

"Hi," he says to her.

Juliette blinks a few times, her face breaking into a wide smile the moment she notices him. It changes her, those smiles. And those are the moments that kill me a little.

"Hi," she says, so happy so suddenly you'd think James had hung the moon for her. "How are you? Did you sleep well? Would you like to sit down? I was just having some rice; would you like some rice?"

James is already blushing. He'd probably eat his own hair if she asked him to. I roll my eyes and drag him away, telling Juliette we'll be right back.

She nods. I look over my shoulder as we walk away and notice that she doesn't seem to mind sitting alone for a little while. She stabs at something on her plate and misses, and that's the last I see of her before we turn the corner.

THREE

“What’s going on? Why do we need to talk?” More questions from James. He’s a freaking question machine. “Is everything okay? Can you tell Juliette not to eat my breakfast?” He cranes his neck to catch a glimpse of her, still sitting at the table. “Sometimes she eats my pudding.”

“Hey,” I say, grabbing hold of his shoulders. “Look at me.”

James turns to face me. “What’s wrong, Addie?” He searches my eyes. “You’re not really going to die, are you?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“Don’t say that,” he says quietly, dropping his gaze. “Don’t say that. It’s not nice to talk like that.”

“James.”

He looks up again, slowly this time.

I drop to my knees and pull him close, resting my forehead against his. I’m staring at the floor, and I know he is, too. I can hear our hearts racing in the silence.

“I love you,” I finally say to him. “You know that, right? You always come first. Everything I do is to take care of you. To protect you. To provide for you.”

James nods.

“It’s you first,” I say to him. “It’s always you first and everyone else second. And that’s never going to change. Okay?”

James nods again. A tear falls on the floor between us. “Okay, Addie.”

“Come here,” I whisper, tugging him into my arms. “We’re going to be okay.”

James clings to me, acting more like a child than he has in a long time, and I’m happy to see it. Sometimes I worry he’s growing up way too fast in this shitty world, and though I know I can’t protect him from everything, I still try. He’s been the only constant in my life for as long as I can remember; I think it’d rip me apart if anything happened to him.

I’ll never love anyone the way I love this kid.

FOUR

After breakfast, the dining hall is practically empty. James had to report to the Safe Room with the other kids—and the elderly—staying behind, and everyone else is getting ready to head out. Some families are still saying final good-byes. Juliette and I have been avoiding eye contact for a few minutes now. She's staring at her hands, studying her fingers like she's checking to make sure they're still there.

"Well damn. Who died?"

Holy hell. That voice. That face.

Impossible.

"Holy crap. Holy *shit*." I'm on my feet.

"Good to see you too, Kent." Kenji smiles wide and nods at me. He looks like hell. Tired eyes, pale face, hands shaking just a little as he holds on to the table. And what's worse is that he's already suited up—like he actually thinks he's heading out onto the battlefield. "You ready to kick some ass today?"

I'm still staring at him in amazement, trying to find a way to respond, when Juliette jumps up and practically tackles him. Just a hug, really, but yikes.

A little too soon for that, I think.

"*Whoa*—hey—thank you, yeah—that's—uh—" Kenji clears his throat. He tries to be nice about it, but it's clear he's trying to back away from Juliette, and yeah, she notices. Her face falls and she goes pale, her eyes wide. She hides her hands behind her back, even though she's wearing her gloves. There's really no obvious threat to Kenji right now, but I understand his hesitation.

The dude almost died. He tried to break up a fight at the same time Juliette did, and *bam*, he went down in an instant. It was scary as hell—and even though I know Juliette didn't *mean* to do it, there's really no other explanation. It had to have been her.

"Yeah, um, maybe you should hold off on touching me for a little while, yeah?" Kenji is smiling—again, nice guy—but no one's buying it. "I'm not too steady on my feet just yet."

Juliette looks so mortified it breaks my heart. She's trying so hard to be okay—to make all this shit be okay—but sometimes it's like the world just won't let

her. The hits keep coming, and she keeps hurting. I hate it.

I have to say something.

"It wasn't her," I say to Kenji. I shoot him a sharp look. *Leave her alone*, I mouth. "You know she didn't even touch you."

"I *don't* know that, actually," Kenji says, ignoring my more subtle hints to change the subject. "And it's not like I'm blaming her—I'm just saying maybe she's projecting and doesn't know it, okay? Because last I checked, I don't think we have any other explanations for what happened last night. It sure as hell wasn't you," he says to me, "and shit, for all we know, Warner being able to touch Juliette could just be a fluke. We don't know anything about him yet." A pause. "Right? Unless Warner pulled some kind of magical rabbit out of his ass while I was busy being dead last night?"

I frown. Look away.

"Right," Kenji says. "That's what I thought. So. I think it's best if, unless absolutely necessary, I stay away." He turns to Juliette. "Right? No offense, right? I mean I did nearly just die. I think you could cut me some slack."

"Yeah, of course," Juliette says quietly. She tries to laugh but it comes out all wrong. I wish I could reach for her; I wish I could wrap her up in my arms. I want to protect her—I want to be able to take care of her, but that seems impossible now.

"So *anyway*," Kenji says. "When are we leaving?"

That gets my attention.

"You're insane," I say to him. "You're not going anywhere."

"Bullshit I'm not."

"You can barely stand up on your own!"

"I'd rather die out there than sit in here like some kind of idiot."

"Kenji—," Juliette tries to say.

"Heeeeeeey, so I heard through the very loud grapevine that Warner got his ass the hell out of here last night." Kenji looks at us. "What's that about?"

"Yeah," I say, my mood darkening. "Who even knows. I never thought it was a good idea to keep him hostage here. It was an even stupider idea to trust him."

Kenji raises an eyebrow. "So first you insult my idea, and then you insult Castle's, huh?"

"They were bad calls," I say to him, refusing to back down. "Bad ideas. Now we have to pay for it." It was Kenji's idea to take Warner hostage, and Castle's idea to let him out of his room. And now we're all suffering. Sometimes I think

this whole movement is led by a bunch of idiots.

“Well how was I supposed to know Anderson would be so willing to let his own son rot in hell?”

I wince involuntarily.

The reminder of my father and what he’d be willing to do to his own son is too much for me this morning. I swallow back the bile inching up my throat.

Kenji notices. “Oh, hey—I’m sorry man—I didn’t mean to say it like that—”

“Forget it,” I say to him. I’m glad Kenji’s not dead, but sometimes all I really want to do is kick his ass. “Maybe you should get back to the medical wing. We’re leaving soon.”

“I’m not going anywhere but *out of here*.”

“Kenji please—” Juliette again.

“Nope.”

“You’re being unreasonable. This isn’t a joke,” she says to him. “People are going to die today.”

Kenji laughs at her. “I’m sorry, are you trying to teach *me* about the realities of war?” He shakes his head. “Are you forgetting that I was a soldier in Warner’s army? Do you have any idea how much crazy shit we’ve seen?” He gestures to me. “I know exactly what to expect today. Warner was *insane*. If Anderson is even twice as bad as his son, then we are diving right into a bloodbath. I can’t leave you guys hanging like that.”

Juliette is frozen, her lips just parted, her eyes wide and horrified. Her reaction feels a little exaggerated.

There’s definitely something wrong with her today.

I know part of what she’s feeling has to do with Kenji, but suddenly I’m not sure if there isn’t something else. Something she’s not telling me.

I can’t read her clearly.

Then again, I feel like I haven’t been able to read her clearly for a while now.

“Was he really that bad . . . ?” Juliette asks.

“Who?” Kenji and I ask at the same time.

“Warner,” she says. “Was he really that ruthless?”

God, she’s so obsessed with him. She has some weird fascination with his twisted life that I don’t understand, and it makes me crazy. I can already feel myself getting angry, annoyed—*jealous*, even—which is ridiculous. Warner isn’t even human; I shouldn’t be comparing myself to him. Besides, she’s not his type at all. He’d probably eat her alive.

Kenji, however, doesn’t seem to have my problem. He’s laughing so hard

he's practically wheezing. "Ruthless? Juliette, the guy is sick. He's an animal. I don't think he even knows what it means to be human. If there's a hell out there, I'm guessing it was designed especially for him."

I catch a glimpse of Juliette's face just before I hear a rush of footsteps charging down the hall. We all glance at one another, but I look at Juliette for a second longer, wishing I could read her mind. I have no idea what she's thinking or why she still looks so horrified. I want to talk to her in private—find out what's going on—but then Kenji nods at me, and I know I have to clear my head.

It's time to go.

We all get to our feet.

"Hey—so, does Castle know what you're doing?" I ask Kenji. "I don't think he'd be okay with you going out there today."

"Castle wants me to be happy," Kenji says. "And I won't be happy if I stay here. I've got work to do. People to save. Ladies to impress. He'd respect that."

"What about everyone else?" Juliette asks him. "Everyone was so worried about you—have you even seen them yet? To at least tell them you're okay?"

"Nah," Kenji says. "They'd probably shit a brick if they knew I was going up. I thought it'd be safer to keep it quiet. I don't want to freak anyone out. And Sonya and Sara—poor kids—they're passed the hell out. It's my fault they're so exhausted, and they're still talking about heading out today. They want to fight even though they're going to have a lot of work to do once we're done with Anderson's army. I've been trying to convince them to stay here, but they can be so damn stubborn. They need to save their strength," he says, "and they've already wasted too much of it on me."

"It's not a *waste*—," she says.

"Anywaaay," Kenji says. "Can we please get going? I know you're all about hunting down Anderson," he says to me, "but personally? I would love to catch Warner. Put a bullet through that worthless piece of crap and be done with it."

I'm about to laugh—finally, someone who agrees with me—when I see Juliette double over. She steadies herself quickly enough, but she's blinking fast and breathing hard, eyes up at the ceiling.

"Hey—you okay?" I pull her to the side and study her face. She scares the shit out of me sometimes. I worry about her almost as much as I do about James.

"I'm okay," she says too many times. Nodding and shaking her head over and over again. "I just didn't get enough sleep last night, but I'll be fine."

I hesitate. "Are you sure?"

“I’m positive,” she says. And then she grabs my shirt, eyes wild. “Hey—just be careful out there, okay?”

I nod, more confused by the second. “Yeah. You too.”

“Let’s go let’s go let’s go!” Kenji interrupts us. “Today is our day to die, ladies.”

I relax and shove him a little. It’s nice to have him around to break up the monotony in this place.

Kenji punches me in the arm. “So now you’re abusing the crippled kid, huh?”

I laugh, flip him off.

“Save your angst for the battlefield, bro.” He grins. “You’re going to need it.”

FIVE

It's raining like hell.

It's cold and wet and muddy and shitty and I hate this. I scowl at Kenji and Juliette, jealous of their fancy suits. Those things are built to give them protection from this crazy winter weather. I should've asked for one.

I'm already freezing my ass off.

We're at the clearing, the barren stretch at the entrance of Omega Point, and most everyone else has scattered. Our only defense is guerrilla warfare, so we've been divided into groups. Me; an ill, barely-able-to-walk-straight Kenji; and Juliette (who's officially locked herself in her own head today)—*this* is our team.

Yeah, I'm definitely worried.

Anyway, at least Kenji is doing his thing: we're already invisible. But now it's time to find the action and join in. The sound of gunshots rings out loud and clear, so we've already got a direction to move in. No one speaks, but we already know the rules: we fight to protect the innocent, and we fight to survive. That's it.

The rain is really messing things up, though. It's falling harder and faster now, pelting me in the face and blurring my vision. I can hardly see straight. I try to wipe the water from my eyes but it's no use. There's too much.

I do know we're getting closer to the compounds, so at least there's that. The outline of the buildings comes into focus and I feel myself getting excited. I'm armed to the teeth and ready to fight—ready to do whatever is necessary to take down The Reestablishment—but I'm not gonna lie: I'm still a little worried we've got a handicap.

Juliette has never done this before.

If it were up to me, she'd be back on base with James where I know she'd be safe, but she wouldn't listen to me even if I asked her to. Kenji and Castle are always blowing smoke up her ass when they shouldn't, and honestly? It's dangerous. It's not good to make her think she can do this kind of thing when really, it'll probably get her killed. She's not a soldier; she doesn't know how to fight; and she has no idea how to use her powers, not really, which makes things

even worse. It's basically like giving a toddler a stick of dynamite and telling him to walk into a fire.

So yeah, I'm worried. I'm really worried something is going to happen to her. And maybe to us, by extension.

But no one ever listens to me, so here we are.

I sigh and forge ahead, irritated, until I hear a piercing scream in the distance. High alert. Kenji squeezes my hand and I squeeze back to let him know I understand.

The compounds are straight ahead, and Kenji pulls us forward until we're standing flush against the back wall of a unit. There's just enough overhang from the roof to keep the rain off. It's just my shitty luck that we're doing this on a rainy day. My clothes are so wet I feel like I've pissed my pants.

Kenji elbows me, just a little, and I'm paying attention again. I hear the sound of a door slam open and I go rigid; I reach for my gun automatically. It feels like I've been through this a million times before, but it's never something I get used to.

"This is the last of them," a voice shouts. "She was hiding out over here."

A soldier is dragging a woman out of her home and she won't stop screaming. My heart speeds up, and I grip my gun more tightly. It's sick, the way some of the soldiers treat the civilians. I get that he's under orders—I really do—but the poor woman is begging for mercy and he's dragging her by the hair and shouting at her to shut up.

Kenji is barely breathing next to me. I glance Juliette's way before I realize we're still invisible, and as I turn my head, I catch a glimpse of another soldier. He jogs over from across the field and shoots the first guy a signal. Not the kind of signal I was hoping for.

Shit.

"Toss her in with everyone else," the other soldier is saying now. "And then we'll call this area clear." Suddenly he's gone, around the corner, and no one's left but us, one soldier, and the lady he's holding hostage. Other soldiers must've rounded up the remaining civilians before we got here.

Then the woman loses it. She's completely hysterical and doesn't seem to be in control of her body anymore. She's gone totally animal, screeching and clawing and flailing, tripping over her own feet. She's asking after her husband and her daughter and I almost have to close my eyes. It's hard to watch this stuff when I already know what's going to happen. War never gets easier when you don't agree with what's going on. Sometimes I let myself get excited about

going to battle—I have to convince myself I’m doing something worthwhile—but fighting another soldier is way easier than dealing with some lady who’s about to watch her daughter get shot in the head.

Juliette will probably puke.

The action is so close to us now that I instinctively press my back into the wall, forgetting again that we’re invisible. The soldier grabs the lady and slams her body against the outside of the unit, and I feel the three of us collectively freak out for a second, calming down just in time to watch the soldier press the barrel of his gun to the lady’s neck and say, “If you don’t shut up I’ll shoot you right now.” What an asshole.

The lady faints.

The soldier doesn’t seem to care. He pulls her out of sight—in the same direction his comrade went—and that’s our cue to follow. I can hear Kenji cursing under his breath. He’s got a soft stomach, that guy. He was always soft when it came to this stuff. I met him for the first time on one of our rounds; when we came back, Kenji lost his shit. Just completely lost it. They put him in solitary confinement for a little while, and after that he kept his emotional breakdowns to a minimum. Most soldiers know better than to complain out loud. I should’ve known then that Kenji wasn’t really one of us.

I shudder against the cold.

We’re still following the soldier, but it’s hard to stay too close to him in this weather. Visibility is shot, and the wind is blowing the rain around so hard it’s almost like we’re trapped in a hurricane. This is going to get ugly really quickly.

Then, a small voice: “What do you think is going on?”

Juliette.

Of course she has no idea what’s happening—why would she?

The smart thing to do would be to hide her somewhere. Keep her safe. Out of danger. A weak link can bring everything down with it, and I don’t think this is the time to be taking chances. But Kenji, as usual, doesn’t seem to agree. Apparently he doesn’t mind making time to give Juliette a tutorial on being at war in Sector 45.

“They’re herding them up,” Kenji explains. “They’re creating groups of people to kill all at once.”

“The woman—,” Juliette says.

“Yeah.” Kenji cuts her off. “Yeah,” Kenji says again. “She and whoever else they think might be connected to the protests,” he says. “They don’t just kill the inciters. They kill the friends and the family members, too. It’s the best way to

keep people in line. It never fails to scare the shit out of the few left alive.”

I have to jump in before Juliette asks any more questions. Those soldiers aren’t going to wait patiently for us to get there—we have to make a move now, and we need a plan. “There has to be a way to get them out of there,” I say. “Maybe we can take out the soldiers in charge—”

“Yeah but listen, you guys know I’m going to have to let go of you, right?” Kenji asks. “I’m already kind of losing strength; my energy is fading faster than normal. So you’ll be visible. You’ll be a clearer target.”

“But what other choice do we have?” Juliette asks.

She’s like the second coming of James. I feel for my gun, flexing and unflexing my fingers around it. We need to get going.

We need to move *now*.

“We could try to take them out sniper-style,” Kenji says. “We don’t have to engage in direct combat. We have that option.” He pauses. “Juliette, you’ve never been in this kind of situation before. I want you to know I’d respect your decision to stay out of the direct line of fire. Not everyone can stomach what we might see if we follow those soldiers. There’s no shame or blame in that.”

Yes. Good. Let her stay behind where she won’t get hurt.

“I’ll be okay,” she says.

I swear under my breath.

“Just—all right—but don’t be afraid to use your abilities to defend yourself,” Kenji says. He seems a little nervous about her, too. “I know you’re all weird about not wanting to hurt people or whatever, but these guys aren’t messing around. They *will* try to kill you.”

“Right,” Juliette says. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

SIX

Juliette shouldn't have to see this.

Six soldiers have rounded up almost thirty civilians—a mix of men, women, and children—and they're going to kill them. It's basically a firing squad. They'll just go down the row, *pop pop pop*, and then drag the dead bodies away. Put them into an incinerator. Clean it up, nice and simple.

It's disgusting.

I'm not sure what the soldiers are waiting for, though. Maybe they need final approval from somewhere, but there's a slight delay as they talk amongst themselves. It's raining really freaking hard, so that might have something to do with it. Honestly, they might not even be able to see where they're shooting. We should be taking advantage of this opportunity. This weather might end up helping us out in the end.

I squint against the rain and take a closer look at the people, trying hard not to lose my head. They're not doing too well, and I'm not either, to be honest. Some are pretty hysterical, and it makes me wonder how I would do in a situation like that. Maybe I'd be like that guy in the middle, standing there with absolutely no expression on his face. He looks almost like he's accepted what's going to happen, and somehow, his certainty hits me even harder than the tears.

A shot rings out.

Dammit.

A guy on the far left falls to the ground and I'm shaking with anger. These people need our help. We can't just hang back and watch thirty unarmed, innocent people get killed when we could find a way to save them. We're supposed to be *doing something*, but we're standing here for some bullshit reason I can't understand because Juliette is scared or Kenji is sick and I guess the truth is we're just a bunch of crappy teenagers, two of whom can barely stand up straight or fire a weapon, and it's unacceptable. I'm just about to say something—I'm about to yell something, actually—when Kenji lets go of my hand.

About goddamn time.

We charge straight ahead and my gun is already up and aimed. I spot the

soldier who fired the first shot and I know I need to fire; there's no room for hesitation. I get lucky: he goes down instantly. Five more soldiers to take out—soldiers I'm hoping I won't recognize—and I'm doing my best, but it's not easy. It was pure luck that got me that first target; it's almost impossible to shoot well in this weather. I can barely see where I'm going, much less where I'm shooting, but I drop to the ground just in time to avoid a stray bullet. At least the rain is making it hard for them to take us out, too.

Kenji is making miracles happen today.

He's invisible now, and working fast. He's staying sharp despite being injured, and he's just a part of the wind, taking out three soldiers in one go. Two soldiers are left and they're distracted by Kenji's dance just long enough for me to take one down. One more left and I'm about to take him out, too, when I see Juliette shoot him from behind.

Not bad.

Kenji reappears just then and he starts bellowing for the civilians to follow us back to shelter, and Juliette and I join in, doing what we can to get them to safety as quickly as possible. There are a few compounds still standing, and they should be enough. The civilians can get inside and away from the battle—as well as the storm brewing in the sky. And even though their gratitude is touching, we can't stop long enough to talk to them. We have to settle them back into their homes, and then keep moving.

It's what I've always done.

Always keep moving.

I glance at Juliette as we run, wondering how she's holding up, and for a second I'm confused; I can't tell if she's crying or if it's just the rain streaking down her cheeks. I'm hoping she'll be okay, though. It kills me to see her deal with this. I wish she didn't have to.

We're running again, charging through the compounds now that we've gotten the civilians back into their homes. This was just a stop on the way to our final destination; we haven't even reached the battlefield yet, where Point men and women are already trying to keep Reestablishment soldiers from slaughtering innocent civilians. Things are about to get much, much worse.

Kenji is pulling us through the half-demolished landscape. I know we're getting closer to the action now because there's so much more devastation here: units falling apart and half on fire, their contents strewn everywhere. Ripped couches and broken lamps, clothes and shoes and fallen bodies to step over. The compounds feel like they could stretch on forever, and the farther we go, the

uglier it gets.

“We’re close!” I shout to Kenji.

He nods, and I’m surprised he even heard me.

I hear a familiar sound. “Thanks!” I call out to him. “You hear that?”

Kenji shoots me a bleak look and nods. “Let’s move!” he says, making a motion with his hand. “We’re not far now!”

It’s a fight to get to the fight, the wind whistling hard in our ears and slapping sharply against our faces, angry raindrops pelting our skin, soaking our hair. I’m frozen to the bone but there’s no time to be bothered by it. I’ve got adrenaline, and that’ll have to be enough for now.

The earth shakes under our feet as a harsh, booming sound explodes in the sky. In an instant the horizon is lit on fire, flames roaring in the distance. Someone is dropping bombs, and that means we’re already screwed. My heart is beating fast and hard, and I’d never admit it out loud, but I’m starting to get nervous.

I glance at Juliette again. I know she’s probably scared, and I want to reassure her—to tell her everything is going to be okay—but she doesn’t look my way. She’s in another world, her eyes cold and sharp, focused on the fire in the distance. She looks different—a little scary, even. Somehow, that worries me even more.

I’m paying such close attention to her that I almost trip; the ground is slick underfoot and I’m up to my ankles in mud. I pull my legs free as we forge ahead, gun steady in my hands, and focus. This is it. This is where it’s all about to get very serious, and I know enough about war to be honest with myself: I might walk onto that battlefield with a beating heart and be dragged off with a dead one.

I take a deep breath as we approach, three invisible kids walking through the compounds. We make our way over fallen units, broken glass from shattered windows; we sidestep the garbage strewn about and try not to hear the sound of people screaming. And I don’t know about the rest of us, but I’m doing my best to fight the urge to turn around and run back to where we started.

Suddenly James is the only person on my mind.

SEVEN

Shit.

This is even worse than I was expecting. There are fallen bodies everywhere, collapsed and piled together and bleeding into one another. It's almost impossible to distinguish arms from legs, enemies from allies. Blood and rain are mixing together and flooding the ground, and suddenly my boots are slick with mud and the blood of someone else—dead or alive, I don't know.

It takes just a split second for enemy combatants to realize we're new to the battlefield; when they do, they don't hesitate. We're already under siege, and I glance back just in time to catch a glimpse of Juliette and Kenji still making their way forward before I feel something sharp slam into my back. I spin around, and one sharp crack later my soldier's got a broken jaw. He doubles over and reaches for his gun and I beat him to it. Now he's down and out, and I'm already moving on to the next one.

We're all so jam-packed together that hand-to-hand combat seems unavoidable; I duck to avoid a right hook and punch the opposing soldier in the gut on my way up, grabbing a knife from my belt to follow through. In, up, twist, and he's done. I yank my knife out of his chest as he falls. Someone charges at me from behind and I turn to meet him when suddenly he's coughing up blood and falling to his knees.

Kenji saved my ass.

He's on the move and moving well, still not letting his injury cripple him. We're fighting together, he and I, and I can feel his movements beside me. We shout warnings to each other, helping each other when we can, and we're actually doing okay, making our way through the madness, when I hear Kenji shouting my name, his voice scared and urgent.

Suddenly I'm invisible and Kenji is screaming at me about Juliette and I don't know what's happening but I'm freaking out and I know now's not the time to ask questions. We fight our way back to the front and jet toward the road, Kenji's panicked voice telling me he saw Juliette go down and get dragged away, and that's all I need to hear. I'm one part furious and one part terrified, and the two are having a battle of their own in my mind.

I knew this would happen.

I knew she never should've come with us. I knew she should've stayed behind. She's not built for this—she's not strong enough to be on the battlefield. She would've been so much safer if she'd stayed behind. *Why does no one ever listen to me?*

Dammit.

I want to scream.

When we reach the road, Kenji pulls me back, and though we're out of breath and barely able to speak, we catch a glimpse of Juliette as she's loaded into the back of a tank, her body limp and heavy as they drag her inside.

It's over in a matter of seconds. They're already driving away.

Juliette is gone.

My chest cracks open.

Kenji has a firm hand on my shoulder and I realize I'm saying "Oh God, oh God" over and over again when Kenji has the decency to shake some sense into me.

"Get your shit together," he says. "We need to go after her!"

My legs are unsteady, but I know he's right. "Where do you think they went?"

"They're probably carting her back to base—"

"Dammit. Of course! Warner—"

"Wants her back." Kenji nods. "That was probably his team he sent to collect her." He swears under his breath. "Only good thing about that is we know he doesn't want her dead."

I grit my teeth to keep from losing my mind. "All right then; let's go."

God, I can't wait to get my hands on that psychopath. I'm going to enjoy killing him. Slowly. Carefully. Cutting him to pieces one finger at a time.

But Kenji hesitates, and I stare at him.

"What?" I ask.

"I can't project, bro. My energy is shot." He sighs. "I'm sorry. My body is seriously jacked up right now."

Shit. "Contingency plan?"

"We can avoid the main roads," he says. "Take the back route and head to base on our own. It'd be easier to track the tank, but if we do, you'll be in plain sight. It's your call."

I frown. "Yeah, I vote for the plan that doesn't get me killed instantly."

Kenji grins. "Okay then. Let's go get our girl back."

“My girl,” I correct him. “She’s my girl.”

Kenji snorts as we head in the direction of the compounds. “Right. Minus the part where she’s not actually your girl. Not anymore.”

“Shut up.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Whatever.”

EIGHT

It takes us a while to get back to base, because we have to be hyperaware of my visibility. We're slower, more cautious, and careful to take our time hiding inside and around abandoned units every hundred yards or so, just to make sure the coast is clear around every corner. But when we're finally approaching base, shit kicks into high gear.

We weren't the only ones taking the back route.

Castle, Ian, Alia, and Lily flipped out when they saw us; they were hiding inside a unit we thought for sure was empty. They jumped out at us from behind a bed, which made me nearly piss my pants. We only had a moment to explain what had happened before Castle was sharing his own story.

They got Brendan and Winston back—broke them out of Sector 45 just as they'd originally planned—but the two of them were in bad shape when Castle found them.

"We think they'll be okay," Castle is saying, "but we have to get them to the girls as soon as possible. I'm hoping they'll be able to help."

"The girls are on the battlefield," Kenji says, eyes wide. "I have no idea where. They insisted on fighting today."

Castle's face falls, and though he doesn't say it out loud, it's clear he's suddenly very worried.

"Where are they now?" I ask. "Brendan and Winston?"

"Hiding," Castle says.

"What?" Kenji looks around. "Why? Why aren't you taking them back to Point?"

Castle goes pale.

It's Lily who speaks. "We heard whispers while we were on base breaking them out," she says. "Whispers of what the soldiers are going to do next."

"They're mobilizing for an air assault," Ian cuts in. "We just heard they're going to bomb Omega Point. We were still trying to figure out what we should do when we heard someone coming, and jumped in here"—he nods around the unit—"to hide."

"What?" Kenji panics. "But—how do you—"

“It’s definite,” Castle says. His eyes are deep and tortured. Terrified. “I heard the orders myself. They’re hoping that if they hit it with enough firepower, everything underground will just collapse in on itself.”

“But sir, no one knows the exact location of Omega Point, it’s not possible —”

“It is,” Alia says. I’ve never heard her speak before, and I’m surprised by the softness of her voice. “They tortured the information out of some of our own.”

“On the battlefield,” Ian says. “Just before killing them.”

Kenji looks like he might throw up. “We have to go right now,” he says, his voice high and sharp. “We have to get everyone out of there—all the ones we left behind—”

Only then does it hit me.

“James.”

I don’t recognize my own voice. The horror, the panic, the dread that floods my body is something I’ve never felt—never known before. Not like this. “We have to get James!” I’m shouting, and Kenji is trying to calm me down, but this time I can’t listen. I don’t care if I have to go alone; I’m getting my brother out of there. “Let’s go!” I bark at Kenji. “We have to get a tank and get back to base as soon as possible—”

“But what about Juliette?” Kenji asks. “Maybe we can split up—I can head back to Point with Castle and Alia; you can stay here with Ian and Lily—”

“No. I have to get James. I have to be there. I have to be the one to get him —”

“But Juliette—”

“You said yourself that Warner isn’t going to kill her—she’ll be okay there for a little while. But right now they’re going to blow up Omega Point, and James—and everyone else—is going to die. We have to go *now*—”

“Maybe I can stay here and look for Juliette, and you guys can go—”

“Juliette will be fine. She’s not in any immediate danger here—Warner isn’t going to hurt her—”

“But—”

“Kenji, *please!*” I’m desperate now and I don’t care. “We need as many people at Omega Point as possible. There are tons of people left behind, and they don’t stand a chance if we don’t get to them now.”

Kenji stares at me for just a moment longer before he nods. “You guys go grab Brendan and Winston,” he says to Castle and the three others. “Kent and I will commandeer a tank and meet you back here. We’ll do everything we can to

get back to Point as soon as possible.”

The second everyone is gone, I grab Kenji by the arm. “If anything happens to James—”

“We’re going to do everything we can, I promise—”

“That’s not good enough for me—I need to go get him—I need to go right now—”

“You *can’t* go right now,” Kenji snaps. “Save your stupid for later, Kent. Now, more than ever, you need to stay in control. If you go crazy and head back to Point on foot with no regard for your own safety, you’ll be dead before you even get there, and any chance of saving James will be lost. You want to keep your little brother alive? Make sure you don’t kill yourself while you’re trying to save him.”

I feel like my throat is closing up. “He can’t die,” I say, my voice breaking. “I can’t be the reason he dies, Kenji—I can’t. . . .”

Kenji blinks fast, forcing back his own emotion. “I know, man. But I can’t think like that right now. We have to keep moving. . . .”

Kenji is still talking, but I can hardly hear him.

James.

Oh God.

What have I done.

NINE

I have no idea how we all fit inside this tank. We're eight people jammed into cramped quarters, sitting on laps, and no one even cares. The tension is so thick it's practically its own person, taking up a seat we don't have to spare. I can barely think straight.

I'm trying to breathe, trying to stay calm, and I can't.

The planes are already overhead, and I feel sick in a way I don't know how to explain. It's deeper than my stomach. Bigger than my heart. More overwhelming than just my mind. It's like fear has become me; it wears my body like an old suit.

Fear is all I have left now.

I think we all feel it. Kenji is driving this tank, somehow still able to function in the face of all this, but no one else is moving. Not speaking. Not even breathing too loudly.

I feel so sick.

Oh God, oh God.

Drive faster, I want to say, but then, actually, I don't. I don't know if I want to hurry up or slow down. I don't know what will hurt more. I watched my own mother die, and, somehow, it didn't hurt as much as this.

I throw up then.

All over the floor mats.

The dead body of my ten-year-old brother.

I'm dry-heaving, wiping my mouth on my shirt.

Will it hurt when he dies? Will he feel it? Will he be killed instantly, or will he be impaled—injured, somehow—and die slowly? Will he bleed to death all alone? My ten-year-old brother?

I'm holding fast to the dashboard, trying to steady my heart, my breathing. It's impossible. The tears are falling fast now, my shoulders shaking, my body breaking. The planes get louder as they come closer. I can hear it now. We all can.

We're not even there yet.

We hear the bombs explode far off in the distance, and that's when I feel it:

the bones inside of me fracture, little earthquakes breaking me apart.

The tank stops.

There's no going forward anymore. There's no one and nothing to get to, and we all know it. The bombs keep falling and I hear the explosions echoing the sounds of my own sobs, loud and gasping in the silence. I have nothing left now.

Nothing left.

Nothing so precious as my own flesh and blood.

I've just dropped my head into my hands when a scream pierces the quiet.

"Kenji! Look!"

It's Alia, shrieking from the backseat as she throws the door open and jumps out. I follow her with my eyes and only then see what she saw, and it takes just seconds before I'm out the door and bolting past her, falling to my knees in front of the one person I never thought I'd see, not ever again.

TEN

I'm almost too overcome to speak.

James is standing in front of me, sobbing, and I don't know if I'm dreaming.

"James?" I hear Kenji say. I look back to see almost everyone has gotten out of the tank now. "Is that you, buddy?"

"Addie, I'm s-sorry," he hiccups. "I know you s-said—you s-said I wasn't supposed to fight, but I couldn't stay behind and I had to l-leave—"

I pull him into my arms, clutching him tight, hardly able to breathe.

"I wanted to f-fight with you," he stammers. "I didn't w-want to be a baby. I wanted t-to h-help—"

"Shhhh," I say to him. "It's okay, James. It's okay. We're okay. It's going to be okay."

"But Addie," he says, "you don't know what h-happened—I'd only been gone a little while and then I saw the p-planes—"

I shush him again and tell him it's okay. That we know what happened. That he's safe now.

"I'm sorry I couldn't h-help you," he says, pulling back to look me in the eye, his cheeks a splotchy red and streaked with tears. "I know you said I shouldn't, but I really w-wanted to h-help—"

I pick him up, cradling his body in my arms as I carry him back to the tank, and only then realize that the wet stain down the front of his pants isn't from the rain.

James must've been terrified. He must've been scared out of his mind and still, he snuck out of Omega Point because he wanted to help. Because he wanted to fight alongside us.

I could kill him for it.

But damn if he's not one of the bravest people I've ever known.

ELEVEN

Once we're back in the tank, we realize we have no idea what to do.

Nowhere to go.

The depth of what's happened has only begun to hit us. And just because I was able to salvage a bit of good news from the wreckage doesn't mean there isn't a lot left to grieve.

Castle is practically comatose.

Kenji is the only one who's still trying to keep us alive. He's the only one with any sense of self-preservation left, and I think it's *because* of Castle. Because no one is leading us anymore, and someone has to step up.

But even with Kenji doing his best to keep us focused, few of us are responding. The day has come to a close much more quickly than we could've expected, and the sun is setting fast, plunging us all into darkness.

We're tired, we're broken, and we can no longer function.

Sleep, it seems, is the only thing that will come.

TWELVE

James stirs in my arms.

I'm awake in an instant, blinking fast and looking around to find everyone else still asleep. The sun slits open the horizon to let the light out, and the morning is so still, and so quiet, it seems impossible there's ever been anything wrong.

The truth, however, comes back too quickly.

It's bricks on my chest, pressure in my lungs, aches in my joints, and metal in my mouth—reminders of the long day, the longer night, and the boy curled up in my arms.

Death and destruction. Slivers of hope.

Kenji drove us to a remote location and used the last of his strength to make the tank invisible for most of the night; it was the only way we could wait out the battle and manage to sleep for a few hours. I'm still not sure how that guy is functioning. He's definitely way stronger than I've ever given him credit for.

The world around us is eerily calm. I shift a little and James is alert, up and asking questions the moment his mouth hinges open. His voice disturbs everyone, startling them awake. I use the back of my hand to rub at my eyes and adjust James in my lap, holding him close. I drop a kiss on the top of his head and tell him to be quiet.

"Why?" he asks.

I cover his mouth with my hand.

He slaps it away.

"Good morning, sunshine." Kenji blinks in our direction.

"Morning," I say back.

"I wasn't talking to you," he says, trying to smile. "I was talking to the sunshine."

I grin in response, not really sure where we're going with this. There's so much to talk about, and so much we don't want to talk about, that I don't know if we'll ever talk at all. I glance back at Castle and notice he's wide awake and staring out the window. I wave hello.

"Did you sleep all right?" I ask him.

Castle stares at me.

I glance at Kenji.

Kenji looks out the window, too.

I blow out a breath.

Everyone makes their way back to the present, slowly but surely. Once we're all in semiworking condition—Brendan and Winston included—Kenji doesn't waste any time.

"We have to figure out where we're going to go," he says. "We can't risk being on the road for too long, and I'm not sure how long or how well I'll be able to project. My energy is coming back, but slowly, and it's in and out. Not something I can rely on right now."

"We also need to think about food," Ian says groggily.

"Yeah, I'm pretty hungry," James adds.

I squeeze his shoulders. We're all starving.

"Right," Kenji says. "So does anyone have any ideas?"

Silence from all of us.

"Come on, guys," he says. "Think. Any hideouts, any secure spots—anywhere you've ever crashed that was once a safe space—"

"What about our old house?" James asks, looking around.

I sit up straighter, surprised I hadn't thought of it myself. "Right—of course," I say. "Good idea, James." I muss his hair. "That would work."

Kenji pounds his fist on the steering wheel. "Yes!" he says loudly. "Good. Excellent. Perfect. Thank God."

"But what if they come looking for us?" Lily asks. "Didn't Warner know about your old place?"

"Yeah," I tell her. "But if they think everyone from Omega Point is dead, they won't think to come search for me. Or any of us."

At that, the car goes dead quiet.

The elephant in the room has made an appearance, and now no one knows what to say. We all look to Castle for direction on how best to proceed, but he doesn't say a word. He's staring straight ahead at nothing at all, like he's been paralyzed from the inside.

"Let's go," Alia says quietly. She's the only one who responds to me, and she offers me a kind smile as she does. I decide I like her for it. "We should secure shelter as soon as possible. And maybe find James something to eat."

I beam at her. So touched that she would speak for James.

"Maybe we could find something all of us could eat," Ian cuts in, grumpy. I

frown, but I can't blame him. My stomach has made a few protests of its own.

"We should have plenty of food back at the house," I say. "It's been paid for through the end of the year, so we'll have just about everything we need—water, electricity, a roof over our heads—but it'll be tight, and it'll be temporary. We'll have to come up with a more long-term solution soon."

"Sounds good," Kenji says to me. He turns back to look at everyone. "We all in agreement here?"

There's a murmur of consent and that's all we need, really, before we're off and heading back to my old place. Back to the beginning.

Relief floods through me.

I'm so grateful to be able to take James home. To let him sleep in his own bed. And though I know better than to ever say it out loud, a small part of me is happy that our time at Omega Point is officially over. There's a silver lining in all of this, and it's that Warner thinks we're all dead. And even though he's got Juliette now, he won't have her forever. She'll be safe until we can find a way to get her back, and until then, he won't come after us. We can find a way to live, away from all the violence and destruction.

Besides, I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of being on the run and always having to risk my life and constantly worrying about James. I just want to go home. I want to take care of my brother. And I never, ever, *ever* want to feel what I felt last night.

I can't risk losing James, not ever again.

THIRTEEN

The roads are almost entirely abandoned. The sun is high and the wind is bitingly cold and though the rain has stopped, the air smells like snow, and I have a feeling it's going to be harsh. I wrap James more tightly in my arms, shivering against a chill coming from deep inside my body. He's fallen asleep again, his small face buried in the crook of my neck. I hug him closer to my chest.

With the opposition destroyed, there's no need to have many—if any—troops on the ground. They're probably clearing out the bodies now, cleaning up the mess and putting things back in order as soon as possible. It's what we always did.

Battle was necessary, but cleaning it up was just as crucial.

Warner used to drill that home: we were never to allow civilians time to grieve. We could never give them the opportunity to make martyrs of their loved ones. No, it was better for the deaths to seem as insignificant as possible.

Everyone had to go back to work right away.

So many times I was a part of those missions. I always hated Warner, hated The Reestablishment and all it stood for, but now I feel even more strongly about it all. Thinking I'd lost James did something to me last night, and the damage is irreparable. I thought I knew what it was like to lose someone close to me, but I didn't, not really. Losing a parent is excruciating, but somehow, the pain is so much different from losing a child. And James, to me, in many ways, feels like my own kid. I raised him. Took care of him. Protected him. Fed him and clothed him. Taught him most everything he knows. He's my only hope in all this devastation—the one thing I've always lived for, always fought for. I'd be lost without him.

James gives my life purpose.

And I didn't realize this until last night.

What The Reestablishment does—separating parents from their children, separating spouses from each other, basically ripping families apart—they do it on purpose. And the cruelty of these actions hadn't really hit me until now.

I don't think I could ever be a part of something like that again.

FOURTEEN

We pull into the underground parking garage without a problem, and once we're inside, I can exhale. I know we'll be safe here.

The nine of us clamber out of the tank and stand around for a moment. Brendan and Winston are holding fast to each other, still recovering from their wounds. I'm not sure what happened to them, exactly, because no one is talking about it, but I don't think I want to know. Alia and Lily help Castle down from the tank, and Ian is close behind. Kenji is standing next to me. I'm still holding James in my arms, and I only put him down after he asks me to.

"You guys ready to go up?" I ask. "Shower? Eat some breakfast?"

"That sounds great, man," says Ian.

Everyone else agrees.

I lead the way, James clinging to my hand.

It's crazy—the last time we were here, we were on the run from Warner. Me and Juliette. It was the first time she met James, the first time it felt like we could really have a life together. And then Kenji showed up and redirected the course of everything. I shake my head, remembering. It feels like a million years ago, somehow. So much has changed. I was practically a different guy back then. I feel much older and harder and angrier now. Difficult to believe it was only a few months ago.

The front door is still messed up from when Warner and his guys busted it open, but we make do. I yank on the handle and then shove, hard, and the door swings inward.

Suddenly we're all crossing the threshold.

I'm looking around, amazed to see everything almost exactly the way we left it. A few things are knocked over and the place needs a serious cleaning, but it'll work. It'll be a great, safe place to live for a while. I start flipping switches and the small rooms flicker to life, fluorescent lights humming steadily in the silence. James bolts toward his bedroom, and I check the cabinets for canned goods and nonperishable items; we've still got tons of Saran-wrapped packages for the Automat.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Who wants breakfast?” I ask, holding up a few packets.

Kenji falls to his knees, shouting, “Hallelujah!” in the process; Ian practically tackles me. James comes racing out of his room shouting, “ME ME ME I DO I DO,” and Lily laughs her head off. Alia smiles and leans against the wall as Brendan and Winston collapse on the couch, groaning in relief. Castle is the only one who remains silent.

“All right, everyone,” Kenji says. “Adam and I will get the food going, and the rest of you can take turns washing up. Also, I hate to be super obvious here, but there’s only one bathroom, and we all have to share, so let’s please be aware of that. Adam’s got some supplies, but not too much, so let’s be frugal, okay? Let’s remember we’re living on rations now. Consideration is crucial.”

There’s general consent and lots of nodding, and everyone busies themselves with a different kind of preparation. Everyone except Castle, who sits down in the single armchair and doesn’t move. He seems to be doing worse than Brendan and Winston, who happen to be in actual physical pain.

I’m still staring at the two of them when Ian slips away from the group to ask me if I have anything to help patch up Brendan and Winston. I assure him that I’ll use whatever supplies I’ve got to fix them up as best I can. I always have a little medical kit at home, but it’s not extensive, and I’m not a medic. But I know enough. I think I’ll be able to help. This cheers up Ian significantly.

It’s only once Kenji and I are busy preparing food in the kitchen that he brings up the most pressing issue. The one I’m still not sure how to resolve.

“So what are we going to do about Juliette?” Kenji asks, tossing an Automat packet into a bowl. “I’m already worried we waited this long to go after her.”

I feel myself pale. I don’t know how to tell him I had no immediate plans to go back out there. Certainly not to fight—not after what happened to James. “I don’t know,” I say. “I’m not sure what we can do.”

Kenji stares at me, confused. “What do you mean? We have to get her out of there. Which means we have to *break* her out of there, which means we’ve got to plan another rescue mission.” He shoots me a look. “I thought that was obvious.”

I clear my throat. “But what about James? And Brendan and Winston? And Castle? We’re not doing too well over here. Is it okay to just leave them here and —”

“Dude, what the hell are you talking about? Aren’t you in love with this girl? Where’s the fire under your ass? I thought you would be dying to get to her right now—”

“I am,” I say urgently. “Of course I am. I’m just worried—it’s so soon after

they bombed Point that I just—”

“The longer we wait, the worse it’s going to get.” Kenji shakes his head. “We have to go as soon as possible. If we don’t, she’ll be stuck there forever, and Warner will use her as his torture monster. He’ll probably kill her in the process without even meaning to.”

I grip the edge of the counter and stare into the sink.

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

I spin around at the sound of James’s voice, listen for a moment as he laughs at something Alia said. My heart constricts just *thinking* about walking away from him again. But I know I have a responsibility to Juliette. What would she do if I weren’t there to help her? She needs me.

“Okay,” I sigh. “Of course. What do we have to do?”

FIFTEEN

After breakfast, which was actually closer to lunch, I tend to Brendan and Winston for a bit, and set them up on the floor so they can get some proper rest. James and I had collected a decent stash of ratty blankets and pillows over the years, so there's just enough to go around, and thank God for that, because it's cold as hell. We even wrapped a blanket around Castle's shoulders. He's still barely moving, but we forced him to eat, so at least he's got a little color in his cheeks now.

With Brendan and Winston settled, Ian and Alia and Lily fed and comfortable, James safe and sound, and Castle resting, Kenji and I are finally ready to initiate some new plans.

"I'm going to go out," Kenji says. "Get on base and get nosy. Listen for rumors and whispers of what's going on—maybe even find Juliette, give her a heads-up that we're coming for her soon."

I nod. "That's a great start."

"Once I know more about what's going on, we can make a firm plan, scoop her up, and bring her home."

"So as soon as she's back," I say, "we'll have to move again."

"Probably, yeah."

I nod a few times. "Okay. All right." I swallow hard. "I'll wait here until you get back."

"Sounds good." Kenji grins, and then he's gone. Disappeared. The front door is yanked open and yanked closed, and I'm staring at the wall and trying not to freak out too much about what's going to happen next.

Another mission. Which means another chance to screw everything up and get ourselves killed. And then, if we're successful, we're rewarded with more running, more instability, more chaos.

I close my eyes.

I love Juliette. I really do. I want to help her and support her and be there for her. I want us to have a future together. But sometimes I wonder if it's ever going to happen.

This isn't easy to admit, but part of me doesn't want to put James at risk

again—on the run again—for a girl who broke up with me. A girl who walked away from us.

I don't know what the right thing is anymore.

I don't know if my allegiance is to James or Juliette.

SIXTEEN

Kenji is back after only a couple of hours. His face ashen, his hands trembling. He's breathing hard and his eyes are unfocused and he sits down on the couch without a word and I'm already panicking.

"What happened?" I ask.

"What's going on?" Lily says.

"You okay, bro?" This from Ian.

We pepper him with questions and he doesn't answer. He stares, unblinking, a replica of Castle, who's sitting in a chair across from him.

Finally, after a long moment of silence, he speaks.

Three words.

"Juliette is dead."

Chaos.

Questions are flying and screams are muffled and everyone is shocked, horrified, freaking out.

I'm stunned.

My brain feels paralyzed, unwilling to process or digest this information. *Why?* I want to ask. *How?* How? How is it possible?

But I can't speak. I'm frozen in horror. Grief.

"It wasn't Warner who came after her," Kenji is saying, tears falling fast down his face. "It was Anderson. Those were Anderson's men. They made the announcement just a couple hours ago," he says, choking on the words. "They said they bombed Omega Point, captured Juliette, and killed her just this morning. The supreme has already headed back to the capital."

"No," I gasp.

"We should've gone after her," Kenji is saying. "I should've stayed behind—I should've tried to find her—it's my fault," he says, hands in his hair, fighting back tears. "It's my fault she's dead. I should've gone after her—"

"It's not your fault," Ian says to him, rushing over and grabbing his arms. "Don't you dare put that on yourself."

"We lost a lot of people," Lily says. "People dear to us that we couldn't save. This is not your fault. I promise. We did our best."

Everyone is consoling Kenji now, trying to reassure him that there's no guilt necessary. No person to blame for all this.

But I can't agree.

I trip backward until I hit the wall, leaning against it for support. I know who to blame. I know where the fault lies.

Juliette is dead because of me.

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FRACTURE ME

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FIRST EDITION

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DEDICATION

For my readers. For your love and support. This one's for you.

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Acknowledgments

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ONE

I am an hourglass.

My seventeen years have collapsed and buried me from the inside out. My legs feel full of sand and stapled together, my mind overflowing with grains of indecision, choices unmade and impatient as time runs out of my body. The small hand of a clock taps me at one and two, three and four, whispering hello, get up, stand up, it's time to

wake up

wake up

"Wake up," he whispers.

A sharp intake of breath and I'm awake but not up, surprised but not scared, somehow staring into the very desperately green eyes that seem to know too much, too well. Aaron Warner Anderson is bent over me, his worried eyes inspecting me, his hand caught in the air like he might've been about to touch me.

He jerks back.

He stares, unblinking, chest rising and falling.

"Good morning," I assume. I'm unsure of my voice, of the hour and this day, of these words leaving my lips and this body that contains me.

I notice he's wearing a white button-down, half untucked into his curiously unrumpled black slacks. His shirtsleeves are folded, pushed up past his elbows.

His smile looks like it hurts.

I pull myself into a seated position and Warner shifts to accommodate me. I have to close my eyes to steady the sudden dizziness, but I force myself to remain still until the feeling passes.

I'm tired and weak from hunger, but other than a few general aches, I seem to be fine. I'm alive. I'm breathing and blinking and feeling human and I know exactly why.

I meet his eyes. "You saved my life."

I was shot in the chest.

Warner's father put a bullet in my body and I can still feel the echoes of it. If

I focus, I can relive the exact moment it happened; the pain: so intense, so excruciating; I'll never be able to forget it.

I suck in a startled breath.

I'm finally aware of the familiar foreignness of this room and I'm quickly seized by a panic that screams I did not wake up where I fell asleep. My heart is racing and I'm inching away from him, hitting my back against the headboard, clutching at these sheets, trying not to stare at the chandelier I remember all too well—

"It's okay—" Warner is saying. "It's all right—"

"What am I doing here?" Panic, panic; terror clouds my consciousness. "Why did you bring me here again—?"

"Juliette, please, I'm not going to hurt you—"

"Then why did you bring me here?" My voice is starting to break and I'm struggling to keep it steady. "Why bring me back to this *hellhole*—"

"I had to hide you." He exhales, looks up at the wall.

"What? Why?"

"No one knows you're alive." He turns to look at me. "I had to get back to base. I needed to pretend everything was back to normal and I was running out of time."

I force myself to lock away the fear.

I study his face and analyze his patient, earnest tone. I remember him last night—it must've been last night—I remember his face, remember him lying next to me in the dark. He was tender and kind and gentle and he saved me, saved my life. Probably carried me into bed. Tucked me in beside him. It must've been him.

But when I glance down at my body I realize I'm wearing clean clothes, no blood or holes or anything anywhere and I wonder who washed me, wonder who changed me, and worry that might've been Warner, too.

"Did you . . ." I hesitate, touching the hem of the shirt I'm wearing. "Did—I mean—my clothes—"

He smiles. He stares until I'm blushing and I decide I hate him a little and then he shakes his head. Looks into his palms. "No," he says. "The girls took care of that. I just carried you to bed."

"The girls," I whisper, dazed.

The girls.

Sonya and Sara. They were there too, the healer twins, they helped Warner. They helped him save me because he's the only one who can touch me now, the

only person in the world who'd have been able to transfer their healing power safely into my body.

My thoughts are on fire.

Where are the girls what happened to the girls and where is Anderson and the war and oh God what's happened to Adam and Kenji and Castle and I have to get up I have to get up I have to get up and get out of bed and get going but

I try to move and Warner catches me. I'm off-balance, unsteady; I still feel as though my legs are anchored to this bed and I'm suddenly unable to breathe, seeing spots and feeling faint. Need up. Need out.

Can't.

"Warner." My eyes are frantic on his face. "What happened? What's happening with the battle—?"

"Please," he says, gripping my shoulders. "You need to start slowly; you should eat something—"

"Tell me—"

"Don't you want to eat first? Or shower?"

"No," I hear myself say. "I have to know now."

One moment. Two and three.

Warner takes a deep breath. A million more. Right hand over left, spinning the jade ring on his pinkie finger over and over and over and over "It's over," he says.

"What?"

I say the word but my lips make no sound. I'm numb, somehow. Blinking and seeing nothing.

"It's over," he says again.

"No."

I exhale the word, exhale the impossibility.

He nods. He's disagreeing with me.

"No."

"Juliette."

"No," I say. "No. No. Don't be stupid," I say to him. "Don't be ridiculous," I say to him. *"Don't lie to me goddamn you,"* but now my voice is high and broken and shaking and "No," I gasp, "no, no, no—"

I actually stand up this time. My eyes are filling fast with tears and I blink and blink but the world is a mess and I want to laugh because all I can think is how horrible and beautiful it is, that our eyes blur the truth when we can't bear

to see it.

The ground is hard.

I know this to be an actual fact because it's suddenly pressed against my face and Warner is trying to touch me but I think I scream and slap his hands away because I already know the answer. I must already know the answer because I can feel the revulsion bubbling up and unsettling my insides but I ask anyway. I'm horizontal and somehow still tipping over and the holes in my head are tearing open and I'm staring at a spot on the carpet not ten feet away and I'm not sure I'm even alive but I have to hear him say it.

"Why?" I ask.

It's just a word, stupid and simple.

"Why is the battle over?" I ask. I'm not breathing anymore, not really speaking at all; just expelling letters through my lips.

Warner is not looking at me.

He's looking at the wall and at the floor and at the bedsheets and at the way his knuckles look when he clenches his fists but no not at me he won't look at me and his next words are so, so soft.

"Because they're dead, love. They're all dead."

TWO

My body locks.

My bones, my blood, my brain freeze in place, seizing in some kind of sudden, uncontrollable paralysis that spreads through me so quickly I can't seem to breathe. I'm wheezing in deep, strained inhalations, and the walls won't stop swaying in front of me.

Warner pulls me into his arms.

"Let go of me," I scream, but, oh, only in my imagination because my lips are finished working and my heart has just expired and my mind has gone to hell for the day and my eyes my eyes I think they're bleeding. Warner is whispering words of comfort I can't hear and his arms are wrapped entirely around me, trying to keep me together through sheer physical force but it's no use.

I feel nothing.

Warner is shushing me, rocking me back and forth, and it's only then that I realize I'm making the most excruciating, earsplitting sound, agony ripping through me. I want to speak, to protest, to accuse Warner, to blame him, to call him a liar, but I can say nothing, can form nothing but sounds so pitiful I'm almost ashamed of myself. I break free of his arms, gasping and doubling over, clutching my stomach.

"Adam." I choke on his name.

"Juliette, please—"

"Kenji." I'm hyperventilating into the carpet now.

"Please, love, let me help you—"

"What about James?" I hear myself say. "He was left at Omega Point—he wasn't a-allowed to c-come—"

"It's all been destroyed," Warner says slowly, quietly. "Everything. They tortured some of your members into giving away the exact location of Omega Point. Then they bombed the entire thing."

"Oh, *God*." I cover my mouth with one hand and stare, unblinking, at the ceiling.

"I'm so sorry," he says. "You have no idea how sorry I am."

“Liar,” I whisper, venom in my voice. I’m angry and mean and I can’t be bothered to care. “You’re not sorry at all.”

I glance at Warner just long enough to see the hurt flash in and out of his eyes. He clears his throat.

“I am sorry,” he says again, quiet but firm. He picks up his jacket from where it was hanging on a nearby rack; shrugs it on without a word.

“Where are you going?” I ask, guilty in an instant.

“You need time to process this and you clearly have no use for my company. I will attend to a few tasks until you’re ready to talk.”

“Please tell me you’re wrong.” My voice breaks. My breath catches. “Tell me there’s a chance you could be wrong—”

Warner stares at me for what feels like a long time. “If there were even the slightest chance I could spare you this pain,” he finally says, “I would’ve taken it. You must know I wouldn’t have said it if it weren’t absolutely true.”

And it’s *this*—his sincerity—that finally snaps me in half.

Because the truth is so unbearable I wish he’d spare me a lie.

I don’t remember when Warner left.

