

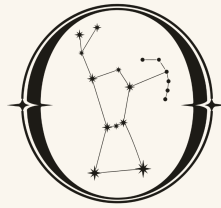
BOOK ONE OF THE ORION UNIVERSE

THE SAINT OF ORION

COLLECTED EDITION

Prologue to Chapter Nine

Jackson Tran



A new installment of the serial every Friday.

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THE SAINT OF ORION

CONTENTS

Prologue	3
----------	---

PART ONE

Chapter One	15
-------------	----

Chapter Two	31
-------------	----

Chapter Three	46
---------------	----

Chapter Four	56
--------------	----

Chapter Five	70
--------------	----

Chapter Six	85
-------------	----

Chapter Seven	97
---------------	----

Chapter Eight	110
---------------	-----

PART TWO

Chapter Nine	128
--------------	-----

DELETED SCENES

The Kitchen	141
-------------	-----

PROLOGUE

GREYBRIAR · LOCATION CLASSIFIED · CAFETERIA — JULY 2006

THERE WERE A LITTLE OVER TWO HUNDRED MINDS in the Greybriar mess at midday, and Dan Park could feel every one of them.

It was something like standing in a field of two hundred small candles, each giving off its own faint heat, the warmth registering as a general impression he couldn't isolate until he chose to focus.

They had warned him about the headaches and the nosebleeds; had sat him down eighteen years ago in a gray room and told him in gray voices that he was *rare*, that he was *valuable*. They had told him he'd be looked after. Nobody mentioned the part where a team, an organization, the whole damn world would lean on him for the rest of his life.

He came off the stairs with the boys strung out behind him and ran the room on reflex, because checking the exits and reading the crowd were the same habit underneath. Lab-coats at the near tables, thinking in numbers he couldn't follow and didn't try to.

Bunch of nerds, really.

A knot of Section Five kids by the windows, all about nineteen or twenty, terrified under the swagger. The sad part was that even the Bleeders — the ones like him — flickered like candle flames in a draft, bright enough to burn but too weak to hold steady. Most were weak Singles, a Charism with one expression.

A TK-2 here, a CT-3 there. Here and there a TP-4. The future state of Greybriar was bleak indeed.

The file waiting on him downstairs was somebody like that. Or near enough. Two days of incident reports off the San Francisco downtown terminal. A departures board that came off its bolts. Things moving when no one was watching. Somebody was burning scared. A Single, perhaps, who had no idea what they were or what they were capable of.

“—and I'm telling you, Chef, the woman had a *husband*,” Paddy was saying, close on Dan's shoulder. “Which I learned, mind, *after*.”

“You learned it after,” Diego said, in the voice of a man who'd heard the front half of this story and wanted nothing to do with the back, “because you weren't *listening*. You never do.”

“I listen when there's something interesting to listen to,” Paddy said. “And anyway, she was more someone I *did* something to. Not someone to *listen* to. Know what I mean?” He jabbed Diego in the side with an elbow.

“I swear to God, Cabbage—” Diego sighed.

The line moved. Dan took a tray and got something the menu swore was beef. Whatever it was, it was not beef. But it was nutritionally dialed in the way Section Three dialed everything in.

Dan felt Diego clock the imposter-beef mush and despair without a word, the big man’s whole soul folding in on itself at the sight of institutional gravy.

“Say, Chef, why don’t you quit the team and go rehabilitate the cafeteria kitchen?” Dan said, slopping onto his tray the next food item that he wouldn’t have been able to name if his life depended on it.

“I don’t think rehab is possible for this,” Diego said, pushing around the slop with the ladle and deciding not to take any. “I think it’s something that needs to be put down, Padre.”

Behind them Thomas drifted up to the rail, long blond hair neatly combed. He looked at the steaming trays the way he’d have looked at a target he’d decided not to waste a round on.

“They realize that I put good money into this facility, right?” Thomas said.

“Your parents do,” Dan corrected. “And I think it goes mostly toward Three. Not food.”

Thomas selected a banana and a black coffee like a man ordering at a hotel he intended to complain about.

“He’s going to eat a *banana*,” Paddy announced to the room. “Cupid. We are about to go to work. You need protein. You need fat. You need — Christ, look at him, he’s got the wrists of a girl who plays the harp.”

“And this harpist can shoot you from a mile away,” Thomas said easily. Paddy blinked at him.

“He could,” Dan agreed with a shrug. “Alright, ladies. After you all put on your makeup and curl your eyelashes, it’s prep at thirteen-thirty. That means trays down by twenty-five past, not twenty-*nine*, Cabbage—”

“Listen, Padre,” Paddy said, taking away Thomas’s banana and pointing it like a gun at Dan. “I need food, okay? I’m a growing boy. You don’t want me passing out on our op, do you?”

“Trays down at twenty-five past,” Dan repeated. “Junior. You herding, or you want me to do your job for you?”

Chris McIntyre had been half a step off the whole time, holding the tray like someone might call for an inspection. Dan could feel him already running the prep in his mind, the bright, over-ordered hum of a kid who’d decided that if he was thorough enough, the world couldn’t surprise him.

Twenty-four years old — twenty-five in a couple weeks, Dan realized — and built like a recruitment poster. A face any good ol’ American mother could be proud of, and broad through the shoulders. The kid was so tightly wound Dan sometimes wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake one human mistake loose, just to watch the relief on everyone else’s faces.

“On it, sir,” Chris said. His watch was already turned up on his wrist. He started moving the boys toward the doors with grim efficiency. He was, Dan thought, a man who’d never once in his life been allowed to be young. Poor thing.

“Junior’s *on it*,” Paddy stage-whispered. “We can all relax now because *Junior’s on it*. I might as well skip breakfast.”

“Leave the kid alone,” Dan said. “He’s going to be all our boss someday.”

Paddy rolled his eyes and peeled Thomas’s banana and took a bite.

“Hmm,” Paddy said. “Not bad. Tastes like rich people paid for it.”

Dan looked back over the sea of people. Team Orion had their own kitchen, but he had always liked being in the cafeteria. It gave him a reason to scan, to notice, to see who was up and coming from Section Five.

And that was when Dan saw the redhead looking at them.

She was over with the other Fivers, a little apart from them — perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three. Red hair came down in waves to her shoulders, a spray of freckles across her nose and cheeks. She possessed a beauty that wouldn’t halt conversation but would improve it, that particular glow of someone who made ordinary rooms feel lived-in. It put him in mind of porch screens and parish picnics, of a girl who’d been taught to look adults in the eye when she said *yes, sir* and *yes, ma’am*.

But what was he doing noticing a young thing like her? He had a small velvet box sitting in the bottom of his locker two floors down, and the woman it was for — that woman he could *not* take his eyes or mind off. She had a tongue on her that put Paddy to shame. Had, many times. Sasha would notice him looking at the young redhead and say something like *down, boy* without even glancing up from her coffee.

He chuckled and turned to follow his team, and his link brushed the redhead unconsciously on the way past —

— and caught.

Hub.

She was a Linker like him. But more. Much more than a Linker. If the other Fiver Charisms were candles, she was a porch light left burning in the middle of the night. Her Throughput *and* Capacity were enormous.

He pushed a bit further and felt not her power but her mind. A dry, low, private amusement, like she was watching the whole room and finding most of it funny. Her edge sat in a wholesome face like a knife in a fruit bowl. And something else.

She was trying not to look at Marcus.

His best friend was walking beside him and was not noticing that a cute, sharp, redheaded Fiver kid was actively *not* watching him with way more than a flicker of interest.

Dan felt the grin come up before he could stop it. It was almost too good.

“Hey, Mr. Smiles,” Dan said, low, just for the two of them. He dropped a hand on his best friend’s shoulder. “Don’t look now, but—”

“You know that just makes me want to look,” his friend said, the Creole-Louisiana accent filed smooth but still showing the grain.

“Window side. Fiver kid. Redhead.” Dan let the grin into his voice. “She’s cute as a button. And my bet is she thinks you are too. You’ve got an admirer, brother.”

Marcus didn’t look. His face didn’t change. That was Marcus through and through. But Dan felt it land — the smallest, almost imperceptible flicker of something. So he *had* seen the redhead. The sly dog.

“She’s a baby, Padre,” Marcus said.

“Well, if that’s how babies look nowadays—”

“Don’t be crass, Padre,” Marcus said. “That’s Cabbage’s job.”

“She doth protest too much,” Dan said, grinning. “I’m only saying, Marky Marc. A man could do worse than a girl who makes ordinary goodness look like something you could fall into. Or on top of.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Dan winked and clapped his shoulder once. “Just saying. Be a shame to die a mystery.”

“I’m okay with dying. Death and I are engaged.”

“A joke from Marcus Miles. What has the world come to?”

“Oh, are we talking engagements?” Paddy crowed from up ahead, because of course Paddy had been listening the whole time. “Lads, Father Dan’s getting *married*, did you know? Who’s going to officiate your wedding, Padre? You can’t officiate your own. Maybe Junior will do it for you so he can follow in his father’s footsteps.”

“Quinn—” Dan began.

“Padre’s settling down. Hardest man in the building, going to be picking out *curtains* and counting thread—”

“I will murder you in your sleep,” Dan said, “and I will tell your mother it was a training accident. She will believe me, because everyone believes me, because I have a kind and trustworthy face.”

“You look like you run a Ponzi scheme,” Thomas said around a new banana. “I would know. I run a few myself.”

They went out laughing — all of them, except Chris.

Dan let the door of the mess swing shut behind the six of them.

. . .

THE BOARD NEVER TOLD YOU the part that mattered.

Dan stood in prep and looked at what Three had handed them: a grainy still off a transit camera, a woman’s face half-turned, the kind of face you’d never look at twice. The boys kitted up around him and pretended they weren’t listening.

“Junior, your op. Get briefing.” Dan moved over to the nearest chair and sat in it, groaning a bit as his bad knee sighed in relief. *A young man in an old man’s body*, Sasha always complained. But who was she kidding? Forty-two and divorced, Sasha didn’t mind a lick that his body was breaking down. Made her feel the younger of the two.

“We have a single subject,” Chris said, voice catching on the words. He cleared his throat. “The big terminal downtown in San Francisco. She’s leaking.”

“Leaking how?” Marcus said, threading his vest. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“The way your m—” Paddy got three words out before Diego snapped a pen at his temple. Chris’s eyes flicked to Dan. Dan just shrugged and crossed his arms. He leaned back in his chair, kicked his boots up onto the table, and smiled. Chris did not look amused.

But when did the kid ever find anything amusing?

“The way a cracked main leaks,” Chris said. “Three’s logged four incidents off that station in two days.”

“Why’s the subject even there?” Marcus asked. “Seems like a weird place to stay for two days.”

“Maybe she’s hiding,” Diego offered. “Maybe someone’s after her and she figured a place like that, with all those people, it’s harder to grab her.”

Chris tapped the still. “Whatever the reason, I don’t think she knows what she’s doing. She’s scared.”

“Yeah, still doesn’t explain the terminal,” Thomas said. “Seems a weird place to be.”

“Ever been homeless, Trust Fund?” Diego asked.

“I have at least five vacation homes.”

“Well, I have. Anywhere that has people that don’t want to hurt you is a place you want to be,” Diego said without humor.

“The mission’s simple—” Chris began. Marcus barked a laugh.

“Simple. All we need is to get there first, get her quiet, get her in the truck *before* she goes berserk. We do it in front of three thousand commuters at rush hour *without* one of them remembering us.” Marcus shook his head.

“Sounds simple,” Thomas said too calmly. “And if she goes batshit, I put a bullet in her head.”

“Does anyone else worry about Cupid?” Paddy said, clicking Diego’s pen over and over. And over.

“Cabbage, I will put that through your eye,” Dan said. “And no, Tom. We will not be putting a bullet in her head. Jesus. There are tourists. Travelers. We need to do this quiet. You’re high — find a perch. Stay a ghost. For God’s sake, don’t shoot anyone.”

Thomas shrugged and looked through his scope.

Chris continued, “Diego and Paddy work the floor in a loose box. Dan’s with me. Marcus—”

“Reserve and the door,” Marcus said. “She comes apart, I’m the door, we all get home.”

THREE THOUSAND MINDS UNDER ONE VAULTED CEILING at the worst hour of the day was like trying to listen to a bunch of howler monkeys in a zoo while hungover. Dan had experienced that once. Unfortunately, it had also included a half-naked Paddy. And not the half that Dan particularly wanted to see.

He had the boys the way he always ran them, four separate leads in one fist, every one a live thing pulling its own direction, and the fifth thread, the quiet one, running from the middle of his chest to Chris: the live feed. Chris could feel Dan's tank and know exactly how much Capacity he had.

Dan had slept well last night. Especially after Sasha's enthusiastic response to the first phase of his proposal: asking her to vacation with him in Cabo. Her enthusiasm had carried to the bed. Which led, afterward, to a contented sleep.

His tank was full from the night's charge. Or as full as it could be, given the steady drain. Four hours of Dan's Capacity against a ninety-minute op window, and the grease over three thousand heads drinking steady. All of it pocket change, though.

Sound off, Chris sent through him to the team. Dan felt them answer down the leads, one after another, clean.

Floor's pretty, Junior, Diego sent, drifting past the ticket machines with a coffee he wasn't drinking, because Diego only drank the fancy kinds. *Regulars own the benches on the east wall. Cop by the flower stand hasn't moved in ten minutes. She's the one to watch.*

Oh, she's the one to watch, alright, Paddy said. *And I'm about to make a friend of her. And by friend, I mean—*

Tom? Chris cut Paddy off.

Mezzanine, west, Thomas said, settling into stillness up over the hall. *I have the concourse, both stair heads, three of four platform mouths. It's a beautiful building. Makes me want to buy it.*

Who the hell says "mezzanine"? Dan made a grunting noise as he thought it at them.

Posh people, Padre, Paddy replied. *Very, very posh people.*

Marcus? Chris continued.

East doors are ours, Marcus said. *Wedged the far one. Truck's on the curb. Janitor thinks I'm an inspector. We all go home through that door, so nobody get creative.*

Dan found the Charism under the departures board inside a minute. She was slick with fear, her powers leaking into everyone near her.

He skimmed the Bleeder. A Mixed, not a Single. Telepathy and telekinesis. A Linker and Thrower, then. That could be useful if they could train her. Now they just needed to get her out of here.

She's walking, Thomas said. *South. Toward the platforms.*

The board flipped its tiles with a sound like a flock of birds taking off. The 12:52, Platform 6, boarding in twenty minutes. If she got on a train, they lost her into a steel tube with two hundred civilians and a tunnel at the end of it.

Nobody spooks her, Dan sent. Junior, your op. What's the call?

Box slides with her, Chris said, no hesitation, and Dan heard the kid's watch in his voice, the little metronome under everything. Chef, if she gets on a train, try to get a seat ahead of her. Cabbage, work your magic on that cop. Make sure she doesn't do anything stupid if the Charism gets spooked. Dan, keep her calm. We are nineteen from boarding.

The crowd thickened, the rush deepening, the terminal filling like a lock chamber. The bleed poured from her like water through a sieve, yet no one looked twice. And that was because Dan was leaning gently on the ones who might notice. Concealing was an art as much as anything, and learning to make sure you didn't drain your entire tank required finesse. A pocket that moves drinks double; every step the Bleeder they were following took, Dan had to re-lay the grease over new ground and let it go off the old. He was burning through his Capacity at a rate he could actually feel. He chose to ignore it anyway. Chris would be nagging him about it soon enough.

Paddy had the flower-stand cop laughing inside ninety seconds, an Irish hand on the blonde woman's shoulder, and she was *leaning in*. He'd somehow made the woman look young and attractive where she had been dour and severe the last time Dan looked.

If Dan hadn't known any better, he would've sworn Paddy was a Charmer-type Charism. Through the link, Dan could hear the Irishman telling some story about a sergeant and a goat, and the woman's attention went wherever Paddy's hands went, which was nowhere near a drifting woman in a plain coat.

Padre. Chris, on the private thread, the feed humming between them. You're burning hot. I'm reading you lower than you should be, and my watch agrees. We're coming up on my number.

Call it two hours in the tank, Dan sent back, easy. I've more than enough.

I'm not reading two hours, Chris said. Sir. She's drifting, the burn's double, and if she boards, we do this again at the next station on fumes. Wave off. We take her at the street tonight — my op, my call—

Chris, I know what I'm doing. And anyway, your watch is fast.

Silence on the thread. Dan felt the kid holding the number and holding his tongue, both.

Twenty years, kiddo, Dan sent, gentler. I've been reading this tank since you were still toddling around. One approach. We close now, while she's calm, and we're home in time for Sasba to whip up drinks for all of us. Deal?

Copy, Chris said after a pause. Closing. Fourteen to boarding.

They closed. Forty feet. Thirty-five. Diego was ahead of her. The cop gave Paddy her number, her fingers lingering on his for a brief moment. Thomas was still above, the crosshair patience of him like a held breath at the top of Dan's mind. Marcus was at the east doors, far away, exactly where he was supposed

to be.

At thirty feet, the woman's mind went quiet.

The slick of fear shut off between one step and the next, like fingers pinching a wick. One breath she was a frightened person dripping into the room, and the next her entire *self* was gone. Everything about her signature had changed.

This was all wrong.

Hold, Dan sent, and it came out harder than he meant it to. *Everybody hold*.

The woman under the platform sign turned around and looked directly at him across thirty feet of moving crowd. Her face had the expression someone wore when they were quite fond of you.

Hi there, it said, into the middle of his head, gentle as a hand on a fevered brow. *I am glad you came so quickly*.

Dan understood the way you understand a fall already in progress. Somewhere between one breath and the next, the Bleeder had changed. It was like looking a bulb swapped in its socket. What was looking at him now was very different than the scared woman from earlier.

And she was *glad* he was there.

The woman suddenly reached. Not to Throw him. Not to read his mind. The thing inside her poured itself toward the rooms where he lived, patient and enormous.

So Dan shut every door he had and put his whole weight on them.

It cost him more than he expected. He felt his tank drop at a furious rate, fifteen minutes for every minute that he held against it. The tank he had claimed was plenty was down to — what? Maybe forty minutes. And it was depleting at an alarming rate.

He had to cut his men loose. They were still tethered to him through the leads, and whatever this woman was attempting — if she succeeded while he held all those connections in his fist — it would channel straight through him into each of them.

So he began handing his boys back to themselves. He let them all go. Thomas, Diego, Paddy.

When it came time for Marcus, his friend gripped hard. The man reached back down the dying lead with everything a mind that isn't gifted has, a hand closing on a rope as the rope left him — and the lead went anyway.

What's going on, Dan? came Chris's voice.

I— Dan began.

You don't have to fight it, sweetheart, the thing told him. *You'll all be so much happier*.

Dan, you're burning too fast. Let go of the crowd.

I let go of the crowd and then what happens, Junior? This thing creates mass panic, and we have a stampede on our hands. No. I just have to hope I have a bigger Capacity than this untrained Bleeder.

It's not about Capacity, Dan. It's about burn rate. You're burning hot.

Dan knew that, of course. He didn't need a boy to lecture him about his own powers. But there was nothing he could do. He had to hold on, and it felt like being on a treadmill that kept increasing its speed.

Junior, he sent, and kept his voice level, because the feed would be screaming the truth into the boy's ribs anyway and one of them should sound calm. *You need to evacuate the building. Get everyone out before I run out. Get them out.*

Copy, Chris said, and Dan felt the boy stop being twenty-four.

"All units." Chris's voice went out flat over the radio, and Dan heard it twice — thin through the air of the hall, and warm through the thread in his chest. It was doubled, like a man standing in two rooms at once. "Dan's engaged, net is down, we are on comms from here. The building goes empty in ten minutes. Paddy, we need your cop. Get her to believe there's been a gas leak. We need transit authority here. Now."

"On it." And then Paddy's voice, farther off, pitched for an audience of one frightened young woman in a uniform: "Claire. Officer Belland. Listen to me very carefully. There's a gas main under Platform Four—"

"Diego, you have the floor. Where do they go?"

"Not the street doors. Three thousand people through four doors is a meat grinder, and not the good kind. The 12:52 is sitting on Six with its doors open. Two hundred empty seats and a driver. Two hundred won't take the building, but it doesn't have to. Every body on that platform is a body not folding back into a doorway."

"We split the hall. Good idea, Chef. Let's do it," Chris said. Then, "Tom, you're eyes. Call the flow. Marcus—"

"East doors," Marcus said. "Yeah, yeah."

The alarm went off like the building had been waiting for permission. And under the alarm, the cop's voice on the PA, steadying as she went, because Paddy was standing at her shoulder feeding her the words.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are conducting a precautionary evacuation. Please proceed calmly to Platform Six or the marked eastern exits." The great furnace of the hall began, slowly, to pour itself out.

Dan held the grease over all of it and drained through his time like a leak he couldn't plug. Would not plug. And all the while, he kept his doors shut.

Across thirty feet of emptying floor, the woman stood under the platform sign with perfect patience. But Dan could tell: she was spending everything she had at top flare to try to get through him.

Maxing out on Throughput was a bad idea when your Capacity was low. She was an untrained Bleeder, driven beyond her limits. She was using everything she had dialed all the way up hoping to take him before she ran out of fuel.

It was going to be close. God help him, it was going to be close.

Hold, old man, he told himself, in Sasha's voice. He could see Sasha's crooked smile, the wrinkles that had begun forming around her eyes, the ones she hated so much. He could almost hear her voice: *Outlast the girl, and I'll throw in something extra tonight.*

Dan almost laughed out loud.

“Flow’s jamming at the stair heads.” Thomas, from up in the dark. “Kiosk knot, forty people, about to fold back into the concourse—”

“Cabbage,” Chris said.

“*Folks!*” Paddy’s voice rose over the alarm like a big brass instrument, warm as a fairground. “Plenty of train for everyone. No pushing, ma’am — that’s lovely, straight on—” and the knot unwound, because there has never been a crowd born that Patrick Quinn could not talk into an orderly line.

The east doors swallowed people in gulps. Dan could see the dark, hulking form of Marcus working the threshold: catching an old man by the arm before the crowd took him under, passing a dropped child back to its mother without letting the flow stop, one hand always on the steel of the door like the door was a patient he refused to lose.

They were all getting home. That part was working. Two thousand. Fifteen hundred.

Chris, over their link: *You’re burning faster than she is. When the floor’s clear, I’m sending Marcus and Diego back in for you—*

No, Dan said, and it was not a suggestion. *Nobody comes back in. That’s the last order I’ll ever give you, Junior, so it had better hold. The moment you clear, you stay the hell away. If I come out of this terminal, you shoot me dead. You hear me?*

What are we up against, sir?

I don’t know, kiddo.

Then give me a target, Chris said. *Cupid’s had her since the second minute. You said no in the brief. I say we take her out. Now.*

Dan looked at the woman-shaped thing across the floor.

Your op, Dan sent. *Your call.*

“Cupid,” Chris said without hesitation. “Light her up.”

The mezzanine cracked once, sharp over the alarm.

The round came in true as a plumb line and *bent*, a hand’s width. Center mass became shoulder. The impact spun her half around. There was no staggering, no crying out, only a brief pause — and Dan felt relief as the minutes remaining in his tank began to match reality once more.

It took a TK-9 to stop a bullet. And even then, it was fifty-fifty. Something like this Mixed had no hope of it. But she *had* moved it, which meant the thing wearing her had Master-level precision. Even through a weak, guttering body, it had performed a near-impossible feat.

But the flood had cost her. And her tank was now significantly lower than it had been. He could feel it, her flame losing its fuel source. He was about to tell Thomas to shoot again when he felt her light swing toward the mezzanine, thin and stretched at that range. The weapon tore itself from Thomas’s grip. And then, the moment it reached outward, Dan felt that blocking it would cost him everything he had left.

He threw a door in front of Thomas's mind and felt the round oak of it land true. He felt the bottom of himself. Everything in him, his whole tank, gone to the last drop, spent, dry.

The pressure came back against his doors, and now there was nothing behind them but rooms. It had, in the end, outlasted him by seconds. If he had let it take Thomas, the rest of them would've gone home.

But Thomas would not have.

The link vanished out of the middle of his chest, and the silence that replaced it was the loudest thing in the empty building, and he stood alone inside his own head with the thing that had waited so patiently to have him.

"Tell Sasha that I'm sorry, Junior."

"Dan!"

The hall was down to stragglers and sirens.

"Junior." He made it level. He had enough craft left for level. "They're yours now. All of them. You were always going to be good at it. Better than me, because you'll believe your instruments. Show 'em who's boss, Cap."

"No, Padre! I'm coming for you!" Marcus was yelling.

"No, you're not, Mark," Dan said gently. "And you're going to forgive me for this someday. All of you. That's an order too. Chris, get them out of here. Now."

There now, it said, kind as a mother's kiss. *That's everything. You didn't have to be so difficult, sweetheart.*

It came through the last doors like light through a curtain, and it did not hurt. It felt like coming home.

Room by room, the walls took on its color. And somewhere in the taking it was telling him something, turning over his shelves with the happy greed of a guest who means to stay, and finding a thing it wanted, a thought about someone he knew very well —

THE SAINT OF ORION

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

GREYBRIAR · LOCATION CLASSIFIED — AUGUST 2006

JO BYRNE HAD BEEN DREAMING OF something wonderful, she was almost certain of it. Unfortunately, the dream itself had slipped beyond recall, and the only proof it had existed at all was the peculiar ferocity of her annoyance when something began hammering at the door of the bedroom she shared with her bunkmate, Adaeze Okonkwo.

It was not an actual assault, though the battering against the wood carried the violence of a midnight raid.

She bolted upright in her bed, heart in her ears, and got onto her feet.

“Who’s come calling at this hour?” Jo asked, thick-voiced with sleep. Addy was already out of bed and hitting the light switch. The sudden glare left Jo half-blind, and she was still blinking the room back into focus when Addy yanked the door open. When her eyes finally focused, it was on the man standing in her doorway, his shoulders broad enough to fill the frame of it.

