

THE WHOLE WORLD TINDER

FLINT AND TINDER BOOK THREE



GREGORY ASHE

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The Whole World Tinder

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1 | EMMETT

I slowed at the top of the stairs; if Jim caught me, he'd kill me. Or, worse, be disappointed in me.

The door to our apartment was closed. In March, the breeze up the stairwell still made me shiver. The building was silent, and outside, I could hear the rumble of a truck idling on the street. I thought about waiting, calling him to make sure he was out of the apartment, but the plastic bags were heavy and cutting into my fingers.

I tested the door; locked. He'd gone for a walk. Or he'd gone to work out. Or he'd gone somewhere else.

Perfect.

I let myself inside and walked straight into Jim.

He's pretty solid, it turned out. Not quite as tall as I am, although he made up for it by being older. Broad across the chest and shoulders. He wore his strawberry-blond hair in a classic part, although he kept it long enough that it made him look boyish instead of like a business bro. It was spring break, and he'd gotten into all sorts of reckless behavior like sleeping until eight and making pancakes for breakfast. Even in gray sweat shorts and a blue tank, he never felt the cold—that had something to do with his ability to call up fire—and the tops of his bare feet were dusted with gold hair. The shorts and tank were a recent—and welcome—change. For a long time, years after he'd stopped being my teacher, he'd been uptight about

stuff like being naked even partially. That had ended the first time I got my hand on his dick. Well, maybe not right then. We'd both been focused on other things.

Jim said something like "Oof."

"Hey!" I twisted to hide the bags behind me. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here. I'm the guy in your bed, remember?"

"No. I don't know. Go get naked and jump in bed, and we'll see."

He was trying to look over my shoulder. "What's going on back there?"

I smirked. "Get in bed and I'll let you have a look."

"I thought you were going to get a haircut."

"I did get a haircut."

"I see that; it looks nice. I was talking about those bags."

"Don't worry about it."

He smiled, but only with his eyes. When I tried to take a step around him, he said in a different voice, "Emmett, what's in the bags?"

It shouldn't have worked. It certainly hadn't worked in the classroom—well, not all the time, anyway. Maybe he was getting better at that trick. Oh God, maybe I was losing my edge.

"Stuff."

Sighing, he folded his arms.

"I'm serious: don't worry about it."

"We talked about this."

“Groceries,” I said. The moment of genius had come too late, though.

“I don’t want presents for my birthday.”

“Good, because these are groceries.”

“Jeez, Emmett. How much wine did you buy?”

“It’s not wine. It’s—a secret.” My face heated. “Stop it with the third degree already.”

But he followed me into the kitchen. “How did you even get wine? I shredded your fake ID.”

“Yeah, Jimothy. That was my only fake ID.”

He wrinkled his nose and poked one of the bags.

“Stay out of there,” I said. “That’s none of your business. Jim, I’m serious!”

He raised his hands in surrender, but he kept looking at the bags, and the smile went out of his eyes. For the second time, he said, “We talked about this.”

“Ok.”

“We’re trying to save money.”

“Uh huh.”

“And one of the ways we agreed to save money was not to make a big deal out of our birthdays.”

“Great. We’re not.”

“Don’t you want to move out of this place? Or go on vacation?”

“Where would we go on vacation?”

“What does that mean? Anywhere. London. Or Paris. Or—or Saskatchewan. Or we could use the money for something else.

If you want to try college—”

“Oh my God, stop talking about it. It’s my money. I can spend it however I want. And if you keep annoying me, I’m going to pour all these bottles of—”

I stopped.

Jim arched an eyebrow. “Surprise?”

I shot him the bird, scowled, and said, “Get out of my kitchen.”

After a moment, Jim kissed my cheek and went back to the living room. The TV came on, and the springs in our secondhand sofa squeaked and protested.

“You could have done this when I wasn’t on spring break, you know,” he called toward me. “If you wanted to surprise me.”

“Feedback is not welcome!” I shouted back.

I put away the few grocery items that weren’t party related. The inside of the refrigerator was so white that it made me squeeze my eyes shut. College. Sure. And I can tell everybody I slipped and got my face caught in a paper cutter.

I shut the fridge door too hard. Bottles rattled. When I passed through the living room, Jim was sitting up, on high alert. I headed for the second bedroom—previously my bedroom—which had been transformed into our storage room because of our new sleeping arrangement. I hid, as best I could, Jim’s presents and the decorations and the wine and the nonperishable stuff that, a few hours ago, it had seemed like a great idea to buy. Why hadn’t I thought of doing this when he was at school? Because I’d gotten an idea for the party. Because I was excited. Because in this, as in all things, Jim Spencer made me an idiot.

When I got back to the living room, I threw myself on the couch, got my head in Jim's lap, and went boneless. He ran his fingers up the back of my head, where the hair was buzzed to a two and it rasped pleasantly under his touch. Bob Barker was on TV, which meant this was a rerun, and an old one. The ladies had such big hair.

"I'm sorry," Jim said.

I grunted.

"The money isn't a big deal."

I made another noise.

His fingers came to a stop on my neck. When Bob took a commercial break, I reached up and started his hand again, and I could feel his smile.

The rest of the day was ok. We went for a walk when the marine layer lifted. San Elredo in spring was beautiful, although it wasn't hugely different from San Elredo any other time of year—northern California was like that, all the differences a question of degree. The annuals hadn't started to bloom yet, but the air was warmer, and the smell of salt on the breeze was fresh. For dinner, we ate a few blocks away, on a street where food trucks lined up most nights. Jim had sushi, which I told him, out of a truck, was asking for dysentery. I had bulgogi and, for dessert, waffles with pearl sugar.

We were in bed, and Jim was reading, and I was doing a good job of drinking up all the lines of chest and shoulders and arm.

"You're so white," I said.

He turned a page in *Hamnet*. "You don't have much of a tan either."

“No, I mean.” I held my arm next to his. The olive tone of mine, the creamy smoothness of his. Dark hair versus red gold.

“Mm-hmm,” he said and put an arm behind his head, and I’m not a pit guy, but he had nice pits, and his biceps looked huge.

I scooted closer until I bumped him. Part of me bumped him, anyway.

He didn’t put down the book, but he did cut his eyes toward me.

I shrugged.

Outside, someone was singing mariachi, the guitars going a hundred miles an hour. Or maybe that was my heart.

He put down the book. He took my chin in his fingers, his thumb resting on that line where the scars started. He was warm, always so much warmer than me.

“Trouble,” he murmured as he rolled to straddle my hips.

I sank down into the pillows, smiling as he kissed me, his mouth like a bloom of sun. “Definitely.”

2 | JIM

“You were sleeping in the tub again,” Emmett said as we pulled into his parents’ driveway.

That was true; I’d woken in the night—before the nightmares started, fortunately. I’d slept on wet towels in the tub, which was standard practice when the nightmares got too bad. It’s better to have a few singed towels than set the bed on fire.

“Are you stressed?” Emmett asked. “Because you shouldn’t be.”

I barely heard him. In San Elredo, a condo—an ok condo, a normal condo, a condo that in Vehpese (if Vehpese had condos) would probably have cost in the high five figures—went for over six hundred thousand. This house, which had to be three thousand square feet if it was an inch, with its shake siding and its windows, its detached garage and pool, with its oceanfront view—this house had to be in the millions. And this was their vacation home, the one they’d bought so they could be closer to their only son. Not that they’d be so crass as to call it a vacation home. I wanted to giggle. They probably called it an investment property.

“This is—” I stopped. “What does their house in LA look like?”

“Jimbo, focus: why were you sleeping in the tub?”

I had my hand on the shifter, and the Tesla was still running. Emmett's Tesla X. The one his parents had bought him. The one that cost more than an imaginary condo in Velepese.

“Fuckity fuck, Jimbo. Ok, here: my mom is going to brag about how this is a North Coast property, she's going to talk about the view of the cove, she'll point out that it's on a cul-de-sac, like she's the one who personally plopped it down on a dead-end street. My dad is going to talk about celebrities he's represented, and he's going to get a boner about classic cars, and he'll have too much to drink and be an asshole to my mom. There. Feel better?”

I flicked a look at him.

“I don't care what they think,” he said in a quieter voice.

No, I thought. No, because you're their son; you're not fourteen years older, you're not a deadbeat, you're not the one who's taking their baby away from them.

“It's going to be fine,” I said.

Emmett snorted. “It's going to be awful.”

“Then it'll be awful.” I tried for a smile. “We'll get through it.”

“Will you feel better if I tell you this house has so many decks and balconies and bullshit, it's one boy in eyeliner short of our high school production of *Romeo and Juliet*?”

I laughed in spite of myself, and then I leaned across the seat to kiss him, and we headed for the front door.

Emmett walked inside without knocking, and it took a moment for my brain to catch up—these were his parents, he'd been to this house before. Inside, it was glossy wood floors, ecru walls, wide archways that connected high-ceilinged rooms, and

sunset tipping in from the huge windows that looked out on the cove. The water was coppery with hammer marks.

“Emmett?” a woman called.

I recognized Jennifer Bradley when she stepped into view. She was thin and dark-haired, and Emmett had her eyes and, when he wasn't in fight mode, her smile. In her Aran sweater and jeans, she struck the right balance between looking fantastic and being comfortable. She smiled as she pulled Emmett into a hug, either not recognizing the stiffness of his body or not caring. She shook my hand, still smiling. Her eyes reminded me of a bird's, sharp and restless.

“Come in,” she said. “The kitchen's a mess. We're eating family style—I hope that's all right, Jim. I can call you Jim, can't I?”

“You're setting me up for one of my dad's favorite jokes,” I said, trying to match her smile. “He loved to say you could call him anything except late for dinner.”

Jennifer pealed laughter.

Emmett groaned. “Don't encourage him.”

“Don't be mean. Jim, come on. Would you like a glass of wine? Beer? Emmett, what does he like?”

“Wine sounds great,” I said.

“He likes beer.”

“I like wine too.”

“He wants a beer, but he's too polite to tell you.”

“We have beer, Jim; it's perfectly all right. I shouldn't have opened the bottle before you got here.”

“Wine is fine, honestly.”

“Well, we don’t want fine, Jim.” She swept ahead of us into the kitchen. “We want perfect.”

“Please tell her wine is fine,” I whispered to Emmett as we trailed after her.

“That rhymes.”

“She already opened the bottle.”

“Please. She’s not worried about it; she’ll drink it herself.”

“Robert,” Jennifer sang from the kitchen. “Dinner. Robert. Dinner.”

When we rejoined her, she was opening a tall white can with a turquoise line around the rim. The movement put her manicured nails on exaggerated display. The can hissed, foam speckled the perfect manicure, and she offered the beer to me with a flourish. I was starting to realize where Emmett got it from.

“Humble Sea,” she said. “Their Pilsner. It’s the only thing Robert will drink when we’re up here. Robert!”

“What’s the only thing I’ll drink?”

He came in from the deck—one of the decks—dressed in a UCLA sweatshirt and golf shorts and boat shoes, and the skin on his legs was pebbled from the spring evening. He had Emmett’s dark hair, although his was longer and slicked back, and when he caught Emmett’s eye for a moment, he had his smirk too. He was heavier in the jaw than Emmett, though, and he leaned toward handsome, while Emmett was stunning. Just enough gray, I thought, that you could see him on the box of a men’s hair coloring kit.

“Robert Bradley,” he said as he shook my hand. He moved toward Emmett, and Emmett stiffened again. Robert’s

movements became awkward, uncoordinated, and he settled for squeezing Emmett's shoulder and pulling Emmett against him. Emmett stumbled, his joints still locked, and then they separated.

"You've met him before," Emmett said as he steadied himself against the counter.

"I'm meeting him now as your partner." Robert was a lawyer, and clearly a good one; he hadn't even stumbled over that little word. "Are we going to eat?"

The food was takeout, although that seemed too casual a word for the ribeye and scallion potatoes and garlic asparagus that Jennifer served from the foam containers.

"I told you it's family style," Jennifer said with a trilling laugh. "Robert, I set the table, but would you rather eat in here?"

"My mom's showing off her kitchen." Emmett slapped the countertop. "All twenty thousand dollars of it. Or was it thirty?"

"Don't be common, Emmett."

"This was her cross to bear. When they bought this house, I mean. Pink-tile countertops. Can you imagine? And the cabinets were oak."

"He loves to tease, Jim. Have you noticed that?"

"Thank God they could get the Carrara marble and not something cultured like the Patels."

"That's enough, Emmett." Robert carried his plate through a connecting archway into the dining room. "We'll eat in here."

The first few minutes were full of stilted sentences, one-off attempts to keep a conversation going—about the weather, about San Elredo, about Jennifer's favorite places to swim.

Then the inquisition started.

“So, you’re a teacher,” Robert said.

Emmett stopped, fork halfway to his mouth. “Dad.”

“I’m talking about here, now. You’re teaching—that’s your job?”

I nodded. “Brookdale.”

“That’s a wonderful school,” Jennifer said. “It’s the best school in the area. The Mackeys send their kids there.” As though confiding a secret, she said, “He’s an orthodontist, and so is she.”

“What’s the pay like?”

“Dad!”

Robert dismissed the objection with his knife. “I’m not asking for exact numbers. Is it competitive with other schools in the area?”

“Better,” I said. “It’s fantastic.”

“Are there bonuses? For test scores, things like that?”

“No, nothing like that.”

Robert made a noise that could have meant anything. “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Emmett said.

“It’s fine—” I began.

“It’s not fine. Leave him alone. I brought him because you made me. He’s here. Stop bothering him.”

“You understand Emmett is on a strict allowance,” Robert said, and for the first time all night, he met my gaze and held it. “Jennifer and I believe that he should work for his money, but in light of his trauma—”

Emmett grinned—the expression hooking across his face. “He means my heroin addiction.”

Coloring, Robert continued, “—we’ve decided to support him while he recovers and decides what he wants to do with his life.”

I nodded. “Emmett and I have been doing everything the counselors and doctors recommend. He’s done great since they moved him to the monthly Sublocade injection—” I stopped. Sweat prickled under my arms, and I forced a laugh. “You already know that—”

“I want you to understand Emmett’s allowance isn’t going to change,” Robert said over me.

“Are you kidding me?” Emmett asked.

“Robert,” Jennifer said.

“Well, why else is he dating him?”

It clicked a moment too late. “Mr. Bradley, if you think money—”

“Is it a fetish thing? Because I have gay friends, and you know what they tell me? They tell me you’re a chickenhawk. What do you say about that?”

In the total silence, I could hear the surf beating the rocks below the house.

“You are out of your fucking mind,” Emmett said. “I went after him. Do you get that?”

“Really, Robert—” Jennifer began.

“What? Am I supposed to pretend I didn’t go to parent-teacher conferences when he had Emmett in class? For God’s sake, Jen, he might as well have changed Emmett’s diapers.”

Emmett shot up from his seat. “Let’s go.”

I folded my napkin. Apparently, I wasn’t moving fast enough because Emmett pulled me up from the seat.

“Here it is.” Robert leaned back in his chair. “The big production.”

“Emmett,” Jennifer said, “your father was teasing.”

“He wasn’t teasing. He was being a dick.” Emmett’s breathing was harsh. “And he’s doing it because he thinks I care if he approves of Jim or not. But I don’t care. I don’t give a single fuck if you like him or not. If that was the point, then you’re wasting your time.”

“Emmett,” I said.

“You left me in that fucking place—” His voice was so thick the words were almost unintelligible. “—and you didn’t visit, and you didn’t want to know. Jim came.”

“So, that’s what this is.” Robert nodded. “You’re punishing us.”

Running a shaky hand over his mouth, Emmett laughed. “This was a mistake. It was a mistake for you to buy this stupid fucking house, and it was a mistake for me to think things were going to be different. Come on, Jim.”

“Just a minute,” I said.

“Come on!”

“Let go of my arm.”

Emmett’s eyes widened until it looked like the tears were going to spill, but he released me. I faced Robert, then Jennifer, the napkin still folded in my hand. I thought I could smell singed cotton.

“I love your son,” I said. “I understand there are unusual elements to this situation. I was his teacher, yes. Nothing inappropriate happened while that was the situation. I’m quite a bit older than he is. I didn’t intend to fall in love with him. I came here because—” I almost said, *I was lost*, but what came out was, “—I was passing through, and I was worried about him. I didn’t plan on staying. I certainly didn’t plan on developing feelings for him. But things are the way they are, and I do love him.”

Robert watched my face; his hands were hidden under the table.

Jennifer cut a carrot and said, “It’s sweet, I think. And the girls at the club all say it’s terribly progressive.”

“We bought this house so that we could have a relationship with you,” Robert said to Emmett.

Emmett rucked up his shirt to wipe his eyes and barked a laugh.

“My spiritual advisor insisted,” Jennifer said, slicing the carrot into thinner and thinner rounds. “It’s important for me to be near the ley lines here.”

“Why don’t we sit down?” I pulled out Emmett’s chair for him. “This is a nice meal; let’s finish it together.”

Emmett glared at me for a moment. He wiped his eyes again, dropped into the chair, and let out a short, bewildered laugh.

I sat, and when the napkin was hidden under the table, I uncurled my fingers. Char stained the cotton where I’d been clutching it, and I stuffed the napkin between my legs. Emmett glanced over and must have seen the napkin. His gaze came up to my face, and he reached over and took my hand. I nodded, squeezed once, and let him go.

We ate in silence for a while. The beer helped. The second one that Emmett brought me helped more. Emmett hadn't been exaggerating; Robert had a moderate glass of wine, and Jennifer killed the rest of the bottle.

"So," Emmett said. "We don't even rate Sunday dinner, huh?"

"Don't be petty," Jennifer said. She had the tightened elocution of the experienced drinker now, and her eyes were soft as she stared at me. "You're coming next Sunday, of course. For the fundraiser."

"What fundraiser?"

"Jim, what kind of exercise do you do? I have to tell you, half the PTO had their eye on you back in Vehpese."

"Sunday night is for important guests, Jim," Emmett said.

Robert paused while spearing a piece of asparagus. "You've made your point."

"Friday and Saturday nights are for fun. And Sundays are for important people. We got a Thursday. What do you think that says?"

"I think we're having a nice meal," I said and tried to catch his eye. "And yes, if you'd like us to be at this fundraiser, we'll be happy to come."

"I'm sorry," Robert said too loudly, and his fork and knife clinked against the plate when he set them down. "Is that what you want to hear? I'm sorry I didn't visit you when you had to be institutionalized. You were...not yourself, Emmett. You were saying things, impossible things." He stopped. The strain was visible in his jaw as he tried to master himself. "So, I'm sorry. There. I'm happy you're better now."

“Better,” Emmett said.

“And I’m happy you’ve found someone you care about. I wanted to meet him—as your partner, you understand. So, again, I apologize.”

Emmett rested his hand on the edge of his plate. It was the scarred hand, the ridged lines running all the way to his fingertips. The nails looked incongruous, smooth and neat, as though they should have been scarred too somehow. He was silent for a moment and looked up at his father and asked, “What do you want?”

“Do you swim?” Jennifer asked me. “I bet you’d be a drink in a swimsuit.”

“He wanted to meet me—” I began.

“What do you really want?” Emmett asked over me.

“I swim two miles every day.” Jennifer arched her back, her breasts outlined by the sweater. “Do you want to guess my stroke?”

“Jennifer, you’re drunk,” Robert said.

“I’m not.” She laughed. “I’m having a lovely—lovely conversation with Jim. Have you ever thought of going by James? I love the name James.”

Emmett was still staring at his father. In the undertow of silence, he shook his head and pushed back his chair.

“Fine,” Robert grated out. He held up a hand. He was silent for another moment. And then, although it must have cost him a great deal, he said, “I would like to ask a favor.”

“Let’s move into the living room for dessert, shall we?” Jennifer stood and began collecting plates. “I found the cutest little bakery, and they call this, ‘Better than Brad Pitt.’” She trilled

another laugh. “Maybe we should call it ‘Better than Jim,’ do you think?”

“A favor,” Emmett said.

“Hurry up, slowpokes,” Jennifer said as she toted the plates into the kitchen. “I’m not waiting.”

Emmett smiled at his father, and I recognized the expression—another piece of armor. “You’ve got a funny way of asking.”

“Please, Emmett. I don’t want a scene, and unlike your mother, I don’t enjoy your dramatics. You know how this works: I will be grateful, of course.”

“And if I refuse, you cut off my allowance, or you take my car, or...what? Because Jim makes enough to support us. You can have the fucking car.”

Support us might have been a stretch unless Emmett and I switched to cat food rations, so I said, “What’s the favor?”

To his credit, Robert’s eyes didn’t even flick toward me. He stayed fully concentrated on Emmett. “This is what I meant about the dramatics. I’m not going to cut your allowance or take the car. If you say no, that’s fine.”

After a few heartbeats, Emmett laughed and shook his head again. “You’re getting better. You’ve learned some new tricks.”

“No tricks. My son is an adult; I can talk to him like an adult now.”

“Jesus Christ.” He looked at me. “Can we leave now, please?”

“What do you want Emmett to do?” I asked.

“This was his whole plan,” Emmett said. “He looks like an asshole. Then he’s apologetic. He seems so reasonable. And you’re falling for it.”

Sighing, Robert met my gaze. If he was lying or acting or pretending, he was good at it—but then, that wouldn't surprise me much because his son had a deceptive streak a mile wide. “Do you know who Sam Lockett is?”

“The senator?”

“I assume you heard about the car crash.”

I glanced at Emmett, but he was back to being the boy carved from ice, and his face told me nothing. “I don't know. I don't think so.”

“His wife, Lelah, was in a bad car accident, oh, six months ago. Her daughter, Aimee, was in the vehicle. This didn't make it into the report, you understand, but Lelah had been drinking. She managed to get clear of the car, but Aimee was badly burned.” Now his gaze did flick to Emmett, and I couldn't tell if the movement was genuine or an act. “She is having a difficult time dealing with the...adjustment.”

“So, I'm a scarred-up freak,” Emmett said, “and I'm supposed to go help another freak feel better.”

“Please don't talk about yourself like that.”

“But that's what you're saying, right? You're setting up a playdate for the monsters.”

Robert winced. I still didn't know what Emmett had told his parents about his scars, how he had explained his disappearance and the marks he carried on half his body. For all I knew, he had told them the truth—that he had gone in search of a real monster, and he had bartered for the ability to protect the people he loved. It was clear, though, that Robert and Jennifer had some private explanation for what had happened. My guess was that it involved drugs, which wasn't a stretch considering Emmett's history.

“I’m asking you to meet her,” Robert said. “She’s dealing with something most people can’t understand. I don’t think it’s unreasonable to believe that she might connect with someone who has gone through something similar. You have the rest of your spring break. Pay a visit to Lelah and Aimee at the family cabin. Give it a few days. I’ll pay your expenses, of course. And since I understand you’ll be giving up your vacation, let me make it up to you. A trip, wherever you’d like, my treat.”

“And what do you get out of this? You can save the explanation about how you’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart, this is to help a dear friend, blah blah blah.”

“Sam and Lelah will be grateful, of course. As any parents would.”

“And Sam happens to be a U.S. senator.”

“Yes, he does. And, of course, his friendship is valuable. Do you expect me to pretend that I’m not aware of that? I taught you, Emmett.”

“If we do this—” I began.

“Where’d you meet him? Did he ask you to do this? Were you swapping war stories about your fucked-up kids, and he said, ‘Sure, send him over?’”

“I haven’t missed this,” Robert said to me. “The performances.”

“I asked you a question!”

“We met at the club.”

“I was going to ask—” I tried again.

“No,” Emmett said.

“Why not?” Robert asked.

“Because I don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to? There’s a girl suffering—”

“Oh my God, Robert!” Jennifer screamed from the other room.

Emmett sprinted toward her cry, and I raced after him. Robert came behind us—walking, I noticed, not running.

On TV, aerial news footage showed a building in flames. It looked familiar—an office skyscraper, part of the San Diego skyline. Much of the front of the building was gone, so that you could see into offices and break rooms, floor after floor, as the fire and smoke followed the bones of the building toward the sky. The chyron said, *Terrorist Attack in San Diego?*

“Oh my God,” Jennifer said again and started to cry.

Emmett stared at the screen for a moment. Then, the movement awkward and unpracticed, he turned and hugged his mom.

“We’ll go,” I said quietly to Robert. Emmett raised his head, his mouth already opening in a challenge, but I gave him a look, and he subsided. “We’ll go tomorrow.”

3 | EMMETT

The last few miles were washboard gravel, and the Tesla bounced and rattled along the curves of the Santa Cruz mountains. The clock on the console said it was barely ten in the morning, but the redwoods and pines and firs grew thick up here, and the shadows were deep; this part of the range, thank God, had escaped the CZU Lightning Complex fires—wildfires that had burned for thirty-eight days the summer before. Even inside the car, the air smelled like cedar.

The next bounce cracked my head against the door. “I repeat: I told my dad no.”

Jim nodded. Or that might have been his head rocking in time with the Tesla. His face was watchful, and his hands tight at nine and three. He slowed as we took the next curve.

After leaving my parents’ the night before, we had argued. It had been short and to the point, and if it had been a debate paper or some bullshit like that, Jim probably would have given himself an A+.

“You want to help her,” he’d said as he stripped out of his clothes in our bedroom, “and you’re being stubborn because you’re angry with your parents.”

I’d stood by the door—the better to slam it when the occasion presented itself. “You know fuck-all about what I want.”

“I know you want to slam that door.”

I bared my teeth at him.

“Are you sleeping in bed with me,” he asked, “or are you going to be out on the couch?”

“Fuck you.”

“How about this? I’m going to brush my teeth and wash my face. When I come back, you can tell me you changed your mind. Then it’s your decision, and we don’t have to fight about it.”

And, it turned out, that was a pretty good idea.

That night, I’d dreamed about the knives again, the burns, the straps, the way it had seemed to go on and on—longer than was possible. I’d woken, covered in cold sweat, suffocating under the bedding, and I’d found Jim sleeping on wet towels in the tub. I climbed in with him, and we’d spent the rest of the night together, which sounded more romantic than saying I had a jankety neck from sleeping crooked in the bathtub.

Now, as we came around the next hill, the cabin came into view. Only, cabin wasn’t the right word. Compound was closer. For starters, it wasn’t one building. It was three: two cabins, if we wanted to stretch the term, and a detached garage. They all had log siding, which was a nice touch, with ribbed steel roofs. The two cabins were sprawling, multistory structures that filled most of the clearing before the scrub oak and chaparral and fir trees began again. Big windows looked out on the world, with nary a curtain in sight—why pay to be up here if you weren’t going to enjoy the view, I guess. I decided Jim would have liked the *nary*.

He let the Tesla come to a stop behind a blue Volvo sedan. New, of course, since the last car had crashed and burned with Aimee still inside it. Then he glanced over at me, some of the tension going out of his shoulders.

“I would have driven,” I said. “I’m a good driver.”

“Thank you for offering.”

“You can’t ride a motorcycle if you’re not a good driver. Well, you can, but you end up going splat.”

He didn’t respond verbally, but from the look on his face, I thought maybe he was offering a silent prayer of thanks that I no longer had the Ducati.

We got out of the car, and we looked at the cabins. Jim said, “It’d be nice to have a place like this. Get away from everything for a while.”

“And nary a curtain in sight.”

He grinned, squeezed my wrist, and started walking toward the cabin on the left.

“Sam Lockett is a freshman senator,” I said. Gravel crunched underfoot. A bird sang a few notes and then went silent. “When he won the primary, it was a total upset.”

“An accident like that would be hard no matter when it happened, but it had to be harder when he was running a campaign and, then, getting ready to move out to Washington.”

“He looks like a wiener.”

Jim grinned again.

“See?” I held out my phone, where I’d pulled up a picture of the senator before my service had crapped out. He was that bland kind of vanilla white guy—handsome enough, dark hair, square jaw. He probably had some sort of kinky secret like tying up hamsters in his basement, but what the voting public didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them.

“He does look like a wiener.”

“Told you.”

At the door, Jim knocked. The sound ran out into the woods and died slowly. After a moment, he knocked again, but still no one came to the door.

I walked over to the window. “Furniture is covered in dust cloths. I don’t think they’re in this one.”

A walkway of wide, flat stones connected the cabins. We were halfway to the cabin on our right when something moved in the brush. It was a tawny blur—or maybe it had been white instead of tawny. It was hard to tell because of the distance, the branches, the shadows. I froze.

Jim stopped too.

“Did you—”

He nodded.

“Uh...”

“They have mountain lions up here still,” he said.

“Maybe you should burn down a few trees and scare it off.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Easier for you, I think. You can literally make yourself invulnerable.”

“Not literally, dumbass. Jesus, what kind of English teacher are you? It’s not my fault I don’t want to know how long it takes a mountain lion to claw its way through my shield.”

He was laughing, so I kicked his ankle, but then he just laughed harder—albeit still quietly—and hopping on one leg toward the cabin.

“Literally,” I muttered.

He rubbed his ankle, gave me that classic Jimbo smile that ran all the way to his molars, and took an experimental step.

Nobody answered this door either.

“This is the place, right?” I stepped back to look up at the windows above us. “I mean, we didn’t get lost.”

“I’m lost. I don’t know about the GPS.”

I cocked my head toward the side of the structure.

“I would,” Jim said, “but I’ve got something going on with my ankle.”

Jim Spencer, ladies and gentlemen. He’ll be here all week.

We made our way around the cabin. Firewood was ricked in an open shed, and the flagstones made a patio out back. A massive propane tank was hidden behind a decorative wall. A glass slider led into a kitchen that looked significantly older than I was: the honey-colored maple table, the fluorescent light in a decorative box that was supposed to look like stained glass, a potbellied stove surrounded by azulejos.

“No dust cloths,” I said.

Jim’s face was intent. “Do you hear something?”

“If this is a mountain lion joke, you’re going to lose your balls.”

But he didn’t laugh. He listened again, and I listened. I couldn’t hear anything, and eventually, he shook his head.

When we got back to the front door, Jim reached out for the handle. He hesitated. Then he gave me an embarrassed smile and tested the handle.

The door opened.

“Ok,” I said. “This is starting to feel like a real Goldilocks situation.”

Jim tried to go first until I grabbed his wrist; he’d been exaggerating with the whole *invulnerability* part, but out of the two of us, I had a better chance of surviving any nasty surprises. I pulled up my shield and stepped through the doorway.

Inside, a flight of stairs ran up the wall on our right, while a hallway led back toward the kitchen and, from what I’d seen through the windows, the living room. Pictures were evenly spaced up the stairway. The frames weren’t dusty, but the photos behind the glass were faded. The ones that I could make out showed a man and a woman and a girl. Sam and Lelah Lockett, and their daughter Aimee.

“This is supposed to be a playdate,” I said as I took another step into the cabin. “So, why does it feel so fucking weird?”

Jim didn’t answer, but he sniffed. “Do you smell that?”

I took a few breaths, and then I did. I made a face. “That smells like—”

“Rotten eggs?”

“I was going to say a gas leak.”

Jim nodded. “Mercaptan. They add it to natural gas so it has an odor.”

“And let me guess: they add it to propane?”

Jim nodded again.

“Go outside,” I said. “I’ll be fast.”

He started to shake his head, but above us, a girl screamed, “I hate you!”

We traded glances.

“I cannot believe you.” That was another voice—a woman’s, more mature. If I had to put money, I’d have bet Lelah. “I told you not to talk to them anymore.”

“Indigo is my friend.” That had to be Aimee.

“It’s not safe.”

“You can’t tell me who to be friends with!”

In a tone I’d once heard Jim use when he tried to sign me up for an eighteen-and-up soccer league—which could be translated as *what’s best for you*—Lelah said, “If you can’t use your phone safely and responsibly, you’re better off not having one.”

“You can’t!” Aimee screamed.

“Mrs. Lockett,” Jim called up the stairs. “Hello? I’m sorry to barge in, but I think we need to get out of the house—”

A ghost of movement reflected in the glass of the framed pictures, and I turned. A knife clicked against the barrier and bounced back to fall to the floor. It had come within a couple of inches of burying itself in Jim’s back.

I grabbed his arm and dragged him away from the door. A second knife followed. It struck my barrier at eye level, which meant I had a front-row seat to three inches of steel. I kept moving, pulling Jim with me. A third knife came through the front door. It ricocheted off the barrier.

“Well, damn.”

The voice was a man’s, and it came from the gravel horseshoe drive in front of the cabin. The man standing there was white, fortyish, with shaggy graying hair in a middle part and a pornstache that had to be the envy of every hipster on the peninsula. He was wearing a wide-lapelled suit—brown, of

course—and Keds. He watched us, tossing a knife and catching it.

Jim raised a hand, but then he grimaced and lowered it again. While it was probably a smart idea not to blow up the house while we were still in it, it was distinctly unsatisfying compared to seeing Jim broil this guy alive.

I opened my mouth, but before I could form a question, another man stepped into view. This one, I knew. Cleofás had light brown skin and dark hair in a quiff, and, like the other times I'd seen him, he wore a three-piece suit. Today's was a chalk-colored gray. He looked like the kind of guy they use on those my billionaire daddy book covers—not that I've ever read any—and he was one of the most dangerous people I knew.

Fact one: he worked for a creature like the ones that had given me and Jim our abilities. This one called itself the Rey Solar.

Fact two: he could create crippling psychic pain. While he couldn't reach us through my shield, as soon as I lowered it—to let Jim attack, for example—Cleofás would be able to incapacitate us.

Fact three: the last time we'd bumped into him, we'd seriously fucked up his plans.

Cleofás made a noise of distaste when he saw us.

“Good morning to you too, motherfucker.”

Jim huffed something between amusement and annoyance. “What are you doing here?”

“No luck?” Cleofás asked the man with the pornstache.

“They've got some kind of shield,” he answered. “I almost got them with the first one.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Roman. They’re surprisingly troublesome.”

I offered a lopsided smile and shot him the middle finger.

Another man appeared at Cleofás’s side. This one was Black, short but not, as I’d assumed at first because of his height, young. His hair was in a tight fro, and he wore a plaid knit shirt that suggested either color blindness or that something had murdered his sense of fashion.

“Go on,” Cleofás said. “If they bring down the barrier to interfere, I’ll handle them.”

“What are you doing?” I asked.

The Black man started toward us, and Jim tensed next to me.

“Silva,” Cleofás called over his shoulder to someone out of sight. “Be prepared. The blond one uses fire. Georgia, as soon as Menfis has them, provide cover.”