I don’t remember how he left or what he said. All I know is that I’ve been lying here curled up on the floor long enough. Long enough for the tears to turn to salt, long enough for my throat to dry up and my lips to chap and my head to pound as hard as my heart.

I sit up slowly, feel my brain twist somewhere in my skull. I manage to climb onto the bed and sit there, still numb but less so, and pull my knees to my chest.

Life without Adam.

Life without Kenji, without James and Castle and Sonya and Sara and Brendan and Winston and all of Omega Point. My friends, all destroyed with the flick of a switch.

Life without Adam.

I hold on tight, pray the pain will pass.

It doesn’t.

Adam is gone.

My first love. My first friend. My only friend when I had none and now he’s gone and I don’t know how I feel. Strange, mostly. Delirious, too. I feel empty and broken and cheated and guilty and angry and desperately, desperately sad.

We’d been growing apart since escaping to Omega Point, but that was my

fault. He wanted more from me, but I wanted him to live a long life. I wanted to protect him from the pain I would cause him. I tried to forget him, to move on without him, to prepare myself for a future separate and apart from him.

I thought staying away would keep him alive.

Stupid girl.

The tears are fresh and falling fast now, traveling quietly down my cheeks and into my open, gasping mouth. My shoulders won't stop shaking and my fists keep clenching and my body is cramping and my knees are knocking and old habits are crawling out of my skin and I'm counting cracks and colors and sounds and shudders and rocking back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and I have to let him go I have to let him go I have to I have to

I close my eyes

and *breathe*.

Harsh, hard, rasping breaths.

In.

Out.

Count them.

I've been here before, I tell myself. I've been lonelier than this, more hopeless than this, more desperate than this. I've been here before and I survived. I can get through this.

But never have I been so thoroughly robbed. Love and possibility, friendships and futures: gone. I have to start over now; face the world alone again. I have to make one final choice: give up or go on.

So I get to my feet.

My head is spinning, thoughts knocking into one another, but I swallow back the tears. I clench my fists and try not to scream and I tuck my friends in my heart and

revenge

I think

has never looked so sweet.

THREE

*Hang tight
Hold on
Look up
Stay strong
Hang on
Hold tight
Look strong
Stay up
One day I might break
One day I might
b r e a k
free*

Warner can't hide his surprise when he walks back into the room.

I look up, close the notebook in my hands. "I'm taking this back," I say to him.

He blinks at me. "You're feeling better."

I nod over my shoulder. "My notebook was just sitting here, on the bedside table."

"Yes," he says slowly. Carefully.

"I'm taking it back."

"I understand." He's still standing by the door, still frozen in place, still staring. "Are you"—he shakes his head—"I'm sorry, are you going somewhere?"

It's only then that I realize I'm already halfway to the door. "I need to get out of here."

Warner says nothing. He takes a few careful steps into the room, slips off his jacket, drapes it over a chair. He pulls three guns out of the holster strapped to his back and takes his time placing them on the table where my notebook used to

be. When he finally looks up he has a slight smile on his face.

Hands in his pockets. His smile a little bigger. "Where are you going, love?"

"I have some things I need to take care of."

"Is that right?" He leans one shoulder against the wall, crosses his arms against his chest. He can't stop smiling.

"Yes." I'm getting irritated now.

Warner waits. Stares. Nods once, as if to say, *Go on*.

"Your father—"

"Is not here."

"Oh."

I try to hide my shock, but now I don't know why I was so certain Anderson would still be here. This complicates things.

"You really thought you could just walk out of this room," Warner says to me, "knock on my father's door, and do away with him?"

Yes. "No."

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," Warner says softly.

I glare at him.

"My father is gone," Warner says. "He's gone back to the capital, and he's taken Sonya and Sara with him."

I gasp, horrified. "No."

Warner isn't smiling anymore.

"Are they . . . alive?" I ask.

"I don't know." A simple shrug. "I imagine they must be, as they're of no use to my father in any other condition."

"They're *alive*?" My heart picks up so quickly I might be having a heart attack. "I have to get them back—I have to find them, I—"

"You what?" Warner is looking at me closely. "How will you get to my father? How will you fight him?"

"I don't know!" I'm pacing across the room now. "But I have to find them. They might be my only friends left in this world and—"

I stop.

I spin around suddenly, heart in my throat.

"What if there are others?" I whisper, too afraid to hope.

I meet Warner across the room.

"What if there are other survivors?" I ask, louder now. "What if they're hiding somewhere?"

"That seems unlikely."

“But there’s a chance, isn’t there?” I’m desperate. “If there’s even the slightest chance—”

Warner sighs. Runs a hand through the hair at the back of his head. “If you’d seen the devastation the way that I did, you wouldn’t be saying such things. Hope will break your heart all over again.”

My knees have begun to buckle.

I cling to the bed frame, breathing fast, hands shaking. I don’t know anything anymore. I don’t actually know what’s happened to Omega Point. I don’t know where the capital is or how I’d get there. I don’t know if I’d even be able to get to Sonya and Sara in time. But I can’t shake this sudden, stupid hope that more of my friends have somehow survived.

Because they’re stronger than this—smarter.

“They’ve been planning for war for such a long time,” I hear myself say. “They must have had some kind of a backup plan. A place to hide—”

“Juliette—”

“Dammit, Warner! I have to try. You have to let me look.”

“This is unhealthy.” He won’t meet my eyes. “It’s dangerous for you to think there’s a chance anyone might still be alive.”

I stare at his strong, steady profile.

He studies his hands.

“Please,” I whisper.

He sighs.

“I have to head to the compounds in the next day or so, just to better oversee the process of rebuilding the area.” He tenses as he speaks. “We lost many civilians,” he says. “Too many. The remaining citizens are understandably traumatized and subdued, as was my father’s intention. They’ve been stripped of any last hope they might’ve had for rebellion.”

A tight breath.

“And now everything must be quickly put back in order,” he says. “The bodies are being cleared out and incinerated. The damaged housing units are being replaced. Civilians are being forced to go back to work, orphans are being moved, and the remaining children are required to attend their sector schools.

“The Reestablishment,” he says, “does not allow time for people to grieve.”

There’s a heavy silence between us.

“While I’m overseeing the compounds,” Warner says, “I can find a way to take you back to Omega Point. I can show you what’s happened. And then, once you have proof, you will have to make your choice.”

“What choice?”

“You have to decide your next move. You can stay with me,” he says, hesitating, “or, if you prefer, I can arrange for you to live undetected, somewhere on unregulated grounds. But it will be a solitary existence,” he says quietly. “You can never be discovered.”

“Oh.”

A pause.

“Yes,” he says.

Another pause.

“Or,” I say to him, “I leave, find your father, kill him, and deal with the consequences on my own.”

Warner fights a smile and fails.

He glances down and laughs just a little before looking me right in the eye. He shakes his head.

“What’s so funny?”

“My dear girl.”

“*What?*”

“I have been waiting for this moment for a long time now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re finally ready,” he says. “You’re finally ready to fight.”

Shock courses through me. “Of course I am.”

In an instant I’m bombarded by memories of the battlefield, the terror of being shot to death. I have not forgotten my friends or my renewed conviction, my determination to do things differently. To make a difference. To really fight this time, with no hesitation. No matter what happens—and no matter what I discover—there’s no turning back for me anymore. There are no other alternatives.

I have not forgotten. “I forge forward or die.”

Warner laughs out loud. He looks like he might cry.

“I *am* going to kill your father,” I say to him, “and I’m going to destroy The Reestablishment.”

He’s still smiling.

“I *will*.”

“I know,” he says.

“Then why are you laughing at me?”

“I’m not,” he says softly. “I’m only wondering,” he says, “if you would like my help.”

FOUR

“What?” I blink fast, disbelieving.

“I’ve always told you,” Warner says to me, “that we would make an excellent team. I’ve always said that I’ve been waiting for you to be ready—for you to recognize your anger, your own strength. I’ve been waiting since the day I met you.”

“But you wanted to use me for The Reestablishment—you wanted me to torture innocent people—”

“Not true.”

“What? What are you talking about? You told me *yourself*—”

“I lied.” He shrugs.

My mouth has fallen open.

“There are three things you should know about me, love.” He steps forward. “The first,” he says, “is that I hate my father more than you might ever be capable of understanding.” He clears his throat. “Second, is that I am an unapologetically selfish person, who, in almost every situation, makes decisions based entirely on self-interest. And third.” A pause as he looks down. Laughs a little. “I never had any intention of using you as a weapon.”

Words have failed me.

I sit down.

Numb.

“That was an elaborate scheme I designed entirely for my father’s benefit,” Warner says. “I had to convince him it would be a good idea to invest in someone like you, that we might utilize you for military gain. And to be quite, quite honest, I’m still not sure how I managed it. The idea is ludicrous. To spend all that time, money, and energy on reforming a supposedly psychotic girl just for the sake of torture?” He shakes his head. “I knew from the beginning it would be a fruitless endeavor; a complete waste of time. There are far more effective methods of extracting information from the unwilling.”

“Then why—why did you want me?”

His eyes are jarring in their sincerity. “I wanted to study you.”

“What?” I gasp.

He turns his back to me. “Did you know,” he says, so quietly I have to strain to hear him, “that my mother lives in that house?” He looks to the closed door. “The one my father brought you to? The one where he shot you? She was in her room. Just down the hall from where he was keeping you.”

When I don’t respond, Warner turns to face me.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Your father mentioned something about her.”

“Oh?” Alarm flits in and out of his features. He quickly masks the emotion. “And what,” he says, making an effort to sound calm, “did he say about her?”

“That she’s sick,” I tell him, hating myself for the tremor that goes through his body. “That he stores her there because she doesn’t do well in the compounds.”

Warner leans back against the wall, looking as if he requires the support. He takes a hard breath. “Yes,” he finally says. “It’s true. She’s sick. She became ill very suddenly.” His eyes are focused on a distant point in another world. “When I was a child, she seemed perfectly fine,” he says, turning and turning the jade ring around his finger. “But then one day she just . . . fell apart. For years I fought my father to seek treatment, to find a cure, but he never cared. I was on my own to find help for her, and no matter who I contacted, no doctor was able to treat her. No one,” he says, hardly breathing now, “knew what was wrong with her. She exists in a constant state of agony,” he says, “and I’ve always been too selfish to let her die.”

He looks up.

“And then I heard about you. I’d heard stories about you, rumors,” he says. “And it gave me hope for the very first time. I wanted access to you; I wanted to study you. I wanted to know and understand you firsthand. Because in all my research, you were the only person I’d ever heard of who might be able to offer me answers about my mother’s condition. I was desperate,” he says. “I was willing to try anything.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “How could someone like me be able to help you with your mother?”

His eyes find mine again, bright with anguish. “Because, love. You cannot touch anyone. And she,” he says, “she cannot be touched.”

FIVE

I've lost the ability to speak.

"I finally understand her pain," Warner says. "I finally understand what it must be like for her. Because of you. Because I saw what it did to you—what it does to you—to carry that kind of burden, to exist with that much power and to live among those who do not understand."

He tilts his head back against the wall, presses the heels of his hands to his eyes.

"She, much like you," he says, "must feel as though there is a monster inside of her. But unlike you, her only victim is herself. She cannot live in her own skin. She cannot be touched by anyone; not even by her own hands. Not to brush a hair from her forehead or to clench her fists. She's afraid to speak, to move her legs, to stretch her arms, even to shift to a more comfortable position, simply because the sensation of her skin brushing against itself causes her an excruciating amount of pain."

He drops his hands.

"It seems," he says, fighting to keep his voice steady, "that something in the heat of human contact triggers this terrible, destructive power within her, and because she is both the originator and the recipient of the pain, she's somehow incapable of killing herself. Instead, she exists as a prisoner in her own bones, unable to escape this self-inflicted torture."

My eyes are stinging hard. I blink fast.

For so many years I thought my life was difficult; I thought I understood what it meant to suffer. But this. This is something I can't even begin to comprehend. I never stopped to consider that someone else might have it worse than I do.

It makes me feel ashamed for ever having felt sorry for myself.

"For a long time," Warner continues, "I thought she was just . . . sick. I thought she'd developed some kind of illness that was attacking her immune system, something that made her skin sensitive and painful. I assumed that, with the proper treatment, she would eventually heal. I kept hoping," he says, "until I

finally realized that years had gone by and nothing had changed. The constant agony began to destroy her mental stability; she eventually gave up on life. She let the pain take over. She refused to get out of bed or to eat regularly; she stopped caring about basic hygiene. And my father's solution was to drug her.

"He keeps her locked in that house with no one but a nurse to keep her company. She's now addicted to morphine and has completely lost her mind. She doesn't even know me anymore. Doesn't recognize me. And the few times I've ever tried to get her off the drugs," he says, speaking quietly now, "she's tried to kill me." He's silent for a second, looking as if he's forgotten I'm still in the room. "My childhood was almost bearable sometimes," he says, "if only because of her. And instead of caring for her, my father turned her into something unrecognizable."

He looks up, laughing.

"I always thought I could fix it," he says. "I thought if I could only find the root of it—I thought I could do something, I thought I could—" He stops. Drags a hand across his face. "I don't know," he whispers. Turns away. "But I never had any intention of using you against your will. The idea has never appealed to me. I only had to maintain the pretense. My father, you see, does not approve of my interest in my mother's well-being."

He smiles a strange, twisted sort of smile. Looks toward the door. Laughs.

"He never wanted to help her. She is a burden he is disgusted by. He thinks that by keeping her alive he's doing her a great kindness for which I should be grateful. He thinks this should be enough for me, to be able to watch my mother turn into a feral creature so utterly consumed by her own agony she's completely vacated her mind." He runs a shaky hand through his hair, grips the back of his neck.

"But it wasn't," he says quietly. "It wasn't enough. I became obsessed with trying to help her. To bring her back to life. And I wanted to feel it," he says to me, looking directly into my eyes. "I wanted to know what it would be like to endure a pain like that. I wanted to know what she must experience every day.

"I was never afraid of your touch," he says. "In fact, I welcomed it. I was so sure you would eventually strike out at me, that you would try to defend yourself against me; and I was looking forward to that moment. But you never did." He shakes his head. "Everything I'd read in your files told me you were an unrestrained, vicious creature. I was expecting you to be an animal, someone who would try to kill me and my men at every opportunity—someone who needed to be closely watched. But you disappointed me by being too human, too

lovely. So unbearably naive. You wouldn't fight back."

His eyes are unfocused, remembering.

"You didn't react against my threats. You wouldn't respond to the things that mattered. You acted like an insolent child," he says. "You didn't like your clothes. You wouldn't eat your fancy food." He laughs out loud and rolls his eyes and I've suddenly forgotten my sympathy.

I'm tempted to throw something at him.

"You were so hurt," he says, "that I'd asked you to wear a *dress*." He looks at me then, eyes sparkling with amusement. "Here I was, prepared to defend my life against an uncontrollable monster who could kill," he says, "kill a man with her *bare hands*—" He bites back another laugh. "And you threw tantrums over clean clothes and hot meals. Oh," he says, shaking his head at the ceiling, "you were ridiculous. You were completely ridiculous and it was the most entertainment I'd ever had. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed it. I loved making you mad," he says to me, his eyes wicked. "I *love* making you mad."

I'm gripping one of his pillows so tightly I'm afraid I might tear it. I glare at him.

He laughs at me.

"I was so distracted," he says, smiling. "Always wanting to spend time with you. Pretending to plan things for your supposed future with The Reestablishment. You were harmless and beautiful and you always *yelled* at me," he says, grinning widely now. "God, you would yell at me over the most inconsequential things," he says, remembering. "But you never laid a hand on me. Not once, not even to save your own life."

His smile fades.

"It worried me. It scared me to think you were so ready to sacrifice yourself before using your abilities to defend yourself." A breath. "So I changed tactics. I tried to bully you into touching me."

I flinch, remembering that day in the blue room too well. When he taunted me and manipulated me and I came so close to hurting him. He'd finally managed to find exactly the right things to say to hurt me enough to want to hurt him back.

I nearly did.

He cocks his head. Exhales a deep, defeated breath. "But that didn't work either. And I quickly began to lose sight of my original purpose. I became so invested in you that I'd forgotten why I'd brought you on base to begin with. I was frustrated that you wouldn't give in, that you refused to lash out even when I

knew you wanted to. But every time I was ready to give up, you would have these moments,” he says, shaking his head. “You had these incredible moments when you’d finally show glimpses of raw, unbridled strength. It was incredible.” He stops. Leans back against the wall. “But then you’d always retreat. Like you were ashamed. Like you didn’t want to recognize those feelings in yourself.

“So I changed tactics again. I tried something else. Something that I knew—with certainty—would push you past your breaking point. And I must say, it really was everything I hoped it would be.” He smiles. “You looked truly alive for the very first time.”

My hands are suddenly ice cold.

“The torture room,” I gasp.

SIX

"I suppose you could call it that." Warner shrugs. "We call it a simulation chamber."

"You made me torture that child," I say to him, the anger and the rage of that day rising up inside of me. How could I forget what he did? What he made me do? The horrible memories he forced me to relive all for the sake of his entertainment. "I will never forgive you for that," I snap, acid in my voice. "I will never forgive you for what you did to that little boy. For what you made me do to him!"

Warner frowns. "I'm sorry—what?"

"You would sacrifice a *child*!" My voice is shaking now. "For your stupid games! How could you do something so despicable?" I throw my pillow at him. "You sick, heartless, *monster*!"

Warner catches the pillow as it hits his chest, staring at me like he's never seen me before. But then a kind of understanding settles into place for him, and the pillow slips from his hands. Falls to the floor. "Oh," he says, so slowly. He's squeezing his eyes shut, trying to suppress his amusement. "Oh, you're going to kill me," he says, laughing openly now. "I don't think I can handle this—"

"What are you talking about? What's wrong with you?" I demand.

He's still smiling as he says, "Tell me, love. Tell me exactly what happened that day."

I clench my fists, offended by his flippancy and shaking with renewed anger. "You gave me stupid, skimpy clothes to wear! And then you took me down to the lower levels of Sector 45 and locked me in a dirty room. I remember it perfectly," I tell him, fighting to remain calm. "It had disgusting yellow walls. Old green carpet. A huge two-way mirror."

Warner raises his eyebrows. Gestures for me to continue.

"Then . . . you hit some kind of a switch," I say, forcing myself to keep talking. I don't know why I'm beginning to doubt myself. "And these huge, metal spikes started coming out of the ground. And then"—I hesitate, steeling myself—"a toddler walked in. He was blindfolded. And you said he was your

replacement. You said that if I didn't save him, you wouldn't either."

Warner is looking at me closely now. Studying my eyes. "Are you sure I said that?"

"Yes."

"Yes?" He cocks his head. "Yes, you saw me say that with your own eyes?"

"N-no," I say quickly, feeling defensive, "but there were loudspeakers—I could hear your voice—"

He takes a deep breath. "Right; of course."

"I *did*," I tell him.

"So after you heard me say that, what happened?"

I swallow hard. "I had to save the boy. He was going to die. He couldn't see where he was going and he was going to be impaled by those spikes. I had to pull him into my arms and try to find a way to hold on to him without killing him."

A beat of silence.

"And did you succeed?" Warner asks me.

"Yes," I whisper, unable to understand why he's asking me this when he saw it all happen for himself. "But the boy went limp," I say. "He was temporarily paralyzed in my arms. And then you hit another switch and the spikes disappeared, and I let him down and he—he started crying again and bumped into my bare legs. And he started screaming. And I . . . I got so mad at you . . ."

"That you broke through concrete," Warner says, a faint smile touching his lips. "You broke through a concrete wall just to try and choke me to death."

"You deserved it," I hear myself say. "You deserved worse."

"Well," he sighs. "If I did, in fact, do what you say I did, it certainly sounds like I deserved it."

"What do you mean, *if* you did? I *know* you did—"

"Is that right?"

"Of course it's right!"

"Then tell me, love, what happened to the boy?"

"What?" I freeze; icicles creep up my arms.

"What happened," he says, "to that little boy? You say that you set him on the ground. But then you proceeded to break through a concrete wall fitted with a thick, six-foot-wide mirror, with no apparent regard for the toddler you claim was wandering around the room. Don't you think the poor child would've been injured in such a wild, reckless display? My soldiers certainly were. You broke down a wall of *concrete*, love. You crushed an enormous piece of glass. You did

not stop to ascertain where the blocks or the shattered bits had fallen or who they might've injured in the process." He stops. Stares. "Did you?"

"No," I gasp, blood draining from my body.

"So what happened after you walked away?" he asks. "Or do you not remember that part? You turned around and left, just after destroying the room, injuring my men, and tossing me to the floor. You turned around," he says, "and walked right out."

I'm numb now, remembering. It's true. I did. I didn't think. I just knew I needed to get out of there as fast as possible. I needed to get away, to clear my head.

"So what happened to the boy?" Warner insists. "Where was he when you were leaving? Did you see him?" A lift of his eyebrows. "And what about the spikes?" he says. "Did you bother to look closely at the ground to see where they might've come from? Or how they might've punctured a carpeted floor without causing any damage? Did you feel the surface under your feet to be shredded or uneven?"

I'm breathing hard now, struggling to stay calm. I can't tear myself away from his gaze.

"Juliette, love," he says softly. "There were no speakers in that room. That room is entirely soundproof, equipped with nothing but sensors and cameras. It is a simulation chamber."

"No," I breathe, refusing to believe. Not wanting to accept that I was wrong, that Warner isn't the monster I thought he was. He can't change things now. Can't confuse me like this. This isn't the way it's supposed to work. "That's not possible—"

"I am guilty," he says, "of forcing you to undergo such a cruel simulation. I accept the fault for that, and I've already apologized for my actions. I only meant to push you into finally reacting, and I knew that sort of re-creation would quickly trigger something inside of you. But good God, love"—he shakes his head—"you must have an absurdly low opinion of me if you think I would steal someone's child just to watch you torture it."

"It wasn't real?" I don't recognize my own raspy, panicked voice. "It wasn't *real*?"

He offers me a sympathetic smile. "I designed the basic elements of the simulation, but the beauty of the program is that it will evolve and adapt as it processes a soldier's most visceral responses. We use it to train soldiers who must overcome specific fears or prepare for a particularly sensitive mission. We

can re-create almost any environment,” he says. “Even soldiers who know what they’re getting into will forget that they’re performing in a simulation.” He averts his eyes. “I knew it would be terrifying for you, and I did it anyway. And for hurting you, I feel true regret. But no,” he says quietly, meeting my eyes again. “None of it was real. You imagined my voice in that room. You imagined the pain, the sounds, the smells. All of it was in your mind.”

“I don’t want to believe you,” I say to him, my voice scarcely a whisper.

He tries to smile. “Why do you think I gave you those clothes?” he asks. “The material of that outfit was lined with a chemical designed to react to the sensors in that room. And the less you’re wearing, the more easily the cameras can track the heat in your body, your movements.” He shakes his head. “I never had a chance to explain what you’d experienced. I wanted to follow you immediately, but I thought I should give you time to collect yourself. It was a stupid decision, on my end.” His jaw tenses. “I waited, and I shouldn’t have. Because when I found you, it was too late. You were ready to jump out a window just to get away from me.”

“For good reason,” I snap.

He holds up his hands in surrender.

“You are a *terrible* person!” I explode, throwing the rest of the pillows at his face, angry and horrified and humiliated all at once. “Why would you put me through something like that when you *know* what I’ve been through, you stupid, arrogant—”

“Juliette, please,” he says, stepping forward, dodging a pillow to reach for my arms. “I *am* sorry for hurting you, but I really think it was worth—”

“Don’t touch me!” I jerk away, glaring, clutching the foot of his bed like it might be a weapon. “I should shoot you all over again for doing that to me! I should—I should—”

“What?” He laughs. “You’re going to throw another pillow at me?”

I shove him, hard, and when he doesn’t budge, I start throwing punches. I’m hitting his chest, his arms, his stomach, and his legs, anywhere I can reach, wishing more than ever that he weren’t able to absorb my power, that I could actually crush all the bones in his body and make him writhe in pain beneath my hands. “You . . . selfish . . . *monster*!” I keep throwing poorly aimed fists in his direction, not realizing how much the effort exhausts me, not realizing how quickly the anger dissolves into pain. Suddenly all I want to do is cry. My body is shaking in both relief and terror, finally unshackled from the fear that I’d caused another innocent child some kind of irreparable damage, and

simultaneously horrified that Warner would ever force such a terrible thing on me. To *help* me.

“I’m so sorry,” he says, stepping closer. “I really, truly am. I didn’t know you then. Not like I do now. I’d never do that to you now.”

“You don’t know me,” I mumble, wiping away tears. “You think you know me just because you’ve read my journal—you stupid, prying, privacy-stealing *asshole*—”

“Oh, right—about that—” He smiles, one quick hand plucking the journal out of my pocket as he moves toward the door. “I’m afraid I wasn’t finished reading this.”

“Hey!” I protest, swiping at him as he walks away. “You said you’d give that back to me!”

“I said no such thing,” he says, subdued, dropping the journal into his own pants pocket. “Now please wait here a moment. I’m going to get you something to eat.”

I’m still shouting as he closes the door behind him.

SEVEN

I fall backward onto the bed and make an angry noise deep inside my throat. Chuck a pillow at the wall.

I need to do something. I need to start moving.

I need to finish forming a plan.

I've been on the defense and on the run for so long now that my mind has often been occupied by elaborate and hopeless daydreams about overthrowing The Reestablishment. I spent most of my 264 days in that cell fantasizing about exactly this kind of impossible moment: the day I'd be able to spit in the face of those who'd oppressed me and everyone else just beyond my window. And though I dreamed up a million different scenarios in which I would stand up and defend myself, I never actually thought I'd have a chance to make it happen. I never thought I'd have the power, the opportunity, or the courage.

But now?

Everyone is gone.

I might be the only one left.

At Omega Point I was happy to let Castle lead. I didn't know much about anything, and I was still too scared to act. Castle was already in charge and already had a plan, so I trusted that he knew best; that they knew better.

A mistake.

I've always known, deep down, who should be leading this resistance. I've felt it quietly for some time now, always too scared to bring the words to my lips. Someone who's got nothing left to lose and everything to gain. Someone no longer afraid of anyone.

Not Castle. Not Kenji. Not Adam. Not even Warner.

It should be me.

I look closely at my outfit for the first time and realize I must be wearing more of Warner's old clothes. I'm drowning in a faded orange T-shirt and a pair of gray sweatpants that almost falls off my hips every time I stand up straight. I

take a moment to regain my equilibrium, testing my full weight on the thick, plush carpet under my bare feet. I roll the waistband of the pants a few times, just until they sit snugly at my hip bone, and then I ball up the extra material of the T-shirt and knot it at the back. I'm vaguely aware that I must look ridiculous, but fitting the clothes to my frame gives me some modicum of control and I cling to it. It makes me feel a little more awake, a little more in command of my situation. All I need now is a rubber band. My hair is too heavy; it's begun to feel like it's suffocating me, and I'm desperate to get it off my neck. I'm desperate to take a shower, actually.

I spin around at the sound of the door.

I'm caught in the middle of a thought, holding my hair up with both hands in a makeshift ponytail, and suddenly acutely aware of the fact that I'm not wearing any underwear.

Warner is holding a tray.

He's staring at me, unblinking. His gaze sweeps across my face, down my neck, my arms. Stops at my waist. I follow his eyes only to realize that my movements have lifted my shirt and exposed my stomach. And I suddenly understand why he's staring.

The memory of his kisses along my torso; his hands exploring my back, my bare legs, the backs of my thighs, his fingers hooking around the elastic band of my underwear—

Oh

I drop my hands and my hair at the same time, the brown waves falling hard and fast around my shoulders, my back, hitting my waist. My face is on fire.

Warner is suddenly transfixed by a spot directly above my head.

"I should probably cut my hair," I say to no one in particular, not understanding why I've even said it. I don't want to cut my hair. I want to lock myself in the toilet.

He doesn't respond. He carries the tray closer to the bed and it's not until I spot the glasses of water and the plates of food that I realize exactly how hungry I am. I can't remember the last time I ate anything; I've been surviving off the energy recharge I received when my wound was healed.

"Have a seat," he says, not meeting my eyes. He nods to the floor before folding himself onto the carpet. I sit down across from him. He pushes the tray in front of me.

"Thank you," I say, my eyes focused on the meal. "This looks delicious."

There's tossed salad and fragrant, colorful rice. Diced, seasoned potatoes and

a small helping of steamed vegetables. A little cup of chocolate pudding. A bowl of fresh-cut fruit. Two glasses of water.

It's a meal I would've scoffed at when I first arrived.

If I knew then what I know now, I would've taken advantage of every opportunity Warner had given me. I would've eaten the food and taken the clothes. I would've built up my strength and paid closer attention when he showed me around base. I would've been looking for escape routes and excuses to tour the compounds. And then I would've bolted. I would've found a way to survive on my own. And I never would've dragged Adam down with me. I never would've gotten myself and so many others into this mess.

If only I had eaten the stupid food.

I was a scared, broken girl, fighting back the only way I knew how. It's no wonder I failed. I wasn't in my right mind. I was weak and terrified and blind to the idea of possibility. I had no experience with stealth or manipulation. I hardly knew how to interact with people—could barely understand the words in my own head.

It shocks me to think how much I've changed in these past months. I feel like a completely different person. Sharper, somehow. Hardened, absolutely. And for the first time in my life, willing to admit that I'm angry.

It's liberating.

I look up suddenly, feeling the weight of Warner's gaze. He's staring at me like he's intrigued, fascinated. "What are you thinking about?" he asks.

I stab a piece of potato with my fork. "I'm thinking I was an idiot for ever turning down a plate of hot food."

He raises an eyebrow at me. "I can't say I disagree."

I shoot him a dirty look.

"You were so broken when you got here," he says, taking a deep breath. "I was so confused. I kept waiting for you to go insane, to jump on the table at dinner and start taking swipes at my soldiers. I was sure you were going to try and kill everyone, and instead, you were stubborn and pouty, refusing to change out of your filthy clothes and complaining about eating your vegetables."

I go pink.

"At first," he says, laughing, "I thought you were plotting something. I thought you were pretending to be complacent just to distract me from some greater goal. I thought your anger over such petty things was a ruse," he says, his eyes mocking me. "I figured it had to be."

I cross my arms. "The extravagance was disgusting. So much money is

wasted on the army while other people are starving to death.”

Warner waves a hand, shaking his head. “That’s not the point. The point,” he says, “is that I hadn’t provided you with any of those things for some calculated, underhanded reason. It wasn’t some kind of a test.” He laughs. “I wasn’t trying to challenge you and your scruples. I thought I was doing you a favor. You’d come from this disgusting, miserable hole in the ground. I wanted you to have a real mattress. To be able to shower in peace. To have beautiful, fresh clothes. And you needed to eat,” he says. “You’d been starved half to death.”

I stiffen, slightly mollified. “Maybe,” I say. “But you were crazy. You were a controlling maniac. You wouldn’t even let me talk to the other soldiers.”

“Because they are animals,” he snaps, his voice unexpectedly sharp.

I look up, startled, to meet his angry, flashing green eyes.

“You, who have spent the majority of your life locked away,” he says, “have not had the opportunity to understand just how beautiful you are, or what kind of effect that can have on a person. I was worried for your safety,” he says. “You were timid and weak and living on a military base full of lonely, fully armed, thickheaded soldiers three times your size. I didn’t want them harassing you. I made a spectacle out of your display with Jenkins because I wanted them to have proof of your abilities. I needed them to see that you were a formidable opponent—one they’d do well to stay away from. I was trying to protect you.”

I can’t look away from the intensity in his eyes.

“How little you must think of me.” He shakes his head in shock. “I had no idea you hated me so much. That everything I tried to do to help you had come under such harsh scrutiny.”

“How can you be surprised? What choice did I have but to expect the worst from you? You were arrogant and crass and you treated me like a piece of property—”

“Because I had to!” He cuts me off, unrepentant. “My every move—every word—is monitored when I am not confined to my own quarters. My entire life depends on maintaining a certain type of personality.”

“What about that soldier you shot in the forehead? Seamus Fletcher?” I challenge him, angry again. Now that I’ve let it enter my life, I’m realizing anger comes a little too naturally to me. “Was that all a part of your plan, too? No wait, don’t tell me”—I hold up a hand—“that was just a simulation, right?”

Warner goes rigid.

He sits back; his jaw twitches. He looks at me with a mixture of sadness and rage in his eyes. “No,” he finally says, deathly soft. “That was not a simulation.”

“So you have no problem with that?” I ask him. “You have no regrets over killing a man for stealing a little extra food? For trying to survive, just like you?”

Warner bites down on his bottom lip for half a second. Clasps his hands in his lap. “Wow,” he says. “How quickly you jump to his defense.”

“He was an innocent man,” I tell him. “He didn’t deserve to die. Not for that. Not like that.”

“Seamus Fletcher,” Warner says calmly, staring into his open palms, “was a drunken bastard who was beating his wife and children. He hadn’t fed them in two weeks. He’d punched his nine-year-old daughter in the mouth, breaking her two front teeth and fracturing her jaw. He beat his pregnant wife so hard she lost the child. He had two other children, too,” he says. “A seven-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl.” A pause. “He broke both their arms.”

My food is forgotten.

“I monitor the lives of our citizens very carefully,” Warner says. “I like to know who they are and how they’re thriving. I probably shouldn’t care,” he says, “but I do.”

I’m thinking I’m never going to open my mouth ever again.

“I have never claimed to live by any set of principles,” Warner says to me. “I’ve never claimed to be right, or good, or even justified in my actions. The simple truth is that I do not care. I have been forced to do terrible things in my life, love, and I am seeking neither your forgiveness nor your approval. Because I do not have the luxury of philosophizing over scruples when I’m forced to act on basic instinct every day.”

He meets my eyes.

“Judge me,” he says, “all you like. But I have no tolerance,” he says sharply, “for a man who beats his wife. No tolerance,” he says, “for a man who beats his children.” He’s breathing hard now. “Seamus Fletcher was murdering his family,” he says to me. “And you can call it whatever the hell you want to call it, but I will never regret killing a man who would bash his wife’s face into a wall. I will never regret killing a man who would punch his nine-year-old daughter in the mouth. I am not sorry,” he says. “And I will not apologize. Because a child is better off with no father, and a wife is better off with no husband, than one like that.” I watch the hard movement in his throat. “I would know.”

“I’m sorry—Warner, I—”

He holds up a hand to stop me. He steadies himself, his eyes focused on the plates of untouched food. “I’ve said it before, love, and I’m sorry I have to say it again, but you do not understand the choices I have to make. You don’t know

what I've seen and what I'm forced to witness every single day." He hesitates. "And I wouldn't want you to. But do not presume to understand my actions," he says, finally meeting my eyes. "Because if you do, I can assure you you'll only be met with disappointment. And if you insist on continuing to make assumptions about my character, I'll advise you only this: assume you will always be wrong."

He hauls himself up with a casual elegance that startles me. Smooths out his slacks. Pushes his sleeves up again. "I've had your armoire moved into my closet," he says. "There are things for you to change into, if you'd like that. The bed and bathroom are yours. I have work to do," he says. "I'll be sleeping in my office tonight."

And with that, he opens the adjoining door to his office, and locks himself inside.

EIGHT

My food is cold.

I poke at the potatoes and force myself to finish the meal even though I've lost my appetite. I can't help but wonder if I've finally pushed Warner too far.

I thought the revelations had come to a close for today, but I was wrong again. It makes me wonder just how much is left, and how much more I'll learn about Warner in the coming days. Months.

And I'm scared.

Because the more I discover about him, the fewer excuses I have to push him away. He's unraveling before me, becoming something entirely different; terrifying me in a way I never could've expected.

And all I can think is *not now*.

Not here. Not when so much is uncertain. If only my emotions would understand the importance of excellent timing.

I never realized Warner was unaware of how deeply I'd detested him. I suppose now I can better understand how he saw himself, how he'd never viewed his actions as guilty or criminal. Maybe he thought I would've given him the benefit of the doubt. That I would've been able to read him as easily as he's been able to read me.

But I couldn't. I didn't. And now I can't help but wonder if I've managed to disappoint him, somehow.

Why I even care.

I clamber to my feet with a sigh, hating my own uncertainty. Because while I might not be able to deny my physical attraction to him, I still can't shake my initial impressions of his character. It's not easy for me to switch so suddenly, to recognize him as anything but some kind of manipulative monster.

I need time to adjust to the idea of Warner as a normal person.

But I'm tired of thinking. And right now, all I want to do is shower.

I drag myself toward the open door of the bathroom before I remember what Warner said about my clothes. That he'd moved my armoire into his closet. I look around, searching for another door and finding none but the locked entry to

his office. I'm half tempted to knock and ask him directly but decide against it. Instead, I study the walls more closely, wondering why Warner wouldn't have given me instructions if his closet was hard to find. But then I see it.

A switch.

It's more of a button, actually, but it sits flush with the wall. It would be almost impossible to spot if you weren't actively searching for it.

I press the button.

A panel in the wall slides out of place. And as I step across the threshold, the room illuminates on its own.

This closet is bigger than his entire bedroom.

The walls and ceiling are tiled with slabs of white stone that gleam under the fluorescent recessed lighting; the floors are covered with thick Oriental rugs. There's a small suede couch the color of light-green jade stationed in the very center of the room, but it's an odd sort of couch: it doesn't have a back. It looks like an oversized ottoman. And strangest of all: there's not a single mirror in here. I spin around, my eyes searching, certain I must've overlooked such an obvious staple, and I'm so caught up in the details of the space that I almost miss the clothes.

The *clothes*.

They're everywhere, on display as if they were works of art. Glossy, dark wood units are built into the walls, shelves lined with rows and rows of shoes. All the other closet space is dedicated to hanging racks, each wall housing different categories of clothing.

Everything is color coordinated.

He owns more coats, more shoes, more pants and shirts than I've ever seen in my life. Ties and bow ties, belts, scarves, gloves, and cuff links. Beautiful, rich fabrics: silk blends and starched cotton, soft wool and cashmere. Dress shoes and buttery leather boots buffed and polished to perfection. A peacoat in a dark, burnt shade of orange; a trench coat in a deep navy blue. A winter toggle coat in a stunning shade of plum. I dare to run my fingers along the different materials, wondering how many of these pieces he's actually worn.

I'm amazed.

It's always been apparent that Warner takes pride in his appearance; his outfits are impeccable; his clothes fit him like they were cut for his body. But now I finally understand why he took such care with my wardrobe.

He wasn't trying to patronize me.

He was enjoying himself.

Aaron Warner Anderson, chief commander and regent of Sector 45, son of the supreme commander of The Reestablishment.

He has a soft spot for fashion.

After my initial shock wears off, I'm able to easily locate my old armoire. It's been placed unceremoniously in a corner of the room, and I'm almost sorry for it. It stands out awkwardly against the rest of the space.

I quickly shuffle through the drawers, grateful for the first time to have clean things to change into. Warner anticipated all of my needs before I arrived on base. The armoire is full of dresses and shirts and pants, but it's also been stocked with socks, bras, and underwear. And even though I know this should make me feel awkward, somehow it doesn't. The underwear is simple and understated. Cotton basics that are exactly average and perfectly functional. He bought these things before he knew me, and knowing that they weren't purchased with any level of intimacy makes me feel less self-conscious about it all.

I grab a small T-shirt, a pair of cotton pajama bottoms, and all of my brand-new underthings, and slip out of the room. The lights immediately switch off as soon as I'm back in the bedroom, and I hit the button to close the panel.

I look around his bedroom with new eyes, reacclimating to this smaller, standard sort of space. Warner's bedroom looks almost identical to the one I occupied while on base, and I always wondered why. There are no personal effects anywhere; no pictures, no odd knickknacks.

But suddenly it all makes sense.

His bedroom doesn't mean anything to him. It's little more than a place to sleep. But his closet—that was his style, his design. It's probably the only space he cares about in this room.

It makes me wonder what the inside of his office looks like, and my eyes dart to his door before I remember how he's locked himself inside.

I stifle a sigh and head toward the bathroom, planning to shower, change, and fall asleep immediately. This day felt more like a few years, and I'm ready to be done with it. Hopefully tomorrow we'll be able to head back to Omega Point and finally make some progress.

But no matter what happens next, and no matter what we discover, I'm determined to find my way to Anderson, even if I have to go alone.

NINE

I can't scream.

My lungs won't expand. My breaths keep coming in short gasps. My chest feels too tight and my throat is closing up and I'm trying to shout and I can't, I can't stop wheezing, thrashing my arms and trying desperately to breathe but the effort is futile. No one can hear me. No one will ever know that I'm dying, that there's a hole in my chest filling with blood and pain and such unbearable agony and there's so much of it, so much blood, hot and pooling around me and I can't, I can't, I can't *breathe*—

“Juliette—*Juliette*, love, wake up—*wake up*—”

I jerk up so quickly I double over. I'm heaving in deep, harsh, gasping breaths, so overcome, so relieved to be able to get oxygen into my lungs that I can't speak, can't do anything but try to inhale as much as possible. My whole body is shaking, my skin is clammy, going from hot to cold too quickly. I can't steady myself, can't stop the silent tears, can't shake the nightmare, can't shake the memory.

I can't stop gasping for air.

Warner's hands cup my face. The warmth of his skin helps calm me somehow, and I finally feel my heart rate begin to slow. “Look at me,” he says.

I force myself to meet his eyes, shaking as I catch my breath.

“It's okay,” he whispers, still holding my cheeks. “It was just a bad dream. Try closing your mouth,” he says, “and breathing through your nose.” He nods. “There you go. Easy. You're okay.” His voice is so soft, so melodic, so inexplicably tender.

I can't look away from his eyes. I'm afraid to blink, afraid to be pulled back into my nightmare.

“I won't let go until you're ready,” he tells me. “Don't worry. Take your time.”

I close my eyes. I feel my heart slow to a normal beat. My muscles begin to unclench, my hands steady their tremble. And even though I'm not actively crying, I can't stop the tears from streaming down my face. But then something

in my body breaks, crumples from the inside, and I'm suddenly so exhausted I can no longer hold myself up.

Somehow, Warner seems to understand.

He helps me sit back on the bed, pulls the blankets up around my shoulders. I'm shivering, wiping away the last of my tears. Warner runs a hand over my hair. "It's okay," he says softly. "You're okay."

"Aren't y-you going to sleep, too?" I stammer, wondering what time it is. I notice he's still fully dressed.

"I . . . yes," he says. Even in this dim light I can see the surprise in his eyes. "Eventually. I don't often go to bed this early."

"Oh." I blink, breathing a little easier now. "What time is it?"

"Two o'clock in the morning."

It's my turn to be surprised. "Don't we have to be up in a few hours?"

"Yes." The ghost of a smile touches his lips. "But I'm almost never able to fall asleep when I should. I can't seem to turn my mind off," he says, grinning at me for only a moment longer before he turns to leave.

"Stay."

The word escapes my lips even before I've had a chance to think it through. I'm not sure why I've said it. Maybe because it's late and I'm still shaking, and maybe having him close might scare my nightmares away. Or maybe it's because I'm weak and grieving and need a friend right now. I'm not sure. But there's something about the darkness, the stillness of this hour, I think, that creates a language of its own. There's a strange kind of freedom in the dark; a terrifying vulnerability we allow ourselves at exactly the wrong moment, tricked by the darkness into thinking it will keep our secrets. We forget that the blackness is not a blanket; we forget that the sun will soon rise. But in the moment, at least, we feel brave enough to say things we'd never say in the light.

Except for Warner, who doesn't say a word.

For a split second he actually looks alarmed. He's staring at me in silent terror, too stunned to speak, and I'm about to take it all back and hide under the covers when he catches my arm.

I still.

He tugs me forward until I'm nestled against his chest. His arms fall around me carefully, as if he's telling me I can pull away, that he'll understand, that it's my choice. But I feel so safe, so warm, so devastatingly content that I can't seem to come up with a single reason why I shouldn't enjoy this moment. I press closer, hiding my face in the soft folds of his shirt, and his arms wrap more

tightly around me, his chest rising and falling. My hands come up to rest against his stomach, the hard muscles tensed under my touch. My left hand slips around his ribs, up his back, and Warner freezes, his heart racing under my ear. My eyes fall closed just as I feel him try to inhale.

“Oh God,” he gasps. He jerks back, breaks away. “I can’t do this. I won’t survive it.”

“What?”

He’s already on his feet and I can only make out enough of his silhouette to see that he’s shaking. “I can’t keep doing this—”

“Warner—”

“I thought I could walk away the last time,” he says. “I thought I could let you go and hate you for it but I can’t. Because you make it so damn difficult,” he says. “Because you don’t play fair. You go and do something like get yourself shot,” he says, “and you *ruin* me in the process.”

I try to remain perfectly still.

I try not to make a sound.

But my mind won’t stop racing and my heart won’t stop pounding and with just a few words he’s managed to dismantle my most concentrated efforts to forget what I did to him.

I don’t know what to do.

My eyes finally adjust to the darkness and I blink, only to find him looking into my eyes like he can see into my soul.

I’m not ready for this. Not yet. Not yet. Not like this. But a rush of feelings, images of his hands, his arms, his lips are charging through my mind and I try but can’t push the thoughts away, can’t ignore the scent of his skin and the insane familiarity of his body. I can almost hear his heart thrumming in his chest, can see the tense movement in his jaw, can feel the power quietly contained within him.

And suddenly his face changes. Worries.

“What’s wrong?” he asks. “Are you scared?”

I startle, breathing faster, grateful he can only sense the general direction of my feelings and not more than that. For a moment I actually want to say no. No, I’m not scared.

I’m petrified.

Because being this close to you is doing things to me. Strange things and irrational things and things that flutter against my chest and braid my bones together. I want a pocketful of punctuation marks to end the thoughts he’s forced

into my head.

But I don't say any of those things.

Instead, I ask a question I already know the answer to.

"Why would I be scared?"

"You're shaking," he says.

"Oh."

The two letters and their small, startled sound run right out of my mouth to seek refuge in a place far from here. I keep wishing I had the strength to look away from him in moments like this. I keep wishing my cheeks wouldn't so easily enflame. I keep wasting my wishes on stupid things, I think.

"No, I'm not scared," I finally say. But I really need him to step away from me. I really need him to do me that favor. "I'm just surprised."

He's silent, then, his eyes imploring me for an explanation. He's become both familiar and foreign to me in such a short period of time; exactly and nothing like I thought he'd be.

"You allow the world to think you're a heartless murderer," I tell him. "And you're not."

He laughs, once; his eyebrows lift in surprise. "No," he says. "I'm afraid I'm just the regular kind of murderer."

"But why—why would you pretend to be so ruthless?" I ask. "Why do you allow people to treat you that way?"

He sighs. Pushes his rolled-up shirtsleeves above his elbows again. I can't help but follow the movement, my eyes lingering along his forearms. And I realize, for the first time, that he doesn't sport any military tattoos like everyone else. I wonder why.

"What difference does it make?" he says. "People can think whatever they like. I don't desire their validation."

"So you don't mind," I ask him, "that people judge you so harshly?"

"I have no one to impress," he says. "No one who cares about what happens to me. I'm not in the business of making friends, love. My job is to lead an army, and it's the only thing I'm good at. No one," he says, "would be proud of the things I've accomplished. My mother doesn't even know me anymore. My father thinks I'm weak and pathetic. My soldiers want me dead. The world is going to hell. And the conversations I have with you are the longest I've ever had."

"What—really?" I ask, eyes wide.

"Really."

“And you trust me with all this information?” I say. “Why share your secrets with me?”

His eyes darken, deaden, all of a sudden. He looks toward the wall. “Don’t do that,” he says. “Don’t ask me questions you already know the answers to. Twice I’ve laid myself bare for you and all it’s gotten me was a bullet wound and a broken heart. Don’t torture me,” he says, meeting my eyes again. “It’s a cruel thing to do, even to someone like me.”

“Warner—”

“I don’t understand!” He breaks, finally losing his composure, his voice rising in pitch. “What could *Kent*,” he says, spitting the name, “possibly do for you?”

I’m so shocked, so unprepared to answer such a question that I’m rendered momentarily speechless. I don’t even know what’s happened to Adam, where he might be or what our future holds. Right now all I’m clinging to is a hope that he made it out alive. That he’s out there somewhere, surviving against the odds. Right now, that certainty would be enough for me.

So I take a deep breath and try to find the right words, the right way to explain that there are so many bigger, heavier issues to deal with, but when I look up I find Warner is still staring at me, waiting for an answer to a question I now realize he’s been trying hard to suppress. Something that must be eating away at him.

And I suppose he deserves an answer. Especially after what I did to him.

So I take a deep breath.

“It’s not something I know how to explain,” I say. “He’s . . . I don’t know.” I stare into my hands. “He was my first friend. The first person to treat me with respect—to love me.” I’m quiet a moment. “He’s always been so kind to me.”

Warner flinches. His eyes widen in shock. “He’s always been so *kind* to you?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

Warner laughs a harsh, hollow sort of laugh.

“This is incredible,” he says, staring at the door, one hand caught in his hair. “I’ve been consumed by this question for the past three days, trying desperately to understand why you would give yourself to me so willingly, just to rip my heart out at the very last moment for some—some bland, utterly replaceable automaton. I kept thinking there had to be some great reason, something I’d overlooked, something I wasn’t able to fathom.”

“And I was ready to accept it,” he says. “I’d forced myself to accept it

because I figured your reasons were deep and beyond my grasp. I was willing to let you go if you'd found something extraordinary. Someone who could know you in ways I'd never be able to comprehend. Because you deserve that," he says. "I told myself you deserved more than me, more than my miserable offerings." He shakes his head. "But this?" he says, appalled. "These words? This explanation? You chose him because he's *kind* to you? Because he's offered you basic *charity*?"

I'm suddenly angry.

I'm suddenly mortified.

I'm outraged by the permission Warner's granted himself to judge my life—that he thought he'd been *generous* by stepping aside. I narrow my eyes, clench my fists. "It's not charity," I snap. "He cares about me—and I care about him!"

Warner nods, unimpressed. "You should get a dog, love. I hear they share much the same qualities."

"You are unbelievable!" I shove myself upward, scrambling to my feet and regretting it. I have to cling to the bed frame to steady myself. "My relationship with Adam is none of your business!"

"Your *relationship*?" Warner laughs, loud. He moves quickly to face me from the other side of the bed, leaving several feet between us. "What relationship? Does he even know anything about you? Does he understand you? Does he know your wants, your fears, the truth you conceal in your heart?"

"Oh, and what? You do?"

"You know damn well that I do!" he shouts, pointing an accusatory finger at me. "And I'm willing to bet my *life* that he has no idea what you're really like. You tiptoe around his feelings, pretending to be a nice little girl for him, don't you? You're afraid of scaring him off. You're afraid of telling him too much—"

"You don't know *anything*!"

"Oh I know," he says, rushing forward. "I understand perfectly. He's fallen for your quiet, timid shell. For who you *used* to be. He has no idea what you're capable of. What you might do if you're pushed too far." His hand slips behind my neck; he leans in until our lips are only inches apart.

What is happening to my lungs.

"You're a coward," he whispers. "You want to be with me and it terrifies you. And you're ashamed," he says. "Ashamed you could ever want someone like me. Aren't you?" He drops his gaze and his nose grazes mine and I can almost count the millimeters between our lips. I'm struggling to focus, trying to remember that I'm mad at him, mad about something, but his mouth is right in

front of mine and my mind can't stop trying to figure out how to shove aside the space between us.

"You want me," he says softly, his hands moving up my back, "and it's *killing* you."

I jerk backward, breaking away, hating my body for reacting to him, for falling apart like this. My joints feel flimsy, my legs have lost their bones. I need oxygen, need a brain, need to find my lungs—

"You deserve so much more than charity," he says, his chest heaving. "You deserve to live. You deserve to be *alive*." He's staring at me, unblinking.

"Come back to life, love. I'll be here when you wake up."

TEN

I wake up on my stomach.

My face is buried in the pillows, my arms hugging their soft contours. I blink steadily, my bleary eyes taking in my surroundings, trying to remember where I am. I squint into the brightness of the day. My hair falls into my face as I lift my head to look around.

“Good morning.”

I startle for no good reason, sitting up too quickly and clutching a pillow to my chest for an equally inexplicable reason. Warner is standing at the foot of the bed, fully dressed. He’s wearing black pants and a slate-green sweater that clings to the shape of his body, the sleeves pushed up his forearms. His hair is perfect. His eyes are alert, awake, impossibly brightened by the green of his shirt. And he’s holding a steaming mug in his hand. Smiling at me.

I offer him a limp wave.

“Coffee?” he asks, offering me the mug.

I stare at it, doubtful. “I’ve never had coffee before.”

“It isn’t terrible,” he says with a shrug. “Delalieu is obsessed with it. Isn’t that right, Delalieu?”

I jerk backward on the bed, my head nearly hitting the wall behind me.

An older, kindly-looking gentleman smiles at me from the corner of the room. His thin brown hair and twitchy mustache look vaguely familiar to me, as if I’ve seen him on base before. I notice he’s standing next to a breakfast cart. “It’s a pleasure to officially meet you, Miss Ferrars,” he says. His voice is a little shaky, but not at all intimidating. His eyes are unexpectedly sincere. “The coffee really is quite good,” he says. “I have it every day. Though I always have mine with—”

“Cream and sugar,” Warner says with a wry smile, his eyes laughing as if at some private joke. “Yes. Though I’m afraid the sugar is a bit too much for me. I find I prefer the bitterness.” He glances at me again. “The choice is yours.”

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Breakfast,” Warner says, his eyes revealing nothing. “I thought you might

be hungry.”

“It’s okay that he’s here?” I whisper, knowing full well that Delalieu can hear me. “That he knows I’m here?”

Warner nods. Offers me no other explanation.

“Okay,” I tell him. “I’ll try the coffee.”

I crawl across the bed to reach for the mug, and Warner’s eyes follow my movements, traveling from my face to the shape of my body to the rumpled pillows and sheets beneath my hands and knees. When he finally meets my eyes he looks away too quickly, handing me the mug only to put an entire room between us.

“So how much does Delalieu know?” I ask, glancing at the older gentleman.

“What do you mean?” Warner raises an eyebrow.

“Well, does he know that I’m leaving?” I raise an eyebrow, too. Warner stares. “You promised you’d get me off base,” I say to him, “and I’m hoping Delalieu is here to help you with that. Though if it’s too much trouble, I’m always happy to take the window.” I cock my head. “It worked out well the last time.”

Warner narrows his eyes at me, his lips a thin line. He’s still glaring when he nods at the breakfast cart beside him. “This is how we’re getting you out of here today.”

I choke on my first sip of coffee. “What?”

“It’s the easiest, most efficient solution,” Warner says. “You’re small and lightweight, you can easily fold yourself into a tight space, and the cloth panels will keep you hidden from sight. I’m often working in my room,” he says. “Delalieu brings me my breakfast trays from time to time. No one will suspect anything unusual.”

I look at Delalieu for some kind of confirmation.

He nods eagerly.

“How did you get me here in the first place?” I ask. “Why can’t we just do the same thing?”

Warner studies one of the breakfast plates. “I’m afraid that option is no longer available to us.”

“What do you mean?” My body seizes with a sudden anxiety. “How did you get me in here?”

“You weren’t exactly conscious,” he says. “We had to be a little more . . . creative.”

“Delalieu.”

The old man looks up at the sound of my voice, clearly surprised to be addressed so directly. “Yes, miss?”

“How did you get me into the building?”

Delalieu glances at Warner, whose gaze is now firmly fixed on the wall. Delalieu looks at me, offers me an apologetic smile. “We—well, we carted you in,” he says.

“How?”

“Sir,” Delalieu says suddenly, his eyes imploring Warner for direction.

“We brought you in,” Warner says, stifling a sigh, “in a body bag.”

My limbs go stiff with fear. “You *what*?”

“You were unconscious, love. We didn’t have many options. I couldn’t very well carry you onto base in my arms.” He shoots me a look. “There were many casualties from the battle,” he says. “On both sides. A body bag was easily overlooked.”

I’m gaping at him.

“Don’t worry.” He smiles. “I cut some holes in it for you.”

“You’re so thoughtful,” I snap.

“It was thoughtful,” I hear Delalieu say. I look at him to find he’s watching me in shock, appalled by my behavior. “Our commander was saving your life.”

I flinch.