Her gaze traveled from those shoulders to the face above them.

Jo knew that face. Everybody in Greybriar knew that face, truly. Chris McIntyre was the newly minted Field Leader of Team Orion, the once top-ranking Section Six unit. But everything had changed that day in the San Francisco terminal. The silence was official. The rumors were not.

And Jo realized that despite the face’s familiarity, she had never been within forty feet of it. Up close, the man it belonged to looked younger than she had envisaged.

He was still in his kit. The kit looked as if it had been wet a while ago, and with something that looked too dark to be sweat. His hair stood up damp like he’d just gotten out of a shower, though he was not clean in the least. There was a dark smear down the side of his neck that he hadn’t wiped. His jaw, like something quarried rather than born, was set so hard she could see the muscle jumping under the skin. He looked at her head to foot in one sweeping motion. Then looked too quickly at his watch.

It was only then that Jo registered what she must look like: white tank top, and beneath it, to her absolute mortification, nothing but *underwear*. She snatched the blanket from her bed and wound it around herself, her face burning, her irritation somehow outstripping even the heat of her embarrassment.

“Can I help you with something?” she snapped.

“Byrne, Joan. TK-8. TP-9. Capacity four hours. Sometimes four and fifteen.” It sounded like her brother Hunter reading aloud from one of his precious baseball cards, all percentages and bare facts, yet with none of the enthusiasm.

“I beg your pardon?” She cut her eyes toward Addy, expecting solidarity, expecting somebody else to be put out by this fool showing up like a thunderclap in the night. But Addy had gone full possum-in-the-headlights, lower lip between her teeth. She was staring at the man like she was fixing to do something she oughtn’t. Judas!

“Clothes. Boots. Now. We have maybe fifteen minutes. Get going.” He turned and went into the hallway.

Well, Jo thought. Aren’t you a peach.

She dressed in ninety seconds flat, which would have made her Mamaw proud. She always did complain about Jo *dawdlin’*.

Chris was already ten feet down the hall and not waiting. She had to trot to keep up, which felt undignified and only fanned her annoyance.

“You want to tell me what this is about?”

“They skip chain of command over in Five?” he said as she caught up to his left shoulder, breathing a little heavy. The top of her head only reached his chin.

“Do you want to tell me what this is about, *sir*?” The impulse to slam him into the corridor wall flickered through her mind. It wouldn’t have been difficult. Just a flick of a finger, truly.

“We intercepted a purchase of a Charism,” he said, and her legs slowed without her meaning to. He kept walking, so she had to scramble to catch up. Again. “Somebody put a kill order in everyone there before we showed. Including our vic. They all bit their tongues off.”

“Good Lord,” Jo gasped.

“Marcus managed to put his hand in the vic’s mouth when he bit down. Saved the man’s life, but we haven’t been able to stop the kill order.”

“Kill order?”

“A command. Most likely by a powerful Controller.”

“Well, have you had a telepath try and stop it?” Jo asked.

“Tried at oh-three-ten.” His jaw did the muscle-jumping thing again. “Didn’t work out so well.”

“Then put him under. Let him sleep it off.”

“Sleep takes *his* hands off the wheel. The order doesn’t sleep.” He turned a corner without breaking stride. “You keep asking questions like we haven’t already tried. We’re not amateurs, Byrne.”

“Fine. But you woke me up and dragged me out of my bed in my—” she was not going to say underwear “—in the middle of the night.”

“It’s four in the morning.” He looked at his stupid watch again.

“My point is *why*, exactly?”

“The duty telepath is a TP-6,” he said, as if that settled the matter. “Strongest one we have. Twelve minutes.”

The room they’d put the man in was two doors past medical proper. When they stepped inside, four men — pressed shoulder to shoulder in the cramped bright space, blood darkening their clothes — turned as one to look at her. The Irishman. The big one with the goatee. The blond sniper who looked built out of catalogue pages, so pretty it wasn’t even fair.

And by the door, arms folded, was the tallest of them. She knew his name was Marcus because she may or may not have made it a point to find out. He stood turned away from the bed, his black skin lush as velvet. She met his eyes once, quickly, and then looked away. Jo felt her stomach drop like something with a mind of its own. She turned her back to him and looked at the man on the bed.

He was in his forties, soaked through, strapped at the wrists, chest, and ankles, with a block of something pale seated between his teeth. He was pulling against the straps in long, patient hauls, then going slack, then pulling again. His eyes came across her face. They were large and scared and frantic.

In the corner chair sat another man, small, in duty grays with his head tipped back and cotton going dark in one nostril. He looked at Jo over the cotton. Their duty telepath, she figured.

“Oh, good,” the Irishman said in a tone far lighter than the situation demanded. “The cavalry is here. And she’s a cute redhead. I do like redheads.” He indicated his own hair, far more orange than hers, with a theatrical flourish.

“He bit through the first block,” the pretty blond one said, his tone matching the gravity of the moment better, if a bit distant. “The second is titanium. Might break his teeth but... well, I guess I can always pay for his dentures.”

“The *first* block was my hand, Thomas,” Marcus corrected. She glanced over her shoulder and then quickly away. His hand was bleeding through the bandage, crimson on white.

“I’m Paddy, by the way,” the Irishman said as he slid in beside her. He was neither handsome nor ugly, although he carried himself with a looseness that disarmed her, flirtation notwithstanding. He must have been in his mid-thirties, but his large blue eyes and disheveled hair made him look far younger. He looked over at her and grinned ear to ear.

“Here’s the job,” Chris interjected. “There is an order in that man that is being carried out against his will. You’re going to take it out.”

“I’ve never done anything like that,” Jo said. She felt her chest tighten at the thought of having to go into this stranger’s head and undo whatever it was that was causing him to look at her with those wild eyes. “I don’t know how much it’ll cost.”

“That’s why I’m going to keep your time,” he said, and for whatever reason, he wasn’t meeting her eyes.

Addy had kept her time during some classes, and Priya too, when Addy was out sick. Theo had even done it once or twice. But those were *her* people. Timekeeping sat outside the ordinary bounds of acquaintance, and letting a man she'd met five minutes ago inside that boundary felt obscene. It was like following a stranger into the confessional.

Her face went hot again as she remembered what she had been wearing *when* he met her five minutes ago.

"Geez, aren't you a Romeo. Buy her dinner first, Cap," Paddy said from beside her. "In fact. Dibs. I'm buying her dinner first." The Hispanic man clipped him across the back of the skull without bothering to look.

"It's the only instrument I trust," Chris said. "Nine minutes."

Lord Almighty, she thought. This man was fixing to wear her nerves smooth through.

"Nine minutes until *what*?" Jo demanded.

"His brain caves in on itself," the duty telepath said, voice nasal through the cotton in his nose, face still tipped to the ceiling.

"Fine," she said, and sucked in through her teeth. She braced and then opened the timekeeping link. A warmth started first somewhere deep underneath her breasts and then radiated out, through her and into the center of Chris McIntyre.

She knew he read her the same second she read him. She tried to close her mind to anything but the Capacity number. Just Capacity. That was what he was there for.

"Two forty-one," he said, out loud, to the room. It was the same voice he'd used reading off the baseball card stats earlier, except now the card was being read to a whole room of strange men. Men who were all staring at her.

Then to just her, through that link a low hum that vibrated deep inside her, *We're at seven minutes. Let's get to work, Byrne.*

She went into the man's mind.

Darrell. She knew it the instant she brushed against him. Scuba instructor. Fourteen years married. One slip, once, two years into their marriage. With a blonde lifeguard he'd seen undress once too many times at work. He'd told his wife and she'd let it go. Sheila, her name was. Short blue hair. Heavy glasses. A round face you wouldn't forget. Pretty in her own way. Not as pretty as the blonde, though.

Jo pushed past the memories and found the kill order almost at once. It was not a subtle thing. It was a thread stitched clean through him, through the hands, the jaw, the long muscles of the back. *Cheap*. That's how she would've described it. And it made her angry that whoever had placed the command to kill a man hadn't even had the decency to put work into it.

But it was elegant in its own way. Every hour this man fought it, the fight billed *him*, and the order itself cost its caster nothing. It just sat in his pocket, spending his money, waiting for him to go broke.

Waiting for Darrell to break.

She grabbed with everything she had — the hands, the jaw, the back — and she held all of the man still. The order, finding the jaw held and the hands held, went looking. It found the small room where breathing lived, and it shut that door from the inside.

The monitor changed its mind about beeping. Somewhere behind her a chair scraped. Paddy, for the first time since she'd entered the room, had nothing at all to say.

Through the thread, Chris's fear went up like a flare.

Byrne.

Not right now, Jo thought back. Let me work.

Jo found the part of Darrell's mind that told the body to breathe. She held that too, just one more on the list of things she was already holding. The drain on her Capacity went from a drip to a stream.

Darrell, held everywhere at once, finally began to relax. She could feel his body loosen. She was the one paying his bill now. And she was fine with that. She had more in the bank than a man four minutes from broke.

With him held by Jo, the command had no purchase. She followed it back through him to where it was tied, deep, knotted. She pinched it, and starved it, and slipped it loose.

It came away like a wire out of a wall. As it came free it smelled, absurdly, of lilac. A strong perfume in a room that smelled of iodine and sweaty men.

She didn't know what to make of that.

The last inch of it fought her, stupid now, a dying wasp. But eventually the wire came all the way out.

Jo let Darrell go and surfaced.

Everyone let out a collective breath. Paddy whistled and dropped into a small circular chair that spun lazily under his weight. He started laughing to himself, shaking his head, his blue eyes dancing as he studied her. She looked down to find the soaked, exhausted man breathing hard around that titanium block. Marcus had come forward and was busy at Darrell's straps, releasing the man. Darrell's eyes came across her once more, and this time they were no longer afraid.

Hi there, she sent him, my name is Jo Byrne.

A wet, ragged breath shuddered through the man and then he was breathing normally again.

The floor tilted a degree and came back. Her nose was bleeding. She pressed the back of her wrist to it. She glanced over at the small man with the cotton in his nose. He was looking at her with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Good work," Chris said as if she needed his approval. "Medical, then sleep. You're reporting at thirteen hundred, Byrne."

"Report for what?" she asked.

"You'll find out at thirteen hundred," Chris answered without looking at her.

“We’re keeping her, though, right, Cap?” Paddy asked. “I vote we keep her.”

“She’s not on the team, Paddy,” Chris said very quietly.

“I also vote we keep her,” the Hispanic man with the goatee said. He flashed her a smile, all warmth and confidence. “Name’s Diego.” She returned the smile, then walked towards the exit.

Marcus held the door for her with his good hand. “Ma’am,” he said, chin dipping toward his collarbone. Though the accent was almost imperceptible, she thought she heard something that sounded adjacent to home. Jo gave him a quick smile before she ducked out of the door.

The thread in her chest, the one she’d forgotten to unlink from Chris, came out of her somewhere down the hall.

She’s not on the team, he had said.

The unmitigated brass of the man. Who was the one who just saved that man’s life while they all stood around like helpless children?

Not on the team.

Well, fine by her. She’d seen the team.

They’d come calling at four in the morning. And their Field Leader was a stopwatch wearing a jaw. Or perhaps a jaw wearing a watch.

She didn’t much care for him either way.

. . .

THERE WAS LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR when Jo got back to her room, which meant Addy hadn’t gone back to sleep. Which was understandable. Jo wouldn’t have either if her roommate had gotten carried off by Section Six at four in the morning.

Addy was sitting cross-legged on her bed, fully dressed. She took one look at Jo — her nose, the rust-brown crust on her upper lip, whatever her face was doing — and got up without a word.

“I’m fine,” Jo said. “I had medical look me over.”

“What did they have you do that required medical to look at you?”

“I can’t tell you,” Jo replied.

Addy left without another word.

She came back four minutes later towing Theo, who was still holding a fan of flashcards in one hand. Behind him came Priya, likely uninvited, hair in knots, her wide eyes broadcasting that she’d been woken by the noise and was thoroughly glad for it. Nothing stops that girl.

“I heard doors,” Priya explained as if it needed explaining, scanning Jo’s face and looking scandalized. “Did you get in a fist fight? Tell me you won, Jojo.”

“No.”

“Oh,” Priya said, sounding rather disappointed. “You lost? Really?”

“No, I didn’t get in a fight.”

Theo set his cards down on the nearest desk, dug a nylon pouch out of his jacket, and turned Jo’s face toward the lamp with two fingers under her chin. He always had steady hands. His penlight shot up her nostrils, which probably wasn’t the most flattering angle to look at her. This was becoming a right spectacle it was. Then he checked one pupil, then the other. He took her wrist and began to count.

He drew out the stiff cotton that medical had put in her nose. “Look up for me. How full were you when they took you?”

Jo looked at the ceiling and said nothing.

“Joanie.”

“Two hours and some change,” she admitted. “I was up late last night.”

“Alright, open up the link,” Theo said.

“Theo,” Jo crossed her arms. “I’m *fine*.”

“Didn’t ask if you were fine, Joanie. And now’s not the time to be a prude. I need to gauge your Capacity.”

Jo let out a breath and opened the link, the warmth spreading again. Then she cut it off.

“There.”

“Hmm. Okay. Ninety to one-twenty deep minutes a night, if you sleep like the dead. Two nights.” He looked up.

“*If* they don’t pull her into her finals before then,” Priya said, arms crossed under her breasts.

“I’m not due yet,” Jo said, looking over at her.

“Didn’t stop them from pulling James Pye the other day, did it? They’re desperate right now, Jo,” Priya said.

“Didn’t James pass out and failed his exam?” Addy asked.

“Oh, it was an absolute nightmare,” Priya said, her voice way more excited than it should’ve been at a classmate’s failure.

“And James is second in our class,” Theo said, putting supplies back into his bag. “Yeah, you’re going to need rest, Joanie. Starts with food, too. People always forget that part. Only think about the sleep.”

“Conditions modify the rate,” Priya supplied.

“Conditions modify the rate,” Theo agreed, glancing over at Priya.

“Mess opens at seven,” Addy said. “But... it’s only five ten.”

Priya pushed off the doorframe. When she had something, she came up over it slow, like sunrise. She came up over this one slower than usual, savoring, that grin spreading across her small, heart-shaped face.

“*Orion* has a kitchen close by.” Her enormous eyes were practically doing a jig. Jo hated when Priya’s eyes got like that. It never boded well for any of them. “Their own kitchen. Off the Six corridor, past the ready room.”

“How on God’s green earth do you know that, Pree?” Jo asked.

“Steward’s requisition comes through intake. I’ve *seen* the paper. They get eggs. Butter. Bacon. Lots and lots of cabbage, for some reason. The place is stocked like a chef’s kitchen.”

“It’s locked,” Theo said. “It’s *Six*. It’s... Priya, I am one demerit from a review board. *One*.” He raised his index finger as if the girl didn’t understand the concept of one and needed to be shown it.

“I know the door,” Addy said, already grabbing her jacket.

Jo turned and looked at her roommate. “How do you know the door?”

“Coursework.”

“What kind of course teaches you—”

“Can’t tell you.” She pulled her braids back and tied them off.

Jo made the protest she was obliged to make. She lost the vote two and a half to one because one look from Priya, and Theo relented. He always relented when it came to Priya. Jo had no idea what the girl had over him.

And so, she found herself infiltrating the Orion kitchen with her friends. The truth was, some part of her *wanted* to go. She wanted the small dumb crime of it. And some other part of her wanted to see the look on Chris McIntyre’s face when he found all his eggs having gone missing.

The corridors before dawn ran on duty lights the color of weak tea. Addy went first and set the pace, slow and confident. Her movements were graceful, her shoulders squared and fluid. Some days she reminded Jo of a panther.

“Nothing draws an eye like a person walking fast at five in the morning,” her roommate said without being prompted.

“And why do you walk around at five in the morning like there’s something to hide?” Jo asked. Addy didn’t dignify her with a reply.

Priya, meanwhile, could not stop being Priya, even in a whisper.

“Trauma team logged in at oh-three-forty,” she breathed, to the corridor at large. “Duty telepath treated for epistaxis—”

“Nosebleed,” supplied Theo.

“Thank you, Dr. About-to-Flunk-Out,” Priya snapped in a sharp whisper. “A Six vehicle came back through the garage before that. Motor pool intake, I’ll see the sheet Monday. And *then*—” she glanced sideways at Jo “—the Field Leader of Team Orion personally extracts a Fiver at oh-four-hundred. *Hmm*.”

Jo kept her eyes forward and her face unreadable, which around Priya was like closing a screen door against weather.

“He is cute, though, isn’t he?” Priya asked, and just as Jo was about to object, Addy raised a fist for them all to stop. They went still as a voice could be heard ahead. Then it went the other way, echo growing fainter.

Addy began walking again. And over her shoulder, she said, “He is. And he has a nice bu—”

“Adaeze Okonkwo!” snapped Jo.

“Shhh!” Priya and Theo hissed at her.

• • •

THE DOOR TO THE ORION KITCHEN had a lock on it that Addy seemed to merely caress and it gave way. It took her less than ten seconds. She eased the door open onto warmth. And the smell of onions in butter, and coffee, and light.

Diego was at the stove. He turned and looked at them.

He had a spatula in one hand and a dish towel over his shoulder. His eyes went across each of them. His surprise turned into amusement, and a grin broke across his face.

“You guys shouldn’t be here,” he said, but there was no heat in his voice. “Alright, puppies. Go on, take a seat.” He cracked eggs like he was dealing cards. Jo watched them hit the pan, and her stomach betrayed her by growling.

“I — sir, we—” Priya began.

“No, no.” Diego shook his spatula at her. “Do not call me *sir*. I’m Diego. Or Chef. Never, sir. *Comprende?*”

“Yes, s—Chef,” Priya said, correcting herself. Was that a faint blush under her brown skin?

“Now, next time you break into a Section Six room, make sure you either announce yourself or do it completely quiet. I could’ve shot you.” He indicated the Glock next to the serving dishes. Theo’s throat worked.

On the other side of the gun, there were two plates already made up on the counter, covered with cloth. He caught her looking.

“For Cabbage,” he said. “Man doesn’t look it, but eats like a bear.”

Priya, who had lasted longer than Jo expected, leaned over her coffee. “So. Busy night for Six?” She had both hands cupping her mug of coffee, and she was doing that thing she did where she made her eyes bigger than they already were, looking both adorable and like an oversized mouse. Diego glanced at Priya then went back to serving the plates.

It was only eggs and fried potatoes. But the toast had real butter spread on it, not whatever fake grease they pretended was butter in the mess. It was like taking Communion for the first time. The warmth went down into the empty place where her gift usually sat and curled up there.

Diego came over to serve Priya next. “Eggs or no eggs?”

“Eggs,” Priya said, and sat back in her chair, pouting.

Diego came over and set a second round of toast down on Jo’s plate.

“Your fella’s keeping his food down.”

She blinked at him.

“Darrell. The man you saved. First thing he did when he could talk was ask after you. I think he’s in love.”

He winked at her and was already turning back to his stove.

Something came loose in her chest that she hadn’t known was cinched. She looked down at her plate and blinked at it, hard, twice. She was glad Darrell was okay. That felt good. Really, really good.

When the plates were clean, Diego pointed at the sink.

“Kitchen law,” he said. “Clean. Everyone but Jo. She gets pancakes.”

Theo washed like his transcript depended on it. Addy dried. Priya inspected the requisition labels on the pantry shelves until Diego took them out of her hands.

• • •

JO REPORTED TO TEAM ORION’S BRIEFING room at one in the afternoon. Without a word, Chris McIntyre motioned for her to follow him. He did not talk as he walked ahead of her, which made it awkward as she was merely looking at the back of his head the entire time. His dark brown hair was so perfect that it wasn’t particularly interesting to look at.

Addy’s unfinished remark about his “bu—” flickered through her mind, and Jo aimed her gaze deliberately at the gap between his ears. Mama would have said that that girl was a bad influence on her. She would be right.

She was walking down a corridor she didn’t have clearance for as a Fiver, but that didn’t seem to matter. The office Chris led her into was dark but for the lamp. It was an ugly, green-shaded thing out of somebody’s idea of the nineteen-nineties, throwing the room jade and yellow and making the shelves of books behind the desk look older than they probably were.

Behind the heavy, hardwood desk, a man was bent to the page, pen moving in the fluent unhurried stroke of deep concentration, the nib making its small scratching sound with each letter. He wrote on through their entrance and only raised his eyes once the sentence was complete.

“Ah, thank you, Chris. You may leave.” Chris stood at parade rest for a moment. He hesitated, something shifting behind his eyes, then dipped his chin in confirmation.

“Sir,” he said, pivoted on his heel, and walked out. He pulled the door shut behind him with a soft click of the latch.

“Ms. Byrne. Sit, please.” He made a loose gesture at the chair on her side of the desk. “I was at the end of a sentence, and I can’t think and be polite at the same time.” The man was Nathaniel Ross, a high-ranking Section One member. That is, a member of the Board that ran Greybriar and reported to the President of the United States. Among others. Ross was, for all intents and purposes, the Board’s public-facing man.

Silver had overtaken Ross’s hair. He looked every bit a man who had been thinking hard for decades. Mid-fifties, if Jo had to guess, with a thin face and a nose that curved downward like the beak on those old plague-doctor masks she’d seen in films. His eyes were a soft blue, almost gray, save for the hint of color that caught the lamplight.

She lowered herself into the chair.

A photograph had been fixed to the page with a simple paper clip, showing a blonde woman half-turned on a staircase, caught in the act of looking back over her shoulder at whoever held the camera. Her mouth was parted in laughter or protest — Jo couldn’t tell which — and one hand was on the rail. The other was lifting a mug that steamed faintly, the blur of its rising warmth softening the line of her jaw.

Ross followed her eyes to the picture.

“That is Sasha Volkova,” he said. “It’s a terrible picture, but it’s the only one I’ve got of her. A lively woman. The camera never does her justice.”

“Who is she, sir?”

He leaned back, and the lamp put half his face in shadow.

“A woman who knows her own mind and wouldn’t ever let you get away without having heard it.” He chuckled to himself. A small private joke, apparently. “She runs a bar outside the city.”

“Do you go there for drinks, sir?”

Something glimmered beneath those unreadable eyes as he raised them up to look at her. Part of that unreadability came from the reverse-dampening bracelet around his wrist. Like most senior Greybriar officials, and politicians, Ross always wore it, and they truly were one of Section Four’s better inventions. The thing shielded him from most Linkers.

“Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity for drinks. The man that Sasha was *going* to be engaged to died last month.”

“Is that the man from Orion, sir?”

“Yes. Dan Park. A fantastic operative.” Ross looked down at the picture again and began to laugh. It was a surprised laugh, as if he hadn’t expected to. “Do you know, Sasha spent a year threatening to propose to him herself if he didn’t get on with it?”

“God help them,” Jo said under her breath, and then, remembering who she was speaking to, she added, “Sir.”

He opened a drawer and pulled out a small, dark box. Jo recognized it for what it was immediately. “This was the ring Dan Park was going to propose to her with.”

“Are you going to give it to her, sir?”

“Yes. Although I do not think it will help how she’s feeling right now. He was a great man, Ms. Byrne. A great man.” Then very quietly, he added, “I have buried far too many great men.”

“I’ve heard very good things about him, sir.”

“Half of it is crap,” Ross said, and something in the offhand way he said it caught her off guard. He chuckled. “I am sorry. He would have said that with far more color. Truth be told, he was the heart and soul of his team, and the team has done incredible work. But—well, without him, I think they’re a bit lost.”

They sat there in silence for a moment, both looking at the woman in the photograph and the small box on the table.

“Sir,” Jo said, “why am I here?”

“I brought you here to tell you that there are, right now, four teams in Section Six without a Linker. Indeed, without a Charism of *any* class. Team Orion included. That shortage is not for lack of recruitment.”

“So, it’s true then, sir? There’s a shortage.”

His hand moved on the wooden desk, fingertips touching down one after another in a practiced rhythm.

“The shortage is not a natural one. There is an enemy force out there that is finding and taking Charisms.”

“To do what, sir?”

“Any number of things, Ms. Byrne.”

“Jo, sir,” she said reflexively.

He inclined his head and continued, “Personal favors. Corporate espionage. Political attacks. Private armies. You name it. In a world where people have superpowers, the greatest commodity is the people with said superpowers.”

“You make it sound like we’re currency, sir.”

Ross let the silence stretch, his fingers still drumming their slow, deliberate pattern across the desk.

“Team Orion tells me you did good work this morning,” he said. “I need you to understand that there is exactly one recruit in this building strong enough, trained enough, and gifted enough to help fight this battle to save Charisms.”

“Who is that, sir?” Jo asked, and Ross actually laughed. “I hear James Pye didn’t do too well.”

“He did not. But then again, he was *second* in his class.”

Jo felt her throat go cold.

“I’m taking my final exam, aren’t I, sir?”

“No,” Ross said. “You already took it.”

The drumming stopped.

“Sir?”

“Four o’clock in the morning. No warning, no preparation, no second chances. A man who could have died in minutes. Jo, we spend a great deal of money building examinations. Rooms full of actors. Charges in the walls. All of it in service of making a recruit believe, for a few hours, that it is real. Yours *was* real. There is nothing I could stage in a basement that would tell me more than this morning already has. The Board reviewed the logs and Field Leader McIntyre’s report at ten. You are certified. Congratulations.”

Ross stood, buttoning his jacket.

“Every Field Leader in the Section has read that report by now. Several of them are waiting down the hall at this very moment in an effort to recruit you to their teams. You are a free agent until you choose—”

“Sir, they’re offering me a job? *Now?*” Her final examination had happened in her nightclothes and been graded while she slept, and now this. “I haven’t even—”

“Yes,” Ross said. “I had them summoned before you sat down in that chair.” He came around the desk, not a bit apologetic about having put her on the spot. “You told me I made it sound as though Charisms were currency. Four teams are in the field blind for want of what you are, and every hour you stay unattached, four Field Leaders lose sleep over it. More Charisms are taken by forces who want to exploit them. I can’t afford to wait, Jo.” He opened the door for her. “Don’t hold the haste against them. Hold it against the ones who made it necessary.”