The Black man—Menfis, presumably—continued toward the cabin.

“He’s worried about fire,” Jim said, “but not about a gas leak.”

“What?”

Jim opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, Lelah Lockett appeared at the top of the stairs. She was white, and while she had to be in her forties, she didn’t look a day over an expensively maintained thirty. Her dark hair curled past her shoulders, with big sunglasses pushed up on her head. She wore a cowl-necked cream sweater, ripped jeans, and thigh-high boots that begged someone to cast her in a dominatrix role.

“What the hell is this?” she demanded. “Who are you? What do you think you’re doing in my house?”

Behind her came Aimee. She looked younger than sixteen. She looked too young for any of this, which made me think, maybe, that's what Jim thought every time he looked at me. She had her mom's coloring, although on the side of her face that hadn't been touched by the burns, she'd hidden herself under red eyeshadow and black lipstick. The palette was obviously intended to complement her Wu-Tang Clan tee and the silver skull rings jammed on her fingers.

Menfis stepped inside the house and started up the steps.

"Do you know who I am?" Lelah snapped as she came down the stairs toward him. "Do you know who my husband is? I've already called the police—"

"Chill," Menfis said.

I felt a hint of it, even though it wasn't directed at me—the sudden rush of hormones through my body, relaxing every muscle, making me feel warm and loose and happy. Part of me wondered how it would feel to get a blast of it dead on.

Lelah obviously liked it. She slumped and would have fallen if Menfis hadn't caught her.

"That's right," Menfis said. "You too, sweetheart."

Aimee let out a soft whimper.

"Outside," Menfis said. "Here we go."

Lelah stumbled down the rest of the stairs, helped by Menfis, while Aimee clumped after them.

"Stop!" I shouted. "You're not taking them anywhere!"

In the old days, I could have drawn a barrier across the doorway, straight and clean as if I'd done it with a ruler. But my abilities—and Jim's—had changed a lot over the last few years.

While I'd recovered a lot of it, including the ability to protect more than just myself, I was still limited to the area around me.

Menfis shot me a look over his shoulder. His mouth opened in a slash that was meant to be a grin as he herded Lelah out of the cabin. Aimee stumbled after him, her face slack. The door slammed shut behind them.

“Jim—”

“The kitchen,” he said.

We ran for the kitchen. In the distance, Cleofás shouted something, and an engine roared to life. Part of me asked how they'd gotten up here without us hearing them. Jim and I sprinted through the kitchen to come out through the glass slider, emerging onto the flagstone patio. Between the cabins, we could see a slice of the horseshoe driveway, where, I shit you not, a Hummer was trundling across the gravel. We ran toward it—Jim needed space to work so that he didn't accidentally turn the gas leak into an explosion.

The woman driving, from what I could make out at a distance, was white and middle-aged, with her dark hair combed back. She spotted us and said something to the woman in the passenger seat. She looked Asian, young, and she wore a nose ring.

The Asian girl pulled herself halfway out of the window to face us.

Jim braced himself. I felt it when he relaxed his control. Heat baked off him, and coppery highlights ran through his hair. Embers spun and drifted around him. The smell of wood smoke filled the air.

He held out his hand, and a lance of fire shot toward the Hummer. Toward one of the tires, to be specific. Before the fire

could strike, though, the girl sitting in the Hummer's window sent a jet of water to meet the flames. The water hissed and steamed, the vapor thickening in the air as Jim's power clashed with the girl's. Cleofás was still shouting, and shapes moved on the other side of the steam cloud.

And then darkness dropped like a curtain. It wasn't like the sun had gone down, or even like being in a dark room. This was pure and total darkness, without even the ruddy glow of Jim's fire to break it. Jim swore, and the ambient temperature dropped twenty degrees. The Hummer's rumble changed, growing more distant.

"For fuck's sake," I said. "They're getting away! Do something!"

Strain made Jim's words snap: "I'm trying."

And then the darkness lifted. One moment, I couldn't see anything. The next, I was blinking, trying to clear my vision from the dazzle of late-morning sunlight. The Hummer was gone, although I could hear it, the sound of the engine growing fainter.

"Come on!" I broke into a run, heading for the Tesla, and Jim raced alongside me. "We can—"

The explosion felt like a shove—a hand between my shoulder blades that sent me hurtling forward. It knocked me off my feet, and I hit the gravel and skidded and rolled until I tumbled to a stop. The sound of the explosion had done something to my ears, and I worked my jaw, trying to make my hearing normal again. Next to me, Jim sat up from where he'd fallen, inspecting a bloody rash the stones had opened on his arm.

Both cabins were burning. The blast had knocked out the windows and punched a hole in the roof of one of the cabins.

The stink of melting plastic and hot metal rolled over us. I got to my feet. I went to help Jim, but he was already up, and he nodded when I asked if he was ok. A second boom made me jump. A bee stung my arm.

I spared it a look and saw blood.

Maybe I'd hit my head. Maybe it was the shock catching up with me. I stared at the blood running down my arm, and I didn't do anything.

Jim's tackle carried both of us behind the Tesla. Another shot rang out, and the bullet raked a path in the gravel. Then Jim scrambled up and loosed a fireball.

The wash of his power, like a campfire on a cold night, dragged me back to reality. I got into a crouch, raising my shield to cover us. And then I caught a glimpse of Jim's face.

He'd gone white, as though all the blood had drained out of his body, and his eyes were wide. I followed his line of sight, scanning the blend of redwood and fir and pine until—

The man had to be past sixty if he was a day. A flattop of stiff white bristles, a square jaw, a snub nose that went with his hard mouth. It was the kind of mouth guys had right before they threw a punch. He was twenty yards away, dressed in camo, slinging a rifle over his shoulder. He bent and picked up a shotgun.

I shoved Jim's shoulder.

He didn't move.

“Jim, we've got to go.”

He stared at the old guy. His face was a whiteout.

“Jim, get in the car—Jim!”

He still wasn't responding. I dug the keys out of his pocket and hit the button to open the falcon-wing doors. Then I half-lifted, half-shoved Jim into the car. I got behind the wheel as the old man fired, and buckshot struck my shield. I could feel where the shot dimpled the barrier, testing its strength. I could take a few more rounds. Or I could get the hell out of here.

I floored the Tesla. The tires slewed on the gravel, throwing up loose stones, and then they caught. We launched forward, toward the deep shadows of the forest, and ran.

4 | JIM

Bolt.

It had been Bolt. His face. His nose. His mouth.

It was impossible.

But my brain was already racing, tracing the outline of the Bolt I'd known from almost thirty years ago against the man I'd seen today. Older, yes. Time had dug furrows around his eyes and mouth, bleached the color from his hair, thinned him until he had that look some old men acquire, like they're nothing but sinew and beef jerky.

I remembered the ropes chafing my wrist. The reek of his breath. The cold greasiness of his spit on my cheek, the particles of liver and onions on my skin. His weight crushing me. Cold air on bare skin.

“Jim!”

I drew in a ragged breath. The car. The trees. I didn't recognize where we were, which meant I'd lost track of time, which meant Emmett had been on his own. He was watching me, dark brows peaked with worry. He was holding my hand. Clutching it, actually.

“Are you ok?” I managed.

His eyebrows went up even more. “I'm dandy. How are you?”

“Fine.” I checked myself to make sure. Some aches that would turn out to be bruises. The lacerations on my arm from when I’d fallen on the gravel. “I’m fine.”

“Very convincing.” But his mouth softened into a droll half-smile. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said. And then I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the seat. Tears boiled up to the surface, but they didn’t slip free.

When I opened my eyes, Emmett was waiting. He squeezed my hand. Then he said, “What the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t know.”

It was a mistake; I knew it was a mistake as soon as I said it. He was too smart to swallow an easy lie, and I didn’t have the time or energy or, if I were being honest, the brain power to come up with a good one.

His expression tightened, and he dropped my hand. “Huh.”

“Where are we?”

“Because—and I know I’m going out on a limb here—it sure as fuck looked like you knew something. You know, based on how you had your little dissociative break.”

“Yeah.” I dry-washed my face. “Sorry about that.”

“I don’t want sorry. I want—” He stopped himself. “I want you to be ok. And then, as quickly as possible, I want to know the rest of it.”

I nodded. Then I opened the door and got out of the Tesla. The air smelled cool and slightly damp under the redwoods, like cedar and coastal clouds and freshly broken duff. We were parked on an asphalt pad. A fenced enclosure at one end held a pair of dumpsters. At the other end, a narrow turnout connected

to more asphalt, but whatever was out there was hidden by a screen of densely planted dwarf spruce. When I got to the end of the pad, I stopped and stared.

Below me, a small campus spread out among the trees. The buildings were small, with asphalt-shingle roofs and plywood siding painted brown—like cabins at a summer camp, or maybe a religious retreat. Albeit, I thought as I continued to examine the campus, a church retreat with money. A hardscaped stream ran between the buildings. At one end of the campus a baseball diamond looked brand new, and at the other end, a winterized pool waited for warmer weather. A sign proclaimed this the TeamGrow Camp and Conference Center.

“I turned our phones off,” Emmett said. “I figured we needed a place to lie low, considering someone is trying to kill us, and that someone might be my parents.”

I shot him a look.

His mouth quirked in that familiar, sardonic non-smile. “They did send us up here, after all.”

“Your parents aren’t trying to kill you.”

“No, that’s too low even for them. Institutionalizing me with a bunch of murderers and drugging me on antipsychotics so I can’t interrupt Mom’s swim lessons, that’s absolutely as low as they’ll go.” He hugged himself and angled his body away from me. When I touched his back, he quivered and wiped his face with his sleeves, and he let me pull him against me for half a second before drawing away again. “So,” and his words were still choppy, “what’s with the whole disappearing Jim act?”

I shook my head. “Your parents weren’t behind this. Why don’t we call them? Maybe they can help us figure out what happened.”

“They already put me in the loony bin once, Jim. What do you think they’re going to do if I ask them why they’re trying to kill me? And the same thing will happen if we call Sam Lockett; whether he was involved with that shitshow or not, the first thing he’ll do is call my parents. We can’t call anybody. Not yet.”

“Your parents aren’t—”

“It was something to do with that guy, right? The one who blew up the cabin and, when that didn’t work, decided shooting us with his rifle was an acceptable alternative.”

Bolt’s face floated in front of me. The younger face. Then, superimposed, the older one. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything right now.” I took a few more steps, looking around us. “Are we the only ones here?”

Emmett’s mouth tightened for a moment, but he said, “There’s a big *Closed* sign on a chain across the driveway. Of course, you can pull around it, so it’s not that effective.” He tugged on the cuffs of his sleeves, pretending to look at them, and then he said, “You know what the question is, right? The question is, why didn’t he blow the house up when we were all inside? Why wait until we’d gotten out? And why try to shoot us after? That’s what I don’t understand. If he wanted to kill us, ok, blow the house up. When that doesn’t work, shoot us. But if he didn’t want to kill us, if blowing the house up is supposed to scare us, then why take a shot? And were we the targets? Or was he trying to get Aimee and Lelah? Was he working with the Solars, and if so—”

“Stop!” The word rang out in the stillness, and when it faded, the creek’s babble rushed into the silence. I chafed my arms and tried for a smile. “That’s more than one question.”

“Ok. Here’s one question, then: what are we going to do?”

I shook my head.

“Quit standing there shaking your fucking head at me. I got us here. I bought us some time. We can’t go home if someone’s trying to kill us. We can’t go to any of our usual places. So, here, I solved a problem. Now I’d like some creative fucking input if that’s not too much to ask, considering I’ve got no fucking idea what to do!”

Circles of color filled his cheeks, and the last few words were a shout. I stared at him. Then I looked away. In the distance, the rustle of pine needles, the snap of a branch—some animal getting away. Take me with you, I thought, and I had to tamp down a wild laugh.

“Great. This is fucking great, Jimbo.” He waited a moment longer; he was twenty, and although he’d seen a lot more in his life than most twenty-year-olds, he was asking me for help. When I couldn’t give it to him, a mangled growl escaped him, and he stalked toward the conference center. Without looking back, he shouted, “I’ve got the keys, so you’re stuck with me.”

I stood there for a while because I didn’t know what else to do. Then I started down toward the conference center. I didn’t have anywhere in mind; I walked aimlessly, needing to move, to warm my body. The day was still chilly in the mountains, even with the sun past its zenith, and it would only get colder. I’d made it as far as the stream when, several buildings over, a door slammed. It sounded like a gunshot, and adrenaline rushed through me, my whole body turning to pins and needles as my heart raced.

I walked some more, trying to work the hormones out of my system. I paced the diamond on the baseball field. I checked out the swimming pool. Even drained, it held a faint hint of chlorine

and wet canvas. When the breeze came off the mountain, the pool covering drew taut and hummed.

Breaking and entering was the technical term, but there wasn't much breaking involved. The doors were ancient, and the latches were just as old; a hard bump with my hip was all it took to pop one free from the jamb, and then I was inside.

I started with the largest building, which turned out to be a combination of dining hall and multipurpose room. It had yellow wood and stone accents and a hint of boiled starches. At the far end, a stage with red curtains waited for this year's performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Stainless steel roll-up doors covered the kitchen pass-throughs.

The kitchen itself was what I expected from too many years of public education and summer camp. Everything had clearly been designed to meet two criteria: volume and cost. The nicked and dented countertops, the battered gas ranges, the industrial ovens with blackened glass—they were all clean, and they all looked dirty, which was the classic condition of a place like this. The smell of powdered gravy and high-sodium meats stained the air. Someone had been in here—I was hoping it was Emmett—because a half-eaten ice cream sandwich lay on the counter, still melting. I threw it away and checked the pantry, then the walk-in refrigerator, then the freezer. Canned chili, mixed vegetables, instant potatoes. Plenty of ice cream sandwiches. Plenty of popsicles. As long as they didn't cut the gas or the electric, we could live up here for six months—or until Emmett murdered me.

I let myself out the back, where the asphalt road ended in a concrete pad, obviously meant for deliveries. I sat. I balled up my fists and pressed them over my eyes until I saw colors, and I breathed through my nose. I told myself you can only spend so

much time feeling sorry for yourself, but that didn't help, so I had to give myself a deadline. I counted down from a hundred, and then I made myself get up.

I spotted him between two buildings. He was sitting next to the creek, knees drawn up to his chest. For some reason, he'd taken off his shoes. I changed course, angling between the buildings, coming up on him from the side. He hadn't seen me, or if he had, he gave no sign of it. His face was relaxed, open, almost transparent. The light haloed each strand of spiky dark hair. It found the hollow of his cheek. It rode the ridge of his jaw.

“There's a number you can call if creepy old men stare at you.”

I smiled. He didn't, of course. “Can I sit down?”

“First ‘literally,’ now ‘can.’ I think you're slipping.”

“I'm going to sit down. If you're planning on stabbing me, maybe you could wait until I finish apologizing.”

He made a noise that could have meant anything, and he trailed his fingers in the creek and watched the water.

“So, first of all, I'm sorry. I hope that's obvious, but it's still important to say—what happened to your arm?”

“It's still important to say, ‘What happened to your arm?’ Haven't heard that one before.”

I got onto my knees and reached for his elbow, but Emmett pulled his arm out of reach and leveled a death ray at me. In a quiet voice, I said, “You got hurt.”

“I got shot.”

The wound was above his elbow, and he'd tied a crude bandage around it—gauze from the first aid kit we kept in the

Tesla. Probably while I'd been comatose or in a fugue state or whatever had happened to me. The gauze was soaked through with blood, but it didn't appear to be bleeding now.

"Not that you noticed," Emmett said drily.

I counted to five in my head. Then, trying to control my voice, I said, "May I please see your arm?"

"After. I want to hear you finish groveling."

It shouldn't have made me smile. It should have been off-putting; for much of the time I'd known him, it had been mildly enraging to hear him talk to people that way, over and over again, and watch ninety percent of them still fall over themselves trying to make him happy. Like you, a voice in my head said. Like you're doing right now. But then I'd started to hear the gradations. The differences in tone. The shadow of mocking self-awareness that hung behind all of it. Vie had obviously figured it out much more quickly, but then, I'm an idiot, and Vie's a psychic.

"Let's see. Have I said I'm sorry?"

He held up one finger.

"Only once? All right. I'm sorry."

"For?"

"Talking to you that way. Shutting down. Putting us in danger. Almost getting us killed."

"Did you throw away my ice cream sandwich?"

"For throwing away your ice cream sandwich."

He knitted his brows.

"I'm really sorry," I said. "I'm super-duper sorry."

"I haven't heard any groveling."

“Will you please forgive me? I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve you. You saved our lives, and you kept your cool, and you figured out the perfect place for us to hide while we get back on our feet, and you did all of that while people were trying to kill us. You’re the single most amazing human who has ever existed.”

“So, this is a joke?”

I hesitated, a half-smile. “You’re the one who insisted on groveling—”

“Not talking to me.”

The pebbles in the hardscape were cutting into my hands and knees. I shifted my weight.

“That’s what I want an apology for.” Emmett drew himself up. “You can be scared. You can shut down. You can tell me to fuck off when you need me to fuck off. But you can’t shut me out.”

I thought about his parents, who had locked him away. I thought about Vie, who had broken his heart.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes.”

He was breathing too fast. His eyes held the light the way the creek held the light.

I crawled closer and pulled him into a hug. He tried to fight it—a push to my chest that was almost a punch. Then he let himself be drawn in, his body coiled tight, the muscles in his back knotted. “I’m sorry,” I said into his hair.

When we separated, his eyes were red, and he ran his hand under them and looked away.

“His name is Bolt.” Emmett’s head whipped back, and I met his gaze. “Can I tell you while I look at your arm?”

So, we moved to the kitchen, and I washed my hands and gloved up. The wound was barely more than a scratch, but it had come from a bullet, and I wanted to be sure it was taken care of properly.

“You know him?” Emmett asked. He was sitting on the stainless-steel countertop. He hadn’t put on his shoes, and his socks were gray from washing. His heels bounced lightly, almost silently, off the cabinets below him. “The guy who shot at us?”

I ran water from the tap and held Emmett’s arm under it. “He’s the one who took me.”

“Took you—” He stopped. “But—I mean—Jim—”

“That was thirty years ago?” I asked, trying to make my voice light.

“Well, yeah.”

I nodded.

You were supposed to rinse a wound for five to ten minutes. The clock on my phone had passed five when Emmett said, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly. Do you want me to talk about it?”

“Can I be honest?”

I looked at him.

To his credit, Emmett blushed, and his real smile, the one that didn’t quite go all the way because of the nerve damage, the one that was totally uncool and verging on goofy, appeared. “Fuck off,” he said, and we both laughed.

The laughter broke the last of the tension that I hadn't realized had still hung between us. I wetted a piece of gauze and cleaned the wound as gently as I could. Fresh blood pinkened the water, and Emmett made an annoyed noise. He made it again when I tightened my grip. "Don't move," I said. "And yes, of course I want you to be honest."

He hissed when I applied a little more pressure. "Jesus Christ, Jimothy!"

"All done." I patted it dry with clean gauze and dug around in the kit for the antibiotic ointment. After spreading a thin layer over the wound, I wrapped it in gauze, taped it, and said, "How does it feel?"

Emmett flexed his arm and made a face, but he gave me a thumbs-up. Then he said, "I guess I kind of—kind of want you to talk about it. But not if you're not ready. I mean, I get it. I don't want to talk about—" He raised a hand, as though he might touch the scars on his face, and then dropped it again. "—my thing."

"I was six," I said. "My mom let us walk to the C-store. I was going to get a Snickers, but I told my brother I wasn't going to share with him, so he didn't come with me. Bolt didn't do anything special. He pulled up next to me in a van, threw me in the back, and kept driving. It took a minute, maybe. There was nobody else on that road for a mile in either direction; you know how Wyoming is." I drew a breath. "We know now that Lady Buckhardt was trying to create a psychic, someone like Vie who could bridge this world and the other. But at the time, I was a kid, and I was scared, and I didn't know why she was hurting me, what she wanted from me. The first time I called fire, though, I could see her disgust. She did what she did with most of her failures; she put me in Belshazzar's Feast."

Emmett was smart; he didn't need me to fill in the rest of it. He knew what the Feast had been, what they had done to the children they'd taken, what men and women had paid to do to those children.

"I escaped," I said. "Burned a man completely by accident, and while he was howling, I made a break for it. It was luck. Or maybe they let me go. I don't know. I found a highway. Someone picked me up, an older couple. They called the police. I couldn't tell anyone how to find the Feast. That's probably a good thing, in hindsight, knowing what we do about how far Lady Buckhardt's influence stretched with law enforcement. I probably would have disappeared again, or had an accident, or something. Anyway, they put me back with my parents. That was that."

Face screwed up, Emmett was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Why don't you have a scar?"

A laugh escaped me. I unbuttoned my flannel and rucked up my undershirt. Then I took his hand and brought it to my chest. After a moment, I slid his fingers lower.

"I was six, and kids heal fast, and my mom didn't want me to scar. But you can still feel them. You can see them, too, but you have to know where to look." I hesitated, and then I said, "John Bolt didn't take me straight to Lady Buckhardt."

The confusion in Emmett's eyes darkened to fury. His fingers flexed against my chest, scraping lightly.

"It's ok," I said. "It was a long time ago, and I'm fine now." I laughed again, but it didn't come out quite right. "Mostly fine. What I don't like is that I let it affect me now, in the present. You're the most important thing in the world to me, Emmett. That's the past. That's a long time ago, and it's over, and it's done, and I don't care about it. I care about you. And I can't believe I

didn't know you'd been hurt. I can't believe I let myself get so—so freaked out—”

“Jim, they took you!” Emmett must have wanted to say something else; his words had the quality of screeching brakes, as though he'd barely stopped himself. “You don't have to apologize for anything.” He was crying again, mopping his eyes with the sleeve of his hoodie. “God, I can't even imagine.”

I brushed at his hair. “It's ok. You don't have to carry all that; that's why I don't tell people.”

“Of course I'm going to—to feel something, Jim. I love you. Like, sickening, disgusting, puppy-dog levels of love. I want to die knowing someone did that to you.” He was crying harder now, wiping his eyes with both sleeves. “Or better yet, I want to kill those motherfuckers.”

I shushed him. I chafed his thighs and made noises to calm him.

I don't know if he noticed first or if I did, but I heard the change in his breathing when I ran the heel of my hand over his erection.

“That's so messed up,” he said. “That's not about what they did to you or about—about anything, but I'm feeling a lot of feelings right now, and, like, pretty much every time you touch me—”

I shushed him again. Then, hooking my thumbs in his waistband, I yanked him toward me, and I found his mouth with mine.

5 | EMMETT

The nice thing about sleeping with a pyromancer—which was a word I'd picked up from those YA novels I definitely did not check out with Jim's library card—was that you could be buck naked on a vinyl-covered mattress in an unheated cabin, and you still wouldn't be cold.

Another nice thing, not to be too pervy, is that sex was definitely a different experience when the other guy's body was significantly warmer than yours. Everywhere.

One problem that sleeping with pyromancers did not solve, however, was that a twin XL bunk bed remained a twin XL bunk bed. I guess if Jim could manipulate time and space, he'd be the total package, but I was still pretty happy with what I got.

We lay together in the gloom. The vinyl stuck to my bare skin, and the cabin smelled like dust and the aftermath of sex. I was playing little spoon, which I honestly didn't mind—it was like being snuggled by an electric blanket—but I still had to point out to Jim that I was technically taller. If he didn't work for it, where was the fun?

I wasn't sure how long I'd slept, but the sun had already dropped behind the mountains, and dusk gathered in the folds of land between the peaks. Chin to my shoulder, Jim was still snoring softly. The sex had been...intense. That was the best word for it. Cathartic, maybe, too. Jim had been rougher than usual. Scorch marks in the kitchen showed where he'd lost

control—which happened a fair amount of the time anyway, so it was nice that I had a built-in shield to avoid having my dick baked into a charcoal briquette. At times, it had seemed like he was still somewhere else. That elsewhere. Or when, I guess. Thirty years ago, if you rounded up.

I traced the faint blond hair on his arm. It seemed to hold the last light of day, glittering as I brushed it across his skin. The vastness of what I didn't know waited for me. It was like the dusk pouring into the cabin: dissolving the corners first, then the walls, until any hint of line or boundary was gone. What I didn't know, I was starting to realize, was everything.

Why had he stayed in Vehpese? That was one of the big ones. Why hadn't he told me? Why hadn't he told anyone? I thought I knew part of the answers; everything Jim did, give or take, was about taking care of other people. He wouldn't have told me today if I hadn't pressed him, because he knew how I'd take it. Had known what it would do to me.

But I had other questions too. One of them I had to grope for in the dark, unsure of how to put it into words, half-afraid to use the wrong ones. Was he ok? I wanted to laugh; instead, I bit the inside of my mouth until I tasted blood, and tears made the shadows swim. Of course he wasn't ok. How not-ok was he? When he went away, did he know how to come back? Did he know how to handle it?

With Vie, I thought, turning my face into the vinyl—which was shit for wiping away tears—with Vie, it had been cutting.

Jim made a soft noise. His body moved around mine. His arm tightened across my belly. He shifted his arm under my head. His breath was like summer against my ear. Then he settled again.

I had learned a long time ago how to cry without waking anyone up.

Sleep came for me by inches, and then, at the end, all at once.

I didn't realize I was awake—or, at least, not unconscious—for the first few disorienting moments. I stood in a dark place, and around me, I sensed echoes: the sound of my breathing coming back to me. Then other breaths, and I knew I wasn't alone.

“Dreamwalkers are rare.” The voice was soft, almost campy, and it was hard to pin down immediately as either male or female. “I'm afraid I'm using my last one up. I tell you so you'll understand how seriously I take this, and I hope that you'll appreciate his sacrifice.”

When I turned again, I saw him. Or maybe her. And then I realized it was intentional: them. They were short, and they had that exaggerated slenderness that some boys and girls carry throughout high school. The longer I looked, though, I realized they weren't young—just small and thin. They had olive skin warmed by the sun, and they wore their pink hair in a French crop. Their black top was loose, with more zippers than anyone could actually use, and the black pants were some kind of tech fabric that went with the Adidas running shoes. Their eyes, though, were orange.

I had met creatures with orange eyes before. A few of them, actually. Someone had told me they called themselves wanderers, but that didn't come close to their true nature. Pain, suffering, chaos. That's what they loved. And now, fuck of all fucks, I had to deal with another one.

They came toward me, and the sound of their steps echoed in that black, nowhere space.

That was when I realized I was still naked.

“Sounds serious,” I said. “Let me throw on a pair of pants.”

They smiled, and a dimple appeared. “I was told that you have a sense of humor.”

“I’m fucking hilarious. Have you ever heard the one about the dreamwalker who fucked around with my nap?”

They stopped a few feet away from me and studied me.

“Let me guess,” I said. “I’m talking to the Rey Solar, or whatever you want to call yourself.”

They nodded. “Indigo, if you like. This is a courtesy.”

“Yeah, yeah, ‘and I hope you appreciate it.’” The name struck a chord, but I couldn’t remember where I’d heard it. I studied them. “Why do you all look different?”

“Members of my court are encouraged to dress in a style befitting—”

“No, you. The wanderers, or whatever you call yourselves. I met one who was a real pioneer-level bitch. And one who was playing suburban mommy. And Adonai thinks he’s rocking the aged-out punk surfer look. And you’re, what? An art kid? You should get a few piercings to sell it.”

If anything, they looked more closely at me. No, not at me. At my scars.

“You wouldn’t believe how many times I’ve had to say this,” I told them. “Looking is free, but touching is going to cost you.”

“Remarkable. Do you know what you are?”

“Jim says I’m wasting my potential because I’m afraid of moving on with my life. Well, he doesn’t say it directly, but he did

talk a lot about ‘this kid’ at ‘my school,’ and it was so embarrassing I had to spend the next three days stoned.”

“A masterpiece, that’s what. The precision that went into this awakening. The control. I’m not familiar with several of these chakras, and I’m not sure I could—” They stopped. “A work of art.”

“That’s another thing I don’t get. You and Adonai act like you’ve never seen anything like this before. Granted, some of the ones from your court can throw some whammy around, and some of the Shadow Nest can too, but they seem like flukes. Most of the ones I’ve met are total duds.”

“Do you know what we are?” they asked, and for a moment, that orange light flared. “Truly, I mean. Our natures.”

“You like to fuck shit up.”

“We are not from here; that is why we call ourselves wanderers. Our home is a place of wildness. Freedom. Change.”

“So, what? This is a vacation?”

“This is a prison. There is a war—was a war, perhaps.” Their voice softened and sounded almost wistful. “It has been a long time. We were tricked, trapped.”

“Maybe you should call yourselves the prisoners, then.”

They made a noncommittal noise.

“So, what?”

“Your companion. Do you know everything he knows? Can you do everything he does?”

“He makes a heck of a PB and J.”

“We are different, the way all things are different. Some of us are greater. Some are lesser. Some, the oldest, have knowledge

that others do not. The awakenings, for example. Adonai can quiet the awakened. My gifts lie in other directions.”

I wasn’t sure what *quiet the awakened* meant, but I remembered last year, when Adonai had done something to weaken our abilities. The only reason we’d survived that fight was because Vie had provided artillery support.

“All right,” I said, “lay it on me. Your big plan to get free from this plane of existence, or whatever you call it. Let me guess: to do it, you have to sacrifice Lelah or Aimee or some shit like that.”

“Let me ask you. What do you want?”

I stared at them.

“You are young. You come from a good family. You have money, opportunities. What do you want?”

My throat felt dry. When I drew a breath, I smelled something that made me think of churches. Incense—my brain filled in the word a moment later.

“Watching TV, jerking off, and eating pizza rolls for the next thirty or forty years sounds pretty good. And I guess washing my hands in between numbers two and three.”

They smiled. “It was this way with many of us when we fell. Despair takes different forms. To face tragedy and not know what will come next. To believe that the end has come, and that no effort of yours can change the future.” Their smile faded. “Some of us found things here, in this world, that were worth living and fighting for. Some of us cling to a fantasy of returning home. Some of us have...diminished.”

“Now’s when you fill in your master plan.”

“No, Emmett.” It was the first time they’d said my name, and it had a faint reverberation like church bells. “I do not want to return home. This is my home now. These are my people. The Court is my only concern.”

“That’s interesting. Where does kidnapping two women fit into your concern for the Solar Court?”

“Simple: they are pawns of the Shadow Nest, and so I remove them. Adonai’s pet senator is neutralized.” A surprisingly genuine grin flashed. “Your face. I did not kill them. Think of chess: I take, I capture. They are removed from the board.” They watched me and said, “Did you think it was chance that you were lured there, where Adonai would have killed you? The war has weakened him, but he will not forget your interference last year. He will try again to kill you.”

And my parents, I thought. Where do they fit in? But what I said was, “It wasn’t chance that we ended up at that house, but—what? It was coincidence you showed up there the same day?”

“Of course not. We couldn’t be sure what your intentions were; it was possible that you had been recruited to protect them. I decided to act first.”

“Then your timing was shit.”

“You should be grateful. If my court had not intervened, you would have died in that explosion.”

“Uh huh, that’s me. Super grateful.” I scratched my throat. “Let me guess: this is where you tell me nicely to fuck off and mind my own business, or else.”

“I have no plans to harm the women.”

“Some people would say holding them hostage counts as harm.”

Indigo waved the words away. “The situation is complicated. In time—a few months—the pressures on my court will resolve themselves. Then I will bring my full strength to bear against Adonai and the Shadow Nest. When they are nothing, I will return the women; I will have no further use for them.”

“So, that’s it? You and Adonai finish your turf war, and everybody goes home happy.” They smiled, and I corrected myself: “Everyone except Adonai.”

Their smile grew bigger, and they shrugged.

“What’s the big deal? Don’t say something lame like, ‘California’s not big enough for the two of us.’ Why are you and Adonai trying to kill each other? He’s your kind, and there can’t be that many of you wanderers.”

“I told you, some of us diminish. Adonai is one such.”

“You mean he’s not as strong? Or the people of his court are not as strong? Because they’re about the same as yours.”

Indigo shook their head. “His...mind, for lack of a better word. He breeds chaos; that is his only love. You’ve heard about the explosions?”

“What explosions?” And then, “The suicide bomber?”

“More than one, although the others have been explained as gas leaks, or planned demolition, or other ridiculous stories. My people.” Indigo’s voice hardened. “Mine. Mortals from my court turned into living weapons. And then he releases them, and they come home, and—” For a moment, frustration slipped into their voice, and the mask slipped. “And now, of all times, the cartels press north—” They stopped, visibly grappling with their fury. In a tight voice, they said, “I have explained myself beyond any reasonable expectation. Now I will have your word to leave this

matter alone. When Adonai is defeated, we will all return to our lives the way they should be.”

“Yeah,” I drawled, “no.”

Indigo stared.

“No way I’m letting you hang on to those women for—you said months? But it might be years. It might be forever. You’ve thought you had Adonai whipped before, and he came back and handed you your ass. No, sorry. No deal. Let the women go, and you won’t have to deal with me and Jim fucking up your goon squad.”

I waited for the explosion: the ranting, the raging, the threats. But Indigo only drew a breath, squared their shoulders, and closed their eyes. When they opened again, orange light fell on me.

“Then consider this: join us, and I will release the women.” I opened my mouth, but before I could speak, Indigo continued, “No harm will come to either of you. I will study the working, of course. I will learn how you were awakened. But you will be treated like princes of the court. I will give you what your hearts most desire. For you, your face.”

The smell of incense was cloying. For a moment, I couldn’t breathe.

“Motherfucker, I earned these scars.”

Indigo nodded. “But aren’t you tired of wearing them? No mortal can offer you what I do: to be whole again, unblemished. And for your companion, knowledge. Or if he wishes, revenge. The man John Bolt. He serves Adonai now—and I will tell you that this came at no small cost, but Adonai sought him out. He is determined to make you pay for your insolence.”

Church bells echoed in my ears. It was harder than I liked to say, “No.”

“You are angry,” Indigo said. “And frightened. I will come to you again.”

The dream ended like a popped bubble. I sat up, knocking Jim’s arm aside. The cabin was dark except for a sliver of moonlight through the shutters, and the sweat on my back and shoulders was freezing. I shivered and pressed my hands over my mouth. I was aware, maybe more than ever, of the ridges of scar tissue under my palm.

“Emmett?” Jim mumbled. His hand curved along my spine, and I felt the change in his body. He sat up. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

I told him.

