

## Into The Fire, Book Two

### Prologue

MASE

JANUARY 5, 1AE

“I’m just sayin’ the General freaks me the fuck out, Mase, and...” Carter stopped talking—for once—as he shifted the beam of his flashlight to shine down the next aisle. “D’you hear that?”

Carter could be dense, but if he thought he heard something, there was something to be heard. Thanks to the Virus, the guy had the ears of a dog.

Mase lifted his left arm and made a fist, and the other two members of his fireteam froze behind him. Ahead, Carter stood, head cocked to the side. As one, they listened. Mase barely caught it—whimpering. After giving Carter a curt nod, he signaled for all three men to follow him, raised his M4, and crept closer to the noise.

Patrolling the supply warehouses had been their duty for over a month, ever since the Virus had wiped out almost everyone, and they’d yet to find an intruder. General Herodson’s standing order was that only select personnel could enter the warehouses to guard, inspect, and distribute food and other supplies. Unless Mase was grossly mistaken, they were the only patrol on duty at Warehouse F until the shift change at midnight, which was still hours away.

It looked like they’d found their first intruder.

As they crept down the aisle between two towering metal shelving units stuffed with pallets of shrink-wrapped supplies—paper towels, toilet paper, plastic cups—they swept each side with the lights attached to their rifles. Halfway down the aisle, huddled on the cold cement floor, was the intruder. The girl was hugging her knees and hiding her face like she was trying to disappear. Mase scowled.

Slowly, the girl raised her head, and when Mase saw her dirt-smudged face, his breath hitched. It couldn’t be her...not in the Colony. Her long, dark

hair was ratted and clumped, tear tracks trailed down her cheeks, and confusion filled her eyes. Mase knew they were hazel from memory, even if he couldn't see their color in the darkness.

“Stand down,” Mase said to the other soldiers before turning his attention to the young woman. “Camille? What are you doing here? Are you hurt?” His voice was always deep, gravelly, but concern or maybe fear made it even harsher. Hesitantly, he took a step closer to her.

Camille flinched, becoming an even tighter ball of folded limbs and tangled hair on the dirty cement floor.

For the first time in his two years as a Ranger, Mase regretted spending so much time lifting weights. She was afraid of him. But he knew her. He had to help her.

Clearing his throat, he put on what he hoped was a comforting smile and took another step closer.

“We won't hurt you,” he told the teenage girl as he knelt down in front of her. “I promise.” When he touched Camille's arm, she flinched again. “I promise we won't hurt you,” he repeated. Intruders were to be taken straight to headquarters—to General Herodson—but he couldn't do that. They tended to disappear after that. Of course, if the bastard found out Mase had disobeyed his orders, Mase would disappear himself . . . but it was Camille.

When she finally peered up at him, Mase did his best to look less intimidating by hunching his shoulders, hanging his head, not scowling. She watched him carefully, blank curiosity filling her face.

“What are you doing here, Camille?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She tried again. “Who—who is Camille?”

Surprised, Mase sat back on his heels and studied her. It is her, isn't it? She was older—more a woman than a child, unlike the last time he'd seen her. Camille was a few years younger than him, so now she had to be at least seventeen. She still looked like a perfect little doll, though. There was no question in Mase's mind that he was staring at the young woman he'd lived next door to nearly his entire life.

“You,” he said. “You're Camille. And I'm Mase.” He remembered the day her parents brought her home from the hospital...the afternoon she fell off her

bike and chipped her tooth on the sidewalk...the Valentine's Day she gave him a card made out of pink and purple construction paper...the day he taught her how to coast on his skateboard without falling...the night she ran away crying after meeting one of his girlfriends. But if Camille could remember any of that, she was hiding it well. She just stared, not responding, and began to shiver.

Mase heard his men whispering and shuffling around behind him. He ignored them. "It's okay, Camille," he said, doing his best to soften his voice. "We're friends. We were neighbors, remember? Back in Minneapolis? I used to look after you when your parents—"

The other men chuckled, Carter bursting into open laughter. Mase flipped them the bird over his shoulder. They only laughed harder.

"You..." Carter couldn't stop laughing. "You...you used to babysit?"

Rising, Mase spun and pointed threateningly at Carter. "Shut the fuck up." He glared at each of the men, warning clear in his eyes, until they quieted. "Nobody touches her. Nobody says a fucking word about this. Forget you ever saw her."

Their amusement vanished, and they stared back at him with identical expressions—fear mixed with pity and regret. They knew what had to be done.

"Mase," the nearest said. "We have to turn her in. The General's standing orders are to—"

"I know the orders," Mase snapped. "Fuck them. She's not going anywhere near Herodson. Forget. You. Ever. Saw. Her."

After a brief hesitation, all three men nodded.

Letting out a relieved breath, Mase turned back to Camille. She was watching him with eyes widened in interest, not fear. He knelt in front of her and explained, "It's not safe for you here. You're going to have to hide until I can get you registered as a Colonist."

Surprising him, Camille reached out and touched the side of his face with her fingertips, frowning when he flinched. "Where am I?" she whispered.

Mase glanced back at his men, silently warning them to keep their mouths shut. If Camille didn't have any memory of the Virus—of nearly everyone dying—he didn't want to be the one to tell her. At least not yet. "You're in the Colony. It used to be a military base. You'll be safe here as soon as I get

you registered.” He hesitated for a moment. “You have no idea how you got here?”

Quietly, Camille said, “No. I have no idea.” She studied him with eerily calm eyes.

A metallic bang stole Mase’s attention, and then the overhead lights flared to life. Someone else was in the warehouse. While the others stood nearby, rifles raised, Mase helped Camille hide between two pallets of paper towels. She was barely out of sight when the newcomers rounded the far end of the aisle. Mase’s stomach dropped when he saw him.

“Atwell! How is your patrol going this evening?” asked the man leading a dozen soldiers. Dressed in his usual officer finery, General Herodson strolled down the aisle toward Mase...toward Camille.

“Nothing unusual, Sir,” Mase reported, stepping away from Camille’s hiding place before the General was close enough to see her in the shadows.

General Herodson inspected Mase and his fireteam closely. “So it seems,” he said, giving Mase an instant feeling of holy-fucking-shit. Casually, the General glanced around, his gaze lingering near Camille’s hiding spot.

“How are the Ability transfers going?” Mase asked, hoping to distract him.

The General looked at him with cold, gray eyes.

Mase returned the man’s stare, refusing to look away. “Have there been any new developments? I know some of the men would like to get outfitted with regeneration or telekinesis.”