Jo stood and felt her hands grow clammy.

“Listen to them,” Ross said. “Ask them questions. You do have time to think on their proposals. Take the night. Perhaps I’ll have Diego whip something up for you while you turn it over.”

Then he left his own office, and the Field Leaders came in one at a time after that.

Paulie of Icarus came in with a couple of members from his team. He talked over everybody in the room, including Jo. He pronounced what she’d done to the kill order “absolutely insane,” which she gathered was praise.

Then a Field Leader named Joe—coincidentally—who ran a unit called Lyra, described the morning’s work the way a man talks about a car he’s itching to buy. Jo retained his name and nothing else.

The third visitor did not sit.

He filled the doorway first. Forty and some change, gray working through close-cropped dark hair and the rough beard along his jaw. He was big, though not in the inflated way of men who built themselves in mirrors; his size looked acquired through years of hitting people and enjoying it. Black ink crowded both forearms. And where Ross wore one reverse-dampening band, this man wore two.

His name was Tavin Ronald of Tarus, and to Jo, the man looked like he had killed so many people that he had begun to grow bored of it. Her “no” was immediate. He didn’t seem to take offense at that.

The next one to come in was a middle-aged woman, solid through the shoulders and arms in a way that suggested she'd sooner move her own furniture than let a man help her. Her dark hair had gone iron-gray in streaks, her sleeves were shoved up over thick forearms. Jo could see the pale lines of old scars on them. She crossed the room and seized Jo's hand, and the grip was hard enough to make the bones in Jo's hand introduce themselves to one another.

"Meredith Cole. Team Corvus. You can call me Meredith or Cole. Never 'ma'am,' though, you hear?"

"It's nice to meet you, Meredith."

Meredith looked her over, quick and frank. "You're smaller than advertised."

"I can throw you across the room, though."

Meredith clapped Jo on the shoulder once, hard enough to set her teeth clicking, and dropped into the chair across from her, elbows on her knees.

"I'll save us both the speech. I read the report twice, and the duty telepath talks more than he ought, so I've had it from the man who bled on the floor. You're brilliant. You're cute, so my boys will love that." Then she tipped her head. "How's your fella doing? Darrell."

"Keeping his food down, they tell me."

"Good." Meredith studied her a beat longer. "And you? You sleeping?"

"Some," Jo said, and it came out more honest than she'd planned.

"Mm." Meredith stood. "Listen, I would love you on my team. I think we could work well together. I treat my people fairly."

"I'll think about it, ma—Meredith."

"You do that," Meredith said with a wink.

The last to come in was Chris. He came in, stiff as a board, and did not look at her.

"I'm Field Leader Chris McIntyre," he said, eyes somewhere above her head. "Team Orion." She bit back a retort that she did not have the memory of a goldfish. Instead, she kept her face still and just looked at him.

After a moment, he continued, "I want you to understand that I am not here to flatter you. I am aware that every Field Leader has come in telling you how impressive your performance was this morning. Most of what they know, they know because I wrote the report. Which was accurate." His eyes finally met hers for the first time since he had entered. "You have an incredible gift. And you're going to brute force your way through everything. That worked. *This time*. The problem is that what I've seen makes me question *who you are* as a team member. How you respond to authority. How you work with others. How much emotions drive your decisions."

"I—" The heat started climbing her throat. "The man is *alive*—"

“There’s no arguing the outcome,” Chris cut her off. His breathing had gone shallow. “But a team requires trust. I’ve already buried one Linker who thought he could carry it all himself. I *will not* do that again. If you choose to join us, know that I will not tolerate ego over teamwork.”

He finished, and she came up out of her chair burning, the flush climbing to her cheeks where she couldn’t stop it.

“Are you done, Field Leader McIntyre, sir?”

“Yes,” Chris said. His eyes had gone above her head again. “That’s all.”

“Thank you for enlightening me with your views on teamwork and leadership. I’m sure some *other* Linker will be very... fortunate to take you up on the offer.”

For a moment something wavered in his face, a crack in the armor, there and gone before she could name it.

“You’re not going to—?”

“Not going to what, *sir*? I don’t believe there’s even been an offer for me to turn down.”

For a second nothing came out. The mask had slipped from his face, and she found herself staring at the rawness underneath until she had to look away.

“I—I think we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot,” he said, the words steady except for a small tremor at the end.

“I think we have,” Jo snapped back.

“I—” That absurdly sharp line of bone shifted as his jaw clenched.

There was more satisfaction in his stumbling silence than she cared to examine in herself. She crossed her arms under her breasts. “Tell me why I should pick Orion. Meredith from Corvus just made me an offer. She was warm, funny, *and* she managed it without insulting me to my face. Give me one reason I should go with Orion when you can’t even seem to bring yourself to ask.”

He looked at her for so long that the weight of his eyes became uncomfortable.

“Because,” he said, and the words came out like something wrenched from him, “we need you.”

That had not been the answer she was expecting.

He straightened, squared his shoulders.

“Team Orion would like to place before you a formal offer for the position of Linker, should you wish to accept it. Please let us know your answer at your earliest convenience.” He said it to that point somewhere above her head again, and the words sounded like a script he had memorized and rehearsed in front of a mirror.

Then he turned and left the room.

After a few minutes, Jo left Ross’s office. She had a photograph of a woman she’d never met sitting behind her eyes, and a ring she had not seen waiting in a soft velvet box that would never be opened by the man who had purchased it.

She did not know when she had decided. Or why. But at some point, between Ross's office and her room, Jo had made her decision.

CHAPTER TWO

GREYBRIAR · LOCATION CLASSIFIED · ORION BRIEFING ROOM —
SEPTEMBER 2006

JO COULD HEAR THAT ONE OF them was halfway through a story about a girl from Southie when she pushed the door open. Whatever the punchline would have been died in his mouth.

“—and then she said—” Paddy stopped and looked at her, looked at Diego, and then back at her.

Jo set her bag down inside the door. “Oh, don’t stop on my account. I was enjoying it from the hallway.”

“Walls that thin, huh?” Paddy said sheepishly.

“Yeah, but so is your material,” laughed Diego, who was sprawled across the bench like he had been poured there, plate carrier half-buckled, one boot up on the crate. He gave her a wink, eyes crinkling.

“The burgoo you made me the other night. Sent to my room. It tasted exactly like home. Thank you for that, by the way. My mama would skin me if I didn’t say it.”

“You’re welcome,” Diego said. He sat up and motioned to the room. “You’ve met everyone, right? That one there is Thomas. We call him Cupid.”

“But he’s mostly stupid,” Paddy chimed in.

“Like I said—thin material,” Diego informed Jo with exaggerated sagacity. From across the room, Thomas took the sniper glass away from his eye and nodded at her.

“That ray of sunshine over there is our ever-chipper Mr. Smiles.” He pointed at Marcus.

Marcus looked up. A scar started under his left eye and ran down into the corner of his mouth. It was old and pale against his dark skin, and it held that corner a little, making it look like he was faintly smiling.

“Hi,” she said, because she had to say something. Her cheeks felt warm, and she, feeling foolish as she did it, tucked back a few stray strands of her red hair. His eyes followed her hand as she tucked, and the heat in her face spilled down her neck. She never could stop that foolish flush. Not since she was ten and started crushing on Cody Wathen.

“Mornin’,” he said. “Did you get lost on a field trip, Fiver?” There was a playfulness under his rough voice.

“Oh, you know,” Jo said. “I was beginning to worry. I did have questions about the choice of chaperones. They all seem to have guns.”

Marcus's mouth moved at the bad corner in what was not quite a smile. Close enough to make the flutter in her stomach worsen instead of settle.

Then the door finally opened, and *he* walked through.

"Our fearless leader arrives," Diego whispered and then strolled back to his bench.

Like the night he pulled her from her bed at four in the morning, Chris was in matte black up to the throat. His dark hair was cropped short. She wondered if he had it cut on the daily. His Field Leader patch rode high on his vest, conspicuous as a challenge.

"Jo," he said, eyes not meeting hers like back in Ross's office.

"Field Leader, sir," she said.

"You're late. Brief was at oh-eight-thirty."

Jo looked at her watch. "I checked it against the clock in the hall on my way here. Your watch is fast, *sir*." She thought he winced at that. He clenched that ridiculous jaw of his and looked at her, eyes impassive. *Unimpressed*, it said to her. He then indicated the empty spot next to Diego.

"Take a seat," he said, and his voice was threaded with exhaustion.

Chris was still looking at her with those impassive eyes, and so she smiled at him. It was a smile Daddy had told her to stop using on people because, he had told her, it was "unfair." She watched his eyes drop to her mouth for half a second before he looked at the wall behind her head.

The satisfaction she felt was not altogether a sanctified one. Mama would not have been proud. She crossed the room. She nudged Diego with her shoulder, a wordless request for more space on the bench. He leaned into her instead.

"Right," Chris said. "We've got a window. Listen up."

. . .

"HERE'S THE JOB," CHRIS SAID, and the screen behind him woke to a face. A woman in her late thirties, plain brown hair and a long face with sharp, intelligent eyes. She had square reading glasses pushed up into her hair. It was the kind of face that looked like it was about to ask you a question you hadn't thought to prepare for.

"That's Mariette Devereux," Jo said, before Chris could.

"Yes, it is," Chris said.

"She taught my investigations module for two terms. She's one of the best instructors I've ever had. No other teacher has ever convinced me I might actually fail an exam."

"Then you can tell the others what she is," Chris said.

Jo kept her eyes on the face on the screen.

“She’s a Gleaner,” she said. “She doesn’t read people. Or at least—that’s not her strength. She reads what people leave behind. You give her a room, and she’ll tell you who stood in it and what they were afraid of. You give her a dead man’s coat, and she’ll tell you the last thing that went through his head while he was wearing it.” She paused. “She told us the gift was mostly useless. She said it was like being able to read everyone’s mail a week after it was delivered. I don’t think that’s true at all.”

“It isn’t,” Chris said. “She is one of the most respected Gleaners alive. Instructor Devereux could be making a fortune working for some corporation, getting dirt on competitors. *Instead*, she’s chosen to spend her life in service, training recruits. And—”

He changed the slide. It was not a face this time, but a building. Gray stone, a colonnade across the front, tall blinded windows. The kind of place money used to go and didn’t anymore.

“Three weeks ago, Devereux was running down a series of disappearances that had caught Section One’s attention.”

“The Charism shortage,” Jo said.

“Yes. You’ve all heard the rumors. Gifted people going missing. Well, she had traced the source back to an organization we call the Aviary. It’s a trafficking network. Old money, old reach, no face we can put on it—we don’t know who runs it, and we’ve stopped pretending we’re close.”

“Is that how you found Darrell? Intercepted that sale?” Jo asked.

“Yes. What we know is the trade. They find gifted people, they take them, they sell them. Devereux got near enough, but—”

“They took her,” Marcus said.

“That’s right. Three weeks ago, Mariette called into Section One to report that she believed someone from the Aviary was on her tail. They set up an extraction point for her. She never made it.”

“How are we getting the hot prof back?” Paddy asked.

Chris changed the slide and tapped the image of the grain elevator. “An asset laid eyes on her. She’s alive. And she’s here. It’s a defunct grain elevator—*was*, before the family that owned it died out. The Aviary kept the shell.”

“What are they doing keeping her in a grain elevator?” Diego asked.

“Holding facility before they take her to a buyer.”

“What do they have on site?” Thomas asked. He’d set the bolt down.

“A security detail. Contractors—good ones. The kind you pay a whole lot of money for. Count’s loose. A few dozen, perhaps.” Chris looked at the room.

“Should be easy, Cap,” Diego said. “We go in, we save her, we get out in time for me to finish the bolognese I was planning on making.”

“What’s my bird’s-eye view?” Thomas asked.

“Ha! I got that one,” Paddy laughed. When no one responded, he said, “Aviary. Bird’s eye. No?”

Ignoring Paddy, Chris said, "You go high, Tom. There's a second silo across the lot with a clean line on the office door."

"Copy."

"Everyone else goes in through the office at the base and clears it. From there it's a single internal staircase up the east wall. It's the only way to the top, and the top is where she is supposed to be. We climb it together. Diego on point, me behind him, Marcus and Paddy on the rear."

"Roger, Captain Rogers," Paddy said, looking at his nails.

"Jo stays in the middle. She's on every floor at once, telling us what's between us and Devereux before we climb into it. We get to her, get a hand on her, and bring her down the way we went up. We do not touch the security unless they touch us first."

"Let's not go getting all raunchy on us," Paddy said, taking a peanut from the center bowl. "All this talk about touching is getting to me." He threw a peanut in the air. It hit his upper lip, landed on the table, and spun lazily. Everyone looked at it for a moment.

"And if it turns loud?" Thomas asked, looking back up at Chris.

"Then you keep us alive while Jo does her part, and we leave with one more person than we came with." Chris closed the folder. "Questions."

"Yeah," Paddy said. He tried, successfully this time, to catch the peanut with his mouth.

"Yes, Paddy?"

"She's one of ours, you say."

"Yes."

"Then what the bloody hell are we waiting for?" Something burned in his normally jovial eyes. "Let's go."

Jo raised her hand, and all eyes turned to look at her.

"Yes?" Chris asked.

"Who's—um—who's keeping my time?"

"Me," Chris said. She'd been afraid of that.

"I—"

"I won't have anyone else keeping time. I kept Dan's time. I intend to keep time for any Linker who works on my team. Is that going to be a problem?"

"No," Jo said.

"You're our Linker, Jo. If this gets ugly, you'll be working somewhere the rest of us can't reach—and you can't watch your own back while you're there. So you'll have to trust us to keep you alive. Can you do that?"

She looked back at Mariette Devereux's face on the screen instead.

"I can do that," she said.

"Then kit up," he said. "We move in twenty."

• • •

THE GRAIN ELEVATOR LOOKED WORSE IN person than it had on the tablet.

Sixty feet of pitted concrete capped with a corrugated head house, the color of dried blood. The surrounding cornfield had gone to seed years ago, and the seed had gone to nothing after, so that the wind moved through it in a dry way Jo did not like. She'd grown up running fields gone exactly this dead in the back end of August, except those had a house at the end of them, a porch light, and somebody's mother calling supper across them. This one just stood there.

The service road was a quarter mile behind them.

Thomas had peeled off at the treeline ten minutes back. He was somewhere in the dark by now, up on the adjacent silo across the lot, the rifle steady on the office door. Jo could feel him—a still point in her head, his attention narrowed to a single line.

She had the rest of them in her head too.

Diego was warm and forward, almost humming, a man who unashamedly loved his own life. Paddy was a bit jittery, words moving in him even when his mouth was closed — *go-go-go-c'mon, easy Paddy, easy, go.*

Marcus—well—Marcus was a closed room with the light on under the door. She wanted to get on her figurative hands and knees and peer through.

Chris she held differently. She held him chest-to-chest, his hard, bright signal thrumming under her breasts. Jo could feel where the edges of him strained at something she didn't know the shape of.

Pay attention, Jo. Stack on me, Chris sent through her. Annoyed, Jo passed it along, a small, clean push to each of them, and she felt Paddy startle slightly at the touch and then settle.

Warn a man, Red, Paddy said.

We're not calling her that, Cabbage, Diego said.

Scared I'll catch you thinking something you shouldn't be? Jo asked.

You naked? Feel free, Rusty. Feel free.

Stop it. All of you, Chris snapped.

They stacked on the office door.

Two on the first floor. West, Jo thought. *One at the desk. One by the back hall. The desk one's awake. The hall one's reading a magazine.*

What's he reading, Penny? Paddy thought.

Quinn, Chris reprimanded.

And we're not calling her that either, Diego chimed in.

Listen. It might be important, Paddy thought back.

It's in Russian. I don't read minds that well.

Bet it's porn. She could almost hear Paddy's glee.

Your mama know you talk like that in front of women? Jo asked.

Hey, listen. I didn't go for Foxy. I could've. I'm showing some real restraint here. Because you're clearly f— Quinn. Chris's thought voice was so clear she heard it almost audibly. *Shut up.*

Upstairs, Jo went on. Two on the catwalks. North and south. South one's a smoker. He's going to step out in about a minute for a cigarette.

Bad habit, Diego murmured.

Real bad, Jo thought. *Mama always said you can forgive a man near anything but bad breath and bad manners.*

Stop talking about Mr. Smiles like that. He's right here, guys, Paddy said.

Y'all make me wish that the good Lord hadn't given me the gift of telepathy, Jo said, shaking her head.

We wait for the cigarette, Chris ordered, annoyance lacing his thought voice.

They waited for what felt like a very long time. At last, the south catwalk hostile stepped out of the silo for his cigarette.

Thomas took him before the lighter sparked. The shot was a soft thing from this distance, a cough, and Jo felt the man go out.

Smoking, Paddy said, *it can kill you.*

Chris was already moving. Paddy hit the door, neat work with the breaching charge. Diego went through the frame first. The desk hostile got a hand to his sidearm, and Diego put him on the floor with the side of one armored forearm before the man cleared leather.

The hall hostile was looking up from his magazine.

Jo took him, telekinetically stopping his hand before it reached his belt and pushing his head up so he was looking at the ceiling. While he was looking at the ceiling, Marcus came around the corner and put him down without a word. The whole thing took two seconds.

Stairs, came Chris's voice.

The internal staircase ran up the east wall of the silo. It was steel, open, and absolutely the wrong shape for a fight. Jo had thought so during the brief. It was worse in person. They went up it anyway.

Landing one, clear. Diego in front, Chris behind, Paddy and Marcus on the rear, Jo in the middle of the diamond with her hand on the rail and her mind on every floor of the building at once.

On landing two, a door cracked open above them. Paddy registered it half a second before Jo could call it.

Up-and-right—

Paddy was already firing. He spun on the ball of one foot, brought the rifle up across his body in a motion that should not have been possible in the width of the stairwell, and put three rounds through the gap in the door above them. A body fell past them down the open center of the stairwell and hit the concrete sixty feet below with the sound of a sack of wet laundry.

Up-and-right, Paddy mimicked back at her, breathing hard, grinning. *Thanks, Cinnabon.*

Jo was tracking them now without thinking about it. Five hostiles left in the building. Then four. The captive at the top. This was going to be easy after all. A smooth—

Suddenly everything felt wrong.

It was not a hostile bead. It was a *presence*. A pressure inside her own head from outside her head. And then, before she could even shape what it was, the bright, clean weave of the team went dark.

Diego, gone. Paddy, gone. Thomas, gone. Marcus, gone. When the link severed between her and Chris, she let out a gasp of air, reaching for her chest. That one *hurt*.

Jo stopped on the stairs so hard that Paddy nearly ran into her back.

“Jo.” Chris’s voice, real, out loud. “What happened?”

“There’s another Charism here. He cut the *link*.”

“*What?*”

“Above us. He’s holding Mariette compliant. He’s a Mixed. Part Linker, part—oh, no. He’s a Controller—”

She didn’t finish.

Paddy made a sound.

It was a small sound—half a breath, the start of a word he never got to. Jo turned to look at him on the step below, and Paddy was looking back at her, but his eyes had gone glassy and very still, and his rifle had begun, very slowly, to come up.

“Paddy?” she said, breath hitching.

“Byrne—” His own voice. Underneath. Far away. “Byrne, I can’t—*Byrne, I can’t stop—*”

The rifle came fully up.

Diego made towards the rifle, but then suddenly dropped hard. He went down on the stair like a man whose strings had been cut, his armored shoulder cracking against the steel grating, and he was clawing at his own head with both hands and making a noise Jo had never heard a grown man make.

“*Get out, get out, get out!*” he was screaming, crying.

“*Diego—*” Chris rushed towards him, dropping to one knee beside him, both hands going to Diego’s shoulders. “Diego, hey, hey, look at me, look at me, *Chef—*”

Paddy’s rifle was at Jo’s chest. She was still trying to regain connection, trying to keep the other presence out of her own mind. She could see his finger slowly pulling back the trigger.

Then Marcus hurled himself at Paddy. He was on Paddy in an instant—one forearm under the rifle barrel slamming it up and away, the other hand into Paddy’s throat, the whole weight of him driving the Irishman back against the stairwell wall with a sound that rang the steel. He was growling, and Paddy thrashed against him. The rifle went off—two rounds into the corrugated ceiling sixty feet up. Concrete dust came down in a fine pale rain.

“Marcus, be careful with him!” Jo shouted. “Please, Marcus! Don’t hurt him.”

“I’m trying,” Marcus said. He had Paddy by the throat against the wall, and Paddy was hitting him—wild, ugly, not-Paddy at all—and Marcus was eating the punches without flinching. “Fix it, Jo.”

She opened her mouth and then closed it. She looked down at Diego, who was still sobbing and clawing at his head as Chris tried to contain him.

She had practiced this against the augments at Greybriar wearing the resistance bands. None of them had been *this*. Jo reached, looking for the Mixed. She realized the other telepath had his guard up the way an amateur guarded—wide on every side, thinking the wall was the wall, not knowing there were doors.

The man felt her. He whipped around in his own mind and tried to defend himself. Behind her, Paddy made a sound, a helpless whimpering noise.

“Marcus!” she yelled.

“Shut up and trust me. I got Paddy. You do your job!” he growled back at her.

She grabbed onto the hand that had a hold of Paddy.

It thrashed and tried to break free of her, but she held on, clamping fingers around the telepathic wrist. Jo felt her knees hit the floor, the shock of it vibrating up her spine.

Paddy sagged in Marcus’s grip, suddenly *Paddy* again. Marcus instantly let him slide down the wall to the grating.

“*Diego*,” Jo gasped. “Hold on, Diego, hold on—”

“Stay focused, Byrne,” Chris said. Diego was on his back on the stair. Chris had both hands on his face. Diego’s eyes were rolled back, and his heels were drumming against the steel. His eyes had gone vacant.

She closed her eyes and found the other hand and grabbed.

The man was thrashing, both hands occupied. The wall of his home was undefended.

She briefly thought of what her offensive instructor would say.

“Two hands is unimaginative.”

She walked through the front door of his mind. She felt the shape of him from the inside for the first time and began rummaging. She had learned early on in her time at Greybriar that in every man there lived a piece of himself. A thing called the Will to Live. Willy, her instructor had dubbed it as a morbid joke.

The thing that you can hold and nourish.

Or crush.

She found it and closed her hand around it where it was. She scooped it up. Small, fragile, vibrating. It was like a newborn bird. Warm and soft and damp.

Stop what you're doing, Jo sent to the man. *Please.*

The man clamped down harder on Diego and Paddy, and they began convulsing again.

She looked down at the small, warm bird. She—in a breath—crushed it. She felt the thing go still and wet in her hands.

The man's whole presence went out at once.

Diego's heels stopped drumming. Paddy gasped on the grating like a man surfacing. Marcus had not moved from where he stood over Paddy, one hand still loose at his side, the other half-raised.

All of their links came back to her at once.

Chris, GO, she said. *He's down. He's all the way down. Go now—*

He went up the stairs three at a time, sidearm drawn, and Jo heard him reach the landing. She heard one short, clean shot.

She put her fingers to her face. They came away red.

Paddy had pushed himself up to sitting against the wall and was looking at his own hands like he had never seen them before. Diego rose slowly, and his face had gone the color of something left too long in the dark.

Nobody said anything for a long second.

Then Paddy, very quietly, said something she couldn't hear.

Come again? Jo said.

That was terrifying, Paddy repeated.

I'm sorry.

No. You were excellent, Paddy said. *And I take back all the dirty thoughts I've had about you today.*

She laughed, and he smiled at her, the twinkle back in his eyes.

I think we got our own— he paused for effect —*patron saint. What do you think, Chef? Saint of Orion?*

From the stair, Diego smiled.

Saint is perfect.

We are not done, came Chris's voice. Humorless. *Mariette's still here. We need to move.*

Marcus reached down without looking and offered Jo his hand.

She took it—palm to palm, armored glove to armored glove, two seconds of contact, and he pulled her up with an ease that suggested she weighed nothing to him. Her face was at the level of his throat for a single beat before she stepped past him onto the next stair.

They continued climbing.

You're at one-thirty, Jo, Chris said. She hadn't noticed how much of her tank had been drained by that.

The fourth landing had a hostile waiting around the corner. Jo, depleted, half a step behind, registered the man a beat too slow. Marcus was already there, inside the rifle's reach, one armored hand on the barrel and the other hand at the man's throat, putting him on his back on the grating with a knee on his chest and a knife in under the collarbone in one continuous motion. The man made a sound that wasn't a scream. Marcus held him there until the sound stopped.

She went past Marcus to the door. Chris put his shoulder against it. Diego put his against Chris. Paddy, paler than Jo had ever seen him, was watching the stairs behind them. Marcus stood at Jo's shoulder.

Jo reached into the room beyond the door, and she found the captive, and the captive was alive.

Barely. But alive.

She's there, Jo said. She's alone. She's—Chris, she's awake. She knows we're here.

Open it, he said.

. . .

JO GUESSED THAT THE ROOM at the top of the silo had been a control room once. The consoles seemed to have been ripped out years ago, and the wiring was rust-bloomed in the wall. The only light was a battery-powered work lamp on the floor in the corner, throwing a hard sideways yellow across the concrete.

Mariette was bound to a chair in the middle of it, though it was hard to tell that it *was* her given what they had done to her face. Her hair had been brown once and was now matted with something that had dried darker. Her hands were zip-tied at the wrists to the chair. There were electrodes adhered to her temples that ran to a small black device on the floor that Jo did not look at for long. Her head was tipped forward against her chest.

Chris went in after Diego.

