

Eyes Ever to the Sky

KATIE FRENCH

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Dedication

To Ryan – You're still the one.

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CHAPTER ONE — HUGH

Monday 12:18 a.m.

He woke knowing only pain.

His bones ached like they'd been shattered and glued haphazardly together. His head buzzed like a tuning fork. A bitter taste coated his tongue. He searched for the word and it swam sluggishly up before him. *Blood.* He tasted blood.

He peeled his eyelids open to a sea of gray. As his eyes focused, he realized he was lying on his back looking up at the night sky. A few thin clouds streaked across a yellow crescent moon. A fringe of leaves and branches stood out black against the sky above. He lifted his head and a stab of pain needled through his skull. He winced, waited and propped himself up on his elbows. He looked down at his naked body and drew in a sharp breath.

Naked. Oh god.

He was lying in a large trough gouged into the earth, a crater from the look of things. The damp, dark soil on either side of him looked freshly uncovered. He reached a trembling hand into the dirt. It crumbled into flecks on his fingers, dark brown and loamy. Frightened, he brushed it away and sat up.

He scanned his body for the source of his pain: broken bones, dislocated joints, flayed skin. But as his eyes traced his limbs, covered in moist earth, he seemed intact.

He pulled himself upright, digging his fingers into a nest of dangling roots. He had to get out of this hole, this...grave. His other senses were awakening now: a gripping hunger, like he'd never eaten a meal in his life, and an overwhelming sense that everything was very wrong. Why couldn't he remember how he'd gotten here? Why couldn't he remember...anything?

The cold, raw panic crept up his limbs as he scrambled out of the crater, sending showers of earth into the hole. He dragged his bare chest over the coarse, dewy lawn. A puff of wind drove goose bumps over his damp skin. He pulled himself to his feet.

A park stretched out before him: long sections of grassy plain, cut into squares with chain-link fence. Signs were posted: "Keep Our Park Clean" and "Dogs MUST be kept on a 6-foot leash." Century-old trees, tall and gnarly, skirted the grassy areas. In the center of the tidy park was

a path of destruction cut like a scar across the face of the earth. It was as if something had plummeted from the sky and skidded along the ground, snapping off trees, scorching branches. At the back of the park, the grass still smoldered. Whatever it was had come to rest here. He peered down into the hole again.

How had he ended up here? And where was he?

He stumbled to a picnic table and sat. His head thrummed. His stomach clenched. He'd throw up if he had anything in his belly. He put his head in his dirt-caked hands.

Who was he?

Hugh.

The name flashed in his head and he grabbed onto it like a life preserver. Was it his name? It could be a brand of soap for all he knew, but he assigned it to himself regardless. A name was one step closer to something. And something was better than nothing. He searched his synapses, but the path fizzled and died like the tail of a rocket. Nothing.

Headlights sliced through the dark as a car pulled up. A door slammed. Hugh's head snapped up, his eyes wide. A thought blared in his head, the only thing he knew for certain: *Trust no one*.

He couldn't be seen. He bolted upright, teetered and righted himself with a hand to the tabletop. Then he was off into the trees as fast as his legs would take him.

Tuesday 9:37 a.m.

Hugh lay stock-still in the crinkly leaves as the dog waddled his way. A basset hound (if his addled brain served him right) lumbered through the underbrush and blinked at him. The brown and white dog with droopy jowls and long floppy ears licked Hugh's cheek. It panted into his face, the pink crescents of skin showing underneath its drooping eyelids, then it went back to sniffing the dirt around his thighs.

The dog park had come alive with activity early this morning. Waiting for something to jog his memory, Hugh had hidden in the woods next to the crater. What a long night. His memory hadn't returned, but people and their four-legged friends had, filling up the grassy areas and woods. Hugh had tried to leave, only to find neat backyards, children playing in little plastic pools or gray-haired ladies weeding their gardens. They probably wouldn't appreciate him strolling naked past their rhododendrons.

Plus, there was that pesky crater that had everyone buzzing.

Naked, hungry, and alone, he'd decided to wait until dark to leave. Now, with the mosquitoes biting his, er, tender regions, he realized this wasn't his brightest idea.

The basset hound nosed Hugh's hand. He ran his fingers through the dog's soft coat as its tail *thwacked* a steady rhythm.

"Hey there, boy. Whatcha doing, huh?" Hugh scratched under the dog's chin. Hugh nuzzled his face into the dog's back and his heartbeat steadied.

A shrill whistle cut through the trees. Hugh tensed. The dog turned.

"Come, Roxy. Come on, girl," a man's voice called from the path.

She's a girl, Hugh thought, as Roxy pulled away and waddled toward her owner. From his hiding spot, he watched the dog leave, feeling empty.

I should just get up and ask for help, he thought. The police had arrived an hour ago. He could sneak through the brush and get someone's attention. But an alarm blared inside him every time someone came near.

They'll hurt you, it shouted. *Don't trust them*.

So, he stayed hidden under a prickly bush, miserable.

By noon, his stomach seized and cramped. Creeping through the woods to the tree line, he stared desperately into the backyards.

Ahead, three children ran squealing through a sprinkler while their mother reclined in a lawn chair with a magazine. To his right, a wide green lawn led up to a large two-story house. A television flickered in the dark interior. Why weren't these people at work? Feeling desperate, he stalked the shadows until he came to another house with a large wooden porch. The garage door was ajar. Inside the garage a big white refrigerator glowed like a lighthouse.

Food.

His stomach churned. Did he dare?

Hugh scanned left, then right. The children and their mother had run inside for a potty break, leaving the littlest—a toddler with damp, yellow curls—on the lawn. As he watched, she tripped on the hose and skidded into the grass. She sucked in a breath and wailed.

Her mother would be back in seconds. The only time was now.

Hugh sucked in a deep breath and sprinted toward the refrigerator.

Glancing left, he saw the little girl was turned away. To his right, the green lawns stretched, empty of people. He skidded to a stop at the doorframe, gripped it, and peered in. The dim garage was silent except for the electric hum of the refrigerator. *Food, food*, it hummed.

He slipped inside, the cement cool under his bare feet. A shiny black SUV took up the whole left side. His eyes raked over the tool bench and the pegboard covered in hammers and wrenches. Wall shelves bulged with soccer balls, buckets, terracotta pots, and cans of paint. Two carpeted steps led up to the house. His eyes tracked to the gleaming white fridge and his stomach flip-flopped. He strode toward it.

Please, God, let there be something to eat.

He was five steps in when he heard movement inside the house. Whistling. Someone was headed his way.

Hugh's eyes flicked between the door and the fridge. Getting caught would be disastrous, but he *needed* food. When would he get another opportunity? He sprinted to the fridge and yanked it open. The door rattled wide, cold air rolling out at his bare legs. His eyes raked over rows of beer and pop cans. He grabbed a few sodas, but where was the food?

He shot a glance toward the house door. There had to be food just inside, rows and rows of it probably, but the cheerful, off-key whistling was still headed his way. If he went in, he'd have to fight for it. No matter how hungry he was, he didn't want to hurt anyone.

Something caught his eye in the bottom drawer, a blurry brown package inside the crisper. He yanked it open, his heart pounding. A package of hot dogs! Hugh nearly shouted for joy. With the package cradled to his chest, he turned.

The door between the house and the garage cracked open.

Heart thumping, Hugh tore across the garage.

He nearly tumbled over a backpack at his feet. Fabric peeked out of the opening. Clothes.

Snatching the bag, he bolted out of the garage and into the yard. The dry grass pierced his feet as he tore over the lawn. He eyed the deep, shadowed woods. Only a few more steps until safety.

"Wook, Mama," a little voice yelled behind him. *"He naked!"*

Hugh shot a look over his shoulder. The little girl, wet curls clinging to her pink cheeks, was pointing at him. The mother gasped and dragged her daughter toward the house. Would she call the police? Hugh sprinted into the woods, ignoring the stabs of sticks and branches.

Darkness, it turned out, was his friend.

About a mile away in a sun-dappled clearing, Hugh skidded to a stop. Nestled between pines and maples, he put his hands to his knees and took gasping breaths. Slipping the backpack off, he pulled out the plump package of hot dogs, his mouth watering. He tore the package open with

his teeth. Meat juice slid over his tongue. He sucked down eight dogs, barely stopping to chew.

Satisfied. Until the next time he needed to eat.

He pulled open the backpack and dug into the contents. Inside he found a white T-shirt with the words *Made in Detroit* circling a wrench-wielding worker. He pulled the T-shirt over his head. It was a tight fit, but the soft fabric stretching across his chest relaxed him. He fished out a pair of women's shorts next: light blue and nylon. He pulled them on and looked down. He might be a sporty cross-dresser, but at least he wasn't naked. He dragged out a pair of women's running shoes, but couldn't pull them over his heels. Barefoot for now.

Hugh stretched out on the carpet of pine needles and laced his fingers behind his head. Blue sky peeked between shifting patterns of green as the wind stirred the branches. The birds chirped to one another. Hugh nestled back and soaked up the serenity. He watched a Chickadee hop into a nest with something clutched in her beak. Her babies peeped anxiously.

He'd proven today he could survive. He was healthy and strong. He had brains. And he would remember who he was. Wouldn't he?

He closed his eyes and pushed for a memory. Anything lurking behind the cobwebs in his brain.

Slowly, an image of a grassy field appeared in his mind's eye. Excited for even a wisp of memory, he strained to see the blurry image. Something solid rose from the grass—large, concrete, and cylindrical, like a silo. Was he looking at a farm? Something from his childhood? He tried to push the vision outward, stretching it in his mind, but the vision fogged and died.

He opened his eyes, a headache pounding behind them. Whatever he'd seen, he knew it was important. That place called to him. He needed to find it. He closed his eyes again, searching for the memory, but nothing appeared, just a steady, unsettling void.

The headache pounded harder and he was exhausted. He let his eyes shift to the overlapping leaves above. He couldn't keep them open.

The earth rocked, a giant boom cracking through the quiet.

He sat up. Around him, the birds cawed and thrust themselves into the air.

This was bad.

Hugh bolted upright. He was sprinting toward the sound before he could think.

A rift in the trees appeared and Hugh skidded to a stop. It was as if something had crash-landed from above. The hairs on his arms stood up

as he looked at the snapped and splintered tree trunks, the burning branches, the ground plowed in a quarter-mile scar of dirt and debris. A sick feeling crept up his throat. In the middle of it all sat a twenty-foot wide crater.

Sweat broke out across his back. His breathing quickened. He stepped toward the crater, his heart pounding. Would someone...be inside it?

Hugh took a few uneasy steps until he was at the edge, the mounds of displaced earth squishing between his bare toes. He leaned forward, held his breath, and peered into the hole.

Empty.

He stumbled back. How did he feel about finding nothing? What had he expected? Someone inside it who could answer his one million burning questions?

He felt so utterly alone.

His eyes on the ground, he noticed something he'd overlooked—long scratches dug deep into the grass at the edge of the crater. It was as if something, some animal, had clawed its way up and out. How had it climbed out so fast? Hugh bent down and touched a finger to the claw marks.

They were huge.

Branches thrashed on the other side of the crater. Hugh stood upright, fear pumping. Deep in the tree cover, a shadow bolted away. Hugh couldn't make out features, only size. It was big. Grizzly bear big.

Hugh didn't breathe as the shadow swiveled toward him. Eyes blinked from the distance. Large, red, and angry.

Hugh stumbled backward. What kind of animal had red eyes? Away. He had to get away.

He turned to run. Voices sounded from behind him; the locals must've heard the boom. When he looked back, across the wreckage, the shadow was gone.

But not for long, Hugh thought as he bolted the opposite direction, his heart hammering into his throat. Whatever it was it had smelled him.

It would be back.

CHAPTER TWO — CECE

Tuesday 9:35 a.m.

Cece tugged at the strings dangling from her jean shorts. The rich girls paid to have some poor Indonesian child distress their jeans, but Cece's were homemade. She grabbed her work shirt off her bed. With *Lizzy's Ice Cream* stenciled on the pocket, the Pepto Bismol pink tee was the newest shirt she owned.

Maybe when she got her first paycheck she'd have a little to spare. She sighed and checked her ponytail in the mirror. Probably not.

A glance around her room told her it was satisfactory. The hand-me-down floral bedspread was tucked around her mattress on the floor. In her closet, doorless since she'd inherited the room, her clothes hung in neat rows by color. The vanity she sat at was a thrift store purchase from Mama two birthdays ago. The varnish was chipped and peeling, but she loved the antique. The circular pink princess clock she'd been dying to replace said she was running late.

Standing, she touched a finger to the folded paper square in her pocket. In here, Mama wouldn't find her rescue list. Plus, Cece liked having it with her, a security blanket with a few names of her scattered family members embroidered on it. Family she hadn't seen in years. Family who'd abandoned them.

Suddenly she smelled smoke coming from under the crack in her door. Cece jumped up and yanked the door open, her heart pounding.

Twice this year Mama had almost burned down their trailer, her forgotten cigarettes smoldering on a pile of magazines.

And damn, if she wasn't going for a third.

Searching the dark hallway, she saw no cloud. She sniffed again and there it was—something more than the Marlboro Ultras Mama chain-smoked.

Something was on fire.

Cece thudded down the hallway, dodging piles of clothes. She hurdled a rusted bike tire and a broken toaster, which balanced on a faded Barbie box. She plowed over a pile of baby shoes and felt something shatter beneath her foot. Ignoring the pain, she barreled into the living room.

Mama was the motionless lump on the couch. The TV light made her look skeletal, like a bony husk detectives would find on one of those *C.S.I.* shows she watched.

The acrid tang of burning plastic drew Cece's eyes to the carpet. She spotted the smoke curling from the floor. The carpet was indeed on fire.

"Jesus!" Cece stomped out the butt with her already throbbing heel.

Mama's eyes flew open. "*Hijo de puta!*" Mama muttered, her hand pressed to her chest. "Cecelia! Good God."

Cece lifted her foot and inspected the damage. She ripped off the singed sock and tossed it toward the overflowing kitchen garbage. Her heel was red and sore, but no harm done. You couldn't say the same for the carpet. The three-inch burn looked like a horrible brown tumor. Not that you could see the carpet under all of Mama's junk.

Adrenalin leaking out of her bloodstream, Cece sagged on the arm of the couch. One more crisis averted. She reached down and patted Mama's tiny hand, like bird bones wrapped in paper. "Mama, put the cigarettes out *before* you fall asleep. Our firemen aren't half as cute as that calendar Ms. K bought you."

Mama waved a dismissive hand. "Pah. I wasn't sleeping." Then she raised a black eyebrow. "Not as cute?"

Cece shook her head. "Not even close."

"Damn." Mama leaned back, letting her eyes trail back to the TV which was showing something about a meteor hitting the dog park. Mama's unwashed hair stuck up in the back, a black and gray nest dented on one side from where it lay against the armrest. What would it take to convince Mama to take a shower? Those hot firemen probably.

Cece stood up, careful to avoid a bowl of bloated Cheerios in sour milk. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Mama shook her head, switched the channel to HSN, and watched the designer model a new handbag.

"Did you take your pills?"

Mama nodded, her mouth open, mesmerized as a woman slung another purse over her bony shoulder. In the TV light, Mama's eyes looked sunken, her skin translucent. How much weight had she lost this time? Ten pounds? Fifteen?

Heavyhearted, Cece stepped over the piles in the hallway. She turned into the bathroom, clicked the door shut, and opened the medicine cabinet. She held the orange pill bottle up to her eye. Seroquel XR prescribed to

Luisa Acha. She pressed her palm down on the white cap and the child safety lock opened with a soft pop. Cece dropped the pills into her palm.

Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen...Shit. Mama had not taken her pill today.

Walking to the back of the trailer, Cece shot one last glance toward the living room, flickering in blue light. She smelled Marlboro Ultras. Her mother had lit another cigarette.

She shut her bedroom door and dug out the little piece of paper tucked in her pocket. Opening it, she eyed the name and phone number, penned in secret, scrawled while Mama was down the street visiting Ms. K. If Mama knew what she was about to do.... It didn't matter if Mama freaked. Mama hadn't worked in eight months. The unemployment barely paid the trailer's mortgage and Cece wasn't even sure if Mama had renewed it last month. Soon they'd be evicted or someone would call Child Protective Services. Or they'd both died in a burning pyre of Mama's own making.

She pulled out her cellphone and dialed the number with trembling fingers.

Cece pressed the phone to her ear until it throbbed. *Please, please, please pick up.* With her other ear she listened down the hall for Mama.

"Hello?" said the voice on the end of the line.

Tingles broke out over Cece's arms. She cupped her hand over her mouth and spoke quietly into the phone. "Hello? I'm, ah...I'm looking for Beatriz Acha."

The voiced sighed, low and female. "I haven't gone by that name in years, but yeah, this is Bea. Who is this?"

Cece's pulse quickened. Her eyes flicked to the door. "This is your niece, Cecelia." She paused, a pit forming in her stomach. "Do you...remember me?"

"*Je-sus,*" Aunt Bea said. Cece could hear her shift the phone. "Cece, God, how you doing? I haven't seen or heard from your *mami* in, what is it, ten years? How old are you now?"

"Fifteen," Cece said, a small smile breaking over her face. "It's been a long time, Aunt Bea."

"It sure has."

Someone shouted in the background on Aunt Bea's end. Cece listened as Aunt Bea pulled the phone away from her mouth and said, "Go downstairs. I gotta take this." Cece pictured a husband or a boyfriend, handsome and rich. Aunt Bea's voice came back in Cece's ear. "So," she said slowly, "is everything okay?"

Cece felt that pit again, only now it had multiplied. “Not really. It's my mom. She's... She needs help.”

A pause. “Does your ma know you're calling me?”

Cece picked at her tank top strap and swallowed. “No, but I— ”

“Cece, honey, I can't get into this again. I tried to help your ma once, but...” She paused and blew out a breath. “No, I promised myself not again.”

“But, she *needs* you.” Cece gripped the phone as if she could hold Aunt Bea on the line with force. Down the hall the couch creaked as Mama shifted. Could this call go any worse?

“Then have *her* call me. Listen, do you want to come here? Is it that bad? I could send you a bus ticket.”

Cece shook her head. “I can't leave Mama.”

“I'm sorry. I really am. I just...” She paused, her voice hitching. “I can't do it. Not again. I love you, *cariña*. Be good to your ma.”

Cece held the phone to her ear. “Aunt Bea?” The phone clicked. Gone.

Cece dropped the phone on the bed and stared at it, dejected. After all the digging it had taken to find Bea's number, she really thought this call would be it. It was over so quickly her head spun. She picked up the phone and dialed the number again, her fingers trembling. It rang three times and then went straight to voicemail. Cece didn't leave a message.

She pulled the piece of paper from her pocket and scratched a line through Aunt Beatriz. There was only one more name on the rescue list, her abuelo. No matter how much she scrounged, she could not find a number for her grandfather in Bolivia. Her eyes rested on the photo wedged under the mirror frame. It was the last time she'd seen him, eight years ago when Mama had felt well enough to fly them to Bolivia. She remembered the thick wet air when they'd stepped off the plane, the smell of Abuelo's aftershave as he pulled her to his chest in a giant bear hug, his hand around hers as he led them to his black sedan. Just before they'd slipped in, Mama had snapped this photo: she and her abuelo, arms around each other's shoulders, matching smiles and the dry, grassy plain behind.

Now he was just a distant memory.

Beside her, the tired A.C. unit hummed diligently, pushing cool air over her bare arms. She hugged herself and stared out her window into the dark street. Who would save them now?

“Shit,” she said out loud. “I guess I'll have to.”

Tuesday 9:53 a.m.

“Mama.” Cece offered her the bowl. “Take this. I gotta go.” She glanced to the clock. She'd have to pedal like mad.

Mama glowered at the cereal. “What's in the bowl, *mi amor*?”

Cece shuffled her feet. What would Mama do if she tasted the pill? “Nothing.”

Mama eyed her. “You know where liars go,” she said, reaching for the bowl.

“To the fires of eternal hell. Thanks for reminding me. How do you think Satan feels about bright pink?” She pointed to her shirt. “Will it clash with the everlasting flames? The instruments of torment?”

Mama frowned. “Cecelia!”

“Okay, okay. Just take the bowl already. I'm late.” She pushed it into Mama's hands.

Mama sat up and cupped the bowl in her lap. After one spoonful, she twisted up her mouth. “Ah, the milk is bad.”

Cece shook her head, trying to keep calm. “I just checked the date. It's good for two more days. Listen, get some sunshine today. I just read an article that said a vitamin D deficiency can cause depression.”

Mama ignored her, pointing at Cece's T-shirt. “What job is this now?” she asked, reaching for the box of cigarettes on the couch arm.

Cece chucked the box over her shoulder and pointed to the cereal bowl with a shake of her head. Mama scowled, but began eating.

“It's the ice cream place, remember? Fer got me the job. I'll scoop 'til I droop.”

Mama frowned. “That Jennifer. Why she wanna dress like a boy?”

Cece pulled an empty Marlboro pack from a crack between two couch cushions and folded it between her hands. “Fer doesn't dress like a boy, Mama. She has her own...style.”

“A boy's style.”

“Mama!”

Mama shrugged. “Okay, okay. I just don't want to see it rub off on you. You have a nice figure.”

Cece tried to cover her blush with a scowl. “I gotta go.”

Mama pretended not to hear. “Why I never see boys over here? You could use a *novio*. What happened to that boy... that Allen. Allen, wasn't it?” The spoon trembled as she lifted the Cheerios to her lips.

“His name was Elliot.” Cece pressed her hands together. How long did it take Elliot to break up with her after his surprise visit to her house last fall? Cece still remembered the embarrassment on his face when she'd opened the door to her trailer. How his jaw dropped when he saw the garbage-filled foyer. No boy would ever come here again.

Cece got up and walked to the door, gripping the knob with white knuckles. “We just park in the alley and have loads of unprotected sex, okay?”

Mama pointed a stern finger. “Cecelia Maria Consuela—”

She cut Mama off by opening the door. Sunshine spilled in, lighting the dark trailer momentarily. “Look, don't worry. I'm a heterosexual virgin, the perfect Catholic, alright? Now I'm going.” She stepped out the door before Mama could stop her. Someone had to make the money around here.

“Love you, *mi amor*,” Mama hollered as Cece shut the door.

“Love you, too,” she muttered. “Don't burn the house down.”

“What up, mother trucker!”

Cece whirled to find Fer perched on her bike in the driveway, a cigarette dangling from her lips. To Cece, Fer was a teenage beauty: full red lips, creamy white skin, and round cheeks that were always pink in the middle. Most people were too distracted by Fer's wardrobe. Her purple hair, the dye fading into a periwinkle gray, was pinched into a messy ponytail. Her pink Lizzy's Ice Cream shirt was baggy and sported stains across her belly. Her boy's skater shorts drooped past her knees.

Cece frowned at the curling smoke. “Surgeon General says smoking kills brain cells. That,” she said, pointing to the cigarette, “is why you scored in the 15th percentile on your PSAT.” She leaned down and spun the lock on her bike chain that was hooked to her porch railing.

Fer shrugged and squinted into the smoke curling around her face. “I plan to live hard and die naked under a Victoria Secret model. Besides, I was copying off you, genius. Now enough with the chitchat. Move your ass 'cause we're late. If Lizzy's in she'll have her panties in a bunch fo sho.”

Cece pulled her bike up—a thrift shop Schwinn with a cracked banana seat—and threw her leg over. The rusty gears groaned as she righted the pedals. “Sorry. Mama was giving me a lecture.”

“The stay-a-virgin-til-you're-thirty routine?” Fer took a drag on her cigarette and blew a few smoke rings out of her puckered lips as she pedaled around.

Cece shook her head as she began to pedal. “Something like that.”

Fer spit the spent cigarette from her mouth. It dropped to the sidewalk in a spray of sparks behind them. “Parents, man.”

Cece pedaled harder as Fer stood up on her bike to pump. They rolled over a busted speedbump and kicked into high gear. Ms. Kaminski's cockier spaniel, Harley, howled and charged his chain. Then he slunk through a gap in the missing skirting around the trailer and eyed them suspiciously from the shadows. Ms. K came out on her porch in a flowered bathrobe, her veiny calves showing below the hem. She leaned over her metal porch rail and waved as they rode past. “Cece, can you walk Harley?”

“Yeah, Ms. K., Tonight. Can you check on Mama this afternoon?” Cece leaned back on her seat and craned her neck to hear.

Ms. K nodded, her curled white hair bobbing. “Sure, honey.” She waved again, her saggy underarm skin (what Fer affectionately called her “bat wings”) flapping.

A few feet ahead, Fer called over her shoulder, “Move your meat!” She shot Cece a look.

Cece waved at Ms. K and pedaled like mad.

A couple of Kool-Aid-mustached children sitting on a plastic climber called to them as they neared the main street. Cece waved as her knees flashed up and down, up and down. They approached Mr. Harris' dilapidated doublewide that he shared with about fifteen cats. Cece wrinkled her nose at the urine smell as she pedaled under his open window. Three cats, clustered around a dish on the porch, turned to watch her pass. The house next to his was abandoned. The wooden porch had separated from the trailer and leaned at a dangerous angle. The siding was bowed and warped, making the whole house look like a bulging can ready to explode. Two-foot-high grass swayed in the breeze, hiding a computer monitor and a printer. Tattered curtains fluttered out of the broken windows like a cartoon haunted house.

No boy would ever come home with her. Not if she could help it.

“I mean,” Fer said, picking up the conversation where they'd left off, “your mom gets knocked up when she's, what, seventeen, not even married? And she expects *you* to keep it in your pants?”

“Stop,” Cece said, keeping her eyes on the cracked sidewalk as they veered past the sign that read Hidden Woods Mobile Homes and out of the park. The main road shimmered in the summer heat. Cars rushed past in a steady stream. One corner held a liquor store, and opposite that sat a four-pump gas station with a 7/11 inside, both in sorry shape.

Fer scratched under her boob, wobbling a little. “Not your fault your ma got knocked up. I mean look at my dumb-ass mother. How many dudes has she brought home this month?”

“Fer,” Cece said, her voice as taut as a wire, “STOP talking about it. Just drop it, okay?”

Fer shrugged. “Jesus. Okay. Sorry.” Then she stood up and pedaled as fast as her beat-up Huffly would go, her body shifting side-to-side.

Cece kept pace, but stayed a few feet back. Why did it bother her so much when Fer talked about Mama? Everything she said was true. And Fer had it bad with her mother's alcoholic boyfriends. But at least Fer knew her father and saw him on holidays and long weekends. Fer had her brother, Shaun, and loads of aunts and cousins. Sure, they didn't get along, but at least she had them. Cece didn't even have a photo of her father. She thought about her rescue list pressed in her pocket. Mama needed help. She was only getting worse.

Her thoughts fell away as they pulled into Lizzy's Ice Cream parking lot and a sick unease took hold. Fer called this job a no-brainer. The owner was a sad divorcée who was never around. The assistant manager was a nineteen-year-old, pot-smoking, community college student. Piece of cake, Fer had said. Then why did Cece's stomach flip as she hooked her bike to the rack?

The ice cream shop was the most rectangular, dumpy building on this crappy two-lane road. The cinder-block exterior, once lemon yellow, had faded to dirty lard. The large block letters above the ordering window read Lizzy's. *Very* creative. The landscaping had run amok and weeds sprouted out of the flowerbeds in brown, wispy strands. A few mismatched chairs and picnic tables sat on the cement slab, filling up with customers on a hot day. Channel 4 News said it was going to be eighty-eight degrees today, hot fo sho, as Fer would say. Cece squeezed her hands together and followed Fer through the back door.

No big deal, Cece thought, with a smirk. *It's not like I need the money.*

Michigan in July was uncomfortable, but the inside of *Lizzy's Ice Cream* felt like an Easy Bake Oven cranked to high. Cece stepped through the back door into the concrete building, careful not to tromp on Fer's

prized Osiris sneakers. She spied the open screen windows, the fans oscillating in the corners. No A.C.

As they stepped in, a woman in her forties blocked their path. Her manicured red nails tapped on the counter as she frowned at them.

“Jennifer, you are twenty minutes late.” The woman, who had to be Lizzy, set her painted mouth in a disapproving scowl. Her bleach-blond hair, going gray at the roots, was teased and sprayed until it flared out like an eighties rock star. She was wearing a Rolling Stones tank top over acid-washed jean shorts. Cece didn’t look directly at them, but she was certain Lizzy’s boobs could not be real.

“Well,” Lizzy said, waving an arm at Fer, “what you got to say for yourself?”

Fer shot a glance at Cece. “Lizzy, I—”

“It’s my fault,” Cece said. “I made her late.”

Lizzy’s scowl tracked from Fer to Cece. “Cecelia, is it?”

Cece nodded, a blush burning up her neck.

“Cecelia, Jennifer runs her mouth all day about how great you are, but I gotta tell ya, late on the first day ain’t cuttin it, sweetheart.” Lizzy pointed a finger at Fer. “What’s Lizzy’s number one rule?”

Fer blew out her breath. “Always be loyal.”

“That’s right!” Lizzy said, smacking her hand on the counter hard enough to make Cece jump. “And being late ain’t loyal. Ask my peach of an ex-husband.”

Fer’s eyebrows drew up and a little smirk curled on her lips. “Tell Cece about your peach of an ex-husband, Liz.”

Lizzy’s eyes lit up. “That smarmy bastard. He lives in Tahoe now with his new screw-buddy-turned-wife, *Darcy*. What kinda dumbasses name their daughter *Darcy*? A couple of inbred, idiot pig farmers, that’s who.”

Cece tried not to make any sudden movements. Fer, standing behind Lizzy, gave a wicked smile and wagged her eyebrows.

“Lizzy,” Fer said, filling a metal cup with warm water and plunking a battered ice cream scoop into it, “tell her what that bastard sent you for Christmas.”

“Ah, God,” Lizzy said, throwing her hands up in disgust. A single leopard-print bra strap dislodged and slid down her shoulder. “You know what that slimy bastard sent me for Christmas?”

Cece took a step back from Lizzy’s flailing arms. “I don’t know— ”

“A Goddamned Christmas card!” Lizzy shrieked, striking her hand on the counter. “And do you know what was on that Goddamned Christmas card?”

“Tell her.” Fer stuck her tongue to the side of her mouth as if to say *Get a load of this one*. Cece made a mental note to kill Fer.

“A picture of the two of them at a chapel in Vegas. Had himself a friggin Elvis weddin. I coulda spit nails.” Lizzy clutched the counter and rocked back and forth. “*Darcy*. Like I give a crap if they get married or screw or whatever. I got his daddy’s ice cream shop, hell hole that it is.”

Cece twisted her hands together. A question burned in her brain, but she was afraid to ask. Still she had to. “Um, Lizzy? When do I get my first pay check?”

Lizzy’s eyes flicked to Cece. “Two weeks. No advances.”

Cece nodded politely, but felt her stomach twist. They needed the money now.

Lizzy’s pocket buzzed. She pulled out her phone and scanned the screen for a moment. Then she turned to Cece and Fer. “Travis comes in at one. Michelle at three. Jennifer, be Mommy’s big girl and show Cece the ropes, yeah?”

Fer nodded, already pulling out stacks of waffle cones and cans of Ready Whip. Cece pictured the patrons, their noses pressed to the glass, fingers pointing at the laminated order menu stuck inside. “You know I got this on lock-down.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Lizzy said, her eyes on her phone. “Just make sure the drawers are right this time.” Lizzy gave her a stern shake of a finger and then shuffled out the door.

As soon as she was gone, Fer burst into laughter.

“Can you believe that crackhead?” Fer said, thumbing toward the back door. “Lizzy is Grade A, bat-shit *craaaa-zaay*.” Fer hefted herself onto one of the counters and sat down, her belly spilling over her jeans. “Didn’t I tell you nothing to worry about?”

Cece’s stomach was still in knots. “What’s all that stuff about loyalty? Rule number one?”

Fer dug her hand into the cup of sprinkles and dropped some into her mouth. “Yeah, she’s not messing around with that one. Better not be late again. That’s probably the only thing Lizzy would can your ass for.” Fer held out her palm. “Sprinkles?”

It was going to be a long summer.

CHAPTER THREE — HUGH

Tuesday 12:48 p.m.

Hugh adjusted the bag of fertilizer under his head for the hundredth time and closed his eyes. The nine-by-six shed smelled of weed killer, cedar chips, and potting soil. The wood floor, baked by the heat of the day, warmed his butt through his spandex running shorts. He lifted his eyes to the distant humming in the corner. He squinted, trying to make out the dark shapes buzzing around the roof. Bees. If he didn't bug them, they'd leave him alone, right?

He dug his head into the fertilizer bag and tried to relax. Having four walls around him was calming. The vast openness of the woods was spooky. An hour before he'd found this shed, something had jumped out of the shadows and he'd screamed like a little girl. That something turned out to be a squirrel.

It was the *thing* that haunted him. The thing with red reptilian eyes that had followed him here. In the dark he could see those eyes—large, veiny, and slitted like a python's. Hugh shivered, despite the heat. He swore he'd heard footsteps behind him for miles, but he'd seen nothing. No red eyes. No dripping fangs. Had there been fangs? He wasn't sure, but his imagination produced them anyway. Six-inch fangs. Dripping in Blood.

Why was it following him? Why was it here?

A coil of knotted-up hose cramped his back. He tried to get comfortable. Would he ever be comfortable again?

All day he'd tried to keep his spirits up, but he was alone, hungry, and wearing women's underwear. Well, not exactly, but it was close enough. He had no idea who he was or where. Tomorrow, if his memory hadn't returned, he'd ask for help, no matter how scared he was. Or, maybe he'd remember. God, let him remember.

He tried again for a memory, closing his eyes. Digging, digging.

This time he found himself at the giant silo's base, the curving wall rising up in front of him. The long grass swayed in the breeze. He tried to look around, but his head was locked in place. All he could do was stare at the pitted gray silo. He put his palms to the cool metal, looking for an opening, a door, anything. And above, someone was calling.

In the shed his foot hit something. He opened his eyes to see a ceramic pot teeter. And smash.

He looked up at the shed doors, anxiety flooding him. The sound would be muffled by the plywood, but the house was only twenty feet away. The house had been quiet when he'd slunk by and let himself in, but someone could be home. His heart leapt in his chest.

He waited, breathless.

Footsteps clomped up the shed ramp outside. The door latch scraped open.

Hugh snapped upright and stood. He watched in horror as the gap between the doors widened. Someone was opening the shed.

His eyes locked on the shadow that stomped up the wooden ramp. He didn't breathe.

The shadow was large and male. Hugh heard something slide under one of the shelves to his right. In the dimness, the shadow stepped closer. Something metal clanked together on the wall.

"Goddamn son-of-a-..." a male voice said. There was click of a lamp chain being pulled. The shed flooded with light.

Blinded, Hugh stumbled back.

"What...? Who the hell are you?" the man shouted, stumbling back in shock. He tripped on a weed whacker and went sprawling on his back.

The light bulb swung back and forth, throwing crazy shadows across the walls. Tools clanked to the floor.

Hugh ran toward the door, but the man hauled himself up and blocked his exit. They stood staring at each other. The forty-something homeowner was clad in a collared work shirt and dress pants. His hair was graying at the temples and thinning at the crown. With his supple beer gut and thick arms, he had at least forty pounds on Hugh.

The man found a long-handled shovel and raised it like a baseball bat.

"What the *hell* are you doing in my shed?" The man's hands were trembling, but his eyes were on fire. He raised the shovel like a medieval broadsword. "Answer me!"

Hugh's throat was dry. No sound came out. Terrified, he listened to his body. He bolted.

The man swung.

The rusty blade, dented at one corner, made a whistling sound as it sliced through the stale air. A beam of light glinted off the metal as it arched toward his head. Hugh winced.

The blade cracked against his skull with a noise like a tree being snapped in half. Pain burst across his cheek. His vision blurred. He fell, his legs suddenly gone. His head seemed to float somewhere far off.

He hit the shed wall and slid down. His mind was a bag of cotton, his arms useless sandbags.

Heat flooded his cheek, his eye socket, down to his jaw. He waited for more pain, like his cranium would crack open. Yet, the throbbing pain was abating. He put his hand to his face. Was his cheek still there?

“What the...?” the man said, astonished.

Hugh opened his eyes.

The man examined the mangled shovel. The steel was dented where it had met Hugh's head.

His head? His head fought a shovel and won?

A cold chill ran up Hugh's arms as he looked at the metal blade. The pain was nearly gone now.

This couldn't be happening.

The man watched as Hugh pulled himself up. The homeowner's face flashed with first terror and then fury. “You think you're just gonna rob me again?” the man said. “Nuh uh. Not this time.”

He dropped the shovel and grabbed for Hugh.

Hugh stumbled into the corner, knocking a shelf off the wall. The man's hairy fingers clawed at him, curled into his throat. Then they were choking, choking. Thumbs dug into Hugh's Adam's apple. The man's brown irises had receded to wild, round pupils. Spittle flecked the corners of his five o'clock shadow.

“Don't!” Hugh choked. His air dwindled. Stars danced across his vision.

Hugh slammed both palms into the center of the man's chest. It felt like pushing a scarecrow. Instantly the choking hands were gone, and the attacker, too. The man sailed backward, arms flailing, shirt rippling. He slammed through the shed doors, smashing them open. They *thwacked* back and forth wildly. There was a thud somewhere on the grass beyond. Then silence. The bees buzzed madly.

Hugh stared at the space where the man had been. He'd only wanted to breathe. He'd only shoved him.

Shaking, Hugh pulled through the shed, past the mangled shovel and over the weed whacker. He stepped onto the grass, one hand on the door to keep his footing. The body lay six or seven feet from the shed. He went to it, barely breathing, the dry July lawn crinkling under his feet.

What have I done?

He leaned over the body. He was about to lose his lunch, but he had to see if he'd killed him. The man lay supine on the lawn, one arm straight

out, the other tucked beneath. His flip-flop had landed in a flowerbed. Hugh bent down and pressed his hand to the man's back.

The shirt was wet in the crease between the shoulder blades. Blood? No, only sweat. He listened for breathing. Oh God, let him be breathing.

The man's chest rose and fell softly. Hugh slumped back on his heels and blew out a breath. He rolled the man over. A welt swelled like a plump fruit on his right temple. Other than that, he looked okay.

Inside the house, a woman began screaming.

Hugh dropped the man and bolted into the night.

CHAPTER FOUR — CECE

Tuesday 1:06 p.m.

One hour into the “piece of cake” job, Cece was ready to eat her words with a double scoop of Chocolate Mocha.

The line at Lizzy’s snaked six feet back from the order window. The picnic tables were packed with laughing teenagers and moms with three or four kids in tow. Cece spotted her Algebra teacher in the crowd, his kids elbowing each other to get a better look at the menu. Everyone in Auburn Township’s heat survival plan seemed to include *Lizzy’s Ice Cream*.

Cece wiped sweat from her brow and tried not to hate them.

“Double swirl with sprinkles and a Kit Kat flurry. Large!” Fer yelled as she streaked by, two waffle cones in each hand.