I stare into my coffee cup, heat coloring my cheeks. My conversations with Warner have never had an audience before. I wonder what our interactions must look like to an outside observer.

“It’s all right, Lieutenant,” Warner says. “She tends to get angry when she’s terrified. It’s little more than a defense mechanism. The idea of being folded into such a small space has likely triggered her claustrophobic tendencies.”

I look up suddenly.

Warner is staring directly at me, his eyes deep with an unspoken understanding.

I keep forgetting that Warner is able to sense emotions, that he can always tell what I’m really feeling. And he knows me well enough to be able to put everything into context.

I’m utterly transparent to him.

And somehow—right now, at least—I’m grateful for it.

“Of course, sir,” Delalieu says. “My apologies.”

“Feel free to shower and change,” Warner says to me. “I left some clothes for you in the bathroom—no dresses,” he says, fighting a smile. “We’ll wait

here. Delalieu and I have a few things to discuss.”

I nod, untangling myself from the bedsheets and stumbling to my feet. I tug on the hem of my T-shirt, self-conscious all of a sudden, feeling rumpled and disheveled in front of these two military men.

I stare at them for a moment.

Warner gestures to the bathroom door.

I take the coffee with me as I go, wondering all the while who Delalieu is and why Warner seems to trust him. I thought he said all of his soldiers wanted him dead.

I wish I could listen in on their conversation, but they’re both careful to say nothing until the bathroom door shuts behind me.

ELEVEN

I take a quick shower, careful not to let the water touch my hair. I already washed it last night, and the temperature feels brisk this morning; if we're headed out, I don't want to risk catching a cold. It's difficult, though, to avoid the temptation of a long shower—and hot water—in Warner's bathroom.

I dress quickly, grabbing the folded clothes Warner left on a shelf for me. Dark jeans and a soft, navy-blue sweater. Fresh socks and underwear. A brand-new pair of tennis shoes.

The sizes are perfect.

Of course they are.

I haven't worn jeans in so many years that at first the material feels strange to me. The fit is so tight, so tapered; I have to bend my knees to stretch the denim a little. But by the time I tug the sweater over my head, I'm finally feeling comfortable. And even though I miss my suit, there's something nice about wearing real clothes. No fancy dresses, no cargo pants, no spandex. Just jeans and a sweater, like a normal person. It's an odd reality.

I take a quick look in the mirror, blinking at my reflection. I wish I had something to tie my hair back with; I got so used to being able to pull it out of my face while I was at Omega Point. I look away with a resigned sigh, hoping to get a start on this day as soon as possible. But the minute I crack open the bathroom door, I hear voices.

I freeze in place. Listening.

“—sure it's safe, sir?”

Delalieu is talking.

“Forgive me,” the older man says quickly. “I don't mean to seem impertinent, but I can't help but be concerned—”

“It'll be fine. Just make sure our troops aren't patrolling that area. We should only be gone a few hours at the most.”

“Yes, sir.”

Silence.

Then

“Juliette,” Warner says, and I nearly fall into the toilet. “Come out here, love. It’s rude to eavesdrop.”

I step out of the bathroom slowly, face flushed with heat from the shower and the shame of being caught in such a juvenile act. I suddenly have no idea what to do with my hands.

Warner is enjoying my embarrassment. “Ready to go?”

No.

No, I’m not.

Suddenly hope and fear are strangling me and I have to remind myself to breathe. I’m not ready to face the death and destruction of all my friends. Of course I’m not.

But “Yes, of course” is what I say out loud.

I’m steeling myself for the truth, in whatever form it arrives.

TWELVE

Warner was right.

Being carted through Sector 45 was a lot easier than I expected. No one noticed us, and the empty space underneath the cart was actually spacious enough for me to sit comfortably.

It's only when Delalieu flips open one of the cloth panels that I realize where we are. I glance around quickly, my eyes taking inventory of the military tanks parked in this vast space.

"Quickly," Delalieu whispers. He motions toward the tank parked closest to us. I watch as the door is pushed open from the inside. "Hurry, miss. You cannot be seen."

I scramble.

I jump out from underneath the cart and into the open door of the tank, clambering up and into the seat. The door shuts behind me, and I turn back to see Delalieu looking on, his watery eyes pinched together with worry. The tank starts moving.

I nearly fall forward.

"Stay low and buckle up, love. These tanks weren't built for comfort."

Warner is smiling as he stares straight ahead, his hands sheathed in black leather gloves, his body draped in a steel-gray overcoat. I duck down in my seat and fumble for the straps, buckling myself in as best I can.

"So you know how to get there?" I ask him.

"Of course."

"But your father said you couldn't remember anything about Omega Point."

Warner glances over, his eyes laughing. "How convenient for us that I've regained my memory."

"Hey—how did you even get out of there?" I ask him. "How did you get past the guards?"

He shrugs. "I told them I had permission to be out of my room."

I gape at him. "You're not serious."

"Very."

“But how did you find your way out?” I ask. “You got past the guards, fine. But that place is like a labyrinth—I couldn’t find my way around even after I’d been living there for a month.”

Warner checks a display on the dashboard. Hits a few buttons for functions I don’t understand. “I wasn’t completely unconscious when I was carried in,” he says. “I forced myself to pay attention to the entrance,” he says. “I did my best to memorize any obvious landmarks. I also kept track of the amount of time it took to carry me from the entrance to the medical wing, and then from the medical wing to my room. And whenever Castle took me on my rounds to the bathroom,” he says, “I studied my surroundings, trying to gauge how far I was from the exit.”

“So—” I frown. “You could’ve defended yourself against the guards and tried to escape much sooner. Why didn’t you?”

“I already told you,” he says. “It was oddly luxurious, being confined like that. I was able to catch up on weeks of sleep. I didn’t have to work or deal with any military issues. But the most obvious answer,” he says, exhaling, “is that I stayed because I was able to see you every day.”

“Oh.”

Warner laughs, his eyes pressed shut for a second. “You really never wanted to be there, did you?”

“What do you mean?”

He shakes his head. “If you’re going to survive,” he says to me, “you can never be indifferent to your surroundings. You can’t depend on others to take care of you. You cannot presume that someone else will do things right.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t care,” he says. “You were there, underground for over a month, grouped together with these supernaturally inclined rebels spouting big, lofty ideals about saving the world, and you say you couldn’t even find your way around. It’s because you didn’t care,” he says. “You didn’t want to participate. If you did, you would’ve taken the initiative to learn as much as possible about your new home. You would’ve been beside yourself with excitement. Instead, you were apathetic. Indifferent.”

I open my mouth to protest but I don’t have a chance.

“I don’t blame you,” he says. “Their goals were unrealistic. I don’t care how flexible your limbs are or how many objects you can move with your mind. If you do not understand your opponent—or worse, if you *underestimate* your opponent—you are going to lose.” His jaw tightens. “I kept trying to tell you,”

he says, “that Castle was going to lead your group into a massacre. He was too optimistic to be a proper leader, too hopeful to logically consider the odds stacked against him, and too ignorant of The Reestablishment to truly understand how they deal with voices of opposition.

“The Reestablishment,” Warner says, “is not interested in maintaining a facade of kindness. The civilians are nothing more than peons to them. They want power,” he says to me, “and they want to be entertained. They are not interested in fixing our problems. They only want to make sure that they are as comfortable as possible as we dig our own graves.”

“No.”

“Yes,” he says. “It is exactly that simple. Everything else is just a joke to them. The texts, the artifacts, the languages. They just want to scare people, to keep them submissive, and to strip them of their individuality—to herd them into a singular mentality that serves no purpose but their own. This is why they can and will destroy all rebel movements. And this is a fact that your friends did not fully understand. And now,” he says, “they have suffered for their ignorance.”

He stops the tank.

Turns off the engine.

Unlocks my door.

And I’m still not ready to face this.

THIRTEEN

Anyone would be able to find Omega Point now. Any citizen, any civilian, anyone with working vision would be able to tell you where the large crater in Sector 45 is located.

Warner was right.

I unbuckle myself slowly, reaching blindly for the door handle. I feel like I'm moving through fog, like my legs have been formed from fresh clay. I fail to account for the height of the tank above the ground and stumble into the open air.

This is it.

The empty, barren stretch of land I'd come to recognize as the area just around Omega Point; the land Castle told us was once lush with greenery and vegetation. He said it'd been the ideal hiding place for Omega Point. But this was before things started changing. Before the weather warped and the plants struggled to flourish. Now it's a graveyard. Skeletal trees and howling winds, a thin layer of snow powdered over the cold, packed earth.

Omega Point is gone.

It's nothing but a huge, gaping hole in the ground about a mile across and 50 feet deep. It's a bowlful of innards, of death and destruction, silent in the wake of tragedy. Years of effort, so much time and energy spent toward a specific goal, one purpose: a plan to save humanity.

Obliterated overnight.

A gust of wind climbs into my clothes then, wraps itself around my bones. Icy fingers tiptoe up my pant legs, clench their fists around my knees and pull; suddenly I'm not sure how I'm still standing. My blood feels frozen, brittle. My hands are covering my mouth and I don't know who put them there.

Something heavy falls onto my shoulders. A coat.

I look back to find that Warner is watching me. He holds out a pair of gloves.

I take the gloves and tug them on over my frozen fingers and wonder why I'm not waking up yet, why no one has reached out to tell me it's okay, it's just a bad dream, that everything is going to be fine.

I feel as though I've been scooped out from the inside, like someone has spooned out all the organs I need to function and I'm left with nothing, just emptiness, just complete and utter disbelief. Because this is impossible.

Omega Point.

Gone.

Completely destroyed.

“JULIETTE, GET DOWN—”

FOURTEEN

Warner tackles me to the ground just as the sound of gunshots fills the air.

His arms are under me, cradling me to his chest, his body shielding mine from whatever imminent danger we've just gotten ourselves into. My heart is beating so loudly I can hardly hear Warner's voice as he speaks into my ear. "Are you all right?" he whispers, pulling me tighter against him.

I try to nod.

"Stay down," he says. "Don't move."

I wasn't planning on it, I don't say to him.

"STEP AWAY FROM HER, YOU WORTHLESS SACK OF SHIT—"

My body goes stiff.

That voice. I know that voice.

I hear footsteps coming closer, crunching on the snow and ice and dirt. Warner loosens his hold around me, and I realize he's reaching for his gun.

"Kenji—no—," I try to shout, my voice muffled by the snow.

"GET UP!" Kenji bellows, still moving closer. "Stand up, coward!"

I've officially begun to panic.

Warner's lips brush against my ear. "I'll be right back."

Just as I turn to protest, Warner's weight is lifted. His body gone. He's completely disappeared.

I scramble to my feet, spinning around.

My eyes land on Kenji.

He's stopped in place, confused and scanning the area, and I'm so happy to see him that I can't be bothered to care about Warner right now. I'm almost ready to cry. I squeak out Kenji's name.

His eyes lock on to mine.

He charges forward, closing the gap between us and tackling me in a hug so fierce he practically cuts off my circulation. "Holy *shit* it's good to see you," he says, breathless, squeezing me tighter.

I cling to him, so relieved, so stunned. I press my eyes shut, unable to stop the tears.

Kenji pulls back to look me in the eye, his face bright with pain and joy. “What the hell are you doing out here? I thought you were *dead*—”

“I thought *you* were dead!”

He stops then. The smile vanishes from his face. “Where the hell did Warner go?” he says, eyes taking in our surroundings. “You were with him, right? I’m not losing my mind, am I?”

“Yes—listen—Warner brought me here,” I tell him, trying to speak calmly, hoping to cool the anger in his eyes. “But he’s not trying to fight. When he told me about what happened to Omega Point, I didn’t believe him, so I asked him to show me proof—”

“Is that right?” Kenji says, eyes flashing with a kind of hatred I’ve never seen in him before. “He came to show off what they did? To show you how many people he MURDERED!” Kenji breaks away from me, shaking with fury. “Did he tell you how many children were in there? Did he tell you how many of our men and women were *slaughtered* because of him?” He stops, heaving. “Did he tell you that?” he asks again, screaming into the air. “COME BACK OUT HERE, YOU SICK BASTARD!”

“Kenji, *no*—”

But Kenji’s already gone, darting away so quickly he’s just a speck in the distance now. I know he’s searching the vast space for glimpses of Warner and I need to do something, I need to stop him but I don’t know how—

“Don’t move.”

Warner’s whispers are at my ear, his hands planted firmly on my shoulders. I try to spin around and he holds me in place. “I said don’t move.”

“What are you d—”

“Shhhh,” he says. “No one can see me.”

“*What?*” I crane my neck to try and glance behind me, but my head knocks against Warner’s chin. His *invisible* chin.

“No,” I hear myself gasp. “But you’re not touching him—”

“Look straight ahead,” he whispers. “It won’t do us any good for you to be caught talking to invisible people.”

I turn my face forward. Kenji is no longer in sight. “How?” I ask Warner. “How did you—”

Warner shrugs behind me. “I’ve felt different since we did that experiment with your power. Now that I know exactly what it’s like to take hold of another ability, I’m more easily able to recognize it. Like right now,” he says. “I feel as though I could quite literally reach forward and take hold of your energy. It was

just as simple with Kenji,” he says. “He was standing right there. My survival instincts took over.”

And even though this is a terrible moment to dwell on these things, I can’t help but allow myself to panic. That Warner can so easily project his powers. With no training. No practice.

He can tap into my abilities and use them as he pleases.

This can’t possibly be good.

Warner’s hands squeeze my shoulders.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“I’m trying to see if I can pass the power on to you—if I can retransfer it and make us both invisible—but it seems I’m unable. Once I’ve taken the energy from someone else, I can *use* it, but I can’t seem to share it. After I release the energy, it can only be returned to the owner.”

“How do you know so much already?” I ask, astonished. “You just learned about this a few days ago.”

“I’ve been practicing,” he says.

“But how? With who?” I pause. “*Oh.*”

“Yes,” he says. “It’s been rather incredible having you stay with me. For so many reasons.” His hands fall from my shoulders. “I was worried I might be able to hurt you with your own power. I wasn’t sure I could absorb it without accidentally using it against you. But we seem to cancel each other out,” he says. “Once I take it from you, I can only ever give it back.”

I’m not breathing.

“Let’s go,” Warner says. “Kenji is moving out of range and I won’t be able to hold on to his energy for much longer. We have to get out of here.”

“I can’t leave,” I tell him. “I can’t just abandon Kenji, not like this—”

“He’s going to try and kill me, love. And while I know I’ve proved otherwise in your case, I can assure you I’m generally incapable of standing by as someone makes an attempt on my life. So unless you want to watch me shoot him first, I suggest we get out of here as soon as possible. I can feel him circling back.”

“No. You can go. You *should* go. But I’m going to stay here.”

Warner stills behind me. “What?”

“Go,” I tell him. “You have to go to the compounds—you have things to take care of. You should go. But I need to be here. I have to know what’s happened to everyone else, and I have to move forward from there.”

“You’re asking me to leave you here,” he says, not bothering to hide his shock. “Indefinitely.”

“Yes,” I say to him. “I’m not leaving until I get some answers. And you’re right. Kenji will definitely shoot first and ask questions later, so it’s best that you leave. I’ll talk to him, try to tell him what’s happened. Maybe we could all work together—”

“What?”

“It doesn’t just have to be me and you,” I tell him. “You said you wanted to help me kill your father and take down The Reestablishment, right?”

Warner nods slowly against the back of my head.

“Okay. So.” I take a deep breath. “I accept your offer.”

Warner goes rigid. “You accept my offer.”

“Yes.”

“Do you understand what you’re saying?”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. I’m not sure I’ll be able to do this without you.”

I feel the breath rush out of him, his heart beating hard against my back.

“But I need to know who else is still alive,” I insist. “And the group of us can work together. We’ll be stronger that way, and we’ll all be fighting toward the same goal—”

“No.”

“It’s the only way—”

“I have to go,” he says, spinning me around. “Kenji is almost here.” He shoves a hard plastic object into my hand. “Activate this pager,” he says, “whenever you’re ready. Keep it with you and I’ll know where to find you.”

“But—”

“You have four hours,” he says. “If I don’t hear from you before then, I’ll assume you are in some kind of danger, and I will come find you myself.” He’s still holding my hand, the pager still pressed against my palm. It’s the craziest feeling, to be touched by someone you can’t see. “Do you understand?”

I nod, once. I have no idea where to look.

And then I freeze, every inch of me hot and cold all at once because he presses his lips to the back of my fingers in one soft, tender moment and when he pulls away I’m reeling, heady, unsteady.

Just as I’m regaining my footing, I hear the familiar sound of an electric thrum, and realize Warner has already begun to drive away.

And I’m left to wonder what on earth I’ve just agreed to.

FIFTEEN

Kenji is stomping toward me, his eyes blazing.

“Where the hell did he go? Did you see where he went?”

I shake my head as I reach forward, grabbing his arms in an attempt to focus his eyes. “Talk to me, Kenji. Tell me what happened—where is everyone—?”

“There is no *everyone*!” he snaps, breaking away. “Omega Point is gone—everything gone—*everything*—” He drops to his knees, heaving as he falls forward, his forehead digging into the snow. “I thought you were dead, too—I thought—”

“No,” I gasp. “No, Kenji—they can’t all have died—not everyone—”

Not Adam.

Not Adam.

Please please please not *Adam*

I’d been too optimistic about today.

I’d been lying to myself.

I didn’t really believe Warner. I didn’t believe it could be this bad. But now, to see the truth, and to hear Kenji’s agony—the reality of all that happened is hitting me so hard I feel like I’m falling backward into my own grave.

My knees have hit the ground.

“Please,” I’m saying, “please tell me there are others—Adam has to be alive —”

“I grew up here,” Kenji is saying. He’s not listening to me and I don’t recognize his raw, aching voice. I want the old Kenji, the one who knew how to take charge, to take control. And this isn’t him.

This Kenji is terrifying me.

“This was my whole life,” he says, looking toward the crater that used to be Omega Point. “The only place—all those people—” He chokes. “They were my *family*. My only family—”

“Kenji, please . . .” I try to shake him. I need him to snap out of his grief before I succumb to it, too. We need to move out of plain sight and I’m only now beginning to realize that Kenji doesn’t care. He *wants* to put himself in

danger. He *wants* to fight. He wants to *die*.

I can't let that happen.

Someone needs to take control of this situation right now and right now I might be the only one capable.

"Get up," I snap, my voice harsher than I intended. "You need to get up, and you need to stop acting reckless. You know we're not safe out here, and we have to move. Where are you staying?" I grab his arm and pull, but he won't budge. "Get up!" I shout again. "Get—"

And then, just like that, I remember I'm a whole hell of a lot stronger than Kenji will ever be. It almost makes me smile.

I close my eyes and focus, trying to remember everything Kenji taught me, everything I've learned about how to control my strength, how to tap into it when I need to. I spent so many years bottling everything up and locking it away that it still takes some time to remember it's there, waiting for me to harness it. But the moment I welcome it, I feel it rush into me. It's a raw power so potent it makes me feel invincible.

And then, just like that, I yank Kenji up off the ground and toss him over my shoulder.

Me.

I do that.

Kenji, of course, unleashes a string of the foulest expletives I've ever heard. He's kicking at me but I can hardly feel it; my arms are wrapped loosely around him, my strength carefully reined in so as not to crush him. He's angry, but at least he's swearing again. This is something I recognize.

I cut him off midexpletive. "Tell me where you're staying," I say to him, "and pull yourself together. You can't fall apart on me now."

Kenji is silent a moment.

"Hey, um, I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for a friend of mine," he says. "Have you seen her? She's a tiny little thing, cries a lot, spends too much time with her feelings—"

"Shut up, Kenji."

"Oh wait!" he says. "It *is* you."

"Where are we going?"

"When are you going to put me down?" he counters, no longer amused. "I mean, I've got an excellent view of your ass from here, but if you don't mind me staring—"

I drop him without thinking.

“Goddammit, Juliette—what the *hell*—”

“How’s the view from down there?” I stand over his splayed body, arms crossed over my chest.

“I hate you.”

“Get up, please.”

“When did you learn to do that?” he grumbles, stumbling to his feet and rubbing his back.

I roll my eyes. Squint into the distance. Nothing and no one in sight, so far. “I didn’t.”

“Oh, right,” he says. “Because that makes sense. Because tossing a grown-ass man over your shoulders is just so freaking easy. That shit just comes naturally to you.”

I shrug.

Kenji lets out a low whistle. “Cocky as hell, too.”

“Yeah.” I shade my eyes against the cold sunlight. “I think spending all that time with you really screwed me up.”

“Ohhh-ho,” he says, clapping his hands together, unamused. “Stand up, princess. You’re a comedian.”

“I’m already standing up.”

“It’s called a joke, smart-ass.”

“Where are we going?” I ask him again. I start walking in no particular direction. “I really need to know where we’re headed.”

“Unregulated turf.” He falls into step with me, taking my hand to lead the way. We go invisible immediately. “It was the only place we could think of.”

“We?”

“Yeah. It’s Adam’s old place, remember? It’s where I first—”

I stop walking, chest heaving. I’m crushing Kenji’s hand in mine and he yanks it free, unleashing expletives as he does, making us visible again. “Adam is still alive?” I ask, searching his eyes.

“Of course he’s still alive.” Kenji shoots me a dirty look as he rubs at his hand. “Have you heard nothing I’ve been saying to you?”

“But you said everyone was dead,” I gasp. “You said—”

“Everyone *is* dead,” Kenji says, his features darkening again. “There were over a hundred of us at Omega Point. There are only nine of us left.”

SIXTEEN

“Who?” I ask, my heart constricting. “Who survived? How?”

Kenji lets out a long breath, running both hands through his hair as he focuses on a point behind me. “You just want a list?” he asks. “Or do you want to know how it all happened?”

“I want to know everything.”

He nods. Looks down, stomps on a clump of snow. He takes my hand again, and we start walking, two invisible kids in the middle of nowhere.

“I guess,” Kenji finally says, “that on some level we have you to thank for us still being alive. Because if we’d never gone to find you, we probably would’ve died on the battlefield with everyone else.”

He hesitates.

“Adam and I noticed you were missing pretty quickly, but by the time we fought our way back to the front, we were too late. We were still maybe twenty feet out, and could only see them hauling you into the tank.” He shakes his head. “We couldn’t just run after you,” he says. “We were trying not to get shot at.”

His voice gets deeper, more somber as he tells the story.

“So we decided we’d go an alternate route—avoiding all the main roads—to try and follow you back to base, because that’s where we thought you were headed. But just as we got there, we ran into Castle, Lily, Ian, and Alia, who were on their way out. They’d managed to complete their own mission successfully; they broke into Sector 45 and stole Winston and Brendan back. Those two were half dead when Castle found them,” Kenji says quietly.

He takes a sharp breath.

“And then Castle told us what they’d heard while they were on base—that the troops were mobilizing for an air assault on Omega Point. They were going to drop bombs on the entire area, hoping that if they hit it with enough firepower, everything underground would just collapse in on itself. There’d be no escape for anyone inside, and everything we’d built would be destroyed.”

I feel him tense beside me.

We stop moving for just a moment before I feel Kenji tug on my hand. I

duck into the cold and wind, steeling myself against the weather and his words.

“Apparently they’d tortured the location out of our people on the battlefield,” he says. “Just before killing them.” He shakes his head. “We knew we didn’t have much time, but we were still close enough to base that I managed to commandeer one of the army tanks. We loaded up and headed straight for Point, hoping to get everyone out in time. But I think, deep down,” he says, “we knew it wasn’t going to work. The planes were overhead. Already on their way.”

He laughs, suddenly, but the action seems to cause him pain.

“And by some freak miracle of insanity, we intercepted James almost a mile out. He’d managed to sneak out, and was on his way toward the battlefield. The poor kid had pissed the whole front of his pants he was so scared, but he said he was tired of being left behind. Said he wanted to fight with his brother.” Kenji’s voice is strained.

“And the craziest shit,” he says, “is that if James had stayed at Point like we told him to, where we thought he’d be safe, he would’ve died with everyone else.” Kenji laughs a little. “And that was it. There was nothing we could do. We just had to stand there, watching as they dropped bombs on thirty years of work, killed everyone too young or too old to fight back, and then massacred the rest of our team on the field.” He clenches his hand around mine. “I come back here every day,” he says. “Hoping someone will show up. Hoping to find something to take back.” He stops then, voice tight with emotion. “And here you are. This shit doesn’t even seem real.”

I squeeze his fingers—gently, this time—and huddle closer to him. “We’re going to be okay, Kenji. I promise. We’ll stick together. We’ll get through this.”

Kenji tugs his hand out of mine only to slip it around my shoulder, pulling me tight against his side. His voice is soft when he speaks. “What happened to you, princess? You seem different.”

“Bad different?”

“Good different,” he says. “Like you finally put your big-girl pants on.”

I laugh out loud.

“I’m serious,” he says.

“Well.” I pause. “Sometimes different is better, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Kenji says. “Yeah, I guess it is.” He hesitates. “So . . . are you going to tell me what happened? Because last I saw you, you were being shoved into the backseat of an army tank, and this morning you show up all freshly showered and shiny-white-sneakered and you’re walking around with *Warner*,” he says, releasing my shoulder and taking my hand again. “And it doesn’t take a genius

to figure out that that shit doesn't make any sense."

I take a deep, steadying breath. It's strange not being able to see Kenji right now; it feels as if I'm making these confessions to the wind. "Anderson shot me," I tell him.

Kenji stills beside me. I can hear him breathing hard. "What?"

I nod, even though he can't see me. "I wasn't taken back to base. The soldiers delivered me to Anderson; he was waiting in one of the houses on unregulated turf. I think he wanted privacy," I tell Kenji, carefully omitting any information about Warner's mom. Those secrets are too private, and not mine to share. "Anderson wanted revenge," I say instead, "for what I did to his legs. He was crippled; when I saw him he was using a cane. But before I could figure out what was happening, he pulled out a gun and shot me. Right in the chest."

"Holy shit," Kenji breathes.

"I remember it so well." I hesitate. "Dying. It was the most painful thing I've ever experienced. I couldn't scream because my lungs were torn apart or full of blood. I don't know. I just had to lie there, trying to breathe, hoping to drop dead as quickly as possible. And the whole time," I say, "the whole time I kept thinking about how I'd spent my entire life being a coward, and how it got me nowhere. And I knew that if I had the chance to do it all again, I'd do it differently. I promised myself I'd finally stop being afraid."

"Yeah, that's all super heartwarming," Kenji says, "but how in the hell did you survive a shot to the chest?" he demands. "You should be dead right now."

"Oh." I clear my throat a little. "Yeah, um, Warner saved my life."

"Shut the hell up."

I try not to laugh. "I'm serious," I say, taking a minute to explain how the girls were there and how Warner used their power to save me. How Anderson left me to die and how Warner took me back to base with him, hid me, and helped me recover. "And by the way," I say to Kenji, "Sonya and Sara are almost definitely still alive. Anderson took them back to the capital with him; he wants to force them to serve as his own personal healers. He's probably gotten them to fix his legs by now."

"Okay, you know what"—Kenji stops walking, grabs my shoulders—"you need to just back up, okay, because you are dumping way too much information on me all at once, and I need you to start from the beginning, and I need you to tell me *everything*," he says, his voice rising in pitch. "What the hell is going on? The girls are still alive? And what do you mean, Warner transferred their power to you? How the hell is that possible?"

So I tell him.

I finally tell him the things I've always wanted to confess. I tell him the truth about Warner's ability and the truth about how Kenji was injured outside the dining hall that night. I tell him how Warner had no idea what he was capable of, and how I let him practice with me in the tunnel while everyone was in the medical wing. How together we broke through the floor.

"Holy shit," Kenji whispers. "So that asshole tried to *kill* me."

"Not on purpose," I point out.

Kenji mutters something crude under his breath.

And though I mention nothing about Warner's unexpected visit to my room later that night, I do tell Kenji how Warner escaped, and how Anderson was waiting for Warner to show up before shooting me. Because Anderson knew how Warner felt about me, I tell Kenji, and wanted to punish him for it.

"Wait." Kenji cuts me off. "What do you mean, he knew how Warner *felt* about you? We *all* knew how Warner felt about you. He wanted to use you as a weapon," Kenji says. "That shouldn't have been a revelation. I thought his dad was happy about that."

I go stiff.

I forgot this part was still a secret. That I'd never revealed the truth about my connection to Warner. Because while Adam might've suspected that Warner had more than a professional interest in me, I'd never told anyone about my intimate moments with Warner. Or any of the things he's said to me.

I swallow, hard.

"Juliette," Kenji says, a warning in his voice. "You can't hold this shit back anymore. You have to tell me what's going on."

I feel myself sway.

"*Juliette—*"

"He's in love with me," I whisper. I've never admitted that out loud before, not even to myself. I think I hoped I could ignore it. Hide it. Make it go away so Adam would never find out.

"He's—wait—*what?*"

I take a deep breath. I suddenly feel exhausted.

"Please tell me you're joking," Kenji says.

I shake my head, forgetting he can't see me.

"Wow."

"Kenji, I—"

"This is soooo weird. Because I always thought Warner was crazy, you

know?” Kenji laughs. “But now, I mean, now there’s no doubt.”

My eyes fly wide open, shocking me into laughter. I push his invisible shoulder, hard.

Kenji laughs again, half amused, half reeling from disbelief. He takes a deep breath. “So, okay, wait, so, how do you know he’s in love with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, like—what, he took you out on a date or something? Bought you chocolates and wrote you some really shitty poetry? Warner doesn’t exactly seem like the affectionate type, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh.” I bite the inside of my cheek. “No, it was nothing like that.”

“Then?”

“He just . . . told me.”

Kenji stops walking so abruptly I nearly fall over. “No he didn’t.”

I don’t know how to respond to that.

“He actually said those words? To your face? Like, directly to your face?”

“Yes.”

“So—so—so wait, so he tells you he loves you . . . and you said? What?” Kenji demands, dumbfounded. “‘Thank you’?”

“No.” I stifle a cringe, remembering all too well that I actually shot Warner for it the first time. “I mean I didn’t—I mean—I don’t know, Kenji, it’s all really weird for me right now. I still haven’t found a way to deal with it.” My voice drops to a whisper. “Warner is really . . . intense,” I say, and I’m overcome by a flood of memories, my emotions colliding into one jumble of insanity.

His kisses on my body. My pants on the floor. His desperate confessions unhinging my joints.

I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling too hot, too unsteady, everything all too suddenly.

“That’s definitely one way of putting it,” Kenji mutters, snapping me out of my reverie. I hear him sigh. “So Warner still has no idea that he and Kent are brothers?”

“No,” I say, immediately sobered.

Brothers.

Brothers who hate each other. Brothers who want to kill each other. And I’m caught in the middle. Good God, what has happened to my life.

“And both of these guys can touch you?”

“Yes? But—well, no, not really.” I try to explain. “Adam . . . can’t really touch me. I mean, he can, sort of . . . ?” I trail off. “It’s complicated. He has to

actively work and train to counteract my energy with his own. But with Warner —” I shake my head, staring down at my invisible feet as I walk. “Warner can touch me with no consequences. It doesn’t do anything to him. He just absorbs it.”

“Damn,” Kenji says after a moment. “Damn damn damn. This shit is bananas.”

“I know.”

“So—okay—you’re telling me that Warner saved your life? That he actually begged the girls to help him heal you? And that he then hid you in his own room, and took care of you? Fed you and gave you clothes and shit and let you sleep in his bed?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah. Okay. I have a really hard time believing that.”

“I know,” I say again, this time blowing out an exasperated breath. “But he’s really not what you guys think. I know he seems kind of crazy, but he’s actually really—”

“Whoa, wait—are you *defending* him?” Kenji’s voice is laced with shock. “We are talking about the same dude who locked you up and tried to make you his military *slave*, right?”

I’m shaking my head, wishing I could try to explain everything Warner’s told me without sounding like a naive, gullible idiot. “It’s not—” I sigh. “He didn’t actually want to use me like that—,” I try to say.

Kenji barks out a laugh. “Holy *shit*,” he says. “You actually believe him, don’t you? You’re buying into all the bullshit he’s fed you—”

“You don’t know him, Kenji, that’s not fair—”

“Oh my God,” he breathes, laughing again. “You are seriously going to try and tell me that I don’t know the man who led me into battle? He was my goddamn commander,” Kenji says to me. “I know exactly who he is—”

“I’m not trying to argue with you, okay? I don’t expect you to understand—”

“This is hilarious,” Kenji says, wheezing through another laugh. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“Ohhh, *man*,” he says suddenly. “Kent is going to be *pissed*,” he says, dragging out the word in glee. He actually giggles.

“Wait—what? What does Adam have to do with this?”

“You do realize you haven’t asked me a single question about him, right?” A pause. “I mean, I just told you the whole saga of all the shit that happened to us

and you were just like, Oh, okay, cool story, bro, thanks for sharing. You didn't freak out or ask if Adam was injured. You didn't ask me what happened to him or even how he's coping right now, especially seeing as how he thinks you're *dead* and everything."

I feel sick all of a sudden. Stopped in my tracks. Mortified and guilty guilty guilty.

"And now you're standing here, defending *Warner*," Kenji is saying. "The same guy who tried to *kill Adam*, and you're acting like he's your friend or someshit. Like he's just some normal dude who's a little misunderstood. Like every single other person on the planet got it wrong, and probably because we're all just a bunch of judgmental, jealous assholes who hate him for having such a pretty, pretty face."

Shame singes my skin.

"I'm not an idiot, Kenji. I have reasons for the things I say."

"Yeah, and maybe I'm just saying that you have no idea what you're saying."

"Whatever."

"Don't *whatever* me—"

"*Whatever*," I say again.

"Oh my God," Kenji says to no one in particular. "I think this girl wants to get her ass kicked."

"You couldn't kick my ass if I had ten of them."

Kenji laughs out loud. "Is that a challenge?"

"It's a warning," I say to him.

"Ohhhhhh, so you're threatening me now? Little crybaby knows how to make threats now?"

"Shut up, Kenji."

"*Shut up, Kenji*," he repeats in a whiny voice, mocking me.

"How much farther do we have to go?" I ask too loudly, irritated and trying to change the subject.

"We're almost there," he shoots back, his words clipped.

Neither one of us speaks for a few minutes.

Then

"So . . . why did you walk all this way?" I ask. "Didn't you say you had a tank?"

"Yeah," Kenji says with a sigh, our argument momentarily forgotten. "We have two, actually. Kent said he stole one when you guys first escaped; it's still

sitting in his garage.”

Of course.

How could I forget?

“But I like walking,” Kenji continues. “I don’t have to worry about anyone seeing me, and I always hope that maybe if I’m on foot, I’ll be able to notice things I wouldn’t be able to otherwise. I’m still hoping,” he says, his voice tight again, “that we’ll find more of our own hidden out here somewhere.”

I squeeze Kenji’s hand again, clinging closer to him. “Me too,” I whisper.

SEVENTEEN

Adam's old place is exactly as I remember it.

Kenji and I sneak in from the underground parking garage, and scale a few flights of stairs to the upper levels. I'm suddenly so nervous I can hardly speak. I've had to grieve the loss of my friends twice already, and part of me feels like this can't possibly be happening. But it must be. It has to be.

I'm going to see Adam.

I'm going to see Adam's face.

He's going to be *real*.

"They blasted the door open when they were searching for us that first time," Kenji is saying, "so the door is pretty jammed up—we'd been piling a bunch of furniture against it to keep it closed, but then it got stuck the other way, soo . . . yeah, it might take them a while to open it. But other than that, this little place has been good to us. Kent's still got a ton of food in storage, and all the plumbing still works because he'd paid for almost everything through the end of the year. All in all, we got pretty lucky," he says.

I'm nodding my head, too afraid to open my mouth. That coffee from this morning suddenly doesn't feel very good in my stomach, and I'm jittery from head to toe.

Adam.

I'm about to see Adam.

Kenji bangs on the door. "Open up," he shouts. "It's me."

For a minute all I hear is the sound of heavy movement, creaky wood, screechy metal, and a series of thuds. I watch the doorframe as it shakes; someone on the other side is yanking on the door, trying to get it unjammed.

And then it opens. So slowly. I'm gripping my hands to keep myself steady.

Winston is standing at the door.

Gaping at me.

"Holy shit," he says. He pulls his glasses off—I notice they've been taped together—and blinks at me. His face is bruised and battered, his bottom lip swollen, split open. His left hand is bandaged, the gauze wrapped several times

around the palm of his hand.

I offer him a timid smile.

Winston grabs ahold of Kenji's shirt and yanks him forward, eyes still focused on my face. "Am I hallucinating again?" he asks. "Because I'm going to be so pissed if I'm hallucinating again. *Dammit*," he says, not waiting for Kenji to respond. "If I had any idea how much it would suck to have a concussion, I'd have shot myself in the face when I had a chance—"

"You're not hallucinating." Kenji cuts him off with a laugh. "Now let us inside."

Winston is still blinking at me, eyes wide as he backs away, giving us room to enter. But the minute I step over the threshold I'm thrust into another world, a whole different set of memories. This is Adam's home. The first place I ever found sanctuary. The first place I ever felt safe.

And now it's full of people, the space far too small to house so many large bodies. Castle and Brendan and Lily and Ian and Alia and James—they've all frozen midmovement, midsentence. They're all staring at me in disbelief. And I'm just about to say something, just about to find something acceptable to say to my only group of battered, broken friends, when Adam walks out of the small room I know used to belong to James. He's holding something in his hands, distracted, not noticing the abrupt change in the atmosphere.

But then he looks up.

His lips are parted as if to speak, and whatever he was holding hits the ground, shattering into so many sounds it startles everyone back to life.

Adam is staring at me, eyes locked on my face, his chest heaving, his face fighting so many different emotions. He looks half terrified, half hopeful. Or maybe terrified to be hopeful.

And though I realize I should probably be the first to speak, I suddenly have no idea what to say.

Kenji pulls up beside me, his face splitting into a huge smile. He slips his arm around my shoulder. Squeezes. Says, "Lookie what I found."

Adam begins to move across the room, but it feels strange—like everything has begun to slow down, like this moment isn't real, somehow. There's so much pain in his eyes.

I feel like I've been punched in the gut.

But then there he is, right in front of me, his hands searching my body as if to ensure that I'm real, that I'm still intact. He's studying my face, my features, his fingers weaving into my hair. And then all at once he seems to accept that

I'm not a ghost, not a nightmare, and he hauls me against himself so quickly I can't help but gasp in response.

"Juliette," he breathes.

His heart is beating hard against my ear, his arms wrapped tight around me, and I melt into his embrace, relishing the warm comfort, the familiarity of his body, his scent, his skin. My hands reach around him, slip up his back and grip him hard, and I don't even realize silent tears have fallen down my face until he pulls back to look me in the eye. He tells me not to cry, tells me it's okay, that everything is going to be okay and I know it's all a lie but it still feels so good to hear.

He's studying my face again, his hands carefully cradling the back of my head, so careful not to touch my skin. The reminder sends a sharp pain through my heart. "I can't believe you're really here," he says, his voice breaking. "I can't believe this is actually happening—"

Kenji clears his throat. "Hey—guys? Your loin passion is grossing out the little ones."

"I'm not a *little one*," James says, visibly offended. "And I don't think it's gross."

Kenji spins around. "You're not bothered by all the heavy breathing going on over here?" He makes a haphazard gesture toward us.

I jump away from Adam reflexively.

"No," James says, crossing his arms. "Are you?"

"Disgust was my general reaction, yeah."

"I bet you wouldn't think it was gross if it was you."

A long pause.

"You make a good point," Kenji finally says. "Maybe you should find me a lady in this crappy sector. I'm okay with anyone between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five." He points at James. "So how about you get on that, thanks."

James seems to take the challenge a little too seriously. He nods several times. "Okay," he says. "How about Alia? Or Lily?" he says, immediately pointing out the only other women in the room.

Kenji's mouth opens and closes a few times before he says, "Yeah, no thanks, kid. These two are like my sisters."

"So smooth," Lily says to Kenji, and I realize it's the first time I've really heard her speak. "I bet you win over all the eligible women by telling them they're like sisters to you. I bet the ladies are just lining up to jump into bed with your punkass."

“Rude.” Kenji crosses his arms.

James is laughing.

“You see what I have to deal with?” Kenji says to him. “There’s no love for Kenji. I give and I give and I give, and I get nothing in return. I need a woman who will appreciate all of this,” he says, gesturing to the length of his body. He’s clearly overexaggerating, hoping to entertain James with his ridiculousness, and his efforts are appreciated. Kenji is probably their only chance for comedic relief in this cramped space, and it makes me wonder if that’s why he sets off on his own every day. Maybe he needs time to grieve in silence, in a place where no one expects him to be the funny one.

My heart starts and stops as I hesitate, wondering at how hard it must be for Kenji to keep it together even when he wants to fall apart. I caught a glimpse of that side of him for the first time today, and it surprised me more than it should have.

Adam squeezes my shoulder, and I turn to face him. He smiles a tender, tortured smile, his eyes heavy with pain and joy.

But of all the things I could be feeling right now, guilt hits me the hardest.

Everyone in this room is carrying such heavy burdens. Brief moments of levity puncture the general gloom shrouding this space, but as soon as the jokes subside, the grief slides back into place. And though I know I should grieve for the lives lost, I don’t know how. They were all strangers to me. I was only just beginning to develop a relationship with Sonya and Sara.

But when I look around I see that I’m alone in feeling this way. I see the lines of loss creasing my friends’ faces. I see the sadness buried in their clothes, perched atop their furrowed brows. And something in the back of my mind is nagging at me, disappointed in me, telling me I should be one of them, that I should be just as defeated as they are.

But I’m not.

I can’t be that girl anymore.

For so many years I lived in constant terror of myself. Doubt had married my fear and moved into my mind, where it built castles and ruled kingdoms and reigned over me, bowing my will to its whispers until I was little more than an acquiescing peon, too terrified to disobey, too terrified to disagree.

I had been shackled, a prisoner in my own mind.

But finally, finally, I have learned to break free.

I *am* upset for our losses. I’m horrified. But I’m also anxious and restless. Sonya and Sara are still alive, living at the mercy of Anderson. They still need

our help. So I don't know how to be sad when all I feel is an unrelenting determination to do something.

I am no longer afraid of fear, and I will not let it rule me.

Fear will learn to fear me.

EIGHTEEN

Adam leads me toward the couch, but Kenji intercepts us. “You guys can have your moment, I promise,” he says, “but right now we all need to get on the same page, say hello and how are you and whatever whatever and we need to do it fast; Juliette has information everyone needs to hear.”

Adam looks from Kenji to me. “What’s going on?”

I turn to Kenji. “What are you talking about?”

He rolls his eyes at me. Looks away and says, “Have a seat, Kent.”

Adam backs away—just an inch or two—his curiosity winning out for the moment, and Kenji tugs me forward so I’m standing in the middle of this tiny room. Everyone is staring at me like I might pull turnips out of my pants. “Kenji, what—”

“Alia, you remember Juliette,” Kenji says, nodding at a slim blond girl sitting in a back corner of the room. She offers me a quick smile before looking away, blushing for no apparent reason. I remember her; she’s the one who designed my custom knuckle braces—the intricate pieces I’d worn over my gloves both times we went out to battle. I’d never really paid close attention to her before, and I now realize it’s because she tries to be invisible. She’s a soft, sweet-looking girl with gentle brown eyes; she also happens to be an exceptional designer. I wonder how she developed her skill.

“Lily—you definitely remember Juliette,” Kenji is saying to her. “We all broke into the storage compounds together.” He glances at me. “You remember, right?”

I nod. Grin at Lily. I don’t really know her, but I like her energy. She mock-salutes me, smiling wide as her springy brown curls fall into her face. “Nice to see you again,” she says. “And thanks for not being dead. It sucks being the only girl around here.”

Alia’s blond head pops up for only a second before she retreats deeper into the corner.

“Sorry,” Lily says, looking only slightly remorseful. “I meant the only *talking* girl around here. Please tell me you talk,” she says to me.

“Oh, she talks,” Kenji says, shooting me a look. “Cusses like a sailor, too.”

“I do not cuss like a—”

“Brendan, Winston.” Kenji cuts me off, pointing at the two guys sitting on the couch. “These two definitely don’t require an introduction, but, as you can see,” he says, “they look a little different now. Behold, the transformative powers of being held hostage by a bunch of sadistic bastards!” He flourishes a hand in their direction, his sarcasm accompanied by a brittle smile. “Now they look like a pair of wildebeests. But, you know, by comparison, I look like a damn king. So it’s good news all around.”

Winston points at my face. His eyes are a little unfocused, and he has to blink a few times before saying, “I like you. It’s pretty nice you’re not dead.”

“I second that, mate.” Brendan claps Winston on the shoulder but he’s smiling at me. His eyes are still so very light blue, and his hair, so very white blond. But he has a huge gash running from his right temple down to his jawline, and it looks like it’s only just beginning to scab up. I can’t imagine where else he’s hurt. What else Anderson must’ve done to both him and Winston. A sick, slithery feeling moves through me.

“It’s so good to see you again,” Brendan is saying, his British accent always surprising me. “Sorry we couldn’t be a bit more presentable.”

I offer them both a smile. “I’m so happy you’re all right.”

“Ian,” Kenji says, gesturing to the tall, lanky guy perched on the arm of the couch. Ian Sanchez. I remember him as a guy on my assembly team when we broke into the storage compound, but more important, I know him to be one of the four guys who were kidnapped by Anderson’s men. He, Winston, Brendan, and another guy named Emory.

We’d managed to get Ian and Emory back, but not Brendan and Winston. I remember Kenji saying that Ian and Emory were so messed up when we brought them in that even with the girls helping to heal them, it’d still taken them a while to recover. Ian looks okay to me now, but he, too, must’ve undergone some horrific things. And Emory clearly isn’t here.

I swallow, hard, offering Ian what I’m hoping is a strong smile.

He doesn’t smile back.

“How are you still alive?” he demands, with no preamble. “You don’t look like anyone beat the shit out of you, so, I mean, no offense or whatever, but I don’t trust you.”

“We’re getting to that part,” Kenji says, cutting Adam off just as he begins to protest on my behalf. “She has a solid explanation, I promise. I already know all

the details.” He shoots Ian a sharp look, but Ian doesn’t seem to notice. He’s still staring at me, one eyebrow raised as if in challenge.

I cock my head at him, considering him closely.

Kenji snaps his fingers in front of my face. “Focus, princess, I’m already getting bored.” He glances around the room, looking for anyone we might’ve missed for the reintroductions. “James,” he says, his eyes landing on the upturned face of my only ten-year-old friend. “Anything you want to say to Juliette before we get started?”

James looks at me, his blue eyes bright below his sandy-blond hair. He shrugs. “I never thought you were dead,” he says simply.

“Is that right?” Kenji says with a laugh.

James nods. “I had a feeling,” he says, tapping his head.

Kenji grins. “All right, well, that’s it. Let’s get started.”

“What about Ca—,” I begin to say, but stop dead at the flicker of alarm that flits in and out of Kenji’s features.

My gaze lands on Castle, studying his face in a way I hadn’t when I first arrived.

Castle’s eyes are unfocused, his eyebrows furrowed as if he’s caught in an endlessly frustrating conversation with himself; his hands are knotted together in his lap. His hair has broken free of its always-perfect ponytail at the nape of his neck, and his dreads have sprung around his face, falling into his eyes. He’s unshaven, and looks as though he’s been dragged through mud; as though he sat down in that chair the moment he walked in and hasn’t left it since.

And I realize that of the group of us, Castle has been hit the hardest.

Omega Point was his life. His dreams were in every brick, every echo of that space. And in one night, he lost everything. His hopes, his vision for the future, the entire community he strove to build. His only family.

Gone.

“He’s had it really rough,” Adam whispers to me, and I’m startled by his presence, not realizing he was standing beside me again. “Castle’s been like that for a little while now.”

My heart breaks.

I try to meet Kenji’s eyes, try to apologize wordlessly, to tell him I understand. But Kenji won’t look at me. It takes him a few moments to pull himself together, and only then does it hit me just how hard all of this must be for him right now. It’s not just Omega Point. It’s not just everyone he’s lost, not just all the work that’s been destroyed.

It's Castle.

Castle, who's been like a father to Kenji, his closest confidant, his dearest friend.

He's become a husk of who he was.

My heart feels weighed down by the depth of Kenji's pain; I wish so much that I could do something to help. To fix things. And in that moment I promise myself I will.

I'll do everything I can.

"All right." Kenji claps his hands together, nods a few times before taking a tight breath. "Everyone all warm and fuzzy? Good? Good." He nods again. "Now let me tell you the story of how our friend Juliette was shot in the chest."

NINETEEN

Everyone is gaping at me.

Kenji has just finished giving them every detail I shared with him, taking care to leave out the parts about Warner telling me he loves me, and I'm silently grateful. Even though I told Adam that he and I shouldn't be together anymore, everything between us is still so raw and unresolved. I've tried to move on, to distance myself from him because I wanted to protect him; but I've had to mourn Adam's loss in so many different ways now that I'm not sure I even know how to feel anymore.

I have no idea what he thinks of me.

There are so many things Adam and I need to talk about; I just don't want Warner to be one of them. Warner has always been a tense topic between us—especially now that Adam knows they're brothers—and I'm not in the mood for arguing, especially not on my first day back.

But it seems I won't be able to get off that easily.

"Warner saved your life?" Lily asks, not bothering to hide her shock or her repulsion. Even Alia is sitting up and paying attention now, her eyes glued to my face. "Why the hell would he do that?"

"Dude, forget that," Ian cuts in. "What are we going to do about the fact that Warner can just steal our powers and shit?"

"You don't have any powers," Winston answers him. "So you don't have anything to worry about."

"You know what I mean," Ian snaps, a hint of color flushing up his neck. "It's not safe for a psycho like him to have that kind of ability. It freaks me the hell out."

"He's not a psych—," I try to say, but the room erupts into a cacophony of voices, all vying for a chance to be heard.

"What does this even mean—"

"—dangerous?"

"So Sonya and Sara are still *alive*—"

"—actually saw Anderson? What did he look like?"

“But why would he even—”

“—okay, but that’s not—”

“WAIT,” Adam cuts everyone off. “Where the hell is he *now*?” He turns to look me in the eye. “You said Warner brought you out here to show you what happened to Omega Point, but then the minute Kenji shows up, he just disappears.” A pause. “Right?”

I nod.

“So—what?” he says. “He’s done? He’s just walking away?” Adam spins around, looks at everyone. “Guys, he knows that at least one of us is still alive! He’s probably gone to get backup, to find a way to take the rest of us out—” He stops, shakes his head, hard. “Shit,” he says under his breath. “SHIT.”

Everyone freezes at the same time. Horrified.

“No,” I say quickly, holding up both hands. “No—he’s not going to do that —”

Eight pairs of eyes turn on me.

“He doesn’t care about killing you guys. He doesn’t even like The Reestablishment. And he hates his father—”

“What are you talking about?” Adam cuts me off, alarmed. “Warner is an *animal*—”

I take a steadying breath. I need to remember how little they know Warner, how little they’ve heard from his point of view; I have to remind myself what I used to think of him just a few days ago.

Warner’s revelations are still so recent. I don’t know how to properly defend him or how to reconcile these polarizing impressions of him, and for a moment it makes me furious with him and his stupid pretenses, for ever having put me in this position. If only he didn’t come across as a sick, twisted psycho, I wouldn’t have to stand up for him right now.

“He *wants* to take down The Reestablishment,” I try to explain. “And he wants to kill Anderson, too—”

The room explodes into more arguments. Shouts and epithets that all boil down to no one believing me, everyone thinking I’m insane and that Warner’s brainwashed me; they think he’s a proven murderer who locked me up and tried to use me to torture people.

And they’re not wrong. Except that they are.

I want so desperately to tell them they don’t understand.

None of them know the truth, and they’re not giving me a chance to explain. But just as I’m about to say something else in my own defense, I catch a glimpse

of Ian out of the corner of my eye.

He's laughing at me.

Out loud, slapping his knee, head thrown back, howling with glee at what he thinks is my stupidity, and for a moment I seriously begin to doubt myself and everything Warner said to me.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

How will I ever really know if I can trust him? How do I know he wasn't lying to me like he always did, like he claims he has been from the beginning?

I'm so sick of this uncertainty. So sick and tired of it.

But I blink and I'm being pulled out of the crowd, tugged toward James's bedroom door; to the storage closet that used to be his room. Adam pulls me inside and shuts the door on the insanity behind us. He's holding my arms, looking into my eyes with a strange, burning intensity that startles me.

I'm trapped.

"What's going on?" he asks. "Why are you defending Warner? After everything he did to you, you should hate him—you should be furious—"

"I can't, Adam, I—"

"What do you mean you *can't*?"

"I just—it's not that easy anymore." I shake my head, try to explain the unexplainable. "I don't know what to think of him now. There are so many things I misunderstood. Things I couldn't comprehend." I drop my eyes. "He's really . . ." I hesitate, conflicted.

I don't know how to tell the truth without sounding like a liar.

"I don't know," I finally say, staring into my hands. "I don't know. He's just . . . he's not as bad as I thought."

"Wow." Adam exhales, shocked. "*He's not as bad as you thought*. He's not as bad as you thought? How on earth could he be any better than you *thought* —?"

"Adam—"

"What the hell are you *thinking*, Juliette?"

I look up. He can't hide the disgust in his eyes.

I panic.

I need to find a way to explain, to present an irrefutable example—proof that Warner is not who I thought he was—but I can already tell that Adam has lost confidence in me, that he doesn't trust me or believe me anymore, and I flounder.

He opens his mouth to speak.

I beat him to it. “Do you remember that day you found me crying in the shower? After Warner forced me to torture that toddler?”

Adam hesitates before nodding slowly, reluctantly.

“That was one of the reasons I hated him so much. I thought he’d actually put a child in that room—that he’d stolen someone’s kid and wanted to watch me torture it. It was just so despicable,” I say. “So disgusting, so horrifying. I thought he was inhuman. Completely evil. But . . . it wasn’t real,” I whisper.

Adam looks confused.

“It was just a simulation,” I try to explain. “Warner told me it was a simulation chamber, not a torture room. He said it all happened in my imagination.”

“Juliette,” Adam says. Sighs. He looks away, looks back at me. “What are you talking about? Of course it was a simulation.”

“What?”

Adam laughs a small, confused sort of laugh.

“You knew it wasn’t real . . . ?” I ask.

He stares at me.

“But when you found me—you said it wasn’t my fault—you told me you’d heard about what happened, and that it wasn’t my fault—”

Adam runs a hand through the hair at the back of his neck. “I thought you were upset about breaking down that wall,” he says. “I mean, I knew the simulation would probably be scary as hell, but I thought Warner would’ve told you what it was beforehand. I had no idea you’d walked into something like that thinking it was going to be real.” He presses his eyes shut for a second. “I thought you were upset about learning you had this whole new crazy ability. And about the soldiers who were injured in the aftermath.”

I’m blinking at him, stunned.

All this time, a small part of me was still holding on to doubt—believing that maybe the torture chamber was real and that Warner was just lying to me. Again.

But now, to have confirmation from Adam himself.

I’m floored.

Adam is shaking his head. “That bastard,” he’s saying. “I can’t believe he did that to you.”

I lower my eyes. “Warner’s done a lot of crazy things,” I say, “but he really thought he was helping me.”

“But he wasn’t helping you,” Adam says, angry again. “He was *torturing* you—”

“No. That’s not true.” I focus my eyes on a crack in the wall. “In some strange way . . . he did help me.” I hesitate before meeting Adam’s gaze. “That moment in the simulation chamber was the first time I ever allowed myself to be angry. I never knew how much more I could do—that I could be so physically strong—until that moment.”

I look away.

Clasp and unclasp my hands.

“Warner puts up this facade,” I’m saying. “He acts like he’s a sick, heartless monster, but he’s . . . I don’t know . . .” I trail off, my eyes trained on something I can’t quite see. A memory, maybe. Of Warner smiling. His gentle hands wiping away my tears. *It’s okay, you’re okay*, he’d said to me. “He’s really—”

“I don’t, um—” Adam breaks away, blows out a strange, shaky breath. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to understand this,” he says, looking unsteady. “You—what? You like him now? You’re friends with him? The same guy who tried to *kill* me?” He’s barely able to conceal the pain in his voice. “He had me hung from a conveyor belt in a slaughterhouse, Juliette. Or have you already forgotten that?”

I flinch. Drop my head in shame.

