

ONE

Three Days Ago

THE WHEELS DIDN'T STOP TURNING ON THE ROAD. NOT for gas, not at signs or signals.

A glare of sunlight burst through the window beside me, washing out the words I was pretending to read on my cell phone's screen. A deep grumble from the engine and the renewed stench of gasoline signaled we were slowly picking up speed. The grind of the highway beneath us still wasn't loud enough to drown out the police escorts' sirens or the chanting from the sign-wavers lined up along the highway.

I refused to turn and look at them. The tinted windows cast them all in shadow, one dark blur of hatred in my peripheral vision: the older men with their guns, the women clutching hateful messages between their hands, the clusters of families with bullhorns, and their cleverly awful slogans.

The police cars' lights flashed in time with their chants.

"God!"

Red.

“Hates!”

Blue.

“Freaks!”

“Well,” Mel said. “No one could ever accuse them of being original.”

“Sorry, ladies,” Agent Cooper called back from the driver’s seat. “It’ll just be another ten minutes. I can turn up the music if you want?”

“That’s okay,” I said, setting my phone down on my lap and folding my hands on top of it. “Really. It’s fine.”

The machine-gun-fire typing coming from the seat beside me suddenly stopped. Mel looked up from the laptop balanced on her knees, a deep frown on her face. “Don’t these people have anything better to do with their lives? Actually, on second thought, maybe I should send a job recruiter down here and see if we can’t get them on our side—that would be quite the narrative, wouldn’t it? From hater to . . . humbled. No, that’s not right. It’ll come to me eventually.” She reached for where she had left her phone on the seat between us and spoke into it. “Make a note: protestor reform program.”

As I’d learned—and apparently Agents Cooper and Martinez had, too—it was best just to let Mel talk herself through to a solution rather than try to offer suggestions.

The car snarled and shuddered as it hit a bad patch of highway. The chanting grew louder, and I fought its tug at my attention.

Don’t be a coward, I told myself. There was nothing any of them could do to me now, not while I was surrounded on all sides by bulletproof glass, FBI agents, and police. If we kept looking away, they would never think we were strong enough to meet them head-on.

With a hard swallow, I turned to gaze out my window again. The day's breeze tugged at the construction flags across the divide between the northbound and southbound lanes. They were the same shade of orange as the barriers protecting the workers as they went about the business of pouring new asphalt.

A few of the men and women stopped mid-task and leaned against the concrete median to watch our motorcade pass; some gave big, cheerful waves. Instinctively, my hand rose to return the gesture, a small smile on my lips. A heartbeat later, just long enough to be embarrassed by it, I remembered they couldn't see me.

Behind the thin barrier of dark glass, I was invisible.

The window was warm as I pressed the tips of my fingers to it, hoping the workers could see them through the tint like five small stars. Eventually, though, just like everyone else, the workers disappeared with distance.

Setting America Back on the Right Route! had been one of Mel's first publicity projects for the interim government established and monitored by the United Nations, back when she was still fairly junior in the White House communications office. It was a way to advertise new infrastructure jobs while also promising that roads would stop buckling under people's wheels, that the gas ration would, eventually, be coming to an end, and that deadly bridge collapses like the one in Wisconsin wouldn't happen anymore—not with reinforcements from new American steel. The proof of its success ran on newscasts every night: the unemployment rate was falling as steadily as the birth rate was beginning to rise.

Numbers were simple, real symbols that people could latch onto, holding them up like trophies. But there was no way they

could capture the *feeling* of the last few years, that all-encompassing sensation that life was rolling out in front of us again, swelling to fill those empty spaces the lost children had left behind.

The same populations that had shifted to the big cities in desperate search of work were now slowly making their way back to the small towns and suburbs they had abandoned. Restaurants opened. Cars pulled in and out of gas stations on their assigned days. Trucks cruised down the highways that had been patched and knitted together again. People walked through newly landscaped parks. Movie theaters began to shift away from showing old films to showing new ones.

They arrived tentatively, slowly—like the first few people on an otherwise empty dance floor, waiting to see if anyone else would rejoin them in search of fun.

Almost five years ago, when we'd driven these same highways, the towns and cities we'd slipped in and out of had practically ached with their emptiness. Parks, homes, businesses, schools: everything had been hollowed out and recast in miserable, dirt-stained gray. Neglected or abandoned like memories left to fade into nothing.

Somehow, the government had managed to shock a pulse back into the country. It fluttered and raced in moments of darkness and frustration, but mostly held steady. Mostly.

The truth was, it had less to do with me than it did the others working day in and day out. I hadn't been allowed to do much of anything until I finished the new mandatory school requirements. President Cruz had said it was important for other Psi to see me do it, to demonstrate there were no exceptions. But it had been agonizing to wait and wait and wait, doing the homework of simple math problems Chubs had taught me years ago in the

back of a beat-up minivan, studying history that felt like it had happened to a completely different country, and memorizing the new Psi laws.

And the whole time, Chubs and Vida had been allowed to do real, meaningful work. They'd moved from one closed door to the next, disappearing into meetings and missions, until I was sure I'd lose track of them completely, or be locked out forever.

But it was only a matter of time before I caught up to them. As long as I kept pulling my weight and proving myself useful, going wherever the government sent me, saying the words they wanted me to say, I'd keep moving forward, too. And someone had clearly seen my potential, because Mel had been reassigned to me, and we'd been traveling together ever since.

"How did I know they'd be back out in full force now that the reparations package has been announced?" Agent Martinez said. "I swear, people are never happy."

After four years of trying, Chubs and the Psi Council finally got a plan for reparations and Psi memorials through the interim Congress. All families affected by IAAN could apply to reclaim their homes and receive debt forgiveness. Banks had foreclosed upon most of them during the financial crisis sparked by a bombing at the old Capitol in DC, which had only worsened with the deaths of millions of children and the loss of jobs as businesses closed.

Watching the final deal go up for vote, seeing it *pass*, had filled me with a renewed sense of purpose and hope. I'd cried at the final *yea* vote. There'd been this pressure locked around my chest for years, so long that I'd gotten used to its ache. In that moment, though, it had finally released. It felt like taking my first deep breath in years.

Justice demanded time, and, in some cases, sacrifice, but with hard work and persistence, it *was* achievable. The kids who'd died, those of us who'd been made to live in the cruel camp system, none of us would be forgotten or brushed aside. Even the old camp controllers were finally being brought to court, with the hope of criminal prosecutions later.

They'd finally know what it meant to be imprisoned. It was what they deserved.

We still had so much work to do, but this was a start. A springboard to asking for—and getting—more. With this victory under his belt, Chubs was already at work trying to shift government research funding away from Leda Corp, which Psi and their families all agreed hadn't deserved to survive the purge of the Gray administration, given their starring role in developing the chemical agent that had caused the mutation.

“The real problem is that we have to announce road closures days ahead of time,” Agent Cooper said. “They want us to alert the cities to secure the routes, but it's like a signal fire to these folks. It doesn't matter if it's you or someone else from the government.”

There was a gap in the unbroken line of protestors as we moved along the highway. Farther from the rowdier ones, clustered in a small, tight group, were a few men and women, all holding signs of their own. They were silent, their faces grim. The SUV flew past them, forcing me to turn back in my seat to read them.

WHO HAS OUR CHILDREN? A chill curled down my spine as another one of the men angled his sign more fully toward me. It read, GONE—AND FORGOTTEN BY UN. Beneath the angry words were old school photos of children.

I sat forward again. “What was that about?”

The government had worked hard to identify unclaimed Psi and find new homes for them—as far as the reports I saw were concerned, all of them were now accounted for. I knew that after the camps had been closed a handful of Psi had run away, choosing that life over returning to the families who had abandoned them. But it seemed a little hard to believe that the kind of parents who were abusive or fearful of their children would stand out on a highway with homemade signs begging for answers.

“It’s those damn conspiracy theorists,” Agent Martinez said, shaking his head.

Of course. I should have put that together. A number of recent news clips had centered on the latest fearmongering line the Liberty Watch people were testing out—that vast numbers of Psi had been taken by our enemies to use against America.

Unfortunately, the rumors didn’t seem likely to die off anytime soon. Joseph Moore, the businessman running against Interim President Cruz in the election, had recklessly parroted one of Liberty Watch’s well-loved demands for mandatory military service for Psi and had watched his popularity numbers spike overnight. Now he repeated whatever script Liberty Watch gave him. If I had to guess, his people were floating the stories as a kind of trial balloon, to test future messaging for his next speech.

“But those pictures . . .” I began.

Mel shook her head in disgust. “This is a new thing that Liberty Watch is doing. They’re taking photos like that off the internet and hiring people to stir up doubt and fear that the government isn’t doing their job. But we, at least, know that they are.”

Frowning, I nodded. “Sorry. They just caught me off guard.”

I leaned my temple back against the window just as we approached another huddle of protestors.

“Oh God,” Agent Cooper said, leaning forward to look up through the windshield. “What now?”

The banner dropped over the pedestrian bridge ahead of us, unfurling like an old flag. The two grown men holding it, both wearing an all-too-familiar stripe of white stars on a blue bandana tied to their upper arms, sent a chill curling down my spine.

LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF FREAKS FOREVER
IT'S ONLY MURDER IF THEY'RE HUMAN

“Charming,” Mel said, rolling her dark eyes as we passed under the bridge.

I rubbed a finger over my top lip, then picked up my phone, tapping through to the most recent text thread. ARE YOU STILL COMING TODAY? I typed.

I didn't take my gaze away from my phone's screen, waiting for the chat bubble to appear with a response. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the reflection of Agent Cooper's mirrored sunglasses as he looked up into the rearview mirror, watching me. His already white skin looked a little bloodless as the sign's message sank in.

Agent Cooper didn't have to worry. There would be no crying. No emotional mess to mop up. Half the poison these people churned out with their signs, their radio shows, on their news programs was lies, and the rest of it was nonsensical. *Freak* was an old insult—sometimes you heard a nasty word so often it lost its fangs. That, or I guess your skin eventually could grow too strong, too thick to cut. My heart didn't bruise the way it used to—they were way too late to get in that particular blow.

I swallowed the thickness in my throat, squeezing the phone's case in my hand.

If they're human . . .

I cleared my throat again, looking out my window. The group of protestors was thinner on the ground, but growing in number again as we left the construction zone. "Everyone's entitled to stupidity, but they really abuse the privilege, don't they?"

Mel gave a weak laugh at that, reaching over to smooth back a strand of my hair that had come loose from its twist.

"Still, better call it in," Agent Cooper said, taking his hand off the wheel to nudge Agent Martinez. "It's not a direct threat, but they need to know they're one step away from taking it too far."

"Agreed," Agent Martinez said. "We need to start documenting everything, no matter how small. Build a case."

"Actually," Mel cut in, now reaching back to adjust the pins she'd used to help secure her locs into a bun, "it's probably best not to give that fire any air. It's what they want—we shut them down and they'll jump on a narrative about us violating their right to free speech. *Our* job is to tell the truth about the Psi, and the polls show that we've been hitting that ball out of the park. The people are on *our* side."

That was a small comfort, but it did help. Sometimes it felt like I was talking to everyone and no one at the same time. I never saw the words leaving my mouth reflected on the audience's faces, good or bad. They just absorbed them. Whether or not they internalized them was another question.

I glanced down at my phone again.

No response.

"I should tell you before we get to the venue," Mel said, turning more fully toward me. A bead of sweat rolled down her cheek,

glinting on her dark skin. She reached down to adjust the air-conditioning vent toward her. “I received an e-mail from Interim President Cruz’s chief of staff this morning saying that they’re going to be sending along some new language for your speech. I’m not sure when it’s going to come in, so I might need to add it directly to the teleprompter.”

I didn’t care if my sigh sounded petulant. They had to realize how annoying it was.

“Aren’t they done tweaking it yet?” I hated not having time to practice new material and straighten out my delivery. “What kind of new language is it anyway?”

Mel slid her laptop back into her satchel. The battered leather case tried to spit up a few of the overstuffed folders inside it to make room. “Just some finessed points, from the sound of it. I know you could recite the speech backward and half-asleep at this point, but just keep an eye on the teleprompter.”

I’d repeated different versions of the same speech a hundred times, in a hundred places, about the nature of fear, and how the Psi had reentered society with only a few ripples. But the added responsibility was a good sign that they trusted me more and more. Maybe they’d even add dates and use me again in the fall, for the big election.

“All right,” I said. “But—”

It was the suddenness of the movement that caught my eye, more than the woman herself. She pulled away from the cluster of sign-wavers and bullhorn-shouters lined up along the shoulder to our left. Long, stringy gray hair, a faded floral shirt, a blue scrap of fabric decorated with white stars tied to her bone-white arm. She could have been anyone’s grandmother—if it hadn’t been for the flaming bottle she clutched in her hand.

I knew we were speeding, that there was no way it could be happening, but time has a way of bending around you when it wants you to see something.

The seconds slowed, ticking in time to each of her running steps. Her lips pulled back, deepening the stark lines of her face as she held the bottle high over her head and flung it toward the SUV, shouting something I couldn't hear.

The small firebomb hit the cement and billowed up with a loud, sucking gasp. It flared as it devoured the traces of oil and chemicals on the highway, blasting my window with enough heat and pressure for it to crack with a high, suffering whine.