“Bolt?” was the first word out of Jim’s mouth. Shadows filled the hollows of his eyes, and in the darkness, he was more an impression of heat and bone than anything else. “They said they could tell me about Bolt?”

“Jim, they were lying. Or trying to trick us. Or—” *to be whole again, unblemished.* The words stuck in my throat. “They were lying.”

It took a moment too long for Jim to say, “Right.”

We sat in that silence. Jim rubbed my back, and when I couldn’t stop shivering, he pulled me into the vee of his legs.

“We can’t leave them,” Jim said softly. “I won’t leave them. What do you want to do?”

I shook my head. In spite of sleeping earlier that day, I felt exhausted. When Jim touched my nape, I felt myself starting to dissolve into tears. Instead, I said, “What do I want to do? Shit,

Jim. I want to find a five-star hotel, eat steak and lobster in bed, and fuck our brains out between episodes of *Below Deck*.”

He laughed brokenly into my shoulder, and I reached back to card his hair.

“What are we going to do?” he asked. “We’ve got to find them, I guess.”

“Actually, I’ve got an idea about that.”

6 | JIM

“It’d be nice,” Emmett said, “if they could try not to be so fucking on the nose.”

Below us, Mission San Elredo glowed in the moonlight. Like most of the California missions, it was a cruciform church of whitewashed adobe. The walls were plain and unadorned, with the exception of the occasional cross or narrow window. At night, the old tile roof was lumpy with shadows, and the belfry loomed over everything else. The church had been built on an east-west axis to take advantage of sunlight, and behind the church, sunken patches of ground and a few simple slabs marked the graveyard. A stone wall, probably a foot or two taller than Emmett or me, surrounded a plaza attached to the side of the church, where an arcade provided access to storerooms.

“I mean, they already have that whole Spanish vibe going, calling themselves the Rey Solar and the Solar Court and all that. And then they pick an old mission as their hideout.”

It hadn’t exactly been rocket science to figure it out. The year before, Adonai had approached Emmett in a dream, and he’d used clues from the dreamwalk to guess—or try to guess—where we were. Emmett had described to me the details he’d noticed during his conversation with Indigo: the echoing space, the church bells, the smell of incense.

“There are other churches around San Elredo, you know,” I said—mostly because the hardest job of being with Emmett was

keeping him from getting a big head. “We still don’t know—”

Emmett pointed to a cloud of darkness coming around the side of the mission. “Now, that’s just lazy.”

“God damn it,” I said.

I couldn’t actually see the woman inside the cloud of darkness, but it was impossible to miss her. It was night, true, and the shadows were thick around the mission. Even so, the cloud of darkness looked like a drop of ink in a glass of fresh water. Cleofás had called her Georgia, and she’d been responsible for the shadows that had blinded us at Lelah and Aimee’s cabin. She must have thought the same trick would help hide her as she patrolled the churchyard, but anyone who stood still for a minute or two and paid attention would spot her immediately.

She continued her path along the side of the mission, cut diagonally across the graveyard, and stopped along the plaza wall. A door opened, and a rectangle of yellow light broke the darkness. It wasn’t clear what she was doing—checking something, reporting in, looking for the restroom—but after a moment, she moved on again. After another minute, the blob of darkness disappeared around the plaza wall.

“Try to step where I step,” I said to Emmett.

He nodded.

“And not on every fallen branch and loose rock you can find.”

“Sorry, Jimbo. I’m sorry my dad didn’t take me hunting every weekend—”

“We’re trying to be quiet, remember?”

Glaring at me, he shoved me to get me started.

We made our way down the face of the hill. The chaparral and scrub oak provided some cover, but not much—on a clear night, like tonight, anyone glassing the slope would pick us out. That meant balancing speed with quiet. Where the brush didn't cover the ground, the litter of branches and dead leaves was thick, which slowed us even further. A recent shower had left the air smelling like wet vegetation, and within a few minutes of starting, my clothes were wet and heavy. Emmett swore a steady stream. Not out loud, of course, but I could hear him anyway.

When we reached the bottom of the hill, I halted. Ahead, the ground became uneven where graves had sunken in on themselves, creating depressions and shallow pits. Perfect for breaking your ankle, say, if you didn't crack your shin or trip over the few small, weathered stone markers. The first twenty yards would leave us completely exposed—there was no cover until we reached the deeper shadows cast by the church. I listened, but we were on the coast, and the only sound was the wind and the waves. Nodding at Emmett, I motioned for him to follow. Then I ran.

Twenty yards doesn't sound like much, but when you're trying not to trip and fall, literally, into a grave, and when you're fighting the urge to check to see if a trained killer is coming at you, it feels a lot longer. The grass was soft and springy underfoot. Emmett ran at my side, his face focused but without any particular strain. Of course. He was one of those people who could spend all day, every day, popping chips in his mouth and watching junk TV, and then one morning decide he wanted to run a marathon—and do it.

Ten yards.

Five.

As we passed into the relative darkness of the church's shadow, I grabbed Emmett and slowed him. Sweat froze on the back of my neck, and my heart pounded in that pleasant way when your body is warm and limber and ready to work. I picked a path between the headstones and the depressions, letting my eyes adjust. We were approaching the plaza wall when a voice rose over the sound of the wind and the surf. I changed course, dragging Emmett toward the corner formed by the back of the church and the plaza wall. He stumbled and swore under his breath, and a moment later, we were huddled against stone and stucco, trying to make ourselves as small as possible. I put my hand on Emmett's nape and turned his face down, and then I looked down, limiting my vision to the ground in front of us and a narrow strip beyond.

The cloud of darkness bobbed into view, and Georgia's words became clearer. "—ought to have a full night's sleep, that's what I should have told them, let one of the young ones do it, like Silva, why doesn't Silva have to do anything, and me with my corns—"

She stopped abruptly, and I held my breath. Emmett tensed too, the muscles in the back of his neck tightening under my hand. I did a mental check. Neither of us was wearing anything bright or shiny, although we weren't exactly dressed for tactical operations. The mistake most people made was keeping their heads up; humans had evolved to identify faces, and for a couple of white boys like me and Emmett, that much exposed skin had a chance of showing in the shadows. I strained my eyes, trying to track her without raising my head, but I could only see the bottom of her cloud of darkness.

Why had she stopped? Had she seen us? Was she staring at us right now? Trying to decide whether to call for Cleofás? Or lining up a shot? Flop sweat dampened the cotton under my

arms. My breathing sounded too loud, too raspy for her not to hear it.

“What the heck am I doing?” she said in that low mumble, and then she started moving again.

I counted to ten and raised my head a few inches. The darkness drifted along the plaza wall. It obscured my view of what happened next, but I saw the door open again, the yellow light framed the opening. Then the door shut, and Georgia’s cloud of darkness moved on.

Emmett was trembling.

She passed around the corner of the plaza again, and I counted to ten and squeezed Emmett’s neck. He threw me a sidelong look, shook himself once, and slapped my knee.

There was only one door in the plaza wall, which meant we knew which one Georgia had stopped twice to check. It was an old door, clearly part of the original structure, the paint flaking. A hole in the wood suggested where a chain could be run to hold it closed, but there was no sign of a chain or lock. I stood still and listened. My blood buzzed in my ears. After a full minute, I tested the handle, and it turned easily. The air flexed slightly as Emmett brought up his shield, and he nodded. I pushed the door open.

Warm light made me blink as my eyes adjusted. Then I could make out the naked bulb hung overhead—clearly an aftermarket addition to the old church. I did a quick check and then motioned Emmett to follow, and I shut the door behind him. The chain and lock lay on the floor below us. Someone had cut the lock’s shackle.

“Dumbass,” Emmett said. “That’s why she keeps checking the door; they fucked up the lock on their way in.”

I nodded and took a few steps in either direction along the arcade, listening and trying to see into the darkness. We stood inside the plaza—well, technically, inside the arcade that ran along its perimeter. The only light came from this solitary bulb. My guess was that the church had installed it at some point because of the door that led to the graveyard. A security measure, maybe. Or maybe to keep old priests from tripping on the uneven sandstone walkway. Farther along the arcade, where the light thinned, outlines suggested doorways. Workshops and storage rooms, most likely, from when the mission had been the hub of nascent San Elredo. The plaza itself was bare earth.

We had agreed to start with the plaza and the storerooms for two reasons: first, it would be easier to escape if things went wrong (easier, anyway, than being trapped inside the church itself); and second, because I was guessing that the Solar Court would want to keep their prisoners somewhere out of sight. Most people, even people who had been trained to kill, were not psychopaths or sociopaths. It made them uncomfortable, believe it or not, to hold another living being captive. So, psychologically, it would be easier to put them in a dark room and not think about them.

All my brilliant deductions, though, went out the window when someone screamed.

Emmett appeared at my side, his shield barely perceptible at the edge of my senses: a hum, or a vibration—something that vanished as soon as I turned my attention to it. The scream came again, longer this time and rising.

“Aimee,” Emmett said.

He turned and jogged toward the sound.

When I caught up with him, I managed to slow him to a walk, and we moved together along the arcade. The darkness

grew as we left that solitary lightbulb behind, and in the darkness, my other senses seemed sharpened: the sound of the wind skipping along the tiles, the smell of olive oil and dry rot and mouse droppings, the flush in my face and throat as my body pumped a fresh round of adrenaline through me. We stopped at darkened doorways and listened.

Then she screamed again.

The room was set into the corner of the arcade, and the door was set at an angle that made it impossible to see from our approach—which was why we didn't see the light until we were right outside the door. Aimee was still screaming, and now, over her, Lelah was shouting, "Stop it! Stop! I'll do whatever you want! Please, stop!"

Aimee's screams cut off into gulping, panting breaths of someone trying to draw air through a barrage of tears.

"We can stop."

I didn't recognize the high voice, but Emmett stiffened next to me. He shot me a look, and his mouth moved in a whisper: "Indigo."

Before I could process what the head of the Solar Court was doing here—in this tiny mission, far from their power base in San Diego, with only a skeleton crew to protect them—Indigo spoke again.

"We can stop whenever you want. We don't have to do this."

Aimee cried harder.

"Please," Lelah begged. "Please let her go. I can help you. I can be useful. My husband—"

"I can't work with her like this," Indigo said. "I will draw from you."

“My king.”

I'd heard the second voice before—the one called Menfis, the one who had done something to hypnotize Lelah and Aimee. He let out a pained noise.

“That’s enough,” Indigo said. Lelah and Aimee’s crying slowed. “Yes, you don’t need to be so upset. Calm down. There, isn’t that better? Now, be a good girl. Don’t you want to be a good girl for me?”

Labored breathing was the only answer.

“I asked you a question,” Indigo said. “Don’t you want to be strong? Don’t you want to be brave?”

Aimee started to cry again—small, broken noises that were unlike the agonized sobs from moments before.

The scuff of rubber on stone made me glance over my shoulder. Another of the Solars was coming toward us—this one was Roman, the one who had thrown the knives. He’d ditched the wide-lapelled suit jacket, and he was toying with his mustache, his face set in a frown. I shot Emmett a look, but his expression was blank. No, not blank. The opposite, actually—full of so much that it looked snowed out. Emotional static.

I grabbed Emmett and hustled him around the corner of the arcade, toward the next door. It was chained shut, like most of the others, but we flattened ourselves in the doorway.

A moment later, hinges creaked, and Roman said, “Apologies, my king.”

“Speak.”

“Georgia believes we are compromised.”

The rush of blood to my head made black spots dance in my vision.

“Seven hells,” Indigo said. “Where is she?”

Their steps moved off toward the church. When I couldn't hear them anymore, I took another look at Emmett. It was hard to tell in the gloom, but he looked pale.

“I'm fine,” he said.

“What happened to you? What's going on?”

He slid out of the doorway. “This is our chance.”

Emmett jogged toward the room where Aimee and Lelah were being held. The door stood open, and light fanned across the sandstone floor of the arcade. I would have told him to stop, to double check, but he was too far ahead, and he went into the room without slowing.

No shouts. No gunshots.

I reached them a moment later.

It was clearly a storeroom, with cardboard boxes stacked along one wall. There was a single window set above us, small and barred. Candles stood around the room—on the back of a chair, on a cardboard box, on a rack of shelves.

The two women were tied to chairs, and both of them slumped, their expressions vacant. In her cowl-necked sweater and ripped jeans and thigh-high boots, Lelah looked untouched, although her makeup was smeared from crying and her hair had flattened out. Aimee, on the other hand, had clearly been worked on. She'd been cut in several places—her forearm, her shoulder, her cheek. Small cuts. Random cuts. Meant to terrorize rather than cause serious damage. The burns on her face looked shiny in the candlelight, and I wondered, briefly, why they hadn't used fire. Her red eyeshadow had started to run, and her tear tracks looked like blood.

“Mrs. Lockett,” Emmett said as he knelt and began tugging on the ropes binding her arms. “We’re here to help you. We’re going to get you out of here.” He swore and yanked. “Jim!”

“Keep watch,” I said, and we traded places.

From where he stood by the door, Emmett said, “Aimee, they’re not going to hurt you again.”

That low, labored breathing was the only answer. I spared a glance from working on the knots. Lelah’s face wasn’t just expressionless; it was slack. Her eyes were half-closed, and she was breathing through her mouth.

“What’s wrong with them?” Emmett asked. “Aimee, what did they do to you? Did they give you something?”

“It’s the same thing that happened at the house,” I said. The knot came undone, and I beckoned Emmett over to finish undoing them as I switched to Aimee. “More of it, I guess. A stronger dose.”

“Fuckers,” Emmett said and yanked harder on the rope.

Aimee’s bindings took less time because now I knew what they’d done, and a minute later, we had both women untied. I got an arm around Aimee and helped her to her feet. She groaned in protest, but when I persisted, she rose unsteadily. Emmett was half-carrying Lelah, but she was upright too.

“Through the graveyard,” I said. “We just have to get to the Tesla.”

I didn’t mention that the Tesla was parked on the other side of the hill. We both knew that. We hadn’t planned on the women being drugged, barely able to walk.

I walked Aimee out of the storeroom, and someone hit me in the head.

I stumbled and lost my grip on Aimee, and I felt her fall, rag-doll style, somewhere to my left. I tried to catch my balance, but a second blow came on the heels of the first, and this one knocked me down. I rolled and scrambled, but by the time I got to my knees, Emmett was there.

He'd dropped Lelah, and now he barreled into my attacker—Menfis. The short Black man snarled as he tried to work a knife free from his belt, but Emmett clamped a hand around Menfis's, forcing the knife back into its sheath. Menfis growled and snapped his head forward. It was the kind of blow that, on anybody else, would have broken a nose and probably put the guy out of the fight for good.

Emmett, though, had his shield.

The sound of Menfis's nose breaking was audible over the sounds of their struggle, and he staggered, his eyes wide and blank as his head rebounded.

“Good idea,” Emmett grunted. He copied the move, driving his forehead into Menfis's face.

The Black man crumpled.

Emmett kicked him once in the head. Then he crouched and took the knife. He was panting when he stood, his eyes wild as he glanced around. When he saw me, he blinked, and then something unwound in his posture, and he took a longer, more normal breath.

“Ok, I don't know why that motherfucker didn't try to use his power, but—”

It was the impression of movement more than anything else—a blur in the corner of my vision, and I thought, Bird, no, bat.

Then the arcade exploded.

7 | EMMETT

The blast from the explosion threw me sideways—I'd been wearing my shield like body armor, and while that could keep me safe from most things, it didn't prevent me from getting knocked ass over teakettle.

By the time my brain had unscrambled and I was getting to my feet, Jim was next to me, hand on my elbow, setting me right.

“What the fuck?” I managed to get out before the shooting started.

I extended my shield in a half dome. A few bullets struck it, but the gunfire didn't seem to be directed at us. So, I had a few questions—like, who was shooting, and why, and more generally, what in the name of every holy fuck was going on?

The RPG—or whatever it had been—had hit the side of the arcade where we were standing. The explosion had collapsed the structure and started a fire, which meant that not only was our escape route through the graveyard blocked, but smoke was spreading everywhere. As if the darkness hadn't been bad enough. Through the smoke, muzzle flashes suggested the locations of shooters. Lots of shooters.

Another bullet hit my shield.

“A few more of those, and we're going to be naked out here.” I crouched next to Lelah and tried to get her to stand. She shook her head dreamily, but when I pressed her, she let me help her

up. Jim already had Aimee on her feet. He was staring out into the plaza.

I followed his gaze. Roman—pornstache—and Silva, the Asian girl who had countered Jim’s fire with water, were retreating slowly across the plaza. Roman held a revolver in one hand, loose at his side. Silva carried an assault rifle, and a whirling wall of water hung in front of her. Six figures in black uniforms were advancing on them, carbines slugged up against their shoulders, firing steadily—not wild sprays, but controlled, purposeful bursts.

The guns were useless. Silva’s curtain of water did something as the bullets passed through them—instead of finding their target, the bullets smacked into the ground, throwing up puffs of dirt, or clipped the arcade and sprayed chips of stone everywhere. A few of them found my shield, and the impact was different. Less powerful. Slowed by the water, I thought.

Roman didn’t have any sort of barrier or shield. With his pornstache and his brown suit, he just...moved. It should have been impossible, but it was like he knew where the bullets would be, and he simply stepped out of the way. As I watched, he brought up the revolver, the movement lazy, almost laughably unconcerned, and squeezed off a single shot.

One of the figures in black fell.

“We need to go,” I said. “Jim!”

He nodded, but then he pointed. “We’ve seen that before.”

“Seen—” And then, in the strobe of muzzle flashes, I could see what he meant: the red bear paw marking the body armor of the men and women fighting their way across the plaza. We’d been attacked by people wearing that symbol—a few months

ago, when we'd been trying to help Chloe. They'd done their best to kill us. "Shit. Come on, let's move!"

Jim nodded again, and we started toward the collapsed section of the arcade. Our only escape now was going to take us around the rubble and briefly into the field of fire. Then we could slip into the church and exit the mission from there.

A shout went up. I glanced over, and a new figure in black had joined the ones on the plaza—this one had some sort of additional insignia on her body armor, which I took to mean she was in charge. She pointed at us, and two of the soldiers—or whatever they were—turned away from Roman and Silva and opened fire.

The spray of bullets made my barrier ripple, then buckle. I grunted.

"Are you—" Jim began.

"Run!" I hauled Lelah into a stumbling jog, and Jim and Aimee lurched into place behind us.

It was hard—so much harder than running on my own. I had to balance Lelah and keep her upright, while also providing a significant portion of energy to move her at more than a walk. When we reached the rubble of the collapsed arcade, shards of sandstone shifted underfoot, and every time I stumbled, Lelah threatened to go down too. Another burst of gunfire echoed through the plaza, and every round hit my shield and caromed off into the night. I could feel the fissures spreading through the barrier. Gunsmoke came in on every breath, scratching my throat and making my head swim. The still-standing portion of the arcade opened up ahead of us, maybe ten feet away.

Lelah cried out and fell, dragging me with her.

A slab of sandstone shifted under me.

A hail of bullets ripped through my shield.

There was a sound that was kind of like an explosion but smaller—much smaller. Something wisped at the edge of my vision, a cloud rolling toward me. Gas, I thought.

Then I hit the ground, and my body responded automatically, sucking in air. I couldn't have stopped it even if I'd tried. My eyes started to burn. My nose began to sting and run. My lungs felt like they were on fire. I hacked, trying to get the gas out of me, and only managed to pull in more with every breath. If I could have put up a barrier, it might have helped—but I'd had my shield shot to shit, and I was crying too hard to see, and I was coughing so hard I couldn't stand.

In the distance, I was vaguely aware of more gunfire and shouts. A thrumming sound in the distance made me think, a heartbeat later, of a helicopter. I reached out around me, still blind with tears, trying to find Lelah. My hands scraped the fresh edges of sandstone, the powdery, sunbaked dirt.

Jim. I had to find Jim.

I turned back. Coughing and spitting and wiping snot and tears from my face, I crawled slowly, patting the ground in front of me and to either side. More dirt. More stone.

And then my hand came down on skin that was too warm to be anybody but Jim Spencer.

His hand found mine a moment later. He was coughing too, so hard that he was gagging. I tried to pull up another shield, but it was gossamer. The chopper sound was growing closer, stirring the tear gas, and I got a whiff of fresh air. Then another.

It wasn't much, but I sucked in a lungful, coughed some more, and managed to get to my feet. Jim was definitely having a worse time; when I helped him, he could stand, but his face was

a mess, and he was still coughing so hard he couldn't get out more than a few words.

“Can't,” he hacked, “see.”

I got his arm around my shoulder and tried to clear my eyes. The plaza was a blur of movement and muzzle flashes, and the sound of the chopper was right above us. The rotors spun dust and tear gas and clean night air through the arcade. A shimmering shape, I thought, was Silva and Roman—protected from the gas by a sphere of flowing water. Lelah and Aimee were being dragged across the open ground by two of the soldiers.

The helicopter began to descend. The roar of the blades grew louder. Particles of dirt stung my face. My vision was getting better, a little, so I could see when Roman stepped clear of Silva's wall of water and raised his revolver.

Under the drone of the chopper, the gunshot sounded like a firecracker.

The helicopter lurched sideways. It took me a moment to realize that somehow, impossibly, Roman had shot the pilot. Not impossibly, obviously. But a shot like that—

Air buffeted me, and the sound of the helicopter's rotors changed in pitch as it began to roll.

“Shit,” I breathed.

Holding Jim by the arm, I pulled him toward the church. More gunfire opened up, but it was directed at Roman and Silva now. Someone was shouting orders. The chopper's lights washed over the plaza and then up and away. The sound of the rotors became struggling, too high. And then the helicopter started to drop.

Ahead of us, double doors led into the church. I yanked them open and forced Jim inside.

As I pulled the doors shut, I heard the shriek of metal as the helicopter crashed. Then the boom of an explosion, muffled by the whitewashed adobe. The wall shivered once, as though it had been struck by something. And then, already filtering into the darkness, blending with the scent of incense and candle wax, the stink of burning electronics.

They had Lelah and Aimee, whoever they were.

They'd faced Silva and Roman and seemed unfazed by their abilities.

Indigo was still here, and Cleofás, and God only knew how many other Solars. With the helicopter down, I figured the battle was just getting started.

I helped Jim to the center of the nave, and we ran toward the exit, our steps echoing among the dark timbers overhead.

8 | JIM

The bottled water in the Tesla helped, and the fresh air, and time. But mostly what brought my panic under control was the confirmation that I wasn't blind. At least, not permanently.

“I can see,” I told Emmett. “Kind of.”

He didn't say anything. He opened another bottle of water and went back to washing out my eyes.

Our escape had been a nightmare—the rat-tat of gunfire behind us, the blind climb into the foothills, the maze of thorns and rough-barked chaparral as I stumbled along behind Emmett. At some point, back at the mission, people had started screaming.

Emmett hadn't said it, and neither had I, but we were both thinking it: Cleofás.

When Emmett had finished with this bottle, I said, “Give me a minute.”

He nodded—I could see that much—and sat on the Tesla's bumper next to me. I'd ditched my shirt in the hopes of keeping it dry, and when the night air kissed the water on my neck and shoulders, it felt like heaven.

“So,” Emmett said, “let's never do that again.”

I laughed. The burn in my eyes and nostrils and lungs had faded to moderate discomfort, which was a lot better than crippling agony. Emmett's breathing sounded easier too.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Ten out of ten.”

I pulled him against me and kissed his hairline.

His body was all coils and wires, metal spun and knotted.
“They took Lelah and Aimee.”

I nodded.

“Who the fuck were those fuckers?” Emmett asked.

“Whoever they are, they’re not strangers to this kind of thing.”

“You noticed that too?” Emmett asked.

I nodded again.

“What are we talking about here? Paramilitary? Special Ops? Some secret branch of the government?”

“*Men in Black?*” I asked drily.

“I don’t know that reference.”

“Yes, you do. You have the Will Smith song on your phone.”

He reared back, already putting on his outraged look.

“Emmett,” I said, “I don’t know who they are. But they’re involved, and they’re dangerous. They have serious equipment, and they’re trained, and they clearly have a plan for handling people with special abilities.”

“It didn’t help them much, did it? I mean, they couldn’t touch Silva and Roman.”

“I don’t know how hard they were trying. They wanted Lelah and Aimee, and they got them.”

“Maybe.” Emmett paused. “I put that song on there ironically.”

“Please focus.”

“I put it on there because I knew you’d like it.”

“We have no idea what we’re up against—”

“Jim, stop.” He hopped down from the bumper. “We’re not going to let them have Aimee and Lelah, right?”

“The fact is, we don’t know enough right now—”

“And you’re going to try to talk me into letting you go check it out yourself, because you want to keep me safe. Is that about the gist of it?”

We couldn’t hear the surf, not all the way up here, but I could hear the wash of blood in my ears.

“We’re going after them.” Emmett put his hands on his hips. “Both of us. Together. That’s the bottom line.”

A drop of water ran between my shoulder blades.

Emmett dropped his eyes. He slid his hands into his pockets. “Please, Jim?”

“How’s your shield?”

“Fine.”

“If you lie to me, I’ll drive you home and handcuff you to the bed.”

“Kinky.” He flashed that smile, the real one, crooked and shining and perfectly imperfect. “Now tell me I’ve been a bad boy.”

“I’m serious, Emmett.”

He kicked a rock and sent it skittering. “I can put up a shield if I have to.”

Which meant he was almost out of gas. I hadn't tapped my powers, not since the cabin, but we were both exhausted and hurting. Those stolen hours at the retreat seemed like weeks ago.

"We don't have enough information," I finally said.

"Then we do what we always do," Emmett said. He didn't smirk, but I could see it in his eyes: the thrill of having gotten his way again. "We go get some."

We drove down out of the foothills and passed the mission. The fire had spread from the arcade, and now it was climbing the belfry. Smoke made a pall against the stars. There were vehicles parked outside, but they didn't appear to be from emergency services.

"Somebody's going to show up eventually, right?" Emmett asked as we flipped around. "The fire department. Somebody."

"There's a historic church burning down and a downed helicopter and, probably, some dead people. Somebody's definitely going to show up." I drove back down the coastal road. The ocean was black and threaded with tinsel. Where it crashed against the rocks, the spume caught the light and glowed. I parked on the shoulder of the road opposite the mission. "The question is when."

When I unbuckled myself, Emmett reached for his seat belt.

"No," I said.

"Obviously I'm going with you—"

"No."

He stopped, hand on the buckle.

As best I could, I softened my voice. "I'll be right back."

I jogged up the narrow two-lane toward the mission, where fire and shadow flickered and danced. Behind me, the Tesla's doors stayed closed.

They let the grass grow high here, and it whispered in the breeze off the ocean, the sound sibilant and unceasing. As I got closer, the stink of burning metal, scorched textiles, and overheated electronics wafted to me. The vehicles that I'd seen from the road, now that I was approaching them, were clearly not civilian. They had been painted matte black instead of the desert tan I normally saw, but I recognized the silhouettes of Humvees. These had to be how the soldiers—or whatever they were—had arrived.

I stopped and listened, but aside from the crackle of the flames and the groan of a timber giving way, I heard nothing. I circled around the Humvees, and then I understood why they were still there. It looked like someone had shot them with an RPG—like the one that had been used in the plaza. The fronts of the Humvees were distorted, the metal broken in some places, melted in others.

After flipping a coin in my head, I jogged to the church first. The fire was spreading fast, and I didn't go farther than the doors. Inside, smoke hung heavy and low and made it impossible to see more than a few feet, but it was obvious that no one could still be in there.

I jogged back to the road and got in the Tesla.

Emmett sat facing forward, jaw set, posture stiff. He had his phone in his hand, but it was still powered off—holding it was reflexive, I guessed, like a self-comforting mechanism.

“Someone destroyed those soldiers' vehicles,” I said. “And their helicopter.”

Emmett blinked.

“Which means,” I continued, “they’re withdrawing on foot. The Solars have already cleared out. They might be pursuing whoever took Lelah and Aimee, but I don’t think so, or we’d see the fight dragging out as they tried to withdraw.”

The wind brushed the Tesla, humming against the car’s frame.

“I think those soldiers are up a creek without a paddle,” I said. “I think the chopper was their backup plan, and now they’re scrambling to get out of here in one piece. I’m saying I think we’ve got a chance to catch up to them and get Aimee and Lelah back.”

Emmett swallowed. The dome light timed off, and then he was a shape in the darkness.

“I’m talking to you,” I said.

“I hear you.”

“I understand you’re upset—”

“I’m pissed off at you, you selfish motherfucker. There’s a difference.”

“Fine. You can be pissed off at me—”

“I am! I don’t need your fucking permission!”

“—if it means you’re still alive.”

“And I don’t need you making decisions for me. You can’t tell me what to do! You could have gotten hurt. What if they’d still been up there? What if—”

“Stop yelling at me.”

He stopped. A moment later, in a lower voice, he said, “What if you’d gotten shot, or what if Cleofás had hurt you, or what if

you'd stepped on a landmine? God damn it, Jim!"

"No. Shouting."

In the darkness, he swallowed, and the movement was grace and shadow.

"I needed you to watch the road for emergency services. Do I need to explain that to you next time?"

"No." And then, the word clearly costing him, "Maybe."

"You could try asking."

"How is this my—" He managed to rein in his rising volume. He breathed harshly.

"Come here," I said.

His laugh was brutal and wet and short.

"Come here," I said again.

He shook his head. But the wind sang against the car again, and then he leaned across the console, and I pulled him into a hug. His face was wet against my neck, and he shivered as I stroked his back.

"I'm sorry I upset you," I whispered.

He shivered once more, a hard one, and then he pulled back, wiping his face. In a semi-Emmett kind of voice he said, "You're lucky you're a hell of a fuck." He cleared his throat, flipped down the visor, and checked himself in the mirror. "Well? Where'd these motherfuckers take Lelah and Aimee?"

"I was hoping you'd help me figure that out."

The scarred corner of his mouth twitched. He fixed his hair and closed the mirror. "Of course you were."

“Say I’m right. Say they’re on foot, making a quick, forced withdrawal in unfamiliar terrain, after losing some of their men and a significant portion of their tactical support.”

Emmett shrugged. “They need to find somewhere defensible. Time to call in backup or arrange to be extracted. You realize it sounds like we’ve both played way too many video games, right?”

“One of us has played way too many video games.” I pulled out my phone and opened the maps app. “So, where would they go? They can’t go into San Elredo, can they?”

“Not on foot,” Emmett agreed. “Not that many of them, carrying those kinds of weapons.”

“Let’s say the same thing is true for any population center. It would be different if they had vehicles, but they don’t.” I dragged the map around for a minute, zooming in and then out. “Come on, we know this part of the world better than they do.”

“Unless we’re dealing with some sort of super fun Santa Cruz militia.”

“There’s the dairy.”

“They’re not going to the dairy. They’ve got security, cameras, that kind of thing. There are a million cabins around here. They need to do what we did: find one and hide out.”

“But none of those cabins are going to be easily accessible, and they need a quick way out of here. You can’t get a helicopter in there—you can’t land it, anyway—and they can’t sit around waiting for someone to drive into the mountains and pick them up. The Solars made a tactical retreat, but they’re going to come back for Lelah and Aimee. What about—”

“The cannery,” Emmett said.

“What?”

“There’s an old cannery. Abandoned, obviously.” He took my phone, zoomed and swiped, and held it up toward me. “A couple of miles south of here.”

I took the phone. The map’s marker suggested that this was a historical site or place of interest, not a business, and the name of the place was Neptune’s Depths.

“Why do you know about this?”

“Because last year, when you were busy banging every college student who moved, I had to go somewhere when I left the apartment. Sometimes I went for drives. Sometimes I went up the coast.” He shrugged. “See? Something good came from all those times you almost got gonorrhoea.”

“I did not—” I stopped.

“It makes sense, right? Someone could land a helicopter on the coast highway—for a few minutes, they’d be fine. Or maybe it’s one of those helicopters they can land on water. Or maybe they’ve got speedboats. But either way, they’re in a building that nobody cares about, and they’re surrounded by water on three sides, and hell, even if somebody is picking them up in a minivan, they could drive right up to the front door.”

I nodded. But I couldn’t help myself: “They weren’t all college students.”

“Oh,” Emmett said, his voice piping and full of affected innocence, “you have a place off campus. That’s so cool!”

“They were older than you.”

“Do you want to think about that for a minute?”

I started the Tesla and didn’t look at him for the first half mile.

The sky was clear and full of stars. The water looked infinite and brushed with silver, and I could understand, in that moment, why the ancients had believed it to be a river that ran its course around the world. My eyes and nose and lungs still stung from the tear gas, but either I was getting used to it, or the effects were wearing off. Emmett must have been feeling somewhat better too; his breathing didn't sound nearly as harsh.

At least three of them had been in their thirties.

“Stop thinking about it,” Emmett said, and he tugged on my ear, and then he rubbed it more gently. “It was a joke.”

When Emmett pointed out the cannery, it was nothing more than a bulky shadow. I turned off the Tesla's lights as we rolled closer. As I opened my mouth to say something along the lines of *We don't know if they're here for sure*, a flashlight broke the darkness. The glow was dim and red, the kind that was meant to reduce the chance of being spotted from a distance, but they were out on the water, and it was the middle of the night. Emmett arched an eyebrow.

“Most people find smugness an unattractive quality.”

“I don't know,” Emmett said. “It seems to work for me.”

We passed the cannery, and when I spotted a dirt road leading up the mountains, I turned. This road was chained off, but I used Emmett's trick and drove around the barrier. As soon as a line of scrub oak screened us from the coast highway, I turned off the Tesla.

“We need a charge,” I said.

Emmett nodded, and we got out of the car.

We hiked back up the highway, staying on the inland side of the road. In the lull of the wind and the waves, the only sounds were the rustle of our clothing and the soft sound of our shoes

on broken asphalt. Emmett caught my hand and squeezed it, hard. I checked his face. The moon was bright enough for shadows, and I couldn't see his eyes.

Up close, the cannery resolved into a sprawling building set out on the water and connected to land by a one-lane bridge. The cannery was one of those post-frame buildings that are ridiculously cheap to throw up, with corrugated steel panels for walls and a tin roof that looked mottled and diseased. The bridge didn't look much better, canting on tilted piles. When the wind picked up, I swear to God the damn thing swayed.

We watched and waited.

A couple of times, those dim, red flashlights moved along a walkway that wrapped around the cannery. After the third time we'd seen them complete their pattern, I checked Emmett's face again. He nodded, and we sprinted across the highway.

