

Destroyers, Book 3

A woman with long, dark, straight hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark, textured dress. She has a serious expression and is looking slightly to her left. The background is a dramatic, stormy sky with dark, swirling clouds and a bright lightning bolt visible on the right side. The overall color palette is dark and moody, with shades of blue, grey, and black.

Outbreak

HOLLY HOOK

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Book Three of the Destroyers Series

By
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OUTBREAK

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Chapter One

"Paul, up. Now. We don't have time to waste."

He forced his eyes open to his dad, staring down at him with narrowed eyes and stubble he hadn't had time to shave this morning. It was still dark in the fields outside and at the landlord's house next door. Paul held back a groan that wouldn't make a difference, anyway. That look was his dad's silent signal. They needed to pack yet again.

"Come on. We're not Marines. Ever heard of sleeping in a bit?" Paul yanked the covers over his head. If his Uncle Tanner was catching up with them again, it wasn't his problem. His uncle never came over to argue with *him*.

Only it *was* his problem, and he didn't want to deal with it before their farmer neighbors got out of bed. Every time his uncle and his dad got in a fight, or his uncle figured out where they lived--a move followed, and Paul had no choice but to go along. Why couldn't Tanner stop blaming his dad for stuff that wasn't his fault, and why couldn't his dad stand up to Tanner?

"We've got to leave right now," his father pressed on, shaking him. "Now. Up. Grab your textbooks. You can do your history test on the road."

"Are you serious?" Paul shot out of bed and stared around at the boxes in his room. He hadn't even gotten a chance to unpack everything into this house. "Tanner won't get up this early, either. I guarantee you. I bet he was up programming until two in the morning. And we've been here less than a month. He couldn't have found our address that fast."

His father bent over, stacking a couple of Paul's boxes on top of each other. "It's not him this time."

"Huh?" Paul shot awake, sitting up.

The back of his dad's plaid shirt, still dusty from helping Mr. Dobson prepare farm equipment yesterday, was his only answer as he shoved Paul's boxes around. His CD's rattled inside one. Somewhere in the next room, his dad's weather radio crackled through a set of headphones, never quite loud enough to make out.

"Then what is it?" Paul made a show of kicking a box of his textbooks across the room.

His father kept his back turned, stacking more boxes. "I just got back from the pay phone in town. Mobley's mayor has requested something of us that has to be done today. If we do him this one favor, he'll give us a huge discount on our house there, and we can finally move in. For good."

The words made him sit up straight. Mobley. The town they'd been supposed to move to for years, but were unable to afford. They even had a house reserved there since before his mother had died. His father had talked about it on occasion, about how things would be stable if he could just work something out, but Paul had started to think they'd never go there, that they'd keep drifting around the Midwest forever.

The anger melted out of him as he stood and joined his father in hauling his guitar and music books out into the living room. He didn't even care

why his father had gone to the pay phone in town at this hour, or even what the mayor wanted. If it meant no more of this, he wouldn't ask questions.

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Paul dropped his magazine in his lap and hit his head on the back of the seat as his father braked suddenly.

"Dad!" He fished down between his feet and retrieved his copy of *Rolling Stone*, which had fallen on top of his textbooks on the floor. It wasn't his newest, but he still needed something to read about on this road trip other than the Reconstruction era, and preferably something that wasn't covered in footprints or dried mud. These magazines weren't cheap, and his lawn mowing money was about gone.

His father didn't apologize. That was strange for him. Instead, the side of his mouth wrinkled as he stared past Paul and to the horizon. "We're here. Perfect timing."

Sighing, he followed his father's gaze out the van's window. Wherever "here" was, it wasn't Mobley. Tall grass blew down in the open fields ahead of some turbulence in the atmosphere. Only a large, low gray building with guard towers lined the horizon. It was the middle of nowhere out here, like it would be up in Oklahoma, too. "Middle of nowhere" was the story of Paul's life up until now.

"Is that a prison?" he asked. It was a rhetorical question. He'd seen plenty of them sitting off lightly traveled roads, surrounded by barbed wire, concrete, and signs warning drivers not to pick up hitchhikers. A bad taste filled his mouth. "Does this have something to do with what Mobley's mayor wanted us to do?"

“Correct,” his father said. He had that tone of voice, like he was planning something. His mustache wrinkled. His dad looked as uncomfortable as he felt. “It’s the North Texas Women’s Correctional Facility, to be exact. We have a pit stop to make right about here, and then we’re on our way up to Mobley. Of course, there's something else, too.”

Something else. Paul wasn’t sure what to say, or what his father was even saying. Ahead, the cracked road stretched away into infinity. “Um, Dad? There’s nothing else out this way.” Unless you planned on taking a leak out in the field, and that didn’t count. “What are you pulling now? Is there someone we have to visit in there?” The thought sent a shudder down his spine.

"No," his father said, staring hard at him. "Don't panic, Paul, but there's someone we need to get out of there. A friend of the mayor. Someone who's going to be executed for a crime she didn't commit."

"What? You're joking, right?" His father hadn't joked about anything for years, not since that horrible morning. "Who, exactly? And how?" It sucked that he never got to watch television and his dad never bought papers. Paul felt like a caveman in the Ice Age.

His father readjusted his position but didn't speak. His gaze stayed on the fields ahead.

That’s when he noticed the darkening on the horizon, a color between blue and black. Paul wanted to smack himself for not noticing it before. The waving grass grew bright for a second in the last of the sun before fading to a dark, ominous green. Suddenly, the magazine in his lap lost all its importance as his heart started to race. This was the second reason his dad had stopped.

His father’s hand clamped down on his shoulder. His tone lightened. The prison break must have been a joke after all. “Today might be the day.

Feel anything?"

Paul concentrated as much as he could over the thudding of his heart, feeling for the signs his father had drilled him about millions of times already. Heaviness in the limbs? No. A sudden urge to take a nap? No. Tingling? Well, he was breaking a sweat, but it was the first big heat wave of the year. "Nothing."

His father yawned, then glanced at him and sighed. Disappointment welled up between the two of them. Nothing had changed in Paul over the past winter. "I was a year younger than you when I had my first Outbreak." He yawned again, a sure sign that one was coming on. No wonder he'd pulled over. They really didn't need him to fall asleep at the wheel and get in an accident.

"Dad, you need me to drive?" Paul fingered his fresh new driver's license in his pocket, squeezing the life out of it and trying to hide his anger and disappointment at the same time. How embarrassing. Almost seventeen and no Outbreak yet, while his dad was probably on his fortieth. Paul was probably going to be the only one in Mobley, which was going to suck.

"No. We need to be here. This is timing to kill for." Another yawn, a silent one, filled half his father's face as he eyed the prison again.

Paul sighed, studying his reflection in the side mirror. His brown eyes, flecked with pure black, stared back at him. Everyone who was ever going to Outbreak had those eyes. But maybe he was a fluke, and he hadn't inherited the ability after all. "Are you *sure* you turned Mom into an Outbreaker *before* you guys had me?" The trait wasn't always passed down, unless both parents were Outbreakers. Only then was there a hundred percent chance. Paul had entertained that possibility since last year.

Silence followed for a second. Mentioning his mother always brought a sad, distant look to his father's eyes. He wished he could take his question back. The van felt so empty without her there, shuffling through the dash for Paul's favorite CD's. "I've told you before, Paul. Yes. There's no chance that you aren't one, too." His voice, normally stern when he gave this lecture, sounded heavy and tired. It was almost time, and once again, Paul would get to sit there and watch.

A crack of thunder washed over the van, making the windows rattle. The first droplets of rain splashed across the glass. The storm was moving fast, faster than most of the ones his father had taken him out to last year. The wait would be short, at least.

"Watch the van, Paul. I'm sure she's out there waiting," his father said, and slumped into unconsciousness.

Watch the van. He'd heard that line countless times, every time he'd failed to Outbreak last summer. Paul sighed and slapped the magazine down on his lap as the rain beat harder on the van, turning the pattering into a roar. But who was *she*? A prisoner? Maybe his dad hadn't been joking after all? Wow, his day had just managed to suck more.

Another crash of thunder rattled his surroundings. Wind howled past, whipping down every blade of grass outside and blowing waves of mist across the road ahead.

His father snored in the driver's seat. He was no longer there. His awareness had left, gone soaring up into the turbulence above. They were going to be sitting here anywhere between two minutes and an hour, depending on how long the storm borrowed his dad for.

Well, at least he had his magazine.

Paul opened his magazine, flipping to the concert schedule for *Executioner*. April fourteenth in Oklahoma City, only a hundred miles from

Mobley. He'd dog-eared the page, since he'd be going there soon and meeting up with Brian and Dominic. He hadn't seen his old neighbors since he'd moved last year. It was the only thing that was going to keep this spring from sucking completely, because moving yet again sure wasn't.

The rain abruptly stopped after a few minutes, and the space around the van cleared and opened up. The field snapped back into view, and Paul closed his magazine. He'd seen this on dozens of expeditions last spring and summer, but he couldn't help but watch every time.

The grass in the field had stopped waving. Clouds hung low over the horizon now, and one section of sky had dropped lower than the rest, slowly rotating like an upside-down top. Paul gripped the armrest while his father—well, his father's body—continued to breathe heavily next to him.

Then the gray cone descended, hanging there at first as if it wasn't sure where it wanted to land. Then it took up the distance between itself and the ground in a second. Brown dust rose and swirled around the newly-formed tornado as it slowly approached, looming larger and larger. Paul's heart started to race—he couldn't help it—but he sucked in a few slow breaths, forcing himself to calm down. He was perfectly safe. No Outbreaker could hurt another. The tornado couldn't come over here.

The grass kept waving gently at him, as if laughing at the fact that Paul wasn't out there with his father. Again. Behind it, the tornado seemed to grow in size, a swirling wedge ripping the dust from the ground and flinging it hundreds of feet. It had to be an experience nothing short of awesome, one that he would never have.

It was also getting awfully close to the prison.

Paul seized the armrest, dropping his magazine again and not even caring this time. The gray building and guard towers barely stood out against the swirling dust, and it didn't look like the tornado was going to

move in time. He'd never seen it happen before--every tornado he'd seen had been out in endless fields--but he could only imagine that this wouldn't have good results.

“Dad!” He slapped his father’s shoulder, to get no response other than a loud snore. “Careful! What if you do some dam—”

Too late.

A bluish-white ball of light erupted from the edge of the prison. A transformer had blown. Paul held his breath as it faded a second later, to be replaced by something worse: chunks of something flying through the air, darkening the funnel even more. Pieces of building. Maybe even cars, joining the swirl of dust around the funnel. He'd seen plenty of tornadoes, of course...but nothing like this.

Paul slugged his father on the arm this time, hard enough to leave a bruise, but he didn’t care. Not now. This wasn’t right. His father had never had an Outbreak near buildings. It was always in a field somewhere, where there was room. “Dad! Knock it off! Do you realize what you’re *doing?*”

Another snore. His father’s head lolled to the side, empty. Meanwhile, the tornado continued its approach, looming larger outside the window. Debris fell to the ground all around it, littering the landscape as it slowed.

“Dad!”

The tornado slowly grew more transparent as it approached the road ahead of him, letting dust and debris plop to the ground and into the ditch on either side. The tornado was dying, so his dad would return to his body any second now. Paul's fists clenched as his stomach threatened to heave up the McDonalds he'd had earlier. He was going to have a talk with his dad as soon as that happened. He didn't care if his dad was the parent and he was just the kid. This demanded some answers.

Paul's heart stopped.

Something orange slowly fell to the side of the road ahead, as if being lowered on a falling feather. Something orange...with flailing arms and legs. Something *dressed* in orange.

No. Someone.

The tornado died, and his father grunted next to him, regaining consciousness.

Paul paid no attention. The person remained still on the ground ahead, facedown. Dead? No. His father wasn't a murderer.

Was he?

"You okay, Paul?" His dad blinked at him as if he hadn't plowed through the prison a few minutes ago.

He lost it. Paul hit the glove compartment with his fist, making it pop open. Maps and CD's toppled to the floor. "No, I'm not okay. What the hell were you doing? You could've...could've hurt somebody!" His own words made it all real to him somehow. He pointed to the body lying on the side of the road ahead. "Wh--"

"Paul. Calm down. She's perfectly okay. Just dazed. I did *not* hurt anyone. I have more control than that." The ignition started as his dad turned the keys. His voice took on a tremor as he spoke, like he was unsure, scared, or both. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to see that, but we had no choice. I should've warned you about this beforehand. It's the only way we can get into Mobley."

A chill rushed over Paul. The tremor in his dad's voice matched the way he felt. He hadn't been joking a few minutes ago. He'd broken a real convict out of prison. Suddenly, he felt dirty and guilty. This was a federal offense or something. Paul had a sudden urge to jump out of the van and hitchhike with the first vehicle that came down the road, regardless of the

warning signs on the highway. "Dad--that's illegal! We could get busted for this. And how do you know for sure you didn't hurt anyone?" A bad taste rose in his mouth as the van rolled past a piece of metal on the side of the road. A chunk of barbed wire. Papers. But thankfully, no one else.

His father stared straight ahead, as if trying to see something in his own words. "I...I only scraped the side of the prison, Paul. She was outside on recreation hour. Ready."

Ahead, the figure on the side of the road began to stir, pushing herself up on her hands. Short brown hair, growing out into blond, spilled around her head. Just then, Paul realized the stupidity of what he'd said. Nobody could tie the tornado to his dad.

At least the woman was alive. Okay. The thought helped to dispel the sickness gnawing at Paul's insides. And the side of the prison...it definitely looked like his dad was telling the truth there. What he'd seen matched what he said. The building was still intact, although the fence might have taken a beating. "But she's a prisoner, Dad. How do you know who she is? How do you know she's *innocent*?" He didn't like the thought of one getting in the van with them.

"They accused her of breaking a man's neck in an airport parking ramp last October," his father continued as he hit the gas, racing up to the now-standing woman on the side of the road. She was in a prison jumpsuit, all right, complete with a number on the front of her shirt. "Tell me, Paul. Does that look like someone who has the strength to do that? She's not even an Outbreaker."

He squinted. The woman had a thin frame, thinner than most. Skinny arms. Small bones. "They think she did that with her bare hands?" Paul felt stupid. If only his dad would buy a television or get a computer, he might actually know what was going on in the world. But he'd gotten rid of

theirs after his mother died. Said they were a waste of time. Not that he'd let Paul watch it much to begin with.

"They're not sure, but they accused her anyway. Figured she must have done it some way, because she had the guy's car. I think she bought it off the murderer like she said at court, personally. But you know how Texas is with executions."

The words swam around Paul's head. He stared at the prison in the distance. The first red lights of emergency vehicles spun around it, no doubt inspecting the damage. The whole world was crashing around him. He could see his dad's point, "but was this necessary? All this? How did you carry her without hurting her?"

At least, she didn't look hurt. Dazed, yes, with hair flying everywhere and her jumpsuit ruffled. Hurt, no. His father pulled the van up to her and unlocked the doors with a *click*.

Paul shook his head. The world suddenly made even less sense to him. The woman scrambled to the van, as if she'd been expecting it for a very long time, and slid the door open without a word. He fought back the urge to jump out.

Leather creaked as the door shut. "Go," she ordered, sliding across the seat.

The engine revved as his father hit the gas to continue their journey to Mobley. Paul stared at him, all words flying out of his mind and his life falling out from under him. Yes, Mobley would mean that they wouldn't have to move anymore, but was it worth risking this?

In the rear view mirror, the woman's eyes seemed to peer into his soul. They were a dark gray color, like the storm that had just gone through, but nothing like Outbreaker eyes at all. Still, they were strange, different somehow, and Paul couldn't decide why.

His father glanced at him and smiled, then back at the woman, but it seemed awkward, forced somehow. "Ma'am, my name is Earl Collins. This is my son, Paul. We'll be taking you to Mobley. Paul, this is the mayor's girlfriend, Andrina Morgen."

Chapter Two

"Janelle, I think I'm getting sunburned. Do you think my skin's getting red back here?" Leslie turned around on the sand and pulled at the back strap of her bathing suit, revealing a light line on her freckled skin. The rest had taken on a pink color for certain.

Janelle shifted on her beach towel to get a better look. Beside her, Gary snored on his towel, one of his black locks hanging over one eye in a funny way. Not that she could blame him. It was hard to stay awake in the middle of the day when you never got any privacy and had to sneak out of the island's complex at midnight just to have one make-out session.

"Yes," she said, squinting at her friend. "You know your skin's really sensitive to the sun. Didn't you put on some sunscreen earlier? Sunburns are so much worse when you're next to a huge body of water. And I think that counts." Janelle pointed to the Caribbean surrounding the island on all sides, its perfect blue shimmering in the sun and inviting her to jump in and cool off. But no. She could never do that again.

Leslie sighed, trudging over to the lapping waves and wiggling her toes in the wet sand. "I've always burned easily, even if I'm only out for a few minutes." Water rushed over her feet and back again, foaming in the sun.

Envy washed through Janelle at the sight of it. That was another thing she could never do again.

Next to her, Gary snored again.

"You have no idea how lucky you are," Janelle blurted as Leslie sent a kick of water back into the ocean.

"What?" She turned. "To burn this easy? I once got burned so bad at Lake Huron that my legs were crab red, and then they peeled for a week. Remember that?"

"Yeah." That was their last spring break, before her life had changed forever. Janelle lightened her tone, hoping to make Leslie cheer up. "Why don't we do our next one at your place? I can actually go in lake water without a reaction. And I meant that you're lucky that you can actually enjoy that water."

Only a few seagulls cackled somewhere. Silence fell over the beach, which was unusual when Leslie was around, period. But her best friend had been abnormally quiet since getting here, which usually meant that something was wrong. Leslie stared down at the ground and dug her toes into it. This had happened a few times already over what was Leslie's spring break. She'd invited her friend here for a week, even paying for her airplane ticket from Michigan to Orlando and then having her pilot, Mel, pick her up--a good sum of money came with being Tempest High Leader. But something seemed to have changed since their last trip together, in Hawaii. Janelle hadn't had time to call Leslie much in the past few months. Not with her father always making her do lessons with her tutor when she wasn't stuck in meetings or flying somewhere to meet up with Tempests on the other side of the world. She'd apologized for it, lots of times since her friend's arrival, but the dark cloud over her didn't show any signs of lifting.

Leslie ducked under her own umbrella, plopping down on her towel. Quiet. Janelle hated quiet. It meant secrets, smoldering emotions, and pain. Her father had been quiet when he was still trying to hide her Tempest identity from her, a fact that she still bristled about at night sometimes as she was drifting off to sleep.

"Leslie, are you okay?" That was the umpteenth time she'd asked the question today. It wasn't like she could help it or anything. "I know something's wrong. You haven't acted this way since Todd broke up with you."

"Yes. I'm fine. Really. There's just some things stressing me out at home. And I think I need to go inside and get something to cover up my skin. I forgot to pack my sunscreen."

Janelle faced the outcrop that hid the door to the Alara complex where she lived. The entire Tempest capital was lying underneath the huge cone of the island, hidden by trees except for a few glass skylights here and there. She didn't care for the idea of Leslie going in there by herself. Everyone knew she was friends with her, and that there would be hell to pay if anyone bothered Leslie...but still. There were plenty of Tempests she was sure hated the idea of a regular human coming to their secret capital.

Janelle rose from her towel and adjusted it so that Gary wouldn't get sunburned himself, though he was already tan. A gorgeous tan. He snored again, louder this time. Even with that, he was so cute when he slept. "I'll come with you. I think I have some leftover shirts in my closet. You'll need me to unlock the apartment door." Her dad was probably there on the computer or something, but she didn't want to let Leslie walk through the halls by herself. It was a hike to get there. She was being paranoid, but she didn't care. Last time Leslie was here, she'd been tied and gagged and held prisoner.

That, and she wanted to catch some quiet time with her, to make sure they still had a friendship left.

"No. I'm fine. My room's not that far," Leslie said, wrapping her towel around herself and drying off her feet. "I can get it. Really."

Leave me alone. Really. They were Leslie's real words. Her best friend wanted the time to think, maybe about what a bad friend Janelle had been to her lately. If, in fact, that was what was even wrong.

Janelle stared down at the tropical fish on her towel, her stomach turning on itself. "Okay." She swallowed, trying to hide her misery inside and sure that she was failing. "See you in a few minutes."

* * * * *

Yes, it was completely understandable that Janelle hadn't had time to contact her much in the past few months. She was Tempest High Leader and had to govern over two thousand Tempests across the entire world, and not by choice. She barely even got much time with Gary, and he lived *here* in the complex with his mom.

Leslie kept reassuring herself with these thoughts as she opened the door, entered the air-conditioned interior of the Alara complex, and walked back towards her guest room on the other side of the sprawling, underground palace. Fish swam inside tropical blue tubes at every corner and skylights cast spirals on the floor, the Tempest symbol. Her bare feet slapped against the cold linoleum, doing nothing to dispel the strange feeling gnawing at her gut. Janelle had called her a grand total of four times since their trip in Hawaii together, when they had chased that newly-discovered volcano goddess across the country and narrowly stopped Andrina from making her blow up the Yellowstone volcano. Had Janelle

forgotten about that? Leslie had risked her life to go on that trip with her. It was a thought that kept rearing up no matter what she did to reassure herself that Janelle still wanted to be her friend.

She turned a corner, passing one of the maintenance workers messing with a pop machine. The gray spiral on his arm stuck out from under the sleeve of his T-shirt. Leslie pulled her towel around her shoulders to hide the fact that her arm lacked one. She was the only one in the whole complex, a fact that she could never forget. Luckily, the Tempest man didn't look at her twice as she passed, keeping the towel over her head to hide her identity. This wasn't her first time here.

Maybe she *shouldn't* have accepted Janelle's invitation, but it wouldn't have been fair to her friend, ducking out without at least letting her have another chance. Janelle was trying, at least, maybe even trying the best she could.

The hallway to the guest rooms was vacant. Only the sound of muttering came from the next hallway, where some of the apartments were. There weren't any major events here this week, thankfully, which meant that the rooms neighboring her were empty. Her door slid open, responding to her key card and making a loud click.

Maybe she should call her mother to keep up the cover story about her and Janelle hanging out in Disney World...but she didn't want to. Not after last week, when she'd told Leslie that she couldn't afford to send her to a university and didn't plan on risking student loan payments on her budget. She hadn't told Janelle yet, because she didn't want to look like a charity case in need of help. *Poor Leslie*, everyone would think. *Poor, helpless Leslie*. That was the last thing she needed right now.

She rummaged through her suitcase and pulled out her longest-sleeved shirt, glancing behind her at her open door every few seconds or so. She'd

show everyone that she could take care of herself.

But in the silence of the complex, she was suddenly scared.

Leslie had tried to push the thought out of her head lots of times since coming through the door. Now, without Janelle or even Gary around, she couldn't. She was the only ordinary person on an island of human hurricanes, without an ounce of power or a way to defend herself. No wonder Janelle was slowly drifting away. She was the leader of these people, loaded with money and power and able to travel the world at a moment's notice.

You have no idea how lucky you are.

Yes. Lucky. Leslie snickered as she picked out a bright blue shirt, one with long, baggy sleeves to hide her lack of a gray spiral on her arm, and slid it over her head. She was losing her future. Her best friend, too. Janelle was part of a new world now, one that she didn't belong in.

Her cell phone waited on the bedspread, begging her to pick it up and make the call to her mother. But if she took too long, Janelle would come looking for her and find her engaging in this sulk-fest. She'd been bad enough today.

Better get back out to the beach and smile, then. Then she'd call her mom when she felt better. Automatically she slid her phone down inside her bathing suit top, since she had no pockets. There was no possible way she'd leave it somewhere now, like the time she'd left it in the gym locker room all weekend. Things might get awkward if it rang, but oh, well. It might give everyone a laugh, which was what she needed right now.

The hole inside her seemed to close a little as she left her guest room and headed back down the hall.

* * * * *

Janelle sat up on her towel. "Gary, I feel bad." Her boyfriend had woken up since Leslie had gone inside, blinking the sun from his eyes.

"Is she getting all sulky again?" He had a way to be blunt, but at least he just came out and said something when it needed to be said.

Janelle sighed and sat up. "I just can't keep up with everything. Had a meeting yesterday while she was here. Someone saw a Tempest experimenting with their water-controlling powers last week in North Carolina. That lasted all day, because we had to call the girl's parents for every detail. It sounds like someone was spying on her, and she didn't realize it until too late."

"Yikes," Gary said. His gorgeous hazel eyes widened, revealing the tan rings around his pupils. They were bright, colorful eyes, unlike the grays of most Tempests, which was why she loved them so much. "Did they find out who saw her? That's scary."

"No. But she knows someone saw because she heard them running away through some underbrush. Sounds like the girl has a stalker. We're paying the family to move as soon as they can." Janelle swallowed. "It's getting harder to hide us from the world. Too many people live on the coasts now. Some people saw *you* changing back to human form the time I found you."

Gary wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. His skin was so warm, as if it had absorbed the sun itself, and his hair tickled her cheek. "For all those people know, I got caught in a water main break. Nothing ever happened from that. But that's not what's really bothering you. It's Leslie."

Blunt and right again, of course. "I think she's starting to hate me, Gary. I can't blame her." She rested her head on his shoulder. This wasn't

about any meeting, and they both knew it, but there didn't seem to be anything either of them could do about it. But there was one thing that could make her feel better right now, and that was Gary's lips on hers. They were alone on the beach, at long last, and it was time to take advantage of it.

* * * * *

There was a group of people standing in the main hall, most of them older folks in formal wear, talking about someone's knee surgery in the Bahamas. Even though Mel, Janelle's old pilot, stood with them, Leslie wasn't sure she wanted to pass through that room. Some of them looked like they could be Elder Council members. While she liked Mel, she could never forget that an Elder Council member, Elise, had been working with Andrina the entire time they were in Hawaii, constantly trying to get in Janelle's way. Elise had looked at her like she was a cockroach every time she even said a word. Leslie had no doubt that at least a couple of these people might do the same.

Maybe it was a better idea to cut around. Quietly.

The shirt felt secure, its sleeves dropping all the way down to her elbows. There shouldn't be much problem slipping back to the beach.

Leslie had just started to head down the opposite hall when the main entrance swung open with a mechanical click.

At first, she thought nothing of this. People came in and out all the time from the underground boat dock, using the finger pad outside the door in the cave. Until she saw one of the janitors standing there, arms held by two large men in ski masks that she didn't recognize. One of them held his wrist--they had used him to open the door.

The conversation in the lobby stopped. Leslie froze, staring. Her limbs froze as the horror of her last experience on Alara came rushing back to her. Ski masks. Those always meant kidnappings. Crime. Murder. Never anything good.

A memory flashed into her mind. Kevin, Andrina's minion, breaking into her house. Tying her wrists, and dragging her to his rental car and eventually, here to Alara. Right in this same spot, he'd threatened to break her neck in front of Janelle.

Leslie sucked in a breath as her mind cleared in an instant. One thought replaced the blank in her mind:

Why didn't the janitor just wrestle out of the grasp of these guys? He was a Tempest, with the strength of a dinosaur. In the lobby, everyone else stared, silent.

Then she saw the white fizz that covered half his body. He shivered in the cold of it. Only two things took a Tempest's powers away. One was distance from the ocean. The other, anything cold. One of those guys had sprayed him head-on with a fire extinguisher.

"What--" Mel began as he and the Elder Council members broke apart.

"Freeze," one of the men ordered from under his mask. "You will not be harmed."

A second later, bodies rushed into the room--all of them hidden behind ski masks and coats. Whitish sprays exploded into the room, clouding the air and sucking all the warmth from the air. Some of the substance landed on Leslie's arm. It felt like liquid ice.

Somewhere, an older woman cried out and a man swore.

Leslie's legs started to pump before she could think about it. A blast of wind shot through the air as the Tempests tried to defend themselves, but it was weak, a breeze at the most. The cold was working.

There had to be a fire alarm around here somewhere. If she pulled it, all the other Tempests would rush out and deal with these guys. She couldn't do it without any powers. At that moment, she didn't care if she was just poor Leslie who wasn't special at all.

There. The red box hung on the wall, ready to be activated. Leslie's bare feet slapped against the floor as she rushed forward, past another janitor running in the opposite direction. Another sound of spraying followed as he ran right into the pandemonium and shouting out in the lobby.

Because of that, the footfalls didn't get obvious until it was too late. Leslie was just about to reach for the handle when something cocked right behind her.

"That's not necessary," a voice said.

The freezing spray made all her limbs seize up and stole her breath away. She might have managed a squeak before falling forward and hitting the wall. It was as if a river of ice were pouring onto her. Tempest or no, there was no resisting this.

Her skin seemed to freeze, her blood to chill. No one could stand up against this. No one. She had to warn Janelle. But when she opened her mouth to scream, only a hoarse cry came out, dying in the footfalls that were now filling the air around her.

A man in a ski mask leaned over her as she shivered on the floor, unable to move with the shock of the cold. He held a pair of handcuffs in one hand and took her right arm with the other, snapping one of the cuffs in place.

"Relax. You're going to be okay. This is for your safety. We're moving all Tempests to a new location." The man's voice was strong, almost reassuring somehow, but she didn't believe it. Whoever these people were, they knew what they were doing.

Leslie couldn't speak a word or even tell the man he was wrong. Way wrong. Her sleeves still hung down to her elbows, hiding the fact that she wasn't a Tempest at all, as the man helped her up from the floor and put the cuff around her other wrist. Behind him, other men in ski masks and winter coats—at least a dozen of them—were leading handcuffed Tempests out the main entrance and towards the boats docked out in the cave. Mel staggered along, shaking and covered with fizz. No one seemed to have the energy to shout for help. The whole thing had been over in seconds, as if these people had rehearsed this over and over again.

“Who...who are you?” Leslie managed at last. They could be someone's government, tipped off about the existence of Tempests, or even other Tempests who were working for Andrina, come to take out the competition so she could start her war on civilization. Either way, it was bad...very bad, for her as well as Janelle.

The man glanced at her through the eyeholes of his mask. His eyes were full of sympathy, as if he hadn't wanted to spray her with the contents of a fire extinguisher. But they were strange somehow, not the stormy gray eyes that most Tempests had, but brown with spots of pure black all through the irises.

“Come along,” her captor said as more masked men rushed past him and down the hall, all armed with red fire extinguishers. They were fanning out through the complex, ready to ambush the remaining Tempest who were in their apartments or working throughout the place, oblivious to the danger.

* * * * *

“Leslie hasn't come back. I'm going after her.”

Janelle rose from her towel, tugging Gary with her and tightening her grip on his hand. The last tingles from their kissing vanished from her body as worry took its place. She'd lost track of time during their make-out session, but she wasn't going to pass that opportunity up. It could be days before the next one.

"Maybe she's just calling her mom or something," Gary offered. "You know she's all worried about her mom finding out about all this. Probably had to go tell her she just got done on the Pirates ride or something. Or that corny Dumbo one."

"Well, how else do you explain her vacation?" Janelle waved her hand at the island itself. "Hawaii was one thing. An uncharted island is another."

"Easy. Shipwreck."

"Come on." She slapped Gary on the arm. "We should check on her. I saw Eric glaring at her yesterday when she came in the door. I'm sure I'll get a lecture about this when she leaves." Eric was the oldest Elder Council member, the one who typically headed all the meetings.

Gary sighed and trekked across the sand with her. If anything happened to Leslie on her watch, she could never forgive herself. It was up to her to protect her friend. If she wasn't Tempest High Leader, she never would have invited her here to begin with.

"Are you sure you aren't being paranoid?" Gary asked as she opened the door. Sand cascaded down from the hill face as the camouflaged door opened to reveal a dusty hallway. People used this beach entrance all the time and tracked in sand. "I mean, I understand with what happened last time Leslie was here, but—"

Janelle sighed and opened her mouth to tell him to stop accusing her of paranoia, but the noises inside beat her to it. As if to answer his question,

shouts echoed down the hall from somewhere deep in the complex, followed by loud footfalls and a crash as if someone had collided with the pop machine up ahead.

Her heart stopped. More footfalls and shouts seemed to come from everywhere inside the complex. From the direction of the kitchen. From the basement. Even from the hallway that led to her apartment.

“What—” Gary started, freezing.

More thuds came from hallway ahead. It sounded like a war scene inside, only without the guns. Janelle’s stomach twisted. She knew. Somehow, it all came to her in an instant.

“Gary,” she said, shooting him a wide-eyed stare. “We’re under attack.”

** * * *

Leslie decided it was best not to tell these guys she wasn’t a Tempest. If they *were* with Andrina somehow, they might decide to kill her if they found her out. Andrina was like that. She’d almost had her killed before, just to get Janelle to bend to her will.

Those were the only thoughts swirling through her head as the masked man led her down the dock and towards the line of waiting boats. They could easily roll up her sleeve and check for a gray spiral on her arm, find none, and simply toss her in this water. She’d never be able to swim with these cuffs. No one would ever know.

Suddenly, she wanted to be back at her boring school and classes and homework, more than anything else in the world.

Janelle’s yacht bobbed in the greenish water, shining under the lights hanging off the ceiling. It seemed untouched.

“Where are you taking us?” one of the Elder Council women asked as their captors led them along.

“To a safe place,” another man responded. He didn’t elaborate.

The men didn’t stop at any of the usual boats, or even the fishing one used to ferry supplies to the island from the nearby Bahamas. Instead, another large fishing boat waited at the end of the dock, a large blue one that hadn’t been there before. It was easily enough to hold two dozen men...as well as prisoners. How had they steered that thing in here unnoticed?

Precious little warmth crept back into her body as some of the fizz fell off, joining the mess already on the dock. Her captor led her over a railing and onto the boat, following his comrades to a door below decks.

Leslie sucked in a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. Maybe the Tempests could fight back once all this fire extinguisher stuff wore off. They could break their cuffs. These guys had overlooked that fact for sure. Then they’d be out of here before the boat even pulled away from the dock. These men didn’t even have their fire extinguishers anymore—they seemed to have given them to the others who were now running through the complex.

She didn’t dare say anything as her captor led her down a narrow set of white stairs, into a boat lined with bunks, fishing supplies, and a salty smell. Ahead, Mel had regained some of his strength, walking fully upright with the last of the fizz dropping off his suit. Hope trickled back into her veins as she walked along.

Until she saw the door to the freezer.

It hung wide open around the next corner, blasting out cool air into the hallway. Leslie tried to drag her feet, even brushing up against a pipe in the process, but it was no use.

The masked man ahead patted down Mel's pockets, taking out his keys and his phone and handing them to one of his partners. Mel said nothing to this. He hung his head as they led him into the freezer, where several chairs were set up in rows. It was a large freezer, too: probably for hauling massive catches of fish. Today, it was hauling something different.

"You don't have anything on you, do you?" the man near the door asked as he quickly patted her down. She flinched at his touch as he slapped at her pant legs.

"N...no," she said, heart fluttering in her chest. Words had left her. They didn't do that often. *Don't roll up the sleeves...please don't roll up the sleeves...*

"She's good." A hand waved her through. The man guarding the door also had those brown eyes flecked with black, she noticed. It might not mean anything, but it was best to be on her guard. She'd already met human hurricanes and a newly-matured volcano goddess. If there was anything she'd learned, it was not to dismiss any possibility.

"You can sit here," her captor said, leading her to a chair. There were quite a few of them in here, crammed side to side, enough to seat a few dozen people. These men had come prepared. "We'll get you blankets shortly."

Leslie's breath swirled into the air as she sat, muscles weak with relief. The cold of the chair made her butt start to go numb. She barely noticed. These people hadn't found her out after all. Then a thought struck her, and the relief flew away like a leaf in a storm.

Andrina had stuck Janelle in a freezer once, to drain her power and keep her under control. This was exactly something that shed have her followers do.

Chapter Three

“My dad.”

Janelle broke away from Gary and rushed down the hallway towards her apartment. He was sitting on the computer there, emailing her tutor, before she'd left for the beach with Leslie.

Whoever was attacking would want to go for her apartment first.

“Wait. Janelle.” Gary's feet slapped the floor as he chased her. “We don't know who this is. It could be the CIA for all we know.”

A blast of wind whistled somewhere, but died. Her people were putting up a defense, but against who? One option was the CIA or some other government agency that had found them out. The other...she didn't want to think about it. Andrina was in prison, far from the ocean in north Texas. Her Tempest powers would be gone there. No way she could've broken out.

That didn't mean others didn't work for her. Her biological mother seemed to have had a bigger reach than most realized during her rule.

Janelle bolted past the pop machine, which was tipped over in its side. Tools lay scattered everywhere, along with some strange white fizz. But the janitor was nowhere to be found. It was as if something had dragged him off down the hallway.

The fizz...she'd seen it before. It came from fire extinguishers. She'd fired one at Andrina once to get away from her. The thought made her pump her legs faster.

"Janelle," Gary said behind her, keeping pace. The tone of his voice told her he'd figured it out, too, and that he'd rather have her go back.

No. Her dad was up there. Leslie was in here somewhere, the friend who had stuck with her all this time. She couldn't just run out on her now.

Fish swam in their tanks as she rushed through the room, under the glass spiral in the ceiling. Sunlight poured down on them, making Gary's skin shine. More fizz lay on the floor here, as if whoever was armed with the fire extinguishers had sprayed someone coming down the stairs.