My seat belt locked against my chest as our car swerved sharply to the right. I craned my neck, watching the road blaze with a wall of red and gold.

"You guys okay?" Agent Cooper bit out, slamming his foot onto the gas. Mel and I were both thrown back against our seats again. I reached out with one hand, gripping the door to steady myself.

Up ahead, one of the cop cars swerved and blared its sirens. The crowd of protestors scattered into the nearby woods and fields like the cowards they were.

"Holy shit" was Mel's response.

Fury stormed through me, twisting my insides, clawing at them. I shook with useless adrenaline. That woman—she could have hurt another protestor, Mel, the agents, or one of the police officers. *Killed* them.

Heat writhed inside me, giving form to my fury. A sharp chemical smell burned the inside of my nose.

It would be so easy to get out of the car and find that woman. Grab her by the hair, throw her to the ground, pin her there until one of the officers caught up with us. So easy.

The charge from the car's battery seethed nearby, waiting. *You think that's enough to scare me? You think I haven't had people try to kill me before?*

Plenty had tried. A few had come close. I wasn't prey anymore, and I wouldn't let anyone turn me into it again, least of all an elderly woman dabbling in a bit of bomb-making with her unpleasant friends.

A single cooling word got through my scorching thoughts.

Don't.

I forced myself to release my hold on the door. I clenched and unclenched that hand, trying to work out the tension still there. That would be exactly what they wanted. Get a reaction, prove that we're all monsters only waiting for the right moment to break out of our cages.

She's not worth it. None of them are.

She wouldn't be the last one to try to hurt me. I accepted that, and was grateful for the protection we all had now. There was no room for ghosts in my life, whether they were living or dead. Ruby used to say that we'd earned our memories, but we didn't owe them anything beyond their keeping. I guess she'd know better than most.

We were moving forward, and the past was best left to its darkness. Its ashes.

"It's all right," I said, when I trusted my voice to be calm. "It's okay."

"That was the definition of *not okay*," Mel said, her tone brittle.

"I think you have your direct threat," Agent Cooper said to his partner, never taking his eyes off the road.

I flipped my phone over from where I had pressed it against my leg, ignoring the pulse pounding at my temples. Even with

its rubber case, the screen flickered as a single lance of electricity crawled out of my finger and danced over it. I dropped it back onto my lap, silently praying for the phone to turn itself back on.

Damn. I hadn't done that in such a long time.

Finally, after another agonizing second, the screen flashed back up again. I swallowed against the dryness in my throat, opening the same text thread as before. My message was still there, still waiting for a response.

"About ten minutes now," Agent Cooper said. "We're almost there."

The phone buzzed in my hand, making me jump. Finally—

I glanced down, fingers flying over the screen to input my password. The thread opened.

COULDN'T GET AWAY. SORRY. NEXT TIME?

"Hey, everything okay?" Mel asked, resting a hand on my arm. Her eyes were soft, searching. I had the stupidest urge to lean my head against her shoulder and shut my eyes, shut out the world, until we got to where we were going.

She must have seen it in my face, because she quickly added, "Should we move the event? Even delaying it a few hours might help. I almost went into cardiac arrest, so I can only imagine what that just did to you."

The smile I plastered onto my face was so wide, it actually ached. "No, I'm all right. Really. No delay necessary. Besides, if we push back this one, we might hit traffic and miss the Japanese embassy event."

The embassy was reopening their Japan Information and Culture Center and had asked me to do the honor of introducing

a documentary film by a fellow Japanese American Psi, Kenji Ota. To say I was excited was an understatement; I'd only met Kenji once in passing, but for weeks now I'd been looking forward to having the chance to connect with someone who'd come from a similar background and experienced the same things I had.

"Can we go through today's schedule?" I asked. "Make sure I have it down?"

Mel squeezed my wrist reassuringly. "You're amazing. I don't know how you stay so strong in the face of all this. I meant what I said, though. I can ask about moving the event."

I shook my head, my heart skipping at the thought. The second President Cruz's director of communications suspected I couldn't handle the stress of this job, I'd be taken off it. "There's no need. I promise."

"All right," Mel said, looking just a little relieved. This would have been a nightmare for her to reschedule. She reached into her bag and pulled out a folder with the day's date and began to run through our itinerary, matching hours to actions.

I dropped the phone back into my own bag, trying to find something to ward off the pressure building in my chest. It pushed at my ribs like it could split me open and reveal the raw mess inside.

Maybe I should have responded? Or would I have just bothered him more?

"Nine thirty a.m., the dean will introduce you. . . ."

Next time? I was tempted to take the phone back out and reread Chubs's message, just to make sure I hadn't imagined it. My mind couldn't stop whispering those two words, wouldn't let go of that question mark—that one small symbol that had never existed between any of us before.

TWO

ONCE UPON A TIME, I WENT MONTHS WITHOUT SAYING a word. More than a year, in fact.

It happened by accident at first—or not by accident, exactly. I still struggled to explain it, to justify why I silenced myself. It was as if the barbed wire that surrounded the rehabilitation camp had cut me so deeply the night we escaped, all the words in me had just bled out. I'd been so empty under my skin. So cold. Weak enough for shock to spill in and take over.

The truth is, some things go beyond words: The sound of gunshots thundering through the night. Blood staining the backs of thin uniforms. Kids facedown, slowly buried by the snow falling from the dark sky. The feeling of being strangled by your own hope in that second *it* escaped the fencing and left you behind to die.

The next few days I was just . . . tired. Unsure. Questions would come at me, and I would nod. Shake my head. It took so much energy. I was afraid of picking the wrong words out of the messy darkness inside my head. Scared to say something the others, the boys who had saved me, wouldn't like.

Every second we spent driving in the van, I could see it: I

would tell them I was hungry or cold or hurt, and they would decide I was a problem, just like my parents once had. The boys would leave me behind somewhere just as quickly as they had decided to take me with them that night we'd escaped.

But they didn't. And, pretty soon after, I realized that they wouldn't. But by then, it felt more comfortable to pick up that ratty notebook we shared and carefully choose my words. I could spell out the exact response I wanted, no mistakes. I could choose when I wanted to say something. I could have that much control over my life.

The problem was that I *kept* choosing silence. Over and over again, I let myself fall into the safety of its depths. Painful things could stay buried, never needing to be understood or talked through. The past wouldn't come back to hurt me if I never spoke of it. The memory of snow and blood and screams couldn't rise up and bury me in its freezing pressure, its dark. I wouldn't need to admit to being scared or hungry or exhausted and worry the others. My silence became a kind of shield.

Something I could use to protect myself.

Something I could hide behind.

That was years ago now. I became known to the world for what I had said, not as the silent little girl with the shaved head and oversize gloves. I appeared on television screens and in front of crowds. She became a ghost, abandoned in the memories I no longer wanted to remember.

Words still seemed to sit a little heavier in my mouth than they did for other people. It was all too easy to slip back into those comfortable depths inside me, where there was quiet. Especially on days like that one, with the last lick of adrenaline making me antsy to move on to the next event.

I couldn't focus on any one thing, no matter how hard I tried. The two dozen rows of people in front of us became an indistinct haze of color and small, shifting movements. I lost the thread of whatever Penn State's steely-haired dean of admissions was saying, the same way I struggled to keep up with the campus tour he'd given us earlier. Now even his dark skin and blue seersucker suit were smearing at the edge of my vision.

I tapped one high heel down, brought the other up, tapped that down, brought the other up, working off the lingering buzz of nerves from the car ride in. I closed my eyes against the warm sunlight, but opened them again just as quickly when I only found the image of the old woman's snarling face there.

The air wept with moisture, so thick with late-summer heat it gave the sky a silky coating. My thick hair rebelled, swelling against the hold of the bobby pins, just at the edge of slipping out of its careful style. A drop of sweat rolled down the ridges of my spine, gluing my blouse to my skin.

Mel gripped my arm, her nails digging into me. I came back to myself all at once, pushing up onto my feet and letting the world open around me again.

The scattered applause wasn't even loud enough to echo back off the columns of the large building behind us, the one the dean had called Old Main. Not a good sign when it came to their interest level, but I could win them over. Being a *freak* meant that people were more than willing to stare at you for a while.

I stepped through the shadow cast by Old Main's clock tower. Setting my shoulders back, I licked my teeth to make sure there was no lipstick on them and lifted my hand in a wave.

The dean stepped away from the podium, which rested on top of a temporary platform that had been built out over the steps

that led down to the grassy seating area. He swept his hands toward it as I approached, inviting me forward with an encouraging smile I forced myself to return.

I didn't need encouragement. This was my job.

The meager applause was lost again, this time to the music that poured through the speakers on either side of the bottom step down on the grass—some kind of fight song, I guessed. While I waited for the words to load on the teleprompter, I cast a quick glance around the audience, making sure to avoid looking directly into the fleet of news cameras positioned off to the right of the stairs.

“Good afternoon,” I said, my hands grasping the lip of the podium. I hated the way my voice sounded as it blasted out of speakers—like a little girl's. “It's an honor to be here with you today. Thank you, Dean Harrison, for giving me the opportunity to address your incredible new class and inviting me to celebrate the reopening of your illustrious university.”

I sincerely doubted there had been any invitations involved—Mel pitched all of these events based on population models and where she thought we would get the most media play. She always seemed to know just the right way to threaten someone to get a *No* magically transformed into an enthusiastic *Yes*.

Every speech was carefully altered at its beginning and end to fit the venue. These slight adjustments were the only variations in the usual routine. My grip on the podium relaxed as I settled into it. I swept my gaze back and forth, trying to take the crowd's temperature. Beyond the row of reporters, all scribbling on notepads or half-hidden by the phones they were using to snap photos, there was an array of people, spanning almost the full range of ages.

Parents and other family members filled the very back rows.

Farther in were the men and women a decade past what you might expect from typical college freshmen. All of them were trying to recover the educations they'd been forced to abandon when the majority of universities had gone bankrupt at the height of the Psi panic.

Then there were those my age, even a little younger. They sat behind the reporters, their thumb-size buttons visible on their shirts, as they were meant to be at all times. Many green buttons, fewer blues, and even fewer yellow ones like my own. And, scattered between them all, white.

I glanced down at the podium, pausing in my speech for a quick breath. *Blank*. The word slipped through my mind, as unwelcome as it was ugly. These were the ones who had elected—or had parents who had elected for them—to get the “cure” procedure. Specifically, the ones who had received surgical implants to halt and effectively neuter their brain's access to the abilities they acquired when they survived IAAN.

“We truly are the lucky ones,” I continued. “We have survived the trials that the last decade has brought to our country, and they have united us in ways that no one could have predicted. Of course, we have all made sacrifices. We have struggled. And from that, we have learned much—including how to trust one another again, and how to believe in the future of this nation.”

There was a loud, sharp cough from the far left end of the front row. It was just pointed enough to draw my gaze as I took a quick sip from the sweating water glass that had been left for me.

Two teenagers sat just behind the police officer standing watch over the left side of the audience. One, a girl with brown skin, glowing in her yellow silk sundress, had stretched her long legs out in front of her. They were crossed at the ankles, just

above her strappy sandals. Her head had lolled to the side, her long ponytail of curly black hair spilling over her shoulder. The metallic-rimmed cat's-eye glasses had dipped down the bridge of her nose, revealing more of her features: full brows and high, slanted cheekbones. She also had what I assumed were beautiful, wide eyes, but there was no way to really confirm it, given that I'd apparently talked her right into a nice nap.

Irritation curled through me as I watched her mouth fall slightly open, and her breathing even out.

Oh, am I wasting your time?

Beside her was a boy, also about my age, more or less. He was such a study in contrasts that my gaze naturally held on him a second longer. His chestnut-colored hair had a hint of wild curl and was barely tamed, glowing with a faint red sheen in the harsh sunlight. His face was lean, but his features were so strong, the lines so distinct, that I would have believed anyone who told me they had carefully designed his face on the pages of a sketchbook. Even the tan on his white skin only seemed to make his pale eyes burn brighter in comparison. He met my gaze directly, his unreadable expression never wavering, not until the corners of his mouth tipped down.

I straightened, glancing away. "I realize that much has been asked of my fellow Psi, but we must establish limits on those perceived to be limitless. Society can only function with boundaries and rules, and we must continue to work to find a way back into it—to not press so hard against those markers as to disturb the peace."

The girl could get right up and leave if she was so bored with a talk about her future—but I let myself glance back toward them for a moment. She wore a green button, and he wore a yellow one.

I shifted my full attention back to the speech as I entered the homestretch. It was my least-favorite part: I'd plead with the Psi

for patience with those who feared us, and plead with those who feared us to acknowledge the terror that we had lived in every day since IAAN was first recognized. It didn't feel like a fair comparison, but this had come directly from professionals. What did I know, when it really came down to it?

I stumbled, just a tiny bit, as unfamiliar words loaded on the screen. "And as we enter this new beginning, I think it has become all the more important to acknowledge the past. We must honor the traditional American way."

It was the new language that Mel had mentioned in the car. The teleprompter slowed, accommodating my unfamiliarity.

"That includes," I read, "honoring our original Constitution, the core foundation of faith, and the requirements of citizenship in our democracy. . . ."