Cece looked warily at the soft-serve machine, a clunky stainless steel contraption with three nozzles protruding from the front. The only “tutorial” Cece’d gotten happened before they opened: Fer had flipped back her ponytail, placed her mouth under the spigot and pulled the vanilla handle. With the line extending into the blacktop, and the natives growing restless, there was no time for Fer to teach her. Cece took a waffle cone from the stack, held it tentatively under the spigot, and pulled the lever. The vanilla ice cream snaked into the cone faster than she’d expected. She attempted a swirl, but the result was a lopsided vanilla mountain ready to topple at any movement.

Fer flew by and grabbed it out of Cece’s grip. “Good enough. Work on the Cherry dip, will ya?” Purple hair clung to Fer’s forehead in sweaty strands.

“Fer, I’m sorry. I’ll—”

“Save the apologies,” Fer said, striding over to the window, where a six-year-old stood on his tip-toes to peer in. She handed him the cone. Then she flicked her eyes back to Cece. “Cherry dip. *Pronto, mi amiga, por favor.*”

“Right, right.” Cece grabbed a cone and swirled in vanilla, managing to keep it relatively symmetrical. The basin holding the red cherry liquid sat to the right of the soft serve machine. Cece flipped the cone upside down and dunked it in the red soup. She watched in anguish as all the ice cream slid out of the cone and bobbed at the bottom of the basin like a mangled beluga whale.

“Whoa! Another one bites the dust,” said a voice behind her.

She whirled around. A slender boy in a *Lizzy's Ice Cream* T-shirt stepped around her, whisked a cone off the rack, filled it with soft serve, and dipped it in with one fluid motion. He handed the perfect cherry dip to Fer without taking his eyes off Cece.

"Don't worry about it, man." A warm smile spread over his face. "My first day I accidentally unplugged the back freezer. Shoulda seen Lizzy flip her lid on that one." He stuck out his hand. "Travis."

The infamous Travis. Fer had described him as a burn-out, complete with hemp necklaces and rasta T-shirts, but with his warm smile and kind eyes, wondered about Fer's assessment. She could see the pothead signals: the stains on his fingers, the unwashed hair that hung past his ears, the bloodshot eyes. He had a scar on his chin and road rash on his elbow that suggested trick biking or skateboarding. His little soul-patch beard curled down his chin like a fuzzy strip of carpet. He was Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo*, yet nicer on the eyes.

She slipped her palm into his. "Cece. Short for Cecelia."

He grasped her hand and broke into song. "*Oh Cecelia. You're breaking my heart. You're taking my confidence, baby.*" He smiled and tossed the hair out of his hazel eyes.

She smiled back. "Yeah. My mom sings it, *You're raking my yard. You're taking my condiments, lady.*"

"Rad," Travis said, still smiling. Still holding Cece's hand.

"Where's my G.D. Kit Kat flurry?" Fer yelled over her shoulder. She handed a stack of napkins to a frustrated mother with a crying baby on her hip.

Travis finally let go of Cece's hand. He flipped around, grabbed a Styrofoam cup from the stack, and held it triumphantly to Fer. "On the double, my Fer-y friend."

Cece went back to sweating and filling orders, but with Travis there to help, everything ran smoothly. Travis taught her the secret of the perfect swirl, how to scoop from the ice cream tubs without cross-contaminating flavors, and how to sweet-talk the customers until they dropped their spare change into the "Tips Much Appreciated" jar. The young mothers flirted with Travis. The teenagers slapped him five through the window.

By three o'clock the long line had dwindled to a few stragglers slumped over the shaded picnic tables. Fer and Cece leaned hip to hip against the splattered counter. Cece laid her head on Fer's sweaty shoulder. "For a girl who slept through most of your classes last semester, you sure worked your ass off."

Fer flicked a sprinkle off Cece's arm and shrugged. "I've found my one true calling." She nodded her head to the machine. "Flurry engineer." She took a Kit Kat and snapped it off in her mouth.

Travis sauntered over, sweat beading under his shaggy bangs, and smiled easily. "Ferina, how we doin on ye ol supplies?"

Fer nodded to a pad of paper on the counter beside her. "I got an inventory list going. When you talk to Lizzy, tell her not to be such a cheap ass with maraschino cherries. And no more generic Andes Mints for Christ's sake."

Travis scanned the list, nodding. Then he lifted his eyes to Cece. "How's the first day, young padawan? Have you harnessed the force?" He picked up a cone and waved it around like a light saber.

Cece cracked a smile. "I think I did more harm than good. I'll do better tomorrow."

Travis waved a dismissive hand. "Psha, don't even sweat it. Plus, you still have the after-dinner rush to get your sea legs."

Cece was about to respond when the back door banged open. She could feel the mood in the small, hot room change.

"Michelle," Fer whispered in her ear. "Wicked Witch of the West."

Fer was about to say more when a girl blew in. Her bleached-blond hair, coming in brown at the roots, framed a face that might've been pretty if it wasn't locked in a perma-frown. She'd knotted her Lizzy's T-shirt tightly in the back so it hugged every curve of her too-thin body. Diamond earrings flashed from her ears and her purse was clearly designer. Cece didn't know Michelle, being a grade below her, but she'd had plenty of run-ins with her type: the I'm-too-good-for-trailer-trash-like-you type.

"You're late, Michelle," Fer said, crossing her arms and frowning. "You know how Lizzy feels about—"

"Oh, you got promoted, Fer? You're the boss now?" Michelle flashed white teeth in a smile that didn't reach her eyes. She tilted her head to the side and waited for a response. Fer just glowered.

Michelle placed a hand on Travis's shoulder. "Am I late, Travis?" She batted long, mascaraed lashes.

Travis blinked. "I...uh..."

Michelle didn't wait for an answer. She grabbed a stool, plopped down, and pulled out her cellphone.

Fer was still glowering. Cece was sure that if this scene had happened in the trailer park, Michelle would be on the ground by now, with Fer's sneaker in her teeth.

“Who's this?” Michelle asked, flicking her eyes up from her phone just long enough to glance at Cece.

Fer puffed her chest up. “She's Cece and if you mess with her, I'll rip that fake weave out your head.”

“Relax, Mike Tyson,” Michelle said, her eyes back on her phone. She extended a limp hand to Cece, still not looking at her.

Cece eyed it suspiciously. Finally, Michelle looked up and thrust her hand out again. Cece put her palm in Michelle's. “Nice to meet you,” Cece said flatly.

“Nice to meet you, Cece.” Michelle smiled. “Now if you'll excuse me,” she said, taking a makeup bag from her expensive purse, “I have to use the ladies' room.”

As Michelle rounded the corner, Cece saw her wipe off the hand she'd just shaken.

Fer turned and gripped the counter with white knuckles. “I can't stand that ho-bag. She thinks she's so much better than us because her daddy gives blow jobs to congressmen.”

Travis scooted back to the window, all too eager to take the next order.

“Who is she?” Cece asked, leaning in to Fer.

Fer glared down the hall where Michelle had disappeared. “Her dad's Shane McGrady. He's the hotshot county prosecutor. But, here's the thing,” she leaned closer, whispering, “she ain't as rich as she'd like you to believe.” Fer raised her eyebrows, smirking. “They live over in Sunset Hills.”

Sunset Hills was only two streets over from the trailer park and not much nicer: little one-garage ranches with weedy lawns and cars parked on blocks.

“If her daddy's such a hotshot, why do they live in that dump?” Cece scooped sprinkles from the counter into her cupped palm.

“Not sure, but here's what I heard. Old Shane's got himself a mondo drinking problem. Chugs his checks each week.” Fer mimed lifting a glass to her lips. “And Michelle's ma left him over it. Now they live in a crappy two-bedroom, but he still drives his Beemer and Michelle tries to keep up appearances. She's real pissed he made her get a job.”

Cece was about to respond when her cellphone rang from her pocket. Was it Mama? Her heart began to race.

A twelve-year-old boy was peering up at the laminated menu stuck to the side of the order window. “Go ahead,” Fer said, nodding toward Cece’s phone. “I’ll take this one.”

Cece nodded, pulling her phone open. The cracked screen showed her an unknown number with an out-of-town area code.

“Hello?”

“Cecelia Acha?” an unfamiliar male voice asked.

“Yeah?” She stepped toward the back and put a finger in her ear to drown out the background noise.

“My name’s Ben.” He paused. “My mom is your Aunt Beatriz.”

Cece felt a cold sweat break out across her back. “She is?”

“Yeah.” His voice was tense, almost angry. “Your call last night really messed her up. She’s been crying all night.”

“I...I’m sorry. I just... My mom needs help.”

He snorted into the phone. “Your mom has some nerve asking for help after what she did.”

“What did she do that—”

“Look. Don’t call here again. We don’t want all that drama back in their lives.”

“Wait, I—”

He hung up.

Cece stared at the phone, feeling slapped.

After a moment she pulled out the slip of paper with the family names on it. Slowly penned the word Ben below Aunt Beatriz. Then she ran her pen through it.

She had gained and lost a cousin in a matter of minutes.

Mama had a lot of explaining to do.

Tuesday 9:05 p.m.

Cece opened the freezer and pressed her forehead to the cold metal door. Her shirt clung to both pits, her ponytail had come loose, and wet strands were stuck to the back of her neck.

Her first day on the job was over.

“Brutal, right?” Fer asked as she slumped against the wall. Sweat dappled Fer’s forehead and glistened on her upper lip. Her size-eighteen body sagged from every angle. She dug out another Kit Kat and snapped it between her teeth.

Cece scraped some ice from the clump clinging to the freezer wall and pressed it to the back of her neck. “Why didn’t you tell me this job was like working in the depths of hell?”

“Because,” Fer said, chewing, “misery loves company. Can’t sweat my ass off alone.”

Cece threw a hunk of ice at her. Fer dodged and threw the remaining Kit Kat half at Cece’s head. “Hey!” Cece said. “That’s chocolate abuse.”

“Here,” Fer dug another out of the jar in between the Heath bars, Nerds and chocolate chips. She tossed the Kit Kat in a clean arch. Cece caught it and took a bite.

“Perks of the job,” Fer said, chomping on another. “Lizzy doesn’t care if we eat the merchandise as long as we don’t go crazy. Now,” Fer rubbed her palms together, “Travis took off early to smoke a bowl or whatever, so I’m in charge.” She raised an eyebrow and twiddled her fingers evilly. “Mwa, ha, ha. You will do my bidding, minion.”

Cece crossed her arms over her chest. “Minion? Who let you copy all year in Algebra?”

Fer dropped her maniacal smirk. “Fine. Forget the minion part. Just take out the trash and I’ll mop up.”

Cece looked at the bulging trash barrel next to the counter. Then she spied the one overflowing onto the cement outside. She suspected she was still a minion.

She yanked out both bags, dropping a glob of chocolate ice cream on one shoe and smearing something unidentifiable on her arm. Then she dragged them to the dark back lot where the dumpster sat reeking. The rancid smell of garbage made her gag, but she held her breath and heaved the first bag in.

“*Umph*,” said a voice from inside the dumpster. Cece froze. A head appeared.

“Oh I...” she stammered. Her mouth dropped open as a man peered out at her from the dumpster.

He was tall with short brown hair and wide dark eyes. He grabbed the lip of the dumpster and swung himself out. Despite his size—over six feet, broad shoulders, muscular arms—he moved like a gymnast. In the orange light from the bulb over the door, she took him in. Not a man, a teen, maybe seventeen with a crop of sexy stubble on his cheeks. He stood facing her, his back to the dumpster and his eyes tracking her every movement.

She took a step back.

“Sorry,” he said, watching her face. His whole body was clenched.

“Sorry?” She blinked. “I’m the one who threw garbage on your head.”

He said nothing, just watched like a frightened animal. She scanned his clothes, the too small T-shirt, tight women’s running shorts, no shoes. What was he doing in a dumpster?

“Were you...” She looked up at his face. “Were you *eating* in there?”

Even in the dark, she could see the embarrassment flood him. He shook his head and tucked his hands behind his back, a banana peel clutched in one fist.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. “We have fresh bananas.”

His eyes followed her as she set the garbage bag on the ground.

“Stay here,” she said. “I’ll be right back.” As she walked back into Lizzy’s, she could feel his eyes on her the whole way.

Inside the building, her thoughts buzzed. What was she thinking? She was going to go back into a dark alley with some stranger who was twice her size, armed with nothing but a handful of bananas? She was nuts. She glanced at Fer, who was mopping the back corner with her headphones stuffed in her ears, some indie rock blaring. Cece snagged a bunch of bananas from the counter, tucked them under her arm and raced out the back.

When she got back, he was gone. She searched the dark alley, walking to the smelly dumpster and peering in. No sign of him. Her arms drooped. The bananas were a pitiful offering.

“Cece!” Fer yelled from the doorway behind her. “Quit dickin’ around out there.”

Cece shot a glance toward the door. Should she tell Fer? And risk the scolding of her life? She walked back, the bananas at her side. “I thought these were bad. I was going to throw them out.” She held up the bananas and shrugged.

Fer picked up the bunch. “These are fine,” she said, inspecting them. “Besides, you shouldn’t hang out here alone. This is rapist central when it gets dark.”

Cece nodded, walking back inside with Fer.

She turned and looked once more. Would he be safe out there alone?

CHAPTER FIVE — LITTLE MACK

Tuesday 9:34 p.m.

When the whiskey was gone, Little Mack let the glass bottle clink to the pavement. He watched it roll back and forth on its side, his bleary eyes separating it into two bottles, then three, then back to one. His head lolled onto the soiled pile of clothes and his eyes rolled up to the stars.

Sleeping in the alley wasn't all that bad in the summer. Bugs sometimes bit him up and gangs of teenagers liked to give him a hard time, but right now the breeze felt just fine on his hot skin, the stars were out and his belly sloshed with liquid happiness. Been a while since he'd had a belly full of whiskey. Too long.

Little Mack watched the stars blur and sharpen above. Vaguely he noted Cassiopeia, a constellation his mother used to point to on those early mornings at the bus stop when she'd stand with him on the crisp snow, their breath puffing in tandem. An ache widened in his chest, but he squashed it. That was a million years ago and his mother was in the cemetery eight blocks away. He visited her last week and fell asleep on her grave.

Little Mack patted his distended tummy. The streets had been busy today and he'd made a good haul. Cross-legged with his sunglasses on, his "Every little bit helps. God bless you," sign tucked in his lap, he'd made twenty dollars. The Black Velvet whiskey was his reward for the bumper crop of loose change. Sure, he'd feel like hell tomorrow, but tonight he felt alright.

"Alright, alright, *alllriiight*," he mumbled, smiling. He got a whiff of his own breath and winced. Next twenty he got he'd buy a toothbrush and some tooth paste. Wouldn't matter tonight. No smoochin or coochin happening at the back of *Chang's Chinese Buffet*, where everything smelled like old grease and egg rolls.

Mmm. Egg rolls.

Noise from the back of the alley drew his attention. Sometimes cops woke him up and told him to move along. Sometimes asshole teenagers with red eyes and shaved heads tried to kick his ribs and step on his fingers while he slept. One time he'd awoken to one peeing on the back of his head. Punks.

In the dark, his eyes scanned the alleyway beyond. Nothing but garbage bins, scattered trash and cracked pavement. Above, fire escapes

clung to the sides of buildings. From this angle they looked like stairways to heaven. He started humming that tune under his breath and let his eyes slip back up to the stars.

Another noise, scraping on the pavement this time. He stopped humming. Was something moving back behind that trash bin? Little Mack squinted, but couldn't stop the landscape from sliding back and forth. He lay his head back down. Too hard to keep it upright.

Little Mack closed his eyes. He was about to drift off when glass fell and shattered behind him. He pulled his eyes open, fear creeping up his numb limbs. He could hear slow, steady breathing. A dog? He pushed himself up on his elbows.

Something was in the alley with him. And it sounded big.

His heart pounded in his ears. He could smell something rancid and feral. His hand trembled as he pulled himself upright again. Was he hallucinating? Sometimes when the drink took hold he saw things. Could be the Black Velvet talkin—

Two blood-red eyes stared from the shadows, hollowing him out.

He scooted back, spooked. What had eyes like that? An animal? A monster?

A deep low growl rolled out of the slash of shadow beside the brick wall.

“Dear Jesus!” Little Mack squealed. He tried to stand and fell. Panic choking him, he scampered on his hands and knees. Pain punctured his palm, glass maybe, but he ignored it. Headlights cut through the night ahead. If only he could make it to the road.

The thing behind him broke into a run.

Faster, faster Mack crawled. The end of the alley seemed miles off. His heart thudded into his throat. He'd die before he made it. His heart would give out, or— A car zoomed past twenty feet away. He was almost there.

Paws the size of bear claws slammed into his back. He crumpled to the ground, the air spewing out of his lungs. A tremendous weight pressed on him. The animal stench was everywhere. Stars swam across his vision. Paws grabbed him and flipped him over like a toddler. His head smacked mercilessly on the pavement. The world shifted and spun.

“No,” he gurgled. Vomit churned up his throat. He raised his eyes and saw a rope of saliva dripping off two rows of six-inch fangs. Hot, rancid breath pulsed against his face. He thrashed back and forth, but he was pinned. Even the whiskey couldn't dull his terror. He started to sob.

Little Mack turned his eyes to Cassiopeia as fangs cinched around his throat. He gurgled his last breath, the smell of his own blood stinging his nose.

CHAPTER SIX — CECE

Tuesday 9:47 p.m.

Cece stumbled in the trailer door, banging her knee against a stack of books. The paperbacks sprawled across the entryway.

“Shit!” she said.

“Watch your mouth,” Mama's voice said from the interior of the dark trailer.

A wreath of smoke bobbed above the couch. Her mother's narrow face scowled at her over the tattered couch back.

“Sorry.” Cece stepped inside. All day long questions had been burning inside her. What had happened with Aunt Beatriz? Was her cousin, Ben, telling the truth? Her eyes locked on the TV newscast, her family problems momentarily forgotten. The dog park down the street was on the news again? She watched as the camera panned over a large crater dug into the earth. *Another* giant meteor had crashed in the woods park? She leaned in.

Mama blocked her view, her dry lips pursed into a frown. “Where have you been all day? I been worried sick.” She smashed her Marlboro into the overflowing ashtray as if it offended her.

“Work, remember?” Cece's eyes stayed locked on the TV screen. Three craters had been found in the ten mile perimeter. Holy crap, *three* craters? That was news.

Mama shook her head slowly, her mouth open. “You shouldn't work so hard, *mi amor*.”

“Yeah, well I gotta,” she snapped.

Mama stiffened and Cece instantly felt bad. This was not the way to get Mama to open up. She tried again. “It's not that hard, really. I've perfected the soft-serve swirl.” She twirled a finger in the air. Mama lifted a small smile, nodding. Her eyes strayed back to the TV. Two minutes of parenting was all Mama had in her.

“Mama,” Cece said, easing herself down on the couch near Mama's feet. The cushions sagged heavily. Cece picked a candy wrapper out of the crack between the cushions and began folding it, mulling over what she wanted to say. “I got a call today.”

Mama didn't look up. “Nice, honey.”

“From a boy named Ben.” Cece watched Mama carefully.

“Yeah,” Mama lit another Marlboro with the flick of a gas station lighter. The smell of butane and carcinogens spiked the air.

God, this was getting her nowhere. She decided to go for it. “Ben is Beatriz's son. Aunt Beatriz.”

Mama sat bolt upright, her eyes flaring open. “Beatriz? My sister Beatriz?”

Cece nodded, biting her lip.

Mama's face tightened, lines deepening around her smoker's mouth. “What he want? Money?”

“Just to reconnect,” Cece lied. She pulled at fuzzies on the afghan, a blush heating up her cheeks. “Mama, what happened with Beatriz? Why don't we ever see them or Abuelo?”

Anger flared in Mama's eyes. She swung her legs around to the front and stood. She started pacing and cursing in Spanish.

Cece held her hands up. “Slow down. I can't understand you.”

“What I said,” she turned, her finger pointed, “is that I don't want you talking to them ever again. They'll infect this *familia* with their lies. They'll tell you things about me that are not true.” Mama walked to the kitchen counter and slammed her palms down.

“Relax, relax,” Cece said, sliding up behind her. She was expecting a reaction. She was not expecting this. Agitation could set off mood swings and push Mama into a manic phase. “I won't talk to them. If they call, I'll just hang up.” The lie felt thick in her throat.

Mama walked back to the couch, muttering in Spanish. Cece turned toward the bathroom, rubbing at a smudge of chocolate on her forearm. If that was the reaction she got when she asked Mama about her family, she'd need to figure out another way to learn what she needed to know.

Inside the bathroom, she pulled off her stained work shirt. She tugged up the sink plunger and turned on the faucet. She'd hand-wash the T-shirt here, let it dry on the porch tonight, and pray to God that no bird took its morning constitutional on it.

A spot of bright orange drew her eyes to the trash. Her heart began to pound as she reached in.

The orange pill bottle was missing the white childproof lid, but it didn't matter. The pills were gone.

With shaking hands she pawed through the crumpled tissues, the toothpaste tube, the maxi pad wrappers. At the bottom of the can, her fear turned into anger. She gripped the pill bottle with white knuckles, threw open the door, and stomped out into the living room.

Mama sat smoking. Cece stood in front of her, blocking the TV and held up the pill bottle.

“Where?!” she asked, realizing now how any second she’d burst into tears. “Where are they?”

Mama leaned forward and peered at the bottle. “What you screaming at? Lower your voice!”

“No, Mama!” She never yelled at Mama. She couldn’t stop. “Where are your pills? What did you do with them?”

Mama crossed her arms over her small chest. “I know what you did this morning to my cereal. I’m not taking that poison. I flushed them all. Over. Gone.”

“No!” Tears streamed down her face. “Why? You need these!”

Mama jutted her chin like a petulant child. “They make me feel like a dead thing. I won’t take them. I’d rather die.”

“Oh God!” Cece swiped angrily at her tears with the back of her hand. Her eyes floated over the garbage heap they called home. Help. She needed help. “We should call Abuelo. I won’t mention Beatriz. I could try to call and tell him—”

“Don’t you dare.” Mama sat up, the afghan falling off her lap. “I don’t want you talking to anyone in that family. Got that? We take care of ourselves.”

“Someone has to help us.” Tears streaked down Cece’s cheeks.

Mama stood up and threw her arms around her daughter. “Shh, shh, *mi amor*. I’ll get better with that poison out of my system. I’ll get a job. I’ll start looking tomorrow.”

Cece shook her head and pulled away. She’d heard those promises before. She dried her eyes and shuffled to her room. God, why hadn’t she locked up the pills in the first place? This was all her fault. She pinched her hands together and forced herself to stop crying. Crying wouldn’t get the money they needed. No, she’d just have to work harder. Somehow.

“Cecelia? My love?” Mama called.

Cece kept walking. She didn’t even slam her door when she entered her room. She didn’t have the energy to be angry anymore.

Tuesday 10:10 p.m.

Knuckles drummed on her windowpane. Cece stirred and blinked into the darkness of her bedroom.

“Open up, penis. The mosquitoes are eating my ass.”

Fer. Cece moaned. Her body felt like a giant knot. Her feet ached. Her head pounded. She had to work in the morning. Fer would pull her into something *fun*. Cece didn't feel like having fun.

“Seriously, dude.” Fer's eyes blinked at her through the three inch crack between the A.C. unit and the glass. “The mosquitoes are eating my ass.” The top of two white butt cheeks pressed against her window.

Cece pulled herself up. “Seriously, Fer?” she whispered. “Mama's sleeping down the hall.”

Fer's face reappeared. “Then hurry up or she'll hear my screams of agony as I die a mosquito-y death.”

Cece tromped toward the window and wrapped her arms around the A.C. unit. “Lift the window up on three,” she said to Fer through the glass. “One. Two—”

Fer lifted the window from her side. Cece gripped the heavy A.C. unit and staggered back with the weight of it, nearly dropping it as she slid it to the ground.

“Fer!” she hissed through her teeth.

Fer hoisted her body over the windowsill and rolled onto Cece's floor. She lay there and looked up at Cece with her sardonic smirk. “Countin's not ma strong suit,” she said in a mock hillbilly accent.

Cece went to the window and pulled the pane down to keep out the ass-eating mosquitoes. Then she flopped back on her bed and threw her arm over her eyes. The bed dipped as Fer sank onto it beside her. Cece felt something wet and cold press into the flesh of her arm.

“What the—?” She jerked her arm back and looked at Fer.

Fer held up a beer bottle and danced it merrily in the air. Moisture slid in rivulets down the brown glass. “Looky what Santa Fer has brought all the good little boys and girls.”

Cece flipped her head away. “Can't. Have to work tomorrow.”

“So do I, dummy.” Fer leaned closer, pressing her face into Cece's shoulder. “There's a *par-ty*.” Fer sing-songed in Cece's ear.

“Don't care.”

“With *bo-oys*,” she sang.

“So?”

“*Travis* will be there.”

Cece lifted her head. Why did Fer think she cared if Travis was there? Travis was cool. They'd talked about music and movies on one of the picnic tables just before he'd left. He'd seen *Empire Records*, a 1990s cult

hit that no one else had heard of. They'd rattled off movie lines for fifteen minutes. But, she didn't like him *like that*, did she?

Cece rolled over and looked at Fer in the dim light. Her best friend slathered on a toothy grin and batted her non-existent eyelashes. Her purple hair hung in sweaty strips along the sides of her round face. She had put on a clean shirt with some band Cece had never heard of on the front, a trio of boys with spiky hair and eyeliner scowling for the camera.

"Come on," Fer said in the first serious tone she'd used. "You can't sit around reading brain magazines all night," she said, pointing to Cece's collection of psychology magazines stacked beside her mattress.

"I was sleeping. You know? Sleep?" Cece put her hands together and rested them under her tilted head in the universal sign for sleep.

Fer ignored her. "It'll make you feel better. You're too damn depressed. Don't those things say something about distraction being a cure for depression? That sitting on your ass feeling sorry for yourself causes butt cancer or something?" Fer reached for a *Psychology Today* and pretended to flip through it. Then she rolled it up and smacked Cece's butt. "Yep, definitely butt cancer."

Cece nearly laughed before she stopped herself. God, but Fer was right. She'd just read an article about downward spirals and depression before bed. Her best friend was trying to cheer her up.

Cece rolled over and sighed. "Fine. What do I wear?"

Tuesday 10:21 p.m.

The abandoned field at the back of the trailer park echoed with the low murmur of voices. Two dozen teenagers clustered around a fire pit in the grassy abandoned lot. In the orange firelight their silhouettes bobbed and danced. Heavy metal pumped from a stereo off in the distance, the hallmark of one of Shaun's parties. Shaun was Fer's older brother. She should've guessed.

As they walked closer, Cece saw the usual suspects. The Harvey twins were sitting side-by-side in two tattered lawn chairs. Their outfits, though never identical, were nearly interchangeable— one wore a T-shirt that read *Wine 'em, dine 'em, sixty-nine 'em*, and the other, *I'm not a gynecologist, but I'll take a look*. Across the fire sat Shaun. His buzzed hair, wife-beater and sagging athletic shorts solidified his status as resident badass.

Shaun killed one beer fast, crumpled the can and chucked it at the fire.

“Hey!” Miranda, his girlfriend, in itty-bitty shorts and a cropped tank, said, “you can get ten cents for that.”

“Shut up,” he muttered without looking at her.

Miranda stuck out her tongue, flashing a piercing.

Fer pressed a wet can to Cece’s chest. “Here.”

Cece eyed the Bud Light. “Like I said, one and I’m outta here. I’m really beat, Fer.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Fer said, waving her away.

Cece cracked the can and took a drink. At least it was cold, but she never got used to the taste. It was like dog pee. How Shaun and his homies chugged can after can most nights of the week was beyond her.

“Over here,” Fer said, tugging on Cece’s elbow.

Cece followed, the long grass swaying under her feet. The phosphorescent lights of winking fireflies danced around them in the grass. Her abuelo had called them *luciérnagas* on that night long ago when he’d taken a seven-year-old Cece back to his *hacienda* in Bolivia. The house smelled like fresh-baked bread and ripe fruit. Abuelo had tucked her into a big bed with silken sheets and sang a song about the *luciérnagas* dancing in the night sky.

Fer’s hand on her elbow brought her out of the memory. “Travis, good of you to show, man.”

Travis turned, an easy smile spreading. His black Bob Marley T-shirt read *One Love*. Cece followed the smell of pot to the joint in Travis’s hand. She would smell like pot now, too. God, if Mama weren’t so oblivious, Cece would be dead when she got home.

“Girls!” he said smiling, but then he shook his head apologetically. “Or should I say, women? I was just schooling these unlearned folk on the aphorisms of Emerson and Thoreau. Care to join?”

The dreadlock-wearing boy across from Travis shrugged. “Kid takes one lit class and he thinks he’s f—ing Shakespeare.”

Travis took a drag and shook his head. “Not Shakespeare, my friend.” He blew out the smoke. “Thoreau. Walden Pond.”

The boy shrugged.

“That *Civil Disobedience* guy?” Cece asked.

“Yes!” Travis said, whirling to her. “That government is best that governs least.” Excitement flared in his red-rimmed eyes.

“Didn’t Martin Luther King study that essay when he was leading his non-violent protests?” So, she did remember something from American Lit, even though she only scraped together a C.

“True,” Travis said, taking another drag from his joint. He held it out to Cece, who shook her head. “M.L.K. got a lot of his ideas from Thoreau. That dude knew all this material garbage didn’t matter. All that matters,” said Travis, taking a step closer to Cece, his eyes sparking, “is freedom, liberty, and equality. And the simple life.” Travis gazed out over the dark field. “Doesn’t get more simple than this.”

His look was expectant, almost delirious, as if they two were the only people in on some monumental secret. For a moment she wondered if he was going to reach out and take her hand. She had no idea what she’d do if he did.

Headlights sliced through the darkness. Every head turned toward the car that parked in the gravel lot at the field’s edge. Shaun stood up, his arms flexing. *Whoever it is, Cece thought, they better be ready to take on a drunk Shaun.*

The headlights clicked off. Two car doors slammed. The gravel crunched as two shadows made their way over to the fire. Cece could make out two teenagers, a boy and a girl. Was the girl wearing high heels?

Finally, the firelight broke over their faces and Michelle walked into the clearing with a boy by her side. Remembering what had Fer said about Michelle’s family falling on hard times, Cece surveyed Michelle’s appearance. At first glance, she was dressed to the nines: six-inch heels, designer jeans, sequined tank top. But as she looked closer, Cece realized all that glittered was not gold. The Coach bag that Michelle clutched under her arm looked worn, and hadn’t she seen that tank top at Walmart? She and Michelle might not be on an even playing field, but maybe it was stacked more evenly than she’d thought.

Michelle clomped over, teetering slightly on the uneven ground, looking displeased at everyone.

The short blond boy next to her strode over and bumped fists with Shaun. Shaun handed him a dripping beer from a cooler. The two walked off into the field while Michelle stared at the fire, looking bored.

“Hey, let’s go say hi,” Travis said, stepping around the fire toward Michelle. Cece didn’t follow.

Fer slid up beside Cece. “Shaun and his drug buddies.” Fer nodded her chin to where her brother and Michelle’s boyfriend talked. “Gage is Michelle’s boy toy for the moment. He buys weed from my brother. Didn’t

think he'd invite them tonight, though." Fer shot a dirty look across the fire pit at Michelle. "Seeing her donkey face really kills my buzz."

Cece threw her arm around Fer and led her over to another pocket of conversation. The best thing to do was pretend Michelle wasn't there. The beer was pumping through her blood stream and her shoulders had relaxed one notch. One of Travis's friends flipped out a deck of cards and began a card trick. Cece picked a card, any card, and watched as the boy tried desperately to find it. When he flubbed it and dropped the stack on the ground, Cece giggled and helped him pick them up. Then she noticed Travis leading Michelle over.

"See?" he said, pointing. "Told you they were here."

"Yes, you did." She glanced at Cece. "What was your name again?"

"Cecelia." She'd already repeated it five times at work. "You know, like the song."

"I guess we listen to different music." Michelle spun away from Cece and raked her eyes over Fer like she'd smelled something bad. "Fer."

Fer narrowed her eyes. "Nobody invited you."

Cece put a hand on Fer's arm. Drunk Fer equaled dangerous Fer. If Michelle wasn't careful she'd have a throat full of teeth. "Hey, Fer, come over here and look at the, uh, fire."

Fer glared over her shoulder, but let Cece drag her away. Cece glanced back as they found two lawn chairs and sat.

Michelle had hooked arms with Travis and was leading him away.

She thought they wouldn't be seeing Travis again for a while, but five minutes later Travis was back at her side, offering her another beer. Cece smiled, but shook her head. "I'm gonna head home," she said, stifling a yawn. "Slinging ice cream can really kill ya."

"Don't I know it," Travis said, putting down his beer. "Let me walk you."

Cece scanned his face—kind, sincere and expectant. But, she didn't want him seeing inside her trailer.

"It's okay. I'm only seven rows that way." She pointed.

Fer slid up beside her. "Let him walk you." Her voice was slurred. "Frickin rapists and murders out this time a night."

Cece shot Fer a look, but then turned to Travis. "Okay," she said. "Thank you."

As she walked around the fire, the long grass tickling her calves, she caught a glimpse of Michelle. In the darkness it was hard to tell, but was that jealousy on her face? As she and Travis hit the gravel and crunched

toward home, she could still feel the burn of Michelle's eyes on the back of her head.

Travis walked next to her down the cracked pavement streets, kicking at loose stones and humming. The trailers were quiet now. The night insects buzzed along with the rickety A.C. units propped in people's windows. They strolled past the Dominicks' place with its yard gnomes, pink flamingos, and dangling wind chimes. Travis touched one with his finger as they passed and the metal tinkled softly. Somewhere a dog howled. A car drove down the main road, bumping the deep boom of some hip hop song. Then it was quiet, except for the scuff of their shoes on the pavement.

"I'm alright from here," she said. They passed Fer's trailer, a double wide with the rusty carport and fake green Astro-Turfed porch stoop. Fer's mom's Chrysler was gone. Probably sleeping at her boyfriend's tonight.

Travis shook his head. "Don't like to see a girl walk home alone." His eyes flicked over to her. "Not that it's some male chauvinist thing. Not that I think women can't take care of themselves."

"I know what you mean," she said, putting him out of his misery. The moonlight highlighted the gold in his blond hair. He chewed on strands of his soul patch with his top teeth as he walked. His eyes were red, stoner's eyes, but still as kind and endearing as ever. His arm brushed so close her skin tingled.

"So, you think Michelle is cool?" Cece asked, as they passed Ms. Howard's trailer. The ceramic Virgin Mary prayed inside her concrete shelter.

Travis shrugged his slim shoulders. "She's alright." He kicked a stone and it skittered into a flowerbed. "I feel bad for her. Her dad's real strict. And her boyfriend's a douche."

Cece looked up at Travis. "That's the first negative thing I've ever heard you say."

Travis frowned. "Sorry."

Cece shook her head. "Don't be. You see the best in everyone, so Michelle's boyfriend must really be a douche."

Travis smiled. "He is."

They turned the corner and her trailer came into view. Her heart stopped. The living room light was on.

Mama must've found her bed empty.

CHAPTER SEVEN — Hugh

Wednesday 12:23 a.m.

Hugh trekked through the brittle grass, his head down, one around wrapped protectively around his stomach. It cramped again, a sharp pain twisting his insides. He fought the urge to throw up, swallowing hard and wiping sweat off his brow. He was sick. So sick.

He kept his head down, his body hunched over and his hands protectively around his stomach. A few hours ago he'd given in to thirst and drank from a trickling steam. Now his stomach was revolting. The half-eaten jelly donut he'd snagged from a backyard picnic table had come up a while ago. His empty stomach churned with nothing to calm it.

Two days of searching for the silo in his vision. Two days of starving, running, of being constantly afraid. And now he was going to die from a drink of water.

He should go back and talk to the girl at the ice cream shop.

As he'd run away from her, the voice in his head encouraged him. *You shouldn't trust her. They are all your enemy. All of them.*

Hugh blinked and shook his head. She was his enemy? The pretty girl with the understanding eyes? He thought about her soft tan skin, the dark hair cascading over smooth shoulders. *You don't have to do that*, she'd said. Her voice echoed in his skull like a song he couldn't shake. She'd gone back to feed him, not turn him in, and still he had run. *Can't trust them*, the voice said. *None of them.*

Each person that he'd encountered struck an off-key chord in his head. *Stay away*, his instincts said. Yet, something had been different in that one moment beside the dumpster. Somehow he'd been drawn to her, to her face so open and inviting, her hands outspread to say *Come as you are*. No alarm bells. No instinct telling him to run. Then she'd gone inside and he'd doubted himself, so he'd fled.

What he wouldn't give to go back there now and stand beside her for just one more moment.

Her voice swam around his head, soft and lyrical. And that smile. He could see the curl of her lips as she'd turned to go. He could run back and wait until she left for home. He could approach her then and hear her voice, see her smile, feel...what? Feel less alone.

Bile rose up his throat, the hot acid burning his esophagus. Hugh stopped, put his hands to his knees, and gagged. Then he lifted his

bloodshot eyes to his surroundings. They'd find his body here beside the rusty tracks, the wildflowers dancing beside his bloated corpse. Or, more likely, no one would find him but the vultures.

Help. He needed help. There was no way around it. His skin might crawl every time he was around people, but if he didn't ask for help soon he'd die. Plain and simple.

Ten minutes later he came across a tiny four-pump gas station sitting between tall pines, on a long gravel driveway. It was empty except for one rusty pickup in the back. A metal *Walt's Crawlers* sign creaked lazily in the breeze. A freezer hummed in front, the word *Ice* written in huge blue letters capped with snow. Hugh eyed the padlock on the freezer, his throat tightening. What he wouldn't give for ice right now. His eyes flicked to the QuickE Mart behind the pumps. The interior, glowing with blueish white florescent light, looked empty, but he spotted the clerk. He seemed to be sleeping with his head slumped to one side. How would he react when Hugh limped up, asking for help? It didn't matter. Too late to turn back now.

His stomach tightened like a fist as he walked to the door. He looked down and saw the tight blue running shorts and his dirty, bare feet. He knew he looked homeless and crazy.

I'll just walk in and say "Hi. I'm Hugh. Can you help me?"

He took a deep breath and pushed inside.

The smell hit him first.

His hands flew up to his mouth as the putrid, decaying stench hit him like a wall. He stumbled back, his shoulder slamming into the door. Good God, what happened? His eyes flicked around the place: metal shelves with bags of chips, beef jerky, canned peanuts and candy. He spotted the trail of blood along the back by the beer fridge.

On the tile, bloody prints tracked toward the door, huge and animal. He spun, trembling. He had to get out. Fear raced up his spine as he turned toward the cash register. The clerk's back was to him, slumped in a chair against the wall.

"Hello?" he said, barely breathing. "Are you alright?"

Hugh walked over, his legs threatening to buckle. He put a trembling hand on the man's shoulder. Slowly, he turned the man around.