As soon as we reached the shoulder, we threw ourselves down and started to crawl. The grass and weeds grew knee high here, and while I was sure that we were making some sort of disturbance, the idea was to reach the bridge while the sentries were moving away from us. Then we'd pause, regroup, and cross the bridge at the next opportunity. It really was like a video game, I thought. The ones where the sentries are conveniently programmed to leave the perfect opening for you to sneak through—although in the video games, you didn't get burrs stuck all over you, and you didn't accidentally grab a thistle and have to swallow a cry. In a video game, you definitely wouldn't be in a weird, post-fight haze with your much younger boyfriend, which you didn't even understand because you thought he liked it when you took charge.

Above the grass, the bridge appeared, and we slowed our crawl as I looked for the best place to wait for our next

opportunity. The bridge seemed like it would provide the best cover, so I changed course, crawling toward the side of the bridge, where we'd be partially blocked from view. When I reached it, I let out a breath and dropped my head, resting it on my arms. Crawling, it turned out, was exhausting.

Cold steel pressed against my skull. The muzzle of a gun, my brain told me after half a heartbeat.

“Tell your friend that if he tries anything, you die.” The man's voice was hard and controlled. He'd been hiding below the bridge. He'd been waiting. The surf roared in below us, and he said, “Tell him.”

“Jim?” Emmett whispered. “Are you talking to me?” The grass rustled, and then Emmett pulled in a sharp breath.

“Shield,” I said. “And run.”

Emmett's movement stopped, and he drew in a sharp breath.

The man shoved the muzzle against my head.

“We surrender,” Emmett said, his voice breaking. “Don't hurt him! We surrender!”

9 | EMMETT

“You try anything, and he dies.” Under the camo face paint, the man was white, probably in his thirties, and he’d spent a lot of those years outdoors. He had a big, ugly pistol pressed against Jim’s crown. “Whatever you can do, it’s not going to be faster than a bullet.”

“I’m not going to do anything,” I said as I brought up my shield, wrapping it tightly around me. At least this time I didn’t sound like I was still experiencing the joys of puberty. “I’m going to do exactly what you tell me.”

As I ran my mouth, my brain was trying to come up with solutions. I couldn’t use the barrier like a battering ram; it wouldn’t work that way. Which meant I couldn’t interpose a barrier between the man and Jim, not while he had his gun pressed against Jim’s head. I could shield myself and try to jump him. There was a chance he’d forget about Jim and try to shoot me, and when he did that and pulled the gun away, I could shield Jim too. But the reality was that I was flat on my stomach, and by the time I got to my hands and knees so I could launch myself, he’d have had plenty of time to put as many holes in Jim’s skull as he wanted.

Before I came up with any good ideas, the man said, “Face down, and hands on your head.”

I did as he said.

He said something—a code I didn’t recognize—and I figured he was talking into a radio. Next to me, heat poured off Jim. I caught a whiff of wood smoke. I hoped Jim wasn’t stupid enough—or so far out of control—to let it go any further. If he started shooting off embers, this guy was going to kill both of us.

The ground was cold and hard under my chin. Mixed with the brine of the ocean now came gunpowder and the kind of sweat-funk I associated with athletic equipment—hours and hours of sweat that had soaked into gear and then been baked by sun and body heat until nothing you did could get rid of it, not completely.

Steps clipped the boards of the bridge, moving toward us, and then I heard the grass being trampled, the winter-brittle stalks snapping.

“Don’t move,” the man said again.

Someone moved my hands to the small of my back and cuffed them there. Then they pulled a bag—or a hood, or whatever it was—over my head, and the muzzle of a gun came to rest at the back of my head. I heard Jim grunt when they repeated the procedure. That would have been a good time to shield both of us, but I couldn’t see anything, which made it impossible.

“Emmett?” he asked, his voice firm and smooth.

Not, for the sake of contrast, his voice cracking like he’d just had his first wet dream.

“No talking,” the man said.

“I’m fine—”

I only got halfway through the word when something hit me in the back of the head. It didn’t hurt because of the shield, but it

snapped my head forward into the ground, and I almost bit my tongue.

“No talking!”

Jim drew a deep breath. He let it out slowly. Jim Spencer, everyone. Master of self-control.

Hands grabbed my arms and pulled me up, and then they moved me forward, walking so fast that for the first few minutes, they were dragging me as I scrambled to find purchase. We crossed the bridge, and the boards felt slick underfoot, almost slimy. Behind me, more steps echoed. I thought I recognized Jim sounds, the way he moved, the way he breathed, but that might have been my imagination.

Then the sound of my steps changed. There were still boards underfoot, but they felt different—not slimy, and not as rough. I felt it when we passed through the cannery’s doors: the cold sharpening, the overwhelming odor of rotting fish, the air more humid so that it felt wet against my exposed skin. Echoes carried every noise back to me, and I couldn’t tell if there were still footsteps following us. I tried to turn my head, and the hands on my arms jostled me until I looked forward again.

“That’s fine.” The words were spoken by a woman, a voice I didn’t recognize. “Let me see his face.”

Someone tore the hood off. I had a glimpse of figures in black, and then someone kicked my feet out from under me. I hit the boards. When I tried to rise, hands bore down on my shoulders.

The only light was red, and it came from a flashlight that had been hung overhead as an improvised lamp. It let me see a circle of maybe five feet—enough to have an impression of the bodies that waited beyond the ring of light, but not to count them.

In front of me, a woman stood with her hands on her hips, studying me. She was Black, and she could have been anywhere between forty and sixty. Her hair was buzzed, and although it might have been the light, it looked like she dyed it. Her face was round. Underneath the body armor and tactical gear, it was hard to tell much about the shape of her body other than that she was tall for a woman and built strong.

I started to rise again, and a muzzle bumped the back of my head—well, my shield, technically.

“I don’t think we need that,” the woman said, and the gun eased away from me. “It wouldn’t do anything to you anyway, would it?”

“Define anything,” I said.

She smiled, the expression small and pursed. “I understand you have a way of protecting yourself. I also understand that your friend doesn’t. He’s not here right now, so you’ll have to take my word for it, but he’s the guarantee you’re going to be on your best behavior.” She paused. “Do I make myself clear?”

“If you hurt him, I’ll forget my manners.”

Now the smile touched her eyes. “What are you doing here, Emmett?”

I looked around. I still couldn’t see beyond a few feet. When I listened, I heard the slap of the waves against the pilings below us and the wind howling along the steel walls of the cannery, pulling at the panels until they rattled.

“You know my name,” I said, “and you know what I can do. And I don’t know anything about you except that a couple of your guys tried to kill me and Jim last year, and I still don’t know why. Kind of rude, don’t you think?”

“What are you doing here, Emmett?”

“Got a chair? Or a crate or something? I’m covered in these fuckers—” I nodded at a burr on my hoodie. “—and I’m dirty, and I’m tired, and I had this weird fight thing with Jim that wasn’t even really a fight, or not the kind I like anyway.”

“What are you doing here, Emmett?”

“Right now? I’m getting these burrs permanently lodged up my ass, that’s what I’m doing.” She opened her mouth, and I said, “You can keep asking, but trust me, I’ve perfected the art of fucking up people’s days. Ask Jim about it sometime. Ask him about our trip to Ikea. I’m not going to talk, not like this. You can’t make me.”

“Maybe I’ll have your friend brought up. He can still teach school without a pinkie finger.”

Something skittered up above us, the sound of tiny claws on the old tin roof.

“I don’t think you will. I don’t think that’s what you do. You went into the mission to rescue Lelah and Aimee. Things went pear-shaped. Now you’re cornered, and you’re low on time, and you’re feeling the pressure. But I don’t think you’re torturers.”

Her face stayed hard, but I heard it in her voice—not quite regret, but the dark sister of acceptance. “We’re whatever we need to be, Emmett.”

“What does that mean? Who are you?”

She took a few steps and crossed the ring of light. The waves sloshed rhythmically beneath us. I almost didn’t hear her when she asked, “Have you heard of the Watchers?”

“No,” a man barked. When he stepped into the light, I recognized him: camo face paint guy, the one who had caught Jim by surprise.

“It’s my decision.”

“We don’t have enough information—”

“That’s enough.” She didn’t raise her voice, but the word was a whip-crack command. Some of the sting went out of it when she added, “We don’t have time, Dozer.”

Struggle showed in his face. Then he nodded. He rested one hand on the butt of his pistol and faced me.

“The Watchers?” I said.

“Captain Gail Holland.” She tapped the red bear-paw print on her chest. “Bear Flag Operations. We’re a security contractor. And, yes, part of the Watchers.”

“Which is super interesting except I still don’t know what the Watchers are.”

“We watch,” she said, a hint of a smile limning her mouth. “What does it sound like?”

I gave her another look, then one for Dozer. “So, you’re, what? Archenemies with the wanderers? Where’s your Fortress of Solitude?”

“Cut the shit,” Dozer said.

“It all sounds so stupid,” I said. “Watchers and wanderers.”

“We watch the night,” Holland said, and it sounded like something memorized, “so humanity can sleep.”

And that was just weird enough that I perked up. It had an echo of how the wanderers said things like *the mortal sleep* and *awakening*.

“We know what they are,” Holland said softly, nodding as she looked into my eyes. “And we stand against them.”

The sound of the water filled the silence. And then, unable to control the anger whetting my voice, I said, “It would have been nice to have some help over the last few years. Where the fuck have you been?”

Dozer took a step forward, hand tightening around the pistol, but Holland waved him back.

“Busy,” she said. “Believe it or not.”

I stared at her. Then, I snorted. “Busy.”

“The world is a big place, and there aren’t many of us.” Holland shifted her weight. “What I’ve got to decide, Emmett, is what I’m going to do with you and your friend.”

“Do with us? Do you know what we’ve done? Do you know what we’ve sacrificed to stop these fucking monsters?”

“We know who you are.” But her tone said something different than what I’d asked. “Until now, we’ve left you alone —”

“Bullshit. Two of your people tried to put a bullet in Jim last year.”

“That was a misunderstanding. Wrong place, wrong time.”

“Wrong place? We were in an innocent girl’s apartment.”

“Protecting a weaponized biological unit.”

“A weaponized—” I stopped. And then I laughed. “Is that what you call us instead of people? So you don’t feel bad putting us down?”

“Why are you here, Emmett? How did you find us? Who sent you?”

“We found you because we took five seconds to think through your options. How do you think we found you? It’s not

like there were a lot of places you could go on foot. Nobody sent us. I want to see Aimee and Lelah.” I started to rise, but Dozer unholstered his pistol, so I stayed on my knees. “I want to see them.”

“Nobody sent you,” Holland repeated. “I find that hard to believe. Here you are, one of the awakened, trying to sneak past our line. And less than an hour ago, I had to withdraw and leave good people behind because a wanderer and their group of psychos—”

She cut off. She hadn’t quite been shouting, but the silence that came after was a vacuum.

“You didn’t expect Indigo to be there.”

“And now you’re here.” Her voice was flat now, planed smooth. “So, I’ve got to decide what to do about you.”

“About a weaponized biological unit.”

“What do you want me to say? The Shadow Nest turns people into human bombs and they send them into office buildings. How long before they send them into shopping malls? Stadiums? How long before they decide the world could use a little more chaos, and they send them into the governor’s mansion? Calling them anything besides a weapon misses the point.” She took a breath. “So, I’m trying to decide. Are you a weapon someone is pointing at me? Or are you pointed at someone else, and I happen to be in the way?”

“Why did you take Lelah and Aimee?”

Holland gave Dozer a considering look; he shook his head.

“I hate stuff like this,” I said. “I did this last year: a girl everybody wanted, and nobody would tell me why. Let me guess. You and your private militia want a buddy in the Senate, so you’re going to save Lelah and Aimee and make sure that Sam

Lockett doesn't forget who brought his wife and daughter home."

Holland smiled. It was wide and showed lots of teeth.

"What?" I asked.

"You and your friend. You jumped into the middle of this."

"Captain," Dozer said.

Holland shook her head at him, her gaze steady on me. "Did you know Sam Lockett is a puppet for the Shadow Nest?"

"I heard something about that."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"All politicians are in somebody's pocket."

"Not all politicians are using charities and shelters to funnel at-risk children to the Shadow Nest."

"Ok, Sam Lockett is a bigger piece of shit than I thought. That doesn't change anything. Indigo wants Lelah and Aimee as hostages, and you want them as bargaining chips, and somebody wants to blow them up. It's fucking exhausting. You should all go get real jobs."

"Yes, the cabin." She gave me that smile again. "You know about that."

"I was there."

That slowed her for a second. "Do you think that was a coincidence?"

"I've got this funny thing about coincidences."

She nodded. "What the wanderers want, the Bear Flag—and the rest of the watchers—oppose."

“So, you get to hold them hostage instead of the Solar Court —”

“We keep them alive when the Shadow Nest would murder them.”

I opened my mouth and then stopped, thinking through the explosion, John Bolt’s face as he shouldered the rifle to fire on us. Indigo had told me that Bolt worked for the Shadow Nest, but I hadn’t stopped to think that through. Sam Lockett was allied with Adonai and the Shadow Nest. Sam Lockett asked my dad to send me, and, by extension, Jim, to visit Lelah and Aimee. Bolt was waiting there, ready to blow up the house—and if that failed, to put a stop to things more directly. And the only reason Jim and I weren’t dead, I guessed, was that Cleofás and the Solars had shown up and interrupted Bolt.

“Lockett’s wife and daughter are a millstone around his neck,” Holland said. “The story is already leaking: the accident wasn’t an accident, it was drunk driving; his wife is an alcoholic; his daughter is being hidden away because she’s not camera friendly anymore. Are voters going to keep a freshman senator with that kind of family drama?”

“Or, spin it another way,” I said. My mouth felt anesthetized. “Wife and daughter die tragically.”

“Close. Wife and daughter are murdered by the same extremists terrorizing southern California. All of a sudden, Lockett’s a victim. A hero.”

“But—” I almost said, But my dad sent me there. It sounded so childlike and hurt, though, that I crushed out the thought. “But Adonai is the one behind those explosions.”

“They don’t know that. All they know is that Sam Lockett was strong in the face of unbelievable tragedy.” She pulled her

head back a little. “How do you feel about coincidences now?”

I heard that scuttle against the tin again. Dozer’s head snapped up, and he grimaced at the roof.

“Word is,” Holland said quietly, “Adonai has a price on your head. You and your friend were supposed to walk into that cabin and never come out.”

I had known that. Or I had suspected it. And the question about my parents, about their role in this, had already occurred to me. But that had all been conjecture, a chain of events that I had put together myself. It was different hearing it from someone else.

Somehow, I managed to say, “There you go. Proof I’m not working for the wanderers; they want to kill me.”

“Proof you don’t work for the Shadow Nest. Maybe. But you survived, didn’t you? And that’s a different kind of proof.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” My voice slipped out of my control. “What the fuck is wrong with you? I’ve fought them. I’ve—I’ve had my life seriously fucked up because of them. What more do I have to do? Do I have to join your little club? Do I have to get a bear paw tattoo on my ass?”

Holland stared at me.

“Your whole operation is a joke,” I said. “You know that, right? If you can’t figure out who the good guys are, then good fucking luck to you.”

“You stayed.”

My knees ached where the boards bit into them. My pulse pounded in my head. “What?”

“You fought them, you said. They ruined your life, you said. But you’re here. You live in the same apartment. You do the

same things you've always done. You play the same video games. You take the same walks."

"Have you been following me?"

"Anybody else would have left. Anybody else would have run."

"How long have you been spying on me?"

"Why? Why do you spend every day sitting in that shithole, doing nothing with your life, in a town that's on the front line of a war between two wanderers? Do you know what that looks like? It looks like you're waiting."

"You're out of your fucking mind."

"You can't tell me why, and that's what worries me."

"Why? Why? We signed a twelve-month lease, and we need the deposit back! That's why!"

If my raised voice bothered Holland, her face didn't show it. She watched me for another moment, and then she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Emmett." She glanced at Dozer. "Secure him."

10 | JIM

With the bag over my head, I couldn't tell where they took me. When we passed inside the cannery, the sounds changed—our steps echoing back from what sounded like a high-ceilinged room, the scuff of rubber on old boards, a fragment of whispered conversation. The air was foul with the old, baked-in fetor of rotting fish, and I could smell myself too, the smell of my breath trapped inside the hood, the smell of my skin and my hair.

The sound of our steps changed again—a smaller room this time, or maybe a corridor—and then metal squealed against metal. The hands on my arms released me, and someone shoved me forward. I took a few stumbling steps, trying to halt myself. In my mind, the darkness was about to open up underfoot, and I braced myself for a fall. But I didn't fall; floorboards rattled and creaked under me, and a moment later, I came to a stop.

Even through the hood, I could tell it was an even smaller room. The squeal of metal on metal came again from behind me, and then iron clanged. The bar thudded when it fell into place.

It all seemed like overkill. I wasn't going anywhere with my hands cuffed behind my back and a hood over my head.

“Emmett?” I asked.

Someone whispered.

“Hello? Emmett? Is someone there?”

“I said no,” a woman snapped.

Then the boards creaked again, and steps moved toward me. “I’m going to take your hood off.” I’d only heard Aimee Lockett speak once, but I thought I recognized her voice. Hands touched my head through the cloth, and even knowing what was happening, they startled me. A moment later, the hood slid off.

The room was dark. I blinked, hoping my eyes would adjust, but nothing changed. It was dark, and it was going to stay dark. The only light seemed to come from chinks and cracks in the walls: where the door wasn’t square in its frame, where the corrugated steel panel of an exterior wall wasn’t flush with the floor. I could make out two silhouettes against the darkness. One was closer to me; the other was on the far side of the little room.

“Aimee?” I asked.

She nodded. Then, with a sound that might have been a sob, she managed, “Yeah.”

“Lelah?”

“They told us not to talk,” she said.

“Are you all right?” Aimee asked.

I took a deep breath and tested the handcuffs at my back. I could melt my way free of them, if it came to that, but for now, I decided to wait. “Fine. How are you?”

Aimee giggled. It had a manic buzz to it, the sound of someone at the end of her rope.

“Be quiet,” Lelah said. “You’re going to make them mad.”

“I’m—” Aimee was still giggling, trying to force the words out. “I’m—”

I shushed her. She fought the giggles, and then she started to shiver. It was cold in the old cannery, and colder out above the water, but I didn't think that's why she was shivering. Then she started to cry.

With my hands cuffed, I couldn't do much beyond whisper, "Hey, it's going to be ok. We're going to make sure you get home safe."

The darkness made everything feel longer; it must have only been another ten or twenty seconds that Aimee wept, hands over her eyes, but it felt like minutes.

"Ok?" I asked.

She nodded. But her voice was raw when she asked, "Who are these people?"

"I'm not sure. But whoever they are, you should be careful about what you say to them."

"Someone is coming for us," Lelah announced. "My husband is a senator. The Capitol Police will coordinate. California Highway Patrol. Local police, of course." Her voice grew hopeful. "They might even call in Special Forces."

"I hope so," I said. "But for now, it's better to assume that we need to get out of here on our own."

Aimee sniffled. "How?"

"Have you looked around?"

"In the dark?" Lelah asked, her tone suggesting I might as well have asked her to fly to the moon.

"Not really," Aimee said.

"Let's try to get a sense of what we're dealing with," I said, "before we make any plans."

“Come away from him, Aimee.” Lelah rose. “I don’t want you around him. We don’t know anything about him, and he’s only going to make things worse. People are coming, and we need to wait.” As an afterthought, she added, “And we’re not supposed to be talking.”

“Go on,” I said. “I’ll take a look around.”

But Aimee stayed where she was. It was hard to tell in the dark, but I had the sense she was studying me. “Who are you?”

“Jim. Jim Spencer.”

“Are you a—a spy or something?”

I pictured Emmett’s mixture of outrage and disbelief, had he heard, and laughed in spite of myself. “Or something.”

“You came for us. At the mission, that was you. When Indigo—” She stopped, and I could hear her swallow. “I wasn’t—I couldn’t think clearly.”

“It’s all right.”

“But who are these people? Do they want to hurt us?”

Lelah waved one arm, trying to signal us through the gloom. “What don’t you understand about no talking?”

“Better be quiet now,” I said.

I started with the door. It was steel, and it was old. I gave it an experimental nudge, but even though it was out of true, it was secure in the frame. I could cut through the hinges, but not without a fair amount of light and some noise. That would be our last option.

As I moved around the room, I checked the interior walls. They were plank, and in places, nails had come loose. A few of the planks moved when I applied pressure, but none of them

had enough give to let me—or even Aimee, who was much smaller—wiggle through. It was the same situation as the door: I could kick a couple of the planks loose, but not without every one of the soldiers coming down on us, guns ready.

The exterior wall seemed the most promising. The corrugated steel felt cold and damp and near the base, where it wasn't flush with the floor, rimed with salt that had accumulated over the decades. It was rusted so thin in places that I thought I could feel air moving on the other side. Below us, the sound of water slapping the piles mixed with the more distant sound of the breakers. We could go out this way, into the water. But unless I got a miracle, the soldiers would hear us, and we'd be sitting ducks as we tried to swim to shore.

Throughout all this, Aimee had crept along at my side, occasionally pointing out things she thought I'd like to see—a nail that had fallen to the floor, or a board that warped under her foot, or dry rot in a stud. Lelah stayed where she was—which, I now saw, was seated on an empty crate stamped NEPTUNE'S DEPTHS—hissing at us and telling us to stop talking and to sit down, usually in that order.

When I'd finished my circuit of the room, I stood still, trying to play out different scenarios.

“What are we going to do?” Aimee asked.

“I'm not sure yet.”

“We can't stay here.” Desperation made the words fuzzy. “We can't.”

“We won't. But I need to think; they've got my friend, and I can't leave him here.”

“Emmett?”

“We’re waiting for someone to handle this in a professional and civilized manner,” Lelah said. And for someone who believed so passionately in the no talking rule, she was talking at drunk-brunch volume. “I don’t know what you two don’t understand about that. I really don’t.”

“He—he’s like me, right?” The words almost slipped under a swell of emotion I couldn’t identify. “That’s why my parents were going to—to make me have this weird blind date thing with him.”

“Emmett called it a playdate.”

A shocked laugh escaped her, and she clapped a hand over her mouth.

“That was about the nicest thing he called it, actually,” I said.

She lowered her mouth. The darkness did nothing to temper her scrutiny. “Are you guys, like...”

I shrugged, and I felt sixteen again. In the darkness, my face was hot. I didn’t exactly redeem myself when I said, “He’s, uh, my boyfriend.”

It was amazing how many things—how many unreadable, but clearly negative, things—a teenager can pack into “Oh.”

The seconds ticked past, and my face was only getting hotter. “You’ll like him,” I finally said. “He’s smart, and he knows some of what you’re going through, and he won’t sugarcoat it.”

She was nodding along. It made me think of Honors classes, the kids—usually the girls—who can’t stop nodding. You’re smart, the nod says. And I’m smart too.

“I think I’ll like him,” she said.

Tenth grade, I thought. Ten Honors.

“There’s nothing that boy can tell her that she hasn’t heard from a licensed—” She laid emphasis on the word. “—professional. Aimee has gotten, and continues to receive, the best possible care.”

It was amazing; you can, apparently, pick out an eye roll in the dark if you’ve been around teenagers long enough.

Aimee shot over her shoulder, “I thought we weren’t supposed to be talking, Mom.”

“I told Sam she didn’t need to meet that...boy. I don’t know why he insisted.”

“He’s smart,” Aimee said, and I had flashbacks of Ten Honors essays, my own words in black and white. “And he knows what I’m going through.”

“Nobody knows what you’re going through, sweetheart. Least of all a boy who sits around in his underwear all day.”

“Mom!”

“What? He does. Ask his much, much older friend.” Lelah’s smugness was pointed at me like an arrow. Her words had a horrified delight as she added, “Who, by the way, used to be his English teacher.”

Aimee turned toward me.

When I didn’t say anything, Lelah continued, “Is that what you want, Aimee? To end up like that, sleeping with an older man for approval, frittering away your days, doing nothing with your life because you’re so broken—”

“Stop talking,” I said. I didn’t recognize my own voice, but I felt the words in my chest, their hollow resonance. “Right now.”

Lelah’s silence lasted a heartbeat, and then another. Her voice was stiff when she said, “I’m sorry, but I’d like more for my

daughter than a dead-end life—”

A man’s raised voice made her cut off. “Hey, what—Johnson?”

No answer came. The wind howled, and the change in air pressure made the steel panels pop against their rivets. As the sound died, something moved on the roof again. My first thought was *squirrel*, but it sounded too big to be a squirrel.

“You look like shit.” The man’s voice came from outside our improvised cell. “What happened? I thought we lost you back at —”

The words broke off in a shout, and then a short burst of gunfire silenced him.

A heavy, dragging step moved toward our cell.

I had heard things that moved like that. A little more than a year before, actually. Things that were no longer technically alive.

And then something hit our door, hard, and it shook in its frame.

11 | EMMETT

My first sign that something had gone wrong was the gunfire.

Shouts erupted around me, and hands tightened on my arms. Inside the hood, all I could see was black. My breathing got faster, catching the wet fabric and filling my mouth with the taste of dusty cotton.

“Get him contained!” a man shouted next to my ear.

“I can’t do anything while you’ve got me blindfolded,” I snapped.

“Go! Go! Go!”

It took me a moment to realize he wasn’t talking to me. One of the hands supporting me released my arm; the other dragged me into a blind, stumbling run. More shots cracked behind us. And then, from ahead, the shriek of metal filled the air.

“That’s Hoffman!” a man called out.

Gunfire erupted again.

“Hoffman’s dead!” cried another.

A body moved past me, checking me with their shoulder, and I stumbled. My guard kept me upright, but only barely, and we had to slow. More bodies passed us, and I realized we were—at least temporarily—fighting our way upstream.

Something boomed, and the building shook around us.

My guard went down, and he dragged me with him. I hit the boards, and the building continued to quake. Metal shrilled. Boards protested. Water sprayed me through the gaps in the floor.

“Get this fucking hood off me!” I screamed as I wriggled upright. “It’s the Solars! You need me!”

The guard’s breathing quickened—the sound of hot, panicked breaths filtered into the spaces between the bursts of gunfire. He yanked on the hood, and it got caught. He yanked again, about breaking my neck in the process, and the hood came free.

I had to blink to adjust my eyes to the mixture of shadow and firelight. The cannery was burning—in fact, a large chunk of the wall opposite was gone, and flames crawled across the boards. I didn’t recognize where we were: another long, open room that looked like it ran the length of the building. Rusted bolts were still set into the floor to show where machinery and equipment had once stood. A mezzanine level with a staircase showed darkened doorways, presumably where the fish-gut bigwigs had once supervised the fish-gutting. A hall opened up behind us, and more gunfire came from that direction. Farther down the large room where we lay, soldiers crouched behind an improvised barrier, occasionally risking a shot against our attackers.

Who were, I could tell at first glance, dead men.

For a moment, I had to recalibrate. Not the Solars. Maybe. Maybe the Shadow Nest.

When I’d been in the hospital in San Elredo, where I’d met Chloe—where, for the record, my parents had stuck me after I’d tried telling them a fraction of the shit that had happened to me in Wyoming—there had been a man working for the Shadow

Nest. Harold Vleck. Harry. And he could bring the dead back. Not, like, to life. But he could shuffle around in their bodies. And, since they were already dead, it was seriously fucking aggravating trying to stop them. What the Bear Flag soldiers were facing looked familiar.

As I watched, something flitted overhead—a dark vee, the lines too perfect to be natural—and darted past the barricaded soldiers. A moment later, an explosion rocked the cannery again, and light and heat welled up and poured into the room. Some of the dead men who were shambling toward us were torn apart by the blast, and I was grateful when the darkness rushed in, so I didn't have to see what was left of them. Others, though, continued to stagger forward, even missing arms and, in one case, both legs. Even though they were on fire.

“What the fuck was that?” It came out a shout; I couldn't help it.

“Drone,” the soldier said. He looked Latin, barely more than a kid, his flattop plastered down by sweat. “Come on, man, do ___”

Something whistled through the air and ripped his head off.

His body fell backward, blood spraying across the floorboards, a glossy, dark lake of it widening as his body continued its arterial pumping. I turned, already bringing up my shield.

A shotput ball hit my barrier hard enough that I felt the invisible field flex and then buckle. The ball ricocheted off, and it still had enough force to punch a hole through the next wall. The soldiers at the barricade hadn't noticed. They were still trying to take down Harry's dead guys, and while a shot to the head seemed to do it, they were slow to fire. These guys—or some of them, anyway—had been their buddies up until a few hours ago.

And, on top of that, they were dead. I couldn't exactly blame them.

Another ball whistled out of the darkness at the same time that one of the soldiers rose up from behind a Neptune's Depths crate. It ripped through his chest, leaving a fist-sized opening. He fell slowly, rocking backward from the impact. The sound of his body hitting the boards was audible in a momentary lull of gunfire.

The sound shook me out of my shock. Keys. I needed the keys to these cuffs. And then I had to find Jim.

I twisted around to examine the body of the soldier who had been escorting me. He had all sorts of pockets on his tactical vest and pants, but I started with his belt. Nothing on this side, so I used one knee to roll him over. Ripples spread sluggishly through the pool of blood, and it slopped against my leg, already cooling, almost cold.

There. The keys.

I had to turn around and fumble at his belt because my hands were cuffed behind my back. And then there was more fumbling as I tried to get one of the keys into the cuff. I was facing the opening to the next room, watching as the Bear Flag troops mowed down two more of Vleck's zombies. In the distance, I thought I heard something buzzing. Another drone, maybe. I kept my barrier up, but whoever had been throwing those balls seemed to have gotten distracted.

As though I'd summoned them, something whizzed through the air. It caught one of the soldiers in the shoulder, ripping through bone and flesh so that his arm dangled from threads of meat and tendon. He started to scream.

I dropped the keys.

For a moment, I thought they'd slipped between the boards. Then I spotted them near the toe of my sneaker, and I tried again.

Come on, I told myself. Come on, come on.

The key slid home. When it turned, I felt the click of the cuff releasing, and a noise that I was too embarrassed to name escaped me.

I started to get to my feet.

A drone zipped overhead, disappearing into the darkness of the next room.

For a moment, everything seemed still. The heat from the flames painted one side of my face. The stink of blood, the rot of old fish, the ammonia spike of spilled urine.

And then something hurtled out of the darkness. I had a momentary impression of black wings. Raven, I thought. And then, more coherently, the drone.

It struck my barrier and exploded. The cannery trembled. A man screamed. The force of the blast rippled through the boards beneath my feet, but it didn't reach me.

Alive, I thought. The word was like a breath.

And then the floor collapsed beneath me.

12 | JIM

Gunfire broke the stillness of the cannery. The sound was distant now.

“I told you someone would come for us,” Lelah said.

Aimee’s face was bright, almost childlike with hope.

I opened the furnace door on the fire inside me, and it surged to life. The cuffs dropped away in molten chunks, and I rolled my shoulders. Something hit the cell door again, and it trembled. A screw squealed as the force of the blow drove it halfway out of the wood.

My brain was trying to piece together the puzzle: something was out there. Something the Bear Flag guard had thought he had recognized. A comrade—another Bear Flag soldier. Someone he thought had died at the mission. And it had turned on him and killed him.

The Shadow Nest. That’s who it had to be. Vleck had been part of the Nest—although, to be fair, he’d been playing on the wrong side back then. I was surprised Adonai hadn’t killed him. Maybe someone with Vleck’s talents was too useful to waste. I had a lot of more pressing questions, though, starting with how the Shadow Nest had found us and ending with why they were here.

The door shivered under another blow, and I refocused.

Vleck’s zombies, I remembered, didn’t particularly like fire.

“Stand back,” I said.

“We need to wait.” Lelah waved a hand in front of my eyes as though I were blind. “They’ll rescue us when the situation is secure.”

“Move.” Embers spun up on the thermals my body was generating. The heat lived just beneath my skin now. “Now.”

Whatever Lelah saw in my face, it must have convinced her; she took Aimee’s arm and dragged her to the side of the room.

I raised one hand, and a bar of light and heat as thick as my wrist shot forward. It speared through the door where the latch and lock were set, and then I swept it sideways like a cutting torch. I called the fire back and let my hand fall.

Smoke eddied up. From the other side of the door came two distinct thumps.

I listened for a moment longer, and then I moved over to the door and pulled it open. The dead man had been neatly bisected by the flames, the wounds cauterized and black. He was dressed in the same tactical gear as the rest of these yahoos. The hallway beyond was clear for the moment.

“Here we go,” I said.

Lelah squawked something, but I started down the hall, and after a moment, I heard her and Aimee coming after me.

At the next intersection, I had a quick glimpse of the battle raging in one of the large processing rooms. I saw just enough to recognize Adonai—tall, lean, his blue, shoulder-length hair tied back, his eyes shedding cones of orange light—and then, as I watched, a woman with dark brown skin, her hair gelled in a Caesar fade, picked up what looked like a shotput ball and hurled it into the processing room. It struck something, a meaty sound of impact I’d never heard before. A man screamed.

“Keep them busy,” Adonai said.

I tried to dart back, and at that moment, Bolt stepped up next to Adonai. In the weak light, he looked even older than he had in the woods—a tired, shrunken man with an almost comical flattop. Before I could think about it, I raised my hand and sent a fireball screaming toward his head.

Adonai turned faster than I could believe, and my fireball went out, extinguished in mid-air. Bolt turned too, eyes wide, and when he saw me, he ducked behind a barrel.

Adonai’s eyes fastened on me, and he shouted, a mixture of fury and recognition and triumph. Then he shouted something else, the command garbled by gunfire and the screams of men dying, and heavy, running steps came toward us.

“Back,” I said, stumbling into Lelah and Aimee as I retreated.

“What—” Lelah began.

“Run!”

They ran, and I turned to sprint after them as the first dead men came around the corner. These were clearly older victims, not fresh from the battle with the Solars—they were in advanced states of decomposition, the skin yellow and green where it hadn’t split from erupting gases, black ooze running from what remained of their eyes and nose and mouth. But they moved fast, and I remembered how strong they could be.

I brought both hands up, and I sent a wall of flame roaring down the corridor.

Without waiting to see what had happened, I kept running. A hot smell, a mixture of burning meat and wood ash, wafted after me. Lumbering steps came too. Awkward steps. Unsteady steps. Not as many as there had been before. But fast.