I *had* forgotten about that.

I’d forgotten that Warner almost killed Adam, that he’d shot Adam right in front of my face. He saw Adam as a traitor, as a soldier who held a gun to the back of his head; defied him and stole me away.

It makes me sick.

“I’m just . . . I’m so confused,” I finally manage to say. “I want to hate him but I just don’t know how anymore—”

Adam is staring at me like he has no idea who I am.

I need to talk about something else.

“What’s going on with Castle?” I ask. “Is he sick?”

Adam hesitates before answering, realizing I’m trying to change the subject. Finally, he relents. Sighs. “It’s bad,” he says to me. “He’s been hit worse than the rest of us. And Castle taking it all so hard has really affected Kenji.”

I study Adam’s face as he speaks, unable to stop myself from searching for similarities to Anderson and Warner.

“He doesn’t really leave that chair,” Adam is saying. “He sits there all day until he collapses from exhaustion, and even then, he just falls asleep sitting in the same spot. Then he wakes up the next morning and does the same thing again, all day. He only eats when we force him to, and only moves to go to the

bathroom.” Adam shakes his head. “We’re all hoping he’ll snap out of it pretty soon, but it’s been really weird to just lose a leader like that. Castle was in charge of everything. And now he doesn’t seem to care about anything.”

“He’s probably still in shock,” I say, remembering it’s only been three days since the battle. “Hopefully, with time,” I tell him, “he’ll be all right.”

“Yeah,” Adam says. Nods. Studies his hands. “But we really need to figure out what we’re going to do. I don’t know how much longer we can live like this. We’re going to run out of food in a few weeks at the most,” he says. “We’ve got ten people to feed now. Plus, Brendan and Winston are still hurting; I’ve done what I can for them using the limited supplies I have here, but they need actual medical attention and pain medication, if we can swing it.” A pause. “I don’t know what Kenji’s told you, but they were seriously messed up when we brought them in here. Winston’s swelling has only just gone down. We really can’t stay here for much longer,” he says. “We need a plan.”

“Yes.” I’m so relieved to hear he’s ready to be proactive. “Yes. Yes. We need a plan. What are you thinking? Do you already have something in mind?”

Adam shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he admits. “Maybe we can keep breaking into the storage units like we used to—steal supplies every once in a while—and lie low in a bigger space on unregulated ground. But we’ll never be able to set foot on the compounds,” he says. “There’s too much risk. They’ll shoot us dead on sight if we’re caught. So . . . I don’t know,” he says. He looks sheepish as he laughs. “I’m kind of hoping I’m not the only one with ideas.”

“But . . .” I hesitate, confused. “That’s it? You’re not thinking of fighting back anymore? You think we should just find a way to live—like *this*?” I gesture to the door, to what lies beyond it.

Adam looks at me, surprised by my reaction.

“It’s not like I *want* this,” he says. “But I can’t see how we could possibly fight back without getting ourselves killed. I’m trying to be practical.” He runs an agitated hand through his hair. “I took a chance,” he says, lowering his voice. “I tried to fight back, and it got us all massacred. I shouldn’t even be alive right now. But for some crazy reason, I am, and so is James, and God, Juliette, so are you.

“And I don’t know,” he says, shaking his head, looking away. “I feel like I’ve been given a chance to live my life. I’ll need to think of new ways to find food and put a roof over my head. I have no money coming in, I’ll never be able to enlist in this sector again, and I’m not a registered citizen, so I’ll never be able to work. Right now all I’m focused on is how I’ll be able to feed my family and

my friends in a few weeks.” His jaw tenses. “Maybe one day another group will be smarter—stronger—but I don’t think that’s us anymore. I don’t think we stand a chance.”

I’m blinking at him, stunned. “I can’t believe this.”

“You can’t believe what?”

“You’re giving up.” I hear the accusation in my voice and I do nothing to hide it. “You’re just giving up.”

“What choice do I have?” he asks, his eyes hurt, angry. “I’m not trying to be a martyr,” he says. “We gave it a shot. We tried to fight back, and it came to shit. Everyone we know is dead, and that battered group of people you saw out there is all that’s left of our resistance. How are the nine of us supposed to fight the world?” he demands. “It’s not a fair fight, Juliette.”

I’m nodding. Staring into my hands. Trying and failing to hide my shock.

“I’m not a coward,” he says to me, struggling to moderate his voice. “I just want to protect my family. I don’t want James to have to worry that I’m going to show up dead every day. He needs me to be rational.”

“But living like this,” I say to him. “As fugitives? Stealing to survive and hiding from the world? How is that any better? You’ll be worried every single day, constantly looking over your shoulder, terrified of ever leaving James alone. You’ll be miserable.”

“But I’ll be alive.”

“That’s not being alive,” I say to him. “That’s not living—”

“How would you know?” he snaps. His mood shifts so suddenly I’m stunned into silence. “What do you know about being alive?” he demands. “You wouldn’t say a word when I first found you. You were afraid of your own shadow. You were so consumed by grief and guilt that you’d gone almost completely insane—living so far inside your own head that you had no idea what happened to the world while you were gone.”

I flinch, stung by the venom in his voice. I’ve never seen Adam so bitter or cruel. This isn’t the Adam I know. I want him to stop. Rewind. Apologize. Erase the things he’s just said.

But he doesn’t.

“You think you’ve had it hard,” he’s saying to me. “Living in psych wards and being thrown in jail—you think that was difficult. But what you don’t realize is that you’ve always had a roof over your head, and food delivered to you on a regular basis.” His hands are clenching, unclenching. “And that’s more than most people will ever have. You have no idea what it’s really like to live

out here—no idea what it's like to starve and watch your family die in front of you. You have no idea," he says to me, "what it means to truly suffer. Sometimes I think you live in some fantasy land where everyone survives on optimism—but it doesn't work that way out here. In this world you're either alive, about to die, or dead. There's no romance in it. No illusion. So don't try to pretend you have any idea what it means to be alive today. *Right now*. Because you don't."

Words, I think, are such unpredictable creatures.

No gun, no sword, no army or king will ever be more powerful than a sentence. Swords may cut and kill, but words will stab and stay, burying themselves in our bones to become corpses we carry into the future, all the time digging and failing to rip their skeletons from our flesh.

I swallow, hard

one

two

three

and steady myself to respond quietly. Carefully.

He's just upset, I'm telling myself. He's just scared and worried and stressed out and he doesn't mean any of it, not really, I keep telling myself.

He's just upset.

He doesn't mean it.

"Maybe," I say. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I don't know what it's like to live. Maybe I'm still not human enough to know more than what's right in front of me." I stare straight into his eyes. "But I do know what it's like to hide from the world. I know what it's like to live as though I don't exist, caged away and isolated from society. And I won't do it again," I say. "I can't. I've finally gotten to a point in my life where I'm not afraid to speak. Where my shadow no longer haunts me. And I don't want to lose that freedom—not again. I can't go backward. I'd rather be shot dead screaming for justice than die alone in a prison of my own making."

Adam looks toward the wall, laughs, looks back at me.

"Are you even hearing yourself right now?" he asks. "You're telling me you want to jump in front of a bunch of soldiers and tell them how much you hate The Reestablishment, just to prove a point? Just so they can kill you before your eighteenth birthday? That doesn't make any sense," he says. "It doesn't serve anything. And this doesn't sound like you," he says, shaking his head. "I thought you wanted to live on your own. You never wanted to be caught up in war—you

just wanted to be free of Warner and the asylum and your crazy parents. I thought you'd be happy to be done with all the fighting."

"What are you talking about?" I say. "I've always said I wanted to fight back. I've said it from the beginning—from the moment I told you I wanted to escape when we were on base. This is me," I insist. "This is how I feel. It's the same way I've always felt."

"No," he says. "No, we didn't leave base to start a war. We left to get the hell away from The Reestablishment, to resist in our own way, but most of all to find a life together. But then Kenji showed up and took us to Omega Point and everything changed, and we decided to fight back. Because it seemed like it might actually work—because it seemed like we might actually have a chance. But now"—he looks around the room, at the closed door—"what do we have left? We're all half dead," he says. "We are eight poorly armed men and women and one ten-year-old boy trying to fight entire armies. It's just not *feasible*," he says. "And if I'm going to die, I don't want it to be for a stupid reason. If I go to war—if I risk my life—it's going to be because the odds are in my favor. Not otherwise."

"I don't think it's stupid to fight for *humanity*—"

"You have no idea what you're saying," he snaps, his jaw tensing. "There's nothing we can do now."

"There's always something, Adam. There has to be. Because I won't live like this anymore. Not ever again."

"Juliette, please," he says, his words desperate all of a sudden, anguished. "I don't want you to get killed—I don't want to lose you again—"

"This isn't about you, Adam." I feel terrible saying it, but he has to understand. "You're so important to me. You've loved me and you were there for me when no one else was. I never want you to think I don't care about you, because I do," I tell him. "But this decision has nothing to do with you. It's about *me*," I tell him. "And this life"—I point to the door—"the life on the other side of that wall? That's not what I want."

My words only seem to upset him more.

"Then you'd rather be dead?" he asks, angry again. "Is that what you're saying? You'd rather be dead than try to build a life with me here?"

"I would rather be dead," I say to him, inching away from his outstretched hand, "than go back to being silent and suffocated."

And Adam is just about to respond—he's parting his lips to speak—when the sounds of chaos reach us from the other side of the wall. We share one panicked

look before yanking the bedroom door open and rushing into the living room.

My heart stops. Starts. Stops again.

Warner is here.

TWENTY

He's standing at the front door, hands shoved casually in his pockets, no fewer than six different guns pointed at his face. My mind is racing as it tries to process what to do next, how best to proceed. But Warner's face changes seasons as I enter the room: the cold line of his mouth blossoms into a bright smile. His eyes shine as he grins at me, not seeming to mind or even notice the many lethal weapons aimed in his direction.

I can't help but wonder how he found me.

I begin to move forward but Adam grabs my arm. I turn around, wondering at my sudden irritation with him. I'm almost irritated with myself for being irritated with him. This is not how I imagined it would be to see Adam again. I don't want it to be this way. I want to start over.

"What are you doing?" Adam says to me. "Don't go near him."

I stare at his hand on my arm. Look up to meet his gaze.

Adam doesn't budge.

"Let go of me," I say to him.

His face clears all of a sudden, like he's startled, somehow. He looks down at his hand; releases me without a word.

I put as much space between us as I can, the whole time scanning the room for Kenji. His sharp black eyes meet mine immediately and he raises one eyebrow; his head is cocked to the side, the twitch of his lips telling me the next move is mine and I'd better make it count. I part my way through my friends until I'm standing in front of Warner, facing my friends and their guns and hoping they won't fire at me instead.

I make an effort to sound calm. "Please," I say. "Don't shoot him."

"And why the hell not?" Ian demands, his grip tightening around his gun.

"Juliette, love," Warner says, leaning into my ear. His voice is still loud enough for everyone to hear. "I do appreciate you defending me, but really, I'm quite able to handle the situation."

"It's eight against one," I say to him, forgetting my fear in the temptation to roll my eyes. "They've all got guns pointed at your face. I'm pretty sure you

need my interference.”

I hear him laugh behind me, just once, just before every gun in the room is yanked out of every hand and thrown up against the ceiling. I spin around in shock, catching a glimpse of the astonishment on every face behind me.

“Why do you always hesitate?” Warner asks, shaking his head as he glances around the room. “Shoot if you want to shoot. Don’t waste my time with theatrics.”

“How the hell did you do that?” Ian demands.

Warner says nothing. He tugs off his gloves carefully, pulling at each finger before slipping them off his hands.

“It’s okay,” I tell him. “They already know.”

Warner looks up. Raises an eyebrow at me. Smiles a little. “Do they really?”

“Yes. I told them.”

Warner’s smile changes into something almost self-mocking as he turns away, his eyes laughing as he contemplates the ceiling. Finally he nods at Castle, who’s staring at the commotion with a vaguely displeased expression. “I borrowed,” Warner says to Ian, “from present company.”

“Hot damn,” Ian breathes.

“What do you want?” Lily asks, fists clenched, standing in a far corner of the room.

“Nothing from you,” Warner says to her. “I’m here to pick up Juliette. I have no wish to disturb your . . . slumber party,” he says, looking around at the pillows and blankets piled on the living room floor.

Adam goes rigid with alarm. “What are you talking about? She’s not going anywhere with you.”

Warner scratches the back of his head. “Do you never get exhausted being so wholly unbearable? You have as much charisma as the rotting innards of unidentified roadkill.”

I hear an abrupt wheezing noise and turn toward the sound.

Kenji has a hand pressed to his mouth, desperately trying to suppress a smile. He’s shaking his head, holding up a hand in apology. And then he breaks, laughing out loud, snorting as he tries to muffle the sound. “I’m sorry,” he says, pressing his lips together, shaking his head again. “This is not a funny moment. It’s not. I’m not laughing.”

Adam looks like he might punch Kenji in the face.

“So you don’t want to kill us?” Winston says. “Because if you’re not going to kill us, you should probably get the hell out of here before we kill you first.”

“No,” Warner says calmly. “I am not going to kill you. And though I wouldn’t mind disposing of these two”—he nods at Adam and Kenji—“the idea is little more than exhausting to me now. I am no longer interested in your sad, pathetic lives. I am only here to accompany and transport Juliette safely home. She and I have urgent matters to attend to.”

“No,” I hear James say suddenly. He clambers to his feet, stares Warner straight in the eye. “*This* is her home now. You can’t take her away. I don’t want anyone to hurt her.”

Warner’s eyebrows fly up in surprise. He seems genuinely startled, as though he’s only now noticing the ten-year-old. Warner and James have never actually met before; neither one of them knows they’re brothers.

I look at Kenji. He looks back.

This is a big moment.

Warner studies James’s face with rapt fascination. He bends down on one knee, meets James at eye level. “And who are you?” he asks.

Everyone in the room is silent, watching.

James blinks steadily and doesn’t answer right away. He finally shoves his hands into his pockets and stares at the floor. “I’m James. Adam’s brother. Who are you?”

Warner tilts his head a little. “No one of consequence,” he says. He tries to smile. “But it’s very nice to meet you, James. I’m pleased to see your concern for Juliette’s safety. You should know, however, that I have no intention of hurting her. It’s just that she’s made me a promise, and I intend to see it through.”

“What kind of promise?” James asks.

“Yeah, what kind of promise?” Kenji cuts in, his voice loud—and angry—all of sudden.

I look up, look around. Everyone is staring at me, waiting for me to answer. Adam’s eyes are wide with horror and disbelief.

I meet Warner’s gaze. “I’m not leaving,” I tell him. “I never promised I would stay on base with you.”

He frowns. “You’d rather stay *here*?” he asks. “Why?”

“I need my friends,” I tell him. “And they need me. Besides, we’re all going to have to work together, so we may as well get started now. And I don’t want to have to be smuggled in and out of base,” I add. “You can just meet me here.”

“Whoa—wait—what do you mean we can all work together?” Ian interrupts. “And why are you inviting him to come back here? What the hell are you guys

talking about?”

“What kind of promise did you make him, Juliette?” Adam’s voice is loud and accusing.

I turn toward the group of them. Me, standing beside Warner, facing Adam’s angry eyes along with the confused, soon-to-be-angry faces of my friends.

Oh how strange all of this has become in such a short period of time.

I take a tight, bracing breath.

“I’m ready to fight,” I say, addressing the entire group. “I know some of you might feel defeated; some of you might think there’s no hope left, especially not after what happened to Omega Point. But Sonya and Sara are still out there, and they need our help. So does the rest of the world. And I haven’t come this far just to turn back now. I’m ready to take action and Warner has offered to help me.”

I look directly at Kenji. “I’ve accepted his offer. I’ve promised to be his ally; to fight by his side; to kill Anderson and to take down The Reestablishment.”

Kenji narrows his eyes at me and I can’t tell if he’s angry, or if he’s really, really angry.

I look at the rest of my friends. “But we can all work together,” I say.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot,” I go on, “and I think the group of us still has a chance, especially if we combine our strengths with Warner’s. He knows things about The Reestablishment and his father that we’d never be able to know otherwise.”

I swallow hard as I take in the shocked, horrified looks on the faces of those around me. “But,” I hurry to say, “if you aren’t interested in fighting back anymore, I totally understand. And if you’d rather I didn’t stay here among you, I would respect your decision. Either way, I’ve already made my choice,” I tell them. “Whether or not you choose to join me, I’ve decided to fight. I will take down The Reestablishment or I will die trying. There’s nothing left for me otherwise.”

TWENTY-ONE

The room is quiet for a long time. I've dropped my eyes, too afraid to see the looks on their faces.

Alia is the first to speak.

"I'll fight with you," she says, her soft voice ringing strong and confident in the silence. I look up to meet her eyes and she smiles, her cheeks flushed with color and determination.

But before I even have a chance to respond, Winston jumps in.

"Me too," he says. "As soon as my head stops hurting, but yeah, me too. I've got nothing left to lose," he says with a shrug. "And I'll kick some ass just to get the girls back, even if we can't save the rest of the world."

"Same," Brendan says, nodding at me. "I'm in, too."

Ian is shaking his head. "How the hell can we trust this guy?" he asks. "How do we know he's not full of shit?"

"Yeah," Lily pipes up. "This doesn't feel right." She focuses her eyes on Warner. "Why would you want to help any of us?" she asks him. "Since when have you ever been trustworthy?"

Warner runs a hand through his hair. Smiles unkindly. Glances at me.

He's not amused.

"I am *not* trustworthy," Warner finally says, looking up to meet Lily's eyes. "And I have no interest in helping you," he says. "In fact, I think I was very clear just a moment ago when I said that I was here for Juliette. I did not sign up to help her friends, and I will make zero guarantees for your survival or your safety. So if you're seeking reassurance," he says, "I can, and will, offer you none."

Ian is actually smiling.

Lily looks a little mollified.

Kenji is shaking his head.

"All right." Ian nods. "That's cool." He rubs his forehead. "So what's the game plan?"

"Have you all lost your *minds*?" Adam explodes. "Are you forgetting who

you're talking to? He just busts down our door and demands to take Juliette away and you want to stand by his side and fight with him? The same guy who's responsible for destroying Omega Point?" he says. "Everyone is dead because of him!"

"I am not responsible for that," Warner says sharply, his expression darkening. "That was not my call, nor did I have any idea it was happening. By the time I broke out of Omega Point and found my way back to base, my father's plans were already under way. I was not a part of the battle, nor was I a part of the assault on Omega Point."

"It's true," Lily says. "The supreme is the one who ordered the air strike against Omega Point."

"Yeah, and as much as I hate this guy by default," Winston adds, jerking a thumb at Warner, "I hate his father a whole hell of a lot more. He's the one who kidnapped us. It was his men who held us captive; not the soldiers of Sector 45. So yeah," Winston says, stretching back on the couch, "I'd love to watch the supreme die a slow, miserable death."

"I have to admit," Brendan says, "I'm not often keen on revenge, but it does sound very sweet right now."

"I want to watch that bastard bleed," Ian says.

"How nice that we all have something in common," Warner mutters, irritated. He sighs. Looks at me. "Juliette, a word, please?"

"This is bullshit!" Adam shouts. He looks around. "How can you all so easily forget yourselves? How can you forget what he's done—what he did to me—what he did to Kenji?" Adam pivots to face me then. "How can you even look at him," he says to me, "knowing how he treated us? He nearly murdered me—leaving me to bleed out slowly so he could take his time torturing me to death—"

"Kent, man, please—you need to calm down, okay?" Kenji steps forward. "I understand that you're pissed—I'm not happy about this either—but things get crazy in the aftermath of war. Alliances form in unlikely ways." He shrugs. "If this is the only way to take Anderson out, maybe we should consider—"

"I can't believe this." Adam cuts him off, looking around. "I can't believe this is happening. You've all lost your minds. You're all *insane*," he says, gripping the back of his head. "This guy is a psycho—he's a *murderer*—"

"Adam," I try to say. "Please—"

"What's happened to you?" He turns on me. "I don't even know who you are anymore. I thought you were dead—I thought *he'd* killed you," he says, pointing

at Warner. “And now you’re standing here, teaming up with the guy who tried to ruin your life? Talking about fighting back because you have nothing left to live for? What about *me*?” he demands. “What about our relationship? When did that stop being enough for you?”

“This isn’t about us,” I try to tell him. “Please, Adam—let me explain—”

“I have to get out of here,” he says abruptly, moving toward the door. “I can’t be here right now—I can’t process all of this in one day. It’s too much,” he says. “It’s too much for me—”

“Adam—” I catch his arm in one last attempt, one last effort to try and talk to him, but he breaks away.

“All of this,” he says, meeting my eyes, his voice quieting to a raw, aching whisper, “was for you. I left everything I knew because I thought we were in this together. I thought it was going to be me and you.” His eyes are so dark, so deep, so hurt. Looking at him makes me want to curl up and die. “What are you doing?” he says, desperate now. “What are you *thinking*?”

And I realize he actually wants an answer.

Because he waits.

He stands there, and he waits. Waits to hear my response while everyone watches us, likely entertained by the spectacle we’ve made. I can’t believe he’s doing this to me. Here. Right now. In front of everyone.

In front of *Warner*.

I try to meet Adam’s eyes, but find I can’t hold his gaze for very long.

“I don’t want to live in fear anymore,” I say, hoping I sound stronger than I feel. “I have to fight back,” I tell him. “I thought we wanted the same things.”

“No—I wanted *you*,” he says, struggling to keep his voice steady. “That’s all I wanted. From the very beginning, Juliette. You were it. You were all I wanted.”

And I can’t speak.

I can’t speak

I can’t cough up the words because I can’t break his heart like this but he’s waiting, he’s waiting and he’s looking at me and “I need more,” I choke out. “I wanted you, too, Adam, but I need more than that. I need to be free. Please, try to understand—”

“STOP!” Adam explodes. “Stop trying to get me to understand a bunch of *bullshit*! I can’t deal with you anymore.” And then he grabs the jacket sitting on the sofa, hauls the door open, and slams it shut behind him.

There’s a moment of absolute silence.

I try to run after him.

Kenji catches me around the waist, yanks me backward. Gives me a hard, knowing look. "I'll take care of Kent. You stay here and clean up the mess you made," he says, cocking his head at Warner.

I swallow, hard. Don't say a word.

It's only after Kenji has disappeared that I turn around to face the remaining members of our audience, and I'm still searching for the right thing to say when I hear the one voice I least expected.

"Ah, Ms. Ferrars," Castle says. "It's so good to have you back. Things are always so much more entertaining when you're around."

Ian bursts into tears.

TWENTY-TWO

Everyone crowds around Castle at once; James practically tackles him. Ian shoves everyone else out of the way in his attempt to get closer. Castle is smiling, laughing a little. He finally looks more like the man I remember.

“I’m all right,” he’s saying. He sounds exhausted, as if the words are costing him a great deal to get out. “Thank you so much for your concern. But I’ll be all right. I just need a little more time, that’s all.”

I meet his eyes. I’m afraid to approach him.

“Please,” Castle says to Alia and Winston—the two standing closest on either side of him—“help me up. I’d like to greet our newest visitor.”

He’s not talking about me.

Castle gets to his feet with some difficulty, even with everyone scrambling to help him. The entire room suddenly feels different: lighter; happier, somehow. I hadn’t realized how much of everyone’s grief was tied up in Castle’s well-being.

“Mr. Warner,” Castle says, locking eyes with him from across the room. “How very nice of you to join us.”

“I’m not joining anyth—”

“I always knew you would,” Castle says. He smiles a little. “And I am pleased.”

Warner seems to be trying not to roll his eyes.

“You may let the guns down now,” Castle says to him. “I promise I will watch them closely in your absence.”

We all glance up at the ceiling. I hear Warner sigh. All at once, the guns float to the floor, settling gently onto the carpet.

“Very good,” Castle says. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’m in desperate need of a long shower. I hope you won’t mistake my early exit for rudeness,” he adds. “It’s only that I feel quite certain we’ll be seeing a lot of each other in these next weeks.”

Warner’s jaw tenses by way of response.

Castle smiles.

Winston and Brendan help Castle to the bathroom, while Ian shouts eagerly

about grabbing him a change of clothes. Me, Warner, James, Alia, and Lily are the only ones left in the room.

“Juliette?” Warner says.

I glance in his direction.

“A moment of your time, please? In private?”

I hesitate.

“You can use my room,” James interjects. “I don’t mind.”

I look at him, shocked he’d offer up his personal space so freely to the likes of me and Warner; especially after having seen his brother’s outburst just now.

“Adam will be okay,” James says to me, as if reading my mind. “He’s just really stressed out. He’s worried about a lot of things. He thinks we’re going to run out of food and stuff.”

“James—”

“It’s really okay,” James says. “I’ll hang out with Alia and Lily.”

I glance at the two girls, but their faces reveal nothing. Alia offers me only the slightest of sympathetic smiles. Lily is staring at Warner, sizing him up.

I finally sigh, relenting.

I follow Warner into the small storage closet, closing the door behind me.

He doesn’t waste any time.

“Why are you inviting your friends to join us? I told you I didn’t want to work with them.”

“How did you find me?” I counter. “I never pressed the button on that pager you gave me.”

Warner studies my eyes, his sharp green gaze locked on to mine as if trying to read me for clues. But the intensity of his gaze is always too much for me; I break the connection too soon, feeling untethered, somehow.

“It was simple deductive reasoning,” he finally says. “Kent was the only member of your group with a life outside of Omega Point; his old home was the only place they’d have been able to retreat to without causing a disturbance. And, as such,” Warner says, “it was the first place I checked.” A slight shake of his head. “Contrary to what you might believe, love, I am not an idiot.”

“I never thought you were an idiot,” I say, surprised. “I thought you were crazy,” I tell him, “but not an idiot.” I hesitate. “I actually think you’re brilliant,” I confess. “I wish I could think like you.” I look away and look back at him too quickly, feeling a lot like I need to learn to keep my mouth shut.

Warner’s face clears. His eyes crinkle in amusement as he smiles. “I don’t want your friends on my team,” he says. “I don’t like them.”

“I don’t care.”

“They will only slow us down.”

“They will give us an advantage,” I insist. “I know you don’t think they did things the right way at Omega Point, but they did know how to survive. They all have important strengths.”

“They’re completely broken.”

“They’re grieving,” I tell him, annoyed. “Don’t underestimate them. Castle is a natural leader,” I say. “Kenji is a genius and an excellent fighter. He acts like an idiot sometimes, but you know better than anyone else that it’s just a show. He’s smarter than all of us. Plus, Winston and Alia can design anything we need as long as they have the materials; Lily has an incredible photographic memory; Brendan can handle electricity and Winston can stretch his limbs into just about anything. And Ian . . .” I falter. “Well, Ian is . . . good for something, I’m sure.”

Warner laughs a little, his smile softening until it disappears altogether. His features settle into an uncertain expression. “And Kent?” Warner finally asks.

I feel my face pale. “What about him?”

“What is he good for?”

I hesitate before answering. “Adam is a great soldier.”

“Is that all?”

My heart is pounding so hard. Too hard.

Warner looks away, carefully neutralizes his expression, his tone. “You care for him.”

It’s not a question.

“Yes,” I manage to say. “Of course I do.”

“And what does that entail, exactly?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I lie.

Warner is staring at the wall, holding himself very still, his eyes revealing nothing of what he’s really thinking, what he’s feeling. “Do you love him?”

I’m stunned.

I can’t even imagine what it must cost him to ask this question so directly. I almost admire him for being brave enough to do it.

But for the first time, I’m not really sure what to say. If this were one week ago, two weeks ago, I would’ve answered without hesitation. I would’ve known, definitively, that I loved Adam, and I wouldn’t have been afraid to say so. But now I can’t help but wonder if I even know what love is; if what I felt for Adam was love or just a mix of deep affection and physical attraction. Because if I loved him—if I really, truly loved him—would I hesitate now? Would I so easily

be able to detach myself from his life? His pain?

I've worried so much about Adam these past weeks—the effects of his training, the news of his father—but I don't know if it's been out of love, or if it's been out of guilt. He left everything for me; because he wanted to be with me. But as much as it pains me to admit it, I know I didn't run away to be with him. Adam wasn't my main reason; he wasn't the driving force.

I ran away for me. Because I wanted to be free.

“Juliette?”

Warner's soft whisper brings me back to the present, hauls me up and into myself, jarring my consciousness back to reality. I'm afraid to dwell on the truths I've just uncovered.

I meet Warner's eyes. “Yes?”

“Do you love him?” he asks again, more quietly this time.

And I suddenly have to force myself to say three words I never, ever thought I'd say. “I don't know.”

Warner closes his eyes.

He exhales, the tension clear in his shoulders and in the line of his jaw and when he finally looks at me again there are stories in his eyes, thoughts and feelings and whispers of things I've never even seen before. Truths he might never bring himself to say; impossible things and unbelievable things and an abundance of feeling I've never thought him capable of. His whole body seems to relax in relief.

I don't know this boy standing before me. He's a perfect stranger, an entirely different being; the type of person I might never have known if my parents hadn't tossed me away.

“Juliette,” he whispers.

I'm only now realizing just how close he is. I could press my face against his neck if I wanted to. Could place my hands on his chest if I wanted to.

If I wanted to.

“I'd really love for you to come back with me,” he says.

“I can't,” I say to him, heart racing suddenly. “I have to stay here.”

“But it's not practical,” he says. “We need to plan. We need to talk strategy—it could take days—”

“I already have a plan.”

His eyebrows fly up and I tilt my head, fixing him with a hard look before I reach for the door.

TWENTY-THREE

Kenji is waiting on the other side.

“What the *hell* do you two think you’re doing?” he says. “Get your asses out here, *right now*.”

I head straight into the living room, eager to put distance between me and whatever keeps happening to my head when Warner gets too close. I need air. I need a new brain. I need to jump out of a window and catch a ride with a dragon to a world far from here.

But the moment I look up and try to steady myself, I find Adam staring at me. Blinking like he’s starting to see something he wishes he could unsee, and I feel my face flush so fast that for a moment I’m surprised I’m not standing in a toilet.

“Adam,” I hear myself say. “No—it’s not—”

“I can’t even talk to you right now.” He’s shaking his head, his voice strangled. “I can’t even be near you right now—”

“Please,” I try to say. “We were just talking—”

“You were just *talking*? Alone? In my brother’s bedroom?” He’s holding his jacket in his hands. He tosses it onto the couch. Laughs like he might be losing his mind. Runs a hand through his hair and glances up at the ceiling. Stares back at me. “What the hell is going on, Juliette?” he asks, his jaw tensing. “What is happening right now?”

“Can’t we talk about this in private—?”

“No.” His chest is heaving. “I want to talk about this right now. I don’t care who hears it.”

My eyes immediately go to Warner. He’s leaning against the wall just outside James’s room, arms crossed loosely at his chest. He’s watching Adam with a calm, focused interest.

Warner stills suddenly, as if he can feel my eyes on him.

He looks up, looks at me for exactly two seconds before turning away. He seems to be laughing.

“Why do you keep looking at him?” Adam demands, eyes flashing. “Why

are you even looking at him at all? Why are you so interested in some demented *psycho*—”

I’m so tired of this.

I’m tired of all the secrets and all my inner turmoil and all the guilt and confusion I’ve felt over these two brothers. More than anything else, I don’t like this angry Adam in front of me.

I try to talk to him and he won’t listen to me. I try to reason with him and he attacks me. I try to be honest with him and he won’t believe me. I have no idea what else to do.

“What’s really going on between you guys?” Adam is still asking me. “What’s *really* happening, Juliette? I need you to stop lying to me—”

“Adam.” I cut him off. I’m surprised by how calm I sound. “There’s so much we need to be discussing right now,” I say to him, “and this isn’t it. Our personal problems don’t need to be shared with everyone.”

“So you admit it then?” he says, somehow angrier. “That we have problems, that something is wrong—”

“Something’s been wrong for a while,” I say, exasperated. “I can’t even talk to y—”

“Yeah, ever since we dragged this asshole back to Omega Point,” Adam says. He turns to glare at Kenji. “It was *your* idea—”

“Hey, don’t pull me into your bullshit, okay?” Kenji counters. “Don’t blame me for your issues.”

“We were fine until she started spending so much goddamn time with him —,” Adam begins to say.

“She spent just as much time with him while we were still on base, genius —”

“*Stop*,” I say. “Please understand: Warner is here to help us. He wants to take down The Reestablishment and kill the supreme just like we do—he’s not our enemy anymore—”

“He’s going to *help* us?” Adam asks, eyes wide, feigning surprise. “Oh, you mean just like he helped us the last time he said he was going to fight on our side? Right before he broke out of Omega Point and *bailed*?” Adam laughs out loud, disbelieving. “I can’t believe you’re falling for all of his *bullshit*—”

“This isn’t some kind of trick, Adam—I’m not stupid—”

“Are you sure?”

“What?” I can’t believe he just insulted me.

“I asked you if you were sure,” he snaps. “Because you’re acting pretty

damn stupid right now, so I don't know if I can trust your judgment anymore."

"What is *wrong* with you—"

"What's wrong with *you*?" he shouts back, eyes blazing. "You don't do this. You don't act like this," he says. "You're like a completely different person—"

"Me?" I demand, my voice rising. I've been trying so hard to control my temper but I just don't think I can anymore. He says he wants to have this conversation in front of everyone?

Fine.

We'll have this conversation in front of everyone.

"If I've changed," I say to him, "then so have you. Because the Adam I remember is kind and gentle and he'd never insult me like this. I know things have been rough for you lately, and I'm trying to understand, to be patient, to give you space—but these last few weeks have been rough on all of us. We're all going through a hard time but we don't put each other down. We don't hurt each other. But you can't even be nice to Kenji," I tell him. "You used to be *friends* with Kenji, remember? Now every time he so much as cracks a joke you look at him like you want to kill him, and I don't know why—"

"You're going to defend everyone in this room except for me, aren't you?" Adam says. "You love Kenji so much, you spend all your goddamn time with Kenji—"

"He's my friend!"

"I'm your boyfriend!"

"No," I tell him. "You're not."

Adam is shaking, fists clenched. "I can't even believe you right now."

"We broke up, Adam." My voice is steady. "We broke up a month ago."

"Right," Adam says. "We broke up because you said you loved me. Because you said you didn't want to hurt me."

"I don't," I tell him. "I don't want to hurt you. I've never wanted to hurt you."

"What the hell do you think you're doing right now?" he shouts.

"I don't know how to talk to you," I tell him, shaking my head. "I don't understand—"

"No—you don't understand anything," he snaps. "You don't understand me, you don't understand yourself, and you don't understand that you're acting like a stupid child who's allowed herself to be brainwashed by a psychopath."

Time seems to stand still.

Everything I want to say and everything I've wished to say begins to take

shape, falling to the floor and scrambling upright. Paragraphs and paragraphs begin building walls around me, blocking and justifying as they find ways to fit together, linking and weaving and leaving no room for escape. And every single space between every unspoken word clambers up and into my open mouth, down my throat and into my chest, filling me with so much emptiness I think I might just float away.

I'm breathing.

So hard.

A throat clears.

"Yes, right, I'm really sorry to interrupt," Warner says, stepping forward. "But Juliette, I need to get going. Are you sure you want to stay here?"

I freeze.

"GET OUT," Adam shouts. "Get the hell out of my house, you piece of shit. And don't come back here."

"Well," Warner says, cocking his head at me. "Never mind. It looks like you don't really have a choice." He holds out his hand. "Shall we?"

"You're not taking her anywhere." Adam turns on him. "She's not leaving with you, and she's not partnering up with you. Now get lost."

"Adam. STOP." My voice is angrier than I mean it to be, but I can't help it anymore. "I don't need your permission. I'm not going to live like this. I'm not hiding anymore. You don't have to come with me—you don't even have to understand," I tell him. "But if you loved me, you wouldn't stand in my way."

Warner is smiling.

Adam notices.

"Is there something you want to say?" Adam turns on him.

"God, no," Warner says. "Juliette doesn't require my assistance. And *you* might not have realized it yet, but it's obvious to everyone else that you've lost this fight, Kent."

Adam snaps.

He charges forward, fist pulled back and ready to swing, and it all happens so quickly I only have time to gasp before I hear a sharp crack.

Adam's fist is frozen only inches from Warner's face. It's caught in Warner's hand.

Adam is shocked into silence, his whole body shaking from the unspent energy. Warner leans into his brother's face, whispers, "You really don't want to fight me, you idiot," and hurls Adam's fist back with so much force that Adam flies backward, catching himself just before hitting the floor.

Adam is up. Bolting across the room. Angrier.

Kenji tackles him.

Adam is shouting for Kenji to let him go, to stop getting involved, and Kenji is yanking Adam across the room against his will. He somehow manages to haul open the front door, and pulls himself and Adam outside.

The door slams shut behind them.

TWENTY-FOUR

James, is my first thought.

I spin around, searching the room for him, hoping he's all right, only to find that Lily has already had the foresight to take him into his room.

Everyone else is staring at me.

"What the hell was that?" Ian is the first to break the silence.

He, Brendan, and Winston are all gaping at me. Alia is standing off to the side, arms wrapped around her body. Castle must still be in the shower.

I flinch as someone touches my shoulder.

Warner.

He leans into my ear, speaking softly so only I can hear him. "It's getting late, love, and I really must get back to base." A pause. "And I'm sorry to keep asking, but are you certain you want to stay here?"

I look up to meet his eyes. Nod. "I need to talk to Kenji," I tell him. "I don't know how everyone else feels anymore, but I don't want to do this without Kenji." I hesitate. "I mean, I can," I say, "if I have to. But I don't want to."

Warner nods. Looks past me at a point behind my head. "Right." He frowns a little. "I expect one day you'll tell me what you find so incredibly appealing about him?"

"Who? Kenji?"

Another nod.

"Oh," I say, blinking in surprise. "He's my best friend."

Warner looks at me. Raises an eyebrow.

I stare back. "Is that going to be a problem?"

He stares into his hands, shakes his head. "No, of course not," he says quietly. He clears his throat. "So, I'll come back tomorrow? Thirteen hundred hours."

"Thirteen hundred hours . . . from *now*?"

Warner laughs. Looks up. "One o'clock in the afternoon."

"Okay."

He looks into my eyes then. Smiles for just a moment too long before he

turns around and walks out the door. Without a word to anyone.

Ian is gaping at me. Again.

“I’m—right, I’m so confused,” Brendan says, blinking. “Right then—what just happened? Was he *smiling* at you? Genuinely smiling at you?”

“Looked to me like he was in love with you,” Winston says, frowning. “But that’s probably just because my head is messed up, right?”

I’m doing my best to look at the wall.

Kenji slams the front door open.

Steps inside.

Alone.

“You,” he says, pointing at me, eyes narrowed. “Get your ass over here, right now. You and me,” he says, “we need to talk.”

TWENTY-FIVE

I shuffle over to the door and Kenji grabs my arm to lead me outside. He turns back and shouts, “Get yourselves some dinner” to everyone else, just before we leave.

We’re standing on the landing just outside Adam’s house, and I realize for the first time that there are more stairwells leading up. To somewhere.

“Come on, princess,” Kenji says. “Follow me.”

And we climb.

Four, five flights of stairs. Maybe eight. Or fifty. I have no idea. All I know is that by the time we reach the top I’m both out of breath and embarrassed for being out of breath.

When I’m finally able to inhale normally, I chance a look around.

Incredible.

We’re on the roof, outside, where the world is pitch-black but for the stars and the sliver of moon someone has hung from the sky. Sometimes I wonder if the planets are still up there, still aligned, still managing to get along after all this time. Maybe we could learn a thing or two from them.

The wind tangles around us and I shiver as my body adjusts to the temperature.

“Come here,” Kenji says to me. He motions to the ledge of the roof, and sits down right on the edge, legs swinging over what would be his fastest path to death. “Don’t worry,” he says when he sees my face. “It’ll be fine. I sit here a lot.”

When I’m finally sitting next to him, I dare to look down. My feet are dangling from the top of the world.

Kenji drops an arm around me. Rubs my shoulder to keep me warm.

“So,” he says. “When’s the big day? Have you set a date yet?”

“What?” I startle. “For what?”

“For the day you’re going to stop being such a *dumbass*,” he says, shooting me a sharp look.

“Oh.” I cringe. Kick at the air. “Yeah, that’ll probably never happen.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Shut up.”

“You know,” he says, “I don’t know where Adam is.”

I stiffen. Sit up. “Is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” Kenji says with a resigned sigh. “He’s just super pissed off. And hurt. And embarrassed. And all that emotional shit.”

I drop my eyes again. Kenji’s arm hangs loosely around my neck, and he pulls me closer, tucking me into his side. I rest my head on his chest.

Moments and minutes and memories build and break between us.

“I really thought you guys were solid,” Kenji finally says to me.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “Me too.”

A few seconds jump off the roof.

“I’m such a horrible person,” I say, so quietly.

“Yeah, well.” Kenji sighs.

I groan. Drop my head into my hands.

Kenji sighs again. “Don’t worry, Kent was being an asshole, too.” He takes a deep breath. “But damn, princess.” Kenji looks at me, shakes his head an inch, looks back into the night. “Seriously? *Warner*?”

I look up. “What are you talking about?”

Kenji raises an eyebrow at me. “I know for a fact that you’re not stupid, so please don’t act like you are.”

I roll my eyes. “I really don’t want to have this conversation again—”

“I don’t care if you don’t want to have this conversation again. You have to talk about this. You can’t just fall for a guy like Warner without telling me why. I need to make sure he didn’t stick a chip in your head or someshit.”

I’m silent for almost a full minute.

“I’m not falling for Warner,” I say quietly.

“Sure you aren’t.”

“I’m not,” I insist. “I’m just—I don’t know.” I sigh. “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

“They’re called hormones.”

I shoot him a dirty look. “I’m serious.”

“Me too.” He cocks his head at me. “That’s like, biological and shit. Scientific. Maybe your lady bits are scientifically confused.”

“My *lady bits*?”

“Oh, I’m sorry”—Kenji pretends to look offended—“would you rather I use the proper anatomical terminology? Because your lady bits do not scare me—”

“Yeah, no thanks.” I manage to laugh a little, my sad attempt dissolving into a sigh.

God, everything is changing.

“He’s just . . . so different,” I hear myself say. “Warner. He’s not what you guys think. He’s sweet. And kind. And his father is so, so horrible to him. You can’t even imagine,” I trail off, thinking of the scars I saw on Warner’s back. “And more than anything else . . . I don’t know,” I say, staring into the darkness. “He really . . . believes in me?” I glance up at Kenji. “Does that sound stupid?”

Kenji shoots me a doubtful look. “Adam believes in you, too.”

“Yeah,” I say, looking into the darkness. “I guess.”

“What do you mean, *you guess*? The kid thinks you invented air.”

I almost smile. “I don’t know which version of me Adam likes. I’m not the same person I was when we were in school. I’m not that girl anymore. I think he wants that,” I say, glancing up at Kenji. “I think he wants to pretend I’m the girl who doesn’t really speak and spends most of her time being scared. The kind of girl he needs to protect and take care of all the time. I don’t know if he likes who I am now. I don’t know if he can handle it.”

“So the minute you opened your mouth you just shattered all his dreams, huh?”

“I will push you off the roof.”

“Yeah, I can definitely see why Adam wouldn’t like you.”

I roll my eyes.

Kenji laughs. Leans back and pulls me down with him. The concrete is under our heads now, the sky draped all around us. It’s like I’ve been dropped into a vat of ink.

“You know, it actually makes a lot of sense,” Kenji finally says.

“What does?”

“I don’t know, I mean—you’ve been locked up basically forever, right? It’s not like you were busy touching a bunch of dudes your whole life.”

“*What?*”

“Like—Adam was the first guy who was ever . . . nice to you. Hell, he was probably the first person in the world who was nice to you. And he can touch you. And he’s not, you know, disgusting looking.” A pause. “I can’t blame you, to be honest. It’s hard being lonely. We all get a little desperate sometimes.”

“Okay,” I say slowly.

“I am just saying,” Kenji says, “that I guess it makes sense you’d fall for him. Like, by default. Because if not him, who else? Your options were super

limited.”

“Oh,” I say, quietly now. “Right. By *default*.” I try to laugh and fail, swallowing hard against the emotion caught in my throat. “Sometimes I’m not sure I even know what’s real anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know,” I whisper, mostly to myself.

A heavy pause.

“Did you really love him . . . ?”

I hesitate before answering. “I think so? I don’t know?” I sigh. “Is it possible to love someone and then stop loving them? I don’t think I even know what love is.”

Kenji blows out a breath. Runs a hand through his hair. “Well shit,” he mutters.

“Have you ever been in love?” I ask, turning on my side to look at him.

He stares up at the sky. Blinks a few times. “Nope.”

I roll back, disappointed. “Oh.”

“This is so depressing,” Kenji says.

“Yeah.”

“We suck.”

“Yeah.”

“So tell me again why you like Warner so much? Did he, like, take all his clothes off or something?”

“What?” I gasp, so glad it’s too dark for him to see me blushing. “No,” I say quickly. “No, he—”

“Damn, princess.” Kenji laughs, hard. “I had no idea.”

I punch him in the arm.

“Hey—be gentle with me!” he protests, rubbing at the sore spot. “I’m weaker than you!”

“You know, I can sort of control it now,” I tell him, beaming. “I can moderate my strength levels.”

“Good for you. I’ll buy you a balloon the minute the world stops shitting on itself.”

“Thank you,” I say, pleased. “You’re a good teacher.”

“I’m good at everything,” he points out.

“Humble, too.”

“And really good-looking.”

I choke on a laugh.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Kenji says. He shifts, folds his hands behind his head. “Why do you like the rich boy so much?”

I take a tight breath. Focus on the brightest star in the sky. “I like the way I feel about myself when I’m with him,” I say quietly. “Warner thinks I’m strong and smart and capable and he actually values my opinion. He makes me feel like his equal—like I can accomplish just as much as he can, and more. And if I do something incredible, he’s not even surprised. He *expects* it. He doesn’t treat me like I’m some fragile little girl who needs to be protected all the time.”

Kenji snorts.

“That’s because you’re not fragile,” Kenji says. “If anything, everyone needs to protect themselves from *you*. You’re like a freaking beast,” he says. Then adds, “I mean, you know—like, a cute beast. A little beast that tears shit up and breaks the earth and sucks the life out of people.”

“Nice.”

“I’m here for you.”

“I can tell.”

“So that’s it?” Kenji says. “You just like him for his personality, huh?”

“What?”

“All of this,” Kenji says, waving a hand in the air, “has nothing to do with him being all sexy and shit and him being able to touch you all the time?”

“You think Warner is sexy?”

“That is not what I said.”

I laugh. “I do like his face.”

“And the touching?”

“What touching?”

Kenji looks at me, eyes wide, eyebrows up. “I am not Adam, okay? You can’t bullshit me with your innocent act. You tell me this guy can touch you, and that he’s into you, and you’re clearly into him, and you spent the night in his bed last night, and then I walk in on the two of you in a freaking closet—no wait, I’m sorry, not a closet—a *child’s bedroom*—and you’re telling me there has been *zero* touching?” He stares at me. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

“No,” I whisper, face on fire.

“You’re just growing up so quickly. You’re getting all excited about being able to touch shit for the first time, and I just want to be sure you are observing sanitary regulations—”

“Stop being so disgusting.”

“Hey—I’m just looking out for y—”

“Kenji?”

“Yeah?”

I take a deep breath. Try to count the stars. “What am I going to do?”

“About what?”

I hesitate. “About everything.”

Kenji makes a strange sound. “Shit if I know.”

“I don’t want to do this without you,” I whisper.

He leans back. “Who said you’re going to do anything without me?”

My heart skips a few beats. I stare at him.

“What?” he asks. Raises his eyebrows. “You’re surprised?”

“You’ll fight with me?” I ask him, hardly breathing. “Fight back with me? Even if it’s with Warner?”

Kenji smiles. Looks up at the sky. “Hell yeah,” he says.

“*Really?*”

“I’m here for you, kid. That’s what friends are for.”

TWENTY-SIX

When we make it back to the house, Castle is standing in the far corner, talking to Winston.

Kenji freezes in the doorway.

I'd forgotten Kenji hadn't had a chance to see Castle on his feet yet, and I feel a true ache as I look at him. I'm a terrible friend. All I do is dump my problems on him, never thinking to ask him about his own. He must have so much on his mind.

Kenji moves across the room in a daze, not stopping until he reaches Castle. He puts a hand on his shoulder. Castle turns around. The whole room stops to watch.

Castle smiles. Nods, just once.

Kenji pulls him into a fierce hug, holding on for only a few seconds before breaking away. The two stare at each other with some kind of silent recognition. Castle rests a hand on Kenji's arm.

Kenji grins.

And then he spins around and smiles at me, and I'm suddenly so happy, so relieved and thrilled and overjoyed that Kenji gets to sleep with a lighter heart tonight. I feel like I might burst from happiness.

The door slams open.

I turn around.

Adam steps inside.

My heart deflates.

Adam doesn't even look at me as he walks in. "James," he says, crossing the room. "Let's go, buddy. It's time for bed."

James nods and darts into his bedroom. Adam follows him in. The door closes behind them.

"He's home," Castle says. He looks relieved.

No one says anything for a second.

"All right, we should get ready for bed, too," Kenji says, looking around. He walks over to the corner and grabs a stack of blankets. Passes them out.

“Does everyone sleep on the floor?” I ask.

Kenji nods. “Yeah,” he says. “Warner wasn’t wrong. It really is like a slumber party.”

I try to laugh.

Can’t.

Everyone gets busy setting up blankets on the ground. Winston, Brendan, and Ian take over one side of the room, Alia and Lily the other. Castle sleeps on the couch.

Kenji points to the middle. “You and me go there.”

“Romantic.”

“You wish.”

“Where does Adam sleep?” I ask, lowering my voice.

Kenji stops midway through tossing down a blanket. Looks up. “Kent’s not coming back out,” he says to me. “He sleeps with James. Poor kid has really bad nightmares every night.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised and ashamed of myself for not remembering this. “Of course.” Of course he does. Kenji must know this firsthand, too. They all used to room together at Omega Point.

Winston hits a switch. The lights go out. There’s a rustle of blankets. “If I hear any of you talk,” Winston says, “I will personally send Brendan over to kick you in the face.”

“I am not going to kick anyone in the face.”

“Kick yourself in the face, Brendan.”

“I don’t even know why we’re friends.”

“Please shut up,” Lily shouts from her corner.

“You heard the lady,” Winston says. “Everyone shut up.”

“You’re the one talking, dumbass,” Ian says.

“Brendan, kick him in the face, please.”

“Shut up, mate, I am not kicking any—”

“*Good night*,” Castle says.

Everyone stops breathing.

“Good night, sir,” Kenji whispers.

I roll over so I’m face-to-face with Kenji. He grins at me in the dark. I grin back.

“Good night,” I mouth.

He winks at me.

My eyes fall shut.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Adam is ignoring me.

He hasn't said a word about yesterday; doesn't betray even a hint of anger or frustration. He talks to everyone, laughs with James, helps get breakfast together. He also pretends I don't exist.

I tried saying good morning to him and he pretended not to hear me. Or maybe he really didn't hear me. Maybe he's managed to train his brain not to hear or see me at all anymore.

I feel like I'm being punched in the heart.

Repeatedly.

"So what do you guys do all day?" I ask, trying desperately to make conversation. We're all sitting on the floor, eating bowls of granola. We woke up late, ate breakfast late. No one has bothered to clean up the blankets yet, and Warner is supposed to be here in about an hour.

"Nothing," Ian says.

"We try not to die, mostly," Winston says.

"It's boring as hell," Lily says.

"Why?" Kenji asks. "You have something in mind?"

"Oh," I say. "No, I just . . ." I hesitate. "Well, Warner's going to be here in an hour, so I wasn't sure if—"

Something crashes in the kitchen. A bowl. In the sink. Silverware flying everywhere.

Adam steps into the living room.

His eyes.

"He's not coming back here." These, the first five words Adam says to me.

"But I already told him," I try to say. "He's going to—"

"This is *my* home," he says, eyes flashing. "I won't let him in here."

I'm staring at Adam, heart beating out of my chest. I never thought he'd be capable of looking at me like he hates me. Really, really hates me.

"Kent, man—," I hear Kenji say.

"NO."

“C’mon bro, it doesn’t have to be like this—”

“If you want to see him so badly,” Adam says to me, “you can get the hell out of my house. But he’s not coming back here. Not ever.”

I blink.

This isn’t really happening.

“Where is she supposed to go?” Kenji says to him. “You want her to stand on the side of the street? So someone can report her and get her killed? Are you out of your mind?”

“I don’t give a shit anymore,” Adam says. “She can go do whatever the hell she wants.” He turns to me again. “You want to be with him?” He points to the door. “Go. Drop dead.”

Ice is eating away at my body.

I stumble to my feet. My legs are unsteady. I’m nodding and I don’t know why but I can’t seem to stop. I make my way to the door.

“Juliette—”

I spin around, even though it’s Kenji calling my name, not Adam.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Kenji says to me. “Don’t move. This is ridiculous.”

This has spiraled out of control. This isn’t just a fight anymore. There is pure, unadulterated hatred in Adam’s eyes, and I’m so blindsided by the impossibility of it—so thrown off guard—that I don’t know how to react. I never could’ve anticipated this—never could’ve imagined things could turn out this way.

The real Adam wouldn’t kick me out of his house like this. He wouldn’t talk to me like this. Not the Adam I know. The Adam I thought I knew.

“Kent,” Kenji says again, “you need to calm down. There is nothing going on between her and Warner, okay? She’s just trying to do what she thinks is right—”

“*Bullshit!*” Adam explodes. “That’s bullshit, and you know it, and you’re a jackass for denying it. She’s been lying to me this whole damn time—”

“You guys aren’t even together, man, you can’t lay a claim on her—”

“We never broke up!” Adam shouts.

“Of course you did,” Kenji snaps back. “Every single person at Point heard your melodramatic ass in the freaking tunnels. We all know you broke up. So stop fighting it.”

“That didn’t count as a breakup,” Adam says, his voice rough. “We still loved each other—”

“Okay, you know what? Whatever. I don’t care.” Kenji waves his hands,

rolls his eyes. “But we’re in the middle of a *war* right now. For shit’s sake, she was shot in the chest a couple days ago and almost died. Don’t you think it’s possible she’s really trying to think of something bigger than just the two of you? Warner’s crazy, but he can help—”

“She looks at that psycho like she’s in *love* with him,” Adam barks back. “You think I don’t know what that look is? You think I wouldn’t be able to tell? She used to look at *me* like that. I know her—I know her so well—”

“Maybe you don’t.”

“Stop defending her!”

“You don’t even know what you’re saying,” Kenji tells him. “You’re acting crazy—”

“I was happier,” Adam says, “when I thought she was *dead*.”

“You don’t mean that. Don’t say things like that, man. Once you say that kind of shit you can’t take it back—”

“Oh, I mean it,” Adam says. “I really, really mean it.” He finally looks at me. Fists clenched. “Thinking you were dead,” he says to me, “was so much better. It hurt so much less than this.”

The walls are moving. I’m seeing spots, blinking at nothing.

This isn’t really happening, I keep telling myself.

This is just a terrible nightmare, and when I wake up Adam will be gentle and kind and wonderful again. Because he isn’t cruel like this. Not to me. Never to me.

“You, of all people,” Adam says to me. He looks so disgusted. “I trusted you—told you things I never should’ve told you—and now you’re going out of your way to throw it all back in my face. I can’t believe you’d do this to me. That you’d fall for *him*. What the hell is wrong with you?” he demands, his voice rising in pitch. “How sick in the head do you have to be?”

I’m so afraid to speak.

So afraid to move my lips.

I’m so scared that if I move even an inch, my body will snap in half and everyone will see that my insides are made up of nothing but all the tears I’m swallowing back right now.

Adam shakes his head.Laughs a sad, twisted laugh. “You won’t even deny it,” he says. “Unbelievable.”

“Leave her alone, Kent,” Kenji says suddenly, his voice deathly sharp. “I’m serious.”

“This is *none* of your business—”

“You’re being a dick—”

“You think I give a shit what you think?” Adam turns on him. “This isn’t your fight, Kenji. Just because she’s too much of a coward to say anything doesn’t mean you have to defend her—”

I feel like I’ve stepped outside of myself. Like my body has collapsed onto the floor and I’m looking on, watching as Adam transforms into a completely different human being. Every word. Every insult he hurls at me seems to fracture my bones. Pretty soon I’ll be nothing but blood and a beating heart.