Chris cleared the corners, his sidearm sweeping the room. The moment the corners were clear, he holstered the weapon and crossed to the chair and crouched in front of it.

"Ma'am," he said.

The captive did not look up.

"Ma'am. Can you hear me?" He turned to look at Jo. She stepped in next to him, kneeling before Mariette. She reached into the woman's mind. Mariette was *barricaded*. The dead telepath had been holding her compliant, and now she had forgotten she could leave.

She's in there, Jo said. Chris, she built a wall, and she's still behind it. She doesn't know he's dead.

Can you bring her out?

Yes. Give me a second.

Okay. You've got an hour twenty-five left.

She pushed deeper and slower this time. She put her hand against the wall. She let the woman feel her on the other side. She sent her an image of herself—not in the tactical gear.

Jo sent her the image of herself she presented at Mass. The green dress and flowing red hair. The smell of grass and the feeling of the warmth of the sun. She felt the woman lower her walls, slowly, and look at her. Recognition dawned in Mariette's mind.

Jo?

Mariette opened her eyes. They were bloodshot, and the pupils were two different sizes.

"He's gone, Mariette. You're okay now."

Mariette let out a shaking breath.

Chris began cutting the zip ties. He was surprisingly careful around the welts under them. The woman tried to stand, but she stumbled forward, and Chris caught her. With a tenderness she hadn't seen in him before, Chris draped her arm around his shoulder.

"Diego," Chris said.

"Cap?"

"Strip the carrier and give it to Paddy. I want your hands free." He glanced over at Marcus. "You cover the rear. Jo, you're with me." He stopped and thought down the link, *Thomas*.

Here, Cap.

We're coming out west side. Status?

Service road, two vehicles. First one I took at the treeline. Driver and passenger. Second one stopped about a quarter mile out when the first one stopped responding. Three men in it. They're on foot now, moving wide through the corn. I have one of them. The other two are smarter than the first one.

How long do we have?

Sixty seconds if they keep being smart. Less if they get brave.

We're coming down.

Come down on the east side.

East side is open ground, Tom.

Trust me.

"East side," he said without hesitation. "Move."

. . .

THEY CAME DOWN THE STAIRS FASTER than they had gone up them.

Diego had the woman against his chest like a child. He moved like she weighed nothing. The plate carrier was strapped to Paddy's back over his own kit.

Landings three and two clear. Keep moving, Thomas said. *Ground floor. There's a man on the catwalk above the office door who has not moved since we breached. He is either very disciplined or he is very dead. I cannot tell from here.*

Can you take him?

The polite cough of a bullet being fired.

Done.

I love it when Cupid does his thing, Paddy said. *Freaky. But I love it.*

They came out the east door of the office building into the dry grass and the smell of the cornfield and the wind. Diego with the woman. Paddy on the rifle. Marcus turning to face the building as they came out, walking backwards with his weapon up.

Jo could see Thomas now. A small dark shape on top of the adjacent silo, prone against the lip of the head house, the rifle a long line out from his shoulder.

Two men in the corn, your eleven o'clock, sixty yards. They have not seen you yet. Keep walking. Do not run. Do not look at the corn.

They followed his instructions.

Forty yards. They are about to look up.

A shot. Then a second.

Clear. Keep moving. Vehicle is two hundred yards your two o'clock past the equipment shed. I have it.

They reached the equipment shed. Their vehicle—the one Thomas had repositioned during the operation while none of them were thinking about it—was idling behind it, doors already open. The sniper had gotten down from the silo. Jo did not know when. The rifle was slung across his back. He was holding the rear door of the vehicle open with one hand, a water bottle in the other. As Jo went past him to climb in, he put the water bottle into her hand without looking at her.

“Good job back there, Saint,” he said with a faint smile. “I like you.”

“Thanks,” she said. “And you’re more interesting than I pegged you for.” He flashed his perfect white teeth at her.

Diego eased Mariette into the back seat as Chris got on the radio. Paddy was sitting on the bumper of the vehicle with his head between his knees. The Irishman let out a long sigh. Marcus was still watching the building they had come out of. Thomas took the driver’s seat.

“Tom,” Chris said.

“Chris.”

“Get us out of here,” he said.

The vehicle rolled, and behind them the grain elevator stood empty in the early morning.

And then it was gone, and they were on the service road, and the road bent into the trees, and Western Pennsylvania closed up behind them.

JO COULDN'T MAKE HER HANDS STOP.

They weren't shaking. She had expected shaking. She couldn't make them stop feeling the soft, damp thing she had squeezed until it was limp and lifeless. She could still feel it in her palms. She had washed them twice, and it hadn't helped, because the thing they were full of wasn't on them.

She felt it over and over. Felt the small warm weight, the give, the break, the way it had gone still. She lay in the dark and turned them over on the blanket and could not put them down.

She had on the soft cotton things her mother had sent her last Christmas — the ones with the little blue flowers on them, because Mama had never quite caught up to the fact that she was not eleven anymore.

She reached across to her nightstand, and her fingers found the rosary her mother had given her when she was confirmed. The one that had been passed down from her grandmother. She absentmindedly mouthed *Hail Mary* as she moved from bead to bead.

Pray for us sinners.

The little bird was crushed in her hands again. And again.

God, she thought. She sat up, put the rosary on the stand, and got out of bed. Her hand unconsciously touched the crucifix that hung between her collarbones.

Then she put on a sweatshirt over the blue flowers because the corridors were cold.

And because she didn't want to look like she was eleven.

She did not lace her boots; she just stepped into them. She opened her door very quietly. The corridor was empty. She hadn't been in Orion's quarters long enough to know it in the dark. She found the stairs she'd only been down once and took them because they led away from her room. At the bottom there was a common room with the light on, and in the common room was Marcus.

He was at the long counter under the single lit lamp, and he was doing something.

She stopped in the doorway and did a double take because she couldn't quite understand what she was seeing.

He was sewing.

It was the bowed head and the small pull of thread she'd watched her mother do at the kitchen table back home, mending altar-server hems and her brothers' torn Sunday pants with the same long-suffering patience. Except the needle was tiny and absurd in the hands of a man who had put a knife under someone's collarbone and held it there until the sound stopped.

He didn't look up. "You should be asleep, Jo."

He drew the thread through, tied it off, bit it. There was a split in the shoulder of his kit laid out in front of him; she remembered the wall ringing when he'd driven Paddy into it. The light cut shadows across his shoulders, and beneath the simple white tank top the muscle stood out in clean, defined lines.

He looked at her, and she was suddenly aware that she was standing in the cotton things with the little blue flowers her mother had bought her and that she was staring.

"I—uh—couldn't sleep," she said.

"Same here." He set the kit aside. "But that's me most nights. You want tea or something, Jo?"

"No," she said too fast. "I mean—yes. Yes, I do."

He made a noise and got up, walking over to the little station that contained a kettle and mugs.

She came into the room. There were a couch and two chairs, and she didn't sit in any of them; she ended up at the end of the station near him, which hadn't been the plan, if there'd been a plan. She looked at his hands as he worked the teabag up and down in the steaming water. They were scarred and steady, faint white lines on the knuckles. The hands of a killer who somehow could be gentle with a needle.

"Does it work?" she said.

"Does what work?"

"That." She nodded at the needle, the kit, all of it. "After something like today."

He was quiet a moment. "It keeps my hands busy," he said. "So the rest of me has to wait its turn." Then he handed her the mug. "But no—not really. I've found talking can help, though."

"You don't look like the talking type," she said.

"And what type do I look like to you?" he asked without heat, but she felt the sting of shame anyway.

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean—"

"I don't offend easy," he said, and he gave her a smile that made her look down at her mug.

She thought about telling him. About what she had done. About the thing she had begun to think of as Willy. Her thumb went to the crucifix.

"Where did you learn to sew?" she asked.

"My dad," he said. "He learned from his. We're a family that's good with our hands."

"I see."

"You don't know where I come from, do you?" he asked. She looked at him. His dark skin, his faint accent.

"New Orleans?" she said.

"Yes," he answered with a small chuckle. "But my family."

"No," she said. "Should I?"

He gave a small shrug.

"Somewhere up my family tree is a man named Augustin Milhet." The name sounded... familiar. She tried to place it. "The Union's Iron. Or Iron Miles, as some called him."

Realization dawned on her.

"Oh," she said. "The one who won the Battle of New Orleans."

“The very one,” he said. “The war hero. The champion. And me? I’m just a man who sews.”

She looked up at him, and his dark eyes were on her.

Jo crossed the half-step between them with the thing she hadn’t said still sitting in her mouth. She got on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“You did a lot more than sew today,” she said. “You saved my life. You saved Paddy. Thank you.”

He smiled at her, warm and genuine.

“And you should smile more, Mr. Smiles. It suits you.”

“Good night, Jo,” he said quietly.

“Good night,” she said, and left to go back to her new room.

CHAPTER THREE

GREYBRIAR · LOCATION CLASSIFIED — SEPTEMBER 2006

SHE HAD PULLED ON TAC PANTS and a white tank and yesterday's boots, her hair scraped into a knot already coming loose at the back. She'd dressed at five, because dressed was easier than lying in the dark pretending she would sleep more. Two hours of sleep. That was all she had gotten.

It wasn't the op that had kept her up. Not exactly. It was her *hands*. They weren't shaking. More like they were feeling. Every time she drifted near sleep, they closed around something small and warm that wasn't there anymore.

Jo left her room and was halfway down the corridor on the third floor when Chris stepped out of the briefing room and almost walked into her.

She could tell that he had not slept either. She could feel it off of him, that stretched-wire quality of a person still running on yesterday.

"Good morning, Byrne," he said in a voice that contained no warmth.

"Field Leader McIntyre," she replied, mimicking his pitch perfectly.

"I—" He paused and puffed air through his nose. "Can you stop doing that, please?"

"Sure," she said, feeling just a little guilty. "Good morning. And it's Jo. You can call me Jo."

"Right," he said with a quick wave of his hand, as though brushing the mistake away might keep it from counting. "Jo."

"Chris," she said.

They stood for an uncomfortable length of time, in that strip of corridor light neither of them had chosen to share but had ended up doing so anyway. Behind him the briefing room door was still open an inch. Down the hall, someone was laughing two corners away. The building had already begun its day.

"You were good last night," he said. Jo blinked at him and then tilted her head. She watched him realize how it had sounded. His eyes grew imperceptibly wider.

"I meant — yesterday. The op." He shifted his weight and immediately regretted it; she saw the pain flicker low at his side before he covered it. "You were good on the op." Then, almost as if he couldn't stand to give a compliment without a qualifier, he added, "For a first op, I mean."

Jo felt her brow furrow.

"Well," she said, "thanks, Chris. I'm glad I met your standards."

His mouth moved, working for a moment before words came out.

"I just meant that you didn't try to do everything yourself. You trusted the team. You held up."

"Well, I'm real glad I held up."

He exhaled once, a sigh that sounded like a deflation. She could see him losing his grip on whatever version of this conversation he had meant to have.

"I told them you did well," he said. Almost a whisper.

That checked her for half a beat.

"You told *who* I did well?"

"Ross. Section One." He made a vague motion with one hand. "The people in charge."

"Oh," she said. "Well... good. Thank you. If you'll excuse me."

She stepped around him and started down the corridor. Then stopped.

The thing that made her turn back was not anger exactly. It was something smaller, she supposed. It was the sense of being condescended to.

"You told them I did well?" she said. "For a first op?"

"Not in those words."

"Well, I reckon I held up better than you did." She indicated his side with a nod. "At least I wasn't the one getting knocked into railings."

His mouth went tight.

"You had us covering you," he said. Something about his voice made her continue despite herself.

"Oh? And who covered all of you?"

The words landed between them harder than she had meant them to. Or maybe exactly as hard as she had meant them to in the first ugly second, before the better part of her had time to object.

Chris looked at her for a moment without speaking. Wounded pride looked different on him than it did on other people. She almost felt bad.

"I— listen, I was trying to—" He stopped. Let out a breath. "Forget it."

He looked past her then, at something that was not there. The wall must have been much easier than dealing with her, she reckoned.

Jo felt the heat of her own defensiveness cool.

"I'm real sorry, Chris," she said after a moment. "That was unfair of me."

"Marcus was up on the second floor when I came down." The change of subject was so abrupt she almost laughed.

"Excuse me?"

"You should ask him how you did." Chris still wasn't looking at her. "He didn't take his eyes off you all op, did he?"

That one landed... strangely.

She looked at him for another heartbeat and saw, beneath the rankness of the exchange, what had gone wrong. But before she could decide what to do about it, he looked at his watch, and when he spoke again it was in the other voice. The one that read facts off cards.

“Ross wants to see you. Oh-nine-hundred. His office.”

“What for?”

“The summons didn’t say.”

Chris was already walking away.

“I’ll see you at debrief, then,” she called after him.

He was down the corridor in the direction he had originally been heading.

Jo watched him go.

Then she turned the other way, feeling faintly irritated with him, faintly irritated with herself.

. . .

ROSS WAS READING A BOOK WHEN Jo entered. He was leaned back against his large leather chair, the leather-bound volume in his hands. There wasn’t nearly enough light but Jo wasn’t about to tell him that.

He looked over his reading glasses and smiled at her.

“Jo. Please. Sit.” He closed the book with a soft thump, set it down, folded the wire arms of his glasses, and rested them on the leather.

“Dr. Patel tells me Instructor Devereux is doing well,” Ross said. “She slept. She had eaten. She has spoken to one of the counselors. She remembers her sister. She remembers you carrying her out. She does not remember the weeks before that. The mind protects what it can.”

“Her mind, sir? Or someone else’s?”

“Both, I am told. To be sure that she recovers.”

He laced his fingers together and rested his chin on them, watching her.

“Are you doing okay?”

“How do you mean, sir?”

“Four days ago you crushed a man’s will to live. That is not something one shakes off easily.”

“I did what I had to do for my team, sir. Reckon that’s what this place trained me for.”

“It is. Then let me tell you something, and we will not need to speak of it again. The guilt you feel is what makes me trust you out there. If you didn’t feel it, we would be having a very different conversation.”

She didn’t know what to say, so she said, “Thank you, sir.”

Ross opened a drawer and took out a manila folder and held it across the desk.

“I have something for you.”

She looked down at it. It was thin. So thin she almost wasn't sure there *was* anything contained in it.

"It is not an op. Not yet. It is a file I want you to read. Take it back to your room. Read it twice. Come back to me once you have and tell me everything that stood out to you."

"What is it about?" She finally took the folder.

"A girl in Marseilles. Fifteen. She has been missing for three weeks. The local field office thinks she is a Charism. A Linker. I am not yet sure. I want your eyes on it. It could be nothing."

"Why my eyes, sir?"

Ross smiled, his teeth so white and perfect it was almost distracting.

"Instructor Devereux recommended you," he said.

She nodded, stood, and held the folder against her hip the way she'd held a notebook in school.

. . .

JO CLOSED THE DOOR TO HER room and sat on the edge of the narrow bed. She opened the thin folder.

A photograph was paper-clipped to the first page. A girl, fifteen, standing on a stone terrace with the Mediterranean behind her. She was in a white sundress and expensive sandals, one hand raised to shade her eyes from the sun. Her hair was the pale blonde that only came from generations of careful breeding and old money. She was pretty and looked like the kind of child who had never had to wait for anything in her life.

Her name read: *Auchincloss, Victoria*.

The file came from an office in Marseilles. The girl had been missing three weeks. She was last seen leaving a private tennis club with her instructor. The instructor had been found two days later in an alley with his throat slit open and his wallet gone. The working theory was kidnapping for ransom. The family was old New England money and had kept a house on the *Côte d'Azur* for sixty years. They were cooperating but were rapidly losing hope. The girl was an only child.

What interested Section Six was the margin note from the field office chief written in blue pen: *Subject has exhibited low-level anomalous perception on at least three documented occasions (ages 9, 11, 13). Family attributes to "vivid imagination." Recommend classification review.*

Jo read the examples. A horse that had thrown its rider and broken its leg. Victoria had refused to get on it that morning and thrown a fit in the stable yard. A storm that had taken out power to half the village. She had woken her governess at three a.m. and asked if the lights would come back on soon. It hadn't affected their house.

And once, at a garden party, she had walked up to a man her parents had never met and told him his daughter was sick and needed him. His daughter had died the next day.

There was no classification for anything like precognition. It had never been heard of, only theorized.

Jo read all of it again. It all bothered her.

The alley suggested robbery. Throat cut, wallet gone. But who opened a man's throat for a wallet? Somebody had cleaned up the last person seen with the girl and dressed it up as street crime. At least that was what it seemed like to her.

And the file argued ransom. Rich family, only child. Except no one had asked for a ransom. There had been no demand.

They hadn't taken her to sell her back.

They'd taken her to keep her. Or sell her to someone else.

Jo sat with that a moment. Then she flipped to the front page and stared into the girl's face. Her eyes were so blue they almost seemed to glow.

Three weeks. Mariette had been taken three weeks earlier, chasing the Aviary's disappearances when the Aviary took her.

Jo turned the page again. There was a second photograph, this one taken from a distance. Victoria on the same terrace. She was sitting alone on the steps with a book in her lap, looking out at the water. Despite her long legs, the girl looked small. Just a child. A young girl who had been left to her own company too often.

Jo closed the folder.

Her body still ached from the op, but she didn't want to sit still with this. She wanted to do something that felt useful.

. . .

THE MESS AT SUPPER HELD MAYBE eighty minds, and Jo tried to ignore every one of them as she walked through it. Her three were at the usual table. Third from the window, same as always, and for a moment, standing there with her tray, it was August again. She was not part of Team Orion. Nothing in her hands had ever died because she crushed it.

Then Priya saw her and lit up like a switchboard.

"You had a nine o'clock," she said, before Jo's tray touched the table. "With Ross. Don't look at me like that, the log sits right there in intake. Anybody could read it."

"Anybody who reads upside down across a counter while distracting the secret keeper with her cleavage," Theo said.

"You think my cleavage is distracting, T?" Priya asked, her eyes gleaming mischievously. Theo did not look up from his textbook.

"Pree." Jo sat, and her ribs told her about it. "Leave poor Theo alone. And stop prying, *Pry-ab*." Priya sat back with her enormous eyes narrowed down to merely large.

The gravy on Jo's tray had skinned over. She ate it anyway. Then, from the serving line, unmistakable as a brass band:

"—then I said, 'There are laws about things like this.' And she looks at me like—" Paddy. Always with a story. Jo had heard that story at least two times now.

Diego spotted their table from the line and threw both arms up, tray and all, like a man greeting a ship. "Saint!" Then, taking in the rest of them: "And the burglars. All my favorite criminals in one place."

"I prefer guests," Priya said, poking at her food and offering the large man a shy smile.

"You broke into my kitchen at five in the morning."

"Well, maybe you can ask me to a proper meal then," Priya said. Theo looked up from his textbook at Priya, then at Diego. He looked back down at his book, ignoring them again.

There was a general dragging of chairs. Paddy arrived at Priya's elbow and took her hand like there was a ring in his pocket.

"Patrick Quinn. You can call me Paddy. Everyone does, except when they call me—"

"Cabbage," Priya said. "Motor pool intake, last Tuesday. One crate, requisition signed P. Quinn, contents listed as *morale*."

Paddy let out a snort.

"It was morale," he said. "And your eyes are so large they practically *are* cabbages. Has anyone told you that you are unusually attractive?"

"Which part? Unusual or attractive?" Addy asked, looking at the man with a queer expression on her face. He glanced over at her then back at Priya. He rested a cheek on his fist as he observed her face.

"Definitely both. Together. Like a married couple. We should get hitched."

Priya's mouth made an O shape and she looked utterly lost for words.

"Ignore him," Diego said, rolling his eyes.

Thomas set down a black coffee and nothing else. He considered Theo's face-down cards the way he considered things through a scope. "Pharmacology?" Theo and Priya exchanged glances. Jo knew they were wondering why a pack of Sixers had chosen to descend on her table. When both of them looked over at Jo, she knew what they were thinking then too.

It was because of her.

"Field pharmacology. Review board in three weeks," Theo replied.

"Turn them over." Theo turned them over. Thomas read for a moment. "They'll test the contraindications, not the doses. Boards test the thing that kills a man, not the thing that cures him." He slid the cards back. "I'll quiz you after supper."

"Why?" Theo said, meaning it.

"I'm between hobbies." Thomas shrugged. Theo watched him from under lowered brows and kept whatever he thought to himself.

Marcus took the end seat with a nod that covered the table. Addy looked at him then looked at Jo, and Jo became very interested in her tray. Why did Addy have to go and make it so obvious?

“What *is* that?” Diego asked, looking with disdain at the Fivers’ meal.

“The menu says beef,” Priya offered.

“If by beef they mean sand and plastic.” He leaned over it. He smelled it. He straightened up with the face of a man who had seen combat. “You know what. Padre was right. It’s time I rehabilitate this place.”

“Thought you said this kitchen needed putting down, Chef,” Paddy said, around a mouthful of Priya’s apple, which he had helped himself to.

“Well, I changed my mind,” Diego declared, his considerably large chest puffed. “It is time I teach those crooked cooks how to cook.”

Diego went through the swinging door talking. If the line cook thought she could object, she was sorely mistaken. Jo caught pieces of the conversation over the counter: *sofrito, walk-in, who ordered this, no, who hurt YOU?*

Diego’s head came back through the pass.

“Cabbage. My kitchen. Eggs, butter, both baskets, the good pan. The *good* pan. Run.”

“What do I get out of this deal?” Paddy asked, observing his nails coyly.

“Food.”

Paddy rolled his eyes.

“Fine, fine,” Paddy muttered, making a show of dragging himself to his feet.

“If you’re not back in less than ten minutes, we eat without you,” Diego said without looking at his friend.

“Avenge me if he does eat without me, won’t you, Saint?” Paddy said as he trotted off.

The steward arrived. He was a narrow man with a ring of keys he wore like a rank, and he had words. *Sanctioned* was one. *Requisition chain* was two more.

“Requisitions come through intake,” Priya said, suddenly appearing at his elbow. The man jumped. “Form eleven-C covers voluntary augmentation of food service by qualified personnel. I’ve seen the paper. I can have it on your desk before the eggs are.”

Priya winked at Diego.

“There is no form eleven-C,” the steward said.

“There will be, my good man,” Theo said, still looking down at his book. “Just you wait.”

The steward went to check the dry store lock, not willing to give in. Unfortunately for him, Addy was inside reading flour sacks.

“That door was locked,” he said.

Addy did not even look at the man.

He was drawing breath for the speech he'd been saving his whole working life when Thomas appeared beside him, coffee in hand.

"Your name, good sir?" He had put on a particular accent that Jo did not recognize.

"Dukes."

"Mr. Dukes. Do you know who I am?"

"Am I supposed to?"

"No. No. Let me introduce myself. My name is Thomas Whitfield-Sterling." Thomas flashed an impossibly beautiful smile. Jo was certain that his teeth actually sparkled as they caught the light. The man fumbled and took a step backward. "Yes. My family paid for this building. I'm positive your salary was included."

"I'm getting the duty officer," Dukes said.

"Bring him," Diego called from the line. "Tell him to bring an appetite. Jorge always likes a good stew!"

By the time Paddy came back with two baskets, the good pan, and a head of cabbage nobody had asked for riding on top like a figurehead, the smell in the kitchen had changed. Butter and onions travel. Heads came up at the Five tables one at a time, the way her brothers used to surface at the smell of Mamaw's skillet or Daddy's grill. They were all being summoned by something older than any dinner bell. The primal understanding that good cooking was afoot.

Diego started putting plates through the window, and Paddy took the room in hand — *"Folks! Plenty for everyone, no pushing, form on the rail, that's lovely. Oh, well, hello, pretty. What's your—? OW! Hey!"* Diego had somehow reached through the window to clip Paddy on the back of his head. *"Do you want me to drop these, Chef? Didn't think so."*

As Fivers were getting their plates and the mess hall became far livelier than Jo had ever seen it, Dukes came back. And it was not Jorge that he brought with him.

It was Chris McIntyre.

Jo heard Diego curse under his breath.

The noise came down a notch, forks hovering over spoons, as the killjoy of all killjoys towered next to the steward. *Here we go*, Jo thought. Chris looked at the line of kids. At the pass, where Diego tried his best to look unrepentant and yet like a kid caught with his hands in the cookie jar.

Paddy was whistling, nonchalantly putting an arm around Priya's shoulder. She pushed it off, a little smirk on her face.

"Is anyone hurt?" Chris turned to Dukes.

"What? That's not — no."

"Did anyone use the Service's property for anything dangerous or illegal?"

"The dry store was breached—"

"I asked a question."

“No,” Dukes said, with difficulty.

“Great. You’re dismissed, Mr. Dukes.”

He stood there while Dukes worked his mouth a few times and then left.

Chris crossed to the pass. “Twenty hundred. The kitchen goes back the way you found it, Diego.”

“Better than I found it. Just look at it, Cap. It’s a place of *life* now. Not institutional slop.”

Chris looked at the steam trays, at what the menu had sworn was beef. A small smile, something Jo had never seen on the recruitment poster, broke across his face. It seemed to light his whole being up. Jo realized she was staring when his eyes met hers. She looked away first.

“Agreed,” he said. He clapped Diego on the shoulder. She looked up as he was turning to go. Diego, however, pushed a loaded plate into his hand. Chris looked down at it and then up at the crowd. He seemed, for a moment, lost. Like he wasn’t sure where he would go.

“You could eat it here,” Addy said from their table, patting the seat right next to her. That look was back on her friend’s face — the look of a woman ready to devour her prey.

Chris looked at the bench. He looked at Addy the way he’d look at an unfamiliar instrument. “Thank you. I have reports,” he said, with perfect courtesy. *The fool had no idea at all, did he?* Jo thought.

Chris carried his plate out of the mess. Addy watched the door swing shut.