The clerk fell forward onto his arm. Hugh screamed and jumped back. The mangled body, slumped against the counter, was grotesque. The clerk's throat was torn away, a wide red mess of sinew and bone above his blood-soaked shirt. Wire-rimmed glasses were perched over sightless,

glassy eyes. Hugh's eyes caught on a red glob resting on the man's collar. Moments ago this man had been breathing, working, maybe reading that blood-soaked paper. A buzzing began in Hugh's ears. The world narrowed to a pinhole. He was going to pass out.

He put his hands to his knees, vaguely aware of smearing the clerk's blood from his hand onto his clothes. He sucked in ragged breaths. The smell was everywhere. With trembling fingers he drew his shirt over his nose. His vision cleared.

Get food and get out. He took a few fumbling steps toward the nearest shelf, keeping his eyes off the clerk. He grabbed a few bags of chips, beef jerky, and a box of donuts. He found a cloth bag on a rack and stuffed it full. Then he opened the fridge and snagged four waters.

Chiming sounded at the door behind him. Hugh swiveled. A cop pushed in, whistling through his teeth. The tune stopped as the cop locked eyes with Hugh. "What the...?" The cop's eyes traveled past Hugh to the dead clerk. Hugh watched as the cop's face registered shock, then fury.

No, Hugh thought. He'll think I—

"Hands up!" the cop said, clawing for the pistol at this belt. His hands shook as he pulled the gun out, but the cop locked his elbows and brought the barrel up to Hugh's chest.

Hugh shook his head, lifting both hands. "I... I didn't kill him."

"Jesus," the cop said, his face draining of color. "Jesus Christ." His eyes flicked to the body. "Joe has eight grandkids." The hitch in the cop's voice was unmistakable. The clerk and the cop had been friends.

Sweat sprang up on Hugh's forehead. He lifted a hand to wipe it out of his eyes.

"Don't move!" The cop's arms trembled, his shaggy gray eyebrows arching high. He thumbed off the safety.

"I didn't kill him." Hugh's voice was high-pitched, strained. He'd be arrested and locked up. He never should've come in here.

Hugh looked toward the backdoor. He could make it in four steps. The cop bristled and tightened his face. "I said don't move, asshole!"

Hugh blinked once, calculating. Then he turned and bolted toward the back door.

The gunshot cracked the air like a bomb. Something punched into Hugh's side. Then another shot. The glass case behind Hugh exploded. Glass shards pelted his legs and back. A can of pop sprayed a hiss of foam into the air.

He fell, the tile rising up to meet his face. He hit the ground, brain jarring, vision dimming. Then he was lying on the floor, the coolness of the tile a relief on his flushed cheek. His eyes focused on a bag of Doritos. The pain in his side burned as if a hot poker was boring deep into this stomach. It was hard to draw breath.

The world became a throbbing pulse somewhere far.
It dimmed, blackened. Gone.

Wednesday 12:31 a.m.

He came to with a start.

Hugh sat up, instantly regretting it. A piercing pain lanced his abdomen. His mind was sluggish. Why was he on the floor?

He looked around. The gas station. The cop. Where was the man that shot him? From his vantage point on the tile, the cop was no where to be seen. His eyes trailed past the shattered glass that littered the floor. An exploded pop can lay on its side, its contents a messy red puddle. Hugh reached a hand down to his side. He was bleeding.

Scooting to the edge of the shelf, he peered around the racks of Doritos. Outside, the cop sat in his black cruiser, a CB to his mouth, the red and blue flashers throwing crazy splotches on the walls.

He thinks I'm dead, Hugh thought. He had minutes, maybe seconds before the cop learned that wasn't true.

Crouching, Hugh ran to the back door. His bloody hands had trouble with the knob, but he managed after a few tries. He slid out onto a small concrete parking lot, pulling the door nearly closed behind him. A beat-up truck sat on a giant oil stain. The dumpster reeked of rotten meat and old beer, but anything was better than what he'd been inhaling inside.

He ran, hunched over, past the truck, and the gravel lot. He fled into the woods without looking back.

Shivering, he pushed himself deep, deep into the forest. When the tree cover was so dense he could barely make his way through, he stopped. A cold sweat covered his body. His legs shook and his stomach churned. He leaned his back against a tree and swallowed. He'd have to look at his wound eventually.

Man up! he told himself. He took a couple deep breaths and looked down.

The T-shirt was red except for a few spots on the collar and arms. Just below his rib cage, the bullet had ripped a jagged hole through the fabric. He bit his lip and peeled the T-shirt up. So much blood. He wiped away the blood, revealing the skin of his stomach. Hugh probed it with his fingers.

There was no wound.

The skin felt tender, liked he'd taken a proper punch, but not at all like a gunshot wound. It was like...like he had healed.

Hugh fell back against the rough tree bark and tried to keep breathing. He pressed his palms to his knees. The shovel was one thing, but a gunshot? How?

"Just keep calm," he said out loud, suddenly afraid of the thoughts banging around his head. He ran his hands over his stomach, his back, his arms. Nothing. He wiggled a finger through the bullet hole in his shirt. Then he slid down the tree and put his head in his hands.

Good God, what *was* he?

CHAPTER EIGHT — CECE

Wednesday 12:36 a.m.

Cece ran up the sidewalk, her eyes locked on light burning inside her trailer. She gritted her teeth and hurdled a faded tricycle that one of the boys next door had left on the sidewalk. Why had she gone to that stupid party anyway? She hadn't wanted to go. She'd wanted to sleep. This was all Fer's fault for dragging her out. Of course she couldn't tell Mama that or Fer would be on Mama's bad list. And you didn't want to be on Mama's bad list.

She jumped up her porch steps, nearly losing her footing as the metal rail wobbled loose. Without thinking, she turned the knob and pushed in.

"Mama, I—"

She stopped. Mama was nowhere to be seen. Cece scanned the trailer. Mama's couch was empty, the cushions dented where she normally lay. The TV was blaring. Every light was on. Cece squinted into the interior of the trailer.

"Mama?" A nervous sweat dotted her back. She glanced around. Had someone been here? The hairs on her arms stood on end as she tiptoed down the hallway toward her room. Could someone have broken in?

The noxious smell of chemicals hit her nose halfway to the bathroom. The door was closed. Behind it she heard muttering.

"Mama!" She jiggled the doorknob. "Let me in."

The door popped open and slid back slowly. Cece stepped inside.

Mama was leaning over the bathtub in her nightgown and slippers, yellow rubber gloves up to both elbows. Her hair curled away from her head in all directions. She regarded her only child with wild, frantic eyes.

"Cecelia, I glad you home from work." Her mother spoke so fast that the words ran together. "Just cleaning this mess up. Help me get this tub clean." She dropped back into the bathroom and scrubbed like a madwoman.

Which of course she was.

"Hey," Cece said, stepping into the bathroom, "It's past midnight. You can clean tomorrow." She pulled at her mother's elbow, just bones and skin under a loose cotton robe.

Mama shook her head and continued to scrub. "Can't leave it like this, *mi amor*. 'S a mess. Filthy. Help me." The brush made a shushing sound against the tub wall.

Manic. Mama was now in the manic stage of her Bipolar Disorder. Cece had read every article she could get her hands on about the disease. The manic phase could last a few hours, a few days, or longer. And with all the pills gone and no money to buy new ones, who knew what was next for Mama? The possibilities were endless and terrifying. Once in eighth grade Mama had disappeared for four days. Another time, she'd bought them a new car and had it repossessed in the same week. And how many times had she been picked up for shoplifting?

"Mama, please." Cece's voice broke.

Mama paid her no mind. Her bony knees pressing into the dirty tile, Mama scrubbed the tub, her elbow cranking like a piston. "We get this clean, don't you worry. All clean. Just help me get this grout and then I work on the sink."

Cece slid down the hallway wall and sat among the trash. There was no stopping Mama now. Waiting for Mama to wear herself out, Cece sat a silent vigil.

Wednesday 8:12 a.m.

Cece woke with a start. Morning. Ms. Kaminski's dog howled outside. She shifted and her elbow *thunked* into a toaster. What was she doing on the hallway floo— Mama.

The bathroom was empty. She listened for movement and heard none. Mama must've given up cleaning and gone to sleep. Maybe things weren't as dire as she thought.

"Mama?"

No trace. Cece flung open the front door and peered into the carport. No trace of her mother.

Cece stuffed her feet into her flip-flops, thundered down the front steps, and tore down the road. She ran to Ms. Kaminski's and pounded on the screen door. Ms. K was the only person in the park that Mama ever talked to.

"Ms. K!" Cece banged her fist on the screen door. It rattled in its casing. Harley, the cockier spaniel, staked on his chain in the side yard, barked like mad. "Ms. K, I need your help!"

Cece's mind raced. The last time Mama went manic, she'd taken off like this. She'd come back eighteen hours later with a dozen dollar store bags slung over her arms, the cops right behind.

Through the screen, Cece watched as the old woman lumbered forward from her back bedroom. She wore a flowered housedress and flattened slippers. Veins stood out like Ramen noodles on her white legs. Her thinning white hair showed too much scalp.

“Cecelia, is everything alright?” Her arthritic fingers fumbled for the door latch.

“Ms. K, is my mom in here? Have you seen her?” Cece peered over Ms. K’s shoulder into her trailer. It smelled of mothballs and cheese. An old rocker with worn arms and a cushioned seat rested in front of a television. *The Price is Right* blared on the screen.

Ms. K shook her head and frowned. “She run off again?”

“I don’t know. Will you let me know if you see her?”

Ms. K nodded. “Sorry, sweetheart. I’ll let you know if I see her.”

Cece was already heading down the sidewalk. She ran around the trailer park once, checking down all the rows, but Mama was nowhere to be found. By the time she got back to the trailer, she was tired and footsore. She clomped up her porch steps, a thick dread hanging over her.

When her eyes found the clock, she realized she was over an hour late for work. She scrambled around the trailer for her keys and phone. She was on her bike and pedaling down the block in seconds.

She skidded up to the ice cream shop, dropped her bike at the back door, and almost ran into Lizzy.

Her boss whirled around, placing both hands on her hips. Her ratted hair was clamped back in a banana clip, the blond bangs spilling over the top like a hair sprayed wave. She scowled at Cece. “Here you are. We’ve been trying to call.” She pinched her lips together.

“Lizzy, I’m sorry. It was my mom. She’s gone—”

Lizzy’s red fingernails sliced through the air, cutting her off. “Cecelia, you know what I hate more than someone being late?”

Cece shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Behind Lizzy, Travis offered a sympathetic shrug. Michelle, standing next to him, smirked.

“I can’t *stand* when someone tries to blame their screw-ups on others.” Her carefully drawn-on eyebrows drew together. “My numb nuts ex-husband tried to blame our breakup on *me*,” she pointed to her chest, “when I knew all along *he* was boinking Darcy in the back of his Suburban. Is that what you’re trying to do to me?” Lizzy flashed nicotine stained teeth. “You trying to screw me, Cecelia?”

Cece dropped her head. “No ma'am, but you don't understand. My mom's *missing*. If I could just get an hour to go looking for her...” She trailed off when Lizzy's scowl did not fade.

“You can have the whole day if I fire you right now.” Lizzy jutted her chin and waited.

Cece dropped her eyes and shook her head.

“Didn't think so.” Lizzy wiped a smudge of goo off the counter and frowned. “I'm a three-strikes kind of lady. You get another chance. But if you're late again, your ass is grass.” She gave Cece a final look. “Travis,” she said, snapping her fingers. “Get Cecelia a spare shirt from the back.” She turned to Cece. “It'll come out of your check, little lady.”

Cece nodded, but the news stung. She needed every bit of that money. She opened her mouth to tell Lizzy, but her boss was already stalking toward the back with her cellphone in hand. The conversation was over.

Cece grabbed the T-shirt from Travis, offered him a pathetic smile, and shuffled to the bathroom. Once inside she locked the door and slumped against the wall. She felt sucker-punched. First her mother went missing, then she got slammed by Lizzy, and now she had to pay for her extra T-shirt. She'd have to work nine hours with a fist of worry clenched around her stomach. She sat on the toilet and stared at the floor. A few dead flies lay on the peeling linoleum tile. Cece felt like one of those fly carcasses: broken, lifeless, and looking for hope that would never come.

Wednesday 3:43 p.m.

Travis leaned on his elbows and waggled his eyebrows up and down at Cece. “Season three of *X-Files* is by far the best. Mulder really hits his stride, man. And Scully's bangs quit being so,” he tugged at his hair, “poufy.”

Cece giggled. “Definitely less pouf, but season four has that awesome episode with the genetic inbred farm mutants.” Oh God, did she hear herself? Back in school this conversation would've been social suicide.

“True, true,” Travis said, shaking out a handful of chocolate chips from the container and tossing them into his mouth. “That was a dope episode.”

From the corner she could feel Michelle's eyes pressing on them. Michelle hadn't turned a page in her *US Weekly* in a half an hour. Why was Michelle interested in their conversation? To torture her later? She had

enough to worry about with Mama wandering the streets in a manic frenzy. She pulled out her cracked cellphone and stared at the screen. No calls. Mama had been missing for over five hours. She should leave work and look, but then she'd lose her job. Besides, Mama had taken off tons of times and always returned home. But what if she was out shopping? Maybe she should call Ms. K again to see—

“Customer!” Michelle yelled, hopping off her stool. She shoved between Travis and Cece to the order window.

“What d'you want?” she asked the pre-teen girl eying the menu.

“A slushy,” the girl lisped, tapping a finger to her braces in thought. “Blue Raspberry.”

Cece reached for a Styrofoam cup. “I'll get it.”

Michelle shoved past her. “I'll get it, butterfingers.” Michelle flicked a look over her shoulder, narrowing her heavily mascaraed eyelashes. “You can take out the trash.” She lowered her voice. “You'll feel right at home.”

Cece glared at Michelle. She'd taken taunts like this her whole life: about her Salvation Army clothes and the free lunch she got at school every day. *Stick and stone, mi amor*; Mama would say. *Stick and stone*. It was Fer who fought back and it was Fer's day off.

Cece plastered a smile on her face and went out to collect the overflowing trash bags.

The sun baked her hair as she strode out onto the blacktop out front. The trash barrel smelled like a dead animal in the hot sun. Cece breathed through her mouth as she pulled off the dome lid. Five goopy bowls spilled out onto the pavement. A splash of something red splattered her shoe. Two teenage skater boys, sitting on the picnic table with boards in their laps, snickered at her misfortune. She shot them a dirty look, picked up the bowls and shoved them into the black bag. Then she hoisted the trash over her shoulder and shuffled to the back.

A man stepped out of the shadow.

Cece jumped back.

The boy from the dumpster. His arms and legs were a mess of dirt and scratches. He was shirtless and the skin on his sculpted body was raw and red. His expression? Terrified.

“Oh my God, what happened?” she asked, dropping her trash bag. His jaw was tight, his eyes hollow. She stepped back, her hands starting to tremble. “Are you hurt?”

Finally his voice broke from his throat, a cracked whisper. “I didn’t know where else to go. I…” He looked down at his trembling hands. “I shouldn’t have come. I’m sorry.” He swiveled to go.

“Wait!” She held her hands out as if that could stop him. What was she doing? She shouldn’t be talking to a strange, shirtless boy. But, he looked absolutely terrified. How many times had she wished someone would step in to help her? How many times had she faced her terrors alone?

She had to think quick or he’d bolt again. She slipped both hands around her body and lifted the baggy work shirt off her head. His mouth dropped open.

Clad only in a thin white tank top, she held her T-shirt out to him.

“Here,” she said. His were so deep, so brown, she could fall into them. “Take it.”

He took a step toward her. She looked into his face, the strong chin covered with a few days’ worth of stubble, the way his sorrowful eyes watched her like she was a falling star and he was making a wish. She could smell his earthen scent beneath the dirt. Heat ran up her arm as his hand closed around the T-shirt.

He lifted his eyes to hers, a question forming on his face.

“You can’t walk around shirtless,” she said. “Do you need medical attention? Should I call someone?”

He shook his head vigorously. “Don’t call anyone.”

“Then what happened?”

He pulled on her shirt. The flex of his chest drew her eyes, his washboard abs, the ripple in his thick arms as he pulled the pink shirt on, tugged it over all that muscle.

“I… I just got scared.”

“Oh… Okay.” He wasn’t ready. She knew what that felt like.

“What’s your name?”

She dropped her eyes and smiled. “Cecelia. Cece.”

“Thank you, Cece.”

“I don’t know your name.”

He looked up at her. “It’s… Hugh.”

Voices from inside. Cece stiffened. “They’re coming.” She turned around, then spun back to Hugh. “Where are you sleeping tonight?” She shook her head. “Never mind, just meet me back here at nine. Okay?”

The nod of agreement came immediately, relief flooding his eyes. Seeing the fear leave his face sent warm tingles across her chest.

She smiled, lifted her hand in parting, and then turned and walked back into the shop.

CHAPTER NINE — HUGH

Wednesday 4:17 p.m.

Hugh watched Cece walk back into the ice cream shop. Then he stared at the doorway for ten minutes hoping she'd reappear. A police siren down the street shook him out of his daze. He had to hide out until after sundown. Then he'd see her again. And food, hopefully. God, he was starving. He pushed the hunger aside (as much as he could) and slipped back down the alley and out of town.

Going to her was the right thing to do. He'd felt torn up, shaken to the core. The dead man's face, frozen in terror, floated after him wherever he went. Every so often his fingers would stray down to his stomach and probe the wound, or lack thereof. His world had flipped upside-down and there was no one to turn to. No one but the girl at the ice cream shop. Cece. Her name was Cece. As he tore through the brush, he pictured her again: her petite frame, the way the white tank top had contrasted so nicely with her brown skin, the way it clung to her curves.

What if she turns you in? He silenced that nagging voice as he thought of her face.

Hugh found himself at the edge of the trees where a train track cut through. In the distance he could see the abandoned train cars. Rusty browns, maroons, navy blues, with the spray-painted tag marks running along the sides. He'd gotten here so quickly. It wasn't ... normal.

"I'm not normal," he muttered to himself. He rubbed a hand over his abdomen again, feeling the smooth pink skin under the T-shirt Cece had given him. Hugh looked around the train yard and felt goosebumps race up his arms. He had powers. There was no denying it any longer. He might need them to survive.

He stepped over to the track and eyed the stretch of railroad ties. Hugh placed his feet on a wooden slat. He flexed his filthy toes, his eyes looking north. The worn gray boards and rusty rails tracked off to the right about a quarter mile up. He had a good couple miles before any civilization. He flexed his calves, inhaled, and took off.

He raced along the tracks, pumping his arms, feeling his legs coil, kick out and pump back. He felt like a machine. The grass on either side of him blurred to a green-brown smear. Trees clipped by so fast he couldn't count them. The wind dashed tears from his eyes, rippled his clothes, his

hair. When he finally stopped and saw just how far he'd run in less than a minute, he let a smile slink up his face.

Pretty damn fast.

He trotted back to the abandoned train cars, feeling great for the first time in days. There was no doubt that he was faster than an average human. That sure would help. What else could he do?

Hugh walked over to the cars, looking for something to test out his next theory. He stepped next to one of the mammoth train car boxes, recalling the way the shovel had dented against his head. Hugh picked a spot on the train car's side, just left of rivets the size of silver dollars. Then he folded his hand into a fist, reached back, and threw a punch.

Dong! Pain radiated from his hand up his arm, but the sight of the train car rocking back and forth, shuddering, made him forget his throbbing knuckles. The car slammed to rest on the tracks.

He'd rocked a twenty ton train car and put a massive dent in the side.

Good God.

His hand. Puffy and red, his knuckles looked mangled, but as he watched, the redness subsided, as did the pain. Soon he could flex it without wincing. Feeling his bones stitch themselves back together was not something he'd get used to any time soon, but, damn, that could come in handy.

He smiled, feeling just crazy enough to try anything at this point. He squared up to the rectangular metal box. It had to weigh at least twenty tons. He slipped his hands under the metal lip at the bottom. He looked down at the massive wheels that rested on the track in front of him. The sheer size of the object him chuckle.

Hugh took a deep breath and pulled.

His arms tensed and legs flexed. The veins on his neck pulsed with the strain. For a split second he thought, *See, I knew it'd never work.* Then the metal he was gripping lifted up. The car creaked and shifted.

He looked down and saw the back wheels on his side hovering two feet off the ground. Suddenly the weight was lifted from his hands as the train car toppled and fell. Hugh threw his arms up over his eyes, jumping back into the dirt.

BOOM! The train car smashed into the earth, shaking the ground. Birds sprung up from the trees, cawing.

When the dust cleared, Hugh stared in awe. On its side, the train car, rusty wheels and gears facing him, looked like a slaughtered animal. It didn't seem real. Yet, he'd seen it with his own eyes.

Hugh took off, sprinting through the forest. He'd made one hell of a racket and needed to put some distance between himself and the train yard if anyone came investigating. Running, he couldn't help but smile.

Super powers. Ha. Now if only he could find that silo and figure out why he was here.

CHAPTER TEN — HARSON

Wednesday 7:32 p.m.

When the microwave dinged, Harson shot a glance at it from across the room. With his recliner thrown back to full tilt, even the thought of a warm microwave dinner didn't stir him from his chair. The dinner needed to cool for a few minutes anyway. He laid his head against cushion and closed his eyes.

It had been the right decision, swapping his sixty-inch LCD TV for the recliner in the divorce. Susan had wanted both. He pictured her downturned mouth and the ugly green sweater she'd worn the last time he'd seen her at the lawyer's office. Just thinking about Susan raised his blood pressure, something the doctor told him to avoid. Well, how could he keep his blood pressure down when his wife left him and took their dog?

He missed that damn dog.

The microwave beeped again, reminding him his Hungry Man dinner was ready. He pushed down the recliner's lever and the footrest dropped with a metal groan. His hips ached as he stood. His doctor had told him to get more exercise since his job was so sedentary, but who had the energy? Chasing down teenage delinquents all day made you plum tuckered. Sure, he did it from his Ford Focus, but dealing with their lip, their waving middle fingers, sucked all the energy right out of him. Two years until retirement. Two more years of cruising the parking lot and handing out parking tickets to high school brats while they silently wished him plagues of ball cancer. Retirement couldn't come fast enough.

He slid the black plastic tray out of the microwave, the pads of his fingers burning. The Salisbury steak did not look one bit like the picture on the carton, all goopy and brown. He shrugged and peeled back the plastic covering. Steam curled up from the meat and potatoes. He turned back to his recliner. That's when he noticed the sliding glass door was open.

He stopped, staring at the open door. How in the name of baby Jesus did the back door get open? Had he opened it when he got home, a subconscious habit left over from the days when the dog yelped and danced until you let her out? He paused, his hand on the wooden door handle. He peered into his backyard, the one that had made Susan clutch his arm and gasp when they'd first seen it. The half-acre lawn (a pain in the ass to mow) led down to the state park. Giant pines, sycamores, and

maples swayed gently in the evening breeze. Twilight fell in the west and the sky was a rosy pink. Susan loved this time of day, loved to sit on the back porch with a lo-cal beer and watch the stars come out. If she were here—

A noise from inside jolted him. He swiveled, his heart pounding. He scanned the house from where he stood, looking for signs of an intruder. The kids at school weren't big fans, but they wouldn't have the brass cojones to break into his house, would they? He thought of the Louisville slugger under his bed. He might be sixty-one, but he could swing for the fences if he had to, goddamn it.

He hustled to the back bedroom, his heart still thudding. Every dark crevasse could hide an attacker. He passed the bathroom and nearly screamed when he saw movement until he realized it was just his reflection slipping past the door.

It's nothing, he told himself. But then, why did his hands tremble so much on the bedroom doorknob?

He pushed open the door. It creaked on its hinges, making the hairs on his arms stand up. From the doorway, he peered in. No sign of forced entry. He hustled to the bed and bent down, his old knees creaking. With one arm he swept under the bed, feeling dust bunnies, shoeboxes and finally, the bat. He circled his hand around the smooth wooden handle.

Then it grabbed him.

Harson screamed. Something gripped his arm like a vice and yanked. He lurched forward, his shoulder striking the bed frame, rocking it. He scrambled, digging his free hand into the frame, holding on for dear life. What in all holy hell—?

His attacker tugged him hard, his head slamming into the frame. Harson screamed, stars dancing across his vision. His arm would tear off. What had him? *Jesus help me*, he prayed.

“I have money! In the safe, I have money! I'll give you whatever you want.”

No answer. Slowly, whatever it was began to reel him in.

“Let go and I'll give you anything!” he screamed, kicking his legs. What was that smell? Like decaying meat. He pulled up with his free arm, but it had him.

Harson screamed as it yanked him under the bed.

Beside him, rancid breath pulsed on his face and he began to cry.

CHAPTER ELEVEN — CECE

Wednesday 8:07 p.m.

Cece was wiping down picnic tables on the pavement slab when her cellphone buzzed. She dropped her rag and clawed at her jeans, scrambling to retrieve the phone. She'd been waiting for a call from Mama all day. Her hands trembled as she stared at the cracked screen. A picture of Fer making an obscene gesture popped up.

"Damn," Cece whispered. She answered the phone. "Yes?" she drawled, trying to keep the annoyance out of her voice.

"Dude, see if you can get out early. There's a boat party on Hunter's Lake. Shaun said he would drive us."

"Can't," she said, eying Travis's silhouette as he moved inside the ice cream shop. He probably wouldn't mind that she was on the phone, but Michelle would freak. She picked up the rag, turned from the front window, and pretended to wipe. "Can you run by my trailer? I need to know if Mama's home."

"I got your text and went by there ten minutes ago. Nada." Fer breathed into the phone. "Sorry, chica."

Cece shrugged. "It's alright. Hey, I gotta go. I'll call you when I get off."

"You better, wiener. But, for real though, ask Trav if he can close up. This party will be dope."

"Sure." Cece hung up and stared at the phone. The hollow feeling had not left her stomach all day. It was after eight o'clock and Mama was still not home. What kind of trouble was she getting into? Shoplifting? Jail? Cece pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to think. She could call the cops, but if they found Cece alone, they'd take her to Children's Village. She'd know a kid at school who had to go there and he'd said it was just like prison. Ms. K was too old to help and Fer's mom was too unreliable. Slowly her hand reached into her pocket and pulled out the little square of paper. Unfolding it, she touched the three names with the pads of her fingers, lingering on Ben. Ben, written and crossed out, in a matter of seconds. She pulled out her phone and found his number before she thought about it too long.

It rang once, twice. Her breath pulsed against the phone, thick and heavy. Thank God for a slow after-dinner crowd. She looked inside the shop again, the order window glowing brightly in contrast to the gathering

dark. Travis and Michelle must've been in the back because she couldn't see them. Cece leaned her hip against a picnic table and waited. Cars began flicking on their headlights, yellow beams slicing through the purple twilight.

"Hello?" Ben said. "Hello?"

Cece stood up, swallowing hard. "Don't hang up."

"Who is this?" he asked, his voice growing wary.

"It's your cousin. Don't hang up."

There was a long pause. "Why shouldn't I?"

Cece paced on the blacktop. She stopped before she got to the street, turned and walked back toward the tables. "Because... Because we're family."

"Yeah, right." She could hear the phone pull away.

"My mom ran off," she said, pressing the phone hard into her cheek. "We...I need help." She leaned against the splintered tabletop, her head spinning. "I can't do this alone."

"Well, maybe it's better for you that she's gone." His voice was so unfeeling.

"God, what did my mom do that makes you hate her?" Cece white-knuckled the phone, a desire to chuck it tightening in her chest.

His voice came closer. She pictured him pressing the phone back to his ear. "You really don't know?"

"My mom...she won't tell me." Cece glanced up at the order window. Travis peered out, looking for her. She slid the phone around and waved her dishrag at him. She didn't have much time.

A long pause. Ben's voice came back in a whisper. "Fine," he said impatiently. "But my mom can't know I told you or she'll flip a gasket." Cece wondered at his age. Seventeen? Fourteen? Was he tall or short? Did he look like her? "What did she tell you about why they came to America?"

Cece thought for a moment, tracking a finger over words carved into the tabletop. Someone had carved "God is dead" in violent, angular lines. "She's never said a word. All I know is she's really pissed and she won't call anyone in the family."

Ben blew a puff of breath into the phone. "I don't know the whole story, but my mom said back in Bolivia your mom stole her boyfriend, who's my dad, and got knocked up. Our abuelo blamed my mom for it, saying she was the older sister, or for having my dad around, or whatever. So, he sent them both to America in shame."

Cece looked up, choking on emotion. Her mother had been sent away in shame because of her? Ben's father was her father, too? "Go on," she whispered.

"Well, my dad followed them to America and apologized to my mom. She took him back and they got married and had me. But then ten years ago, your mom showed up and hooked up with my dad or whatever. My mom caught them fooling around. It's your mom's fault they're divorced." Bitterness and anger coated his voice.

Cece pressed her hand to her head, trying to nail down all the pieces of his story. Her father was Aunt Bea's husband. But that would make Ben her...half-brother? Mama broke up her sister's marriage? Mama had never seemed remotely interested in men. She'd never brought one home, never stumbled in the door late with hickies on her neck or numbers scrawled on napkins. Cece shook her head. "That doesn't sound right."

"What doesn't? That your mom's a whore or that she broke up my family, because it all makes sense to me."

"You can't say that about my mom! You don't even know her."

"I know what she did," his voice was loud, sharp. "I don't really need to more than that."

She flicked her eyes back to the window and found Michelle staring out at her. "How do you know your mom's not lying?" God, she was running out of time and was being sucked into a childish argument.

"I know my parents are divorced," he said. "I remember them screaming, her throwing plates, him trying to apologize. Now I have to see my dad on long weekends and holidays thanks to your mom."

"Well, it's *our* dad's fault, too."

"Don't call him that!" he shouted into the phone. "He's not your dad."

"From what you just told me it sounds like he is." Cece watched as Travis headed her way. She clenched her fists. Everything was falling apart. "Look, whatever happened, it's in the past. We're family. We should put this behind us."

"You're only saying that because you need something from us," he said, his voice cold again.

"Now you listen." She stood up, her hands trembling.

"Cece, what up, man?" Travis was at her elbow. "Everything okay?"

She gave Travis a one-minute finger. "Ben," she said, cupping her hand around the phone, "My mom is *missing*. I'm all alone. She's gone manic. If we don't get help..." a sob rose up in her throat. She couldn't cry. Not now.

There was a long pause. When he answered, his voice was ice. “She should've thought of that ten years ago.” The line went dead.

Cece turned slowly to Travis, dropping the phone like a lead weight.

“You okay?” he asked, touching her arm tenderly.

“I'll be fine,” she lied.

Wednesday 9:02 p.m.

Cece stood in a cone of light, peering into the alley. The sky was deep purple, the first stars showing. The bag of trash she'd offered to take out lay forgotten at her feet.

“Hugh!” she whisper-shouted. Her eyes searched the shadows. She peered into the dark alleyway. The dumpster was a black rectangle next to the brick wall. She didn't see him anywhere. “Hugh!”

She stepped forward into the puddling blackness. Goosebumps ran the length of her arms and she stopped, her eyes scanning the alley. Earlier someone mentioned a murder seven blocks from here. A homeless man had been torn to pieces. She shivered. No one had been murdered in Auburn in years. And here she was standing in the dark, calling to some strange boy.

She took a step back into the cone of light. He wasn't out there. She was surprised at how much she'd looked forward to seeing him. After that awful phone call, it was the one thought that had carried her through the rest of her shift. She'd thought out how she'd clothe him, feed him, and send him on his way. Now it seemed silly. He wasn't a lost cat. He was a boy, a very large boy who she did not know.

She flicked her eyes to the heavy, gray clouds gathering above. Where would he sleep if it rained?

Cece wandered out front and started to pick up the scattered paper napkins and plastic spoons dropped beneath the rickety picnic tables. She scooped up a half-eaten waffle cone and tucked it in the garbage can. She smiled at the elderly couple still sharing a hot fudge sundae and gave a good rubdown to their aging terrier before they finished up and left. The last customers gone, she sighed, big and heavy.

A deep base rumble shook the ground as a black sports car pulled into the parking lot. The headlights flashed in her eyes, making her throw a hand up to shade them. The door snapped open and a figure strode toward Cece.

“Where’s Michelle?” The boy glared at her, annoyed. He was short—five-foot-six with spiked blond hair and straight white teeth. A spattering of pimples dotted his chin, but not enough to mar the smug handsomeness of his face. It took Cece a moment to place him: Gage, Michelle’s boyfriend.

Cece pointed toward the window, happy to divert his attention from her. “She’s inside.”

“Why don’t you do me a favor and go fetch her?” He sat back on a picnic table and splayed his arms across the tabletop. His cellphone pinged in his pocket and he drew it out. The blue light on his face made his eyes look sunken.

He looked up and his face darkened, noticing her still standing there. “You slow or something?” He knocked his knuckles on his head. “Anybody home?”

Cece couldn’t move. Heat rose up her neck. She remembered Gage now. It’d been a long time since he’d smeared chocolate on her desk in 4th grade and told everyone her family was so poor they ate dog shit for dinner. She remembered the hot tears dribbling down her face as the class snickered.

Stick and stone, mi amor. Stick and stone.

She looked down at Gage. His smug smile still hung at the corners of his mouth. “Find her yourself,” she said.

Gage dropped his jaw, his eyes suddenly finding her. “What’d you say?”

Cece gripped the trash bag tighter and thrust out her chin. “I *said* find her yourself.”

Gage stood up, flashing a smile that never reached his eyes. “Well, aren’t you sassy.” He took a step closer.

“You should leave.” Her body tightened. She could knee him in the groin and run, but what if he came after her?

“Get away from her.”

Both heads turned. Tall and broad-shouldered in his pink Lizzy’s T-shirt and spandex running shorts, Hugh stood at the edge of the parking lot. His fists were clenched at his sides, veins on his arms popping. And his eyes were locked on Gage.

Gage took a step back. “You work here, asshole? Or do you just like pink?” He flashed his teeth again, but Cece could see the fight draining out of him. Hugh was a foot taller and had a good fifty pounds on Gage. Gage’s eyes flicked between Hugh and his car, parked across the lot.

Coward.

Hugh took a step forward. "You're still too close to her."

"What're those, women's panties?" Gage snorted, nodding to Hugh's shorts. He stepped backwards toward his car, the keys white-knuckled in his hand.

Hugh closed the gap and positioned himself in front of Cece. His muscles filled every inch of his pink T-shirt. He made Gage look like an underfed twelve-year-old.

"Go while you're still able."

Gage looked between Hugh and Cece. "Tell Michelle she can get her own f—ing ride." He glared at Hugh. For a moment it looked like he would speak, but instead he turned and stomped to his car. The engine flared and he peeled out, the boom of his speakers thudding into the twilight.

Hugh turned to Cece, his stiff, corded arms pulsing with anger. "Did he hurt you?" His eyes traced her for injury.

She shook her head. "Just my ego." She tried to laugh, but it was hollow. "Thanks." She looked up into his brown eyes. "You got here just in time."

Hugh paused and eyed Gage's tail lights. "He looked like trouble."

"He is." Cece wrapped her arms around herself. "Come on," she said. "Follow me."

They stepped around the building and stopped next to the dumpster. The smell of day-old food festering in the hot sun was overwhelming. It would cling to her long after she slung the bag in. Maybe garbage duty wasn't such a hot idea.

She threw the bag over the lip of the dumpster and rubbed her hands on her shorts. Hugh watched her every move as if she might break apart. "I'm okay," she said. "Relax." She put her hand on his arm. He was as hot as asphalt pavement on a ninety-degree day. She flicked her eyes to his face. "Are *you* okay?"

He nodded. "Who was that boy?" A vein on his neck throbbed.

"Just some idiot. Never mind." She looked him over. "Have you eaten?"

He nodded.

She put a hand on her hip. "You wouldn't lie to me, would you?"

His face softened. "Okay, no, I haven't eaten."

"See, I knew it." She blew out her breath and looked back toward Lizzy's. "I gotta finish up. Will you wait?"

He nodded again.

She ran in and found Michelle and Travis in the pantry. In the narrow closet, Travis slid the cylinders of canned fruit topping onto the shelves. Michelle hovered right behind him, looking with rapt attention as he started unloading cans of hot fudge. Cece watched as Michelle leaned forward, her chest in Travis' face.

"Travis," Cece said. Michelle jumped back and shot Cece a dirty look.

Travis' face brightened. "What up, C? How'd trash duty go?" He tossed hair out of his eyes.

"Fine. Hey, are we done? I gotta go. I mean, if that's okay."

Travis' face fell. "Yeah, hey listen, Michelle and I were thinking 'bout catching a flick. You down?"

Another glare from Michelle. Apparently she wasn't interested in making it a threesome. Cece shook her head. "I gotta go. Michelle, when I was out there Gage stopped by. He said you needed to find your own ride home."

Michelle frowned and dug her phone out of her back pocket. "Shit! I gotta go." She started tapping on the keypad. "Gage is pissed. Shit!" Michelle pushed past Cece.

"Do you need me to stay?" Cece asked, her eyes flicking to the back door. Did Michelle see Hugh? Would he run?

Travis waved a dismissive hand. "Naw. I got this. Go ahead and do whatcha gotta do."

"Thanks, Travis!" She gave him a big smile. Then she spun and trotted out the back door.

She walked up to where Hugh waited for her in the alley, the dark pressing around them, making her skin tingle. "I need to get my bike. Then we can go back to my place and I'll get you some supper. Okay?"

He nodded again. Then he cleared his throat as if his voice was rusty. "That would be nice."

She pushed her bike and he walked steadily beside her. Overhead the storm clouds thickened, plunging the world into early darkness. The air hung heavy and damp. A distant rumble and a flash of lightning crackled across the horizon. They passed a liquor store, wafting the delicious smell of pizza. Hugh's head turned. Cece really hoped Mama had food in the fridge.

Mama. What if she got home and Mama was there? Well, that was what she wanted, right? Then she could stop worrying she was dead in a ditch somewhere. But this wasn't the first time Mama took off when she was manic and stayed away for two, three, even four days without calling.

But if Mama were gone, they'd have the house all to themselves. Cece felt awful for even thinking it, but she let her eyes stray to Hugh, quietly walking next to her. He towered at least a foot over her, his muscled arms swinging in time with his footfalls. The scruffy beard only added to the rugged handsomeness of his face. She *wanted* to be alone in a house with Hugh. What hot-blooded teenage girl wouldn't? He was the kind of hot you found in magazine ads for Gucci or Hugo Boss. Then again, girls who let random boys into their bedrooms when their parents weren't home ended up on *Dateline* with actors portraying their last hours alive.

Plus, there was the hoarding. He couldn't see that.

They rounded into her trailer park as the first raindrops began to splat on the warm pavement. Ms. K's dog gave a few tired growls and tucked himself under the stoop. Some seventies rock ballad floated from a few trailers down. They slipped past a rusty Dodge with a mismatched door, the rain pinging steadily off the roof.

"Sorry. It's not the nicest neighborhood, but it has its charm." Cece wondered what Hugh thought of her neighborhood. It had to be better than a dumpster, but still...

"It's nice," he said. "Homey."

She chuckled. "That's a polite way to put it."