The words rolled forward on the screen, even as they halted in my throat.

TODAY, THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT HAS VOTED ON AND APPROVED A BILL THAT TEMPORARILY REMOVES PSYCHICALLY INJURED, INCLUDING THOSE OF LEGAL AGE, FROM CURRENT VOTER ROLLS. THIS IS TO ALLOW THEM MORE TIME TO HEAL FROM THEIR TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES BEFORE MAKING POTENTIALLY LIFE-ALTERING DECISIONS ON THEIR BALLOTS, AND SO THAT THEY MAY BETTER UNDERSTAND THE FULL WEIGHT AND IMPACT OF THIS SACRED CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY.

THIS IS ONLY A PROVISIONAL MEASURE, AND THE MATTER WILL BE REVISITED FOLLOWING THE ELECTION THIS NOVEMBER, AFTER THE NEW FULL CONGRESS IS SWORN IN.

A tremor worked its way up through my arms, even as my hands clenched the podium's glossy wood. The silence stretched

on, punctuated only by the muffled sigh of the breeze catching the microphone. The audience began to shift in their seats. A woman in the second row finally stopped using her program as a fan, leaning forward to give me a curious look.

That couldn't be right. I wanted to look back at Mel, to signal that the wrong text had been loaded in. Whoever thought this was a funny joke deserved a fist to the throat.

The words scrolled back up, repeating. Insistent.

No—this was . . . The Psi already had stricter ID requirements. We had to wait until we were twenty-one before we could get legal driver's licenses. I'd given a whole speech about how it would be worth the delay, and how exciting it would be to finally be able to turn in a voter registration form with it. I filled mine out years ago, when Chubs and Vida were doing theirs. I hadn't wanted to be left out.

This must have . . . This had to have slipped by him and the other Psi on Interim President Cruz's council. They were probably already pushing back against it.

Except hadn't Mel said the language had come directly from President Cruz's chief of staff? Why spring it on me like this without any explanation or warning?

Because they know you'll say it no matter what, a small voice whispered in my mind, *like you've said everything else they've given you.*

Or . . . because the Psi Council had already refused to announce it themselves.

This time I did glance back over my shoulder. The crowd began to quietly murmur, clearly wondering what was going on. Mel didn't rise out of her chair, didn't take off her sunglasses. She motioned with her hands, pushing them forward, urging me to turn back to the audience. To keep going.

The boy in the front row, the one I'd noticed before, narrowed his eyes, cocking his head to the side slightly. The way his whole body tensed made me wonder if he'd somehow managed to read the words on the teleprompter, or if he could hear my heart hammering inside my chest.

Just say it, I thought, watching as the words rewound again, then paused. I'd promised them my voice, for whatever they'd need me to do. This was what I had agreed to, the whole point of coming here.

Just say it.

It would only be temporary. They promised. One election. We could sit out *one* election. Justice took time and sacrifice, but like the reparations had proven, it was best won through cooperation. We were working toward a better *forever* for the Psi, not just one year.

My throat burned. The podium trembled under my hands, and I couldn't understand why. Why now—why this announcement, and not any of the others?

Just say it.

The girl, the ghost from the past, was back, her gloved hands wrapping around my neck.

I can't. Not this time. Not this.

"Thank you for your time," I choked out, "it was an honor to speak to you today, and I wish you the best as you begin a new chapter of your lives—"

The teleprompter's screen blanked out. A second later, a single line of text appeared.

SOMEONE IS HERE TO KILL YOU.

THREE

I LAUGHED.

It was a jarring end to an unfinished thought, momentarily drowning out the persistent hum of the speakers and electronics surrounding me. The shocked sound somehow seemed to multiply as it ricocheted off the pillars of Old Main—like a single bullet summoning a hail of them.

Confusion spread through the crowd; I saw it in their faces, heard it in their murmurs. Bands of anger and resentment locked me in place, and the longer I stood there, useless and silent, the deeper I sank into the humiliation.

Someone with an ax to grind had clearly loaded fake text into the teleprompter instead of the new material Mel had given them.

Say something. Do something.

I should have realized it the second the language about the provisional voting measure had appeared on the screen and wrapped things up as naturally as I could. Instead, I'd frozen like a total novice and left myself open to the worst kind of speculation from the nightly newscasts. I could practically hear them

now, dissecting the pause, replaying the moment over and over again, asking, *Is the girl well?*

I leaned forward and managed to squeeze out, “Thank you again. Enjoy your day.”

Rather than settle the crowd, the words only seemed to stir them. Even the sleeping girl suddenly sat up, curling her legs back under her, glancing at the dark-haired boy beside her.

The dean stepped up to the microphone again, casting a nervous look my way. “Well . . . thank you, everyone. Please enjoy the refreshments and sunshine.”

The last thirty seconds had felt like thirty minutes. Fake threat or real threat, it didn’t matter: the wheels of the emergency protocol were now turning. Agent Cooper walked straight to me, his tie fluttering with each quick, clipped step. The words on the teleprompter were reflected in the silver lenses of his sunglasses before someone cut the power and blacked out the screen.

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders. To anyone looking on, it probably seemed like he was just escorting me off the stage. They might not have noticed that Agent Cooper was pressing me hard into his side, that his other hand was just a few centimeters away from the gun in his holster. The sun had baked heat into the sleeve of his dark suit and it burned everywhere it touched me.

“It’s all right. It’s all right.” He repeated the words over and over again as the police officers turned to the university staff and began to wave them off the steps of Old Main. Most of the students and their families had risen to their feet and were milling around, talking to one another or moving toward the nearby table of food and drinks.

“I know,” I said pointedly. My heel caught on a crack in the

old stone, sinking into it. Instead of giving me a moment to ease it free, Agent Cooper yanked me forward, shredding the leather off it and leaving me stumbling toward Mel.

“Wait here,” he said. “Martinez will come get you. I’ll get the car.”

That was the extent of our security protocol: shelter in place until safe transport could be secured. I nodded and Agent Cooper was off, heading toward where the car was under joint custody of the newly reinstated Pennsylvania State Police and the United Nations’ new federal police force, the Defenders.

I spotted Martinez a short distance away, not heading in my direction, but interrogating the shrugging woman in the tech booth.

Mel’s voice rang out behind me, cutting into my thoughts.

“—unacceptable! I asked you to guarantee a level of security, and you didn’t deliver!”

My heels clicked against the stone as I pivoted and cut a straight path toward her. Mel turned away from the pale-faced university staffer, who’d been nodding, nodding, nodding, simply absorbing the publicist’s lecture. Her face was strained with barely muted anger.

Because of her job, Mel had been trained to be changeable, to shift between many roles depending on who she was with or what she was doing. To me, she’d been a coach, a defender, a guide, and a protector. Incompetence, especially when it came to safety, never sat well with her. This security breach, combined with the car incident, had clearly rattled her.

“It’s fine,” I assured her. “Just someone looking for a reaction—”

“It’s *not* fine,” Mel said, her hand closing over my shoulder. She drew me behind the nearest pillar, out of the lingering news

cameras' line of sight. "You were supposed to launch the voting order. That's why I pitched this event to the press!"

I took a step back, lips parting as I searched for the right words.

"I told them you were ready for bigger announcements, but if that's not the case—" she began.

"No!" Somehow I managed to throw off the shock that had blanketed my mind. "No, I *am* ready. It's just, it didn't seem like— It wasn't—"

Right.

I couldn't get the word out, not under the full force of Mel's disappointment. The day's heat was unbearable, but her words were coated with ice.

"It came directly from the interim president's office. They chose you for this announcement," Mel said.

"Why?"

Mel stared back at me like I'd asked it in another language.

I didn't look away as I clarified, "Why did they want *me*?"

Someone touched my elbow, silencing any reply I might have gotten from Mel. "Ma'am? This way."

The Defenders' uniforms were as crisp and new as the fighting force itself. The gray jacket was cut close to the body, allowing for a black utility belt stocked with nonlethal weapons and tools, including the signature batons with their motto stamped lengthwise in silver lettering: FOR THE COMMON DEFENSE. A red leather sash ran from the left shoulder to the hip, pinned in place with a silver badge over the heart.

I'd been in the focus group that helped to choose the uniforms. One minute, I was sitting next to Cruz's chief of staff and the man modeling the sample—the third of five final options—had come into the conference room. The next, I found myself

standing at the door, heading out. I still didn't understand why the sight of that particular one had put my heart in a vise. It was a nice uniform. A fantastic one. There was nothing wrong with it, even if the colors were . . .

I drew in a deep breath as I looked to the Defender and nodded. I'd been so embarrassed when the chief of staff asked me what was wrong that day, and even more embarrassed when the designer explained the concept. The boldness of the crimson against the gray represented the hope for a stronger, more peaceful future in the face of a dismal past.

There was nothing wrong with the uniform, or me, and I proved as much when I voted for it.

The Defender, with her neat braid beneath her helmet, her sunburned white skin, and rigid posture had likely come out of one of the country's fighting forces and had gone through psychological evaluations and tactical retraining with the United Nations peacekeepers. She walked us forward with the controlled assurance of someone who was used to giving orders, or at least following them.

"Wait," I said, trying to pull my arm free. The Defender tightened her grip as she walked me back down the steps of Old Main, toward the speakers and the podium. I only knew Mel was still behind me by the sound of her heels. "Agent Cooper said to—"

"Not now," Mel said sharply, coming to stand beside me. She waved toward where a group of Defenders had lined up along the edge of the makeshift stage, keeping back the tide of curious attendees trying to snap photos and the few reporters shouting questions at her.

"What are the interim president's thoughts about the approaching elections? Has she seen the latest polling?"

“Mel, what can you tell us about the rumors of the UN General Assembly coming back to Manhattan?”

“Mel! *Mel!*”

Realizing how it must have looked to everyone, I stepped in close to the Defender’s side, ignoring the pressing buzz in the back of my mind. The speakers were still humming as power moved through them, whispering something I couldn’t quite hear.

But I heard Mel all too clearly when she hissed from her own plastered-on grin, “*Smile.*”

I couldn’t.

Across the impatient, jostling bodies, through the shouted questions, I accidentally caught the eye of the boy I’d seen before. He hadn’t moved from where he stood in front of his chair, and now it felt like I had frozen in place, too. His brow creased as his gaze finally broke away from mine and locked onto the sight of a tall male Defender wading through the crowd.

The Defender who had my arm tugged me forward, down the steps. Not away from the crowd, but into it.

“Why are we going this way?” I asked. It would have been quicker to go the opposite direction, following the path Agent Cooper had taken to the other side of Old Main.

“Security protocol has changed,” the Defender muttered. Her dark braid shone in the damp heat.

There’s something deep inside you that shifts—awakens, I guess—when, at one point in your life, you come face-to-face with death and narrowly escape it. From that moment on, it’s like an unacknowledged insight is plugged into your mind. It doesn’t ring like an alarm when it picks up on something that’s off. It doesn’t always make your heart pound. Sometimes, there isn’t the time for that.

Call it instinct or intuition or whatever word you have for self-preservation, but once it's there, it never goes away. And when it stirs, you feel it like a layer of static on your skin.

I should know. I'd felt it from the moment I'd accidentally stalled my family's car in the middle of the I-495. From that heartbeat before the truck rammed into the passenger side of the car. It's saved me too many times to ever risk ignoring it. As Vida always said, there are times you have to listen to your gut and tell common courtesy to fuck right off.

It was just a little bit harder to do that with cameras rolling. I didn't want to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing me afraid. I wasn't about to flinch again.

But . . . it wasn't just a feeling of unease. A faint new vibration coated the air, tickling along the edge of my ear, whining and burning.

In the blur of the crowd moving around me, I caught sight of the girl with the marigold-colored dress. She reached out and grabbed the boy's arm, pointing at something behind me.

I glanced back over my shoulder, searching for whatever they were looking at. The whining grew in intensity, melting into the hum of the speakers.

"We should go a different way," Mel said to the Defender in a low voice. "Avoid the crowd."

Yes. Yes we should. The attendees had bottlenecked at the only entrance, and therefore exit, in the security fencing. The day's heat boiled the stench of sweat and the mowed lawn, leaving a burning aftertaste in my mouth.

I turned again, looking for a clear path back up toward Old Main, for Agent Martinez, who seemed to have disappeared. But as the crowds parted, only one figure was still heading our way.

It was the male Defender, his uniform too tight across his broad shoulders, sweat gleaming on his white face. He lowered his head but not his gaze. It fixed on me a second too long. Before I could point him out, he was an arm's length away.

Close enough for me to see my face reflected in his gleaming badge.

Close enough to see that there were no silvered words along the length of his baton.

Close enough to see his free hand slip into his uniform jacket pocket. The deadly shape of the weapon there as he reached for its trigger.

I didn't think. I didn't scream. The old woman from the highway, her face, flashed through my mind as my arm shot up. My fingers strained forward, close enough to nearly brush the end of the baton. The man gritted his teeth, eyes narrowed with naked hatred. He raised the gun inside his pocket to level with my heart.

I fired first.