"Dad?" It was stupid, giving away where she was at, but Janelle's emotions welled to the surface uncontrollably. They'd started getting along better lately. He'd actually started talking to her more after her close brush with death. They spent every night after dinner talking for half an hour, no matter how busy either of them were, and had even watched a movie together the other night.

On top of the spiral staircase, her apartment door stood wide open.

Janelle felt as if she'd died inside. The door was normally locked. Only she or her dad could get in without a key. The alternative would be to bust the door down. Tempests could definitely do that. Ordinary humans, no, unless they had bombs or battering rams. She hadn't heard either.

"I don't hear anyone," Gary said. "I think it's a trap. Don't go."

Janelle couldn't resist climbing a few of the steps for a look into the apartment. Gary didn't understand. This was her *dad* here.

"Janelle, he wouldn't want you to--" Gary started.

Footsteps.

She staggered back into Gary, who took her arm and pulled her down the remaining stairs. Male voices spoke above in the apartment. They weren't familiar. In fact, one of them had a faint Midwestern accent. Nothing Tempest at all.

"...stay up here? You crazy?" the voice said. "I don't like this, Steve. We're breaking the law."

"What law? We're not in the U.S. anymore." Another voice, this one with a Texas twang, responded. "Well, I think these are Bahamian waters, but we're too far away for them to notice."

"Quiet."

Only then did she realize most of the thumping had stopped throughout the building. Footfalls thudded somewhere. Janelle slid around the corner, squeezing next to Gary. Whoever these people were, they knew who she was. Was there a Tempest named Steve? She didn't think so. Not even in her panic. But if these guys weren't Tempests, how had they broken open the door?

"Don't hear anyone," Steve said. His Texas drawl seemed thicker now. He was relaxing. "They're all loaded into the boat. We should go. Our ten minutes is about up."

"But the High Leader--" the other man started.

"Someone else might have got her. If not, she'll go after her father. Ms. Morgen's plans said so. She'd know her daughter. *You* want to try fighting her? Do you realize which hurricane she turned into last summer?"

A pause. Janelle's heart felt as if it had fallen down to the floor.

Ms. Morgen. Andrina. She was somehow planning this, even from prison. Her father had tried to drown her months ago. No doubt he wouldn't survive long if her people had him in custody. Leslie, too.

The only thing that kept her from rushing up the stairs was the two men thudding down at the same time.

Gary pushed her back with his shoulder just as they appeared in the hallway, dodging the other way, towards the main entrance. Both wore ski masks and coats, but neither had her father. Instead, they brandished plain red fire extinguishers. It would have looked ridiculous under any other circumstances.

The white fizz from one still sat on the floor. Her father might have come down already, been sprayed, and been dragged away. *Must* have.

The two men vanished down the hallway, past the aquarium tubes. Their steps grew fainter as they echoed back at them.

"Gary, let's go," she hissed.

"Trap," he mouthed.

"My dad. Leslie!" They were both in danger if Andrina was involved in this. Mortal danger. "Didn't you hear what they said?"

"It's to lure you in, Janelle!" Gary's voice rose in time to replace the footfalls fading away. Those men had to be going through the main entrance by now, towards the docks, ready to take their prisoners away. "Maybe they knew you were here."

He could be right. Probably right. But she couldn't stand by and let something happen to Leslie or her father.

The complex stood empty all around her as she ran. No kids chased each other down in the apartments. No janitors pushed trash cans into the basement. The next second, her foot went out from under her and she went to the floor. Yellow flashed in her vision as her butt collided with the ground. The fire alarm hung over her head, its door open but its handle still in the up position. More of that fire extinguisher stuff slumped down the wall around it. Someone had tried to activate it, but hadn't made it.

"Up. You slipped," Gary said. His voice contained relief. That she hadn't run out there yet and gotten herself captured?

Janelle took a deep breath as she stood. But she was the strongest Tempest in the world. At least, according to everyone. She should be able to handle this. Yet a voice inside yelled back at her. These people probably weren't Tempests, but if they were human, how had they broken down her doors?

More of the cold fizz spread out on the lobby floor, covering the gray Tempest spiral. Janelle stood closer to Gary, taking in the silence. These guys in their ski masks had already taken any Tempests that were still in this part of the building.

This gang had subdued and captured a building of Tempests, and in less than ten minutes. Maybe the only thing that had saved her and Gary was their making out on the beach. These people knew their weaknesses. The location of their secret complex. Everything. No doubt Andrina was involved, in that case.

Gary shot her a wide-eyed glance. His hazel eyes seemed dark in this light. He glanced at the pair of double doors next to them and nodded.

The meeting room. It stood empty with its glass table and chairs intact. From here, they could see that no one was hiding in there.

Janelle eyed the lobby again. The door to the docks stood wide open, leading away into the cave. As if someone were expecting her to go through. Gary was right, then. It was a trap. Big time. The lobby had three hallways branching off from it. There could be dozens of men in masks waiting in the other two. Sure, she was a Tempest and could hold her own, but one shot from a cold fire extinguisher and she was done. Out of commission. Her powers drained. Gary, too. Tempest powers sure hadn't helped the others here.

Her heart felt as if it was not only on the floor, but trampled under her own feet. They couldn't continue. There was no safe way to go after Leslie or her father, who were probably loaded onto a boat out in that cave, only ten seconds away from her.

The seconds turned into a minute, then another minute. No movement. And then--

"Hide," Gary hissed in her ear.

Her legs carried her into the meeting hall before she even thought about it. At the same time, slow footsteps met her ears from the direction of the lobby. There had been an ambush waiting there after all, and those men were coming to see what the holdup was.

Unfortunately, the meeting hall had no exit.

Janelle rushed to the back of the room, out of range of any fire extinguishers that might shoot through the door. She needed room if there was going to be a fight. Gary nodded, joining her at her side. Fight, then. There would be no other choice.

"Hello, Tempest High Leader."

One of the men in ski masks had appeared in the doorway, red canister in hand. He wasn't aiming it at her, which was good. But he appeared sinister in his black ski mask and coat. He had strange eyes somehow, but she couldn't quite put her finger on why.

"Who are you?" she demanded, standing taller. Her fists clenched in anticipation. She could send a blast of wind through the room and knock the guy over in a heartbeat, and then she and Gary could run out of here and down the hall before the others knew what happened. "Are you Tempests?"

The man shook his head. His strange brown eyes--spotted with black, she noticed--never left her. "No. We're not. However, your mother considers us to be your close cousins. If you'll come with me, I'll explain ev--"

No. She was *not* going with them if Andrina was involved. Nothing good came from her plans. Avoiding capture might be her only hope to get her dad and Leslie out of this. She wouldn't be any good shivering and powerless.

The wind started before she even raised her hands. The power was coming easier now. Gary backed away as it screamed through the room,

whipping her own hair in front of her face.

Chairs slid across the floor and tumbled. A plant fell from its perch and crashed into the wall, sending shards flying. She expected the man to stagger back. To fall. To run away screaming.

Not this.

The man stood there in the full brunt of her power, unaffected. His coat flapped against his body...but nothing else.

The wind died, and Janelle backed away into the mini-stage. Whatever these people were, they were immune to hurricane force winds. No wonder they had taken the complex. Gary shot her a wide-eyed glance. "Get behind me," he said. "Go!"

The strange man stepped into the room, flanked by two others who also brandished those red cans. He clicked the nozzle. "Sorry, High Leader," he said, his voice filled with genuine sympathy. "We didn't want to use force on you, but you're not giving us much of a choice."

Chapter Four

Paul didn't speak much for the rest of the trip. It was hard to focus on his magazine as his father drove in silence with that strange woman in the backseat. Studying for his History test wasn't possible, either. How was he supposed to take his test, knowing they were transporting a wanted prisoner? How did his dad *know* she was innocent? Maybe he didn't know, and this really was the only way they'd be allowed to move to Mobley.

And he couldn't get the thought of the tornado ripping up the prison out of his head. His father had said nothing more about that, either, and Paul

didn't want to ask. All he'd done was twitch nervously in his seat for the past three hours.

"Can I just take my test tomorrow?" he asked. "You know--after we unpack?"

His father wrinkled his mustache and nodded. "Yes. That would be fine," he said absently.

"When we get to Mobley, can I actually go to the school there?" Anything to break this awkward silence. The blond woman--Andrina--was watching them. Her strange gray eyes glanced at him through the rearview mirror. He looked away. "And can we get Internet, too?"

"No Internet or cell phones with your uncle," he said, repeating the same line he had for the past several years. "I don't need him tracking us down. Sorry. I'll think about having you attend Mobley High. You'll be in good company there. All Outbreakers."

An entire school of Outbreakers. Paul couldn't imagine. He'd spent years studying at home, always in some house way out in the boonies, away from company his own age. Well, he'd been neighbors with Brian and Dominic last year (who lived a mile away), but they were human. That was different. Maybe, even, he'd get to meet some girls.

"Yes, you will," the woman added, speaking for the first time in hours. "The mayor's seeing to it. Mobley's his baby. It's going to grow. Others will be joining us."

Something in her voice told him that there was something he didn't know yet. He glanced at his dad, but he shook his head. He was just as clueless. For the first time, it seemed like his dad was a pawn in something he didn't even quite understand, and Paul didn't like it. Not one bit.

He had to say something. "You're human, right? So do you mean we'll have some living in Mobley?" Paul didn't mind the idea of that...as long as

they didn't mind Outbreakers. This woman knew about them already, and so did lots of people who married Outbreakers. That made sense, he supposed.

Andrina wrinkled the side of her mouth, like she wanted to say something huge. Instead, she nodded to Paul's magazine. "Interesting?"

"If you like metal." His words felt dry in his throat. She'd dodged his question. And what if Mobley's mayor was wrong and this woman wasn't innocent? He didn't know the mayor or anything about what he was thinking. Well, she *did* look awfully thin and incapable of breaking a man's neck. The thought made him feel a bit better. "I'm going to see *Executioner* in a couple of weeks. Not sure if you've heard of them." Dumb conversation, but it beat asking her if she'd killed someone or not.

"No." Andrina sat back in her seat, glancing down at her jumpsuit. "Earl, I'll need a new set of clothes before we reach Mobley. Can we stop at the next store?"

"Sure, Ma'am." His father took the freeway exit and hit the brakes, banking around the curve. Ahead, a small town spread out on the plains in front of them, a few fast food signs towering above it.

"Dad, I don't like this," he said as the two of them ruffled through women's T-shirts at a huge dollar store. They'd left the prisoner in the van, and Paul was glad to breathe fresh air.

Then his father glanced around the store and spoke in a low voice. "I'm not sure I do, either, to tell you the truth. But if she's really innocent, I couldn't bear to let her go to the chair. I just couldn't."

Something still seemed really suspicious here. Paul had the idea that this really wasn't a request at all. His father wouldn't have partially destroyed the prison if it wasn't. He just wasn't like that. "Okay, Dad. What exactly did we get in return for this?"

He sighed. Bingo. “A discount on our house. The mayor's got connections with Mobley's real estate. Also, a free surveillance system at our place. He also offered to have Mobley's police force keep an eye on us. That'll make Tanner think twice about approaching us again.” He turned, mustache relaxing. “Paul, I think she's innocent. It was all a mistake.”

Maybe. If his dad would get a TV, he'd have a better idea of what to think here.

Andrina was thumbing through Paul's magazine when they got back. She handed it back and took the clothes, while Paul and his father stepped out of the van to let her get changed. A knock on the door indicated when they could return, and they were back on the freeway five minutes later.

* * * * *

Click.

Janelle braced herself for the frigid spray to rush over her body, sapping all of her power and making her helpless in front of these strange beings. She braced herself to see Andrina again. To find out that Leslie was dead, or that her father was dead, or both.

Click. The masked man pulled the trigger of the extinguisher again, but nothing exploded from the nozzle. He shook the canister, to get a tinny, faint clinking sound in response.

Janelle expelled a breath. The extinguisher was out of juice. Or dry ice, or whatever. She and Gary had a chance, if they moved fast enough and--

Gary beat her to it. He rushed forward in nothing but his swim trunks, unshielded if the canister wasn't out after all. The man tried to move, but too late. Gary crashed into him with all the force of a truck, knocking him

back into his companions like they were bowling pins. Thuds and cries echoed down the hall as they fell.

So they weren't immune to Tempest strength, at least.

“Come on!” Gary took her hand, but she didn't need convincing. The first man was already scrambling to rise from the floor.

Janelle jumped over the bodies on the floor, feeling vulnerable in her bathing suit. Just in time to see ten more masked men appear in the lobby from the neighboring halls.

Five of them held red canisters. Chances were against them all being empty.

“It's them!”

“Gary!” She seized his arm and pulled him along as she ran, bare feet slapping against the floor.

Hide. They needed to hide, and now. There was no way two of them could fight all these guys. Her apartment was out. The doors were broken down. But the beach...she had an idea.

Heavy footfalls fell behind them and another clicking sound rang through the air. “Stop. We won't hurt you. Cooperate and you will not be sprayed.”

Janelle leapt over the fizz she'd slipped on earlier. For some reason, she didn't believe that.

“Where we going?” Gary breathed as they cut around the corner and the tubular fish tanks. His hair flopped around on his head as he ran.

“The ocean.”

Gary nodded. It was their last weapon.

She wasn't sure if this would work. Summoning a windstorm was one thing. Water was a lot heavier and harder to control. Janelle had never been very good at it, even though everyone told her she should be. She

hadn't practiced, and now was a time she wished she'd listened to her dad about it.

Another spraying sound came from behind. Ice splattered the back of Janelle's leg, threatening to make it seize up, but the shock only served to help her run faster. No stopping. The salty smell of the ocean wafted through the door ahead as sand on the floor stuck to her feet. Gary slammed into the door at the end of the hall, making it squeal open as the lock broke. They had no time to leave it on its hinges.

Her towel and umbrella waited on the beach. Gary leapt over the towel, barely missing the umbrella. "Ready for this?" he called, reaching for her arm.

No. She wasn't. But she had to be. "Yes."

They'd have to be careful. Too much ocean, and they could transform completely. Whatever boat these guys had brought to take their prisoners away in wouldn't stand a chance in a hurricane. It would kill Leslie. Not to mention, they'd be breaking the law. Their turns to change had passed already.

Gary took her arm. It was reassuring and strong as she followed him into the water.

Ocean lapped over her feet, hugging them. Instantly the ice vanished from her leg and the footfalls stopped on the beach behind them. A roaring sensation filled her like an oncoming train, growing louder with each step she took into the ocean. How deep did they have to go to trigger the full change? Not far.

"What are you doing?" one of the men asked behind them. His voice went up an octave. He knew about Tempests, all right.

Gary stopped and faced her. His eyes. The hazel was gone. Now gray storm clouds spun around his pupils in a rage. This was normal--her eyes

must look the same--but she had to resist the urge to pull away. It was something she could never get used to.

Janelle turned. Five men in masks stood on the beach, trampling her towel underfoot and all holding the extinguishers. They suddenly looked ridiculous, gaping at the two of them.

"Ma'am..." the leader started.

It was their chance. Gary faced the water under him, which started to sway and slap at the sand.

Focus. Gary had told her that every time he'd tried to teach her how to do this.

She turned to her gaze to the shining water under her. The roar in her head grew stronger and threatened to consume her. It could, if they weren't careful.

Another spray came from an extinguisher as one of them men desperately tried to stop them. The foam coated the front of her bathing suit, but Janelle couldn't feel it this time. She was too consumed by the ocean's power now, too gone.

The water lurched more, rising around her feet as she focused. One of the men turned and retreated through the busted door. It was too late. The water rose around Janelle's shins, bringing the roar inside her to a scream, and rushed forward towards the men in front of them.

They had no chance. The water struck, and all five of them went tumbling to the ground as the ocean rushed over them, rolling over their bodies and foaming against the sides of the doorway. The first managed to make it through the doorway, dripping wet and leaving sloshing footsteps in his wake. A second man struck the sand next to it, pulled himself up, and followed.

Within seconds, the last three men piled through the doorway, coats and ski masks sticking to their bodies. The water retreated around Janelle's feet, letting the roar inside her slowly calm and fade like a departing thunderstorm. She ran her hands down the sides of her body and her legs, making sure they were still there. Good. They were. Judging from the roar in her head, she must have come within seconds of the full transformation.

She faced Gary as soon as it had stopped, just in time to see the storm clouds in his eyes disappear and form back into their usual hazel. Good. Tempest or not, she hated seeing that.

Then another thought struck her as her feet sank in the wet sand. "My dad. Leslie!"

The men were heading back to their boat or whatever. She had no doubt. They wouldn't come back here as long as they had the ocean at their backs.

This time, Gary didn't argue. He knew.

This was their last chance. If they didn't take it now, they might never see Leslie or her father again.

Janelle rushed back through the door and back down the hall. She didn't remember anything, not tearing back through the now-empty complex, until she found herself rushing through the doorway of the cave dock, and finally out onto the dock itself.

Everything seemed to collapse inside of her.

Another boat--a large fishing boat not unlike theirs--was pulling out of the dock and already steering itself through the cave entrance and out to the ocean beyond. Janelle would have rushed to one of her yachts, which sat parked next to the dock, if it wasn't for the fact that the bow was sagging fast, with water rushing over the deck.

These people had somehow punched a hole in the front of her boat. And judging from the oil slick spreading out from the fishing boat on the other side of the cave, they had done the same to that one, too.

The captors had sabotaged them in the time she and Gary were running out to the beach. It was insurance, in case they couldn't be captured.

Janelle let out a cry of anguish as the captors' boat turned the corner to the cave, heading for the sunlight outside and disappearing from sight.

Chapter Five

Paul's legs had started to cramp by time they reached Mobley.

The sun was already starting to set, casting an orange glow over the plains around them. The drive had taken them all day. Paul had thumbed through his magazine way too many times, all too aware that the woman in the backseat seemed to be watching him. His father made small talk occasionally, but things were just as awkward as they were earlier that day.

Relief coursed through his limbs as they pulled off an expressway exit, turned onto a two-lane highway, drove past an abandoned house and a caved-in barn, and finally into the town limits.

Mobley. The world's first Outbreaker town.

It didn't look like anything special: just rows of houses, a Marathon and an Admiral, a convenience store called the Mobley Party Stop, and an old high school with a sign that announced its mascot: the Stallions. Some guy walked a dog down one of the side streets as they passed. A couple of kids rode bikes down another. If Paul didn't know better, he would have thought that it was just another Midwest town. It was good that it didn't look like

much, his dad had told him already. Mobley was the kind of place that would never attract attention to itself, which was what they needed.

"What do you think?" his father asked.

"Definitely better than the middle of nowhere," Paul said, glancing back at the high school, which was disappearing behind a row of hundred-year-old downtown stores. The lights were starting to come in inside the stores and restaurants. A waitress moved around inside one called the Family Grill, stopping to talk to a man in a suit.

His father brought the van to a stop, taking up two parallel parking spaces with the trailer. "That's the mayor in there. I have to stop and talk to him for a minute, and then we'll get over to our house. I doubt we'll finish all the unpacking tonight."

Andrina bolted out of the van without a goodbye and into the restaurant, where she promptly wrapped her arms around the blond man in the suit. He returned the hug, embracing her for almost a full minute. Her boyfriend, Paul guessed.

His father followed, disappearing inside the glass door and behind some pink curtains. The streetlights came on, revealing a fire station down the street with one of those megaphone sirens rising above it. Old cold war sirens, his dad always called them. This town had definitely been here since before then, and the rust covering it was proof of that.

Paul really needed to get up and move. He couldn't sit much longer.

The Family Grill had a fan blasting inside, which felt good. The place was mostly empty, except for Andrina, the mayor, the waitress, and a couple of twin guys about his age in sitting the corner booth. He guessed they were the mayor's sons. They had the same sandy hair as the man in the suit, and the same wide eyebrows. They were watching a movie on something that might have been a phone. It was hard to tell. All the ones

Paul had seen in the stores were flat and didn't look much different than some mp3 players.

He waved to them as he headed to the bathroom. One of them returned it. He had brown eyes spotted with pure black. Like his. As he passed the counter, a glance from the waitress confirmed that she did, too.

"...years of work here. Real estate's had a hard time convincing the last non-Outbreakers to move. Hard time making it not look obvious, too." The mayor's voice followed Paul to the bathroom. "Anyway, I have your key for you, Earl. I can't thank you enough. I promise you, I'll work it out to cut your house payments in half. Security will be out to install your system tomorrow." He coughed. "If you want, you can show up at the old Masonic Temple for our guests of honor tomorrow. They should arrive at about two."

"Guests of honor?" his father asked. This clearly wasn't something he knew about. "From where?"

Paul stopped in the little hallway, holding his breath to stretch his hearing. He hung behind a green pop machine, hoping no one knew he was eavesdropping. "Caribbean. You could say that we have...close relatives out there." He wrapped his arm around Andrina, who snuggled closer to him. "But I don't want to spoil the surprise. Just show up and have fun."

* * * * *

Of course, Paul pressed his father for whatever special guests the mayor had been talking about, but he didn't know, either. It seemed pretty likely that the prisoner they'd rescued had something to do with this. Was there more to Mobley than either of them thought?

The thought kept bugging him as he lugged his boxes to his room, unpacked his CD's, and placed his guitar on its stand against the wall. Outside, a family walked past, enjoying the warm weather. Paul had never lived in a suburb before. It seemed so crowded, so closed in. Maybe that was why he was a little uncomfortable.

"We won't have time to go to the Masonic Temple tomorrow," his father explained a little later as he put the pans up in the kitchen cupboard. He was putting more things away than usual, Paul noticed. Did this mean they were actually going to stay here for a while? "It's probably just a gimmick to get the mayor more votes next election season."

Paul nodded. If he finished unpacking tonight, he might get time to go down there himself. "You don't think Tanner's going to come here?"

"Even if he does, Mobley's police is on this." He turned away to put glasses into the cupboard. "This is the safest place for us."

"Why is he still mad at you about Mom?" he blurted.

The question hung in the air. His father froze and let out a breath. A sad breath. Paul wished he could take the question back. He wasn't even sure what he'd asked it for. He'd never had the guts to ask the question before. Something in his gut always held him back.

"He doesn't like that I made her an Outbreaker. Says it might have caused her to have some health problems that led to the heart attack, because she was so young when it happened. He never did like it, even back when we married."

"But...that doesn't make any *sense!*" Paul gripped the counter. "She was fine up until...until that morning. He should know it doesn't kill you. I mean, their *dad* was an Outbreaker and he lived to his seventies." Paul's mother and Tanner were both born human--they hadn't inherited the trait. But his father's parents hadn't wanted him to marry a human woman, so his

mother had asked to become an Outbreaker herself so they'd approve. It was the only way they could have been together, his father said.

"Yes. I know." A tinge of impatience crept into his voice. "Your uncle was just angry, Paul. I was, too, at the time. He was always protective of his sister, and doesn't know where to direct his anger."

The exhaustion of his existence crept into Paul. "Then why do you keep running from Tanner? Just confront him, already. I'm tired of moving."

His father turned to finish stocking the cupboards, punctuating his sentence with the slap of a plate. No matter what Paul said now, the conversation was over.

* * * * *

The whole day kept rushing back Paul as he stared at the ceiling of his new bedroom, counting the cracks in the ceiling. It was an older ranch house, like the others in Mobley. There were plenty of them to count.

A car rolled past outside, blurry through the raindrops on the window. Paul turned his head to see a police cruiser rolling past. The Mobley police. They were on patrol, checking on them. Paul was sure they were overreacting, but suddenly he didn't blame his father for carrying out the mayor's request. If the reward was a stable life at last, without having to move every few months, so be it. Maybe that Andrina woman was innocent after all. If she was, then they'd done a good thing. The right thing.

Paul closed his burning eyelids...*and the next moment, he was walking out of his bedroom in his kangaroo pajamas. His bare feet slapped against the floor as he made his way past his growth chart, pinned up by his mother several years ago. There were several ticks on it now, well past the four foot mark. His parents always told him he was going to be a tall kid.*

The smell of his mother's coffee drifted down the hall. Somewhere, the television droned the morning news away, barely audible. He ignored it. Why did his parents want to watch something so boring, anyway? Once he got his cereal, he'd turn it to the cartoon channel before his dad got up. If he was lucky, he'd gotten up early enough to watch Dragonclaw X, and he wouldn't have to start his lessons for another hour. His parents didn't usually let him watch the news, anyway. They wouldn't mind if he turned the channel.

"Mom, can I turn it?" Paul rounded the corner to the kitchen, to where the coffee machine spit at the air on the counter. The glow of the television poured into the room, turning the floor blue.

His mother was slumped over the kitchen table, coffee mug barely out of reach of her outstretched hand.

"Mom?" Paul rushed to her side. His stomach told him that something wasn't right before his brain did. He searched the kitchen for his father, but he was still in bed, so he shook her sleeve. "Mom!"

Nothing. Her arm slumped off the table, nearly hitting Paul in the chest. She was facing him. Her brown eyes stared at him, blank, empty, dilated so much that he could no longer see the black flecks in them.

The next moment, Paul was tossing the bedcovers off his bed and sitting up in his new, dark bedroom. He wore boxers, not his ten-year-old kangaroo pajamas. He sucked in a breath as his gaze focused on the raindrops pattering on his window. Somewhere, thunder rumbled across the sky. His stomach felt ready to lose its contents, and he prepared to rush to the bathroom just in case.

Nothing came except a bad taste in his mouth. He swore and wiped the sweat from his forehead, trying to distract himself from the image burned

into his head since that morning years ago. No matter how many times he moved and turned his thoughts to something else, it followed him.

A faint rumble of thunder came and went.

Paul fell back onto his bedcovers, sighing. The cracks in the ceiling came back into focus. Maybe he could count them again and fall back asleep in a hurry. The same dream rarely plagued him more than once per night. He'd likely fall into oblivion until late tomorrow morning.

He closed his eyes, letting the rain lull him back to sleep, but started a second later when a strange sensation washed over him.

His limbs felt heavy and started to tingle.

Chapter Six

Despite the blankets their captors had given them all, Leslie was still freezing as she sat in her chair. Next to her, Janelle's father, Lucas, shivered under his. His wavy brown hair hung in his face, nearly hiding his glasses at times.

She could tell that the boat was moving now, and had been for the past several hours. Where they were headed, the men in ski masks wouldn't tell them. About everyone trapped in the freezer with her had asked that question.

"Just sit tight. It's nothing bad, we promise," they'd say, or something along those lines. Or, "We're not allowed to tell you yet. Sorry." Or simply, "Do any of you need a bathroom break?" It was frustrating, but at least whoever these guys were, they weren't treating them too badly. They'd passed out water bottles and crackers soon after the boat had started

moving, and undid their cuffs at the same time, but that made no difference. Three men always stood right outside the door, fire extinguishers in hand, ready to subdue anyone who made a break for it. Not that there was anywhere to go. The Tempests had zero power sitting here in this freezer. And she had a feeling the captors might not be so nice to her if they found out she wasn't one.

"Where do you think we're going?" Leslie asked Janelle's father for the millionth time. The more she talked, the better she felt.

He didn't answer her this time. There was no point. He wiped the hair from his face and studied the closed door in front of them, where a man in a mask stood with his back to the glass pane. "I'm just glad Janelle managed to get away. I hope she stays away." His tone betrayed his doubt.

Janelle wouldn't *not* try to come after them. They both knew it. When her best friend wanted something, she was sure to get it no matter what. Janelle would be desperate to make everything up to her after ignoring her for the past few months. And she was just helpless Leslie. Her friend would try to track them down, maybe even walking right into a trap in the process. These people would set one up for her now, with them as the bait.

Leslie cursed herself. If she never made it out of here, the last memories anyone would ever have of her was her misery. But before she had time to brood too much, the door swung open again. Somewhere underneath, the boat's engine seemed to slow down, quieting to a low rumble.

"Everyone up. We're going to be boarding a plane," the man in the doorway ordered. His brown eyes swept around the room like a suspicious teacher's. "We'll be taking you to the airstrip in groups of five and six. Front row first. If anyone needs bathroom breaks, now is the time."

Those nearest him rose from their seats, which included most of the Elder Council members. Nobody spoke. A bald, old council member nodded to the masked men as they came back in. Eric, his name was. Was he in on this somehow?

The room felt crowded and claustrophobic for almost a minute as they snapped handcuffs back onto the prisoners and led them out the door, rushing them through the interior of the boat and up the stairs. Leslie knew why. They needed to get the Tempests to another cold area before they regained the strength to fight back. These men had worked this out perfectly.

Around her, the others seemed to find the floor interesting, as if too ashamed to admit that someone had been able to subdue Tempests. Lucas studied the door as the lead masked man waited just outside of it, but he didn't say anything. Was he thinking? Leslie hoped he was, because her brain wasn't working right now.

The front row cleared, leaving only the row of folding chairs and discarded blankets. The freezer door closed, leaving the room silent of footsteps and scraping chairs.

"We must be in the Bahamas," Janelle's father said. "One of the south islands, I think. They usually have small airstrips."

Her brain thawed a little. "Then we're not staying here. In the Caribbean, I mean. They'll want Tempests away from the ocean so they can't fight back." This was only a stopping point for wherever they were going. Wherever they were being taken, it was a long way away. Overseas? Maybe. Maybe not. None of these guys had foreign accents or anything.

Lucas nodded, staring at her through the fog on his glasses. "You're probably right, Leslie. I wouldn't be surprised."

Leslie was about to respond when a buzzing sound filled the room.

She jumped as the vibration from it hit her chest. The buzzing stopped for a second and started up again.

Her cell phone. She still had it with her, tucked inside her bra, thanks to her shorts having no pockets.

“You have a phone?” a woman asked from down the row. She leaned to stare at her, inviting everyone else in the freezer to do the same thing.

“Y...yes,” she stammered, pulling the blanket over herself to fish it out. Her limbs trembled with nerves. She could at least call the Coast Guard or something for help. Or Janelle's dad could. As long as she did it before--

“Leslie, turn it off!” Janelle's dad slapped her on the back. “They're coming back.”

Her heart leapt into her throat. She finally produced her phone, which had just stopped buzzing. The display showed a number she couldn't recognize—probably a classmate asking her for the answers to their Literature project again—but she couldn't use it now. Not until they were away from these guys.

She just barely turned her phone off and tucked it back in when the door came open again, and five more men in ski masks poured through for the second row. They were working fast, pit crew fast, too fast for Leslie to turn her phone back on and send out even a simple text. But she couldn't risk the phone ringing.

In less than two minutes, the men returned for her row. She didn't struggle as they cuffed her again. There was no point. Maybe there would be some privacy on the plane. That was the only hope.

It was nighttime already, with the full moon almost right overhead. Palm trees shone with it everywhere along the coast. Midnight. They'd been in the boat for hours.

Their captors didn't give her much time to look around. They jogged down the dock with them in tow, towards a waiting food delivery truck with ice lining the walls inside. No one spoke. Another truck was already rolling away down a narrow dirt road nearby, disappearing behind tropical foliage. Leslie had to struggle to keep from tripping as they led her up the ramp of the truck, right behind Janelle's dad and in front of the woman who'd asked her about the phone. Two more prisoners, a boy of about ten and one of the complex's janitors, brought up the rear as they packed into the rolling refrigerator. It smelled like the world's coldest day ever inside.

"This ride will only last a few minutes. We promise," one of the unnamed men said, and slammed the door behind them.

Fortunately, he was right. It was completely dark inside the back of the truck and the road seemed to be rough, making it not fun in the slightest. Leslie didn't dare take out her phone—she wasn't sure when the ride was going to end and if she could hold onto it on this road. If she dropped it, it would be discovered by the wrong people. Only two minutes later, the truck came to a stop, footfalls thudded outside, and the door came open again.

The man opening the door was a Tempest. His tank top did nothing to hide the gray spiral on his arm. At first Leslie thought it might be Deon, who was a friend of Janelle's father. He had the same dark skin and muscular build. But this was a different guy. Leslie's heart sank. She liked Deon, and he'd never be aiding these people. He'd even taken her back to the mainland after she'd been kidnapped the first time.

"Out," the man ordered. "I need to take off in ten minutes."

"What are you doing?" Janelle's father asked. His voice trembled just a little, Leslie noticed. "How much did they pay you for this?"

He didn't answer, but instead joined three masked men on the sprawling pavement below them. Lights lined what looked like a wide road stretching into a grassy field. The airstrip.

They moved quickly again, pulled along by masked men and their Tempest buddy. The plane was a large, bulky one probably used for cargo jobs, and the interior was lined with bags of ice, effectively bringing the interior temperature down to the point where Leslie had to hold back a shiver. Chairs were chained together in the middle, and the other prisoners were already seated in the front two rows. Conscious of her phone bouncing around inside her shirt, she fell into one of the chairs and stared down at the dirty floor, praying that she didn't look too suspicious as more footsteps thudded in.

At last, the sliding door closed, shutting in everyone and lowering the temperature even more. Once this thing was in the air, Leslie would have to try making a call. Or a text, whatever could get to Janelle. She'd beg her friend not to come chasing after them, but to call the authorities instead. They could both win here, and no one would end up getting hurt.

"My name is Steve," one of the men said, shuffling to the front of the cabin and removing his ski mask. He had a forgettable face, a smooth, oval one like so many others, and messy black hair that spilled around his ears. The only thing that stood out about him was his eyes. Brown, with flecks of pure black that didn't look entirely natural. The same eyes as all the other captors. He gave a polite smile, as if he were in front of a dinner meeting at some fancy hotel instead of on a beater of a cargo plane full of prisoners. "I will do what I can to keep you all comfortable during this flight. I am limited on the questions I can answer, but I am happy to say that your people and mine are about to unite, for a brighter and happier future."

Murmurs filled the cabin, but the plane's engine started up before anyone could speak, sending a rumbling sensation through Leslie. To her horror, Steve wandered over to a seat on the other side of the room while the other men headed up front to the cockpit, leaving her no privacy to so much as take out her phone. If he stayed there, she might never get the chance.

* * * * *

Paul couldn't so much as lift a toe off his bedcovers. His eyelids refused to cooperate. A paralysis stole over his body, as if an iron hand from within was holding him down. He felt the mattress sagging underneath him, worn from years of use and travel, but he couldn't peel himself from it.

Thunder rumbled again, farther away. Out of nowhere, his heart began to race faster than it ever had before.

His thoughts raced. His heart felt ready to pound its way out of his ribcage. If he could have leapt off the bed, he would have. But he was locked there in silent panic, unable to part his lips and scream for help. Paul could feel himself breathing heavily, slowly, like his father had earlier that day when--

Was this his first Outbreak?

Even that thought couldn't break him from the paralysis. His dad never told him about these symptoms. Was this normal? Or was he about to die, like his mother had that morning years ago? Maybe being an Outbreaker *could* kill you.

A roaring noise filled his head, as if an oncoming train was bearing down on the house and into his bedroom. An electrical pulse raced down

from his head to his toes, intensifying until he was sure he was being electrocuted—

Dad! His cry fell silent in his head.

--and at last the roar faded somewhere behind him as the pulses died away.

Silence. And darkness. Paul still had his eyes shut...and yet he didn't.

He was floating somewhere in his bedroom. He couldn't see a thing, but somehow, he knew. His bed sat about two feet away, with his sleeping form still on it. Just to his left lay a stack of CD's he'd unloaded a few hours ago. Another box was propped against the wall next to him, right where he'd shoved it before getting into bed.

Another clap of thunder rang out like a summons, and Paul zipped upwards as if something had grabbed the back of his shirt and started pulling, leaving his room and his body behind. The roof shot past him as his vision snapped into place. Streetlights seemed to spin and zip. Rows of houses grew smaller underneath him, brightening for a second as lightning jumped cloud to cloud somewhere in the distance. His mind seemed to have frozen. He couldn't stop. Some force had a hold on him, and it wasn't letting go.

The world seemed to blur around him. Dark clouds rolled past, blocking his view of Mobley below. He was leaving it behind, too, miles behind. Only huge rolling fields spread out under him now. He wasn't sure how, but ahead, he could sense something different about the storm, something great and rolling and powerful. He drifted towards it, savoring the heat and turmoil as it wrapped around him like a giant mother's embrace. There could be no pulling back from this. Paul's thoughts melted, whipped away by the winds screaming around him. His life vanished, fading to black somewhere behind the storm clouds, and his last thought

before his mind seemed to break apart was that he couldn't remember his name, or where he lived, or where he was even from.

Lightning flashed, an eerie glow turning the clouds around him a brilliant yellow before it died.

He was merging with the storm around him.

Breaking apart. Spreading out. Spinning. Taking up more and more space between himself and the ground. A strange roar filled his whole being, both overwhelming and exhilarating at the same time, as he raced across the landscape and left everything he knew behind.

* * * * *

Steve didn't leave his chair much during the plane trip, forcing Leslie to keep her cell phone hidden for hours on end. No one asked him questions, probably in the hope that he'd feel unneeded and go away, but it was hopeless. He only got up once to use the bathroom at the back of the plane, but left one of his buddies in his place the entire time. She might as well not even have her phone with her.

The men removed the ice bags a couple of hours into the flight, and Leslie could see the sun rising out her window. She'd been awake almost twenty-four hours by now, but she didn't feel tired. Not like the Elder Council members slumped in their seats, snoring. Not like Janelle's dad, who stared at the wall in a daze. Instead, the cogs spun in her mind. Where were they? They must be well over land by now, or the men wouldn't have taken the ice bags out of the room. Tempests had no power when they were far from the ocean. Whatever these guys were, they had the advantage now.