When they came to her trailer, her heart was pounding. She pulled her bike into the stuffed carport and pointed inside to a green, fraying lawn chair. "Can you wait here? I gotta check something."

Could he even hear her over the deafening rain on the metal carport roof?

He sat in the lawn chair, gripping the rusting metal arm rests, and smiled. "I'll be right here."

She ran up the steps and plowed into her front door.

Cece stood on the welcome mat, dripping. No sounds from inside. The trailer looked untouched from when she'd left this morning.

"Mama!" She listened. "Mama, you here?"

Nothing. Mama was out there somewhere in the rain.

An awful, selfish part of her was happy Mama was gone. She was a terrible daughter. She would rot in hell. But, what could she do with no car in a torrential downpour? And Mama had always come home unscathed before. Just like Fer's cat, Frank. He'd be gone for days, but would always come back, sometimes scratched, sometimes beat up, but happy to be home.

Christ, was she really comparing her mother to a cat?

Hugh was outside in the rain. She needed to make a quick decision.

She turned to step outside, but stopped with her hand on the screen door. Should she invite him in? She scanned the cluttered living room. A rancid smell wafted from the kitchen trash. Something that looked like old pizza lay on the carpet next to the couch. Could she really bring him in here? Then there was the whole inviting-a-strange-boy-into-her-home thing. And the fact that Mama could come home any minute and find her alone. And with a boy.

She peered out the screen, rain splashing into her face. Hugh sat, drenched to the core, blinking water out of his eyes with long dark lashes, the shirt she gave him clinging helplessly to his chest. She stared at his abs and sucked in a hot breath. No, she had to think! Above, lightning split the sky and a rumble of thunder cracked overhead, loud enough to make them both jump. Hugh ran both hands over his arms and shivered.

All her reservations flew out of her head. She pushed the screen open and leaned out. Rain pelted her face as she shouted, "Come on."

He ran up and stepped into her house.

CHAPTER TWELVE — HUGH

Wednesday 9:18 p.m.

They stood inside the foyer, water dripping on the fraying rug. The smell of her strawberry shampoo, brought out by the rain, filled his nose. Her dark brown hair hung limp to her face in wet coils as she blinked up at him. Her cheeks blazed pink from the walk and perhaps from the fact that he was standing two feet away? He hoped so.

“So,” she said, gesturing around the trailer, “this is my place.”

He took a sweep of the trailer with his eyes. Every square inch of carpet was covered by saggy cardboard boxes, mismatched shoes, purses. A trail of papers littered the walkway between the foyer and the kitchen. Around the couch lay cigarette boxes, ashtrays, old magazines, TV dinner trays.

Cece gnawed nervously at her lip; her hands twisted together at her waist. She wouldn’t meet his eyes, just looked around her home. “My mom, she’s a little...okay *a lot* messy. If you’ll give me a minute to tidy up...” She spun, grabbed trash from the floor, and shoved it in an overflowing garbage can. Then she hurried over and began stacking food-encrusted plates together.

He walked up and put his hand on her arm. Her skin was warm and supple. God, he loved touching her.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Leave it. Yesterday I was eating in a dumpster.”

She met his eyes, setting the plates back on the end table. “Hugh, are you homeless?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

She gave a sad smile. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. At least it’s summer, right?”

“Good point.” She stared up into his eyes again. “Still. This is embarrassing.” She looked around her trailer.

“Cece, I don’t care that your trailer’s a mess.”

She blew out a breath. “Good. Cause it’d take all week to get it clean.”

He chuckled. “No kidding.”

He watched the unease fall from her face. Her eyes locked on him. They traveled down to his chest, her cheeks flushed and then she darted her eyes away.

“So, what’s first?” she asked. “Food or shower?”

He lifted his hands and peered at the black crescents under his fingernails. "Shower."

She nodded, pulling her wet hair over her shoulder and twirling it. "This way."

She led him down the cluttered hallway into the little bathroom. The fluorescent light buzzed to life and she pointed him to the tub shower. He stepped in the bathroom, the curling linoleum crinkling under his feet. She returned with a clean, if rust-stained, bath towel, disposable razor, and washcloth. Before she pulled the door shut, she stopped and fixed him with a worried look. "If my mother comes home, you'll duck out my bedroom window when it's safe."

He furrowed his brow. "Is she going to come home?"

She shrugged. "Dunno." Then she clicked the door shut.

Hugh pressed his forehead to the door. That girl.

He could still smell her strawberry shampoo.

Wednesday 9:32 p.m.

The rain drummed on the roof above as Hugh walked out of the bathroom, rubbing a towel on his wet hair. He wore a navy V-neck T-shirt and black athletic shorts with drawstring ties Cece had left at the bathroom door. The clothes smelled a little musty, like they'd been in bags for a couple of years, but he didn't mind. He'd thrown away those women's jogging shorts and hoped to God he never had to see them again.

Cece had cleared off the kitchen dinette and put water on to boil for macaroni and cheese. She'd also changed into a thin pink tank top and black yoga pants. And had she put on lipstick? He watched her move, hands gracefully setting the table. The symmetry of her body, the way her clothes hugged every curve. And they were alone. Heat traveled up his chest.

Stop it, he told himself. Don't get carried away.

Suddenly a memory gripped him. A hand on his. Tender. Loving. Then someone was calling his name, but it wasn't Hugh. She was calling something else. Jo? Joseph? She was calling and calling, but he couldn't answer. He was running in the opposite direction. He was late and he couldn't even say goodbye.

"Hugh." Cece was starting at him, concern wrinkling her forehead.

He shook his head. The memory was gone. "Sorry."

“Do you want to eat? I have a granola bar you can have while we wait for the macaroni.”

His stomach grumble. “Yes, please.”

She handed him the granola bar and then sat across from him at the dinette where she could watch the pot boiling on the stove.

Hugh unwrapped the granola bar. It smelled amazing. “So you like your job?”

She shrugged. “It’s okay. I mean, I love working with Fer, but Michelle is out to get me. That was her boyfriend you sent packing tonight.”

Hugh nodded. “The short guy.”

“Yeah,” Cece smiled. Her two front teeth were slightly longer than the rest. Adorable.

“What about you?”

He took a bite from the granola bar she’d given him and his stomach rumbled.

“Do you have family somewhere?” She combed through her damp hair with her fingers and watched his face.

Hugh chewed slowly, giving himself a chance to think. How much should he tell her? He looked at her wide, understanding eyes. “I don’t remember.”

She placed both hands on the tabletop and cocked her head. “You don’t remember?”

“Nope,” he said, trying not to let the frustration bleed through his voice. “No idea. I woke up two days ago with no memory.” He knocked on his head. “Nothing.”

Her jaw dropped. “No kidding?”

He nodded. “No kidding.”

“Jesus.” She whistled. “It’s like a frickin *Lifetime* movie or something.”

“Something like that,” he said, taking another granola bite. The chocolate chips crumbled beneath his molars, exploding sugary goodness over his tongue.

The water on the stove began to bubble. Cece got up and slid the yellow noodles from the box into the pot. He could tell she was deep in thought by the crooked set of her mouth.

She stopped and fixed her eyes on him. “We gotta figure out who you are.”

Hugh shrugged.

Cece sat down in front of him, still fixing him with that look. A look that said *this is serious business, mister*. She squinted her eyes and pointed a finger. “I’m going to help you find your family.”

Hugh shrugged and took another bite of his granola bar. “Who says I got a family?”

Cece’s brow furrowed. “Everybody’s got a family. Even if it’s really messed up.”

Hugh nodded in agreement, but a cold sliver had sunk into his heart. No one had come for him. No one cared but this short, scrappy girl with a big heart. And right now no one else seemed to matter.

But what about the memory? Someone had to be out there worried about him.

Yeah, well, where the heck were they, then?

The timer above the stove dinged and Hugh pushed up before Cece could stand. “You don’t have to wait on me,” he said, heading for the stove. “Sit down. You worked all day.”

Her smile deepened. She sat back in her chair and crossed her tan arms on the tabletop. “I guess I’m just used to waiting on people.”

He flipped off the burner and lifted the pot. Steam coiled from the macaroni. “Well, I’m not used to being waited on.”

She cocked her head, a slash of dark bangs falling over her eyes. “How’d you know? You only remember the last three days.”

He smiled. “You’re right, but you’re still not getting up. Where’s your butter?”

She pointed. There was a short silence while Hugh cut a hunk of butter and dropped it in the pot. He found the milk carton in the fridge and poured some in. Then the powdered cheese. When he finally came to the table with two steaming bowls and produced them triumphantly, he saw her frowning. He sat, letting the bowl sit uneaten.

“What is it?”

She twisted her mouth. “I need to ask you...”

“Ask.” He placed both palms on the table, ready. “I’ll tell you the truth. Whatever it is.”

She looked up, her hands tugging on the ends of her hair. “What happened this morning? You looked so panicked.”

Hugh leaned back in his chair. He’d said he’d tell her the truth. He lifted his fork and tapped it nervously on the side of the bowl.

“This morning I was really sick, so sick I thought I was going to die.” His eyes flicked to her face. “I decided I’d find a cop or something and ask

for help. I walked into a convenience store a couple miles outta town. The shop owner was dead. He..." Hugh winced remembering the man's bloody throat, the flies.

"Oh my God." Cece's eyes went huge. "I heard about a murder. You were there?"

He swallowed hard. "I was in there when a cop showed up. He thought I had something to do with it." Hugh's hand floated down to his side where he'd felt the bullet enter. Where there was no trace.

Cece pushed up from the table, the dishes clattering. "Are you wanted by the police?"

He put his hands up, shaking his head. "No, no, it's fine. Really. I explained everything and they let me go. They had fingerprints from someone else. It wasn't me."

So much for telling the truth. But there was no way she'd believe the truth.

Cece crossed her arms over her chest, her brow furrowing.

Hugh tried to smile, but his face tightened. "Really, Cece, would I be sitting with you if I was wanted for murder?"

She paused, pressing her hand to the tabletop. "I guess not."

"Cece," he said, placing both palms on the table, looking straight into her face. "I didn't hurt anyone. I swear."

There was a long pause. What he wouldn't give to get inside her head right now. Why couldn't he have that super power stored up somewhere?

"If you're lying, I'll kill you," she said slowly.

"Okay." He nodded, feeling guilty.

The smell of the macaroni, so starchy and cheesy, was making his stomach somersault. He took a bite, the gooey goodness coating his tongue. Would she kick him out? Slam the door in his face? He glanced up at her. She was eating carefully. He could almost see the gears working in her head. She seemed to let it slide for now.

Her eyes flicked to the door and a nervous shadow darkened her face.

"Where's your mom at?" he asked, scraping the last yellow globs out of the bowl.

Cece shrugged. "I woke up this morning and she was gone. She takes off sometimes." Her eyes trailed over to the couch. "Most of the time lately she just lays around, but she flushed her medication and now I'm not sure what she'll do."

"Sorry."

"It's okay," she said, looking down.

Hugh reached for her empty dish and rinsed both out in the sink. The clock above the stove read half past ten. He felt the fatigue down to his bones. He looked over and caught her rubbing her eyes. "I should go."

"Where?" Her eyes shifted to the rain streaming down the kitchen window. "Out there? You can't."

Thunder cracked across the sky hard enough to rattle the windowpanes. He certainly didn't want to sleep under some overpass, but the thought of her mother coming home and catching him sleeping on her couch did not appeal to him either. "I'll be fine."

Cece put both hands on her hips. "You will not be fine. Look at it out there." Lightning split the sky.

Hugh shrugged. "Do you have an umbrella?"

Cece arched back in her chair as she thought. He tried not to focus on the pull of her tank top across the swell of her breasts. Tried and failed.

"Look, here's what we'll do. You can sleep in the spare bedroom. It's a mess, but it's better than out there." Her eyes flicked uncertainly to his face and then away. "We'll shut the door. Mama never goes in there. That'd come too close to facing her problems."

Hugh swallowed hard. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why?" A blush crept up her cheeks. "You'd rather sleep in the rain than with me?" She clasped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. "Oh, no. We'd just, you know, be sleeping."

A blush burned up Hugh's cheeks. "It's okay. I knew what you meant. I don't want to sleep in the rain, but I can't get you in trouble."

She tugged on the hem of her tank top. "She probably won't even come home. If she does, we'll sneak you out the window. My mama's not the most observant person."

Hugh felt himself nodding. As he followed her to the spare bedroom, his eyes locked on the backside of her yoga pants. She had a magnificent behind.

Cece flicked on the bedroom light. The small room was, to put it bluntly, a disaster. There was a footpath that lead to a bare mattress surrounded by mounds of clothes and shoes. It reminded him of a crater, *his* crater. He shuttered.

She shrugged. "Sorry."

"It's great actually. So much better than where I've been sleeping."

She pulled down a sleeping bag and spare pillow from the closet. A two-inch expanse of stomach appeared as she reached up for it and heat

burned up Hugh's chest. He took the bedding from her, suddenly aware of the warmth of the room. She was so close to him.

"The mattress is okay. It hasn't been slept on in ages. I just wish I had clean sheets." She looked up at him.

Hugh spread the sleeping bag on the mattress, plumped the pillow, and lay down on his side, facing her.

"Cece," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you," he rolled over on his back and looked up at the ceiling. "As far as I can remember this is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me."

She laughed lightly. "Considering you only remember the last three days, that's not saying much, but you're welcome. Good night, Hugh."

"Good night."

She clicked the door shut. Hugh lay on his back, his hands locked behind his head, listening to her footsteps. Sleep pulled him down, but he fought it for as long as he could, if just to hear her a little longer.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN — CECE

Wednesday 10:47 p.m.

There was a boy sleeping in her home.

Cece stared at the dark ceiling, her heart pounding ruthlessly in her chest. There was a boy sleeping in her home. A handsome, sweet, caring boy ten feet away. She listened for each breath, deep, resonant, and entirely male coming from down the hall. She was exhausted, but her body felt charged as if she'd just been sprinting. She rolled over and caught a whiff of his scent, a mix of Dove soap from her shower and a male musk completely his own. Breathing him in, listening for his movements, she knew she'd never get to sleep.

This was crazy. Any minute Mama could blow in like a tornado and rip this moment apart. What would Mama do if she found Hugh here? Clearly they weren't doing anything. Mama had said Cece needed to bring a nice boy home, but this was probably not what Mama had in mind.

Thinking of Mama, the guilt gripped her again. God, she hoped her mother was someplace safe. An image of her frail mother soaking wet and shivering under an overpass flooded her mind. She pushed the thought away. Tomorrow morning if Mama wasn't home, Cece would organize a search.

From her bed, she could see his closed bedroom door. She gazed at it in the dark. God, he was *so* handsome. Was that the reason she'd decided to trust him even though she knew it wasn't the smartest decision? But his eyes were so...honest. She'd read about liars in her psychology magazines and how to recognize their tells. Hugh was just scared.

And, oh God, he was sweet. He'd made her macaroni, cleaned her dishes. She'd noticed his eyes on her when he thought she wasn't looking. Would he try anything? Slip into her bed and press himself on top of her, run his hands over her? Her body coiled and uncoiled at the thought. She knew nothing about this strange boy and yet, some deep part of her yearned for him to crawl into her bed, to taste his mouth, to feel his hands in her hair, on her neck, lower.

Cece rolled over again and pinched her hands between her knees. She should just go to sleep. Based on his quiet wheezing, he was already out. His life for the last few days had been a nightmare. And not knowing his own identity? Hugh put her torn-apart family in a whole new light.

Finally, fatigue settled over her charged limbs. *Hugh*, she thought as she drifted away. *Where have you been all my life?*

Thursday 7:56 a.m.

Cupboards banging in the kitchen woke her.

Mama's making breakfast, she thought, rolling over.

Mama! She snapped upright.

A breeze filtered through the open window, already hot like a breath on her face. The AC unit lay on the floor. So was the sleeping bag she'd given Hugh, folded neatly at the base of the window. Was it Hugh in the kitchen making breakfast? Cece jumped out of bed and ran out of her room.

The spare bedroom door was open. The room was empty.

As soon as she heard the Latin music blasting from the tiny kitchen radio, she knew Mama was home. Relief flooded her, but also deep worry. What state would Mama be in? Cece's nose picked up the smell of burned meat and something else. Cleaning supplies? Cece barged into the kitchen.

Mama stood at the stove, flipping over blackened strips of bacon. The kitchen looked rearranged, not necessarily cleaner, just moved around. She spotted bags of old clothes and records shifted from one spot to another. Mama had cleared off the kitchen counter and wiped it clean, but the counter's contents were in a pile on the floor. This was typical. When Cece was younger she'd try to help her mother clean up by dumping whatever she could lay her hands on in the trash. The minute Mama realized she was throwing items away, she'd slapped Cece's arm. After that Cece had stayed out of Mama's cleaning escapades, no matter how much she hated the mess.

"Mama," she called. The music thumped from the yellow CD boom box on the counter. One blown speaker buzzed. She tried again. "Mama!" Still nothing. Mama swayed her hips in time to the upbeat tempo. She was wearing a bright orange skirt and one of Cece's tank tops. From behind, you might've thought she was a teenager with her stick-thin frame and bright clothing.

Cece stomped over and slammed her hand on the radio's power button. The music stopped, leaving the sound of crackling of bacon behind. Mama spun around.

“Cecelia, I’m making *brrr*reakfast.” Mama rolled her Rs merrily, waving her hand over the smoldering bacon, not noticing the charred smell.

“Mama, where were you all day yesterday? Where did you sleep?” Cece walked over and snapped off the burner. The glowing orange coil dimmed.

Mama swept around the kitchen, pulling out a carton of milk, boxes of cereal, donuts. She held out the donuts. “Bear claws. Your favorite.” She pushed them into Cece’s hands.

As Mama faced her, Cece’s mouth fell open. Mama looked like a twenty-dollar hooker. Her face had been coated in layers of heavy make-up, now dripping in smears of red and beige. Mama’s ponytail had sprung several leaks that hung limply down her face. There was either a bruise or a hickey on her neck.

“Mama, listen to me, I need to ask you something.” This might not be the best time to ask about what cousin Ben had said, but the question had slowly been smoldering for hours. If she waited to ask any longer, her brain might catch fire. “I know you don’t like talking about it, but it’s time you called Aunt Bea. Whatever happened between you two—”

“Beatriz!” Mama spat the name, throwing blackened bacon on a paper towel. “I not talk to that *puta* until she apologize.” She waved her spatula like a sword.

Cece backed away from the flying bacon grease. “She’s your sister. Your blood.” Cece gripped Mama’s arm. “I haven’t heard your side of things, but—”

“What you mean hear *my* side?” Mama stopped in mid-swing, her eyes slowly fixing on Cece. “What *other* side have you heard?”

Cece tried to look innocent, her face flushing. “Nothing. I mean, no ones.”

“Did she call you?” Mama stepped closer, eyeing Cece dangerously. “Did my lying sister call you?”

“No.” Cece shook her head slowly. “Ben did. Her son.”

Mama slammed her spatula on the counter as a string of Spanish curse words flew out of her mouth. She picked up a plate and smashed it on the counter. Shards of ceramic sprayed out, slicing through the air near Cece’s face. Mama reached for a dirty glass and raised it to throw.

Cece grabbed for Mama’s arm. “Stop!” she screamed. Mama’s eyes darted around like a toddler’s with ADD. Cece shook Mama’s arm. “Look at me!”

Mama stopped, her brow furrowing. “Cecelia, don’t raise—”

“Mama! Don’t interrupt. You are manic, okay? Out of control. You need to get back on your meds. I don’t get paid for another week and a half. Do you have any money? I can go to the store and ask the pharmacist for some sample packs or something.” Cece pressed her hands to her cheeks. God, how had it come to this?

Mama shook her head, anger leaving her face, a wild smile replacing it. “I don’t need that poison. I feel wonderful. I was out all night, saw some old friends. We went *dancing*.” Mama threw her arms out and did a twirl, her skirt swirling in an orange bloom around her.

Cece shook her head. “You are not alright. It might feel alright now, but this always ends badly. You remember when C.P.S. came last time?” Cece’s windpipe felt like someone was squeezing it. “You want them to take me away?”

This wasn’t some bluff. Last time Mama was manic she’d been caught shoplifting and the cops had come to their home. They’d threatened to take Cece to Children’s Village and put her into foster care if Mama couldn’t get it together. Luckily, the store didn’t press charges and Mama was able act normal every time the social worker came to inspect the house. This time if they came back there would be no home visits. They would just take Cece.

Mama shook her head rapidly. “That won’t happen. They can’t take you.”

Cece dropped her mother’s arm, feeling very tired. “They will. They’ll take me if you don’t stop.” She turned and shuffled back to her bedroom.

“*Mi amor*,” Mama called after her. “Breakfast?”

Cece didn’t look back. “I’m not hungry.”

Thursday 10:45 a.m.

Cece blew in the door at *Lizzy’s* fifteen minutes early for her shift. She’d be early every day from now on, no matter what Mama did. Now more than ever she needed to keep this job.

Fer trailed in behind her, sweating and puffing, her cheeks a blotchy red. “Jesus, you pedal fast. I think you’re taking those LiveStrong bracelets too seriously, Lance.”

Cece smirked. She put her keys in one of the little cubbies by the back door. Then she walked over and started washing her hands in the metal sink.

Fer pulled up beside her. “So, what happened to you last night? I sent you, like, a billion texts and blew up your Twitter. You going Amish on me? Shunning all technology to make your own aprons or some shit?” Fer poked her in the ribs. She was trying to make Cece smile, but she couldn't force a smile today if she used pliers.

Cece flicked her eyes up to Fer and shrugged. “My battery died.” It was a pathetic lie and they both knew it. She'd never lied to her best friend before, but Fer would never approve of a strange boy sleeping in her trailer.

Fer studied Cece's face, narrowing her eyes. “Huh. Well, I wanted to know what you thought about dead guy *numero tres*. Everybody said Harelip Harson was a creeper, but I still can't believe he's dead. My mom's having a conniption fit. She slept with her .45 under her pillow last night. I told her she was gonna blow a nice hole in her brain stem before the killer could even get near her, but she didn't—”

“Wait, what? What dead guy?”

Cece's head was spinning. Harelip Harson? That was the nickname students gave the weird parking lot security guard at their high school. Mr. Harson drove around the school in his rusty Ford Escort giving kids tickets and chasing down skippers. Now he was dead?

“Didn't you hear? What the hell were you doing last night?” Fer crossed her arms over her boobs and narrowed her eyes.

“I...uh, went to bed.” A cold sweat had broken out across her back. Three murders. What was happening?

Fer tossed a strand of purple hair out of her eyes. “It was all over the news. They're calling it an “animal attack”, but come on. They found Harelip—”

“Stop calling him that.”

“Sorry. They found Harson under his bed.” Fer leaned in close and whispered. “Said his throat was ripped out.”

Cece pressed her hands to her ears. “I don't wanna know,” she said, shaking her head. “But maybe it was an animal.”

“No way. What kind of animal is that big? The cops are just trying to cover it up. First that homeless dude, then the gas station attendant, and now Harson. If you ask me, it's meth heads. My brother knows a few of them and they're psycho as hell.” Fer ran her hands under the tap and

splashed some water on her neck. “No riding home alone like you did last night unless you want to be famous.”

“Yeah.” Cece's mind was off with Mama who was prone to wander and do impulsive things. And Hugh alone in the forest. Sure, he was big, but what chance did he stand against a bear or worse a serial killer meth head? Her hands trembled as she pulled her hair into a ponytail. Work. She needed to focus on work.

By mid-morning a hazy scrim of clouds hung over the sun. Cece told Fer she was emptying the garbage and headed out to the dumpster. A glance into the shadows told her Hugh wasn't around. Cold prickles ran up her arms as she turned and walked through the dark alley. Couldn't serial killer meth heads lurk in alleys, too?

She was turning to go back inside when a figure came striding up to Cece, overloaded with half a dozen mismatched canvas shopping bags.

“Mama!” Cece said, her heart pounding.

Her mother whirled and locked her eyes on Cece. She tottered forward on oversized high heels that clomped on the pavement. Her face spread into a delirious smile.

“Cecelia, I went shopping. I bought you the prettiest dress. It's blue with a sash.” Mama shook the bags toward Cece. “Try it on.”

Cece stepped out, hoping against hope that no one was close enough to hear. She peered into the bags. Clothes, shoes, and purses bulged from at least six overflowing bags. Cece gripped the bag with white knuckles. “Where did you get the money for all this?”

Mama ignored the question, dropping half her bags and pulling out a blue dress. She pressed it to Cece's chest. “You look beautiful.”

Cece tugged the dress down and stuffed it in the bag. “Where are the receipts? How much did you spend?”

Mama tugged at Cece's shirt. “Try it on. Try it on. I want to see.”

Cece batted at Mama's hands and dropped her voice to a harsh whisper. “You stole them again, didn't you? That's why there's no receipt. Why they're not in the regular bags. Jesus.” She leaned against the wall, the bricks baking into her back.

Mama's face fell. She took a clomping step forward, pouting. “I just wanted you to have something nice.”

Cece nodded, feeling the anger deflate like a punctured balloon. Mama was sick. This wasn't her fault.

“I’d tell you to take the stuff back, but then they’d probably press charges.” Cece gripped Mama’s arm and looked deep into her eyes. “Just please, please, *please*, stay out of the stores.”

She nodded. “You’re gonna love the blue dress.”

Cece threw her hands up. “Mama!”

“Okay, okay,” she waved her arms in defense. “I see you at home.”

Cece nodded, blowing hair out of her eyes. The sweat-drenched strand didn’t budge. She watched her mother clomp down the street, feeling wrung out. As she turned and walked back into the ice cream shop, a shadow darted away from the door. Cece narrowed her eyes and caught a glimpse of a blond ponytail as it disappeared around the corner. Michelle.

How much had she heard?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN — HUGH

Thursday 12:51 p.m.

Hugh pressed his back to the tree trunk, feeling the rough bark beneath his T-shirt, as he skimmed the headlines fluttering in his hand. *Please don't let there be a sketch of my face above the word Wanted. Please.*

He peered at the color image on the front page. There, between the columns and bold black headlines, was a picture of his crater and, next to it, two others.

CRATER INVESTIGATION CONTINUES AS OFFICIALS SHUT DOWN AUBURN OAKS PARK

July 9th, 2012

After three craters appeared in Auburn Oaks Dog Park and the surrounding forest, officials from Oakland County Parks have shut down the park. The three craters, each measuring over twenty feet in diameter, have appeared over the last three days. Neighbors of the park say they heard loud explosions and saw a comet-like streak in the sky. One resident, Nathaniel Dugget, in the Bailey Ridge subdivision said he saw the third celestial event two nights ago.

“I was standing on my porch when I saw this bright light cut through the sky. The meteor smacked into the trees behind my house. It felt like the whole earth was shaking,” stated Dugget, 54.

Park officials have neither confirmed nor denied the craters are caused by meteor activity, though several eyewitnesses claim to have seen a bright streak in the sky just prior to the discovery of the craters.

Harvey Natchetson, chief parks operator, has closed the park to visitors until they can repair the damage. That effort, however, is being delayed by an investigatory team of the federal agents who arrived yesterday evening. The team of specialists was unavailable for comment, but could be seen inspecting the crater and the surrounding damage. Natchetson is unable to determine when the park will be reopened, but stated it could take weeks.

Hugh let the paper slip into his lap. Three craters. Federal investigations. A cold sweat sprouted along his back. How were there *three* craters? There'd been his and the one he'd seen when the beast arrived, but now another one? Was it another beast like the one he'd seen in the woods? Oh gods. The dead man in the Quick E Mart was only the start of what that thing could do. And if there were two? He shuddered.

Or, could it be someone like him? Someone who was normal except for a few powers? Hugh shook his head. Who was he kidding? He was no more normal than the beast, but at least he wasn't tearing people's throats out. That was something.

Hugh scanned the paper again for more news about the deaths. There had been the man in the gas station store, Joseph Bordeau, 67. The paper also listed a Mackenzie Fisher, a homeless man who died in similar fashion only twelve hours from the first. And now a school parking lot attendant, John Harson, had been found in his home with his neck torn from jaw to collarbone. They could find no sign of any other disturbance or stolen goods in the home.

Hugh shook his head and dropped the paper. He stared through the tree trunks where, across the road, he could see the faint outline of the ice cream shop. This morning he'd bolted out of Cece's window the moment he'd heard her mother put the key in the front door. He'd spent the morning in the woods, as near as he could be to her. Hugh sighed and slid down to the ground. Eight hours until she got off work. An eternity.

The forest sounds were soothing. Above, birds twittered and insects droned. The breeze stirred the trees. After a while, his head dipped forward. Sleep would help pass the time.

He became aware of a scent that tugged on his brain. Something foreign and animal.

When his nose fully caught the scent, his head snapped up, adrenaline pumping through him. The last time he'd smelled it was in the convenience store. The thing from the crater. Hugh scrambled to his feet. It was close. He stared across the road to the ice cream shop. Images of Cece torn apart just like the clerk sent his heart thumping. He wouldn't let it get anywhere near her.

A raw ferocity built in his gut, pushing down fear. Just the thought of the beast sniffing around Cece drove a rage into his brain that compelled him onto his feet. He'd work the edges of the woods and circle back. He took off running so fast the dry leaves swirled up in his wake.

The wind lashed at his face, forcing tears from his squinted eyes, but Hugh was built for speed. Trees whipped by in green blurs. Birds arrowed out of the branches around him, squawking as they tore away. He hurdled over a fallen tree trunk and landed with barely a sound. His lungs felt like hot air balloons, able to hold endless oxygen. Every sense was heightened, fresh, raw. He smelled a campfire ten miles off, heard the rush of cars on a freeway twenty miles east. He knifed through the greenery, the light and shadow dappling his skin.

Hugh skidded to a stop, his feet digging deep grooves into the pine carpet. He sniffed, catching the scent, something animal and musky. His eyes tracked the shadowed landscape. He turned his head and...there.

It was here. Close.

He peered into the semi-darkness. Here the pines and maples were ancient columns thrust halfway to the moon. Little light made its way down. His heartbeat picked up.

In the distance he spotted something foreign nestled between tree trunks—a large white structure half as big as Cece's trailer, dotted with rust and vines. As he stepped closer, careful to stay downwind, he could make out a seventies-style R.V. trailer. Rectangular windows, their glass long since shattered and littering the forest floor, looked into a dark interior. The tires were strips of flattened leather circling bent hubcaps. A ladder missing several rungs ran up the back and over the top. One step closer and he could see a large olive green V.W. emblem peeking through the vines. The R.V. was likely a hunter's hangout, long forgotten. The whole thing looked like it hadn't been touched in years.

But it has, Hugh thought. *This is where that thing's been staying.* His breath caught in his throat at the thought. It could be in there right now, all teeth and claws. He'd be torn to pieces.

The monster was obviously hunting, but for what reason. Did it hate humans, wish them ill? Or was it just hungry? Either way, Hugh's gut clenched.

Cece. This thing had been within minutes of her workplace. What was to stop it from going back for her? He stalked closer, not even breathing. He was probably the only person strong enough to stop it. He had to try, or how would he sleep at night?

Hugh stepped to the open doorway and peered in. A rancid smell greeted him: animal odors, decay and rust. His eyes zeroed in. Near the front, warped cabinet doors dangled on their battered hinges. The floor was littered with trash, dirt and— What were those white things? Bones?

Small animal bones were scattered throughout the entryway and snaked back into the darkness. A skull with a matted hunk of fur on it looked up from the floor. A dead raccoon or dog? Hugh swallowed hard. *I have to try to stop this thing before it kills again.* In his mind he saw the clerk with his throat ripped open. But, what if that happened to—

Movement inside the trailer. Hugh tensed, scanning the blackness. Was that a shape in the back? Was it in there? Fear bounded in his chest. Willing himself forward, he took one step.

“Hello?”

It tore out of the darkness.

The thing slammed into him like a freight train. Hugh fell backward, out of the trailer, all his breath knocked away. Leaves and dirt flew up around him. His head smacked the ground hard enough to send a burst of stars shooting across his vision.

A brown blur sailed over him. He caught a glimpse of one foot, each toe armed with three inch claws.

I'm dead! he thought.

He tried to stand, scrambling up, sucking in air. His head spun, but he didn't have time to recover. He had to fight now.

Only... The beast was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN — CECE

Thursday 5:45 p.m.

Travis's eyes flicked between Cece and Michelle. He gulped and offered up a shrug. "Anybody wanna volunteer to go home?"

Cece threw a glance at Michelle. Her arms were crossed over her push-up bra like a barricade.

"Uh-uh. No way," Michelle said, shaking her ponytail back and forth. "Make this one go home," she said, thumbing towards Cece without looking at her. "The sooner I can pay off the money I owe my dad, the sooner I can quit this lame-ass job."

Cece leaned her back against one of the prep counters. She needed to check on Mama. Lord knew what kind of trouble she was getting into right now. But she needed the money, too. Every dollar mattered, and the sooner they could get those pills, the faster Mama would go back to normal.

At least that's what she kept telling herself.

Cece locked eyes with Travis. "Couldn't we all stay?"

Travis shook his head sadly. "Lizzy called and when she heard we hadn't had a customer in an hour, she told me to cut back to two." Travis looked over his shoulder at the empty order window. "Guess everybody's home with their doors locked."

Cece swallowed hard. Just another reason she should be home instead of here getting dirty looks from Michelle. Who knew if Mama had the sense to lock the doors and not answer for strangers?

"I'll go." Cece said, pushing off the counter. "You and Michelle can have the closing shift."

Michelle let her mouth slink up in a triumphant smirk. Travis nodded. "Cool. Thanks, C. Way to take one for the team."

Cece nodded, grabbed her stuff from the cubby, and headed out the door. She got to the back when she felt a hand on her arm. She whirled around.

Travis dropped his hand, a blush blossoming in his cheeks. "Hey, I...uh...Who's gonna walk you home? You shouldn't go by yourself. I mean, not with that mountain lion on the loose." He pushed a hand through this dark blond hair.

"It's a mountain lion now?" She put her hand on his arm. "I'll be okay. It's broad daylight and my house is only a five-minute bike ride from here."

Travis twisted the hairs on his chin beard. "Still, though."

A voice answered behind them. "I'll walk her."

In the alleyway, halfway between the dumpster and the front door, Hugh waited. In the bright sunshine, Cece thought he looked like a bronzed statue, all tan and muscles and sun-kissed hair. His cheeks were flushed as if he'd been running and there was a twig in his hair. Where had he been all day? She smiled at him. Travis took a step forward.

"Who're you, dude?" He crossed his arms over his narrow chest and stood to his full height.

"Hugh." He stepped forward and offered his hand to shake.

Travis stared at it. "Hugh who? Cece, you know this dude?"

Cece nodded. "Travis, this is my...uh...cousin. Hugh's from outta town. Just got in yesterday from Lansing."

"Lansing, huh?" Travis narrowed his eyes. He still didn't reach to shake Hugh's hand. "He's been in town two days? Weird."

Cece pressed on a smile. "I've known Hugh since I was a little kid. I'll be fine. Really."

Travis furrowed his brow but took a step back into the ice cream shop. "If you're sure. I mean, I could always run you home."

"And leave Michelle on her lonesome? Nah, it's fine. Hugh will walk me. Like I said, it's five minutes."

Travis nodded. "Alright then." He gave Hugh one last suspicious look. "Later, Hubert."

Hugh just nodded. When Travis was gone, his eyes fell on Cece.

She looked into his sun-kissed face, smiling. "How did you know when I'd get off?"

Hugh shrugged, his broad shoulders tightening the T-shirt she'd given him. "I didn't. I've been waiting in the alley for a while."

Cece widened her eyes. "You have? Why?"

Hugh shrugged, a blush forming on his cheeks. "Thought I'd make sure you were safe."

Her mind told her she should be wary, yet her body pulsed with a strange, rhythmic heat and she wondered what fantastic shade of red she was turning.

"What?" he asked, studying her. "Did I do something wrong?"

She shook her head. "No. Somehow you do everything right."

Now it was his turn to sheepishly rub the back of his neck. "So, can I walk you?"

Cece nodded and led him around to collect her bike. They walked past Lizzy's to the little strip mall next door. Most windows were already dark, odd for six on a Thursday. They rounded onto Sisson Street and passed the Shell Gas Station with the droopy pumps and the ragged-looking man behind the cash register. Cece locked eyes with him through the window and dropped her gaze. He reminded her too much of the story Hugh had told about the dead clerk.

"It's like a ghost town around here," Hugh said, his eyes tracing up and down the four-lane road. A few cars zipped past, going way over the posted speed limit. Everyone wanted to get where they were going and lock themselves in. Cece thought of Mama and walked a little faster.

They passed a coffee shop, nearly empty but for a few employees, and a closed ladies' retail store. Cece shook her head. "What's it going to take for them to catch whoever or *whatever* is doing this?"

Hugh swallowed. "It won't be easy."

Cece looked up at Hugh, a shiver running over her arms. There was something in his voice.

They walked through a weedy parking lot and down an embankment that stank of animal waste and sour liquor. The dry two-foot-high grass lashed at their legs. They dodged faded beer cans, broken bottles and candy bar wrappers fluttering in the breeze. From here they could see her trailer park, saggy rectangles in a multitude of stained colors, off in the distance. She hoped Mama would be there when she got home. But then, how would she get more time with Hugh?

As they entered the trailer park, the air hung hot and heavy. The empty playground swings moaned in the breeze. No one trusted their children out today. They were cramped inside on musty carpets while their mothers watched *Judge Judy*.

They stopped in front of her trailer. Cece took the bike from Hugh and locked it to the stoop. No way to tell if Mama was home from the driveway.

"Wait here, please," she said to Hugh, who tucked his large frame into a folding chair between two stacks of boxes. She opened the front door and stepped inside.

The smell of cleaning chemicals had abated and the powerful aroma of decaying synthetic material and stale air was back. From the entryway she could see new shopping bags resting next to the ones from yesterday. Garage sale finds by the look of it. More flip-flops, CDs, cheese graters and knick-knacks.

Where was Mama? Cece walked in and peered over the couch. Empty. A look to the kitchen showed it unoccupied. She walked down to the bathroom and pushed that door open. Mama must've washed some of her clothes in the bathtub—wet socks, T-shirts, shorts, and bras were slung over every available surface to dry.

The only place left to look was her room. Dread surged up as she pushed into her bedroom.

Mama was splayed across her bed, still in her clothes. One high heel lay on the ground discarded. The other dangled from Mama's foot extending off the edge of the bed. Her black and gray curls tumbled over her head like untrimmed shrubs. Lipstick was smeared on Cece's pillowcase. Her room was a mess. Her anger flared, but she squashed it. Mama was home safe. And judging by the way she was snoring, she'd be out for a while. She probably hadn't slept in at least twenty-four hours.

Cece found Hugh sitting with his hands in his lap right where she'd left him. His eyes met hers as she stood over him.

"Is she here?" he asked.

"She's asleep. Probably will be all night."

Hugh got up and gestured to the folding chair, offering it to her. She shook her head. They still had a good three hours of daylight. She didn't want to spend it sitting in her mouse-infested carport. "You wanna go for a walk?" she asked.

"What about the killer?"