I pulled the charge from the humming currents in the air, distilling it into a single thread of electricity that jumped from my skin. I aimed for his chest, to give him just enough of a nudge to knock him off his feet, but—

“No!” someone shouted. The voice rang out through the air just as the Defender—whoever he was—raised his baton to catch the charge. It was wood, it should have only been wood, but the thread of light exploded into a crackling halo that surrounded the baton, flashing up to capture the man in a cage of furious power.

“What did you do?” Mel screamed. “Oh God, what did you—?”

But even her voice was lost to the roar of the speakers blowing out in a wave of fire and thunder.

FOUR

AT FIRST, THERE WAS NOTHING BUT SILENCE. SMOKE.

It sank deep into my lungs, driving out every last ounce of air. The heat was trapped inside me, bubbling up until I was sure it would separate my skin from my muscles and my muscles from my bones.

The pain came next.

Panic trilled inside my skull. The white-hot air and pressure had lifted me up off my feet just as the Defender disappeared into the torrent of scorched plastic and metal. The fire had caught his uniform and hair, coating him like a second skin before devouring him entirely. And I'd flown— My head hurt, and it was so dark, it was so dark—

My chest wouldn't expand to take in the breath it desperately wanted. I couldn't move. My nerves sang and screamed and stung, but the pressure, the pressure that ground me harder against the sharp, uneven stone—it was going to crush me.

Smoke rose everywhere. Ribbons of it spilled over me, stroking the open gashes on my arms and chest. My right arm was caught under a sheet of metal that had fallen over me. I tried to

draw it back to my side, but my wrist caught on something jagged. I bit back a low sob of pain.

Think—think—

Mel. Where was Mel?

I twisted as much as I could, feeling the metal edge bite into my skin. *Can't stay down here— Can't stay—*

Someone is here to kill you.

Someone is here to kill you.

Bomb.

“Stop it,” I choked out. “*Stop.*”

It ran against every instinct, every single voice in my head screaming at me to get out, to move, to breathe, but I forced myself to stop struggling against the metal sheet. I forced myself to take in the burning air, every acrid gasp of it I could manage. *Calm down.*

It didn't work. The Defenders, Mel, the boy, the teleprompter, the green, green grass, it all spun together in my mind. I tried to use my broken nails to claw through the sheet that was pinning me in place. I was breathing, I was alive—all those times the darkness had tried to catch me, I'd slipped through it. I'd escaped. This wasn't it for me. I was alive.

I have to help them.

With a heaving groan, I arched my back, wedging my knees up under whatever had fallen on me to try to shove it off.

It wasn't until I felt the rough carpeting rub against my cheek that I realized what it was: part of the temporary stage they'd built for my speech.

I shoved at it again, and this time it skidded against the nearby steps, giving me just enough room to slip both of my arms in toward my chest before the metal collapsed back onto me.

Then, all at once, the pressure, the weight, the darkness—it was gone.

The metal sheeting trembled as a silhouetted figure struggled to lift it. But when the sunlight momentarily dimmed, I could make out his face clearly.

It was the dark-haired boy.

The second the weight was off me, I crawled as far away from it as I could. With a look of intense relief, the boy dropped the piece of the stage back onto the steps, sending another cloud of dust into the air.

Blood suddenly rushed through me, pounding in my ears, sending knives through my numbed legs. I swiped a hand over my stinging eyes. The ash swirled in the air like a fierce snow-storm, and, for a second, I wasn't there at all—I was somewhere else, my skin freezing, my body small.

A scream lodged itself in my throat.

The boy, his eyes bright, wrapped his hands around my upper arms and pulled me onto my feet before they'd even had a chance to feel again. He held firm, even as my ankles buckled and I dipped forward. The boy gave me a faint shake, trying, I thought, to draw my attention back to his face.

But I was looking past him.

Mel.

They looked like doll parts scattered across the ground in the wake of a child's temper tantrum. One of her heels stood upright on the step below me, as if she'd simply slipped it off the instant before the explosion's heat overtook her. The Defenders—the woman who had led us along, the man who'd had the gun—were dead, the gray fabric of their uniforms still smoldering.

The blast had scalped the grass, leaving a halo of overturned

soil and brick. A few members of the university staff and reporters were gravely injured nearby and were trying to crawl away from the burning ground. Their skin and clothes were charred almost beyond recognition.

I jumped as the first figure tore through the heavy veil of smoke, smashing through the mangled security fencing. A woman stumbled after him, her sundress torn and stained by the blood running down her shins. Her expression was blank, as if the blast had incinerated every thought in her mind. It didn't waver, not even as she looked down at the severed arm she held in her other hand.

People fled in a thrashing mass of chaos, trampling the shattered cameras, narrowly avoiding the injured and the dead and those who were trying to tend to them. The ones on their knees on the ground screamed silently into the chaos. Kids. Parents. Grandparents. Police. Defenders. Blood, everywhere. Smoke—so much smoke.

It was just one spark.

It was just one jolt of power. It couldn't have expanded like that, or jumped to the speakers. I had too much control. I turned again, this time toward the place where the tech booth should have been. Where Agent Martinez should have been.

The pressure on my arms increased again. My eyes were raw, streaming with tears, as the boy adjusted his stance to block the destruction. His mouth was moving, but I couldn't make out more than a few of the words—they were pops of muted sound, like he was shouting at me underwater.

“—go—back—hear—?”

He realized I couldn't hear him at the same moment I did. I flinched, trying to shove myself away. My heartbeat kicked so high, so fast, my vision went black. He held on tighter, this time clasp my face in one hand, forcing my gaze back toward him again.

The storm of panic and fear swirling in my mind abated, just for a moment. He kept talking. One word. I couldn't tell if I was actually hearing him, or if I had imagined his voice, deep and gravelly: "Okay? Okay?"

My hearing wasn't totally gone, but nearly everything was being drowned out by a keening whine that came from everywhere and nowhere.

"Okay?" he shouted, inches from my ear. "Okay?"

I nodded, because I was alive. I nodded, because it was the only movement my body seemed capable of making in that moment. It wasn't okay—none of this was okay—

I couldn't even cry: My eyes were already streaming hot tears to clear out the dust and smoke. My brain couldn't sink into the grief.

He reached for my arm again, pulling me forward down the remaining steps. Toward the bodies.

I tried to pull back, to head into the safety of Old Main. None of this made sense. The explosion. The Defenders. This *stranger*—I hadn't made a habit out of following strangers since I was a child, so why was I doing it now? He could be involved. He could have . . . he could have rigged the explosion.

You did it, a voice whispered. You lost control.

I shook my head, trying to wrench myself free. I didn't. I knew my power.

The thought steadied me, echoing through my mind. *I know my power.*

It wasn't me. Dissolving into panic, getting caught in the snare of that horrifying possibility, wasn't going to do me any good. I clenched my jaw, willing my hands to stop shaking.

Plan: Get to the car. Find Cooper. Drive myself, and anyone else who needed help, away.

Focus.

The boy released me when he felt me tug against his hold. I straightened, looking up to meet his gaze.

“Not safe!” he shouted.

“No shit!” I shouted back. I pointed in the direction of where we’d left the SUV. *“Car!”*

His face changed beneath the streaks of grit, the intense gaze slipping into a look of surprise. Recovering quickly, the steely look of determination returned. He nodded and gestured for me to take the lead.

I turned. The girl I’d seen with him before appeared without warning, her yellow dress bright in the haze of smoke. There was a burn on her right forearm, as if she’d thrown it up to shield herself from the heat of the blast. She shouted something to the boy, who swung back around to see what was happening.

A rush of uniformed police and clusters of horrified spectators came toward the wreckage. Some of the survivors fell to their knees, putting their hands behind their heads; others ran blindly forward, toward the rifles in the police officers’ hands. The Defenders among them had taken out their batons, but most broke away to tend to the wounded.

The first bullet hit the smoldering remains of the speaker seconds before the crack of the shot’s discharge split the air.

The girl in yellow dove to the right. The boy reached for the back of his jeans, only to realize whatever he was looking for there was gone. Without a word, he turned sideways and gestured for me to do the same.

For a second I thought he was trying to direct my gaze toward something, but no—I knew this trick. Vida had taught it to me years ago, before the new government had taken root.

Turn to the side to give your attacker less body mass to shoot at.

Another flash appeared in the smoke-clogged distance. This time the bullet struck at my feet, splintering the stone. A shard sliced across my shin, nearly taking me down.

The boy surveyed the steps around us, his eyes landing on a different, smaller panel of the temporary stage that had been blown out in the explosion.

He bounded down toward it, and, in one smooth motion, kicked the sheet up in time for the next bullet to glance off it.

It was the smoke. They didn't know—they couldn't see who they were firing at.

"Stop!" I shouted. The word was ragged as it left my raw throat. "Don't shoot! *Don't shoot!*"

The shots flashed in the burning smoke. The last bit of speaker exploded into black shards that cut at me, fast and deep.

"It's me!" I screamed back. "It's Suzume!"

The boy threw us both down, grunting as the sheet of metal absorbed the force of the bullets' impact. It bent in, further and further, until it was a hairbreadth from his face.

"They don't know," I said, struggling against him. They thought it was the attacker. They thought someone was taking me hostage. He didn't get that. We needed to find Cooper or Martinez.

The boy made sure I heard every single word as he shouted, "*They know it's you!*"

I shook my head, blood exploding in my mouth as I bit my tongue. He was breathing hard, inches from my own face; I answered each gasp with one of my own. His weight wasn't braced on me, but the heat of him was. Droplets of sweat, his or mine, ran down my chest.

He's wrong, I thought. He has no idea—

“Are you with me?” the boy shouted. “Can you run?”

What was the protocol? What would Mel do?

“We should wait!” I said. “We need to let them see we aren’t a threat!”

“Like hell we should,” he shouted next to my ear. “I don’t want to die here! Do you?”

No.

I don’t know where the voice came from, the same one whispering the words on the teleprompter inside my mind: *Someone is here to kill you.* As those few agonizing seconds ticked by, the words slowly shifted, slithering and crackling like a serpent shedding its skin. *They are going to kill you.*

Someone almost had. But I wasn’t about to lie down and let them do it now, or take a bullet by mistake.

Do you want to die here?

I looked at the boy.

He squeezed my arm, understanding. Then we were running toward the car.

The gunfire roared behind us like an ocean wave trying to catch our heels. The girl in the yellow dress appeared in the smoke, her eyes widening as she spotted us. She motioned for us to follow, yelling something I couldn’t hear but the boy could. He looked toward me, then nodded in her direction.

I nodded back, following the path she cleared for us by showing through the horrified witnesses and university staff on the upper steps. It was only then that the firing stopped. The boy ditched the sheet of metal he’d used to cover us.

What is happening?

A hand reached out to grab me, but slid right off the coat of dust and soot on my arm.

What is happening?

“—op! Stop right—! —ume!”

Cop cars and fire trucks tore up onto the lawn in front of Old Main, their lights blazing as they surrounded the edge of the ruined security perimeter.

They're here to help. They're here to take control of the situation. Finally, some kind of protocol was clicking into place. They'd search the area, make sure it was safe. They'd help the injured. They'd find whoever was responsible for . . . *this*.

It had to have been a bomb. It took out the speakers on either side of the stage and decimated the tech booth. I remembered that now—that it hadn't been just one explosion. It had been three separate explosions, within the space of that last breath I'd drawn.

Three detonations, that same dark voice whispered in my aching ears, or a single powerful electrical current traveling through their shared conductor?

My stomach churned, the bile there roiling. Now that the authorities were here, it would only be a matter of time before they figured out who or what was responsible—and whether or not it was connected to the warning on the teleprompter.

We followed the flood of running attendees and staff until the point where they met with a line of Defenders, who caught and corralled them, ushering them to safety in groups. I let out a heavy breath at the sight, at the small touch of relief it brought.

Instead of following them headlong into the human safety net of gray uniforms, the boy and girl swung a hard right at the edge of Old Main, toward the street on the other side of the massive building.

My feet slowed, even as people jostled me from all sides. The

girl noticed I had fallen behind first, and motioned for the boy to keep going as she made her way back to me. An expression of disbelief overtook her soot-smearred face.

“Really?” she shouted. “Don’t make me carry you!”

The Defenders were there to help. I looked between her and the swarm of them, including the few who had noticed us—who were pointing and shouting in our direction.

The Defenders were there to help.

The silver, shining words. The promise, the oath they all took. *For the common defense.*

But it had been a Defender who had guided Mel and me toward the speakers. It had been a Defender who’d had that gun in his pocket, even though they were banned from carrying lethal weapons.

I didn’t let myself think it through. I just followed the girl. Her long legs easily outstripped mine as she caught up to her friend. I tucked my chin against my chest and limped after them as quickly as I could.

The fountain at the back of Old Main, repurposed and rededicated as a memorial to the community’s Lost Generation, gurgled up water as if nothing had happened. This side of the building looked otherwise abandoned. The cars that clogged the small parking lot had been deserted, a few doors left open with the engines running. All except one.

It should have struck me as strange, but I was too relieved to care. I ran toward our SUV, noticing for the first time that the front headlights had been cracked and the hubcap melted by the earlier attack.

The boy tried to catch my shoulder, but I dodged away. My heart galloped as I all but slammed into the passenger side of the

SUV. I could just make out Agent Cooper's form through the tinted windows.