“I’m leaving,” Adam is saying. “I’m leaving, and when I come back, I want her gone.”

Don’t cry, I keep saying to myself.

Don’t cry.

This isn’t real.

“You and me,” Adam is saying to me now, his voice so rough, so angry, “we’re *done*. We’re finished,” he snaps. “I never want to see you again. Not anywhere in this world, and definitely not in my own goddamn house.” He stares at me, chest heaving. “So get the hell out. Get out before I get back.”

He stalks across the room. Grabs a coat. Yanks the door open.

The walls shake as he slams it shut.

TWENTY-EIGHT

I'm standing in the middle of the room, staring at nothing.

I'm suddenly freezing. My hands, I think, are shaking. Or maybe it's my bones. Maybe my bones are shaking. I move mechanically, so slowly, my mind still fuzzy. I'm vaguely aware that someone might be saying something to me, but I'm too focused on getting my coat because I'm so cold. It's so *cold* in here. I really need my jacket. And maybe my gloves. I can't stop shivering.

I pull my coat on. Shove my hands into the pockets. I feel like someone might be talking to me but I can't hear anything through the weird haze muting my senses. I clench my fists and my fingers fumble against a piece of plastic.

The pager. I'd almost forgotten.

I pull it out of my pocket. It's a tiny little thing; a thin, black rectangle with a button set flush against the length of it. I press it without thinking. I press it over and over and over again, because the action calms me. Soothes me, somehow. *Click click*. I like the repetitive motion. *Click*. *Click click*. I don't know what else to do.

Click.

Hands land on my shoulders.

I turn around. Castle is standing just behind me, his eyes heavy with concern. "You're not going to leave," he says to me. "We'll work things out. It'll be all right."

"No." My tongue is dust. My teeth have crumbled away. "I have to go."

I can't stop pressing the button on this pager.

Click.

Click click.

"Come sit down," Castle is saying to me. "Adam is upset, but he'll be okay. I'm sure he didn't mean what he said."

"I'm pretty sure he did," Ian says.

Castle shoots him a sharp look.

"You can't leave," says Winston. "I thought we were going to kick some ass together. You promised."

“Yeah,” Lily pipes up, trying to sound upbeat. But her eyes are wary, pulled together in fear or concern and I realize she’s terrified for me.

Not *of* me.

For me.

It’s the strangest sensation.

Click click click.

Click click.

“If you go,” she’s saying, trying to smile, “we’ll have to live like this forever. And I don’t want to live with a bunch of smelly guys for the rest of my life.”

Click.

Click click.

“Don’t go,” James says. He looks so sad. So serious. “I’m sorry Adam was mean to you. But I don’t want you to die,” he says. “And I don’t wish you were dead. I swear I don’t.”

James. Sweet James. His eyes break my heart.

“I can’t stay.” My voice sounds strange to me. Broken. “He really meant what he said—”

“We’ll be a sad, sorry lot if you leave.” Brendan cuts me off. “And I have to agree with Lily. I don’t want to live like this for much longer.”

“But how—”

The front door flies open.

“JULIETTE—*Juliette*—”

I spin around.

Warner is standing there, face flushed, chest rising and falling, staring at me like I might be a ghost. He strides across the room before I have a chance to say a word and cups my face in his hands, his eyes searching me. “Are you okay?” he’s saying. “God—are you okay? What happened? Are you all right?”

He’s here.

He’s here and all I want to do is fall apart but I don’t.

I won’t.

“Thank you,” I manage to say to him. “Thank you for coming—”

He wraps me up in his arms, not caring about the eight sets of eyes watching us. He just holds me, one arm tight around my waist, the other held to the back of my head. My face is buried in his chest and the warmth of him is so familiar to me now. Oddly comforting. He runs his hand up and down my back, tilts his head toward mine. “What’s wrong, love?” he whispers. “What happened? Please

tell me—”

I blink.

“Do you want me to take you back?”

I don’t answer.

I don’t know what I want or need to do anymore. Everyone is telling me to stay, but this isn’t their home. This is Adam’s home, and it’s so clear he hates me now. But I also don’t want to leave my friends. I don’t want to leave Kenji.

“Do you want *me* to leave?” Warner asks.

“No,” I say too quickly. “No.”

Warner leans back, just a little. “Tell me what you want,” he says desperately. “Tell me what to do,” he says, “and I’ll do it.”

“This is, by far, the craziest shit I have ever seen,” Kenji says. “I really never would’ve believed it. Not in a million years.”

“It’s like a soap opera.” Ian nods. “But with worse acting.”

“I think it’s kind of sweet,” Winston says.

I jerk back, half spinning around. Everyone is staring at us. Winston is the only one smiling.

“What’s going on?” Warner asks them. “Why does she look like she’s about to cry?”

No one answers.

“Where’s Kent?” Warner asks, eyes narrowing as he reads their faces. “What did he do to her?”

“He’s out,” Lily says. “He left a little bit ago.”

Warner’s eyes darken as he processes the information. He turns to me. “Please tell me you don’t want to stay here anymore.”

I drop my head into my hands. “Everyone wants to help—to fight—except for Adam. But they can’t leave. And I don’t want to leave them behind.”

Warner sighs. Closes his eyes. “Then stay,” he says gently. “If that’s what you want. Stay here. I can always meet you.”

“I can’t,” I tell him. “I have to go. I’m not allowed to come back here again.”

“What?” Anger. In and out of his eyes. “What do you mean you’re not *allowed*?”

“Adam doesn’t want me to stay here anymore. I have to be gone before he gets back.”

Warner’s jaw tightens. He stares at me for what feels like a century. I can almost see him thinking—his mind working at an impossible rate—to find a solution. “Okay,” he finally says. “Okay.” He exhales. “Kishimoto,” he says all

at once, never breaking eye contact with me.

“Present, sir.”

Warner tries not to roll his eyes as he turns toward Kenji. “I will set up your group in my private training quarters on base. I will require a day to work out the details, but I will make sure you are granted easy access and clearance to enter the grounds upon arrival. You will make yourself and your team invisible and follow my lead. You are free to stay in these quarters until we are ready to proceed with the first stage of our plan.” A pause. “Will this arrangement work for you?”

Kenji actually looks disgusted. “Hell no.”

“Why not?”

“You’re going to lock us up in your ‘private training quarters’?” Kenji says, making air quotes with his fingers. “Why don’t you just say you’re going to put us in a cage and kill us slowly? You think I’m a moron? What reason would I have to believe that kind of shit?”

“I will make sure you are fed well and regularly,” Warner says by way of response. “Your accommodations will be simple, but they will not be simpler than this,” he says, gesturing to the room. “The arrangement will provide us ample opportunity to meet and structure our next moves. You must know that you’re putting everyone at risk by staying on unregulated territory. You and your friends will be safer with me.”

“Why would you do that, though?” Ian asks. “Why would you want to help us and feed us and keep us alive? That doesn’t make any sense—”

“It doesn’t need to make sense.”

“Of course it does,” Lily counters. Her eyes are hard, angry. “We’re not going to walk onto a military base just to get ourselves killed,” she snaps. “This could be some sick trick.”

“Fine,” Warner says.

“Fine, what?” Lily asks.

“Don’t come.”

“Oh.” Lily blinks.

Warner turns to Kenji. “You are officially refusing my offer, then?”

“Yeah, no thanks,” Kenji says.

Warner nods. Looks to me. “Should we get going?”

“But—no—” I’m panicking now, looking from Warner to Kenji and back to Warner again. “I can’t just *leave*—I can’t just never see them again—”

I turn to Kenji.

“You’re just going to stay here?” I ask. “And I’ll never see you again?”

“You can stay here with us.” Kenji crosses his arms against his chest. “You don’t have to go.”

“You know I can’t stay,” I tell him, angry and hurt. “You know Adam meant what he said—he’ll go crazy if he comes back and I’m still here—”

“So you’re just going to leave, then?” Kenji says sharply. “You’re going to walk away from all of us”—he gestures to everyone—“just because Adam decided to be a douchebag? You’re trading all of us in for Warner?”

“Kenji—I’m not—I have nowhere else to live! What am I supposed to—”

“Stay.”

“Adam will throw me out—”

“No he won’t,” Kenji says. “We won’t let him.”

“I won’t force myself on him. I won’t beg him. Let me at least leave with a shred of dignity—”

Kenji throws his arms in the air in frustration. “This is *bullshit!*”

“Come with me,” I say to him. “Please—I want us to stay together—”

“We can’t,” he says. “We can’t risk that, J. I don’t know what’s going on between you two,” he says, gesturing between me and Warner. “Maybe he really is different with you, I don’t know, whatever—but I can’t put all of our lives at risk based on emotions and an assumption. Maybe he cares about *you*,” Kenji says, “but he doesn’t give a shit about the rest of us.” He looks at Warner. “Do you?”

“Do I what?” Warner asks.

“Do you care about any of us? About our survival—our well-being?”

“No.”

Kenji almost laughs. “Well at least you’re honest.”

“My offer, however, still stands. And you’re an idiot to refuse,” Warner says. “You’ll all die out here, and you know that better than I do.”

“We’ll take our chances.”

“No,” I gasp. “Kenji—”

“It’ll be all right,” he says to me. His forehead is pinched, his eyes heavy. “I’m sure we’ll find a way to see each other one day. Do what you need to do.”

“No,” I’m trying to say. Trying to breathe. My lungs are swelling up, my heart racing so fast I can hear it pounding in my ears. I’m feeling hot and cold and too hot, too cold, and all I can think is *no*, it wasn’t supposed to happen like this, it wasn’t all supposed to fall apart, not again not again—

Warner grabs my arms. “Please,” he’s saying, his voice urgent, panicked.

“Please don’t do that, love, I need you not to do that—”

“Dammit, Kenji!” I explode, breaking away from Warner. “Please, for the love of God, don’t be an idiot. You have to come with me—I need you—”

“I need some kind of guarantee, J”—Kenji is pacing, hands in his hair—“I can’t just trust that everything is going to be all right—”

I turn on Warner, chest heaving, fists clenched. “Give them what they want. I don’t care what it is,” I say to him. “Please, you have to negotiate. You have to make this work. I need him. I need my friends.”

Warner looks at me for a long time.

“Please,” I whisper.

He looks away. Looks back at me.

He finally meets Kenji’s eyes. Sighs. “What do you want?”

“I want a hot bath,” I hear Winston say.

And then he giggles.

He actually giggles.

“Two of my men are ill and injured,” Kenji says, immediately switching gears. His voice is clipped, sharp. Unfeeling. “They need medicine and medical attention. We don’t want to be monitored, we don’t want a curfew, and we want to be able to eat more than the Automat food. We want protein. Fruits. Vegetables. Real meals. We want regular access to showers. We’ll need new clothes. And we want to remain armed at all times.”

Warner is standing so still beside me I can hardly hear him breathing anymore. My head is pounding so hard and my heart is still racing in my chest, but I’ve calmed down enough that I’m able to breathe a little easier now.

Warner glances down at me.

He holds my gaze for just a moment before he closes his eyes. Exhales a sharp breath. Looks up.

“Fine,” he says.

Kenji is staring at him. “Wait—*what?*”

“I will be back tomorrow at fourteen hundred hours to guide you to your new quarters.”

“Holy shit.” Winston is bouncing on the couch. “Holy shit holy shit holy shit.”

“Do you have your things?” Warner asks me.

I nod.

“Good,” he says. “Let’s go.”

TWENTY-NINE

Warner is holding my hand.

I only have enough energy to focus on this single, strange fact as he leads me down the stairs and into the parking garage. He opens the door of the tank and helps me in before closing it behind me.

He climbs into the other side.

Turns on the engine.

We're already on the road and I've blinked only six times since we left Adam's house.

I still can't believe what just happened. I can't believe we're all going to be working together. I can't believe I told Warner what to do and he *listened to me*.

I turn to look at him. It's strange: I've never felt so safe or so relieved to be beside him. I never thought I could feel this way with him.

"Thank you," I whisper, grateful and guilty, somehow, about everything that's happened. About leaving Adam behind. I realize now that I've made the kind of choice I can't undo. My heart is still breaking. "Really," I say again. "Thank you so much. For coming to get me. I appreciate—"

"Please," he says. "I'm begging you to stop."

I still.

"I can't stomach your pain," he says. "I can feel it so strongly and it's making me crazy—*please*," he says to me. "Don't be sad. Or hurt. Or guilty. You've done nothing wrong."

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't be sorry, either," he says. "God, the only reason I'm not going to kill Kent for this is because I know it would only upset you more."

"You're right," I say after a moment. "But it's not just him."

"What?" he asks. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want you to kill anyone at all," I say. "Not just Adam."

Warner laughs a sharp, strange laugh. He looks almost relieved. "Do you have any other stipulations?"

"Not really."

“You don’t want to fix me, then? You don’t have a long list of things I need to work on?”

“No.” I stare out the window. The view is so bleak. So cold. Covered in ice and snow. “There’s nothing wrong with you that isn’t already wrong with me,” I say quietly. “And if I were smart I’d first figure out how to fix myself.”

We’re both silent awhile. The tension is so thick in this small space.

“Aaron?” I say, still watching the scenery fly by.

I hear the small hitch in his breath. The hesitation. It’s the first time I’ve used his first name so casually.

“Yes?” he says.

“I want you to know,” I tell him, “that I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“What?” He startles.

“I don’t think you’re crazy.” The world is blurring away as I watch it through the window. “And I don’t think you’re a psychopath. I also don’t think you’re a sick, twisted monster. I don’t think you’re a heartless murderer, and I don’t think you deserve to die, and I don’t think you’re pathetic. Or stupid. Or a coward. I don’t think you’re any of the things people have said about you.”

I turn to look at him.

Warner is staring out the windshield.

“You don’t?” His voice is so soft and so scared I can scarcely hear it.

“No,” I say. “I don’t. And I just thought you should know. I’m not trying to fix you; I don’t think you need to be fixed. I’m not trying to turn you into someone else. I only want you to be who you really are. Because I think I know the real you. I think I’ve seen him.”

Warner says nothing, his chest rising and falling.

“I don’t care what anyone else says about you,” I tell him. “I think you’re a good person.”

Warner is blinking fast now. I can hear him breathing.

In and out.

Unevenly.

He says nothing.

“Do you . . . believe me?” I ask after a moment. “Can you sense that I’m telling the truth? That I really mean it?”

Warner’s hands are clenched around the steering wheel. His knuckles are white.

He nods.

Just once.

THIRTY

Warner still hasn't said a single word to me.

We're in his room now, courtesy of Delalieu, who Warner was quick to dismiss. It feels strange and familiar to be back here, in this room that I've found both fear and comfort in.

Now it feels right to me.

This is Warner's room. And Warner, to me, is no longer something to be afraid of.

These past few months have transformed him in my eyes, and these past two days have been full of revelations that I'm still recovering from. I can't deny that he seems different to me now.

I feel like I understand him in a way I never did before.

He's like a terrified, tortured animal. A creature who spent his whole life being beaten, abused, and caged away. He was forced into a life he never asked for, and was never given an opportunity to choose anything else. And though he's been given all the tools to kill a person, he's too emotionally tortured to be able to use those skills against his own father—the very man who taught him to be a murderer. Because somehow, in some strange, inexplicable way, he still wants his father to love him.

And I understand that.

I really, really do.

"What happened?" Warner finally says to me.

I'm sitting on his bed; he's standing by the door, staring at the wall.

"What do you mean?"

"With Kent," he says. "Earlier. What did he say to you?"

"Oh." I flush. Embarrassed. "He kicked me out of his house."

"But why?"

"He was mad," I explain. "That I was defending you. That I'd invited you to come back at all."

“Oh.”

I can almost hear our hearts beat in the silence between us.

“You were defending me,” Warner finally says.

“Yes.”

He says nothing.

I say nothing.

“So he told you to leave,” Warner says, “because you were defending me.”

“Yes.”

“Is that all?”

My heart is racing. I’m suddenly nervous. “No.”

“There were other things?”

“Yes.”

Warner blinks at the wall. Unmoving. “Really.”

I nod.

He says nothing.

“He was upset,” I whisper, “because I didn’t agree that you were crazy. And he was accusing me”—I hesitate—“of being in love with you.”

Warner exhales sharply. Touches a hand to the doorframe.

My heart is pounding so hard.

Warner’s eyes are glued to the wall. “And you told him he was an idiot.”

Breathe. “No.”

Warner turns, just halfway. I see his profile, the unsteady rise and fall of his chest. He’s staring directly at the door now, and it’s clear it’s costing him a great deal of effort to speak. “Then you told him he was crazy. You told him he had to be out of his mind to say something like that.”

“No.”

“No,” he echoes.

I try not to move.

Warner takes a hard, shaky breath. “Then what did you say to him?”

Seven seconds die between us.

“Nothing,” I whisper.

Warner stills.

I don’t breathe.

No one speaks for what feels like forever.

“Of course,” Warner finally says. He looks pale, unsteady. “You said nothing. Of course.”

“Aaron—” I get to my feet.

“There are a lot of things I have to do before tomorrow,” he says. “Especially if your friends will be joining us on base.” His hands tremble in the second it takes him to reach for the door. “Forgive me,” he says. “But I have to go.”

THIRTY-ONE

I decide to take a bath.

I've never taken a bath before.

I poke around the bathroom as the tub fills with hot water, and discover stacks and stacks of scented soaps. All different kinds. All different sizes. Each bar of soap has been wrapped in a thick piece of parchment, and tied with twine. There are small labels affixed to each package to distinguish one scent from another.

I pick up one of the bundles.

HONEYSUCKLE

I clutch the soap and can't help but think how different it was to take a shower at Omega Point. We had nothing so fancy as this. Our soaps were harsh and smelled strange and were fairly ineffective. Kenji used to bring them into our training sessions and break off pieces to pelt at me when I wasn't focusing.

The memory makes me inexplicably emotional.

My heart swells as I remember that my friends will be here tomorrow. This is really going to happen, I think. We'll be unstoppable, all of us together. I can't wait.

I look more closely at the label.

Top notes of jasmine and nuances of grape. Mild notes of lilac, honeysuckle, rose, and cinnamon. Orange-flower and powder base notes complete the fragrance.

Sounds amazing.

I steal one of Warner's soaps.

I'm freshly scrubbed and wearing a clean set of clothes.

I keep sniffing my skin, pleasantly surprised by how nice it is to smell like a flower. I've never smelled like anything before. I keep running my fingers down my arms, wondering at how much of a difference a good bar of soap can make. I've never felt so clean in my life. I didn't realize soap could lather like that or react so well to my body. The only soap I've ever used before always dried up

my skin and left me feeling uncomfortable for a few hours. But this is weird. Wonderful. I feel soft and smooth and so refreshed.

I also have absolutely nothing to do.

I sit down on Warner's bed, pull my feet up underneath me. Stare at his office door.

I'm so tempted to see if the door is unlocked.

My conscience, however, overrules me.

I sink into the pillows with a sigh. Kick up the blankets and snuggle beneath them.

Close my eyes.

My mind is instantly flooded with images of Adam's angry face, his shaking fists, his hurtful words. I try to push the memories away and I can't.

My eyes fly open.

I wonder if I'll ever see him and James again.

Maybe this is what Adam wanted. He can go back to his life with his little brother now. He won't have to worry about sharing his rations with eight other people and he'll be able to survive much longer this way.

But then what? I can't help but think.

He'll be all alone. With no food. No friends. No income.

It breaks my heart to imagine it. To think of him struggling to find a way to live, to provide for his brother. Because even though Adam seems to hate me now, I don't think I could ever reciprocate those feelings.

I don't even know that I understand what just happened between us.

It seems impossible that Adam and I could fissure and break apart so abruptly. I care so deeply for him. He was there for me when no one else was; he gave me hope when I needed it most; he loved me when no one else would. He's not anyone I want to erase from my life.

I want him around. I want my friend back.

But I'm realizing now that Kenji was right.

Adam was the first and only person who'd ever shown me compassion. The first, and, at the time, only person who was able to touch me. I was caught up in the impossibility of it, so convinced fate had brought us together. His tattoo was a perfect snapshot of my dreams.

I thought it was about us. About my escape. About our happily-ever-after.

And it was.

And it wasn't.

I want to laugh at my own blindness.

It linked us, I realize. That tattoo. It did bring me and Adam together, but not because we were destined for one another. Not because he was my flight to freedom. But because we have one major connection between the two of us. One kind of hope neither one of us was able to see.

Warner.

A white bird with streaks of gold like a crown atop its head.

A fair-skinned boy with gold hair, the leader of Sector 45.

It was always him. All along.

The link.

Warner, Adam's brother, my captor and now comrade. He inadvertently brought me and Adam together. And being with Adam gave me a new kind of strength. I was still scared and still very broken and Adam cared for me, giving me a reason to stand up for myself when I was too weak to realize I had always been reason enough. It was affection and a desperate desire for physical connection. Two things I'd been so deprived of, and so wholly unfamiliar with. I had nothing to compare these new experiences to.

Of course I thought I was in love.

But while I don't know much, I do know that if Adam really loved me, he wouldn't have treated me the way he did today. He wouldn't prefer that I was dead.

I know this, because I've seen proof of his opposite.

Because I was dying.

And Warner could've let me die. He was angry and hurt and had every reason to be bitter. I'd just ripped his heart out; I'd let him believe something would come of our relationship. I let him confess the depth of his feelings to me; I let him touch me in ways even Adam hadn't. I didn't ask him to stop.

Every inch of me was saying yes.

And then I took it all back. Because I was scared, and confused, and conflicted. Because of Adam.

Warner told me he loved me, and in return I insulted him and lied to him and yelled at him and pushed him away. And when he had the chance to stand back and watch me die, he didn't.

He found a way to save my life.

With no demands. No expectations. Believing full well that I was in love with someone else, and that saving my life meant making me whole again only to give me back to another guy.

And right now, I can't say I know what Adam would do if I were dying in

front of him. I'm not sure if he would save my life. And that uncertainty alone makes me certain that something wasn't right between us. Something wasn't real.

Maybe we both fell in love with the illusion of something more.

THIRTY-TWO

My eyes fly open.

It's pitch-black. Quiet. I sit up too fast.

I must've fallen asleep. I have no idea what time it is, but a quick glance around the room tells me Warner isn't here.

I slip out of bed. I'm still wearing socks and I'm suddenly grateful; I have to wrap my arms around myself, shivering as the cold winter air creeps through the thin material of my T-shirt. My hair is still slightly damp from the bath.

Warner's office door is cracked open.

There's a sliver of light peeking through the opening, and it makes me wonder if he really forgot to close it, or if maybe he's only just walked in. Maybe he's not in there at all. But my curiosity beats out my conscience this time.

I want to know where he works and what his desk looks like; I want to know if he's messy or organized or if he keeps personal items around. I wonder if he has any pictures of himself as a kid.

Or of his mother.

I tiptoe forward, butterflies stirring awake in my stomach. I shouldn't be nervous, I tell myself. I'm not doing anything illegal. I'm just going to see if he's in there, and if he's not, I'll leave. I'm only going to walk in for a second. I'm not going to search through any of his things.

I'm not.

I hesitate outside his door. It's so quiet that I'm almost certain my heart is beating loud and hard enough for him to hear. I don't know why I'm so scared.

I knock twice against the door as I nudge it open.

"Aaron, are you—"

Something crashes to the floor.

I push the door open and rush inside, jerking to a stop just as I cross the threshold. Stunned.

His office is enormous.

It's the size of his entire bedroom and closet combined. Bigger. There's so

much space in here—room enough to house the huge boardroom table and the six chairs stationed on either side of it. There's a couch and a few side tables set off in the corner, and one wall is made up of nothing but bookshelves. Loaded with books. Bursting with books. Old books and new books and books with spines falling off.

Everything in here is made of dark wood.

Wood so brown it looks black. Clean, straight lines, simple cuts. Nothing is ornate or bulky. No leather. No high-backed chairs or overly detailed woodwork. Minimal.

The boardroom table is stacked with file folders and papers and binders and notebooks. The floor is covered in a thick, plush Oriental rug, similar to the one in his closet. And at the far end of the room is his desk.

Warner is staring at me in shock.

He's wearing nothing but his slacks and a pair of socks, his shirt and belt discarded. He's standing in front of his desk, clinging to something in his hands—something I can't quite see.

"What are you doing here?" he says.

"The door was open." What a stupid answer.

He stares at me.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"One thirty in the morning," he says automatically.

"Oh."

"You should go back to bed." I don't know why he looks so nervous. Why his eyes keep darting from me to the door.

"I'm not tired anymore."

"Oh." He fumbles with what I now realize is a small jar in his hands. Sets it on the desk behind him without turning around.

He's been so off today, I think. Unlike himself. He's usually so composed, so self-assured. But recently he's been so shaky around me. The inconsistency is unnerving.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

There's about ten feet between us, and neither one of us is making any effort to bridge the gap. We're talking like we don't know each other, like we're strangers who've just found themselves in a compromising situation. Which is ridiculous.

I begin to cross the room, to make my way over to him.

He freezes.

I stop.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” he says too quickly.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing to the little plastic jar.

“You should go back to sleep, love. You’re probably more tired than you think—”

I walk right up to him, reach around and grab the jar before he can do much to stop me.

“That is a violation of privacy,” he says sharply, sounding more like himself. “Give that back to me—”

“Medicine?” I ask, surprised. I turn the little jar around in my hands, reading the label. I look up at him. Finally understanding. “This is for scars.”

He runs a hand through his hair. Looks toward the wall. “Yes,” he says. “Now please give it back to me.”

“Do you need help?” I ask.

He stills. “What?”

“This is for your back, isn’t it?”

He runs a hand across his mouth, down his chin. “You won’t allow me to walk away from this with even an ounce of self-respect, will you?”

“I didn’t know you cared about your scars,” I say to him.

I take a step forward.

He takes a step back.

“I don’t.”

“Then why this?” I hold up the jar. “Where did you even get this from?”

“It’s nothing—it’s just—” He shakes his head. “Delalieu found it for me. It’s ridiculous,” he says. “I feel ridiculous.”

“Because you can’t reach your own back?”

He stares at me then. Sighs.

“Turn around,” I tell him.

“No.”

“You’re being weird about nothing. I’ve already seen your scars.”

“That doesn’t mean you need to see them again.”

I can’t help but smile a little.

“What?” he demands. “What’s so funny?”

“You just don’t seem like the kind of person who would be self-conscious about something like this.”

“I’m not.”

“Obviously.”

“Please,” he says, “just go back to bed.”

“I’m wide-awake.”

“That’s not my problem.”

“Turn around,” I tell him again.

He narrows his eyes at me.

“Why are you even using this stuff?” I ask him for the second time. “You don’t need it. Don’t use it if it makes you uncomfortable.”

He’s quiet a moment. “You don’t think I need it?”

“Of course not. Why . . . ? Are you in pain? Do your scars hurt?”

“Sometimes,” he says quietly. “Not as much as they used to. I actually can’t feel much of anything on my back anymore.”

Something cold and sharp hits me in the stomach. “Really?”

He nods.

“Will you tell me where they came from?” I whisper, unable to meet his eyes.

He’s silent for so long I’m finally forced to look up.

His eyes are dead of emotion, his face set to neutral. He clears his throat. “They were my birthday presents,” he says. “Every year from the time I was five. Until I turned eighteen,” he says. “He didn’t come back for my nineteenth birthday.”

I’m frozen in horror.

“Right.” Warner looks into his hands. “So—”

“He *cut* you?” My voice is so hoarse.

“Whip.”

“Oh my God,” I gasp, covering my mouth. I have to look toward the wall to pull myself together. I blink several times, struggle to swallow back the pain and rage building inside of me. “I’m so sorry,” I choke out. “Aaron. I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be repulsed by me,” he says quietly.

I spin around, stunned. Mildly horrified. “You’re not serious.”

His eyes say that he is.

“Have you never looked in a mirror?” I ask, angry now.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re perfect,” I tell him, so overcome I forget myself. “All of you. Your entire body. Proportionally. Symmetrically. You’re absurdly, mathematically perfect. It doesn’t even make sense that a person could look like you,” I say, shaking my head. “I can’t believe you would ever say something like that—”

“Juliette, please. Don’t talk to me like that.”

“What? Why?”

“Because it’s *cruel*,” he says, losing his composure. “It’s cruel and it’s heartless and you don’t even realize—”

“Aaron—”

“I take it back,” he says. “I don’t want you to call me Aaron anymore—”

“Aaron,” I say again, more firmly this time. “Please—you can’t really think you repulse me? You can’t really think I would care—that I would be put off by your scars—”

“I don’t know,” he says. He’s pacing in front of his desk, his eyes fixed on the ground.

“I thought you could sense feelings,” I say to him. “I thought mine would be so obvious to you.”

“I can’t always think clearly,” he says, frustrated, rubbing his face, his forehead. “Especially when my emotions are involved. I can’t always be objective—and sometimes I make assumptions,” he says, “that aren’t true—and I don’t—I just don’t trust my own judgment anymore. Because I’ve done that,” he says, “and it’s backfired. So terribly.”

He looks up, finally. Looks me in the eye.

“You’re right,” I whisper.

He looks away.

“You’ve made a lot of mistakes,” I say to him. “You did everything wrong.”

He runs a hand down the length of his face.

“But it’s not too late to fix things—you can make it right—”

“*Please—*”

“It’s not too late—”

“Stop saying that to me!” he explodes. “You don’t know me—you don’t know what I’ve done or what I’d need to do to make things right—”

“Don’t you understand? It doesn’t matter—you can choose to be different now—”

“I thought you weren’t going to try and change me!”

“I’m not trying to change you,” I say, lowering my voice. “I’m just trying to get you to understand that your life isn’t over. You don’t have to be who you’ve been. You can make different choices now. You can be *happy—*”

“*Juliette.*” One sharp word. His green eyes so intense.

I stop.

I glance at his trembling hands; he clenches them into fists.

“Go,” he says quietly. “I don’t want you to be here right now.”

“Then why did you bring me back with you?” I ask, angry. “If you don’t even want to see me—”

“Why don’t you understand?” He looks up at me and his eyes are so full of pain and devastation it actually takes my breath away.

My hands are shaking. “Understand what—?”

“I *love* you.”

He breaks.

His voice. His back. His knees. His face.

He breaks.

He has to hold on to the side of his desk. He can’t meet my eyes. “I love you,” he says, his words harsh and soft all at once. “I love you and it isn’t enough. I thought it would be enough and I was wrong. I thought I could fight for you and I was wrong. Because I can’t. I can’t even face you anymore—”

“Aaron—”

“Tell me it isn’t true,” he says. “Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me I’m blind. Tell me you love me.”

My heart won’t stop screaming as it breaks in half.

I can’t lie to him.

“I don’t—I don’t know how to understand what I feel,” I try to explain.

“Please,” he whispers. “Please just go—”

“Aaron, please understand—I thought I knew what love was before and I was wrong—I don’t want to make that mistake again—”

“Please”—he’s begging now—“for the love of God, Juliette, I have lost my *dignity*—”

“Okay.” I nod. “Okay. I’m sorry. Okay.”

I back away.

I turn around.

And I don’t look back.

THIRTY-THREE

“I have to leave in seven minutes.”

Warner and I are both fully dressed, talking to each other like perfect acquaintances; like last night never happened. Delalieu brought us breakfast and we ate quietly in separate rooms. No talk of him or me or us or what might’ve been or what might be.

There is no us.

There’s the absence of Adam, and there’s fighting against The Reestablishment. That’s it.

I get it now.

“I’d bring you with me,” he’s saying, “but I think it’ll be hard to disguise you on this trip. If you want, you can wait in the training rooms—I’ll bring the group of them straight there. You can say hello as soon as they arrive.” He finally looks at me. “Is that okay?”

I nod.

“Very good,” he says. “I’ll show you how to get there.”

He leads me back into his office, and into one of the far corners by the couch. There’s an exit in here I didn’t see last night. Warner hits a button on the wall. The doors slide open.

It’s an elevator.

We walk in and he hits the button for the ground floor. The doors close and we start moving.

I glance up at him. “I never knew you had an elevator in your room.”

“I needed private access to my training facilities.”

“You keep saying that,” I tell him. “*Training facilities*. What’s a training facility?”

The elevator stops.

The doors slide open.

He holds them open for me. “This.”

I’ve never seen so many machines in my life.

Running machines and leg machines and machines that work your arms,

your shoulders, your abdominals. There are even machines that look like bikes. I don't know what any of them are called. I know one of these things is a bench press. I also know what dumbbells look like, and there are racks and racks of those, in all different sizes. Weights, I think. Free weights. There are also bars attached to the ceiling in some places, but I can't imagine what those are for. There are tons of things around this room, actually, that look entirely foreign to me.

And each wall is used for something different.

One wall seems to be made of stone. Or rock. There are little grooves in it that are accented by what look like pieces of plastic in different colors. Another wall is covered in guns. Hundreds of guns resting on pegs that keep them in place. They're pristine. Gleaming as if they've just been cleaned. There's a door in that same wall; I wonder where it goes. The third wall is covered in the same black, spongelike material that covers the floors. It looks like it might be soft and springy. And the final wall is the one we've just walked through. It houses the elevator, and one other door, and nothing else.

The dimensions are enormous. This space is at least two or three times the size of Warner's bedroom, his closet, and his office put together. It doesn't seem possible that all of this is for one person.

"This is amazing," I say, turning to face him. "You use all of this?"

He nods. "I'm usually in here at least two or three times a day," he says. "I got off track when I was injured," he says, "but in general, yes." He steps forward, touches the spongy black wall. "This has been my life for as long as I've known it. Training," he says. "I've been training forever. And this is where we're going to start with you, too."

"Me?"

He nods.

"But I don't need to train," I tell him. "Not like this."

He tries to meet my eyes and can't.

"I have to go," he says. "If you get bored in here, take the elevator back up. This elevator can only access two levels, so you can't get lost." He buttons his blazer. "I'll return as soon as I can."

"Okay."

I expect him to leave, but he doesn't. "You'll still be here," he finally says, "when I return."

It's not exactly a question.

I nod anyway.

“It doesn’t seem possible,” he says, so quietly, “that you’re not trying to run away.”

I say nothing.

He exhales a hard breath. Pivots on one heel. And leaves.

THIRTY-FOUR

I'm sitting on one of the benches, toying with five-pound dumbbells, when I hear his voice.

"Holy shit," he's saying. "This place is legit."

I jump up, nearly dropping the weights on my foot. Kenji and Winston and Castle and Brendan and Ian and Alia and Lily are all walking through the extra door in the gun wall.

Kenji's face lights up when he sees me.

I run forward and he catches me in his arms, hugs me tight before breaking away. "Well, I'll be damned," Kenji says. "He didn't kill you. That's a really good sign."

I shove him a little. Suppress a grin.

I quickly say hi to everyone. I'm practically bouncing I'm so excited to have them here. But they're all looking around in shock. Like they really thought Warner was leading them into a trap.

"There's a locker room through here," Warner is telling them. He points to the door beside the elevator. "There are plenty of showers and bathroom stalls and anything else you might need to keep from smelling like an animal. Towels, soap, laundry machines. All through here."

I'm so focused on Warner I almost don't notice Delalieu standing in the corner.

I stifle a gasp.

He's standing quietly, hands clasped behind his back, watching closely as everyone listens to Warner talk. And not for the first time, I wonder who he really is. Why Warner seems to trust him so much.

"Your meals will be delivered to you three times a day," Warner is saying. "If you don't eat, or if you miss a meal and find yourself hungry, feel free to shed your tears in the shower. And then learn to set a schedule. Don't bring your complaints to me."

"You already have your own weapons," he goes on, "but, as you can see, this room is also fully stocked and—"

“Sweet,” Ian says. He looks a little too excited as he heads toward a set of rifles.

“If you touch any of my guns, I will break both of your hands,” Warner says to him.

Ian freezes in place.

“This wall is off-limits to you. All of you,” he says, looking around the room. “Everything else is available for your use. Do not damage any of my equipment. Leave things the way you found them. And if you do not shower on a regular basis, do not come within ten feet of me.”

Kenji snorts.

“I have other work to attend to,” Warner says. “I will return at nineteen hundred hours, at which time we can reconvene and begin our discussions. In the interim, take advantage of the opportunity to get situated. You may use the extra mats in the corner to sleep on. I hope for your sake you brought your own blankets.”

Alia’s bag slips out of her hands and thuds onto the floor. Everyone spins in her direction. She goes scarlet.

“Are there any questions?” Warner asks.

“Yeah,” Kenji says. “Where’s the medicine?”

Warner nods to Delalieu, who’s still standing in the corner. “Give my lieutenant a detailed account of any injuries and illnesses. He will procure the necessary treatments.”

Kenji nods, and means it. He actually looks grateful. “Thank you,” he says.

Warner holds Kenji’s gaze for just a moment. “You’re welcome.”

Kenji raises his eyebrows.

Even I’m surprised.

Warner looks at me then. He looks at me for just a split second before looking away. And then, without a word, he hits the button for the elevator.

Steps inside.

I watch the doors close behind him.

THIRTY-FIVE

Kenji is staring at me, concerned. “What the hell was that?”

Winston and Ian are looking at me too, making no effort to hide their confusion. Lily is unpacking her things. Castle is watching me closely. Brendan and Alia are deep in conversation.

“What do you mean?” I ask. I’m trying to be nonchalant, but I think my ears have gone pink.

Kenji clasps one hand behind his neck. Shrugs. “You two get into a fight or something?”

“No,” I say too quickly.

“Uh-huh.” Kenji cocks his head at me.

“How’s Adam?” I ask, hoping to change the subject.

Kenji blows out a long breath; looks away; rubs at his eyes just before dropping his bag on the floor. He leans back against the wall. “I’m not gonna lie to you, J,” he says, lowering his voice. “This crap with Kent is really stressing me out. Your drama is making things messy. He didn’t make it easy for us to leave.”

“What? But he said he didn’t want to fight back anymore—”

“Yeah, well.” Kenji nods. “Apparently that doesn’t mean he wants to lose all his friends at once.”

I shake my head. “He’s not being fair.”

“I know,” Kenji says. Sighs again. “Anyway, it’s good to see you, princess, but I’m tired as hell. And hungry. Grumpy. You know.” He makes a haphazard motion with his hand. Slumps to the floor.

He’s not telling me something.

“What’s wrong?” I sit down across from him and lower my voice.

He looks up, meets my eyes.

“I miss James, okay? I miss that kid.” Kenji sounds so tired. I can actually see the exhaustion in his eyes. “I didn’t want to leave him behind.”

My heart sinks fast.

Of course.

James.

"I'm so sorry. I wish there'd been a way we could've brought him with us."

Kenji flicks an imaginary piece of lint off his shirt. "It's probably safer for him where he is," he says, but it's obvious he doesn't believe a word of it. "I just wish Kent would stop being such a dick."

I cringe.

"This could all be amazing if he would just get his shit together," Kenji says. "But no, he has to go and get all weird and crazy and dramatic." He blows out a breath. "He's so freaking emotional," Kenji says suddenly. "Everything is such a big deal to him. He can't just let things go. He can't just be cool and move on with his life. I just . . . I don't know. Whatever. I just wish James were here. I miss him."

"I'm sorry," I say again.

Kenji makes a weird face. Waves his hand at nothing. "It's fine. I'll be fine."

I look up and find that everyone else has dispersed.

Castle, Ian, Alia, and Lily are heading to the locker room, while Winston and Brendan wander around the facility. They're touching the rock wall right now, having a conversation I can't hear.

I scoot closer to Kenji. Prop my head in my hands.

"So," he says. "I don't see you for twenty-four hours and you and Warner go from let's-hug-in-super-dramatic-fashion to let-me-give-you-an-ice-cold-shoulder, huh?" Kenji is tracing shapes into the mats underneath us. "Must be an interesting story there."

"I doubt it."

"You're seriously not going to tell me what happened?" He looks up, offended. "I tell you everything."

"Sure you don't."

"Don't be fresh."

"What's really going on, Kenji?" I study his face, his weak attempt at humor. "You seem different today. Off."

"Nothing," he mumbles. "I told you. I just didn't want to leave James."

"But that's not all, is it?"

He says nothing.

I look into my lap. "You can tell me anything, you know. You've always been there for me and I'll always be here if you need to talk, too."

Kenji rolls his eyes. "Why do you have to make me feel all guilty about not wanting to participate in share-your-feelings-story-time?"

“I’m n—”

“I’m just—I’m in a really shitty mood, okay?” He looks off to the side. “I feel weird. Like I just want to be pissed off today. Like I just want to punch people in the face for no reason.”

I pull my knees up to my chest. Rest my chin on my knees. Nod. “You’ve had a hard day.”

He grunts. Nods and looks at the wall. Presses a fist into the mat. “Sometimes I just get really tired, you know?” He stares at his fist, at the shapes he makes by pressing his knuckles into the soft, spongy material. “Like I just get really fed up.” His voice is suddenly so quiet, it’s almost like he’s not talking to me at all. I can see his throat move, the emotions caught in his chest. “I keep losing people,” he says. “It’s like every day I’m losing people. Every goddamn day. I’m so sick of it—I’m so sick and tired of it—”

“Kenji—,” I try to say.

“I missed you, J.” He’s still studying the mats. “I wish you’d been there last night.”

“I missed you, too.”

“I don’t have anyone else to talk to.”

“I thought you didn’t like talking about your feelings,” I tease him, trying to lighten the mood.

He doesn’t bite.

“It just gets really heavy sometimes.” He looks away. “Too heavy. Even for me. And some days I don’t want to laugh,” he says. “I don’t want to be funny. I don’t want to give a shit about anything. Some days I just want to sit on my ass and cry. All day long.” His hands stop moving against the mats. “Is that crazy?” he asks quietly, still not meeting my gaze.

I blink hard against the stinging in my eyes. “No,” I tell him. “No, that’s not crazy at all.”

He stares at the floor. “Hanging out with you has made me weird, J. All I do is sit around thinking about my feelings these days. Thanks for that.”

I crawl forward and hug him right around the middle and he responds immediately, wrapping me up against him. My face is pressed to his chest and I can hear his heart beating so hard. He’s still hurting so badly right now, and I keep forgetting that. I need to not forget that.

I cling to him, wishing I could ease his pain. I wish I could take his burdens and make them mine.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” he says.

“What is?”

“If we were naked right now, I’d be dead.”

“Shut up,” I say, laughing against his chest. We’re both wearing long sleeves, long pants. As long as my face and hands don’t touch his skin, he’s perfectly safe.

“Well, it’s true.”

“In what alternate universe would I ever be naked with you?”

“I am just *saying*,” he says. “Shit happens. You never know.”

“I think you need a girlfriend.”

“Nah,” he says. “I just need a hug. From my friend.”

I lean back to look at him. Try to read his eyes. “You’re my *best* friend, Kenji. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, kid.” He grins at me. “I do. And I can’t believe I got stuck with your skinny ass.”

I break free of his arms. Narrow my eyes at him.

He laughs. “So how’s the new boyfriend?”

My smiles fall away. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Are you sure about that? Because I’m pretty sure Romeo wouldn’t have let us come live with him if he weren’t a little bit madly in love with you.”

I look into my hands. “Maybe one day Warner and I will learn to be friends.”

“*Seriously?*” Kenji looks shocked. “I thought you were super into him?”

I shrug. “I’m . . . attracted to him.”

“But?”

“But Warner still has a long way to go, you know?”

“Well, yeah,” Kenji says. Exhales. Leans back. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

We both say nothing for a while.

“This shit is still super freaking weird, though,” Kenji says all of a sudden.

“What do you mean?” I glance up. “Which part?”

“Warner,” Kenji says. “Warner is so freaking weird to me right now.” Kenji looks at me. Really looks at me. “You know—in all my time on base, I never saw him have, like, a single casual conversation with a soldier before. Never. He was ice cold, *J. Ice. Cold*,” he says again. “He never smiled. Never laughed. Never showed any emotion. And he never, *ever* talked unless he was issuing orders. He was like a machine,” Kenji says. “And this?” He points at the elevator. “This guy who just left here? The guy who showed up at the house yesterday? I don’t know who the hell that is. I can’t even wrap my mind around it right now. Shit is unreal.”

“I didn’t know that,” I say to him, surprised. “I had no idea he was like that.”

“He wasn’t like that with you?” Kenji asks. “When you first got here?”

“No,” I say. “He was always pretty . . . animated with me. Not, like, *nice* animated,” I clarify, “but, I mean . . . I don’t know. He talked a lot.” I’m silent as the memories resurface. “He was always talking, actually. That’s kind of all he ever did. And he smiled at me all the time.” I pause. “I thought he was doing it on purpose. To make fun of me. Or try to scare me.”

Kenji leans back on his hands. “Yeah, no.”

“Huh,” I say, my eyes focused on a point in the distance.

Kenji sighs. “Is he . . . like . . . nice to you, at least?”

I look down. Stare at my feet. “Yeah,” I whisper. “He’s really nice to me.”

“But you guys are not an item or anything?”

I make a face.

“Okay,” Kenji says quickly, holding up both hands. “All right—I was just curious. This is a judgment-free zone, J.”

I snort. “Yeah it isn’t.”

Kenji relaxes a little. “You know, Adam really thinks you and Warner are, like, a thing now.”

I roll my eyes. “Adam is stupid.”

“Tsk, ts, princess. We need to talk about your language—”

“Adam needs to tell Warner they’re brothers.”

Kenji looks up, alarmed. “Lower your voice,” he whispers. “You can’t just go around saying that. You know how Kent feels about it.”

“I think it’s unfair. Warner has a right to know.”

“Why?” Kenji says. “You think he and Kent are going to become besties all of a sudden?”

I look at him then, my eyes steady, serious. “James is his brother, too, Kenji.”

Kenji’s body goes stiff, his face blank. His eyes widen, just a little.

I tilt my head. Raise an eyebrow.

“I didn’t even . . . wow,” he says. He presses a fist to his forehead. “I didn’t even think about that.”

“It’s not fair to either of them,” I say. “And I really think Warner would love to know he has brothers in this world. At least James and Adam have each other,” I say. “But Warner has always been alone.”

Kenji is shaking his head. Disbelief etched across his features. “This just keeps getting more and more twisted,” he says. “It’s like you think it couldn’t

possibly get more convoluted, and then, bam.”

“He deserves to know, Kenji,” I say again. “You know Warner at least deserves to *know*. It’s his right. It’s his blood, too.”

Kenji looks up. Sighs. “Damn.”

“If Adam doesn’t tell him,” I say, “I will.”

“You wouldn’t.”

I stare at him. Hard.

“That’s messed up, J.” Kenji looks surprised. “You can’t do that.”

“Why do you keep calling me J?” I ask him. “When did that even happen? You’ve already given me, like, fifty different nicknames.”

He shrugs. “You should be flattered.”

“Oh really?” I say. “Nicknames are flattering, huh?”

He nods.

“Then how about I call you Kenny?”

Kenji crosses his arms. Stares me down. “That’s not even a little bit funny.”

I grin. “It is, a little bit.”

“How about I call your new boyfriend King Stick-Up-His-Ass?”

“He’s not my boyfriend, *Kenny*.”

Kenji shoots me a warning look. Points at my face. “I am not amused, princess.”

“Hey, don’t you need to shower?” I ask him.

“So now you’re telling me I smell.”

I roll my eyes.

He clambers to his feet. Sniffs his shirt. “Damn, I do kind of smell, don’t I?”

“Go,” I say. “Go and hurry back. I have a feeling this is going to be a long night.”

THIRTY-SIX

We're all sitting on benches around the training room. Warner is sitting next to me and I'm doing everything I can to make sure our shoulders don't accidentally touch.

"All right, so, first things first, right?" Winston says, looking around. "We have to get Sonya and Sara back. The question is how." A pause. "We have no idea how to get to the supreme."

Everyone looks at Warner.

Warner looks at his watch.

"Well?" Kenji says.

"Well, what?" Warner says, bored.

"Well, aren't you going to help us?" Ian snaps. "This is your territory."

Warner looks at me for the first time all evening. "You're absolutely sure you trust these people?" he asks me. "All of them?"

"Yes," I say quietly. "I really do."

"Very well." Warner takes a deep breath before addressing the group. "My father," he says calmly, "is on a ship. In the middle of the ocean."

"He's on a ship?" Kenji asks, startled. "The capital is a *ship*?"

"Not exactly." Warner hesitates. "But the point is, we have to lure him *here*. Going to him will not work. We have to create a problem big enough for him to be forced to come to us." He looks at me then. "Juliette says she already has a plan."

I nod. Take a deep breath. Study the faces before me. "I think we should take over Sector 45."

Stunned silence.

"I think, together," I tell them, "we'll be able to convince the soldiers to fight on our side. At the end of the day, no one is benefiting from The Reestablishment except for the people in charge. The soldiers are tired and hungry and probably only took this job because there were no other options." I pause. "We can rally the civilians *and* the soldiers. Everyone in the sector. Get them to join us. And they know me," I say. "The soldiers. They've already seen

me—they know what I can do. But all of us together?” I shake my head. “That would be amazing. We could show them that we’re different. Stronger. We can give them hope—a reason to fight back.

“And then,” I say, “once we have their support, news will spread, and Anderson will be forced to come back here. He’ll have to try and take us down—he’ll have no other choice. And once he’s back, we take him out. We fight him and his army and we win. And then we take over the country.”

“My goodness.”

Castle is the first to speak.

“Ms. Ferrars,” he says, “you’ve given this a great deal of thought.”

I nod.

Kenji is looking at me like he’s not sure if he should laugh or applaud.

“What do you think?” I ask, looking around.

“What if it doesn’t work?” Lily says. “What if the soldiers are too scared to change their allegiance? What if they kill you instead?”

“That’s a definite possibility,” I say. “But I think if we’re strong enough—if the nine of us stand united, with all of our strengths combined—I think they’ll believe we can do something pretty amazing.”

“Yeah but how will they know what our strengths are?” Brendan asks. “What if they don’t believe us?”

“We can show them.”

“And if they shoot us?” Ian counters.

“I can do it alone, if you’re worried about that. I don’t mind. Kenji was teaching me how to project my energy before the war, and I think if I can learn to master that, I could do some pretty scary things. Things that might impress them enough to join us.”

“You can *project*?” Winston asks, eyes wide. “You mean you can, like, mass-kill everyone with your life-sucking thing?”

“Um, no,” I say. “I mean, well, yes, I suppose I could do that, too, but I’m not talking about that. I mean I can project my strength. Not the . . . life-sucking thing—”

“Wait, what strength?” Brendan asks, confused. “I thought it’s your skin that’s lethal?”

I’m about to respond when I remember that Brendan and Winston and Ian were all taken hostage before I’d begun to seriously train. I don’t know that they knew much about my progress at all.

So I start from the top.

“My . . . power,” I say, “has to do with more than just my skin.” I glance at Kenji. Gesture to him. “We’d been working together for a while, trying to figure out what it was, exactly, I was capable of, and Kenji realized that my true energy is coming from deep within me, not the surface. It’s in my bones, my blood, *and* my skin,” I try to explain. “My real power is an insane kind of superstrength.

“My skin is just one element of that,” I tell them. “It’s like the most heightened form of my energy, and the craziest form of protection; it’s like my body has put up a shield. Metaphorical barbed wire. It keeps intruders away.” I almost laugh, wondering when it became so easy for me to talk about this stuff. To be comfortable with it. “But I’m also strong enough to break through just about anything,” I tell them, “and without even injuring myself. Concrete. Brick. Glass—”

“The earth,” Kenji adds.

“Yes,” I say, smiling at him. “Even the earth.”

“She created an earthquake,” Alia says eagerly, and I’m actually surprised to hear her voice. “During the first battle,” she tells Brendan and Winston and Ian. “When we were trying to save you guys. She punched the ground and it split open. That’s how we were able to get away.”

The guys are gawking at me.

“So, what I’m trying to say,” I tell them, “is that if I can project my strength, and really learn to control it? I don’t know.” I shrug. “I could move mountains, probably.”

“That’s a bit ambitious.” Kenji grins, ever the proud parent.

“Ambitious, but probably not impossible.” I grin back.

“Wow,” Lily says. “So you can just . . . destroy stuff? Like, anything?”

I nod. Glance at Warner. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” he says. His eyes are carefully inscrutable.

I get to my feet and walk over to the stacks of dumbbells, all the while prepping myself mentally to tap into my energy. This is still the trickiest part for me: learning how to moderate my strength with finesse.

I pick up a fifty-pound free weight and carry it over to the group.

For a moment I wonder if this should feel heavy to me, especially considering how it weighs about half of what I do, but I can’t really feel it.

I sit back down on the bench. Rest the weight on the ground.

“What are you going to do with that?” Ian asks, eyes wide.

“What do you want me to do?” I ask him.

“You’re telling me you can just, like, rip that apart or whatever?” Winston

says.

I nod.

“Do it,” Kenji says. He’s practically bouncing in his seat. “Do it do it.”

So I do.

I pick it up, and literally crush the weight between my hands. It becomes a mangled mess of metal. A fifty-pound lump. I rip it in half and drop the two pieces on the floor.

The benches shake.

“Sorry,” I say quickly, looking around. “I didn’t mean to toss it like that—”

“Goddamn,” Ian says. “That is so cool.”

“Do it again,” Winston says, eyes bright.

“I’d really rather she didn’t destroy all of my property,” Warner cuts in.

“Hey, so—wait—,” Winston says, realizing something as he stares at Warner. “You can do that, too, can’t you? You can just take her power and use it like that, too?”

“I can take all of your powers,” Warner corrects him. “And do whatever I want with them.”

The terror in the room is a very palpable thing.

I frown at Warner. “Please don’t scare them.”

He says nothing. Looks at nothing.

“So the two of you”—Ian tries to find his voice—“I mean, together—you two could basically—”

“Take over the world?” Warner is looking at the wall now.

“I was going to say you could kick some serious ass, but yeah, that, too, I guess.” Ian shakes his head.

“Are you sure you trust this guy?” Lily asks me, jerking a thumb at Warner and looking at me like she’s seriously, genuinely concerned. “What if he’s just using you for your power?”

“I trust him with my life,” I say quietly. “I already have, and I’d do it again.”

Warner looks at me and looks away, and for a brief second I catch the charge of emotion in his eyes.

“So, let me get this straight,” Winston says. “Our plan is to basically seduce the soldiers and civilians of Sector 45 into fighting with us?”

Kenji crosses his arms. “Yeah, it sounds like we’re going to go all peacock and hope they find us attractive enough to mate with.”

“Gross.” Brendan frowns.

“Despite how weird Kenji just made this sound,” I say, shooting a stern look

in his direction, “the answer is yes, basically. We can provide them with a group to rally around. We take charge of the army, and then take charge of the people. And then we lead them into battle. We really, truly fight back.”

“And if you win?” Castle asks. He’s been so quiet all this time. “What do you plan to do then?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Let’s say you are successful,” he says. “You defeat the supreme. You kill him and his men. Then what? Who will take over as the supreme commander?”

“I will.”

The room gasps. I feel Warner go stiff beside me.

“Damn, princess,” Kenji says quietly.

“And then?” Castle asks, ignoring everyone but me. “After that?” His eyes are worried. Scared, almost. “You’re going to kill whoever else stands in your way? All the other sector leaders, all across the nation? That’s 554 more wars—”

“Some will surrender,” I tell him.

“And the others?” he asks. “How can you lead a nation in the right direction when you’ve just slaughtered all who oppose you? How will you be any different from those you’ve defeated?”

“I trust myself,” I tell him, “to be strong enough to do what’s right. Our world is dying right now. You said yourself that we have the means to reclaim our land—to change things back to the way they were. Once power is in the right place—with *us*—you can rebuild what you started at Omega Point. You’ll have the freedom to implement those changes to our land, water, animals, and atmosphere, and save millions of lives in the process—giving the new generations hope for a different future. We have to try,” I tell him. “We can’t just sit back and watch people die when we have the power to make a difference.”

The room goes silent. Still.

“Hell,” Winston says. “I’d follow you into battle.”

“Me too,” Alia says.

“And me.” Brendan.

“You know I’m in,” Kenji says.

“Me too,” Lily and Ian say at the same time.