“Mmm! That man is—”

“—*fne*.” Priya finished for Addy, both women looking at the door long past necessary. Jo shook her head as Theo let out something like a moan at their unabashed display of lust.

• • •

THEY CAME OUT INTO THE CORRIDOR in pieces: Diego and Paddy ahead with the baskets, arguing about the cabbage that had gone unused, Thomas peeling off toward the lockers, her three friends turning the other way, toward the Five wing. Toward the room that used to be hers.

Addy hung back.

“They haven’t reassigned your bunk,” she said. “I told housing there’s a mold problem.” When Jo didn’t reply right away, Addy said, “Priya’s built a whole theory about your team that needs shooting down. Come with us.”

She was about to relent when she saw Marcus standing by the door, looking over at her. Waiting. For *her*. Addy followed her gaze and then gave her a soft, almost sad smile.

“That’s what I was afraid of.” She squeezed Jo’s arm once, hard, and went after the others, and did not look back.

Marcus had the last basket. Jo fell in beside him and they went the long way, without either of them deciding it aloud. The corridor lights had gone over to their evening setting.

They'd gone a hundred feet before he spoke.

"I needed that." It was almost a sigh.

"Needed what?"

"That. Back there." He tipped his head back the way they'd come. Back towards the mess hall.

"Remembering him without —" He hunted for the word. "— all the drama. Dan would've gotten a kick out of it."

They came to the stairwell where his floor went one way and hers went the other. He moved the basket to his outside hip so she'd have the rail. She put her hand on it. She didn't take the step.

She had about six things to say and no order to put them in. What came out was, "Thanks for walking me."

"Any time."

He stayed where he was. Then he bent and set the basket on the bottom stair. He took her hand in both of his, and hers disappeared. They were simply massive. He lifted it to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. She laughed, both flustered and a bit disappointed.

"I give you a kiss on the cheek, and I get a hand kiss?"

He looked at her face a moment, as if checking it against something. Then he let her hand go, took her face instead, and kissed her. His mouth was warm. Softer than she'd have guessed, and under the softness she could feel the scar at the corner of it.

"Good night, Jo," he said, when he finally pulled back.

"Good night, Marcus."

• • •

IN HER ROOM, SHE TOUCHED THE crucifix around her neck, forefinger brushing the face of her God. Then sat on the edge of the bed. Then she took the folder out once more.

Jo slid the second photograph out from under its clip, the one with the terrace, the steps, the girl alone with a book in her lap, looking out at all that water. Small as a comma on the page. Just a child. Was she still even alive?

Jo began to pray. She began to pray for a girl she had never met, in a place she couldn't picture, held by people whose faces nobody knew. And then, because prayer and action were not contradictory things, she pressed her thumb to the small gray shoulder in the photograph.

Hold on, she thought at the girl. We'll come for you. Show us where you are, Victoria. We'll come for you.

She fell asleep with the lamp on. And the girl on the terrace sat behind her eyes all night.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MARSEILLES-AJACCIO FERRY · MEDITERRANEAN SEA — DECEMBER 2006

THE MEDITERRANEAN HAD GONE CALM AN hour after dark.

Jo could see it from the table by the dining room window: flat black, the lights of the boat sliding over it without breaking the surface. The ferry had left Marseilles at seven. They were three hours out, and the coast of France was no longer visible to her. Corsica was eight hours ahead of them. The glass was cold enough at its edges to fog faintly where the dining room's warmth touched it.

Marcus pulled out her chair.

She had not expected the gesture. She had to gather her dress under her with one hand as she sat, the way her mother had shown her at a wedding when she was twelve. Marcus pushed the chair in as she lowered herself down. His hand brushed her bare shoulder in an intimate, almost tender way as he stepped back to his seat.

The cover required it. The cover required a great many small things she had not anticipated when Chris had briefed them in Marseilles that afternoon. Her prayer, after almost three months, had been answered. There was news about Victoria Auchincloss.

"You and Marcus are a couple. Family money on his side. You're on your honeymoon. You don't have to oversell it." He had said it in a way that carried no warmth, as was the standard for Chris McIntyre. "Mediterranean ferries in December are full of people escaping something. Family, ex-lovers, both. A honeymoon won't draw a second look."

Jo had nodded. She had not thought about what it would actually be like across a candlelit dinner at sea. Marcus sat down across from her. He was in a dark suit Section Two had tailored to him. The shoulders fit him exactly as they should, which was to say she noticed them far too much. The shirt was open at the throat, and her eyes kept falling to the space it revealed, his dark skin seeming to invite her attention, wanted or not. She was finding it difficult not to feel self-conscious about him looking at her looking at him.

"Bonsoir, madame, monsieur," the waiter said to them.

"Bonsoir," Marcus said.

She had been surprised to find out that Marcus spoke excellent French. But of course he did. His family went back generations in New Orleans. The descendant of Augustin "Iron Miles" Milhet. Marcus ordered two glasses of white, the bouillabaisse for him, the John Dory for her. She had told him to order for her

before they had been seated.

She wondered now, as she forced herself to look up from that open space his shirt made, why she had done that. She had not let a man order for her since she was a girl at her grandfather's dinner table. Perhaps it was because she knew nothing about wine whatsoever.

Marcus looked at her across the table.

"You okay there, mademoiselle?"

"What? Yeah, I'm fine."

"You look like you're somewhere else." He took a sip of water, put it down, and adjusted his cuff. "You're thinking about something."

"I'm always thinking," she said playfully, tapping her temple. "Comes with the territory. We have extra thinking to do."

"You're thinking more than usual, Byrne."

"Don't call me that tonight, Marcus," she said, in a voice that was softer than she expected.

He inclined his head.

"How about sweetie?"

"Marcus Miles, don't you start," she laughed.

"Honey? Sugar?"

"I'm fixin' to throw my glass of water at you."

He chuckled and they sat there, smiling at one another with the candlelight between them. Then they both looked toward the bar, where Diego sat.

She could see him from the table by tilting her head two inches to the right. He had been at the bar for an hour and was on his third drink. She had been concerned he would drink too much given the assignment, but, as it turned out, Diego did not drink at all.

"I'm a teetotaler," he had declared with a grin on his face. They were all full of surprises.

There was a small wreath of cheap gold ribbon wired to the mirror behind the bar. It looked absurd and somehow expensive in the low light.

Diego was telling the bartender a story about a woman in Havana — Jo could hear it through their telepathic link — and the bartender was laughing the way bartenders laugh when they are being tipped well. Diego's jacket was charcoal, cut precisely, catching the bar light differently from the suits around him. He looked, from across the dining room, exactly the way he was supposed to look: a wealthy solo traveler on a working holiday. The kind of man who tipped in cash and remembered the bartender's name. Jo thought that Diego did not look half bad when he cleaned up. She could understand why Priya, the girl who hit on any half-decent-looking man who crossed her path, would suddenly become so shy around him.

Jo did not have eyes on Paddy. Through their link she knew that he had attached himself to a wedding party in the second-class lounge two decks down. He had not been heard from in forty minutes. She could make herself hear him, of course. But she knew he would reach out when he was ready.

Thomas was on the boat as crew, which was its own kind of comedy. The man who literally owned yachts was being forced to work this one. He would be walking the corridor outside the target cabin at twenty-minute intervals and reporting what he saw.

Chris was in his cabin on Deck 7 with a laptop on the small writing desk and three feeds running simultaneously — the corridor outside Victoria's cabin, the corridor outside the principal's cabin, the dining room. He was also, as usual, Linked to her as Timekeeper. She knew he could feel the subtle emotions and thoughts that leaked despite her efforts. Thoughts, for example, of Marcus.

The principal was at a table on the other side of the dining room. Sixty-one years old, drinking like he was twenty-one. He was with a woman in a green dress thirty years younger than he was. The woman had been to the bathroom twice in the half-hour since they had been seated.

Sources had it that they had Victoria Auchincloss in a cabin on Deck 7.

The waiter brought their wine, and after he had disappeared back into the room, Marcus raised his glass. Back home, wine belonged either to the altar or to tourists pretending bourbon country had made them sophisticated. She had never known what to do with it in a glass meant for pleasure.

"To the health of our marriage."

She raised hers, laughing. "To the health of our marriage."

They drank.

The wine was good. Mass wine was — well, it was different, wasn't it? It was something special. Holy. And never tasted great.

This, though, she could get used to.

She set the glass down.

"You don't seem like a man who likes wearing a suit."

He looked at her over his glass.

"And what do you picture me wearing instead?" He said it casually. The first thing that came into her mind was not a word but an image. And the image did not, she realized, contain much clothing at all. She pushed it out of her mind and felt heat go up the back of her neck.

She picked up her wine to have something to do with her hand. She smelled its alcoholic, sweet aroma and drank more of it than she had intended to. He watched her drink it and did not look away. There was a bemused look on his face.

"I don't really wear suits," Marcus said, and his voice went low and soft at the edges. "Dan was going to get me out of wearing one for the wedding. Sasha wouldn't have cared, either. But I was planning on surprising them. Show up exactly as the brief required."

“Well, you look very nice in a suit,” Jo found herself saying into her glass.

“Are you hitting on me, wifey?” Marcus teased. She was about to answer when Chris’s voice came through her.

Status. Of course. Mr. Timing himself.

I’ve got eyes on the room, Jo thought back. *No one’s moving.*

Reyes?

Still at the bar, Cap. Bartender’s name is Olivier. He’s from Nice. Has a daughter at university in Aix that he wants to marry off to me. I think it’s the suit. Oh, and probably because I’m tipping with Cupid’s money.

Paddy?

A pause. Then Paddy’s voice, slightly louder as if he were shouting in his mind:

Guys. Guys. And gal. Sorry, Saint. You certainly do not count as a guy. I mean that dress on you—

Paddy, snapped Chris. *Are you operational?*

All right. Listen. Listen. The bride is amazing! Her name is Solène. Her mother is from Bastia. Her father owns three restaurants in Marseilles and is paying for a string quartet that hasn’t shown up yet. I think I’m in love. I’m trying to get her to run off with me instead of that loser of a groom. Dude’s a jackass. Nice jaw, though. Looks a bit like yours, Cap. But more of a jackass.

Is that possible? Jo asked despite herself. She regretted it the moment she thought it at them.

A pause.

Paddy, Chris said again.

Right. Father’s clean. Been with Solène and the female cousins all night. Not like that. Although I wouldn’t mind it. But he’s made no contacts. Nothing on his phone he’d care to hide. Whoever Ross talked to about this guy got bad intel.

Stay on him anyway. We don’t need you for the Victoria op yet.

Copy. Also, to answer your question. I am extremely operational. I am the most operational I have been ever. I’m pretty sure Solène just licked her lips at me. Wait. Maybe that was from the dessert she was eating. Oh! But yes. Operational as they come. And I’ve got pro—

Cabbage! Jo and Diego yelled at him together.

Easy, easy. I’m only messing. I’m staying with the wedding party. I’ve only had like one sip of wine. I’m good. Steady and operational.

The line went quiet again.

“Paddy’s having a good night,” Marcus said, the scar tugging up the side of his mouth.

“Cabbage always has good nights, doesn’t he?”

“That’s true.”

She cut a piece of her fish.

“How’s yours?”

“My fish?”

“Your night, Marcus.”

“Exceptional,” he said without any inflection in his voice. “I’d have cooked that fish differently, though.”

“How?”

“Without the lemon. Then I’d have offered the lemon at the table for the people who wanted it.”

“You like giving people options then?” she asked.

“It’s the only way to do it.”

The link warmed at the edge of her attention.

Jo, what’s the status of the girl? Any luck getting past whatever device they have? It was Chris again. Again. *This is an op, not a date,* Jo reminded herself.

Let me check.

Jo extended her mind the length of the boat. Up two decks. Down the corridor. Past her own cabin door, past Thomas in his crew whites at the end of the hall, to cabin 7-08.

She hit the wall that she had been hitting all night. She could make out the room, the shape of it. The girl on the other side, barely legible. Young, small of frame. Strong of mind. But whatever the cabin was made of, whatever its construction, Jo couldn’t quite push through it. It was not quite a solid wall. More like a dense, thick gel, present and soft.

Still in her cabin. Still hard to read. I can’t get into her cleanly. There’s something on her.

Has she moved?

She moved an hour ago. Got up from the bed. Moved to the chair. She’s been in the chair since. She rubbed her temples, which were beginning to pulsate. *She’s not a strong telepath from what I’m gathering. It’s so hard to push past this wall though.*

Stay with her. We don’t move until she does.

Copy.

The link dimmed. Marcus was looking at her across the table.

“You look like you’re in pain. Do you need to take a break? We can do old-school recon.”

“I’ll be fine.”

He made a noise that was softer than a grunt, then smiled at her.

She set the wine down.

“You’re staring at me, Marcus.”

“I am?” He was grinning, which made him look both younger and more dangerous. “I can’t imagine why. A man newly married to a beautiful young woman. Would be weird if I wasn’t staring, right?”

“Right,” she said, feeling the heat on her neck spread. “So you think I’m beautiful, huh?”

“Is that even a question?”

The link warmed again. Diego this time. Lord help her.

Cap. The sidepiece just went to the bathroom for the third time.

Maybe she has a small bladder. I’ve got an unusually small bladder myself—

Do shut up, Cabbage. That was Thomas.

She’s not just going to the bathroom, Diego resumed. *She’s meeting with someone. Hold up.* Jo could see Diego leave the bar. Moments later he spoke again. *I think she has a handler.*

What? This time it was an overlap of all of them.

There was a man two stools down. He’s been pretending to drink all night. He’s been watching her every time she stands up. And, well, they’re exchanging something now.

Could be cheatin’ on her man. Maybe he’s the side—

Shut up, Cabbage. It was Jo now.

A long pause.

Jo, what’s your read? Chris asked.

She extended her mind again. Lightly. Across the room, down the hall. Toward the woman in green and the man she was with. With a second hand, she reached her mind out to the principal.

The principal’s mind was loud and undisciplined and a little drunk. He was thinking about getting the woman back to the cabin and what he would do with her there. The images were of things she could not unsee. But he was, in the strict telepathic sense, an uncomplicated man.

The woman in green...

A shield came up before Jo could read any further, completely blocking her. She felt herself startle in her chair.

Diego. Did she make me?

Not that I can tell, Saint. Still talking to the handler. She didn’t move or anything.

Jo pressed, but the wall was stronger than she could get through. And she did not intend to go through it. She tried the handler, but his shield was already up.

I don’t get it. I don’t know what’s going on.

Easy, Jo, Marcus said. *Just let it go for now.*

She pulled back.

Chris. I think she’s gifted. Trained. She felt me coming and she blocked me.

Sidepiece. Told ya. Silence, then. *Shut it, Cabbage.* That was... Paddy. To himself.

You’re such an idiot, Diego said, and she was sure she could hear him chuckling in his head.

Chris spoke next. *Okay, so let's reanalyze here, Team. If she's the one who nabbed the Victoria girl, and she's the one with powers... we need to be careful. She's strong enough to block Jo. We need to extract Victoria without causing a scene. We need to get her out.*

Something nagged at the edges of her mind. The fog seemed to be gone. She felt the door opening. The girl was moving. She told Chris.

Where?

She just came out of her cabin. She's walking the corridor. Toward the powder room at the end.

Victoria was reading clear now. She was a signal Jo could feel from two decks down without straining. The girl was scared. She was walking with a large man who was pretending to be her security guard. She read him. He went by Little T. He was certainly security and certainly guarding. But he was not, by any strict definition, her bodyguard.

Jo could feel the tremor in Victoria's hands, the way her knees wanted to buckle as she walked.

She's scared. She's holding it together, but she's barely walking.

How scared?

Terrified. And she's running out of energy to be afraid. I don't know what they've done to her. She doesn't know what they will do to her.

Where's the handler?

Diego cut in. *He and the woman just split. He's leaving.*

Going where?

Toward the back. The staff exit.

Marcus. On him. Chef, keep on the woman. Cupid, are you there?

Thomas's voice was quiet through her mind. *Service corridor, Deck 7. Twenty feet from the powder room. I need you off-post, Tom. There's a passenger emergency two corridors over. Take the bodyguard with you. Tell him you need an extra hand.*

He'll say no.

Then figure something out that involves your fist. I don't care. We need the girl alone so Jo can extract her.

Marcus was already standing. He winked at her.

"I'll see you upstairs, sweetheart."

"That better be a promise, suga'."

He made a pleased noise as he left the dining room through the front doors and turned right.

Jo got up and walked across the dining room. The not-actually-a-principal-but-really-a-sidepiece looked up as she passed his table. She could see his eyes raking down her body. She could also, unfortunately, see his thoughts about her. Jo put an image of his mother naked in his mind instead and smiled as she felt his revulsion.

Stairwell A, Deck 7. Take the staff door if you can, Jo, Chris said.

The staff stairwell smelled like cleaning fluid and old carpet. She climbed the two decks. Her mind was on Victoria the whole climb. Jo could almost taste the young girl's terror in her own throat.

She had not realized fear had a taste until tonight.

On the link, half-audible:

The handler went down to Deck 4. There's a crew passage that runs under the kitchens. He's headed that way, Marcus said.

Stay with him, Marcus.

Roger that.

Tom?

Uh. Well. I may have started something with him by spilling some bleach on him. He isn't happy and wants to fight me.

The girl?

She just ran.

Jo. Window's open. Go.

Jo came out at Deck 7.

The corridor was empty. The lights were dim. Half the sconces were off, the way they ran them after midnight. Cabin 7-08 was on her left. She passed it without looking at the door.

She could see the girl in her mind; Victoria was in front of her. The girl was just past the next bend in the corridor. Jo turned the bend, then stopped.

She's not here.

A pause on the link.

What did you say?

I said she's not here.

I can't hear you, Jo. You're breaking up. What did you say? Confirm you have eyes on the package.

I said— Jo stopped. What was happening? There was a buzzing noise in her head she couldn't shake.
Marcus. Can you hear me?

Nothing.

Jo. You there? Marcus.

Marcus! I'm here.

I can't hear her, Chris said. *Can you guys still hear me?*

Loud and clear. I followed our new principal out into the corridor. Diego.

Where the hell is Jo? And how can we still communicate? A pause from Chris. *Everyone hold position. Tom— can you get to Jo?*

After I—ow—beat this guy up. Right now, no.

Jo felt the back of her neck go cold. She extended further.

Get out, Jo. Come back to my cabin. Abandon mission. Go now.

Jo turned to go back the way she had come. She did not know what was happening, and she didn't intend to find out. She passed 7-08 again.

Then a door ahead of her on the left opened, and a figure stepped out into the hall.

It was a service closet she had not noticed when she had walked past it the first time. A narrow door that was easy to miss.

Jo squinted at the figure, the hall being too dark to make out the shape at first. Then she realized who it was.

Victoria Auchincloss had straight, pale blonde hair past her shoulders. She was dressed in a cardigan and a wool skirt. The cardigan was cashmere, thin, expensive in a way that did not announce itself, but one knew it was anyway. The skirt was pleated and knee-length, the kind a girl wore at a New England boarding school after her family had paid the tuition that cost several full-time salaries. Her stockings were sheer. The shoes were dark leather, low-heeled.

Jo had expected Victoria to be a girl.

The fifteen-year-old in front of her was taller than Jo had expected — almost Jo's height. All legs. Beneath the cardigan and skirt, her body had already taken on a woman's shape, thin and lanky though it was. Victoria was settled. Adult in a way Jo had not been prepared for.

But what surprised her the most, what struck her — the thing that made her completely stop in her tracks — was that there was no fear in the girl's face. There wasn't much at all on the girl's face except a cold smile. She looked at Jo with piercing blue eyes that did not blink.

The coldness came off the girl like cold coming off an open freezer in a warm room. It was a drop in temperature Jo felt on her bare shoulders, on the back of her neck, in the small bones of her fingers.

The girl had been holding back all night.

Whatever it was that Jo had read through the cabin door had been a fraction of what was actually in the room with her.

This was the rest of it. And it was overwhelming in its power.

And Jo realized that the principal, the woman-in-green, the handler — they were all fake. All a setup for this very moment.

Hello, Victoria Auchincloss said. The smile widened into something that reminded Jo of a tiger ready to snatch its prey. *I have been waiting all night to meet you. It has been quite fascinating seeing you work.*

Victoria had a Transatlantic accent that did not fit the young face, like something out of an old black-and-white film. Jo recognized it as the voice of a woman who had been speaking carefully for a very long time, in a girl's high-pitched tone.

Jo did not know how to respond. She opened her mouth to say something.

In that very moment, Victoria pushed out with her mind.

It hit Jo like a door being knocked off its hinges. She threw up her shield too late.

Jo went to one knee in the corridor. Both hands went to her temples, and her vision narrowed to a point. Her ears were full of something that was not sound. In an instant the girl was inside her — past every defense she had built through years of training.

Victoria was inside Jo's memories of her mother, her brothers, the desperate search for Georgie, her First Communion, the silo, the dead telepath at the silo, the feel of Marcus's scar on her lips—

The girl saw all of it at once. And Victoria smiled with no warmth.

GET OUT!

Jo pushed as hard as she could. She hit the girl's shield, and the shield was not what she expected. It was layers, dense, organized. The shield of a person not only trained but immense. Far beyond the man in the silo. It dwarfed Jo's own powers completely.

On the floor, Jo felt the smile the way a jar of put-up beans feels the lid being tightened.

And then she screamed, hands clawing at her head now as Victoria stepped closer. Through tears Jo could see the girl's shoes and the sheer stockings.

You are unusually strong, the girl said in her mind, voice flat. *I've never had this much trouble killing someone before.*

Jo could feel the squeeze. The pressure. The mind-numbing sensation of Victoria trying to crush her.

And with all her might Jo pushed. And in pushing, she found a seam. A small, tiny, thin crack.

Jo found herself inside the girl's mind.

The girl's mind was the inside of a clean, cold room with no furniture. No memories on the walls. No people in the chairs. A great empty space the girl had hollowed out a long time ago and had been keeping clean ever since.

There was nothing in it Jo could grab.

The girl, surprised that Jo had gotten in at all, pulled back hard.

The link snapped like a cord pulled too taut.

The corridor came back. Jo was on her knees on the carpet with her nose bleeding profusely onto the front of her own dress.

Victoria was sweating, and she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

Interesting, she said to Jo.

The girl took half a step out of the closet doorway.

Jo, on her knees, did the only thing she could do. She pushed again, but this time she pushed at the girl's body instead of her mind.

The girl's foot, mid-step, came down sideways. Her ankle gave. She caught herself on the door frame with one hand.

Oh, the girl said, mildly. *This is going to be fun.*

The cleaning trolley came out of the service closet at chest height.

Jo felt the air shift behind it before she saw it. She rolled sideways on the carpet, her shoulder hitting the wall, and the trolley sailed past her face — Jo could almost feel the steel of the bottom rail an inch from her cheek as it went by — and slammed into the corridor wall hard enough that the bottles on it shattered.

Cleaning fluid sprayed up the wallpaper, and glass littered the carpet.

Jo, on her side now, reached.

The bottle Victoria had not yet thrown — a bigger one, blue plastic — lifted off its closet shelf and flew at Victoria's face. The girl's hand came up. The bottle stopped six inches from her and hung in the air, spinning slowly.

She turned the bottle ninety degrees. Then she pushed it.

The bottle came back at Jo three times as fast as it had gone out.

Jo's wall came up. The bottle hit her wall. It stopped and dropped to the floor.

The wall had taken half of what she had left in the tank. She knew that even without Chris's read.

Then a fire extinguisher came off its bracket on the corridor wall and went at Jo like a man swinging an axe.

Jo caught it a foot from her face. Held it. Tried to push it back at Victoria.

The extinguisher would not move.

It hung in the air between them. Victoria was holding one end. Jo was holding the other. The thing trembled.

It cracked.

The pin came out. White powder erupted into the corridor in a roaring cloud. Jo could not see Victoria.

But it seemed that Victoria did not need to see Jo to know where she was.

The fist of pressure that came through the white cloud caught Jo across the ribs and threw her down the corridor. Her hip hit a wall. She came to a stop fifteen feet from where Victoria had thrown her, on her back, with the white powder coating her dress and her face and hands.

Jo could not breathe. She coughed instead.

She hauled herself upward, palms flat to the deck, then up onto her knees. The powder burned in her eyes and her nostrils and coated her tongue. Her vision went white, then black at the edges, the world reduced to ringing silence and the certainty that she was about to lose consciousness.

The girl was eight feet from her, moving forward. Walking. One step at a time with those long, thin legs.

Jo reached for Victoria's body, and Victoria's body did not move because Victoria's body had its own grip on the carpet now. She was anchored to the deck through her own telekinesis, every footstep weighted into the carpet by the same force that had thrown Jo into the wall.

Victoria stepped out of the powder cloud, and the cloud parted around her like she was the still center of it. The girl's hair was white now. Everything was white except the blue of her eyes, which glowed like two orbs against a bright sky.

Jo had never known fear the way she did then. Her mind was empty of options.

She reached once more. Not at Victoria. At the wall sconce above Victoria's head.

The sconce came off the wall. Victoria saw it come, and her hand was up before it cleared the bracket. The sconce stopped.

Jo did not have the strength to attack again. But she had the strength to do one small, specific thing.

She pushed Victoria's ankle out from under her.

Victoria, holding the sconce, fell.

The sconce fell with her, and the heavy brass casing came down on Victoria's shoulder hard enough that Jo heard the impact through the powder.

Victoria made a sound that was not telepathic.

The link went taut between them again, and Victoria's voice came through it sharper than it had been all night.

It's been so long since I've gotten to play. Victoria's voice was delighted, like a girl who had just found out that unicorns were real after all.

Jo felt her arms shaking beyond her control. The bones in her left shoulder were sitting in a place they were not designed to sit.

And she thought, somewhere in the back of her mind, that she had one push left in her.

Maybe one.

She had to make it count.