I pounded on the glass to get his attention.

"Cooper!" I shouted. This wasn't like him—I'd never seen him so still in all the years I'd known him. "*Agent Cooper!*"

The piercing drone in my ears grew louder and louder, pitching up and down with my pulse as I ran to the SUV's driver's side.

I saw the distorted shapes of the boy and girl through the shattered driver's side window and the hole in the front windshield before I saw Agent Cooper. He was slumped forward against his locked seat belt, blood still dripping from his forehead and pooling where his sunglasses had fallen into his lap. One of the lenses was blown out.

I reached inside, slicing my arms on the jagged edge of the window. I gripped his shoulder, his tie, then recoiled at the feeling of warm blood. The left side of his skull was broken in, exposing white bone. The speckled pink of soft tissue.

That last fading spark of composure I'd been clinging to was stamped out, and I was left in the clawing dark.

It poured over my mind, my eyes. I knew I was screaming by the burn in my throat. Heat gathered in the center of my palms, and the car's engine revved to life. The remaining headlight flashed, exploding out onto the asphalt. The flat, dull blare of the horn finally broke through the high-frequency wail stabbing into my ears.

What the hell is going on?

The air shifted behind me. I turned, throwing out my elbow, intending to catch the boy in the chest. I couldn't stand the idea of being touched, not with the charge from the car's battery flowing through my senses, giving me power, giving me control when seconds ago I'd had none.

A hand latched onto my head, yanking me back away from the car. My heels caught in the uneven paved surface and knocked me off balance. The rubber of the glove caught in my hair's twist and dragged painfully across my scalp.

I screamed again, punching back at whoever was behind me. The charge curled just above my knuckles and between my fingers, searing the air. It caught the attacker, but right in the thick chest plate he was wearing over his black jumpsuit. Everything, from the helmet he wore down to the soles of his boots, had been coated with a thick tire-like cover of rubber.

The pulse of power flared white as it met the resistance of his body armor and traveled out through the air, looking for another conductor.

Shit. There wasn't anything electrical on him that I could sense, not even a comm in his ear. *Shit!*

My body knew what to do a full second before my mind did. I went limp, making myself deadweight. The asphalt dragged against the back of my legs, tearing at my calves, but the shock of that one movement was enough for him to relax his grip in my hair.

I swung my leg so that my foot caught his ankle. At the edge of my vision, the boy came tearing around the side of the car, a small gun in his hands. He wheeled back in surprise as I shoved myself up off the ground and launched my fist one, two, three times into the attacker's throat.

"Down!"

I threw myself to the left as his first shot rang out. The attacker staggered back, pressing a hand to where his rubber vest had caught the bullet. The boy's face was utterly expressionless as he adjusted his aim by less than an inch and fired again.

What the hell? It was an impossible shot, catching the man

between the low-slung helmet and the rise of the vest that covered the lower half of his face. Even Vida would have struggled to make it.

The man dropped to the ground, bleeding out onto the cement between us.

The boy took a step toward me. I took a step back, heart jumping into my throat. This wasn't just another Psi—this wasn't just another kid. The training that took . . .

“Who the hell are you?” I snarled.

He's part of this, that voice whispered. Him and the girl.

That unreadable mask faltered as he lowered his gun, only to draw it back up again, spinning toward the fountain.

The girl in the yellow dress was knocked back by another man dressed in solid black, but she went down kicking, beating her foot against his kneecap. Her impressive height and strong, athletic figure made them evenly matched—until the attacker trained his gun on her.

I took a running step toward them on instinct, but he wasn't alone—*we* weren't alone. Three more men, all in the same dark uniform, came running up from behind the police cars, guns trained on us.

“Go!” the boy shouted.

I swung my gaze to him as he squeezed off a shot at the other girl's attacker. He spared only a single look at me, then pivoted toward the girl. The soldier dropped both knees onto the girl's stomach, pinning her there.

The girl screamed in pain as she reached up to knock his helmet back, then clawed at its strap hard enough to choke him. With her kicking up to flip them, and the soldier trying to pin her, the boy couldn't get a clear shot.

“Priya!” the boy shouted. “Stop!”

The man—the soldier—whoever it was—reached into a pocket on his vest and pulled out a yellow handheld device.

It had been so long since I’d seen one, and an old model at that. Years and years and years, hundreds of miles from this place, on the road in the middle of nowhere. The memory invaded my mind, filled my mouth with static until I was sure I could feel sparks traveling over my teeth.

But when the White Noise sounded, I couldn’t hear it. Didn’t feel it.

It tore through the others, and I knew exactly what they were feeling, how it must have shredded their thoughts and set fire to their nerve endings. The boy fought to stay on his feet as blood began to drip from his nose. The girl went terrifyingly still. The man laughed as he punched her again and got no response.

The other men were on the boy in an instant, kicking and beating him until, finally, he collapsed onto the sidewalk. He strained to lift up his head, finding my gaze.

I read the word on his lips: “*Run!*”

I could. I could take one of the deserted cars left in the lot and be in the wind, be gone. The realization made my knees lock, my hands shake.

But I hadn’t been able to leave that stranger at the gas station in West Virginia when she needed help. I couldn’t leave these strangers now, not after they’d tried to help me. Even if it came to nothing, I had to try. I’d cheated death once today. I could do it again. I wasn’t weak or small or frightened—I wasn’t that little girl anymore.

He’d trusted me. I’d brought them here, right into this. I had to be the one to get us out.

The words blazed through my mind as I threw myself onto the man holding the device, raking my broken nails down the exposed skin of his cheek. I knocked him sideways off the girl, clawing until I could get the device in my hand. My fingers brushed against it, making it spark and crackle as the plastic casing melted down into its wires.

The others stopped writhing, but before I could try to wake them, a pair of arms locked across my chest. They hauled me up until my feet dangled over the ground. I bucked, trying to smash my head back into his face, but I only hit the helmet. Black stars burst in my vision.

“Stupid bitch!” the man yelled, throwing me back down. I slammed into the cement, gasping. *“I’ll fucking kill you, I don’t care—”*

“Easy!” someone else bellowed. *“Come on, there’s no time—”*

A cloth reeking of damp, sickly sweetness was shoved up against my face. I crawled forward, toward the unconscious boy, only to have the cloth pressed in tighter. Chloroform.

Let me help—let me help—let me— I bucked against the weight that fell over me, hating the hot sting of tears in my eyes, and the way the growing darkness took the sight of him, the words, the pain from me, until all I had left was the deepest black of sleep.

FIVE

I FADED—IN AND OUT OF CONSCIOUSNESS, IN BETWEEN reality and dream, and through light and darkness.

My mind spun inside my skull, light as a passing breeze. The bite of the leather straps holding me down—across my shoulders, my stomach, my legs—was disorienting. Half of me was there. The other half was rising toward the cracks in the metal roof, pulling myself up on those narrow ropes of light. The shadows on the walls were like long-forgotten nightmares, circling their prey.

Each time I closed my eyes, a new scene played out. Campfires. Dark roads. Electric fences. Closer and closer, faces edged forward out of the darkness. They watched me, blurred and unreal. They were all here, everyone I had known. My friends. Caledonia's controller. Gabe. Mel. The old woman. My head was crowned with sparks and crackling threads of power.

They watched, but didn't come closer. Didn't help. They spoke in broken thoughts and uneven voices.

“—everywhere, looking for her—”

“Stay here, wait for orders—”

“The truck—”

My eyelids burned. They drooped shut under their own weight; the tears and crusts caught in the lashes were as heavy as lead. This time, there was only darkness.

There was nothing at all.

At first, I thought it was blood.

The metallic stench seeped into my nose, my hair, my skin until I couldn't escape it. I forced my eyes open, cringing at the intensity of the light from above. As the black spots floating in my retinas faded, I could finally make out the stains on the ceiling. On the walls around me.

It was only rust. But seeing it smeared everywhere, the red-tinged droplets falling steadily into a small pool near my head, made the bile rise in my throat again, until I was sure I would choke on my own vomit.

Breathe. I sucked one breath in through my nose, then released it slowly. Just the way Doctor Poiner had taught me in our very first session, three years ago, when the past suddenly grew teeth and started following me everywhere.

Breathe through the panic, she'd coached. Find five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, one thing you can taste.

Three walls, the ceiling, my shirt, I counted. The ridges on the metal, the damp strokes of condensation, the clumps of rust both old and new, the rough wood of the floor beneath me. My heartbeat, drips of water, my breath. Gasoline and something rotting. My sweat.

Breaking down all those senses one at a time made me realize something else: I could hear again. The static whine had subsided

enough that it no longer blocked out every other sound. It was still there, though, buzzing like a fly trapped in my ear.

I took in another breath, trying to sit up. The straps keeping me in place creaked but didn't stretch. I was flat on my back and wet where my body touched the ground. Judging by the shape of the small space, it had to be some kind of shed—or a shipping container?

I craned my neck back, catching sight of two long, still shapes in the shadows. It all came back in a jolt that sent awareness shooting through me. Wherever I was now, they hadn't brought me here alone.

Someone was taking shallow breaths, pulling hard against their restraints. There was an edge of panic to it, and I had to fight to keep it from infecting me, too.

"Hello?" My throat felt blistered.

"Try to keep your voice down." The boy. He spoke so softly, I barely made him out. He was still tugging at his restraints when he added, "There are guards posted outside."

Some of the tension in my shoulders eased, making it easier to breath.

"Oh good," I whispered back, forcing a brightness into my voice. The patented Liam Stewart method of trying to defuse someone else's fears while swallowing your own. "I was worried escaping would be too easy."

"Too easy?" he repeated, momentarily forgetting the restraints. I was just about to explain the art of inappropriately timed sarcasm when he said, almost as if testing a joking tone for the first time, "Then . . . you'll be excited to know that it looked like they were armed with everything but flamethrowers."

I twisted to look at him again—the dirt-caked bottom of his sneakers, at least. His breathing had evened out somewhat, and even with the lack of light I could see him twisting his body to try to catch a glimpse of me. “No flamethrowers?” I said. “What kind of evil organization is this?”

“A particularly stupid kind,” he whispered back, “one that was reckless enough to try taking you *and* foolish enough to underestimate your ability to fight back. I think you gave them the shock of their lives.”

It was what I wanted to believe more than anything in that moment: that I was capable of both getting us out of here, and making whoever had taken us regret it. That strand of confidence wove through me. “And that’s too bad. About the flamethrower, I mean. I do know how to use one, you know.”

“You say that like it’s meant to surprise me,” the boy said quietly. “Like I didn’t watch you punch a man twice your size with a fistful of lightning.”

That’s right—I had, hadn’t I? That memory was enough to send the aftermath of the explosion crashing back through my mind. Him and the girl being beaten and slammed against the ground. The armor the soldiers wore that blocked my power. The boy shouting at me to run.

Would he have told me to go if they were involved? Would they be locked in here—wherever *here* was—with me? He’d held himself together after the bomb in a calm, composed way. Even as the men attacked us, he’d seemed to sink deeper into that control, as if he’d merely clicked into a different, more lethal mode.

But a minute ago, I’d heard his strained breathing. I’d felt his rising panic as if it had been my own pulse fluttering beneath my skin.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “There’s nothing funny about this.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said. “Humor is good for the alleviation of stress.”

Now that I could hear him clearly, my ears picked up the faint trace of an accent. Polish, maybe? Russian?

I gave a faint laugh. “That sounds like something a friend of mine would say.”

God. Chubs would be so worried. He and the others were probably losing their minds. He’d be my first call once I got us all out of here.

Get out, find a phone, make the call. It wasn’t even enough to really be considered a plan, but I clung to it. Even if there were a hundred steps that I still had to sort out, it gave me something real to start planning for. Just the possibility of hearing his voice after everything was enough to make me test the strength of the restraints again.

“I’ve been informed that I have the sense of humor of a rock,” he whispered, “which I’m interpreting as *nonexistent* and not *surprisingly colorful*.”

“I don’t know, you seem to be doing okay,” I told him, pulling at my restraints again. “We can work on it after we get out of here. You didn’t happen to notice where that is, did you?”

It was a long moment before he responded. I heard him swallow hard, the creak of leather as he tried to move. When he did speak, his voice had gone hollow. Remote. “Storage container—some kind of rail yard.”

The waves of fear rolled out, releasing the unbearable tightness in my chest, carving out pockets of paralyzing anxiety. In those places, something new bloomed.

Fury.

For the threat during the speech. For Mel. For the wounded. For Cooper. For shattering that small measure of peace we'd managed to scrape together after almost five years of struggling. For the boy and the girl caught in this dark web with me.

It had to be connected—the bombing, being taken. From the moment the Defender had walked me down the steps of Old Main, toward the second Defender with the wrong baton and the gun, to when we'd reached the lot and had been confronted by a man with protective tactical gear that had nullified my specific power.

They had targeted me.

"I'm getting us out of here," I told him, not bothering to keep my voice down. "Do you see anything around you we could use to pry up the bolts on our restraints?"

"Guards," the boy reminded me quietly.

Right then, I couldn't hear anything other than the wind blowing outside the storage container. My job required me to be so reserved, so careful with every small word choice, it felt like a relief to finally be able to say exactly what I wanted to.