Leslie wondered about Janelle and Gary, still back at the complex, unsure what to do or where she was going. It was an awful feeling. Janelle

probably thought she hated her now, and she had no way to tell her otherwise.

A single cloud raced past the window, leaving blue sky in its place. Then another. Wherever they were, it was a nice spring day. But that could be anywhere. It might help if she could see the ground.

One of the doors swung open to the cockpit, and a masked man spoke to Steve in a low voice. A couple of heads perked up around Leslie, but there was no way she could hear what he was saying. The pair separated, and Steve stood up to address them again.

“Alright, everyone,” he instructed. “We’re going to be landing in about fifteen minutes. I suggest everyone be awake for the landing. I don’t want anyone taking a surprise trip out of their chairs.”

No one chuckled. A few people shifted in place but said nothing.

Leslie felt her phone poking into her again, very close and yet so very far away. Janelle’s father shot her a look and shook his head. *Don’t call Janelle*, it meant, or she’d come after them and right into the trap. But other gazes met hers. The woman with her ten-year-old son. The janitor. A young man with rings under his eyes.

Her gut seemed to be going in two separate directions. As soon as these guys left them alone, she’d have to compromise. It was the only way. This might be a chance to get on the Tempests’ good sides, which she sorely needed right now. It could keep one of them from revealing her secret to their captors. They might even help her escape whatever they were going to.

She got the chance a few minutes later.

Steve left his chair with a scrape and headed to the cockpit. The door closed behind him, leaving the cabin empty of those creepy brown-eyed guys.

“Your phone,” the woman whispered, tapping her on the arm.

“No.” Lucas's face was all desperation. “I'm sure this is what they want. We can't tell her where we are. Leslie, keep the phone turned *off*.”

Her heart pounded. This might be the last chance. Pleading glances surrounded her on all sides. “I...I'll tell her to stay away. But I'll have her send help. Look out the windows and see where we are, everybody.”

Land, flat land that seemed to go on forever, appeared in the windows. Leslie turned on her phone, muffling it in her shirt in case someone could hear it nearby. Her stomach rolled. Janelle might not stay away, and if she didn't--

“Hurry,” someone whispered to her left.

Leslie dialed Janelle's number as her dad gripped her arm. He could stop her now, but he didn't. He couldn't, not with all the faces staring at him.

“Dad? Leslie?” Her friend's voice sounded higher than usual as it poured out of the phone.

Leslie's brain seemed to freeze. Janelle's dad motioned for her to give him the phone. “Don't follow us, Janelle. We think it's a trap. Send someone instead. We're on a plane, about to land.”

Janelle did something she didn't manage to do often—she interrupted Leslie. “Can you see out the windows? Who took you guys?”

The knob started to turn to the cockpit. She had seconds. “Kind of. Don't know.” Leslie pressed the phone tighter to her ear and stood for a better view. Her heart felt like it was shooting to her head. The plane kept lowering, enough to show brown and green rolling fields, and a landscape so flat she could see forever in the direction of the rising sun. They were as far from the ocean as they could be. “We're in the Midwest. It's all flat out there. And these guys are--” Leslie nearly choked as it hit her.

Suddenly, she *knew* what these guys were. Her brain had put the pieces together before she even realized it.

“Are what? See any signs out there? Anything?”

The cockpit door flew open and footfalls thudded towards her. Around her, chairs squeaked as everyone shifted. She had only a few seconds. “Janelle--”

Leslie realized too late that speaking her friend's name was a huge mistake. Her insides collapsed. A hand wrapped around her wrist and removed her phone a second later.

“No!” Both Leslie and Janelle's father swiped for it, but too late. Steve backed away as Lucas lunged for him, smashing the phone to his ear as Janelle's dad crumpled to the floor.

“Mobley, Oklahoma, Ma'am,” he said into it as Janelle's dad stood for another attempt. “We hope that you can join us soon.”

The plane landed with a thud, sending Lucas to the floor again. Steve caught his balance, threw Leslie's phone to the floor, and brought his foot down on it with a horrible crunch.

Chapter Seven

Paul wasn't sure where he was when he woke. Only that he was lying on his mattress, staring at some cracks on the ceiling as the sun streamed into the room. One looked like a gremlin creature standing next to a tree. Another, like a dog's head.

His room. His new bedroom. Only twenty-four hours ago, he'd woken up in another state. Now he was in Mobley, Oklahoma, the Outbreaker

community where he was going to fit in. Where everyone shared his secret.

"Oh."

The memory hit him like a freight train. Paul shot up out of bed as a wave of shock passed through his body, tensing all of his muscles. Last night.

He'd just had his first Outbreak.

It had happened so fast, so suddenly. The flying. The spinning. The roar of power, consuming his being and taking him over completely, just like his father had said it would be.

But, even after the years of waiting and anticipation, he wasn't sure that he liked it.

Paul wasn't sure how he felt right now, period. The whole memory of who he was had been, well, gone with the wind. His dad had never warned him about that part.

His father's voice floated down the basement stairwell, talking to someone who must have come over. Paul glanced at his clock to see that it read noon. His exhaustion had kept him in bed forever this morning.

After navigating the boxes in the basement and making his way up to the kitchen, he found his father by the table, talking to the mayor and his fugitive girlfriend. Actually, he was just listening now as the mayor babbled on. Footfalls sounded out in the living room as a technician dragged a wire from one end to the other. The guy installing their security system, Paul decided. He'd forgotten all about it.

"...can't stop thanking you, Earl. Let us know if he still tries to bother you. We'll make sure it doesn't happen anymore." The mayor was all smiles as he spoke. Paul wished he could be done. He needed to talk to his dad, and the nervous tingling in his limbs wasn't going to stop until he did.

He shot his father a glance that he hoped communicated what had happened last night.

His dad faced him for a second, studied him, and turned back to the mayor. "When is the installation going to be done?"

"Give it an hour. I really need to be going. I'm due at the Masonic Temple in fifteen minutes," he said, glancing at Paul. "Still hoping you both can make it."

He and Andrina were heading out the door seconds later, leaving the technician behind to install a numeric pad next to the door. This was good enough, about as good as it was going to be for a while. Nervous tingles covered his skin. "Dad."

His voice must have carried a lot of urgency, because even the mayor and his girlfriend turned to stare at him for a second. Paul swallowed. There was something about Andrina's gaze he didn't care for. It was like she was peering into his soul with those gray eyes of hers. But it didn't last long, because she turned and left, leaving a heavy feeling behind in the house.

"Paul?" Now it was his father's turn to stare at him.

It seemed to last forever. Finally, Paul managed to choke it out. "There's a lot you didn't tell me about your first Outbreak."

Dawning realization stole over his dad's face, widening his eyes and making his mouth gape open. "So it was...it was...those storms last night?" He shook his head, as if he were trying to pull his thoughts together. "I didn't expect it to happen so soon after yesterday." He clapped him on the back, the family equivalent of a hug, and gave him a smile. "Everything you felt was normal, Paul."

"Normal? I felt like I was being electrocuted right before it happened. And it sounded like there was a freight train going through my room." He

couldn't help but think of his mom...and of heart attacks. It was the only thing that kept him from mentioning the whole racing heartbeat sensation.

“Those sensations are normal, believe it or not. I didn't want to tell you about that before. It only would have made you nervous. Trust me, the more Outbreaks you have, the less you'll get those symptoms. Nobody's sure why we have them or how it works.”

So he hadn't come close to death or anything, but that didn't stop a flare of anger from rushing through him. “I still wished you would have told me. I was in a panic.”

“Then you wouldn't have looked forward to the experience nearly as much. I didn't want to ruin it for you.” His father's voice carried sincerity with it. Paul's anger melted away a little, letting a touch of guilt replace it. He couldn't help it. Maybe he *wouldn't* have looked forward to his first Outbreak as much if he'd known about all the weird feelings. He could see his father's point. In the past few years, there hadn't been anything else to look forward to.

“Sorry. Overreacting,” Paul said. He turned away and fished through the fridge for some milk. A rush of emotions stole over him, but he wasn't sure what exactly he felt. He'd always thought he'd feel elated or something after his first Outbreak, but now he wasn't sure. “I forgot who I was while it was going on. I couldn't remember that I was even a *person*. I'm not sure I like that.”

His dad didn't say anything for a few seconds. “It can happen, especially when you're young, and this was your first one. Newly turned Outbreakers can have that issue, too. It's nothing unusual. You'll learn more control as you get older. I almost always remember who I am when I Outbreak now.”

Paul absently poured himself a bowl of cereal and splashed a good deal of milk on the counter. His dad's words hung in the air. He hoped they were right. If he didn't have control of himself every time he had an Outbreak, then...he needed to get out of here. Think about this. He wasn't sure why...but he did. The whole world floated past him, surreal. "I think I need to go for a walk."

"Understandable. Don't worry, Paul. It'll get better."

The words followed him out the door and into the fresh air, but they did nothing to dispel the storm growing inside him.s

* * * * *

Paul walked for quite some time, past rows of old houses, ancient oaks planted when Model T's were cruising down the streets, and a couple of old people sitting out on their porch. The rusty gate to Mobley High stood open, revealing a few cars in the parking lot. The teachers, stuck grading papers or whatever they had to do over the holiday. The school itself towered two floors above the pavement, made of brick and straight from the fifties.

Paul might be going there when spring break finished. The thought helped to distract him from last night's events, and helped his stomach to settle. His father had brought him here because it was the best he could do. Maybe their pain could start to ease at last.

He watched his feet slap against the pavement. His shadow was short and stubby in the early afternoon sun.

Last night.

His first Outbreak.

He'd forgotten who he was.

Paul turned down a side street and ducked into the nearest store, out of the spotlight sun for a few minutes. It helped. He distracted himself by spending some money on an energy drink and a bag of chips, stopping to talk about the warm weather for a second with the pretty clerk behind the counter. Her brown Outbreaker eyes shined without a trace of stress in them. Had she ever felt this way about her first Outbreak?

Paul couldn't remember leaving the store. The next he knew, he was walking under the sun again. He wanted to think about last night and he didn't at the same time.

A white van rolled past him, in the direction of downtown. And then another, and another.

Paul broke out of his daze and let his gaze follow the procession. Several white vans, none of them marked, continued to roll past him towards the storefronts downtown and beyond. The first turned the corner, parking in the lot of a building shaped like an old airplane hangar. The building itself had a small crowd gathered in front of it, families and the local police standing around in their dark blue uniforms. Thomas Curt, who was fanning himself in a fancy gray suit, waved his hands at people to clear the doorway. He looked like a politician on campaign with all the balloons sprouting from either side of the building's entrance, which itself looked like an airplane could fit through it. The mayor's twin sons stood propped up against the open doors, both occupied by their cell phones. Around them, several families gathered on either side of the walkway, forming twin walls at the direction of the mayor. Andrina was nowhere to be seen. That was weird. She'd been at the mayor's side ever since his father had brought her here.

Another white van parked in the lot, and then another, until there were no longer any spaces left near the front row. A glance at the side of the

building told Paul that it was the old Masonic Temple, circa 1937.

Thomas's invitation reared back up in his mind. The special guests. That was what the vans were for. Whoever they were, they'd arrived.

Paul let his legs carry him towards the Temple, as if they were desperate to escape the thoughts that had been racing through his head since yesterday. He was out and about with most of his stuff unpacked already. He didn't have anything else to do.

"Hold it," one of the cops ordered, staring hard at his face. Making sure he was an Outbreaker, Paul supposed. He wrinkled his mustache and nodded. "You're good."

His palms tingled. Whatever took this kind of security had to be interesting.

He joined the wall of people waiting for the mystery guests. Paul had never seen so many Outbreakers in one place. Then again, he hadn't met very many Outbreakers--his grandparents, mostly. Everyone looked as confused as he felt.

The last white van squeaked into place, and all at once, as if this was something rehearsed, men jumped out of the fronts of each van, shedding coats that weren't needed this week. The nearest, a black-haired man, nodded to Thomas.

Like cogs in a machine, the rest of the men made their way to the back of the vans, hands on the doors as the police all rushed over to join them.

Doors opened, and people started to stream out of the backs of each van.

Paul had expected people in suits or something, judging from the security around here. There *were* a few older people in suits, but most of the passengers looked like normal families he'd seen walking through Kroger on the weekend. A mom and her kid. A man in a janitor's uniform.

A cute redheaded girl who looked around nervously, tugging the sleeves of her shirt down as if it were January and not April.

Something seemed off. None of the arrivals smiled or waved at the crowd in front of them. Most glanced around at their surroundings, and no one spoke.

“This way, everyone,” an officer said, waving the arrivals down the sidewalk.

If Paul didn't know better, he'd think these people were prisoners. Their mood seemed to contrast with the bright balloons floating on the Masonic Temple, almost threatening to make them all pop. The cute girl hugged her arms to her chest as her gaze floated across the crowd in front of her. Her skin paled, turning her freckles a darker brown color, so much that they looked like dabs of paint on her cheeks.

Thomas Curt positioned himself in front of the entrance, puffing himself up. He was all teeth as he greeted the guests. “Welcome to Mobley,” he said, shaking the hand of the first older man so fast he might burp. “Go on in, help yourself to some food, and have a seat.”

A line formed on the sidewalk as the guests filed past the mayor and into the Masonic Temple. Thomas Curt shook each hand in turn and gave the same greeting, until he sounded like a robot reading the same line over and over.

The redheaded girl was staring right at him.

Paul stiffened. She had striking green eyes, eyes that came from a world outside of his. Eyes that didn't belong here.

“H...hey,” Paul managed. He felt oddly exposed and speechless, and he wasn't sure why.

The girl twitched nervously as she passed. She hurried away, head down against an invisible downpour, and only slowed again when Thomas

Curt sent out his hand to shake hers.

She was the last of the guests inside the building.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" the mayor asked everyone left outside. "You're all welcome inside."

* * * * *

Leslie ducked through the door of the meeting hall without looking up. Her stomach threatened to lose its contents, even at the smell of hamburgers. This was an entire town full of those strange brown-and-black eyed people, and they were all studying her. The suited guy who was probably the mayor. All those families outside. That long-haired boy. There were no signs of any other regular people around here, people like her. She already had the company of dozens of human hurricanes, even if they were powerless out here. And this town...this entire town--

"You guys all must have had a long trip. Here, come on over and grab something to eat."

A woman's voice cut into her thoughts. Leslie dared to look up and found a few more of the brown-and-black eyed people, two women and a man dressed in white aprons, standing near several long tables of food and underneath the blue Oklahoma flag. Overhead, fans blew a steady breeze through the room. A few of the suited Elder Council members had already taken chairs at some empty tables, their plates barely containing any food. One older woman picked at hers as if she wasn't sure it was safe to eat or not. Maybe it wasn't. There could be poison lurking in those burgers, or in the punch, or maybe even in the yellow cake someone must have baked in their kitchen this morning.

It looked so normal, and yet it wasn't. Leslie hugged her shirt closer to her and studied her surroundings. She needed a grip on the situation, and to think, but she didn't like what she saw.

Stacks upon stacks of dusty chairs and tables blocked the emergency exit door—at least for today. It was no accident. The Mobley police patrolled and hung around the front entrance, like they would at any major event, standing behind the locals who were filing inside. It was another prison, cleverly disguised with balloons and food and curious families. What would the police do if she tried to make a run for it? Catch her, haul her off to jail, and discover she wasn't a Tempest. The families outside the door wouldn't likely help her, either. These people were--

“Everyone, grab a bite and have a seat!” The suited man entered the building, flanked by the Mobley police force. More people came in behind them, the families from out on the sidewalk. Among them was the long-haired boy straight from a rock band. The front of his shirt read *Executioner* in angry red letters. It sported a hooded man with an axe. It was the name of a power metal band she'd heard only a few songs by, but Leslie didn't find it amusing. Not now. Not when these people were more than capable of fulfilling that title.

The best thing she could do right now was not look obvious. There was no sign of Andrina around or any other Tempests who might be allies with her. Like Elise. But that didn't mean anything. She might be in prison, but that didn't mean she had no contacts out here.

Leslie scooped some baked beans onto her plate, accidentally slopping them onto the side of the tablecloth and nearly hitting Janelle's dad with the spoon. They'd never been her favorite, but it wasn't like she could eat right now, anyway. The hole inside her opened so much that it threatened to swallow her.

“Sit behind someone tall, Leslie. And away from me. If she has people here, they'll be looking for me.” Lucas's breath blew hot into her ear. He didn't have to say who *she* was. He was right. Absolutely right.

She chose a chair behind the tall janitor in the middle of the room. Confusion stole over faces everywhere. It seemed that no one knew what was going on.

“All right, everyone. Find seats.” The suited man shuffled onto the stage and pulled the curtains back to reveal a flat screen TV in the center, with speakers wired to it on either sides. “I apologize there is not room for everyone to sit, but we're working with limited space. Guests, you are probably wondering why you are here.”

“You took us against our will,” the janitor shouted, letting his plate fall to his lap. “Are you working for our former High Leader? This is her style.”

Mobley's people looked around at each other as if they weren't sure what to think. None of the police budged. The suited man gave the janitor a look as if he knew nothing about Andrina. It was probably a lie.

So she wasn't the only one who had come to that conclusion. The thought didn't make her feel any better. On her own plate, the baked beans panned out like they were melting and dying.

“No, no,” the suited man said, waving his arms. “I know who you speak of, though. Rest assured, she is still in prison.” He glanced around the room and smiled. “My name is Thomas Curt, and I am Mobley's mayor. I did have contact with your former leader several years ago. She was quite outgoing and in search of others like you, and a few of you in the Elder Council have met me through her. She was...highly ambitious, to say the least. A bit too ambitious for my taste. However, I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting her successor.”

Thomas Curt nodded to the Elder Council, who sat in the front row. Two of the men returned his nod. “Eric, if you could step up, please. We need to get the video rolling.”

One of the old men, so bald he looked like an ancient vampire without fangs, stepped up to join Thomas Curt. The pair shook hands as if they were old friends.

Leslie made a mental note to herself to avoid Eric from now on.

Muttering spread through the audience. One of the Elder Council had been in on this. It wasn't a good sign. The last person who had helped Andrina with one of her plans was also from the Elder Council.

“Everyone, there's no need to panic. We're all safe now,” Eric announced, holding up a hand. The room quieted, leaving only the squeak of the fan overhead. “I'm afraid to announce that we had a security breach which mandated the swift evacuation of Alara. As some of you have heard, last week a Tempest was caught displaying her powers on a North Carolina beach by an unknown human who was spying on her.”

Leslie shifted. Janelle had mentioned that yesterday. It was why she'd been pulled into a meeting with the Elder Council the first day Leslie had arrived.

“What's a Tempest?” a Mobley woman asked from the side of the room. “I'm confused. What's going on?”

Her questions went ignored. “However, there is more. A quick search of the Internet revealed that whoever was spying on her caught this on tape and uploaded the footage to several video hosting websites. I took pains to make the High Leader aware of this, but I could not locate her before the evacuation. We were unable to bring her with us, but we expect her to arrive soon.”

Leslie's stomach seemed to twist itself into a knot. This didn't sound right. As the High Leader, Janelle should have been the first to know about an evacuation. She should have been the one to *order* it, not Eric. She could tell by the way her fellow prisoners were glancing at each other that they weren't buying it, either.

"You used force," Gary's mother said. "Very uncomfortable force, I might add."

Eric took a step back, putting his hand up to silence the room. "It was necessary. We did not have time to explain the situation, or to fight. Government agencies may be invading Alara as we speak. Let me show you this footage before we continue."

The television came on. The camera was shaky, with a leaf in front of it like a green blur, but the scene was unmistakable: a brown-haired girl standing on the beach in cutoff shorts and a pink hoodie, the ocean lapping at her feet. Next to her stood a man with the same color hair, also with his back turned.

Chairs squeaked as people squirmed around Leslie. No wonder Janelle had been in a meeting all of yesterday. A fist of guilt squeezed her somewhere in the chest. She'd never blamed Janelle for yesterday out loud, but she had, silently.

The girl stood perfectly still on the deserted stretch of sand, concentrating on the gentle waves lapping at the shore as if they were whispering to her. The camera focused, zooming in, as she lifted an invisible plate with her hand.

The water moved with it, bobbing up and down with more and more intensity as the girl kept holding out her hand. "I've got it!" She glanced at the man who must be her father.

The camera trembled more, as if the person recording had started to shake. Maybe they had.

The girl dropped her hand, and the water sloshed back down to its almost-flat state in an instant. She took a step closer, wringing out her hand, as the camera zoomed closer to the back of her head.

“Now you won't be the only one on Alara who doesn't know how to do that,” her father said off screen, his voice terribly clear. “Relax. The convention next month will be just fine. You won't be embarrassed.”

More shifting around Leslie. The girl had named Alara, the Tempest capital. This *was* bad news for the Tempests.

Somewhere, a twig snapped on the television and the girl squeaked. She whirled around, and the person recording leaped back, camera tilting, but not fast enough to miss capturing her eyes, or the storm clouds swirling inside of them, or the surprised look on her face as she realized she was discovered.

The screen rippled with static for a second, leaving black in its place. The recording had ended.

People shot up out of their chairs everywhere as the room filled with shouting.

“How many websites is this on?”

“Did you catch the guy who did this?”

“Quiet. Quiet!” Thomas Curt waved his hands again. He looked strangely like a gray duck. “I'll allow Eric to explain.”

No one sat back down. Leslie sank down farther in her chair, glad for the sudden shelter. She could hear Eric clearing his throat.

“This is the reason for our sudden evacuation,” Eric began. “Our former High Leader knew about Mobley for several years, and I learned of this community through her. I also knew that the risk of Tempests being

discovered was growing by the day. Even though she's gone, we needed a plan in case something like this occurred, so I hatched the Alara Evacuation Plan with Thomas Curt. We apologize for your forceful removal, but with this video spreading around the Internet, we needed this to happen quickly and quietly. I doubt any of you would have come with us had a bunch of strangers just arrived at Alara and explained the situation.”

Silence. Someone coughed. Eric did have a point, if this video was even the real deal. Leslie sure wouldn't have taken their word for it.

The mayor spoke up. “We also apologize for removing your electronics. It was for security reasons. The government is capable of monitoring phone calls now, and maybe even tracking their locations. We will compensate you through the city tax fund. Also, we will be providing all of you temporary housing here in Mobley, until we can be sure that this situation will simply blow over. Bad pun, I know.”

No one laughed.

“You've brought us to a place where our power is drained,” Janelle's father said. “What do you have to say about that?”

It was awfully brave of him. They still couldn't know for sure that Andrina wasn't involved in this.

Thomas Curt puffed up again, raising his voice for the benefit of the whole building. “If the authorities want to look for human hurricanes, they're not going to start in Oklahoma. Now, enough with the talk. Let's take a couple of hours to mingle and get to know each other.”

Chapter Eight

Paul stiffened. He couldn't have heard this Eric man right.

What's a Tempest?

Human hurricanes.

He'd read about hurricanes in his textbooks before--those powerful storms that grew in the oceans in late summer and early fall. He'd even read about how they could cause damage to coastal communities if they got too close to land. Six years ago, he'd even seen a donation jar labeled *hurricane relief* in a dollar store, but not having a TV set at the time and with all the newspapers sold out that day, he never learned anything more about it.

Could these people--these Tempests--sitting in the middle of the Masonic Temple really be capable of leaving their bodies and turning into those storms?

All around him, people shifted nervously. A dad tugged his daughter a little closer to the entrance, where the Mobley police stood with radios in their hands. The Tempests all hunched down in their chairs, their secret out in the open, as the Outbreakers all stared back. The green-eyed girl's gaze landed on him again, then quickly moved away.

Paul had not imagined that Mobley would be anything like this.

"Well, go on. No one's going to bite or spill anyone else's secret," Thomas Curt announced, his voice a stark contrast to the mood in the building. "Shake hands. Talk. We're close cousins. Consider this a family reunion."

At last, the guests started to stand. Everyone moved slowly at first, taking their time on the way back to the food tables. Somewhere, music started--a Top 40 station playing some electro song Paul didn't recognize.

It seemed to break the ice in the room a bit. A woman finally made it to the food. She had a strange mark on her upper arm. A gray spiral. Was it a

special Tempest trait, or just some kind of tattoo? Paul's throat locked up. He was too nervous to ask.

The redheaded girl made her way down the table towards him, her gaze on the floor and her hand running along the checkered tablecloth. Her long blue shirt hung on her small frame, as if she were hiding inside it somehow, and she was about to bump right into him.

"Hey," he said automatically, unable to back away. His limbs were freezing, keeping him rooted to the spot like a terrified animal.

The redhead looked up as if someone had yanked a string attached to her head. Her green eyes widened. He breathed a little slower. Paul couldn't imagine that she was some kind of human hurricane. The idea seemed wrong somehow, and he wasn't sure why.

The girl stood taller, as if puffing herself up in front of a predator. She reminded him of a peacock: bright, graceful, beautiful...

"Hey," she said, her voice high with nerves.

It matched the way he felt. The whole place was full of nerves. Behind her, two men reluctantly shook hands, one an Outbreaker and the other one of the guests.

"I'm Paul," he blurted. Heat gathered under his shirt. "Look, I'm sorry if I scared you outside. I didn't know any more than you as to what's going on here."

"I know what you are."

The words made him stiffen again. The girl continued to stare into his eyes. Paul felt as if he were standing there, naked and exposed. "What?"

She spoke quickly, not moving, stretching out to gain more height. "I've figured it out. I know what you are. What you can turn into. Your mayor didn't need to tell us."

The heat intensified under his collar, as if the sun had hidden in there. His tongue wrestled with itself, but at last he got the words out. “What, then? What can I turn into?” It was a big mistake, but he couldn't help it. The part of his brain that regulated speech had short-circuited, as if a magnetic field were radiating from this girl.

She lowered her voice. “Tornado.”

Paul's legs wanted to carry him out of the Masonic Temple and go land him in the nearest hole, but at the same time, he couldn't move. The naked feeling grew worse. “Well--” he choked on his own spit. His secret was out in the open, too, and it was a horrible feeling. His father had told him never to reveal it to anyone. Man, he was going to be so dead. That might be a good thing, with how he was embarrassing himself in front of the first girl he'd spoken to in forever. “Well, sort of. Not physically. It's complicated.” The girl took a step back, but righted herself. “And you're a Tempest person, right?” It was a stupid question. This wasn't going well.

“N--yes, I am,” she said, stepping a bit closer. She glanced at the entrance, as if she wanted to fly out of there herself. “Is everyone in this town like you?”

“Yes. I just moved here.” He held back telling her why. The girl seemed to be on her toes enough—not that he could blame her. “Sounds like you had a long trip. Hey, there's no reason to be nervous. We're just people.”

The girl stared at him as if he were a lobster creature from space. He didn't like it. Was she just a person, too? He had probably stared at her the same way when Eric had referred to all the guests as human hurricanes in front of everyone.

“Of course you are,” she said, a little too quickly. She busied herself reaching into a bag of potato chips.

This still wasn't going well. "What's your name, anyway?"

She answered as if she were answering a question on a game show, lights and pressure blaring down on her. "Leslie."

The same pressure felt as if it were crushing him. Heat rushed to his cheeks. "N...nice to meet you," Paul said, extending a hand.

* * * * *

Leslie took Paul's hand, as much as she wanted to pull away. His handshake was strong, as much as any Tempest's, and she could tell that if he squeezed, he could shatter all the bones in her hand. But he didn't. His felt as sweaty as hers.

Paul glanced outside and back at her. "Well, nice talking to you. I've...I've got to be headed home now. I still have some unpacking to do. I guess I'll see you around."

"You, too." She could hardly contain her relief as Paul turned and went for the exit, weaving around the police on the way. Or was it fear, that she was being left alone in this place by the only person in this town not bent on her destruction.

A few stray tears gathered in the corners of her vision, but she blinked them away. They would only betray her now.

She turned back to the table of food to lose her gaze in the bowl of punch, but not before she caught an indistinct blur of motion from the kitchen. But when she turned, nothing was there.

* * * * *

Paul walked several laps around block for the next hour or so, cursing himself for looking so stupid and waiting for the guests to come out of the Masonic Temple. They didn't. He should have stayed a little longer and been a bit nicer to that girl instead of ducking out like that. An apology would be the right thing to do. Even if she was a human hurricane who'd guessed his secret, she hadn't meant any harm by it. Leslie had come a long way from wherever she was from--some island in the Caribbean, maybe--and her people were pretty much having to hide out here. She was a refugee.

Chatter grew louder inside the Masonic Temple as more conversations started and grew less awkward. The Tempests and the Outbreakers seemed to be warming up to each other a little. The sun beat down on him harder, making sweat roll down the back of his neck. He stood for a long time on the sidewalk, facing the almost-closed door, before he decided he didn't have the guts to go back in. His life was too complicated right now as it was. Time to go home, then. He'd look for Leslie again around town, if in fact she was staying here. Once she (and he) got settled in, things might be a bit less awkward.

It took him a few minutes to remember which street to go down to find his house. He'd never realized that suburbs were so confusing. All of the houses looked the same, as if the builders had used the same floor plan for every single one. At last he located his, with his father's van parked in the driveway and several empty boxes laying by the side of the road. A pang of guilt ran through him for not being there to help him unpack this morning. Well, his dad had sort of excused him.

There was a green van parked on the side of the street, empty. He'd seen it before, right before every other time they'd had to move. It was the same van that belonged to his Uncle Tanner.

His guts felt as if they'd fallen to the pavement. It was a coincidence. It had to be. Tanner hadn't had enough time to even know about this place, and even if he did, the police would be out here in an instant. They even had one patrolling the neighborhood at all times, who was--

A few curse words escaped him.

--at the Masonic Temple right now with all the other cops.

If Tanner was here, they'd be packing their things back in the van and leaving this behind, to keep going with their nomadic life. So much for going to school. The thought of staying in one place had been too good to be true. He'd been stupid to hope for it.

He tried the front door first, but it was locked, as if someone were trying to keep him out. The thought made him madder. Whenever his dad and Tanner met, he was pushed out of the picture until his uncle left. Made to do an errand or made to mow the lawn. This was a sure sign that he was probably inside.

He'd try the back door, then.

The sliding glass door in the back was locked, too. Another sign. He'd have to settle with eavesdropping. No one stood in the kitchen, but a shadow crept across the wall of the living room, its owner out of sight behind the corner. Even from here, Paul could see that the curtains, which hadn't been up on the living room window this morning, were drawn closed, bathing the living room in a faint blue glow.

Glass wouldn't absorb much sound. It would have to work. Paul pressed his ear to the sliding door, not caring if he got caught. There wasn't anything his father could ground him from.

"...won't happen to Paul here. I promise. I've got the solution. This is the best place for him."

His father.

Then, another voice, a higher one with a slightly nasal tone not unlike his mother's. Paul's stomach sank even more. It was Tanner, all right. He remembered the voice from a year ago, arguing with his father from inside their house. He spoke quieter than his father, and only some of his words came through the glass.

"...can't be certain. You're always moving." Indistinct mumbling, but for the first time ever, no yelling. Why, this time, were they talking in civilized tones? The two of them had never done that. "I'm just as worried about it as you are...don't like your approach to this...kept everything away..."

"It was all I could do. How did you find us so quickly, by the way?"

Tanner must have moved closer, because his voice came through clearer. "I know people, Earl. I'm not completely detached from the Outbreaker community."

"You shouldn't be here," his father countered. "If the police catch you, they could even arrest you. They'll be back any minute to finish doing my security system."

Paul braced himself for the yelling to start, but there was none. Instead, footsteps echoed through the glass, making it shake against his ear. "I'll go."

The front door opened and closed, leaving silence in his place.

A heartbeat raced through his ears as Paul peeled himself from the glass. Tomorrow, his dad would shake him awake again and tell him to pack.

He was so angry right now, he couldn't even fathom talking to his dad. Paul stalked back up through the yard. He couldn't face it right now. The crap would be here when he got home.

Chapter Nine

"Stay still. I just need to do some touch-ups." The brush tickled the side of Leslie's upper arm Gary's mother, Annette, finished the awkward gray spiral that all Tempests shared.

Leslie's feet had started to cramp from standing in the apartment bathroom. "I'll never pass as a Tempest. Or your niece."

"It won't matter so long as we're here." Annette's messy black hair fell into her face as she worked. It was so much like Gary's, a bit mopey and cool at the same time. "None of us can so much as summon a breeze out here. You'll fit right in."

"We've got to find a way out," she said, the familiar panic worming its way back into her gut. She'd be found out sooner or later, and even if she wasn't, the Mobley police were sure to be watching this shiny new apartment complex 24/7. Earlier that day, when the party at the Masonic Temple had ended, they'd been loaded back into the vans and driven to a large, tan building with the words *Woodview Apartments* out front. Group by group, the Mobley police had escorted them to different apartments according to family, with Thomas Curt bouncing all over and showing off the furnishings of each one. These places had come complete with beds, clothes of all sizes, towels, and even food stocked in the cupboards. One thing, however, had been missing. "Did you notice that this place has no phones or computers? I didn't even see a cable cord anywhere, and *every* apartment has those. They want us isolated."

A surprise brush stroke made Leslie jump. Annette nodded. "I know. I noticed it, too. We're prisoners, as much as they're trying to tell us

otherwise. What gets me is that Janelle wasn't brought along with us. If it was a real evacuation, they'd want the High Leader out first no matter what, wouldn't they?" She dipped her brush in the running sink. "At least they didn't bring Gary along. I'm sure he was with her. And I have doubts that the video they showed us really got leaked onto the Internet."

She was right. "I bet there's a cop car at the gate behind that bush." Leslie stared out the sliding door window, past the porch and to the fence which surrounded the whole complex. Six feet of metal poles shut them out of the world. Beyond them, downtown Mobley started to light up. A store of some sort. A fire station. Even, ironically, a rusty tornado siren. "Did you happen to hear what these people call themselves?"

Another tickle from the brush. "They're called Outbreakers. You were talking to one. Didn't you catch it?"

Paul flashed back into her mind, with his long hair and *Executioner* shirt. "I didn't mean to. I mean, it was an accident I even ran into him. It was a short conversation. Well, for me. Usually I talk all the time, but for some reason I was uncomfortable talking to a guy who can turn into a tornado and stuff."

Annette snorted with laughter. It was the first happy thing she'd heard all day. "Well, you're talking to me. And your best friend--"

"I know. But that's different. I've known Janelle all my life. We went to preschool together. I know she's not a bad person."

"How do you know any of these people are different?"

Leslie didn't have a response for that one. She didn't. Even if they'd been kidnapped, those curious people at the Masonic Temple hadn't seemed to know what was going on. Maybe Mobley was a town of secrets that only some of the residents knew about.

And if Paul had stuck around, she could've asked to borrow his cell phone so she could warn Janelle about this place. Her best friend was almost certainly on the way to danger, and it was all her fault. Paul hadn't seemed like that bad of a guy, now that she thought about it. He might have let her borrow his phone.

"Done," Annette announced, waving air onto Leslie's arm to dry the paint. "Now if someone pulls up your sleeve, they won't know the difference unless they look very close."

Annette had done a good job. The now-familiar gray spiral now decorated Leslie's arm. It looked so real at first that she nearly flinched. "Thanks," she said, trying to hide the fact that it was giving her the creeps. "I really appreciate this. I think I'll go sit on the porch for a bit and stake out this place. See if there's any way out." It might be a good idea to look for weak spots in the fence before she or anyone else tried to make a break for it. "I've got to get out of here before Janelle decides to come here. Call her."

The quicker she got out of Mobley, the better. Even if she got to the next town, wherever it was, they'd have phones.

She had just stepped out of the bathroom when there was a knock on the door.

Leslie's heart felt ready to explode as every muscle in her body tensed, ready for flight. Annette gave her a push back as she made for the door. "Stay back," she whispered, putting her eye up to the peephole. "Oh. It's him."

She opened the door to reveal Thomas Curt and two twin boys who might have been his sons, because they had the same sandy hair. No Andrina or Elise stood with them, and no police. Leslie felt about to crumple to the floor with relief.

"Just checking to see how everyone's settling in," he said, wearing that fake smile. "Is there anything either of you need?"

"Oh, I think we're good," Annette said, keeping one hand on the door. "We've got plenty of food here. Thank you for accommodating us."

"You're welcome," Thomas Curt said, taking a step inside the apartment--

Leslie started to tense again.

--and shifting his glance over to her. His smile refused to fade, but the brown and black in the mayor's eyes seemed to deepen in the light. "However, there's one small problem that needs to be rectified."

No.

She was discovered.

All her muscles went off like a spring, and she started for the sliding door before the mayor took another step. In the edge of her vision, Annette moved in front of Thomas Curt, but he took her arms and swept her aside with no effort. Even a Tempest couldn't help her here.

"It's okay, Leslie. You won't be harmed," the mayor pleaded, pushing past the couch.

It was a lie, like this entire town. Leslie yanked open the sliding door so hard that it squeaked in its hinges. Her legs carried her off the porch, slipping for a second, nearly sending her down to the freshly mowed grass, towards the front gate, towards--

A squeak escaped her throat.

A police car rolled in through the front gates, as if it had been waiting there the entire time. A spotlight swept in her direction, filling her vision with a blinding glare. Leslie stopped and turned away--where could she run?--only to feel a set of hands wrapping around her wrists a second later.

"Be calm!" Thomas Curt's voice rang out near her ears as his steel grip tightened. His silhouette stood out against the glare of the spotlight. Car doors swung open nearby and a flashlight beam darted on the ground. "There's been a mix-up, Leslie, but you're not in trouble. We'll sort it out at the station."