General Herodson bared his teeth in a smile. “Not yet, no. However, we have had an interesting breakthrough on another project. We’re calling them ‘Re-gens’—they’re reanimated corpses, more or less. They even retain their Abilities, though they’re altered somewhat from what they were during their first lives.” He paused, glancing up at the lights thoughtfully. “But the process wipes their minds completely clean, making them very easy to influence.” He rubbed his hands together briskly. “No need to deal with pesky memories or morals.”

Reanimated corpses. It took effort for Mase to keep his expression blank.

Abruptly, General Herodson said, “As you were,” and turned to leave.

Mase watched him walk away, reluctant to move. Why had the General told him about the Re-gens? Why had he come into the warehouse in the first place? Something wasn't right.

As they neared the end of the aisle, General Herodson and his guards halted. “CL-one,” the General called out as he turned to face Mase again. “Come here, CL-one.”

Shocking the shit out of Mase, Camille wriggled out from her hiding spot and hurried to General Herodson's side.

Mase clenched his jaw, realizing he'd just signed his own death warrant.

“CL-one is a particularly amazing Re-gen, don't you agree, Atwell? We just finished her the other day.” General Herodson watched Mase like he was gauging every minute change in his expression. Mase kept his face hard and cold, like the General's. “Take their weapons, my dear,” Herodson said to Camille.

Even at a distance, Mase could see the confusion on Camille's face. “Why, Father?” she asked softly.

The General stiffened. “Because I told you to, my dear,” he said with strained affection. “These men must be arrested and put on trial. They broke the law. My law.”

“Oh,” Camille said, sounding sad, or maybe confused. “What will happen to them after the trial?”

It seemed to take a conscious effort for General Herodson to suppress his simmering anger. The man hated being questioned. “The other three will be banished from the Colony,” he said through gritted teeth. “Atwell will be executed and turned into a Re-gen.”

“Okay,” she said, smiling contentedly. She took a deep breath, then shut her eyes. Her mouth thinned to a flat line.

As Mase looked from her to General Herodson, hatred flooded his veins, quickly followed by adrenaline. His muscles vibrated with the unnatural strength that had increased steadily over the past two years. He was the

strongest, fastest person he'd ever heard of—not that it would help him now. The General knew about his Ability. Mase figured that was probably the only reason he wanted to bring him back as a Re-gen: to be used...owned. Mase ground his teeth together and tried to think of a way out of this clusterfuck.

Suddenly, his M4 tugged out of his hands and floated upward. He tried to yank it back down, but it continued to float higher. Moving quickly, he untangled his arm from the rifle's strap before it forced him up onto his toes. From the sounds of his men cursing behind him, he knew they were being remotely disarmed as well. Mase watched as their weapons glided into the hands of the General's guards. His attention was drawn to Camille, who was still concentrating. She was doing it.

She opened her eyes and left the General's side, a coy smile curving her mouth. Mase watched her approach him, frozen in remorse at what he'd caused. His men wouldn't be "tossed out of the Colony"—they would be executed, regardless of what the General had claimed.

It felt like minutes, but finally Camille reached Mase. She caught his gaze, a spark of sharp intelligence lighting eyes that had once been hazel but were now gray. Almost inaudibly, she whispered, "Do not be afraid, Mase. I will take care of you, just like you used to take care of me. And with my friends, we will take care of Father."

Mase barely registered her robotic intonation. He couldn't believe what was about to happen. Soon, he would die, only to be brought back as something else. As someone else.

The reanimated young woman stood on tiptoes and lightly touched her lips to Mase's cheek. "My friends really do not like Father."

## Chapter 1

ZOE

March 14, 1AE

No! No! This can't be happening!

“Dani!” My voice carried throughout the eerily quiet field as I sprinted along the pasture fence, away from the barn and toward Dani’s bone-chilling scream. Jake was right behind me, the light from his flashlight dancing around my bare feet. Each breath was so loud, so raspy, it was like I could hear nothing else.

My mind started to feel odd, momentarily distracting me as I ran, but I ignored the feeling along with the frigid air biting at my skin and the jagged rocks poking the bottoms of my feet. My eyes blurred with unshed tears, and I stumbled over something, barely catching myself before colliding with the unyielding ground. I shook my head, trying to dispel the disorienting fog that was steadily creeping into my mind.

In the darkness a few yards ahead, I could see Jason’s shadowy form. His flashlight and gun were pointed in front of him as he swept into the forest with Jack, Dani’s German shepherd, leading the way.

I slowed, hesitating at the edge of the forest. Seeing Jason’s pistol raised scared the shit out of me. Did he find something? Who’s in there? What’s in there?

“D!” I cried out.

In an instant, a strong hand wrapped around my arm. I whipped my head around to face Jake. “What—”

“We have to be quiet, Zoe.” His voice was low and severe. He pointed into the woods, and I realized all I could hear was the sound of flapping wings and a hoot from an owl off in the distance. Jason wasn’t calling out for Dani; there were no voices.

I nodded, feeling stupid, but I still wanted to call for her. I needed her to

know that we were nearby...that we would find her. Why is this happening to us? Why can't we catch a goddamn break!

Turning back to the woods, I concentrated on controlling my breath and regaining some clarity. Why can't I focus? Sanchez, Harper, Chris, and Carlos passed me, bouncing flashlight beams lighting their way into the dense forest. I vaguely noticed Biggs, Ben, and Ky following them, Biggs muttering curses under his breath. My head started to throb under the massive influx of foreign emotions. I shuttered myself against the onslaught and rushed into the woods, hardly feeling the scraggly branches poking and scratching me.

"What was she even doing out here?" I rasped. I stopped inside the tree line, wishing I had been levelheaded enough to grab a flashlight and a pair of boots like everyone else.

Jake stopped beside me, but Cooper trotted passed us, his nose skimming the ground for a scent. He locked on to a trail and began to follow it. I heard a barrage of whispers around me before everyone broke off into groups, but I focused on the dogs; they were following two different scent trails.

After what felt like an hour of following, searching, and waiting for Jack or Cooper to find some sign of Dani, both dogs' trails converged at a narrow, jagged tree stump. Jack whined, and Cooper sniffed the pine needles around the base of the stump. The dogs had found something. Instinctively, my gut balled into a knot.

Ben, who was helping to keep his brother upright, began to say something. "I think—"

"Here," Harper said, aiming his flashlight at the exposed roots of the stump. Crouching, he shifted a fist-sized stone and picked something up.