"Let them listen, I don't care." I raised my voice, loud enough for it to echo off the metal walls. "I want them to know *exactly* how fucked they are the second we get out of here."

Silence. The boy shifted, craning his neck to watch what I assumed was the entrance.

"Is she—the girl—is she okay?" I asked. "It looked like she took a big hit. . . ."

"Priyanka? She's taken bigger ones," he said unhappily. "A word of warning: she's going to wake up in a few minutes and will absolutely fight you to be the first one out of here. Please do not forget to unchain me when the two of you escape." Somehow,

he didn't need to raise his voice the way I had for it to carry through our prison. His words were pure ice. "And when you're done with them, I'll make sure no one will recognize they were ever human."

No response. Not even a bang on the door to tell us to shut up. No taunts, either.

I breathed in and out, cringing as a fat droplet of rust-stained water dripped onto my forehead.

"Maybe they're gone," I ventured. "Taking a break to do something else horrific. I should have asked before, but are you all right?"

"I just . . . want to get out of here," he said haltingly. He shifted again, and I wondered what he was trying to see. "Can you think of any reason why they'd want to grab you?"

So he was also operating under the assumption that they had targeted me, and he and his friend had just been collateral damage.

Collateral damage who happened to be able to fight with an efficiency I'd only ever seen in trained soldiers.

"To make a statement? For ransom?" I decided to feel him out, see what he'd tell me about himself before clamming up. "Why do you assume they weren't targeting *you*? Or Priyanka?"

"Because I'm no one," he said quietly. "And I can't imagine what they'd gain by taking Priyanka, unless they're just planning on selling us to the highest bidder. But even that doesn't seem likely, considering your high profile. It's too big of a risk."

"I doubt they'd risk selling *any* Psi. The government has shut down every attempt to illegally move Psi both inside and out of the country," I said. "That's why they keep such close tabs on all of us, to protect against that possibility."

“All right,” he said slowly. “So what do you want to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“How do you want us to handle the escape?” he clarified. “I can’t tell how long we’ve been here, but if the guards are really gone they might be prepping to move us.”

As his words sank in, I felt something bright, something steady and calm break open inside me. He was looking to me again for what to do.

Relying on me.

“Normally, I love a good road trip, but we can’t let them move us,” I said. “If they come in to remove the restraints to bring us to another transport, wait until we’re all freed. Then we fight.”

“Agreed.”

I closed my eyes briefly, exhaling through my nose.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said softly.

“I was about to say the same thing to you,” I said. My bottom lip must have split open at some point after I lost consciousness, because the cut reopened as I spoke, and I tasted blood. “People will be looking for me, and once we break out of here, these assholes will have to face the full measure of the law for the lives they took. I’ll make sure of it.”

Silenced pooled between us once more. Finally, he asked, “What about me?”

“Well, you’re welcome to help,” I told him.

“No,” he cut in. “I mean, will you do the same for me? Make sure I don’t escape the law?”

“What are you talking about?” I said.

“The men,” he continued. “The ones I killed.”

The ones he’d dispatched with cool efficiency, and that expressionless mask on his face.

“That was self-defense,” I said, wondering who I was trying to reassure. “Anyone with eyes could have seen that.”

“For us,” he said, “there is no such thing as self-defense.”

“What do you mean?” When he didn’t respond, I pressed: “Who are you that you could even do that? You’re not just a student, are you? Why were you *really* at the speech?”

“It’s not like that,” he said quickly. “Suzume, listen—”

There was a labored groan of metal somewhere behind me. Daylight washed in, blanketing us in late-afternoon gold. My eyes watered the longer I stared at the opening, at the silhouetted figures there.

“I don’t know who the hell you are—” I called out to them.

I was cut off by the clang of metal striking metal, and a sinister hiss. Gas billowed around us, choking the small space. The door slammed shut again, a heavy lock rammed into place. The air turned sour, chemical.

“Shit,” the boy said, his words slurring. “Don’t breathe. Try not to—”

My thoughts slowed as the sensation of spinning returned. The darkness was a whirlpool that came on too quickly for me to feel afraid, or wonder if I’d ever wake up again.

“Your name,” I gasped out. “What’s your name?”

I fought against the pull of unconsciousness, bucking up against the restraints. It wasn’t right, none of this was right—I couldn’t go without knowing—

A single word reached me before the world dissolved into darkness: “Roman.”

SIX

THE NEXT TIME I SURFACED, IT WAS TO THE SOUND OF wheels against highway, muffled voices, and the loud, wet breathing of a man hovering above me.

I was flat on my back again, the thick heat baking me from all sides. The stench of hot rubber was everywhere. I was being steamed alive in my own sweat.

“Shit,” came a grumbling voice. “Fucking light . . .”

A joint cracked as the man rose, stepping on my shin as he moved away.

I fought to stay awake. To take in what was around me before unconsciousness crept up and pulled me back under.

The space was pitch-black, save for the narrow light attached to the top of the man’s helmet. He wore the same black uniform as the ones who had grabbed us, but his skin was as white as a ghost’s in the dark. His form took on an unnatural sheen—it was like searching the shadows of a lucid dream. The haziness of my vision made me uncertain if he was really hanging a bag of yellow liquid up beside me, or if it was a hallucination.

It wasn't.

The light on his helmet sputtered. He knocked a fist hard against it, letting its full glow sweep down over Roman's sleeping form. He used his boot to roll him off his back and onto his right side, facing away from me. Save for his shallow breathing, Roman didn't move, not even as the man knelt behind him, fussing with the bag . . . the . . .

My mind struggled for the word.

Roman's hands were bound together behind his back with a black zip tie. I couldn't see them, but I assumed his feet were secured with a few more. My own ankles rubbed together uncomfortably, and there was a bite from something hard digging into my skin there.

As the man looked up and shone the light on it, I could see liquid drip down from the bag and glide through the thin tube that connected it to Roman. The needle in his forearm was secured with a heavy bandage of tape.

But . . . I squinted, waiting for the splotches of black to clear from my vision again. His and Priyanka's IV bags were hung awkwardly from the straps on the ceiling, ones probably meant to secure shipments.

My own arm began to hurt in the same spot. There was a new, unrelenting pressure where a needle had been slipped beneath the thin layer of skin. A clear tube connected it to an IV bag on a metal stand. The first few drips of the same yellow liquid slid down the line toward my arm.

Spots of every color floated in front of my eyes, but the fresh surge of dread pushed back against the coaxing of whatever drug this was. My hands filled with hot sand as I tried to move them.

I couldn't. My wrists were locked together. Not with zip ties, but actual handcuffs, lined with rubber. Sweat poured down over my forehead, my throat, my chest.

The drug left a rancid taste in my mouth as it seeped into my body. Within the space of two heartbeats, it became harder to focus on the sight of the man hovering over Roman. But when his back was finally to me, I turned my head toward the IV line, taking it between my teeth and yanking—*hard*.

The long needle pulled partway out of the vein. The tape hissed as the edge lifted off my skin.

I tensed, my hands curling into claws. Watching the man's back. Waiting.

He didn't turn around. He coughed without covering his mouth, smearing sweat and snot against the sleeve of his black shirt. My ears filled with static as I took the plastic tube between my teeth again. I didn't look away from him, even as my heart began to bang in warning.

The tape gave way, lifting enough for the needle to slip out. The drug spilled over my wrist and the back of my hand, dripping onto the rubber mat beneath me.

The man rose again, pulling a cell phone from his pocket. He tapped out a message. Its screen cast a faint blue light on his face. That, combined with the glow from his helmet, was enough to confirm what I already suspected.

It was a semitruck of some kind. Every inch of it, from the inside of the door, to the ground, to the walls, was covered in old tires, cut open and melted together again in a tarry black quilt.

Thoughts were sharpening in my mind again, fragments piecing themselves together. I looked to the IV stand over me, then toward the haphazard way the others had been strung up.

Our suspicions had been right. *They were only after me.*

The boy was a Yellow, too, wasn't he? I'd seen his button, and I assumed the kidnappers had as well. But I was the only one in proper handcuffs, lined with rubber. The girl was a Green, considered relatively harmless by most of the population, but her hands had been bound in front of her, and her ankles were locked together with zip ties of her own. If they were only ever after me, why hadn't they just killed the others—witnesses—outright?

One possible answer was leverage. What was better than one hostage? Three of them. They could kill one or both of the others as a sign to show how serious they were about doing the same to me.

But there was this instinctive feeling I had about Roman and Priyanka that I just couldn't shake. It had seared through me like an electric current from the second I saw Roman fire that first shot, and it hadn't disappeared since.

I hated feeling suspicious of Psi who needed help; it made me more nauseous than the sedatives. If I questioned the motives of every stranger in a terrifying situation, I would never have opened the van door for Ruby all those years ago.

But the attackers, these two Psi, the men who had us now . . . Everyone in this situation was too well trained. No one shot like Roman did without hours of practice and instruction. No one fought with the confidence of Priyanka without having done it before.

Maybe they were part of this after all. I wanted to believe that all Psi were on each other's sides, but I wasn't stupid. There was the rumored nihilistic Psion Ring group, for one thing, constantly floating threats that undermined the work the Psi Council was doing. Or, the kidnappers could have hired these two to act

as bait, knowing I'd be more likely to accept another kid's help. If that was the case, they'd done their job well.

But . . . they were tied up and drugged, too.

As Vida always said, the best way through bullshit was to wade in, hold your nose with one hand and a grenade in the other, and cut straight through it. Right now, I needed to eliminate the immediate threat and then wake up the others for answers. As the only one of us currently conscious, it fell on me to figure out exactly how to do that.

“Changing the Op—” The man stuffed his phone back into a leather pouch on his belt and took two swaying steps toward the wall that aligned with the truck's cab. He pounded on it. “You see that shit? Why the fuck should we take them there? The zone crossing is going to be a goddamn nightmare as it is.”

I couldn't make out the muffled reply, only that there were two distinct male voices.

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered. His helmet light flickered as he swept it over us again, this time pivoting toward Priyanka, to my left. The IV bag above her was empty, sucking into itself as if wanting more.

The truck vibrated beneath me. I closed my eyes as he passed by. Priyanka's right leg shifted against my left as the man reached down and took her chin between his gloved hand, squeezing the soft skin of her cheeks. He stared into her face, bringing it close to his masked lips. He *tsked* at her, giving a mocking little coo.

Every inch of me went cold with fury. My fingers curled against the cuffs as I tried to slide my right hand free without making a big enough movement for him to notice. There was a gun at his hip and a knife in a holster at the other—but there was

also the White Noise device on his utility belt and a smartphone in his pocket. And, if my senses were correct, a comm in his ear.

With a hiss, he shoved Priyanka's face away, letting her head slam back against the rubber mat on the ground. My top lip pulled back in a sneer as his gaze lingered a second too long at the spot where her dress had ridden up to her thighs.

Oh, so it was like that, was it? He was *that* brand of bastard.

I felt wild with the thoughts careening through my head. They urged me forward, cutting through to a part of me I didn't recognize. Here in the dark, I could be someone else. Someone who didn't stand in front of audiences, perfectly coifed, smiling, smiling, smiling no matter what the world threw in her face. There were no cameras. There were no protocols.

There was only escape. Survival.

The man turned, kicking Priyanka's leg aside to go for a small cooler near the door.

"You're lucky he didn't tell us to break your legs to keep you from running," he told her casually, the way someone would report the weather. *Cloudy, with a chance of agony.* "I argued for it, of course." He flipped the lid open, letting the flickering light on his helmet illuminate the bag of yellow liquid he pulled from the cooler. The light shifted, exposing her again to his gaze. "I would have taken special pleasure in smashing one bone at a time, starting with your hips."

I knew the drug was fading from my system by how fast the words jumped to my tongue. How clear they were, despite the dry ache in my throat. "You like leering at unconscious girls, do you?"

The bag of fluid jumped from his hand, slapping against the rubber mat. The truck's engine roared as it picked up speed. I felt

the flare of its electric current as it flowed through the body of the truck, but I couldn't tap into it. Not with the layers of rubber insulation between it and me.

The man's light landed on the wet spot the drug had left on my side.

"You sneaky little bitch," he said in disbelief.

"Call me a bitch again and I'll show you how hard I bite," I said.

"That's some mouth you got on you," he said. "I've a mind to put it to good use, freak or not. Maybe I'll keep you awake, just to hear you scream."

He laughed, and that shadow that lived in me, that small, dark corner of my heart that made me feel so ashamed when it demanded *more*, began to shift inside me. To rise.

How many people have to die because of you, before you'll do something?

I stopped thinking. I shut down the carefully conditioned serenity. I let Mel and all of her lessons be carried out of my mind on a wave of anger.

Then I started to laugh, too.

The sound was haunted, ragged. The man sucked in a sharp breath as it reached him.

"Stop it," he barked, lurching over to me. His light washed out my vision, but I refused to shut my eyes to escape it. He stepped onto my ankle, and I had to bite back a cry of pain as he leaned his full weight on it. A dare, a threat.

"I think it's funny, too," I told him. "Really, truly funny how much your friends up there must hate you."

He was close enough for me to see his eyes shift, to confirm

what I'd suspected: they thought the drugs would be enough. That the handcuffs would take care of the rest.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded.