When Aimee glanced back, I shouted, “Keep running!”

I stopped, the soles of my boots squeaking as the rubber tried to grip the boards. I spun back. At least half a dozen of the zombies had survived the inferno, although they were barely more than blackened assemblages of meat and bone. I lanced fire into the closest one, and he went down in a puff of bone crumbling to ash. I cut sideways with a second blast, and a charred skull hit the boards and rolled. Four now. A rod of flame cored out the next one’s chest. Three.

And then, I reached for the fire, and it was—

Not gone. But deeper than it usually was. Farther away, almost out of reach. I recognized it: the weight of his power, the pressure of it bearing down on me.

At the end of the hall, behind the zombies rushing toward us, stood Adonai. The jack-o’-lantern lights of his eyes suggested amusement.

Ten feet.

I reached for the fire again. It was like drawing my fingers through cold ash.

Seven feet.

I gritted my teeth and called. I had done this before, once. But Adonai had been weakened then, hurt. Lusterless, flickering red gathered in my hand. I threw the fireball, and it splattered harmlessly against the closest zombie.

Five feet.

They’ll kill Lelah and Aimee, I thought. They’ll rip them apart.

Slowly, reluctantly, like starting a campfire on a cold morning with wet wood, tongues of fire gathered again in my hand. It

wasn't going to be enough.

“My lord,” Lelah screamed and hit me on the side of the head.

The world scrambled. Lelah hit me again, and one of my knees buckled. She hit me a third time, and I started to fall. Aimee was grappling with her, shouting, “No! No!” But it was too late; I was off balance, dazed, and the zombies had reached us.

Then the wall exploded, and Emmett flew across the hall like a human wrecking ball. He knocked down all three of the zombies before he hit the wall. By some miracle, he landed on his feet. Then he stared at me. His cheeks started to turn red.

I stared back.

“That bitch threw me.” He loaded *threw* with indignation. “I was hanging there, trying to drag my ass out of that hole, and she picked me up like a fucking racquetball.”

On the other side of the hole in the wall, the woman with the gelled-up Caesar fade glared, bent, and picked up a long, broken piece of floorboard. She hurled it like a javelin.

I felt the brush of Emmett's barrier as he extended it, and I felt the weight of Adonai's power bearing down on us.

The improvised spear struck Emmett's barrier and glanced off it. Three feet of jagged pine went through Lelah Lockett's belly and came out her back. Blood made a black, curlicue pattern against the wall behind her.

She screamed.

“I have waited for this,” Adonai said as he started down the hall toward us.

“Jim!” Emmett caught Lelah as she fell.

I glanced around. The woman with the Caesar cut was already picking up her next weapon—a staved-in wooden crate. The intersecting corridor behind us lit up with fresh bursts of gunfire. An explosion rocked the cannery, and I braced myself on the corrugated steel of an exterior wall. Something gave with a long, rending noise, and the whole building slipped and canted at an angle.

“Jim, this whole place is going down!”

I took a breath, called fire, and slapped my hand against the steel.

The fire came.

The panel blew apart in superheated chunks, flying out into the darkness. I had a glimpse of the coast—curves and swells that looked like they’d been cut out of the darkness with pinking shears. I had a moment to see the surf, and in my brain, it was played slowly in that moment, rising and falling with the stuttering flicker of an old projector. The water below us was dark except where it glowed with neon tracers.

“Come on,” I said.

“We can’t leave her.”

“She’s dead.”

“I’m not leaving her!”

Adonai was still coming, so I helped Emmett drag Lelah toward the opening I’d blown in the wall. She left a black smear on the boards, and her face was empty and white and unreal, like it was covered in a caul. If she’s not dead already, I wanted to tell Emmett, the fall will do it. But his face was tight and furious and knotted with determination, and I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“You first,” I said. “Then swim clear—”

He was already shaking his head, but I never got a chance to finish.

Someone shoved me.

I had half a moment to realize it had been Aimee.

Then I fell into the night.

13 | EMMETT

Aimee shoved Jim.

I watched it happen. I had half a second for my brain to process it, and then I started to turn.

I was too slow. The burned scar twisted along her cheek as she grimaced and shoved me too. I lurched, tried to balance myself with one foot suspended on nothing, and fell. Lelah came with me.

For a disorienting moment, I hurtled down through the darkness. When I hit the water, the slap was painful, but not serious. Then Lelah hit the water. I was still trying to hold on to her, and there was a sharp pain in my shoulder. It felt like something separating. I let go of her without meaning to, and pain billowed in my head, a red cloud. I kicked in what I hoped was the right direction, aiming for the surface. Seconds ticked past. Shock and surprise had kept me from taking a breath, and my lungs burned.

And then I launched up from the water, the air cold and burning against exposed skin. I wiped my eyes, treading water and favoring my shoulder.

Behind me, flames chimneyed up from inside the cannery, casting a red glare over the water. Shots and screams continued to ring out. A shadow passed the opening in the wall, where Jim had created our exit, and then came back, staring out. I thought I could see two orange specks the color of jack-o'-lanterns.

“You ok?”

Jim treaded water easily behind me, blinking to clear his eyes.

I shook my head, but I said, “Fine.” Then I looked at Lelah, who floated face down a few feet away. “I can’t—I did something to my arm.”

The firelight glowed in the streaks of water on Jim’s face. “Can you make it to shore?”

I nodded.

“I’ve got her.”

The best I could manage was an awkward sidestroke that still had my shoulder screaming at me before I’d gone twenty yards. When I looked back, Jim was doing the backstroke, his arms looped under Lelah’s as he carried her to shore. Her head rolled into the water, and Jim had to stop to get her into position again. After that, I didn’t look back.

When I felt rocks underfoot, I stood, and I crossed the remaining distance slipping and stumbling. Water sloshed out of my sneakers when I reached the shore, and sand oozed out from under me with every step. Behind me, Jim’s labored breaths punctuated his movements. I kept my back to him, staring at the rocky bluff ahead of me. Someone was still shooting. Another explosion broke the air. It all sounded like it was a lot farther off, and I wondered how long it would take them to track us here. Five minutes? It couldn’t take more than ten.

Sand crunched, and then there was a wet, slithering noise, and Jim grunted. Wet clothing rustled. When he spoke, his voice was so close to me that I started.

“Why don’t you go find us a way up to the road? I can do this.”

I shook my head and started to turn around. Jim caught my shoulder, and I twisted out from under his hand.

“You don’t need to—”

“Don’t touch me,” I said. My voice sounded wrapped in barbed wire.

He had laid her on the sand and straightened her limbs, and a lock of wet hair curved along her cheek. Her eyes were mostly closed, and that was a mercy. The wind picked up, and the spray of sand stung the side of my face, but she didn’t flinch, didn’t close her eyes. Her cowl-necked sweater hung heavily on her, waterlogged now. Blood stained the cream-colored fabric, but the garment itself had pulled askew so that the hole in it didn’t line up with the wound in her body. Instead, it showed only a stretch of undamaged skin. In my head, I saw it again: the woman with the Caesar cut raising the improvised spear, the movement of arm and shoulder as she threw it, the difficulty of raising a shield while I was being crushed under Adonai’s power. And then the broken length of floorboard had glanced off my barrier and gone straight through Lelah Lockett.

The smell of the ocean was so thick I could barely breathe.

“Go find a way up to the road,” Jim said again more firmly.

“Are you going to bury her?”

The tide pulled back.

“Emmett—” Jim said.

“We should bury her. We couldn’t fucking save her, so we owe her that much.”

“We’re at sea level, and the sand—even if we could, we don’t have time.”

I snorted to clear snot and saltwater from my nose, and I mopped at my face with my sleeve. Jim reached out, but he didn't touch me again. I wasn't sure what I'd do if he touched me. The tide rolled in again, and in the glow of the firelight, the surf was tinged red too.

With a sigh, Jim crouched next to Lelah. He began examining her—moving her hair, lifting her arms, patting her down.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm seeing if she had anything useful.”

“She's dead. She's not a vending machine.”

“This is why I asked you to go find a way up to the road.”

I squatted. “I can help.”

Jim stopped. He closed his eyes and drew a breath. When the next wave came in, it ran up to his knees, but he didn't seem to notice. Then he opened them again and went back to work.

He took her earrings, her necklaces, and her watch. He pulled off her shoes to check them and then, without looking at me, he put them on again. It looked harder than taking them off. Because of the water, I thought.

The splintered piece of floorboard flying toward me. The tremor as it glanced off my shield. The sound Lelah had made when it went into her belly and out her back. When the wind picked up, I turned my head so that it felt like it was blowing straight into my ear, and that was the only thing I could hear.

When Jim had finished, he looked at me.

I tried to match his gaze, but I looked away first.

“We need to go,” he said.

I wiped my face with my sleeve again and nodded.

Weighed down by wet clothes, our shoes squishing with every step, we made our way along the bluff until we found a narrow path worn into the face. Jim went first, scrambling up until he found somewhere he could stop, and then he turned back to help me. My injured arm hung at my side, and my shoulder blazed every time Jim grabbed me and pulled. When we finally staggered onto level ground at the top, I immediately dropped onto my knees next to a clump of scrub and vomited—mostly seawater and stomach acid. Jim stood with his hands on his knees. His wet shirt clung to the ridge of his spine.

He startled me again when he said, “We have to go.”

Wiping my mouth, I followed his gaze. Dark shapes were flowing across the bridge to the cannery. It was possible that they were leaving. It was possible that they’d been driven off and they were running. But it was also possible that they were looking for us. I let Jim help me to my feet.

The Tesla was where we’d left it. Jim drove. The clock said it was a little after two in the morning, but it felt like years and years had passed. We drove south on the coast road, and the red glare in the sky from the cannery fire was slow to fade behind us.

I must have slept, although I didn’t remember closing my eyes, because I woke with a start. We’d stopped moving, and the car was dark, and panic closed around my chest for a moment until I heard Jim’s breathing.

When I tried to sit up, the pain in my shoulder rushed to my head, and cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

“You awake?” Jim asked in a low voice.

I nodded because that was more polite than puking all over him.

“Let’s get inside.”

He came around the car without me having to ask, and he helped me out. I blinked and craned my head; a lighthouse towered over us, although the light was out. We were higher than we had been—the drop to the ocean had to be a couple of hundred feet, and that made the quality of sound different. Deeper. Mellowed. But still a roar.

“Not far,” Jim said, and he hooked an arm around my waist and walked me the rest of the way.

He’d melted out the bolt and latch, which the San Elredo Historical Society would definitely be pissed about—I guessed from the plaque they were extremely proud of the old lighthouse—which meant he’d already come up here while I was sleeping. I wondered how long I’d been out. He bumped the door open, helped me over the threshold, and hit a switch.

Lights blazed to life. We stood in a reproduction—God, I hoped it was a reproduction—of a traditional lighthouse keeper’s residence: the equivalent of a studio apartment built into the ground floor of the lighthouse. A stove, a bed, a table. The furniture was pushed up against the brick walls, probably to maximize space. A metal staircase led up to the rest of the building.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I croaked.

I couldn’t see the smile on Jim’s face, but I could feel it. He sat me in one of the hardbacked chairs at the table, and then he left again. He came back with the Boy Scout supplies he kept in the Tesla: an emergency blanket, a first aid kit, bottled water, a backpack with protein bars. He shut the door behind him and dragged a chair in front of it so it wouldn’t blow open.

“Did I have a schizo break?” I asked. “Is there seriously a charging station out there?”

“We’ll be good to go in a few hours.”

“Fucking California,” I said, and a weird laugh escaped me.

Jim’s eyebrows went up when he heard that laugh. He carried his Boy Scout goodies to the table. “We need to get you out of those clothes.”

“I’ve heard that one before.”

“I want to take a look at your arm.”

“Shoulder.”

“All right. Do you want me to cut away the sleeve—”

“Did you get kicked in the head? This is my favorite hoodie!”

He huffed a noise that could have meant anything, and his jaw was tight. He said again, “All right.”

When he reached for me, though, I said, “No.”

“It’ll only hurt for a minute.”

“No.”

“You’re freezing, and you’re hurt, and you’re making this more difficult than it has to be.” He caught the hem of the hoodie.

“I said don’t touch me!” I only had one working arm, but I shoved him—or I tried to, anyway. “Get the fuck off me!”

He was breathing hard. Something changed in his eyes, and he came at me again.

“No!” I struck out with my good arm, and then I tried kicking.

It didn’t help. Jim got in too close, too fast. He caught my arm and held it. When I tried to get out of the chair, he forced me back into the seat.

“You motherfucking piece of shit!” I screamed. “Get off me! Get off me! Get off me!”

“Knock it off.” It wasn’t a shout, not exactly, but it was hard and loud. I’d been moving around too much, and fresh waves of pain rolled up into my head. I stopped thrashing, but I was breathing so hard I was about to fall off the edge of the seat, and I was shaking. He asked, “Are you ready to knock it off?”

Tears ran down my cheeks. In part it was the pain. In part it was the humiliation. It was everything, all of it, welling up inside me.

But I was still me, which meant I said, “Do you want to fuck me like this?”

He shifted his weight. His grip on my arm relaxed.

“Are you going to pull my pants down and bend me over and fuck me across this table? Hot teach dominates young stud.”

He let go of me and said, “Jesus, Emmett.”

When his steps moved away, I put my head down on the table and curled my good arm in front of me, wincing as my joints protested.

I got five fucking seconds of peace.

Then his hands were back. He wiped his thumb across my nape, the pad of his thumb skipping across damp skin. Then he settled his hand there, fingers strong and loose at the back of my neck. I started to cry harder.

“Come on,” he said, the words scratchy. “Let’s get you out of these wet clothes.”

I tried to elbow him in the crotch, for good form’s sake, but I got his thigh instead. He did, however, make a satisfyingly pained sound. Then he started rucking up my sweatshirt, and I forgot

about fighting him because I was too busy trying to keep him from yanking my arm out of its socket.

When the sweatshirt finally came free, I hacked to clear the phlegm from my throat, and then I said, “Holy fuck!”

“It’s over,” he murmured.

“You’re not the one who was getting his arm ripped off.”

“Don’t be such a baby.”

He knelt and took off my sneakers and socks. Then he had me stand. His fingers trembled as he undid the button on the waistband of my jeans, and then he didn’t move anymore. He stayed there, his fingers curled around the denim, his knuckles pressing against the taut skin of my belly. He took a deep breath. I ran my hand through his hair, and he dropped his head. After what felt like a long time, he unzipped the jeans and helped me out of them, and then he stripped off my boxers.

My dick bobbed and hit him in the chin.

“No,” he said, but he looked up and offered a quarter-moon smile.

“You’ve been bullying me all night,” I said. “Now you need to be sweet to me.”

“No,” he said again more firmly.

“Blue balls is a serious medical condition.”

He got to his feet. He was hard too; wet denim doesn’t hide much, especially when you’re packing like Jim. He touched my shoulder, and I gasped and tried to pull away. He caught me and held me still. He touched me a few more times, and I did some swearing.

“I don’t think it’s dislocated. You pulled a muscle or something; I’m not sure, but there’s not much we can do now.”

He gave me Tylenol and water and a protein bar. I drank slowly, and he watched me, watched my throat move. When I pulled the bottle away, water clung to my lips, and I gathered it with my tongue.

Jim snorted.

“I could die tonight,” I told him. “In the throes of sexual unfulfillment.”

“I liked it better when you were fighting me,” he said in a voice so soft it was almost to himself, although that quarter-moon smile was definitely for me. Heat bloomed in my chest, in my throat, in my face. It was hard, all of a sudden, to look him in the eye.

He took my head in both hands, and for a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. Then, instead, a wave of heat swept over me. It was like a combination of the fluffiest, softest towel and the toastiest blanket all at the same time. I could feel the water evaporating from my skin, my pores relaxing, tight muscles easing. His eyes were half-closed, and when he opened them, I thought I could see cinders swirling in the dilated black of his pupils.

I made a poor attempt at a laugh. “When’d you learn how to do that?”

“Bed,” he said.

“Why don’t you do that every time I take a shower?”

“Bed,” he said again more firmly.

He spread out the emergency blanket on the lighthouse keeper’s bed, and then he helped me lie down and tucked me in.

He turned off the lights. In the dark, every sound seemed magnified. I could hear the drag of wet fabric on skin. I knew his body, knew the shape of it, the lines of his arms, his shoulders, his chest. The weight and curve of his dick. When the bed sagged under his body and the rope lattice groaned, something coiled low in my belly. I scooted closer, and the emergency blanket rustled.

“I said no,” Jim said, although his hand found my erection and stroked it once through the blanket.

“I’m cold.”

He did a lot of grumbling, but after some shuffling, we ended up with me as the little spoon and Jim as the big spoon. He didn’t need the blanket because he was the Human Torch, but he insisted on keeping it between us.

“I can still feel your dick poking my ass.”

“Keep talking, and I’ll sleep in the car.”

“I thought you should know. In case you were uncomfortable. Maybe you want to do something about it.”

He sighed, and he pulled me against his chest.

His breathing evened out. Mine did too. I’d lost track of time, and as sleep pulled on me, I was surprised to see the sky lightening through the window. We’d been up all night.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He shifted, made a noise. He touched my cheek with the back of his hand.

“I don’t know why I do it,” I said. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me sometimes.”

Squirming closer, he tightened his arm around me and shushed me.

A bird made a dagger against the sky. The murmur of the clouds rolled between our bodies. I'd gone camping with Austin and Vie and the rest of the dumbasses once, at the end of summer, and Austin, because he was Austin, had pointed out rubs, where bucks had worked their antlers against the tree. The dawn came like that, the morning rubbing the dark from the sky like bucks shedding their velvet.

"It's my fault," I said. I blinked and tried to wipe my face, but I couldn't get free of the blanket.

His breathing changed, quickened, and he sat up over me.

"I shouldn't have done that." It didn't matter what I tried; the tears came faster now. "I should have done something different. It's my fault. It's my fault again. She's dead, and it's my fucking fault."

He said a lot of things—not that I could hear most of them, but the sound of his voice, the timbre, the slow steadiness of the words, they helped. I cried for a long time. And then I slept.

I woke once, clawing my way out of the old nightmare, the one where I drove a knife into Makayla's chest, and she died in my arms.

Jim was still there, and after a long time, I slept again.

14 | JIM

The next night, we parked the Tesla a mile from the Shadow Nest safe house. The moon was bright. The ocean shone like a mirror pocked with lead.

“Why are we doing this?” Emmett asked for about what must have been the hundredth time.

I kept my focus on the tracking app. According to this, Aimee hadn’t left the house since the Shadow Nest troops had taken her there from the cannery.

In the end, finding her had been a combination of luck and logic. We’d started off slow, brainstorming ways to find Aimee and the Shadow Nest, considering phone calls to Senator Sam or Emmett’s parents, even trying our lone Shadow Nest contact. Well, ex-Shadow Nest. But Chloe hadn’t been able to tell us anything either.

It had been Emmett who noticed the brand of Lelah’s watch, of course. It wasn’t the designer piece I had expected. It had turned out to be a special kind of watch—an AngelWatch, a high-end personal security product, which included, among other things, a real-time location feature. As Emmett had put it, *In case your security guard needed to rescue you from a hooker sandwich.* The watch had been engraved with a unique serial number, which could be inputted on the AngelWatch website to gain access to the tracker’s information.

It had been Emmett's idea that Aimee might have a watch too. And that Sam Lockett, promising young freshman senator, might have bought the watches at the same time. Right when he got elected, say, when his family's security became a more pressing issue. Or maybe when he decided to run for office.

So, we tried the same serial number, but with one difference: we went up one number on the final digit. Assuming—we hoped—that if Sam had bought three watches, and if he'd bought them at the same time, somebody in the AngelWatch warehouse had grabbed three boxes in a row and shipped them to the Lockett family. Assuming that was how Adonai had found Lelah and Aimee at the cannery.

That number showed us Sam Lockett's position—or somebody wearing an AngelWatch at Sam Lockett's office in San Francisco.

We tried again, going down one number this time.

That number had led us here: to an isolated beach house on a bare, windswept stretch of coast halfway between San Elredo and San Francisco.

“She's got to be here,” I said. “She's going to be here.”

“Yeah, I know. It was my idea.” Emmett tested his shoulder. “But why bother?”

“How is it?”

“It's the same as it was when you asked me an hour ago.” Emmett grimaced. “It's fine. Lots better since I slept.”

Maybe, I thought. But I hadn't seen him lift that arm more than chest high since we'd left the lighthouse.

“She wants to be with them,” Emmett said. “She literally pushed us overboard so she could go with them. So, fine. They

can have her.”

I shook my head. “She doesn’t want to be with them.”

“She seemed pretty happy to push us overboard.”

“I don’t think you can say overboard unless you’re on a ship. Or a boat. Or whatever.”

“Jim, they killed her mom right in front of her, and she still wanted to go with them.”

“I don’t think that’s quite right.” I looked up and caught him probing his shoulder again. He made a face and dropped his hand. “She didn’t want to go with us. But I don’t think she wanted to go with Adonai either. Back at the cannery, her mom kept shouting to Adonai for help, but Aimee didn’t. And when Lelah started hitting me, trying to get to Adonai, Aimee got in her way.”

In the silence, I could hear the skitter of sand carried by the wind.

“Well,” Emmett finally said, “she picked a seriously fucking annoying time to run away. And that stuff with her mom? That’s some psycho-level shit.”

“We can’t leave her. Holland told you what Adonai was planning.”

“Adonai’s a fucking lunatic.”

“Lunatic or not, he’s got a plan. You’ve seen those explosions on TV; they’re no joke. And Aimee is a senator’s daughter. All he has to do is get her close enough—inside the same building would probably be enough. Adonai wants chaos? He’s going to get plenty of it when he assassinates a senator .”

“Being turned into a human bomb. Christ, no wonder she wants to run away.”

“We can’t leave her,” I said again, and Emmett shook his head, but he didn’t say anything.

We sat in silence after that, parked on a side road behind a scraggly stand of eucalyptus, with the sound of the ocean like the sound of a slow drill. The minutes ticked forward. Midnight became one in the morning. One became two.

Clouds scudded in front of the moon, and I said, “Now.”

Emmett gave me a look, hand resting on the door handle.

“We’re not going to get a better opportunity. Now.”

We got out of the car, and we started toward the safe house. The Shadow Nest had picked a good location: there were maybe a half dozen trees on the property, all of them twisted and stunted and providing almost no cover. At night, with clouds, we had a chance of approaching the house unseen. By day, though, they’d have sightlines for miles in every direction. They had a boat tied up at the dock—something that looked fast and sleek and like something you’d see on *CSI: Miami*. And, the most important part of any safe house, it was secret. I was sure that if we did some digging, we’d find the property titled in the name of a trust, or owned by a lovely widow who spent most of her time on the East Coast, or tied up in probate.

We left the asphalt behind, the sound of our steps changing as we crossed rocky soil with low, scrubby growth. Then that changed too, the ground beneath us turning sandier, softer, threatening to turn our ankles with every step. We kept running. Emmett’s breathing sounded clean and light next to me. I sounded like a rhinoceros in labor.

As we approached one of the stunted trees, Emmett grabbed my arm and yanked me sideways. We stumbled into a patch of

deeper shadow. I took a deep breath and then another and cocked my head at Emmett.

He pointed.

And then I saw him: a man stretched out on the sand, maybe ten yards toward the shore. I stared. He lay on his side, his knees pulled up, and if it were another place and another night, I might have believed he'd wandered out here to look at the stars and fallen asleep.

Waving for Emmett to stay, I crept toward the fallen man. The sound of my blood rose in my ears. In my imagination, he rolled over, sprang up, like some awful version of a game—surprise! But he didn't move, and as I got closer, I could smell blood and loose bowels, and I could see where the sand was black and clumped together. I crouched next to him. I searched for a pulse. Then I ran back to Emmett.

He was biting his thumb, fury and worry battling in his face. He looked a question at me.

“Thierry,” I said. We'd first encountered the shadow-walker a few months before. “He's dead.”

Emmett's eyes were blank for a moment. Then he said, “The Solars have got that woman who can create patches of darkness. I bet that's how they got him.”

I shrugged a maybe. “The more important question is how they tracked them here. He's still warm. If they're here, they're about to make their move.”

“Fucking hell,” Emmett said. “Can we catch one fucking break?”

“Come on.”

We sprinted the rest of the distance to the house. Our window to get Aimee away from here had been narrow to begin with—the plan, if you could call it a plan, had been simply to hit fast and hard: overwhelm the one or two guards who were awake before they could rouse the rest of the Shadow Nest, find Aimee, and get out. All of that had depended on speed and, frankly, a great deal of luck, with only a few hours of opportunity when the Shadow Nest would be at its most vulnerable. If the Solars were about to move in, though, we had a matter of minutes, not hours.

The house was two stories, the kind of unimpressive California vacation home with too many balconies and brown stucco and absolutely zero attempt to make the place look appealing from the outside—and that still sold for a few million dollars. The windows were dark. My guess was that they'd be keeping Aimee on the second floor, where it would be more difficult for her to escape.

We slowed our pace as we reached the back of the house, and I moved as quietly as I could across the concrete patio. The back door was a full lite; aluminum blinds hung on the other side, blocking my view into the house. I touched the handle and reached into that place inside myself, that place where the fire lived. But before I could call the fire forth, the handle rocked under the weight of my touch.

I shot Emmett a look. Then I applied more pressure.

The handle turned, and the door popped open.

Emmett caught my sleeve and moved in front of me. His barrier passed me like a whisper. It was smart, letting him go first. He could take a lot of hits before he was in danger, which wasn't true for me. But I'd never been smart when it came to Emmett, which pretty much summed up our entire relationship.

I thought about pulling him back. Yeah, I thought, and a jagged little laugh rang out inside my head. Good luck.

I followed him into the kitchen. Oak cabinets. Laminate countertop. Tile floors—easier to keep clean with all that sand. A sign above the sink with the words THE ROBERTSONS – SUN – SALT – LIFE. Ceramic starfish hung on the walls. Someone had propped a pair of antique-looking oars in the corner, in case you had an emergency with your dinghy, I suppose.

Emmett took another step and then stopped.

Then voices reached me, coming from the next room.

“I told you to stay upstairs.” It was a man’s voice. I recognized that voice—older, yes. A little thicker. Which made sense; I’d been six the last time I’d heard it, when John Bolt had forced me into his truck.

I couldn’t explain what happened. It was like the fugue state that had followed seeing him at the cabin. A part of my brain seemed to shut down, and everything narrowed in a kind of hyperfocus with Bolt at its center.

Aimee answered, “The doors—”

“They’re unlocked. I told you, I’m taking care of it. I’ll get you when it’s time.”

Emmett half-turned, and he must have seen something on my face because his eyes widened. I started past him, and he grabbed my arm. I shook him off.

“Jim—”

“Lock the door.”

“Something is seriously wrong. We need to get out of here.”

I heard him, and I knew I needed to answer him, but I felt like I was talking to him from somewhere else. Whatever he was saying, it was too small for where I'd gone. "If you can keep them out, keep them out. If not, run."

He grabbed me again. "We're in danger—"

For a moment, I felt myself on the edge of losing this new focus. Because of him. Because of Emmett. Who always had to have my attention.

"Did you hear what I told you?" I asked. Even in a whisper, the words were a slap. Emmett's dark eyes grew huge. "Stay here. Do what I said."

"Their security system has been disabled—"

"Be. Quiet." I waited a moment as a flush darkened his face. "And do what I told you."

He must have done something, adjusting his barrier, because the hairs on my arms went up. He didn't look at me, but he nodded.

I pushed him out of my head; there was only room for one thing now. Then I turned and started toward the next room.

I had a vague impression of the room itself: taupe walls and aquamarine throw pillows and a mirror shaped like a porthole. But all of that registered only at the periphery. I felt like I was looking down a tunnel, and the only people in that tunnel were me and John Bolt.

This time, I got a better look at him: how he'd gotten old, how his hair had gone white, how the square line of his jaw had softened slightly. The nose was the same. The mouth. I remembered his weight. His hand around my throat, yanking my body into position. I hadn't been able to breathe.

I couldn't breathe now, either. There wasn't enough air in the room. Embers spun, drifted. They cast a ruddy light. In the porthole mirror, they looked like fireflies.

Bolt was in the process of picking a lock—a double-sided deadbolt for which, apparently, he didn't have the key. Which told me something interesting, although I couldn't say what—it was one of those background thoughts that couldn't quite claim my attention. I knew the moment the light caught his attention. His head snapped up, and his hand went to his side.

He had the pistol in a flash, but I was faster. He held on to the superheated metal longer than most people would have, but then he dropped it, shouting and wringing his hand. He went for the knife next. It was red hot before he even touched it, and when he closed his fingers around it, he screamed.

Embers danced. They filled the air with the smell of scorched upholstery. I took a step toward Bolt. His breath on the side of my face. The scratch of whiskers as his body juddered against mine in that final moment of release. He had pulled my hair when I didn't scream enough.

The first ember landed on his arm, and he flinched.

Above us, a sleep-heavy voice called out.

“Jim!” Emmett whispered from the kitchen.

Another shout came from above, louder this time.

“Do you remember me?” I asked.

Bolt stared, his eyes narrowed, his lips pulled back. An ember brushed his cheek, and he jerked back hard enough to thump his head on the door.

“Do you—” There wasn't enough air. Black spots floated in my vision. “—remember?”

Emmett's voice held fresh urgency. "Jim!"

Something thudded in the kitchen, and Emmett grunted.

A warbling, unsteady cry came from above: "Attack! Attack! We're under attack!"

"You can't hurt me," Bolt said.

It wasn't like calling up fire. It wasn't even like letting it loose. This once, the fire was simply there, an extension of me, licking out toward Bolt, eager to devour him.

Before it reached him, a curtain of water unfolded in the air. It hissed, boiling into steam as the fire struck.

"Jim!" Emmett screamed, and then everything went wrong.

The door behind Bolt flew open, and Menfis stepped into the house, his nose still splinted and packed. I spun flame toward him, and he smiled at me. A wave of...something hit me. The fire sputtered out. Every muscle in my body relaxed. I smiled back. My joints felt loose. My skin felt warm. I took a deep breath, and even with the stink of singed synthetics, it was the sweetest thing I'd ever tasted.

Indigo came through the door next, even smaller than I remembered, with their pixie cut and the soft curves of their face. Their orange eyes shed a weak light over everything.

The curtain of water protecting Bolt dissolved. Bolt held up his burned hands, as though offering evidence, and said, "You see what he did? Kill that son of a bitch!"

"Sweetheart," Menfis called into the kitchen. "You want to come out of there?"

"Jim?" Emmett called, his voice woozy. "He's trying to fuck with my head. He shouldn't be able to do that. He shouldn't be able to...to..."

“They’re all right,” Menfis said to Indigo.

“They’re not all right.” Bolt gestured with his burned hands again. “That son of a bitch almost killed me!”

“Watch your tone,” Indigo said. “Disrespect is not tolerated in my court.”

Rapid steps came from the stairs, and a moment later, Aimee appeared. The girl’s shirt was bloodied, and under it, I could see fresh bandages. Where Adonai had cut her, I guessed. Where he had done his work, whatever it was, shattering chakras to make her into a living bomb. When Aimee reached the bottom of the steps, she hurled herself at Indigo, and Indigo wrapped her in an embrace. I stared, a smile starting on my face.

“You’re all right,” Indigo said, stroking Aimee’s hair as they hugged her closer. “You did well. I know it was hard, but you did well. I’m so proud of you.”

“Bolt didn’t want to—” Aimee began.

But whatever Aimee had been about to say, a slurred voice from the top of the stairs interrupted her.

“Bolt!” It was Adonai’s voice, but the name sounded sloppy, half-formed. “Bolt, the bitch betrayed us. Raise the alarm—”

Adonai stopped halfway down the stairs. The orange light from his eyes gave the outline of his face in the darkness. He stared down into the room, and he didn’t look nearly as happy as the rest of us.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Brother,” Indigo said, their voice a caress.

“Bolt, what—” Adonai stopped. “Traitor.”

Cradling his burned hands, Bolt spared him a scornful glance.

“Your pets can’t help you now,” Indigo said. “Come; the game is over, but your passing will not be in vain. You were right about many things, brother, and you laid the groundwork well. The chaos you wrought was beautiful—your last stroke of genius. You simply needed to dream a little bigger.” Their smile had an insane gentleness to it. “I swear to you, you will not be forgotten.”

A muzzy noise came from farther up the steps, and Adonai glanced over his shoulder. He moved quickly, grabbing the person on the stairs and shoving them in front of him. It was the Latin woman with the gelled Caesar fade, her face dopey, her movements shambling and uncoordinated under the effects of whatever drugs Aimee or Bolt, maybe both, had managed to administer. The woman who had thrown shotput balls hard enough to rip through bone and flesh and steel, she was gone.

“Epifania,” Adonai shouted as he scrambled up the steps behind her, “protect me!”

The woman—Epifania—stumbled down a step. When Indigo moved toward her, Epifania swung a lazy punch. Indigo caught her arm. A startled look tried to make its way across Epifania’s face, struggling against the weight of the drugs. Then Indigo grabbed her by the shirt and threw her up the stairs.

A muffled thump sounded when Epifania struck Adonai. In the gloom, the two of them went down, tangled together. Indigo wobbled, off balance on the step, and Menfis moved toward them. Indigo made a wordless noise of warning and reared back, and Menfis drew his hand back. With another warning gesture for Menfis to stay clear, Indigo steadied himself. Then they mounted the stairs slowly, every movement deliberate and

coordinated in contrast to Adonai's frantic scrambling with Epifania.

"We could have done this the easy way, brother," Indigo said as they reached them.

"Do not!" Adonai shouted, panic making his voice pitch. "I command you!"

It was hard to tell in the shadows, but it looked like Indigo smiled as they bent down and ripped his head off.

Blood fountained, barely more than glitter in the darkness, but the soft patter of it falling filled the house.

"Eliminate the others," Indigo said as they descended the stairs, carrying Adonai's head in one hand. The orange light was still dying from his eyes. "Aimee, let's get you into a bath and some comfortable clothes."

A hand on my arm made me turn, and there was a slight change in air pressure as Emmett's barrier surrounded me. Suddenly, everything hurt, and I felt like my head was packed with fog.

"Jim, come on," Emmett said. His pupils were dilated, and his face was flushed. He sounded like he'd been saying the same thing over and over again. When he tugged, I stumbled after him.