Castle takes a deep breath. “Maybe,” he says. He leans back in his chair, clasps his hands. “Maybe you’ll be able to do right what I did wrong.” He shakes his head. “I am twenty-seven years your senior and I’ve never had your confidence, but I do understand your heart. And I trust that you say what you

believe to be true.” A pause. A careful look. “We will support you. But know now that you are taking on a great and terrifying responsibility. One that may backfire in an irreversible way.”

“I do understand that,” I say quietly.

“Very well then, Ms. Ferrars. Good luck, and godspeed. Our world is in your hands.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

“You didn’t tell me what you thought of my plan.”

Warner and I have just stepped back into his room and he still hasn’t said a word to me. He’s standing by the door to his office, his eyes on the floor. “I didn’t realize you wanted my opinion.”

“Of course I want your opinion.”

“I should really get back to work,” he says, and turns to go.

I touch his arm.

Warner goes rigid. He stands, unmoving, his eyes trained on the hand I’ve placed on his forearm.

“Please,” I whisper. “I don’t want it to be like this with us. I want us to be able to talk. To get to know each other again, *properly*—to be friends—”

Warner makes a strange sound deep in his throat. Puts a few feet between us. “I am doing my best, love. But I don’t know how to be just your friend.”

“It doesn’t have to be all or nothing,” I try to tell him. “There can be steps in between—I just need time to understand you like this—as a different person—”

“But that’s just it.” His voice is worn thin. “You need time to understand me as a *different person*. You need time to fix your perception of me.”

“Why is that so wrong—”

“Because I am not a different person,” he says firmly. “I am the same man I’ve always been and I have never tried to be different. You have misunderstood me, Juliette. You’ve judged me, you’ve perceived me to be something I am not, but that is no fault of mine. I have not changed, and I will not change—”

“You already have.”

His jaw clenches. “You have quite a lot of gall to speak with such conviction on matters you know nothing about.”

I swallow, hard.

Warner steps so close to me I’m actually afraid to move. “You once accused me of not knowing the meaning of love,” he says. “But you were wrong. You fault me, perhaps, for loving you too much.” His eyes are so intense. So green. So cold. “But at least I do not deny my own heart.”

“And you think I do,” I whisper.

Warner drops his eyes. Says nothing.

“What you don’t understand,” I tell him, my voice catching, “is that I don’t even know my own heart anymore. I don’t know how to name what I feel yet and I need time to figure it out. You want more right now but right now what I need is for you to be my friend—”

Warner flinches.

“I do not have friends,” he says.

“Why can’t you try?”

He shakes his head.

“Why? Why not give it a chance—”

“Because I am afraid,” he finally says, voice shaking, “that your friendship would be the end of me.”

I’m still frozen in place as his office door slams shut behind him.

THIRTY-EIGHT

I never thought I'd see Warner in sweatpants.

Or sneakers.

And right now, he's wearing both. Plus a T-shirt.

Now that our group is staying in Warner's training facilities, I have a reason to tag along as he starts his day. I always knew he spent a lot of time working, but I never knew how much of his time was spent working out. He's so disciplined, so precise about everything. It amazes me.

He starts his mornings on a stationary bike, ends his evenings with a run on the treadmill. And every weekday he works out a different part of his body.

"Mondays are for legs," I heard him explain to Castle. "Tuesdays I work chest. Wednesdays I work my shoulders and my back. Thursdays are for triceps and deltoids. Fridays are for biceps and forearms. And every day is for abdominals and cardio. I also spend most weekends doing target practice," he said.

Today is Tuesday.

Which means right now, I'm watching him bench-press three hundred and fifteen pounds. Three forty-five-pound plates on each side of what Kenji told me is called an Olympic bar, which weighs an additional forty-five pounds. I can't stop staring. I don't think I've ever been more attracted to him in all the time I've known him.

Kenji pulls up next to me. Nods at Warner. "So this gets you going, huh?"

I'm mortified.

Kenji barks out a laugh.

"I've never seen him in sweatpants before." I try to sound normal. "I've never even seen him in shorts."

Kenji raises an eyebrow at me. "I bet you've seen him in less."

I want to die.

Kenji and I are supposed to spend this next month training. That's the plan. I

need to train enough to fight and use my strength without being overpowered ever again. This isn't the kind of situation we can go into without absolute confidence, and since I'm supposed to be leading the mission, I still have a lot of work to do. I need to be able to access my energy in an instant, and I need to be able to moderate the amount of power I exert at any given time. In other words: I need to achieve absolute mastery over my ability.

Kenji is also training in his own way; he wants to perfect his skill in projecting; he wants to be able to do it without having to make direct contact with another person. But he and I are the only ones who have any real work to do. Castle has been in control of himself for decades now, and everyone else has fairly straightforward skills that they've very naturally adapted to. In my case, I have seventeen years of psychological trauma to undo.

I need to break down these self-made walls.

Today, Kenji's starting small. He wants me to move a dumbbell across the room through sheer force of will. But all I've managed to do was make it twitch. And I'm not even sure that was me.

"You're not focusing," Kenji says to me. "You need to connect—find your core and pull from within," he's saying. "You have to, like, *literally* pull it out of yourself and then push it out around you, J. It's only difficult in the beginning," he says, "because your body is so used to containing the energy. In your case it's going to be even harder, because you've spent your whole life bottling it up. You have to give yourself permission to let it go. Let down your guard. Find it. Harness it. Release it."

He gives me the same speech, over and over again.

And I keep trying, over and over again.

I count to three.

I close my eyes and try to really, truly focus this time. I listen to the sudden urge to lift my arms, planting my feet firmly on the floor. I blow out a breath. Squeeze my eyes shut tighter. I feel the energy surging up, through my bones, my blood, raging and rising until it culminates into a mass so potent I can no longer contain it. I know it needs release, and needs it now.

But how?

Before, I always thought I needed to touch something to let the power out.

It never occurred to me to throw the energy into a stationary object. I thought my hands were the final destination; I never considered using them as a transmitter, as a medium for the energy to pass through. But I'm just now realizing that I can try to push it out *through* my hands—*through* my skin. And

maybe, if I'm strong enough, I might be able to learn to manipulate the power in midair, forcing it to move whichever way I want.

My sudden realization gives me a renewed burst of confidence. I'm excited now, eager to see if my theory is correct. I steel myself, feeling the rush of power flood through me again. My shoulders tense as the energy coats my hands, my wrists, my forearms. It feels so warm, so intense, almost like it's a tangible thing; the kind of power that could tangle in my fingers.

I curl my fists.

Pull back my arms.

And then fling them forward, opening my hands at the same time.

Silence.

I squint one eye open, sneaking a look at the dumbbell still sitting in the same spot.

Sigh.

"GET DOWN," Kenji shouts, yanking me backward and shoving me face-first onto the floor.

I can hear everyone shouting and thudding to the ground around us. I crane my neck up only to see that they've all got their hands over their heads, faces covered; I try to look around.

Panic seizes me by the throat.

The rock wall is fissuring into what might be a hundred pieces, creaking and groaning as it falls apart. I watch, horrified, as one huge, jagged chunk trembles just before unhinging from the wall.

Warner is standing underneath.

I'm about to scream before I see him look up, both hands outstretched toward the chaos. Immediately, the wall stops shaking. The pieces hover, trembling only slightly, caught between falling and fitting back into place.

My mouth is still open.

Warner looks to his right. Nods.

I follow his line of sight and see Castle on the other side, using his power to hold up the other end. Together they control the pieces as they fall to the floor, allowing them to float down, settling each broken slab and each jagged bit gently against what remains of the wall.

Everyone begins to pop their heads up, realizing something has changed. We slowly get to our feet, and watch, dumbstruck, as Castle and Warner contain the disaster and confine it to one space. Nothing else is damaged. No one is hurt. I'm still looking on, eyes wide with awe.

When the work is finally done, Warner and Castle share a brief moment of acknowledgment before they head in opposite directions.

Warner comes to find me. Castle to everyone else.

“Are you okay?” Warner asks. His tone is businesslike, but his eyes give him away. “You’re not injured?”

I shake my head. “That was incredible.”

“I can’t take any credit for it,” he says. “It was Castle’s power I borrowed.”

“But you’re so *good* at it,” I tell him, forgetting for a moment that we’re supposed to be mad at each other. “You *just* learned you have this ability, and you can already control it. So naturally. But then when I try to do something, I nearly kill everyone in the process.” I drop my head. “I’m the worst at everything,” I mutter. “The worst.”

“Don’t feel bad,” he says quietly. “You’ll figure it out.”

“Was it ever hard for you?” I look up, hopeful. “Figuring out how to control the energy?”

“Oh,” he says, surprised. “No. Though I’ve always been very good at everything I do.”

I drop my head again. Sigh.

Warner laughs and I peek up.

He’s smiling.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he whispers.

I hear a sharp whistle. Spin around.

“Hey—jazz hands!” Kenji barks. “Get your ass back over here.” He makes it a point to look as irritated as possible. “Back to work. And this time, *focus*. You’re not an ape. Don’t just throw your shit everywhere.”

Warner actually laughs.

Out loud.

I look back at him, and he’s looking toward the wall, trying to suppress a wide smile as he runs a hand through his hair, down the back of his neck.

“At least someone appreciates my sense of humor,” Kenji says before tugging at my arm. “Come on, princess. Let’s try that again. And please, try not to kill everyone in this room.”

THIRTY-NINE

We've been practicing all week.

I'm so exhausted I can't even stand up anymore, but I've made more progress than I ever could've hoped for. Kenji is still working with me directly, and Castle is overseeing my progress, but everyone else spends time training on all the various machines.

Winston and Brendan seem to be in better spirits every day—they look healthier, livelier—and the gash on Brendan's face is starting to fade. I'm so happy to see their progress, and doubly thrilled Delalieu was able to find the right medicines for them.

The two of them spend most days eating and sleeping and jumping from the bikes to the treadmill. Lily has been messing around with a little of everything, and today she's exercising with the medicine balls in the corner. Ian has been lifting weights and looking after Castle, and Alia has spent all week sitting in the corner, sketching things in a notepad. She seems happier, more settled. And I can't help but wonder if Adam and James are okay, too. I hope they're safe.

Warner is always gone during the day.

Every once in a while I glance at the elevator doors, secretly hoping they'll open and deposit him back inside this room. Sometimes he stops by for a bit—jumps on the bike or goes for a quick run—but mostly he's gone.

I only really see him in the mornings for his early workout, and in the evenings when he does another round of cardio. The end of the night is my favorite part of the day. It's when all nine of us sit down and talk about our progress. Winston and Brendan are healing, I'm getting stronger, and Warner lets us know if there've been any new developments from the civilians, the soldiers, or The Reestablishment—so far, everything is still quiet.

And then Warner and I go back up to his quarters, where we shower and head to separate rooms. I sleep on his bed. He sleeps on the couch in his office.

Every night I tell myself I'll be brave enough to knock on his door, but I never have.

I still don't know what to say.

Kenji tugs on my hair.

“Ow—” I jerk back, scowling. “What’s wrong with you?”

“You’ve been hit extra hard with the stupid stick today.”

“What? I thought you said I was doing okay—”

“You are. But you’re distracted. You keep staring at the elevator like it’s about to grant you three wishes.”

“Oh,” I say. I look away. “Well. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” he sighs. Frowns a little. “What the hell is going on between you guys, anyway? Do I even want to know?”

I sigh. Flop onto the mats. “I have no idea, Kenji. He’s hot and cold.” I shrug. “I guess it’s fine. I just need a little space for now.”

“But you like him?” Kenji raises an eyebrow.

I say nothing. Feel my face warm.

Kenji rolls his eyes. “You know, I really never would’ve thought Warner could make you happy.”

“Do I *look* happy?” I counter.

“Good point.” He sighs. “I just mean that you always seemed so happy with Kent. This is a little hard for me to process.” He hesitates. Rubs his forehead. “Well. Actually, you were a hell of a lot weirder when you were with Kent. Super whiny. And so dramatic. And you cried. All. The. Damn. Time.” He screws up his face. “Jesus. I can’t decide which one of them is worse.”

“You think *I’m* dramatic?” I ask him, eyes wide. “Do you even know yourself at all?”

“I am not dramatic, okay? My presence just commands a certain kind of attention—”

I snort.

“Hey,” he says, pointing at my face. “I am just saying that I don’t know what to believe anymore. I’ve already been on this merry-go-round. First Adam. Now Warner. Next week you’re going to try and hook up with me.”

“You really wish that were true, don’t you?”

“Whatever,” he says, looking away. “I don’t even like you.”

“You think I’m pretty.”

“I think you’re delusional.”

“I don’t even know what this is, Kenji.” I meet his eyes. “That’s the problem. I don’t know how to explain it, and I’m not sure I understand the depth of it yet. All I know is that whatever this is, I never felt it with Adam.”

Kenji’s eyes pull together, surprised and scared. He says nothing for a

second. Blows out a breath. “Seriously?”

I nod.

“*Seriously*, seriously?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I feel so . . . *light*. Like I could just . . . I don’t know . . .” I trail off. “It’s like I feel like, for the first time in my life, I’m going to be okay. Like I’m going to be strong.”

“But that sounds like it’s just *you*,” he says. “That has nothing to do with Warner.”

“That’s true,” I tell him. “But sometimes people can weigh us down, too. And I know Adam didn’t mean to, but he was weighing me down. We were two sad people stuck together.”

“Huh.” Kenji leans back on his hands.

“Being with Adam was always overshadowed by some kind of pain or difficulty,” I explain, “and Adam was always so serious. He was intense in a way that exhausted me sometimes. We were always hiding, or sneaking around, or on the run, and we never found enough uninterrupted moments to be together. It was almost like the universe was trying to tell me I was trying too hard to make things work with him.”

“Kent wasn’t that bad, J.” Kenji frowns. “You’re not giving him enough credit. He’s been acting kind of dickish lately, but he’s a good guy. You know he is. Shit is just really rough for him right now.”

“I know,” I sigh, feeling sad, somehow. “But this world is still falling apart. Even if we win this war, everything is going to get much, much worse before it gets better.” I pause. Stare into my hands. “And I think people become who they really are when things get rough. I’ve seen it firsthand. With myself, my parents, with society, even. And yeah, Adam is a good guy. He really is. But just because he’s a good guy doesn’t make him the right guy for me.”

I look up.

“I’m so different now. I’m not right for him anymore, and he’s not right for me.”

“But he still loves you.”

“No,” I say. “He doesn’t.”

“That’s a pretty heavy accusation.”

“It’s not an accusation,” I say. “One day Adam will realize that what he felt for me was just a crazy kind of desperation. We were two people who really needed someone to hold on to, and we had this past that made us seem so compatible. But it wasn’t enough. Because if it were, I wouldn’t have been able

to walk away so easily.” I drop my eyes, my voice. “Warner didn’t seduce me, Kenji. He didn’t steal me away. I just . . . I reached a point where everything changed for me.

“Everything I thought I knew about Warner was wrong. Everything I thought I believed about myself was wrong. And I knew *I* was changing,” I say to him. “I wanted to move forward. I wanted to be angry and I wanted to scream for the first time in my life and I couldn’t. I didn’t want people to be afraid of me, so I tried to shut up and disappear, hoping it would make them more comfortable. But I hate that I let myself be so passive my whole life, and I see now how differently things could’ve been if I’d had faith in myself when it mattered. I don’t want to go back to that,” I tell him. “I won’t. Not ever.”

“You don’t have to,” Kenji points out. “Why would you? I don’t think Kent wanted you to be passive.”

I shrug. “I still wonder if he wants me to be the girl he first fell for. The person I was when we met.”

“And that’s bad?”

“That’s not who I *am* anymore, Kenji. Do I still seem like that girl to you?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“You *don’t* know,” I say, exasperated. “That’s why you don’t understand. You don’t know what I used to be like. You don’t know what it was like in my head. I lived in a really dark place,” I say to him. “I wasn’t safe in my own mind. I woke up every morning hoping to die and then spent the rest of the day wondering if maybe I was already dead because I couldn’t even tell the *difference*,” I say, more harshly than I mean to. “I had a small thread of hope and I clung to it, but the majority of my life was spent waiting around to see if someone would take pity on me.”

Kenji is just staring at me, his eyes tight.

“Don’t you think I’ve realized,” I say to him, angrier now, “that if I’d allowed myself to get mad a long time ago, I would’ve discovered I had the strength to break through that asylum with my own two hands?”

Kenji flinches.

“Don’t you think that I think about that, all the time?” I ask him, my voice shaking. “Don’t you think it *kills* me to know that it was my own unwillingness to recognize myself as a human being that kept me trapped for so long? For two hundred and sixty-four days, Kenji,” I say, swallowing hard. “Two hundred and sixty-four days I was in there and the whole time, I had the power to break myself out and I didn’t, because I had no idea I could. Because I never even

tried. Because I let the world teach me to hate myself. I was a *coward*,” I say, “who needed someone else to tell me I was worth something before I took any steps to save myself.

“This isn’t about Adam or Warner,” I tell him. “This is about me and what I want. This is about me finally understanding where I want to be in ten years. Because I’m going to be alive, Kenji. I will be alive in ten years, and I’m going to be happy. I’m going to be strong. And I don’t need anyone to tell me that anymore. I am enough, and I always will be.”

I’m breathing hard now, trying to calm my heart.

Kenji is staring at me, mildly terrified.

“I want Adam to be happy, Kenji, I really do. But he and I would end up like water going nowhere.”

“What do you mean . . . ?”

“Water that never moves,” I say to him. “It’s fine for a little while. You can drink from it and it’ll sustain you. But if it sits too long it goes bad. It grows stale. It becomes toxic.” I shake my head. “I need waves. I need waterfalls. I want rushing currents.”

“Damn,” Kenji says. He laughs nervously, scratches the back of his head. “I think you should write that speech down, princess. Because you’re going to have to tell him all of that yourself.”

“What?” My body goes rigid.

“Yeah.” Kenji coughs. “Adam and James are coming here tomorrow.”

“*What?*” I gasp.

“Yeah. Awkward, right?” He tries to laugh. “Sooo awkward.”

“Why? Why would he come here? How do you even know?”

“I’ve, um, kind of been going back?” He clears his throat. “To, you know, check up on them. Mostly James. But you know.” He looks away. Looks around.

“To check up on them?”

“Yeah. Just to make sure they’re doing okay.” He nods at nothing. “Like, I told him that we had a really awesome plan in place,” Kenji says, pointing at me. “Thanks to you, of course. Really awesome plan. So. And I told him the food was good,” Kenji adds. “And the showers are hot. So, like, he knows Warner didn’t cheap out on us or anything. And yeah, you know, some other stuff.”

“What other stuff?” I ask, suspicious now. “What did you say to him?”

“Hmm?” Kenji is studying the hem of his shirt, pulling at it.

“*Kenji.*”

“Okay, listen,” Kenji says, holding up both hands. “Just—don’t get mad,

okay?”

“I’m already getting mad—”

“They were going to *die* out there. I couldn’t just let them stay in that crappy little space all by themselves—especially not James—and especially not now that we’ve got a solid plan in place—”

“What did you tell him, Kenji?” My patience is wearing thin.

“Maybe,” he says, backing away now, “maybe I told him how you were a calm, rational, very nice person who does not like to hurt people, especially not her very good-looking friend Kenji—”

“Dammit, Kenji, tell me what you did—”

“I need five feet,” he says.

“What?”

“Five feet. Of space,” he says. “Between us.”

“I will give you five inches.”

Kenji swallows, hard. “Okay, well, maybe,” he says, “maybe I told him . . . that . . . um, you missed him. A lot.”

I nearly rock backward, reeling from the impact of his words.

“You did what?” My voice drops to a whisper.

“It was the only way I could get him here, okay? He thought you were in love with Warner, and his pride is such a freaking *issue* with him—”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I shout. “They’re going to *kill* each other!”

“This could be their chance to make up,” Kenji says. “And then we can all be friends, just like you wanted—”

“Oh my God,” I say, running a hand over my eyes. “Are you *insane*? Why would you do that? I’ll have to break his heart all over again!”

“Yeah, you know, I was thinking maybe you could pretend to be, like, *not* interested in Warner? Just until after this war is over? Because that would make things a little less stressful. And then we’d all get along, and Adam and James wouldn’t die out there all alone. You know? Happy ending.”

I’m so mad right now I’m shaking.

“You told him something else, didn’t you?” I ask, my eyes narrowing. “You said something else to him. About me. *Didn’t you?*”

“What?” Kenji is moving backward now. “I don’t—”

“Is that all you told him?” I demand. “That I missed him? Or did you tell him something else, too?”

“Oh. Well, now that you mention it, yeah, um, I might’ve told him, um, that

you were still in love with him?”

My brain is screaming.

“And . . . that maybe you talk about him all the time? And maybe I told him that you cry a lot about how much you miss him. Maybe. I don’t know, we talked about a lot of things, so—”

“I am going to MURDER YOU—”

“No,” he says, pointing at me as he shifts backward again. “Bad Juliette. You don’t like to kill people, remember? You’re against that, remember? You like to talk about feelings and rainbows—”

“Why, Kenji?” I drop my head into my hands. “Why? Why would you lie to him?”

“Because,” he snaps, frustrated. “This is *bullshit*. Everyone is already dying in this world. Everyone has lost their homes, their families—everything they’ve ever loved. And you and Kent should be able to work out your stupid high school drama like two adults. We shouldn’t have to lose each other like this. We’ve already lost everyone else,” he says, angry now.

“They’re *alive*, J. They’re still alive.” He looks at me, eyes bright with barely restrained emotion. “That’s reason enough for me to try and keep them in my life.” He looks away. Lowers his voice. “Please,” he says. “This is such crap. This whole thing. I feel like I’m the kid caught in the middle of a divorce. And I didn’t want to lie to him, okay? I didn’t. But at least I convinced him to come back. And maybe once he gets here, he’ll want to stay.”

I glare at him. “When are they going to be here?”

Kenji takes a beat to breathe. “I’m getting them in the morning.”

“You know I’m going to tell Warner, right? You know you can’t just keep them here and make them invisible.”

“I know,” he says.

“Fine.” I’m so furious I don’t even know what to say anymore. I can’t even look at him right now.

“So . . .,” Kenji says. “Good talk?”

I spin around. My voice is deathly soft, my face only inches from his. “If they kill each other,” I say to him, “I will break your neck.”

“Damn, princess. When did you get so violent?”

“I’m not kidding, Kenji. They’ve tried to kill each other before, and they almost succeeded. I hope you didn’t forget that detail when you were making your happy rainbow plans.” I stare him down. “This isn’t just the story of two guys who don’t like each other. They want each other *dead*.”

Kenji sighs. Looks toward the wall. "It'll be okay," he says. "We'll figure it out."

"No," I say to him. "*You'll* figure it out."

"Can't you try to see where I'm coming from?" he asks. "Can't you see how much better it would be for us to all be together? There's no one left, J. It's just us. We shouldn't all have to suffer just because you and Kent aren't making out anymore. We shouldn't be living like this."

I close my eyes. Sigh deeply and try to calm down.

"I do," I say quietly. "I do see where you're coming from. I really, really do. And I love you for wanting everyone to be okay, and I love you for looking out for me, and for wanting me and Adam to be together again. I know how much you're going through right now. And I'm so sorry, Kenji. I really am. I know this isn't easy for you. But that's also exactly why I don't understand why you'd force the two of them together. You want to stick them in the same room. In a confined space. I thought you *didn't* want them to die."

"I think you're being a little pessimistic about this."

"Dammit, Kenji!" I throw my arm out, exasperated, and don't even realize what I've done until I hear a crash. I look toward the sound. I've managed to knock down an entire rack of free weights. From across the room.

I am a walking catastrophe.

"I need to cool off," I tell him, trying to moderate my voice. "I'll be back to shave your head while you're sleeping."

Kenji looks genuinely terrified for the first time. "You wouldn't."

I head toward the opposite wall. Hit the button for the elevator. "You're a heavy sleeper, right?"

"That's not funny, J—that's not even a little bit funny—"

The elevator pings open. I step inside. "Good night, Kenji."

I can still hear him shouting at me as the doors close.

FORTY

Warner is in the shower when I get back up to the room.

I glance at the clock. This would be about the time he'd start heading down to the training rooms; I usually meet him there for our nightly recap.

Instead I fall face-first onto the bed.

I don't know what I'm going to do.

Adam is going to show up here tomorrow thinking I still want to be with him. I don't want to have to walk away again, to see the hurt in his eyes. I don't want to hurt him. I really don't. I never have.

I'm going to *kill* Kenji.

I shove my head under the pillows, stacking them on my head and squishing them down around my ears until I've managed to shut out the world. I don't want to think about this right now. Now, of all the times to be thinking about this. Why do things always have to be so complicated? *Why?*

I feel a hand on my back.

I jerk up, pillows flying everywhere, and I'm so stupidly startled I actually fall off the bed. A pillow topples over and hits me in the face.

I groan, clutching the pillow to my chest. I press my forehead to the soft cushion of it, squeezing my eyes shut. I've never had such a terrible headache.

"Juliette?" A tentative voice. "Are you okay?"

I lower the pillow. Blink up.

Warner is wearing a towel.

A towel.

I want to roll under the bed.

"Adam and James are coming here tomorrow," I say to him, all at once. I just say it, just like that.

Warner raises his eyebrows. "I didn't realize they'd received an invitation."

"Kenji is bringing them here. He's been sneaking out to go check on them, and now he's bringing them here. Tomorrow morning."

Warner's face is carefully neutral, his voice unaffected. He might be talking about the color of the walls. "I thought he wasn't interested in joining your

resistance anymore.”

For a moment I can’t believe I’m still lying on the ground, clutching a pillow to my chest, staring at Warner who’s wearing a towel and nothing else. I can’t even take myself seriously.

“Kenji told Adam I’m still in love with him.”

There it is.

A flash of anger. In and out. Warner’s eyes spark and fade. He looks to the wall, silent a moment. “I see.” His voice is quiet, controlled.

“He knew it was the only way to get Adam back here.”

Warner says nothing.

“But I’m not, you know. In love with him.” I’m surprised at how easily the words leave my lips, and even more surprised that I feel the need to say them out loud. That I’d need to reassure Warner, of all people. “I care about Adam,” I say to him, “in the way that I’ll always care about the few people who’ve shown me kindness in my life, but everything else is just . . . gone.”

“I understand,” he says.

I don’t believe him.

“So what do you want to do?” I ask. “About tomorrow? And Adam?”

“What do you think should be done?”

I sigh. “I’m going to have to talk to him. I’ll have to break up with him for the third time,” I say, groaning again. “This is so stupid. So *stupid*.”

I finally drop the pillow. Drop my arms to my sides.

But when I look up again, Warner is gone.

I sit up, alert. Glance around.

He’s standing in the corner, putting on a pair of pants.

I try not to look at him as I climb back onto the bed.

I kick off my shoes and sink under the blankets, burrowing into the pillows until my head is buried beneath them. I feel the weight shift on the bed, and realize Warner must be sitting beside me. He plucks one of the pillows off my head. Leans in. Our noses are only inches apart.

“You don’t love him at all?” Warner asks me.

My voice is being stupid. “Romantically?”

He nods.

“No.”

“You’re not attracted to him?”

“I’m attracted to you.”

“I’m serious,” he says.

“So am I.”

Warner’s still staring at me. He blinks, once.

“Don’t you believe me?” I ask.

He looks away.

“Can’t you tell?” I ask him. “Can’t you feel it?”

And I am either losing my mind or Warner just blushed.

“You give me too much credit, love.” His eyes are focused on the blanket, his words soft. “I will disappoint you. I am every bit the defective human being you don’t think I am.”

I sit up. Look at him closely. “You’re so different,” I whisper. “So different and exactly the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re so gentle now. You’re very . . . calm,” I tell him. “Much more than you were before.”

He says nothing for a long time. And then he stands up. His tone is curt when he says, “Yes, well, I’m sure you and Kishimoto will find a way to sort this situation out. Excuse me.”

And then he leaves. Again.

I have no idea what to make of him anymore.

FORTY-ONE

Adam is already here.

Warner was completely uninterested in dealing with Adam. So he's gone about his day and his duties, having skipped his morning workout.

And now I'm here.

I've just stepped out of the elevator, and the pinging sound that signals the opening of the doors has alerted everyone to my presence. Adam was standing in the corner, talking to James. He's now staring at me.

It's weird, how I feel when I look at him now. There is no extreme emotion in me. No excess of happiness or sadness. Not upset. Not overjoyed. His face is familiar to me; his body, familiar to me. His unsteady smile, as he looks at me, is familiar to me.

How strange that we can go from friends to inseparable to hateful then casual all in one lifetime.

"Hi," I say.

"Hey." He looks away.

"Hi, James." I smile.

"Hi!" He waves, buoyant. He's standing just next to Adam, eyes lit up, clearly thrilled to be back among us. "This place is so cool."

"It is," I agree. "Have you had a chance to take a shower yet? The water is warm here."

"Oh, right," he says, shyly now. "Kenji told me about that."

"Why don't you get washed up? Delalieu will be bringing lunch down soon. I'm sure Brendan can show you around the locker room—and where to put all your stuff. You can have your own locker," I tell him, glancing at Brendan as I do. He nods, taking the hint and jumping to his feet right away.

"Really?" James is saying. "That's so cool. So they just bring the food to you? And you get to shower whenever you want? Is there a curfew?"

"Yes, yes, and no," Brendan answers him. He takes James's hand. Grabs his little bag. "We can stay up as late as we like," he tells him. "Maybe after dinner I'll show you how to use the bicycles in here," he says, his voice fading to an

echo as he and James disappear into the locker room.

Once James is gone, everyone seems to exhale.

I steel myself. Step forward.

"I'm really sorry," Adam says first, crossing the room to meet me. "You have no idea—"

"Adam." I cut him off, anxious. Nervous. I have to say this and I have to say it now. "Kenji lied to you."

Adam stops. Stills.

"I haven't been crying over you," I say, wondering if it's even possible to deliver this kind of information without both humiliating him and breaking his heart. I feel like such a monster. "And I'm really, really happy you're here, but I don't think we should be together anymore."

"Oh," he says. Rocks back on his heels. Drops his eyes. Runs both hands through his hair. "Right."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kenji looking at me. He's waving his hand, trying to get my attention, but I'm still too mad at him right now. I don't want to talk to him until I've fixed this.

"Adam," I say. "I'm sorry—"

"No," he says, holding up a hand to stop me. He looks dazed, sort of. Strange. "It's okay. Really. I already knew you were going to say that to me." He laughs a little, but awkwardly. "I guess I thought knowing in advance would make it feel a lot less like I was being punched in the gut." He cringes. "But nope. Still hurts like hell." He backs up against the wall. Slides down to the floor.

He's not looking at me.

"How did you know?" I ask. "How did you know what I was going to say?"

"I told him before you got here," Kenji says, stepping forward. He shoots me a sharp look. "I came clean. I told him what we talked about yesterday. All the things you said."

"Then why is he still here?" I ask, stunned. I turn to face Adam. "I thought you said you never wanted to see me again."

"I never should've said that." Adam is still looking at the floor.

"So . . . you're okay?" I ask him. "With Warner?"

Adam looks up in disgust, so different in an instant. "Are you out of your mind? I want to put his head through a goddamn wall."

"Then why are you still here?" I ask again. "I don't understand—"

"Because I don't want to *die*," he says to me. "Because I've been racking my

brain trying to figure out how to feed my little brother and I've come up with exactly jack and shit in the way of solutions. Because it's cold as hell outside, and he's hungry, and because our electricity is going to get shut off soon." Adam is breathing hard. "I didn't know what else to do. So now I'm here, my pride in the toilet, hoping I can stay in my ex-girlfriend's new *boyfriend's* bachelor pad, and I want to kill myself." He swallows. "And I can suffer through that," he says, "if it means James will be safe. But right now I'm still waiting for your shithead of a boyfriend to show up and try to kill me."

"He's not my boyfriend," I say quietly. "And he's not going to kill you. He doesn't even care that you're here."

Adam laughs out loud. "Bullshit," he says.

"I'm serious."

Adam gets to his feet. Studies my eyes. "You're telling me I can stay here, in his room, and eat his food, and he's just going to *let* me?" Adam's eyes are wide, incredulous. "You still don't understand this guy. He doesn't operate the way you think he does, Juliette. He doesn't think like a normal human being. He's a freaking sociopath. And you really are insane," he says, "if you think it's okay to be with someone like that."

I flinch, stung. "Be very careful how you speak to me, Adam. I won't tolerate your insults again."

"I can't even believe you," he says. "I can't believe you can stand there and treat me like this." His face is twisted into something so intensely unattractive.

Anger.

"I'm not trying to hurt you—"

"Maybe you should've remembered that before you ran into the arms of some psycho!"

"Calm your ass down, Kent." I hear Kenji's sharp warning from the corner of the room. "I thought you said you were going to be cool."

"I am being cool," he says, his voice rising, eyes on fire. "I'm a freaking saint. I don't know anyone else who would be as generous as I am right now." He looks back at me. "You were lying to me the whole time we were together. You were *cheating* on me—"

"No I wasn't."

"This kind of shit doesn't just happen overnight," he shouts. "You don't just fall out of love with someone like that—"

"We're *done*, Adam. I'm not doing this again. You're welcome to stay here," I tell him. "Especially for James's sake. But you can't stay here and insult me."

You have no right.”

Adam tenses his jaw. Grabs his things. And charges into the locker room.

FORTY-TWO

“I am going to kill you.”

“He wasn’t like that when I went to visit,” Kenji says to me. “I swear. He was fine. He was *sad*.”

“Yeah, well, obviously seeing my face isn’t bringing back happy memories for him.”

Kenji sighs. Looks away. “I’m really sorry,” he says. “I swear. But he wasn’t lying, J. They were down to practically nothing the last time I went back there. Kent said half their supplies went bad because he didn’t realize the blast had broken some of the shelves in their storage room. Some of the jars had cracked open and there were rodents and shit eating their food. And they were all alone out there. It’s cold as all hell and you have no idea how depressing it was, seeing them like that, and James—”

“I get it, Kenji.” I blow out a breath. Fold myself onto the floor. “I really do.”

I look up, look around. Everyone is busying themselves with some kind of task. Running or sketching or training or lifting weights. I think we’re all exhausted by this drama. No one wants to deal with it anymore.

Kenji sits down across from me.

“He can’t keep treating me like that,” I finally say. “And I won’t keep having the same conversation with him.” I look up. “You brought him here. He’s your responsibility. We have three weeks before we initiate this plan, and we’re already cutting it really close. I need to be able to come down here and train every day, and I don’t want to have to worry about him freaking out on me.”

“I know,” he says. “I know.”

“Good.”

“Hey, so—were you serious?” Kenji asks. “When you said Warner doesn’t care about him being here?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Kenji raises his eyebrows. “That’s . . . weird.”

“One day,” I say to him, “you’ll realize that Warner is not as crazy as you

think he is.”

“Yeah,” Kenji says. “Or maybe one day we’ll be able to reprogram that chip in your head.”

“Shut up.” I laugh, shoving him a little.

“All right. Up. Let’s go. It’s time to work.”

FORTY-THREE

Alia has designed me a new suit.

We're sitting on the mats like we always do in the evenings, and right now, Alia is showing us her designs.

I've never seen her this animated before.

She's more confident talking about the contents of her sketchbook than she is the weather. She's talking fast and fluid, describing the details and the dimensions, even outlining the materials we'll need in order to make it.

It's built with carbon.

Carbon fibers, to be precise. She explained that carbon fibers are so stiff and abrasive that they'll need to be bonded with something very flexible in order to become wearable, so she's planning on experimenting with several different materials. Something about polymers. And synthetic something. And a bunch of other words I didn't really understand. Her sketches show how the carbon fibers are literally woven into a textile, creating a durable and lightweight material that will serve as a stronger basis for what I need.

Her idea was inspired by the knuckle braces she made for me.

She said she originally wanted the suit to be made of thousands of pieces of gunmetal, but then she realized she'd never have the tools to make the pieces as thin as she'd like them, and therefore, the suit would be too heavy. But this is sounding just as amazing.

"It'll complement and enhance your strength," she's saying to me. "The carbon fibers will give you an added level of protection; they won't damage easily, so you'll be able to move more freely through different terrains. And when you're in a dangerous environment, you must remember to maintain a state of *electricum* at all times; that way your body will become virtually indestructible," she says.

"What do you mean . . . ?" I look from her to Castle for clarification. "How can that be possible?"

"Because," Alia explains. "In the same way that you can break through concrete without hurting yourself, you should also be able to sustain an attack—

from a bullet, for example—without harm.” She smiles. “Your powers make you functionally invincible.”

Wow.

“This suit is a precaution more than anything else,” she goes on. “We’ve seen in the past that you *can*, in fact, damage your skin if you’re not wholly in control of your power. When you broke the ground in the research rooms,” she says, “we thought it was the enormity of the act that injured you. But after examining the situation and your abilities more thoroughly, Castle and I found this deduction to be inaccurate.”

“Our energies are never inconsistent,” Castle jumps in, nodding at Alia. “They follow a pattern—an almost mathematical precision. If you cannot injure yourself while breaking through a concrete wall, it does not then follow that you should be able to injure yourself by breaking the ground, only to remain *uninjured* after breaking the ground a second time.” He looks at me. “Your injuries have to do with your hold on your ability. If you ever slip out of *electricum*—if you dial it back for even a moment—you will be vulnerable. Remember to be *on*, at all times. If you do, you cannot be defeated.”

“I hate you so hard right now,” Kenji mutters under his breath. “Functionally invincible my ass.”

“Jealous?” I grin at him.

“I can’t even look at you.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised.” Warner has just walked in. I spin around to find he’s heading toward our group, smiling a brittle smile at no one in particular. He sits down across from me. Meets my eyes as he says, “I always knew your powers, once harnessed, would be unmatched.”

I try to breathe.

Warner finally breaks eye contact with me to glance around the room. “Good evening, everyone,” he says. He nods at Castle. A special sort of acknowledgment.

Adam has a special sort of acknowledgment of his own.

He’s staring at Warner with an intense, unmasked hatred, looking as though he truly wants to murder Warner, and I’m suddenly more anxious than I’ve been all day. I’m looking from Adam to Warner and back again and I don’t know what to do. I don’t know if something is about to happen and I’m so desperate for things to be civil that I—

“Hi,” James says, so loudly it startles all of us. He’s looking at Warner. “What are you doing here?”

Warner raises an eyebrow. "I live here."

"This is your *house*?" James asks.

Strange. I wonder what Adam and Kenji told him about where they were going.

Warner nods. "In some capacity, yes," he says. "It serves as my home. I live upstairs."

"That's so cool," James says, grinning. "This whole place is so cool." He frowns. "Hey I thought we were supposed to hate you, though."

"James," Adam says, shooting his brother a warning glance.

"What?" James asks.

"You are free to hate me," Warner says. "If you want to. I don't mind."

"Well you *should* mind," James says, surprised. "I'd be really upset if someone hated me."

"You are young."

"I'm almost twelve," James says to him.

"I was told you were ten."

"I said *almost* twelve." James rolls his eyes. "How old are you?"

Everyone is watching. Listening. Too fascinated to look away.

Warner studies James. Takes his time answering. "I'm nineteen years old."

James's eyes go wide. "You're only a year older than Adam," he says. "How do you have so many nice things if you're only a year older than Adam? I don't know anyone your age who has nice things."

Warner looks over at me. Looks back at James. Looks at me again. "Is there nothing you want to add to this conversation, love?"

I shake my head. Smiling.

"Why do you call her 'love'?" James asks. "I've heard you say that before, too. A lot. Are you in love with her? I think Adam's in love with her. Kenji's not in love with her, though. I already asked him."

Warner blinks at him.

"Well?" James asks.

"Well what?"

"Are you in love with her?"

"Are *you* in love with her?"

"What?" James blushes. "No. She's like a million years older than me."

"Would anyone like to take over this conversation?" Warner asks, looking around the group.

"You never answered my question," James says. "About why you have so

many things. I'm not trying to be rude," he says. "Really. I'm just wondering. I've never taken a shower with hot water before. And you have so much food. It must be really nice to have so much food all the time."

Warner flinches, unexpectedly. He looks more carefully at James. "No," he says slowly. "It is not a terrible thing to have food and hot water all the time."

"So then are you going to answer my question? About where you got all this stuff?"

Warner sighs.

"I am the commander and regent of Sector 45," he says. "We are currently on an army base, where it is my job to oversee our soldiers and all the civilians who live on the accompanying compounds. I am paid to live here."

"Oh." James goes pale in an instant; he suddenly looks inhumanly terrified. "You work for The Reestablishment?"

"Hey, it's okay, buddy," Kenji says to James. "You're safe here. Okay? No one's going to hurt you."

"This is the kind of guy you're into, huh?" Adam snaps at me. "The kind of guy who petrifies children?"

"It's nice to see you again, Kent." Warner is watching Adam now. "How are you enjoying your stay?"

Adam seems to be fighting back the urge to say a lot of unkind things.

"So you really work for them?" James is asking Warner again, his words just a breath, his eyes still frozen on Warner's face. He's shaking so hard it breaks my heart. "You work for The Reestablishment?"

Warner hesitates. Looks away and looks back again. "Theoretically," he says. "Yes."

"What do you mean?" James asks.

Warner is looking into his hands.

"What do you mean, *theoretically*?" James demands.

"Are you asking," Warner says with a sigh, "because you are actually seeking clarification? Or is it because you don't know what the word *theoretically* means?"

James hesitates, his panic dissolving into frustration for a moment. He screws up his face, annoyed. "Fine. What does *theoretically* mean?"

"Theoretically," Warner says, "I'm supposed to work for The Reestablishment. But, obviously, as I'm hosting a group of rebels on this government-owned military base—in my private quarters, no less—and sustaining said rebels so that they might overthrow our current regime, I would

say no. I am not, exactly, working for The Reestablishment. I have committed treason,” he says to James. “A crime that is punishable by death.”

James stares at him for a long time. “*That’s what theoretically means?*”

Warner looks up at the wall. Sighs again.

I bite back a laugh.

“So, wait—then you’re not the bad guy,” James says all of a sudden. “You’re on our side, right?”

Warner turns slowly to meet James’s eyes. Says nothing.

“Well?” James asks, impatient. “Aren’t you on our side?”

Warner blinks. Twice. “So it seems,” he says, looking as though he can hardly believe he’s saying it.

“Perhaps we should get back to the suit,” Castle cuts in. He’s looking at Warner, smiling triumphantly. “Alia has spent a long time designing it, and I know she has more details to share.”

“Yeah,” Kenji says, excited. “This looks badass, Alia. I want one. Can I have one?”

I wonder if I’m the only person who notices that Warner’s hands are shaking.

FORTY-FOUR

“Punch me.”

Warner is standing directly across from me, head cocked to the side. Everyone is watching us.

I shake my head, fast.

“Don’t be afraid, love,” he says to me. “I just want you to try.”

His arms are relaxed at his sides. His stance so casual. It’s Saturday morning, which means he has time off from his daily workout routine. Which means he’s decided to work with me, instead.

I shake my head again.

He laughs. “Your training with Kenji is good,” he says, “but this is just as important. You need to learn how to fight. You have to be able to defend yourself.”

“But I can defend myself,” I say to him. “I’m strong enough.”

“Strength is excellent,” he says, “but it’s worth nothing without technique. If you can be overpowered, you are not strong *enough*.”

“I don’t think I could be overpowered,” I say to him. “Not really.”

“I admire your confidence.”

“Well, it’s true.”

“When you met my father for the first time,” he says, “were you not initially overpowered?”

My blood runs cold.

“And when you set out to fight after I left Omega Point,” he says to me, “were you not overpowered again?”

I clench my fists.

“And even after you were captured,” he says quietly, “was my father not able to overpower you once more?”

I drop my head.

“I want you to be able to defend yourself,” Warner says, his voice gentle now. “I want you to learn how to fight. Kenji was right the other day, when he said you can’t just throw your energy around. You have to be able to project

with precision. Your moves must always be deliberate. You have to be able to anticipate your opponent in every possible way, both mentally and physically. Strength is only the first step.”

I look up, meet his eyes.

“Now punch me,” he says.

“I don’t know how,” I finally admit, embarrassed.

He’s trying so hard not to smile.

“Are you looking for volunteers?” I hear Kenji ask. He steps closer. “Because I’ll gladly kick your ass if Juliette isn’t interested.”

“Kenji,” I snap, spinning around. I narrow my eyes.

“What?”

“Come on, love,” Warner says to me. He’s unfazed by Kenji’s comment, looking at me as if no one else in this room exists. “I want you to try. Use your strength. Tap into every bit of power you have. And then punch me.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to hurt you.”

Warner laughs again. Looks away. Bites his lip as he stifles another smile. “You’re not going to hurt me,” he says. “Trust me.”

“Because you’ll absorb the power?”

“No,” he says. “Because you won’t be *able* to hurt me. You don’t know how.”

I frown, annoyed. “Fine.”

I swing my fist in what I assume a punch is supposed to look like. But my motion is limp and wobbly and so humiliatingly bad I almost give up halfway.

Warner catches my arm. He meets my eyes. “Focus,” he says to me. “Imagine you are terrified. You are cornered. You are fighting for your life. *Defend* yourself,” he demands.

I pull my arm back with more intensity, ready to try harder this time, when Warner stops me. He grabs my elbow. Shakes it a little. “You are not playing baseball,” he says. “You do not wind up for a punch, and you do not need to lift your elbow up to your ear. Do not give your opponent advance notice of what you’re about to do,” he says. “The impact should be unexpected.”

I try again.

“My face is in the center, love, right here,” he says, tapping a finger against his chin. “Why are you trying to hit my shoulder?”

I try again.

“Better—control your arm—keep your left fist up—protect your face—”

I punch hard, a cheap shot, an unexpected hit even though I know he isn’t

ready.

His reflexes are too fast.

His fist is clenched around my forearm in an instant. He yanks, hard, pulling my arm forward and down until I'm off-balance and toppling toward him. Our faces are an inch apart.

I look up, embarrassed.

"That was cute," he says, unamused as he releases me. "Try again."

I do.

He blocks my punch with the back of his hand, slamming into the space just inside my wrist, knocking my arm sideways.

I try again.

He uses the same hand to grab my arm in midair and pull me close again. He leans in. "Do not allow anyone to catch your arms like this," he says. "Because once they do, they'll be able to control you." And, as if to prove it, he uses his hold on my arm to pull me in and then shove me backward, hard.

Not too hard.

But still.

I'm starting to get irritated, and he can tell.

He smiles.

"You really want me to hurt you?" I ask him, eyes narrowing.

"I don't think you can," he says.

"I think you're pretty cocky about that."

"Prove me wrong, love." He raises an eyebrow at me. "Please."

I swing.

He blocks.

I strike again.

He blocks.

His forearms are made of *steel*.

"I thought this was about *punching*," I say to him, rubbing at my arms. "Why do you keep hitting my forearms?"

"Your fist does not carry your strength," he says. "It's just a tool."

I swing again, faltering at the last minute, my confidence failing me.

He catches my arm. Drops it.

"If you're going to hesitate," he says, "do it on purpose. If you're going to hurt someone, do it on purpose. If you're going to lose a fight," he says, "do it on *purpose*."

"I just—I can't do this right," I tell him. "My hands are shaking and my arms

are starting to hurt—”

“Watch what I do,” he says. “Watch my form.”

His feet are planted about shoulder-width apart, his legs slightly bent at the knees. His left fist is up and held back, protecting the side of his face, and his right fist is leading, sitting higher and slightly diagonal from his left. Both elbows are tucked in, hovering close to his chest.

He swings at me, slowly, so I can study the movement.

His body is tensed, his aim focused, every movement controlled. The power comes from somewhere deep inside of him; it’s the kind of strength that is a consequence of years of careful training. His muscles know how to move. Know how to fight. His power is not a gimmick of supernatural coincidence.

His knuckles gently graze the edge of my chin.

He makes it look so easy to punch someone. I had no idea it was this difficult.

“Do you want to switch?” he asks.

“What?”

“If I try to punch you,” he says. “Can you defend yourself?”

“No.”

“Try,” he says to me. “Just try to block me.”

“Okay,” I say, not actually wanting to. I feel stupid and petulant.

He swings again, slowly, for my sake.

I slap his arm out of the way.

He drops his hands. Tries not to laugh. “You are so much worse at this than I thought you’d be.”

I scowl.

“Use your forearms,” he says. “Block my swing. Knock it out of the way and shift your body with it. Remember to move your head when you block. You want to move yourself *away* from danger. Don’t just stand there and slap.”

I nod.

He starts to swing.

I block too quickly, my forearm hitting his fist. Hard.

I wince.

“It’s good to anticipate,” he says to me, his eyes sharp. “But don’t get eager.”

Another swing.

I catch his forearm. Stare at it. I try to pull it down like he did with mine, but he literally does not budge. At all. Not even an inch. It’s like tugging on a metal pole buried in concrete.

“That was . . . okay,” he says, smiling. “Try again. Focus.” He’s studying my eyes. “*Focus*, love.”

“I *am* focused,” I insist, irritated.

“Look at your feet,” he says. “You’re putting your weight on the front of your feet and you look like you’re about to tip over. Plant yourself in place,” he says. “But be ready to move. Your weight should rest on the heels of your feet,” he says, tapping the back of his own foot.

“Fine,” I snap, angry now. “I’m standing on the heels of my feet. I’m not tipping over anymore.”

Warner looks at me. Captures my eyes. “Never fight when you’re angry,” he says quietly. “Anger will make you weak and clumsy. It will divert your focus. Your instincts will fail you.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Frustrated and ashamed.

“Try again,” he says slowly. “Stay calm. Have faith in yourself. If you don’t believe you can do it,” he says, “you won’t.”

I nod, slightly mollified. Try to concentrate.

I tell him I’m ready.

He swings.

My left arm bends at the elbow in a perfect ninety-degree angle that slams into his forearm so hard it stops his swing. My head has shifted out of the way, my feet turned in the direction of his punch; I’m still standing steady.

Warner is amused.

He swings with his other fist.

I grab his forearm in midair, my fist closed around the space above his wrist, and I take advantage of his surprise to throw him off-balance, pulling his arm down and yanking him forward. He almost crashes into me. His face is right in front of mine.

And I’m so surprised that for a moment I don’t know what to do. I’m caught in his eyes.

“Push me,” he whispers.

I tighten my hold around his arm, and then shove him across the room.

He flies back, catching himself before hitting the floor.

I’m frozen in place. Shocked.

Someone whistles.

I turn around.

Kenji is clapping. “Well done, princess,” he says, trying not to laugh. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

I grin, half embarrassed and half absurdly proud of myself.

I meet Warner's eyes across the room. He nods, smiling so wide. "Good," he says. "Very good. You're a fast learner. But we still have a lot of work to do."

I finally look away, catching a glimpse of Adam in the process.

He looks pissed.

FORTY-FIVE

The days have flown by, kites carrying them off into the distance.

Warner's been working with me every morning now. After his workout, and after my training with Kenji, he's carved out two hours a day to spend with me. Seven days a week.

He's an extraordinary teacher.

So patient with me. So pleasant. He's never frustrated, never bothered by how long it takes me to learn something new. He takes the time to explain the logic behind every detail, every motion, every position. He wants me to understand what I'm doing on an elemental level. He makes sure I'm internalizing the information and replicating it on my own, not just mimicking his movements.

I'm finally learning how to be strong in more ways than one.

It's strange. I never thought knowing how to throw a punch could make a difference, but the simple knowledge of understanding how to defend myself has made me so much more confident.

I'm so much more aware of myself now.

I walk around feeling the strength in my limbs. I'm able to name the individual muscles in my body, knowing exactly how to use them—and how to abuse them, if I do things wrong. My reflexes are getting better, my senses are heightened. I'm beginning to understand my surroundings, to anticipate danger, and to recognize the subtle shifts in body language that indicate anger and aggression.

And my projection is almost too easy now.

Warner collected all sorts of things for me to destroy, just for target practice. Scraps of wood and metal, old chairs and tables. Blocks of concrete. Anything that would test my strength. Castle uses his energy to toss the objects into the air and it's my job to destroy them from across the room. At first it was nearly impossible; it's an extremely intense exercise that requires me to be wholly in control of myself.

But now, it's one of my favorite games.

I can stop and crush anything in the air. From any distance across the room. All I need are my hands to control the energy. I can move my own power in any direction, focusing it on small objects and then widening the scope for a larger mass.

I can move everything in the training room now. Nothing is difficult anymore.

Kenji thinks I need a new challenge.

“I want to take her outside,” Kenji says. He’s talking directly to Warner—so casually—something that’s still strange for me to see. “I think she needs to start experimenting with natural materials. We’re too limited in here.”

Warner looks at me. “What do you think?”

“Will it be safe?” I ask.

“Well,” he says, “it doesn’t really matter, does it? In one week we’ll be outing ourselves anyway.”

“Good point.” I try to smile.

Adam has been unusually quiet these past couple weeks.

I don’t know if it’s because Kenji talked to him and told him to be careful, or if it’s because he’s really resigned himself to this situation. Maybe he’s realized there’s nothing romantic happening between me and Warner. Which both pleases and disappoints me.

Warner and I seem to have reached some kind of understanding. A civil, oddly formal relationship that balances precariously between friendship and something else that has never been defined.

I can’t say I enjoy it.

Adam doesn’t interfere, however, when James speaks to Warner, and Kenji told me it’s because Adam doesn’t want to traumatize James by giving him a reason to be afraid of living here.

Which means James is constantly talking to Warner.

He’s a curious kid, and Warner is so naturally private that he’s the most obvious target for James’s questions. Their exchanges are always entertaining for all of us. James is thoroughly unapologetic, and bolder than most anyone would ever be when talking to Warner.

It’s kind of cute, actually.

Other than that, everyone has been progressing well. Brendan and Winston are back to perfect, Castle is in better spirits every day, and Lily is a self-sufficient kind of girl who doesn’t need much to be entertained—though she and

Ian seem to have found a sort of solace in each other's company.

I suppose it makes sense that this kind of isolation would bring people together.

Like Adam and Alia.

He's been spending a lot of time with her lately, and I don't know what that means; it might be nothing more than friendship. But for most of the time I've been down in the training room, I've seen him sitting next her, just watching her sketch, asking the occasional question.

She's always blushing.

In some ways, she reminds me a lot of how I used to be.

I adore Alia, but sometimes watching them together makes me wonder if this is what Adam's always wanted. A sweet, quiet, gentle girl. Someone who would compensate for all the roughness he's seen in his life. He said that to me once, I remember. He said he loved that about me. That I was so *good*. So sweet. That I was the only good thing left in this world.

I think I always knew that wasn't true.

Maybe he's starting to see it, too.

FORTY-SIX

“I have to visit my mother today.”

These are the seven words that begin our morning.

Warner has just walked out of his office, his hair a golden mess around his head, his eyes so green and so simultaneously transparent that they defy true description. He hasn't bothered to button his rumpled shirt and his slacks are unbelted and hanging low on his waist. He looks completely disoriented. I don't think he's slept all night and I want so desperately to know what's been happening in his life but I know it's not my place to ask. Worse still, I know he wouldn't even tell me if I did.

There's no level of intimacy between us anymore.

Everything was moving so quickly between us and then it halted to a complete stop. All those thoughts and feelings and emotions frozen in place. And now I'm so afraid that if I make the wrong move, everything will break.

But I miss him.

He stands in front of me every day and I train with him and work alongside him like a colleague and it's not enough for me anymore. I miss our easy conversations, his open smiles, the way he always used to meet my eyes.

I miss him.

And I need to talk to him, but I don't know how. Or when. Or what to say.

Coward.

“Why today . . . ?” I ask tentatively. “Did something happen?”

Warner says nothing for a long time, just stares at the wall. “Today is her birthday.”

“Oh,” I whisper, heart breaking.

“You wanted to practice outdoors,” he says, still staring straight ahead. “With Kenji. I can take you with me when I leave, as long as he promises to keep you invisible. I'll drop you off somewhere on unregulated territory and pick you up when I'm heading back. Will that be all right?”

“Yes.”

He says nothing else, but his eyes are wild and unfocused. He's looking at

the wall like it might be a window.

“Aaron?”

“Yes, love.”

“Are you scared?”

He takes a tight breath. Exhales it slowly.

“I never know what to expect when I visit her,” he says quietly. “She’s different each time. Sometimes she’s so drugged up she doesn’t even move. Sometimes her eyes are open and she just stares at the ceiling. Sometimes,” he says, “she’s completely hysterical.”

My heart twists.

“It’s good that you still visit her,” I say to him. “You know that, right?”