Chris stepped up behind him and peered over his shoulder. "Jason," she said ominously, glancing at my brother.

He moved to her side, and hesitantly, I followed. I stopped almost instantly. Jason's dread washed over me, a wave of nausea making my insides lurch, and I had to close my mouth and hold my breath to avoid vomiting. Every hair on my body stood on end at the thought of what they'd found. "What is it?" I croaked. Please don't say a body part...

Stiffly, Jason squatted beside Harper, taking whatever Harper had found from his hand. A yellow piece of fabric?



“It’s just like the ones we saw back at Lewis-McChord,” Chris said quietly. Rising from his seated position next to Jason, Jack stretched out his neck to sniff the cloth and whined.

Chris glanced around at our confused faces and explained, “It’s an armband, or at least part of one. Some of the personnel were wearing these when they put our base on lock-down.” She shook her head. “We stole a few; it was the only way we could get off the base. The people wearing these”—she snatched the armband out of Jason’s hand and clenched it in her fist—“had something to do with the Virus.”

“I’ve seen those before too, on people from the Colony,” Jake said. He’d been trying to convince us that the supposed safe haven was dangerous since we first met up with him at Fort Knox. “It must’ve been them...”

An image of his sister’s dark hair and violet eyes flashed through my mind. He was remembering her. He was remembering the men who’d promised to help her, the men who had frightened her enough that she’d taken her own life before they could.

Everyone looked at Jake, including my dangerously quiet brother. “Why would they take Dani?” Jason asked as he rose and took a menacing step toward Jake. “How would they even know we’re here?”

I didn’t like Jason’s accusing tone, but Jake didn’t seem to notice. Never taking his eyes off the yellow armband, he answered, “I don’t know how they knew we were here, but if they wanted her bad enough to kidnap her...their resources are—were...” He paused. “It wouldn’t have been difficult for them to take her.” The images of his sister’s final breath played through his head...through mine. A gut-wrenching feeling of loss took root in the pit of my stomach.

“You seem to know a lot about them,” Jason probed, taking another step toward Jake. “Maybe you know more than you’re letting on. Maybe you—”

“You think I’d save Zoe’s life back at Fort Knox just to put her in danger again? You really are a piece of—” Jake inhaled and then emitted no further sounds, like he’d decided holding his breath for a while was the safer option. He was probably right.

He met Jason’s challenging stare a moment longer before turning his

angry gaze on me. “I warned you not to come here.” His words stung with truth.

“Then how the fuck did they find us?” Jason’s voice was damning, his glare focused solely on Jake. I didn’t like it and felt a sudden desire to punch my brother in the face.

“How the hell should I know?” Jake snapped. “We’ve been here over a month and nothing. You get here and now they know where we are.”

Jason made a noise that was part exhale, part growl. “How exactly do you know so much about them?”

“Because they tried to take my sister, and now she’s dead,” Jake replied hotly.

The two men were standing less than two feet apart, Jason’s rage barely contained. He didn’t lose control often, but when he did...I shuddered, recalling the worst of the fights between him and our dad. Jason cracked his knuckles, an ominous sign I was all too familiar with, and I feared my brother wouldn’t be able to rein in his temper.

I stepped between them. “It’s not Jake’s fault, Jason, so back off!”

My brother ignored me, instead turning his aggression on Chris. “Stay the fuck out of my head,” he ordered, obviously feeling her cerebral fingers trying to manipulate his mental state into something more stable.

Jake and Jason weren’t the only ones on edge. Biggs was worrying about Sarah and their unborn baby, and Ky was in pain, practically folding under the weight of our collective panic. Ky’s Ability to feel volatility—to sense and internalize everyone’s destructive emotions—was physically debilitating him. He reached for the flask in his pocket without a second thought. Abandoning Jason, Chris ran to Ky’s side.

The weight and amount of negativity Ky was picking up on frightened me; it was as if he wasn’t just sensing our group, but all of the fear and hostility surrounding us. From Cañon City? From the Colony? Like Ky, I was pulled in all directions by the mounting unease and fear of everyone around us, as though I were being emotionally drawn and quartered. I wanted to scream.

The looming fog seemed to thicken in my brain, tangling with the barrage of emotions. What the hell’s going on? I searched my convoluted mind for something I could grasp on to—something other than anger and fear and resentment. I’d been so fucking naïve to think everything would be okay once

we found each other. Keep it together, Zoe, Dani needs you.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the forest—the sharp smell of pine needles, damp soil, and wood. The fog continued to spread its tendrils through my mind in a horrifyingly familiar way. I felt trapped in my own head, unable to escape the encroaching numbness. The only other time I'd felt such an overwhelming loss of mental control was when my mind had been invaded by Crazies in the hospital back at Fort Knox. What if we're wrong? What if it isn't the Colony?

Feeling a sudden jolt of panic, I opened my eyes. I could see the lichen coating the tree trunks in the dim moonlight, like spots on a leopard. But there were no snarls or howls or voices beyond our group. There were no fiendish sounds of Crazies cackling in the distance. There were no signs giving me cause to think anyone was there at all.

But someone took Dani.

A bolt of anger shot through me, jostling me from my statue-like state. I took a step toward my brother. "What the hell was she doing out here, Jason?" He'd always been big, bad, protective Jason—so why had he let Dani go outside, alone, in the middle of the night?

In the faint moonlight dappling his face, I could barely make out the hard set of his features. "Peeing," he answered lamely.

"Peeing? Alone? In the woods?" My anger flared, fury consuming my disbelief and fear. "I can't believe you, Jason! I just got her back, and now you—"

"Fuck you!" He pointed at me in warning, his eyes glinting silver in the darkness. "She was just peeing," he muttered.

"I can't believe someone was just standing here," Biggs said and began pacing. "Were they just waiting for us this whole time? Sarah...the baby..." He looked up at Sanchez abruptly. "We need to get out of here," he said evenly. "It's not safe here anymore. We've—"

"Do what you want," Jason growled. "I'm going after Dani."

"You think you can just walk into the Colony and get her? We need a plan first," Jake said, facing Chris and Sanchez. "We need—"

"Need to what? To wait for them to hurt her? To do worse?" Jason's tone

was scathing as, once again, he took a step closer to Jake.

“Calm down, Jason.” I placed myself between them again. “We need to come up with a plan first. I mean, what if it’s Crazies and has nothing to do with the—”

“It’s not Crazies,” Jake and Jason said at the same time. They exchanged an irritated glance.