They knew she wasn't a Tempest. They even knew her name. Leslie pulled against his grip. Outbreakers were just as strong as Tempests. There was no hope. Her knees threatened to give out. Even words had abandoned her. Annette yelled somewhere for them to let her go, but her words were falling on closed ears. Lights flicked on in a couple of upstairs apartments and a set of curtains parted, but what could they do? Nothing. Just like her.

* * * * *

The ride in the back of the police car was short, too short. The two officers--who had both been present at the Masonic Temple--wouldn't even look back at her through the bars as they drove under the lights of Mobley's downtown. Headlights bobbed in the rearview mirror as Thomas Curt and his sons followed in their own vehicle. The handcuffs dug into her wrists as she tugged at them. Annette's pleas to release her still rang in her ear. But she couldn't follow, nor could any of the Tempests. Well, the ones who wanted to help. The second police car blocking the entrance of the apartment complex had given that away.

The hole inside her turned into a canyon. So much for trying to get on their good sides. Calling Janelle had all been for nothing, too.

She tried to ask the cops what was going to happen, but the speech center in her brain seemed to have shut down. That only happened when things were bad. Despair threatened to drown her inside as the canyon

filled with muddy water. At least her mother wouldn't have to worry about college expenses anymore. That problem had been solved, at least.

The car slowed near the fire station, turned a corner, and parked in the back lot of a white building that might have once been a schoolhouse, because it had a small bell tower. The cop cars in the lot told her what it was used for now.

A couple of officers filled out paperwork at desks inside while security cameras watched overhead. Leslie ducked her head as her captors walked her under it, then realized how stupid that was now. She was already caught. It wouldn't make any difference.

"In here," Thomas Curt said, stopping at a door with a frosty window. He faced her and squinted. "Now, you have to vow not to be loud at all, and everything will be okay. I don't want anyone overhearing this if they were to call here, and getting the wrong impression about our police force. Do you promise?"

For a second, the mayor actually sounded honest, but she knew better. But she nodded. The last thing she wanted to do was anger a building of Outbreakers.

"Okay. Come on in."

The door came open, revealing a small meeting room with maps on the wall and a dusty television in the corner. Leslie panned her gaze around the room, searching for a possible exit, but there were none. No windows. Not even a barricaded emergency exit door.

"Well, if it isn't my daughter's best friend. How did you end up here in Mobley?"

Leslie's guts felt like they twisted in on themselves. The same voice had haunted the dark halls of her memories since last September, never quite

going away, never quite leaving her alone, even when she was back home, worrying about college tuition and grades and the rest of her mundane life.

At the end of the meeting table sat Andrina. Her dyed brown hair was growing out into blond now, approaching her shoulders. Somehow, she had escaped prison. Her gray eyes brimmed with hate, disgust--and jealousy?

And behind her stood Elise, dressed in a fuzzy pink sweater with a puppy on it as if she was trying to disguise what a monster she really was.

"Sit," Elise ordered everyone.

Leslie searched her blank mind for something to say as the police led her to a chair and undid her cuffs, but only managed to blurt, "Please don't kill me. I won't tell anyone about this place. I promise." It sounded weak and terrible, but she didn't care. She wanted to be out of the building, out of Mobley, and back home even if she had to flip burgers for the rest of her life. At least it *was* a life.

"Killing you is not in the equation this time. That would be worthless to us," Andrina said. The tone of her voice--and the look in her eyes--said that she wanted to take the *not* out of her first sentence more than anything, and it didn't make Leslie feel any better. "It would generate too much suspicion among Mobley's...new residents. Many of them will be less likely to settle in if they even suspect that I'm here, unfortunately. With the coming war, we can't afford that."

She meant the Tempests. "Coming war?" Leslie asked despite herself. She flexed her wrists, glad to be free of the cuffs. It didn't matter. The two cops still stood behind her, and Thomas Curt's sons both blocked the door, looking bored. They weren't going to let this information out of the room.

"You saw the leaked video. It's only a matter of time. I've known it was coming for years. The world will know about people like us within a decade at most. Our best chance of survival is to be the first to move, and

time is running out. Janelle failed me on my first attempt. Kenna failed me on the second. It's time for drastic measures. Eric came through for us at last, and the wheels are in motion. That is why people like us need to unite."

Elise's face twitched behind Andrina, like she didn't quite agree, but she remained silent.

Leslie could only stare at her. Why was Andrina telling her all this? But she didn't dare ask. There had to be a reason.

"I need my daughter more than ever now," she continued. "She will show up. I know it. You know it. It's another reason I need you alive. She won't come to my side any other way."

Did Andrina really think she could win Janelle over? Leslie wanted to ask her that, but kept her mouth shut. It wasn't going to happen. Andrina had killed Janelle's grandmother, and then tried to make her destroy New York City. That by itself would prevent that for life. But Andrina always had plans up her sleeve.

"However, Leslie, you are still a security threat to Mobley," Thomas Curt continued, flattening both palms on the meeting table opposite her. "We will keep you alive here, and let the Tempests see you appear around town at times so that they know you're all right. But you will have to remain under supervision so you don't tell anyone that Andrina is here. Mobley isn't ready for that yet. Also, we can't risk a human knowing Mobley's secret, especially one with no Outbreaker relatives."

Thomas Curt stared her down, as if expecting her to get something that she wasn't. And she wasn't. Leslie tensed, knowing somehow that what he was going to say next wasn't going to make her comfortable at all.

He continued, the black in his eyes deepening. "Now, we don't do this often or lightly, but we need to be certain that you'll never tell the world

about Mobley's secret. This is why we will be making you an Outbreaker."

The words hung in the air as Leslie struggled to process them. Outbreakers could turn you into one of them?

The two cops behind her took her arms, forcing her out of her chair. Her whole body had suddenly turned to rubber. Terror exploded in her chest. Thomas Curt straightened up, giving his sons a single nod.

An image roared into her mind. Janelle, being dragged onto that fishing boat before Andrina, the ocean surrounding her on all sides, terrified of the disaster she was doomed to become.

Kenna, lying trapped in that flooded car in Yellowstone, eyes filled with flames as the supervolcano rumbled below, ready to end civilization.

Even Paul, with his long hair and dark eyes. *What, then? What can I turn into?*

The mayor's voice cut into the images in her head, bringing her back to the police station. "We need to do this quickly. Robert. Ronnie. One of you is going to turn her. Now."

The twins balked on the other side of the room. One stuffed his phone back into his pocket. "Dad, it's *spring!* I'll miss out. If I give her my breath it'll be months before I can Outbreak again."

Thomas Curt's face darkened. "Don't argue. Those of us who can control our Outbreaks need our abilities right now. You can afford to drain yours for a few months. *Now*, Robert. Or I'm taking your phone away."

Keep arguing, Leslie prayed. It would buy her some time.

But he didn't. The officers' grips tightened on Leslie's arms. Robert sighed and trudged through the meeting room, straight towards her.

Leslie shrunk back. If they made her an Outbreaker, she would one day have to turn into--

"No!" Her shout made everyone in the room jump. She kicked at an officer's pant leg, but her shoe only scraped fabric. She could never break free. "Come closer and I'll scream as loud as I can!"

Robert froze, staring back at her with those awful eyes. The color in them had started to spin now, the brown and black turning into a maelstrom, revealing something inside that wasn't even slightly human.

Somewhere outside the room, a phone rang. An officer answered it.

Thomas Curt shifted as everyone listened. "...okay. Your trash cans?" A pause. "Ma'am, a dog might have knocked them over. Has anything else been vandalized?"

"Take her outside and turn her. Fast," the mayor ordered his sons. "I don't want callers hearing the noise. Cover her mouth until you're out. Then bring her back in."

Leslie tried to scream. Too late. Robert rushed forward and clamped his hand over her mouth before she could suck in a breath. She struggled to breathe. The police released her just in time for Robert to take one hand and his brother the other.

As they dragged her out the door, Andrina stood on the other side of the table, smiling cruelly in her direction.

A cop kept talking to a woman on the phone, turning away as Robert and Ronnie forced her past. She dragged her feet as much as she could, but it didn't slow them down. Neither of them spoke, maybe because one of them was ready to give her his breath. His breath. Leslie struggled to think against the ice rising inside of her. She would have to keep her mouth shut, then. It was her only chance.

"Well, Dad says you have to turn her," the second twin, Ronnie, told his brother as they walked outside along the side of the building. "I'll watch and make sure she doesn't run away."

Robert sighed again and moved his hand off her mouth and down to her jaw, shoving her up against the side of the building. Leslie felt as if a truck had her pinned. Her legs flailed under her. She would've fallen if Robert wasn't holding her up.

He tightened his grip, forcing her jaw down...and forcing her mouth open. There was no fighting it.

She let out a squeak.

Downtown Mobley looked dark behind him, except for a bar way down the street. If she screamed for help, no one would come.

"Hurry up, man," Ronnie ordered his brother.

Leslie screamed anyway.

The sound filled the world, but Robert seemed prepared this time. The brown and black in his eyes swirled with more rage, and inside her head, a wind began to scream. Robert leaned closer as the sound grew deafening, until his lips began to brush hers.

Chapter Ten

A *thud* rang through the air and the howling wind stopped a second later.

Robert yelped and fell away from her, tumbling into his brother. Two bodies fell to the pavement. Leslie clamped her mouth shut as another figure took Robert's place, fists clenched and staring down at her.

"Come on," the stranger said, taking her wrist.

He was tall, with long hair and a shirt that read *Executioner*. Paul. He'd come up behind Robert and slugged him. She didn't know where he'd come

from, but she wanted to hug him. Kiss him. Run away with him. Anything that got her away from here.

Leslie peeled herself from the wall as Robert and Ronnie lay on ground next to her, both facedown, pushing themselves off the pavement. She wasn't going to argue. Leslie dodged around the two of them, following Paul down the sidewalk along the side of the police station. She didn't have long to get away before the cops inside knew she was missing.

"The cops. We've got to get in there," Paul breathed as he ran. His brown eyes locked on hers, then shifted to the front of the police station. "Man, those guys were stupid attacking you right here."

He didn't know the truth. "No," she pleaded, taking his arm and steering him away, towards a dark set of railroad tracks nearby. He didn't resist. If he did, they wouldn't be going anywhere. "I can't go in there. I can't explain. Just help me hide somewhere."

She nearly tripped over the train tracks as they bolted across. Paul shot her a confused glance. He didn't know what was really going on in the police station. If she got away, she'd have some explaining to do. She'd have to trust Paul. She'd have to trust an Outbreaker.

"Dad!" one of the twins shouted behind them.

Paul stopped on the other side of the tracks, looking back at the station. The sound of the back door opening and slamming echoed through the night air. Shouting followed.

"We've got to go," Leslie pleaded again. She gave him what she hoped was her most intense look. "I have enemies here, Paul. Come on!"

Some kind of dawning swept over his face. He nodded. "Okay."

* * * * *

They ran down the railroad tracks some way and ducked off into a cluster of trees when the sound of cars started to drift down the streets. Leslie knew what kind of cars they were. Police cars. No doubt Thomas Curt and his officers had jumped in as soon as they'd found out she was missing and his sons had failed at turning her. Or had they? The feel of Robert's lips were still on hers. He might have given her his breath right before Paul had punched him from behind, and she might already be an Outbreaker. Did she feel any different? There was no way to tell. Not now, with the police car rolling past the railroad tracks.

"Get down," Paul hissed.

She did. Leaves tickled her skin and a stick poked its way up the back of her shirt as the glare of another spotlight shined down the length of the railroad tracks only inches away, stayed put for a few horrifying seconds, and moved on.

Leslie allowed herself to breathe again. Tears of relief filled her vision, turning the night into a blurry mess. The sound of the car's motor faded.

"Hey," Paul said next to her. "What's going on? I'm confused here. Are the cops looking for *you*? But it was those two guys who were bothering you."

"They were the mayor's sons," she managed. A huge lump had formed in her throat. How much could she tell Paul? And would he turn her in? "You probably saw them at the meeting thing earlier."

He stiffened next to her, a silhouette. She imagined that if she could see him clearer, he'd have a look of shock on his face. "*That's* who I punched? I couldn't tell. I just heard you screaming, so I...they had their backs turned and it was dark. You okay, by the way?"

Was she? She imagined a twister tearing up a farmhouse and the color in Robert's eyes swirling with rage as something in her collapsed. She

might...she might..."I don't know if I'm--"

"Quiet."

She could hear footsteps crunching on the gravel next to the train tracks. They'd sent someone down here for another look.

"...find whoever did that. My head's pounding," one of the twins said. Robert, it would have to be. "You sure you didn't see who it was?"

"No. I didn't. Give me a break. I guess we'll find out when they catch her. Come on. She's not down this way."

A pebble rolled down next to Leslie. She didn't dare move. Two figures stormed past their cluster of trees, one of them swearing under his breath about what he wanted to do to the guy who'd punched him. This had to be awful for Paul, too. Guilt bubbled up inside Leslie. Had she put him in danger, right along with Janelle?

"I said come on. We're wasting our time," Ronnie begged his brother. "There's mosquitoes out here."

Robert sighed again and turned around. His brother followed, and their footsteps faded off in the direction of town.

* * * * *

Another fugitive. His second since waking up yesterday morning. The whole idea of it made Paul's head want to explode with pressure. He wasn't even sure why he was doing this, or why he'd just walked up and punched those guys when the police station was right there. Maybe he'd *really* been punching Tanner after the day he'd had. There had to be some psychological explanation. He should've just walked in and told the cops there was a mugging in progress outside. It would've been easier.

But the cops were *after* Leslie, not trying to protect her. *I have enemies here, Paul.* It was something in her eyes as they ran down another street, their feet slapping against pavement and dodging trash cans, that kept him going, that kept him leading her back to his house. Desperation. Fear. Whatever had nearly happened to her back there.

It took a long time for him to find a safe way back to his house with Leslie in tow. Neither of them said much on the way, just in case someone was listening. Twice, he spotted patrolling police cars turning around distant corners and waving their spotlights, and he pulled Leslie into a nearby yard or behind a cluster of trash cans both times until the danger had passed. He almost felt like he was having an Outbreak again, his head was spinning so much. Was he doing the right thing? Leslie might have tried to murder someone for all he knew. She *was* a Tempest, and he didn't know what kind of past she even had.

But every time he saw those freckles and her quivering chin, he couldn't imagine that she had.

The kitchen light was on at home, and the curtains were open just a little, but there was no sign of his father inside. That meant he'd already gone to bed, and left the door unlocked for Paul. He hoped he hadn't worried his dad, but it wasn't his fault he hadn't been able to get in the house earlier.

"My dad's in bed. I can take you down to the basement," Paul said, facing Leslie. She stared back with those huge green eyes of hers. "That's where I set up my room. I play guitar, so it's better that I'm down there." Wow, how was he going to explain this to his dad? Or should he? A sinking feeling filled his gut. His dad knew the mayor, so would he turn Leslie in when he heard about everything? He didn't know, and that was the scary part.

But Leslie had nowhere else to go right now.

The faint smell of fast food lingered in the kitchen as Paul made his way across it, heart pounding. Leslie followed, eyeing all the exits to the room as if she were expecting an ambush any second. She also had a faint sunburn ring on her arm, he noticed, like she'd been on a beach earlier that day. Someplace far away, where they didn't have to wait for spring to have those first nice days.

His father never appeared. He'd stayed out way too late, and would probably get a chewing for it tomorrow morning. With a nod, he opened the basement door and nodded at his guest.

She hesitated for a second, but followed him downstairs. Paul prayed that his footsteps were masking hers. "Watch your step," he whispered, barely missing a box his dad must have placed down here earlier today. "You should be okay in here."

Color blasted into his vision as he crossed the threshold of his room and clicked the light on. His guitar. Mountains of CD's. Magazines. Even his *Executioner* poster he'd taped up last night, thinking he'd be staying. That was, until his uncle had showed up again. He'd be taking it down within a week. This was the stable life that had been a lie, like everything else seemed to be turning into.

"Paul, what color are my eyes?"

"Huh?" He whirled around to face Leslie, who hovered in his doorway. She looked so bright and full of life compared to the dark basement behind her. "Green. Why? Do yours change color?"

It must have been a stupid answer, because she sighed and walked past him to his bed, plopping down. A girl. On his bed. Late at night. If his dad came down here now, he wouldn't have to worry about moving again, because he'd be dead.

"No," Leslie said. "I'm just relieved, is all. Thanks for that back there, and for hiding me in here. You didn't have to do it."

"I wasn't going to let those guys rob you," he said. He could ask her about her weird eye question later. So many other things didn't make sense right now. It sounded like Leslie had had a bad enough night. "Why were they bothering you, anyway? They should know better than to mess with a Tempest. And outside of the police station." He could speak. At least he wasn't making himself look like an idiot now.

Leslie stood up off the bed and stretched, wincing as she pulled a sore muscle. "It's a long story, Paul. There's a lot going on that I'll tell you about later. Can I use your phone first?"

The heat rose to his cheeks for a few seconds before he answered, and Leslie turned her gaze to him, shifting foot to foot as if she wasn't sure if she wanted to run or not. "Sorry. We don't have a phone. It's complicated. Not my choice."

Leslie's face fell, and Paul felt his doing the same. "Do you have your Internet set up?" She searched his room, his posters and guitars that the outside world rarely saw, face falling further.

She was disappointed, and it made Paul feel the same way. "My dad pretty much banned anything that uses electricity years ago. Says it takes away from family time. We used to have a TV, but he got rid of it when--" he caught himself before he spilled his whole past in front of her. He had barely been able to talk to Leslie earlier today, and now he was talking too much. What was happening to him? "Look, I'm sorry about running out of the Masonic Temple on you earlier."

"It's okay. I'm sorry I just flat-out said what I thought you were. I was just trying to act tough because...because I'm not really a Tempest. I'm just a regular person. I'll explain."

Chapter Eleven

Paul didn't even act surprised when she spilled her secret. He only nodded and said, "Okay." Maybe it had been that obvious after all, and Mobley's mayor hadn't needed Eric or Andrina to figure it out.

But at least she'd escaped becoming an Outbreaker. That alone made everything around her seem brighter, but of course, she couldn't tell Paul that. Leslie didn't want him to feel bad about being one, because he seemed like such a nice guy. Something felt off about the whole situation, though. Who in this age didn't even have a phone? It almost sounded like his father was trying to keep him cut off from the world. After meeting Janelle and Kenna, she could believe anything that parents would do to keep their kids from the truth. But Paul already knew what he was, so it made no sense. What was there to hide?

"I didn't think someone like you could be a human hurricane," Paul said, sitting on the bed next to her. Her pulse quickened, and she wasn't sure if it was due to fear or not. "How'd you get mixed up in all this?"

She told him, starting at the beginning, to where Andrina's henchman, Kevin, had broken into her house late at night and kidnapped her. Then, her trip to Alara, where she learned that her best friend was a Tempest, and her other trip to Hawaii after the fact, where she met Kenna. She finished with the Outbreaker men who had managed to subdue an island of Tempests, and her ordeal at the police station. This time, she had no choice but to tell Paul about their real plans for her. But he was easy to talk to. Not once did he interrupt, and his eyes remained soft through the entire story.

He waited until she was done speaking to let his jaw fall. "You're saying there's such thing as volcano goddesses, too? And Andrina--" his brown and black eyes widened, like he recognized her name, but no color swirled inside of them. No sound of a screaming wind filled her ears. Only the sound of a car--probably a police car--went past. Paul had no intention of turning her.

"You know her?" Leslie asked. Her muscles all tightened again, but she didn't stand up. Paul blanched, which meant that yes, he'd at least heard of her.

"Oh, man. I didn't realize." He put his face in his hands, because now he had his own secret to confess. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. My dad's the one who broke her out of prison."

* * * * *

"Your dad probably didn't know what was really going on, Paul, when he got Andrina out of prison," Leslie had told him at least a dozen times that night. "He didn't know Tempests were real at the time. None of you did. Except the mayor."

Probably. Paul relaxed, staring at the ceiling as Leslie breathed heavily on the floor next to him. Maybe she was right, and his dad really did think Andrina was an innocent human woman caught up on the wrong side of the legal system. Thomas Curt might have hoodwinked him with the discount on the house and the security system.

But the word was too uncertain.

His alarm clock read two-thirty in the morning, casting a faint red glow in the dark, and a car was going past his house every fifteen minutes or so. The Mobley police were all out, searching for the human girl who was a

security threat to their town. What if they started knocking on doors? Where could he hide Leslie? She could stay down here for a while, hiding in his room, because his dad never snooped and would probably only come down here to do laundry, and the washing machine was over by the stairs.

He'd spilled almost everything to Leslie after she'd told him her story. His constant moving, his uncle, his mother, everything. It was only fair after she'd had her turn. The only thing he'd held back was his first Outbreak. Leslie had been so relieved when she learned that her eyes were still green instead of brown, when she learned that she hadn't become an Outbreaker after all. Well, it *would* be scary changing species and gaining new abilities. Had his mother been afraid? But she'd requested it. Leslie hadn't. It wasn't right to force something like that on someone if they didn't want it.

Paul's stomach turned over. Outside, Mobley seemed darker than ever. The idyllic rows of houses outside were all a lie. *Was* there a war coming between people like them and the rest of the world?

He could make out Leslie's sleeping form on the floor, breathing slowly with exhaustion, red hair spilling out over the spare blanket he'd given her. He alternated between watching her sleep and staring at the cracks in the ceiling, and staring up out of the basement window at Mobley outside, the place that was really being run by a Tempest woman who had slaughtered hundreds, if Leslie was telling the truth.

Had that hurricane relief jar he'd seen six years ago been about her?

Even watching Leslie sleep couldn't quite chase away the gnawing tension in his gut, but at last, he drifted away to the sound of another police car rolling by, vowing that tomorrow morning, he would drive Leslie over to the next town and out of the nightmare they had both landed in.

* * * * *

"All aboard."

Janelle gave a heartfelt thanks to Deon, her father's old friend, as she climbed onto his yacht. Gary kept her hand clutched in his as he helped her over. The first of the morning sun filtered in through the entrance of the cave, revealing the sorry state of her boats. Her yacht had sunk halfway down in the water, listing to the side.

It didn't compare to the sad state inside the complex that she was leaving behind. No one walked up and down the halls, and the only sounds left were the snack machines humming and the water boiler working. She and Gary had spent over twenty-four hours in there, wandering around and waiting for Deon to arrive. A day to themselves at last, and it was impossible to enjoy it.

It sucked that they couldn't make contact with Kenna. They could really use her traveling abilities right about now. But she was off on vacation with her father this spring break, out camping on the East Coast without any phones, and they didn't have time to go look for her. Getting to Mobley, Oklahoma was goal number one. Goal number two was to avoid falling into whatever trap those guys in the ski masks had set up for her.

If Leslie and her father were even still alive. The thought kept pushing its way into her chest, making it hard and painful to breathe. Even Gary's kisses couldn't quite chase it away.

"You do know what those people were, don't you?" Gary snuggled closer to her as Deon steered his yacht out of the cave, leaving the empty complex behind. The Bahamian flag waved in the morning wind as the ocean parted around them.

"You're always the first to say anything when something bad's going on." Janelle let her head fall onto his shoulder. It was nice, not to have to look like the leader right now, and it was nice that Gary never skirted around the truth. Not like her father had last September. Not like Elise had before she'd disappeared. Not like those men who had subdued and kidnapped her people. "I've figured it out. I think. What else would be from Oklahoma and still be our close relatives?" She'd suspected that they were dealing with human tornadoes shortly after they'd taken off with Leslie, her father, and everyone else in the complex, but the frantic phone call from Leslie--and one of her captors--had confirmed it. There was one thing she didn't need to mention, of course.

Andrina had been found in Oklahoma City when the police had caught up to her after Yellowstone. It made sense now. She was definitely linked to this, even if she was still in prison.

Gary stayed silent, staring down at the ocean as it passed. They would soon be leaving it, and their power, behind. Oklahoma was almost as far from the ocean as they could get. It was why those guys in the masks had taken the other Tempests there.

"What else do you think is out there?" he asked after a long time.

"Huh?" She lifted her head from his shoulder.

"Well, there's us," he said. His eyes met hers, and a faint trace of gray began to swirl inside them. But he blinked, as if sensing it, and the hazel returned fully. "And then there's Kenna, and now there's these guys. It makes me wonder if that whole legend about Tempests is true after all."

"You mean the one with the Mayan storm god?" Gary had told her the legend back when she'd first learned about her Tempest identity, but she hadn't given it much thought in recent months, with everything else that was going on. "How he made the first Tempests by giving people his breath?"

Gary gripped the railing of the boat, staring down at the bubbles seething past. "Yeah. It makes me wonder if he's actually out there, somewhere, dormant like the whole legend says. Maybe he really did exist, and he got ticked that no one was worshiping him anymore, so he went to sleep somewhere or something. Now we get to carry his torch."

"That's silly." Janelle leaned on his shoulder again, enjoying the warmth of the sun on his skin. It was so different from the gray swirling she'd seen in his eyes a second ago, so opposite of what Tempests truly were. She could forget all about it for a few blissful seconds.

"Maybe not," Gary said. "Well, we know Kenna's real, and her mom is too, even though I hate mentioning her. Why couldn't there be other gods out there waiting to be discovered?"

He was right. Again. She didn't want to entertain the thought that a storm god had cursed her to her Tempest status five hundred years ago, all by giving one of her ancestors his breath. How could she imagine the terror of his victims? Andrina had called the transformation a gift, but even she couldn't deny that being a Tempest came with its problems.

"Deon, how long do you think it'll take to get to the airstrip?" Janelle called, trying to clear the thoughts from her mind. Deon stood with his back to her, staring out at the open sea ahead, as the conical island of Alara grew smaller and fainter behind them.

"Too long," he said, twisting around as much as he could. "Several hours, at least. Then we need to secure a pilot."

There was another issue. Mel had been taken right along with the rest of her people, and her backup pilot, Steph, had been kidnapped as well. She still had her money on hand, thankfully, but hiring another plane would take some time. They might even need to hire a human pilot. Janelle hoped that Deon knew someone and could find them, fast.

* * * * *

Paul lent Leslie one of his smaller *Executioner* shirts. He couldn't do anything about getting her some new shorts, not without generating suspicion. The cops were bound to be swarming all over the town, searching for any sign of her, and they might stop him if he got caught buying women's clothing and returning to a house with no women living in it.

"Sorry. I don't have anything better," he said as his father made the floorboards creak upstairs. His heart thudded against his ribcage. If his father did come down here, he'd have to shove Leslie in the closet. "As soon as he's not in the kitchen or the living room, I'll have us go for the van. I'll tell him I'm going to the store to get a few things. Then I'll drive you until we see another town."

Leslie's eyes grew wide with hope, making the green inside brighter, more alive somehow. She extended her arms and rushed at him, only to wrap him inside a tight hug a second later. "Thanks, Paul. You don't know what you've done for me."

He returned the hug without thinking, his hand brushing down her hair. It was so soft, warm in the sunlight that was pouring in through the window. His brain fumbled for words. "At least you'll be able to call your friend. Keep her out of whatever trap Thomas Curt has set up. I'm not sure I want to stay here, either."

Upstairs, his father's footsteps creaked towards the bathroom down the hall. A door closed. Paul nodded, a rush of nerves washing up his spine. "Now."

The two of them thudded up the stairs, Leslie right behind him, as he called, "Dad, I'm running to the store. Be back in a while."

"Okay, Paul. Don't wreck the van," he called from behind the closed door.

After scanning the street for cops, he got Leslie into the van and started it up a second later. "You might want to get down," he said, nodding to her.

She did, eyes shining. With relief, maybe. At least, he knew, it wasn't fear, not like it had been at the Masonic Temple. He'd miss her. She was nice and understanding. Easy to talk to. Well, once he got to know her a little better. Now he'd never see her again. It would be too dangerous for them to keep any contact.

They passed one patrolling police car on the way to the highway, during which Leslie stayed down below the window, knees folded up against her chest. Paul's heart almost stopped as it passed, but he kept looking straight ahead, hoping that he looked casual and that the cop wouldn't find a reason to pull him over. The cruiser passed without incident, and his sigh of relief brought a smile to Leslie's face.

"Are they gone?" she asked.

"Yeah. But you might want to stay down." Paul hoped she couldn't hear the shaking in his voice. If the cops caught her--which was bad enough--what would they do to him? He immediately felt guilty for the thought. He wasn't a selfish guy.

He made the turn onto the two-lane highway, glancing at Leslie. Even though she was squashed down, out of view of the window, a tremble racing through her arms betrayed her worry. Paul resisted the urge to reach out and hold her arm. It would look too strange, him leaning over as he drove. Maybe, once they were out of the town and past these gas stations--

There was another cop car waiting next to a clump of trees ahead, watching the only highway out of Mobley. Waiting to pull the next vehicle over.

"Stay down!" Paul slammed his brakes and put on his blinker to the Marathon. Leslie cried out as he turned into the station, making her lurch into the seat.

"What's going on? Are they pulling us over?" she asked, gaze darting around the van, no doubt trying to see if any flashing lights were closing in outside the window. Her hand closed around the door handle, ready to bail.

"No. No. They're watching the road ahead." If she bailed now, the cop would see. "There's a cruiser waiting. I think they'll try to pull us over if we go past them. Especially since we're in a van. I'm sure they'll make up an excuse."

Leslie stared down at the dirty floor, releasing the door handle. Her arm flopped down in defeat. "Is there another way out of town?"

Paul hadn't seen any road besides the highway leaving it. Oklahoma's roads were few and far apart, with only endless fields separating them. He knew from all the moving he'd done in the past several years. If he tried to head out of town the opposite way, there might be another cop waiting there, too. It would arouse suspicion. "Leslie, I have to go into the gas station and buy something. If we leave now, the cops are going to know we're avoiding them."

Her eyes shone with terror. It made something twist in his guts. Leaving her here even for a few minutes was horrible, but he had no other ideas. If they left now, he might as well plaster a sign on the van that said *pull me over, the girl you're looking for is inside!*

"You're right. I'll stay down. Look natural."

Looking natural was the hardest thing Paul had ever done. He had to hold back from looking at the cop car and the van as he walked to the mini-mart and let the door swing shut behind him. As soon as it did, his mind locked down into panic mode, wondering if the cops were pulling into the parking lot to examine his van. A quick glance out the door confirmed that they weren't. It would still pay to hurry.

His hand wrapped around a loaf of bread and a half gallon of milk. It was stuff he should be getting, since he'd moved in only yesterday. No one would suspect that.

"Watch out if you make a left out of here," the guy behind the counter told him as he paid. "That cop's been pulling people over all morning. Must be on a quota."

Paul nodded his thanks as his stomach shrunk in on itself, making the sight of the bread on the counter make him want to gag. He'd been right. It meant Leslie was right about everything. He couldn't afford to get in a police chase. Now he couldn't get her out of Mobley.

But even as he walked towards the van with bread and milk in hand, some greedy part of him was relieved that Leslie wasn't leaving quite yet.

Chapter Twelve

"Can you tell me more about Outbreakers?"

Leslie sat down on Paul's bed, limbs still trembling after the near miss at the gas station. She might not get out of here for a long time. She had no access to a phone or a computer. But at least she had Paul, who wouldn't

turn her in to the cops. And his father hadn't detected her presence yet, thanks to him being in another room unpacking when they'd returned.

Paul made his way over to the corner of his room and sat next to his guitar--a shiny red one with some kind of dark wooden trim--as she watched. He had no computer desk to sit at. No phone to talk or text on. There were piles and piles of metal CD's, including the whole *Executioner* discography on his nightstand, and stacks of music magazines and guitar books. He was like a blind person, with sound the only thing that kept him connected with the outside world.

"What do you want to know?" He leaned back against the wall, making a magazine shift under him. He was getting more comfortable around her, she noticed. And he had such big, brown puppy eyes. They were nothing like Robert's swirling ones, so full of rage. Paul had zero in common with those twins, the mayor, and Andrina. He might be an Outbreaker, but he seemed so innocent, so human.

"I don't know. Just wondering how you transform and stuff. Do you have to do it at a certain time like Tempests do? Does someone keep you all on record? Tempests have all kinds of crazy laws like that, so I figured you might, too."

"No. No. It just happens on its own once you hit your teenage years. Or it starts a few months after you become an Outbreaker if you weren't one to begin with. At least, that's what my dad told me. I wouldn't really consider it a transformation. What happens is that we leave our bodies during thunderstorms, and--"

He didn't need to finish. Paul shifted on the floor, yanking the magazine out from under him and thumbing it. Somewhere above, Paul's yet-unseen father moved around, out from unpacking the stuff in his bedroom upstairs.

"Has it happened to you yet?" Leslie blurted. Immediately her face heated up. She felt as if she'd just asked a way-too-personal question.

Paul stared down the magazine, then shifted his gaze up to her. "Once. Right before you came here."

"Were you scared?"

He licked his lips as his brown eyes widened with a hint of anxiety. "Kind of. At first. It was weird, you know? I couldn't even remember who I was."

"But weren't you scared that you'd--"

Footsteps creaked down the stairs. Paul shot her a glance.

His father was coming. Her discovery could be seconds away.

She scrambled for Paul's open closet, which thankfully hadn't been filled yet. Paul closed the door behind her, shutting her in near-darkness as the creaking stopped and a box slid somewhere not too far away.

"Hey, Dad." Paul sounded cool a few feet away. "I picked up some milk and bread this morning."

"Great," his father said, voice full of enthusiasm. "Look, I just wanted you to know that your uncle stopped by last night, but we're not going to let him make us move again. I worked out a bit of an understanding with him. He won't be coming back here now that the security system's all set up. All we have to do is hit the alarm if he comes to the door. I'm not sure how he found out we were coming here, but it's done now. We're staying put here in Mobley."

"What did you guys talk about? How come you didn't give in to it this time?"

"Oh, about how you needed a stable life. Even he couldn't deny that."

"And?"

"The usual. Your mother." The voice of Paul's father filled with gray gloom. "But it's all over now. We're here to stay. By the way, I'll need you to run to the market to pick up a couple of frozen pizzas. There's a little grocery store over by the police station. That way we'll have something besides fast food tonight. I'll wrap up the unpacking upstairs while you do that."

"Okay." Leslie could sense the reluctance in Paul's voice. That meant he'd have to go out again and leave her here. She didn't like the idea of staying down in this basement by herself.

Paul's father said something else and headed back to the stairs. The closet door only came back open when the creaking had stopped.

"At least your father's not a snoop." Leslie climbed out of the closet. "Mine used to inspect my room every day to make sure everything was in place. It drove me crazy. He'd--"

She stopped as she spotted the look on Paul's face. His brows were furrowed in confusion...but not at her. He stared more at the wall beside

him, at one of his *Executioner* posters. "What were you asking me before he came down? That I was afraid of something?"

That's when she realized.

Paul knew what he was. But he didn't really *know*. The lack of technology in the entire house and the way his father had dodged his questions added up. Paul knew what he could turn into, but he didn't understand what tornadoes *were* to the rest of the world. *We're just people*, he'd said. Maybe, somewhere deep down, the truth was lurking, but Paul didn't fully realize it yet.

"I don't remember," Leslie said. She couldn't tell him, at least not right now when he was staring at her like that. Those wide brown eyes told her that he'd be crushed. "Can...can you control when you have one of your... what's it called?"

"An Outbreak," Paul said, that confused look stealing over his face again. "And no. You can't control when it happens."

* * * * *

The walk to the market took longer than driving, of course, but he needed to stake out as much of Mobley as he could. And he needed to figure out a way to sneak Leslie out of here. The cops would pull over the van for sure, even if he did five miles under the speed limit.

A single patrolling cop car passed him as he turned onto Main Street and passed the Masonic Temple, not daring to even glance at it. No one stopped him. They wouldn't, not if they wanted everyone in Mobley to go on thinking there was nothing seriously wrong with the government and law enforcement here. At least he'd be able to buy Leslie some lunch without looking suspicious.

He didn't notice the vehicle sneaking up on him until the brakes squeaked only feet to his left.

"Hey, Paul. Haven't seen you in forever."

He stopped. Turned. Sucked in a breath.

His uncle Tanner leaned out of his green van, smiling with blue eyes flashing.

Paul's legs started a couple of steps, but there was nowhere to go. If he ran, it would look suspicious. The police station was nearby. The last thing he needed was them.

"Paul, you look alarmed. I just stopped by to say hi." His uncle laid his arm on the rim of the window, as if he came by like this every week or so. His square glasses reflected the sunlight beating down on them like a huge spotlight. "You know, I never get to catch up with you anymore since you move so much."

Paul started to turn away. "Were you stalking me?" His uncle had the nerve to make a comment about them moving so much.

"Paul. Paul. Of course I'm not stalking you. Your birthday's in three weeks, and I wanted to see you before I head back to Nebraska." His uncle sounded hurt. "I have seen you walking around here quite a bit, so I was hoping to catch you, but that's all. Why don't we grab lunch in the Family Diner over here? It's on me."

Lunch? His uncle had accused his father of causing his mother's death for the past seven years, making his life a living hell in the meantime, and he wanted to buy lunch?

"I don't have time," Paul said. And he didn't. Leslie was waiting back home for her own food.

"Sure, you do," Tanner said. "It'll just be half an hour. We can talk. Catch up. Just one visit, and if you want, I'll never approach you again."