“Is it?” He laughs a strange, nervous sort of laugh. “Sometimes I’m not so sure.”

“Yes. It is.”

“How can you know?” He looks at me now, looks at me as though he’s almost afraid to hear the answer.

“Because if she can tell, for even a second, that you’re in the room with her, you’ve given her an extraordinary gift. She is not gone completely,” I tell him. “She knows. Even if it’s not all the time, and even if she can’t show it. She knows you’ve been there. And I know it must mean so much to her.”

He takes in another shaky breath. He’s staring at the ceiling now. “That is a very nice thing to say.”

“I really mean it.”

“I know,” he says. “I know you do.”

I look at him a little longer, wondering if there’s ever an appropriate time to ask questions about his mother. But there’s one thing I’ve always wanted to ask. So I do.

“She gave you that ring, didn’t she?”

Warner goes still. I think I can hear his heart racing from here. “What?”

I walk up to him and take his left hand. “This one,” I say, pointing to the jade ring he’s always worn on his left pinkie finger. He never takes it off. Not to shower. Not to sleep. Not ever.

He nods, so slowly.

“But . . . you don’t like to talk about it,” I say, remembering the last time I asked him about his ring.

I count exactly ten seconds before he speaks again.

“I was never allowed,” he says very, very quietly, “to receive presents. From

anyone. My father hated the idea of presents. He hated birthday parties and holidays. He never let anyone give anything to me, and especially not my mother. He said that accepting gifts would make me weak. He thought they would encourage me to rely on the charity of others.

“But we were hiding one day,” he says. “My mother and I.” His eyes are up, off, lost in another place. He might not be talking to me at all. “It was my sixth birthday and she was trying to hide me. Because she knew what he wanted to do to me.” He blinks. His voice is a whisper, half dead of emotion. “I remember her hands were shaking,” he says. “I remember because I kept looking at her hands. Because she was holding mine to her chest. And she was wearing this ring.” He quiets, remembering. “I’d never seen much jewelry in my life. I didn’t know what it was, exactly. But she saw me staring and she wanted to distract me,” he says. “She wanted to keep me entertained.”

My stomach is threatening to be sick.

“So she told me a story. A story about a boy who was born with very green eyes, and the man who was so captivated by their color that he searched the world for a stone in exactly the same shade.” His voice is fading now, falling into whispers so quiet I can hardly hear him. “She said the boy was me. That this ring was made from that very same stone, and that the man had given it to her, hoping one day she’d be able to give it to me. It was his gift, she said, for my birthday.” He stops. Breathes. “And then she took it off, slipped it on my index finger, and said, ‘If you hide your heart, he will never be able to take it from you.’”

He looks toward the wall.

“It’s the only gift,” he says, “anyone has ever given to me.”

My tears fall backward, burning as they singe their way down my throat.

FORTY-SEVEN

I feel strange, all day.

I feel off, somehow. Kenji is thrilled to be getting off base, excited about testing my strength in new places, and everyone else is jealous that we get to leave. So I should be happy. I should be eager.

But I feel strange.

My head is in a weird place, and I think it's because I haven't been able to shake Warner's story from my mind. I can't stop trying to imagine him as he was. As a small, terrified child.

No one knows where he's headed today. No one knows the depth of it. And he does nothing to betray how he's really feeling. He's been as calm as ever, controlled and careful in his words, his actions.

Kenji and I are meeting him again in just a moment.

We're slipping through the door in the gun wall, and I'm finally able to see firsthand how Warner sneaked them inside. We're crossing through a shooting range.

There are gun stations and little cubicles with targets set hundreds of feet away, and right now, the entire place is deserted. This must be another one of Warner's practice rooms.

There's a door at the end of the walkway, and Kenji pushes it open. He doesn't need to touch me at all anymore in order to keep me invisible, and it's so much more convenient this way. We can move freely as long as I'm within fifty feet of him, which gives us the flexibility we need to be able to work outside today.

We're now on the other side of the door.

Standing in an enormous storage facility.

The space is at least five hundred feet across, and maybe twice as high. I've never seen more boxes in my entire life. I have no idea what they contain, and no time to wonder.

Kenji is pulling me through the maze.

We sidestep boxes of all different sizes, careful not to trip over electrical

cords and the machinery used to move the heavier items. There are rows and rows and more rows divided into even more rows that house everything in very organized sections. I notice there are labels on every shelf and in all the aisles, but I can't get close enough to read them.

When we finally make it to the end of the storage room, there are two huge, fifty-foot doors that lead to the exit. This is clearly a loading zone for trucks and tanks. Kenji grabs my arm and keeps me close as we pass several guards stationed by the exit. We dart through the trucks parked all around the loading zone, until we finally get to the meeting point where we're supposed to find Warner.

I wish Kenji could've been around to make me invisible when I first tried to get on and off base. It would've been so nice to just walk out like a human being, instead of being carted through the halls, jolting and teetering and clinging to the legs of a wheeling tray table.

Warner is leaning against a tank.

Both doors are open, and he's looking around like he might be overseeing the work being done with the loading units. He nods to several soldiers as they pass.

We clamber into the passenger side unnoticed.

And just as I'm about to whisper a notification to Warner, he walks around to the passenger side, says, "Watch your legs, love," and shuts the door.

And then he climbs into the other side. Starts driving.

We're still invisible.

"How did you know we were in here?" Kenji asks immediately. "Can you, like, see invisible people, too?"

"No," Warner says to him, eyes focused in front of him. "I can feel your presence. Hers, most of all."

"Really?" Kenji says. "That's some weird shit. What do I feel like? Peanut butter?"

Warner is unamused.

Kenji clears his throat. "J, I think you should switch spots with me."

"Why?"

"I think your boyfriend is touching my leg."

"You flatter yourself," Warner says.

"Switch spots with me, J. He's making me feel all goosebumpy and shit, like maybe he's about to knife me."

"Fine." I sigh. I try clambering over him, but it's difficult, considering I can

see neither my own body nor his.

“Ow—*dammit*—you almost kicked me in the face—”

“Sorry!” I say, trying to scramble over his knees.

“Just move,” he says. “God, how much do you weigh—”

He shifts, all at once, slipping out from under me, and gives me a small shove to move me over.

I fall face-first into Warner’s lap.

I hear Warner’s brief, sharp intake of breath, and I scramble upright, blushing so hard, and I’m suddenly so relieved no one can see me right now.

I want to punch Kenji in the nose.

No one talks much after that.

As we get closer to unregulated territory, the scenery starts to change. The simple, signless, semipaved roads give way to the streets of our old world. The houses are painted in shades that promised to be colorful once upon a time, and the roads are lined with sidewalks that might’ve carried children safely home from school. The houses are all falling apart now.

Everything is broken, dilapidated. The windows boarded up. The lawns overgrown and iced over. The winter bite looks fresh in the air, and it casts a gloom over the scene in a way that says this all might be different in another season. Who knows.

Warner stops the tank.

He climbs out and walks over to our door, just in case anyone is still out here, and makes it seem as though he’s opening it for a specific reason. To check the interior. To examine a problem.

It doesn’t matter.

Kenji jumps out first, and Warner seems to be able to tell that he’s gone.

I reach for Warner’s hand, because I know he can’t see me. His fingers immediately tighten around mine. His eyes are focused on the floor.

“It’s going to be okay,” I tell him. “Okay?”

“Yes,” he says. “I’m sure you’re right.”

I hesitate. “Will you be back soon?”

“Yes,” he whispers. “I’ll return for you in exactly two hours. Will that be sufficient time?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’ll meet you back here, then. In this exact location.”

“Okay.”

He says nothing for a second. Then, "Okay."

I squeeze his hand.

He smiles at the ground.

I stand up and he shifts to the side, allowing me room to get by. I touch him as I move past, just briefly. Just as a reminder. That I'm here for him.

He flinches, startled, and steps back.

And then he climbs into the tank, and leaves.

FORTY-EIGHT

Warner is late.

Kenji and I had a semisuccessful session, one that consisted mainly of us arguing over where we were standing and what we were looking at. We're going to have to come up with much better signals next time, because trying to coordinate a training session between two invisible people is a lot more difficult than it sounds. Which is saying a lot.

So now we're tired and slightly disappointed, having accomplished little in the way of progress, and we're standing in exactly the same place Warner dropped us off.

And Warner is late.

This is unusual for many reasons. The first of which is that Warner is never late. Not for anything. And the second is that if he were going to be late, it definitely wouldn't be for something like this. This situation is far too dangerous to be casual about. He wouldn't have taken it lightly. I know he wouldn't have.

So I'm pacing.

"I'm sure it's fine," Kenji is saying to me. "He probably just got hung up doing whatever it is he's doing. You know, commanding and shit."

"*Commanding* is not a word."

"It has letters, doesn't it? Sounds like a word to me."

I'm too nervous to banter right now.

Kenji sighs. I hear him stomp his feet against the cold. "He'll be here."

"I don't feel right, Kenji."

"I don't feel right, either," he says. "I'm hungry as hell."

"Warner wouldn't be late. It's not like him to be late."

"How would you know?" Kenji shoots back. "You've known him for how long, exactly? Five months? And you think you know him so well? Maybe he's in a secret jazz club where he sings a cappella and wears sparkly vests and thinks it's cool to do the cancan."

"Warner wouldn't wear sparkly vests," I snap.

"But you think he'd be down with the cancan."

“Kenji, I love you, I really do, but right now I’m so anxious, and I feel so sick, that the more you speak, the more I want to kill you.”

“Don’t talk sexy to me, J.”

I huff, irritated. God, I’m so worried. “What time is it?”

“Two forty-five.”

“This isn’t right. We should go find him.”

“We don’t even know where he is.”

“I do,” I say. “I know where he is.”

“*What?* How?”

“Do you remember where we met Anderson for the first time?” I ask him.
“Do you remember how to get back to Sycamore Street?”

“Yeah . . .,” Kenji says slowly. “Why?”

“He’s about two streets down from there.”

“Um. What the hell? Why is he down there?”

“Will you go with me?” I ask, nervous. “Please? Now?”

“Okay,” he says, unconvinced. “But only because I’m curious. And because it’s cold as hell out here and I need to move my legs before I freeze to death.”

“Thank you,” I say. “Where are you?”

We follow the sounds of each other’s voices until we bump right into one another. Kenji slips his arm into mine. We huddle together against the cold.

He leads the way.

FORTY-NINE

This is it.

The robin's-egg-blue house. The one I woke up in. The one Warner lived in. The one his mother is stored in. We're standing in front of it and it looks exactly as it did the last two times I was here. Beautiful and terrifying. Wind chimes whipping back and forth.

"Why the hell would Warner be here?" Kenji asks. "What is this place?"

"I can't really tell you," I say to him.

"Why not?"

"Because it's not my secret to tell."

Kenji is silent a moment. "So what do you want me to do?"

"Can you wait here?" I ask him. "Will I be able to stay invisible if I go inside? Or will I get out of range?"

Kenji sighs. "I don't know. You can definitely try. I've never tried to do this from outside a house before." He hesitates. "But if you're going to go in without me, can you please hurry the hell up? I'm already freezing my ass off."

"Yes. I promise. I'll be fast. I just want to make sure he's all right—or that he's even in here. Because if he's not inside, he might be waiting for us back at the drop-off."

"And all of this will have been a huge waste of time."

"I'm sorry," I say to him. "I'm really sorry. But I just have to make sure."

"Go," he says. "Go and come back fast."

"Okay," I whisper. "Thank you."

I break away and climb up the stairs to the little porch. Test the handle. It's unlocked. I turn it, push the door open. Step inside.

This is where I was shot.

The bloodstain from where I was lying on the ground has already been cleaned up. Or maybe the carpet was changed. I'm not sure. Either way, the memories still surround me. I can't walk back into this house without feeling sick to my stomach. Everything is wrong in here. Everything is so wrong. So off.

Something has happened.

I can feel it.

I'm careful to shut the door gently behind me. I creep up the stairs, remembering how the floorboards squeaked when I was first captured and brought here, and I'm able to sidestep the noisiest parts; the rest of it, thankfully, just sounds like it could be the wind.

When I'm upstairs, I count three doors. Three rooms.

On the left: Warner's old room. The one I woke up in.

In the middle: the bathroom. The one I was bathed in.

On the far end of the hall, all the way to the right: his mother's room. The one I'm looking for.

My heart is racing in my chest.

I can hardly breathe as I tiptoe closer. I don't know what I'm expecting to find. I don't know what I'm hoping will come of this trip. I don't have any idea, even, if Warner is still in here.

And I have no idea what it'll be like to see his mother.

But something is pulling me forward, urging me to open the door and check. I need to know. I just have to know. My mind won't rest otherwise.

So I inch forward. Take several deep breaths. I grasp the doorknob and turn, so slowly, not even realizing I've lost invisibility until I see my feet crossing the threshold.

I panic in an instant, my brain calculating contingency plans, and though I briefly consider turning around and bolting out the door, my eyes have already scanned the room.

And I know I can't turn back now.

FIFTY

There's a bed in here.

A single bed. Surrounded by machines and IVs and bottles and brand-new bedpans. There are stacks of bedsheets and stacks of blankets and the most beautiful bookcases and embroidered pillows and adorable stuffed animals piled everywhere. There are fresh flowers in five different vases and four brightly painted walls and there's a little desk in the corner with a little matching chair and there's a potted plant and a set of old paintbrushes and there are picture frames, everywhere. On the walls, on the desk, sitting on the table beside the bed.

A blond woman. A little blond boy. Together.

They never age, I notice. The pictures never move past a certain year. They never show the evolution of this child's life. The boy in these photos is always young, and always startled, and always holding fast to the hand of the lady standing beside him.

But that lady is not here. And her nurse is gone, too.

The machines are off.

The lights are out.

The bed is empty.

Warner has collapsed in the corner.

He's curled into himself, knees pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped around his legs, his head buried in his arms. And he's shaking.

Tremors are rocking his entire body.

I've never, ever seen him look like a child before. Never, not once, not in all the time I've known him. But right now, he looks just like a little boy. Scared. Vulnerable. All alone.

It doesn't take much to understand why.

I fall to my knees in front of him. I know he must be able to sense my presence, but I don't know if he wants to see me right now. I don't know how he's going to react if I reach out.

But I have to try.

I touch his arms, so gently. I run my hand down his back, his shoulders. And then I dare to wrap myself around him until he slowly breaks apart, unfolding in front of me.

He lifts his head.

His eyes are red-rimmed and a startling, striking shade of green, shining with barely restrained emotion. His face is the picture of so much pain.

I almost can't breathe.

An earthquake hits my heart then, cracks it right down the middle. And I think here, in him, there is more feeling than any one person should ever have to contain.

I try to hold him closer but he wraps his arms around my hips instead, his head falling into my lap. I bend over him instinctively, shielding his body with my own.

I press my cheek to his forehead. Press a kiss to his temple.

And then he breaks.

Shaking violently, shattering in my arms, a million gasping, choking pieces I'm trying so hard to hold together. And I promise myself then, in that moment, that I will hold him forever, just like this, until all the pain and torture and suffering is gone, until he's given a chance to live the kind of life where no one can wound him this deeply ever again.

And we are quotation marks, inverted and upside down, clinging to one another at the end of this life sentence. Trapped by lives we did not choose.

It's time, I think, to break free.

FIFTY-ONE

Kenji is waiting in the tank when we get back. He managed to find it.

He's sitting in the passenger side, invisibility off, and he doesn't say a single word as Warner and I climb inside.

I try to meet his eyes, already prepared to concoct some crazy story for why it took me an hour to get Warner out of the house, but then Kenji looks at me. Really looks at me.

And I close my mouth forever.

Warner doesn't say a single word. He doesn't even breathe loudly. And when we get back to base, he lets me and Kenji leave the tank under our guise of invisibility and he still says nothing, not even to me. As soon as we're out of the tank, he closes our door, and climbs back inside.

I'm watching him drive off again when Kenji slips his arm into mine.

We weave back through the storage facility without a problem. Cross through the shooting range without a problem. But just before we reach the door to Warner's training facility, Kenji pulls me aside.

"I followed you in," he says, with no preamble. "You took too long and I got worried and I followed you up there." A pause. A heavy pause. "I saw you guys," he says, so quietly. "In that room."

Not for the first time today, I'm glad he can't see my face. "Okay," I whisper, not knowing what else to say. Not knowing what Kenji will do with the information.

"I just—" Kenji takes a deep breath. "I'm just confused, okay? I don't need to know all the details—I realize that whatever was happening in there was none of my business—but are you okay? Did something happen?"

I exhale. Close my eyes as I say, "His mom died today."

"What?" Kenji asks, stunned. "What—h-how? His mom was in there?"

"She'd been sick for a long time," I say, the words rushing out of me. "Anderson kept her locked in that house and he abandoned her. He left her to die. Warner had been trying to help her, and he didn't know how. She couldn't be touched, just like I can't touch anyone, and the pain of it was killing her every

day.” I’m losing control now, unable to keep my feelings contained any longer. “Warner never wanted to use me as a weapon,” I say to him. “He made that up so he had a story to tell his father. He found me by accident. Because he was trying to find a solution. To help *her*. All these years.”

Kenji takes a sharp breath. “I had no idea,” he says. “I didn’t even know he was close to his mom.”

“You don’t know him at all,” I say, not caring how desperate I sound. “You think you do but you really don’t.” I feel raw, like I’ve been sanded down to the bone.

He says nothing.

“Let’s go,” I say. “I need some time to breathe. To think.”

“Yeah,” he says. He exhales. “Yeah, sure. Of course.”

I turn to go.

“J,” he says, stopping me, his hand still on my arm.

I wait.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I didn’t know.”

I blink fast against the burning in my eyes. Swallow back the emotion building in my throat. “It’s okay, Kenji. You were never supposed to.”

FIFTY-TWO

I finally manage to pull myself together long enough to head back to the training rooms. It's getting late, but I don't anticipate seeing Warner down here tonight. I think he'll want the time alone.

I'm making myself scarce on purpose.

I've had enough.

I came so close to killing Anderson once, and I'll make sure I have that chance again. But this time, I'll follow through.

I wasn't ready last time. I wouldn't have known what to do even if I'd killed him then. I would've handed control over to Castle and I would've watched quietly as someone else tried to fix our world again. But I see now that Castle was wrong for this job. He's too tender. Too anxious to please everyone.

I, on the other hand, am left with no concerns at all.

I will be unapologetic. I will live with no regrets. I will reach into the earth and rip out the injustice and I will crush it in my bare hands. I want Anderson to fear me and I want him to beg for mercy and I want to say no, not for you. Never for you.

And I don't care if that's not nice enough.

FIFTY-THREE

I get to my feet.

Adam is standing across the room, talking to Winston and Ian. Everyone falls silent as I approach. And if Adam is thinking or feeling anything at all about me, he doesn't show it.

"You have to tell him," I say.

"What?" Adam startles.

"You have to tell him the truth," I say. "And if you don't, I will."

All at once Adam's eyes are a frozen ocean, cold and closed off. "Don't push me, Juliette. Don't say stupid things you're going to regret."

"You have no right to keep this from him. He has no one in this world, and he deserves to know."

"This is *none* of your business," Adam says. He's towering over me, his fists clenched. "Stay out of it. Don't force me to do something I don't want to do."

"Are you actually threatening me?" I ask. "Are you insane?"

"Maybe you've forgotten," he says, "that I'm the only one in this room who can shut you off. But I haven't. You have no power against me."

"Of course I have power against you," I tell him. "My touch was *killing you* when we were together—"

"Yeah, well, things have changed a lot since then." He grabs my hand, yanking so hard I nearly fall forward. I try to pull away and I can't.

He's too strong.

"Adam, let go of me—"

"Can you feel that?" he asks, eyes a crazy, stormy shade of blue.

"What?" I ask. "Feel what?"

"Exactly," he says. "There's nothing there. You're empty. No power, no fire, no superstrength. Just a girl who can't throw a punch to save her life. And I'm perfectly fine. Unharméd."

I swallow hard and meet his cold gaze. "So you've done it, then?" I ask. "You managed to control it?"

"Of course I did," he says angrily. "And you couldn't wait—even though I

told you I could do it—you couldn't wait even though I told you I was training so we could be together—”

“It doesn't matter anymore.” I'm staring at my hand in his, his refusal to let go. “We would've ended up in the same place sooner or later.”

“That's not true—this is proof!” he says, holding up my hand. “We could've made it work—”

“We're too different now. We want different things. And this?” I say, nodding at our hands. “All this managed to prove is that you are extremely good at turning me off.”

Adam's jaw clenches.

“Now let go of my hand.”

“Hey—can we please refrain from putting on a shitshow tonight?” Kenji's voice booms from across the room. He's heading toward us. Pissed.

“Stay out of this,” Adam snaps at him.

“It's called *consideration*. There are other people living in this room, jackass,” Kenji says once he's close enough. He grabs Adam's arm. “So knock it off.”

Adam breaks away angrily. “Don't touch me.”

Kenji shoots him a sharp look. “Let go of her.”

“You know what?” Adam says, his anger taking over. “You're so obsessed with her—jumping to her defense all the time, getting involved in our conversations all the time—you like her so much? Fine. You can have her.”

Time freezes all around us.

The stage is set:

Adam and his wild eyes, his rage and his red face.

Kenji standing next to him, annoyed, slightly confused.

And me, my hand still locked in Adam's viselike grip, his touch so quickly and easily reducing me back to who I was when we first met.

I'm completely powerless.

But then, in one movement, everything changes:

Adam grabs Kenji's bare hand and presses it into my empty one.

For just long enough.

FIFTY-FOUR

It takes a couple of seconds for the two of us to register what's just happened before Kenji rips his hand away, and in a moment of perfect spontaneity, uses it to punch Adam in the face.

Everyone else in the room is now up and alert. Castle runs forward immediately, and Ian and Winston—who were already standing close by—hurry to join him. Brendan rushes out of the locker room in a towel, eyes searching for the source of the commotion; Lily and Alia jump off the bikes and crowd around us.

We're lucky it's so late; James is already sleeping quietly in the corner.

Adam was thrown back by Kenji's punch, but he quickly regained his footing. He's breathing hard, dragging the back of his hand across his now-bloody lip. He does not apologize.

No sound escapes my open, horrified mouth.

"What in God's name is wrong with you?" Kenji's voice is soft but deathly sharp, his right fist still clenched. "Were you trying to get me killed?"

Adam rolls his eyes. "I knew it wouldn't kill you. Not that quickly. I've felt it before," he says. "It just burns a little."

"Pull yourself together, dickhead," Kenji snaps. "You're acting insane."

Adam says nothing. He actually laughs, flips Kenji off, and heads in the direction of the locker room.

"Hey—are you okay?" I ask Kenji, trying to catch a glimpse of his hand.

"I'm fine," he sighs, glancing at Adam's retreating figure before looking back at me. "But his jaw is hard as hell." He flexes his fist a little.

"But my touch—it didn't hurt you?"

Kenji shakes his head. "Nah, I didn't feel anything," he says. "And I'd know if I did." He almost laughs, and frowns instead. I cringe at the memory of the last time this happened. "I think Kent was deflecting your power somehow," Kenji says.

"No he wasn't," I whisper. "He let go of my other hand. I felt the energy come back into me."

We both look at Adam's retreating figure.

Kenji shrugs.

"But then how—"

"I don't know," Kenji says again. He sighs. "I guess I just got lucky. Listen"—he looks around at everyone—"I don't want to talk right now, okay? I'm going to go sit down. I need to cool off."

The group breaks up slowly, everyone going back to their corners.

But I can't walk away. I'm rooted in place.

I felt my skin touch Kenji's, and that's not something I can ignore. Those kinds of moments are so rare for me that I can't just shake them off; I never get to be that close to people without serious consequences. And I felt the power inside my body. Kenji should've felt *something*.

My mind is working fast, trying to solve an impossible equation, and a crazy theory takes root inside of me, crystallizing in a way I'd never thought it could.

This whole time I've been training to control my power, to contain it, to focus it—but I never thought I'd be able to turn it *off*. And I don't know why.

Adam had a similar problem: he'd been running on *electricum* his whole life. But now he's learned how to control it. To power it down when he needs to.

Shouldn't I be able to do the same?

Kenji can go visible and invisible whenever he likes—it was something he had to teach himself after training for a long time, after understanding how to shift from one state of being to another. I remember the story he told me from when he was little: he turned invisible for a couple of days without knowing how to change back. But eventually he did.

Castle, Brendan, Winston, Lily—they can all turn their abilities on and off. Castle doesn't move things with his mind by accident. Brendan doesn't electrocute everything he touches. Winston can tighten and loosen his limbs at will, and Lily can look around normally, without taking snapshots of everything with her eyes.

Why am I the only one without an off switch?

My mind is overwhelmed as I process the possibilities. I begin to realize that I never even *tried* to turn my power off, because I always thought it would be impossible. I assumed I was fated to this life, to an existence in which my hands—my skin—would always, always keep me away from others.

But now?

"Kenji!" I cry out as I run toward him.

Kenji glances over his shoulder at me, but doesn't have the chance to turn all

the way around before I crash into him, grabbing his hands and squeezing them in my own. “Don’t let go,” I tell him, eyes filling fast with tears. “Don’t let go. You don’t have to let go.”

Kenji is frozen, shock and amazement all over his face. He looks at our hands. Looks back up at me.

“You learned how to control it?” he asks.

I can hardly speak. I manage to nod, tears spilling down my cheeks. “I think I’ve had it contained, all this time, and just didn’t know it. I never would’ve risked practicing it on anyone.”

“Damn, princess,” he says softly, his own eyes shining. “I’m so proud of you.”

Everyone is crowding around us now.

Castle pulls me into a fierce hug, and Brendan and Winston and Lily and Ian and Alia jump on top of him, crushing me all at once. They’re cheering and clapping and shaking my hand and I’ve never felt so much support or so much strength in our group before. No moment in my life has ever been more extraordinary than this.

But when the congratulations ebb and the good-nights begin, I pull Kenji aside for one last hug.

“So,” I say to him, rocking on my heels. “I can touch anyone I want now.”

“Yeah, I know.” He laughs, cocking an eyebrow.

“Do you know what that means?”

“Are you asking me out?”

“You know what this *means*, right?”

“Because I’m flattered, really, but I still think we’re much better off as friends—”

“*Kenji.*”

He grins. Musses my hair. “No,” he says. “I don’t know. What does it mean?”

“It means a million things,” I say to him, standing on tiptoe to look him in the eye. “But it also means that now I will never end up with anyone by default. I can do anything I want now. Be with anyone I want. And it’ll be my choice.”

Kenji just looks at me for a long time. Smiles. Finally, he drops his eyes. Nods.

And says, “Go do what you gotta do, J.”

FIFTY-FIVE

When I get off the elevator and step into Warner's office, all the lights are off. Everything is swimming in an inky sort of black, and it takes me several tries to adjust my eyes to the darkness. I pad my way through the office carefully, searching for any sign of its owner, and find none.

I head into the bedroom.

Warner is sitting on the edge of the mattress, his coat thrown on the floor, his boots kicked off to the side. He's sitting in silence, palms up on his lap, looking into his hands like he's searching for something he cannot find.

"Aaron?" I whisper, moving forward.

He lifts his head. Looks at me.

And something inside of me shatters.

Every vertebra, every knuckle, both kneecaps, both hips. I am a pile of bones on the floor and no one knows it but me. I am a broken skeleton with a beating heart.

Exhale, I tell myself.

Exhale.

"I'm so sorry," are the first words I whisper.

He nods. Gets to his feet.

"Thank you," he says to no one at all as he walks out the door.

I follow him across the bedroom and into his office. Call out his name.

He stops in front of the boardroom table, his back to me, his hands gripping the edge. "Please, Juliette, not tonight, I can't—"

"You're right," I finally say. "You've always been right."

He turns around, so slowly.

I'm looking into his eyes and I'm suddenly petrified. I'm suddenly nervous and suddenly worried and suddenly so sure I'm going to do this all wrong but maybe wrong is the only way to do it because I can't keep it to myself anymore. There are so many things I need to tell him. Things I've been too much of a coward to admit, even to myself.

"Right about what?" His green eyes are wide. Scared.

I hold my fingers to my mouth, still so afraid to speak.

I do so much with these lips, I think.

I taste and touch and kiss and I've pressed them to the tender parts of his skin and I've made promises and told lies and touched lives all with these two lips and the words they form, the shapes and sounds they curve around. But right now my lips wish he would just read my mind because the truth is I've been hoping I'd never have to say any of it, these thoughts, out loud.

"I do want you," I say to him, my voice shaking. "I want you so much it scares me."

I see the movement in his throat, the effort he's making to keep still. His eyes are terrified.

"I lied to you," I tell him, words tripping and stumbling out of me. "That night. When I said I didn't want to be with you. I lied. Because you were right. I was a coward. I didn't want to admit the truth to myself, and I felt so guilty for preferring you, for wanting to spend all my time with you, even when everything was falling apart. I was confused about Adam, I was confused about who I was supposed to be and I didn't know what I was doing and I was stupid," I say. "I was stupid and inconsiderate and I tried to blame it on you and I hurt you, so badly." I try to breathe. "And I'm so, so sorry."

"What—" Warner is blinking fast. His voice is fragile, uneven. "What are you saying?"

"I love you," I whisper. "I love you exactly as you are."

Warner is looking at me like he might be going deaf and blind at the same time. "No," he gasps. One broken, broken word. Barely even a sound. He's shaking his head and he's looking away from me and his hand is caught in his hair, his body turned toward the table and he says "No. No, no—"

"Aaron—"

"No," he says, backing away. "No, you don't know what you're saying—"

"I love you," I tell him again. "I love you and I want you and I wanted you then," I say to him, "I wanted you so much and I still want you, I want you right now—"

Stop.

Stop time.

Stop the world.

Stop everything for the moment he crosses the room and pulls me into his arms and pins me against the wall and I'm spinning and standing and not even breathing but I'm alive so alive so very very alive

and he's kissing me.

Deeply, desperately. His hands are around my waist and he's breathing so hard and he hoists me up, into his arms, and my legs wrap around his hips and he's kissing my neck, my throat, and he sets me down on the edge of the boardroom table.

He has one hand under my neck, the other under my shirt and he's running his fingers up my back and suddenly his thigh is between my legs and his hand is slipping behind my knee and up, higher, pulling me closer, and when he breaks the kiss I'm breathing so fast, head spinning as I try to hold on to him.

"Up," he says, gasping for air. "Lift your arms up."

I do.

He tugs up my shirt. Pulls it over my head. Tosses it to the floor.

"Lie back," he says to me, still breathing hard, guiding me onto the table as his hands slide down my spine, under my backside. He unbuttons my jeans. Unzips them. Says, "Lift your hips for me, love," and hooks his fingers around the waist of my pants and my underwear at the same time. Tugs them down.

I gasp.

I'm lying on his table in nothing but my bra.

Then that's gone, too.

His hands are moving up my legs and the insides of my thighs and his lips are making their way down my chest, and he's undoing what little is left of my composure and every bit of my sanity and I'm aching, everywhere, tasting colors and sounds I didn't even know existed. My head is pressed back against the table and my hands are gripping his shoulders and he's hot, everywhere, gentle and somehow so urgent, and I'm trying not to scream and he's already moving down my body, he's already chosen where to kiss me. How to kiss me.

And he's not going to stop.

I'm beyond rational thought. Beyond words, beyond comprehensible ideas. Seconds are merging into minutes and hearts are collapsing and hands are grasping and I've tripped over a planet and I don't know anything anymore, I don't know anything because nothing will ever be able to compare to this. Nothing will ever capture the way I'm feeling right now.

Nothing matters anymore.

Nothing but this moment and his mouth on my body, his hands on my skin, his kisses in brand-new places making me absolutely, certifiably insane. I cry out and cling to him, dying and somehow being brought back to life in the same moment, the same breath.

He's on his knees.

I bite back the moan caught in my throat just before he lifts me up and carries me to the bed. He's on top of me in an instant, kissing me with a kind of intensity that makes me wonder why I haven't died or caught on fire or woken up from this dream yet. He's running his hands down my body only to bring them back up to my face and he kisses me once, twice, and his teeth catch my bottom lip for just a second and I'm clinging to him, wrapping my arms around his neck and running my hands through his hair and pulling him into me. He tastes so sweet. So hot and so sweet and I keep trying to say his name but I can't even find the time to breathe, much less to say a single word.

I shove him up, off me.

I undo his shirt, my hands shaking and fumbling with the buttons and I get so frustrated I just rip it open, buttons flying everywhere, and I don't have a chance to push the fabric off his body before he pulls me into his lap. He wraps my legs around his hips and dips me backward until the mattress is under my head and he leans over me, cupping my face in his hands, his thumbs two parentheses around my mouth and he pulls me close and he kisses me, kisses me until time topples over and my head spins into oblivion.

It's a heavy, unbelievable kiss.

It's the kind of kiss that inspires stars to climb into the sky and light up the world. The kind that takes forever and no time at all. His hands are holding my cheeks, and he pulls back just to look me in the eye and his chest is heaving and he says, "I think," he says, "my heart is going to explode," and I wish, more than ever, that I knew how to capture moments like these and revisit them forever.

Because this.

This is everything.

FIFTY-SIX

Warner has been asleep all morning.

He didn't wake up to work out. Didn't wake up to shower. Didn't wake up to do anything. He's just lying here, on his stomach, arms wrapped around a pillow.

I've been awake since 8:00 a.m., and I've been staring at him for two hours.

He's usually up at five thirty. Sometimes earlier.

I worry that he might've missed a lot of important things by now. I have no idea if he has meetings or specific places to be today. I don't know if he's ruined his schedule by being asleep so late. I don't know if anyone will come to check on him. I have no idea.

I do know that I don't want to wake him.

We were up very late last night.

I run my fingers down his back, still confused by the word **IGNITE** tattooed on his skin, and train my eyes to see his scars as something other than the terrifying abuse he's suffered his whole life. I can't handle the horrible truth of it. I curl my body around his, rest my face against his back, my arms holding fast to his sides. I drop a kiss on his spine. I can feel him breathing, in and out, so evenly. So steadily.

Warner shifts, just a little.

I sit up.

He rolls over slowly, still half asleep. Uses the back of one fist to rub his eyes. Blinks several times. And then he sees me.

Smiles.

It's a sleepy, sleepy smile.

I can't help but smile back. I feel like I've been split open and stuffed with sunshine. I've never seen a sleepy Warner before. Never woken up in his arms. Never seen him be anything but awake and alert and sharp.

He looks almost lazy right now.

It's adorable.

"Come here," he says, reaching for me.

I crawl into his arms and cling, and he holds me tight against him. Drops a kiss on the top of my head. Whispers, "Good morning, sweetheart."

"I like that," I say quietly, smiling even though he can't see it. "I like it when you call me sweetheart."

He laughs then, his shoulders shaking as he does. He rolls onto his back, arms stretched out at his sides.

God, he looks so good without his clothes on.

"I have never slept so well in my entire life," he says softly. He grins, eyes still closed. Dimples on both cheeks. "I feel so strange."

"You slept for a long time," I tell him, lacing his fingers in mine.

He peeks at me through one eye. "Did I?"

I nod. "It's late. It's already ten thirty."

He stiffens. "Really?"

I nod again. "I didn't want to wake you."

He sighs. "I'm afraid I should get going then. Delalieu has likely had an aneurysm."

A pause.

"Aaron," I say tentatively. "Who is Delalieu, exactly? Why is he so trustworthy with all of this?"

A deep breath. "I've known him for many, many years."

"Is that all . . . ?" I ask, leaning back to look him in the eye. "He knows so much about us and what we're doing and it worries me sometimes. I thought you said all your soldiers hated you. Shouldn't you be suspicious? Trust him less?"

"Yes," he says quietly, "you'd think I would."

"But you don't."

Warner meets my eyes. Softens his voice. "He's my mother's father, love."

I stiffen in an instant, jerking back. "What?"

Warner looks up at the ceiling.

"He's your *grandfather*?" I'm sitting up in bed now.

Warner nods.

"How long have you known?" I don't know how to stay calm about this.

"My entire life." Warner shrugs. "He's always been around. I've known his face since I was a child; I used to see him around our house, sitting in on meetings for The Reestablishment, all organized by my father."

I'm so stunned I hardly know what to say. "But . . . you treat him like he's . . ."

"My lieutenant?" Warner stretches his neck. "Well, he is."

“But he’s your *family*—”

“He was assigned to this sector by my father, and I had no reason to believe he was any different from the man who gave me half my DNA. He’s never gone to visit my mother. Never asks about her. Has never shown any interest in her. It’s taken Delalieu nineteen years to earn my trust, and I’ve only just allowed myself this weakness because I’ve been able to sense his sincerity with regular consistency throughout the years.” Warner pauses. “And even though we’ve reached some level of familiarity, he has never, and will never, acknowledge our shared biology.”

“But why not?”

“Because he is no more my grandfather than I am my father’s son.”

I stare at Warner for a long time before I realize there’s no point in continuing this conversation. Because I think I understand. He and Delalieu have nothing more than an odd, formal sort of respect for each other. And just because you’re bound by blood does not make you a family.

I would know.

“So do you have to go now?” I whisper, sorry I even brought up the topic of Delalieu.

“Not just yet.” He smiles. Touches my cheek.

We’re both silent a moment.

“What are you thinking?” I ask him.

He leans in, kisses me so softly. Shakes his head.

I touch the tip of my finger to his lips. “There are secrets in here,” I say. “I want them out.”

He tries to bite my finger.

I steal it back.

“Why do you smell so good?” he asks, still smiling as he avoids my question. He leans in again, leaves light kisses along my jawline, under my chin. “It’s making me crazy.”

“I’ve been stealing your soaps,” I tell him.

He raises his eyebrows at me.

“Sorry.” I feel myself blush.

“Don’t feel bad,” he says, serious so suddenly. “You can have anything of mine you want. You can have all of it.”

I’m caught off guard, so touched by the sincerity in his voice. “Really?” I ask. “Because I do love that soap.”

He grins at me then. His eyes are wicked.

“What?”

He shakes his head. Breaks away. Slips out of bed.

“Aaron—”

“I’ll be right back,” he says.

I watch him walk into the bathroom. I hear the sound of a faucet, the rush of water filling a tub.

My heart starts racing.

He walks back into the room and I’m clinging to the sheets, already protesting what I think he’s about to do.

He tugs on the blanket. Tilts his head at me. “Let go, please.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“What are you going to do?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“It’s okay, love.” His eyes are teasing me. “Don’t be embarrassed.”

“It’s too bright in here. Turn the lights off.”

He laughs out loud. Yanks the covers off the bed.

I bite back a scream. “Aaron—”

“You are perfect,” he says. “Every inch of you. Perfect,” he says again. “Don’t hide from me.”

“I take it back,” I say, panicked, clutching a pillow to my body. “I don’t want your soap—I take it back—”

But then he plucks the pillow out of my arms, scoops me up, and carries me away.

FIFTY-SEVEN

My suit is ready.

Warner made sure Alia and Winston would have everything they needed in order to create it, and though I'd seen them tackling the project a little more every day, I never would've thought all those different materials could turn into this.

It looks like snakeskin.

The material is both black and gunmetal gray, but it looks almost gold in certain flashes of light. The pattern moves when I do, and it's dizzying how the threads seem to converge and diverge, looking as though they swim together and come apart.

It fits me in a way that's both uncomfortable and reassuring; it's skintight and a little stiff at first, but once I start moving my arms and legs I begin to understand just how much hidden flexibility it holds. It all seems strangely counterintuitive. This suit is even lighter than the one I had before—it hardly feels like I'm wearing anything at all—and yet it feels so much more durable, so much stronger. I feel like I could block a knife in this suit. Like I could be dragged across a mile of pavement in this suit.

I also have new boots.

They're very similar to my old ones, but these cut off at my calf, not my ankle. They're flat, springy, and soundless as I walk around in them.

I didn't ask for any gloves.

I'm flexing my bare hands, walking the length of the room and back, bending my knees and familiarizing myself with the sensation of wearing a new kind of outfit. It serves a different purpose. I'm not trying to hide my skin from the world anymore. I'm only trying to enhance the power I already have.

It feels so good.

"These are for you, too," Alia says, beaming as she blushes. "I thought you might like a new set." She holds out exact replicas of the knuckle braces she made for me once before.

The ones I lost. In a battle we lost.

These, more than anything else, represent so much to me. It's a second chance. An opportunity to do things right. "Thank you," I tell her, hoping she knows how much I mean it.

I fit the braces over my bare knuckles, flexing my fingers as I do.

I look up. Look around.

Everyone is staring at me. "What do you think?" I ask.

"Your suit looks just like mine." Kenji frowns. "I'm supposed to be the one with the black suit. Why can't you have a pink suit? Or a yellow suit—"

"Because we're not the freaking Power Rangers," Winston says, rolling his eyes.

"What the hell is a Power Ranger?" Kenji shoots back.

"I think it looks awesome," James says, grinning big. "You look way cooler than you did before."

"Yeah, that is seriously badass," Lily says. "I love it."

"It's your best work, mates," Brendan says to both Winston and Alia. "Really. And the knuckle—things . . .," he says, gesturing to my hands. "Those are just . . . they bring the whole thing together, I think. It's brilliant."

"You look very sharp, Ms. Ferrars," Castle says to me. "I think it quite suits you," he says, "if you'll forgive the pun."

I grin.

Warner's hand is on my back. He leans in, whispers, "How easy is it to take this thing off?" and I force myself not to look at him and the smile he's surely enjoying at my expense. I hate that he can still make me blush.

My eyes try to find a new focus around the room.

Adam.

He's staring at me, his features unexpectedly relaxed. Calm. And for one moment, one very brief moment, I catch a glimpse of the boy I once knew. The one I first fell for.

He turns away.

I can't stop hoping he'll be okay; he only has twelve hours to pull himself together. Because tonight, we go over the plan, one last time.

And tomorrow, it all begins.

FIFTY-EIGHT

“Aaron?” I whisper.

The lights are out. We’re lying in bed. I’m stretched out across his body, my head pillowed on his chest. My eyes are on the ceiling.

He’s running his hand over my hair, his fingers occasionally combing through the strands. “Your hair is like water,” he whispers. “It’s so fluid. Like silk.”

“Aaron.”

He leaves a light kiss on top of my head. Rubs his hands down my arms. “Are you cold?” he asks.

“You can’t avoid this forever.”

“We don’t have to avoid it at all,” he says. “There’s nothing to avoid.”

“I just want to know you’re okay,” I say. “I’m worried about you.” He still hasn’t said a single thing to me about his mother. He never said a word the entire time we were in her room, and he hasn’t spoken about it since. Hasn’t even alluded to it. Not once.

Even now, he says nothing.

“Aaron?”

“Yes, love.”

“You’re not going to talk about it?”

He’s silent again for so long I’m about to turn around to face him. But then.

“She’s no longer in pain,” he says softly. “This is a great consolation to me.”

I don’t push him to speak after that.

“Juliette,” he says.

“Yes?”

I can hear him breathing.

“Thank you,” he whispers. “For being my friend.”

I turn around then. Press close to him, my nose grazing his neck. “I will always be here if you need me,” I say, the darkness catching and hushing my voice. “Please remember that. Always remember that.”

More seconds drown in the darkness. I feel myself drifting off to sleep.

“Is this really happening?” I hear him whisper.

“What?” I blink, try to stay awake.

“You feel so real,” he says. “You sound so real. I want so badly for this to be real.”

“This is real,” I say. “And things are going to get better. Things are going to get so much better. I promise.”

He takes a tight breath. “The scariest part,” he says, so quietly, “is that for the first time in my life, I actually believe that.”

“Good,” I say softly, turning my face into his chest. I close my eyes.

Warner’s arms slip around me, pulling me closer. “Why are you wearing so many clothes?” he whispers.

“Mmm?”

“I don’t like these,” he says. He tugs on my pants.

I touch my lips to his neck, just barely. It’s a feather of a kiss. “Then take them off.”

He pulls back the covers.

I only have a second to bite back a shiver before he’s kneeling between my legs. He finds the waistband of my pants and tugs, pulling them off, over my hips, down my thighs. So slowly.

My heart is asking me all kinds of questions.

He bunches my pants in one fist and throws them across the room.

And then his arms slip behind my back, pulling me up and against his chest. His hands move under my shirt, up my spine.

Soon my shirt is gone.

Tossed in the same direction as my pants.

I shiver, just a little, and he eases me back onto the pillows, careful not to crush me under his weight. His body heat is so welcome, so warm. My head tilts backward. My eyes are still closed.

My lips part for no reason at all.

“I want to be able to feel you,” he whispers, his words at my ear. “I want your skin against mine.” His gentle hands move down my body. “God, you’re so soft,” he says, his voice husky with emotion.

He’s kissing my neck.

My head is spinning. Everything goes hot and cold and something is stirring to life inside of me and my hands reach for his chest, looking for something to hold on to and my eyes are trying and failing to stay open and I’m only just conscious enough to whisper his name.

“Yes, love?”

I try to say more but my mouth won’t listen.

“Are you asleep now?” he asks.

Yes, I think. I don’t know. Yes.

I nod.

“That’s good,” he says quietly. He lifts my head, pulls my hair away from my neck so my face falls more easily onto the pillow. He shifts so he’s beside me on the bed. “You need to sleep more,” he says.

I nod again, curling onto my side. He pulls the blankets up around my arms.

He kisses the curve of my shoulder. My shoulder blade. Five kisses down my spine, one softer than the next. “I will be here every night,” he whispers, his words so soft, so tortured, “to keep you warm. I will kiss you until I can’t keep my eyes open.”

My head is caught in a cloud.

Can you hear my heart? I want to ask him.

I want you to make a list of all of your favorite things, and I want to be on it.

But I’m falling asleep so fast I’ve lost my grasp on reality, and I don’t know how to move my mouth. Time has fallen all around me, wrapped me in this moment.

And Warner is still talking. So quietly, so softly. He thinks I’m asleep now. He thinks I can’t hear him.

“Did you know,” he’s whispering, “that I wake up, every morning, convinced you’ll be gone?”

Wake up, I keep telling myself. Wake up. Pay attention.

“That all of this,” he says, “these moments, will be confirmed as some kind of extraordinary dream? But then I hear you speak to me,” he says. “I see the way you look at me and I can feel how real it is. I can feel the truth in your emotions, and in the way you touch me,” he whispers, the back of his hand brushing my cheek.

My eyes flicker open. I blink once, twice.

His lips are set in a soft smile.

“Aaron,” I whisper.

“I love you,” he says.

My heart no longer fits in my chest.

“Everything looks so different to me now,” he says. “It feels different. It tastes different. You brought me back to life.” He’s quiet a moment. “I have never known this kind of peace. Never known this kind of comfort. And

sometimes I am afraid,” he says, dropping his eyes, “that my love will terrify you.”

He looks up, so slowly, gold lashes lifting to reveal more sadness and beauty than I’ve ever seen in the same moment. I didn’t know a person could convey so much with just one look. There’s extraordinary pain in him. Extraordinary passion.

It takes my breath away.

I take his face in my hands and kiss him, so slowly.

His eyes fall closed. His mouth responds to mine. His hands reach up to pull me closer and I stop him.

“No,” I whisper. “Don’t move.”

He drops his hands.

“Lie back,” I whisper.

He does.

I kiss him everywhere. His cheeks. His chin. The tip of his nose and the space between his eyebrows. All across his forehead and along his jawline. Every inch of his face. Small, soft kisses that say so much more than I ever could. I want him to know how I feel. I want him to know it the way only he can, the way he can sense the depth of emotion behind my movements. I want him to know and never doubt.

And I want to take my time.

My mouth moves down to his neck and he gasps, and I breathe in the scent of his skin, take in the taste of him and I run my hands down his chest, kissing my way across and down the line of his torso. He keeps trying to reach for me, keeps trying to touch me, and I have to tell him to stop.

“Please,” he says, “I want to feel you—”

I gentle his arms back down. “Not yet. Not now.”

My hands move to his pants. His eyes fly open.

“Close your eyes,” I have to tell him.

“No.” He can hardly speak.

“Close your eyes.”

He shakes his head.

“Fine.”

I unbutton his pants. Unzip.

“Juliette,” he breathes. “What—”

I’m pulling off his pants.

He sits up.

“Lie down. Please.”

He’s staring at me, eyes wide.

He finally falls back.

I tug his pants off all the way. Toss them to the floor.

He’s in his underwear.

I trace the stitching on the soft cotton, following the lines on the overlapping pieces of his boxer-briefs as they intersect in the middle. He’s breathing so fast I can hear him, can see his chest moving. His eyes are squeezed shut. His head tilted back. His lips parted.

I touch him again, so gently.

He stifles a moan, turns his face into the pillows. His whole body is trembling, his hands clutching at the sheets. I run my hands down his legs, gripping them just above his knees and inching them apart to make room for the kisses I trail up the insides of his thighs. My nose skims his skin.

He looks like he’s in pain. So much pain.

I find the elastic waist of his underwear. Tug it down.

Slowly.

Slowly.

The tattoo is sitting just below his hip bone.

h e l l i s e m p t y
a n d a l l t h e d e v i l s a r e h e r e

I kiss my way across the words.

Kissing away the devils.

Kissing away the pain.

FIFTY-NINE

I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows propped up on my knees, face dropped into my hands.

"Are you ready?" he asks me.

I look up. Stand up. Shake my head.

"Breathe, sweetheart." He stands in front of me, slips his hands around my face. His eyes are bright, intense, steady, and so full of confidence. In me. "You are magnificent. You are extraordinary."

I try to laugh and it comes out all wrong.

Warner leans his forehead against mine. "There is nothing to fear. Nothing to worry about. Grieve nothing in this transitory world," he says softly.

I tilt back, a question in my eyes.

"It's the only way I know how to exist," he says. "In a world where there is so much to grieve and so little good to take? I grieve nothing. I take everything."

I stare into his eyes for what feels like forever.

He leans into my ear. Lowers his voice. "Ignite, my love. Ignite."

Warner has called for an assembly.

He says it's a fairly routine procedure, one wherein the soldiers are required to wear a standard black uniform. "And they will be unarmed," Warner said to me.

Kenji and Castle and everyone else are coming to watch, care of Kenji's invisibility, but I'm the only one who's going to speak today. I told them I wanted to lead. I told them I'd be willing to take the first risk.

So here I am.

Warner walks me out of his bedroom door.

The halls are abandoned. The soldiers patrolling his quarters are gone, already assembled and awaiting his presence. The reality of what I'm about to do is only just starting to sink in.

Because no matter the outcome today, I am putting myself on display. It is a

message from me to Anderson. A message I know he'll receive.

I am alive.

I will use your own armies to hunt you down.

And I will kill you.

Something about this thought makes me absurdly happy.

We walk into the elevator and Warner takes my hand. I squeeze his fingers. He smiles straight ahead. And suddenly we're walking out of the elevator and through another door and right into the open courtyard I've only ever stood in once before.

How odd, I think, that I should return to this roof not as a captive. No longer afraid. And clinging fast to the hand of the same blond boy who brought me here before.

How very strange this world is.

Warner hesitates before moving into view. He looks at me for confirmation. I nod. He releases my hand.

We step forward together.

SIXTY

There's an audible gasp from the soldiers standing just below.

They definitely remember me.

Warner pulls a square piece of mesh out of his pocket and presses it to his lips, just once, before holding it in his fist. His voice is amplified across the crowd when he speaks.

"Sector 45," he says.

They shift. Their right fists rise up to fall on their chests, their left fists released, dropping to their sides.

"You were told," he says, "a little over a month ago, that we'd won the battle against a resistance group by the name of Omega Point. You were told we decimated their home base and slaughtered their remaining men and women on the battlefield. You were told," he says, "never to doubt the power of The Reestablishment. We are unbeatable. Unsurpassed in military power and land control. You were told that we are the future. The only hope."

His voice rings out over the crowd, his eyes scanning the faces of his men.

"And I hope," he says, "that you did not believe it."

The soldiers are staring, stunned, as Warner speaks. They seem afraid to step out of line in case this turns out to be some kind of elaborate joke, or perhaps a test from The Reestablishment. They do nothing but stare, no longer taking care to make their faces appear as stoic as possible.

"Juliette Ferrars," he says, "is not dead. She is here, standing beside me, despite the claims made by our supreme commander. He did, in fact, shoot her in the chest. And he did leave her to die. But she was able to survive his attack on her life, and she has arrived here today to make you an offer."

I take the mesh from Warner's hand, touch it to my lips just as he did. Drop it into my fist.

I take a deep breath. And say six words.

"I want to destroy The Reestablishment."

My voice is so loud, so powerfully projected over the crowd, that for a moment it surprises me. The soldiers are staring at me in horror. Shock.

Disbelief. Astonishment. They're starting to whisper.

"I want to lead you into battle," I say to them. "I want to fight back—"

No one is listening to me anymore.

Their perfectly organized lines have been abandoned. They're now converging together in one mass, speaking and shouting and trying to deliberate among themselves. Trying to understand what's happening.

I can't believe I lost their attention so quickly.

"Don't hesitate," Warner says to me. "You must react. *Now.*"

I was hoping to save this for later.

Right now, we're only about fifteen feet off the ground, but Warner told me there are four more levels, if I want to go all the way up. The highest level houses the speakers designated for this particular area. It has a small maintenance platform that is only ever accessed by technicians.

I'm already climbing my way up.

The soldiers are distracted again, pointing at me as I scale the stairs; still talking loudly with one another. I have no idea if it's possible for news of this situation to have already reached the civilians or the spies who report back to the supreme. I have no time to care right now because I haven't even finished giving my speech, and I've already lost them.

This isn't good.

When I finally reach the top level, I'm about a hundred feet off the ground. I'm careful as I step onto the platform, but I'm more careful not to look down for too long. And when I've finally planted my feet, I look up and around the crowd.

I have their attention again.

I close my fist over the microphonic mesh.

"I only have one question," I say, my words powerful and clear, projecting into the distance. "What has The Reestablishment ever done for you?"

They're actually looking at me now. Listening.

"They have given you nothing but meager wages and promises for a future that will never come. They have divided your families and forced them across what's left of this earth. They have starved your children and destroyed your homes. They lie to you, over and over again, forcing you to take jobs in their army so they might control you. And you have no other choice," I say. "No other options. So you fight in their wars, and you kill your own friends, just so you might feed your families."

Yes, I have their attention now.

"The person you allow to lead this nation is a coward," I say to them. "He is

a weak man who's too afraid to show his face to the public. He lives in secrecy, hides from the people who rely on him, and yet he's taught you to fear him," I say. "He's taught you to cower when his name is spoken.

"Maybe you haven't met him yet," I say. "But I have. And I was not impressed."

I can't believe no one has shot me yet. I don't care if they're supposed to be unarmed. Someone probably has a gun. And no one has shot me yet.

"Join a new resistance," I say to them, calling out to the crowd. "We are the majority, and we can stand united. Will you continue to live like this?" I ask them, pointing to the compounds in the distance. "Will you continue to starve? Because they will continue to lie to you!" I say. "Our world is not beyond repair. It's not beyond saving. We can be our own army," I say to them. "We can stand together. Join me," I say, "and I promise things will change."

"How?" I hear someone shout. "How can you promise something like that?"

"I am not intimidated by The Reestablishment," I tell them. "And I have more strength than you might realize. I have the kind of power that the supreme commander cannot stand against."

"We already know what you can do!" someone else yells. "That didn't save you before!"

"No," I say to them, "you don't know what I can do. You have no idea what I can do."

I reach my arms out in front of me, both hands pointed in the direction of the crowd. I try to find a good middle. And then I focus.

Feel your power, Kenji said to me once. It's a part of you—a part of your body and mind. It will listen to you if you can learn how to control it.

I plant my feet. Steel myself.

And then I pry the crowd apart.

Slowly.

I focus my energy on recognizing the individual bodies and allow my power to move fluidly, working around the soldiers in a gentle fashion, as opposed to rushing through them and accidentally ripping them apart. My power clings to their forms as my fingers would, finally finding a perfect center that divides the group into two halves. They're already looking at each other from across the courtyard, trying to understand why they can't move against the invisible walls pushing them apart.

But once the energy is set in place, I open my arms, wide.

Pull.

The soldiers are knocked back. Half to the left. Half to the right. Not enough to be injured, but just enough to be startled. I want them to feel the power I'm containing. I want them to know that I'm holding back.

"I can protect you," I say to them, my voice still ringing loud over them. "And I have friends who could do more. Who will stand beside you and fight."