I rolled my eyes. “If it is the Colony, they’ll outnumber us and—”

“Then you stay here and plan,” Jason said with a smirk. “I’ll go find Dani.”

“Get over yourself already!” I seethed. “You think I’m not worried about her? Like I haven’t been waiting to see Dani for months? Like I haven’t been worrying about her since all this bullshit started? Like suddenly I don’t care about her anymore because you’re in the picture? She’s my best friend, remember? Or did you forget that, since everything’s always about you?” My voice was riddled with bitterness and jealousy, and my words were laden with twenty-six years’ worth of resentment.

To my surprise, Jason remained silent.

Sanchez cleared her throat. “Look,” she said deliberately. “If we want to find your friend, we need to be rational. So grow the fuck up and stop arguing, and then we can come up with a plan that won’t get us all killed.”

“We can’t do much else in the dark,” Harper said, his voice breaking through the tension. “The sun’ll be up in an hour or so, then we can continue searching for signs of what happened.”

“I’m not finished looking for her,” Jason muttered and turned toward his tent.

“I wasn’t implying that any of us were finished looking for her,” Harper clarified, but Jason continued stalking away. The rest of us dispersed, some making their way back to camp, but Jake, Harper, and I stopped at the edge of the forest, watching...thinking.

“Look how close they were to us,” I said with a shaky breath. I gauged the distance between where we stood and the barn. Although far away, I could see the dim embers of the night’s fire and the outline of the hay bales and chairs surrounding it. I watched the dark figures of my companions as they moved

around the camp. “We never even heard them.”

Suddenly, as if my skin had become animated, creeping over my bones and muscles, I shivered. The thought of never seeing Dani alive again after everything we’d been through—journeying across the country, surviving homicide attempts and Crazies—caused a rogue tear to roll down my cheek. Determination, Zoe, I told myself. I hurriedly wiped the tear away.

With my brother out of earshot, I turned to Harper. I recalled the fleeting look of unease that had flashed over his dark, handsome features when Dani had arrived the day before. Whatever he’d seen was startling enough to have made his green eyes flare with apprehension.

“You had a vision earlier...yesterday, when you were hugging Dani, didn’t you?” I knew I wasn’t going to like his reply the moment he closed his eyes in...regret?

Harper didn’t look at me when he spoke. “I saw her in darkness,” he said quietly. “I don’t know if she was sleeping or—”

“Unconscious,” I finished for him, refusing to hear him utter the word “dead.”

## Chapter 2

ZOE  
MARCH 15, 1AE

I sat on one of the hay bales arranged around the campfire and brushed off the bottoms of my feet to pull on my socks. My eyes drifted to Dani's cup from the night before, sitting on the makeshift table Jake had made. It still held about an inch of white wine. Then my gaze moved to the empty liquor bottles and red plastic cups stacked on the boulder a few feet away. The sight was enough to make me sick to my stomach all over again. I couldn't believe how stupid we'd been...how careless. We weren't safe, and we never had been.

Cooper licked the back of my hand, and I looked down. He was watching me with downtrodden eyes, his tail moving in a half wag. "Thank you for your help, Coop," I said, rubbing his velvety ears. I hadn't seen Jack in a while, but I assumed he was still in the tent with Jason.

"What if whoever took Dani is waiting for you guys in town?" Sarah said to Biggs as he, Harper, and Sanchez noisily readied our weapons behind me. "I mean—"

"They won't be, baby," Biggs said, trying to soothe her. "They have better things to do than wait around for the likes of us." His voice was cool and easy, and I wondered if Sarah believed him. I wanted to believe him.

I glanced over my shoulder in time to see Biggs give Sarah a kiss on the forehead. She smiled, rubbing her bulging belly anxiously. Their unborn child had grown so much in the past month that Sarah was limited to sweatpants and loose shirts, a look that was so out of character for the former fashionista, I almost smiled.

"Are we at least moving camp?" she asked him, practically pleading. "I mean, what if they come back and take someone else?"

"Dani might come back," I interjected before Biggs could formulate an answer. I knew he wanted to leave. "Besides, they could've hurt us last night if they really wanted to. They're not interested in the rest of us." At least, I

assumed they weren't.

Sarah tucked a strand of curly hair behind her ear and absentmindedly chewed on her fingernails—a new nervous habit she'd adopted within the last couple months since learning she was pregnant. Realizing I was watching her, she focused on me and lowered her hand from her mouth. "I guess that makes sense," she said and wrapped her arms around her belly. It was like she was protecting the rapidly growing fetus from the gloomy shadow that had settled over us all.

As Sarah retreated into the barn, an image of her house in St. Louis flashed through her mind, and I knew she was missing her home. She hadn't wanted to leave, but she'd done so for Biggs...for me. A fleeting pang of guilt gave me pause, but there was little I could do. I turned back around and picked up my right boot. Dani's out there somewhere, in the hands of...who knows. That was my focus.

Three miles to the east, Cañon City was the closest place to search for maps, plans, and anything else that could help us come up with a way to get Dani back. Jason didn't like waiting, but most of us agreed we needed to be strategic if we were going to have any chance of rescuing her. Assuming she's still alive.

"I think we should assume these 'Colony' people want something specific from Danielle," Grayson said, practically reading my mind. He sat on a hay bale on the other side of the dying fire. Although his face was grim and his weathered skin seemed particularly pinched around his eyes, his presence provided a sense of comfort. I couldn't quite pinpoint why. Maybe it was because Grayson reminded me of home, of my past.

I thought of my dad and Jason, of how they used to be, but that only conjured a mess of unsettling memories. I can't believe Dad's really gone. Then, I remembered the box Jason had brought from Bodega Bay—our dad's box. I glanced toward Jason's tent on the edge of the woods, assuming it was in there with him.

In my peripheral vision, I spotted Grayson watching me. I looked down at my boot instead of meeting his knowing, apologetic eyes. Satisfied that the laces were tied well enough, I pulled my pant leg down and raised my other foot to tie my left boot.

"They wouldn't have gone to all this trouble," Grayson continued, "just to

kill her, or—”

I swallowed another wave of nausea. Once the sun had risen, we'd searched the woods surrounding our camp for what felt like endless, heart-wrenching hours, only to be left with nothing but broken twigs indicating there'd been a struggle, the torn yellow armband, a cigarette butt, and five sets of boot prints, not including our own. We'd wasted the early hours of the morning getting nowhere. It was difficult to remain hopeful when I could feel everyone's concern and even some of their doubt.