"Hey, guys," Menfis said. "Hang on a minute."

The rush of...pleasure, for lack of a better word almost ground me to a halt, but Emmett kept pulling.

"They're getting away," Menfis said without raising his voice.

"Georgia, Silva, Roman," Indigo said, their voice growing fainter as they moved out of the house, "Kill them. Cleofás, clean up this mess."

15 | EMMETT

Twice on the way back to the Tesla, something hit my barrier—not enough kinetic force to be a bullet, but it made me think of Roman, he of the pornstache and the throwing knives. We had enough of a head start, though, that the others didn't get close enough to use their abilities: no wall of water, no cloud of darkness. As the influence of whatever Menfis had done wore off, my head began to pound. Jim had gotten a way bigger dose of it, whatever it was. He was breathing shallowly, and his face looked white.

I got him loaded into the car, and then I drove. At first, the only thing that mattered was speed. And then, after I'd put a few dozen miles of empty coast roads behind us, the adrenaline ebbed. I drove around aimlessly for a while. Around dawn, I ended up back at our apartment.

In the weak light, the board-and-batten building looked worse than ever. The roof was practically bald. A heavysset Mexican guy, whose last name was Herrera and who lived on the second floor, crossed the parking lot carrying a toolbox to a minivan. He glanced at us on his way back, and then he repeated the trip carrying two five-gallon buckets. He backed out of the parking stall, and then he flashed his brights at me, and I realized I was sitting in the middle of the lot, blocking his way.

I parked, and as I helped Jim out of the seat, the minivan squeaked away on a bad axle. Jim groaned. His color was still

bad, and as I steadied him, he made a heaving noise.

“Do not puke on me.”

“Won’t,” he whispered.

Then he puked on me.

With a sigh, I held on to him until he didn’t have anything left.

I got him upstairs, stripped him, and bundled him up in bed. Then I cleaned off. The shower felt good—the water warm, even if the pressure was never great. I thought of the safe house. The unlocked door. The deactivated security system. The sound of Jim’s voice as he said, *Do what I told you*. The look on his face when he went after Bolt, like a stranger peering out of a mask.

Adonai’s head hanging from Indigo’s hand, a trail of red drops down the stairs and across the tile, like paint dripping from a brush.

I got out of the shower and held a towel over my face for a long time.

Dry, in my most comfortable shorts and one of Jim’s old, well-washed Lego tees, I crawled in bed next to him. He smelled a little pukey, and a little like wood smoke, and his forehead was hot when I touched him. I got out of bed, wetted some towels, and hung them on the footboard, where Jim could find them if he woke up. I was out as soon as I closed my eyes.

When I woke, the light in the room had changed: the angle, the color, the shadows. Jim was gone, and so were the towels.

I made my way to the bathroom and peed, and the towels were there, lining the tub. Of course, I thought as I washed my hands. Why not? Last night, his nightmares had walked in through the front door.

Jim was in the living room, already dressed, his hair combed in that disarmingly boyish part. His color was better, and a plate with a few crumbs suggested he'd had toast. He was looking at his laptop and scribbling notes on a legal pad.

I got onto the couch and brought my knees to my chest. When my foot bumped the legal pad, he made a noise and shifted it away from me. He had shadows under his eyes, but then, I'd seen myself in the mirror, and who was I to talk? I slid my feet forward over the cushions and dug my toes in under his thigh. He crossed something out and wrote something on a new line. I moved my feet enough to rock him.

When he looked up, the stranger was looking out. Not-Jim behind a Jim mask. Not-Jim with a not-Jim smile. "Hey, you're up."

"Uh huh."

He smiled blankly for another moment, and then he turned back to the computer.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to figure something out."

"What?"

A little furrow appeared between his eyebrows.

After another minute or two of that, my head started to ache.

"Should you be looking at a screen right now?" I rocked him again with my feet, and this time, he shifted away, leaving me with cold toes and no leverage. "Is that good for you, I mean?"

"I don't have a concussion," he said. "I was drugged. I thought about it this morning. I think he transmits pheromones of some kind, but in massive doses. We know that psychic

abilities can't pass through your barrier, which means he wasn't —”

“You were throwing up. Your head has to be killing you—my head is still hurting, anyway. I just think you shouldn't be squinting at a screen right now.”

“—psychically manipulating us, but we also know that your barrier does allow air to circulate, because a few months ago, Maija was able to cut off your supply. And that means that some other gases must be able to pass through as well. But more slowly, maybe. Like through a filter. That would explain why it affected you less.”

I stared at him. He'd angled the laptop away from me so I couldn't see the screen. “What are you trying to figure out?”

“And something else I was thinking about,” he said in that not-Jim voice, rattling off the words like he was reading cue cards. “We know Adonai could suppress abilities, or at least, make them difficult to use. And Indigo told you that their powers, the wanderers, I mean, were different, the way our abilities are different. I think Indigo can absorb abilities. Temporarily, at least.”

“Jim.”

“At the mission, they absorbed Menfis's power, remember? They used it to calm Lelah and Aimee, and then when Menfis caught us trying to help them escape, he didn't use his ability to stop us. That didn't make sense at the time, but now it does—he couldn't use it because Indigo had absorbed it. And at the house last night, we know that woman with Adonai, we know she was strong. We saw what she did at the cannery. Indigo grabbed her arm, so absorbing abilities must require physical contact. And that's how they were able to rip Adonai's head off.” His laugh had a mechanical abruptness that made me think of the clatter of

typewriter keys and the sharp, ringing silence after the carriage return. “That’s one thing we don’t have to worry about anymore.”

“Jim.”

“If you think about it, we didn’t understand anything at the mission correctly. Lelah didn’t want to be there—she and Sam are working with Adonai. But Aimee did. What we heard? When it sounded like Indigo was torturing her? That must have been Indigo breaking chakras, awakening her. It’s a painful process; we both know that. We misunderstood what they were saying, that’s all.” The mechanical, clattering laugh ended as sharply as before. “At first, I didn’t understand why, but remember what Indigo said at the end? About Adonai’s plans? I think they’re going to keep doing what Adonai was doing. Living weapons. Human bombs. I think that’s what Indigo was doing to Aimee—”

“Jim!”

He shivered. Not-Jim looked out at me.

“What the fuck,” I said, “are you talking about?”

He stared at me. His lips were dry and chapped. There was a slight tremor in his jaw that I’d never seen before.

“You have got to be shitting me.”

“Emmett.”

“No.” I stood. I tried to walk away, and then I came back. “Give me that; you’re not going after them.”

When I reached for the laptop, he turned, shielding it with his body. “You know what Adonai has been doing. Indigo might be the one pulling the trigger now, but it’s the same thing—”

“So, let’s say you’re right: Aimee blows up. Big deal. She wants it, Jim. She’s nuts. She—she orchestrated this whole

fucking thing. It's like you said after the cannery: she didn't want to be with us, but she didn't want to be with the Shadow Nest either. She wants to be with the Solars. She tried it first at the cabin with her mom. We heard them arguing—she said Indigo was her friend. That's why the door was unlocked; that's why Cleofás and the others knew where to find her. Just like she did at the safe house, when she and Bolt made sure that Indigo and the Solars could get inside while Adonai and the others were drugged. She wants this, get it? She wants to be with Indigo, and if she's stupid enough to let him turn her into a human bomb, then that's her choice. The world's not going to fall apart.”

“You don't know that,” Jim said. “That's the whole point: neither of us knows what will happen. But Indigo wants it, and whatever they want, it's about creating chaos, destruction, disaster.”

“Fuck that noise.”

“And you can stand there and pretend you don't care about Aimee, but I know you do. She's a victim, even if she doesn't realize it. She's hurt. She's been through terrible trauma, and she thinks her life is over, and she wants—wants anything that will make her feel like it won't happen again, anything that will make her feel like she's safe.”

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense. So, she's going to blow herself up.”

“She's going to do whatever she has to do to feel accepted, valued, needed. Don't be obstinate; you know what she's going through. You've been through it yourself.”

“I didn't turn into a psycho wannabe mass murderer. I'm not anything like her except the scars, Jim. Fuck you, you superficial fucker.”

He laughed—not the typewriter this time, but a broken, jangling noise, like something had beat the fuck out of the typewriter and then thrown it down a flight of stairs—and he shook his head. Clutching the laptop to his chest, he stood and tried to move around me.

I got in his way. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He took another step, and I moved with him.

My voice sounded like it was coming from outside my body. “Don’t you dare laugh at me and walk away. Say it to my face.”

He shook his head like maybe the answer was no, but he said, “How are you different?”

Outside, a horn blared.

“I told you—” I began.

“Look at your life, Emmett. Take five fucking seconds and look.” The swear sounded all rough edges. “The only difference is that you’re exploding in slow motion.”

I swung before I realized what I was doing. He pulled back, and instead of breaking his nose, I caught air. He dropped the laptop. It thunked against the carpet. Then, the next thing I knew, he had his hands wrapped around my wrists, and he was forcing me back down the hallway.

“Get off me!” I screamed, the words high and ragged. My voice still sounded like it was coming from outside of me. “Get your hands off me!”

“You don’t want to help me? Fine. But you’re staying here, in the room, where I know you’ll be safe.”

He was bigger than me. He was stronger. At the edge of my thoughts was the possibility of raising a shield, but I was hyperventilating, and I felt like I was seeing the world through

smoked glass. I couldn't even hold on to the thought of a shield, much less bring one up. He forced me back step by step. When I tried to knee him in the balls, he blocked me with his thigh.

“You can't tell me what to do! You can't make me stay!”

His face twisted, and only distantly did it register that this was a not-Jim smile. “Come on, Emmett. This is what you want. You push me, and you push me, and you push me. You think it's funny. You think it's a game. Always trying to find the line, see how much it'll take for me to snap. And what happens as soon as I put my foot down? You spring a boner. So, here it is. This is the line. You found it.” He released my wrists with a shove that sent me stumbling into our bedroom. “Don't leave the apartment. For that matter, don't leave this room.”

I slapped him. It was a big, broad, open-handed slap, and there was no way he didn't see it coming. It cracked his head to the side, and a red print glowed in his cheek. My hand felt hot from the impact, like it was crawling with bees. I had to blink to clear my eyes. That was when I realized I was crying.

My voice cracked. “I'll call my dad. I'll call the school. I'll get you fired, get you arrested, ruin your life.”

He ran his fingers over his cheek, tracing the outline the slap had left. “Call your dad, huh? That sounds about right.”

“You're a fucking liar. You don't care about Aimee. You don't care about keeping people safe. You don't care about any of that. You want Bolt. You want revenge, you selfish fuck. And you can't even say that to my face because you're a coward.”

For the first time, the not-Jim behind the mask looked angry, his cheeks mottled with red, his mouth twisting and then flattening into a line. “You want to talk about selfish? What have

I done for the last two years except eat your shit, Emmett, and hope that once a month or so, you'd feel like being nice to me.”

That feeling of the bees swarming on my hand had spread: my chest, my face, my whole body. My lips were stiff as I said, “If that’s how you felt, you should have left.”

He made a disgusted noise and shook his head.

“Go on,” I said. “Leave.”

“Poor Emmett. Is that what this is? You’re afraid of being left, so you push people away? Points for effort, but it’s not original.”

It was like a bell inside my head, this note, this tone, clear and deep and resonant. It made my head feel empty, like there wasn’t room for anything else, and that emptiness was a decent substitute for clarity. Seconds passed, and then more. I took a deep breath. That control room inside my head, with all the lights and switches, had gone dark. I looked in his face and tried to find Jim Spencer.

“Yeah,” I said. It was maybe the hardest word I’d ever spoken, but I forced myself to keep going. “That’s it.”

He made that noise again and cut his eyes away.

“My parents. My friends. Makayla. Vie. And now you, Jim.”

“Don’t do this. You’re going to be embarrassed when I get back, and you’re going to take it out on me.”

“For a long time—for my whole life, I guess—I’ve felt like it was better to be safe. There’s this part of me that’s fucked up. I know it’s fucked up. And I like fucking things up, and I like fucking with people’s heads, and I know that’s wrong, but I don’t stop. And that’s fucked up too, all right? And it’s easier, and it’s safer, and it’s—” I tried to stop, but the landslide kept coming—

all the things I thought but hadn't ever brought myself to say. "It's better to be in control, all right? I can piss people off. I can drive them crazy. I can make them be my friend. I can make them want to fuck me. And all of that's safe. Because when I let people close—" I stopped. Or something stopped, clicking in my throat, and the tears came harder.

Jim's face softened a degree. "It's going to be all right. I'll be back tonight. Tomorrow at the latest."

He turned to go, and the last thread of my control broke.

"Please."

He stopped.

"I'll beg. I can—I can beg, if that's what you want. I am begging. I'm begging you, Jim, please don't go."

He turned, his body in profile, his face music in a key I couldn't read.

"Please," I whispered. "If you do this, if you go after Bolt to kill him, you won't be my Jim anymore. You won't come back. I know it. Please don't go. Please, Jim." I wet my lips. "For me."

His eyes were paler than I'd ever seen them, like the first touch of watercolor. His pupils were small and hard, at odds with the strange gentleness in his voice as he said, "Not everything's about you, Emmett."

And then he left.

16 | JIM

I made it as far as the Tesla before the shakes started, and then they hit me so hard, I could barely start the car. It came to life around me, lights flashing, and I locked my hands on the wheel. Distantly, I was aware of the smell of overheated plastic. I closed my eyes as a wave of vertigo spun me, and I thought, distantly, I'm going to pass out.

But I didn't. And the next wave was easier.

I'm driving away, I thought as I opened my eyes. I'm leaving. Of all the ways to hurt Emmett Bradley, this was the worst, and he'd never forgive me.

I put the car in reverse and pulled out of the stall. It wasn't until I was turning out onto the street that I realized it wasn't my car, and I'd have to return it. That made me laugh—a harsh noise that felt more like choking.

Finding Sam Lockett, warning him, was my only idea. I'd tried, before Emmett had interrupted my research, to locate Aimee's tracker. It had been deactivated, of course—now that Indigo had her, there was no reason to keep it. I'd tried contacting Sam, but I hadn't been able to reach him at any of the public numbers. I'd even tried to backtrack through a maze of shell companies, hoping I could figure out where the Solars might be holed up. But that plan was shot, and I wasn't sure I had time. So, I drove north through San Elredo, toward San Francisco.

But when I got to the north side of town, I parked in one of the public beach lots. I stared out at the hammered bronze of the ocean, slowly drinking down the sun. And then the light was too bright, and I covered my eyes. The pressure of my fingertips was the only thing holding my skull together.

It was darker when I opened my eyes again, and the lot was mostly empty. I got out of the Tesla and walked down the street. When I got to the concrete steps, I stopped and stared.

When I'd come to San Elredo almost two years ago, when I'd decided to stay because I thought Emmett needed me and because I had nowhere better to be, I'd fallen into the bushes while drunk—and, in the process, discovered the stairs by accident. Since then, someone had cut back the brush that had been hiding them; now the steps were in plain view, for anyone who passed by to see and, if they wanted to, use. Frowning, I started down them.

It wasn't my beach anymore. The little stretch was still secluded, cut off from beaches around it while still offering views of the peninsula where it jutted out to the west. But now a Black woman in waders was making her way along the beach, stopping to inspect shells, occasionally putting one in a plastic bucket. A dog splashed alongside her through the surf. Farther down the beach, a young white man and woman, barely more than a boy and a girl, were trying to fly a kite and failing. They kept laughing. They kept touching each other. The boy pretended to get tangled up in the kite's string, and I could hear the vomiting noises Emmett would have made. The girl kept laughing and kissed him. I squinted against the last of the sun and tried to pick out a tide pool where I could drown both of them.

Rosie was gone. I hadn't known that. This had been her beach too—maybe more hers, in a sense. We'd spent a lot of nights here sharing our patchwork meals, talking, but mostly sitting and relishing silent company. After Emmett and I had gotten a place, I'd come to check on her, but that kind of thing made her nervous, so I didn't do it too often. And now she was gone. I wondered if it had been me, bringing her bags of nonperishables, lugging jugs of water. Or if it had been the brush cut back, and new people crowding her space. Or something else. I wondered if she'd gotten sick.

Shadows came in on the tide, and the young man and woman left, and the woman with the dog left, and I walked the wet sand, back and forth, until the only light seemed to come from the houses on the bluffs, and the ocean was leaden, refusing to give back even a glimmer. One of those houses up there belonged to Emmett's parents. I tried to cut the string on that thought and let it fly away like a kite.

You didn't want to get your feet wet, not when you were sleeping outdoors. Never mind that I kept myself warm fine, and I didn't have to worry about stuff like that. I watched the waves breaking, and I kept out of the swash, and after a while, I turned and walked inland.

When I'd lived here, or squatted here, or camped here—whatever verb you wanted to use—I'd had a tent, and I'd set it up in a depression in the face of the cliff. It was too shallow to be called a cave, but it provided some shelter from the wind, and a little less from rain. I didn't have a tent tonight, so I sat, and then I lay back and moved around a few times until the sand had molded itself to me. I needed to be driving north. I needed to get to San Francisco. There was a girl who was going to die, and in the process, maybe kill a lot of people. But I was so tired. I was exhausted, as though I hadn't slept a few hours ago. So, instead, I

lay there, watching the empty sky. Here we are, Jimbo. The voice sounded like Emmett's, but not quite right. Back at the beginning.

In some of my dreams, Bolt's weight crushed me against the van's ribbed steel floor, his breath hot on my ear, his hand tangled in my hair. In others, we were in a shapeless darkness, running, and I didn't know if I was chasing or being chased. I wanted to call fire, but the fire was gone, and all I could do was run faster. If he got away—that was one layer of the dream. And the other was: if he catches up.

My eyes came open, my chest heaving for breath. The sky was still charcoal and felt. The waves were quiet, and then they came again.

A shadow over me.

I scrambled upright, opening that place of fire inside me.

“Jim! Jim! It's me!”

Embers whirled around me, and in their faint light, Emmett stared back at me.

“Jesus,” Emmett said and shivered. He glanced down, and I spared the ground a glance. An outline of where I'd slept was visible—_inches of sand melted to glass, heat still radiating into the night. When I looked up, the scarred corner of Emmett's mouth drooped in what I'd come to recognize as suppressed amusement. “Jumpy much?”

I dry-washed my face.

Above us, a car passed—an old beater, accompanied by squeaking belts and clanking metal.

When the sound faded, in a different voice, Emmett said, “I think you need to come home.”

The embers were winking out one by one. In their last light, his face was the kind of ugly that comes from nonstop crying.

“I know sometimes it’s nice to feel shitty,” Emmett said in that different voice, and now I recognized it: the tightrope act. “And I know I can’t make you do what I want. But it’s late, and you’re here, and I’m here, and—and I was thinking maybe you could come home. You could sleep. You need to sleep. In a real bed, I mean. If you’re not going anywhere else tonight. Not that I’m trying to make you do anything. But if you wanted to—I mean, I think you should, if you want to, and then tomorrow, you can—you can do whatever you want to do.” He swallowed. The ridges of scars rippled on his throat. “Please?”

17 | EMMETT

Jim slept. And, of course, I didn't.

He'd been exhausted and confused and terrified, all of which had made him susceptible to the power of suggestion and all that, meaning it was easy to bundle him off from the beach. I'd gotten him home in the Tesla. He'd gotten himself into bed. I hadn't touched him because that seemed like a good way to get burned—literally and figuratively. That had been sometime before midnight. And then I'd gone into the living room and watched seven hours of infomercials, courtroom reality TV, and a local broadcast religious service that, apparently, required a lot of wheelchairs and ballroom dancing.

But I must have slept because I woke up in time to catch him sneaking out of the house.

Jim had his flannel unbuttoned, no undershirt, the planes of his belly and chest like etchings. The weak morning light caught the red-gold hairs above the band of his jeans. He was carrying his boots in one hand. His hair was mussed. He looked so unbelievably guilty that I almost laughed.

“Where,” I said in a sleep-thick voice, “do you think you’re going?”

“Oh.” It was, possibly, the worst *oh* in the history of human language. “You’re up.”

I snorted.

“I didn’t want to wake you.”

I snorted again. I got myself upright, pulled the blanket around me, and said, “So.” I waited. “You’re leaving.” I waited some more. “Again.”

“I thought...”

I raised an eyebrow when he didn’t finish.

“Um.” He cleared his throat. “You hated me?”

It came out as a question, and I almost smiled again. Instead, I thumped the far cushion of the sofa and said, “Sit.”

He didn’t exactly sigh, but you could tell he wanted to. He kept the boots, presumably in case he had to make a quick escape, and settled onto the sofa.

“I don’t track down random homeless men on the beach and invite them home,” I said. “Yet. I guess that could become a fetish later in life, so we’ll see. I certainly don’t track down people I hate and tell them to come home. Especially not when they’ve managed to stuff themselves up Poseidon’s bunghole, and it’s a total bitch finding that place in the dark.”

For a moment, he lifted his eyes. “How did you—” He stopped himself.

“I followed you, Jimothy. I mean, not yesterday, obviously. I was too busy trying to cry myself to death. But you’ve gone there a lot over the last year.” I shrugged. “I got curious.”

He sat there, shoulders drooping, and stared at the floor. It took him a minute to come up with “Oh.”

In the parking lot, a tom started caterwauling. We listened to that for a while.

“You were right,” I said. “About a lot of stuff.”

He adjusted his grip on the boots. He played with the laces.

“Now you say, ‘You were right about some stuff too, Emmett.’”

But he didn’t say anything. He didn’t smile.

“All right.” I struggled to sit up straight inside my blanket cocoon. “You were right about—about how I treat people, I guess. I hope I’m not always that awful to you, but I know that I am...difficult.”

“Difficult?” he murmured.

I nudged his hip with my foot. “Do you want me to stop?”

He raised his free hand in surrender.

“I’m difficult,” I said. “Sometimes.” He didn’t have a punchline for that, or if he did, he kept it to himself, so after a moment I kept going. “I’m selfish. I’m childish. I’m petty. I can’t believe I threatened to get you fired; that was remarkably shitty, even for me.”

His head came up a few inches, and for only the second time that morning, he looked at me.

My face heated. “You were right about some other stuff too. I guess, I don’t know, you’re not all that far off. The exploding in slow motion thing, I mean. Maybe.”

His eyebrows quirked.

“It’s not exactly easy to hear that, you know,” I said. “Not everybody wants to realize they’re a worthless sack of shit, and they’ve given up on life and living, and oh yeah, they’re making their boyfriend’s life hell.”

“I like when you tease me, I only meant—”

“I don’t know what I want to do.” The words burst out of me, and Jim closed his mouth and looked at me. That oh-so-intent, oh-so-earnest look that he’d used on me God only knew how many times. When he wanted you to answer a question in class. When he wanted you to know you were important, like you were the only thing in the universe in that moment. “I don’t want to do anything, I guess. Go to school or get a job or—or leave the house sometimes. Or get dressed. Or shower. Or.”

His mouth moved, but he stopped himself before he said anything.

“So, yeah,” I said. “I need to work on that.”

“You need help with that,” he said gently.

“Maybe.” I tried to fix the blanket and gave it up. “But I meant what I said. About people. About me and people. You’ve seen my parents; you know how fucked up we are. And you know about Makayla.” Saying her name was easier than saying, My ex-girlfriend everyone accused me of murdering, only I didn’t, only then she came back and I did. “And you know about Vie. So, I wasn’t bullshitting you. I want you to know that. I tried. Yesterday, I mean. I tried to be vulnerable and whatever. And I’ll keep trying.”

His eyes looked wet. He was breathing slower, deeper—not naturally. “Do you know why I stayed in Vehpese?”

“Is that a trick question?”

“After...Bolt. After I’d grown up. I could have left, you know. I went away to college. I didn’t have to come back.”

I shook my head.

“My mom wanted me to come back.” His smile was small and bitter and soft at the same time. “So, I did. And then my mom died, and I stayed. I stayed until I couldn’t be there

anymore, not after the Feast, not after everything with Vie. I stayed until I left.”

The tom started up again.

“Ok,” he said with a flash of a real grin. “I stayed until I left isn’t the best way of putting it.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

He raised an eyebrow.

My smile slipped out. “Not right now, anyway.”

“You didn’t talk to Aimee, did you?”

“Uh, you mean in the five seconds total that I’ve been around her?”

“I did. For a little while. At the cannery. And it was like seeing myself, the me who came back from the Feast. I wanted... approval. I wanted everyone’s approval. I wanted everyone to look at me and tell me I was doing the right thing. Everyone except my dad.” That smile came again, the gently bitter one. “We weren’t talking by the time he died. I...blamed him. That’s not fair. It took me a long time to accept that.”

I tried to scoot closer. “Jim—”

“The point is, Aimee’s like that. When something awful happens to you—well, people handle it different ways. Some people become compliant. They want everyone to tell them they’re doing the right thing because that means they’re safe. The bad thing won’t happen again. And if you always make the right choice, you’ll always be safe, and getting approval from other people becomes a magic spell.” He was silent for a long moment before he added, “Other people shut down.”

“Ding ding ding.”

He looked down at the boots again. He tugged one of the laces free.

“You don’t seem very compliant,” I said. “You made me sweep the floor last time even after I turned it into a screaming match. Frankly, it’d be nice if you were a little more compliant.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve had about fifteen years of therapy to work on it.”

A window rattled open, and a woman said in a loud voice, “I have a headache, Robert. And it’s not every time.”

Jim looked at me.

I bit the blanket to keep from laughing.

His eyes got bigger.

I spat the blanket out and, fighting a giggle, whispered, “Stop!”

And for a moment, it felt like everything had gone back to the way it should have been. Then the moment passed, and his eyes slid away from my face.

“Is this about me?” I asked. “Are you telling me—I don’t know, I’m a brat?”

“No. I’m telling you about me. And I guess I’m telling you I understand what it’s like to come through something, to be scared of what’s going to come next, even if you and I handle it differently. Although, yes, you are a brat.”

“Jim!”

“You are.” He wasn’t grinning, but I could hear it in his voice. “Actually, I think that kind of...I think it’s one of the reasons I’m attracted to you. You are who you are, Emmett. No fucks given or taken. God, that’s—that’s amazing. And who you

are, the Emmett Bradley I know, he shouldn't give or take any fucks. If that means you're a brat, well, that's a bargain."

I was hot inside the blanket. The smell of freshly baked cookies wafted in from somewhere. My forehead felt damp with sweat, and I had to stop and swallow because I felt like my voice was about to crack. "I was so scared."

Jim nodded.

"For you."

"I'm sorry, Emmett. I'm sorry for what I did. For what I said. You trusted me, and I betrayed that trust. I love you, and you're the most important person in my life. I shouldn't have treated you that way."

I was all mature and stuff now, so I said, "I'm sorry too." And then, "No, don't get that look on your face."

Jim tried to stop smiling.

"I love you too, you know? And I'm sorry. I didn't know how to help you, but I was so scared that I didn't—I didn't try very hard to figure it out. I'm sorry I let you down."

"You didn't let me down," he said quietly. "You found me."

We were both quiet for a long moment.

"You, uh, weren't wrong about something else."

Jim cocked his head.

"About the fact that I—" More sweat broke out across my chest, stinging. "—I like it, sometimes, when you—" He waited, that look of implacably gentle interrogation on his face, and I finished in a rush. "—you get assertive."

"When I get assertive."

“You know what I mean,” I snapped. “And you didn’t have to be so crass about it yesterday.”

He smiled. It was the first real Jim smile I’d seen in two days, the one that went all the way and showed those incredible cheekbones.

“Don’t get any ideas,” I said, yanking the blanket tighter. “I’m not in the mood.”

But he kept looking at me, and the air had a new charge, and even I knew I was full of shit.

He set the boots down. He stood. He had powerful thighs, and in profile, the way those jeans fit him, I could see the length of his dick.

“Are you deaf?” I asked.

“You like it,” he said and took hold of the blanket. He stripped it back. I fought him, but he was stronger and had leverage, and after a moment I let go. He looked down at me, and even in jeans and a tee, I felt naked. I folded my arms across my chest. “When I take charge, huh?”

I flipped him the bird.

“Get up,” he said quietly.

I waved my middle finger in his general direction.

“Stand up,” he said in that same tone, but this time, he wrapped a hand around my arm, and it was either stand or discover if dislocated shoulders were sexy.

When I was on my feet, I was taller, but only a little. Right then, it didn’t feel like an advantage at all.

“I asked you a question,” he said.

The room was too hot. I didn't know if that was just me or if it was Jim turning up his internal furnace or if it was a combo. I couldn't look at him when I mumbled, "Yes."

He turned my face back.

"But not all the time," I said with a little more vigor. "You have to listen to me sometimes. I told you something was fucked in that safe house, and you didn't listen."

He nodded.

"And you should have listened to me yesterday when—when you were going to do something stupid and throw your life away."

He nodded again. His eyes were blue like heaven. He said, "Take your clothes off."

Sweat bunched the cotton of my tee under my arms.

"All right," he said and grabbed the hem of my shirt.

I knocked his hand away. I was breathing faster. My dick pressed against my jeans.

Jim watched me for a moment. I couldn't read his face, but I could read his body. It looked like somebody had parked a battleship in his pants.

"How about this?" His voice was raspy. "If you say no, it means no."

I stared at him. I didn't think I could talk.

He reached for my shirt again, and I struck out.

"If you want me to stop," he said, "you'd better say no."

I scratched my cheek with my middle finger.

This time, it was a trap. He reached for my shirt, and when I tried to dislodge his hand, he grabbed my wrist and twisted. The next thing I knew, he had both my hands pinioned, and his other hand gripped my shoulder as he pressed me up against the wall.

“You want me to tell you what to do sometimes?” he asked.

“Fuck off.”

“That’s what you need, is that it?”

I twisted. I could hear my own breathing, savage and rapid. It sounded more like a cry this time: “Fuck off!”

“I think that’s what you need, but I want to hear you say it.”

With my face flattened against the wall, the sound of my breathing was different—higher, filling my ears. “Yeah.” The word sounded scraped out. “Yes. Yeah, I want you to tell me what to do.” And then because I was still me and couldn’t help myself, I added, “Sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” Jim said. “What else do you want that you haven’t been telling me?”

“I want you to fight me sometimes.”

He released my arms, but a firm push from his other hand told me to stay against the wall. He drew my head to the side and kissed my neck. This morning’s stubble made something run through me like a string of firecrackers.

“What else?”

I tried to move back, to turn around, but he kept me there with his hand between my shoulder blades. We were somewhere else now, just the two of us, beyond the real world, beyond the normal, ordinary things that had dictated what we were to each other. It felt like a game. It felt like the truth. It felt like the

surrender of something I'd been carrying so long, I didn't know what it was anymore.

“I want you to say no.”

He hesitated—a change in the quality of his body against mine, more than anything else.

“When I'm—when I'm wrong,” I whispered. Tears ran down my cheeks. “I'm really fucked up, Jim. I don't want to keep fucking things up.”

The hand against my back eased, and he turned me around. He wiped tears from my cheek, and when I reared back, he caught my jaw and stared at me until I settled down. Then, slowly, he rucked up my shirt. I shivered, caught between the cold draft and the heat of his hands. I shivered harder as the shirt came over my head. Then he knelt, undoing the button on the waistband of my jeans. I started to shake. The jeans came off. Then my boxers. Then my socks. He lifted each leg one at a time, a hand steady under my knee, and when he put each foot down again, he trailed his fingers over the dark hair on my thighs. I moved forward, toward his mouth.

He smirked and got to his feet, and then he turned me toward the bedroom, our bedroom, and his hands felt like signal flares on my shoulders.

He went slow. When he spoke, it was mostly to say no. I cried a lot, and I felt like I was emptying myself out only to be filled up with something I hadn't had before—no jokes, please.

When he came, a corona of light haloed him, and I thought about how forest fires cleared deadwood to make room to grow, and certain pinecones opened only under tremendous heat. How life began with fire.

18 | JIM

A hand on my shoulder woke me. It was late afternoon, the light sandy—golden and grainy and filling the room. The rush of traffic and the rush of the ocean made a quiet, retreating symphony outside the window.

“Wake up!” Emmett said.

“What is it?” I sat up. “Is it on fire?”

“Is it on fire,” he said in a tone of absolute disgust.

When I looked over, he was the boy of ice again—all the armor back on. But it was different, seeing him like this. Knowing the straps and buckles, knowing where to loosen, where to apply pressure. Knowing who lived underneath. I’d caught glimpses of him before, and that had been enough to make me love him. No wonder Vie loved him, a part of me thought; he saw it before any of us. Which probably said something about me, that even now I couldn’t keep Vie out of our bed.

Since nothing appeared to be on fire, and nobody was kicking down our door, and all the monsters we knew were either dead or off hatching diabolical plans, I reclined on one elbow.

“Stop,” he said.

“I like looking at you.”

“Well, it’s fucking annoying, so stop.” He squirmed, pulling the sheet up to the lean cant of his hips, and then he pushed a pillow in my face.

Laughing, I batted the pillow away.

“What I said—” Emmett’s eyes were wary, his face unreadable. “I didn’t mean, you know, it applies to everything.” His face got red. “I thought I should tell you that.”

I want you to fight me, he had said. *I want you to say no*. I didn’t know entirely what it had cost him to make that admission. I didn’t know what the boundaries were, aside from the rough sketch we’d laid down before other things had taken my attention. But I knew, the way you know from dealing with lots and lots of adolescents over the course of the years, the bare bones of it. Parents who had never said no, who had never fought back—who had disappeared to New York or LA or Sedona, or into a bottle, or into a shopping spree. Parents who had given him a credit card so they wouldn’t have to deal with his wants or needs. Parents who had greased wheels and slapped backs when *situations* arose. And the problem was that when you greased everything with money, pretty soon you didn’t have anything to hold on to.

I wasn’t naïve enough to believe kids wanted rules and boundaries on everything. Part of being an adolescent was testing boundaries, figuring out who you were. But that was the point of rules, too. To draw a line in the sand. To say, everything up to here is what I’ll allow, everything up to here is safe, and you need to figure out what you’re going to do about it. And if they went too far, you dragged them back inside the lines and helped them figure it out better the next time. That was the whole point of fighting—good, normal, healthy disagreement—in my

experience. It wasn't fun, but it was part of learning to be human in a civilized world: this is my line; where's yours?

So, now he was looking at me, waiting for an answer, and I nodded.

"Oh God," he said and looked away.

"We'll figure it out," I said.