The hurt was back, rolling over his face like a sheet of rain.

This wasn't the Tanner he was used to. The Tanner he knew was always behind a closed door, having a shouting match with his father, but never talking to him one on one like this. Paul had always known that his uncle's problem had never been with him, but this seemed to confirm it. It made him almost want to have the lunch. But--

"You're in a town of Outbreakers," he said. Would the police arrest him if he was caught? Force him to turn? Yeah, Tanner would like that.

"Do you think I'm not aware of that?" The wall of rain parted from his expression a little as his gaze darted to the restaurant ahead. "I know all about Mobley. Knew you'd show up here sooner or later. Come on. Like I said, I'll buy."

* * * * *

The Family Grill was almost as barren as it had been the night his father had met Thomas Curt here. The same waitress led them both to a table in the corner of the room, underneath an old photo of a steam train. Paul caught her studying Tanner's blue, non-Outbreaker eyes as they sat.

To his surprise, Tanner just smiled at her and said, "Don't worry. I'm from an Ourbreaker family. Just didn't get the lucky gene." It might have been Paul's imagination, but it sounded like his uncle had stressed the word *lucky*, and not in a good way.

But the waitress didn't seem to notice. She smiled. "That's okay. People visit their relatives here all the time. What do you want to drink?"

They ordered as a swarm of bugs ran underneath Paul's skin. Tanner might have an ulterior motive behind this, as friendly as he seemed right

now. Leslie was still waiting. Well, he could save some fish and chips for her and take them back in a box. It beat frozen pizza.

Outside, another cop car rolled past.

Tanner shifted and produced his laptop bag, unzipping it on the table. "Happy early seventeenth birthday," he said, revealing a box inside covered in red and blue wrapping paper.

His uncle had brought him a present. Instantly a feeling of guilt filled him. He'd been rude to Tanner out on the sidewalk. But it was short-lived. Paul relaxed. Maybe his uncle *had* only wanted to catch up with him.

"Th...thanks," he said, taking the box. It was a decent sized box, too.

"You can open it. I didn't plant a bomb in there or anything." The smile had returned.

He did. "It's..." he started, unable to believe it. He'd only glanced at these in the stores.

"A Netbook," his uncle finished for him. "Good enough to get on the Internet, but small enough to hide from your dad. Granted, you'll have to find some wireless hotspots to do that, but at least you can have some contact with the outside world. It's not much for gaming, though."

Paul's heart started to race as he pried open the box and fished out the Styrofoam inside, along with plastic-wrapped cords and the Netbook itself. "So I can use this to e-mail and--" *help Leslie get out of here*, he wanted to say. "--and watch movies, and download music?"

His uncle laughed. "I forget how much your dad's kept technology out of your house. That and more. You can also check the news and the weather. Not that you'd care much about the news, anyway. It'll give you a better way to keep up with your friends. I'll also give you my e-mail address if you ever want to chat."

“Th...thanks,” Paul managed. He resisted the urge to reach over the table and hug his uncle. He wanted to run out of there and back home right now, to show Leslie her key to escape. It took all he had to stay in his chair. “You don't know what this means to me. This is great. I mean it.”

Tanner smiled, but it looked like it was taking him some effort. Why? This was a great present. It wasn't like he'd bought Paul an encyclopedia or something. “I'm glad you like it. Sounds like it'll come in handy. If you have any questions on how to use it, I'm staying over in Yaslett for a couple more days. Just drop me an e-mail, and we can meet back over here.”

Paul thanked him a few more times as the waitress brought their food back to the table, eager to get back to Leslie more than ever.

“So how did you know when we'd be here?” Paul asked.

“Oh, Mobley's been in the works for a long time,” he said. The waitress was staring at him again, Paul noticed. “Your mother wanted to raise you here, you know, so you wouldn't be an outcast. She had your father reserve your house years ago. It was only a matter of time before he moved you in. It's only been a matter of checking, really. He must have gotten in good with the mayor to get that security system.”

The waitress stiffened on the other side of the room. Invisible spiderwebs crawled across Paul's skin. Tanner meant it as a joke, but it was too close to the truth.

“My mother wanted to come here?” he asked, changing the subject even though he already knew the answer.

“She was thinking of you. That, and your family would have been a great fit here. Your mother was a powerful Outbreaker, you know. I think that sometimes, she couldn't handle it. It was a lot to deal with.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Show me how to use this.”

Leslie emerged from Paul's closet to find him holding a styrofoam restaurant box in one hand and—gasp--a brand new Netbook in the other, with the plastic still hugging the frame around the screen.

“How?” She rose, loving what she was seeing. That little piece of technology could be her answer to getting help. “Paul, I love you!”

She flung her arms around him, nearly making the Netbook fall to the floor. Paul caught it, gasping, but enjoying Leslie's hug and warmth.

* * * * *

“That was really nice of your uncle,” she told him as the Netbook fired up for the first time. She almost wondered if Paul's uncle knew about their situation, but if he had, he might have given Paul a phone instead. It was easier to hide than a Netbook.

“I wasn't really expecting it.” The blue of the screen reflected off his eyes as he stared, transfixed. “I don't get why he did it. He and my dad have been at each other's throats since my mom passed.”

“Maybe he never gets to see you, and he wanted to make up for it,” Leslie said. She glanced around his room again, at the lack of technology imposed by his father. Paul's uncle had found a way around it, and a way around the isolation his father had kept him in all these years.

Her throat went dry.

Tanner had given Paul a window to the world, and along with it, the truth about being an Outbreaker. He would discover it sooner or later if he

got Internet access.

The first time he saw a news story about a tornado ripping up some town, and it would crush his world.

Paul seemed so innocent, so oblivious, as she guided him through the setup, watching as he slowly typed his name, unsure of where all the letters were on the keyboard. Leslie suddenly hated Tanner, even though she'd never met him, but she hated his still-unseen father more for keeping the truth away. But Paul would have to learn it someday, and his uncle couldn't have told him in the middle of a restaurant. How *did* you break news like that? She knew that she couldn't, and it made her no different than Janelle's father, Kenna's parents, and all the rest of them.

“Like it?” Paul held up the Netbook to show the username he'd typed: *ExecutionerMan1*.

Leslie managed a nod. “Suits you,” she said, forcing herself to glance around his room at his music collection. She thought about taking the battery out of the Netbook and hiding it, but she couldn't. It would make her just as bad as Paul's dad. “Here, I'll show you all the programs you have on here. And let's check for an Internet connection. If we're lucky, you can pick up one of your neighbors'.”

Leslie's heart swelled with hope as she pulled up the list of available networks, and the third down was an unsecured network wavering between two and three bars.

* * * * *

Janelle's phone beeped in her pocket as Deon pulled his yacht up to a dock. Behind them, the orange sun crept closer to the ocean's horizon, dyeing the water a blinding orange. She paid no heed as she pulled it out.

An email. From Leslie.

“Yes!” The phone trembled in her hand as she held it up. “Leslie's alive. That means my dad might still be alive, too. And your mother.”

“Read it,” Gary begged, hovering over the phone. Even Deon rushed over, concern spilling over his features.

It wasn't easy reading the small print. Janelle had to block out the sun with her hand. But it was there, and as usual, Leslie had written a small novel in her email. She could write as much as she could talk, and a lot had happened to her since the kidnapping. Janelle scanned the words so hard they might burst into flames, taking in every detail about Mobley, Oklahoma that Leslie could give her. Her father was alive but imprisoned in some apartment complex with the other Tempests, along with Gary's mother. The video she'd forgotten about until now had supposedly been leaked onto the Internet, but Leslie didn't know if it was a lie or not. Eric had moved all the Tempests to Mobley in some fake evacuation. *She* sure hadn't been told any plans.

“Well, it looks like you're right about those guys. They're called Outbreakers, huh?” Gary wiped his bangs from his eyes and squinted at the email as Janelle scrolled down.

There was more. Too much more. The next words cut their way into her skin and started crawling around, refusing to go:

They caught me and took me to the police station, and Andrina was there. She's working with Mobley's mayor in secret. One of the Outbreakers broke her out of prison. She doesn't want Mobley or the Tempests to know she's there right now, and she wants you to go there before her war starts. Elise was there, too. They kept me alive because they don't want people to get suspicious, but they tried to turn me into an

Outbreaker so I couldn't blab about Mobley. Luckily, a guy named Paul helped me escape, and I'm hiding at his house right now. He's an Outbreaker but he's really nice. (And cute!) I'm safe right now. I typed his address below.

Please don't come here. It's what Andrina wants. Send Deon. Or your uncle. Oh, and Paul's trying to find a way to get me out. The cops are guarding all the ways in and out of town, so be careful.

Leslie

“Janelle, careful! Or you'll crush the phone.” Gary moved his hand over hers, gently prying her fingers away from the screen to reveal the text again.

She relaxed her grip, barely catching herself in time. With the ocean all around, she could easily smash her phone to bits. “They tried to do *what* to Leslie?” Her muscles tightened more with each time she read the words. “The Outbreakers tried to inflict--” *our hell*, she wanted to say-- “*that* on her?” The prison escape hadn't surprised her much--Andrina had connections--and Leslie's other news made that look like an ant next to an elephant. She knew what Leslie had felt when she was threatened with that. It was the same feeling she'd had when Gary had dropped the bomb on her Tempest status, the sense that the universe was collapsing all around her, leaving no escape.

“We can't leave her there,” she said, reading the email again. “I don't care what my dad says. If they find her--”

“I know.” Gary's wide-eyed stare met hers as Deon came up behind him. He gripped her arms and slid his hands down them, his smooth skin brushing hers. “Janelle, promise me you won't go into Mobley. We'll stay

somewhere close to it until we figure out what to do. You can make phone calls and have others help us. Or I'll go in and get Leslie and our parents if I have to."

"Gary, you're not--" she started. The look in his hazel eyes was stone and love at the same time. He was serious about this. "Gary, you're not going up against a town of tornado people in the middle of Oklahoma without your powers. Without the ocean, we're screwed. Even with it, we didn't stand up too well." A fluttery panic rose in her chest. Sending Gary into danger after what had happened in Hawaii was not her idea of rescuing Leslie. There was no way she could go through that again.

"Promise me."

"I can't. Not after you nearly died. I won't. It's crazy to go in there without the ocean."

Gary flinched, a hurt look stealing over his features. It was the same look he gave her whenever they brought up his near-death. Her boyfriend's pride was scarred, but he didn't realize that a suicide trip into Mobley wasn't going to fix it.

But the wounded expression passed quickly. Gary glanced at the ocean and back, his mouth turning up into a smile. "Who said we had to leave it here?" He turned, releasing her arms. "Deon, you have any plastic milk jugs or anything on this boat? We're taking some of the ocean with us."

* * * * *

An ominous crack of thunder sounded as Leslie read Janelle's response to her email.

Coming. We won't barge right in or anything. I'll get help. Deon's with us. Let me know if you find a way out before then and we'll pick you up.

Leslie could barely hold in a squeal of joy. Another roll of thunder came over the house, but it sounded far away. Next to her, Paul tensed.

"It went through. They know I'm here," she said, wrapping her arms around him. His body felt so tense against her arms, and he refused to relax. "Paul, what's wr--"

Another distant crack of thunder.

"Oh." She relaxed her grip as his eyes met hers. The black spots in them seemed deeper somehow, darker. His other nature was floating to the surface.

"It might happen. If the storm gets too close." His voice rang flat in the quiet basement. Above, his father paced around the house, as if sensing the tension in the air. "I might pass out, so don't panic. Just stay quiet and hide in the closet in case my dad comes down to check on me."

"Okay."

Paul wasn't smiling, she noticed. Then, he blinked and asked, "Can I see the weather on this?"

Leslie's stomach turned over. Paul wasn't ready for this. He never would be. "The ads on there might slow down the Netbook quite a bit."

"It's worth a shot." Paul pulled up the Internet, and Leslie found herself praying that the neighbors' router had failed. It hadn't. Paul typed something in the search bar, and he was on a weather site seconds later.

"Paul, you're not going to--"

"Do I type where we're at here?" It was an unneeded question, because he was already putting Mobley into the weather site's search bar. There was no stopping it now. The train was in motion, and it was going to hit Paul in

seconds. The news had to be broken, but she hadn't wanted it to happen right this minute. Not here. Not now.

The brown in Paul's eyes deepened as his gaze landed on the screen. Leslie couldn't see his whole face in the blue glow, but she didn't have to. She could tell that he was starting to crack from the way he blinked at the bold words *Tornado Warning* bordered in red at the top of the screen.

Leslie trained her ears and stared at the sky through Paul's small basement window, taking in the dark gray. But no sirens wailed here in Mobley. They didn't need to. Mobley was perfectly safe.

She watched as Paul traced his finger down the small screen, mouthing the warning text to himself for an eternity, until at last his finger stopped on one word near the bottom of the page.

"Paul--" Leslie started, but didn't finish. She didn't need to. Her one word contained everything it needed to. *I'm so sorry, Paul.* There was nothing left to say at this point.

But it seemed he hadn't heard her. Paul muttered a curse, stiffened, and rose so fast that the Netbook fell to the floor.

He disappeared up the stairs a second later without a look back.

Leslie sat for a minute on Paul's bed, staring at the Netbook on the floor, still casting a glow on the carpet that seemed to have been sucked right out of him. Upstairs, a door opened and closed as Paul left, left her sitting there alone in Mobley without another word. An ache rose up in her chest that she hadn't expected before, and it hurt so much that she couldn't lift the Netbook from the floor for what felt like minutes.

Another crack of thunder rang through the air as she looked at the screen, but it was more distant now. The storm was moving away.

If she squinted, she could trace where Paul had moved his finger on the screen and stopped. The faint line ended down the middle of the warning

text, over a word she'd heard him mention earlier that day, when talking about the surprise visit with his uncle.

YASLETT.

The town Paul's uncle was supposed to be staying in.

* * * * *

Less than ten seconds after Paul grabbed the keys off the kitchen table, rushed past his father cleaning the oven in the kitchen, and ran outside, he was in the van, foot mashed down on the accelerator and headed east towards Yaslett as his world gave way and crashed all around him.

Chapter Fourteen

His uncle Tanner. Yaslett. The tornado warning. The truth.

Distant lightning flashed across the sky as the storm moved ahead of him, lighting the plains ahead for a split second. Paul couldn't get too close, or he could Outbreak again. Hurt somebody.

Kill somebody.

That waitress from the Family Grill had been suspicious of his uncle's words after all. She'd reported him, and now Mobley's elite had sent someone out to take care of Tanner. He was a threat the same way Leslie was a threat, but since he wasn't staying in Mobley, they'd needed a different way of taking care of him.

The thoughts swirled through his being as his foot crushed the accelerator, urging the van forward past the Marathon and down the

highway. His brain wouldn't let in anything else. Not his dad back at the house, wondering where he'd gone. Not Leslie, who he'd left sitting on his bed.

Not the fact that the cops had the exits to Mobley staked out.

The sudden flash of red and blue lights in the rear view mirror made Paul jump in his seat. He swore and slammed the brakes, not caring if the cop gave him a ticket. It didn't matter now. His uncle could be--

"Going a little fast there, aren't we?"

It was one of the cops from the Masonic Temple, shining a flashlight in his face. Bags sagged under his eyes. The cop had been working long hours out here. Paul suppressed the urge to put the van back into drive and pull away. Even in his panicked state, he knew it would be a mistake. A police chase would only land him in jail, and maybe earn him a search of his house, where Leslie was hiding.

"Come on," Paul begged. Ahead, the storm continued to move away, lightning illuminating the bottom of the clouds. "I really have to get going."

"Oh, I see." The cop smiled, leaning over and shining his flashlight into the back of the van, taking a long time to stop over every seat and shadow. He was searching for passengers, notably young female ones with red hair. Paul was careful to keep staring right at him, hoping he looked clueless. "You're trying to rush to the action. I'm afraid you might be too late, because that storm's moving very fast."

"I..." Paul started, his insides twisting in on themselves. The cop thought he was going out there to have an Outbreak. The thought made a bad taste rise in his mouth. He'd *wanted* one only a few days ago, and now-

-

“No one with you? You don't want to be driving when it comes on.” The officer circled around the van, shining his light in each window. Eventually he came around to his window again, nodding. It was a clever way of hiding what he was really looking for. “I'll let you off with a warning. Be careful out there, and slow down. Pull over if you start to feel drowsy.”

“Okay,” Paul said, shifting the van into drive as the cop walked away to prepare for the next car that tried to leave town. He'd wasted time sitting here.

He was back on the road the second the red and blue lights went off behind him.

* * * * *

Yaslett was about forty miles from Mobley, straight down the highway, judging from the map he'd seen on the weather forecasting website. Paul was good at following maps and directions, having moved so much all his life, but this was an eternity, driving through the dark fields with only the lightning ahead to guide him. Each mile felt like the distance to the moon. Each minute, an hour.

At last, dark buildings stood out against a flash of lightning. Paul squinted as the lightning faded, but there was no light coming from the town ahead.

No light except a few pulsating red ones that tightened every muscle in his body and nearly sent him off the road. The van lurched as he pulled it away from the wet gravel and back on the pavement.

A sign loomed out of the darkness, but something was wrong. The word *Yaslett* lurched to the side in the wind, its top half decapitated, the

population count probably lying in the field next to it. Ahead, red lights spun with more urgency. A dark traffic signal hung in midair, suspended by a single wire, while another power line drooped down to the sidewalk like a scrawny eel.

Paul's leg slammed the brakes as his tires jerked over something in the road. His mind seemed to shut down. Figures milled around in the darkness in front of him. Flashlight beams bobbed up and down everywhere, illuminating a scene that made something stir inside of him.

Yaslett looked as if a bomb had fallen on it.

Yellow light swept over a pile of rubble nearby, making shadows warp around boards and debris. Police and firefighters crawled over it, searching for anyone who might be pinned underneath. The same scene stretched on down the street: more piles of rubble disappearing into the darkness, a flashing ambulance with its back doors open, a car lying on its side up against a tree...

Paul squeezed his eyes shut to keep it out. It was all he could do.

...his mother, lying motionless against the kitchen table as he approached her, the television streaming the morning news into the room.

"Mom?" Paul asked, tugging on her sleeve.

No response.

"Mom!"

His mother's eyes lay open, facing the living room and the television glowing within.

He couldn't scream. He couldn't cry. Numb, in shock, Paul turned to face the glow of the morning news, his pajamas scraping the floor and nearly making him trip.

"Paul?" His father's voice erupted from the nearby bedroom as his footfalls drew closer. "You're not supposed to be watching that!" His dad

was coming to turn the TV off and shake his mother awake.

He caught a glimpse before his dad's frame blocked the view, casting him in shadow.

A newscaster, choking on his own words as he described the scene.

Concrete slabs where houses had once stood. Debris scattered everywhere. Trees stripped almost down to their trunks. Cars wrapped around mangled poles. Bold text on the bottom of the screen that read Possible EF5 Tornado Devastates Carroll, Dozens Feared Dead.

The television clicked off for the last time. “Paul, what have I told you about—Tonya? Tonya?” His father rushed to the kitchen table. “Paul, call the ambulance. We need your help. Hey! We could use your help!”

“Hello?” Pounding on the van's door broke him from his trance. Devastation stretched out in front of him as another distant flash of lightning lit the sky. “Are you injured? If not, we need help!”

A firefighter stood on the other side of the glass, pupils dilated as if he'd emerged from a war zone. He had blue eyes, Paul noticed. Human eyes. Not like his.

Not like his mother's the morning she had died.

Paul had forgotten what was on their television that morning for the past several years. Shoved it down somewhere deep inside of him, hoping that it would never surface again. His mother had died looking at the devastation on the screen, because she had *done* it. The guilt itself had caused her heart attack. Tanner had been right all along. Being an Outbreaker *had* killed her, but not in the way Paul had thought.

“Hello? You okay in there?”

Paul shoved open the van door, hopped down to the pavement, and started throwing up.

He didn't know how long he faced the ground, retching his guts out. Eventually, a minute later, maybe a year later, the firefighter slapped his hand on his back. "Hang in there, son," he said. "Where's your family?"

His family. Tanner, who had been right to be angry at his father, who had brought him the truth he deserved. "Motel," he managed. He didn't know how many were in this town. "Where's the motel? My uncle's there."

The firefighter turned and faced the pile of rubble with the cops swarming over it. Underneath a chunk of black roofing, the back of a green van stuck out, the glass in its rear window blasted out.

"No!" Paul's feet slapped against broken glass. His heart fluttered. A cop shouted something unintelligible as he pointed a flashlight down into the rubble of the motel. Tanner? Dead? Alive? Paralyzed for life? He couldn't do this.

"Someone's down here," the cop shouted, waving everyone over to the spot he was shining the flashlight down into. "I need help. You hear me, sir?"

Boards creaked under Paul as he rushed up them, tripping over splinters and pieces of roofing. A man called out from somewhere down in the destruction. The footfalls of others thumped up towards Paul as he followed the officer's gaze down through tangles of two-by-fours, torn wallpaper--

--and down to Tanner.

Still wearing the same olive T-shirt and jeans he'd been in at lunch, he was lying in a bathtub in a fetal position. Tremors racked his body. Why was he in a bathtub? But then Paul spotted the two-by-four lying over the rim. It had barely missed his uncle's head. Lying in the bathtub had saved his life.

Tears of relief flooded his vision. Paul blinked them away. “Uncle Tanner?”

His uncle turned his head the best he could. His pupils grew tiny under the flashlight beam. Not dilated. They were alive. “Paul? Is that you?”

For a moment he forgot about his mother, his father, even Leslie sitting back in Mobley. “Don't move. We're coming down to get you.”

“I'm not injured. Go look for others first.”

He wasn't leaving his uncle down there. The rest of the motel could collapse at any second. “Shut up. I'm coming down.” Paul had his Outbreaker strength—and his anger--on his side.

“Hold on. I don't want you going down there alone,” the cop said behind him.

Paul crawled down through the opening, scraping his arm on a splinter. He could lift those boards better than the cops could. There was no way they were stopping him. Blood throbbed through his ears. He was too pissed at his dad. He hated Mobley and Thomas Curt and Andrina too much. The world seemed to turn red as he seized the board that sat two inches over his uncle's head. He didn't care if the Yaslett emergency personnel saw this. They'd chalk it up to one of those famous adrenaline rushes, anyway.

Debris cracked and popped as Paul lifted, the muscles in his arms turning to stone. The air above the bathtub cleared as his uncle sat up and turned over on his hands and knees with several thuds that sounded like they might bring the wreckage of the motel back down on top of him. Tanner stared at the ruins of the motel hovering over his head as Paul held them up, arms quivering.

Something popped above, sending a waterfall of dust down between them.

“Get out!” Paul ordered, dust filling his nose and threatening to make him sneeze.

His uncle did. Scraping sounds rushed past him as Tanner climbed up towards the cops waiting above. Boards snapped. Debris popped. Paul backed away on his knees and let go of the board holding up the roof of the motel. It crashed down on the bathtub with a deafening roar, sending dust into his eyes and up his nose.

The rest happened in a blur. He must have stood up, because fresh air finally filled his lungs. Someone brushed off the back of his shirt. Paul muttered a thanks as his legs carried him down the pile of debris, barely keeping him upright as the cops and firefighters stared after him in amazement.

"How did you do that, kid?" someone called after him.

Paul's feet found the pavement. He stood next to Tanner's van, which lay half-crushed under the roof of the motel. His uncle called out to him from somewhere, but a lake of panic closed in on all sides. It had been there since his father had ripped up the side of the prison, maybe even since he was ten years old, but Paul had held it back. Now, the dam was breaking right down the middle.

His people were murderers.

He was a monster.

Paul ran.

He didn't know how long for. It didn't matter. He ran past fallen trees and ambulances until his lungs hurt and he couldn't go anymore. At last he collapsed to his knees in a bed of wood chips, moisture soaking through his pants, not sure where he'd parked the van but knowing that he had to get out of here. These people didn't deserve to have an Outbreaker among them. Not now.

"Paul. Stand up."

Tanner. His uncle had followed him and taken his arm.

His body stood. He wasn't sure how. Distant lightning flashed again, turning the sky an alien orange color for a second. He couldn't look at his uncle.

"I don't understand, Paul," Tanner said with a sigh. "Mobley was supposed to stop this from happening. It was supposed to help Outbreakers stop this sort of thing."

He faced his uncle, who stared down at the ground through the dust on his glasses. His knees buckled and he keeled over, putting his hands on them to make them stop. Tanner was suffering as much as he was. Paul couldn't bring himself to tell him that this hadn't been an accident, and Mobley wasn't what it seemed.

Tanner glanced around to make sure no one had come within earshot. Firefighters crawled over another pile of rubble farther down the street as police officers shined flashlights on a house that looked half-collapsed. Somewhere, someone shouted. In the panic of the scene, they'd forgotten all about Tanner and him.

His uncle's legs started going out from under him and he barely caught himself. "I don't understand," he repeated as shudders raced over his body. Paul found himself having to hold him up. "By time the sirens went off all I had time to do was get in the bathtub. The motel exploded around me. Did I say something wrong at the diner? The roar..." he muttered something that got drowned out by police sirens.

"Come on." Paul took his arm. Tanner needed to sit more than he did. "You need to go to the hospital?"

"No. No. Just shaken."

You and me both, Paul wanted to say. It was the first coherent thought he'd had since getting here, but the panic inside him that had parted for a second started to close in again. No. He couldn't give in to it now. Tanner had to get out of here, before another Outbreaker decided to make an attempt on his life. Already, new flashes of lightning had started up in the west.

"Paul," Tanner said, breaking out of his grip. "You have to drive us both back to Mobley."

The words hung in the humid air. "I can't. I'll drive you anywhere else." He wouldn't have another person hostage there because of the cops. He had to tell his uncle the truth. He deserved that. "There's people in Mobley who think you know what's really going on there due to a joke you made at lunch today. I think. Tanner, if you go there, they might try making you an Outbreaker, because they wouldn't be able to kill you in town. That might make people think that something's up." Paul had to hold down another bout of retching as he glanced at Yaslett. Who would *ever* want to become an Outbreaker? Why had his father turned his mother? He could have eloped with his mom so his grandparents couldn't gripe about it. Then, Paul would have had a chance of being born human and not...this. His mother would still be here right now.

Tanner stopped with his hand on the passenger door of the van. His blue eyes were wide and dilated with a new fear, a fear he must have felt when his twin sister was turned. "They're doing *that* in Mobley? How do you know this?"

Another flash of lightning raced across the sky, a bit closer now. His uncle shifted. He'd explain in the van. "I'll take you to an airport. Anything. Just tell me where to go."

His uncle stared at the sky and back to him, as if Paul was going to morph into a werewolf at any second. "I'm not telling you to take us back to Mobley because of me. It's because of you. If you're anything like your mother, your one goal should be never to have an Outbreak anywhere away from Mobley again."

Chapter Fifteen

Paul spilled everything to his uncle on the way back to Mobley to the tune of the highway clunking under them. It was the only thing he could do to keep the panic from taking him over completely. The distant lightning slowly drew closer, keeping every muscle in his body tense. He'd have to pull over if an Outbreak started to come on. At least he was out in the middle of nowhere now--where his father had always kept him--and he couldn't hurt Mobley even if he tried.

It eased some of the panic down as he spoke. Tanner didn't interrupt, though he shifted when Paul mentioned his first Outbreak. Once Paul finished with his recovered memory, Tanner sighed and let his forehead fall to his hand.

"I'm sorry, Paul." It sounded genuine.

"It's not your fault." He gripped the steering wheel tighter. Another flash of lightning revealed the buildings of Mobley in the distance, rising from the horizon like rows and rows of sores. "We have to get Leslie out of there before they find her," he added. She didn't deserve to suffer his condition. No one did.

"No. It partly is my fault." Tanner faced him and swallowed, eyes deep behind his glasses. "After Tonya turned, it was I who told her about Mobley. It was meant to be a safe haven for Outbreakers who wanted to avoid hurting people or causing destruction, because it's so far from other towns. Your grandfather--*my* father, that is--had been getting brochures about it since it was in the beginning stages, although he never planned to move there himself. He was old by then and had good control of his Outbreaks, enough so that he only had them in unpopulated areas, like your father does. Your mother, on the other hand--"

"Couldn't control hers that well. Because she was new," Paul finished for him. The words felt like grains of sand scraping his throat as they came out, as if he'd been screaming nonstop for days. In a way, he had.

"Tonya was scared that she might hurt someone when she started having Outbreaks, and wanted to move somewhere where she could never harm a soul. Anyone in Mobley who has an Outbreak can't hurt anyone. Well, unless you travel miles away from the town to do it on purpose."

"Like whoever targeted Yaslett," Paul said. He gripped the steering wheel so tight that it started to warp. If he ever found out who had done it, he'd kill them. Probably Thomas Curt or one of his spoiled sons. Or the Mobley cops. People could be lying dead or critically injured back in that town. His uncle would have nightmares about it for life. "But if my mom knew this could happen, why did she let my dad turn her?" He suddenly felt a flash of anger at her for saying yes, for *asking* to become an Outbreaker. Getting the acceptance of his dad's parents hadn't been worth all this misery. It hadn't been worth her life.

Tanner stared ahead into darkness that seemed so thick that the sun might never come up again. A faint rumble to thunder came over them. "She loved your father so much that she was willing to do anything to be

with him. Our own father didn't want her to go through with it. He knew there were dangers, but even he didn't know just how bad they were."

Paul felt as if he were made of mud, and that he was going to slide down the seat and soak through the floor to the road below. Beside him, Tanner scrunched down lower as if he were fulfilling his wish for him. "Why didn't she just move somewhere where there's never any thunderstorms? Or not as many? I should hightail it to Arizona." Another flash of lightning illuminated the landscape in an alien light. The panic rose in his chest again, squeezing his chest painfully. Next time he had an Outbreak anywhere away from Mobley, he could cause a scene like the one in Yaslett. Once he escaped with Leslie, he should go to the desert with Tanner. Leave his dad in this place to think about what he'd done. What if his dad *did* know about the real Mobley after all, and he supported Andrina and Thomas Curt's upcoming war?

"Didn't your father explain?" His uncle scrunched down lower, a shadow next to him.

"Explain what? He didn't tell me anything. I'm surprised he even told me what I am, to be honest. My mother probably made him."

"I need to get down. Cops. Keep going. I'll find a way out of town later." The Marathon loomed ahead in yellow light and past it, the downtown. Paul felt terrible bringing him back to this place, but his uncle had insisted. His uncle waited until they'd gone by it to speak again. "Paul, the reason your parents couldn't do that is because if your kind can't have Outbreaks for any extended periods of time, your health starts to fail. It takes a toll on your body. Your immune system grows weaker and your strength starts to wane, and it only gets worse from there. Had your parents moved to Arizona, you would not have either one of them right now."

Silence filled the space between them as the first lights of downtown rolled past. The horror of his predicament weighed down slowly on his chest. If Tanner was right--and he had no reason to suspect that he was lying after all that had happened--

"Mobley was the only good option at the time. It may still be the only good option for you. The only reason your father took so long to move you here was money and the fact that I knew about this place. For that, I take the blame. For a while, I was so angry about your mother that I forgot about your welfare. But as you got older, he and I realized that your coming here couldn't wait any longer, and we finally agreed on something."

"The best option? This place? Are you crazy?" The steering wheel started turning into an oval in his hands. So that was why his uncle and his father had stopped arguing recently. "You heard me. Mobley's a lie. It's just an excuse to round up Outbreakers and Tempests and who knows what else for some war with humanity that I don't want anything to do with."

Downtown Mobley was mostly dark by now, with only the streetlights reflecting off the storefronts and windows. And the old siren, which towered over the fire department. Paul's stomach twisted again, but he had nothing left to retch up. It was something his uncle had said earlier. Those old cold war sirens he'd seen in every town weren't really old cold war sirens. They were for something else entirely.

Him.

"I can't deny that after what happened." His uncle stared straight ahead, lost in the events of that night. "It's still better that you stay here, Paul, but don't tell anyone about your mother."

Paul automatically made the turn to his house, barely missing a truck parked on the side of the road with a cabinet in the back. Others were moving in, oblivious to what was going on here. He wanted to scream at

them to turn back and to go anywhere but here. But where was there to go?

Where could *he* go?

The curtains were shut at his house, only letting out a blue square of light. Although the van's clock read twelve-fifteen, his father was still up past his usual nine-thirty, waiting for him to come back. Paul had forgotten about the fact that he'd run past him on the way out without a word.

A figure moved behind the curtains, parting them ever so slightly. A second shadow moved behind him.

Leslie. His father had discovered her. Or she'd revealed herself.

"I left her here. I'm such a jerk." Paul threw open the van door and ran for the house. His uncle's footfalls came right behind. He wasn't ready for the blowup that was sure to come as soon as he opened the door. He'd hidden a girl in his room and brought his uncle here, not to mention taken possession of a forbidden piece of technology. And if his dad *was* in league with Thomas Curt--

But behind the door, his father looked as bad as Paul felt.

His plaid shirt was wrinkled and covered in oven grease. His stubble seemed to have grown in the past few hours, leaving a shadow on both sides of his face. Dark bags hung under his red eyes. Leslie stood behind him, clutching his new Netbook. Her freckles looked very brown on her cheeks, and she glanced down at the floor after meeting his gaze.

His father stared on as Tanner came through the door behind him and closed it with a final *click*.

There was no blowup. No yelling. No throwing of punches, not that his dad and Tanner had ever sunk that low.

His uncle was the first to speak. "Paul helped pull me out of the rubble that was my motel over in Yaslett. Thanks to him, I'm alive and unhurt."

His father seemed to crumple under the words. "God. It sounds like you were right about this place," he said to Leslie, sinking in a kitchen chair. He might have fallen to the floor if it wasn't there. "I didn't tell the police that you were bothering us, Tanner. Just that I wanted the security system. I had no idea that they would do this. This isn't what Mobley was supposed to be about."

"Well, it is," Paul snapped. He met Leslie's gaze for a second. It was calm, but worried at the same time. She nodded and gave him a brief smile, one that told him that everything might be all right after all. His father hadn't tried to turn her in. It raised some hope for him, that maybe he wasn't with Andrina and Thomas Curt's cause after all.

"He came down to your room right after you left," Leslie explained, clutching his new Netbook. "To see if you had anything like this. I explained everything to him."

Paul nodded his thanks. Maybe he should have felt betrayed, but he didn't. Leslie hadn't had a choice but to tell his dad about all this, and he and Tanner were going to do that anyway. It had been his fault he'd left her here to deal with it. Paul was secretly glad he didn't have to tell his painful story a third time. Not having to keep her a secret from his dad anymore lifted a weight from his shoulders. And it was about time they were all on the same page.

"I've made so many mistakes," his father continued, voice heavy and hurt. "I let Thomas Curt take advantage of this whole situation with you, Paul. He manipulated us."

"Me? Moving here was all about me?" Paul moved to fill the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, keeping his father and his uncle apart. It was one-on-one time. His father had a lot of explaining to do.

"Paul, sit down."

"No."

His father didn't press him any further, but turned his gaze to Leslie. "You can sit down if you want. Grab a drink. I'm sorry this place has put you through so much." His voice carried no anger.

Leslie didn't sit, either.

"Earl, we need to cut to the chase, like I told you to do years ago. Paul remembers why you threw all the electronics out, by the way." His uncle spoke behind him, his voice a hair below yelling. He was struggling to hold back the explosion.

Still no yelling from his father. He sounded like a child getting grounded, ready to accept his punishment. "I was trying to protect him."

Paul moved out of the doorway to stand in the middle of the kitchen. "Hello? Dad? I'm right here."

"I know."

"You took me out the past three summers trying to make me have Outbreaks," he went on. "You *encouraged* it. Oh, yeah, and you forgot to mention that tornadoes kill people all the time and demolish towns. Why didn't you think to tell me that? I was going to figure it out eventually, especially after you did the number on the prison. That Andrina woman you rescued is a lot less innocent than you think, by the way. I can't believe you haven't heard about the Tempests yet."

His dad's eyes met his as another crack of thunder shook the house. "Most tornadoes don't kill," he said. "Only the ones that go through populated areas. The Outbreakers who can't control themselves...and the ones who do it on purpose." The words cracked as he spoke. "I've never killed anyone, Paul. That's why so many of us Outbreakers live out here in the plains states. There's enough room to avoid accidents most of the time, and enough storms here to keep us healthy."

Paul flinched. What Tanner had told him about his health was true, then.

"But, Paul, the reason I kept taking you out every summer is that I had to know. If you were like your mother. At the time, Mobley wasn't an option."

"Well, it still isn't. I'm leaving with Leslie and Tanner as soon as I can. If she doesn't get out of here, they'll...they'll turn her!"

Leslie flinched. Paul wanted to take back his words, but they were the truth, so he rushed over and put his arm around her instead. She was shaking--and quiet--despite her tough exterior. He *wouldn't* let them turn her. The thought of it made an ache rise in him.

"You *have* to stay in Mobley, Paul. There's a good chance that you're too dangerous to live anywhere else." His father rose, voice rising as he stretched to his full height. "I freed Andrina from prison for that reason, and no, I wasn't certain she was innocent. But it was a necessary sacrifice. Without Thomas Curt's discount I could not have gotten you here. You have no idea what I'm saving you from."

Footsteps came into the kitchen as his uncle appeared in front of him. Tanner's blue eyes were full of sympathy as he swallowed. "Paul, do you know what the Fujita Scale is?"