Victoria was getting to her feet. Jo reached out with her hand, and she felt the building gather behind that hand. Victoria raised hers.

Jo pushed first.

She pushed everything she had. She pushed parts of herself she did not know she had. She pushed until something in the back of her own head gave way with a sound.

The girl came off the carpet.

Six inches. A foot. Victoria's other hand came up as well, fighting the push midair the way a person fought a current. Jo felt the resistance through her own bones. She felt something fracture up her forearm, and she screamed again. In pain. In terror. In anger.

Victoria slowed. Stopped. Hung there.

For a half-second they held, suspended, neither of them moving.

Then Jo found the last thing in her. It was something older, deeper, more powerful than she had ever felt. It radiated from within. It came surging forward like a force of its own.

Victoria broke loose and went backward. She rotated midair and caught the doorway with one hand. She came down on her stockinged feet on the carpet outside the closet, light as a girl stepping off a curb. She had not gone where Jo had thrown her. Instead, she had ridden the push.

Victoria reached again, lifting Jo off the ground. She felt Victoria's fingers wrap around something and pull. Jo held on, pulled back against the girl.

That — is not supposed to happen, Victoria said, almost indignant. She caught hold of something in Jo, then pulled, fast and ugly. Whatever she pulled, Jo felt come away with a sickening pluck.

The noise Jo made was not a scream. It was a noise that had never escaped her lips before.

Her vision went red at the edges. Her body went down flat on the carpet. She could not lift her face. She could feel the carpet against her cheek and the powder in her mouth. One of her hands was twitching against the wall, and she could not move any of her fingers.

The corridor was quiet. She could feel Victoria standing over her. The girl spoke aloud this time. "So very interesting."

Then she crouched.

Jo could not see her. She could feel her. Victoria's face was close to her face, the cold of her presence inches away, the small movement of her hair near Jo's ear.

"You and I are going to have a lot of fun together, Joan Byrne." There was almost tenderness now in the way she said her name. "And I almost spoiled it. It's good you don't die easy."

Jo's mouth tried to make a word. Could not.

Victoria straightened, then stepped over her and walked down the corridor in the direction where the powder cloud was thinning. She picked up her shoes and continued walking. Her feet made no sound on the carpet, the shoes dangling in her hands.

There were running footsteps. Closer now. A man, running flat-out down the corridor from the other direction.

She heard her name through the powder before she could see who was calling it.

It was Chris.

He came at full speed and went down on one knee beside her.

Then Marcus was beside him.

"Jo. Jo. Jo."

Marcus's hands found her face. He said her name again.

She tried to look at him.

The corridor went dark at the edges.

Somewhere far down the corridor — already too far for either Marcus or Chris to chase — was a small, clear laugh. Almost a little girl's giggle.

Then everything went away.

CHAPTER FIVE

GREYBRIAR (LOCATION: CLASSIFIED) — JANUARY 2007

THE WATER WOULD NOT HOLD.

Jo had it up out of the basin in a column the way she'd done it before December — rounded it, leaned her will into it — and for the length of one breath it was a sphere the size of a grapefruit, the recessed light bending soft through it.

Then the whine came up the back of her skull, and the sphere shuddered, threw a fine spray, and came apart.

Half of it hit the floor. She caught the rest too late and dragged it into a sagging teardrop that would not round. She held it there, shaking, while the noise sat behind her eyes and screamed at a pitch she thought only she could hear.

“Nine seconds,” Ayala said.

Jo let the water fall, sucking air as if she'd just sprinted four hundred meters. The water slapped flat into the basin, ordinary again.

“That's down from yesterday.” Ayala didn't look up from her clipboard. She made a small mark, then reached over and pressed two fingers to the inside of Jo's wrist without asking. “Pulse is up. And you're bleeding again.”

Jo touched her lip. Her fingers came away red. She wiped them on her pants leg.

“Sit, sweetheart. I want it written down before the next one.”

“I don't need to sit down. I was lifting that basin for fun in October.”

“And in October you hadn't been beaten to a pulp and left writhing on the floor. Sit.”

Jo sat on the edge of the mat.

“I wasn't writhing,” she said petulantly.

“You're sulking,” Ayala said. “It doesn't suit you.” She tore the page free, clipped a fresh one. Jo glowered at her. The curvaceous nurse peered up at her over the clipboard. “It's coming back, hon. Slower than you'd like. Mostly because you nearly died. Trust me, I would know. I changed your bedsheet.”

Jo had something ugly ready on her tongue, embarrassment and annoyance sharpening it to a point, when the familiar shape of Chris appeared at the edge of her senses, still half a corridor away. Her mind brushed his involuntarily and she snapped her mouth shut just as he came in. He took in the basin, the

blood on her lip, the page in Ayala's hand in the span of half a second.

"How is she?" he said.

"Good afternoon to you too," Jo said irascibly.

Chris looked over at her, and Jo took a small, mean satisfaction in how off-balance he seemed.

After the briefest beat, Chris said, "Good afternoon, Jo."

That felt less... satisfying.

"She's recovering," Ayala replied. "It's up and down, but she's trending in the right direction."

He nodded. "What's the projection? Realistically. Before she's—"

"Operational? Useful again?" Jo said. "Not dead weight?"

"I didn't say that." There was less patience in his voice this time.

"Sure, but that's what you were thinking." She knew, even as the words were coming out of her mouth, that she was taking out all her frustration on a man who hadn't done anything at all. Underneath that tilt of his chin, she saw something else. Something tight around the corners of his mouth. Jo decided to put the sharp thing she had been meaning to poke him with down.

"I'm doing fine," she said, shoulders dropping.

"She'll be back to work when she's ready, Chris," Ayala said.

"See? You didn't have to come down for it," she said to her knees.

"No," he said quietly. "I'm glad you're getting better."

Jo was trying to think of something that didn't sound petty when Marcus walked in.

He had on casual wear, long black sleeves pushed up over his muscular forearms, dark jeans, and black boots. Jo felt herself smile the moment she saw him.

"Afternoon, Freckles." She wrinkled her nose at him, then touched her face self-consciously. She didn't have *that* many freckles. "You look like you could use a break." He was carrying two different bottles, one the color of a blue highlighter, the other a Smartwater. He lifted both up at her. She pointed at the blue one.

"My favorite," she said, twisting the cap.

"You know it's mainly chemicals, right?" He sat down next to her, shoulder brushing hers.

"Maybe I have unconventional taste," she said.

"That's beyond dispute. Which reminds me." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out two long pieces of paper. Tickets. "There's a circus."

"A what?"

"A circus. In town, this weekend. Absolutely ridiculous-looking. There's a tiger, supposedly. Trapeze. You know. Circus."

"A circus."

“Well, I figured it’s just the sort of thing you would love. Being unconventional and all. But we could do other things too.”

“Are you asking me out, Mr. Smiles?”

“Well—yeah. I mean, if you don’t count the movie and dinner.”

“I don’t because it was in the common room *and* Diego made the dinner. And then he sat down. And watched the movie. *Between us*. He put his arm around me and started sniffing during the death scene.”

“He’s an affectionate guy,” Marcus said, chuckling. “Well then. Will you go out with me, Jo Byrne?”

“Mmmm.” She tapped her chin with a finger. “Well, there is this circus in town someone told me about. But I think I require a real dinner. French.”

“I happen to know a guy who can speak French.”

“Then fine. I shall give you the pleasure of taking me out.”

Without meaning to, Jo’s eyes moved across the room. She saw Chris’s pen hover, unmoving for a split second, before starting again.

. . .

THE CIRCUS WAS, AS PROMISED, RIDICULOUS.

It had set up in a field off the county road, in a parking lot that was really just mud someone had thrown gravel at. The big top of the tent had been red once but was now an ugly shade of pink that didn’t know what to do with itself. The air smelled of diesel and fried foods and animal sweat. A calliope somewhere played a song that had three notes and misused all of them. Strings of bulbs ran from tent to tent with half the bulbs dead.

It was love at first sight. It had the same doomed cheer as the parish picnic rides back home, all mud and extension cords. Back home it would’ve been the church grounds in August, the Knights of Columbus running the burgoo pot and Little Timmy losing money at the booths, the whole county turned out in the heat. This was sadder and colder and run by strangers. But it had the same bones.

“This is worse than you said,” she told him with a huge grin on her face. “I love it!” She spun around on her heels in the mud, got on her tippytoes, and pecked him on the cheek.

“You’re a strange woman,” he said, hands in his jacket. He was taking in the whole sad bright mess of it. “Popcorn?” He brought the bucket in front of her. She reached in and took a kernel.

“Buttery—” she said. “—and delicious.”

She adjusted the scratchy sweater sleeves over her palms and then licked her greasy fingers.

The sweater was the third one she had tried on earlier that night. The other two were still on the bed, and the coat was the good wool one, dug out from the back of the closet where it had hung since her cousin’s wedding. She had brushed her hair out. She had also added just a touch of makeup and eyeliner

and had regretted it the moment she had gotten into the car.

He had been behind the wheel in the jacket she had seen him in so many times it just meant *Marcus*: the dark one with the neat mend at the cuff he had done himself. He had nodded at her the way he nodded at Diego and pulled out of the lot.

Now they walked the row of booths: the ring toss, the milk bottles, the hammer that sent a thing up to ring a bell at the top.

It wasn't until she kissed his cheek that she realized he had shaved. The small old scar at the corner of his mouth sat plain and bare. She smiled to herself and reached into the bucket for another kernel.

"What's it going to be, Freckles?" They had stopped at the shooting gallery with the little tin stars tracking across the back on a chain and the BB rifles chained to the counter, worked by a teenager who made Marcus look enthusiastic by comparison.

Jo tapped her chin for a bit, surveying the prizes. She pointed at the very top, the biggest and the worst of them: a purple gorilla as tall as a small toddler with a felt heart sewn to its chest and one eye replaced by a button. Why? Jo didn't really care.

"That one," she said. "But I don't know if you're a good enough shot. I might've gotten my hopes up for no reason. Should've brought Tom, perhaps."

Marcus looked at the gorilla. He looked at her. He put his money down and picked up the rifle in a "how dare you question my masculinity" kind of way.

"Cupid," Marcus muttered to himself like it was a curse word, shaking his head. He fired and hit all of them. Dead center, in the order they came across, fast, and the little winner's bell on the counter went off and kept going off.

It was the sexiest thing she had ever seen.

"You can stop," the kid said.

Marcus put down another quarter.

"Sir. You won. You can stop."

He hit five more before the kid forcibly took the gun from him. The kid pulled the rifle's pump like he suspected cheating. She had to put a hand over her mouth as she watched Marcus take the gorilla off the wall.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing—" she said, feeling a heat somewhere low and feeling ridiculous for it. She took the purple gorilla and pressed it against herself. They walked on with its mismatched eyes pointed at the ground, its back firmly pressed against her body.

"I think you just got banned from a children's game," she said.

"Still questioning whether you should've gone with the pretty boy?" Marcus asked.

"Nope," she said, bumping him gently with her shoulder.

Inside the big top, the tiger was old and moved like it hurt to do so. It did three small things a man with a stick asked of it. It was a sad creature, but she supposed it would have had a harder time in the wild at that age. She pressed her face into the top of the gorilla's head and felt its soft fur tickle her nose. She could feel Marcus's eyes on her from beside her and she smiled into the gorilla.

The trapeze man was, exactly as predicted, drunk. He missed the first catch and caught the net and the whole crowd screamed, and then he climbed back up and made the second one clean.

The Ferris wheel was the last thing they did. It was essentially rust held together by paint. Jo would not have gotten on it if she hadn't been able to levitate them back down. The man running it loaded the two of them into a swinging bucket and then wandered off to deal with something on the far side. The wheel carried them up and stopped with them at the very top.

Up there the calliope was small and far. The crowd was a glow underneath them, and the cold came up clean off the dark field. It was, all at once, very quiet.

Jo realized she'd been holding the whine down all night without noticing, keeping it small under all the noise. And now there was nothing to lose it in. Up here it was only her and the high thin scream of it behind her eyes, and the field, and Marcus, close to her with the gorilla wedged against the rail.

When his arm wrapped around her shoulder, the warmth of his body somehow made her believe, for just a moment, that he could silence the noise. He couldn't. But it was close. She leaned in and put her head on his shoulder. The wheel sat them at the top of the cold dark.

Then the man remembered them, and the wheel came down. The noise came up around them again. They walked out through the mud and the dead bulbs to the car, carrying a purple gorilla she loved more than anything she owned.

Greybriar took them back. Down, and down, past the checkpoint and into the concrete, where the work lights had dropped to the low setting they ran after midnight, yellow pools at every third fixture and the rest of the corridor dark.

Marcus walked her to her door, where they stopped, and the thing that had been sitting in the swinging bucket at the top of the wheel sat down between them again in the low yellow light. He stood there for a moment without doing anything. He looked down at her like she was the loveliest person he had ever seen and she didn't wait for him to have to make a decision.

Jo made it for him.

She closed the distance, one hand flat on his chest. She went up and found the corner of his mouth, the small scar, and then the rest of his lips. He made a low sound and his hand came to the side of her face, thumb brushing her cheek.

The gorilla fell over between them. They both laughed, his teeth on her lips. Then she kissed him again.

When they finally came apart, she was smiling so wide her cheeks hurt.

Over his shoulder, far down the corridor where the light pooled and ran out into dark, something moved.

A shape. At the far end, by the stairwell. Someone had seen them and turned away.

She was too happy, just then, to care.

LOCATION: CLASSIFIED — JUNE 2007

THE HIGH-PITCHED WHINE HAD COME UP the back of Jo's skull the moment she stepped into the staging room, and it hadn't stopped since. She put her back against the wall next to Paddy and ground her teeth against the noise.

Six months in, she knew the routine. Don't fight it. Let it crest. It would settle.

And it did settle. Mostly.

The whine hadn't stopped — not completely — since she woke up in her fake honeymoon cabin on the ferry with Marcus and Chris both looking paler than she had ever seen them. It hadn't stopped as she was transported to the hospital, where she was sewn up and nursed back to health by Ayala.

It hadn't even fully stopped on those wonderful nights when Marcus took her out: to dinner, to the movies, to that ridiculous circus.

It didn't fully stop now as she rolled her shoulder and looked down the third-floor corridor. A long gray tunnel. There were doors on either side. The emergency lights were running on low and the dust at the baseboards had not been disturbed in years.

Chris was two doors down. She had Diego and Marcus on the floor below her, moving in the parallel formation Chris had laid out at the brief. Thomas was on the roof of the building across the lot.

They were points in her head. Five handles her hands touched, connecting each of them to her and to one another. A single living, breathing organism made of five points and a single center.

This was working. It was holding.

Two on the ground floor, she sent to all of them. One at the desk looking at a magazine.

Oh! Deja vu. Love it. What's he looking at? Paddy.

Don't answer that, Saint, Chris sighed.

It's porn, she sent back.

Really? came Paddy's excited voice.

No, Cabbage. It's National Geographic.

There was a moment of silence before Paddy, shrugging beside her, said, *Close enough.*

What? Ew. Anyways. Two on the second floor, she went on. East side, walking the corridor together. One on the third. That's the one we just passed through the floor of. Four on the fourth. Defector on the fifth, northeast corner. He's scared and alive.

Diego. Marcus, Chris said.

Two down, Diego sent after a moment.

He forgot to say that part where Marcus was the one who took them down, Jo sent.

Not cool, Saint. I thought we were friends.

Hold position, Chris said. We're going up to four.

Jo extended through the building's ductwork. HVAC was a kind of acoustic-emotional bridge. The federal records facility was practically built for it. It was all old, galvanized steel, wide enough to carry a current, and every floor was connected by the same shaft. She could feel the four men on the fourth in a tight cluster: a security office, by the layout, where someone had once watched cameras for a living and where four operators were now watching a dead monitor and a working coffee maker and waiting to be relieved.

The defector on the fifth was a small point above them, scared in the low background way he had been scared since they entered the building.

She could feel —

Jo stopped.

Wait.

What?

Second floor, she said.

She had not felt it thirty seconds ago. A signature. Faint. Not Diego. Not Marcus. Active. Looking at the team. Looking at *her*. But try as she might, Jo could not read it. She began to shake, thinking back to those cold blue eyes, that smile that seemed almost inhuman.

I can't read her, she sent to Chris. Oh, God. Chris. Chris. It's Victoria!

Jo, it can't be. Calm yourself down. Remember why we're here.

He sent something to her then. Through their Timekeeping link that pulsed warm and steady between her chest and his. It wasn't words. It wasn't a thought. It wasn't even a feeling. It was... *him*. His own steadiness.

Jo took in a few shallow breaths. He was right. It couldn't be Victoria.

Right. It's female, I think. She's right by Chef and Mr. Smiles. She's... she's not moving. She's just there. Like she's been there the whole time and I missed her.

You okay, Jo? Chris asked.

I... no. I don't know.

She pushed. The whine in her head went hotter and she nearly doubled over. She pushed through it anyway, the noise annoying her more with each passing moment. The signature on the second floor went sideways, folding into shadows. It slipped through her fingers like mist.

Another telepath, Jo sent. That's all I know. Smiles. Chef. Get out of there!

Pull back. Both of you, Chris commanded.

Pulling, Diego said.

But Diego had not finished saying the word before the signature on the second floor flared bright and locked.

Chef — wait — hostile, hostile on your — Marcus was cut short as the link to Diego went dark.

NO! Diego. Answer me. Jo could feel her heart thrumming in her ears. *Marcus. Marcus. Answer me. Marcus!*

Nothing.

Damn it, Chris thought. *Tom. Anything you can see?*

Movement in the second-floor windows, Cap, Thomas sent. *East side. Two operators just dropped behind cubicles. Hold — there's a third presence I wasn't tracking. She just came up through the —*

Thomas went dark.

• • •

JO'S BACK WAS AGAINST THE WALL harder than it had been thirty seconds ago.

The five points were now two: Chris and Paddy. This couldn't be happening.

Chris. Her voice in her own head sounded smaller than she wanted it to because the whine wouldn't stop. *Where are you?*

I'm heading back to you, Jo. Stay put.

She saw Chris moments later. Then they moved together as a three-man unit: Chris leading, Paddy at the rear.

The third-floor corridor ended at a fire door. Chris cleared it, swept the next corridor, signaled.

This section of the floor had been the executive offices. The carpet here was nicer, three years of dust on it. A conference room door stood open on the left with a long table inside, six chairs neatly tucked, water glasses left from the last meeting anyone had taken in the building before it was mothballed. The northwest stairwell was at the end.

The defector was two floors above them. Jo could feel him in tight focus now. Close, scared, breathing.

She used him as her axis and let the rest of the building blur.

Her mind was on Chris and Paddy. On the defector. On the woman who was impossible to pin down. On the whine that wouldn't stop.

She did not feel the hostiles who came out of the conference room behind them, but she could feel the first round hit Paddy in the chest. Her friend made a sound and went down sideways into the doorframe and slid down it to the carpet. There was a stain spreading from under his vest.

"PADDY!" she screamed.

Chris pivoted and fired. The two hostiles went down clean against the conference room's open door. Chris was at Paddy before she could move.

Paddy's eyes were open. He was looking at her. His signature went out.

Jo went to her knees on the carpet beside him.

She had her hand on his chest, and she could feel the warmth of him through the vest, but the bright point of him in her head was gone. The whine had disappeared. Everything had disappeared.

She heard herself making a sound.

"Jo!"

Chris's voice from very far away, in the air now, not in her head.

"Jo!"

His hand was on her shoulder. She turned and looked at him.

His face was wrong. It was too bright.

Why? Why was it so bright?

The lights had come on. What were the lights doing on?

• • •

THE DROP-CEILING FLUORESCENTS HUMMED TO LIFE all at once. The emergency lighting they had been moving under for the last hour vanished. The dust in the air became visible. The two hostiles at the conference room door were sitting up and pulling off their masks. One of them was rolling his shoulders. They nodded to Chris.

Paddy sat up under her hand.

There was no blood. The stain on his vest was not a stain. It was a patch the suit had triggered when the round hit. Paddy was rubbing his sternum where the impact had bruised him. He was wincing.

"Bloody hell!" Paddy said. "That hurt more than I remembered."

Jo did not move her hand off his chest. A speaker in the drop ceiling clicked on.

"End of exercise."

The handles were re-emerging. Paddy. She could feel him in her mind as warm as on her hand that was still on his chest. Diego next.

Marcus. Marcus came back on.

Chris was kneeling on the other side of Paddy.

"Jo, you alright?" She could feel the restraint in him, holding himself back from pushing further with his link to read her. She unhooked their Timekeeping link and stood up, breathing in shallow gasps of air.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm fine. I just—"

"Hey, it's alright," Chris said, and he sounded genuine. "That's why we practice."

“I—” The whine was coming back.

Paddy reached up and put his hand over hers on his chest.

“Jo. Look at me. I want you to remember this moment.” He sounded serious. She looked at him.

“Because what you just felt was true love. Forget about Mr. Smiles. We belong together.”

She let out a small noise that could have been a laugh. He was grinning at her.

She got up.

“I need to catch a breath,” she said and she walked past the two hostiles. She walked past the open door of the conference room — empty now in the light, the table clean and the chairs tucked, props arranged that morning to make the room look like part of a building left alone for three years.

She walked down the corridor. She walked into the central stairwell. She walked down four flights, her hand on the rail because the stairwell smelled like old paper and the smell was so specific she didn’t trust her balance.

She passed Diego on the second-floor landing. He was leaning against the wall with his vest open, looking up at her, and eating an apple.

She walked past him.

Marcus was next. She walked past him too.

Jo walked through the lobby past two more operators with coffee and out the front door of the facility into the warm June morning. The sky was overcast, and the weather felt thick and muggy. She crossed to the chain-link fence at the edge of the lot and put her hands on it because she needed her hands on something. She hooked her fingers through the links and found they were shaking.

She closed her eyes. All she could see were two orbs of blue light and that wide, terrifying grin of Victoria Auchincloss.

Jo had known, of course. She had known it was just a training session. She knew that she hadn’t actually lost any of them.

But it had felt so real. It had felt too real.

And she had failed.

Who was the other telepath? Why couldn’t she read her? Wasn’t she supposed to be “the most talented telepath” Ross had ever met?

Was it a mistake?

“WHY DO YOU KEEP WHINING IN MY HEAD?” she screamed, scratching the side of her head.

“Jo,” came Ross’s voice.

Ross came to stand next to her. “Come back inside, Jo. I would like you to meet someone.”

She let her hands come off the fence. The mesh had pressed two diamond patterns into her palms.

“Yes, sir.”

The staging room had been a property clerk's office once. There was still a row of green filing cabinets along the back wall and a calendar from 2003 on the door. The folding tables had coffee on them and a box of pastries Paddy had brought up from the vending machine in the lobby. Diego was working through a second apple and looking with disgust at Paddy, who had one hand on his sternum where the round had bruised him, the other gesturing with a puff pastry as he chatted away about something Jo probably didn't want to know about.

Chris was at the far end of the room near the window. He looked up when she came in. He gave her a single small nod — how he had communicated with her for the last six months. Kinder than he had been. But distant. Always distant. As if, for whatever reason, he was afraid to close the gap between them.

Marcus was against the wall to her left, arms folded, one boot up on the baseboard. He looked at her as she came in.

She gave him half a smile. It was as much as she had in her.

And then she saw Thomas.

Thomas was sitting. Thomas, who stood at the back of every room with his rifle clean and his attention narrow, was sitting at the table closest to the window. He had elbows on it and his weight forward. He was leaning toward someone across the table from him. He was — Jo took half a second to credit her own eyes — *smiling*. The someone he was smiling at was a woman.

She was in her mid-twenties but looked younger. Dark tactical pants, a soft black sweater, no vest, her hair down past her shoulders. The hair was black and very straight. Her skin was pale and impossibly smooth. Asian, but not in a way Jo could quite place. Perhaps a quarter European. Dark almond eyes. A mouth that fell, at rest, into a perpetually amused smile.

Jo felt a sudden, almost violent jealousy so ugly she was instantly ashamed of herself.

This woman wasn't just beautiful. She was an exemplar of the word.

She was also, Jo realized in the same beat, the signature she had not been able to pin in the exercise.

The woman looked at Jo.

The recognition was instant on both sides. The woman was letting Jo see her now in a way she had not during the run. The woman was an open book even as the book could be closed without Jo being able to open it again.

"Jo," Ross said behind her. "This is Elizabeth Nguyen."

Elizabeth Nguyen stood up. She crossed the small distance between them — a movement that should not have been graceful in tactical boots but was anyway — and offered Jo her hand. She was about half an inch shorter than Jo.

"Beth, please." The accent was British. Not the kind Paddy did when he was imitating the supposedly "hot" girls he bedded on the weekends. It was not the kind from films, either. It was a quieter version. Educated, careful, vowels rounded. "I've been very much looking forward to meeting you."

Jo took her hand. Beth's hand was cool and the grip was firm without being a statement.

"Jo Byrne." She heard her voice come out a little flatter than she had intended.

"Yes, I know. I've heard so much." A small, genuine smile played at her perfect lips. "I'm sorry about earlier. That can't have been very pleasant."

"Sit down, everyone," Ross said, moving past her into the room. "I want to introduce you all properly."

Diego pushed a chair out for her with his foot and gave her a wink. Jo sent him *thanks* through their link and took it.

Beth sat back down across from Thomas.

"Elizabeth is on loan to us from Eastbourne House," Ross said. "Some of you have heard the name. For those who have not, Eastbourne is the British equivalent of our Section Six. We have worked alongside them for thirty years. They are very good at what they do, and they do it differently from how we do it. Elizabeth is a Linker. She is also a great deal more than that, which I will leave to her to demonstrate in her own time."

"Another Telly, huh?" Paddy said with a grin. "And British." Thomas looked over at him and shot him a warning through Jo.

Game on, pal, Paddy sent back through her.