I gathered my hair behind me and started weaving it into a French braid, wondering what was taking Jason so long to get ready.

“—saying. They knew what they were after, and they must have planned it ahead of time.” Grayson leaned forward to stoke the fire with a scrap of cardboard.

“If they were after her specifically,” Harper said, drawing my attention to him, “they must've known about her 'Ability'.” He was rifling through an ammo-filled duffel bag behind me. “It's the only thing that makes sense.”

“But what would they want with her Ability?” Carlos asked as he, too, joined us, donning his leather jacket. Though the sun was up, it was chilly. “A lot of you have an Ability, you know, so why take her instead of...” He shrugged.

Grayson nodded thoughtfully and scratched his brow. “True. There are other, more accessible victims they could've taken.” He glanced at Sarah as she waddled out of the barn, her cheeks packed with the last mouthful of her second breakfast.

Carlos tossed a piece of straw into the fire. “And...how'd they know about her? How'd they know anything about us?”

“Well, I suppose the first thing we need to consider is who, outside of us, knows anything about the people in our group.” Grayson reached behind him, pulling a couple saddlebags up into his lap, and he began packing them with water and granola bars.

Carlos crouched down near the fire, his eyes squinting from the brightness of the sun. “Hmmm...”

Sarah stopped at the edge of the campfire and tossed her paper napkin and plate into the pit. The flames grew. As I leaned in toward their heat, I scrubbed my face with my hands and took a deep breath. I watched the dancing



flames until they died back down, recalling the weekend bonfires Dani and I used to have on the beach back home.

The beach... The memory of a dream flickered to life.

I was lying on an incredibly soft mattress, candles glowing all around me, illuminating the fire burning in Jake's eyes. "I'm going to do things to you, Zoe," he whispered against my cheek with delicious promise. His fingertips skimmed across my belly, lingering at the waistband of my boy shorts, and his lips were soft and moist against my neck as he kissed me. I closed my eyes in anticipation.

"I'm definitely going to do things," he said again.

"Yeah?" I giggled. "What sort of things?"

"I'm going to..." His warm breath caressing my skin turned into a chilly breeze, and the heat of his body against mine vanished. A bright, blinding light seared through my eyelids. Instinctively, they flew open, and I sat up. Wait...what?

I was lying on a beach—a seemingly familiar beach that Dani and I spent long summer days lounging on back home—and I was suddenly wearing a purple bikini. I closed my eyes and sighed. So much for a salacious dream tonight. I stretched out on my towel in resignation.

"Hi, Zoe."

I opened my eyes and sat up with a start. Dani was sitting on a green towel beside me, her legs crossed and her hand raised. She waved casually. Her hair was poofier and redder than usual, and she seemed more subdued.

"Uh...hey, D." I flashed her an awkward smile, and then realized she wasn't the only thing in my dream that seemed off. The cypress tree up on the ridge to my left was too small, and the ocean stretching out in front of me was too blue, too vibrant.

"Hey, Zoe." Dani said again, and I looked back at her. Her grin suddenly grew...too big. I frowned.

Is there a glitch in the matrix or something? I plastered a tolerant, perhaps sad smile on my face. It would be nice if any of this was real. "Hey, D."

Dani donned a pair of sunglasses that appeared out of nowhere and lay

down on her towel, her strangely too-red curls fanning out behind her. As she adjusted her bikini top, I noted she was much curvier than in real life. I started chewing on the inside of my cheek. “This dream is really creeping me out.”

The breeze died down, and Dani suddenly vanished.

“That’s my fault,” a man’s voice echoed around me. “I was trying to recreate a scenario that would be comfortable and familiar to you.”

Startled, I scanned the beach. There was no one there. “Who are you, and what the hell are you doing in my dream?” My eyes narrowed as I again scanned the endless beach, expecting to see someone walking toward me.

He chuckled. “I think you know who I am.”

It was strange having a conversation with someone I didn’t know...and couldn’t see. “Do I?” At first I wasn’t convinced, but when he chuckled again, I thought about the mystery guy from Dani’s dreams. Is it possible he’s real? “MG...?”

“According to Dani, yes, that would be me.”

“And you’re in my dream because...?”

“I’m doing a favor for our mutual friend.”

Relieved, I smiled. “Really? Then she’s okay?” I hadn’t heard from her in weeks, not since she’d gone off on her own. “Is she still alone?”

“Yes, she’s okay. She’s with her friends, and she wants to know where you are. They’re on their way to meet you, but it might take them a while...they’re on horseback.”

Ignoring a fleeting feeling of distrust, I told him where we planned to set up camp once we made it to Colorado. Dani was alive, and I knew MG was the only hope I had of finding my best friend and my brother.

“I knew I shouldn’t have trusted him,” I spat.

Six heads whipped in my direction.

“Trusted who, Baby Girl?” Harper asked.

“The bastard from her dreams. Mystery Guy or MG or whatever she calls

him,” I said. In my moment of clarity, I’d bitten the inside of my cheek too hard, and I could taste salty blood welling in the break of my skin. “I told him where Dani could find us...where we’d be.” I lowered my face to my hands. “I can’t believe I was so stupid! It had to be—”

“But he helped bring us together,” Carlos reminded me. “Why would he do something like this?”

“He was playing us,” I snapped. “He’s the only one who knew we were here. And, outside of us, he’s the only one who knows about Dani’s Ability.” I shook my head, still staring into the fire pit, which was once again a smoldering mess of embers and weak flames. “Why was he in her dreams to begin with? How did he even find her?” Was he hunting her? Herding her to the Colony?

“Wait.” Still crouched, Harper pivoted to face me. “Didn’t Dani ask him to find us, to find you?”

Carlos stood up defensively. “She did. And he helped her learn how to use her Ability. He’s her friend.”

The reminder made my skin crawl. Was he grooming her? Molding her into a toy, something he could play with? I groaned. Not knowing what MG wanted with Dani filled me with dread.

Understanding widened Harper’s eyes. “He had to have known we’d figure it out eventually—”

“Right, and now that we know who he is...we still don’t know who he really is,” I bit out, wanting to scream. “It’s fucking perfect.”

“Which is why we need to leave,” Biggs said forcefully. “He knows we’re here, and if he’s got the whole Colony to back him, we can’t protect ourselves if he comes back for us.”

“But he could’ve killed us already,” Harper argued. “He could’ve killed us, taken Dani, and never given us a second thought. I mean, it makes sense that he’s the one who took her, but the repercussions of letting us live...” He shook his head.