And then, as if on cue, the group of them appear out of thin air, in the very center of the courtyard, in the space I've just cleared.

The soldiers jerk back, stunned, shifting farther into their corners.

Castle reaches up one arm, coaxing a small tree in the distance to uproot itself. He uses both hands to pull it out of the ground, and once he does, the tree careens out of control, flying through the air, branches rattling in the wind. Castle pulls it back, yanking on it with nothing more than his mind.

He tosses it higher in the air, just over their heads, and Brendan raises his arms.

Claps his hands, hard.

A bolt of electricity hits the tree at the base and travels up the trunk so quickly, and with such extreme power, it practically disintegrates; the only remaining pieces rain to the ground.

I was not expecting that; they weren't even supposed to be helping me today. But they've just created the perfect introduction for me.

Now. Right now.

All the soldiers are watching. The courtyard has been cleared. I find Kenji's eyes down below and check for confirmation.

He nods.

I jump.

A hundred feet in the air, eyes closed, legs straight, arms out. And I feel more power rushing through my being than ever before. I harness it. Project it.

And land so hard on the ground that it shatters beneath me.

I'm crouched, knees bent, one hand outstretched in front of me. The courtyard is shaking so badly that for a second I'm not sure I haven't caused another earthquake.

When I finally stand up and look around, I can see the soldiers much more clearly. Their faces, their worries. They're looking at me in awe, eyes wide with wonder and a touch of fear.

"You will not be alone," I say to them, spinning to see their faces. "You don't need to be afraid anymore. We want to take back our world. We want to save the lives of our family members, our friends. We want your children to

have a chance at a better future. And we want to fight. We want to *win*.” I lock eyes with them. “And we are asking for your help.”

There’s absolute silence.

And then, absolute chaos.

Cheers. Screams and shouts. Stomping feet.

I feel the mesh square tugged out of my hand. It flies up into the air and into Warner’s hand.

He addresses his men.

“Congratulations, gentlemen,” he says. “Send word to your families. Your friends. Tomorrow, everything will change. The supreme will be here in a matter of days,” he says. “Prepare for war.”

And then, all at once.

Kenji makes us disappear.

SIXTY-ONE

We're running through the courtyard and right through base, and as soon as we're out of sight, Kenji pulls back the invisibility. He darts ahead of the group, leading us toward the training room, winding and twisting and darting through the storage facility and up the shooting range until we're all toppling into the room at once.

James has been waiting for us.

He stands up, eyes wide. "How'd it go?"

Kenji runs forward and flips James into his arms. "How do you *think* it went?"

"Um. Good?" James is laughing.

Castle claps me on the back. I turn to face him. He's beaming at me, eyes shining, prouder than I've ever seen him. "Well done, Ms. Ferrars," he says quietly. "Well done."

Brendan and Winston rush over, grinning from ear to ear.

"That was so freaking cool," Winston says. "It was like we were celebrities or something."

Lily, Ian, and Alia join the group. I thank them all for their help, for their show of support at the last minute.

"Do you really think it'll work?" I'm asking. "Do you think it's enough?"

"It's certainly a start," Castle says. "We'll need to move quickly now. I imagine the news has already spread, but the other sectors will surely stand down until the supreme arrives." Castle looks at me. "I hope you understand that this will be a fight against the entire country."

"Not if the other sectors join us, too," I say.

"Such confidence," Castle says. He's staring at me like I'm a strange, alien being. One he doesn't know how to understand or identify. "You surprise me, Ms. Ferrars."

The elevator pings open.

Warner.

He walks right up to me. "The base has been secured," he says. "We are on

lockdown until my father arrives. No one will enter or exit the premises.”

“So what do we do now?” Ian asks.

“We wait,” Warner says. He looks around at us. “If he does not already know, he will within the next five minutes. The supreme will know that some members of your group are still alive. That Juliette is still alive. He will know that I have defied him and stood against him publicly. And he will be very, very angry,” Warner says. “This much I can absolutely guarantee.”

“So we go to war,” Brendan says.

“Yes.” Warner is calm, so calm. “We fight. Soon.”

“And the soldiers?” I ask him. “Are they really on board?”

He holds my eyes for just a moment too long. “Yes,” he says. “I can feel the depth of their passion. Their sudden respect for you. There are many among them who are still afraid, and others still who are rigid in their skepticism, but you were right, love. They might fear, but they do not want to be soldiers. Not like this. Not for The Reestablishment. They are ready to join us.”

“And the civilians?” I ask, amazed.

“They will follow.”

“Are you sure?”

“I can be sure of nothing,” he says quietly. “But I have never, in all my time in this sector, felt the kind of hope in my men that I felt today. It was so powerful, so all-consuming, I can still feel it from here. It’s practically vibrating in my blood.”

I can hardly breathe.

“Juliette, love,” he says to me, still holding my eyes. “You have just started a war.”

SIXTY-TWO

Warner pulls me to the side. Away from everyone else.

We're standing in a corner of the training room, and his hands are gripped around my shoulders. He's looking at me like I've just pulled the moon out of my pocket.

"I have to go," he says urgently. "There are many things that must be set in motion now, and I have to reconvene with Delalieu. I will handle every aspect of the military details, love. I will see to it that you have everything you need, and that my men are equipped in every possible way."

I'm nodding, trying to thank him.

But he's still looking at me, searching my eyes like he's found something he can't bear to walk away from. His hands move to my face; his thumb brushes my cheek. His voice is so tender when he speaks.

"You will go on to greatness," he whispers. "I have never deserved you."

My heart.

He leans in, kisses my forehead, so gently.

And then he leaves.

I'm still watching the elevator doors close when I catch a glimpse of Adam out of the corner of my eye. He walks up to me.

"Hey," he says. He looks nervous, uncomfortable.

"Hi."

He's nodding, staring at his feet. "So," he says. Blows out a breath. He's still not looking at me. "Nice show."

I'm not really sure what to say. So I say nothing.

Adam sighs. "You really have changed," he whispers. "Haven't you?"

"Yes. I have."

He nods, just once. Laughs a strange laugh. And walks away.

SIXTY-THREE

We're all sitting around again.

Talking. Discussing. Thinking and planning. James is snoring soundly in the corner.

We're all caught somewhere between being excited and being terrified, and yet, somehow, we're mostly excited. This is, after all, what everyone at Omega Point had always been planning; they'd joined Castle hoping it would one day come to this.

A chance to defeat The Reestablishment.

They've all been training for this. Even Adam, who somehow convinced himself to stand with us, has been a soldier. Kenji, a soldier. All of them in peak physical condition. They are all fighters; even Alia, whose quiet shell contains so much. I couldn't have asked for a more solid group of individuals.

"So when do you think he'll be here?" Ian is asking. "Tomorrow?"

"Maybe," Kenji says. "But I don't think it'll take him more than two days."

"I thought he was on a ship? In the middle of the ocean?" Lily asks. "How is he supposed to get here in two days?"

"I don't think it's the kind of ship you're thinking of," Castle says to her. "I imagine he is on an army vessel; one equipped with a landing strip. If he calls for a jet, they will deliver him to us."

"Wow." Brendan leans back, rests on his hands. "This is really happening, then? *The supreme commander of The Reestablishment*. Winston and I never saw him, not once, even though his men were holding us captive." He shakes his head. Glances at me. "What does he look like?"

"He's extremely handsome," I say.

Lily laughs out loud.

"I'm serious," I say to her. "It's almost sick how beautiful he is."

"Really?" Winston is staring at me, eyes wide.

Kenji nods. "Very pretty guy."

Lily is gawking.

"And you said his name is Anderson?" Alia asks.

I nod.

“That’s strange,” Lily says. “I always thought Warner’s last name was *Warner*, not *Anderson*.” She thinks for a second. “So his name is Warner Anderson?”

“No,” I say to her. “You’re right. Warner is his last name—but not his dad’s. He took his mom’s last name,” I say. “He didn’t want to be associated with his father.”

Adam snorts.

We all look at him.

“So what’s Warner’s first name?” Ian asks. “Do you know?”

I nod.

“And?” Winston asks. “You’re not going to tell us?”

“Ask him yourself,” I say. “If he wants to tell you, I’m sure he will.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” Winston says. “I’m not asking that guy personal questions.”

I try not to laugh.

“So—do you know Anderson’s first name?” Ian asks. “Or is that a secret, too? I mean this whole thing is really weird, right? That they’d be so secretive about their names?”

“Oh,” I say, caught off guard. “I’m not sure. There’s a lot of power in a name, I guess. And no,” I say, shaking my head. “I don’t actually know Anderson’s first name. I never asked.”

“You’re not missing anything,” Adam says, irritated. “It’s a stupid name.” He’s staring at his shoes. “His name is Paris.”

“How did you know that?”

I spin around and find Warner standing just outside the open elevator. It’s still pinging softly, only just now signaling his arrival. The doors close behind him. He’s staring at Adam in shock.

Adam blinks fast at Warner and then at us, unsure what to do.

“How did you know that?” Warner demands again. He walks right through our group and grabs Adam by the shirt, moving so quickly Adam has no time to react.

He pins him against the wall.

I’ve never heard Warner raise his voice like this before. Never seen him so angry. “Who do you answer to, soldier?” he shouts. “Who is your commander?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Adam yells back. He tries breaking away and Warner grabs him with both fists, shoving him harder against

the wall.

I'm beginning to panic.

"How long have you been working for him?" Warner shouts again. "How long have you been infiltrating my base—"

I jump to my feet. Kenji is close behind.

"Warner," I say, "please, he's not a spy—"

"There's no way he could know something like that," Warner says to me, still looking at Adam. "Not unless he is a member of the Supreme Guard, where even then it would be questionable. A foot soldier would never have that kind of information—"

"I'm not a Supreme Soldier," Adam tries to say, "I swear—"

"Liar," Warner barks, shoving him harder against the wall. Adam's shirt is starting to tear. "Why were you sent here? What is your mission? Has he sent you to kill me?"

"Warner," I call again, pleading this time, running forward until I'm in his line of vision. "Please—he's not working for the supreme, I promise—"

"How can you know?" Warner finally glances at me, just for a second. "I'm telling you," he says, "it's impossible for him to know this—"

"He's your *brother*," I finally choke out. "Please. He's your brother. You have the same father."

Warner goes rigid.

He turns to me.

"What?" he breathes.

"It's true," I tell him, feeling so heartbroken as I do. "And I know you can tell I'm not lying." I shake my head. "He's your brother. Your father was leading a double life. He abandoned Adam and James a long time ago. After Adam's mom died."

Warner drops Adam to the floor.

"No," Warner says. He's not even blinking. Just staring. Hands shaking.

I turn to look at Adam, eyes tight with emotion. "Tell him," I say, desperate now. "Tell him the truth."

Adam says nothing.

"Dammit, Adam, *tell* him!"

"You knew, all this time?" Warner asks, turning to face me. "You knew this and yet you said nothing?"

"I wanted to—I really, really wanted to, but I didn't think it was my place—"

"No," he says, cutting me off. He's shaking his head. "No, this doesn't make

any sense. How—how is that even possible?” He looks up, looks around. “That doesn’t—”

He stops.

Looks at Adam.

“Tell me the truth,” he says. He walks up to Adam again, looking like he might shake him. “Tell me! I have a right to know!”

And every moment in the world drops dead just then, because they woke up and realized they’d never be as important as this one.

“It’s true,” Adam says.

Two words to change the world.

Warner steps back, hand caught in his hair. He’s rubbing his eyes, his forehead, running his hand down his mouth, his neck. He’s breathing so hard. “How?” he finally asks.

And then.

And then.

The truth.

Little by little. It’s pulled out of Adam. One word at a time. And the rest of us are looking on, and James is still sleeping, and I go silent as these two brothers have the hardest conversation I’ve ever had to watch.

SIXTY-FOUR

Warner is sitting in one corner. Adam in another. They've both asked to be left alone.

And they're both staring at James.

James, who's still just a little snoring lump.

Adam looks exhausted, but not defeated. Tired, but not upset. He looks freer. His eyebrows unfurrowed. His fists unclenched. His face is calm in a way I haven't seen it in what feels like a long time.

He looks *relieved*.

As if he'd been carrying this great burden he thought might kill him. As if he'd thought sharing this truth with Warner might somehow inspire a lifelong war between him and his brand-new biological sibling.

But Warner wasn't angry at all. He wasn't even upset.

He was just shocked beyond belief.

One father, I think. Three brothers. Two who nearly killed each other, all because of the world they were bred in. Because of the many words, the many lies they were fed.

Words are like seeds, I think, planted into our hearts at a tender age.

They take root in us as we grow, settling deep into our souls. The good words plant well. They flourish and find homes in our hearts. They build trunks around our spines, steadying us when we're feeling most flimsy; planting our feet firmly when we're feeling most unsure. But the bad words grow poorly. Our trunks infest and spoil until we are hollow and housing the interests of others and not our own. We are forced to eat the fruit those words have borne, held hostage by the branches growing arms around our necks, suffocating us to death, one word at a time.

I don't know how Adam and Warner are going to break the news to James. Maybe they won't tell him until he's older and able to deal with the ramifications of knowing his heritage. I don't know what it'll do to James to learn that his father is actually a mass murderer and a despicable human being who's destroyed every life he's ever touched.

No.

Maybe it's better James doesn't know, not just yet.

Maybe it's enough for now that Warner knows at all.

I can't help but find it both painful and beautiful that Warner lost a mother and gained two brothers in the same week. And though I understand that he's asked to be left alone, I can't stop myself from walking over to him. I won't say a word, I promise myself. But I just want to be close to him right now.

So I sit down beside him, and lean my head against the wall. Just breathing.

"You should've told me," he whispers.

I hesitate before answering. "You have no idea how many times I wanted to."

"You should've told me."

"I'm so sorry," I say, dropping my head. My voice. "I'm really sorry."

Silence.

More silence.

Then.

A whisper.

"I have two brothers."

I lift my head. Look at him.

"I have two brothers," he says again, his voice so soft. "And I almost killed one of them."

His eyes are focused on a point far, far from here, pinched together in pain and confusion, and something that looks like regret.

"I suppose I should've known," he says to me. "He can touch you. He lives in the same sector. And his eyes have always been oddly familiar to me. I realize now that they're shaped just like my father's."

He sighs.

"This is so unbearably inconvenient," he says. "I was prepared to hate him for the rest of my life."

I startle, surprised. "You mean . . . you don't hate him anymore?"

Warner drops his head. His voice is so low I can hardly hear it. "How can I hate his anger," he says, "when I know so well where it comes from?"

I'm staring at him. Stunned.

"I can well imagine the extent of his relationship with my father," Warner says, shaking his head. "And that he has managed to survive it at all, and with more humanity than I did?" A pause. "No," he says. "I cannot hate him. And I would be lying if I said I didn't admire him."

I think I might cry.

The minutes pass between us, silent and still, stopping only to hear us breathe.

“Come on,” I finally whisper, reaching for his hand. “Let’s go to bed.”

Warner nods, gets to his feet, but then he stops. Confused. So tortured. He looks at Adam. Adam looks back.

They stare at each other for a long time.

“Please excuse me,” Warner says.

And I watch, astonished, as he crosses the room. Adam is on his feet in an instant, defensive, uncertain. But as Warner approaches, Adam seems to thaw.

The two are now face-to-face, and Warner is speaking.

Adam’s jaw tenses. He looks at the floor.

He nods.

Warner is still speaking.

Adam swallows, hard. He nods again.

Then he looks up.

The two of them acknowledge each other for a long moment. And then Warner places one hand on Adam’s shoulder.

I must be dreaming.

The two exchange a few more words before Warner pivots on one foot, and walks away.

SIXTY-FIVE

“What did you say to him?” I ask as soon as the elevator doors close.

Warner takes a deep breath. He says nothing.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“I’d rather not,” he says quietly.

I take his hand. Squeeze.

The elevator doors open.

“Will this be weird for you?” Warner asks. He looks surprised by his own question, as though he can’t believe he’s even asking it.

“Will what be weird?”

“That Kent and I are . . . brothers.”

“No,” I say to him. “I’ve known for a while now. It doesn’t change anything for me.”

“That’s good,” he says quietly.

I’m nodding, confused.

We’ve moved into the bedroom. We’re sitting on the bed now.

“You wouldn’t mind, then?” Warner asks.

I’m still confused.

“If he and I,” Warner says, “spent some time together?”

“What?” I ask, unable to hide my disbelief. “No,” I say quickly. “No, of course not—I think that would be amazing.”

Warner’s eyes are on the wall.

“So . . . you want to spend time with him?” I’m trying so hard to give Warner space, and I don’t want to pry, but I just can’t help myself.

“I would like to know my own brother, yes.”

“And James?” I ask.

Warner laughs a little. “Yes. And James.”

“So you’re . . . happy about this?”

He doesn’t answer right away. “I am not unhappy.”

I climb into his lap. Cup his face in my hands, tilting his chin up so I can see his eyes. I’m smiling a stupid smile. “I think that’s so wonderful,” I tell him.

“Do you?” He grins. “How interesting.”

I nod. Over and over again. And I kiss him once, very softly.

Warner closes his eyes. Smiles slightly, his cheek dimpled on one side. He looks thoughtful now. “How strange this has all become.”

I feel like I might die of happiness.

Warner picks me up off his lap, lays me back on the bed. Crawls over me, on top of me. “And why are you so thrilled?” he asks, trying not to laugh. “You’re practically buoyant.”

“I want you to be happy,” I tell him, my eyes searching his. “I want you to have a family. I want you to be surrounded by people who care about you,” I say. “You deserve that.”

“I have you,” he says, resting his forehead against mine. His eyes shut.

“You should have more than me.”

“No,” he whispers. He shakes his head. His nose grazes mine.

“Yes.”

“What about you? And your parents?” he asks me. “Do you ever want to find them?”

“No,” I say quietly. “They were never parents to me. Besides, I have my friends.”

“And me,” he says.

“You are my friend,” I tell him.

“But not your best friend. Kenji is your best friend.”

I try so hard not to laugh at the jealousy in his voice. “Yes, but you’re my *favorite* friend.”

Warner leans in, bypasses my lips. “Good,” he whispers, kissing my neck. “Now flip over,” he says. “On your stomach.”

I stare at him.

“Please,” he says. Smiles.

I do. Very slowly.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, turning to look at him.

He gentles my body back down.

“I want you to know,” he says, pulling on the zipper holding this suit together, “how much I value your friendship.” The seam is coming apart and my skin is now open to the elements; I bite back a shiver.

The zipper stops at the base of my spine.

“But I’d like you to reconsider my title,” Warner says. He drops a soft kiss in the middle of my back. Runs his hands up my skin and pushes the sleeves off my

shoulders, leaving kisses against my shoulder blades, the back of my neck. “Because my friendship,” he whispers, “comes with so many more benefits than Kenji could ever offer.”

I can’t breathe. Can’t.

“Don’t you think?” Warner asks.

“Yes,” I say too quickly. “Yes.”

And then I’m spinning, lost in sensations, and wondering how soon we’ll be losing these moments, and wondering how long it’ll be before we’ll have them again.

I don’t know where we’re going, he and I, but I know I want to get there. We are hours and minutes reaching for the same second, holding hands as we spin forward into new days and the promise of something better.

But though we’ll know forward and we’ve known backward, we will never know the present. This moment and the next one and even the one that would’ve been right now are gone, already passed, and all we’re left with are these tired bodies, the only proof that we’ve lived through time and survived it.

It’ll be worth it, though, in the end.

Fighting for a lifetime of this.

SIXTY-SIX

It took one day.

“I want one.” I’m staring at the gun wall in the training room. “Which one is the best one?”

Delalieu arrived just this morning to deliver the news. The supreme has arrived. He’s been transported from the ocean by jet, but he’s now staying on one of Sector 45’s army ships, stationed at the dock.

His guard is close behind. And his armies will be following soon.

Sometimes I’m not so sure we’re not going to die.

“You don’t need a gun,” Warner says to me, surprised. “You can certainly have one, but I don’t think you need one.”

“I want two.”

“All right,” he laughs. But he’s the only one.

Everyone else is frozen in the moments before fear takes over. We’re all cautiously optimistic, but concerned nonetheless. Warner has already assembled his troops, and the civilians have already been notified; if they want to join us, a station has been set up to provide weapons and ammunition. All they have to do is present their RR cards to prove they are residents of Sector 45, and they will be granted amnesty. Shelters and relief centers have been created in the soldiers’ barracks to stow away any remaining men, women, and children who cannot, or will not, join the battle. They will be allowed to take refuge here, and wait out the bloodshed.

These extra efforts were all coordinated by Warner.

“What if he just bombs everyone again?” Ian asks, breaking the silence. “Just like he did with Omega Point?”

“He won’t,” Warner says to him. “He’s too arrogant, and this war has become personal. He’ll want to toy with us. He’ll want to draw this out as long as possible. He is a man who has always been fascinated by the idea of torture. This is going to be fun for him.”

“Yeah, that’s making me feel real good,” Kenji says. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

“Anytime,” Warner says.

Kenji almost laughs. Almost.

“So he’s staying in another ship?” Winston asks. “Here?”

“This is my understanding, yes,” Warner says. “Normally he would stay on base, but as we are currently the enemy, it’s become a bit of a problem. Apparently he’s also granted sector clearance to soldiers across the country in order to have them join him. He has his own elite guard, as well as the soldiers who maintain the capital, but he’s also collecting men from around the nation. It’s all for show,” Warner says. “We are not so vast in number that he’d need that many men. He just wants to terrify us.”

“Well, it’s working,” Ian says.

“And you’re sure,” I ask Warner, “that he won’t be on the battlefield? You’re positive?” This is the part of the plan that’s the most important. The most critical.

Warner nods.

Anderson never fights in his own wars. He never shows his face. And we’re relying on his cowardice to be our biggest advantage. Because while he might be able to anticipate an attempt on his life, we’re hoping he won’t be able to anticipate invisible attackers.

Warner has to oversee the troops. Castle, Brendan, Winston, Lily, Alia, and Adam will be supporting him. James will be staying behind on base.

But me and Kenji are going to the source.

And right now, we’re ready to go. We’re suited up, armed, and highly caffeinated.

I hear the sound of a gun being reloaded.

Spin around.

Warner is looking at me.

It’s time to go.

SIXTY-SEVEN

Kenji grabs my arm.

Everyone else is going up and out of Warner's room, but Kenji and I will head out the back way, alerting no one to our presence. We want everyone, even the soldiers, to think we are in the midst of battle. We don't want to show up only to disappear; we don't want anyone to notice we're missing.

So we stand back and watch as our friends load into the elevator to go up to the main floor. James is still waving as the doors close and leave him behind.

My heart stops for a second.

Kenji kisses James good-bye. It's an obnoxious, noisy kiss, right on top of his head. "Watch my back, okay?" he says to James. "If anyone comes in here, I want you to kick the shit out of them."

"Okay," James says. He's laughing to pretend he's not crying.

"I'm serious," Kenji says. "Just start whaling on them. Like just go batshit." He makes a weird fighting motion with his hands. "Get super crazy," he says. "Beat the crazy with crazy—"

"No one is going to come in here, James," I say, shooting a sharp look at Kenji. "You won't have to worry about defending yourself. You're going to be perfectly safe. And then we'll come back."

"Really?" he asks, turning his eyes on me. "All of you?"

Smart kid.

"Yes," I lie. "All of us are going to come back."

"Okay," he whispers. He bites down on his trembling lip. "Good luck."

"No tears necessary," Kenji says to him, wrapping him up in a ferocious hug. "We'll be back soon."

James nods.

Kenji breaks away.

And then we head out the door in the gun wall.

The first part, I think, is going to be the hardest. Our trek to the port will be

made entirely on foot, because we can't risk stealing vehicles. Even if Kenji could make the tank invisible, we'd have to abandon it in its visible form, and an extra, unexpected tank stationed at the port would be too much of a giveaway.

Anderson must have his place completely guarded.

Kenji and I don't speak as we move. When Delalieu told us the supreme would be stationed at the port, Kenji immediately knew where it was. So did Warner and Adam and Castle and just about everyone except for me. "I spent some time on one of those ships," Kenji said. "Just for a bit. For bad behavior." He smiled. "I know my way around."

So I'm holding on to his arm and he's leading the way.

There's never been a colder day, I think. Never been more ice in the air.

This ship looks like a small city; it's so enormous I can't even see the end of it. We scan the perimeter, attempting to gauge exactly how difficult it'll be to infiltrate the premises.

Extremely difficult.

Nearly impossible.

These are Kenji's exact words.

Sort of.

"*Shit*," he says. "This is ridiculous. I have never seen this level of security before. This is backed *up*," he says.

And he's right. There are soldiers everywhere. On land. At the entrance. On deck. And they're all so heavily armed it makes me feel stupid with my two handguns and the simple holster swung around my shoulders.

"So what do we do?"

He's quiet a moment. "Can you swim?"

"What? No."

"Shit."

"We can't just jump in the ocean, Kenji—"

"Well it's not like we can *fly*."

"Maybe we can fight them?"

"Are you out of your goddamn mind? You think we can take on two hundred soldiers? I know I am an extremely attractive man, J, but I am not Bruce Lee."

"Who's Bruce Lee?"

"*Who's Bruce Lee?*" Kenji asks, horrified. "Oh my God. We can't even be friends anymore."

"Why? Was he a friend of yours?"

“You know what,” he says, “just stop. Just—I can’t even talk to you right now.”

“Then how are we supposed to get inside?”

“Shit if I know. How are we supposed to get all those guys off the ship?”

“Oh,” I gasp. “Oh my God. Kenji—” I grab his invisible arm.

“Yeah, that’s my leg, and you’re cutting it a little too close there, princess.”

“Kenji, I can *shove* them off,” I say, ignoring him. “I can just push them into the water. Will that work?”

Silence.

“Well?” I ask.

“Your hand is still on my leg.”

“Oh.” I jerk back. “So? What do you think? Will it work?”

“*Obviously*,” Kenji says, exasperated. “Do it now, please. And hurry.”

So I do.

I stand back and pull all my energy up and into my arms.

Power, harnessed.

Arms, positioned.

Energy, projected.

I move my arm through the air like I might be clearing off a table.

And all the soldiers topple into the water.

It looks almost comical from here. Like they were a bunch of toys I was pushing off my desk. And now they’re bouncing in the water, trying to figure out what’s just happened.

“Let’s go,” Kenji says suddenly, grabbing my arm. We’re darting forward and down the hundred-foot pier. “They’re not stupid,” he says. “Someone is going to sound the alarm and they’re going to seal the doors soon. We’ve probably got a minute before it all goes on lockdown.”

So we’re bolting.

We’re racing across the pier and clambering up, onto the deck, and Kenji pulls on my arm to tell me where to go. We’re becoming so much more aware of each other’s bodies now. I can almost feel his presence beside me, even though I can’t see him.

“Down here,” he shouts, and I look down, spotting what looks like a narrow, circular opening with a ladder affixed to the inside. “I’m going in,” he says. “Start climbing down in five seconds!”

I can hear the alarms already going off, sirens wailing in the distance. The ship is steady against the dock, but the water in the distance goes on forever,

disappearing into the edge of the earth.

My five seconds are up.

I'm climbing after him.

SIXTY-EIGHT

I have no idea where Kenji is.

It's cramped and claustrophobic down here and I can already hear a rush of footsteps coming toward me, shouts and cries echoing down the hall; they must know something has happened above deck. I'm trying really hard not to panic, but I'm no longer sure what the next step should be.

I never anticipated doing this alone.

I keep whispering Kenji's name and hoping for a response, but there's nothing. I can't believe I've already lost him. At least I'm still invisible, which means he can't be more than fifty feet away, but the soldiers are too close for me to take any chances right now. I can't do anything that would draw attention to my presence—or Kenji's.

So I have to force myself to stay calm.

The problem is I have no idea where I am. No idea what I'm looking at. I've never even been on a *boat* before, much less an army ship of this magnitude.

But I have to try and understand my surroundings.

I'm standing in the middle of what looks like a very long hallway; wooden panels run across the floors, the walls, and even the low ceiling above my head. There are little nooks every few feet, where the wall seems to be scooped out.

They're for doors, I realize.

I wonder where they lead. Where I'll have to go.

Boots are thundering closer now.

My heart starts racing and I try to shove myself against the wall, but these hallways are too narrow; even though they can't see me, there's no way I'd be able to slip past them. I can see a group approaching now, can hear them barking orders at one another. At any moment they're going to slam right into me.

I shift backward as fast as I can and run, keeping my weight on my toes to minimize sound as much as possible. I skid to a stop. Hit the wall behind me. More soldiers are bolting down the halls now, clearly alerted to something, and for a second I feel my heart fail. I'm so worried about Kenji.

But as long as I'm invisible, Kenji must be close, I think. He must be alive.

I cling to this hope as the soldiers approach.

I look to my left. Look to my right. They're closing in on me without even realizing it. I have no idea where they're headed—maybe they're going back up, outside—but I have to make a move, fast, and I don't want to alert them to my presence. Not yet. It's too soon to try to take them out. I know Alia promised I could sustain a bullet wound as long as my power is on, but my last experience with being shot in the chest has left me traumatized enough to want to avoid that option as much as possible.

So I do the only thing I can think of.

I jump into one of the doorways and plant my hands against the inside of the frame, holding myself in place, my back pressed against the door. *Please please please*, I think, *please don't let there be someone in this room*. All anyone has to do is open the door and I'll be dead.

The soldiers are getting closer.

I stop breathing as they pass.

One of their elbows grazes my arm.

My heart is pounding, so hard. As soon as they're gone I dart out of the doorway and bolt, running down halls that only lead into more halls. This place is like a maze. I have no idea where I am, no idea what's happening.

Not a single clue where I'll find Anderson.

And the soldiers won't stop coming. They're everywhere, all at once and then not at all, and I'm turning down corners and spinning in different directions and trying my best to outrun them. But then I notice my hands.

I'm no longer invisible.

I bite back a scream.

I jump into another doorway, hoping to press myself out of sight, but now I'm both nervous and horrified, because not only do I not know what's happened to Kenji, but I don't know what's going to happen to me, either. This was such a stupid idea. I am such a stupid person. I don't know what I was thinking.

That I ever thought I could do this.

Boots.

Stomping toward me. I steel myself and suck up my fear and try to be as prepared as possible. There's no way they won't notice me now. I haul my energy up and into myself, feel my bones thrumming with the rush of it and the thrill of power raging through me. If I can maintain this state for as long as I'm down here, I should be able to protect myself. I know how to fight now. I can disarm a man, steal away his weapon. I've learned to do so much.

But I'm still fairly terrified, and I've never needed to use the bathroom as much as I do right now.

Think, I keep telling myself. Think. What can you do? Where can you go? Where would Anderson be hiding? Deeper? Lower?

Where would the largest room on this ship be? Certainly not on the top level. I have to drop down.

But how?

The soldiers are getting closer.

I wonder what these rooms contain, what this doorway leads to. If it's just a room, then it's a dead end. But if it's an entrance to a larger space, then I might have a chance. But if there's someone in here, I'll definitely be in trouble. I don't know if I should take the risk.

A shout.

A cry.

A gunshot.

They've seen me.

SIXTY-NINE

I slam my elbow into the door behind me, shattering the wood into splinters that fly everywhere. I turn around and punch my way through the rest of it, kicking the door down with a sudden burst of adrenaline, and as soon as I see that this room is just a small bunker and a dead end, I do the only thing I can think of.

I jump.

And land.

And go right through the floor.

I fall into a tumble and manage to catch myself in time. The soldiers are jumping down after me, shouting and screaming. Boots chase me as I yank open the door and dart down the hall. Alarms are going off everywhere, sounds so loud and so obnoxious I can hardly hear myself think. I feel like I'm running through a haze, the sirens flashing red lights that circle the halls, screeching and blaring and signaling an intruder.

I'm on my own now.

I'm darting around more corners, spinning around bends in this floor plan and trying to get a feel for the difference between this level and the one just above it. There doesn't seem to be any. They look exactly the same, and the soldiers are just as aggressive.

They're shooting freely now, the earsplitting sound of gunshots colliding with the blare of the sirens. I'm not even sure I haven't gone deaf yet.

I can't believe they keep managing to *miss* me.

It seems impossible, statistically speaking, that so many soldiers at such close range wouldn't be able to find a target on my body. That can't be right.

I slam through the floor again.

Land on my feet this time.

I'm crouched, looking around, and for the first time, I see that this level is different. The hallways are wider, the doors set farther apart. I wish Kenji were here. I wish I had any idea what this means, what the difference is between the levels. I wish I knew where to go, where to start looking.

I kick open a door.

Nothing.

I run forward, kick down another one.

Nothing.

I keep running. I'm starting to see the inner workings of the ship. Machines, pipes, steel beams, huge tanks, puffs of steam. I must be headed in the wrong direction.

But I have no idea how many floors this ship has, and I have no idea if I can keep moving down.

I'm still being shot at, and I'm staying only just a step ahead. I'm slipping around tight bends and pulling myself against the wall, turning into dark corners and hoping they won't see me.

Where is Kenji? I keep asking myself. *Where is he?*

I need to be on the other side of this ship. I don't want boiler rooms and water tanks. This can't be right. Everything is different about this side of the ship. Even the doors look different. They're made of steel, not wood.

I kick open a few, just to be sure.

A radio control room, abandoned.

A meeting room, abandoned.

No. I want real rooms. Big offices and living quarters. Anderson wouldn't be here. He wouldn't be found by the gas pipes and the whirring engines.

I tiptoe out of my newest hiding spot, peek my head out.

Shouts. Cries.

More gunshots.

I pull back. Take a deep breath. Harness all my energy, all at once, and decide I have no choice but to test Alia's theory.

I jump out and charge down the hall.

Running, racing like I never have before. Bullets are flying past my head and pelting my body, hitting my face, my back, my arms, and I force myself to keep running, force myself to keep breathing, not feeling pain, not feeling terror, but holding on to my energy like a lifeline and not letting anything stop me. I'm trampling over soldiers, knocking them out with my elbows, not hesitating long enough to do more than shove them out of my way.

Three of them come flying at me, trying to tackle me to the ground, and I shove them all back. One runs forward again and I punch him directly in the face, feeling his nose break against my metal knuckles. Another tries to grab my arm from behind and I catch his hand, breaking his fingers in my grip only to catch his forearm, pull him close, and shove him through a wall. I spin around to

face the rest of them and they're all staring at me, panic and terror mixing in their eyes.

"Fight me," I say to them, blood and urgency and a crazy kind of adrenaline rushing through me. "I dare you."

Five of them lift their guns in my direction, point them at my face.

Shoot.

Over and over and over again, unloading round after round. My instinct is to protect myself from the bullets, but I focus instead on the men, on their bodies and their angry, twisted faces. I have to close my eyes for a second, because I can't see through the barrage of metal being crushed against my body. And when I'm ready, I bring my fist close to my chest, feeling the power rise up inside of me, and I throw it forward, all at once, knocking seventy-five soldiers down like they're made of matchsticks.

I take a moment to breathe.

My chest is heaving, my heart racing, and I look around, feeling the stillness within the madness, blinking hard against the flashing red lights of the alarm, and find that the soldiers do not stir. They're still alive, I can tell, but they're unconscious. And I allow myself one instant to look down.

I'm surrounded.

Bullets. Hundreds of bullets. A puddle of bullets. All around my feet. Dropping off my suit.

My face.

I taste something cold and hard in my mouth and spit it into my hand. It looks like a broken, mangled piece of metal. Like it was too flimsy to stand against me.

Smart little bullet, I think.

And then I run.

SEVENTY

The halls are still now. The footsteps, fewer.

I've already tossed two hundred soldiers into the ocean.

Knocked down about a hundred more.

I have no idea how many more soldiers Anderson has left guarding this ship.
But I'm going to find out.

I'm breathing hard as I make my way through this maze. It's a sad truth that while I've learned to fight and I've learned to project, I still have no idea how to run.

For someone with so much power, I'm terribly out of shape.

I kick down the first door I see.

Another.

Then another.

I'm going to rip apart every inch of this ship until I find Anderson. I will tear it down with my own two hands if I need to. Because he has Sonya and Sara. And he might have Kenji.

And first, I need to make them safe.

And second, I need him dead.

Another door splinters open.

I kick the next one down with my foot.

They're all empty.

I see a set of swinging double doors at the end of the hall and I shove through them, hoping for something, anything, any sign of life.

It's a kitchen.

Knives and stoves and food and tables. Rows and rows and rows of canned goods. I make a mental note to come back for this. It seems a shame to let all this food go to waste.

I bolt back out the doors.

And jump. Hard. Stomping through the deck and hoping there's another floor to this ship.

Hoping.

I land badly on the toes of my feet, slightly off-balance and toppling backward. I catch myself just in time.

Look around.

This, I think. This is right. This is totally different.

The halls are huge down here; windows to the outside cut into the walls. The floor is made of wood again, long, thin panels that are brightly glossed and polished. It looks nice down here. Fancy. Clean. The sirens feel muted on this level, like a distant threat that means little anymore, and I realize I must be close.

Footsteps, rushing toward me.

I spin around.

There's a soldier charging in my direction, and this time, I don't hide. I run toward him, tucking my head in as I do, and my right shoulder slams into his chest so hard he goes flying across the hall.

Someone tries to shoot me from behind.

I spin around and walk right up to him, swatting the bullets from my face like they might be flies. And then I grab his shoulders, pull him close, and knee him in the groin. He doubles over, gasping and groaning and curling into himself on the floor. I bend down, rip the gun out of his hand, and clutch a fistful of his shirt. Pick him up with one hand. Slam him into the wall. Press the gun to his forehead.

I'm tired of waiting.

"Where is he?" I demand.

He won't answer me.

"Where?" I shout.

"I d-don't know," he finally says, his voice shaking, his body twitching, trembling in my grip.

And for some reason, I believe him. I try to read his eyes for something, and get nothing but terror. I drop him to the floor. Crush his gun in my hand. Toss it into his lap.

I kick open another door.

I'm getting so frustrated, so angry now, and so blindly terrified for Kenji's well-being that I'm shaking with rage. I don't even know who to look for first.

Sonya.

Sara.

Kenji.

Anderson.

I stand in front of another door, defeated. The soldiers have stopped coming.

The sirens are still blaring, but from a distance now. And suddenly I'm wondering if this was all just a waste of time. If maybe Anderson isn't even on this ship. If maybe we're not even on the *right* ship.

And for some reason, I don't kick down the door this time.

For some reason, I decide to try the handle first.

It's unlocked.

SEVENTY-ONE

There's a huge bed in here with a large window and a beautiful view of the ocean. It's lovely, actually, how wide and expansive everything is. Lovelier still are its occupants.

Sonya and Sara are staring at me.

They're perfect. Alive.

Just as beautiful as they've ever been.

I rush over to them, so relieved I nearly burst into tears.

"Are you okay?" I ask, gasping, unable to control myself. "Are you all right?"

They throw themselves into my arms, looking like they've been through hell and back, tortured from the inside, and all I want to do is carry them out of this ship and take them home.

But as soon as the initial hyperventilations are out of the way, Sonya says something that stops my heart.

"Kenji was looking for you," she says. "He was just here, not too long ago, and he asked us if we'd seen you—"

"He said you got split up," Sara says.

"And that he didn't know what happened to you," Sonya says.

"We were so worried you were dead," they say together.

"No," I tell them, feeling crazy now. "No, no, I'm not dead. But I have to go. Stay here," I'm saying to them. "Don't move. Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back, I promise," I say. "I just have to go find Kenji—I have to find Anderson —"

"He's two doors over," Sara says, eyes wide.

"The one all the way at the end of the hall," Sonya says.

"It's the one with the blue door," they tell me.

"Wait!" Sonya stops me as I turn to go.

"Be careful," Sara says. "We've heard some things—"

"About a weapon he's brought with him," Sonya says.

"What kind of weapon?" I ask, heart slowing.

“We don’t know,” they say together.

“But it made him very happy,” Sara whispers.

“Yes, very happy,” Sonya adds.

I clench my fists.

“Thank you,” I say to them. “Thank you—I’ll see you soon,” I’m saying. “Very soon—” And I’m backing out, backing away, rushing down the hall and I hear them shouting for me to be safe, and good luck, just behind me.

But I don’t need luck anymore. I need these two fists and this spine of steel. I waste no time at all getting to the blue room. I’m not afraid anymore.

I don’t hesitate. I won’t hesitate. Never again.

I kick it down.

“JULIETTE—NO—”

SEVENTY-TWO

Kenji's voice hits me like a fist to the throat.

I don't even have time to blink before I'm thrown against the wall.

My back, I think. Something is wrong with my back. The pain is so excruciating that I can't help but wonder if it's broken. I'm dizzy and I feel slow; my head is spinning and there's a strange ringing in my ears.

I clamber to my feet.

I'm hit, again, so hard. And I don't even know where the pain is coming from. I can't blink fast enough, can't steady my head long enough to shake the confusion.

Everything is tilting sideways.

I'm trying so hard to shake it off.

I'm stronger than this. Better than this. I'm supposed to be indestructible.

Up, again.

Slowly.

Something hits me so hard I fly across the room, slamming into the wall. I slide down to the floor. I'm bent over now, holding my hands to my head, trying to blink, trying to understand what's happening.

I don't understand what could possibly be hitting me.

This hard.

Nothing should be able to hit me this hard. Not over and over again.

It feels like someone is calling my name, but I can't seem to hear it. Everything is so muffled, so slippery and off-balance, like it's there, just out of reach, and I can't seem to find it. Feel it.

I need a new plan.

I don't stand up again. I stay on my knees, crawling forward, and this time, when the hit comes, I try to beat it back. I'm trying so hard to push my energy forward, but all the hits to my head have made me unsteady. I'm clinging to my energy with a manic desperation, and though I don't manage to move forward, I'm also not thrown back.

I try to lift my head.

Slowly.

There's nothing in front of me. No machine. No strange element that might be able to create these powerful impacts. I blink hard against the ringing in my ears, trying frantically to clear my vision.

Something hits me again.

The intensity threatens to beat me back but I dig my fingers into the ground until they go through the wood and I'm clinging to the floor.

I would scream, if I could. If I had any energy left.

I lift my head again. Try again to see.

And this time, two figures come into focus.

One is Anderson.

The other is someone I don't recognize.

He's a stocky blond with closely cropped hair and flinty eyes. He looks vaguely familiar to me. And he's standing beside Anderson with a cocky smile on his face, his hands held out in front of him.

He claps.

Just once.

I'm ripped from the floor and thrown back against the wall.

Sound waves.

These are *pressure waves*, I realize.

Anderson has found himself a toy.

I shake my head and try to clear it again, but the hits are coming faster now. Harder. More intense. I have to close my eyes against the pressure of the hits and try to crawl, desperately, breaking through the floorboards to get a grip on something.

Another hit.

Hard to the head.

It's like he's causing an explosion every time his hands clap together, and what's killing me isn't the explosion. It isn't direct impact. It's the pressure released from a bomb.

Over and over and over again.

I know the only reason I'm able to survive this is because I'm too strong.

But *Kenji*, I think.

Kenji must be somewhere in this room. He was the one who called my name, who tried to warn me. He must be here, somewhere, and if I can hardly survive this right now, I don't know how he could be doing any better.

He must be doing worse.

Much worse.

That fear is enough for me. I'm fortified with a new kind of strength, a desperate, animal intensity that overpowers me and forces me upright. I manage to stand in the face of each impact, each blow as it rattles my head and rings in my ears.

And I walk.

One step at a time, I walk.

I hear a gunshot. Three. Five more. And realize they're all aimed in my direction. Bullets breaking off my body.

The blond is moving. Backing up. Trying to get away from me. He's increasing the frequency of his hits, hoping to throw me off course, but I've come too far to lose this fight. I'm not even thinking now, barely even lucid, focused solely on reaching him and silencing him forever. I have no idea if he's managed to kill Kenji yet. I have no idea if I'm about to die. I have no idea how much longer I can withstand this.

But I have to try.

One more step, I tell myself.

Move your leg. Now your foot. Bend at the knee.

You're almost there, I tell myself.

Think of Kenji. Think of James. Think of the promises you made to that ten-year-old boy, I tell myself. Bring Kenji home. Bring yourself home.

There he is. Right in front of you.

I reach forward as if through a cloud, and clench my fist around his neck.

Squeeze.

Squeeze until the sound waves stop.

I hear something crack.

The blond falls to the floor.

And I collapse.

SEVENTY-THREE

Anderson is standing over me now, pointing a gun at my face.

He shoots.

Again.

Once more.

I close my eyes and pull deep, deep within myself for my last dregs of strength, because somehow, some instinct inside of my body is still screaming at me to stay alive. I remember Sonya and Sara telling me once that our energies could be depleted. That we could overexert ourselves. That they were trying to make medicines to help with that sort of thing.

I wish I had that kind of medicine right now.

I blink up at Anderson, his form blurring at the edges. He's standing just behind my head, the toes of his shiny boots touching the top of my skull. I can't hear much but the echoes in my bones, can't see anything other than the bullets raining down around me. He's still shooting. Still unloading his gun into my body, waiting for the moment when he knows I won't be able to hold on any longer.

I'm dying, I think. I must be. I thought I knew what it felt like to die, but I must've been wrong. Because this is a whole different kind of dying. A whole different kind of pain.

But I suppose, if I have to die, I may as well do one more thing before I go.

I reach up. Grab Anderson's ankles. Clench my fists.

And crush his bones in my hands.

His screams pierce the haze of my mind, long enough to bring the world back into focus. I'm blinking fast, looking around and able to see clearly for the first time. Kenji is slumped in the corner. Blond boy is on the floor.

Anderson has been disconnected from his feet.

My thoughts are sharper all of a sudden, like I'm in control again. I don't know if this is what hope does to a person, if it really has the power to bring someone back to life, but seeing Anderson writhing on the floor does something to me. It makes me think I still have a chance.

He's screaming so much, scrambling back and dragging himself across the floor with his arms. He's dropped his gun, clearly too pained and too petrified to reach for it any longer, and I can see the agony in his eyes. The weakness. The terror. He's only now understanding the horror of what's about to happen to him. How it had to happen to him. That he would be brought to nothing by a silly little girl who was too much of a coward, he said, to defend herself.

And it's then that I realize he's trying to say something to me. He's trying to talk. Maybe he's pleading. Maybe he's crying. Maybe he's begging for mercy. But I'm not listening anymore.

I have absolutely nothing to say.

I reach back, pull the gun out of my holster.

And shoot him in the forehead.

SEVENTY-FOUR

Twice.

Once for Adam.

Once for Warner.

SEVENTY-FIVE

I tuck the gun back into its holster. Walk over to Kenji's limp, still-breathing form, and throw him over my shoulder.

I kick down the door.

Walk directly back down the hall.

Kick my way through the entry to Sonya and Sara's room, and drop Kenji on the bed.

"Fix him," I say, hardly breathing now. "Please fix him."

I drop to my knees.

Sonya and Sara are on in an instant. They don't speak. They don't cry. They don't scream. They don't fall apart. They immediately get to work and I don't think I have ever loved them more than I do in this moment. They lay him out flat on the bed, Sara standing on one side of him, Sonya on the other, and they hold their hands to his head, first. Then his heart.

Then they alternate, taking turns forcing life back into different parts of his body until Kenji is stirring, his eyes flickering but not opening, his head whipping back and forth.

I'm beginning to worry, but I'm too afraid, and too tired to move, not even an inch.

Finally, finally, they step back.

Kenji's eyes still aren't open.

"Did it work?" I ask, terrified to hear the answer.

Sonya and Sara nod. "He's asleep," they say.

"Will he get better? Fully?" I ask, desperate now.

"We hope," Sonya says.

"But he'll be asleep for a few days," Sara says.

"The damage was very deep," they say together. "What happened?"

"Pressure waves," I tell them, my words a whisper. "He shouldn't have been able to survive at all."

Sonya and Sara are staring at me, still waiting.

I force myself to my feet. "Anderson is dead."

“You killed him,” they whisper. It’s not a question.

I nod.

They’re staring at me, slack-jawed and stunned.

“Let’s go,” I say. “This war is over. We have to tell the others.”

“But how will we get out?” Sara asks.

“There are soldiers everywhere,” Sonya says.

“Not anymore,” I tell them, too tired to explain, but so grateful for their help. For their existence. For the fact that they’re still alive. I offer them a small smile before walking over to the bed, and haul Kenji’s body up and over my shoulders. His chest is curved over my back, one of his arms thrown over my left shoulder, the other hanging in front of me. My right arm is wrapped around both his legs.

I hoist him higher up on my shoulders.

“Ready?” I say, looking at the two of them.

They nod.

I lead them out the door and down the halls, forgetting for a moment that I have no idea how to actually exit this ship. But the halls are lifeless. Everyone is either injured, unconscious, or gone. We sidestep fallen bodies, shift arms and legs out of the way. We’re all that’s left.

Me, carrying Kenji.

Sonya and Sara close behind.

I finally find a ladder. Climb up. Sonya and Sara hold Kenji’s weight between them and I reach down to haul him up. We have to do this three more times, until we’re finally on the top deck, where I toss him up over my shoulders for the final time.

And then we walk, silently, across the abandoned ship, down the pier, and back onto dry land. This time, I don’t care about stealing tanks. I don’t care about being seen. I don’t care about anything but finding my friends. And ending this war.

There’s an army tank abandoned on the side of the road. I test the door.

Unlocked.

The girls clamber in and they help me haul Kenji onto their laps. I close the door shut behind them. Climb into the driver’s side. I press my thumb to the scanner to start the engine; so grateful Warner had us programmed to gain access to the system.

It’s only then that I remember I still have no idea how to drive.

It’s probably a good thing I’m driving a tank.

I don't pay attention to stop signs or streets. I drive the tank right off the road and straight back into the heart of the sector, in the general direction I know we came from. I'm too heavy on the gas, and too heavy on the brakes, but my mind is in a place where nothing else matters anymore.

I had a goal. Step one has been accomplished.

And now I will see it through to the end.

I drop Sonya and Sara off at the barracks and help them carry Kenji out. Here, they'll be safe. Here, they can rest. But it's not my turn to stop yet.

I head directly up and through the military base, up the elevator to where I remember we got off for the assembly. I slam through door after door, heading straight outside and into the courtyard, where I climb until I reach the top. One hundred feet in the air.

Where it all began.

There's a technician stand here, a maintenance system for the speakers that run throughout the sector. I remember this. I remember all of this now, even though my brain is numb and my hands are still shaking, and blood that does not belong to me is dripping down my face and onto my neck.

But this was the plan.

I have to finish the plan.

I punch the pass code into the keypad and wait to hear the click. The technician box snaps open. I scan the different fuses and buttons, and flip the switch that reads ALL SPEAKERS, and take a deep breath. Hit the intercom key.

"Attention, Sector 45," I say, the words rough and loud and mottled in my ear. "The supreme commander of The Reestablishment is dead. The capital has surrendered. The war is over." I'm shaking so hard now, my finger slipping on the button as I try to hold it down. "I repeat, the supreme commander of The Reestablishment is dead. The capital has surrendered. The war is over."

Finish it, I tell myself.

Finish it now.

"I am Juliette Ferrars, and I will lead this nation. I challenge anyone who would stand against me."

SEVENTY-SIX

I take a step forward and my legs tremble, threaten to bend and break beneath me, but I push myself to keep moving. I push myself to get through the door, to get down the elevator, and to get out, onto the battlefield.

It doesn't take long to get there.

There are hundreds of bodies in huddled, bloody masses on the ground, but there are hundreds more still standing; more alive than I could've hoped for. The news has spread more quickly than I thought it would. It's almost as if they've known for a little while now that the battle was over. The surviving soldiers from Anderson's ship are standing alongside our own, some still soaking wet, frozen to the bone in this icy weather. They must've found their way ashore and shared the news of our assault, of Anderson's imminent demise. Everyone is looking around, staring at each other in shock, staring at their own hands or up into the sky. Others still are checking the mass of bodies for friends and family members, relief and fear apparent on their faces. Their worn bodies do not want to go on like this.

The doors to the barracks have burst open and the remaining civilians flood the grounds, running out to reunite with loved ones, and for a moment the scene is both so terribly bleak, and so terribly beautiful, that I don't know whether to cry out in pain or joy.

I don't cry at all.

I walk forward, forcing my limbs to move, begging my bones to stay steady, to carry me through the end of this day, and into the rest of my life.

I want to see my friends. I need to know they're okay. I need visual confirmation that they're okay.

But as soon as I walk into the crowd, the soldiers of Sector 45 lose control.

The bloodied and beaten on our battlefield are shouting and cheering despite the stain of death they stand in, saluting me as I pass. And as I look around I realize that they are *my* soldiers now. They trusted me, fought with me and alongside me, and now I will trust them. I will fight for them. This is the first of many battles to come. There will be many more days like this.

I'm covered in blood, my suit ripped and riddled with splintered wood and broken bits of metal. My hands are trembling so hard I don't even recognize them anymore.

And yet I feel so calm.

So unbelievably calm.

Like the depth of what just happened hasn't managed to hit me yet.

It's impossible not to brush against outstretched hands and arms as I cross the battlefield, and it's strange to me, somehow, strange that I don't flinch, strange that I don't hide my hands, strange that I'm not worried I'll injure them.

They can touch me if they like, and maybe it'll hurt, but my skin won't kill anyone anymore.

Because I'll never let it get that far.

Because I now know how to control it.

SEVENTY-SEVEN

The compounds are such bleak, barren places, I think, as I pass through them. These should be the first to go. Our homes should be rebuilt. Restored.

We need to start again.

I climb up the side of one of the little compound homes. Climb its second story, too. I reach up, clinging to the roof, and pull myself over. I kick the solar panels off, onto the ground, and plant myself on top, right in the middle, as I look out over the crowd.

Searching for familiar faces.

Hoping they'll see me and come forward.

Hoping.

I stand on the roof of this home for what feels like days, months, years, and I see nothing but faces of soldiers and their families. None of my friends.

I feel myself sway, dizziness threatening to overtake me, my pulse racing fast and hard. I'm ready to give up. I've stood here long enough for people to point, for my face to be recognized, for word to spread that I'm standing here, waiting for something. Someone. Anyone.

I'm just about to dive back into the crowd to search for their fallen bodies when hope seizes my heart.

One by one, they emerge, from all corners of the field, from deep inside the barracks, from across the compounds. Bloodied and bruised. Adam, Alia, Castle, Ian, Lily, Brendan, and Winston each make their way toward me only to turn and wait for the others to arrive. Winston is sobbing.

Sonya and Sara are dragging Kenji out of the barracks, small steps hauling him forward. I see that his eyes have opened now, just a little. Stubborn, stubborn Kenji. Of course he's awake when he should be asleep.

James comes running toward them.

He crashes into Adam, clinging to his legs, and Adam hauls his little brother up, into his arms, smiling like I've never seen him smile before. Castle nods at me, beaming. Lily blows me a kiss. Ian makes some strange finger-gun motion and Brendan waves. Alia has never looked more jubilant.

And I'm looking out over them, my smile steady, held there by nothing but sheer force of will. I'm still staring, waiting for my last friend to show up. Waiting for him to find us.

But he isn't here.

I'm scanning the thousands of people scattered around this icy, icy ground and I don't see him, not anywhere, and the terror of this moment kicks me in the gut until I'm out of breath and out of hope, blinking fast and trying to hold myself together.

The metal roof under my feet is shaking.

I turn toward the sound, heart pounding, and see a hand reach over the top.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

He pulls himself up onto the roof and walks over to me, so steadily. Calm, like there's nothing in the world we'd planned to do today but to stand here, together, looking out over a field of dead bodies and happy children.

"Aaron," I whisper.

He pulls me into his arms.

And I fall.

Every bone, every muscle, every nerve in my body comes undone at his touch and I cling to him, holding on for dear life.

"You know," he whispers, his lips at my ear, "the whole world will be coming for us now."

I lean back. Look into his eyes.

"I can't wait to watch them try."

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I've reached the end.

And here, at the finish line, I am suddenly speechless, unable to articulate in any number of words just how many helpers I've had, how many hands have touched this book, or how many minds have shaped this story. But you were there all along, reading with me and writing to me and cheering me on, helping me through hard moments and always holding my hand. My many dear friends at HarperCollins and Writers House. My family, steadfast, always. Ransom Riggs, an angel on earth. Tara Weikum, a magician. Jodi Reamer, a saint.

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Lots of love,



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