He looked back.

"I can get one of those easel pads, and it'll be like the first day of school. In my class, we come up with the rules together; you should remember."

His whole face opened in shock. And then he shoved me halfway out of the bed.

I was laughing as he tried to push me the rest of the way.

After a while, when I had him pinned and was kissing the hair above his ear, he told me, "I give up."

I rolled onto my side and scooped him closer. He was hard again, the miracle of being young, and he trembled when I touched him.

"We'll figure it out," I said, drawing my fingertips lightly along his length. "I like that you told me what you want. That's hot for me."

"Jesus."

"And good communication is an important part of a relationship."

He turned his face into the pillow and said something like "Somebody please fucking kill me."

I slapped his ass and rolled out of bed. "Come on."

Instead, he stretched out, arms behind his head, and gave a significant look down the length of his body. “Aren’t you going to—”

“Pancakes now,” I said. “We’ll deal with that later.”

“I can deal with it myself,” he said as I picked out a sweatshirt and shorts. “Don’t get the idea that you’re indispensable.”

“I’ve lived with you for over a year,” I said as I headed out into the hall. “I’ve heard you; it’s like the hundred-yard dash.”

I was pretty sure I heard a disbelieving laugh from behind me.

When he came out, black jeans low on his hips, a gray Volcom tee, big wool socks that I’d bought him for Christmas, he said, “I don’t like this.”

I got the milk and eggs out of the refrigerator.

“This new, confident you. I don’t care for it.”

“Hand me the flour, please.”

He did, and then he stood hipshot in the opening between the living room and the kitchen and said, “It’s unacceptable.”

“Emmett, I understand that you feel vulnerable after last night, and you want to set boundaries for me so I don’t—well, I don’t know exactly what you’re afraid I’ll do. Turn this into a twenty-four-seven live-in dom situation, I guess? Make you act like human furniture?”

“You don’t know what doms are. You’ve never even seen pornography.”

I rolled my eyes as I cracked eggs into a bowl. I tossed the shells in the trash. For a while, the only sound was the whisk

chiming against the ceramic bowl.

“It’s just...a lot.”

“It’s a lot for me too. This is still a new relationship; four months, Emmett, that’s not a lot of time. We’re figuring things out. It’s good that you told me. I’ll tell you what I like.”

“Missionary. Eyes closed. Gentle, chaste kisses.”

I caught the grin before it slipped out. “What I’m saying is, we’re still the same people we were before, but with more depth, I guess. More layers. More intimacy. This thing between us? It’s only going to get better.”

He shrugged and let his head hang loose on his neck.

“Now come over and give me a kiss. Yes, that was me telling you what to do.”

The wool socks slid a bit as he came across the floor, and he still smelled a little like sex when he ducked his head to kiss me.

“Better?” I asked.

He nodded.

Then, because he was Emmett, he sat on a stool and ate a banana—well, deep-throated it until it started to fall apart—and made the occasional, unmistakably sexual noise. For what reason, I still can’t tell you.

In the middle of that, he said, “I think I want to go to school.”

I looked over my shoulder. I tried to keep my voice even. “Well, we all have room for improvement, but there’s something to be said for being twenty and enthusiastic, even if you lack finesse—”

The chunk of banana whistled through the air. I caught it with my mouth and grinned.

“I’m sending you back.” Emmett prepared another chunk of banana. “This model is defective. I want the shy, retiring poetesque Jim Spencer.”

I caught the next banana missile too and poured pancakes onto the griddle.

“It’s almost dinner time,” Emmett said. “Why are you making pancakes?”

“Because my sleep schedule is all messed up, and because you like pancakes, and because we can have breakfast for dinner. Where do you want to go to school?”

“I don’t know,” he said, and if you didn’t know him, you wouldn’t have spotted the lie.

Ok, I thought. So. You want to go there. With him.

But all I said was “Do you know what you want to study?”

“No.”

“Do you want to be a teacher?”

He paused in the act of preparing another piece of banana to throw at me. “Did you hit your head?”

“You’d be good at it.”

“Of course I’d be good at it, Jimbo. That’s not the point.”

“What about a therapist? Or a psychiatrist?”

“I don’t understand what’s happening. Are you having a stroke? Do you smell toast? Nod if you smell toast.”

I turned the pancakes. “You’re insightful, especially when it comes to people. You could offer a lot.”

He popped a piece of banana in the air, caught it, and made a face.

“Ok,” I said. “You don’t have to know right now.”

“I was thinking music.” And then, in a rush, “But then I realized that’s dumb.”

I plated the first few pancakes and carried them to the table. The smell of buttery carbs wafted up, and my stomach growled; I couldn’t remember the last time I ate. As I got the maple syrup, I asked, “Why’s it dumb?”

“Because it’s stupid.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, you can’t make any money doing it.”

“That’s not the only consideration.”

“I’m not going to be a—” His mouth brightened into a smirk that I knew was at my expense. “—rock star or anything.”

“You’re very talented, but that’s a crapshoot. If you want to make a go at it, though, we can talk about what that would look like.”

His face was serious as he poured the syrup on his pancakes. I wondered if anyone else had seen him like this, these moments of domestic ordinariness that were, in their own way, a kind of vulnerability. How many breakfasts had he gotten himself because his mom had a headache or his dad had to leave early for work?

He scratched his cheek with his middle finger.

Laughing, I took the syrup back.

“If you want to do music, I think you should do music,” I said.

“I’d have to do a double major. Like, accounting.”

“You wouldn’t have to. Not unless you want to be an accountant.”

“Or I could do pre-law and music. The credit requirements aren’t too high, actually.”

The credit requirements, I thought. At this school you haven’t picked yet.

“Or if I took some business classes.” Emmett said into the pause. “That’s where a lot of music guys go wrong; they don’t learn anything about business, so they never make any money.”

“How about this?” I asked. “How about you take a few music classes and see how you feel about the major, and then you decide?” He opened his mouth, but I spoke first. “They need teachers everywhere, Emmett. I’ll have a job. We won’t starve.”

What I wanted to say, I didn’t: *And fuck your dad for making you think the only thing you have to worry about is money.*

Emmett looked like he was going to continue arguing against what he really wanted, I guess so that I could keep convincing him it was ok to, you know, be a human and be passionate about things other than how much money you can make, but instead his phone rang. He took it out, frowned at it, and said, “My mom.”

“We’ve been AWOL for a few days. She’s probably worried.”

“Or she wants to know if I’m best friends with Aimee now, oh, and do you think the Locketts would introduce your father to so-and-so because it would be so good for his firm. Yeah, Mom, we’re best friends. We had an awesome playdate because we’re both fucking psychos.”

I speared a piece of pancake meaningfully, and Emmett made a face.

He answered, and then, after a few seconds of listening, he said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t do anything...I don’t know...I don’t know! Fine. Yeah, you’re right, it doesn’t matter. No, Mom, you don’t have to worry about a fucking thing. I’ll stay in my room just like every other fucking dinner.”

Slamming the phone down didn’t work the same with a cell phone, but that didn’t stop Emmett. The table and plates and flatware rattled.

“What did I do to offend the Locketts?” he said. “My parents have that stupid fundraiser tonight, and apparently Sam called and told them he didn’t want us there, so we’re officially uninvited. Gee, yeah, it probably would be awkward to see them after I learned they’re about the most fucked up family in the universe after my own, and they’re allied with these creepy-as-fuck monsters, oh, and I accidentally-kind-of killed the mom, who according to my mom, won’t be at the fundraiser because she’s in Taos. Like I want to meet the fucking President of the United States anyway; my dad would make me get a picture with him. And can you imagine the fucking nightmare of security?” He looked up and said, “What?”

My blood hammered in my ears, and I said, “Emmett, the president is going to be at the fundraiser? The president of the United States? President Willis? With Aimee in the same room?”

He froze. Color drained from his face. “Oh. Shit.”

19 | EMMETT

We had to park on the next street because my parents' cul-de-sac was cordoned off. Apparently, that's what happened when the President of the United States paid a surprise visit to help a freshman senator raise funds. A couple of San Elredo uniformed officers were visible at the cordon itself, and I could make out Secret Service agents moving around outside my parents' house. The house itself glowed warmly in the evening, and inside, silhouettes moved against the light.

Heat rolled off Jim, tiny embers turning and dying in the air, so I rubbed his shoulder and said, "This is going to work."

"I don't care if it works. I care about you being safe."

The problem was time. Calling in a bomb threat, or the equivalent, wouldn't help because the bomb in question—Aimee—would be glued to the president's side, along with her dad, for the duration of his trip. And we hadn't had much time to plan an alternative—and even less time to put the different parts of our plan in motion. We definitely hadn't had time to call Vie and get his pale ass out here, which meant we'd be going up against a wanderer without our heavy. But at least we had a plan, and that was better than nothing. In theory.

The ice cream truck rolled into position thirty yards from the mouth of the cul-de-sac, parking in front of a fire hydrant. If a police officer decided to ticket them, well, that might change how things played out, so I hoped all of San Elredo's police

would be busy worrying about other things, tonight. Like making sure the president stayed alive.

Jim and I got out of the Tesla. We were halfway across the street when he took my hand, and I squeezed his fingers once. As we approached the cordon, one of the officers turned his full attention on us.

“Can we get through?” I asked. And then, on a whim, I lifted our joined hands and smirked. “We got, uh, busy.”

Jim didn’t exactly burst into flames, but then, he had a lot of practice at self-control.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen,” the cop said. “The street’s closed tonight for a private event. Residents only.”

“That’s my house,” I said. “Well, my parents’. Emmett Bradley. We’re supposed to be at the fundraiser, but like I said...” I glanced at Jim and then at the cop, and my smile got bigger.

This time, I was sure the ambient temperature rose a few degrees.

The cops traded a look. “License?”

I took out my license and handed it over. “I’ve got a different address. Please, I’m super late, and my mom’s going to be so mad.”

For a moment, the one with my license held it up and tried to compare it to my face. He did what most people did: pretended to look long enough to feel like it had been believable.

The other cop said, “If your license doesn’t have this address, we’re not supposed to let you through.”

“Can I vouch for him?” Jim asked. “It’s my fault. And his parents don’t like me as it is.”

After another shared look, the first cop said, “You can try that on the Secret Service boys. See what they say.”

As we hurried down the cul-de-sac, Jim blew out a breath.

“Come on,” I said. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“The younger one winked at me.”

“See? You’ve still got it.”

“No, it was more of a ‘good job’—” He stopped. And then, in a dry voice: “Don’t do that.”

I tucked away my smile as we approached the driveway.

One of the Secret Service guards moved to intercept us. He was out-of-the-box standard: dark hair, thirtyish, that ropy kind of muscular. He didn’t put a hand on his gun, but his body language changed, the threat visible there.

“Private event, gentlemen—”

“It’s my parents’ house,” I said and kept walking. “And we’re late.”

This time, his hand did go to his gun, although he didn’t draw it. “Sir, stop right there.”

I stopped. I went through my song and dance again, and Jim was so embarrassed—again—that it actually sold the thing. The agent was too professional to smirk, but this time, I caught the *good job* look he sent at Jim. I was close enough to feel the subaudible groan in Jim’s chest. I wondered if all men were pigs, or if it was only the ones Jim and I bumped into. The agent said something into his earpiece. He must have been speaking to an agent inside the house because a moment later, movement at the end of the drive drew my eye.

Cleofás emerged from my parents' house. He wore another of the tailored three-piece suits, complete with a pocket square today, and his dark quiff was perfect as usual. When he saw us, his face didn't change, but he started walking faster.

I drew up my barrier, shaping it into a sphere as wide as I could—enough to contain me, Jim, and the agent. It was a stretch, but I managed. I felt the brush of Cleofás's power against mine, and the attack slid away. Disappointment and frustration tightened his face.

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He stopped. He tried again. He looked flushed.

"It'll be a minute," the Secret Service agent said to me. He was still facing us, and he hadn't seen Cleofás yet.

When he started to glance over his shoulder, Jim said, "Is this a good job?"

"Yes, sir. It's an honor."

"But it's got to be hard, right? Traveling all the time? Always being on edge?"

Behind the agent, Cleofás took a staggering step. He was clawing at his neck, trying to get the collar of that expensive dress shirt open. I felt a momentary pang. I knew the panic of trying to draw a breath and not finding any air; I'd been on the other side of Maija's attacks before. But Cleofás was dangerous, and the stakes were too high.

When he collapsed, the sound was loud enough for the Secret Service agent to turn. He said something into his earpiece.

"I'm a doctor," Jim said.

The agent gave him an appraising look and then motioned us over to Cleofás. Jim knelt next to him. He did things that looked

pseudo-medical, like tilting Cleofás's head back to clear his airway, loosening his collar, taking his pulse. That last part was real; we had to make sure, and it took a surprisingly long time for someone to die from asphyxiation. This was how Jim was going to buy that time for us. Most of the movements were designed to block any close-up view of Cleofás's body. The whole plan hinged on it, actually.

"He's all right," Jim said, still holding Cleofás's wrist. "He's breathing, and his pulse is strong."

"I'm getting an ambulance," the agent said.

"Hold off. I think he's coming around; it might have been low blood sugar, something like that. One of us can drive him."

"Are you sure?" Cleofás's collapse had stripped some of the plating from the agent's armor, and he sounded the way a lot of people do when a medical emergency spins them out of their normal orbit. "He doesn't look good."

Another agent jogged toward us down the drive. They'd be prepared for this. Something that might be a ruse. A distraction. The two agents conferred in low voices.

I crouched next to Jim; his color was bad, and his jaw was set. "I fucking hate this," he whispered.

"I know."

"It's murder."

I touched the small of his back; the day was cool, but the cloth was damp where sweat had gathered.

"Sir, we've got an ambulance on the way."

"I don't think—"

“I understand, sir, but this is protocol. Now, I need you to move back to the street—”

With a gasping noise that didn't sound like breathing at all, Cleofás sat up. He was pale, his lips almost blue, with dark circles under his eyes. Harold Vleck, the Shadow Nest's resident animator, had done his job, like Maija had done hers. The ones who'd survived that night attack on the safe house had all wanted revenge and been willing to help, but I didn't plan on inviting any of them to Jim's birthday party.

“Sir, you need to lie down—”

“I'm fine.” It didn't sound like Cleofás's voice, and his movements as he rose were jerky and uncoordinated. Jim released his wrist and scrambled back, wiping his hand on his leg. “I have an inhaler in the house. I just need help getting inside.”

“Sir—”

“He's Emmett Bradley,” Vleck-as-Cleofás said. “Robert and Jennifer's son. Do you need to ask your hosts for permission to let their son into their house?”

The agents traded a look. The one who had joined us on the driveway shook his head. With an annoyed noise, Cleofás motioned for me and Jim to help him, so we pretended to assist him up the driveway. He smelled faintly of urine, and it might have been my imagination, but his body was already starting to cool.

Behind us, one of the agents was speaking quietly into his earpiece.

“They didn't buy it,” I whispered to Jim.

“Just keep moving,” he whispered back.

The inside of the house felt hot and close, a mixture of too many bodies, too many perfumes, and synthetics that needed dry cleaning. We hurried through the kitchen, dodging the catering staff that zipped back and forth with trays of canapes and satay skewers and lobster puffs. The living room was crowded with old white people, all of them with drinks in hand. Their voices mingled into a buzzing volume that felt like pressure at the base of my skull.

Like any party, this one was composed of smaller groups of people: a red-faced man in a matching red power tie expostulating to a group of other men who looked like they were waiting for their turn to talk; a pair of svelte older women who had gone for elegance and simplicity, little black dresses—and, of course, massive diamonds on their ears and fingers; a man in a Prince of Wales check suit pursuing, literally, a much younger woman down the length of the bar. She looked like she had her keys slotted between her fingers, and I figured she'd be able to handle him one way or another.

And then one of those groups shifted, and Bolt and Indigo were standing across the room from us. Bolt wore a black suit that was too small for him, the cuffs of the jacket riding up, the trousers practically highwaters. He looked miserable, and there was no way that anybody could look at the flattop, the snub nose, the mouth like he was gearing up to throw a punch, and think he was anything but what he was: a thug.

Indigo, in contrast, looked perfectly in place. Their pixie bowl cut was edgy enough to pass for trendy, and they wore a navy jumpsuit that rode the line between Air Force surplus and haute couture. When they saw us, their jaw dropped.

I flicked my chin at them and smiled.

Next to me, the air warped, the way tremendous heat makes the air shimmer in the desert. The first embers spun and drifted on Jim's thermals.

Indigo snapped something at Bolt. Bolt tapped his earpiece—much more discreet than the Secret Service ones—and barked something. All hands on deck, I thought. Well, it's a little late for that; Holland's Bear Flag operations were on the beach, disguised as police, and what was left of the Shadow Nest would make sure the Solar Court's reserve forces couldn't arrive from the street.

Indigo broke and ran, and Bolt drew his gun and fired.

The bullet slammed into my shield.

He fired twice more. The shield trembled under the impacts.

Screams broke out around us. Men shouted. The party erupted into chaos—shoving and clawing. One of the svelte ladies went down, trampled by the red-faced man who was holding his matching tie away from his body like he didn't want to get it dirty.

“Go,” Jim said. He held out his hand, and I parted the shield long enough for him to send a jet of flame at Bolt. The older man threw himself behind the sofa.

“But—”

“Go!” Jim's hand was a brand where it touched my shoulder; he shoved me in the direction Indigo had gone, and I broke into a stumbling run.

Behind me another shot rang out, and fire roared.

I held my shield around both of us as long as I could, extending it into a long, narrow dome. And then I couldn't stretch that far, and the shield came apart. I pulled it closer around me, a dense sphere—I'd learned the hard way that

wearing the shield like a suit of armor left me vulnerable to other kinds of attacks. A woman with a bloody nose bounced off the invisible dome and landed flat on her ass and started to cry.

Fortunately for her—and me—the crowd was already thinning. From the family room, a shot rang out, and then a fresh round of screams. Not hard to guess which way Indigo had gone.

I skidded to a stop in the archway that connected to the family room. Extra seating had been brought in to accommodate the guests, and chairs lined the walls. People ran past me, emptying the room. A man in a dark suit lay dead, his throat opened from ear to ear, blood washing the floorboards. His earpiece had fallen on the rug. His gun was gone.

On the far side of the room, my parents sat next to Sam and Aimee Lockett. I recognized Sam from publicity photos and election ads—muddy hair and a narrow, weak-chinned face that made me think of a guy who'd been picked on in high school and figured out, later, how to pay the world back. Indigo held a gun—the one taken from the fallen Secret Service agent, I guessed—on them.

“Where is he?” Indigo was shouting. “Where is the president? Where is he?”

Sam let out a dazed laugh. “Went to take a leak. He went to take a leak. Just now.” He laughed again, the sound like a tin can rolling in the dark. “Talk about timing.”

Indigo screamed and shot him.

The bullet caught him in the leg, and Sam howled and rolled out of his chair. He clamped his fingers around the injury. Dark threads of blood unspooled slowly across the backs of his hands. He screamed again.

“Be quiet, or I’ll shoot you in the head,” Indigo said. They turned like they might try to catch the president in the whiz palace, but when they saw me, they stopped. They stepped sideways, angling their body to keep an eye on me while still watching the hostages.

Sam stopped screaming.

My dad moved in his seat, like he might try something, and Indigo snapped the muzzle of the pistol toward him. My dad froze. Then he saw me, and something I couldn’t read whirred across his face. My mother clutched her elbows, trying to make herself smaller. Aimee was crying silently.

“Stay where you are,” Indigo said to me. “You’ve vexed me today. I would enjoy hurting them.”

“Run,” I said. “Your plan got fucked sideways. You didn’t get what you wanted. So, run. And today, right now, I’ll let you live. Hell, I’ll even give you a head start.”

“My plan.” Indigo’s laugh was high and chiming. The gun drifted in their hand, a greasy smear of metal at the edge of my vision.

I couldn’t reach my parents with a shield—they were too far away, and even if I had that kind of range, it would be a sphere, encapsulating Indigo inside it with us. Which was about the most useless kind of shield I could imagine. I needed to get closer. I sidestepped along the perimeter of the room, bringing each foot down slowly. I’d worn dress shoes, with trousers and a button-up and blazer, all part of getting in here. Now, though, when the heels clicked against the boards, I regretted it.

Indigo said, “What did you not understand?”

“I’ve got this thing about people telling me what to do,” I said. “I fucking hate it. Well, it turns out it’s more complicated

than that. Sometimes, I actually like it, and let me tell you, that's confusing as hell. But that's ok. I can live with being confused. I'm a richly complicated human being; it's part of my charm."

Indigo was silent for a heartbeat. Then, turning toward Aimee, they said, "Now, child."

Aimee sniffled.

"Now," Indigo said softly. "This is what we worked for. This is what we promised each other."

Her voice was small, and she sounded a lot younger than sixteen. "But—but you said I had to be right next to President Willis—"

"Aimee, you must do it now. It will be what we dreamed of: a new world, a future we can build together. But you must do it now."

I took another step, and Indigo brought the gun up and fired. My shield vibrated as the bullet caromed off. I could take more of those, but not many.

In the aftershock of the gunfire, with the clap still ringing in my ears, Indigo turned back to Aimee and said, "It must be now —"

Gunfire came from outside the house, shattering the windows. Indigo jerked backward, and dark spots bloomed on the jumpsuit where bullets struck home. My parents threw themselves onto the floor. Indigo staggered away from the windows, bringing up the pistol and firing wildly out of the house. Aimee screamed.

It was my opportunity, maybe the only one I would get. I sprinted forward, and I pushed my shield out, spreading the dome to cover my parents and Sam and Aimee.

Aimee's scream cut off, and she blinked up at me, breathing raggedly. And then she started to glow.

The glow didn't come from everywhere. It looked like a crosshatch of light, finely worked lines bursting into a brilliance too bright to stare at directly. The scars, I thought. The damaged chakras. We'd stumbled onto Indigo doing some of that work at the mission, and we'd been naïve enough to assume it was torture. Indigo must have finished the work in the time since. And now, it was happening: Aimee was going to explode.

"What are you doing?" Sam shouted. "Stop! Stop! You're going to kill us!"

"Do you hear him?" Indigo's voice was strained. They had withdrawn to the archway, where they were taking cover, staying out of the sight lines of anyone outside the house. "Listen to him, your own father. He's frightened, Aimee. He's scared. And what does he worry about?"

Aimee swallowed. Her eyes were red and puffy, and her hands tightened into fists. The light grew brighter, and I had to shield my eyes.

"What?" Indigo shouted. "What does he care about?"

"Himself!" Aimee screamed. "He only cares about himself! He doesn't care about me or Mom or anything!"

"That's right," Indigo said. "Do this one last thing for me, child, and you will have what I promised you."

A sob racked Aimee as Sam began to shout at her again.

I couldn't look directly at her, but I dropped to my knees, and I tried to speak in her general direction. "That's bullshit, you know."

Another sob made Aimee double over. Her shoulders shook.

“Whatever they promised you, you’re not going to get it. You’re going to explode. Kaboom. That’s it, the end of Aimee. You can feel it, can’t you? You can feel it moving through you. You know it doesn’t feel right. You know something is wrong.”

Wiping her eyes, Aimee sat up straight again. She put on her warrior face, which wasn’t half bad, and she shook her head. The brightness intensified again. Her voice was taut, and I thought it was from pain, but it had an iron resolve now too. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Trust me, I’ve got an idea. I’ve dealt with wanderers before. Whatever you asked for, they’re going to give it to you in the worst fucking way they can imagine.”

Aimee smiled, surprisingly knowing and adult.

A noise had started, a whistling in my ears that was rising. It sounded like wind rushing through a tunnel. A freight train hauling ass.

“Aimee, what did they promise you?”

The smile grew, softened, touched her eyes.

“Aimee, what did you ask for? What did they say they’d give you?”

“I can make it better. I can make the world a better place. I know what it means; I know it means—” She stopped, hiccupping once, and wiped her eyes again. “But that’s ok. The world needs people who are willing to make sacrifices. I can make it better. A place where people will be safe, happy. No more wars. No more violence. No more—” She hiccupped again, on the verge of a sob. “No more people getting hurt.”

I watched her, the blind hope, the childlike faith, the dark tincture of belief that lures broken people everywhere: my life is meaningless, but if I give it to this thing, it will be worth it. Call it

what you will. The Crusades, jihad, Jonestown. I'd had a taste of it myself.

For a moment, panic snowed out everything else. And then a small voice reminded me that if I didn't do something, everyone important to me would die, and that would only be the start of the chaos to follow. I blinked to clear my eyes and tried to look past the intense light to make out Aimee's face. The zeal I saw there looked out of place on a teenager's face. Most teenagers were too self-absorbed for causes. Trauma changed people, but if there was one thing I knew, it was teenagers. I'd been one myself recently.

And then the panic settled. In my head, I saw that enormous control room, the one with all the switches and levers and buttons and flashing lights, like something out of NASA in the '60s. If there was one thing I knew, it was teenagers—and, of course, how to fuck with their heads.

“Ok,” I said. “Let's blow this fucker up.”

Her eyes slid toward me. Sirens wailed outside, coming closer.

“Come on.” I waved at the shot-out windows. “Here we go. One, two, three.”

“Emmett!” my dad barked.

Aimee's face looked waxen.

I counted to ten in my head. “Seriously? After all that?” She didn't bite. “You're telling me you went through all that—playing patty-cake with Indigo, giving them access to your tracker, tricking your parents into taking you somewhere remote, getting yourself kidnapped, and then getting yourself kidnapped again, and then getting away, and, let's not forget, pushing me into the fucking ocean—after all that, you're going to pussy out?”

She sat up a little. For the first time, I realized she'd lost the eyeshadow, lost the Metallica tee. She looked younger, vanilla, Daddy's good little girl in an unremarkable dress and black flats. But something in her face said this was what she looked like when Daddy's little girl wanted to pick a fight.

"Oh boy," I said and laughed. "I bet this is classic Aimee. You go balls to the wall, and then no delivery. It drives your parents bonkers, doesn't it?"

My mom's voice was breathy and high. "Emmett, what are you doing?"

"See, my thing is, I fuck things up. I've got authority issues. I've got control issues. I've got a dollop of oppositional defiance. I've definitely got trust issues. But at least with me, nobody can say I only go halfway." I pointed to my face. "Get it?"

"Stop talking to me," Aimee said.

"You know what I think?" I said. "I think you're scared. I think you put yourself through all that shit because Indigo got inside your head, and now I think you realize maybe you don't want to blow yourself up and kill a bunch of innocent people. Do you know what they're going to do? They're going to use this, no matter how it turns out, to start a war. There's a big explosion. The President of the United States survives, maybe. Or maybe he doesn't. Either way, they're ready, and they make it look like it was China or North Korea or Russia. And then it's war, Aimee, because that's what these murdering fuckholes want. Chaos. Destruction. Slaughter. What do you think about that?"

"This is bigger than me." Her voice rose shrilly. "This is bigger than any one person. We're remaking the world."

"Bullshit. Hot, stinking, fat chunks of bullshit."

“Don’t listen to him!” Indigo shouted from the doorway. They tried to move forward, but gunfire from outside the house drove them back again. “You can do this, Aimee. I believe in you. You were given an unbearable tragedy, and you have the strength to turn that tragedy into the final victory.”

Something in Aimee’s countenance hardened.

“Ah.” I cocked my head. “That’s it? Something bad happened to little Aimee, and now your life is over, and so the only thing you can do, the only thing worth doing, is to sacrifice yourself for something bigger. How am I doing?”

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

“Bitch, look at my face and tell me I don’t know what I’m talking about. You want to blow everything up and make a new world? That’s not what’s going to happen.” I took a breath. “Let me guess: Indigo showed you some magic tricks. They promised you they could make everything better. All it would take was a sacrifice, and you’re not too worried about that part because you’re tired of being Aimee Lockett, and you wouldn’t mind if somebody got rid of her.

“But here’s the truth: Indigo and the Solar Court? They’re not going to make things better. If you do this, it’s going to start something. Maybe not a war like Indigo had hoped. But something. And it’ll get worse. You want to know who you’re dealing with? In the south, they’re fighting the cartels for territory. Up here, they were fighting another monster like Indigo. They take children and make them disappear, like they’re going to do with you. And they do a lot worse. You think you’re going to do this, and the worst thing that happens is extra-crispy Aimee, and everyone else gets to live happily ever after? That’s bullshit.”

“Stop!” Aimee shouted.

“Don’t listen to him!” Indigo called. They fired, and the shot hammered my shield.

“I’m not going to stop,” I said. “You want to do this? Fine. There have been a lot of times when I wanted to blow up the world. But if you’re going to do it, at least have the balls to do it with your eyes open. You’re going to fuck hundreds of millions of people. A lot of them will die. That’s what you’re creating, not paradise.”

“I warned you,” Indigo said. “I warned you they would try to stop us. I warned you they would stop at nothing, that no lie was too low.”

“Sweetheart,” Sam said, “whoever’s making you do this—”

“Shut up!” Aimee screamed. The light radiating up from her flared. “Everyone shut up for one second so I can think!”

My knees were starting to hurt from the boards. I could smell my own flop sweat. The sirens had cut off, and in the silence, my heartbeat was a drum.

“I just want it to be over,” Aimee said in a whisper.

I nodded. “I know.”

She started to cry. I scooted closer, and when nothing went boom, I touched her arm, and the world still didn’t blow up, so I pulled her into a hug. She sobbed like she was falling apart, and the light streaming up from her dimmed.

Farther back in the house, the fire roared, and gunshots answered. Jim and Bolt were still at it.

When Aimee pulled back, the light had faded to nothing but a hatchwork of lines on her skin, no brighter than fireflies. She wiped her cheeks, and her voice was clotted when she said, “I don’t know what to do.”

“Nobody does.” I shrugged. “You’re not supposed to.”

“Aimee—” Indigo said.

Aimee let out a broken laugh. “I’m supposed to move on.”

With a snort, I shook my head. “More bullshit. You go through something like that, and you’re lost. You can’t find your way out on your own. Some people find a thread they can follow—a book or a program. Sometimes you find somebody who can help you. Maybe it’s a therapist. Maybe it’s this guy who’s hella annoying about his meal prep and won’t get high with you even though it’s legal and has totally unreasonable expectations of you as a human being, even though you’re a piece of shit.”

Aimee laughed again—the sound small, falling, and then gone. She shook her head.

“Maybe not exactly like that,” I said, “but you get the idea: someone who cares about you. Someone who can help you find the next step when you can’t see anything except how much it hurts right now.”

She wiped her face. Her breathing was wet and fast, but she nodded.

“No!” Indigo shouted. They left the archway, coming toward us. “No, we’ve both worked too hard for this.” Their voice trembled with barely controlled fury. “It would be more effective if you did it yourself, but if you won’t, I will.”

Aimee let out a high, pained noise. Lines of light blazed to life on her bare skin. She looked at me, her dark eyes huge, and shook her head.

She wasn’t in control anymore. Indigo had set her to self-destruct—or whatever the woo-woo version of that was.

I hadn't realized, until then, it was a possibility. But I should have. After all, that's what Adonai had done: taken members of the Solar Court, turned them into weapons, and detonated them once they returned to Solar Court territory. And now Indigo was doing the same thing.

Movement in the opening to the living room made me turn. Jim stood there. His clothes were charred, and one shoulder was a bloody mess. Fire wreathed him—not ordinary fire, but the flames I had only seen once, in a cave deep under San Francisco. Instead of orange or red or yellow, they were iridescent, shimmering with every color of light imaginable. This was the fire that had hurt Adonai—the only thing I'd ever seen hurt a wanderer, besides Vie. Well, and getting their heads ripped off, apparently.

“When I tell you,” I whispered to Aimee, “do exactly what I say.”

Fear had emptied out her eyes, but when I squeezed her arm, she nodded.

Indigo turned to face him. “You're too late.”

Jim took a limping step into the room.

“Run, and live a few more days,” Indigo said. “Or stay, and I will piss on your ashes.”

Jim raised his hand, and that coruscating, pearlescent fire streaked through the air. At the same time, Indigo leveled the pistol and squeezed off a shot. The bullet was moving too fast for me to see it, but I heard it explode before it got anywhere close to Jim. Then Jim's fire speared Indigo, and the wanderer began to scream.

“Grab Indigo,” I said, and I dropped my barrier. I got to my feet, hauling Aimee out of her seat, and we stumbled toward the

wanderer. “Bare skin! Anywhere!”

Aimee didn't seem to know what she was doing. Her legs kept folding, and I felt like I was carrying her across the room. The light coming off her was so bright that I had to squeeze my eyes to slits, and Indigo dissolved into a shadow, backlit by Jim's rainbow fire.

Five more steps.

Indigo was screaming, and the heat from that rainbow fire hammered me, baking the sweat from my face.

Three steps.

My mother was shouting my name. My father bellowed something.

One step.

Sam Lockett cried out, “Aimee, please!”

When Aimee's hand closed around Indigo's, the latticework of light on her skin extinguished.

“Jim!” I shouted.

The scintillating lance of fire went out.

A tracery of light opened on Indigo's exposed skin as they absorbed the energy coursing through Aimee, and I exhaled in relief. It had worked. When I had seen Indigo at the safe house, how they had absorbed Epifania's power and then reacted so strangely when Menfis almost touched them, I had wondered. Maybe Indigo couldn't control the absorption; maybe it happened whenever they touched anyone with an ability. And, as usual, I had been right.

“No,” the wanderer shook their head. They dropped the gun, and they plucked at the jumpsuit as they took a step back. “No!”

“Get them out of here,” I said to Jim, readying a shield.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“Indigo’s going to explode!”

“Aimee, get your dad, the Bradleys, get them out of here.” Jim limped over to me, and he gave Aimee a nudge toward the other adults.

“Someone needs to call the police!” my dad shouted, which was proof that even at the end of the world, your parents could still be so cringe that you wanted to die.

“Get Mom out of here,” I called to him. Aimee was already helping my mom to her feet. My mom hesitated, looking at me. She had blood at the corner of her mouth. She had sung me lullabies. The thought came out of nowhere, a memory that I’d forgotten until now. It seemed impossible; growing up, I’d never heard her sing. I pushed the thoughts away and yelled, “Go!”

Between Aimee and my dad, they got Sam onto his uninjured leg, and they hurried toward the front door.

Indigo was clawing at their skin now, raking bloody furrows in the flesh, panting for air.

“Jim, you have to go,” I said.

He ruffled my hair and leaned his head against mine.