"No."

Tanner shot a glare back at his father before looking back to him. At the same time, Leslie wrapped her arm around his waist and squeezed. Her touch did something to make the ache in his gut ease, despite whatever news Tanner was about to give him.

"It's a scale that humans use to measure how strong tornadoes are. Well, it's called the Enhanced Fujita Scale now. The ratings go from zero to five, with five being the strongest kind of tornado, capable of the most incredible

destruction. Five is also the rarest type, so much that only one out of every thousand Outbreakers has the ability to achieve it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The wobble in his knees returned. Paul leaned onto Leslie. The destruction in Yaslett had been bad, but it paled in comparison to what he'd seen on TV the morning of his mother's death.

"My mother was that one out of a thousand," Paul managed, nearly choking.

Tanner did the worst thing he could have done. He nodded, his eyes sad. "She already had some Outbreaker in her family when your father turned her. That may have been the cause. Even when I was trying to talk her out of turning, I never anticipated this happening. Not to your mother."

His father, from somewhere, his voice tired and stretched in anguish. "Paul, I never would have turned her if I'd known. Nor would she have asked me to do it. But this is why you need to stay here. It's likely that... that..."

"She passed this to me," Paul finished for him. He felt faint. The roar of panic filled his head, growing louder. "I'm the worst kind of Outbreaker!"

Tanner shook his head. "Don't call yourself--"

Another crash of thunder overhead. The roar in his head grew so loud that it drowned that out, too. His legs went out from under him. The floor rose. Leslie's hands brushed his side as his heart raced, unable to hold him up. Beside him, his father slumped back into his chair, head lolling towards the table. Tanner rushed towards him, yelling his name. Paul was passing out--

"No!" he cried. His head hit the floor with a thud, but he didn't feel it. --because he was having another Outbreak.

"Paul!" Leslie appeared over him, taking his shoulders. "Hold on. Stay awake. You can do it. Stay with me!"

She cared. But why about a monster like him?

Electric pulses raced through his body. He couldn't move. An invisible fist held him down and threatened to pull him away any second.

Tanner said something, but it was lost in the air. His father lay slumped over the table behind him. Nobody could help him. There was no stopping this.

"Paul."

Leslie. Her green eyes were so beautiful as she leaned down towards him, flashing for a split second before she pressed her lips to his.

The roar in his head quieted for a second and the sun itself felt as if it were warming his chest, dispelling the storm inside him. It seemed as if his Outbreak had stopped, and that Leslie's kiss was chasing it all away and making him warm and human, freeing him from this curse and telling him that everything would be all right.

The relief was short-lived. Even before she pulled away, the roar returned and the pulses intensified, and the last thing he saw before the storm's hand pulled him away was Leslie's red hair as she hugged him tight, as if trying to hold him there in her world.

Chapter Sixteen

Paul lay motionless on the kitchen floor, eyes shut, chest rising up and down in peace. Leslie scooted back on her knees, very aware that Paul's

uncle Tanner was staring at her from behind. At the table, Paul's father snored away as another crack of thunder shook the windows.

She expected Tanner to pull her away from Paul and ask her what the heck she'd been doing. What *had* she been doing? Leslie had never been brave enough to just come out and kiss a human boy, let alone an Outbreaker one. She'd been nervous about even holding hands with Todd last year at the movies. This wasn't like her.

"Leslie, he's gone," Tanner said. "And so is his father. He won't wake up until it's over. Have something to drink and rest a minute. Paul's going to need you when he wakes up. I'll get a pillow under his head."

Paul's uncle left the room, footsteps fading down the hall. A door squeaked open somewhere.

Leslie sat down next to Paul, watching him sleep. It was a deception. He wasn't dreaming. He was somewhere outside of town with his father and who knew how many other Outbreakers, taking on a new, deadly form, one that didn't know her kiss or even his own name. One that didn't know what kind of pain it could cause to others.

And she was falling in love with him.

Maybe she was trying to escape something. The boredom. The nothing. Whatever it was, she was on a crazy amusement park ride and couldn't get off.

Tanner returned and handed her a pillow, which she slid under Paul's head. He continued to breathe like a sleeping baby as the storm passed overhead, refusing to give him back. She lay on the cold kitchen floor next to him, snuggling close, glad that his father wasn't awake to see this.

* * * * *

Paul woke up maybe ten minutes later as his father continued to snore away on the table. His eyelids fluttered and came open, revealing the brown and black inside them, not swirling but solidified. His irises turned towards her, softening.

"Paul." Leslie shifted and sat up next to him. "Did you--"

"Yes." He turned away, sat up, and wrapped his hands around his knees.

Tanner rushed to his side. "Away from people, I take it?"

"Thankfully. There's nothing around here. It was all fields." Paul made a loud breathing sound. "I still couldn't control myself. I really am dangerous. Dad's right. I need to stay here."

"No. We can work something out." Leslie wrapped her arm around him, pulling Paul into a half-hug. "There's lots of unpopulated places you can go. Until you learn how to control yourself." Paul had helped her so much. It was her turn to help him. Leaving him in this place was unthinkable.

"Your dad's still out there," Tanner said, slapping Paul's father on the back to get rewarded with a snore.

"There were a lot of other tornadoes. Maybe a dozen. Not all at once, though." Paul lifted his head to stare out the kitchen window. "That was my second Outbreak since I got here. How many am I going to have? Even Dad never had more than a few every year, and he went *looking* for storms."

Leslie hugged him tighter. He was cold. Shaking. "It's not your fault, Paul. There's been a lot of storms this spring."

"It's been happening every day." He faced her, blanching. "I've never seen a spring this bad. It's like something's happened to the atmosphere in this whole area. It's blowing up. Something's not right."

Tanner shook his head. "It doesn't sound right to me, either. Paul, I think your dad's stirring."

He rose. Leslie could barely keep up with him. "I don't want to talk to him right now," he said, opening the basement door and holding it open for Leslie.

"I think Leslie had better sleep on the couch," Tanner said to everyone, forcing a smile. "We all need sleep. Tomorrow, we make a plan for getting her out of here."

* * * * *

Paul spent half his night staring at the ceiling as images from that night raced through his head. Just above him, Leslie was on the couch. Which was understandable--he couldn't have her spend another night in his room with his dad and his uncle knowing, or even the basement. He turned his memory to her kiss instead. It had been like the sun itself, calm and warm, the opposite of what he was.

But had she kissed him because she felt sorry for him? Perhaps...but most likely not. Something in him told him it was real, and that if they thought this out, they could get through this. Leslie had saved him from an unbearable night of emotional agony. It was there, of course, in the form of that glowing TV from years ago and those piles of rubble in Yaslett, but she was holding it back. Even his second Outbreak, filled with raw power, dark fields and lightning flashes paled in comparison.

Holding onto her kiss as tight as he could, Paul slipped into unconsciousness as distant lightning continued to flash out in the night.

* * * * *

“Paul. Get up.”

Morning. Sunlight poured in through his basement window, casting a square on his wall and his music collection right under it. For a second, he forgot about last night, and he was tempted to believe those images of destruction were only a bad dream.

His father stood on the stairs to the basement, gripping the railing as if Paul were going to tear into him at any second. But he didn't feel like doing any more yelling. Not right now, anyway. His throat was sore from that, and possibly from losing his lunch the night before. Exhaustion still filled his limbs like a parasite that refused to let go.

“We've just had a new development,” his father said, glancing up the stairs. Paul couldn't tell if his voice was apologetic at all or not. Quiet footsteps filled the kitchen above. “Your friends are here. Brian and Dominic. I think you forgot they were coming. Also, they brought their car.”

His dad's words were so full of meaning. *They brought their car.*

“The *Executioner* concert. I forgot!” Paul shot out of bed, ignoring the ache in his limbs. It was all he'd been thinking about up until his father had broken Andrina out of prison. In the past couple of days, it had flown from his mind.

Leslie was already standing in the kitchen when he emerged from the basement, along with his uncle. Dominic's huge frame shifted in the hall as he fumbled with his wallet. He was wearing a black *Executioner* shirt, one of the same ones that Paul had. Brian pushed around him and entered the kitchen, slugging him in the shoulder. Despite being brothers, Brian was pretty thin.

“How long were you going to sleep?” Brian asked. “We've got to be over in Oklahoma City by six. It's one-thirty.”

Paul glanced at the clock. He was right. It must have been four or five in the morning before he fell asleep last night. “I was up late,” he said truthfully. Tanner shot him a warning glance. It wasn't as if he was going to tell Brian and Dominic about Outbreakers. The less they knew, the better. Mobley would probably leave them alone if they were oblivious. “I had to unpack some stuff. It's a lot of work.”

“Man, we haven't seen you in a year. I think you would have gotten up a little earlier,” Brian said. “I've got your ticket, by the way. You owe me thirty-four.”

“That's fine.” He didn't care about the money right now, or that Brian was sounding like a bit of a jerk. He *always* sounded like that, but it was nothing personal. At least it was something familiar and sane.

“We'll also need to stop somewhere to eat,” Dominic added. “There's a bunch of fast food places in a town halfway there.”

Paul parted the curtains, the thought of food turning his stomach. Dominic had driven his old Buick over, which sat next to the van and the trailer still sitting in the yard. Two vehicles. The cop waiting just outside of town couldn't pull two vehicles over at once...but he could still call for backup. They needed to think this out, and well.

“Okay. I'll be ready in a few minutes.” Paul glanced at Leslie, then down at the basement stairs. Conference time.

And a bit of alone time. Something else bothered him entirely, and he had to know the truth.

Leslie closed the door behind her, and fortunately neither his father nor Tanner tried to stop her.

"You didn't kiss me because you pitied me?" Paul asked, taking Leslie's arms. He had to know. "Tell me the truth."

Her response was more than he'd hoped for. Leslie threw her arms around him, squeezing so hard he could hardly breathe, and locking her lips with his once again.

This time the glow inside him stayed, no roar crushing it and no storm yanking him from his body. It remained even when Leslie finally pulled away. Paul couldn't suppress a smile. This was true, then. "We're leaving Mobley today. I guess my dad changed his mind."

Footsteps echoed above them, growing faster and more impatient. Brian, probably. He could wait a few minutes.

"Your friends brought a car. Could we use them as a distraction?" Leslie asked. "The cops won't turn them. They shouldn't, anyway. Brian and Dominic don't know anything about Mobley."

It was exactly what he'd been thinking. "I'll tell them we should take two cars. That I need to drop you off somewhere after the concert. By then, they'll be sick of driving. They already drove two hours to get here, so I'm sure they won't complain. Especially Brian." He hugged her close, smelling the shampoo in her hair. "You should have your friend Janelle meet us in Oklahoma City. It's better than her coming to Mobley." Another thought struck him. "You might be safe with her. Just don't go home. At least, not right away."

Leslie stared up at him, realization stealing over her features. "Paul--you're right. Andrina already knows my address. She stole Janelle's phone one time and got it that way."

"Exactly." It pained him to tell her this, but he couldn't bear the thought of her getting hurt. "Once you leave Mobley, I'm scared they might try something other than turning you. Something worse."

"Paul, we both might have to stay with Janelle. You can go to Alara. She'll understand." Leslie glanced around for something, probably the Netbook. Were those tears starting to rim her eyes? "I have to warn my mom. My neighbors. Tell them to get out of my neighborhood before something happens."

He tightened his hug, careful not to suffocate her. She meant the same thing that had happened in Yaslett last night, and who knew how many other towns. "Do...do a lot of tornadoes happen in Michigan?"

"Not really. But there was one back in the fifties, in Flint, only a few miles from where I live." Leslie buried her face in his chest. "It was bad. I've seen pictures of what was left. Over a hundred people died."

Paul's heart thumped in his chest. "Was it...a five? Where *you* live?"

Her silence answered his question and made his heart beat harder.

"Leslie, we can make Thomas Curt and Andrina think you're somewhere else." He ran his hand down her hair, hoping to ease her fear. "And could we stay at Alara? I thought that video got leaked on the Internet. The government could go there at any time."

"We don't even know if it's real, or if anyone out there won't think it's a fake."

The basement door creaked open, and footsteps started to come down the stairs.

Paul and Leslie broke apart. His father came down the stairs, looking grave. Bags hung under his eyes. His skin looked like a mask over his skull, as if he'd been up all night. All the color he'd had when Brian and Dominic had first arrived had all but vanished.

"I've made a lot of mistakes," he started, gripping the railing as if he was going to fall. "With your mother. With you, the last of which I told you that you needed to stay here in Mobley."

He stood frozen as his father approached. His skin had taken on a gray pallor. Something was eating him from the inside that he needed to get out. It made Paul want to take back all the yelling he'd done last night, but it was too late.

"But where do I go?" Paul asked. The basement seemed huge and silent.

"Anywhere but here," his father continued. He stopped a few feet away. "I forgot to tell you something last night. Back when I was making plans with Thomas Curt to move here, I thought he was understanding. That he really wanted to help Outbreakers avoid hurting people. I explained to him our situation. Your situation."

"*What?*" Paul exploded as fresh panic bloomed in his chest. "He knows what kind of tornado I can become? He knows about *Mom?*"

The gray under his father's eyes deepened. "I thought I was doing the right thing for you, Paul. That's all I ever wanted to do."

"You have to leave," Leslie's voice rose an octave as she tugged at his sleeve. "If Thomas Curt knows, then Andrina knows, too. I've seen what kind of stuff she likes to force people like you to do."

Her eyes shone with terror. Leslie wasn't lying or overreacting. He remembered her story, about Janelle and Kenna. Was he about to join them in her memory? The thought was unbearable.

"I'm going to make things right for you, Paul." His father slapped his hand down on his shoulder. The gesture made Paul's eyes water, but he blinked it away. "Your chances are better out there, away from Mobley. You'll need to avoid living in towns and cities, at least for a few years until you learn control of your Outbreaks. Tanner and I discussed this last night. Paul, you and Leslie are receiving the sums of both our bank accounts.

Your uncle's running to the ATM to get the money out for you now. I gave him my card as well."

Something felt wrong here. "Dad, you don't have to give me all of your-
-."

"Yes I do, and I will. Don't argue with me. Besides, neither of us will need it after today." His father's stare grew more intense, boring into his own.

"What are you saying?"

"Tanner and I will be creating a diversion for the police as you leave town. Take both vehicles. Leslie should ride with you. Send Brian and Dominic first, just in case there's still a cop left to pull them over."

"Dad? What are you planning?"

His father swallowed. "Your uncle and I are going to rob the Marathon at the edge of town. By time they figure out that we were trying to help you escape, you should be long gone."

"No!" All the rage from last night returned to him. He separated from Leslie and kicked a box across the room. He had already lost a parent. There was no way he could do it again. "You're not going to ruin your lives for me."

"Paul. Paul!" His father's hand came down on his shoulder again, this time from behind. "We both helped ruin *your* life. I promise you we won't hurt anyone. We'll surrender before the police use force on us, and we're going to use masks. They won't know it's us until the arrests. We're taking my old pistols, which won't be loaded. Our cover story will be that we gambled all our money away and needed more."

He whirled around to face his father, the father he was about to lose. "But what if *you* get hurt? And the cops know that you and Tanner hated each other just a few days ago. It won't work!"

"For long, anyway. I'll be fine, Paul. Who'd be able to mess with an Outbreaker in prison?" His dad smiled. "Besides, we won't be there forever. And we'll make it a long standoff. The state police might get involved, and be the ones to arrest us if we're lucky. And if I stay with Tanner, no one in Mobley will be able to Outbreak and hurt him."

"But what if the local cops arrest you? They realize Tanner knows too much."

Sadness stole over his dad's tired features, but the look in them told Paul that he was set. There was no swaying him from this. "He accepts the risks. We all need to."

Chapter Seventeen

Leslie hated watching Paul take one final glance at his bedroom as his father stayed by his side, silent. He stood with his back to her, no doubt trying to hide the emotions welling up inside. Her heart ached for him.

They headed upstairs a minute later, silent. Paul's eyes were dry, but had they been when he was looking away from her?

Brian and Dominic had taken seats at the kitchen table, Brian tapping the keys on his phone. Tanner was back in the kitchen, opening his wallet and smiling at Paul. Leslie could see the nervousness in his eyes. "I just checked the weather. They're predicting all sunshine for today, so it should be a good drive. Also, you might want to buy some shirts at the concert," he said, handing him a wad of bills. A very *big* wad, Leslie noticed, enough for maybe twenty concerts. She had a feeling that they were all hundreds.

"Your father and I are heading out for a bike ride. I'm assuming you'll be leaving in about twenty minutes, so be sure to lock the house up."

"Thank you," Paul said, sounding very unenthused. Brian shot him a glance as if to say, *what the hell?* But Paul didn't notice. He stuffed the bills in his pocket and swallowed as his father and his uncle shuffled towards the door. Neither of them looked back as it opened and closed.

He hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye.

"You ready?" Brian asked.

"In a bit." Paul wandered towards the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Outside, his father and uncle pulled a pair of bikes away from the house, mounting them. Paul's dad was wearing a coat even in the warmth outside. The thought of what he had hidden inside made Leslie shudder.

They rode off, turned a corner towards downtown, and disappeared.

It might take them ten minutes, tops, to reach the Marathon. After that, it would be time to leave. It had to be timed right, or escape would be almost impossible.

Leslie forced herself to make small talk with Brian and Dominic, who had lived a mile down the road from Paul on an Oklahoma farm for about six months. Paul had gotten Dominic interested in *Executioner*, and Brian thought they were okay but was mostly going to catch up with Paul. Paul stayed in the bathroom, trying to stall so that the timing would be right. Minutes crawled by. Paul's dad and uncle were probably barging into the Marathon now, guns drawn, ready to ruin their lives so she and Paul could escape and he could avoid his mother's fate. Paul had to feel terrible about this. Leslie knew that she did.

Somewhere, police sirens sounded off.

It was happening.

"Paul?" Leslie hoped she didn't sound too desperate. "I think we should get going. Your friends are waiting."

He recognized the signal. The bathroom door flew open, and both Brian and Dominic rose from their chairs, desperate to get to the concert on time. The police sirens grew louder as Paul wordlessly grabbed his keys and made for the front door.

"We'll follow you guys," he said, making for the van. "Leslie's riding with me. I have to drop her off at her sister's after the concert. Don't worry. I'll buy her a ticket."

Brian was clearly relieved that they were taking off at last. "Be sure to pull off at Exit Two Forty-Three," he said, opening the door to his car. "We're stopping for fast food there. See you then."

The sirens cut off, only to be replaced by another one from the direction of downtown. And another. It sounded like the entire Mobley police force was headed for the Marathon. Would they shoot Tanner when they realized it was him? If the state police didn't join the standoff in time, they could and get away with it. And what of Paul's dad?

Paul started the van without a word. If these same thoughts were plaguing him--and no doubt they were--he wasn't showing it. There was determination in his eyes. Leslie wished she could find something to say to him, but there wasn't anything that could help this situation.

"I shouldn't have yelled at my dad," he said, following Brian and Dominic's car around a corner and onto Main Street. "Get down. Just in case."

Red and blue lights flashed ahead of them, but they were headed away, towards the Marathon. There might not be a need to duck down, but she did. Paul's dad and uncle hadn't made this sacrifice for them to get caught.

Paul hit the accelerator through downtown, past the old tornado siren that didn't need to work. It stared down at Leslie as they passed, as if warning her to get out of town.

"What's going on up there?" she asked.

At first, nothing from Paul. Then: "There's four cop cars at the Marathon. Brian and Dominic are slowing down to gawk." His voice sounded hollow and dead. Leslie hoped she never had to hear him this way again. He stiffened. "No. There's a fifth one pulling them over. I can't believe this!"

Leslie's heart leapt. The Mobley police might have planned for something like this. The van's engine whined louder as Paul gassed it. He was going to try to get through. This was the only chance.

Red and blue seemed to flash all around them, reflecting off the side mirrors and off the glass. Paul stared straight ahead, not shooting her a glance. The green of Brian and Dominic's car flashed past, stuck on the side of the road with a cop car on its rear like a parasite.

"Stay down," Paul ordered. The van's engine whined higher. The reds and blues slid off the glass and out of the side mirrors. Paul's face grew redder. He was holding his breath between words. "Hold on. I've got to get us out of the township."

Leslie held her breath, too, praying to any good force out there that they'd make it out of Mobley completely, that Paul would never Outbreak and kill people, that history wouldn't repeat itself back in Flint, and that she wouldn't have to become an Outbreaker herself. A minute stretched by, and then another. Paul didn't slow. At last, he nodded to her, the red in his face disappearing little by little.

"I think you can sit up," he said. "I didn't see any cops leaving the gas station. I guess they can't. And I have a feeling they won't keep Brian and

Dominic long." His voice was starting to go flat again. "Well, it looks like I'm on the road because of my dad and my uncle again."

Ahead, the highway stretched into infinite fields and into their future, whatever it was going to be. Paul didn't have anywhere to go after the concert tonight. And did she? Not as long as Andrina knew her address. But they had escaped Mobley, thanks to the sacrifice those two men had made for them.

"Paul," she managed at last, watching as the green of Brian and Dominic's car appeared in the rearview mirror, a tiny dot in front of the huddle of buildings that was Andrina's secret base and not a small town. "Your family's amazing."

He stared ahead at the road, blinking. "I know."

* * * * *

Brian and Dominic cut ahead of them once they merged onto the freeway, giving Paul a view of Dominic's *Executioner* stickers on the back. They were from another life of his, one that he was leaving after tonight. He hadn't even checked to see how much cash Tanner had handed him, but he could tell from the smoothness of the bills in his pocket that they must all be hundreds. His father's paltry savings, and his uncle's earnings from programming so many websites. They'd given all that, and their freedom, up for him.

He couldn't look. Not yet. Every bill he felt in his pocket made a sense of maddening guilt rise up inside him. The only thing that kept him from breaking down was Leslie, leaning up against him as he drove. Paul put his arm around her, glad for her presence. He could tell her anything. Brian and Dominic could never know about this, and he would have to pretend

that everything was all right around them tonight. He would have to pretend to enjoy the concert with all this going on in his head. After what had happened with Leslie and Tanner, his friends had to be oblivious that anything strange was going on, even away from Mobley. If the coming war was real, it could mean life or death to them.

"You should try to enjoy yourself tonight," Leslie told him as they weaved through a construction zone. "I know. Crazy, right? Hard to do when you're worried about so much." She opened the Netbook, which sat on her lap. "Once we get to the fast food places, I'll need to email Janelle again. I never got a chance at the house, because your friends were there. I figured you didn't want them to know anything. Not that your friends are annoying at all."

"Except Brian," he said, forcing a smile. The ache in him eased a bit. It was good to hear Leslie talk. He was finding out that she did that a lot when she wasn't in danger. It was the times she was silent that things were bad.

They reached the town with the fast food places some time later and pulled off. Brian and Dominic parked at a Burger Planet, and as Paul predicted, Brian got out of the Buick cussing.

"Didn't you see us getting pulled over back there?" he ranted, pulling open the door to the restaurant. "They thought we might be getaway drivers for whoever was robbing that Marathon. I mean, hello. Someone's robbing the gas station! Shouldn't you be there instead? And why would anyone be stupid enough to be their getaway drivers with four cop cars in the parking lot?" Brian fished for his wallet with one hand and smacked himself on the forehead with the other.

Paul forced a smile as he slid his hand into Leslie's. "You're right. That's stupid. Did they give you a ticket?"

"No. I would've taken it to court if they did."

"Hey. I was the one driving," Dominic reminded him. "Chill out. You always get so freaked out about everything." He turned his attention to Paul and Leslie. "By the way, how long you two been together? That's news I never heard last time you wrote."

"A week," Leslie said before he could answer. It was close enough. Paul could feel a real smile coming to his face. "By the way, I need to use the bathroom before we go."

Leslie must have tapped out her email in the bathroom using Burger Planet's free wifi as it was too risky to borrow Brian's or Dominic's phone, or type it out in the open where they could see. It was clear from her smile as she got back into the van next to Paul that Janelle had received her message.

"They're on their way to Oklahoma already," she explained as he started the van. "On a plane, I mean. It took them a while to get one since they had to take a boat from Alara, and landed on one of the smaller Bahamian islands. They had to find a pilot to pay since Janelle's normal one's trapped in Mobley right now." Leslie cast her gaze down at her jeans. "All the Tempests are still there, Paul. In that apartment complex. What are we going to do about them?"

She was right. And he didn't know. His dad and uncle hadn't done the standoff to have him go back there and get caught. "Maybe your friend Janelle will have some ideas. I don't think Andrina's planning to hurt them. If she's right about her war, then she'll want as many soldiers as possible."

Leslie went pale. "Except for Janelle's father. She won't want him." Her silence let the meaning sink in. "And the video. I checked Youtube while I was in there. It really did get leaked, Paul. Someone really did

record a Tempest girl moving the ocean, but I don't know who. That part wasn't a lie."

Paul stiffened. At least no one could record what an Outbreaker could do. Well, there was no way to record it and convince the world about what was *really* going on. The world might get a shot of someone passing out, or the tornado itself, but nothing else. The connection could never be proven. "So the world's going to know."

She nodded. "They're going to suspect, at the very least. Paul, the video already had twenty thousand views. It's growing."

They pulled back onto the freeway behind Brian and Dominic, the late afternoon sun beating in their eyes. Paul scanned the sky for anything suspicious, but only spotted a few puffy clouds behind them. One was a bit bigger than the others, but not a thunderhead by any means. "Did you check the weather?"

"Yes. Your uncle was right. It's supposed to be sunny today. We're not under any weather watches or anything. Which means you probably won't have to worry about having an Outbreak," Leslie added, probably seeing the confused look on his face. "We'll check it every day, Paul."

He relaxed a bit. "It's just...I was getting worried." Paul checked the rearview mirror again. Was that cloud a bit bigger now, towering a little higher into the sky? "I think I still am, to tell you the truth. I don't think Tempests and Outbreakers are supposed to be together like this. That might be what's making all these storms happen. Mobley's had storms every day since Andrina and the other Tempests got there. And there was conveniently one at the prison, where she was only a mile from us at the time. Our species being around each other's doing something to the atmosphere. I know it is. I think we were kept apart for a reason."

"Kept apart?" Now it was Leslie's turn to wear that look of confusion. "Like someone told you not to talk to each other? Sounds like--" she paused. "Paul, do your people have any legends? About who made you?"

He kept staring at the expressway ahead. His father had told him some story about it when he was eight, but it seemed about as real as the cartoons he used to watch. "We do, but it's silly. Most of us don't believe it. There's no way to prove if it's just some story or not."

"What god or goddess do they say made you?"

It was a serious question. There was no sign of a laugh on Leslie's face, or of sarcasm. She meant this.

Paul swallowed. "The god they *say* made Outbreakers was actually a god of storms from some ancient civilization in Mexico." He paused as Leslie sat up straighter next to him, like she was onto something.

"And his name?" she pressed, green eyes flashing.

His mind went empty for a second, but he remembered. "The god's name...I think it was Huracan."

She gave a squee, jumping in her seat. "Breakthrough!" Her lips brushed his cheek, replacing all his other emotions with happy tingles. "That's it. He made you *and* the Tempests. It's like you each got a different set of his abilities. And when you're together, it's like all that combines. That might be why it's causing all this crazy weather."

"You mean--" Paul gasped for air. "--that the whole stupid legend is for real?"

"I wouldn't say it's stupid. This might be important. It could help us figure out what Andrina and Thomas Curt are up to."

The words slid into his ears and out again. Paul found himself staring into the rearview mirror once more, to the horizon behind the gray stretch of the freeway and the small army of cars on the road. The cloud was

definitely growing larger, towering well over the others now. If he didn't know better, he would have thought it was following him.

* * * * *

"Leslie, I don't think we can linger here long."

He couldn't deny it anymore. The cloud behind them had bloomed into a full-fledged thunderstorm, complete with a wispy anvil top. If there was anything his father had taught him about these storms, it was that you could tell the direction they were headed by where the anvil was pointed. And the feathery top of the thundercloud was stretching towards him like a giant arrow.

"You're right," she said, glancing at the Energy Theater. It was so huge, it had taken minutes for him to drive around it in search of a parking space. People weaved around cars, wearing *Executioner* shirts and hats. Paul barely missed some guy walking around, trying to sell overpriced T-shirts. Brian and Dominic pulled into an empty space, barely beating another car. Headlights had just started to come on in the deepening twilight. "How long do you think we have until it hits?" Leslie asked.

Paul studied the oncoming thunderstorm again as he parked next to the Buick. It was still far away enough to make out the individual folds in the cloud and the yellow light reflecting off it in the setting sun. "I'm guessing we have an hour before it gets here. If it gets here. That'll be long enough to make Brian and Dominic think we're going into the concert. Are Janelle and Gary waiting yet?" Leslie shrugged. "If they're here and I'm here at the same time, that might be what's causing the problem. We should meet them outside of the city instead. Man, I shouldn't have even come here." A flash of anger raced through him. His Outbreaker status had taken almost

everything from him. His family. His home. Even his ability to attend the concert he'd been looking forward to for months. Oklahoma City was not the place to even risk an Outbreak. Too many tall buildings all around them, shining in the last of the sun. Too much traffic on the roads. Too many people who could be hurt--or worse.

"Oh, Paul, I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I told them to meet us here before we figured this all out." Leslie snuggled up to him, resting her cheek on his shoulder. "I'll find another hotspot and send them another email. Tell them to head away. Maybe the storm will stop, and you can still see the concert."

He couldn't be mad at her. None of this was her fault. In fact, she had saved him from something far worse than this. "Don't blame yourself. But let's try that. I still think we should get out of the city after you send the message. I don't think the arena has any wireless hotspots, though. Would it?"

Brian knocked on his window. "Hello? You coming? It starts in ten minutes!"

"Yes. Go ahead without us. We'll be right behind you." It was a lie, but he couldn't pull his friends into this, even slightly. If Tanner's joke had nearly gotten him killed, what would Andrina and Thomas Curt do to Brian and Dominic? He could catch up with them afterwards. Say he and Leslie had to sit somewhere else during the concert, and then buy them dinner to apologize. The storm would be done and past by then.

But what would they do after that? Paul couldn't just move in with them. Too dangerous.

Dominic waved as the two of them weaved around cars and towards the entrance, where a line of people squeezed itself into the building. Paul wished he was with them, worried about nothing more than finding a seat.

Leslie took his sleeve, interrupting his thoughts. She pointed to a sign advertising a restaurant inside the arena. "I'll try that. That might have a hotspot." She gathered the Netbook. "It'll also give me a chance to see if Janelle's waiting at the entrance. I told her to meet us there. If she's there, I'll grab her and Gary and tell them we need to go."

"Don't take more than ten minutes." The storm cloud loomed a bit larger to the west, growing darker against the sun. It wasn't going to miss the city. Paul started the van. "You know what? I'll drive you to the front. It'll save time. I might have to park back out farther, but I'll sit on top of the van so you can see me." Once Leslie came back out, it would be easy to get back on the freeway and get ahead of the storm.

It was difficult getting Leslie anywhere close to the entrance due to all the people still trying to get in, but still faster than having her walk. Paul shoved a hundred dollar bill in her hand in case she got bothered for admission, cursing himself for wasting the money, but it was an emergency. At least the lines were much shorter, allowing Leslie to vanish through the turnstiles within half a minute. He would have gone with her, but he couldn't leave the van here. It might get towed, leaving them no escape. And there was a cop car parked against the side of the building. If they'd caught his father, they might be searching for him to ask questions. They'd have his license plate number for certain.

Paul went in search of a parking space, cursing each filled-up row he encountered. Thousands upon thousands had showed up to see *Executioner*. It might even be a sold-out show. At last he found a spot near the edge of the parking lot and swung in, scrambling out the door and to the top of the van. It left a decent view of the front entrance. As soon as he saw Leslie coming out those doors, he could just drive to her and pick her up.

A low rumble, almost inaudible, met his ears.

Paul shifted on the hot surface of the van, feeling oddly exposed. The storm still had a long way to come, but the hourglass was slowly draining. Five minutes must have passed already, and no redheaded figure was coming out of those doors. She only had a few left to spare, and they had to leave.

He was so focused on watching the doors that he didn't hear the thumping behind him until someone grabbed hold of his shirt from behind and yanked him up.

Paul gasped for air as he rose to his feet. The sea of cars spun as a figure barged in front of him, a blond-haired guy about his age wearing such an intense scowl that the brown and black in his eyes were swirling.

Another Outbreaker. Out here. Attacking him. No, two. Someone had him from behind.

The mayor's sons. They'd found him.

Robert--or was it Ronnie?--growled and hauled off.

Crushing pain exploded in Paul's stomach. He doubled over, gasping for air. The world dimmed to a ghostly gray color. There was no way he could straighten up. Or breathe.

"Don't hurt him too badly," another voice cut in as if through water. "Bring him down. Quickly. Open the back doors."

Something creaked somewhere. Another rumble of thunder. Paul's feet dragged against the surface of the van, making high-pitched squeals that matched the pain throbbing through his gut.

"We can stick him in the trunk," one of the twins protested.

"I won't have him suffocate. He's too valuable," a third voice, this one female, cut in, sharp and cold as a surgical knife. "Van. Now. Thomas, grab the cuffs."

No.

Paul's feet hit the concrete, and the pain cleared enough to let him move, to let him look up at his captors.

Thomas Curt, shifting through the trunk of his silver sedan, which he'd parked right behind Paul. Andrina, holding up a magazine which was open to a dog-eared page advertising the *Executioner* concert, the dark gray in her eyes matching the color of the storm approaching behind her.

The world seemed to stop.

His *Rolling Stone* magazine. The same one she'd paged through on their way to Mobley. She had paged through it right after they'd picked her up from the prison. He'd forgotten. The Mobley cops must have searched his house when they arrested his dad and uncle. They'd figured out everything. It was because of Andrina and Thomas Curt that the storm was coming, not Janelle and Gary. They'd brought it with them.

Paul had no chance to speak. The twins dragged him back, over the threshold of his van, along the carpet inside the back. Metal jingled somewhere. Thomas Curt climbed in after them, sitting on Paul's legs, leaving him unable to move. He could smell the dirt on someone's shoes. It was three against one.

"Cuff him to the seats," he ordered his sons.

"Wait--" Paul started, struggling to sit up and gasping for breath. Another rumble of thunder came, louder now. He couldn't stay here. And they might find Leslie. "Let me up!"

A cold metal ring closed around his wrists, then snapped shut somewhere else. Then another, and another. How many cuffs were they putting on him? "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?" the mayor demanded, the black spots in his eyes so dark they seemed bottomless. "You hid someone who's dangerous to

Mobley. You and your father both. Where is she?"

"I don't know! And she's not dangerous. Do anything to her and I'll kill you!" Paul tugged at the cuffs binding him to the seats. His world turned red. He already wanted to murder them for Yaslett. For Tanner. And now, his dad. Mobley must have them in custody.

The cuffs held, even against his Outbreaker strength. He could feel at least four around each wrist. It would take too long to break through so many.

"We don't have time to worry about her. She's probably in the arena," Andrina said from behind him. "Thomas, we clear the area. Now."

The mayor turned. "But what if your daughter is here? We need her tonight. If Leslie's here, then Janelle might be--"

"She will be fine. Tornadoes can't hurt Tempests. Her friend, on the other hand--"

"You leave her alone!" Paul shouted so loud his throat burned.

"Get out and shut the door. No one's going to hear him out here," Andrina ordered. "Well, until he has his Outbreak. Then *everyone's* going to hear him."

Thomas Curt and his sons backed out of the van, leaving enough space for him to see Andrina standing there, facing the Energy Theater where twenty thousand people were gathering at this very moment.

With a sickening twist in his insides, Paul understood what she meant.

They'd chained him here so he could hurt or kill those twenty thousand people. Brian. Dominic.

Leslie.

"No!" Paul thrashed against the cuffs, kicking at Thomas Curt. "You can't! You *can't*!"

His shouts were lost on them. "Got his keys, Ronnie? Good. He's not going anywhere." The mayor faced him again, smiling. "We'll return for you when you're finished. You're too powerful to waste."

Thomas Curt slammed the doors to the van, sealing him inside.

Chapter Eighteen

Leslie felt her heart race as she rushed back out of the arena, pushing past some last-minute concert-goers and past the turnstiles. No Janelle. No Gary. They must not be off their flight yet, or they were still at the airport. The restaurant inside hadn't given the Netbook any signs of a hotspot. She would have to wait until later to contact them, or find a pay phone. But right now, they didn't have the time. She must have been inside for seven or eight minutes, searching for her friend. That was eight minutes closer the storm had gotten.

Gray and black filled the western sky. Mugginess clung to her skin. A distant flash of lightning lit the clouds. A low rumble of thunder followed almost ten seconds later. How many miles did it mean the storm was away? She'd known how to count that back in elementary school, but she didn't stop to do the math in her head.

Paul said he'd be sitting on his van, waving to her.

He wasn't. Nor was he driving over to pick her up. Surely he would have been watching the door.

The sea of vehicles stretched out in front of her, and the gray van wasn't anywhere among the closer rows. Had he left? No. Paul wouldn't leave

without her, especially since the storm wasn't even here yet. Something was very wrong.

But it was getting close. If they didn't leave within fifteen minutes, it might be too late.

"Paul?" She broke into a run, past rows of parked cars and past a few stragglers headed into the Energy Theater. A cheer erupted from the building behind her. The concert had started. "Paul!"