“We’re nothing to them. There are only a dozen of us and only half are trained to fight.” I counted to five and then to ten, trying to breathe away the tremors of outrage.

Jake strode over from the stable, oblivious to our collective realization.

“You ready?” He dropped a pistol holster next to me on the hay bale. “This one straps to your thigh,” he explained. “Chris had an extra. It’ll make lugging your duffle bag around easier.”

I gave him a weak, grateful smile, loving his thoughtfulness and the way his warm, brown eyes made me feel a little less pissed off. “Thanks.”

Sanchez cleared her throat and we turned to her. She was focusing on the small, fold-up map in her hands. “I know the Colony is set up at Peterson, but what about this other base—”

“They were going to take Becca to Peterson,” Jake said. “Dani’s situation doesn’t seem so different.”

“What happened to her—your sister, I mean?” Carlos asked. I could feel his growing fear.

After a moment, Jake shrugged. He was as exhausted as the rest of us, and naturally, he wasn’t eager to relive the moment his sister died in a bloody heap in his arms.

“We need to know everything we’re up against,” Grayson told him.

Jake’s expression was blank, but he nodded slowly. I reached for his hand and pulled him down to sit beside me. He started by telling them that his sister was like Harper, that the Virus had changed the way her mind worked, and that she had visions of the future.

“But I didn’t know it was real. I thought she was losing her mind.” He paused and looked down at his hands, picking idly at the callouses that had formed on his palms. “Gabe—my best friend—was a contracted geneticist at Peterson. He swore he could help her, that he could fix her.”

Jake continued, his natural reserve making it difficult to speak openly about what was easily the worst night of his life. His words faded to a steady hum in my ears as his memories of the events surrounding his sister’s death played out in his head, drawing me deeper into his mind. His remorse cloaked my own emotions, and I could feel the excruciating depth of his emptiness, his crushing regret. Feeling Jake’s pain helped fuel my determination to make sure Dani’s fate wouldn’t resemble Becca’s. Unbidden tears accumulated in the corners of my eyes, and I blinked them away.

“Becca saw what the people at Peterson were going to do to her, and she chose death instead.” Jake ran his fingers through his short, dark brown hair.

With the exception of a hawk screeching somewhere in the distance and the crackle of the dying fire, it was completely silent.

After a long moment, Sanchez said, “We should probably go or we’ll run out of daylight before we get back.”

“He’s gone!” Chris called from behind me. I turned around to see her jogging back from the stable. “Jason’s not in his tent and his horse is gone.” She glanced out at the woods. “So is Jack.”

Carlos jumped up from his seat on the other side of the fire. “He left?”

“I should’ve known,” I muttered. “He’s going to try and get Dani...on his own. He going to get himself killed, and then Dani’s going to blame herself for his death, just like she did with Cam.” Terror jolted through me, and I stood and started pacing. My brother is going to get himself killed.

Carlos hurried over to Chris. “We have to go after him. We have to—”

“We can’t go after him,” she said sympathetically. “We don’t know how much ground he’s covered or which route he took. We have no idea where he is, and even if we do find him, he won’t come back with us.” She squeezed his shoulder. “Jason knows how to take care of himself. We need to stick together, and we need to focus on getting Dani back.” She turned her attention to Sanchez. “I’ll stay here and wait for Jason in case he returns. Get to Cañon City. Find out everything you possibly can about Peterson, and get your asses back here.”

“I’ll finish getting the horses ready,” Carlos offered, jogging toward the stable.

As I turned to follow him, Jake’s strong fingers entangled with mine, giving me a momentary wash of comfort. I peered at him, a tired but grateful smile spreading across my face, and he glanced toward Jason’s tent. “He’ll be back,” he said, trying to reassure me.

No he won’t. I knew how my brother was, but I nodded without arguing and continued on to the stable.

Wings stood out among the group of grays, chestnuts, and bays. I smiled. Of course Dani would ride the most vibrant paint horse I’d ever seen. Wings’s colors were rich and pure and bold, like her owner. Taking a slight detour, I stopped by a galvanized tub that held a few small apples and snatched one

before heading over to introduce myself to my new riding companion.

“She’s all ready for you,” Carlos said as he double-checked the cinch around Wings’s belly.

I unwound her leather reins from the metal railing. “Thanks.”

Carlos gave me a quick nod and started toward the barn, toward Chris.

“You’re not coming with us?”

He shook his head. “I’m gonna wait with Chris.”

I shrugged and turned my attention back to Wings. Thoughtfully, I looked into her watchful, pale blue eyes. They were inquiring and cautious. “Hey, girl,” I whispered. I couldn’t communicate with animals like Dani, so I was left to my own devices to win her favor. I placed my palm below her velvety nose so she could smell my scent.

Wings’s nostrils flared as she studied me. Slowly, she lowered her head to my palm. Her ears—one white, one coffee-brown—angled toward me, and her head bobbed a little, almost like she was nodding with approval.

“I know I’m not Dani, but I like horses, too. I’ll take good care of you for her,” I promised, stroking her chin and patting her thick, mostly-white neck. I held out the apple and offered it to her in my flattened palm. Eagerly, she reached for the treat with her lips, pulling it into her mouth. When it was gone, she nudged me. Wings suddenly seemed excited to have me as a riding partner, and I couldn’t help but grin at my small but very important victory.

“Ready?” Jake asked, his deep voice interrupting me from my celebratory moment.

“Yeah.” I smiled, stroking Wings’s sleek neck once more before moving to her side and climbing up into the saddle with surprising ease—I hadn’t been on a horse in years, but walking would take too long and cars weren’t a viable option. Carlos had gauged the length of the stirrups perfectly. I pulled back on the reins ever so slightly, backing the mare away from the hitching post and positioning her toward the rest of the group.

“You’re pretty good at that,” Jake said enviously as he struggled with the reddish-brown horse he was riding...or trying to ride.

Grinning, I observed his valiant attempt at horsemanship. I was no

expert, but I'd taken enough riding classes with Dani to have some know-how. "Your reins are too tight," I offered, stopping Wings beside him. "Give him some slack and he'll like you more." I lifted mine to demonstrate.

"I need to give him an apple so he'll like me more," he muttered, and my grin widened. Jake loosened the tension of the reins so the horse could move his head in stride as he walked, and then his gaze met mine, a playful glint in his eyes. A slight smile curved his lips. He opened his mouth to say something but closed it again when Harper guided his horse up beside us.

"Let's go," he said, waving for us to follow him.