"I'm Paddy," he said, stepping towards them and sitting down next to her. "How'd I come across, English?"

"Don't ask her that, Quinn," Chris said.

"You came across very warmly," Beth said, eyes gleaming. "And a little louder than the rest of them."

Paddy beamed as if he had been handed a medal. "Thank you. Thomas, did you hear that? She thinks I'm hot."

Beth let out a small laugh and leaned back in her chair.

"I do like this one," she said more to herself. Paddy was grinning in that self-satisfied way of his.

"Alright, that's enough," Chris said, stepping forward. Jo noted Beth's eyes roaming Chris, from his face to his wide shoulders, and all the way down. That ugliness in Jo spiked even higher.

"I asked Eastbourne for someone five months ago. Elizabeth is who they sent because she is their best. And they sent their best because they owe me a rather large favor. She has spent the time since then being briefed on every operation this team has run, every operator on this team, and every person of interest in our active files. She knows you. You will need to get to know her. Now. Elizabeth. The floor is yours."

Beth inclined her head.

"Thank you, sir." She turned to look at them. The look went around the room and rested on each face for almost exactly the same beat. It was a small, even-handed sweep that took them in without showing what it had taken. "I'll be brief. I am not what most of you would think of as a... typical Linker and Thrower. I won't be able to toss cars or sustain telepathic engagements the way, say, Jo can. From

everything I've read, Jo is an *exceptional* telepath and I cannot replace that. I do not intend to. I could not have done what Jo did in the building today. Even *with* what happened today." Jo felt annoyed without having any right to. "I am very specifically trained. I can hide a team. I can hold a comm line through interference. I can, in fact, communicate in rooms designed to stop telepathic links."

Paddy raised a hand.

"Yes?" she asked with the long-suffering patience of a saint.

"Can you read my mind right now?"

Jo gave him a mental punch and he spat his coffee.

Beth's eyes had crinkled.

"We will have a lot of time to get to know one another. For now, I ask you trust that I am here to help."

"Thank you, Elizabeth," Ross said, and then turned to Jo. "A word, please."

. . .

THE DINER WAS THE KIND SHE'D grown up in. The four-way stop, the pie case, the waitress who'd worked the register longer than Jo had been alive and knew every regular's order. And probably most of their business. It steadied her a little, being somewhere that ordinary.

The waitress, somewhere in her sixties, looked up as they came in, and there was a hint of surprise on her kind, wrinkled face.

"Dr. Ross."

"Good morning, Margaret."

"Your regular?"

"Yes. And whatever Jo's having."

The waitress looked at Jo, eyes scanning her tactical pants and boots, then her white tank top. Her eyebrow did a small quirk upwards.

"I'll just have a coffee."

"Pancakes," Ross said. "Plain, please."

Jo opened her mouth to protest, but Ross gestured her into a booth by the window, and she decided to go along. He waited until she had slid in before he sat down across from her, the vinyl creaking under him.

The waitress placed the coffee mug onto the table, the coffee sloshing back and forth. Without intending to, she stopped it with her mind before it went over the rim.

"That seems to be improving," he said, indicating the cup.

"I guess."

"And how is the noise?"

"It's fine," she lied. She cupped the coffee mug with both hands. "What is it, sir?"

Ross leaned back, observing her the way he often did. A faint curiosity mingled with something that reminded her of the way her father used to look at her.

“What do you know about Harvesters?”

“You mean Takers, sir?”

“Colloquially speaking, yes. The Takers.”

“Just what I’ve learned during my time in Five, sir. There are a very, very small number of telepaths who can take a gift out of another telepath. Incorporate it into themselves. Become stronger.”

“It’s called Metabolizing. Yes.” Ross took a sip of his coffee but did not take his eyes off her.

“From what I know it’s very rare. Only four known cases. And none of them survived.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it’s unnatural. Metabolizing someone’s powers means also taking that person into themselves. All four known cases resulted in insanity and death.”

“And what happens to the victims?”

“They die. You can’t survive a process like that. You can’t have something that fundamental ripped out of you and live.”

“That’s correct. It *always* kills the person it is being taken from,” Ross said. “The strain of the extraction is not something a mind and body are built to survive.”

“Why are we talking about this, sir?”

“Because I believe that Victoria is a Harvester. The only known living Harvester.”

“But sir. That’s not—”

“What do you think she did to you on the ferry?”

“I—I don’t know.”

The pancakes had arrived. Jo could not remember Margaret setting them down.

“I have never known a single person to be able to fight *back* against being Harvested. I believe that’s what happened. I believe that Victoria tried to Take you and failed. I believe that’s why she left you alive. Because you are, in some yet to be explained way, unique in that.”

He sliced a neat square from the egg, dipped the corner into the broken yolk, and watched the yellow pool onto the plate.

“What about this noise, sir?”

“It will pass. You escaped a process no one else has survived. A little noise is a modest price.”

After a moment, Jo asked, “Why did you bring her here? Elizabeth.”

“Why do you think?”

“Because you don’t think I can handle Victoria.”

“Can you handle Victoria?”

“No.” Jo shook her head, the movement sluggish, as if the weight of everything he’d said had settled into her skull like wet sand. She felt suddenly very small and tired. Small as she’d been on the ferry when her life was in Victoria’s hands. Tired as the nights she’d spent listening to that whining in her skull, wondering if madness or death came first.

“From what I have gathered since your mission, Victoria has consumed countless telepaths. You fought her one-on-one. You *survived*.”

“But Elizabeth is here because I cannot handle Victoria alone.”

“In part. I think that you and Beth together can be something that can defeat Victoria.”

CHAPTER SIX

GREYBRIAR (LOCATION: CLASSIFIED), SECTION SIX BRIEFING ROOM C —
JULY 2007

JO CAME INTO THE BRIEFING ROOM LAST and took the chair at the end of the table, the one that put the most distance between herself and Beth. The woman was lounging back while Thomas and Paddy embarrassed themselves trying to get her attention. Her dark almond eyes sparkled playfully at them. Teasing them. Encouraging them.

The screen on the far wall had never focused properly, and for most briefings Chris let it stay that way. A license plate, a doorway, a face caught badly in the dark. But it was Ross in the room today, and he did not put up a surveillance photo of the woman looking back at them now.

He had put up a magazine cover.

“This, ladies and gentlemen, is Theresa Winslow,” Ross said, hands clasped behind his back.

The image came up glossy and lit and perfectly sharp, the way the screen never was for anyone else. And the image changed the temperature of the room.

The cover was of a charity benefit with a marble staircase and a woman three steps up, half-turned toward the lens as though she had been caught by it and had decided, in the catching, to be gracious about it.

She was in a column of dark silk that had probably cost more than Jo’s annual salary. Her brown hair was swept up off her long neck, and even through the gloss of the photograph Jo could see that her eyes were different colors: one hazel, the other a bright, impossible blue.

Paddy whistled, turning away from one beautiful woman to admire another, different kind of beauty.

“She is a looker, isn’t she?” Paddy was grinning as he reached into the box of donuts that sat on the table. Jo gave him a withering look when he met her eyes, and his smile turned sheepish. “I’m just saying. Look at her. That is one *fine* specimen of a woman.”

“She’s our way in,” Ross said over Paddy. “Host of the most exclusive private game in the country. Old money, very quiet, very particular about who comes through the door. The kind of room where people with a great deal to lose feel safe for one evening. She decides who sits down, and who never hears it happened. She has stayed at the top for quite some time in a world that does not forgive mistakes.”

“By being a hottie?” Paddy asked.

“By being cleverer than the men around her.”

He moved to the next image.

“One of the men who comes to her table keeps things for other people. It has come to my attention that right now he is keeping a file on Victoria Auchincloss. Sightings. Movements. The dead. A decade or more of careful, patient work.” Jo leaned forward, her chair creaking with the shifting weight. “It is the closest thing that exists in the world to a true picture of her.”

“And the host?” Jo asked, and felt the room turn to her. “What’s she to any of this?”

“Nothing we need,” Ross said. “She runs the room. He keeps his business in it. We take his business and leave her the room. She never learns it was us. We need more information about the girl if we are going to be able to protect our interests.” His eyes moved over them without resting. “This is the first chance any of us have had to get in front of her.”

Chris straightened, and Jo could see the hunger in his eyes, that desire to prove himself. “How do we get near it?”

“The game.” The image on the screen changed to a building. Grand, columned, dark. “It runs in a theater she’s spent two years restoring. Invitation only, no exceptions. Very high stakes.”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Paddy asked, and that boyish grin of his lit up his face. “Our job is to sneak in and play *poker*? I’ve been waiting for this day my whole life. It’s like you read my mind.” He paused. “Wait, did you read my mind?” He glanced at Beth and Jo.

“This is where Elizabeth comes in,” Ross continued.

“You want me at the table,” Beth said, as if it were the obvious choice.

“Yes. You will present as a professional poker player. All the money in the world and not a care about burning through it. You will be the kind of player Theresa wants in her room, because winning against you means something to the men she is trying to flatter.”

“And the file?” Chris said.

“The keeper takes the manager’s office for the games. Privacy is part of what Winslow sells her guests. The file is in his safe, in a room his own men watch. Diego and Patrick go in backstage, a contractor and his man—”

“But. But. But.” Paddy was looking from Ross to Diego and back to Ross. Ross did not skip a beat.

“—because a theater under restoration is always full of contractors, and no one looks twice.”

Paddy hung his head.

“And me?” Marcus said.

“The floor. You are a guest who does not gamble, which gives you a reason to stand at the edges and watch the doors.” Ross looked up. “Thomas will be above you, in the gallery. Jo holds all of you together from a position with sightlines. Elizabeth keeps the building from noticing any of it.

“That leaves the host,” Ross said. “We need to keep her busy. And to do that, we give her something she would rather look at than the rest of us.” His gaze settled on Chris. “She has an appetite for a particular kind of young man. Fresh. Moneyed. Earnest, or earnest-seeming, which is harder to find than you would think.”

“Does that include a chisel-jawed fella who looks like he was poured into an oversized GI Joe mold at a toy factory?” Paddy chimed in.

Chris’s jaw set. “Sir—”

“I want you to be exactly the type of man she cannot resist, because that is exactly what you are.” Jo watched the back of Chris’s neck go the color of her hair. Something about it made her insides twist. She looked back up at that too-perfect face with its mismatched eyes.

“So, we’re sending Miss Eurasia here to have fun and play poker. We’re sending Master Mold here to get seduced by a society scarlet for the good of the nation.” A pause. “And I am stuck with Chef doing the actual work? Why can’t I be the one seducing the hottie?”

“Because he’s actually sexy, darling,” Beth said mildly, that knowing smile playing at her lips. Something went sour low in Jo’s chest, looking from the image of Theresa Winslow to Beth.

“It’s called denial, sweetheart—” Paddy began.

“That’s enough, Quinn,” Chris said, and it came out with an edge that made Paddy go silent.

Jo did not say anything. She looked back at the glamorous woman on the screen — the dark hair, the face that might as well have been right out of a male fantasy, the whole expensive certainty of her. The image of the woman sat in her mind, right beside the noise that never quite left the back of her head.

“This one matters,” Ross said. “More than any of you yet understand. If we get it, we might actually know how to stop Victoria.” He paused at the door. “And if we do not, be very careful what she sees of us. There are things it is not safe for Victoria Auchincloss to know exist.”

GREYBRIAR (LOCATION: CLASSIFIED), THE COMMON ROOM — JULY 2007

THE COMMON ROOM HAD THE BEST CHAIRS in Greybriar and the worst light in the building at that moment. It had the worst light because Paddy had decided to modify it to look like a poker room. He had killed the overheads so that it was almost pitch black save for the lamp still burning over the card table, throwing a hard yellow ring across the felt.

Paddy sat leaning back so that his chair rocked on its two back legs, a cigar in his mouth and a glass of whiskey hanging precariously halfway off the table. He was dressed in a ridiculous all-white tuxedo and, for reasons beyond Jo’s ability to comprehend, a pirate’s patch over his left eye. Jo telepathically moved the glass of whiskey back from the edge.

“Cheatin’ already, our Saint,” Paddy said through the cigar, smoke streaming out of his mouth. He chewed on the fat cigar, making a ridiculous show of it.

“If I was cheatin’, Cabbage, I would not be down forty dollars.” She had meant to say it as a simple retort, but it came out with more heat than she intended. She scowled down at her cards.

Paddy finally took the cigar out of his mouth and laid it down on the ashtray. He looked at his cards and then sighed. He laid them down, one at a time, grave as a man identifying a body.

“I would like a moment of silence to pay our respects.”

Beth turned hers over without ceremony. It was, of course, a straight. She drew the pot in with two fingers, moving the chips telepathically.

“That can’t be possible,” Diego said, shaking his head. “She’s got to be cheating.”

“If I was cheating, darling, I would be up more than five hundred dollars.” Beth’s accent came out smooth and effortless. Having Jo’s own words echoed in that perfectly lyrical voice irritated Jo more than it should have.

Beth’s eyes left the table and went across the room, to where Chris sat on the long couch with a laptop open on his knees. The backlight of the laptop spilled across his features, catching the hard line of his jaw, the shadow pooled under his cheekbone. Beth’s eyes stayed there, taking in the lines all too hungrily. Jo felt her face grow warm with anger.

“You don’t pay attention and you might be down a lot more than forty,” Diego said, snapping Jo’s attention back. His eyes seemed to say more than his words. He had been watching her watch Beth watching Chris. Or was it something else?

Beth stacked the chips, one hand flicking back her long black hair, straight and smooth and glossy.

“How in God’s green earth are you doing that?” Jo said before she could stop herself.

Beth looked up. “Doing what, darling?”

The way the Englishwoman said the word *darling* felt like a rock in Jo’s shoe.

“Win. Every. Stinkin’. Hand. How?”

“I’ve played poker professionally.”

“What?” Jo felt like throwing up her hands in frustration.

“She’s English,” Paddy chimed in.

“What?” Diego looked over at him with that look he so often gave Paddy: a mixture of confusion and pity.

“That or she’s cheating.” Paddy lifted his fingers and tapped his temple.

“You can’t get straights by reading minds,” Jo said, and they all turned to her.

“Reading minds now, are we?” Paddy said, eyes narrowing.

“I am not—”

"Hands on the table, Freckles," Marcus said. He hadn't looked up from his cards. His face had remained impassive the entire game, which was both impressive and unfair.

"My hands *are* on the table," Jo said. "And you're supposed to be on my side."

"I'm here to win," he said. "Poker is a cold, cold game, Jo."

"Traitor! I'm betting with Bartholomew next."

"Tell me more about this *Bartholomew*, Saint," Paddy said, grinning. "I'm dying to know."

"Zip it, Quinn," Marcus said, pointing a finger right at Paddy without looking up from his hand.

"He's a purple gorilla Marcus won for me at the circus," Jo whispered. The couch creaked where Chris was sitting.

"Cap." Diego twisted around. "Get in. One hand. We need fresh blood. English over here is slaughtering us."

"I'm working," Captain Killjoy said.

"You're *always* working," Paddy sighed. "Listen, Marcus loves playing the straight man as much as anyone. But he plays poker." He turned and stage-whispered to Beth, "Cap's just scared. Won't play because he can't bluff. Look at that face. He's as honest as a Labrador."

"But far more attractive," Beth murmured sensually.

"I am prepping for our op tomorrow," Chris said to the laptop. "You guys might want to do the same."

"Scared!" Paddy said triumphantly.

"I'm working, Quinn."

Jo watched him stare straight at his computer and not look their way. She wondered why he couldn't just, for once, let his hair down.

"Fine. All right, English." Paddy had wrestled the deck off Diego somehow and was sweeping the cards up to deal. "You and me. New hand. I'm going to win all my money back, and then you're going to fall hopelessly in love with me. Because what's sexier than a man who plays poker well, huh?"

"A man who's actually sexy." Beth shrugged, and while she did not look at Chris, Jo could not help but feel she was talking about Chris. Again.

"Your bet, Jo," Beth said. Jo realized she had not been looking at her hand but simply staring at the woman. She looked down, embarrassed at being caught. Her hand was awful.

"I'm in," Jo said, and she didn't know why she had said that. There was no way she could win.

"Out," Diego and Thomas both said.

Marcus looked at Jo for a moment, then laid his cards face-down. "Out."

Beth looked at Jo with that too-cool gaze.

"You're bluffing," she said.

"Am I?"

“You reach too much, darling. It’s a tell.”

It landed somewhere low, like a physical blow.

“At least when I reach, I can throw a man through a wall. What is it you do again? Hide, was it?”

The room had gotten very quiet, and she felt, immediately, the stupidity of her words.

And then Beth said, “I fold.” There was nothing to it. Just her usual cool voice, and she set her cards down on the table.

And all of a sudden that whine began to ring louder and louder, and Jo pushed herself up from the table.

“I—”

Marcus got up as well.

“I think it’s time for me to go to bed.” He glanced over at her. “You heading back or are you staying, Freckles?”

She looked from Marcus to Beth and then nodded.

“Yeah, I’m tired. I should go to bed too.”

She left with Marcus, feeling vaguely that she had lost more than just money that evening.

THE MARQUAND THEATRE, CHICAGO — JULY 2007

THE THEATER HAD BEEN RED AND GOLD ONCE. Now it was mostly dark and smelled of plaster dust. Two years of restoration had stopped somewhere in the middle and never started again. Scaffolding stood furred in canvas along one wall of the lobby. The chandelier overhead was wrapped and lowered halfway, hanging in the dark like something that had not decided whether to fall.

But the room they had opened for the game was alive. And they had set it on the stage itself.

From the back of the house, Jo could see the single green table at the dead center of the bare stage. Over it was one work light on a stand throwing a hard yellow ring down across the felt, and nothing else, the rest of the enormous space falling away into black above and around it.

Where Paddy’s makeshift common room poker lounge had been underwhelming, this was the most theatrical thing Jo had ever seen anyone do with a card game. Not that she had much experience with card games.

High rollers love spectacle, darling, Beth said over the link, far too familiar for Jo’s liking.

The dress Jo was in was Section Two’s doing. It was nothing she would have chosen herself, or been caught dead in. Mamaw would not have been pleased. It was black silk, clinging, showing more than it ought, the back cut open nearly to her waist. So open, in fact, that she could feel the cool theater air along her spine and had nowhere on her to hide so much as a blade. The skirt was narrow enough that she couldn’t have taken a full stride.

Jo stood in the shadow of the rear doors with the whole team held in her head and wondered, not idly, whether she was meant to fight in this if it came to it. She watched the lit table from the dark. Beth was at the table.

She was in slate gray and she sat the way she had the previous night, giving nothing away, and the men around her — six of them, the kind of men who owned whole cities — had already begun to look at her like they were each ready to duel the others for her hand.

Status update, Chris said through her, his mind's voice rumbling in her chest where the link connected the two of them. He was on the floor near the bar at the lip of the stage, in a dark suit cut to make him look like money instead of a soldier. And he was *smiling*. A broad grin that went ear to ear as he spoke with the few people around him, flute in hand. It was such an incongruous sight that Jo found herself staring at him.

At the table, dear, Beth said. *Up two hundred. Theresa knows my name now. She's pleased with me.*

Gallery, Thomas said, and Jo could feel him above and behind her. *I have the table, the stage, the doors, most of the house.*

Floor, Marcus said. *Watching the doors.*

Backstage, Diego said. *Cabbage is having a religious experience with the lock.*

It's — what do they call it? — a sanctifying lock, Paddy grunted. *I might even get baptized after this. Then we'll have ourselves a good proper Catholic wedding, eh, Saint?*

Pretty sure that's more Protestant than Catholic, she responded.

At the table, Beth sat back with a glass in her hand and let a man refill it for the privilege of losing to her. The Englishwoman's work was concealment, spread across the room like glass over a map, meant to keep them all just under the radar of any Charism who might be in the house. It was good work. It was better than Jo wanted it to be, because she wanted the woman to not be good at *something*.

The problem was that because Beth's concealment lay over her own, it sat over her hold on the team a fraction off, like two pictures of the same room not quite agreeing. The double exposure turned her stomach when she let herself notice it.

She did not have to notice it long.

Theresa had come up onto the stage.

From the dark, Jo finally saw what the photograph hadn't been able to hold. A photograph could give you the surface of Theresa Winslow. The silk, the certainty, the face the magazines loved and men tripped themselves over. It did not capture the net effect of her: the way attention bent toward her before anyone had decided to give it, the way warmth seemed to come from her and arrive in you as if it had been yours first.

It was, quite literally, breathtaking.

And before Jo had time to understand or examine it, Theresa had turned from the table and found Chris at the edge of the stage. All of her attention settled on him like a bird of prey on an unsuspecting rodent. Chris hadn't needed to do anything but look the part — he certainly looked the part — and Ross's entire prediction had played out like a thing already recorded.

And he noticed Theresa noticing him. Down their warm, vibrating thread, Jo could feel the stiffness in him, the discomfort he was trying to hold still under. And underneath the discomfort — because Jo had too much access to him through their Timekeeping link — there was that other thing. A warmth he had not asked for and could not entirely stop, because Theresa Winslow was a center of gravity unto herself.

Theresa came to the lip of the stage and offered Chris her hand knuckles-up, so old-fashioned it would have looked ridiculous on anyone else. She said something that made him laugh — a real one, surprised out of him — and Jo felt the laugh go through him and through her. And then into the others she was holding. She didn't know why her breath had gone shallow.

And Chris did exactly what he had been sent there to do. He played it. He gave her the earnest, half-overwhelmed young money she had not ordered but certainly wanted anyway.

Jo forced herself to look away and found Beth's eyes on her from across the room. Great.

Beth had just taken another pot. Jo watched her draw the chips in with that small economy of motion, watched the man across from her laugh at his own ruin.

The whine came up the back of her skull, a high thin scream. She ground her teeth against it and held the team, trying not to listen to whatever Theresa was murmuring to Chris with her lips near his ear.

The plan was working. Theresa was fixed on Chris and looking nowhere else. Jo could feel the easy weight of Theresa's hand where it had come to rest on Chris's arm as they talked. Theresa laughed at something he said. Her hand slid lower, never leaving contact, until it found his.

We'll be taking a tour soon, Chris sent, clipped, holding it even. Jo swallowed as she realized she was feeling everything Chris was feeling. She could feel the warmth of Theresa's palm as it found his jaw, the smell of the woman's perfume, the half-inch he leaned into the woman's hand—

Jo pulled back so hard her skull knocked the door behind her. The whine spiked white, and for one bad second the lines she held of her team lurched in her hold like water sloshing in a too-full bucket. She willed them level again — jaw locked, a sound trapped behind her teeth, forcing the water back into the shape she chose — while forty feet away Beth took another pot without spilling her drink.

There was a beat of silence from the team. She wasn't sure if any of them had noticed.

Then Chris continued, *Alright, she's walking me off the stage. Toward the office corridor.*

That's the wrong direction, Cap. Diego's down there, Beth said.

Which way do I take her?

Keep her left, Thomas said.

How?

There's a stair to the boxes before the corridor, Beth said. Take her up it. Keep her looking at the view, not the doors.

What view?

By view, she meant your jaw, Cap, Paddy said. Oh, and Saint, you're leaking a bit too much. I did not need to feel Cap when she—

Face burning in a way no amount of Kentucky Catholic upbringing had prepared her to survive, Jo turned their link all the way down.

Don't do that, Beth chimed in. That's too low. I can barely feel the team.

Bristling, and more than a bit flustered, Jo turned the link back up by a fraction.

She's insisting on the rest of the tour. I think she has a destination in mind. But we're heading back toward Diego, Chris said, a small hint of panic in his voice.

Jo felt Beth give a small, clean nudge, a suggestion laid so lightly that Theresa would feel only her own idea, steering the woman off the path that would have walked her straight into Diego.

I have Chris, Beth said. Jo, hold center on the floor. Let me carry Chris and the office. We do not cross.

I can take Chris. That was the plan, Jo sent. You hold the concealment. I've got Chris. He's linked to me as Timekeeper.

Wait, Jo, I haven't—

She reached past Beth to strengthen her hold on the link.

Somehow, in a way Jo couldn't describe, their powers crossed.

For half a second they both had hold of the same work, each assuming the other would let go. Instead of depth there was glare. The whole stage flashed white-hot behind her eyes and went blank. And everything she had spent the night holding let go at once. Her knees slid an inch down the door, and she felt the concealment shudder under the cross.

The glass Beth had so carefully laid over the map cracked.

Then it shattered completely.

That was when the trap that had been waiting all night closed its jaws.

The trap was a Suppressor. A Charism who hunts power leaking off other Charisms and then crushes what he finds. Flattens it. Weakens it. Sometimes kills it outright. This one's Suppression hit like a sledgehammer. He came down over the room like the lid of a pot, and every line in Jo's mind blinked out at once, smothered under a hand she could not push off. The silence inside her skull was so absolute she heard herself gasp aloud in the dark.

A few heads turned towards her, but Jo didn't care. She scrambled, trying to reestablish her connection with her team. Her hand had gone to her chest where the link to Chris had been torn off. Her eyes searched the room and met Beth.

And a small sliver of light cut through the darkness.

I have us, came Beth's voice, strained and thin as wire. *Bloody hell, this drains Capacity. How do you do this all day?*

I'm going in through you, Jo sent. She went searching and found Theresa Winslow inches from Chris's face, lips parted... and then, all at once, the warmth went out of the woman like a light switched off. The easy, magnetic want was simply gone. Her eyes came up off Chris and moved across the dark of the house, reading it. Then she lifted two fingers.

The men on the walls moved all at once. Two of them closed on Theresa and folded her out of danger, shoving Chris aside.

What's going on? came Chris's voice, muffled, down the line Beth was bleeding to keep open.

We've been made, Jo said. *There's a Suppressor.*

Then how are we still talking, Jo?

I can work under the Suppressor's detection by minimizing residual energy. Long story, Beth said.