"The police say we shouldn't be afraid, right? Besides, Harson was killed *inside* his home. If nowhere is safe, we should at least enjoy summer while we can. I'm not going to be cooped up like a prisoner." She shrugged.

He nodded. "I'm not afraid. Where are we going?"

"The lake."

"The lake?" he asked.

She nodded. "You'll see."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN — HUGH

Thursday 6:38 p.m.

When the trees pulled back and he spotted the lake, Hugh blew out a deep breath. Magnificent. The lake stretched across his periphery, hedged with trees all the way around. Across the way, two white swans floated regally across the rippling surface. To his left a killdeer scuttled across the brown sand. It keened a mournful note and its mate answered. Despite the heat, there were no bathers. One leathery old man lay face up, his radio broadcasting a baseball game in his ear. Cece and Hugh moved off to the right where the water lapped quietly on the sand. Hugh felt a shiver of pleasure run through him. To be in this place of splendid beauty with an even more beautiful girl at his side. Well, this was paradise.

“You come here a lot?” he asked, his eyes on a swan that was circling the water.

“Uh-huh.” Cece’s eyes followed the swan too, but Hugh could tell her mind was floating elsewhere. “Mama used to bring me here as a kid. Before she got sick.”

Hugh scooped up a handful of sand and let it sift through his fingers. “How long has she been like this?”

Cece shrugged. “Hard to say. It was kind of a gradual decline, not like a sharp drop. I remember her being in bed a lot when I was in fifth grade. By high school, our trailer was pretty trashed. Once she went off for a week without calling. I was pretty scared.” She squeezed her hands together and blew out a tense breath. “One time she picked me up from school, plopped me in the car, and started driving to Disney. We ran out of gas in Tennessee. Never made it to Disney, but we did get a tour of Nashville from the guy who drove us to the gas station.”

Hugh smiled. “That’s an exciting way to live life.”

“You mean weird.” She shook her head, smiling wryly.

“What about the rest of your family? What do they think about your mom?”

Cece took a breath. “Uh, they’re not big fans. We’re not really in touch. I’ve been trying to get a hold of my grandfather in Bolivia, Cruz Acha, but I can’t find a phone number.” Cece shook her head, lifting a smile onto her face. “But, we’ve all got our problems.” she said, letting her eyes trace his face. “You can’t even remember who you are. *That’s* a problem.”

His cheeks flushed and he dropped his eyes to the sand flecks clinging to his fingers. “Maybe it’s better I don’t remember my family. I mean, if they cared about me so much, wouldn’t they have come looking for me?”

Cece drew her name in the sand with her finger and then smoothed it out with her palm. “They’re looking. Maybe we need to ask around. Where was the last place you remember?”

“The dog park,” he said, and regretted it. Would she put two and two together?

Her lips pursed as her mind worked this over. “The park that they closed down? The one with those comet craters?”

He nodded.

“Did you see the craters?”

Hugh swallowed and nodded. “One of them, anyway.”

Should he tell her? He’d already lied once. He felt his secret resting uncomfortably just above his breastbone. It would feel so good to get it out, like coughing hard enough to dislodge a kernel stuck in his throat.

“So, maybe something from the meteor knocked you unconscious or whatever,” she said, splaying her fingers through the sand. “Did your head hurt?”

He rubbed at hand over the back of his head. “Yeah, a little.”

“Okay.” She stared off into the weeds. “Then how do we figure out who you are? In movies they always go back to the last place they remember, but the park’s off limits. We’ll have to come up with something else.”

Hugh picked up a strand of dried seaweed and twisted it. He thought of the silo from his vision. Should he ask her? “There is this one thing.”

Cece squinted into the sun as she met his gaze. “What?”

“I keep picturing this big cement silo. Like a grain silo maybe, or something like that. Is there a farm with one of those around here?”

Cece scrunched up her face, thinking. Finally she shook her head. “I don’t think so. That’s the only memory you have?”

Hugh nodded. “There’s nothing else.”

Cece leaned in a little. “Close your eyes.”

He looked at her. “Why?”

She shrugged, offering a small smile. “Something I saw on *Guiding Light*. They’re always losing their memory and trying to get it back.” She sank back in the sand. “Never mind, it’s stupid.”

“No, let’s do it.”

“You sure?” She perked up.

“Yeah.” He settled back and closed his eyes. “It can’t hurt, right?”

With his vision gone, the rest of his senses picked up the slack. He was suddenly aware of the sound of water lapping at the shore, the ribbets of frogs in the cattails to his right, the shrill cicada’s buzz. He heard Cece lean closer in the sand. Her knee brushed against the fabric at his thigh as she shifted. Over the smells of lake water and earthy forest, he found the scent of her strawberry shampoo. If she’d stay this close to him, he’d do any memory exercise in the world.

“Okay,” her voice said above him. “I want you to clear your mind.”

“Isn’t that the problem?” he said, smirking.

“No, silly, I mean clear it of all the thoughts of the day, the worries, the fears. Just try to make your mind blank.” She shifted and again he felt her knee brush his thigh. How could he clear his mind when she kept touching him?

“I’ll try,” he said, blowing out a breath. “For you.”

Hugh settled himself and pressed the thoughts out of his mind. Many came swirling back, the anxieties of the day buzzed around like pesky flies, but he fought back, chasing them down and swatting them out. When Cece spoke next, it was as if her voice came from farther away.

“I want you to go deep, deep inside your mind. Deep into the places where you’ve hidden your memories. As I count to ten, you’re going to go deeper. At ten you’ll be so deep you’ll find those memories you’re looking for. Okay, one...two...three...”

This is never going to work, Hugh thought, but he cleared that thought away and listened to the soft vibration of Cece’s voice. With his eyes closed, he was actually feeling pretty drowsy.

By the count of six, he felt his head dip.

By ten the lake, the sand and even Cece were gone.

Thursday 6:48 p.m.

Darkness. Then sparklers of light at the backs of his eyes. Suddenly there was a flash and the sharp smell of something burning. Then the feel of moist dirt on his bare skin.

Another flash. His head spun. Then he was hurtling downward in a black void. Stars whipped past in streaks of light through the small semi-translucent window. He was in some sort of organic pod, warm and pulsing. It felt like being inside a beating heart. A voice spoke, vibrating

the walls. Someone familiar. He wanted to hear more, but the image bled and shifted.

The silo flashed before him like a neon sign on a black backdrop. This time he was farther back and he could see the whole thing. It was taller, more bulbous at the top. Some type of tower? He started to walk toward it.

Then it too fizzled and died.

Deeper, further. He needed more.

He pushed inside himself, digging at memories through a membrane of foggy confusion. Just as he was about to break through the fog, a searing pain hit him like a fire poker wedged through the two halves of his cranium. His head would split apart.

He cried out.

Thursday 6:49 p.m.

He woke gasping.

Cradled his throbbing head in his hands, he moaned. He couldn't open his eyes. They would rupture and leak out if he tried.

"Hugh? Oh God, Hugh. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

He turned toward the voice. "Cece?" he mumbled. God, his head. It felt like someone had dropped one of those train cars on it.

"Hugh? What happened?" A hand closed over his and a thumb moved in gentle circles over the back of his wrist. He concentrated on the sensation of her fingers on his skin and the headache abated slowly. He opened his eyes.

A jab of pain, but then it backed off until he could focus on her face hovering over his. Her dark brows furrowed. Her hair fell over her shoulder and tumbled down to where it lay pooled on his chest like a silk curtain. Her tank top spilled forward revealing two mounds of soft flesh. Suddenly his headache seemed a lot better.

She shook her head. "I can't believe I did that. God, I'm sorry, Hugh." She continued to rub his hand. "That never happens on *Guiding Light*."

Hugh sat up and the pain lanced the backs of his eyes. He pressed his fingers to his eye sockets and waited. Then he opened them again. "I think it might've worked. At least..." He looked up, trying to remember.

"Really?" she asked, her eyes widening.

“I don’t know what it means.” He dug his finger into the soft brown sand, drawing the image he had seen. Slowly he traced the shape burned into his brain like an after image of a flashbulb in the darkness—the tall cylinder topped with an oval. Hugh shook his head. What was it?

“The water tower?” Cece said, examining his drawing. She lifted her eyes to his. “You had a vision of the water tower?”

Hugh pointed to his drawing. “This is the water tower?”

Cece nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “It looks like it. It’s the right shape anyway. It’s the one they just built on Guidings Road over by the landfill. Is this what you saw?”

“Some of it, yeah.” Hugh ran a hand over his forehead. Most of his vision was a blur, like images viewed out a car window at eighty miles an hour.

Cece stood, brushing her sandy hands on her cut-off shorts. “Well, let’s go.”

He squinted up at her. “Go? To the water tower?”

She nodded, holding a hand out to help him. He accepted and she pulled him to his feet.

For a moment they stood, feet planted on the sand, a warm summer breeze teasing back the strands of her dark hair. Her hand was in his. He savored the supple curve of her palm, the delicate brush of her fingers on his. She released him and turned away. He stood, wishing he could go back to touching her again.

When they got to the main road and set out toward the water tower, the sun was just brushing the tops of the trees. Cece looked up at the sinking sun and frowned.

“When does your mom expect you home?” Hugh asked, kicking at a hunk of gravel buried in the long grass on the road’s shoulder.

Cece shrugged, frowning. “She’ll probably be zonked out until morning.”

Hugh dug his hands in his shorts' pockets. He was about to answer when a semi-truck clattered by, spewing a cloud of exhaust in their direction. When the rumble faded, he turned to Cece. “You don’t have to do this. I can go alone.”

Cece shook her head. “Nuh-uh. Not with a psycho killer on the loose.”

Hugh raised an eyebrow, smiling. “*You’re going to protect me?*”

“What? You don’t think I can?” She swiveled and lifted her fists, a playful smile dancing across her face. “You think you’re so tough because you’re six-four?”

Hugh nodded. “Six-five,” he corrected her. “Yeah, I’m pretty tough.”

Cece stuck out her bottom lip and waved him forward. “Give me your best shot.”

Hugh held up two palms like boxer’s mitts. “You’re the one who’s going to defend us, remember?” Her eyes were twinkling with mischief. He pointed to his outstretched palm. “Go ahead. Put one right here.”

Cece looked from Hugh’s face to his hand. “Really? Really hit you?”

“Really.” He lowered his hand to make it easier.

She considered this for a minute, reached back and punched his palm.

The smack was loud, a good solid punch, but Hugh hardly felt it. He pulled back his hand, shook it tenderly, and mouthed *ow*.

Cece smiled and dropped her fists to her hips. “Told you I could defend us. Bring on the psycho killers,” she said, turning.

Hugh nodded, but suddenly felt cold. His eyes flitted to the dark shadows between each pine. Where was the beast now? Did he smell him?

By the time they got to the water tower, the sun had disappeared behind the tree line and the sky was a beautiful orange and purple blend. As they approached, his heart spurred up. It *was* the tower from his vision. But why?

They shuffled to a stop beneath it and Hugh looked up, hoping something would jog his memory. It rose about ten stories with a cylindrical concrete base. Up above, the curve of the oval water basin bowed out above them. The side read *Auburn Township* in big green letters. Hugh waited, shifted, waited some more. A mosquito landed and needled into this arm. He swatted at it and looked up. What was he doing here?

“Well,” Cece said, studying his face, “anything?”

He looked around the shrubs that bordered the field. The grass waved in the twilight. A truck thudded by on the road beside them.

“Nothing.” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Maybe it’s another building nearby.” She squinted into the dark, off into the distance.

Suddenly a figure strode out of the shadows: a man maybe a couple years older than Hugh. He was tall and muscular, though a little pudgy around the middle and he was eating... Was that a cake right out of the box? Hugh jumped in front of Cece, his hands in fists.

The stranger raised a cake-filled hand in greeting.

“Jesus, Jopari,” the stranger said, “where have you been? You look like crap.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN — CECE

Thursday 7:54 p.m.

Cece stared at the stranger in front of them, a raw anxiety snapping through her like an electric current. Tall and broad shouldered like Hugh, they could've been brothers with their dark brown hair and brown eyes. This guy looked four or five years older with long wavy locks, olive skin and a pouty mouth set in an impish smirk. The stranger had on a white Haynes T-shirt, board shorts and flip-flops, like he was ready for a beach party. And he was eating a whole cake out of the baker's box. The chocolate frosting clung to his fingers as he took another giant bite and chewed. He tossed the box into the weeds and brushed his hands on his shorts.

Was she dreaming? Cece blinked and shook her head. Nope. Just losing her marbles.

"Who are you?" Hugh asked, not moving, not even blinking. His forearms tensed.

The man chewed a few more times, then shook his head. "Are you kidding?" His voice was still thick with cake. "Gods, Jopari, I've been all over this hell-hole looking for you. We were supposed to meet here two days ago and you never showed. What happened to you this time? And who's the broad?"

The broad? Cece crossed her arms over her chest, indignation swelling.

Hugh just stood dazed.

The guy pulled a plastic soda bottle from his shorts' pocket and took a swig, shaking his head. "Ah, damn it. Total wipe? Gods, we've had a lot of trouble this time around." He strode forward and peered into Hugh's eyes like a doctor.

Hugh stumbled back.

"Stop!" Cece said, stepping forward. "What're you doing? Who are you?" She planted herself in front of the stranger and glared at him.

The stranger laughed, sending a wave of goose bumps up her arms. "Where'd you find her, Jop? The back of the line at the *Jersey Shore* auditions?" He snorted at his joke, then raised a dark eyebrow at Cece. She frowned. He held his soda out in her direction. "Thirsty?" She shook her head. He shrugged and took a huge gulp. "I love Mountain Dew." He glanced at the bottle. "How do they come up with this stuff?"

Cece frowned. "Who are you?"

The stranger stepped closer, peering down at Cece, more amused than annoyed. He waggled one dark eyebrow. "I could tell you who I am, sweetheart, but if I tell ya," he lifted the corners of his mouth mischievously, "I gotta kill ya."

"Enough!" Hugh stepped between Cece and the stranger and peered into his face. Was that some recognition dawning behind all the confusion?

The stranger slapped a hand on Hugh's shoulder. Hugh stiffened, but the stranger tugged him forward. Hugh reluctantly followed him. They stopped a few feet away, heads bowed together and began whispering. What were they saying? Cece couldn't help it. She tiptoed close enough to catch their words.

"...thought you'd come alone, Jop. Can't blame ya cause of the difficulties with your noggin, but this chick," he shook his head, "she complicates things, my friend."

Oh God, this guy made her mad. "I can hear you," Cece said, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Course you can, sweetheart," the stranger said, stepping back. He addressed them both now, spreading his arms wide like he was giving a speech. "You two can call me Nomad. Jopari, Hugh, whoever you are these days, I need you to meet me back here in an hour. *Alone.*" He stressed the word, looking at Cece.

She frowned. "Why should he?"

"Because," he said, smirking, "if he doesn't, he'll never know who he is or where he came from."

Cece looked up at Hugh. His eyes were still trained on Nomad. Somehow that made her angry. "Why should he trust you?"

Nomad dug a candy bar out of his pants and took a huge bite. Then he continued with his mouth full. "He knows why, he just doesn't remember. If you don't come, Hugh, you'll never know what is hunting the nice people of this town." He flashed Cece a set of perfect teeth, marred with gobs of chocolate. "And you'll never know how to stop it."

He turned and strode through the long grass and into the trees. The shadows curled around him until he was a blotch of darkness, until he was a swish of leaves in the distance.

Cece stared after him.

What the hell had just happened?

She watched Hugh stare toward the wooded path where Nomad had disappeared. Hugh's face was twisted into a look of torment. Cece put a hand delicately on his arm. He jumped at the touch, his eyes finding hers,

his face melting into a look of dejection. She withdrew her hand and tugged on her shirt instead.

She sighed. "You were on another planet for a minute there."

Hugh stiffened, then let out a nervous laugh. Then his face fell. His eyes tracked to the woods that had swallowed Nomad up.

Good riddance to bad rubbish was all she could think.

"You really want to come back here and talk to him, don't you?" Cece asked.

He didn't answer.

Jealousy stole over her. She didn't trust that smug idiot one bit. She looked up at Hugh. He started towards the gravel path, then stopped and doubled back for her as if she were an afterthought. She clenched her fists, but forced a smile when he looked at her.

"I'll walk you home," Hugh said, sounding far away.

Cece nodded. They were about a half mile from her trailer. The gravel on the shoulder crunched under her flip-flops. She stepped over a shard of brown glass and tried to think. What did Nomad say? *Something* was hunting the people of this town? Did that mean it was an animal and not a human? Well, that made sense, but she wasn't willing to believe a word that came out of that guy's mouth. From the look on Hugh's face, he was willing to believe every word.

Whether Nomad was crazy or not, it would get very dark, very fast. Suddenly the fear she had suppressed all day reared its head. She wanted away from here. Now.

He'll never know what he is or where he came from. Those were Nomad's words. Cece let her eyes slip toward Hugh shuffling quietly beside her, his head down, his mouth quirked to the side, his hands stuffed in his pockets. From here she could see his fists were clenched like he was holding onto something.

He's holding onto himself. He's holding on because a storm is coming and he'll be swept up with it.

Wasn't she just projecting? Wasn't that how she felt all the time?

They reached her trailer park much sooner than she'd expected. The homes were eerily quiet. Each squat little breadbox of a house had the door shut, the windows closed on such a warm July night. Was Mama still sleeping? Cece would find out soon enough.

She faced Hugh, who stood stoop-shouldered, his face dark. He lifted a smile when their eyes met, but the worry still hung on his face.

Cece gnawed on her lip. “So...” She blew out a breath. “You gonna go back?”

Hugh shrugged his big shoulders. His eyes tracked back toward the water tower. She could just see the rounded top beyond the tree line.

“You are, huh?” she said, wrapping her arms around herself.

Hugh scratched a hand behind his neck. “Yeah.” He wouldn’t meet her eyes.

Cece shrugged. “You’re a big boy. I can’t tell you what to do.”

Hugh shook his head. “I need to know.”

“He seems like he may be a few sandwiches short of a full picnic, Hugh. Do you really think you can trust that guy?”

Hugh shrugged. “I dunno, but I gotta see. What if he knows about me? What if he knows what I am?” He pressed a hand to his chest.

She locked eyes with him, taking a step forward until she was an arm’s length away. “What you are, Hugh, is a nice guy who deserves more than he was handed. You don’t need that guy,” she thumbed back to the direction of the water tower, “to tell you that.”

Hugh took a step back and swallowed hard. “Cece, what you don’t understand—”

“No, I understand. You want to know. You think some part of you is waiting under that water tower, but I don’t trust that guy.” She pressed a finger into his chest. Then she lifted her eyes to his face. “He didn’t even call you by the right name. There’s something not right about him. I can feel it.”

Hugh shook his head slowly back and forth. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Cecelia!” a voice yelled from down the street.

Standing in the road with no shoes, her skirt askew and her hair curling in every direction, Mama waved to her. Somehow Cece’s heart rose and sank at the same time: Mama was safe; Mama was manic.

Cece waved back and mimed *just a minute*. She turned back to Hugh. “I gotta go.” She couldn’t look at him. He shifted beside her, feet scuffing the pavement. Would he change his mind?

“Okay,” he whispered.

She looked at him one more time. He had to go back to Nomad or he’d combust. Cece nodded. “See you tomorrow, maybe?”

A flicker of a smile lit up his face. “I’ll be waiting when you get off.”

“Please be careful.” She looked up at him. She wanted so much more: to throw her arms around him, smell his scent, kiss his mouth. Instead she

turned walked toward her mother without looking back. When she reached her front door, Hugh was gone.

Cece walked up to Mama and nodded to the house. “We should go inside. It’s not safe out here.”

“It’s not?” Mama looked confused. She flicked her wide eyes up and down the quiet street. “What wrong?”

Cece shook her head and walked toward the door. “I’ll tell you inside.”

The two entered the house and Cece bolted the door behind them. She stared at the flimsy lock that separated their trailer from the outside world. It wouldn’t stop a normal person, let alone someone that would shred their throats for fun. Then she remembered her bedroom window didn’t even lock. It had busted three years ago and they’d never bothered to fix it. Cece tucked the worry aside and turned toward Mama. As she did, her eyes trailed over their little dinette. A checkered tablecloth was draped on the table. It was set with matching clean plates and silverware. In the center was a white Pyrex dish curling with steam, a delicious aroma wafting from it.

“What’s this?” she asked, walking toward the table.

“Humitas,” Mama said proudly, peering over the casserole dish. “I haven’t made them in a while.” Her eyes lit up as she breathed in the smell of them.

Cece realized how hungry she was. She leaned over the dish and took a big whiff. “Mama, these look delicious.”

Mama drew back a chair for her. “Go ahead. They’re for you.”

Cece sat, picked out one of the cornhusk packages from the dish and dropped it on her plate. She unwrapped the husk to reveal the yellow corn center. She dug in, savoring the steaming mixture, the taste of mashed corn, both salty and sweet on her tongue. “Mama, this is awesome.”

Mama nodded, sitting opposite Cece. Her eyes were still too wide, her lipstick smeared, but Mama was smiling, eating hungrily with both hands. “So, your job, how it goes?”

Cece nodded, chewing. “Okay. It’s a job. Fer’s there.”

“And that boy?” Mama lifted her eyes coyly to Cece’s. “Does he work there?”

Cece shook her head, feeling the heat flare up her cheeks. “No, Hugh doesn’t work there.”

“Hugh?” Mama trilled the word. “He’s so handsome, *mi amor*. Where did you meet him?”

Cece gulped down a hunk of corn. “He was just hanging around the ice cream shop. I sort of bumped into him.”

Mama nodded, leaning forward. One black and gray curl bobbed in the middle of her forehead. “So, he is your boyfriend?”

Cece shifted her eyes. She had no idea how to answer that question. As she pondered, her eye lit on Mama’s pink tank top. It revealed far too much cleavage. “Mama, do you have to wear my shirts? You’ll stretch them out.”

“Cecelia, don’t change the subject.” Mama pushed an unruly curl out of her eyes. “The boy. Tell me about the boy. I need details.”

“The boy is just a boy. We just met. He’s very nice, but I don’t think he knows what he wants right now.”

Mama leaned back, clearly disappointed, but she nodded her head. “Just like your father.”

Cece dropped her fork and leaned forward. “What about my father?” Maybe she could finally get to the bottom of this.

In the background a merengue beat had picked up on the tiny kitchen stereo. Mama ignored the question and, instead, flounced up from her chair and cranked the volume up. Then she bopped over to Cece, swaying her hips and clapping.

“Darling, come dance with me.” Mama’s hips swayed in her purple A-line skirt. Her feet shuffled lithely on the linoleum.

Cece shook her head. “Oh no. No merengue. You were going to tell me about my father?”

Mama shuffled over and tugged at Cece’s hands. “Yes, yes. Dance! Dance with me.” Mama swirled around the table as the Latin beat blasted from the stereo. The horns blared, the drums pounded. Mama pulled Cece from her chair.

“Mama, no.”

“*Si*,” Mama said, taking Cece’s hand and wrapping one arm around her back. She began to sway them back and forth.

For a few beats Cece resisted. This was ridiculous, the two of them dancing around their kitchen table, trying to dodge the piles of garbage on the floor. But the beat was in her blood. Her hips swayed. Her feet stepped. She felt a smile curl up her lips as Mama tried to dip her and nearly spilled her on the floor. Cece pressed her hand to her mouth and laughed. Really laughed.

This is how it used to be with Mama before everything fell apart. Cece remembered Mama taking her to fairs, of riding the tea cups until Mama

turned green and vowed never to spin again. A memory flashed before Cece of the two of them dancing at a wedding. She could picture the frilly pink dress she wore. It twirled as Mama spun her around. And Mama had smiled and smiled.

Like she was smiling now.

Suddenly there was a rapping on their front door, loud and urgent.

They stopped and stared at the door. Cece ran over and snapped off the stereo. Mama froze.

“Open up,” a husky male voice said through the door. “It’s the police.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN — HUGH

Thursday 8:52 p.m.

Hugh sprinted back to the water tower as fast as his legs would take him. He'd disappointed Cece, but she'd forgive him when he found her tomorrow and told her everything. It was time to share it with her, share it all. He only hoped she would still want to be with him when she knew.

He scanned the darkened landscape from the base of the tower. Fireflies blinked across the field. Above, the moon was large and round, not a cloud in the sky. He tapped his hand on his thigh and willed Nomad into the clearing. He couldn't wait a couple of hours to know who he was. *What* he was. Nomad might have some answers and no matter how strange or elusive he seemed, Hugh had to know. Tonight he would unlock all the secrets inside him and finally feel... What? Whole? Alive? Sane?

At peace, he thought, finally. *I'd feel at peace with myself.*

And then what? Well, then he'd go after the beast and try to kill it if he could or, if he couldn't, he'd get Cece and her mother far away from here. He could protect them; he knew that now.

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen," a voice said from behind him.

Hugh spun around.

A shadow stepped out of the darkness. Nomad came into view, his face lifted into his patented smirk, his hands brushing the tops of the grass. He stopped a few feet away, tossed back a lock of curly black hair and regarded Hugh.

"Look at you. Where'd you get those clothes, Jopari, the bottom of a dump? They don't even fit you." Nomad circled, running his eyes up and down.

Hugh shrugged, feeling a blush rise up his neck. "Where should I have gotten clothes? I woke up naked."

Nomad clapped a hand on Hugh's shoulder. Hugh stiffened at the touch. "Buddy, what's theirs is ours." He leaned in close, his breath hissing against Hugh's neck. "You just take." Nomad dug in his pocket, pulled out a wrapped sandwich, and tossed it to Hugh.

Hugh caught it and stared. "Are you always eating?"

Nomad pulled another sandwich from his pocket and began unwrapping it, the paper crinkling beneath his fingers. "Always. It's the best part about this place. They have killer food." Nomad took a giant bite

and a smile stretched across his face. “I put on, like, twenty pounds each time we come here.”

Hugh stared at the sandwich, the thick-crust bread, the folds of sliced meat. His stomach growled at the smell, but he hated eating something given to him by this stranger who called him *friend*.

“Eat,” Nomad said, bits of lettuce falling from his mouth.

Hugh couldn't help it; he tore off the paper and took a giant bite. The savory flavor of meat and mayo burst into his mouth. He groaned.

Nomad squinted at Hugh, studying him. “Please tell me you've been using your powers to help you get food.”

Hugh nodded. “Some.”

“Some?” Nomad stepped back, throwing his arms in the air. “Some? You've been using them some? Do you even remember what we can do?” Hugh shrugged. Nomad circled Hugh and swatted at the air. “Jopari, what do you remember?”

Hugh stepped back. “Stop calling me Jopari. My name is Hugh. And I remember nothing. That's why I'm here, so stop the buddy-buddy act, and tell me what's going on.”

Nomad's face spread in a slow smile and he nodded slightly. “Okay, big man. At least now you're sounding a little more like yourself and not some *human*.”

“I'm not human?” A jolt of shock rocked up Hugh's spine. There it was, the confirmation of something he'd suspected, but never believed. Not until now.

Nomad laughed, tossing back his curls. “Oh gods. I'd die if I had to be like them. Can you imagine? Small, miserable, ignorant creatures.” Nomad stared out toward the road. Then he flashed his eyes back to Hugh. “But by Gotharie's spear their food is *so* much better.”

“Stop talking about food and tell me who I am.” Hugh fought the urge to shake Nomad. He was on the edge of a cliff and Nomad was nudging him closer.

Nomad's eyes burned with mischief as he shook his head. “I will. Come on.” With a wink, Nomad turned and rose into the sky. He was hovering ten feet off the ground.

“How...?” Hugh said, unable to finish. He knew how. He just couldn't get his brain to believe it.

“Hugh, you are still asking the wrong questions. Not *how*, little buddy.” Nomad dropped back to the ground. “*What*. What are we? Ask me that.”

“What are we?”

Nomad smiled. “You and I, we’re the best of the best.” His eyes glistened with pride. “We are scouts, highly-trained agents, the top of our field.”

Hugh shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“Gods, I have to dumb *everything* down for you.” He bobbed in the air as he blew out a frustrated sigh. “We’re not from Earth. We were sent here to scout out conditions.”

Hugh shook his head. “I... don't know.”

“Of course you don't know, but what I'm telling you is the truth.” Nomad twitched and his vocal tone changed. “*You can't handle the truth,*” he shouted with a strange accent. Hugh backed up, arms tensing. Nomad shook his head and wiggled a finger in his ear. “Sorry. Cheese and crackers, they jam a whole lot of crap in here.” He knocked on his head as if dislodging something.

Hugh placed a hand to his forehead. “Jammed what in there?”

Nomad gave his head one more shake and then straightened up. “Before we leave they fill us up with the language, culture and idioms of the life forms we’re checking out. With limited data, loads of it comes from bad movies and TV. I can quote whole *Law and Order* episodes. It’s messed up.” Nomad caught the questioning look on Hugh’s face. “How do you think you know how to speak their language? Know their customs? Where do you think that sex drive comes from when you get a boner for that hot chick? All stuff they shoved in here the first time we left the ship.”

“How many trips have we made to earth?”

Nomad shrugged. “A dozen over the last year. This is our first time here, but we’ve been all over. Kansas. Ecuador. Iraq. Didn't like that one. Too dusty. And all the food tasted like dates.”

Hugh’s head was spinning. Everything he was, every feeling had been pumped into him from some information hose? What about him was real? Anything? And he'd been to other places, other cities just like this one? He staggered back, clutching for the water tower. The concrete was cool beneath his palms. He leaned in and pressed his head to it.

“Hold on there, man. I know this is a lot to handle.” Nomad's voice came closer. “We have protocol for an addled agent, but not a total tabula rasa. Never happened before. I'd call for backup, but there's no time.”

Hugh peeled back from the tower. “What’s the rush?”

Nomad raised his eyebrows as if he'd revealed too much. He covered it with a false smile. "Nothing, buddy. Let's not worry about that now. Now we gotta jog that memory of yours, and quick-like."

Hugh nodded. "I want to know."

"Of course you do. But not here. It's so..." Nomad waved his hand with a flourish, "uninspiring. Let's go."

Nomad paused for a moment, coiled and then sprung into the air. He hovered effortlessly above the ground. Bathed in moonlight he was a scene straight out of a comic book.

"How do I do it?" Hugh asked, looking up.

Nomad flashed a toothy smile. "Just push off. It'll be just like learning to ride a bike, if we'd ever had to do that. Hmm, a bike. Maybe I'll get me one to take back. Anyway, come on," he said, waving Hugh up. Then he soared up into the night sky.

Sweat broke out across his back as Hugh crouched down. *This is stupid*, he thought, coiling to spring. *It'll never wor—*

Somehow his muscles knew what to do. His legs coiled and sprang. His toes scraped the dirt as he rose. A strange sensation circled his torso, a tugging in his body, as if all his cells were surging upward. His arms and legs thrashed like he was struggling not to drown. The air swished through his fingers. Somewhere a truck trundled by and he prayed it was dark enough to keep him hidden.

A hand clasped his forearm. Hugh snapped his head up.

"Let's go," Nomad said, tugging. "Quit jacking around."

Nomad dragged him skyward and Hugh willed his body along. Somehow he rose until he was soaring up, up into the night sky.

CHAPTER NINETEEN — CECE

Thursday 8:55 p.m.

Cece stared at the door. Her heart was in her throat. Did he just say—
“Open up. It’s the police,” the voice urged.

Cece’s wide eyes found Mama’s. “What did you do?” she whispered.

Mama shook her head, terror filling her face. “Nothing. Oh God, Cecelia.” She crossed her chest, clasped her hands and began mumbling a prayer in Spanish.

Cece strode to the door, her whole body trembling. This was it. This was where they would lose everything. The police would come in, see the mess, find the shoplifted items... *O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us.*

“Just a moment, officer.” Her voice rattled like a twig in a hurricane. *Pull it together*, she thought. She clenched her hands, swallowed the fear, and turned the doorknob. She slid into the little crack between the door and the jamb and peered out.

One uniformed police officer stood on her stoop. Another waited at the base of the steps. They were both relatively young and trim, though one had a potbelly that rounded over his belt. The cop on her stoop met her eyes and nodded.

“Miss, are your parents home?” His voice was not unkind, but she couldn’t tell if he was just putting on a good face before he dragged her away.

Cece shook her head. “No, officer. They’re at work.” She prayed Mama would keep her mouth shut.

The officer glanced back at his partner and then up at Cece. “Miss, we’re going house to house in this area to determine if anyone’s seen a suspect in a crime.” He held up a sheet of paper. Cece stared at it.

Hugh. The sketch on the paper was clearly meant to be Hugh with the strong jaw, sad eyes, and short hair. The ears and nose were all wrong, but the rest of him was there. Cece gulped and tried to sound casual though her insides tumbled like a washing machine. “I...I’ve never seen that person before. Is he the...the killer?”

She just lied to a uniformed police officer. *Pray for us who have recourse to thee.*

The officer dropped his paper and leveled his gaze. Cece tried to breathe, tried to think. Her stomach was on spin cycle, her head following.

“He’s wanted as a suspect in a murder investigation. I’m sure you’ve heard of what’s been happening around here.”

Cece nodded. Breathed. Tried to smile.

“Well, if you see anyone you think matches this description, please call the police. And keep your doors and windows locked. Don’t venture out alone. Don’t go in secluded areas.”

“Are you sure?” she blurted.

“Miss?” he looked at her questioningly.

“Are you sure they were murders? I heard that it was probably an animal attack.”

The cop looked down at the sketch of Hugh. “I cannot discuss the particulars of this case with you, but we are sure.”

It felt like a punch in the stomach. Cece leaned against the door for support.

He narrowed his eyes. “When are your parents going to be home tonight?”

Cece tried to look normal. She was pretty sure she was failing. “Soon. My mom usually gets home around nine.”

“Good.” He nodded, sticking a thumb in his belt. “We could wait, but—”

“That won’t be necessary,” she said. “She’ll be home any minute. I’m sure you have more houses to hit.”

The officer nodded. He looked tired. His partner leaned his hip against her stoop and rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, if you’re alright.”

“I’m fine. Thank you. Goodnight.” Cece clicked the door shut and turned the lock. Then she pressed her back to the door and tried to breathe.

“Cecelia,” Mama said from her place at the table, “what they want?”

“Nothing.” Cece rubbed her forehead. Where was Hugh? Was he alright? A deeper worry throbbed at the back of her brain. Had she been wrong about him this whole time? He’d told her the cop thought he’d killed the man when he hadn’t. That they’d let him go.

And that sketch sure looked a lot like Nomad.

“Cecelia, what did they say?”

Cece looked up at Mama. The joy of the moment had been sucked out of the room. Cece strode to the table and started clearing off dishes, tossing napkins and paper plates in the garbage.

“But, you haven’t finished eating,” Mama grabbed for the humitas, which Cece was attempting to swath in cling wrap.

“I’m finished,” Cece said, pulling the dish back. Her voice was steel as her hands clenched the Pyrex. “Thank you for the meal. Really. Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Mama crossed her arms. “You don’t sound like you appreciate it at all.”

A rage bubbled inside of Cece. She swung around and narrowed her eyes. “What I’d really appreciate is if you’d get back on your meds and stop this madness. One home-cooked meal doesn’t change the fact that we live like crazy people all the time!” Cece dropped the Pyrex to the table and shook her hands in the air. “You think one meal makes up for the nights you never come home? The days there’s nothing in the fridge but ketchup? Worrying that the *cops*,” she pointed to the door, “are going to show up to drag me to some foster home?!”

She slammed her hands into the table, rattling the glasses. “Thanks for the humitas, Mama, but what I’d really appreciate is a normal mother.”

She’d gone too far. She knew it. Yet her chest felt lighter. The years of pent-up frustration, of never saying a word had slowly eroded her life one square inch at a time.

Mama’s face contorted into a look of astonishment, then rage. Her five-foot-two frame rocked back and forth. “How *dare* you speak to me that way!”

“Mama, I—”

“Shut up,” Mama snapped.

It felt like a slap. Cece dropped her jaw.

“Now *you* listen to *me*.” Her hands shook as she racked them through her wild curls. “I am sorry that you haven’t had a perfect life, but I always loved you. I always done the best I could for *you*.” Mama punctuated the word with her finger. “You might think you’d have some perfect life with a better *mami*, and maybe you would, but we don’t get a choice in our *familia*. Just like I didn’t get a choice when my *papi* kicked me out at sixteen because I was pregnant with *you*.”

Tears filled Mama’s eyes. “But, I would never, ever do that to you.” She paused, sniffled. “Those pills make me feel like I’m dead, Cecelia. Dead.”

Tears rolled steadily down Mama’s cheeks. She shoved them away with the back of her hand. “I won’t stand for this kind of treatment in my own home.”

“I’m sorry,” Cece mumbled, but Mama grabbed her purse and streaked for the door. “Mama, wait. They said we shouldn’t leave.”

Cece watched as Mama slammed the door behind her, rattling the kitchen window. The sound cut through Cece like a quake. Tears trickled down her cheeks and she let them fall. Hot, angry tears. She wanted a million tears. Enough to wash this shitty trailer away. To wash her away.

Cece walked over to the cluttered roll-top desk, shoved a wad of papers out of the way, and rolled it back. Bills, receipts, and envelopes covered every surface of the desktop. She heaved a frustrated sigh. It would take ages to dig through all this. She pressed her hands to the chipped wood lid. Two tears slid down and splatted on a wrinkled Kmart bill from 1999.

Her eyes landed on a yellowing address book with a faded kitten on the front. Cece blew the dust off and flipped through. The pages were littered with old addresses, long scratched out, names that once had meant something to her mother. There was her babysitter from second grade crossed out. The next page listed Mama's friend Holly from a church they no longer attended. Each name was like a stake through her heart, one more person that her mother had cut them off from. She wiped away the tears and kept going.

Cruz Acha, her grandfather, was on the first page, but all the numbers had been inked through. Cece stared at the digits, cut through with blue pen, and ached. The numbers and addresses were severed ties to a family she could never reach. Her eyes fell on the last number, crossed out. What if it wasn't an old number? What if Mama had crossed it out in anger?

Cece dug her cellphone out of her pocket, heart pounding. She dialed the international area code as Mama had taught her so many years ago. Then she pressed the numbers and held the phone to her ear, barely breathing.

There were a series of clicks and a long expanse of silence. What would she say to him if he answered? She hadn't talk to him since she was eight years ol—

“Hola. Residencia Romos,” a woman's voice said.

Cece's brain flipped to Spanish mode. *“Hola. Estoy tratando de llegar a mi abuelo, Cruz Acha. Abuelo? Entender?”* Why hadn't she thought about what she would say before she called? She pressed the phone to her ear until it hurt. *Please let him be there.*

The woman on the other end paused. *“No. No hay nadie llamado asi aqui.”*

Her translation was slow. No one here by that name? “Wait. There has to be a mistake,” Cece stammered. “Uh...*Error. Por favor.*”

“No comprendo.” The phone clicked.

“No. Wait.” The line buzzed in her ear. Whoever she'd been talking to was already gone.

She stared at the phone for a long minute, feeling her hope crumble. She flipped more pages, finding no one. She took the address book and threw it. It hit a dusty picture frame, which toppled to the floor and smashed.