Five minutes. Ten minutes. A black van. A gray van, but not Paul's. A gray SUV. She might have taken too long. Maybe he really had left. But she couldn't be sure.

Another rumble of thunder. Closer. Low, dark clouds started to roll over her head, changing shapes and appearing and disappearing like wisps of dirty smoke. How many minutes had she been running through the parking lot? Too many.

"Paul!"

Lightning flashed so close she could see the bolt against the darkness behind it. Another crack of thunder shook the air. There was very little time.

A raindrop fell on the top of her head and a wind kicked up, blowing her hair in her face. Rubbery panic took over her limbs. She could run back into the building, just in case something was about to happen. It was reinforced with concrete. But it also had a dome roof that could be ripped off, and all the people under it could be--

"Where *are* you?"

A new sound echoed over the parking lot, a low one that grew higher in pitch as it got louder, a scream that she'd heard several times back home during storms just like this.

A siren.

Leslie's heart felt crushed. Was it too late? Paul might already be having his Outbreak. She searched the clouds around her. Nothing suspicious yet. Then she remembered that they sometimes issued the warnings for even the potential of a tornado. There might still be time.

Rain blasted down, soaking her clothes in a freezing cold. Its roar nearly drowned out the siren. Curtains of it grew thicker around her in seconds, but not quickly enough to hide one of the vehicles parked on a far row--Paul's gray van.

* * * * *

Paul had never heard one before, but the sound was unmistakable: a siren wailing somewhere in the city, ebbing and growing in sound over the beating of the rain on the roof of the van.

A tornado siren.

He swore and tugged at the cuffs again. He'd gotten two to snap off in the past ten minutes, but there were several to go. Pain dug into his forearms, but he ignored it. A third chain snapped, giving his left arm a bit more movement. The cuffs weren't meant to keep him here forever. They were only meant to slow him down, enough so he couldn't escape the storm.

And his van keys were gone. The twins had taken them. Paul was stranded here.

Rain kept beating down on the van. Thoughts raced through his head. He didn't feel woozy yet, but he would. Very soon. If he broke the rest of the cuffs, he could run inside the Energy Theater. If he was in there when he had his Outbreak, at least he wouldn't be able to hit that building. The concert goers would be safe at least. But everyone else--

"Paul? You in there?"

A voice. A beautiful voice. Leslie.

"I'm in here! Open the back door!"

The back doors clicked open, letting in a torrent of rain. Leslie crawled in with it, soaked from head to toe. Her red hair stuck to her head, dripping on him. "Paul!" She wrapped her arms around him. "You're still awake!"

"They followed us. Cuffed me here." He pulled again, to be rewarded with another snap. Paul glanced to see two cuffs still on his right arm, one on his left.

The siren continued to wail away, urging him to hurry.

"You've only got a couple more. Where's your keys? I'll drive." Leslie fished in his pockets, voice rising several octaves. "Where's your keys?"

"They took them!"

The beating grew louder on the van. Leslie glanced at the windshield. Paul followed her gaze as best he could. Small chunks of ice slid down the glass. Hail. The storm was moving fast. His father had always told him the best chance to have an Outbreak was at the back of the storm, after the hail had passed.

Paul yanked at the last two cuffs, but this time, his arm pulled weakly against them. Heaviness crept over his body, worming its way under his eyelids and forcing a yawn to escape his throat. Near him, Leslie scraped her hands along the floor, searching for any keys that might have been dropped. It was futile. The twins had taken them.

The first electric pulses started to race through his legs, paralyzing them. He wanted to scream. Pound his fists on the floor.

It was done. There was nothing he could do. He was about to become the slaughterer of thousands. He didn't deserve Leslie. Even her kiss couldn't hold him here. He really *was* a monster.

"Leslie," he got out through the despair weighing down his insides. "It's too late. It's happening. I'm sorry. *I'm sorry!*"

She froze, stiffening and staring at him with those beautiful green eyes. They were starting to rim with tears. "Paul, don't give up." She sucked in a breath and let it out as his eyelids began to droop, threatening to take him away from her and towards the arena as a whirling column of death. "Paul...I think...I think there's a way to stop this."

* * * * *

Leslie's stomach turned with the horror of what she had to do.

She couldn't. *Couldn't*. But there were no other choices. Twenty thousand lives depended on it. They had no keys to the van. Paul still lay there, chained, no longer struggling. The black flecks in his eyes turned to bottomless pits. He had a minute at most before he took his other form.

"Leslie, stay with me. I can't hurt you here," Paul managed, voice tired and weighted down with defeat. The coming Outbreak was forcing his eyes shut, hiding the black flecks within. "Tell Brian and Dominic's family I'm sorry."

"Don't talk like that!" She slapped his cheek. His eyes flew back open as he gazed at her, the black of his pupils molding into brown. It was a temporary fix, because they started to close again. "I won't let this happen. We can stop your Outbreak. Give me your breath."

Paul blinked and stared up at her. The color in his eyes swirled and deepened. It was close. "No. I won't turn you!"

"Please!" She shook his shoulders, trying not to look at his eyes, trying not to think about what she was about to become. If she did, she might

back out and thousands would die. "It'll drain your powers and stop you from having Outbreaks for months."

"Leslie, *no!*"

Outside, the hail stopped, leaving only the sound of the siren wailing outside. The calm before--

Paul's eyes slid shut.

"Paul! I'll never forgive you if you don't!"

His eyes opened once again, only halfway this time, but enough to show the maelstrom inside, swirling with rage. She was staring into something no longer human. No longer the Paul that she loved.

A screaming wind filled her head, growing deafening in less than a second.

A desperate yes.

Leslie leaned down and pressed her lips to Paul's.

It was nothing like their last kiss. Their mouths opened, and the screaming filled her whole world, paralyzing her. She could taste rain. Dust. Spring and summer. Muggy afternoons. They filled her lungs, spreading to her fingers and toes, suffocating and invigorating at the same time.

Paul...

He released her, and the storm's grip broke. Silence replaced the howl in her head. Leslie fell back, the strength gone from her body, as Paul sat up next to her, eyes solid. A chain snapped as he broke his arm away from the seat, leaning over in time to catch her before she hit the floor. The ceiling of the van tilted around her. She was passing out.

"Leslie!" Paul hugged her close with his free arm as darkness closed in, the distant siren screaming at her that she'd just made the biggest mistake of her life.

Chapter Nineteen

She woke to the sound of a heartbeat. A strong, but nervous, heartbeat thrumming against her ear.

Paul's.

No siren wailed outside. No emergency vehicles blew their horns. No one cried and ran around outside, searching for lost loved ones.

Her body trembled, like she'd just recovered from a long illness. Leslie forced her eyes open. She was sitting up. Paul had his arm--no, both arms--around her, warm and safe. He'd freed himself, and his eyes had no sign of swirling rage in them.

"Take it easy." He gave her a smile, but it seemed forced, like the real Paul was in the process of getting the world's most painful shot. "I think you might be shaky for a little while."

"Did...did it work?" She had to know.

He looked out the van's back window, to the red glow of the setting sun. The storm had passed. "Yes. The arena's still there."

They'd done it. The Energy Arena was safe. No bloodbath. Paul's friends would make it home. But she couldn't smile, not even with Paul holding her close and this nightmare averted.

"Paul," she asked, meeting his gaze again. "How long was I out?"

"About fifteen minutes." He wouldn't look right at her, she noticed.

She swallowed and coughed. "Am I--" Her throat locked up before she could finish.

Paul held her closer, kissing her forehead. His words trembled. "I swear, I'll never forgive myself. I'll make this up to you, Leslie, if it takes the rest of my life. I'll make sure what happened to my mom never happens to you."

His words settled inside her like a stone. Tremors raced through her limbs, and they had nothing to do with fatigue. It was done. There was no going back. But she couldn't break down now. Paul must feel worse than she did. She'd made him do one of the last things he ever wanted to do to her. "This isn't your fault. I made you do this. If it's anyone's, it's mine." How would she explain this to her mother? How could she even go home like this? It might be years before she could live in a town or a city again, if at all. "Guess I'd better get used to the boondocks, right?"

Paul stared at the carpeting on the van's floor. "It could be months before you even start having any Outbreaks. Same with me. We've got time to figure this out."

Leslie needed to get out of the van. Away from those words. They didn't apply to her. She was just regular Leslie, not some--

"Paul, I need air."

She kicked the van's door open, surprised at how easy it swung out. The evening air, cooler after the storm, washed over her skin as she staggered to the pavement.

"Leslie, are you sure you can stand?" The van lurched as Paul climbed out after her, not bothering to close the door. His arm wrapped around her middle, holding her up. "Well, I guess you have to. Andrina and Thomas Curt are coming back soon to get me, and I don't think we need to be out here." All the noises around her--the cars rolling through the intersection, the birds chirping in the last of the light--all sounded amplified, like her brain couldn't process anything anymore.

All she could remember about her walk through the parking lot was Paul's arm around her, supporting her. Without it, she would have toppled to the pavement. Paul must have found a way inside the arena without being stopped, because when she looked up next, they were standing in a lobby overlooking an enormous bowl of seats and a concert stage decorated with fake guillotines, maces, and medieval torture devices. But there wasn't a band performing on it, and it seemed like everyone was standing up, milling around the balconies and the aisles between seats.

Thousands of people. Thousands of lives, all floating around her. Leslie had never seen so many. She stood taller to take in the scene, enough so that Paul's grip on her could loosen.

"What--?" Paul started, staring at the scene.

"Where the hell have you been?" Two guys cut through the crowd around them. Brian. And Dominic, trailing close behind. Leslie barely paid attention. "You missed the opening."

"Um..." Paul started next to her.

"And the evacuation," Dominic added. "It was crazy. Right after the first song they turned all the lights on and told us all over the intercom to get down to the lower level. I guess there was a tornado warning. They only let us come back up ten minutes ago. People were freaking out. You could hear the hail hitting the roof."

"I...I waited it out in the van," Paul said, shifting next to her.

"Bad idea, man." Brian glared at him. "You would've been better off laying flat on the ground. Or coming in with us in the first place. Well, at least you didn't miss half the concert. We saved you guys some seats."

"And we can actually see this without nearly dying this time," Dominic said. "Man, that would suck if we were just sitting there watching the

concert, and some tornado just rips off the roof and starts impaling people with boards and throwing them--"

"I have to go use the bathroom," Leslie said, separating from Paul and heading to the door marked *Women*.

She cut through the thinning crowd as the arena lights dimmed behind her. The door flew open as she rammed into it, barely missing a girl with red-streaked hair who was rushing out. There were mirrors here, and Paul couldn't follow.

Her hair hung in strings along the sides of her face, half-dry. The freckles lining her cheeks had taken on a darker color against the paste that was her skin.

And her eyes.

Brown, flecked with pure black.

Her chest exploded with panic. Leslie staggered back, hit a wall, and started to slide down as her legs gave out. An uncontrollable sob burst from her throat. She was no longer human, and never would be again. And one day, maybe in a few months, maybe in a year, she would have to--

A knock sounded on the bathroom door. She ignored it.

A roar from the crowd as the concert started again.

Another knock.

It had to be Paul. Paul, who was no doubt going through as much pain as she was, if not more. She'd forced him to do the same thing his father had done to his mother.

Leslie stood. She could--and would--have her cryfest later when she found some solitude. Now wasn't the time. If Paul saw her like this, it would kill him even more than he'd already died.

She flushed a toilet to hide her real purpose for ducking in here, wiped the moisture from her eyes, and returned to the world outside. Cheering

subsided as flames belched onstage and beams of light swung through the air. A guitar riff shook the floor under her feet.

Paul caught her as she staggered over the threshold. "You okay?" he asked. His brown-and-black eyes were soft, relieved, and terrified at the same time, but solid. Paul was safe from having Outbreaks for a while to come.

But when would she have her first? And where? "Yes. I think so."

The look he gave her said he knew she was lying. "I'm sorry it came down to this, Leslie. We'll work something out. I know. Lame thing to say."

"Paul, it's not like you knew this was going to happen."

He stared down at the floor, hair shielding his face from view. Shame seemed to be pulling him towards the ground. "I didn't. But I should have."

"Stop blaming yourself," she shouted over the music. The world around her started to blur again. The tears and the heaving sobs were coming despite her efforts to hold them back. "If it's anyone's fault, it's mine."

Paul straightened up and tightened his grip around her, forcing her to do the same. "Look at all this," he shouted over the music, facing the arena and the thousands packed into every available seat. "All these people are still alive because of what you did. I want you to keep that in mind for the rest of the night, and for the rest of your life."

* * * * *

They made their way to the balcony, close to where Brian and Dominic were sitting. Paul had suggested they stay for the rest of the concert, though she'd barely heard.

"Andrina and Thomas Curt are probably out there," he explained. "We should leave with the crowd."

"I agree." She had a feeling she wouldn't drop off Andrina's hit list because of her transformation. If anything, her stopping Paul's Outbreak would infuriate her more. Or worse, she might shift the same attention she'd given Janelle and Kenna over to her. Since Paul had turned her, what kind of Outbreaker would she be? The worst kind? Like the one who must have visited her city so many decades ago?

She chased the thought away and focused on *Executioner* doing a song about the end of the world. The lights dimmed to an eerie red and a slow, guttural beat echoed through the arena. The Earth trembled, volcanoes erupted, and tsunamis washed over the coasts. Violent winds swept over the lands. Floods overtook cities. Millions died.

Leslie's hands grew tighter on the handrail. She belonged in that song now, right alongside Janelle and Kenna.

But at least Paul was there, too.

Paul leaned closer to her, enough so that she could feel the heat of his body. It was as if he could sense the shivers of revulsion racing across her skin, and wanted to chase them away. "We also need to stay here to protect these people. Outbreakers can't hurt each other, so I don't think a tornado can hit this building as long as we're in it."

The shivers left, but he was right. Andrina and Thomas Curt might try to finish the job that Paul had failed to do. There was plenty of time left in the concert. It wouldn't take them long to make another thunderstorm appear. All they had to do was be anywhere near each other.

Another rumble of thunder swept over the building. There was definitely a Tempest around, causing this reaction again. She shuddered as a panic swept over her. What did it feel like to have an Outbreak? Tiring?

Like you were going to pass out? But she didn't feel like that. Maybe Paul was right. There was safety from that horror for a while yet.

A new voice cut into her thoughts. "Leslie?"

She'd forgotten. Janelle and Gary were supposed to meet her here. An ache seized her chest. She couldn't let them see her like this.

"Leslie!" A figure bolted out of the darkness, pulling her away from Paul and wrapping her in a hug. She stiffened, aware of the stiff, lavender suit sleeve pushing its way up her neck. Janelle. She had traveled all the way up here to get her out of this mess. How could she tell her best friend that she was too late? "I can't describe how glad I am you got out of that town. That place must have been hell. Did you see my dad again before you left?"

The sobs started to force their way up her throat again, but she swallowed them down through the pain in her chest. "I...I...how do I..."

"Leslie? You're not talking like an auctioneer. Normally I'm the one that listens to you and can't get a word in." Janelle loosened her hug and leveled a look of concern at her.

She tried to turn away, to hide her eyes in the darkness, but a spotlight swept over them as the song ended, highlighting Janelle's storm-gray eyes and certainly, Leslie's own. It was out. Janelle's eyebrows lifted as the dawning horror came over her features.

"Oh, no." The hug returned with a vengeance, so much that she could barely breathe. "Leslie! Who did this to you? I'll murder them. I swear, I will." A hint of a growl crept its way into Janelle's voice. But how was that possible so far from the ocean?

Leslie gasped for breath, all too aware that Paul was standing next to her in the darkness. She could feel the anxiety and the shame rolling off of him, murky and thick. "It was...Thomas Curt," she managed, returning the

hug. "Mobley's mayor. In the parking lot. He's around here, with--" she didn't need to finish, and she couldn't with her throat locking up.

Beside her, Paul drew closer, breathing a sigh that she could hear over the intro to the next song. Somewhere nearby, another voice asked, "You found her?"

Gary.

But she barely took notice. All she could do while he and Paul stared on was lean on Janelle's shoulder and let a silent flood of tears wash out of her like a baby.

* * * * *

Leslie leaned back on the bench as the last song played on the stage below, locking hands with Paul. His presence--and Janelle's--helped to ease the ache inside of her, even if he hadn't spoken much in the past few minutes. She gave his hand a squeeze to tell him that it would all be okay. It was a lie. How could she tell him this would all work out when she was doubting that herself?

Paul returned it and leaned closer as Janelle turned away to stake out the balcony. "Thanks. For not telling her it was me."

"She's nice. Just upset right now." Leslie would tell the truth later, once they had all calmed down. A fight between her best friend and her new boyfriend would only make matters worse. And more awkward, if that was even possible. Paul hadn't said a word to Janelle, and had barely shaken her hand. She checked to make sure Janelle and Gary had stepped out of earshot. They were, talking amongst themselves near the water fountain while Deon stood by and listened. "Paul, make me a deal. I want you to

stop feeling bad about this in exchange for me feeling good that all these people are still alive. Can you do that?"

He smiled. It was a weak smile, but a smile, a real one. "I'll try. You're right. We need to figure out what to do about all this instead of feeling sorry for ourselves." He glanced at Janelle and back. "She looks so much like Andrina."

"Don't tell her that."

Another weak smile. "Didn't plan on it."

"And her boyfriend--Gary. He's a Tempest too?" Paul's eyebrows lowered as he tried to understand.

"Well, yeah. They met right when Janelle found out what she was." Leslie paused to let a group of guys in *Executioner* shirts walk past. "Just so you know, Gary can be a little bit...blunt sometimes. He just tells everything how it is. Don't take offense."

Paul's eyes shot to the side and back to her. "They're coming back."

"Leslie. Paul. Thanks for hiding her, by the way." Janelle leaned down and gave Paul a quick hug as the final cheer erupted from the stands below. He returned it, tense, barely tapping her on the back, but she didn't seem to notice. "We've got to figure out where to go after here. I got Deon to rent a car. We can always find a hotel for tonight. Leslie, you'll want to call your mom."

Her mom. Back home, a place she couldn't return to. "How do I explain this to her? I can't go back there right now."

"She's right," Gary said, pulling Janelle closer. Another crack of thunder sounded overhead. "Certain people know her address. We might have to get her mother to move."

So she wasn't the only one worried about it. Leslie could hide her new status from her mother easily enough--it would just be a matter of colored

contact lenses--but the rest couldn't be ignored.

The crowd started to spill up through the aisles and onto the balcony, vanishing into bathrooms, lining up near the water fountains, and heading out the exit doors. Leslie stood with Paul, leaning against him as they backed up against the wall to avoid the moving bodies. Paul said goodbye to Brian and Dominic, barely audible over the chatter in the arena. Brian slugged him on the shoulder again, smiling, but his eyes betrayed his irritation that he'd spent the whole concert with Leslie instead of them.

Paul pulled Leslie closer. "We should go before the crowd thins too much."

No one protested. She and Paul had stayed here long enough to protect the crowd. Now it was time to protect themselves.

Brian and Dominic disappeared into the crowd ahead. Leslie leaned on Paul as they made their way to the exit, Janelle and Gary leading the way through the river of people. What would she say to her mom on the phone? No excuse would fully cover up for her not being able to go home. And she couldn't explain to her that her best friend was a Tempest, her new boyfriend was an Outbreaker, and now she was one, too. Her mother would freak. And then what? If she somehow got the money, could she even go to college without endangering everyone around her?

The crowd thickened around the door, so much that she couldn't see the back of Gary's head anymore. Paul leaned over and kissed the side of her forehead, chasing those horrible thoughts away for a few seconds. She was headed out those doors to an uncertain future, but at least he, Janelle, and Gary were in this with her.

It was raining outside. Thundering a little, too. Paul tensed next to her, studying the dark sky, blinking against the raindrops. "I don't feel

anything,” he said at last, letting his shoulders slump. “But it still makes me nervous, you know?”

The crowd dispersed around them as people got into cars, headlights came on, and cars started to navigate the maze that was the parking lot. Leslie scanned the lot in front of them for Janelle and Gary.

“Paul,” she asked, a sinking feeling taking over her body. “You see them?”

He scanned the lot, waving again to Brian and Dominic. “No. You?”

“They came out ahead of us.” Every muscle tensed. “They should be here. They wouldn't wander off with everything going on. And they had Deon not too far from them, too.”

She studied the lot in front of them again. A few girls hopped into a car nearby and some guys walked past in a cluster, laughing at some joke. It was almost as if Janelle and Gary had never existed.

The rain poured down harder, splattering on her face, as her heart started to race. “Paul. This isn't right. Janelle wouldn't wander off like this. She's not an idiot.”

A hand clamped down on her shoulder from behind. “Guys.”

Leslie whirled around, dragging Paul with her. Gary stood there, hazel eyes big and darting side to side. Deon stood right behind him, but no Janelle. They'd been holding hands a few minutes ago. She couldn't imagine that they would've separated in that crowd.

“Where's--” she started.

“If I knew, I wouldn't be searching everywhere around here,” Gary interrupted. “One second she was with me, and the next, a couple of guys cut in between us. I haven't seen her since.”

“Where?” Paul asked. His grip tightened on her hand as he joined Gary in searching the parking lot.

“Before we came out.” Deon shook his head. “I got outside first and waited. I saw Gary come out, but no Janelle.”

“Then she's still in the building.” Leslie tugged Paul back towards the door. Her skin felt as if the raindrops were made of ice. “What did those two guys look like?”

Gary shrugged and twisted around to search for her again. “Blond. Fat. Might have been twins.”

Leslie bit her tongue. *The twins.*

Paul swore. Now it was his turn to tug Leslie back towards the door, and she joined him in running against the tide of people still coming out. “We can't let them drag her out of there,” he shouted over the noise. “They'll take her back to Mobley for certain.”

Chapter Twenty

The small car sped down the expressway and out of the city, judging from the buildings and the exits getting farther and farther apart in the darkness outside. Janelle kept her hands clasped together, trying to keep as far as she could from one of those twin boys sitting on one side of her and Andrina on the other. And the blond man who must be Mobley's mayor, driving in the front with his other son.

She wasn't even sure how it happened. One second, she'd been holding hands with Gary, ready to go out in the parking lot, and the next, these twins had shoved themselves between them, breaking her hold and shoving her towards a side door, through a hallway lined with mops, and into this car waiting out at the side of the building. Janelle had yelled for the others,

but it hadn't been any use over the noise of the thick crowd. No Gary or Deon had come through that door after her.

The vial of her ocean water poked at her leg in her pocket as the mayor asked the twins for the fourth time where Paul was, and if they'd seen him. It had helped boost her strength, like Gary had predicted it would. She'd even almost broken away from the twins in that maintenance hallway, but ultimately they'd won. The twins were Outbreakers on their turf. She was a Tempest a thousand miles from hers.

"We didn't see him, Dad. I'm not sure where he could've gone," one of the twins protested.

"He couldn't have gone far," the mayor said. "You should have looked harder. I swear, I can't trust the two of you to do anything."

The twin in the front seat sighed as a roll of thunder swept over the car.

"Janelle--" Andrina started.

"Don't talk to me. Just, don't." There was no way she could face the woman who had killed over eight hundred people in hurricane form alone, had murdered her grandmother, and had *tried* to murder her best friend. Or the man driving in front of her, who had stolen Leslie's humanity away forever.

"Janelle, I'm sorry for forcing you into the car like this. We need you. I need you. We were hoping you'd come to Mobley, but unfortunately it came down to this."

Something flared inside of her. Andrina had *apologized* for the twins dragging her here, and yet she'd kidnapped her before and tried to force her to kill thousands. "It's a bit late for an apology, don't you think? What are you going to force me to do now? And what have you done with my dad?" She was beyond scared at this point. All the fear had left her since she'd

seen Leslie's brown-and-black eyes, only to be replaced by a quiet fury that this monster had forced her way into her life again.

“Your father is fine, Janelle, and will continue to be. He doesn't even know that I'm staying in Mobley, and it'll stay that way for a while. We've placed him in the same apartment complex as the other Tempests. They're all safe, I assure you, safer than they'd be at Alara right now. I don't consider your father a threat now, and definitely won't after tonight. I've moved on with my life.” Andrina nodded up to Thomas Curt, who returned it with a smile. “There's no point in us fighting anymore, not when we're about to be discovered. It's time for us to band together. I regret that I didn't treat you as an equal in the past, Janelle.”

It was a lie. It had to be. Andrina didn't regret anything, or how she treated anyone. She wasn't going to leave her father alone. Not after he'd split with her when Janelle was a baby. Not after he'd attempted to drown her in that cage. “I'm sure you regret killing my grandmother and everyone else, too.”

Andrina stared down at the carpet of the car. “She attacked me, Janelle. I had no choice.”

“Because you were trying to force me into that cage.”

“Back then, Janelle, you didn't know any proper Tempest pride. I think you still don't.” Andrina brushed her two-tone hair from her face. “No, I should not have forced you like that, but time was short and there was little opportunity to have you learn your full potential. With that video going viral on the Internet, you'll know who the real enemy is soon enough. I'm thinking about you, Janelle. I don't want you to get hurt. Not after what almost happened at Yellowstone.” She stared out into the darkness for a second, remembering. “You may think your human friend would never

want to do a bad thing to you, but I thought the same thing about my mother before she learned what my father and I were."

"If you cared about me, you'd get out of my life." Janelle turned away and faced the boy on the other side of her--Robert or Ronnie, she didn't know which one--who shifted uncomfortably like he wanted out of the car. Well, he deserved it. Not to mention, he was one of those pigs who had tried to turn Leslie the first time around.

But why had Andrina referred to Leslie as human when she knew that Thomas Curt had turned her? She had to know that, right? But the mayor didn't correct her. He only cleared his throat and kept driving as the car's engine whined against the rain outside. It had done nothing *but* rain since she'd gotten to Oklahoma City.

After several minutes, or maybe an hour, Andrina responded to her words. "Janelle, after tonight, things will be different between us. No one will ever be able to hurt me or you again."

* * * * *

Paul couldn't go back to Mobley. His father had robbed the Marathon and given up his freedom so that he could have his. Returning would only betray him and his uncle. And yet, he was sitting in the backseat of a rental SUV with Leslie and Gary while their Bahamian driver, Deon, burned rubber merging onto the freeway he'd come down a few hours before.

And yet, he couldn't not help Leslie get her best friend back. If all the things he'd heard about Andrina were true--and he was sure they were given the last week he'd had--then leaving Janelle with her would be the worst thing they could do. He owed it to Leslie, no matter what she said, even if

Janelle was going to hate him when she found out he'd been the one to turn her.

"I still don't understand how they got her out of there without anyone noticing," Gary said, scratching at his chin. Frustration hardened his gaze as he stared at the back of Deon's head. "I'm sure they'll be expecting us. They're not stupid. How are we supposed to get into this town?"

"Drive in," Paul said. "Usually, you can get in okay. It's getting back out that's the hard part. Though I'm not sure what the cops will be doing now that this has come up." Mentioning them made his last memory of his father and uncle snap into his mind, of them riding away on bicycles towards a future behind steel bars. Or worse. Were they still in Mobley? Hopefully, no. He had no way of knowing until he got there.

Leslie shifted next to him. "Well, there's not much else I need to worry about now from the cops, is there? I mean, what else are they going to do to me, right?" Her voice was high, trying too hard to lighten the mood.

"They can force you to work for them," Gary said, bringing the mood right back down again. Leslie had been right about the blunt thing.

Paul hugged her closer as she shifted. He hadn't wanted her to come along, but he couldn't leave her in Oklahoma City, either. Besides, she hadn't given him a choice. Janelle was her best friend since preschool, something she'd reminded him of numerous times back when they were searching the arena.

Yes, he owed her. That fact reared up inside him, squeezing at his chest, every time she glanced at him with those new eyes of hers.

* * * * *

They stopped for gas a town away from Yaslett as the sky lit and flashed in the distance. No one spoke as Deon filled the tank and they all took turns taking bathroom breaks. They would cross the line into Mobley in about an hour, entering whatever Andrina and Thomas Curt had planned for them.

Paul's stomach turned at the sight of the gas station around him, which, ironically, was a Marathon. He was relieved to see it disappear behind them as Deon drove them away from the nameless town and back into the darkness that was the road ahead of them.

The next hour passed too quickly as Deon sped along the state highway. At one point, lightning forked across the sky, lighting up something that looked suspiciously like a funnel cloud in the distance. Paul shook his limbs, making sure no heavy feelings had come over him. They hadn't.

"Is that--" Gary started as the sky lit again, twisting in his seat to look over Leslie and him. At the same time, Deon braked.

"Yes." Paul pulled Leslie down to his shoulder, to hopefully block her view. She didn't protest, but she didn't speak, either. Another, more distant flash gave him a view of the tornado again, a bit bigger and more formed now, black against a yellow-blue. "It can't hurt us. Keep going."

"That's easy for you to say." Gary continued to gawk.

"No, really. It can't even come over here. Not with me--" *and Leslie*, he nearly added, but stopped himself in time, "in the car. We're perfectly safe. From that, at least." From Andrina and Thomas Curt was a different story. The two of them had to know that they were coming, but at least they wouldn't recognize this SUV.

Lights appeared on the horizon, gathered into a small puddle against the darkness. Mobley. They'd arrived.

Leslie stiffened next to her.

"You sure about this?" Paul asked.

"My best friend is in there," she said, staring straight ahead at the place that had once been her prison, and could become her prison again if they weren't careful. His, too. He had no doubt that the twins had also been hunting for him back at the arena. But, for some reason, they'd wanted Janelle even more than him, and he couldn't imagine why. A Tempest wasn't able to do much out here in Oklahoma.

The Mobley Marathon glowed in the darkness. Paul studied it as Deon drove them past, stomach rising into his throat. No tape marked off a crime scene, and all the cop cars had cleared the area. A woman stood there, gassing up her vehicle. It settled the nervous shudders racing under his skin. No tape meant that probably no blood had been spilled there, at least. His father and uncle had left the gas station alive.

But where were they now?

"Well, no cops," Leslie said, straightening up to look around. "I think they might be waiting for us. I'm not sure where they would've taken Janelle, though. Maybe back to their house. Or the Masonic Temple. That's where they took all the Tempests when they first brought them here."

"We can check," Deon said, hitting the brake as they entered downtown. "They were driving a silver car, right?"

"Yes." Paul remembered all too well.

"And is that it?" He pointed and hit the brakes.

The Masonic Temple was lit inside, yellow light pouring out of the windows and forming squares on the grass. In the parking lot sat a lone silver sedan, dark and empty. The front door to the Temple was propped open, enough to illuminate a sliver of concrete in the parking lot.

"Keep going, man," Gary said. "That's an obvious trap if I ever saw one. We've got to park somewhere else."

Deon did. Paul's skin crawled as he stared at the doorway of the Temple. It reminded him of the light he'd seen pouring out of a closet on a scary horror movie he'd seen when he was seven, before his father had thrown out the television. Something about it seemed unnatural against the darkness that was the rest of the town this late at night.

"We can't park too far away from this place," Leslie cut in. "We might need to get away in a hurry. Luckily, I didn't see any cops when we came into town. We should turn the headlights off."

Deon did. "Good idea."

They parked behind the same little market Paul had picked up some stuff from on the first day, in an alley that wasn't in sight of the police station and had two exits out. A dog barked somewhere as they climbed out in silence, closing the doors as quietly as they could. Gary was right. Andrina and Thomas Curt had made this too easy. But a heavy feeling in Paul's gut told him that there wasn't any time to waste. They didn't have time to think out a plan for this, except to go around the front doors of the Temple and try to get in the back.

Deon popped the trunk. "Gary, we'll need to take some of this with us."

He leaned down into the trunk to produce a jug filled with water. Paul couldn't help but stare. "How's that supposed to--"

"It's ocean water," Gary explained as if Paul should know already. "Keeping some of it with us keeps our abilities from being drained completely. It's not perfect, though. Sure didn't help Janelle too much. And you won't need it."

"She was outnumbered," Paul said. "Well, if the twins got her."

Another flash of lightning lit the air, but at least no rain poured down. "And we'll probably be outnumbered, too, if they're expecting us."

Paul stared at his group. Gary and Deon looked ridiculous standing there and holding jugs of water, ready to go into battle. Exhaustion weighed at his own limbs, making him want to collapse to the concrete and sleep right there in the alley. Leslie squeezed his hand from the side, standing taller, putting on that tough act that Paul was sure was hiding how she really felt: like him.

She glanced at him and back to Gary. "Well, they're not expecting me, are they?"

Chapter Twenty-One

There wasn't much noise coming out of the Masonic Temple, just a shadow moving across the open doorway as they approached. Leslie stiffened and fought the urge to turn back and wait at the car, like Paul had wanted her to. But she wasn't plain old Leslie anymore. Like it or not, those days were gone. If anything good was to come out of her new life, it would be helping her best friend, who had risked the same for her at one time.

Paul waved them to the side of the building, and their feet thudded in the grass as they ran. A lone raindrop hit her in the forehead as she watched Paul creep up towards a long window.

"Let me try to see in there. I'm taller," he said, rising on his toes. Leslie held her breath as his eyes darted back and forth, straining to see inside. "There's people standing around. I see Thomas Curt. And a cop. Great. How did I know they were going to be here too?"

"No Janelle?" Leslie asked.

"Don't see her. Maybe they don't have her here."

"I don't believe that." Gary shuffled in to get a look, but the window was too high for him. "Let's cut around to the back. See if there's another door."

Leslie didn't believe that, either. If they had Janelle, they'd hardly be letting her walk around with that door open like that.

There was a back door, and it was clearly locked. Leslie only had to tug on it to realize that. "Looks like it's going to have to be broken," she said, struggling to keep her voice from shaking. "How are we supposed to do that without them hearing us?"

Deon cut in front and took the door handle. "Like this." With a twist, something broke inside the lock with a snap. "Now we wait to see if anyone heard us."

No one seemed to have. Leslie braced herself to run, but after a full minute, no one came to the door. "I think they want us to go in," she said, hoping that someone would come up with a better alternative. But no one did. What were they supposed to do? Call the police? The dispatcher would send the Mobley cops who were just down the street. There was silence as Paul and Gary and Deon stared at each other, no doubt thinking the same thing.

She took a deep breath. *I can defend myself now.* Maybe, even better than Gary and Deon could.

Leslie opened the back door of the Masonic Temple and slowly stepped into a darkened kitchen.

There were still faint smells of the food they must have prepared here on their first day in Mobley, for that meeting where Eric and Thomas Curt had showed that video. A fridge hummed nearby, barely audible over the raised voice of a woman out in the main room.

She strained her ears, but the muffled voice--no doubt Elise's--was barely too far off to make out. So she was here, too. Gary traded a grimace with her and Paul drew closer, his gaze imploring her to go back.

But there was no going back now.

Paul's breath blew on her neck as she drew closer to a second door, a drafty one that must have dated from a few decades ago judging from all the peeling paint. There was a crack between it and the frame, just enough to let her see into the main room and to hear Elise enough to tell what she was saying.

"...if I'd known. This is insanity. We're not sure what we're messing with here." A blur of pink appeared not too far from the door, back turned. Elise was wearing her puppy sweater again, the one that made Leslie think of her encounter at the police station. "How are we supposed to know what an Outbreaker's breath is going to do to a Tempest? It's never been done before. It could be fatal for all we know. I understand our species unifying, Andrina. These are desperate times. But I believe that Huracan kept us separate for a reason." She muttered something that Leslie couldn't catch. "If you were still young enough to have children, I would not approve of your current relationship. And besides, aren't you concerned about what this may do to your daughter?"

Gary swore next to her, gripping her shoulder with enough force to hurt. Leslie tried not to flinch as she let the news sink in.

Some Outbreaker was going to give Janelle their breath.

Her thoughts raced. What would that even *do* to a Tempest? Would it even have an effect? Maybe. Maybe not. What would someone with both sets of powers be able to turn into, anyway? A tornado the size of a hurricane? It would be a nightmare, whatever it was.

"Oh, stop touting your Elder Council talk. You're so tied down to tradition," Andrina said from somewhere. "This is necessary, Elise. It's the only way to ensure we're united under strong leaders, and I know that putting the pieces together like this is the answer. I've been seeking it for years. Besides, I'm going first. If I'm harmed in any way, do not give the same thing to Janelle. And if I die--and I'm certain I won't--I expect all of you to defer to Janelle, as she will *then* be the rightful Tempest High Leader. War is still coming, and even she will realize that."

Now it was Leslie's turn to let profanity slip out of her lips. Andrina was going to take the Outbreaker breath first. She crouched down against the door to let Gary and Paul see over her head.

"No, Ma'am. I won't stand for this. I understand many of your points, but this is going too far. How do we know this will even work? There could be more pieces to this for all we know. Huracan was the god of bad weather in general, and that encompasses more than tornadoes and hurricanes."

Leslie got a better view as Elise stepped out of the way to reveal the main hall. There were long tables sitting out, and tied down to one with yellow cables was Janelle, still dressed in her lavender suit. But her best friend wasn't moving or struggling. Her chest rose and fell, but she didn't so much as lift her head to see what was going on. A few officers stood around her, keeping guard, but overall the place seemed pretty empty. This wasn't an event for the public. Not this late at night.

"They must have her sedated," she whispered as Gary brushed up against her to see.

"Great," he muttered, sucking in a breath. "They do. We've got to get in there."

She stared hard at him. He'd been the one insisting this was a trap. Gary shook his head and glanced at Janelle again. Trap or not, they might not have a choice.