"They trapped you in here with me, didn't they?" I said. The cut opened on my lip as I smiled.

"Shut the fuck up," he growled, storming over to the back of the truck to retrieve the drugs. At the force of his words, Priyanka began to stir again, her bag still empty, waiting to be changed. "I can't kill you, but I can use these last hours to create your perfect hell. So try me, you freak bitch."

"What did I say about that word?" I asked.

I felt for the charge of his ear comm and seized it. Even with a throbbing head, it took only a second of focus to pulse it, to fry the small circuitry inside its plastic shell.

"Fuck!" he screamed, clawing at his ear. A thread of smoke wove between his fingers as he tried to yank it out.

"They lined everything with rubber to protect themselves and the truck. But they didn't even tell you to leave your electronics with them." I lifted my cuffed wrists. "They made you think I had to actually touch you in order to hurt you, didn't they?"

His free hand went for his belt, to the White Noise device.

It was nearly impossible to explain what I could do to anyone who hadn't experienced it themselves. Most of the time, it was important to pretend that I didn't have the power at all; that I couldn't hear the song of electronics buzzing and vibrating against my senses, or feel the buried electrical lines growling beneath my feet.

It was frightening—it had always been, from the time I was a child. The vastness of that power. The innate charge inside my

mind only ever wanted to connect, to join and complete those nearby circuits.

I reached out for the batteries. They reached out to me.

The device exploded in his hand. A hot shard of plastic landed on my shin as he fell back, stunned by the sound, the pain. But I wasn't finished, not until I had the battery of his phone in my mind's grasp.

"Say you're sorry," I rasped out.

"You . . . *bitch!*"

The battery exploded inside his uniform pocket. The fire caught on his black pants, traveled up his side, to his neck, to his face, to his helmet. He screamed so violently, falling to the ground to try to roll the flames away, I was shocked the others didn't stop the truck. The heat spread out through the rubber and melted it beneath him.

I sucked in a breath and sat up. The darkness pushed toward me from all sides, coated in smoke. I forced myself to stay upright, to watch.

The man writhed and groaned, trying to drag himself to the door. He was within arm's reach of it when his body gave one final tremor and collapsed. The fire burned until it couldn't, trailing out in thin, glowing veins across the rubber mat. As the last flame went out, the only thing left to me was darkness—darkness, and the sound of the wheels against the road, keeping time with my own driving heartbeat.

SEVEN

“HOLY . . . SHIT . . .”

I jumped at the sound of Priyanka’s voice.

The girl turned slightly to the side, jolting as the dry IV line tugged back at her. She jerked her bound hands forward, ripping the empty bag from its strap.

“Here, let me do it,” I said. Easier said than done. My ankles were locked together by loops of zip ties. I had just enough range of movement to get my knees under me and inch over to her.

The chain linking my handcuffs clicked and strained as I pulled off her tape in one go, ignoring her sharp “Shit, ow!”

“That’s what hurts?” I said in disbelief. The man’s helmet light was still glowing against the wall beside her. I’d made sure not to fry the device, thinking we might need to use it. Now it only illuminated her collection of cuts and bruises. Seeing them seemed to wake up my body to the reality of my own injuries. For a second, the pain took my breath away.

I shook my head, trying to clear the throbbing as I removed the IV line from Roman’s arm.

“I’m adding it to my list of complaints,” she muttered.

Roman let out a soft sigh as the needle slipped free, but he didn't immediately rouse like I'd hoped.

I tugged down the bag of yellow fluid, turning it toward the helmet's light to try to find some kind of label. About a quarter of it was gone. It looked like he'd gotten a higher dose than both Priyanka and I had, and I didn't know how long he'd be out, or if we'd have to try to break out of the truck without him.

It would be easier. I couldn't stop the thought from welling up in my mind. One less person to potentially have to run from. One less reason to question my gut.

But also one less person to fight off the people who had taken us.

I released a hard breath. Who was I kidding—I was never going to leave either of them behind to the mercy of these people. For one thing, I wouldn't be able to look myself in the eye again. If there was even the slightest chance they were innocent bystanders, then I was going to give them the exact same chance I had to get out of here.

"Where the hell are we?" Priyanka asked, the words slightly slurred.

The thick curtain of her wavy black hair fell over her shoulder as she propped herself up on her elbow and, finally, pushed herself fully upright. The drug was clearly still working its way through her system; she had that slightly glassy look of someone whose brain was caught up in a fog. Which meant that I had an opportunity.

In another time, and in a very different world, I would have felt guilty for trying it, but this was life or death. And I was going to make it out of this truck alive no matter what.

“I’m a little more concerned about who took us,” I said evenly. “Did you recognize any of them?”

“Why are you asking me that?” she said, reaching her bound hands up to touch a spot on her cheek where a new bruise was forming. It was the size of a fingerprint. “Shouldn’t you have some sort of catalog of bad guys we can work through? Who are the idiots who are always out screaming on highways and at speeches with signs?”

“You mean Liberty Watch?” I said.

“If they’re the ones who think that you Psi should make up some sacrificial army, then yeah, Liberty Watch.”

Ice prickled down the length of my spine.

“*You Psi?*” I don’t know how I managed to get the words out. I don’t know how I managed to smile when panic’s numbing fingers were stroking my face. “How hard was that hit you took?”

A heartbeat of silence passed between us before Priyanka reached up and pressed a hand to her face. “Yeah. Wow. My mind is a mess right now . . . I’m—” She sucked in a breath through her nose, glancing down at Roman. “I’m . . . I’m one of those . . . a prodigy.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh . . . a Green? Whatever the government has decided the ‘correct’ label is,” she said.

None of this felt right. None of this. Were they not even Psi? I hadn’t seen them use their abilities—they looked young, but so did plenty of adults who weren’t affected by IAAN.

Do something, I thought, feeling my handcuffs’ lock again. *Don’t let them get free before you do.*

I leaned forward, bracing the bottoms of my palms against

the ground, crawling forward, toward the dead man. Priyanka's gaze was almost suffocating as she watched me. My breath caught with the effort it took not to turn and meet it head-on.

Keys—I needed the keys to the handcuffs. I felt across the man's charred chest for anything that might have once been a pocket. The smell of burned hair and skin made me gag until I finally had to hold my breath. The utility belt around his waist was in better shape, but the few pouches attached to it either had cigarettes stashed inside, or were empty.

What I was doing was horrifying, but my mind had switched back into survival mode. The only thing I could really focus on right now was getting out of this truck and staying alive.

If the handcuff keys had been on him, they'd either melted or had been thrown off him as the man had tried to save himself. The better bet was that they were with one of the soldiers up front.

"It's bad enough that we have to announce our abilities with those hideous buttons, but why do we have to use the labels they gave us?" Priyanka asked. "Why did you government-Psi types keep *that*?"

My fingers trembled as they brushed the hilt of the small knife attached to the man's utility belt. This could work. I just needed to wedge the blade between the small links and use enough force to break one of them.

My eyes fell upon the gun at his side, and when I finally glanced back at Priyanka, she was looking at it, too.

Then her dark eyes shifted, meeting mine.

Shit, I thought, my fingers tightening around the hilt of the knife as I pulled it from his belt. *Say something, say anything* . . .

But it was Priyanka who broke the silence. She clucked her tongue, her smile too easy to be completely natural. "What

a shock, no response. Did your speechwriter not give you any canned one-liners to use?"

I knew a lot of Psi didn't necessarily see the point of the work we were doing with Cruz and the interim Congress—but they also didn't see half of what we were up against. It was always easier to be cynical than actually roll up your sleeves to help.

"Well, you're clearly not a fan of my work," I said, keeping my voice neutral. "But I guess that makes sense. Roman already told me you weren't really there for the speech."

That was a lie, but her lips parted in surprise all the same.

Dread braided with disappointment, until I could no longer tell one feeling apart from the other.

I wanted to be wrong.

I wanted to believe them.

It was like I could see the flurry of thoughts and excuses moving behind her dark eyes as she flicked away each option, searching for a best one. She finally settled on the one I expected: outright denial. "Clearly his brain was fogged by whatever drug they pumped into his system. We were there because we had to be, as members of the new class."

It was tempting to keep digging, especially as the lies began stacking up like a house of cards. But one wrong move on my part, however slight, could send everything crashing down on me, escalating an already dangerous situation. A little suspicion would read as normal, but if Roman and Priyanka did have something else planned for me, pushing them too hard for answers would only make them close ranks and shut down.

I had exactly one guaranteed way of making it out of here and contacting DC: alone.

"Good point. He could have just misheard me, too," I said.

“Your families must be worried sick about you. Did you see if they were hurt? As soon as we’re out of here, we’ll find a phone for you to call them.”

Or we’d see if they made an excuse not to. Or pretended to put a call through.

“Ouch with that assumption,” Priyanka said. “Roman is my only family, and vice versa.”

Shit. The forced lightness of those words pinged against my mind as truth. Shame burned in my throat. I shouldn’t have brought families into this. God knew I didn’t ever want to talk about mine.

“Sorry,” I said with weak smile. “I’m a bit on edge. To answer your earlier question, though, I have no idea what group they could be. Antigovernment, anti-Psi, the Psion Ring . . .”

Priyanka held out her hands for me to cut the zip ties there, the rigid lines of her posture finally relaxing. I cut the ties binding my ankles together before taking care of hers. By the time her hands fell back into her lap, her expression was no longer shuttered; she lost that defensive glint in her eye, and, for a fraction of a second, her lips traced out a faint smile. There and gone.

But I saw it.

Who are you? I fought to keep my face blank, even as the hair stood up on the back of my neck. *Who the hell are you?*

“Well, you can cross the Psion Ring off that list,” Priyanka said. “It wasn’t them.”

“How can you be sure?” I asked.

The group was like a ghost; they had countless agencies trying to track them and reports of violence done in their name, but they’d never stepped out of the shadows. Many people assumed that they were some remnant from the Children’s League, but

everyone affiliated with the League was accounted for, and most had moved directly into government work.

“Because,” Priyanka said, “we used to work with them.”

The truck swayed as it hit a bad patch of road. I stared at her.

“Oh, come on. I saw the expression on your face when you watched Roman take those guys out,” she said, looking down at him. “You’re not stupid, and you have a working set of eyes. It’s obvious we’ve had some kind of tactical training. I’m surprised you didn’t put it together yourself.”

Her tone was so baiting, I felt my temper rise and had to take a breath.

“I didn’t think the Psion Ring actually existed,” I told her. *And where’s your proof?*

“Well, that would be because the *whole point* is to operate under the radar and covertly push for the things no one in the government is willing to give us,” Priyanka said, swaying with the movement of the truck. “More importantly, it’s Psi-only.”

Clever. I pushed back the strands of hair glued to my face, considering it. She’d picked the one group the government, myself included, knew next to nothing about. I’d hated the idea of the Psion Ring from the moment I’d heard about it. The last thing the Psi needed was a rogue element causing chaos.

“So you were there to do . . . what? Report back on what I said?”

“We were there for a fresh start,” she said, her voice taking on an edge. “To try to get our lives straight again after leaving an organization that got to be too much. Too violent. They were broadcasting your speech, remember? What information would I be gathering that I couldn’t get by sitting in my dorm room and turning on the TV?”

I could think of any number of things, actually. Security protocols, identifying the car we'd used, studying Mel or the agents and analyzing potential threats.

"At least then I could have been lying on my bed, eating Pop-Tarts," she said. "Do you think we wanted to be there listening to you tell us what the government was going to take away from us next? It was a mandatory event. They all but dragged us out of the dorms."

If there was one thing I'd learned about liars, it was this: they gave you way too many details. The Pop-Tarts were a nice touch, but she wasn't the only one who could spin a detailed cover story out of nothing.

"Well, sorry to disturb your busy day," I said. "Those dorm rooms were nice. Southgate, right? I got a tour from the dean right before my speech. That's where they finally found the missing mascot head, right?"

Lie, lie, lie. Southgate wasn't the one dorm they'd reopened—it wasn't even a dorm at all. As far as I knew, the mascot's head had never gone missing, either.

There was a silence that stretched a second too long before Priyanka looked me in the eye and said, smoothly, "Yeah. They found it in the oven of the third-floor kitchen."

Liar.

It should have filled me with some small feeling of victory, but it only set my nerves ablaze. My skin felt like it was slowly being cut away the longer she stared back at me, as if daring me to call her out. To see what would happen when I did.

My grip on the knife was slick with sweat. I tightened my grip on it again, drawing it closer to my body.

"I'm glad you got out. Of the Psion Ring, I mean," I said. "I'm

a little surprised that a group that basically sounds like a terrorist organization simply let you go, considering the secrecy surrounding it.”

“We had to fake our own deaths to get out,” she said sharply. “And go ahead, call them what you want. At least they’re trying to do work on behalf of the Psi.”

“No, they’re ruining *our* work,” I said. “You can’t burn a house down when we’re all still inside it. You have to come in and sit down at the table if you’re going to create lasting change. The Psion Ring has only succeeded in scaring people, which makes the job of the good guys that much harder.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?” Priyanka said.

I didn’t want to fight with her about this, and I didn’t have to justify myself, either. I worked with the government because even with its flaws, it was still our best bet for protection and security.