“Goddamn it!” She shook her fists, a silly gesture, but one that brought her no comfort. She wanted to smash more than a just frame, but Mama would notice. Tears sliding down her nose, Cece leaned down and picked up the cracked frame. The picture was one she'd seen a hundred times, Mama on the beach with her friend Holly in tiny bikinis, their tan bodies glistening in the Florida sun. It lay half out of the frame. She tried to slip it back in, but something was wedged behind it. Another photo. Her fingers dug out the crinkled image.

A man with dark curly hair and a thick mustache smiled at her from the faded photo, a suave Antonio Banderas type. His eyes held a spark of mischief that drew her in. As she lifted the image she realized the photo was creased so the second half of the picture was folded back. Cece slipped her fingers around and opened the photograph up all the way. The crinkled image formed into one of a happy couple, pressed into each other, smiling.

The woman was Aunt Beatriz. She recognized her from pictures she'd seen. Was this...? Was this the man Mama had stolen? Cece stared at the image, feeling faint. Slowly she turned the photo over.

Scrawled in Mama's handwriting was the name Marquez and ten digits.

A phone number. Her father's.

CHAPTER TWENTY — HUGH

Thursday 9:22 p.m.

Hugh streaked through the purple star-strewn sky as if in a dream. Flying. He couldn't believe it.

They soared over a carpet of evergreens, the scent of pine thick in the air. Below, a rippling river sparkled with moonlight as the water tumbled over the rocks. A slash of highway cut through the trees, red taillights blinking as they passed. The cars were black beetles, trundling along below him. *So small from up here*, he thought. It made him feel huge, like a god. Cece would never believe this.

Cece. An image of her face awash in disappointment flashed before him. She was safe with her mother. And she'd forgive him when he explained everything.

Nomad flitted a few feet away, bobbing and weaving like an otter through the air currents, the wind rippling his clothes. Every so often he'd flash Hugh an amused grin. Then he'd go back to dipping below the treetops, or swooping down into the shadows only to pop back out again in a spray of leaves. Hugh smiled, but didn't attempt any loop-de-loops. His brain had enough trouble processing up and forward.

Nomad swooped in and pointed toward a gleaming metal structure in the distance. Hugh squinted towards it. A large expanse of water shimmered in the moonlight. A bridge, a long one too from the look of things, stretched across the water. Lights dotted the suspension cables in two giant triangles. Across the water, dark smears of land sat on the horizon. Where were they?

Nomad guided him to the very top of one of the suspension towers. He touched down on a white walkway about four feet wide and twenty feet across. Hugh followed, grabbing for the metal railing and slamming into the outside with a metal *clang!* He scrambled over and fell on his back onto the platform.

Nomad stood above him, smiling, his hair wind-whipped. "You're missing the view. It's the best part." He held down a hand and pulled Hugh upright.

Hugh stood and clutched the chest-high white railing that separated him from a 500 foot freefall into the bridge traffic below. Cars pounded over a metal grating, rumbling loudly. The water below undulated in peaks of moonlight and valleys of wet shadow. His stomach flipped uneasily.

Even though he'd just been soaring through open sky, somehow being stationary made him feel dizzy. He gripped the railing and closed his eyes. "I thought you were going to tell me—"

"Look up." Nomad pointed.

Even in the dark, the landscape was amazing. The last trace of orange sunset splashed the west where Hugh could just make out treetops and roof peaks. The water stretched on forever, a few boats dipping in the waves. The tangy, wet smell of lake water filled his nose. Hugh shook his head. "Why'd you bring me all the way out here?"

"I like it here," Nomad said, draping his arms over the railing. He gazed out and sighed. "The boys upstairs are always, 'Go here. Do this.' This planet has so much beauty. Better than that cramped ship, I tell you what. Sometimes I just need a breather."

Hugh turned to face him. "What's this about a ship?" The whole bridge vibrated beneath him, a steady shimmy that jangled his nerves.

Nomad glanced at him, the moonlight darkening his features. "What's the rush? You got a hot date?" He smirked, ignoring Hugh's frown, and gestured to the bridge below. "Mackinaw Island Bridge. Third longest suspension bridge in the world. Makes you think," Nomad said, staring out at the rippling water, "if humans can make something like this, they gotta be good for something, right?"

"The way you talk about them makes them seem like...idiots." Hugh wanted to say *makes us seem like idiots*, but he couldn't. Not anymore. That realization sat like a lead weight on his chest.

Nomad shrugged. "They'll be alright with our help."

"What do you mean?" Hugh asked.

"Don't you wonder why we're scouting? We're supposed to collect intel to help with the arrival of the rest of us."

Hugh crinkled his brow. "Like an invasion?"

Nomad shook his head. "Nah. Not like the kind of *Attack of the Body Snatchers* crap you have pumped into your head. No brain-sucking parasites. No *War of the Worlds*. We'll come on down and drop in like old neighbors. Offer our help in exchange for a few things."

"Like what?" A car honked below making Hugh grip the rail.

"Like, that they stop mucking up the planet, polluting it, blowing it up, over-populating it. All that dumb shit they should've been doing in the first place. We'll give them a little boost in technology, medical care, clean energy, and all they have to do is frickin recycle. And work with our government. Theirs could use a little 'tweaking'." He used air quotes,

smirking. Nomad pressed a salesman's smile on his face, his teeth gleaming in the dim light. "It's a great trade, Hugh."

Hugh's brain churned like a virus-riddled computer. He pressed his palms to his eyes. "But, where did we come from? What happened to our planet?"

Nomad gripped the railing and stared out into the night. "Carth...got it bad. Mutant fungus infected the plant life, killing off a lot of the vegetation. There were mass animal die-offs. The air clogged with pollution. We had horrible temperature changes." Nomad adopted a mock reporter's voice. "The planet became inhospitable." He gave a weak smile and shifted back to normal. "So, we left. We've been living in space for a few generations now. We've tried a couple of planets with limited success, but now we think we've found a place to settle down." A small smile spread on Nomad's face. A real smile. Maybe the first one Hugh had seen. "It's a great time for our people, Hugh. You were pretty pumped about it a few days ago."

"So..." Hugh said, staring up into the stars, "we're...aliens."

"To us, the humans are aliens. We're Carthians."

Nomad gripped Hugh's shoulder. This time Hugh didn't pull away. They stood there for a moment and Hugh felt that tug of recognition again.

Yet, all Nomad's answers felt like a tangle of threads. None of this sounded as easy as Nomad made it out to be. An alien race telling humans how to live, what to do? Somehow he didn't see it going down so easily. "What happens if the humans say no?"

Nomad stared across the shimmering lake. "They won't." He waggled his eyebrows. "We're *very* convincing."

Hugh thought about what it would mean for super-powered beings to crash land on earth. The humans would have no choice but to comply. Yet, if all of the beings were as peaceful as he felt, it would be against their nature to harm humans. Nomad, however, didn't seem to share his love for humanity. His thoughts raced to the other creature who had crash-landed on earth. He could see its red slitted eyes in the dark even now.

Hugh stiffened. "What about the thing in the woods? The beast. Is that one of ours, too?"

"That was," Nomad paused and swallowed, "a mistake. We didn't mean for him to end up here."

Hugh got the distinct impression that Nomad was hiding something from him. "Yeah, but you sure aren't doing much to stop it, are you?"

“We haven’t had time to get the extraction team here yet, but we will. Don’t worry. In forty-eight hours everything will change, anyway. Now, just chill out.” The smile had fallen off Nomad’s face. “By Turin’s claw, you’re nothing like the guy I knew on Carth.”

The thing in the woods was still out there and Nomad had no intention of stopping it. It had been lurking around Cece’s work; it had killed only miles from her home. What was he doing here taking in the sights? He had to get back. Hugh pushed off the bridge into the air, wobbling a little. The wind battered him, but he managed to keep his eyes locked on Nomad. “I have to go.”

From the bridge railing, Nomad’s hair billowed around his head like an angry rain cloud. “Go? You can’t just go. The higher-ups want you taken in. Fixed. You have to come with me. We gotta get your brain back.”

Hugh shook his head, bobbing down in the air. “I’m not going to be *fixed*.”

Nomad frowned. “You think they don’t know where you are and what you’re doing? They won’t be happy campers when they find out you’re trying to put the bone to some human girl. And if she finds out what you are, they’ll take care of her.”

Hugh tightened his fists at his side. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve seen what that thing can do, right? How it rips them from here,” Nomad touched underneath one ear, “to here.” He drew his finger across his throat, down his neck to his collarbone. “You don’t want that to happen to her.”

An image of Cece, bloody and shredded, flashed into Hugh’s head before he could stop it. He shuddered, the wind stinging his face. He couldn’t think straight. He needed to get back. Why had he left?

Nomad pushed off the bridge and bobbed in the air before Hugh. “So, I’ve got to report our coordinates and then we can catch a ride up. They’ll know what to do about your brain wipe. Maybe it was the landing?” He pushed his hand through his rippling hair. “They’ll probably send some—”

Hugh turned and shot away from Nomad into the moonlit sky. He pushed through the air, eyes streaming, clothes slapping against his chest. Faster. A hand cinched around his ankle and pulled. Hugh whirled in a circle, the landscape spinning into a blur. The pines below became a smear of dark green as he spun end over end.

Nomad clutched Hugh’s leg with both hands. “What’re you doing? We have to go back!” he shouted over the wind.

Hugh shook his head. Back to where they would change him, manipulate him, make him forget? No, he couldn't go back.

Hugh drew both legs to his body and kicked hard with his free leg. His foot connected with Nomad's chest and the force sent him whirling like a trapeze artist. Nomad smashed into a tall pine below them, a spray of needles filling the air. He scrambled out of the branches and flew up. Now his glare was angry. "You shouldn't have done that," he shouted.

"You shouldn't have threatened her!" Hugh shouted. "Tell whoever *they* are that I plan on protecting that girl and everyone around her with my life." Hugh flexed his arms. He could feel power surging through his body. "I'll kill you if I have to."

Nomad, picking pine needles from his clothes, shook his head. "It's not me you have to worry about."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE — CECE

Thursday 10:32 p.m.

A knock tore Cece out of sleep. She sat up, wiping drool from her chin. The late-night news flickered from the TV. She blinked and shook the sleep from her head. The knock sounded again, a quiet tapping on her bedroom window. Was it Hugh? She pulled herself off the couch and stumbled down the hallway, nearly tripping on some junk splayed across the floor. When she got to her bedroom, she could see Fer's face pressed onto the window.

"Come to the front!" Cece yelled, miming to the front door. "My mom's not here."

Fer nodded and disappeared. Moments later she was letting herself in. Cece slumped on the couch and Fer joined her.

"Where's your *mamacita*?" Fer asked, scanning the trailer. "She run out again?"

Cece nodded. She muted the TV and dropped her head back on the tattered cushion.

"Sorry, dude. I know she is acting all crazy-like right now." Fer offered a sympathetic shrug.

"You have no idea."

Fer's eyes flicked to the news. Then she straightened, her eyebrows popping up. "Oh, man, did the cops come here, too?"

"Yeah. I kinda freaked on Mama because of it." She pressed her palms to her forehead. "I can't take this anymore, Fer." She squeezed her eyes shut, holding back tears. She'd driven Mama out into the night with a killer on the loose for Christ's sake.

Fer rubbed a hand on Cece's back. "Sorry, dude. She'll be back. She always comes back, right?" Cece nodded, her head down. They sat in silence for a minute. Fer leaned back and propped her feet on the cigarette-strewn coffee table. "You wanna hear something funny? Shaun freaked when the cops showed up. He flushed two dime bags before he heard why they were there. He was so pissed. He should be happy they weren't there to cart his ass back to lock-up."

Cece lifted her head, her eyes straying to the muted TV. She stiffened and sat up. There was the sketch of Hugh on the screen, with a number to call if he was spotted. He was officially a wanted criminal. Again doubt gnawed at her. What if he *was* the one? All the lame excuses about why

the cops were looking for him. But he'd slept in her home and hadn't laid a finger on her. She shook her head, remembering his kind eyes.

Fer glanced at the screen. "Whoever that dude is, he's in for a world of hurt. They're gonna give his ass life in prison for sure."

"Why?" A cold chill ran up Cece's arms. Everyone would know his face by morning.

Fer gave her a sarcastic look. "Why permanent lockdown when this dude viciously murdered *three people* in cold blood? Hmm, let me think."

Cece shook her head and snapped the TV off. "How do they know they have the right guy?"

Fer shrugged, her eyes on her phone. "Of course it's the right guy. I just want him caught pronto so nobody I know ends up shredded." Fer lifted her eyes. "Don't you?"

Cece suddenly became interested in the cigarette pack stuffed in between two couch cushions. "I don't want anybody else killed."

She had to warn Hugh. But how?

Fer put down her phone and turned to Cece. "Listen, I know everything's pretty shitty right now, so I arranged us a little something." Fer smiled at her expectantly, took a big breath and blurted, "Shaun got tickets to Avenged Sevenfold tomorrow night!" She squeezed Cece's arm excitedly. "Isn't that frickin' sweet? I convinced him to swing two tickets. I even talked Lizzy into scheduling us both off work." Fer bounced on the couch like a five-year-old and waited for Cece's reaction.

Cece attempted a smile. How could she tell Fer that she couldn't go to a concert right now? Mama was gone. Hugh was a murder suspect. They needed her.

"Thanks, Fer. I just don't know—"

"Don't worry about the price. Shaun took care of it."

"With his drug money?"

Fer stiffened. "Since when did you care about that?"

Cece crossed her arms over her chest. "I care, okay? I don't want to go to some concert on dope money."

Fer frowned, shifting away from Cece. "I do something nice and this is how you act?"

Cece dropped her arms, exhausted. "Oh, Fer, you don't understand."

"Yeah, I understand." Fer clenched her phone in her fist. "Do you know how hard it is to be your friend?"

Cece pulled back. "What?"

“You mope around all the time ‘cause your life is so bad. I get it. Your life sucks. My life sucks, too. That doesn’t mean you stop living. That doesn’t mean you stop having fun.”

Anger flashed over her. “I don’t want to drink and do drugs—”

“I’m not talking about that,” Fer said. “All I’m talking about is a concert. No drugs. No drinking. Just an f—ing concert.”

Cece crossed her arms over her chest. “Mama needs me.” *Hugh needs me.*

Fer nodded vigorously, her ponytail bobbing up and down, a purple strand falling over her wrinkled brow. “And you love it, too.” She pointed a finger at Cece. “That’s why you’re always reading those psychology magazines. So you can fix everything. It gives you a purpose. It gives you an identity. Cece to the rescue. You ever ask yourself what you’d do if your mom got well?”

Cece stood now, her heart pounding in her temples. “What’re you, Dr. Phil?! You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!”

“The school social worker told me about co-dependency. You’re the frickin poster-child. You need your mom to be sick. You’d have no idea what to do with yourself if you didn’t have her to take care of.”

Cece clenched her hands into fists and shook them. “That’s not true. I *hate* that Mama’s sick. I *hate* my life. I *hate* this dump.” She swung her arm around the trailer. She dropped her voice to an angry whisper. “You have no idea what it’s like to be me.”

Fer shot an angry finger in the direction of her trailer. “Have you seen *my* life?”

Cece opened her mouth to answer when someone knocked on the front door. Both girls froze.

Cece walked over and peered out the peephole. Hugh stood on her front stoop, hands in his shorts’ pockets. She shot a glance back to Fer, her heart racing. “Just a second, Fer.”

She slipped through the door and onto the stoop next to Hugh. Hugh peered down at her with sheepish, apologetic eyes.

“Come on.” She grabbed his arm and pulled him around the back of the trailer.

As they jogged around back and out of the porch light, Cece glanced up and down the street. She caught the eye shine of a stray cat skittering under a car, but that was it. Once they were in full darkness, they stopped. They stood for a moment in the dark, the night air wet and sticky on her bare skin. Cece cleared her throat, pulling on the hem of her tank top.

There was awkwardness between them that hadn't been there a couple of hours ago. What she wouldn't give to go back to the lake before everything had fallen apart.

"You shouldn't be out here. Someone could see you." She glanced down the street again. Then she forced herself to meet his eyes and ask a question she wasn't sure she wanted answered. "What did Nomad say?"

Hugh shook his head. "Nothing. What's going on? Have you been crying?" He nodded toward her face.

She touched her cheek and then shook her head. "No. Listen, you have to get out of here. The cops are looking for you. I don't have any money, but maybe we could get someone to get you a train ticket. I know that—"

He held a hand up to stop her. "What are you talking about?"

She stared up into his face. "You don't know?"

He shook his head. "Know what?"

She pointed back to the house where she'd seen the sketch of his face. "They're looking for you. The police. They came here tonight. Fer said..." She paused and met his eyes, weighing her words. "It's bad, Hugh. *Really* bad."

He grabbed her hand and gave her a reassuring smile. "It's okay. They won't be able to catch me."

Cece tightened her grip around Hugh's hand. "Everyone knows what you look like. And the cops around here, they might shoot you, Hugh."

Hugh smirked. "I'm not worried about it."

"How can you say that?" She stood and began pacing in the dark. "We have to think of a plan."

"Cece, listen..." He paused, as if getting ready to tell her something. "It's okay."

She stopped pacing and looked up at him. "How can you say that?" she whispered.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her into an embrace.

His skin on her skin. His breath on the top of her head. She buried her face into his chest and sank into him until she could feel her heart thumping against his stomach. All the doubt melted away. Safe. That's what this was.

"Mmm," he sighed, pressing his lips to the top of her head.

She let out a soft sigh and lifted her chin until she was facing him. There was his mouth, soft and inviting. She smelled the sweetness of his breath and a wave of want surged through her. His eyes flicked down to

her lips. She raised her chin, thinking *Yes, kiss me. I want you to*. He leaned down. She stood up on her tiptoes and closed her eyes.

“Get away from her, you asshole!”

They jumped, falling out of each other's arms. Fer stood in the side yard, a butcher knife clutched in her hand. It flashed under the streetlamp as she pointed it at Hugh.

“Fer, what're you doing?” Cece asked, stepping in front of Hugh.

Confusion flooded Fer's face. “What're *you* doing? Isn't he...?” She mouthed the next words, “*The killer?*”

She shook her head. “He's... He's my friend.”

“Since when?” Fer asked, letting the knife droop.

Cece shrugged, offering an apologetic smile. “I was afraid to tell you.”

“Oh shit,” Fer said. “I thought he was gonna rip your head off. I called the police. They're on their way.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO — HUGH

Thursday 10:42 p.m.

Hugh looked to Cece, but she was already turning, her hand tugging his arm. “Go. We gotta go.”

“I’ll go,” he said, touching Cece’s arm. “You stay here. Stay inside.”

“No,” she said, glancing out toward the road. “I wanna go with you.”

He began to shake his head, but stopped. If he left her again, how could he know if she was safe? And who knew what Nomad had planned? He took her hand. “If you’re sure.”

“You can’t be serious,” Fer said behind her. “Cece, don’t go with him.” She gripped the knife.

“Fer, I’m safer with him than home alone. Just keep an eye out for Mama.”

Fer shook her head. “I wanna go on record as saying that this is a stupid idea that will likely land in your face on a milk carton.”

Cece patted Fer’s arm once. “Nobody buys milk in a carton anymore.”

Fer scowled. “You know what I mean. Don’t do this.”

Cece turned and tugged Hugh. “Let’s go.”

“Cece, no,” Fer begged.

With one last look at her friend, Cece turned and pulled Hugh forward. They sprinted out across the lawns of brittle grass, past the dark sheds and carports. Hugh plowed over a plastic bucket as they ran through a weed-filled sandpit and felt it splinter beneath his feet. When they reached the field, Hugh tugged Cece toward the woods.

I should just pick her up and fly off, he thought, but someone might see. Cece was already lagging behind and halfway through the long grass her panting sounded loudly in his ears. At this rate, they’d never outrun the cops.

Cece stopped, placed her hands on her knees and sucked air. “Just... a sec. I...gotta catch...my breath.”

Hugh’s legs itched to run. Above the buzz of insects, police sirens sounded. They both stiffened and turned toward the road.

Cece pushed Hugh forward. “Let’s go! I’m fine.”

They ran. In the dark, shrubs and brambles tore at their clothes. Hugh had no trouble avoiding obstacles, but only a few minutes in, Cece tripped and fell into a thick crop of shrubs. Hugh bolted to her side, yanking shrubs out by the roots, kneeling beside her.

“My ankle.” She reached for it, her face pinching in pain.

“Let me carry you,” Hugh said, feeling helpless. Dogs barked in the distance. Flashlights cut through the trees. They were gaining. It would only be a matter of time.

“I’m too heavy.” She stood, wincing. Blood dribbled from her knee.

He shook his head. All this was his fault. “You’re not. Please.”

She tugged damp hair out of her eyes. “I can make it.” She limped forward.

The dogs were closing in. Men’s voices shouted. Shadows danced between the tree trunks as more flashlights joined the search. A beam of light skidded over his face. The dogs’ frantic baying cut into him. They’d be here any minute. How could he protect her from a jail cell? Nomad had said that knowing his secret would put Cece in danger. As Hugh looked down at her twisted ankle, the scratches on her arms and legs, he realized he’d already done that.

“Grab my neck,” he said, lifting her. He pulled her body to his. The heat that he felt every time he touched her stirred, but he pushed it aside. The pain left her expression as she looked into his eyes. For good or bad, she would finally see him for what he was.

Then he ran.

The forest blurred to a dark smudge around them. The wind whistled by, blowing her hair back from her face. Soon they couldn’t hear the dogs.

“Hugh,” she said, but her words were sucked away by the rushing wind. He stole a glance at her. Even in the darkness he could see the awe in her eyes.

He had a lot to explain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE — NOMAD

Thursday 11:20 p.m.

Nomad stood in the darkness and watched Hugh and Cece bolt past. Beside him, Borrin shifted, shaking his mane, sending up a cloud of pheromones thick as the July heat. His clawed hands flared and then retracted into fists. Nomad could understand his desire. Borrin wanted the girl the same way Nomad wanted a Coney dog with everything on it. Borrin pushed a low, guttural growl through his fangs, his hot breath flooding the air. Nomad turned, batting away the fetid stink. What had he been eating, dead mouse intestines?

“Calm down, buddy,” Nomad said, putting a hand on Borrin’s massive bicep. It felt like gripping a scaly Arnold Schwarzenegger. The beast flexed under Nomad’s hand, but he obeyed, his breath slowing. The cloying scent of desire faded.

“Good,” Nomad said, dropping his hand. “Next, we’ll work on your breath.”

In the distance dogs bayed obnoxiously. Gods, he hated dogs. He shook his head as he watched the police bumble their way through the trees. A portly human took a tumble over a log and Nomad struggled not to laugh out loud.

Beside him, Borrin tensed. Nomad needed to get him out of here before the beast lost control and made a mess of that search party.

“Come on,” Nomad said, pulling a bag of Fritos out of his pocket. He took a bite, letting the salty flavor dance over his tongue. Then he nodded to the interior of the trees. “Let’s hit the road.”

Borrin stiffened and uttered a throaty whine, curved fangs glistening with saliva. He wanted to feed and had been promised the girl. Poor Hugh. He was not going to take that well.

“Not yet,” Nomad said, walking into the forest. Nomad could still smell her strawberry shampoo. He'd warned Hugh not to get her involved. Now, he had no choice.

“Don't worry, buddy,” he said, tugging the beast into the dense trees. “You'll get your chance.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR — HUGH

Thursday 11:27 p.m.

Hugh ran for miles. With Cece clutched to his chest, her arms around his neck, her hair fluttering against his face, he could run forever.

When he'd put enough distance between them and the cops, Hugh skidded to a stop. A few feet away, a small cliff dropped off into a moonlit valley, shimmering like a Renaissance painting. Cutting through the valley, a river burred over the rocks. Tall pines lined the hills, their dark bows bobbing in the breeze. Hugh strained his ears for a single man-made sound and found none. The forest sounds were soothing: the gentle drone of insects, the wind stirring the pines, and the peaceful trickle of the river. He let out a tense breath and gently lowered Cece to the grass.

Once she was sitting comfortably, he bent down to examine her ankle. He gingerly touched the puffy joint. "I think it's just a strain, but I'd stay off it for a couple of days." He lifted his eyes to hers.

"You ran so fast." She was staring at him, eyes wide, mouth open.

He gave a weak smile and shrugged. "I'm training for the Olympics?" She shook her head, her mouth still gaping.

He sighed and sat on the grass beside her. An owl cut across the field and swooped down on its prey. "I'm going to tell you something crazy."

She nodded, staring. "Tell me."

He scooted closer until their arms were nearly touching. The breeze slipped over his skin, making him shiver. "Are you going to freak out?"

She shook her head. "Never."

He moved his hand until it was inches from hers. "I'm not normal."

She rotated her hand in a hurry-up motion. "Keep going."

"I..." He lifted his eyes to the giant round moon in the sky. "Oh God, I'll just say it."

"Say it," she said.

He swallowed hard. "I'm not from around here."

Cece shook her head, her mouth tightening. "Quit beating around the bush. You ran like... You ran as fast as a car back there."

Hugh sighed. "What I meant to say was I'm not from *here*." He pointed down. "Here as in Earth."

Cece sucked in a breath. She looked up at the sky, then back at Hugh. "What do you mean?"

“I mean...” He clutched his hands together and tried to find the words. “I mean I'm pretty sure I'm from another planet.”

“Another planet? Like...up there?” She pointed at the moon, her finger trembling slightly.

He shrugged and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Really?” She drew her knees to her chest and hugged them.

“Really,” he said, chucking a rock out over the ravine. It sliced through the air and sailed for a quarter mile before falling out of sight. “And also, I can do things.”

She laced her fingers into the dry grass and gripped it like an anchor. “What kind of things?”

He ticked them off on his fingers. “Flight. Super strength. Super speed. Healing. That's all so far.”

“That's *all*?” Her voice rose.

“Oh, and I lied before about the cops.” He flicked his eyes to her face to watch her reaction. “At the gas station the cop shot me, but I healed. I just didn't know how to tell you.”

Cece snorted. “I wouldn't know how to tell someone that, either.”

They sat for a moment in silence. In the valley, a coyote howled. The silence was killing him. What was she thinking? Would this end it between them? “I'm sorry, Cece.”

She looked into his eyes. “Hugh, why are you apologizing?”

Hugh shrugged. “I don't know. I don't want to be different. I don't even know where I came from.”

Cece's face softened. “What did Nomad say?”

“He told me I was an alien scout sent here to do reconnaissance and report back.”

Her face tightened. “Report back to who?”

Hugh shrugged. “We didn't get that far.”

“What about the killings? Did he know who did them?”

Hugh looked out over the river. “He knows.”

“Is he going to stop them?” She twisted the ends of her hair between her fingers and looked up at him.

He dropped his eyes. “I don't think so. I don't really know what's going to happen next.”

She dropped her eyes to her hands. “Are you going to meet up with him again?”

“No. I don't think he was too happy with me when I left.” Hugh twisted a few strands of grass around his fingers. Nomad. Every time he

thought about him, he wanted to take Cece and run far, far away. And yet, there was another side of him that wanted to pepper Nomad with questions and untangle his past. How could he have both?

“Listen,” Hugh said. “If you see Nomad, I want you to hide, okay? He's not a good guy.”

Cece nodded. “I kinda thought that.”

“I should've listened to you.”

Cece reached for his hand. When her fingers laced through his own, tingles shot up his arm. His heart sped up.

“You needed to know,” she said, rubbing her thumb over his hand. “I understand.”

He met her gaze. Moonlight reflected in her brown irises. Her dark hair rippled in the breeze. She pressed her lips together and then parted them slightly. She blinked and leaned closer.

He could barely contain the beating of his heart as he pulled her to him.

Their lips met. The softness of her mouth, the sweetness of her tongue overwhelmed him. She tasted like spring. One of her hands locked at the back of his neck. The other gripped his shoulder. He cupped his hands under her chin as her body pressed into his, every curve angling, filling him up. God, he wanted her.

She pulled away, breathless, her eyes searching his face. A small smile lit the corners of her mouth. “That was...”

“Magic,” he whispered.

She leaned in, laying her head on his chest as he held her in his arms. He inhaled and took in the scent of her.

“That was better than any kiss I've ever had.” She lifted her face to his, tossing a dark strand of hair out of her eyes. “Have you kissed a human before?”

He shook his head, twining his fingers through the hair that brushed her shoulders. “Not that I remember.”

She smiled. “Good.”

He looked out over the moonlit landscape. *Hold this moment*, he thought. *There won't be another like it.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE — CECE

Thursday 11:47 p.m.

“So, you can fly?” Cece asked, her hand curling around Hugh's arm. She couldn't stop touching him.

He nodded. “Like Superman.”

She pulled back a little. “Really?” Her eyes grew wide.

“Really.”

She hopped up excitedly. “Can you do it? Can you take me?” She'd seen the old *Superman* movie with her mother and how she'd envied Lois Lane. To be *literally* swept off your feet, well, that was romance.

Hugh stood, brushing off the back of his shorts. He shrugged sheepishly. “I'm not very good.”

“Hugh, Jesus,” she said, smiling, “you are a bona-fide superhero. Don't be so damn humble.”

His cheeks flushed. “I don't feel like a superhero.”

“You are,” she whispered. She took his hand and stared into his eyes. The moonlight on his face made him look like a Greek statue. She couldn't believe she was standing here. That he was real.

He hoisted her up in his arms like she was a child. God, he was so strong. Her pulse thudded through her veins as her eyes traced over his strong jawline, the stubble on his chin, the curve of his bottom lip.

He gave her one more questioning look as if to say, *Are you sure?*

She tightened her arms around his neck. “I'm ready.”

He took three huge steps and launched himself off the cliff.

As the wind whistled past and she felt them falling, she thought maybe it was all a mistake, that they'd fall to their death on the hillside below. She gasped and buried her face in his chest as the landscape streaked by. Her stomach lurched. She sucked in a ragged breath. Then they were rising.

They soared over the bubbling river, the waves flashing silver in the moonlight. A whitetailed deer bolted from the river's edge and into the dense crop of trees. They soared over the canopy, the leaves streaking along beneath them until it looked like a lush green carpet. Cece smelled the pine, the earthen swell of the land. They rose higher until the trees were just small circles. The river was gone, replaced with stretches of green, small brown rooftops, little cars that pattered after their headlights. Cece

wanted to laugh, to scream, to burst this was so amazing. Flying! Dear God in Heaven if her Mama could see her now.

They soared higher. The air that buffeted her was cold now, damp. A shiver ran through her and Hugh looked down, concerned. He started to descend, but she shook her head. *I'm fine*, she mouthed as the wind sucked away her breath. He frowned. She shook her head. *Go higher*, she mouthed. He flashed a worried look, but did as she asked.

They flew through a streak of low-hanging clouds and moisture collected like dew on her skin. She tilted her head up and let the clouds kiss her face. Below, the dark landscape was surreal in its brilliance. Lights twinkled like stars below her feet. The river was a thin ribbon, carving its way through the dark.

She began to shiver, but she was enjoying herself too much to tell Hugh to turn around. She gripped his neck and nuzzled into his warmth. The joy was making her lightheaded. But then the lightness turned to dizziness. Her throat began to constrict until it felt like she was breathing through a straw that someone was slowly squeezing.

The air, she thought as the world grayed. *I can't breathe.*

Then the world was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX — HUGH

Friday 12:01 a.m.

As soon as she went limp in his arms, he knew what he'd done.

“No, Cece! No!” he shouted into the wind as her arms slipped from his neck. Her head hung over his arm, her eyes closed.

Was she breathing?

He dropped like a stone, descending far faster than he ever had, his heart tearing around his chest. Why had he gone so high? Why?

He hit the ground, burying both legs up to his knees in dirt. Pain rocketed up his ankles and, for a second, he thought he'd broken them, but his thoughts were locked on Cece. He set her limp body on the ground and leaned his cheek over her mouth.

Please be breathing, he thought. *Please!*

Slowly, softly, a breath pulsed on his cheek. He leaned back, digging his hand in his hair. She was alive, if unconscious. Thank God. But then the guilt hit like a punch. He'd almost killed her. He staggered back, resting a hand on a nearby sapling. His body pumped with anger. Didn't he know better? He'd risked her life for a joy ride. Stupid. Stupid.

He grabbed the sapling, tore it from the ground, and chucked the sheared tree a half a mile.

“Hugh?”

He ran over and there she was, sitting up, staring at him with wide eyes.

“Cece, are you okay? I'm sorry. I didn't think.” He reached for her hand. His own was trembling.

She blinked and rubbed at her eyes. “I must've...passed out.”

He shook his head, hovering over her like a fret-less mother. “All my fault. I went too high.”

“I told you to,” she said, drawing herself to her feet. She pressed her palm to her head. She looked skyward. “I wanted to see what it felt like to be free.”

He looked at her, confused.

She shook her head. “What time is it?”

“Late.”

She pulled her cellphone out of her pocket. Hugh watched over her shoulder as the screen reluctantly flickered to life. Two missed calls from Travis. Ten missed calls from Fer and a text. She opened it.

Get back NOW! Cops in your house with your MOM.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN — CECE

Friday 12:18 a.m.

Hugh skidded to a stop at the edge of the tree line and set her down. They peered nervously into the field toward the trailer park. No barking dogs, no police sirens.

Hugh clutched her hand, his brow stitched together. “I don’t like it. What if they take you in for questioning? I should come.”

She shook her head. “So what if they take me in? They can’t keep me. They might question me, but I’ll just tell them that Fer was confused or high or something. It’s not far-fetched. Thumb screws, water boarding, whatever. My lips are sealed.” She made a zipping motion over her mouth. “Besides, Fer’s probably just lying just to get me back home.”

She peered toward her trailer in the dark. No sign of police anywhere.

“I still don’t like it.” He leaned down and touched his forehead to hers. “I could take you away. Somewhere we’d be safe.”

She shook her head. “What if the cops do have my mother? I have to make sure she’s okay.”

Hugh lifted his head, sighing. “Then I’m going to hang around.”

She nodded. “Don’t get caught.”

It was the first time he’d smiled since she passed out. “Not a chance.”

She stood on her tip toes, turning her face up and closing her eyes. His soft lips pressed down on hers, his arms circled around her back and drew her in. *He’s an alien*, was her fleeting thought before passion took over. Desire burned through her body as he pressed his chest to hers. His hands were in her hair. His mouth trailed kisses down her neck until she stopped breathing, until her body cried out for him. When he pulled away, she felt a tug deep in her heart, as if Hugh were anchored there.

Then she turned and ran toward her trailer. She could still taste his kiss. A current sparked her skin like an electrical wire. She’d never sleep tonight.

Then she saw the red and blue flashing lights. All good feelings drained away.

Two cop cars sat in front of her house, their flashers splattering the night in garish red and blue.

Cece ran up the street, her feet slapping the pavement. As she neared, she saw police officers struggling with someone. She looked up, flashing wild caged-animal eyes. *Mama*.

Cece clutched her chest. This could not be happening.

The cops had her wrists pinned behind her back as they snapped on cuffs. Cece caught Spanish curse words as Mama kicked a cop in the shins. One grabbed her legs and began stuffing her in the back of his cruiser.

As Cece sprinted toward the scene, a hand clawed around her wrist and yanked sideways. She stumbled behind a dark shed.

“Let me g—” A hand clamped over her mouth. She fought with elbows and knees.

“Jesus,” her attacker said, scrambling to grab her hands. “Watch those elbows, Chuck Norris!”

“Fer!” Cece whispered as she pulled back. Fer frowned and rubbed her stomach where Cece had hit her. Fer looked straight out of bed with her Sponge Bob sleep pants and matted hair. “What’s going on? What’re you doing out here?” Cece asked, leaning around to look for Mama. The police were pulling out with her mother in the back of their cruiser. “No!” she yelled, turning to run after it.

“Whoa!” Fer said, grabbing her arm. “You can’t go out there.”

“I can’t let them take her.” Cece gripped the shed wall and watched as the cruiser turned down the main road. “Fer, they have her!”

Fer shook her head. “There’s nothing you can do tonight. The cops are asking about you. When I texted you, I thought maybe you could keep your mom from bitch slapping an officer of the law, but it’s a good thing you’re late. They would’ve taken you with her. God.” Fer rubbed a hand down her face. “What’re we going to do?”

Cece covered her eyes with trembling hands. “I should’ve been there.”

Fer gripped Cece’s shoulders. “If you had been, they would’ve hauled your ass down to Children’s Village.” She dropped her eyes, shoulders sagging. “This is my fault.”

“It’s not. It’s mine.” Cece’s legs buckled. She slid down the shed into the dirt and put her head in her hands. “What am I going to do? I don’t have bail. I’ll lose my job. We’ll lose the trailer...” She looked at her friend, tears spilling out of her eyes.

Fer leaned down beside her. “One thing at a time. We gotta get you out of here.”

“But why did they arrest her?” Cece stared at her sneakers and pictured Mama twisting around in the back of a cop car.

Fer lit a cigarette and sucked desperately on it. “When the cops got here, they did a search of the trailer. I said the call was a mistake, that I thought I saw someone but it turned out to be nothing. They wanted to

check, make sure no one was hiding inside or anything. That's when your mom got home. All of a sudden they had her in cuffs. Some of the neighbors are saying there was a warrant out for her arrest. Shoplifting or some shit. God, your ma has a mouth on her." Fer looked over. "I'm really sorry, C. Really. I didn't know."

"You were just trying to protect me. I'm the one who had a wanted criminal at the house." Cece tugged at her hair.

"Wait, that *was* him?" Fer's eyes popped open.

"No, I mean they have the wrong guy. I can explain—"

Sirens sounded again. The girls stiffened.

"We gotta get out of here." Fer tugged on her arm. "I have a plan, but you gotta stand up."

Somehow she rose. She met Fer's eyes and tried to thank her, but her mouth wasn't working. She let Fer lead her around several dark trailers and through the field. Finally, they stood on the sidewalk as a car, headlights off, pulled up. Fer pushed her towards it. "Get in."

The backseat was cluttered with pop cans, wrappers, and crinkly cigarette boxes. The cheap upholstery reeked of smoke. Shaun sat in the driver's seat, a cigarette winking red in the dark. Fer slid in the back next to her and clicked the door shut.

"We good?" Shaun took a long drag and let the smoke trail from his lips.

Fer nodded. "You know where you're going?"

Shaun put the car in drive. "Yep."

"Think you can avoid the cops?" Fer asked.

Shaun peered up at them through the rear-view. Cece could tell he was smiling. "Me, avoid cops? Yeah, I think I can do that." He hit the gas.

They drove ten minutes to the other side of town. With her face pressed against Fer's side, Cece folded into herself and pretended she was seven again, riding in the back seat as Mama drove home from Sunday mass. The swaying of the car used to lull her to sleep and Mama would carry her into the house. She used to feel so safe in Mama's arms.

Fer shook her. "We're here. Put this on." Fer threw a men's oversized hoodie at her. Cece slipped it on and pulled the hood over her head.