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Still sitting atop our mounts, we paused in the cover provided by two houses, grateful to have reached the outskirts of Cañon City. The ride had taken just under an hour, but my butt was paying the price.

"Downtown's a little ways that way," Jake said, pointing to the southeast through a ritzy suburban neighborhood that stretched out ahead. He continued to speak, but I was distracted. I couldn't tear my eyes from the serrated, snow-covered peaks of the Rocky Mountains to the north and west of us. I had been surrounded by their majesty for over a month, but the sight of them still enthralled me. Colorado was untamed and beautiful—so different from the colonial grace and sprawling greens I'd left behind in Salem.

Sighing, I threw my leg over Wings to dismount.

"What're you doing, Baby Girl?" I glanced over my shoulder to see Harper's eyebrows raised in curiosity as my boots hit the ground with a thud.

"Getting off my horse so whoever's here doesn't hear us clomping in a mile away." I walked Wings through a gate into a large, overgrown backyard. She followed me happily, eyeing the tall, untended grass. I waited for everyone else to follow suit. When I looked back at them expectantly, they dismounted from their horses—some with more ease than others—and did the same.

We secured the horses and unloaded what supplies we needed before heading toward downtown. After almost an hour of mostly silent slinking around, ducking under windowsills and crouching behind delivery trucks, we spotted the row of stone and brick buildings lining Main Street. It was easy to

imagine the city in its heyday, booming with miners and cowboys in the decades after the gold rush. But now, windows were shattered, neon graffiti colored century-old brick walls, and cars were covered in dirt and grime, the only remnants of the season's final snow.

With the exception of our footsteps and hushed exchanges, Cañon City was quiet. There were no barking dogs, no Crazies mumbling incessantly, and no soldiers patrolling the streets. This seems a little too easy. My gaze veered up to the rows of windows on the second floor of the buildings, suddenly sinister and foreboding. Where are all the Crazies? That was one thing we'd come to expect.

"Something's not right," Sanchez said inside my head, and I assumed she was speaking telepathically to the others as well. Even though her Ability wasn't as strong or multifaceted as Dani's, it was still useful. "Where are the Crazies?" she asked, echoing my thoughts.

"There are worse things than no Crazies," I offered, not wanting to give the others too much time to consider turning back.

My companions exchanged apprehensive glances before we continued on to Main Street.

Staying true to our usual, cautious methods, Jake and I paused in an open, brick alley between two buildings, waiting for Harper and Sanchez to scout the nearby parking lots and shops. The cinderblock museum and history center, the most promising place to search for useful information about the Colony's layout, was a few blocks further down the street.

A gust of wind whooshed through the empty, stinking alleyway. The brisk air bit at my skin, and I shivered. My sweatshirt wasn't cutting it, especially since I'd stopped walking. Sunlight reflected off of a storefront window ahead, and I squinted in the glare. An antique shop was nestled between a pool hall and bridal shop.

"Ready?" Jake asked, looking back at me. He nodded across the street in the direction Harper and Sanchez had gone, but I was focused on the figures in the antique shop's display window. Sun-washed mannequins posed—one wearing a 1950s floral-print, halter sundress, the other in faded blue jeans and a vintage, olive-green bomber jacket. Its distressed leather looked worn and soft and enticingly warm. It looked so comfortable, I was practically salivating. I glanced up at the hand-painted sign: Alice's Attic.



“Hey,” Jake nudged my shoulder with his. “What’s up?”

“I’m cold,” I said, glancing up and down the street. I looked over at Harper and Sanchez, who were moving toward the antique shop. “Where are we going?” I asked, happy to be moving closer to the shop that held the jacket and my potential warmth, but confused to be headed to the right, away from the museum.

“Pit stop,” Jake said, pointing to the sign that hung three stores down from the antique shop. Tommy’s Gun Exchange, read bold red and orange letters. Perfect.

Jake reached for my hand, entwining our fingers, and we hurried across the street toward the others. Sanchez was already inside Tommy’s, rifling through what remained of the store’s stock, while Harper waited just outside the entrance, his sidearm drawn and aimed as he scanned up and down the street for movement.

Once we reached Harper, I pointed my thumb over my shoulder in the direction of Alice’s Attic and said, “I’m going to grab a jacket.”

Stopping a few steps inside the store, Jake glanced back at me with an agitated smirk.

Harper chortled. “Why am I not surprised.”

I shrugged, equally annoyed with my inability to withstand the cold, and flashed them both an innocent smile. “Sorry,” I mouthed.

“Jake,” Sanchez called from the back of the store. “Bring me that bag, would ya?”

Harper looked from Jake to me. “I’ll go with her.” He nodded toward Alice’s. “Come on, Baby Girl,” he said with a nudge and started down the sidewalk, rifle drawn and each footstep light and calculated.

I glanced back at Jake, who nodded hesitantly. “Be quick about it.”

Harper and I reached Alice’s in less than a minute. The glass door was shattered, allowing us to slip into the shop easily.

I climbed up into the window display, unnerved by the antique mannequins, whose eyes were too wide and animated and whose mouths were too small for their heads. With a scrunched face, I unzipped the jacket, hoping

the sleeves would be long enough for me. Harper helped me maneuver the plastic person's arms, jerking it toward me a few times, clearly entertained each time I recoiled. It was just...creepy.

Finally, I freed the jacket and shrugged into it. The moment I zipped it up—the bottom snug around my waist and the stand-up collar closing around my neck—I sighed. It fit perfectly. Unzipping the pockets, I stuck my hands inside and posed. “How’s it look?”

Harper's eyebrows waggled in playful interest, and he flashed me a killer smile. “Not too bad,” he said with a wink. “Alright, let’s get this show on the road.”

He was making his way for the door just as the rumble of an engine echoed down the street. We were hugging the shadows on the walls in milliseconds, my body tense and my heartbeat quickened.

“Shit,” I hissed. Harper reached for my hand and pulled me closer to him.

The engine noise grew louder until a military Jeep sped past and continued through downtown.

“Damn, they’re in a hurry.” Harper whispered. “Let’s move before—”

The sound of roaring engines grew louder, and another truck passed the antique store and stopped somewhere not too far down the street. Hearing the engines turn off and the doors creak open, I prayed the newcomers weren't planning on hanging around. We shuffled closer to the door and watched five men unload their things and settle into a store a few buildings up from us on the same side of the road. Shit. They had duffel bags and thermoses of what I assumed was coffee, or possibly booze, to warm their insides and help alleviate their boredom. So...not just a quick stop then.