“Indigo’s going to explode. I can contain that. I can—I can prevent other people from being hurt.” It would mean trapping myself inside with the wanderer, but it would stop things from getting worse. No fabricated story of terrorist actions or rogue nations or a nuclear weapon. No war.

His hand was strong as it closed on my nape. His fingers were gritty with char.

I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, everything was blurry. “Please?”

“This is one of those times,” he said and kissed my temple, “when I get to tell you no.”

The light welling up from Indigo grew stronger. They shouted, “No! No! No!” And then the words became a scream. The light was blinding, and I raised my hand to block it out.

We were going to die. Jim was going to die. Because of me. Because, in the end, I was too broken.

Once—what felt like a long time ago—I could have done this. I could have wrapped Indigo in a barrier and contained the explosion. But ever since leaving Vehpese, when my life had fallen apart, my abilities had been less. Weaker.

“Not weaker,” Jim said over Indigo’s screams, and I realized I’d been talking out loud. “Different.”

My first reaction was to kick that thought away. But I’d been making all sorts of progress in the last few days, so I tried to think. All I could do was shape a sphere around myself. I couldn’t center it around Indigo, which meant I’d be trapped inside with them. Maybe that wasn’t weaker; maybe a better word was limitation or restriction. The difference was semantics. The only way to stop Indigo was to be inside the sphere with them, and since Jim wouldn’t leave, he’d die too, and Jim was too good to die, and we’d only just started building our life here together, finding this little bubble of happiness where the two of us fit together—

“Fuck me,” I said. “I am a fucking genius.”

That won me a real Jim Spencer smile, the one where I could see his molars, everything capped by those chiseled cheekbones.

I raised a barrier—a perfect sphere, encasing us and Indigo. The wanderer was still clawing at their skin. The orange lights where their eyes should have been held manic, flickering terror.

Then I raised a second barrier. A smaller one. Just big enough for me and Jim.

Our little bubble.

All I needed now was a sign that said, **STAY THE FUCK OUT.**

Jim was looking me in the eye. I saw the pain there. The fear. The trust.

I felt it, the moment Indigo began to come apart, whatever supernatural fuckery they had set in motion chaining together into a blast of heat and pressure as energy found its release.

“I can do this,” I said.

Jim bumped his forehead against mine. “I know you can.”

And then the world exploded.

20 | JIM

In the aftermath of the explosion, it was easy to get away. Emmett's barrier had contained the damage to a fairly small area, which meant the house was still standing. We left through the back, down the stairs to the private beach. Holland's security contractors, still masquerading as police, waved us through, and ten minutes later, we were on a different street in San Elredo.

We went home, and while I peeled half-burned clothing off, Emmett called his parents to tell them we were alive, oh, and don't say a fucking word about anything. His words, not mine. Then he joined me in the bathroom, and I tried not to move as he stripped off the rest of the blood-stiff clothing.

"Stop being such a baby," he said and made me sit on the toilet.

The graze on my shoulder wasn't all that bad; my hip bothered me more, from where I'd taken a bad fall when I'd thrown myself behind the kitchen counter to avoid Bolt's gunfire.

Emmett was cleaning my shoulder with an antiseptic wipe when he started to shake. The wipe tumbled out of his hand. When he tried unwrapping a bandage, he dropped that too.

"I—I'm cold. I must be cold." He tried to smile. "My teeth are chattering."

I pulled him down to sit on my lap. It wasn't hard; he was trembling so hard his legs gave out. His body was tight, his legs

drawn up, muscles contracted in that old, instinctive defense. His face was hot against me, and I brushed his hair back from his forehead.

His words were still jittery when he said, “Will you stop being so un-fucking-bearably supportive?”

I slapped his ass, and he yelped, and then he started to laugh. He laughed until he had to press his face into my shoulder, arms looping around my neck. Then it wasn't laughing anymore. He was still clinging to my neck when I put him to bed.

When his breathing softened, I went back into the bathroom and finished the patch-up job. Emmett had a lot of amazing qualities. It turned out playing nurse might not be one of them.

In the kitchen, in the dark, I drank a beer. The night looked like peel-and-stick against our windows. I drank a second beer over the sink, fast. I gripped the stainless-steel apron until I smelled hot metal, and then I ran cold water and held my hands under it. The sound of gunfire. The screams. The press of bodies. The stink of burned meat. John Bolt's body lying on the floor. The hole in his chest had been as wide as my hand, the flesh around it burned to charcoal. The third and the fourth beer, I drank on the balcony, in the dark, watching the stars go out. And then I went to bed.

When I woke, it was dawn, light boomeranging along the horizon, our bedroom filling with pale warmth.

Emmett was staring at me.

I pulled a pillow between us. Then I said, “Didn't you tell me this is creepy?”

“It's creepy when you do it. When I do it, it's endearing.”

I groaned.

I was too tired to fight him when he took the pillow away, and I was definitely too tired to fight him when he pushed and pulled and prodded until he was snuggled under my arm. His breath whispered against my chest. We both needed to brush our teeth.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, the words warm with his life where they touched bare skin.

“No.” I closed my eyes against the rush, and when I could, later, I said, “Not now.”

He nodded into my shoulder. Outside, a motor buzzed—something small, somebody out getting ready for spring. The color of the light deepened. Emmett moved against me, and the skin on my chest pebbled. I could hear myself, like I was outside myself, the deep swell of each breath.

I rolled onto my side. Emmett’s eyes were open, the scarred one slightly different in shape, unable to open as wide. They were dark. His pupils were wide. I ran my hand up his thigh, crested the ridge of his hip. He hardened, his dick filling out his boxers. He was still watching me, so I moved those last few inches and kissed him.

He made a small, satisfied noise, and when I broke the kiss, his lips were glossy. Propping himself on an elbow, he came toward me for more. His dick pressed against my leg. He had goose bumps too.

Someone hammered on the front door.

Emmett hesitated.

“Ignore them,” I said.

The hammering continued.

Emmett shifted his weight.

“It’s the building manager,” I said. “Or it’s DoorDash, and they got the wrong apartment.”

“I don’t think DoorDash knocks,” he said.

The knocking ended. Emmett cocked his head. Five seconds passed. Ten. A tiny smirk pulled at the scarred corner of his mouth, and he lowered his head and kissed me.

Just like that, someone started pounding on the door—shaking it in its frame. Like they knew.

“For fuck’s sake,” I said.

Emmett mimed outrage. “Jimothy! You kiss your boyfriend with your mouth?”

“I do other stuff too. Let me show you.”

But the knocking continued.

“They’ll go away,” I said.

“This place is a shithole,” Emmett said, rolling toward the edge of the mattress. “Ten more seconds, and the door will fall off its hinges.”

I listened to him pad toward the front door. And then I thought about Holland, and the Shadow Nest, and what was left of the Solar Court. I scrambled out of bed and sprinted down the hallway.

“Of all the fucking cockblocks,” Emmett was saying as he opened the door.

On the other side, Vie, Emmett’s high school love, and his boyfriend, Austin, stood. They both looked road-worn and weary, and both wore coats that were too heavy for this part of the world. Vie’s long blond hair was tucked up under a beanie. Austin wore a John Deere hat.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I said before I could stop myself.

What might have been a smile passed over Vie’s face and then was gone. Austin glanced at me (in my boxers) and Emmett (in his boxers) and his eyebrows went up.

“Go fuck yourself,” Emmett told him. “It’s our apartment. We can do whatever we want.”

“I told you they could take care of themselves,” Austin said.

Vie gave a miniscule, one-shouldered shrug.

“Of course we can,” Emmett said, scratching his belly, the movement designed—because he was Emmett—to force the waistband of his boxers lower. “What the fuck took you so long?”

21 | EMMETT

Instead of a foursome, which I offered and which Austin turned down—although I noticed Vie didn't say no—we had breakfast.

The place was called Sally's, and it was one of those greasy spoons lacking in charisma. No chrome trim. No nostalgic red vinyl banquettes. Everything was either plywood or plastic, and you paid a woman behind a bulletproof partition. But it smelled like bacon and onions and carbs, and the Sally's Special was four dollars, and you got two eggs and two links of sausage and two pancakes as big as your head, and coffee was only a dollar more.

“Hello, lovely,” our waitress, Frida, said, and she trailed inch-long scarlet nails along Jim's shoulder. “Where have you been all my life?”

“You saw him last week,” I said.

Frida's expression flattened, and she gave me a look. She smiled as she turned back to Jim and waved at the back of the diner. “You want your table? I'll be right there with your coffee.”

“I think we all want coffee,” I said.

She gave me another look. “People are trying to enjoy their meals. Keep your voice down, please.”

Before I could reply, she sashayed off behind the counter, and Jim put a hand on my shoulder. He steered me toward our table at the back. Austin and Vie were sharing a look.

“Do you know why we come here?” I said.

“The service,” Austin said, hiding his face behind the menu.

“We come here because they think Jim hung the moon. And me, I’m the guy tracking dogshit on their grandma’s shag carpeting. It’s like the library. It’s batshit, the whole world upside down.”

“Huh,” Vie said and hid his face behind a menu too.

“Fuck both of you,” I said.

They were definitely laughing, even though I couldn’t hear them. Their shoulders gave them away.

Frida came with the coffee.

“We’re not coming here anymore,” I said.

“Fine.” She poured Jim’s first, of course. “Jim will still come, won’t you, sweetheart?”

He smiled and, because he was learning, didn’t say anything.

“Ha,” I said.

Frida stared at me for five seconds, and five seconds is a long time when a waitress is thinking about cracking you in the head with a coffeepot.

“Welcome to Sally’s,” she said to Vie and Austin. “Have you been here before?”

Vie shook his head.

“We’re visiting Jim,” Austin said.

I tried to kick him under the table. “You little shit.”

Austin grinned and kicked me back. Hard. That was probably for the foursome.

“Knock it off,” Frida said, rounding on me. “Or you can take your food to go.”

“Why are you looking at me? He was kicking too!”

Frida made a disgusted noise and patted Austin’s shoulder.

We ordered, which should have gotten rid of her, but instead Frida spent an agonizing two and a half minutes telling Jim he was too thin, and why didn’t he eat right, and he needed a boyfriend who took care of him, and how had he hurt himself, and why didn’t he have a boyfriend who could keep him safe, and her brother had a motorcycle, and he was single.

“I have a motorcycle,” I said. “I used to, I mean. And Jim gets plenty to eat. He ate all the taquitos the other night.”

Frida snatched the menus up and stalked off.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” I said. “Jim picks these places because they’re *Looney Tunes*.”

“I have a motorcycle,” Austin murmured into his coffee.

Vie snorted and grabbed a napkin and spent a long time wiping his mouth.

“Motherfuckers.” I pointed at each of them in turn. “Both of you.”

Jim rubbed my leg a few times.

“You’re getting fat,” I said to Austin.

He flipped me the bird as he drank more coffee.

“What’s it called? The freshman forty?”

“I’ve lost weight, actually. I stopped trying to bulk up for football.”

I made a face. “So, another thousand-mile road trip because Vie’s radar went off. How’s that feel, Austin?”

Jim squeezed my knee and gave me a look, and I picked up my mug and ignored him.

But Austin smirked. “You ever had road head?”

Choking on hot coffee hurts.

Vie was smiling now—one of those buried, Vie Eliot smiles that you had to know him to see.

“You think it’s funny?” I asked as I mopped at myself with wadded-up napkins. “How funny is it to pay for all that fucking gas every time you drive out here? Is bubble butt here still trying to compensate for his micropenis by driving that ridiculous fucking car?”

“Bubble butt,” Austin said to Vie. He had bushy eyebrows, and he wagged them now. “Told you he’d say it again.”

Vie’s eyes crinkled with amusement, but his gaze stayed on me. Then I felt the brush of his mind against mine, that doorway opening between us again. It wasn’t words; words could be lies. It was something below words, a mixture of satisfaction and amusement and deep happiness. My brain translated it, as best it could, into *I’m happy to see you too*.

And then he was gone, the door closed between us. But the look on his face didn’t change, and a moment later, Austin cocked his head, and Jim’s eyes got huge. Austin began to smirk, and the corner of Jim’s mouth twitched, and all three of them burst out laughing.

“Fuck you all,” I said, throwing down the coffee-soaked napkins. “Fuck all of you, then.”

“Is it his hair?” Frida asked as she came back with more coffee. “We were laughing about it in back.”

Before I could stop myself, I reached up to check my hair, and all three of them burst out laughing again.

I would have left, but Jim pulled me back into my seat, and besides, I didn't want to give them the satisfaction.

"How's everyone doing?" Jim asked later.

The Vehpese boys shrugged in unison, and then they smiled at each other when they caught themselves doing it, and the whole thing made me want to put a fork in my eye.

"Good," Vie said in his deep, quiet voice. "Sarah's opening a second location for Bighorn Burgers."

"Vie's going to manage it," Austin said with a grin.

"I said I'd do the weekends, but only until she finds someone else."

"He's worried about his grades." There was so much pride in Austin's voice that I upped myself to two forks: one for each eye. "He's going to get straight A's again, you know."

"Have you picked a major?" Jim asked.

Vie actually blushed.

"Don't tell me," I said. "Art. He's going to be one of those nude models for the art department. Bruh, bit of advice—hang a banana down there. Give them something to work with."

Vie shot me a flat look, and I almost lost it and grinned.

Austin glowered at me. To Jim, he said, "Social work. That's awesome, right?"

"That's very impressive," Jim said. He was watching Vie. "That can be a difficult job even for someone who's not... sensitive."

“Rooting around in people’s thoughts like a pig in a trough,” I said.

This time, Vie gave me the middle finger. But to Jim, he mumbled, “I think I could help. Maybe help people, you know, who are different.”

“I think you’ll help a lot of people,” Jim said. “As long as you take care of yourself too.”

Vie nodded. Then he elbowed Austin, and Austin got a big smile and said, “Mining engineering.”

“God,” I said, “even your major is a boner killer.”

“It’s a great career. I’m good at math, and it’s interesting. Besides, there’s good money in it, especially if you have people skills, you know, so you can get promoted into management.”

“Sucks to be you then.”

Austin flicked a wadded-up straw wrapper at me.

“What’s the envelope?” Vie asked, turning toward me.

Jim frowned and shook his head.

“Stay out of my head,” I said.

“I’m trying to.” Vie laughed. “It’s practically a spotlight.”

“What envelope?” Jim asked me.

It wasn’t easy to surprise Vie, and it was even harder to get that surprise to show on his face. So, it was a tiny bit satisfying when his jaw sagged a moment before I began speaking.

“I’m going to apply to colleges,” I said, “which was supposed to be a surprise, only this motherfucker can’t keep his hands out of the cookie jar.”

For a moment, nobody said anything.

“That’s great,” Jim said. And then he was grinning, that real smile, the one for me. “Emmett, that’s fantastic!”

“Nice,” Austin said, and he stretched out a hand to bump fists. I rolled my eyes and rapped his knuckles.

“College would be good,” Vie said, but I felt the brush of his mind again, that tremendous wash of emotion that was more than I could handle. Happiness. Maybe even joy.

“Jim’s going to do all my homework,” I said because it was all suddenly a lot. “He’s going to pack my lunches, and he’ll buy me my notebooks and my pencil pouches and a lot of rubber cement. He already picked out my back-to-school outfit.”

They laughed, and they traded looks, and they laughed harder, and I thought how funny it would be if somebody kicked Austin in the ’nads and Mr. Lumpy didn’t work for a week. How about road head then, huh?

They were all having such a good fucking time laughing that when my phone buzzed, I slid out of my seat and moved toward the door. The air was fresh, and it smelled like the Laundry Hut up the block, and the cold made my eyes water after the steamy warmth of the diner.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Holland’s voice held a dry smile. “Bad time?”

“Dealing with a world of fuckwits. Pretty much the usual for me. What’s wrong?”

“I thought you’d like to know we routed the last Solar stronghold. Went in about two this morning.”

“Jesus. You don’t sit around.”

She laughed. “No word from what’s left of the Shadow Nest; I figure they scarpered as soon as their asses were dry. Have they

tried to contact you?”

“I have no idea what that means. And no.”

“They’ll turn up; they can’t help themselves. Listen, I wanted to make you an offer. You and your friend, you could mean the difference. Things get tight, we’ve got a couple of the awakened in our corner. I was wrong, what I said before; I can admit that. And we could use the help.”

I looked over my shoulder. Jim and Vie and Austin were still laughing, the fuck-for-brains, and they looked so happy and relaxed and—and together that my throat tightened. It took me a few extra seconds to say, “No. I mean, thanks. We couldn’t have done what we did without you. But...no. I think we’re headed a different direction.”

Holland was silent. A garbage truck rumbled past, the diesel growling. When the sound faded, she said, “Think about it. The offer stays open. We leave for Oklahoma in two weeks, so you’ve got time.”

In the distance, the garbage truck beeped as it began to back up.

“Oklahoma?” I asked. Somehow my voice was normal, which was amazing because my heart had stopped. I knew only one reason Holland might be going to Oklahoma. One reason the Watchers might be interested in that anal fissure of a state. The creature who had made me the way I was. The one who also happened to be Vie’s mom.

“Got a tip,” Holland said. “A wanderer, supposed to be one of the old ones.”

And then she was gone.

The breeze picked up, the air spiked with salt, and I shivered. I ran through a checklist in my head: your eyes, your face, your

smile, your shoulders, your hands, the way you walk. Normal. Be normal.

When I slid into my seat, Jim touched my arm and looked a question at me.

“My parents,” I said, directing the words to the table. “They’re still freaking out.”

Austin made an understanding noise; he’d been through freaked-out parents himself. Jim squeezed my arm, his eyes still looking questions at me, wanting to know if I was ok without asking, because he knew better than to ask. And Vie just looked at me.

I pushed my tongue against the inside of my cheek, miming a blow job. There was a pause, Vie’s blue eyes studying me, and it could have meant anything. Then he shook his head and flashed a tiny smile. I watched his face for another moment, looking for a sign. Only for a second. Less than a second. He started to glance back, a hint of a frown forming, so I cut my eyes away and reached for my coffee.

22 | JIM

The Vehpese boys thanked us for the offer of a place to stay, but they got a motel instead. Austin insisted his parents would pay, which was probably true, but I didn't miss the way he had his hand on Vie's nape as they walked back to their car. Whatever else, that boy was going to make sure Vie Eliot remembered who he belonged to.

We went home, and I spent some time doing the same thing with Emmett.

The sex was good—slow, fun, with the most intense moments, when what I felt for him threatened to overwhelm me, broken up by a laugh, a smile, a smartass comment—all the things Emmett couldn't help because he was Emmett. At the end, it was better than good. His face was open. His head hung back. He made noises I wanted more of, so I worked for them until sweat stung my eyes. When he was close, he tried to raise himself like he was doing a crunch, his whole body fighting its own helplessness, but his face stayed open, translucent, his eyes wide and searching until he found me, and then he came.

I was still gliding on hormones and sunlight when he said, "It's your birthday."

After some mental math, I laughed. "I guess it is."

"I bought all this shit to give you the best birthday ever."

"I think today is a rainout. We'll do it tomorrow."

“I bought a banner.”

“I saw.”

“And wine.”

I laughed. “I saw that too.”

“So I can get you drunk and have my way with you.”

I kissed his shoulder.

“Happy birthday, Jim.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s amazing that you’re forty and can still get it up.”

I didn’t squeeze his balls that hard, but he still made a lot of noise.

When he was done—done yelping, done trying not to giggle, done shoving me like he was going to throw me out of bed—he curled up next to me and said, in a tone I didn’t understand, “We should go on a trip.”

I rubbed his stomach. A flush still spread like an arrowhead down his throat, across his chest. “Ok.”

“Before I’m a poor student.”

“Aren’t you technically poor right now? I mean, you’re unemployed.”

“My parents will pay.”

“Your parents will pay for college too.”

He pinched my nipple, and I yelped.

“I want to go on a trip,” he said again. More loudly this time.

“Ok,” I said, laughing as I massaged my chest. “Where?”

“I don’t know.”

Sometimes, when you were teaching, you had to remember things like their brains weren't fully developed, or they were fighting an uphill battle against hormones, or these were the same kids who built plywood ramps for their dirt bikes. And sometimes you had to count to fifty in your head so you didn't throttle them.

"Maybe we don't have a plan," Emmett said, the words strangely quiet, almost defensive. A lull came, and outside, a gull called. "Maybe we just get in the car and go."

I raised myself enough to look at his face. His eyes were half-closed. He looked like he might be crying. I raised my hand, but before I could touch his cheek, he turned his face toward the window. The sun through the blinds gave him zebra stripes.

So, I said, "We can do that."

"It's stupid."

"It's not stupid. That could be fun."

"We'd run out of gas."

"In a Tesla?"

His voice was thicker now. "We'll get to the end of the day, and all the motels in the next town will be booked."

"I've slept in a car before. It'd only be for a night."

He was crying now—a single tear coursed its way down, pulled by gravity along the bridge of his nose. He shook it off. "It's just—sometimes it's not good, having everything planned out. I was like that for a long time. I was so careful. I didn't want—" He caught himself in time, but I heard what he hadn't said because I'd known it, even back in Vehpese. "I didn't want anything to fuck up my plans."

I didn't want Vie to fuck up my plans was what he meant, though.

We were silent. Our breaths interwove. I laid my hand on his belly again and curled my fingers.

“The other way’s no good either,” he whispered and wiped his face against the pillow again. “I know that. I mean, I know that now. After you yelled at me.”

My voice sounded like I hadn’t used it in years. “I didn’t yell at you.”

“It seemed...easier, I guess. Not to plan anything. Not to think about the future. I’d had all these plans, made all these fucked-up decisions because I thought my plans were so important. So, I was done planning. No more plans. No more future.”

“I have a four-day weekend in April.” My voice was steady enough, all things considered. “How about then?”

“Do you think about the future?”

“Of course.”

“With me?”

“Yes, with you.”

“Even though I was a little shit with those guys?”

“Somehow, still yes, believe it or not.”

He smiled, just the tracery of a curve. He looked up at me, dark eyes liquid, and I ran my hand back and forth over his stomach, the movement slow and steady.

“And now I have you,” he said. “And I think I want a future again. All my plans not to have any plans, Jimbo. You fucked them right up.”

“You don’t have to make any plans. Not yet.”

His hand found mine, stopping it. Then he laced our fingers together. Music came from somewhere else in the building, and a beat found a place in my chest and echoed.

“We used to talk about the future,” he said. His voice was barely more than a whisper, and after a moment, I realized it was because his throat was tight, and he was forcing the words out. He had long dark lashes, and when they fluttered, they collected his tears and became prismatic in the sunlight. “Do you remember?”

I couldn't say anything, so I nodded.

“We used to talk about our future, all the things we were going to do when I got out of the hospital. Remember that?”

I owed him this much, and although the words were rough, I managed to say, “I remember.”

“Tell me.”

My mouth quirked. “Please.”

He brought our joined hands to his mouth, and he kissed my knuckles, and the words were nothing more than a breath: “Tell me, please.”

“We're going to celebrate,” I said. Sunlight caught on the windowpane; I closed my eyes against the dazzle. “When we're both better.”

“When I got better. When I wasn't a junkie anymore.”

“When we're both better,” I said a little more firmly. I opened my eyes and ran the back of my free hand over my cheeks. “We'll go to dinner.”

“You were supposed to take me to see your school, but you were lying. You were a bum.”

I laughed and wiped my face again. “Who’s telling this?”

“You’re doing it wrong.”

I gave him a look.

“You need to do it right.” He flashed me a shit-eating grin. “Please.”

“I’m employed now,” I said. “And you’ve seen my school. So, we’ll go to dinner.”

He wriggled around, propped himself up with a pillow. He folded his arms behind his head, and the hair under his arms was dark and silky. After another heartbeat, he nudged me with his knee.

“We’ll go to Claude’s,” I said. “We’ll get ribeyes. Mine will be medium; yours, medium-rare. We’ll both get the garlic mashed potatoes. You’ll get a house salad; I’ll get the Cobb. Which, I will now admit you’re right, is too much salad for a big meal like that.”

“And dessert?”

I didn’t know why it hurt so bad, or why, at the same time, it felt good. My smile felt cattywampus. “Chocolate mousse for me. Apple pie a la mode for you.”

“And then?”

I stopped. “Emmett.”

His eyes were wide and dark and intent, fixed on me, and the thought came so clearly that it was like I had spoken it aloud: *This is for you; he’s doing this for you because he doesn’t know any other way.*

“And then we’ll go back to our apartment.”

“Our apartment,” he echoed and nodded.

“It’ll be dark by then.” I had to stop. I couldn’t brush the tears away quickly enough. “I’ve—I’ve got some blankets.”

He nodded again.

“I’ll make some coffee. We’ll go out on the balcony and watch the stars.”

“We don’t have to talk,” he whispered.

“No.” The word fractured somewhere inside me, so I shook my head. And it might have been the hardest thing I’d ever done, but I looked him in the eyes. “But we can if we want.”

“Yeah,” he said in that same whisper. “That’s how I remember it too.”

Then I couldn’t do it anymore, and I dropped my gaze. His chest rose and fell slowly. The arrowhead flush was fading. One nipple was still puffy with tooth marks. When my eyes came back to his, he was waiting for me.

“I love you.” The weight he laid on the last word put the universe on a fulcrum. “James Cooper Spencer.” His voice was husky as he said, “You.”

I nodded. He got onto his knees and kissed me, and then he pulled my head against his chest. The ridges of scar tissue rubbed my cheek. His heartbeat was a slow, solemn drum. We stayed like that for a while, and then he kissed me again.

“I love you too,” I said.

The shadow of a smirk touched his face. “I know.”

I slapped his ass for that, and that made him howl and then laugh uncontrollably, and for some reason, all that laughing meant he collapsed on top of me. We ended up lying in bed again, Emmett’s body draped over mine. His chin dug pleasantly

into my breastbone when he raised his head. “We never did it, you know. Any of it.”

Running my fingers through the dark spikes of his hair, I felt something ease in my chest, a weight I hadn't known was there, lifting the way fog lifts. I could hear the old song of the ocean. I remembered a morning on my beach, back when I'd first come to San Elredo, the cold and the damp and being all alone, and watching the mill wheel of the world turn at dawn, not knowing what to do with the beauty of that moment, not knowing how to make place for it in all my grief. I remembered thinking I would see him that day, and how that thought had made a place inside me for all the rest.

“Then I guess,” I said, giving his hair a last riffle, “it's about time.”

THE STRANGEST FORMS

Keep reading for a sneak preview of *The Strangest Forms*, the first book of The Adventures of Holloway Holmes.

Chapter 1

Empty All Receptacles

Watson was late.

I paced, planks creaking underfoot. The old boathouse was dark; starlight filtered through where boards had warped and no longer met and the tin roof sagged. The air smelled like waxed canvas, dust, dry wood. When I turned too fast, I bumped one of the boats racked on either side of me. I made my way to the south wall, bumping another boat in the process, and pressed my eye to one of the gaps in the wall.

On the other side, the twinkle of The Walker School's lights broke the mountain night. No movement. Me, and the murmur of the lake, and that was just about it. Then a golf cart whined, its shadow moving down the path less than a hundred yards off. A girl said something, and a boy laughed drunkenly, and then the golf cart was gone, the whine fading toward the glow between the trees. Friday night fun. Still no Watson.

I checked my jacket pocket. It was September, and down in the valley, it was still too warm to need another layer, but up here, on the back of Timp, the temperature dropped quickly. The zannies shifted under my touch; the plastic baggie rustled. I paced back the other way, toward the roll-up doors and the dock that pushed out into the lake. I told myself, For fuck's sake, stand still and stop making so much noise.

It wasn't always like this; it wasn't always Xanax. Sometimes it was beer. Well, more often it was rum or vodka or hard seltzer. Sometimes it was Ding Dongs or Twinkies or Doublemint, stuff you couldn't buy in the canteen. There was a manga girl who paid me a shitload to bring her a case of Milkis every month, covered in all that Korean writing I couldn't read, and then that little bit of English: *New feeling of soda beverage*. Sure, whatever. There was a wannabe tweaker, a little white boy, who wanted Sudafed. There was another white boy, not so little, who wanted live crickets, and I never asked why. One time, this real butch Mexican kid had wanted a Snuggie. So, you never knew.

It didn't matter what they wanted. They were stuck up here—that was the whole point of Walker, a place rich people could send their troubled teens to be kept neatly out of sight—and I wasn't. I knew what that meant; I hadn't read all those Wikipedia articles on economics for nothing. What mattered was that the rich kids paid, and some months they paid enough that Dad and I weren't completely underwater. Of course, that had been before I bought hundreds of dollars of zannies on credit from Shivers and Watson decided not to show.

Never again, I told myself. Never buy on credit again.

When I made my next loop, I pressed up against that gap in the boards, looking out again, and called myself every kind of stupid. Nothing. The boathouse was a good spot; it didn't get used much during the school year, and it was far enough from the rest of campus that people wouldn't stumble across you—with the exception of the occasional joyride or the kids who wanted a quick fuck. I had an excuse for being here if anybody spotted me: the raccoons dragged trash up this way sometimes. I always had an excuse. The rules were clear; any trouble, and Dad would be out of a job, and so I'd be out of a job, and what the hell would we do then?

I made one last loop of the boathouse and gave up on waiting any longer. I let myself out and locked the door behind me. I headed south, toward campus, the buildings faintly visible between the trees like the fairy lights Mom had hung on our Salt Lake porch. I fumbled the custodial cart out from where I'd hidden it behind some trash cans and wheeled it toward the maintenance building.

I pulled on my headphones, fired up Dad's old Discman, and turned up the volume as "Smells Like Teen Spirit" started. Kurt sang hello. How low. I tried to think. I'd finished my route for the night, so I could drop the garbage in the dumpster, put away the cart, and head home. But then what? I had almost five hundred dollars' worth of zannies, and we had bills that were due. Past due. I figured I could try to track down Watson, make her pay, but what if she'd changed her mind? Rich kids did that sometimes. I'd had a girl asking me for weeks to get her this skin cream, something Korean, and I did, only it took two weeks, and when it finally got here, she didn't want it anymore. *I changed my mind*, that's what she said. And who ate the eighty dollars? You're goddamn right I did. What was I going to do, tell Mr. Taylor or Headmaster Burrows?

And Watson wasn't some nobody first-year. She was a junior, and she was pretty and wore expensive clothes and was nice, I mean, as far as I could tell, and she had that family name. She was a prime candidate for missing white girl syndrome (thank you, Wikipedia); if she was more than ten minutes late, I was probably legally obligated to start a national news campaign. And, of course, Watson had Supercreep for a best friend. I'd sold to Holloway Holmes—aka Supercreep—a couple of times. Addys. And sure, he was pretty, if you were into white boys who looked like statues, and oh yeah, the statue was based on someone who had been a gaping dickhole in real life, like he

hunted foxes and had a butler and stuff like that. But pretty or not, he was also scary as hell—didn't say anything, sometimes didn't even seem to breathe, just stared at you like he was waiting for you to turn around so he could suck your blood. And he was a Holmes. Like, related to that Holmes. I'd heard some of the kids talking—they didn't even seem to see me sometimes, like I was just another part of the background, picking up their trash, cleaning up their shit, literally—about how he'd asked a girl to Homecoming at his last school, and when she'd said no, he'd leaked all these nudes, and she ate like eight Tide pods and they had to put her in this special home in Switzerland or something. So, yeah, the short version: Watson and Supercreep were above my paygrade, no matter how badly Watson screwed me.

The edge of campus was quiet except for the night breeze coming off Timp's ass, making me shiver as I pushed the cart. The thing about Walker was that it was full of these rich, entitled assholes, full of teachers, full of staff like my dad—and, by extension, me—full of people, in other words, and you could still walk five yards this way, ten yards that way, and be the only person in the whole universe. The sky was thick with stars. The pines, the tall ones with their branches hanging down at their sides, made me think of crime-scene bodies, chalk outlines against the horizon.

My old, dumb, brick of a phone buzzed, and when I checked it, I saw a message from Shivers: *what up*

I put my phone back in my pocket and kept going. When I reached the little concrete slab bridge over the Toqueah, where the cottonwoods grew like someone had drawn them against the water with a Sharpie, I stopped and got my broom from the cart. I went down the sloping bank, bracing my foot on cottonwood roots, careful to keep from pitching into the water as I did a quick sweep. Kids liked to smoke and vape down there, and it

smelled like that, like stale cigarette smoke mixing with old leaves and mud. Tonight I came up with some empty pods and a few butts. I dumped them in with the rest of the trash. Mr. Taylor didn't always check; he was like that, he wanted to catch you by surprise. When he knew I was covering for Dad, he did petty shit like that.

My phone buzzed again, another message from Shivers: *Jacky tough shit.*

Nothing but that—nothing but his stupid nickname for me.

As I pushed the cart across the bridge, the casters clattering over the slight unevenness of the concrete, the bad one still squeaking like crazy, I tried to think. I had other people who bought zannies, sure. Not this many at one time, but it's not like they were going to go bad. The real problem was the cash. I checked my phone; the messages, both of them, were still there on the screen, still marked unread. There was a girl, Lin, who bought Xanax from me sometimes. I pushed the cart a little faster. She always had extra cash. And there were a couple of guys in Anderson. They hadn't bought zannies before, but they were into chemsex—they wanted Viagra, MDMA, a couple of times coke. And, more importantly, they liked me. Hell, one time they'd gotten me halfway out of my pants, back when I'd just started hooking up with Ariana, and that had just been them messing around.

The maintenance building came into view ahead: a single-story brick structure, security lights cutting sharp corners out of the night. Using one elbow to steer the cart around back, I tapped out a message to Jonno, one of the Anderson boys. I needed the money, and I was single, right? And they were both cute if you were into twinks.

As I came around the corner, the cart hit something, and metal boomed. I looked up from my phone. Someone had wheeled one of the dumpsters out from the wall, and I'd run into it with the cart. Shaking my head, I shoved the phone into my pocket, took the headphones off, and pulled the cart back a few feet. I moved around to the dumpster to shove it back into position; the garbage truck drivers were assholes, and sometimes they wouldn't pick up a dumpster if it wasn't right where it was supposed to be. I stopped to grab a broken piece of plastic from the ground. Probably a stupid prank, I thought as I got to my feet. Or a dare. Or a challenge. Although what the hell kind of prank—

I stopped.

Watson—Sarah Elizabeth Watson—lay like a broken doll on top of the black garbage bags, dead.

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