They were parked in front of a rundown apartment complex. The brick buildings were splattered with graffiti. Weeds poked through sidewalk cracks. Most of the streetlamps were busted, creating an eerie darkness that hung over the lot like a fog. A few unsavory characters stood in a cluster near the front door.

Cece stared up at the crumbling concrete steps to the door under a fluorescent light. “Where are we?”

“You’ll see,” Fer said, slipping out. She reached in for Cece. “Come on.”

Cece took Fer’s hand and followed.

They climbed the steps two at a time. The men near the door watched them. Cece scooted closer to Fer, the hairs on her neck standing up. Fer thumbed the button beside the door and a low buzz sounded.

“Yeah?” A groggy male voice crackled through the speaker.

Fer pressed her thumb to the button again. “It’s us.”

A louder buzz this time. The door clicked. Fer yanked it open and they entered the foyer.

The musty carpet smelled like cat pee. The bulb overhead clicked and buzzed. They walked up two flights to a dented metal door. Fer knocked twice and the door sprang open.

Travis stood inside, wearing a pair of shorts and a wife beater. His eyes were red and bleary, his hair a mess of bedhead. He waved them in. Cece stumbled in after Fer, her stomach knotting. What was she doing in Travis’s apartment at one in the morning? What would Mama thi—

Mama was in jail. The thought pretzeled her insides.

“We owe you one, Trav,” Fer was saying.

Travis shook his head, looking awkward. “No worries. No worries. Glad to help.” His eyes flicked up to Cece. “Glad you’re okay.”

Cece nodded. She felt anything but okay.

Travis nodded. “Can I get you ladies a drink? Something to eat?”

Fer shook her head. “I gotta go.”

Cece grabbed for Fer’s arm. “You’re leaving?”

Fer nodded, checking her phone. “Shaun’s waiting. We gotta be home before Ma. Plus, with the cops looking for you, they’ll be looking for the rest of us.” Fer nodded to Travis. “At least if we’re home we can lead them off your trail for a while.”

Cece wouldn’t let go of Fer’s arm. Every anchor to her former life had been severed and she was slowly bobbing out to sea.

“She’ll be fine here,” Travis said, running a hand through his messy hair. His eyes flicked up to Cece’s and then away. He walked back to his bedroom.

Fer turned to Cece. “I’ll be back tomorrow as soon as I can get away. We’ll figure something out. Maybe the police will release your mom. Or I’ll ask my mom about bail.”

Cece threw her arms around her best friend. “I’m sorry,” she whispered into Fer’s purple hair.

“Don’t,” Fer said softly, returning her hug. “Nothing to apologize for.”

Tears sprang into Cece’s eyes, but she swallowed them back and pulled away from Fer. “Can you do something for me?”

Fer nodded. “Anything.”

“If you see him hanging around my house, will you tell him where to find me?”

Fer wrinkled her brow. “Who? The homicidal maniac you disappeared with? Let’s think about that for a moment, shall we?”

Cece grabbed Fer’s arms. “He’s not the killer.” She stared pleadingly into Fer’s eyes.

Fer pushed back a stray hair and fixed Cece with a look. “I’m your best friend. I am *not* giving a wanted criminal your locale, okay?”

Cece blew out her breath. “Fine. I’ll call you in the morning.”

Just as Fer left, Travis returned, looking a little more awake in a fresh T-shirt. He gestured to a sagging sofa. “Have a seat.”

The apartment was small—two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a living room connected to a galley kitchen. The decor was decidedly bachelor pad—posters of Bob Marley, *The Godfather*, a curvaceous girl in a yellow bikini. A scratched coffee table held Xbox controllers, an ashtray, a bong and a *Playboy* magazine. Travis spotted it and chucked it into a bedroom. He offered her a sheepish smile. “It’s Mike’s.”

“Mike?” she asked.

“My roommate. Total pig.”

Cece nodded. “I like your place.”

The couch dipped as he sat beside her, causing Cece to slide closer to the center. Suddenly she was very aware of the space between them.

“It’s a dump,” he said.

Cece laughed. “Only a little.”

He chuckled. “My mom won’t even set foot. She brings a can of Lysol every time she brings my mail. Sprays it right at Mike.”

Cece let herself smile. “Your mom sounds like a trip.”

Travis nodded. “She is.” He paused. “Sorry about your mom.”

There was that feeling again, like someone gripping her stomach. Squeezing. She nodded.

Travis jiggled his foot nervously. “Fer told me.”

Cece nodded again. Tears swelled back to the surface. She sniffed and pinched the bridge of her nose. She couldn’t cry. Not in front of Travis.

“It'll be okay.” Slowly, gently, he lay his hand on top of hers.

Tears streaked down her face as her guard fell. “It's all my fault.” More tears. Sobs shook through her body. “All...my fault.”

“Hey, it's okay. It's okay.” Travis leaned over and put his arms around her.

Cece leaned in, pressed her face to his shoulder. She couldn't stop the flood. Travis rubbed her back and murmured condolences. She cried long and hard. When the tears finally stopped, she sat back, sniffing and wiping at her eyes.

“I'm sorry.” She looked up at his face. He had the strangest expression. As if he were deciding something.

Then he leaned in and kissed her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT — HUGH

Friday 1:23 a.m.

He stood in the woods barely breathing. Something wasn't right, he could feel it.

Cece had run through the moonlit field almost an hour ago and he'd stood listening since. *If something was wrong, she'd come back*, he thought as he shifted again. Yet, his gut twisted and his palms were dotted with sweat. Something was not right.

A noise echoed through the forest behind him. He snapped his head around, his eyes sifting through the inky blackness. A twig snapped to his left and his body tightened like a fist. Someone or some *thing* was out there. He strained his ears toward the sound, filtered out the buzz of insects, the rustling leaves. There, to his right, something shifted ever so slightly. He strode forward, anger heating up his insides. The smell hit him. Feral, animal, big.

Rage seethed through him until rational thought was crowded out. How dare it come here, nearly to her doorstep. *I'll kill it*, he thought, tearing after the scent. *This time I'll make sure it's dead.*

He tore toward through the branches, his arms pumping, hands fisted. He gritted his teeth and an animal growl gurgled out of his throat.

Hugh pulled back, shaking his head. *What's gotten into me?* He loosened his grip, pushing down the rage. Then a whiff of feral scent hit him in the face. The rage reared up, overpowering him. The beast had to die. Then he'd be able to calm down.

He tore into a small clearing. Here the pines thinned, letting a sliver of moonlight spear into the ferny underbrush. Hugh stopped and looked around.

Still as a statue, the beast waited. Close to seven feet tall, rippled in muscle, it was a thing of nightmares. From here, the creature looked like a gnarled tree with slitted red eyes. Its lion-like mane stirred in the breeze; its skin was a network of hard scales the size of nickels that reflected the moonlight. Hugh's eyes tracked over the claws that curled from each finger, at the teeth that curved outward six inches in both directions. The sunken red eyes watched him from a bony face that protruded in knobs at the cheekbones and forehead.

It was grotesque, an aberration. A monstrosity.

Hugh squared up with it, took a deep breath, and bared his teeth.

The beast didn't move. Red eyes watched Hugh's every move intently. Could it actually be...thinking? No. This monster didn't think.

“Come on!” Hugh pointed to his neck, veins popping. “This is what you like, right?” Hugh jutted his chin upward. “Come and get it!”

The beast flexed, lips curling back to reveal more of those razor-sharp teeth, but the posture was defensive. It made no move to charge.

“Come on!” Hugh grabbed a log and hurled it at the beast. The monster deflected the log with one swipe of a forearm, raining splinters into bushes. Still, it blinked at him.

How could this killing machine stand there looking at him without attacking? He thought of the man in the gas station, the blood, the shocked expression on his face, the flies.

An image of Cece, crumpled and bloody, flashed before his eyes.

He ran and jumped on the beast.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE — CECE

Friday 1:25 a.m.

Travis was *kissing* her.

Cece slammed back against the couch, pressing her palms into Travis's chest. He fell back, stunned.

"Travis, I..." She stared up at him.

Travis slumped back, dropping his eyes to the floor. He planted his palm in the middle of his forehead. "Stupid."

"No." Cece shifted forward again, touching his arm. "It wasn't stupid. I like you. A lot. It's just... I like someone else."

"Who? You never talk about anybody at work. It's just an excuse, isn't it?" He shook his head and then clasped it in his hands. "I suck."

She laid her hand gently on his arm. "No, you don't. You are smart and funny and nobody makes me laugh like you."

Travis lifted his sad eyes to hers. "Then why don't you like me?"

How could she explain how she felt when she was with Hugh? She grabbed a tattered pillow and hugged it to her chest. "I'm all messed up right now. You don't want to be with me."

Travis leaned in, his face lighting up. "I do!"

"No." She pulled back. "I think we should just be friends."

"Oh God!" He fell back as it had been a fatal blow.

"Oh, Travis. I'm sorry."

He sat there for a moment, letting his eyes burn holes into the dirty carpet. Finally, he sighed. "I can dig what you're saying, being your friend or whatever, but whoever this dude is, he better be good to you."

She pinched her hands together on her lap. "He is."

An awkward silence filled the room. He turned and looked at the neon Budweiser clock glowing in the corner, drew out a fake yawn. "Dude, it's late and I gotta work tomorrow."

"Oh no! Work." She fell back on the couch. She'd nearly forgotten. She'd never be able to work at Lizzy's again. Not with the cops and Child Protective Services looking for her.

"I'm sure Lizzy'll give you your job back when this whole thing blows over." Travis handed her a faded blue and gray Detroit Lions blanket. "I'd give you my bed, but it's kinda gross. I think the couch is cleaner."

Cece took the blanket, feigning a yawn. The atmosphere in the room was decidedly awkward, and she needed to be alone for what she was

planning to do next. Travis shuffled off and clicked his door shut. Cece pulled out the folded piece of paper from her pocket. In all the excitement she'd forgotten she had a new number at the bottom, penned in fresh ink. Marquez, her father. She thought of his photo stuffed in Mama's frame, the cleft chin, the dark curly hair, the crooked front tooth. Did he ever think of her? Had he ever tried to call, come by? What would he say to his long-lost daughter? She looked down at her cellphone. Time to find out.

She dialed the number. She'd been nervous with Aunt Bea, even worse with Ben, but this...

It rang three times. A deep male voice, sleepy and deep, answered. "Hello?"

She swallowed. "Marquez? Is this Marquez?"

"Yeah," his voice was slow and thick. He coughed into the phone. "Who is this?"

"My name is Cecelia. And I'm...your daughter."

The man coughed again. "It's the middle of the night. I'm not in the mood for jokes." His words slurred as if he were drunk.

"This isn't a joke. My mother is Luisa Acha. I think you know her and my Aunt Bea."

There was a pause and then a low rumble that turned into a wheezing laugh. "So, she told you, eh? She said she'd never tell her daughter about the pigshit that fathered her. Looks like I'm not too much of a pigshit after all."

"No, she didn't tell me. I found a picture and kind of put things together." She paused. "So, why didn't you ever come to see me?"

"Your mother said she'd cut off my balls if I ever set foot near you. And Bea," he took a swig of something, gulped, and continued. "She wasn't too keen on me seeing Luisa either."

"But you didn't even try? Not once?" Anger flooded her voice. Fifteen years of having a blank spot where her father should be and this man, this drunk idiot was it?

"Listen, girly—"

"My name is Cecelia." She gripped the phone with white knuckles.

"Cecelia, this is a lot and it's past midnight, sweetheart. Maybe we could talk later on. Next week or whatever?"

He was just trying to get her off the phone. Well, she'd help him along.

"I don't want to talk to you next week. I have nothing to say to you. All I want to know is if you know the number for my grandfather, Cruz Acha."

He coughed again, the phone shifting. “Nope.”

“Well, good,” she said. “At least you're thoroughly useless then. Have a good life.”

She hung up. Cece lay on the couch and pulled the blanket over her legs. She thought of the rocks she'd seen on the beach. How many waves had they weathered before they were pebbles, before they were grains of sand? Before they were nothing, nothing at all?

CHAPTER THIRTY — HUGH

Friday 1:26 a.m.

Hugh's body collided with the beast and they went sprawling into the underbrush.

Twigs and branches snapped on either side as they fell. They skidded across the forest floor, stopping when the beast's back slammed into a massive tree. On top, legs straddling the beast's torso, Hugh swung like a heavyweight boxer, fists pounding into the beast's scaly chest and bony head again and again. It was like punching a stone statue. Blood splattered from Hugh's knuckles as he swung.

The beast let out a ferocious growl, spittle spewing through its fangs. Hugh felt hot wetness on his cheeks. The beast lurched sideways, its claws furrowing the dirt. Hugh's grip slipped and the beast rolled away. Hugh grabbed at it and came away with a handful of matted, stinking fur. The beast let out a roar, its rancid breath clotting the air.

In one move it was behind Hugh. Paws clamped over Hugh's chest, locked, and began squeezing.

It's as strong as I am! Hugh thought, as his ribs creaked. Pain spread through his chest like a cancer, setting warning bells off in his head. He thrashed back and forth.

No air! Got to—

Hugh smashed his heel into the beast's groin. Another guttural growl and suddenly Hugh's arms were free. He dropped to the dirt and rolled into the undergrowth.

Scrambling through bushes, Hugh sucked air madly. Once he could breathe, he pulled up and turned back to his opponent. The beast stood in a defensive stance, claws up, eyes and ears alert, legs tense. Its dirty brown mane wavered in the breeze. A clot of yellow saliva dripped from one curving fang. The slitted red eyes blinked at Hugh. Blinked and stared. Almost as if it were trying to communicate.

“Why don't you fight me?!” He had no idea if the thing could understand him. It would understand a fight. Hugh tore forward, yelling at the top of his lungs.

They grappled, arms around each other, bodies lurching back and forth, slamming into trees, toppling them with tremendous cracks that echoed through the forest. A cloying smell of earth and raw meat overwhelmed him as Hugh's face pressed against its massive shoulder.

From behind, a slashing blow sliced through Hugh's shirt and into his back. He cried out and threw a punch, the beast's head snapping back, blood arcing in the moonlight.

The beast fell heavily into the leaves.

Hugh stood, panting, waiting for it to charge again. Warm blood dribbled down his back. A lot of it. How long before he healed? How much blood could he stand to lose?

The beast sat up, shaking its head. Then it skittered between tree trunks and into the shadows.

He needed something to put an end to this cat-and-mouse game. Something to finish this once and for all. A giant boulder six feet in diameter lay in the shadows, fuzzy with moss and lichen. Hugh strode over and heaved the massive thing out of the ground, clutching it in his arms like a load of heavy groceries. Then he stalked into the darkness.

The smell of the thing was all over him now, so following its scent was no good. His eyes sliced through the shadows, picking up tree trunks, fern fronds, the skitter of some rodent avoiding his path. There was no telling where the thing had gone. His arms ached with the weight of the boulder. His back throbbed where the thing had slashed him.

The sound of a breaking twig to his right. He whirled and jogged forward. Stopped. Listened.

Buzzing mosquitoes and chirping frogs. Then... In the distance, he heard it: the airy sound of something inhaling. He took a step forward.

Something hit him hard from behind.

Hugh went down, the boulder falling out of his arms. His body careened into a pile of leaves. The boulder slammed down on his leg with a sickening crack.

Pain like white lightning shot up his leg and speared his whole body. He cried out, arching his back, reaching for his leg, now buried under six feet of solid rock.

The beast stalked out of the shadows.

Throbbing pain like ten-foot waves crashed over him until he felt he would drown. He shook his head and swiveled his neck to stare the thing in the face. God, it was horrible—the knobby, angled skull, the matted mane around its head reeking of animal waste. Its red eyes slitted to half-moons as if sensing a meal. Then it slowly opened its mouth and flashed rows and rows of dripping fangs.

Hugh pushed on the boulder with his ebbing strength. Pain shot through his body, turning the world gray. He slapped his face. He could

not pass out with this thing hovering over him. He slapped once more, clearing his vision, and pushed his hands against solid rock.

The boulder rocked forward and another crunch rocketed up his mangled leg. Pain exploded in his brain like a bomb. He fell back, fighting to stay conscious. He was pinned. Finished.

A low, rumbling growl rolled over Hugh, sending pin-pricks of fear down his limbs. The beast stood over him and spread its claws.

I'm dead, he thought.

He swung his fists wildly a couple of times, but it was no use. The beast was out of range. When it opened its mouth again, revealing razor-sharp teeth curling outward like scimitars, it seemed to be smiling.

The pain transformed to a warm numbness that radiated up Hugh's body. He shook the drowsiness away. He flashed his teeth at the beast in challenge.

“What're you going to do, kill me?! Well, then kill me!”

The beast hovered above for a moment. Then it bolted into the shadows.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE — CECE

Friday 6:46 a.m.

Cece woke to someone pounding on the front door.

Her eyes flew open, panic stretching over her body. Morning light filtered in from Travis's smoke-glazed kitchen window. Her eyes locked on the front door. The knuckles sounded again. Harder.

Travis skidded out of his bedroom, tugging on a pair of jeans. He shot a terrified glance at Cece, waved at her to stay out of sight, and peered out the peephole.

"Oh shit," he said. "Get in my room." He reached down and unlocked the door.

Cece stood upright, dragging the blanket with her. She was in a tank top and jean shorts. She had no idea where her shoes were. If it was the cops, she was done for. She scrambled toward Travis's bedroom as the door flew open.

Michelle burst in. "I wanted to talk to you before work. I need to know..."

She stopped, eyes locked on Cece halfway in the bedroom, a blanket around her waist. Shock flashed on Michelle's face as if someone had just tossed a bucket of water at her. Her fists balled up. Her cheeks reddened.

"You *slept* with her?" she screamed. She whirled on Travis. "You took *me* out to a movie and then you came back and had sex with *her*?"

Travis shook his head, holding his palms up in defense. "No, no, no. Cece just crashed here."

Michelle folded her arms across her chest and flashed a set of white teeth. "Spare me." She shot a venomous glance at Cece. "I knew you were trash," she said, "but I didn't know you were a whore, too."

Cece took a step forward. "You can't call me that!"

"I just did." Michelle narrowed her eyes. "You know, my daddy really hates shoplifting." Michelle paused, studying Cece's face. "And he prosecutes criminals to the full extent of the law."

Cece dropped her jaw. "You!" she said, as the realization crested over her like a cold wave. "You heard me talking to my mother at Lizzy's. You knew she'd shoplifted." Her blood began to boil. "You turned her in."

Michelle shrugged, smirking.

Cece strode up and slapped her face.

Michelle staggered back, clutching her cheek. Then she lunged for Cece, hands clawed. “Bitch, I’ll kill you!”

The girls grappled, stumbling around Travis’s apartment, knocking over the coffee table with a crash. Cece grabbed a fistful of blond ponytail and yanked. Michelle yowled like a cat and dug fingernails into Cece’s arm.

Travis yanked Michelle back, dragging the girls apart. “Stop it. Stop.” He held Michelle in his arms as she thrashed and lunged for Cece. “Ladies, let’s not fight. At least, not without the Jell-O.”

The joke fell flat as the two girls shot eye-daggers at each other.

Michelle ran a trembling hand over her destroyed ponytail. “You dirty, trailer-trash bitch. If you lay another finger on me—”

Cece raised a fist. “Come here and I’ll hit you again.”

Michelle ripped her cellphone out of her pocket and began punching numbers. “Let’s see what the police have to say about this.”

“Michelle, stop!” Travis scrambled for the phone in Michelle’s hands. Cece grabbed her shoes, shouldered past them and sprinted out the door.

She took the apartment stairs two at a time. She stumbled once, wrenching her sore ankle, which instantly began throbbing again. She gritted her teeth and ran. *Hugh*, she thought. She had to find him. Would he be waiting for her in the shadows like he always was?

She skidded around the side of the apartment complex, dodging a broken beer bottle. The alleyway between two buildings was thick with morning shadow. She turned in. It would give her cover from the road while she thought. She pressed her back to the warm brick and turned her eyes to the clouds. How could she find Hugh? He said he’d be waiting at the trailer park, but she couldn’t go back there. Fer. She dug in her pocket for her cellphone, but her hand came up empty. It must’ve slipped out of her pocket when she was sleeping on the couch.

“Dammit,” she whispered, flicking her eyes to the street. The alleyway opened up to the parking lot and after that the main road. The forest waited on the other side. She could run across and into tree cover. From there, she’d circle back to the trailer park and hope Hugh would find her. It was her only shot.

A shape streaked down from the sky and landed in front of her, sending the trash skittering in all directions. *Hugh!* Her heart soared. The figure uncurled himself and lifted his head.

Nomad.

He was wearing jeans, brand-new sneakers, and a Pacer's T-shirt with crisp lines. He looked so much like Hugh—brown hair, brown eyes, tall, and muscular—but without Hugh's kindness.

All good feelings drained away. Hugh had told her to run if she ever saw Nomad again, and boy, was she willing to oblige. She stepped back, clutching the brick, her heart pounding.

Nomad smiled smugly at her. He tossed back a lock of dark hair and raised an eyebrow. "Whoa, mama, could you use a shower?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and tried not to tremble. "What do you want?" Her eyes flicked to the road. Clearly he could fly like Hugh. Did he have other powers as well? Could she make it across the street before he pounced?

Nomad closed the gap between them, his eyes still on her. She shivered and shot a glance to the sky.

"Your boy isn't coming." Nomad followed her eyes up to the clouds. "Busy. Sorry. Maybe later you two can rendezvous. That's what you lovers say, right? A little *rendezvous*." He threw on a French accent and twiddled his fingers.

"If you touch him, I'll—"

"Oh, Cece— Mind if I call you Cece?" he asked, digging a bag of sunflower seeds out of his pocket. She watched as he pried open the bag with his teeth and tipped a large portion of seeds into his mouth. He paused, crunching, and offered her the bag. "Want some?" She shook her head. Nomad shrugged. "Cece, listen, I wanna help you out here. You've got spunk. It's kinda cute. But all this *sass*," he waved his hand in the air, "is gonna get you killed, honey lamb."

He spit a few seeds to the pavement. When he raised his eyes again, they were darker, colder. "I want you to understand," he stepped closer and grabbed her wrist.

She struggled back, but his grip was iron, his hand a vise. He stared into her eyes. She could smell the wind on him and something else. Something animal.

He gripped her harder. She winced.

"He's got you thinking you're special," Nomad said, revealing perfect white teeth. "But you're not. You're a complication. An annoyance. And hanging around us is going to get you killed." He squeezed harder. Pain flared up her arm.

"Stop!" she said, scrambling back, her shoes scuffing into the brick.

“But doll face, if I stop, you'll never learn.” He pouted his lower lip. “It's like a wild dog, yeah? Get bitten once and you won't put your hands near its mouth again.”

She shook her head back and forth, the brick scraping against her skull. Her fingers were blue. Her arm was speckled red.

He smiled then, unable to control himself. “It's for your own good.” Then he wrenched her hand back, way, way too far.

There was a sickening pop.

Cece gasped. White-hot pain snapped from her wrist to her brain, blocking out all thought. Her knees sagged. Pain pulsed into her head. She slumped down the wall.

“See,” Nomad said, as he wrapped his arms around her chest and pulled her upright. “Now you know we bite. Even Hugh. He'll bite when the time comes.”

Her body sagged against Nomad's as her mind floated somewhere out of reach, out of the pain that *throbbed, throbbed, throbbed* at the back of her mind. Suddenly, she felt a searing heat on her skin. Her eye's snapped open to see Nomad burning a shape into the brick with...his eyes?! Oh God, she was going to die.

Nomad pushed up, lifting Cece with him. Her sneakers scraped against the pavement, then paddled through open air. They took off, shooting into the sky.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO — HUGH

Friday 7:01 a.m.

Hugh hobbled toward the apartments in the dim morning light as his leg stitched itself back together.

The pain was awful, but he kept himself occupied by following the scent of strawberry shampoo. It was faint, but when he honed his mind, the scent was there like a thin ribbon drawing him to her. He glanced around at the apartments: the busted front windows, the spray-painted dumpster. A baby cried in an upstairs window and someone was either vacuuming or drying their hair. The rest of the windows were shut or humming with AC units. A willowy old man sat on a stoop three buildings down, puffing on a cigarette. Hugh smelled burnt bacon, motor oil, and garbage.

What was Cece doing in this seedy complex?

Her scent led to a door propped open with a rock. Hugh lumbered up the rickety stairs, pain spiking at every step, but it was duller now. His broken foot seemed to be totally healed, and the shin, too. His femur still felt brittle as glass, but he focused on her scent, the strawberry smell close now, sending tingles up his spine. He found the door and knocked, not sure what to expect.

A boy flung the door open. As soon as he saw him, his face fell. Hugh recognized him now, Travis from the ice cream shop. He looked awful, hair disheveled, pants sagging over dirty boxers, a red welt forming on one cheek.

“What d’you want?” Travis asked, glaring at Hugh. Then, slowly, his face morphed into a look of panic, his jaw dropping. “You...you’re the psycho dude!” He shoved the door closed.

Hugh thrust his foot in the gap, the door slamming against his toes and jangling open. Then he shouldered into the door, helping it snap back. Travis stumbled backwards, skidding to his butt on the dirty carpet.

“Where is she?” Hugh said, striding in, looking around. Some of the rage from the forest had followed him. If this boy had done anything to her...

He shook his head, trying to clear the anger away. If he didn’t calm down, he could hurt someone. Bad. “Where is she?” he repeated.

Travis jumped up, the veins on his neck pulsing. “I’m not gonna tell you.” His wide eyes flicked toward a cellphone on the coffee table.

Hugh shook his head, striding forward, arms flexed. Travis backed up, his eyes widening. Hugh towered over him, eyes slitted. "You're not going to call anyone." Realizing fear would get him nowhere, he took a deep breath and lightened his tone. "Look, I'm not here to hurt her. I'm here to protect her. She's in danger."

"Yeah, from you!" Travis shouted. He balled up his fist, reached back, and socked Hugh in the face.

It felt like a child's punch, but Hugh's body reacted anyway. Before he knew it, he had his hands around Travis's scrawny neck and was lifting him into the air.

Travis's legs wheeled, one bare foot catching Hugh in the stomach. His hands circled Hugh's wrists, scratching and clawing. His eyes bulged behind the clump of greasy blond hair that had fallen over his eyes. None of it stopped Hugh. Anger vined through his brain, snaked through his synapses, blocked out thought. He slammed Travis into the wall, the drywall denting. This boy wanted Cece. Hugh wanted to smash. To tear.

The boy's face was turning blue, the veins on his neck pulsing as he took small, gasping breaths. His scared, watering eyes found Hugh's. "Please," he croaked.

Gods, what was he doing? Hugh shook his head, releasing Travis, who slumped down the wall into a pile on the floor. Hugh stepped back, his hands trembling. Why had he attacked this boy? What was happening to him? He backed away as Travis sat up, gasping. When he looked up at Hugh, the terror was still there.

"Sorry," Hugh mumbled, staggering out of the apartment.

"You...better not hurt her!" Travis rasped as Hugh pushed out the door.

Hugh didn't answer. Cece. He came for Cece.

His eyes searched the parking lot, the shrubs, any place she could hide. He sniffed again. There, faintly, was the ribbon of scent, and something else too. Something...charred? He followed it around the building and down the alley. It didn't take him long to find the singed brick. He blinked at the two blackened triangles for a moment, a sense of dread stealing over him.

The drawing looked like someone had taken a blowtorch to the wall. Hugh's whole body went numb. He walked over and placed his hand on a seared drawing of the Mackinaw Island Bridge. Still hot.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE — CECE

Friday 7:50 a.m.

Cece clung to the metal girding and prayed. *Holy Mary, Mother of God...*

She tried not to look down. The metal railing was ice cold and her good hand felt numb, but she clutched the railing for dear life. The broken wrist... She couldn't even bring herself to look at it. What had Nomad done to her? What else would he do?

The wind gusted again, splaying her hair back. The twenty-foot long walkway shimmied with the wind, making it feel even more unstable. She tucked her head to her chest, gripped the railing, and prayed.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

When Nomad had deposited her nearly fifty stories up at the top of the tower, Cece had felt relief. Anything not to be in the air, pressed against Nomad's sweaty body, his arms wrapped just below her breasts, his chin brushing against the back of her head. She'd spent most of the ride convinced that at any moment he would drop her just to watch her splat. But now, with the wind buffeting her like a steady slap and the tower jittering like a tree branch in a tornado, she knew this was worse.

She forced herself to look down at her broken wrist, clutched to her chest like a wounded animal. The pain blared like a foghorn, nearly blocking out rational thought, but somehow the eminent fear of death cleared her head. Pain was temporary. Death, well, that wasn't something you could just grin and bear.

"Let me down!" she yelled at Nomad, who stood on the other side of the twenty-foot walkway, his clothes fluttering in the wind.

Since he'd dropped her on the support tower, he'd pretty much ignored her completely, spending his time watching the horizon and staring down at the little cars trundling along. She steeled her nerve enough to let go of the railing and waved her good arm at him. "Let. Me. Down!"

His head snapped up at her, annoyance creeping onto his face. He didn't bother answering, just went back to scanning the horizon.

She wrapped her good arm around the metal railing and accidentally looked through the metal grate below. Her head swam at the height. So high. If she fell... She closed her eyes and pressed out the thought. Why was she so afraid? She hadn't had this fear when Hugh had lifted her into

the sky. Then again, she'd known he'd keep her safe. She swallowed and forced her eyes open. Maybe if she looked again, the fear would subside.

She let her eyes stray out over the water. The blue lake was beautiful this time of morning. She'd seen it once before on a church trip with a friend's youth group in eighth grade. In the morning light, the lake was almost purple, capped with frothy flecks of white. The cars were insects from this high. At first she'd hoped someone would see them and call the police, but now she knew better. Even if someone managed to look up, she and Nomad would be little black specks. Indecipherable from the metal tower.

She let her eyes follow Nomad's out to where the earth curved. Hugh had to come. That was why Nomad brought her here. She was the worm dangling on a flashy hook, the peanut butter in the mousetrap. God, this all was so ridiculous. Then she looked down at the cars fifty stories below and lost her humor.

Would Hugh care enough to come? To battle this insane superhuman for her? Cece pressed her forehead to the railing, an unease falling over her. She wasn't prize enough to warrant a duel to the death. She tried not to imagine what it would feel like to plummet from this height into the waves below. Didn't they say hitting water from this high up was like hitting concrete?

Nomad floated by again, an evil Peter Pan. The wind swirled his shoulder-length hair around his face, tugged his clothes back from the pudge around his belly. She yelled at him again as he passed. "He's not coming! Just let me go!"

Nomad's face darkened as he floated over nearer to Cece. "He's coming." He flashed an evil smile. "He'll be here in a few minutes. And then you and I will help him see reason."

Cece scoffed. "You're going to help him see reason? *You?* You're the craziest person I know."

Nomad grabbed her uninjured forearm and tugged her off the walkway into open air, nearly dislocating her shoulder. Cece screamed, bicycling her feet through nothingness. Her eyes flashed to the churning water below, the frothy white caps large and hungry. She pictured drowning, how it would burn, the terror of sinking down into the dark depths before sucking in lungfuls of icy water. They'd find her bloated body in the cattails.

She clutched at his body as they hovered, clawing his clothes with her injured hand. "Put me down!"

“Then stop talking. You're annoying me.” He sailed back over and dumped her on the metal walkway.

Glass shards of pain arrowed from her wrist. She clutched it, moaning. The cool metal beneath her body was the only comfort she could find. She pressed her head to the floor, a rivet the size of a half dollar digging into her forehead. She would not cry. Not here. Not in front of the psychopath.

Tears streaked down her cheeks and were sucked up by the wind. There was no fighting Nomad. Her thoughts turned to Mama. Where was she now, in a jail cell? Did she wonder where her daughter was? She probably didn't picture Cece held captive at the top of a bridge by an alien mental case.

She flicked her eyes up, wanting to take in all the beauty before it was snatched away.

Something was streaking through the sky.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR — HUGH

Friday 7:55 a.m.

Hugh soared toward the bridge, his eyes finding Cece. Tears were streaking down her cheeks and she cradled her wrist to her chest. What had Nomad done?

Anger exploded through his body as Hugh drove straight into Nomad like a wrecking ball.

They sailed end over end, spiraling in the air. As they flipped, Hugh's fingers fumbled onto Nomad's shirt and locked on. Their bodies slammed into the metal tower with a *clang*. Hovering in the air, Hugh pinned Nomad to the bridge with one hand. He reached back for a punch with the other.

Nomad's eyes darted to Hugh's fist. He slipped out of the T-shirt Hugh was clutching. Hugh, tossing the empty shirt aside, whirled around just in time to catch a kick in the side. Hugh buckled, sailing back through space in a ball, pain exploding through his ribs.

"Why are you making this so damn *hard!*" Nomad shouted, pulling at his hair. "Just come back and let me show you. If you just remembered, all this agony could be over."

Hugh's eyes drew back to Cece. This could be over? Nomad meant over between him and Cece. He'd forget her and become...well, whatever Nomad and his superiors wanted him to be. He shook his head. "No way."

"Then I'll take you in myself." Nomad sailed forward and swung at Hugh.

Nomad's knuckles smashed into his jaw like a sledgehammer. Hugh's head snapped back, his vision blurring, his mind ringing like a gong. He spun in the air, arms wheeling to right himself. Finally he stopped spinning, placing both hands to his head. When his vision cleared, he saw Nomad holding Cece above the churning water below. His arms were locked around her chest, her feet dangling in open space.

Hugh skidded to a stop, fists lowering. Cece's face was a war of relief and terror as she looked at him. The puffy wrist hung uselessly at her waist. *Hugh*, she mouthed, a fresh tear pooling in one eye.

"Please," Hugh said, terror now beating out the anger, "don't."

"Gods, listen to you," Nomad said, flashing his teeth. "Lovesick Romeo. This isn't you, Jopari. You would've never dated a human. They're a sub-species. It'd be like her dating a spider monkey." He squeezed Cece a little and her eyes flashed open.

“Don't hurt her!” Hugh hovered closer, gasping, feeling the dread of losing her like a ton of bricks on his chest.

Nomad gave a shrug. “I think I already broke her.” He nodded to Cece's limp wrist, twice as big as normal. “Can't blame me. They're just so damn breakable. And that's the thing Hugh, if you're with her long enough, you'll break her, too. I'm just saving you all that awful guilt.”

Hugh thought of Cece going limp in his arms as he'd sailed through the clouds. He grimaced. “Just put her down, Nomad.”

“It doesn't matter.” Nomad loosened his grip. Cece slipped down a few inches and gasped, her hands clawing for Nomad's shirt. Below, the water churned angrily. “They're coming. And once they're here, none of this will matter. You won't get a choice in whether you remember or not.”

“Who's coming?”

Nomad grinned. “Our people. I'll show you.”

Hugh looked at Cece. She was watching him desperately. “I'll come. Just let her go.”

Nomad smiled. “Sure thing.”

He opened his arms.

Hugh watched it in slow motion—the shock on her face as Nomad's arms left her, the pull of gravity, her hair, her clothes angling upward as she went down, slipping past Nomad into space. The shock turning into fear, into terror.

Oh God. No!

Hugh dropped after her.

He plummeted down. The wind pushed at his eyes, making him squint, but he kept his sights locked on Cece as she fell. He pushed with all his will downward, down toward the waves, down toward the cars. His heart would burst, but he pushed down, down, down.

Cece fell like a broken-winged bird, her arms wheeling, her clothes fluttering around her like limp feathers. Her dark brown hair lashed up over her face. Right now she'd be thinking of death, thinking she'd smack into the cold water before he'd reach her.

No, he thought, gritting his teeth. I'll save her. I'll—

He snatched at her arm, but his fingers sliced through empty air. He pushed down, his body groaning, every atom vibrating as he plummeted. Thirty feet from the waves. Twenty. He could almost taste the lake they were so close. He reached for her hand as the water rose up to meet them. She looked up. Between the long ribbons of hair, her face was fixed with terror, but a sliver of relief too, as if she believed in him. He pulled her

body to his, folding himself around her, and used his body to cushion her fall.

They hit the water like a sack of rocks.

His back slammed into the waves, pain jolting into every part of him. The cold was shocking. Then water was everywhere, a world of swirling blue and froth and arms and legs. His brain chugged slowly. He fumbled, his hands slicing through the water uselessly. What direction was up? Where was Cece?

His fingers brushed something solid. An arm. He drew her to him, limp, heavy and lifeless. Was she dead? He wrapped his arms around her chest and pulled them upward.

He broke the surface, gasping. In the churning waves, her head bobbed lifelessly. He lifted her higher, his legs stirring beneath the water in a frantic tread.

“Cece!” he gasped, blowing water out of his mouth as a wave threatened to drown him. He had to get her out, but already a few people had stopped their cars and were peering down from the railing, gawkers with hands shielding eyes for a better look. Was that a camera flash? He gripped Cece's limp body with one arm and sidestroked like the devil was chasing him.

He pulled her onto the bank a quarter mile from the bridge. How long since they'd plunged under? A minute? Two? Her legs dragged deep furrows in the mud as he nestled her body between rocks and cattails. He pressed his ear to her mouth.

Nothing.

He locked his fingers together and positioned them over her breastbone. At least those alien bastards had programed him with CPR. He started compressions, hoping to God he didn't crush her ribs. “Please,” he muttered. He couldn't breathe. Not until she did.

She gasped, coughing, and opened her eyes, blinking droplets of water away that clung to her eyelashes. Her lips were purple and puckered, her skin pasty white but for two roses on her cheeks. When her eyes fell on him, she slowly lifted her trembling lips into a smile.

“You did it.” She weakly brushed a strand of hair from her face.

Hugh let out a huge sigh. Then he leaned down and kissed her long and hard.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE — CECE

Friday 7:34 a.m.

Her whole body felt like it had been dragged through a trash compactor, but she was alive and Hugh was kissing her. It was one of the best moments of her life.

He pulled back, his chest heaving, his T-shirt clinging to him, revealing every muscle. Though her brain was still soggy, warmth puddled in her stomach as she took him in—the flat abs, the curving pecs that rose and fell as he breathed.

Then the pain in her wrist found her. She moaned and drew her arm to her chest.

Hugh's face flooded with concern. "Are you hurt? What can I do?"

"You saved my life," she breathed. "That's plenty for now."

She drew a slow smile onto her face, though the pain was almost overpowering. She slid onto her elbows and looked around. They were on a muddy river bank. Her clothes were streaked with muck and soaked straight through. Seaweed tangled around one sneaker.

The bridge strung across the water in the distance. No one could see them from here. Her eyes searched the sky. No sign of Nomad.

Hugh followed her eyes up. "He's gone. I can feel it."

Cece nodded, no longer needing to ask how he knew. All she felt was relief. That, and her throbbing wrist.

Hugh reached out and touched the swollen, purple wrist with one gentle finger. "He did this?"

Cece nodded.

His face twisted into rage. "I'll kill him," he said through his teeth.

She reached up and caressed his cheek with her good hand, his stubble deliciously rough under her fingertips. "Just take me back."

Friday 8:52 a.m.