With the soldiers out of sight, Harper and I hurried down the street to the gun exchange. Once inside, the four of us fell into a heated debate over whether we should stay and keep searching for helpful information or go back to camp.

“What other options do we have? We need information...something, otherwise this trip was pointless,” I said anxiously. We'd come so far and now they were considering turning back. “There are only four of us. There's gotta be a way we can get to the museum without being

seen.”

Sanchez and Harper considered it for a moment, and finally Sanchez nodded. “Fine, but we need to stay off the main road. We’ll go in from the back.”

“There’s probably an alley,” Jake said, and he found my hand and led me to the back of the gun store. He unlocked the back door and slowly opened it. Loosening his grip on my fingers, he let go and leaned out for a better look. A moment later, he closed the door. “The back alley runs along all the buildings. If they stay inside, it’s doable.”

Sanchez took a deep breath. “Let’s get this over with,” she said bitterly.

Within minutes, we were darting behind the buildings, crouching and ducking wherever we could. We were getting close. Just as Jake and I slipped behind an enormous delivery truck, a screen door flung open. It was the back door to a café—crates of coffee filters and paper cups were piled beside the dumpsters like they’d been unloaded but never delivered. Sanchez and Harper were up ahead, but Jake and I were stuck behind the truck, waiting for whoever had come out of the café to go back inside.

“I thought we were giving her a few days to get the intel,” a man with a lisp said. Curious, I peeked through a slat in a stack of empty crates behind the truck just in time to see him unzipping his pants. I shrank back. The man—a soldier wearing green fatigues with a black armband wrapped around each sleeve at the biceps—had dark hair and a goatee. I could smell the tobacco smoke from his cigarette amidst the other rank smells of rotting food in the dumpsters.

“I mean, I don’t get it,” he said. I could tell by his muddled words that he was holding the cigarette between his lips as he used his hands to pee...at least that’s what I assumed he was doing. “Just seems a little excessive, don’t you think?”

“Apparently she’s something special. He wants her back sooner,” another man called from inside.

“She better be great in bed for all this trouble we’re going to. I thought he had a thing for the doctor, but I guess he can get away with more than one piece of ass.” The man cleared his throat. “Either way, I heard his newest flavor is a redhead.” He groaned. “I love redheads.”

A redhead...that could be Dani! So, who's the "he"? MG? The soldier's second groan made me want to walk over and kick him repeatedly in the groin, especially when the men inside the café only laughed.

"So, the raid's moved up to tomorrow night?" After goatee zipped up his pants, I heard him take a deep drag on his cigarette and cough.

"Roger that. We've got to get his toy home safe and sound, though. God, have you seen that bitch naked? I swear, I've never gotten a chub so fast."

"Hey, fuck-wad," another man called. "Are you taking a piss or a dump? If you're taking a shit at least shut the fucking door!"

Goatee laughed. "Shut up, dickhead, I'm done. Don't get your panties in a bunch."

Once the screen door slammed closed, I looked at Jake. The dread I felt was mirrored in his eyes. A raid? Assuming Dani was the "redhead," I couldn't help but think they were likely talking about us.

"A raid? Tomorrow?" I mouthed.

Jake shook his head, not wanting to think about an impending catastrophe while we were in the middle of another.

Carefully, we continued on toward the museum. Once we were inside, luck seemed to throw us a much-needed bone—a regular post-apocalyptic miracle. The museum contained ample information about Peterson Air Force Base.

We rummaged through the mini-exhibit and gathered a few maps of the base—they were vague and had obviously been created for tourists, but helpful nonetheless—a few history and general information books, and some black-and-white photos that had been taken on the base.

After nearly an hour, we cautiously found our way back to the horses, hoping that the café outpost was the only one we needed to worry about. It was another hour before we made it back to camp, leaving us with only a few hours before dusk.

Chris was the first person we saw as we rode up behind the barn. She'd apparently been waiting for us.

"I was starting to worry," she said, then let out a nervous laugh. "I never

thought I'd be so happy to hear Sanchez's voice in my head." She surveyed our group, her eyes assessing, and I figured she was making sure we'd all made it back in one piece.

Jake's boots hit the ground with a dull thump, and he started unloading the duffel bags and backpacks of weapons, ammo, books, and maps. I dismounted and patted Wings on the neck, thanking her for being so steady and fast.

"We saw soldiers...I'm assuming from the Colony. They had trucks and were wearing armbands, but these ones were black instead of yellow." I frowned, feeling slightly ill as I recalled the perverted comments they'd been making. "We overheard them talking about a redhead...and, well, they mentioned a raid that's supposed to happen tomorrow," I told Chris while, around me, the others were unsaddling their horses. "We think the raid's gonna be here."

"Great," Chris breathed.

"Seriously. We were talking on the way back and we think we should leave. We can't take any chances. Especially with Sarah so—"

"Carlos is gone," she blurted.

I froze, my mouth gaping open. "What?"

"I'm sure he went after Jason."

"Jesus," I muttered, resting my forehead against the side of the barn.

Chris ignored my melodramatics. "So...Ky and Ben went after Carlos. Ky felt responsible, since Carlos must've ridden right past him." Her eyes drooped with exhaustion, and she shook her head. "This is such a damn mess."

I could sense there was something else she needed to tell us.

"What is it?" I groaned, straightening and dropping my hands to my sides. "What else happened?"

"A woman showed up this afternoon. She's not a Crazy, but something's not right about her. Her mind is...off, somehow. Cooper heard her walking around in the forest and..." Chris shook her head again. "Anyway, she was unarmed, confused, and seemed like she hadn't bathed or eaten anything in a while. Sarah and I got her cleaned up and fed her."

Sanchez took Wings's reins from me, and Chris matched my stride as I headed for the campfire.

"She seemed so lost and helpless," Chris added.

As we rounded the corner of the barn, I slammed into Jake's stiff, motionless body. "Jesus, Jake..." I half expected him to turn around and reach out to steady me like he'd done so many times before, but he didn't move. I righted myself and glared at him. He was completely unfazed that I'd just crashed into him. "Good thing I'm not as delicate as I used to be," I muttered tartly, but he didn't notice. Shock and horror—his shock and horror—trumped all preceding thought, and goose bumps prickled my arms.

I shifted my eyes in the direction of his to find the woman Chris had mentioned—our uninvited guest. The duffel bag Jake had flung over his shoulder slid to the ground with a heavy thud.

"Oh my God," I rasped, and Jake said, "Becca?"