"Well, if there are more pieces, I'll find them," Andrina snapped. "Thomas. I'm ready. We can't wait for the kids to get here. I suppose we can find Paul later."

Andrina walked over to a table, lying down on top of it. Thomas Curt appeared in Leslie's view, drawing closer, as if he wasn't sure he wanted to go through with this. Elise took a step forward, but froze as Andrina's glare landed on her. Feet shifted around on the linoleum.

If Andrina managed to get any more powerful, they might never get Janelle out of there.

Leslie reached for the door. She owed this to Janelle after luring her here. They had to move. She nodded to Paul and Gary, who was unscrewing the lid on the jug of ocean water. "The table," he whispered to Deon. "Go for the table."

There was no more waiting. Leslie sucked in a breath, ready to make the second biggest mistake of her life, and shoved open the kitchen door.

Thomas Curt jumped and spun around. Andrina sat up, blinking at her in surprise. Leslie struggled for words, but none came.

She didn't have to speak. Water splashed behind her, bringing a salty smell with it, and a fierce wind blasted through the room as Gary and Deon stared down the table Andrina lay on, shirts dripping with a bit of the ocean.

Paul leapt out of the way and took her arm, trying to hold her down, but it wasn't needed. The wind snapped against their clothes, but she couldn't feel it pushing her at all. It was as if it was making a detour around her and Paul, leaving them standing there together in the storm that was making the fans above her head shake and spin.

No, it was going right for the table Andrina lay on, and Thomas Curt behind it.

No one in the room moved in the blast. Maybe it couldn't affect Outbreakers? The table wasn't immune, though. It went flying out from under Andrina with a horrible screech, ramming into Thomas Curt and sending him staggering back, clutching his arm as she tumbled to his feet. From there, it flew for the line of officers on the other side of the room, tilting until its legs pointed back at Leslie.

There was a crash so loud that she couldn't help but smash her hands against her ears. A pair of blue trousers stuck out from under the table, still. A sick feeling filled her gut. Gary and Deon might have killed that guy.

Paul slapped her on the back. "Your friend," he said, eyes darting to Janelle. "I'll cover your back. Go!"

She did. Janelle lay on the table, tied down, eyes closed. Behind her, Elise screamed and Thomas Curt cried out in pain. She didn't have time to feel sorry for these people. They'd tried to murder Paul's uncle and nearly made him kill thousands at the arena.

"Janelle! Wake up. It's Leslie." Her friend's eyelids fluttered as Leslie shook her shoulders, but didn't open all the way. Drugs. That had to be it. "I'll untie you. Hold on." She was stronger now, right? If Paul had broken those cuffs, could she break these straps? "Open your eyes. We have to go." Her hands took the first strap, the one across her stomach, and pulled as she kept yelling at Janelle to wake up.

It snapped. Janelle groaned and opened her eyes halfway. To the side, Paul shoved back Thomas Curt and Gary was in a wrestling match with one of the cops. Andrina struggled to get off the floor. Several other officers

were gathered around their fallen comrade, eerily silent. Rain beat against the flat roof.

Leslie grit her teeth and broke the second strap in her hands, freeing Janelle's legs. "Sit up!"

"Huh?" her friend managed. It was better than unconsciousness, but not much. Janelle needed to walk. Run, maybe. And fight. That gave her an idea. "Hold on!"

A half-filled jug of ocean water sat near the kitchen door, amazingly still upright after the blast of wind. She bolted across the room, foot going out from under her for a terrifying millisecond as she ran across a stray puddle.

Then, a hand wrapped around her ankle.

Leslie went down, pain surging through her elbow. A glance back at a head of brown hair growing into blond confirmed it: Andrina had tripped her, scowling. She was going for the jug, too.

She wouldn't let her get it. Leslie shook her leg, breaking her grip and sending a kick into her shoulder. Andrina drew back and sat on her knees, rubbing her shoulder and squeezing her eyes shut. Leslie turned and wrapped her hand around the handle as someone's shoes squeaked on the linoleum.

Then, she felt something cold push against the back of her head.

Her stomach knew what it was before her brain did. She swallowed bile and froze, hand tightening around the handle of the milk jug as if an electric current were rushing through her arm.

The sounds of struggle stopped, leaving a heavy silence. Janelle muttered something from the table she must still be lying on.

"Up," a gruff voice behind her ordered. "You heard me. Now. Up!"

She had forgotten that there were armed cops in here. Leslie didn't have to ask what he had at the back of her head. It made that sick terror rise up

in her all over again, that same terror she'd felt when Andrina's henchman, Kevin, had her restrained in front of Janelle, ready to snap her neck if her best friend didn't do what she said.

Leslie swallowed. Her throat was dry. Her teeth hurt. But she rose, releasing the jug of ocean water that would surely make Janelle snap out of it and help.

Janelle still lay on the table, free of her straps but unable to do anything more than raise an arm, which flopped back down onto her stomach. Paul stood almost opposite her, staring on in horror, his pupils dilated so much that it seemed to be squeezing the brown and black from his eyes, pushing the Outbreaker out of him. Thomas Curt stood next to him, seemingly oblivious that Paul was still there. His gaze was focused on the blue trousers of the unlucky officer sticking out from under the fallen table. Gary coughed somewhere to her side. Even the pink of Elise's sweater moved somewhere in her peripheral vision. Deon must be somewhere behind her, but Leslie didn't dare turn her head.

She was the victim again. Paul's breath hadn't changed that after all.

"Do not shoot her," Andrina ordered, voice booming a few feet behind her. "I'd like to deal with her personally after my procedure. I've got no need for her anymore. Thomas, where were we? I prefer that they watch this."

The mayor cleared his throat. A greenish tint had come over his cheeks in the time he'd spent staring at the fallen officer. "It's a shame you didn't accept our gift," he managed, barely glancing at Leslie. "You would have enjoyed a good life here in Mobley. Now you've left us no choice but to deal with you in a different way. Sad, really." He cleared his throat as Andrina sat down on the floor next to him, stretching out on her back with her gray eyes cast lovingly up towards him.

They didn't know that Paul had turned her. In the scuffle, no one had really noticed the supposedly-still-human redheaded girl running in. Neither Gary nor Deon spoke up to correct the mayor and she didn't think that revealing the truth would get the cop to remove the pistol from the back of her head. This might be an advantage...she could move without getting shot.

And move, someone needed to do. Thomas Curt kneeled down next to Andrina, the color in his eyes starting to churn and spin around each other, just like Paul's had done back in the van. A faint feeling washed over her as the rain outside poured down harder and a fresh crack of thunder shook the building, as if anticipating the merger. Why couldn't the cop behind her fall over and have an Outbreak? Or Thomas Curt?

"Don't try anything," the officer reminded her. But his words were lost as Thomas Curt's lips met Andrina's.

There was no roar. Not that she could hear, anyway. Andrina's whole body seized up like she'd touched a live wire and couldn't let go, just like Leslie's had as Paul delivered his breath to her.

It was done. It was working. Thomas separated from her, gasping for air, bending over with his hands on his knees. Andrina let out a groan and slumped down into unconsciousness. Her chest rose and fell in as the rain roared overhead. Thomas Curt slipped his arms under her and lifted her head to his chest. She was still alive. Recovering, just like she had in Paul's arms.

Paul stared down at the floor, refusing to look at the sight before him. Leslie tried to nod at him, to tell him it was going to be okay, but he couldn't see her. *Would* it be okay? She might not leave here alive, and Paul would need to go on without her, even if he made it out of here. Depending on what happened with Andrina, it might not be possible. Her

throat constricted. She wished she could run to Paul and wrap her arms around him. If these were her last moments, she wanted to spend them in comfort, and she wanted Paul to know that she felt no different about him now.

A flash of lightning lit the outside in electric blue, a deafening crash of thunder followed a nanosecond later, and the power went out.

In the darkness, Andrina groaned. Leslie blinked a bluish-gray afterimage from her eyes, but it wouldn't disappear. Strange. It almost seemed as if Andrina were bordered in the color itself.

She squinted. It wasn't an afterimage. The grayish-blue glow hugged her body, rippling like waves and bending under an imaginary wind.

A curse came from Gary.

Thomas Curt made a strange noise and let go of Andrina, backing away in shock.

Even the officer behind her lowered his pistol from the back of her head.

Leslie had seen something like this before, back in Hawaii. An orange glow around Kenna the night she'd matured into--

"Run," Leslie managed, certain she'd fall to the floor. But something inside of her, some ancient instinct, refused to let her move.

The former Tempest High Leader opened her eyes as the lights flickered back on, stinging Leslie's own and forcing her to squint. The glow seemed to disappear in the brightness of the room, like the green light of those solar system stickers Leslie had on her door at home, but she was focused on something else.

Andrina's eyes were no longer gray, nor had they turned the brown-and-black of an Outbreaker. Her irises had gone the strangest bluish-gray color Leslie had ever seen, the same color as the glow that had been there in the

darkness, and they seemed to shimmer and roll from within like twisting storm clouds and rippling ocean at the same time.

Andrina had brought two pieces together that had been apart for hundreds of years, to form a whole that the world hadn't seen since the days of bloody sacrifices and rising pyramids.

A new goddess had been born.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The entire room felt electric, making the hairs on Paul's arms stand on end. He exchanged a glance with Leslie, who stood in front of the stunned officer, apparently unaware that he no longer had his pistol pointed at the back of her head. He wanted to yell at her to run, but he couldn't do that without alerting the creature rising from the grip of Thomas Curt.

Whatever Andrina had become, it was no longer a Tempest, and it wasn't an Outbreaker.

Leslie's freckles darkened as she shot him a desperate glance. She seemed to know more about this than he did, and it wasn't a good sign. Maybe he could create a diversion so she could run out of here. But, he knew, she wouldn't leave without him, or without Janelle, who continued to try to sit up on her table.

"It worked," Thomas Curt said in wonder, rising beside Andrina. He was trembling, Paul noticed. From exhaustion or fear? He couldn't tell. "How are you feeling?"

"Better than I ever have," she said. Her voice had changed, somehow. Not louder, but more...penetrating, coming from outside and inside his

head at the same time. Deon and Gary winced on the other side of the room, and Elise's eyes darted side to side as if she wasn't sure where it was coming from. Andrina turned to take in the room around her, at the scattered cops, at Elise, and at Deon and Gary. She didn't bother to look at Leslie. That was good. The less attention on her, the better.

"There's nothing to fear from me." She smiled, but it was a predator's smile. "There is nothing to fear from the coming war. The danger is about to pass, and all of us will live in safety. When Huracan made Tempests and Outbreakers all those hundreds of years ago, I'm sure he didn't anticipate the dangers our kinds would one day face in the human world." She rubbed Thomas Curt's shoulder and began to pace around the room, passing Paul and making a slow circle around the cops, Gary, Leslie, and Deon. Feet made to shuffle away as she passed, but she didn't seem to notice. "Now, we are slowly being discovered. Gary turned back to human form in front of a small crowd once, and then--"

"Because you made me turn back in front of Janelle so you could find her," he butted in.

It was brave of him. Paul had to admire that.

Andrina only smiled. "I didn't expect her father to have taken her to a shelter," she explained patiently, as if Gary were a five-year-old. "Then, we had the most recent incident with that video. It's my promise that I will remove Tempests and Outbreakers from this threat forever."

Something heavy seemed to settle inside of Paul. This sounded ominous, and he wasn't sure why. She wouldn't kill them, would she? No. Andrina liked to use people like them too much.

But Andrina had a strange glint in her eyes as she walked around the small crowd of officers, not bothering to glance at the fallen one under the table. It was the glint of someone who thought they had won. A slight

tingle ran over Paul's skin as she neared him, smiling. It was nothing like the tingle he got when Leslie had kissed him.

"Paul," she said, her voice exploding inside his head and invading his ears at the same time. "I would like to offer you something. A reprieve." The almost-invisible clouds in her eyes churned as rain continued to beat down on the Masonic Temple outside. Andrina glanced up at the ceiling, impatience growing over her features. All at once, the noise stopped. Had she actually made it stop somehow? The thought was insane, so Paul shoved it back and took a step away. He immediately regretted it. It was a show of fear. But Andrina didn't seem to notice as he gaze landed back on him and she spoke again, her voice clearer in the new silence. "I don't know how you avoided having an Outbreak at the Energy Arena, but now that the concert is over, I would like to make you a deal. Now, you see what you are capable of. You can stop having Outbreaks for several months if you do this one thing for me. Simply give my daughter your breath, and the reprieve is yours."

Behind Andrina, Leslie stared at him. Paul didn't dare meet her gaze. Instead, he kept his on the woman in front of him, trying not to get sucked into those eyes.

"J...Janelle?" he asked, sneaking a glance at the table she still lay on. She seemed to have given up and fallen back into unconsciousness.

"Only the best Outbreaker breath for my daughter," she continued. "I was counting on you to show up here, Paul, ever since we learned that you were driving Leslie to Oklahoma City. It is for the best. Janelle will rule with me, and we will no longer have anything to fear."

Paul's throat went dry as he forced himself to look at the floor. An awful feeling swept over him, like he was just a pawn in her game all along and that she knew everything about him, but there was one thing that

Andrina didn't know, one secret that was still his. He already had that reprieve, and he didn't think he could give someone else his breath anytime soon. She couldn't manipulate him now.

Not that he would. Although he'd only just met her, he was pretty sure that Janelle wouldn't want to become whatever Andrina was now.

But this could buy them some time, if he did this right.

"Your decision?" she pressed.

He spied the jug of ocean water on the floor, forgotten next to the kitchen door. Only a couple of birds chirped outside as gray light filtered in through the windows. Early morning. Andrina really *had* dismissed that storm, like she was in command of the weather. Like she was--

"Okay. I'll do it. But only if my friends are allowed to leave."

"I promise, they will be able to leave," Andrina said. "However, you need to meet your end of the bargain first."

No one protested. Leslie kept silent. Even Gary didn't speak. But Andrina didn't seem to notice. She approached Janelle's table, rubbing her arm as if soothing her. Janelle groaned and turned away at her touch, eyes still closed, as if she could sense whatever change had come over her.

"It's okay," Andrina said in a low voice, one that didn't reverberate in Paul's head. "No one will ever be able to hurt you again. I promise."

He would pretend. Put his lips on hers, and hope that someone would do something while Andrina wasn't watching. He owed an apology to Leslie and Gary later, but now wasn't the time to feel awkward. This might be their only chance to do something.

Janelle let out a slow breath, slumping against the table as if accepting her fate.

"Now. Before the sedatives wear off," Andrina ordered, her voice gone from soothing to a thunderous crack booming in Paul's head.

She leaned closer, ready to watch.

Paul sucked in a breath and kneeled down.

The next moment, water splashed over him on its way to Janelle, soaking through his clothes with the smell of the ocean invading his nostrils. Janelle coughed and sprang up from the table, her arm hitting Paul and sending him back.

He slid on the wet floor, falling past someone in a pink sweater on his way to the linoleum. Elise. Out of everyone, she had come to Janelle's aid first.

Andrina whirled around, eyes churning with more anger and power than Paul had ever seen. The air practically sparked, making waves of static electricity fizzle through his hair. But she wasn't focused on him. She'd turned all her anger to Elise, who froze in front of her like a terrified prey animal. Behind her, Janelle scrambled off the table and back towards the crowd, dripping. She shouted something to Leslie and Gary, but it was lost on him as he watched the horror unfold.

"Elise!" Andrina's voice might have made the building shake with its intensity. "I thought you were with us."

She took a step back. The makeup on her cheeks looked orange compared to the pallor of her skin. "I...I am!" she managed. "But not like this. I see where you're going. You want to return to those pre-Tempest days. Huracan was a god consumed by power, and I'm afraid you'll go down the same path. The only reason he passed his torch to us was that no one was worshipping him anymore."

God? Did that mean Andrina had become a goddess?

"You mean the pre-Elder Council days," Andrina corrected her, lowering her voice. "I see what you're saying. In a way, you're right, Elise.

I'll be putting things back to the way they were, the way they *should* be. For your insight, you will be the first to experience it."

Paul begged his legs to move away from whatever was about to happen, but he couldn't. The fizzling electricity in the air seemed to be holding him. No one else in the room moved, either. Elise shuddered on the spot, as if the temperature in the room had dropped fifty degrees. "N...no!"

"Dear," Thomas Curt said, rushing up to Andrina. He seemed like that tiny king at the heels of the evil queen from *Alice in Wonderland*. "What are you planning? Why didn't you tell me about this?" Hurt marred his features as he took her arm.

"You may want to back away for now," she said without casting him a glance. "I will be liberating Tempests and Outbreakers from their human forms, and you will finally be free from the dangers imposed on you. In exchange for your safety, I may call upon you when needed--if a town or city needs to be taught a lesson, for example. Thankfully, this will be an easy process as we have brought many of the world's Tempests and Outbreakers here to Mobley. For that, I thank you."

Paul swallowed as a lightning bolt of panic shot through him.

No.

He imagined, in one horrifying moment, drifting around the world with no body at all, maybe forever, forced to become a whirling column of destruction whenever Andrina wanted, *wherever* she wanted. Never remembering his name again, or the sacrifice his father and uncle had made for him, or Leslie's kiss. This was the fate he had doomed her to as well.

Paul wanted to run for Leslie and carry her out the door if he had to, but he couldn't. All of his muscles had seized up. Janelle and Gary also stood frozen, arms wrapped around each other. Leslie stood smashed into the cop who had been holding her hostage a few minutes ago, unmoving.

Andrina gave no one time to even speak before she lunged forward and planted her palm on Elise's forehead.

The older woman opened her mouth to scream, but it never came. Her form snapped into a wispy gray, keeping the outline of a woman for a second before breaking apart and scattering into the air, swept away by an invisible wind. Paul blinked. But Elise no longer stood there. It was as if she'd been erased from existence.

Thomas Curt backed away, his head flopping on his chest. "D...dear!"

"Oh, don't worry," she said, slowly advancing on the small crowd in front of her. "I'm not going to liberate you quite yet. Officer Chandler. Forward, please."

She was getting close to them now. Close to Leslie. It wouldn't be long before Andrina saw her eyes. Why wasn't she running? Why weren't any of them running? Even Janelle and Gary had frozen by the door, locked in each other's arms. The door outside was right there, still cracked open on the early morning light.

* * * * *

Leslie felt the officer brush past her, his shaky legs carrying him closer to Andrina and those terrifying eyes of hers, as if she was bending his will with her gaze. She could be. Had to be. The electricity in the air could be paralyzing them all. Leslie's own legs seemed to have turned to cement, and next to her, Deon stared on, unmoving. Behind Andrina, even Paul was having trouble. He shook an arm as if trying to break her spell, but she couldn't meet his gaze.

Keep your face down. Keep your face down. If Andrina saw her eyes, it would be all over. Any semblance of a human life, anyway. She'd meet

Elise's fate with a touch to the forehead.

There was no trace of the Elder Council member in the building, not even in the form of gray mist. She'd scattered into the atmosphere above.

"You...you killed her," the officer managed, stopping before Andrina with his gun hanging in his hand. "You're going to kill us all!"

"Relax. She's not dead." Impatience crept into the voice exploding in Leslie's head. "Only back where we all belong. Be happy I'm freeing you from this unnatural state. No one can hurt us ever again."

"I have a family. Kids. We're *people*, Andrina. We're--"

"And you'll see them again soon." She touched her hand to the officer's forehead, and his words died in his throat as he snapped into a tan mist, only to dissipate and fly out the door so fast Leslie wasn't even sure she'd seen it right.

Someone whimpered next to her. Maybe another officer. Maybe Janelle.

Too late, she realized that she wasn't staring at the floor, and that Andrina was advancing once again. The speed of her pace told Leslie that the discovery had happened.

No, she thought, trembling uncontrollably. *No, no no!*

She stared back down at the floor, but the electric feeling overtook her whole body, keeping her rooted to the spot. Andrina's shadow fell over her, blocking out the lights above. "Did I see what I thought I saw?" she asked, each word a step higher into triumph. "Look up at me, Leslie. *Look up.*"

The words were magnets, raising her chin until she was staring into the blue-gray of those irises. She had no control, not in the presence of this new goddess.

"Oh, I see what happened," she said, glancing back at Paul and back at her. "*That's* how he stopped his Outbreak. But don't worry. I'm not

concerned. The Energy Arena wasn't all that important compared to this."

Her lie was out in the open. Not that it mattered. Nothing would matter ever again. Andrina was about to steal the last of her humanity away for good. She wanted to collapse to the floor, but the electricity around her kept her upright.

"What?" Janelle broke in. "Paul, *you* were the one who--"

"This is good. Very good." Andrina clapped her hands together. "You likely gained Paul's prowess as an Outbreaker. I can feel it."

She smiled and raised the palm of her hand towards her. Somewhere, Janelle screamed, unable to move. Leslie could only whimper. It seemed even her lips were glued shut. This must have been how Paul felt back in the van.

"Leslie, *go!*"

Paul's voice, the most beautiful voice in the world, stomped out the tingling that held her in place in an instant. He tackled Andrina from behind, making her fall to the side, so close that her hand barely brushed Leslie's bangs. She hadn't been facing him. His paralysis had broken.

The spell in the room broke as the electricity fell away.

Bodies moved everywhere. The door flew open as officers bolted out, shouting on radios. Janelle lunged forward and took her arm, yanking her towards the door with the strength of a freight train. Shouting molded together in a sea of confusion.

Paul. She couldn't leave him.

Leslie stopped, holding Janelle back. Paul rose from the floor as Andrina fell on her face, his eyes begging her to run. Somewhere, Thomas Curt shouted, "Evacuate Mobley!" He rushed past her, yelling orders lost on her ears.

"Paul!" Leslie wrenched her arm from Janelle's grasp and took his as he scrambled towards her. "Come on!"

She broke into open air, hand locked with Paul's, into the sun starting to peek over the horizon like a fiery half-eye. Thomas Curt ran for the police station, suit flapping around him. Gary pulled Janelle back towards the alley they'd come out of.

And a horrible roar echoed from inside the Masonic Temple as the double doors flew open so fast they came off their hinges.

The electric feeling seized her again, forcing her legs to stop so abruptly Leslie felt like she was going to break in half bending forward. Paul stopped beside her, locking eyes with hers as a figure appeared in the doorway, only feet away. Neither of them could move, and no footfalls came from Janelle and Gary, either. The spell had returned, and now that Paul was back in Andrina's gaze, there would be no breaking it.

Andrina took a step outside, silent, only feet away. Her eyes swirled with a rage so intense, it looked like it might break out of her and consume the world.

"No. Leave her alone!" Janelle begged from somewhere. "I promise I'll do whatever you want. Please."

Her shouts were lost. Leslie stared into the softness of Paul's eyes, hoping that he knew that she didn't regret her decision to take his breath, that she didn't regret anything.

"Goodbye," she said.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Then, there came a scream.

An agonized scream.

Every muscle in Paul's body seized at the sound. It wasn't Leslie's. Or Janelle's, but Andrina's.

She stood frozen in the full brunt of the morning light, shielding her face against its light. Her eyes were shut tight in agony. Her form wavered, snapping in and out of reality like a distant radio station, and her scream pierced every bone in his body like a million knives, rattling him so much that he leapt back, free of her spell once again. Leslie crashed into him, hands over her ears. Her force sent him to the ground, to the concrete of Main Street so hard that a white flash cut across his vision.

Andrina rushed back towards the shelter of the building, but she didn't make it. Her legs fell out from under her as she continued to scream. She shifted to a blur against the backdrop of Mobley and the Masonic Temple where he and Leslie had met, writhing on the ground and sending a small flock of birds into flight.

And then, she was gone from the ground next time he blinked, leaving only an indistinct hint of motion against the orange sky like the trail of a jet. He blinked again as Leslie groaned and sat up next to him. Barely, just barely, he made out a dot shooting for the nearest stack of gray clouds, a thunderhead that looked to be a hundred miles away, before it disappeared into the early morning sky.

Paul flinched, trying to shake away the jabbing pain of Andrina's scream as he sat up beside Leslie, embracing her. He stared at the sky in front of him, trying to process whatever had happened. At last, his brain started to work again, and a thought formed inside him,

The new goddess had made a mistake, dismissing the storm a few minutes ago. It turned out that just like Kenna, who couldn't touch water,

she had a weakness.

Fortunately for them, it was the sun itself.

* * * * *

The only thing keeping Janelle from launching herself at Paul and wrapping her arms around his neck was the fact that he had tackled Andrina and saved everyone--well, almost everyone--in the Masonic Temple from a horrible fate that she would have shared if Leslie hasn't freed her from that table. Instead, she nodded at him as he held Leslie close in the street, hoping that there was still enough of that ocean water on her for her eyes to take on a hint of her other nature. As much as she hated that, now was the time to let Paul know what she was. He should have *understood* exactly what he had doomed Leslie to for the rest of her life. At the moment, she didn't even care about how Andrina had disappeared, fleeing the sun as if it were acid. As long as the skies stayed blue, she wouldn't come back here.

"Janelle, it's okay," Leslie said, moving in front of him. *Why?* Janelle thought. "I asked him to turn me because it drains an Outbreaker's powers for a while. If I hadn't, he would've had an Outbreak and hit that stadium. Andrina and Thomas Curt had him handcuffed in his van so he couldn't get away. I'm sorry I lied to you. I couldn't tell you back at the concert. That's my fault."

"Leslie, move." A hot wave of anger coursed under her skin, curling her fingers and chasing away every thought of Paul tackling Andrina. A monster had been born inside of her, one that had been incubating for a long time underneath her uncomfortable business suits and the mask she'd had no choice but to put on the surface. It was the anger, and the grief and the rage

she hadn't had time to feel since that day on the beach where Gary had broken the truth to her.

Janelle barreled her way around Leslie and towards Paul, who backed away, hands down and refusing to meet her gaze.

"No! Stop," Leslie yelled, waving her arms and appearing in front of her. "It wasn't an easy decision. If we hadn't done this thousands of people would have died." Leslie took her arms. She was strong, holding her in place with a stone grasp. "You know what it's like to have to make a choice like that."

Janelle stopped pushing, staring at her.

Yes, she did.

The transformation she'd had to undergo to keep the world's weather in check so millions wouldn't die in horrible droughts. The sacrifice she'd had to make. Now, her best friend was enduring the same thing, and she wasn't making matters better for her. "Leslie," she said, her throat still so locked with anger that she couldn't spit out an apology. "I need to go think for a minute."

Gary met her with a hug over on the lawn of the Masonic Temple as the wet ground soaked through her shoes. "I'm such a jerk. All I'm doing for Leslie is making it harder on her."

"It's okay to feel like this," he said, running his hand down her back. "You don't have to hold it in all the time. I don't care what your dad says."

"But I have to, Gary." Now that she was away from Paul, the situation came crashing down on her in an avalanche of panic. Andrina had found a way to become a goddess. She was on the loose, ready to strip every Tempest and Outbreaker alive of their human forms forever. Only then would they truly be her slaves, forced to come to life as destructive forces

of nature whenever she wanted. "I'm the Tempest High Leader. People are going to need me."

Gary didn't have an answer for this. She was right, and they both knew it. It wasn't just about them anymore. It was about everyone.

Then, out of nowhere, she uttered, "She wanted to make me a goddess, too, right? That's why she had Paul leaning over me."

Again, nothing.

"Gary, you always tell me the truth."

His grip tightened. "Yes. She was. Thomas Curt's the one who gave her his breath. You must have overheard it."

She nodded, brushing her chin against his shoulder. "I don't even remember how they drugged me. It must have been in the car. I remember little bits and pieces until Leslie revived me with that ocean water."

"No. Elise did."

"*Elise* did?" A shock ran through her as she released Gary, staring hard at him.

"I guess she knew she was getting in over her head." He shrugged, staring at the wispy clouds passing through the sky. "Kind of makes me feel bad for her. Wonder if she's up there, drifting around with nothing to do? A hurricane on demand."

"That's not funny." That could happen to everyone in this town as soon as the sun went away. To Leslie. To Gary. Already, a few puffy thunderheads were starting to form to the west, like a line of soldiers against the sun. If one came rolling over, Andrina could return in its shadow.

Down the street, several police cars pulled out of the station, windows rolled down. A cop with a loudspeaker in hand leaned out of one, ready to blare a message at the closest subdivision. Thomas Curt sat in the driver's

seat of the last cruiser, probably the one that had belonged to Officer Chandler. His gray suit looked rumpled and his face red. Two blond boys sat in the back. His sons. They'd be leaving his dream town with the clothes on their backs. Janelle almost felt sorry for them. Almost.

Gary joined her in watching after them. "They're going to evacuate this place."

Janelle's stomach lurched. She scrambled through her mental notes, the information Leslie had given her about the other Tempests and where they were being kept. "My father. Your mother. We have to go find them."

* * * * *

Paul couldn't even care how angry Janelle was with him. He'd just have to deal with it later, when they met back at the SUV. Hand in hand with Leslie, he ran for the police station, heart pounding, praying that two of the cells there were occupied. Somewhere, a loudspeaker blared, but he couldn't make out the words. He could imagine the message. *Insane goddess on the loose! Leave town before the sun goes back in!*

The police station looked empty. There wasn't a single cop car left in the back lot. Thomas Curt was serious about evacuating the town, and they didn't have a lot of time. The new line of thunderstorms grew higher in the west. When they got here, Andrina could return, assuming all she needed was cloud cover.

Leslie hesitated at the back door in front of him, fingers pale around the handle. But it wasn't for long. "I'll go in first," she said, disappearing inside.

Paul went right behind her, his heart in his throat. Leslie weaved ahead of him, peeking into doorways and making her way down the hall. "Mr.

Collins? Tanner?”

“They're not here.”

The woman's voice seemed to come from the front of the station. Paul broke into a run, scanning the open rooms around him just in case. A meeting room with a dusty TV inside that Leslie had rushed past. Another with a pair of computers. He found Leslie standing over a woman at a phone, who had makeup running down one side of her face and a phone held to the other.

“What do you mean, they're not here?” Paul slammed his hands down on her desk. “What did you do with them? I can't put anything past you.”

“I'm assuming you're Earl's son,” the woman said, slamming the phone down on the desk and staring hard at him with a gaze so intense that the color in her eyes threatened to move and swirl. “Your father and uncle were taken into custody by the state police, fortunately for them. They're in the county jail. Now if you'd excuse me, we have an evacuation to do. Of course, I know how much *you* care about this town.”

Something flared inside of him. “And I know how much you cared about Yaslett.” The only thing keeping him from taking her desk and flipping it over was the phone she was using to get people out of here. Most of the people in Mobley didn't deserve to be punished like this—or did they? He couldn't tell anymore. “Don't worry about me getting out, because I'm never coming back here again.”

* * * * *

Janelle ran. There wasn't a cop guarding the apartment complex like Leslie had warned her about in her emails. They were all out around town, blaring messages through loudspeakers. Janelle caught a few words here

and there, echoing between houses: *leave town, immediate, mandatory*. With no one guarding the place, there were already several people outside the building as she and Gary approached with Deon on their heels. The complex had been easy to find, as it was maybe a minute from the police station and in view of downtown.

"Dad!"

He was standing on the lawn of the apartment building with Mel, straining to hear whatever the police were blaring. He barely had time to face her before she wrapped her arms around him. "Are you okay? How's everyone? We have to get out of here."

"H...honey!" he managed, returning her hug. She'd never loved his hug so much before. "I didn't want you to come here. They'll want you for something, I know it. There's a cop that's always outside this place, but I don't know where he went."

She felt the tears rising up and heard footsteps closing in on her at all sides. Doors opened and closed at her arrival. Janelle wanted to just spill out the scene at the Masonic Temple, where Elise and that officer had disappeared in that horrible way and where Andrina had exacted that almost complete control over everyone in the building. But it was time to pull in her emotions again, like she had so many times before.

"I'll explain what happened," Gary said, wrapping his arm around her waist as she separated from her father. "Janelle's still feeling a little woozy. Then, we need to go."

* * * * *

Leslie saw Janelle and Gary standing on the front lawn of the apartment complex where she'd been a prisoner only a few days ago, and more people-

-all of them the Tempest prisoners--were gathering on the lawn in front of them. She gave Paul's hand a squeeze as she ran, aching for the fact that they hadn't found his father and uncle. Janelle's father stood nearby with Deon as Gary gesticulated to everyone. The megaphones of the cops got fainter. Thomas Curt might want to evacuate Mobley, but they were still on their own.

It was obvious from the pale faces of everyone standing on the front lawn and now staring at the line of tall clouds approaching that Janelle and Gary had told them everything.

"Now how are we going to get everyone out of here?" Gary's question was directed at Paul, who flinched.

Janelle and her father turned to face him, and so did almost every Tempest on the lawn. A kid. Gary's mother. Even Eric, who trembled as he stood there, eyeing the sky and no doubt regretting his part in this. It was a good question. Leslie glanced at the parking lot, where not a single car or even a bicycle stood. The Tempests were stranded, just as Andrina had wanted them. She'd fooled even Eric and Thomas Curt into doing this work for her. Maybe *she'd* even released that video onto YouTube.

Paul swallowed next to her. He clearly didn't have an answer, and neither did she. They could only fit an extra person or two in the rental SUV. To get everyone out of here in time, they'd need--

"Paul, there's a school here, right? And buses?"

He jumped, facing her. "Yes. There should be." He opened his eyes wider, getting it. Turning, he asked, "Deon, can you drive us there?"

* * * * *

The simple part was breaking into the bus garage. Though Paul had already given Leslie his breath, he still had most of his strength, so there was no trouble breaking the gate open, especially with her helping him. A cop car rolled past them as they worked, but it didn't stop. The police weren't their enemies anymore. Right now, everyone was united against a common enemy, one that was drifting closer in that line of storm clouds.

"I'll check the building for the keys." Deon rushed away, and the sound of shattering glass followed. An alarm blared, but the cop didn't come rolling back. Instead, a short line of cars rushed past the gate, headed out of town. Paul sent them a silent blessing. The more people that got out of the Outbreaker community, the better. He knew what would happen to those who didn't get out in time, and it made his stomach hurt. By tonight, Mobley would be a ghost town.

It was what had almost happened to Leslie. As they broke through the gate, he took her arms and planted a kiss on her lips as if he'd never get to again. It was still sunlight. Gold, despite the new color of her eyes and the Outbreaks waiting for them both in only a few months, provided Andrina didn't get to them first. They didn't break apart until Deon got back with the keys.

The hard part was finding a bus that still had a decent amount of gas and sounded like it would run for more than a few minutes. Paul struggled to back it out of its spot and not hit Deon's SUV as he led the way, unable to take his gaze off the storm clouds rushing towards town. They were taller now, and through the trees the gray of their bottoms was visible.

They avoided a lot of near-accidents headed back to the complex. Every four-way was crowded and rushed. Every street had cars on the side, filling with luggage and bodies. Paul didn't park the bus right inside the apartment complex. He wasn't sure he could get it out again with its narrow

entrance. Leslie popped open the door, which he was clueless about how to do. It was his first time on a school bus in his whole life.

People lined up and piled on as Janelle and Gary stood outside and directed the other Tempests. All the seats filled behind him, and no one spoke. Everyone wore the same question on their faces: where were they going to go from here?

Janelle came on last in her wrinkled lavender suit. Paul tensed in the driver's seat, waiting for her to slap him across the face or otherwise tear into him again.

Instead, she smiled. It was a tired, strained smile, but still a smile. "Thanks, Paul. We have everyone out of there. Let's go."

* * * * *

They beat the line of storms, along with a stream of cars leaving Mobley. A lot of people had listened to the evacuation warnings. When Paul reached the freeway, he noticed a lot of the cars taking opposite directions--some on the northbound ramp, some on the southbound. Mobley's residents were splitting up. Maybe it was better that way. Paul glanced back at the thunderhead that seemed to be parked over where Mobley should be, but at least it didn't seem to be following them.

"Maybe Tempests and Outbreakers aren't causing storms to blow up when they're together anymore?" he asked Leslie, who sat in the first passenger seat opposite him with Janelle. "Now that Andrina's all--you know?"

"In charge of it all?" Gary slugged the back of his seat. "Yeah. Maybe. I'm wondering if she can still find us, though. Track us and appear whenever we're not in the sunlight."

His words made some murmurs rise up from the people behind him. Leslie cringed, squeezing her eyes shut, as though she was afraid Andrina could appear and see them again. Paul couldn't stand to see her like that. But the decision that they'd made would be with them for the rest of their lives.

"Everyone, calm down," Janelle said. "If she could do that, she would've gotten all of you while you were indoors at the apartments. At least now she doesn't know where we are." Janelle didn't sound so sure, but Paul hoped she was right. If she wasn't, there would be no escaping her after night fell.

"You know, it's ironic," Gary said. "Andrina was going on and on about wanting to keep Tempests safe and how everyone else is our enemy, and look at what she's doing. It's not my idea of safe."

Janelle interrupted him. Clearly, she didn't want to hear about Andrina right now. "Paul, can you drive us to a campground?"

"Yes." He kept his eyes on the freeway, only glancing at Leslie every once in a while. Each time, she returned his glance with a smile. He was home, on the road again, but at least she was in this with him. "How come?"

"We need a place where we can start a campfire." She smiled, and this time it was without that anger from the morning. "As soon as she's done with her trip with her dad, I'm giving Kenna a call. I have a feeling she's the only one who can help us if...if Andrina comes back. We're going to need all the hands we can get."

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