They stood hand in hand at the back entrance of Lizzy's. The drab yellow paint looked like bile in the hazy mid-morning sun. A cloud slunk across the sun, plunging them into sudden darkness. Cece shivered. Was it the dunk in the lake, the shock from her broken wrist? Or was it something else, some premonition of what was to come?

Hugh's brow furrowed in worry. "We have to get you to a doctor."

Cece shook her head. If she went to a hospital, there was a chance the police would find her. Instead, they had stopped at Fer's. Fer was gone, apparently already at work, but Shaun was home. He had dug out clean clothes and Vicodin. With the pain at least numbed and her wrist wrapped she could bear it.

Cece's stomach twisted into sailor's knots. She only hoped the plan she'd cooked up on the flight over would work. She would march into Lizzy's and beg Michelle call her father and have him drop the charges. And if Michelle refused? Well, she'd threaten to tell Gage that Michelle went out with Travis. It might make Travis's life hell for a little bit, but Mama was rotting in a jail cell. She couldn't take it any longer.

Once Mama was safe, then what? They'd have to figure out what to do about Nomad and the beast. One thing at a time. She looked up at Hugh and he gave her a reassuring smile. She rubbed her thumb against his palm, savoring the smoothness.

"I'll be right here," he said in a hushed whisper.

It was the encouragement she needed. She pulled the door open and walked in.

On two stools near the order window, Fer and Travis looked like they'd been up all night: Travis's hair angled wildly and Fer sported her same Sponge Bob pajama pants. Steam curled from a convenience store coffee cup on the counter. For two sleep-deprived teens, they sure looked tense.

"It's your fault she ran off with that killer," Fer was saying.

Travis shook his head. "Well, you let her go the first time."

"It's your damn girlfriend's fault that her mom's in lockup."

Travis blushed. "She's not my girlfriend, and maybe it wasn't Michelle who called."

Fer rolled her eyes. "Oh please. Look, we just need to find Cece now."

Travis shook his head back and forth sadly. "I called everyone we know."

Fer shook her head. "Not good enough." She held out her cellphone to Travis. "Call Michelle and tell her to get her dad to organize a search party."

Travis eyed the phone. "I don't... think it'll be that easy."

Cece stepped into the room. "Travis, it's okay. You don't have to call anyone."

Fer ran over and crushed Cece with a hug. “I thought you were dead.” Her eyes found Hugh standing in the doorway. “What’s he doing here?” she said, stiffening.

Travis bolted upright, his stool clattering to the floor.

Cece shook her head. “Guys, please, he’s not a killer. You gotta believe me.”

Travis opened his mouth to respond when a horrible ripping noise cut through the ice cream shop. They watched in horror as the door separated from the back wall.

Concrete popped and metal screamed as the back door splintered out of its hinges and crashed into the alley. Debris shifted through the light now pouring in from the hole. Two shapes stepped into the void. The claws were black scimitars, six-inches long on paws the size of a grizzly’s. The beast stood seven-feet-tall, a wall of muscle, the shaggy mane of fur behind the horrible, knotty skull. And those eyes, red and reptilian, that seemed to zero in on her.

She stopped breathing.

Beside her, Fer screamed.

Nomad walked around the beast like one would his faithful dog and looked at Hugh. Nomad’s eyes were almost sad as he addressed him.

“I tried, Jopari. I tried to tell you what a mess you were making. Now the top brass says this is the way it goes down.”

Hugh moved in front of Cece. “Nomad, listen to me. I’ll go. I’ll leave with you and the beast right now. No one has to get hurt.” Hugh’s arms tightened. Even from behind she could see his chest heaving.

Nomad nodded. “Yeah, we’ll go.” He turned to the beast. “Do what you what you were ordered.”

The beast turned toward Cece and opened its mouth, saliva dripping down its fangs hungrily.

Then it charged.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX — HUGH

Friday 9:06 a.m.

Hugh dove into the beast's path.

Their bodies collided like a head-on car crash. There was a crunch in his neck and instant pain. His fingers found fur and grabbed on. The two spilled into the hallway, skidding, denting the far wall. Ceiling tiles raining down in chunks of white. An elbow cracked into Hugh's skull, then claws sunk into his bicep. The white-hot flare of pain. Hugh wrapped his arms around the beast's and locked them in a bear hug.

Cece. Where was she?

They grappled, the thing rolling, lurching to escape. It slammed them into the freezer, sending the hunk of metal smashing into a far wall. Its matted mane was in his face, gagging him. The smell was terrible, like a long-dead animal. The beast's arms flexed over and over again as it attempted to break Hugh's grip. Though his muscles burned like hell, Hugh held on like a cowboy at his last rodeo.

“Get...out!” he shouted at the humans. All he could see was a shaggy mane of fur and scaly shoulders, but he knew they were standing somewhere behind him, gaping. His grip was already loosening, fingers slipping like a climber on a cliff's edge. A shoulder mashed into Hugh's jaw, his head snapping back. Hot blood filled his mouth. Something wet and stringy dripped on Hugh's arm as the beast tossed its head back and forth. It growled and shook. Hugh's fingers slipped another notch. He had to get these humans out.

Cece ran over. “Hugh!” she screamed. She grabbed a metal ice cream scoop from the counter and whacked the beast in the head. It shook and turned toward her, its eyes searching.

“Run!” he shouted, spitting mane from his mouth. The beast clawed against the floor, nails scratching the tile, pushing both their bodies backward. Hugh locked his fingers, but he knew he had only seconds left. The beast placed his paw on Hugh's thigh and dug downward. Claws sliced into the meat of his leg. More pain. Hugh ignored it. The beast would go for Cece. It would go for the kill.

“Run, Cece! Please!” His fingers slid apart. He searched the room for her, behind the mane of hair that pressed into his face. She was there at the door, staring at him, fear etched into her face. Fer tugged at her arm, but she pulled away. She stopped, staring. Hugh pleaded with his eyes. *Go!*

He couldn't watch the beast tear into her. He opened his mouth to speak, but the beast jammed an elbow into Hugh's ribs. His breath tore out of his throat, pain tightening his torso. He flexed his arms to the breaking point. He'd hold this thing until they were torn off if that's what it took.

A scream tore from the doorway. Hugh snapped his head around. Nomad stood, bathed in light with Cece clamped in his arms.

Nomad stepped into the destroyed ice cream shop. His fingers tightened around Cece's bare arm, puckering her flesh. "Let him go," Nomad said coolly, "or I crush her right here in front of you." Nomad squeezed until Cece gasped in pain.

"Okay, okay," Hugh said. He couldn't think. Cece's cries of pain echoed in his head. He released his arms. The beast rolled away and stood, panting, claws out, eyes wild. Hugh backed away slowly with his hands up. "Let Cece go," he said, flicking his eyes between his enemies.

Nomad shook his head, smiling as he tightened his grip. Cece's face twisted in pain. She locked eyes with Hugh.

"Stop it!" Hugh shouted, striding forward.

His arms were wrenched behind him. Hugh struggled, but the beast's arms were iron. Its scaly chest pressed into Hugh's back.

Nomad held his ground. "Why wouldn't you listen to me when I told you to stay away from her in the first place, Jopari?"

Hugh stared into Cece's face. She stared back, her brown eyes filling with tears. "Don't worry about me," she whispered.

"I will," he said, his voice trembling. "I will always worry about you."

"Enough." Nomad's eyes were dark and hallow.

Hugh slumped in the beast's arms. "Fine," he whispered.

He looked up at Cece. Her eyes pleaded with him to make this all better. His heart was crumbling like a brittle sandcastle, but he knew what he had to do. He sucked in a shuddering breath and looked up at Nomad. "Okay. Let's go. No tricks this time."

Nomad released his grip on Cece. She sagged as if the wind had been sucked from her sails.

"Give me your wrists," Nomad said, pointing. Hugh complied. Nomad snapped on thick cuffs made of some shimmering metal material. "Try to wiggle all you like, *compadre*. They're Cartharian steel, strong enough to hold the likes of you ten times over. The favors I had to do to get these..." Nomad nodded toward the door. "Let's go before the 5-0 get here."

Hugh turned and followed Nomad. He told himself not to, but he stole one last look at Cece. It was like someone digging out his heart with their hands. She sat, slumped on the floor, mud-caked sneakers tucked under her, hair trailing in front of her face. Tears snaked down both cheeks. “Hugh.” She lifted a hand, reaching for him.

Hugh choked back the sadness. She'd be safe. Her mother would be free. She'd be better off without him. He wouldn't hurt her anymore.

He turned to Nomad. “Can I say goodbye?”

Nomad shook his head and continued to press Hugh toward the door. “It's best if we just go. Don't make this suck any harder. If we hurry, we can catch a corn dog on the way.”

“What about that...that thing?” Hugh craned his neck as Nomad shoved him into the alley. Hugh's eyes found the dumpster, the first place he'd seen her. He dropped his head. He'd get back to her. Somehow he'd—

Grinding metal echoed loudly behind him. Hugh whirled around.

Nomad slammed the door back in its casing. Red beams shot out of his eyes and began to weld the metal shut.

“What're you doing?!” Hugh asked, scrambling around.

Nomad pushed back on Hugh's chest. “Let's go. You don't want to be here for this.”

Hugh stumbled toward the closed door. “You said she wouldn't get hurt!” he nearly screamed. “You promised!”

Nomad shook his head as he gripped Hugh's shirt. “I wouldn't call it a promise. Anyway, it's protocol. I just do what I'm told.”

Inside, Cece screamed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN — CECE

Friday 9:17 a.m.

When the door slammed shut, Cece's heart kicked into gear, drumming out the pain of Hugh's departure.

Seven feet of terror stood before her. The claws, the huge muscular limbs, the skeletal knobs made its features horrible and otherworldly. She got a flash in her head of the Predator from that terrible Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. It walked on two legs like a man, but its movements shouted predator.

She scuttled back, slamming into the far wall.

The beast took a step forward, rattling the containers. Its eyes tracked over her body and a gurgle rolled from its throat. Slowly, it cocked its head and sniffed at the air. It opened its mouth. Curving teeth dripped with yellow saliva.

The beast lidded its eyes, curled up its jowls, and roared.

Cece bolted for the storage room.

Claws slashed through her shirt and tore through the skin of her back. Heat and pain seared her shoulder. She skidded into the storage room and slammed the door.

Claws on the outside, nails slowly dragging against the wood. It was toying with her like a cat with a mouse. Her sweaty hands fumbled for a lock, but remembered there was none.

The beast slammed its body against the door.

The door banged into her and sending her flying. She hit the far wall and crumpled to the floor. Her head spun and pain blared from her back and neck.

She lifted her eyes. The door was *open*.

Razor sharp claws curled over the door frame.

Terror raked through her. What should she do? She scrambled up, pulling on the metal storage racks for support. Her eyes scanned rows of Ready Whip, hot fudge, cherry topping. No weapons. Nothing.

The beast growled.

Outside her storage room, something was happening. Was someone trying to get in the back door? There was no time. She had to flight.

The beast stepped into the storage closet and raised its claws.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT — HUGH

Friday 9:20 a.m.

Hugh slammed his body into Nomad, catching him off guard. He couldn't use his shackled hands, so he lashed out with his legs, landing two solid kicks into Nomad's knee and groin, the cracks echoing off the brick walls. Nomad buckled to the pavement, unprepared for the ferocity of the attack. With Nomad down, Hugh ran and slammed his body into Lizzy's backdoor. The metal door *thunked* and dented in, but would not give. He might be able to pry it off if his hands were fr—

Nomad slammed into him from behind, sending him careening headfirst into the brick wall. His head cracked through the brick, sending mortar and rubble flying. Stars exploded in his vision. Hot blood dripped into his eyes as the world dimmed; he shook his head to clear his sight. He dragged his body off the ground and stood.

“Somehow,” Nomad said, spitting blood from his mouth, “I knew you'd fight back.”

Hugh ran full speed and slammed into Nomad.

They flew across the alley and smashed into the dumpster with a loud bang. Nomad drummed punches into Hugh's kidneys, his stomach, his face. Hugh kicked, leaning down to bite Nomad's neck. Nomad choked Hugh. Hugh twisted out of his grip and kicked Nomad away as hard as he could.

In seconds he was bolting back toward the ice cream shop.

Somewhere in the distance police sirens sounded.

“Stop,” Nomad said, dragging himself after Hugh. Blood trickled from his mouth and ear. “You can't kill him.”

“Yes I can.” Hugh turned the corner and headed straight for the front window.

“No, Hugh!” Nomad shouted after him. “You don't understand.”

Hugh ignored Nomad's calls. He had seconds to save her. If it wasn't already too late. *God*, he thought, *please don't let it be too late*.

He plunged head first through the front window.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE — CECE

Friday 9:21 a.m.

Cece trembled as the beast stepped into the storage room.

She scrambled back, bumping into the shelves. She fumbled for something, anything to use as a weapon.

It stepped closer, blood dripping off one claw.

It would hurt to die. She trembled, trying to breathe. She had to get out.

The beast stood, looking at her. Its veiny, slitted eyes studied her, reminding her of an Amazon python. It seemed to be thinking. The beast huffed in a breath, its nostrils flaring. Then it lifted the corners of its mouth in a hungry smile.

“Don't. Please,” Cece whispered. Could it understand her?

The beast's smile widened. It lunged.

Cece dove sideways. The beast's matted body plowed into her left shoulder. Her chin smacked into the shelves. Blood burst into her mouth as she scrambled away from his massive girth. Claws scraped the floor, searching for her. She scampered back and banged into the corner. Nowhere to go.

A paw curled around her ankle and dragged her backward.

“*No!*” she screamed.

Her hands scrambled on the floor as it drug her toward its rancid open mouth. Her fingers locked on the metal shelving and latched on. If she could only hold on...

The beast tugged and the shelf toppled down on them.

CHAPTER FORTY — HUGH

Friday 9:21 a.m.

Hugh barreled into the ice cream shop. Shards of glass, wood, and brick pelted the serving area. He hit the ground and rolled to standing.

“Cece!” He ran toward the back, skidding to a stop when he reached the storage closet.

A shelf had toppled, littering the floor with cans of fruit and tubs of chocolate. A smear of something coated the floor. Blood? No, chocolate syrup. Inside, the metal shelf lay diagonal to the floor. The beast was under it, its legs pinned. It seemed stunned, for now.

Movement at the base of the shelf. A hand emerged, then an arm. Cece wiggled out from under the mess.

Relief flooded him. He reached for her with both shackled hands, pulling her upright. She bled from a cut on her forehead and scratches down her arm. Her wrist looked even worse—purple, swollen, and tucked to her side. He pulled her into his arms, needing her body next to his, her heart beating against his chest. She looked into his eyes.

The beast erupted from under the shelf.

Hugh pushed Cece behind him and turned to face it.

Blood lust had transformed the defensive creature in the woods into a killing machine. Taking one giant step, the beast lashed out, raking claws across Hugh's chest. Blood sprayed from the wound into the beast's fur. Hugh staggered back, a hand to his chest. Hugh raised his fists as the beast lunged and sunk its teeth into Hugh's neck.

Pain. Panic. Teeth tore at Hugh's throat, an awful tearing just below his ear. He couldn't breathe. The beast's arms were locked around his, pinning him. The smell of blood—*his* blood—filled his nose. If it punctured his windpipe, would he heal?

Hugh lurched forward, slamming the beast into the wall. A section of drywall fell away in powdery pieces, dust clotting the air. Still its teeth tore at his flesh.

Hugh pushed against the beast and they went sprawling into the front. Tumbling over a stool, the beast fell, its arms slipping off. Hugh struggled up. He touched his wound. His hand came away soaked in red. Hot blood flowed out of his neck. He'd heal, but how much blood could he stand to lose? His head felt like a helium balloon. The place was trashed—stools lay on the floor, blood and plaster clotted on the tile. Where was the beas—

“Hugh!” Cece screamed.

The beast pounced.

Teeth sunk into his shoulder again. Hugh's eyes locked on the matted mane and a brown ear. Hugh could feel his blood, hot and sticky, pouring down his chest. His limbs sagged like lead weights. A deep hum filled his skull.

Dying. That's what this was.

He blinked back the darkness. The beast lifted up to bite him again, closer to the jugular, a death bite. In that second Hugh's eyes locked on the front window. The broken glass angled up like shark's teeth, sharp and deadly. If he could push the beast back... He gritted his teeth and shoved as hard as he could.

The beast flew back and its shoulders sunk into the window's jagged glass. One large shard sliced through the meat of the beast's shoulder. It growled in pain.

Hugh grabbed the beast by both shoulders and pushed down. The beast's neck sank deeper into the glass, shards piercing through its flesh, dripping in blood. It roared and lashed out with its arms. Claws scraped skin off of Hugh's shoulder, his cheek, but he pushed, *pushed*. He leaned his weight on the beast, shoving down as the glass shards cut through cords of flesh. The thick smell of blood clotted the air.

The beast's face twisted in agony. Its curved teeth gnashed and its red eyes rolled in its head.

Nomad skidded up to the window from the outside and waved his hands, frantic. “Stop! Stop!” Nomad tried to grab Hugh through the window, but Hugh ducked away from his grasp and continued to push.

The beast struggled out with weak hands, claws cycling in the air. Fear finally crept into its slitted reptilian eyes.

“Jopari,” Nomad said, “he's one of us!”

“What?” Hugh flicked his eyes to the beast. The flaring nostrils pulsed in slow, straggling breaths.

“He's our friend Hugh, one of our people!” Nomad said. “You're killing *your friend*.”

Hugh's mind unraveled. How? How could that be?

“Are you saying...” Hugh shook his head. “This is a trick.”

The beast gurgled weakly.

“He's your friend! Your partner. You grew up together. Went into the Carthian guard together. Look at him, Jopari. Don't you remember? He's what we are, what you will be in your true form. Now get off him and let

him heal!” Nomad pointed from the other side of the smashed order window. When Hugh didn't respond, Nomad threw his arms up. “You're killing him!”

“What I'll become?” Hugh murmured, a cold sweat breaking out across his chest. Was Nomad telling the truth? He searched his memories for something to tell him what to do. All that greeted him was a large blank wall.

And behind him Cece was quietly sobbing.

Hugh knew he wasn't a monster. Yet, he thought back to the animal urges in the woods, the desire to tear and rip. He couldn't be... Could he?

Cece stepped up behind him, pressing a hand on Hugh's shoulder. Even near death, the beast's eyes flared open at her scent.

Hugh pushed down, the glass sinking upward, cutting through the beast's throat.

“*Nooo!*” Nomad shouted, punching through the window. Brick went flying.

The beast's arms slumped to the floor. It was dead.

Nomad stared at the body as if frozen. “How could you?” He turned wet eyes up to Hugh.

Trembling, Hugh fell back, his muscles shuddering, his head full of wet cotton.

“How could I not?” he whispered.

Cece stepped beside him, her palm slipping into his. Her hand was cold and shaking. He couldn't look at her. Not when he knew what he had to do.

Sirens filled the air. The police would be here soon. Hugh swallowed hard and tried to prepare himself.

“Hugh?” Cece whispered, tugging lightly on his arm.

“We have to go. We're already late,” Nomad said, the emotion drained from his voice. “When the general learns about this...” Nomad swallowed. “Bad, bad, bad. Goddamn it, Jopari.” Nomad shot him a vile look, clambered through the order window, and pulled the body off the jagged glass. The head dangled loosely to one side and Hugh looked away.

Once the beast was on the ground, Nomad muttered something in a language he didn't understand, pulled out a vile of liquid, and poured it on the beast. The body began to smoke and hiss. Hugh and Cece stepped back.

“Let's go,” Nomad said, turning.

“He doesn't have to listen to you anymore,” Cece answered.

Hugh almost smiled. He focused on the warmth of her hand, the brush of her arm against his. He took a deep breath. "I have to go."

"What?" The fear was back in her voice. Her face was spattered with blood. A cut ran down her brow, blood matting her hair. Yet, she was *so* beautiful. He felt like dying. "What did you say?"

He forced the words out. "I...have to go. I can't stay here. I'm sorry."

She clutched his hand tighter. "You don't have to listen to him." She pointed at Nomad. "He lies. He's lying to get you to leave with him."

"I almost got you killed," Hugh whispered.

The sirens blared outside.

"You saved my life!" Tears spilled down her face. Her hand, wrapped in his, shook.

"I can't be the one who kills you." His voice trembled now. "I can't watch myself do that."

He pulled his hand out of hers, like ripping a bandage off a wound.

"Hugh," she whispered, stepping forward.

He tried to make his voice cold. "We're too different. It could never work out."

"It could." She placed her hands over her heart.

He turned his eyes away. Each glance knifed into his chest. He didn't trust himself if this went on any longer.

"I'm going." He turned to her, trying to make his face stern, knowing it was the only way to save her. "I'm leaving. There's nothing you can say or do to change that."

Tears spilled down her face. He looked once more, memorizing the slope of her neck, the curve of her bottom lip, the dozen freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. Then he turned away and faced Nomad, hating the very sight of him. "Let's go."

Nomad nodded weakly and blasted through the back wall with a few solid punches. Debris reigned down in huge chunks. He pushed Hugh through.

"What about the cops?" Hugh asked, struggling through the hole.

Nomad snorted. "Don't worry. They're preoccupied."

Hugh didn't worry. All he could do was listen to the sounds of Cece's quiet crying.

They took off into the sky.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE — CECE

Friday 9:37 a.m.

Cece watched them go, not quite believing it was real. Hugh wouldn't leave her in this rubble with a beast silently smoking into ash at her feet. He wouldn't just leave like that, would he? No, he didn't leave her. He was taken.

Tears spilled down her cheeks. The air was acrid and filling her lungs at an unhealthy rate, but she didn't move. If she just waited right here, he'd come back.

Her vision blurred with smoke. Deep racking coughs shook her body. Her lungs wanted clean air, but her body was cemented in place. If she left this spot, his leaving would be real.

Men poured into the hole Nomad had made. Hands clasped around her wrists, her waist.

Light blinded her. She blinked and coughed as the alley came into focus. Behind her, Lizzy's was smoking as if it had caught fire. Her eyes locked on the dumpster, the place she'd met Hugh. She doubled over, light-headed.

A man in blue put his arm around her. The cops had pulled her out of the building. Their blue and red flashers glanced off the brick, making her head swim. She stumbled forward.

"Easy, miss. Easy," the cop said, grabbing her arm to steady her. "The ambulance will be here soon. If they can even get here through all that mess. Jesus," he said.

"All that mess?" she croaked, not really caring. Her eyes tracked upward.

The cop thumbed back his hat and wiped sweat off his brow. "We had a hell of a time getting here. Road's all tore up. Goddamn craters."

He had her full attention. "Craters?"

"Yeah." He looked back toward the road, still shaking his head. "Craters like those ones in the bark park. Dozens of 'em."

Monday 1:57 p.m.

Two days later, Cece picked her mother up from county lock-up. Mama looked wrung out and in need of a shower, but otherwise unharmed

by her time behind bars. She fell into Cece's arms, sobbing. Cece patted her back and murmured reassurances until she managed to get Mama out the door, down the steps, and into Fer's mom's car.

Mama apologized over and over. She promised to get a job, to get back on meds, to really take charge of her life this time. Cece just patted Mama's back. It would be good to have her home.

The store dropped the charges because the items she stole added up to less than one hundred dollars and because it was her first offense (that they knew of). Mama was free to go. This time.

The rest of the ride back to the trailer park was quiet. Fer's mom drummed her fingertips on the steering wheel to the beat of some Jack Johnson tune. Cece sat at the window and let her eyes drift over every cloud. She'd been doing this ever since he left, looking up, staring. Waiting.

She drew her eyes down to her hands, clutched in her lap. The pink cast on her wrist was just one more painful reminder. She squeezed and squeezed, but she couldn't compress the pain. In her mind one thought rang out. *He's gone. He's gone. He's gone.*

"We're here," Fer's mom said, pulling up to the curb in front of their trailer. Mama and Cece thanked her, slipped out, and shuffled up the steps. The loose porch railing creaked as they climbed. Soon it would detach and be yet another eyesore on their eyesore of a life. Cece fought back tears and pushed up a smile for Mama. She was back. That was something, after all.

The door flew open and a man stood staring at them from inside the trailer. His white hair was coiffed into a stiff wave across his head. He wore a loose cream-colored shirt, tailored black pants, and actual penny loafers. A gold necklace and bracelet flashed from his neck and wrist. Who was this stranger in her hou—

"Papi!" Mama cried. "What are you doing here?"

Abuelo. Her grandfather. He had come.

He pressed Cece into a tight hug. The smell of his aftershave brought images swimming back to her, the hot day at the airport, the big bed in the house in Bolivia, the scratch of his stubble against her cheek when he kissed her goodnight.

Abuelo half-walked, half-dragged Mama into the house. Cece followed, her legs feeling unsteady.

Inside, her grandfather set Mama on the couch. There, standing awkwardly in the back, was Aunt Bea.

“*Ay dios mio*,” Mama said, gaping at her sister. “What are you doing here?” Mama could barely catch her breath. She leaned on the couch arm for support.

“We came because we heard you were in trouble,” her grandfather answered in accented English. “A young man showed up at my door two days ago. He spoke English and said I must come here. Things were very bad. I called Beatriz. It’s time to heal our *familia*.”

Bea nodded, tears flooding her eyes. “I should’ve come when Cece called me. I had no idea.” She looked around the trashed trailer.

Her grandfather’s brow wrinkled into deep lines. He reached for Mama’s hand with his big brown one, his eyes sweeping around the trailer. “What happened here?” he whispered.

“After what happened with Marquez, you disowned me. You never wanted to see me again.” A tremble rose into Mama’s voice. She placed a hand at her throat as if she were struggling to hold in the sobs.

“That’s over. All of it.” Abuelo’s voice was low and commanding. Both of his daughters nodded, their eyes finding each other. Abuelo pulled Cece in and gestured for Bea. She stepped over and threw her arms around them.

Cece’s heart swelled as she pressed her face into Abuelo’s chest. After a few moments, Cece pulled back, a question tugging at her brain. “Abuelo, the young man. What did he look like?”

Her grandfather rubbed his hands together, thinking. “Tall, broad. Dark hair and eyes. About your age. There was another waiting for him down the driveway that could’ve been his *hermano*.”

Cece drew her hand to her mouth. “Did he say his name?”

Grandfather shook his head. Then he nodded slowly, remembering. “Hugh.”

Cece took a step back, closing her eyes. Mama, Abuelo, and her aunt began talking in Spanish too fast for her to translate. Instead she pressed her back to the wall and tried to breathe.

Hugh had sent her grandfather here. Though he couldn’t be here to rescue her, he’d sent another. That meant only one thing.

He still cared about her.

Three weeks later

Cece bounded down the steps of her trailer. Fer stood at the bottom in a new *Avenged Sevenfold* T-shirt, her face beaming with pride.

“Sweet. Where'd you get it?” Cece said, pointing to the shirt.

Fer smiled. “Sean got it for me. Said I should have something new. Not look like such a scumbag all the time. I punched him in the nads for that one.”

Cece laughed. “I like it.”

Fer pulled something from behind her back. It was another T-shirt, similar to Fer's but with a different black logo on the front.

“Oh my God, Fer. For me?” Cece held the shirt up and examined it.

Fer nodded, looking proud. “I bought this one. No drug money. Thought it'd be a cool memento for your first concert.”

Cece gave Fer a big hug. “Many more to come,” she said, pulling it over her head. She smoothed her hair out and stared down at her new shirt.

A dented Honda pulled up, music blaring. Michelle sat in the driver's seat, a scowl on her face. Travis beamed at them from the passenger seat.

“So, she's really dating Travis, huh? I just can't imagine,” Cece whispered, leaning into Fer.

Fer nodded. “Guess Michelle finally figured out we knew she was south side trash like us. That dating Gage wasn't fooling anyone. Plus, he's a dick.”

Cece nodded. “Travis hasn't said anything to her about what happened, right? She doesn't know?” She lowered her voice. “About Hugh and the beast?”

Fer shook her head. “We both swore we wouldn't tell. Don't worry. Travis is a solid dude.”

Travis hopped out of the car and jogged over, tossing his shaggy hair out of his eyes. “You cats ready?”

Fer nodded. “It's gonna be kick-ass.”

Travis nodded. “C, do you have a minute? Michelle wants to tell you something.”

Cece stiffened. She wasn't ready for a confrontation with Michelle, but Travis was smiling at her expectantly. She blew out her breath. “Sure.”

Travis waved at Michelle, who reluctantly stepped out of the Honda and strode over. She stopped on the sidewalk and crossed her arms over her chest. Cece had a feeling this would not be good.

“Go on,” Travis said, placing his hand at the small of her back. It seemed weird, them touching, but then again they'd been going out for a week now.

Michelle cleared her throat and raised her eyes to Cece. “I know I made you think I put your mom in jail, but it wasn't me. My dad told me about it, and then you asked me if I'd turned her in.” Her eyes flicked to Travis and heat flooded into her face. “I was pissed you were with him. So, I lied and made you believe I ratted your mom out.” She looked back at Cece. “Well, anyway, I'm sorry how that all went down.”

Cece nodded. “It's okay. Travis convinced me you had nothing to do with it. But thanks for the, uh, apology.”

There was an awkward silence. Michelle shrugged and looked to Travis, who kissed the top of her head. She strode back to her car and pulled away.

Cece sighed. She and Michelle would never be friends, but they could tolerate each other. That was fine with her.

The screen door screeched open and Abuelo stepped out onto the porch steps. Cece turned and waved. “Abuelo, this is Fer and Travis, the friends I was talking about.”

Fer gave a shy smile and a nod. Travis shook Abuelo's hand. Abuelo turned to Cece. “Not too late, *mi amor*. Moving trucks, they come *mañana*.”

Cece nodded. “Not too late.”

Abuelo retreated into the trailer. Cece could see the stacks of packed boxes from here.

Fer stood, shaking her head. “I don't like it. We've been neighbors for seven years.”

Cece threw her arm around Fer, her cast banging on Fer's back. “The house he bought us is, like, three miles away. We've biked farther than that in our sleep. Plus, Abuelo says I can start driver's training this year.”

Travis leaned in. “No more trailer trash.”

Cece released Fer and smiled. “I'll always be trailer trash.”

As they walked down the street to meet Shaun, Cece lifted her eyes to the tops of the trailers, then to the tree line beyond, then upward. Puffy white clouds floated across the canvas of blue. Nothing stirred. Nothing darted out towards her, arms stretched wide in invitation.

A shove in her ribs drew her attention back to earth.

“You gotta quit that,” Fer said, taking a drag on a cigarette she'd just lighted. “You can't live your life in the clouds. He might never come back.”

Cece shrugged. “He sent my grandfather back. That's something.”

“Yeah, something to indicate that you need back-up cause his ass ain't coming back.” Fer grabbed Cece's arm and they both stopped, Travis

shuffling up behind them. “Whatever those things were, we don't want them back. A dozen craters means a dozen monsters. What if they start hunting again? We'll be the daily special in a monster buffet.”

“I don't even want to think about it,” Travis said, shivering. “Beasts. Jesus.”

“No one's seen any sign of monsters. It might've just been a 'geological event,’” Cece said, using air quotes, “like the news said.”

“We all know it wasn't a geological event. We saw what that thing was,” Fer said.

Travis nodded warily. “It almost killed you.”

“Hugh saved me.”

Fer kicked at a loose piece of sidewalk. It skidded into the weeds that decorated the skirting of the Garba trailer. Inside, a dog started yapping. “Cece, he saved you by *leaving*. He's not coming back.”

Cece dropped her chin and stared at the tangle of weeds sprouting through the cracks at her feet.

The three friends moved on in silence. Down the street another dog howled. A car with too-loud bass bummed by. Another normal evening in the park. One of Cece's last. Her heart hung heavy.

As they approached Shaun's car, she fought the urge to look up again. Fer was right. She'd be better off if she could set her heart aside, broken dejected thing it that was, and move forward. Yet, deep down she knew she'd spend many moments like this one—hollow, heart-broken, and with her eyes ever to the sky.

THE END

EPILOGUE — HUGH

Date and Time Unknown

Hugh lifted his head as a scaly paw slid the food tray through the door slot. The tray scraped across the concrete and the slot closed with a snap. In the gray light of his cell, he could see they'd given him another chunk of raw meat, a T-bone cold and bleeding on the tray. His stomach roiled.

They were trying to break him, trying to force him to *turn*. When they'd shuffled him onto the mother ship, away from the girl he cared about, he'd seen them, legions of them with their red reptilian eyes and scaly skin. His people. He shuddered at the thought.

They wanted him to *turn*, but he fought it with every ounce of his being. Only yesterday they'd brought in a live goat and left it in the cell with him. He was starving, his stomach convulsing, but there was no way he'd tear into the bleating animal with those large, wet eyes. He wasn't a monster.

In his head he repeated it over and over: *I'm not a monster. I'm not a monster.*

The door slid open with a pneumatic hiss and Nomad strode in. In his human form, his sarcastic smile was back, but his eyes looked tired. Whoever was in charge of this place seemed unhappy with Nomad's performance. This pleased Hugh to no end.

"Get up," Nomad commanded.

Hugh stared up at him from the floor. "Why?" he croaked. "What's the point?"

"The point," Nomad said, squatting down to look into Hugh's face, "is that if you don't start cooperating, they're going to try some," Nomad swallowed hard, "drastic measures."

"More than starving me? Beating me? Electrocuting me?"

"Yes," Nomad said, little expression on his face.

Hugh laughed hollowly. "Why not kill me?" He spread his arms wide. "What's the point of all this? I'm not going to turn. Just put me out of my misery."

"Can't," Nomad said, standing. "Unfortunately, you are important to the plan. You'd remember why if you'd cooperate with the transformation." Nomad leaned against the cell wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "Come on, Hugh. This is all so," he waved his hand in the air, "time consuming."

Hugh rolled on his back and laced his fingers behind his head. “Tell your them I won't cooperate until I'm free. If they want my help with their invasion, or whatever it is they're planning, they'll have to let me out of here first.”

Nomad shook his head. “Not gonna happen. You'll just fly right back to your little sassy love pie.”

Hugh swallowed hard, dropping the smile from his face. “No.” He shook his head. “That's done.”

“Maybe not.” Nomad turned to go. “They'll find a way to make you cooperate, and I have a feeling it has to do with that chica you left behind.”

Hugh lifted his head, his fists clenched. “Tell them to stay away from her.” He couldn't keep the fear out of his voice.

“See, that's what I thought. She's really your only motivation. The General will be happy to know I've found a way to,” he lifted his eyebrows, “persuade you.”

Hugh pushed to his feet and ran across the cell. He gripped Nomad's T-shirt in his hands and yanked him forward until they were face-to-face, inches apart. “I swear to God if you touch her, I'll never stop until every single one of you are dead!”

Nomad smiled and pulled out of Hugh's grip. “That's the kind of spunk we need. Okay, I'll see you later.”

Nomad slid out of the cell, the pneumatic door shutting with a decisive click. Hugh tugged at his hair. The cell was impenetrable. He'd tried prying at the door, digging at the cracks in the walls until his fingernails were bloody.

Nothing worked.

The room was empty but for a bedpan and the tray of food. He looked down at the tray, the bloody T-bone staring back at him.

The bone. He dug the slick white bone out of the meat and stared at it. If he worked at it long enough, it would whittle down into a weapon.

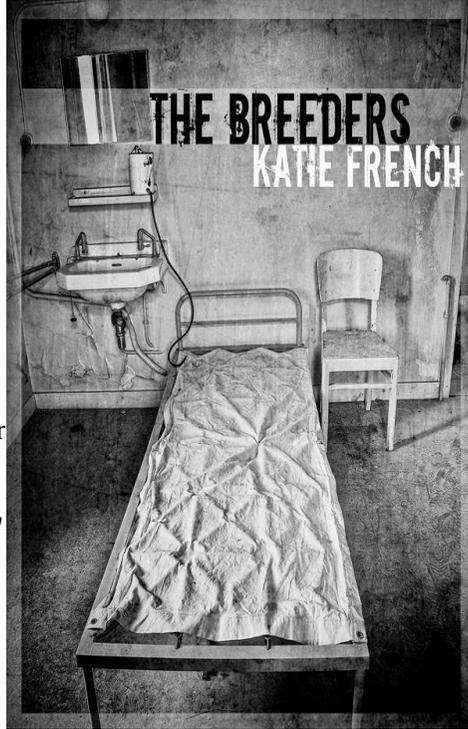
Cece, he thought, as he began to scrape the bone back and forth on the concrete floor, *I'm coming back for you.*

Book two is coming! To find out when, head over to my website, <http://www.katiefrenchbooks.com/>.

If you enjoyed this book, it would make my day if you would leave a review on Amazon or GoodReads. For updates on more of the series and kind of funny posts and pics of my pets, like me on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

If you enjoyed this story, please pick up a copy of my other novel, [THE BREEDERS](#).

Sixteen-year-old Riley Meemick is one of the world's last free girls. When Riley was born, her mother escaped the Breeders, the group of doctors using cruel experiments to bolster the dwindling human race. Her parents do everything possible to keep her from their clutches-- moving from one desolate farm after another to escape the Breeders' long reach. The Breeders control everything- the local war lords, the remaining factories, the fuel. They have unchecked power in this lawless society. And they're hunting Riley.



When the local Sheriff abducts the adult members of her family and hands her mother over to the Breeders, Riley and her eight-year-old brother, Ethan, hiding in a shelter, are left to starve. Then Clay arrives, the handsome gunslinger who seems determined to help to make up for past sins. The problem is Clay thinks Riley is a bender—a genderless mutation, neither male nor female. As Riley's affection for Clay grows she wonders can she trust Clay with her secret and risk her freedom?

The three embark on a journey across the scarred remains of New Mexico— escaping the Riders who use human sacrifice to appease their Good Mother, various men scrambling for luck, and a deranged lone survivor of a plague. When Riley is forced into the Breeder's hospital, she learns the horrible fate of her mother—a fate she'll share unless she can find a way out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katie French imagined herself an author when her poem caught the eye of her second grade teacher. In middle school she spent her free time locked in her room, writing her first young adult novel. Though her social life suffered, her love for literature thrived. She studied English at Eastern Michigan University, where she veered from writing and earned an education degree. She spent nine years teaching high school English. Currently she is a school counselor, doing a job that is both one of the hardest things she's ever done and the most rewarding. In her free time she writes, reads great books and takes care of her two beautiful and crazy children. She is a contributor and co-creator of Underground Book Reviews, a website dedicated to erasing the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional publishing. She lives in Michigan with her husband and two children. You can find her at www.katiefrenchbooks.com, or on [Facebook](#).

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When I first decided to publish the summer of 2012, I was terrified. Who would read a self-published book from an unknown author? I fretted late into the night about bad reviews, friends who would lie to me and say they liked it, and the shame of selling little. But I'm not one to let a dose of fear stand in the way of something I want. I held my breath and hit publish. Since that time I've been amazed. To everyone who has supported me on this amazing and strange adventure, thank you, thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart. The out-pouring of love and encouragement has been more than I could have ever dreamed. Friends, family, co-workers, students and strangers, all have patted me on the back and gave me the push forward I needed to keep this crazy publishing dream alive. Words fail when I think of your love and generosity.

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