I held up my cuffed hands, feeling strangely hollow as I forced myself to shrug.

Finally, Priyanka’s gaze fell back on Roman. She blew out a long sigh, then started again, her voice softer. “Look. While I will confess I am not unfamiliar with certain criminal elements in this country, these guys honestly just seemed like your run-of-the-mill, stereotypical bad guys. They were clearly trained, so maybe ex-military? Former PSFs hiring out their services to third parties? I mean, would it kill you to just . . . ?”

“What?” I prompted.

“My stupid, heroic Boy Scout of a best friend survived a bomb blast and still ran *toward* you, not because of who you were, but because he thought you needed help. And yet, it feels like you think we’re the bad guys,” Priyanka said. “Can we please just focus on getting out of here?”

An unwelcome flicker of guilt moved through me. The rawness of her voice had been . . .

I looked away. If it turned out this was all true, I could feel guilty and apologize later. For right now, I needed to smooth things over. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m just trying to make sense of what happened.”

“What’s . . . happening . . . ?” a soft voice interrupted. Then, stronger, “Priya?”

Both of us startled as Roman rolled onto his back. He blinked fiercely in the dim light.

“I’m here,” she said as she leaned over him. “You okay, bud?”

Moving slow, dragging himself out of the pull of the drug, Roman tried to get his feet flat on the ground. The zip tie restraints around his ankles locked up where they were looped through the ones binding his wrists behind his back.

That one small tug of resistance was enough to send a shock through his whole body. Roman jerked, turning back onto his side with a thin sound of panic.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” Priyanka’s voice rose as he continued to struggle against the restraints. “Roman, just wait. Don’t do it—don’t you dare—”

Roman’s body contorted into an agonized pose, his shoulders hunching forward, the muscles of his back and arms straining—

“I’m not popping it back in again!” Priyanka said. “Don’t—”

There was a sickening, wet *pop* as the zip tie that had locked his hands behind his back snapped, and his left shoulder dislocated.

I reared back at the horrifying sound. *What the hell?*

Priyanka gagged. “Jesus! Will you stop hulking out on me?”

Roman struggled to sit up, keeping one hand pressed against his shoulder.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Priyanka said. “You’re not going to do it right—let me—”

She braced one hand against his shoulder and set her jaw. I had a half second to look away before she realigned it. The only noise from Roman was a grunt of pain, and then a long sigh.

“What? You’re not going to chew through the ankle restraints?” Priyanka groused, watching him examine them. The truck swerved right, rocking all three of us. “Or are you done showing off?”

He looked down at the zip ties, cocking his head to the side. Considering.

“I . . .” I began, awkwardly holding up the blade. “Knife?”

“The man didn’t say anything about who they are or where we’re going?”

Roman’s dark head was bent over my handcuffs as he turned my wrists this way and that. His touch was soft, and it confused me, just for a second, into forgetting that his palms and fingers were covered in calluses, the kind that come from handling many weapons over many years.

I hadn’t noticed before, but the back of his right hand was covered in a web of dark scars. It looked beyond painful; I turned his hand slightly to get a better look, but Roman immediately tugged it back.

“Sorry,” I murmured. What could have caused something like that? Fire?

Roman kept his face turned down, even as he returned his hand to the cuffs.

“It was a stupid thing I did,” he explained quietly. “My fault.”

When I didn’t respond, he looked up at me through the strands of his tousled hair, bright eyes rimmed with full lashes. Even if his face betrayed no hints to his thoughts, those eyes had currents of emotion in their depths. The danger was that they kept drawing me in, even as my head was telling me to look away.

Eyes of a poet, hands of a killer.

Who the hell are you?

“We really owe you,” he said, nodding toward the dead man. “He must have had no idea what hit him.”

In the moment, it had felt like I had no other option but to attack the man, but now I wondered if I’d made a mistake in revealing what I could do. “He deserved it.”

My skin heated under the scrutiny of Roman’s gaze, but my head was a mess. He looked at me the way he did when he helped me out of the wreckage from the bombing. It was a potent combination of relief and gratitude, and I didn’t understand it.

Distance, I reminded myself.

I pulled my hands back, straightening the best I could. “Anyway, the only thing I got from him is that they changed the Op in some way. He did mention we still have hours ahead on the drive.”

I tried not to think about the context in which that little piece of information had come up.

“Op.” Priyanka snickered, repeating the word. “Op.”

“What’s your problem?” I snapped.

“I need you to stay very still for just a second,” Roman interrupted, his voice as quiet and steady as the stretch of road beneath us. “I can’t get the cuffs off without a key, but this should give you a better range of motion.”

He brought up the tip of the knife, wedging it between two of the narrow links connecting the cuffs. If he could keep his hands steady in this situation, even with the swaying of the truck, I sure as hell wasn't going to let mine shake.

"It's just funny to hear you say that," Priyanka said, pitching her voice up higher. "*Op.*"

The metal links split and my wrists fell away from each other.

"You find yourself in handcuffs often?" I asked Roman, rubbing at the metal rings still circling my wrists.

He looked down at the knife's blade, clearly trying to decide how to answer. "Are we still trying to relieve stress?"

My nerves were sparking, flaring hot and fast with no sign of burning out. So, yes.

Priyanka held up her hands. "Could we now turn our attention back to the situation at hand? How many people do we think are in the cab of the truck?"

"I heard two voices respond to the guy back here," I said, crossing my arms over my stomach.

Priyanka rose to her full, impressive height, knocking into one of the empty racks that lined the roof of the truck. "*Ou, dammit.* All right, then, spark plug," she said, her hand rubbing her head. "You're up. Can you stall the truck?"

"What did you just call me?" I asked.

Roman sighed, giving Priyanka a look. "She means that you're classified Yellow. A surge of power could stop the truck's engine, right?"

I nodded. "But if they've insulated the cab, too, it's going to be a problem for us."

Roman's mouth flattened for a moment, his brows drawing down in thought.

“You’re a Yellow too, right?” I pressed. “I didn’t imagine your button?”

In spite of everything, including my fears about them, it would almost be reassuring to have another Psi like me here. It would help explain why I felt a small instinctive tug toward him, even now. Yellow-classified Psi could connect to each other as they felt out the same electrical currents—one flicker of power brushing up against another.

Some days, that passing sensation felt like the only reassurance that I wasn’t alone.

“You didn’t imagine it,” he said. “But you have the better control by far, and I don’t know how useful I’ll be. How do you want to play this?”

I rubbed at my face, thinking. Control would be key here. It meant the difference between stopping the engine and exploding it, which could kill all of us. “I can take care of the engine. It’s going to come down to using the element of surprise. One of you can get the door open; the other is going to need to be ready to fire at any of the soldiers who come back to investigate.”

Roman nodded, his gaze sharpening with focus. “I’ll take care of them before they can get out of the cab. Priya will get the door open. Does that work for everyone?”

I was surprised when Roman flipped the knife in his hand, catching it by the tip and passing the handle over to me. I took it, swaying with the movement of the truck, and realized a second too late he’d only done it so he’d have both hands free to take the utility belt off the dead man.

Including the gun.

Shit. Why hadn’t I grabbed it the second he’d freed my hands?

“Could I *possibly* do more than get a door open?” Priyanka

said. “Just so I don’t, you know, fall asleep waiting for you guys to save us?”

Roman cast an anxious look in her direction. “It’ll be enough for now. Don’t rush the horses.”

Priyanka gave him a look. He let out a sound of exasperation. “What is it in English?” he asked.

“Don’t be in such a rush,” she said. “Or hold your horses. I like that one, though. A point to Mother Russia.”

I’d been right. English wasn’t his first language.

He nodded. “I just mean that it’s better to be careful and not overdo it if we don’t have to.”

“Okay, but counterpoint: Is it even possible to ‘overdo it’ with assholes like these?” Priyanka asked. “Can’t we also use the opportunity to send a message straight up to the top? To whoever might be running this show?”

“We just need to get out of here alive.” His tone had a note of pleading.

“And find out who’s responsible for grabbing us,” I added, watching them both for their reactions. Their expressions betrayed nothing.

“I hate it when you use that earnest look.” Priyanka blew out a frustrated sound. “It always makes me feel like I’m about to tell you that your puppy got hit by a car.”

“Priya.”

“All right,” she relented. “I’ll get the door open—but I want the knife when she’s done with it.”

My heart gave another hard kick. I tightened my grip on the hilt. “Wait—”

“God, what’s the problem now?” Priyanka demanded.

Everything, I thought. It would leave me without a weapon,

but I was never defenseless. I had my power. “Nothing. Never mind.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Roman shift toward the front of the truck. I turned to find him staring down at the gun in his hand, a pensive look on his face.

As if feeling my gaze, Roman looked up, and I quickly knelt on the rubber mat. Pressing the blade of the knife to it, I sawed at the heavy material until it broke through and clinked against the metal truck bed below.

The engine’s power surged across my senses, the voltage registering like lightning in my blood.

Roman checked the cartridge of the gun, his frown deepening.

“How many shots do you have?” Priyanka asked.

“Three.” He moved past me to press his ear up against the wall dividing us from the cab. “You’re sure you heard two voices?”

It was my turn to give a bad answer. “He asked a question and two voices responded. That’s all I’ve got.”

Roman nodded.

“Ready?” I asked.

He took the knife from me and cut a section of rubber away from the wall.

Get out, find some kind of ID on these people, get away. With that last thought, I let my mind connect with the engine. Its knot of electricity was so powerful, it burned away the rest of the world.

I grounded myself on the rubber mat. “All set here. Can we get this show on the road?”

“All right,” he said. “Once we’re out, head west. Don’t stop running for anything.”

“And if we get separated?” Priyanka prompted.

“Like hell we will” was his only reply.

“Stay on the mats,” I told her. “Just in case.”

Priyanka gave me a bland look as she stepped over the man’s body to take the knife from Roman.

The image of the Defender, his whole body seizing as I sent the charge toward him, flashed behind my closed eyelids.

“Just in case,” I repeated, when I realized the others were waiting. My fingertips pressed into the ridged floor, searching for that powerful connection again. “Tell me when. . . .”

Priyanka positioned herself at the door, the soldier’s knife in one hand, the other on the latch to the truck’s gate. At the edge of my vision, I saw her nod.

Roman waited a beat longer before shouting, “*Now!*”

I fell into the blinding-white power that flooded through my mind. I called it out, pulled up and up and up, feeding it back tenfold until the engine stalled out with a metallic bellow. The truck swung left, the wheels on the right side lifting off the road as the driver tried to regain control.

Roman braced his back against the side of the trailer and fired two shots into the wall that separated us from the cab.

The wheels locked, skidding in the opposite direction.

“*Holy sh—!*” Priyanka’s voice cut off as she was thrown against the door.

The world rocked up and down, around, around, around. I released my hold on the current, breaking it. The last of its power caressed my spine, purring against my senses.

With a bone-jarring finality, the truck slammed down on all four wheels and rolled forward slowly, coming to a stop. Roman raised his brows at me. I raised mine.

“Well, that was some demon’s idea of fun.” Priyanka shook

out her whole body, recovering enough to shove the truck's gate open. Dusky light poured in from behind her, revealing a landscape of flat green fields and little else. "Come on, before—"

I felt it a split second before the others did—the spark as the engine reignited. The truck suddenly shot forward, and Priyanka fell.

"No!"

Roman's shout was drowned out by the hail of bullets that tore through the wall separating the trailer from the cab. They pinged against the exposed metal, roaring as they shredded the rubber. The air filled with black and metal ribbons, the stench of hot rubber clogging the already thick air.

Priyanka had grabbed the metal edge of the trailer, her legs pumping under her, as if trying to run at the accelerating speed of the truck. With a gasp, she hauled her elbows onto the trailer's lip, one hand reaching for the door's strap. There was a scream of gears as the truck swerved hard to the left, knocking her back down.

Bullets whistled and banged around my head as I saw her pulled farther beneath the truck, until only her white-knuckled fingers were still visible.

Priyanka wasn't being dragged, I realized. She was using whatever strength she had left to hold her tall frame between the scalding hot metal of the axles and undercarriage and the bite of the road.

"Kill it!" Roman shouted, throwing himself flat on his stomach as the spray of bullets poured through the wall. He flipped over, trying to use the holes left behind to aim at the figure moving there, climbing over the two bodies between him and the wheel.

Three. There had been *three* of them, not two.

One more bullet.

“I can’t,” I called. “I’ll electrocute her, too!”

I crawled over to the edge of the truck. Priyanka had tucked her long legs up under the lip of it, bracing her feet against something I couldn’t see. Her hands and the top of her head were the only thing visible. The road streaked beneath her, ready to tear her apart.

Priyanka set her eyes on something past me, her face going blank. I was close enough to see her pupils flare as she took in her next gasp of exhaust and air. Her adrenaline must have been off the charts.

Sound exploded out from the cab of the truck and the relentless grind of the wheels slowed with a few sputters.

“Grab my hand!” I called, reaching out to her. “Priyanka!”

I wasn’t sure she even heard me. I barely heard myself over the road, the screaming radio from the cab, the thrum of blood in my ears.

“Priyanka!”

I reached for her hands just as she released her grip and the dark, tattered road snatched her.