Alright, keep comms and eyes, Chris said. *Diego?*

Got the case. Corridor's filling up. Cabbage, your bit's done. Get—

Jo never heard the rest. A hand clamped around her arm and hauled.

The man it belonged to was big, with a broad, neanderthal face — all forehead and jaw. His free hand was sliding into his jacket for what she presumed was a gun. Jo reached on reflex for what had always been there — the flood, the strength that put grown men through walls — and found a wall standing where it lived. What came through was a thin thread. It knocked his hand off the jacket. Barely.

He looked at her, eyes wide in surprise for a moment, then he was on her.

He drove her back into the doors hard enough to punch the air out of her. She dropped a foot back to brace, and the skirt caught her at the knees like a hobble — Section Two's beautiful, useless silk — and she went down the doorframe sideways with all of his weight coming after.

She caught herself with that thin thread of her power before her wrists took the fall. It was all she could do not to break bones. She rolled and got back to her feet but he was on her again like a magnet.

She put two fingers under the hinge of his jaw and dug. Then she put her thumb into his eye and pressed. It was warm and it was wet, and the sound he made turned her stomach. She kept pressing anyway. He reared back. Her free hand found the seam at her thigh and tore; the silk gave in one long rip to her hip. Knee up, into the gap, into the inside of his thigh, she bucked the way the sparring room had taught her, and for one bright half-second it worked. His weight came up. Off-balance. The way out was right there in front of her.

His fist got there first.

White heat across her cheekbone. The room tipped, and the floor took the side of her head. Then his weight settled down through his arms, and his hands closed around her throat and bore down.

There was no air. None. There was the flat, enormous pressure of him, and her own pulse going loud and wrong in her ears.

She reached for her powers. Everything behind that stupid wall.

Nothing.

She clawed at his wrists and got nowhere. She bucked, arching, trying to roll him over her right shoulder as she'd been taught. He did not move. That was the worst of it: he wasn't even angry. He was patient. He leaned into her throat like a man closing a stubborn valve, and the dark came in from the edges, and the whine in her skull thinned to one high, distant note—

Something warm misted across her face.

The hands went slack. The man slumped over her, all that terrible weight gone stupid. Just mass, now pressing down on her chest.

Move, Saint, Thomas said from somewhere far above. *Off the floor.*

She got both hands under the body — dragging air in strips — and heaved him off. When she was finally successful, Jo lay still one more second. Her face was on fire. Her dress was in ruins.

Jo. Are you okay? Chris asked.

I feel like a real man now, she sent back. *Got sucker-punched and everything.*

Even through the borrowed line with no Timekeeper link, she knew he could feel what sat underneath the joke.

I'm coming for you, Chris said.

No. Cupid's got me, Cap. Go. Watch after your team.

She felt him waver. Then he went.

Backstage reached her in pieces, secondhand through Beth: shouting, work lights swinging, the taste of plaster dust in someone else's mouth. Diego and Paddy had gone in together, and the corridor had come apart between them, a rolling scaffold shoved crosswise, and behind it dark suits pouring in from the loading dock like water finding a crack. Four men. Then six. Paddy was on the wrong side of all of them.

And Diego was alone with the case.

Chris was there now and throwing punches.

Chris, don't, Diego said, and his voice had gone strange. It had gone calm. *It's okay. I—*

I'm right here, Reyes. I—

Take this and GO!

Jo felt it more than saw it: Diego getting the case up over the heads of the men dragging at his arms, one clean, desperate pass out of the crowd — and Chris's hands closing on it out of the air.

Chris had the case.

He did not have Diego.

Dammit! It came out of Chris out loud, ragged, composure breaking in a way she had never seen.

Chef! came Paddy's voice, out loud and down the line at once. Jo felt him throwing men off himself with the efficiency of the trained killer Jo often forgot he was. But it gained him nothing. There was no getting to Diego.

Someone hit Diego with the butt of a pistol. They took him backward off his feet, a wall of backs closing around him, his arms pinned. Then the small bright sting of a needle in the side of his throat.

Jo felt that too. Even secondhand. Even smothered. The point of him in the middle of her head went from a man fighting to a man held. Quiet. Slow. Draining out like a tide.

I'm coming, I'm coming, you absolute— Then Paddy's voice went very sharp. *Let fucking go of me, Chris! Let me go!*

Through Beth, Jo reached for Diego with everything she did not have. She found the place where he should have been, and there was nothing in it to hold. No weight. No warmth. No line.

He disappeared. A bead lifted off the string.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHICAGO SAFEHOUSE (LOCATION: CLASSIFIED) — JULY 2007

THE SAFEHOUSE WAS A THREE-STORY BROWNSTONE on a quiet residential block three miles from the river, and at this hour the only sound it made was literally crickets chirping.

Jo lay on her back in the bedroom on the second floor with the blue flowered comforter pulled up to her sternum and her hands interlaced over it. Somehow even the crickets sounded mournful.

Diego's room was at the other end of the hall.

The door had been open when they came in at two in the morning. None of them had looked at it on the way past. None of them except her. She had gone to the door to close it but then she had looked inside. And then she had turned on the light.

Diego's suitcase was at the foot of the bed. He had a book at the bedstand. He must have been reading it the night before. She had walked in and picked it up. The book was a paperback of *Love in the Time of Cholera* with the spine immaculate and a thin, unassuming bookmark at a chapter break. She hadn't known Diego was a reader.

His suitcase at the foot of the bed was open. Inside it the clothes were folded in a way that was neat and orderly. Most likely the way his commanding officers had expected it. Three white t-shirts on top. A dark sweater. Two pairs of jeans.

At the bottom of the case there was a small wooden box with a brass clasp. She had not opened it. She had felt, with her gift, the shape of what was inside without meaning to — a folded photograph, a chain with a small medal on it, a piece of paper folded many times that she did not need to read to know was a letter. She had pulled her gift back from the box like a hand from a hot pan.

Now, Jo turned in her bed, curling into herself, trying to sleep.

Beth was in the room next to Jo's.

That mattered too, though Jo did not yet have a clear thought about why. Ross had assigned the rooms in Chicago the way Ross had assigned the rooms in every safehouse since Marseilles.

Her mind went back to the theatre. To the half-second she had reached past Beth for Chris's line. Why had she done that? Why had she felt, in that strange moment of panic, so possessive of that connection?

And then she thought of that psychic cross. The lid coming down over all of them. The way her powers had come flooding back on the floor a heartbeat too late, every ounce of it useless because Diego was already taken.

She closed her eyes and then opened them again.

She got out of bed.

The corridor lights were on at the half-setting. She walked the corridor and stopped outside Marcus's door. She turned the knob and stepped through.

Marcus was sitting on the floor with his back against the bed. His sidearm was on the floor in front of him and he was scrubbing the inside of the barrel, the sound of the brush scratching metal. He looked up as she closed the door behind her.

The lamp on the nightstand was on, and the bulb was the kind that gave a low warm yellow. Marcus was in a gray t-shirt and boxer briefs. His hair was still wet from the shower.

She crossed the room and lowered herself to the floor beside him.

Jo did not look at him. She put her back against the bed next to his and she sat with her knees drawn up and her arms around them. She looked at the closed door across from her.

For a long time neither of them said anything.

Then Marcus said, very quietly, "Don't blame yourself, Jo."

She closed her eyes. Felt them sting, hot and wet.

He continued, "I've known Diego for years. I know he wouldn't blame you." Jo felt her breath hitch, and it was suddenly very hard to breathe. She opened her eyes and looked at her knees. Marcus tossed the barrel onto the towel in front of him where the other pieces lay in perfect, meticulous order.

She turned her head to look at him.

"Marcus—" she said. "I just—I want—I wish—"

She put her face into her knees and the sound came out of her, ragged at the edges. She felt his arm around her shoulders as he drew her to him. He felt so warm. She turned into him. She put her face against the side of his neck and she cried into the cotton of his t-shirt the way she had not cried in front of anyone since her father's funeral when she was eleven.

Jo didn't know how long she cried.

When the worst of it had moved through her, she did not lift her head. She stayed where she was with her face against the warm place under his jaw and his arm around her shoulders and the smell of him in her nose. Underneath the shampoo she smelled something musky and gamey and masculine. Something that reminded Jo of home. She thought foolishly of Cody back home. The first time she had ever kissed a boy. He hadn't been nearly as manly as Marcus. But he had that same smell.

She lifted her face.

He was looking at her. He was very close. His arm was still around her shoulders.

She kissed him.

She had not meant to. She had meant to say something. Instead she put her mouth on his and the kiss was wet at the start because her face was wet. He kissed her back without surprise.

She climbed onto him, hands cupping his face. His hands moved up her back over the cotton of the pajama top and her hands found the back of his neck and the kiss got longer and louder in her own head.

She felt the bed against her back before she realized he had stood with her in his arms and had spun them around. He had not put her down. He was holding her against him with her legs around his hips and her arms around his neck. He had risen from the floor as if she weighed nothing, which she did to him, and that somehow made her want to kiss him harder.

Then he set her on the edge of the bed. He did not lay her down. He stood between her knees with his hands at her waist and she felt the heat of his hands through the cotton. She pulled him down by the front of his shirt and he came down slowly.

She lay back against the pillow and pulled him with her and his weight was on her. The kiss had kept going the whole time.

Without meaning to, without any reason to, Jo was ten years old in a pew at St. Joseph's, the varnish sticky under her fingers, looking up past the rows of bowed heads to the crucifix hung enormous over the altar.

Marcus had noticed she had not breathed out.

He lifted his face from her and she opened her eyes.

He was looking at her. She could feel his saliva cooling and drying the place where his mouth had just been. She could feel the room behind him — the lamp on the nightstand, the door, the corridor, the closed door at the end of the hall. She could feel Marcus's hand against her ribs, warm, not moving.

She tried to say his name, but she only moved her lips. He rolled onto his back beside her.

She turned onto her side and put her face against his shoulder.

He put his arm around her without comment.

She did not say anything for a long time.

"You should go back to your room," he said eventually. His voice was very even. She nodded her head, but she did not move.

He did not move either.

After a while she said, "Will you hold me tonight?"

She felt his breath slow under her cheek. He did not answer for so long that she thought he might be asleep. Then he said, "I'll hold you every night, Jo."

Jo thought of the rosary on her nightstand, three doors down the corridor. Her hand went up and touched the crucifix which had gone askew around her neck. She fixed it, centered it, and fingered the image of a nailed God.

JO WOKE AT SIX WITH HER HEAD on Marcus's chest. She did not move for a long time. She could hear his heart beating slowly in his chest and feel the rise and fall of her head with each breath he took. Then she shifted up so she was level with him. She looked at his face and reached out a finger to trace it against the scar on his lip. The stubble that had grown tickled her fingers.

Jo pushed herself up very gently and placed a kiss on his lips without waking him.

Then she got up.

She adjusted the top so that it was properly centered. She trod on the side of each step the way she had done as a girl so as to not wake a sleeping house. At the bottom she let out a breath and was smiling to herself.

That aching feeling of Diego's absence was still there. She still felt the guilt roil inside of her.

But somehow—somehow, she felt lighter. She took another breath and then went into the kitchen.

The kitchen at the back of the brownstone was small. A single yellow bulb was on over the sink. The curtain at the back window had been pushed aside and the window looked out on a brick courtyard where light spilled in.

Paddy was cooking something.

He was in the same dark t-shirt and fake contractor work pants he had been in at the theatre. His jacket was hung over the back of the chair next to him. His hair almost looked like it was glowing in the morning light.

He smiled as she entered.

"Mornin', Red."

"Morning yourself—Orange."

He grinned at her and gestured at the seat next to his laptop. A phone was beside it, disassembled neatly: back cover off, battery out, sim tray ejected, a small reader cabled into one of the laptop's ports.

"I didn't know you knew so much about computers," she said as she sat down. "You sleep, Cabbage?"

"Nope."

"And—what are you making?"

"Omelets."

"You're usually more of a Pop-tart kind of a guy," she said, picking up his mug of coffee from beside the laptop. It was still warm. She cupped it with both hands and took a sip.

"Yeah, well, need my strength today, don't I? Want one?"

"Sure," she said. He indicated the screen and then turned back to the pan. The screen was a map of the towers north of the city with a single line traced in blue running north. The line ended somewhere near the Wisconsin border, with several branches she could not read upside down.

“What’s that?”

“Every burner that hit a tower north of the city between two and three this morning. Seventeen of them. I’ve crossed off fifteen.”

He had crossed them off neatly, in pen. Each line had a number, a first ping, a tower, a dwell. The two he had not crossed off were highlighted yellow.

“How did you get tower dumps this early in the morning?”

“I called a guy.”

“You called a guy?”

“I called a guy. He’s a guy. Although, I suppose, he *could* be a girl with a very low voice.” He paused, as if contemplating that possibility. “I’ve never met him... or *her*... in person so I can’t really know for sure.”

She let that go and watched him flip the omelet into the air with a flick of the pan. It landed perfectly.

“Whose phone is that?” she said.

“Belonged to the one with the broken wrist. I grabbed it on the way out.” The surprise on her face must have shone because he said, “I’m not just a pretty face, you know. There’s a reason you’re gonna marry me some day.” She snorted and took another sip from his coffee mug.

“We’ll see, Romeo.”

“Hey!” he exclaimed, pointing his spatula at the coffeemaker. “There’s some in there.”

“Yours taste better,” she said, taking yet another sip.

“That’s what she said.” He winked at her.

She looked back at his work. A burner number, first ping at oh-two-eleven, off a tower in the middle of nowhere. Everything else that had touched it that hour had moved on. This one hadn’t, which Paddy had circled twice with a question mark.

“It stayed. Everyone else was just passing through. This one stopped and you don’t stop out there for nothing. That’s where I think they took him. Look.”

She scrolled the map. “Looking,” she said, but she was eyeing him over her mug — *his* mug — of coffee.

“There’s an old industrial site under that tower, about forty miles north. Nothing’s used it in years. Used to be a meat-processing operation in the seventies.”

“Ew.”

“Yeah, well, it’s been decommissioned since eighty-one. Bank took it in eighty-three. Then it gets... weird.”

He placed a plate in front of her and a fork into her hands. He took his coffee from her.

“Hey, I was enjoying that,” she complained. Pouting, she took a bite of his food. “Oh *wow*. Paddy—”

“That’s what she said,” he said with that wide boyish grin of his. She laughed at that one. He placed his mug of coffee back next to her plate, only he had filled it with fresh coffee from the pot. She smiled to herself as she wrapped her hands around the mug again, feeling its warmth. “Property changed hands four times in twelve years through shell LLCs. Last sale of record is two thousand one. Buyer’s a thing called Lakeshore Holdings, which is a thing called Brennan Trust, which is a thing called nothing at all because the trust’s registered in the Channel Islands.”

She set the coffee down and looked up. He was flipping another omelet.

“Paddy.”

“Hm?”

“And how did you find out all that this early in the morning?”

“I called a guy that is not a guy.”

“What?”

“Well, see, she had a really high voice. So, if the first was a girl but had a low voice, I’m going to assume this is a guy with a really high voice.”

She stared at him from across the kitchen. That one hurt her brain.

“It makes perfect sense, Saint. Just don’t think about it too hard.” He gestured with his spatula again at the phone, which made some pieces of eggs go flying. “This phone called a number forty-six minutes before we hit the theatre last night. The number’s a burner. The same one I just showed you. The one that went quiet up by Kenosha.”

“Paddy, you’re brilliant.”

“I knew you were going to see the light someday, Saint.”

Chris was downstairs ten minutes later.

He looked at the laptop. He looked at the burner list. He looked at Paddy’s three handwritten pages of notes. He did not say anything for a long time.

Then he sat down across from him and pulled the laptop toward himself.

“Walk me through it.”

Paddy walked him through it. He did not, Jo noticed, make Chris an omelet. Or coffee. It made her savor both of hers more.

The walkthrough took twenty minutes because Chris kept interjecting with questions. Paddy answered them all without missing a beat. It was the first time that Jo thought she truly saw her friend for what he was. His eyes were bright and intelligent and there was a drive to him that had been masked beneath all the jokes. She wondered if she really, truly, knew Patrick Quinn.

After it was all said and done, Chris sat back, arms crossed. Jo realized she was biting the inside of her cheek as she watched Chris decide what to do with the information Paddy had just handed him.

“You did this on no sleep?”

"I'll sleep when Diego sleeps in his own bed again, Cap."

Chris looked at him for a beat longer than he needed to.

"This is good work, Paddy. Really. And you're taking point," he said. "I want you calling the shots. It's your op."

Paddy took in a breath and set his jaw. This was not a different Paddy, exactly. It was, she was beginning to realize, something that she simply hadn't known about the Paddy she loved like her own brothers. And in that realization, it only made her love him more.

"Brief us at seven." Chris stood and Jo passed him her coffee, which had been refilled twice already. She didn't think she should drink another.

"Thanks," he said, and didn't meet her eyes. He hadn't met them since the theatre. Not since she had been inside his head with Theresa's hand on his face and felt what he felt.

She opened her mouth. She didn't know what was in it. *Sorry*, maybe? Or perhaps something she had no business saying. She closed it.

He left the kitchen.

. . .

JO WAS UPSTAIRS AT SIX-THIRTY pulling her vest tight when Beth knocked at the open door.

"May I?"

Jo nodded.

Beth came in and pushed the door not quite closed behind her. She had her hair pulled back and was already dressed in her gear.

"I want to clear something before we go."

"Alright," Jo said. She didn't know what to do with her hands. She decided to clasp them in front of her and felt like a silly schoolgirl.

"At the theatre. When I told you to let me carry Chris, I know that may have been hard. I should have taken that into consideration and talked to you about it beforehand. I am sorry, Jo."

Jo had not expected an apology. It made her like Beth less for half a second before it, somehow, made Jo like the woman more. She registered, for no reason whatsoever, that Beth's beauty no longer bothered her.

"I shouldn't have reached for Chris when you had him," Jo said. "I knew you saw the field. I'm sorry, as well."

Beth nodded and then considered for a moment before speaking again.

"You reach. I told you that at the table. It's still true. It's a tell. When something matters to you, you take hold of it yourself. But this was on both of us." Beth paused. "I'd like us to fix the timing before we go in there today."

“How?”

“You take center. I work the seams. We do not cross. If I see something and you don’t, I tell you. You decide whether to reach.”

“I—Beth.” She looked at the dark-haired woman, and something flooded her. Guilt and something like shame. “Beth, I’ve been ugly to you.”

“It’s okay,” Beth said with a smile playing at her lips. She seemed truly, completely unbothered by how Jo had been treating her. Jo finished pulling the strap. She didn’t know what to say.

“Test it with me before we leave. Five minutes in the front room. Let’s make sure we kick some ass out there today.”

“You bet.”

Beth turned to go.

“Hey,” Jo said. Beth stopped at the door. Jo took in a breath. “I would like for us to be friends.”

“We are, Saint.” Beth smiled at her. All the animosity Jo had felt toward her dissipated in a single moment. The woman turned to leave again.

“And English,” Jo called after her. “Be good to Tom.”

DECOMMISSIONED STOCKYARD, KENOSHA COUNTY — JULY 2007

THE PLANT SAT AT THE END OF THE SPUR. It was two stories of cinder block gone the gray of a long-dead tooth, with a third-story office box bolted onto the south face. The killing floor would be the long low room on the east side. She could read the shape of it even from here, the channel drains, the overhead rail where the hooks had run. The freight platform ran its length, and the reefer car still sat on the rail fifty yards out with its doors shut. CSXT 18841. The car Paddy had pulled off the manifest, the one that had cleared the north switch bound for the south side of the city and come here instead.

There were pickups at the front and an SUV at the side.

Paddy went down into the dead grass and they went down with him. A Suppressor worked much like a trap might. When a Charism used their powers, there was always residual energy left behind. That residual energy came from poor Efficiency. A TK-9 with poor Efficiency could waste much of their strength and never truly reach the full potential of a throw. And that wasted energy could be picked up by a Suppressor, who could then clamp down on that Charism’s powers and stop them.

Beth, who was flat in the grass beside Jo, had almost no wasted energy. Which meant, along with her concealment, she could operate undetected by a Suppressor. The woman was reading the building now and passing along the shape of it to the team.

Chris’s voice came in over the link, fraying at the edges where Beth was carrying it. *Alright, Cabbage. It’s yours.*

Copy, Paddy said. And then, out loud, low, in the grass: “Ears in. All of you. Now. We don’t want English passing out from all the strain.” He winked at her.

Jo seated the earpiece. There was a soft tone, and then Paddy’s voice came into her ear from six feet away.

“Comms check,” Paddy said. “Sound off the boring way, my beauties.”

“Floor,” Marcus said, close to Jo’s left. His voice in the earpiece and his voice in the air arrived just a half-beat apart.

“He can’t be talking about you, Mr. Smiles,” Thomas said in her ear. “This beauty, on the other hand, is in position.”

“Center,” Beth said.

“Center,” Jo said, and hated how thin her own voice sounded.

“Right,” Paddy said. “Here’s the Gospel According to Patrick Quinn. Sorry, Saint. I know that’s probably blasphemous. But I heard there’s a Gospel of Thomas. Figured, if there’s—”

“Quinn,” warned Chris.

“Right. Last time that Suppressor turned off our Jo and we stood around in the dark like a load of Muppets. Not today. He can take the link. He cannot take this.” A pause; she could hear him grinning even now. “And in about thirty seconds, their lot won’t have voice at all.”

She heard him work something — a small device, a thumb on a wheel.

“They’re on the same cheap repeater as the theatre,” Paddy said, almost to himself. “People never change their kit, do they?” Another beat. “Right. They’re deaf. We are not. I’m hungry. Let’s go get back our Chef.”

He took them in through the cooler dock on the north face, a low roll-shutter bay that a meat plant always had. The shutter was chained. Paddy had the chain off and the bolt cutters back over his shoulder in the time it took Jo to wonder how they were going to get through.

And then they were inside and the cold came up around them. Real refrigerant cold. The one that lasted even years dead. And under it was the *smell*.

Iron and old fat, with bleach laid over both and losing. The overhead rail ran the length of the killing floor above their heads, and the hooks still hung from it — a long row of them, swaying very slightly in the air the open shutter had let in. The channel drains ran black down the center of the concrete.

Jo thought she was going to be sick.

She held a hand flat to the cold tile.

Anything? she sent to Beth. They had opened a link just between the two of them so they could coordinate wordlessly.

Working on it, Beth said. There was sweat running down the side of her long face.

Then two came out of a side room at the end of the floor. Paddy had already moved. The rifle came up across the narrow lane between the drain channels in a motion that should not have fit the space. The two men went down clean against the doorframe before the second one had cleared the room.

Paddy was past them before they hit the tile.

“Two down,” he said into the earpiece, not breaking stride. “They’ll have heard that. Cap, with me. Mr. Smiles, on Jo. Not literally, please. I know you two like doing that sort of thing. Save that for when I have time to watch it.”

Jo wished she still had her powers.

“Cupid—” Paddy continued.

“I have you,” Thomas said. There was something reassuring about hearing his voice and the confidence that lay behind it.

More came. From the floor above, down the open stair at the east wall; from the cold rooms; the building waking to them.

A man came around the end of the rail with a weapon up. Jo instinctively raised her arm to use her powers, but they were immediately clamped down by the Suppressor. Marcus put the attacking man down with the butt of his rifle and a knee.

Beth’s voice came into the thin link, low and even, the way it had come across a card table. *Stop reaching, Saint. Remember what we talked about. Reach for me instead. I can hide your attack. One at a time. You go through the hole and hit them with all you’ve got.*

Right.

Try it, Beth said. There. The one behind the column, the one Tom can’t reach.

Jo felt the pinhole open. It was a single clean aperture Beth held wide with everything she was, and through it the man behind the column went from a blank to a thing Jo could touch. She wrenched the muzzle two inches offline and into the column. The round went into concrete. Marcus was across the floor and on him before the echo died.

Good work, Beth said, giving Jo a wry smile that, somehow, she now interpreted as warm.

Let’s do this, Jo said.

It was slower than her usual work. Every aperture Beth opened was deliberate, which meant Jo had to direct her. Jo also felt the strain of it bleed across the thin link — felt Beth spending herself a teaspoon at a time on work Jo would once have done with a careless sweep of her hand if not for the Suppressor. But it worked. Beth made the concealment holes and Jo went through them, one at a time.

Paddy, Marcus, Thomas, and Chris did the rest.

They took the killing floor. They took the cold rooms beyond it — heavy insulated doors that swung open on nothing, on hooks and dark and the cold. They took the stair and the second floor, office after office stripped to the studs.

And Diego wasn't in any of it.

The last room they entered had a chair alone in the middle of an empty office with cable ties still looped on the arms. She stopped on the second-floor landing with her hand on the rail, and the wrongness of it sat in her chest.

"He's not here," she said. "Paddy. He's not in the building."

There was a beat of silence on the link.

"Can you find the Suppressor, Beth?" Chris asked. "We need Jo at full strength."

"I *have* found him," Beth said. "The box on the roof. The office. He has to be high to hold all of this. Same as you'd put a man, Cap. I can get you to him. But I'll need help to put him down."

The office box sat at the top of a steel stair on the south face. There was a single door and a window gone milk-white with grime.

"Whenever you're ready, ladies," Paddy said. "We'll keep handling these goons."

Jo knelt on the steel grating. She didn't know why she knelt. It was the posture her body wanted — the one it took at the rail at St. Brigid's — and there wasn't time to wonder at it.

This bit's going to be a tad unpleasant, Beth said.

What do you mean?

Just... whatever happens to me, you keep going.

Beth...

You do what only you can do, darling. Let me do what only I can. That's how we win this.

Without giving her time to interject, Beth created the concealment hole. No, it wasn't just a hole this time. It was a tunnel.

And for the first time all op, Jo felt a Charism again. The relief of it was so total she nearly wept: a man at a desk with a window in front of him and the entire building laid out under his attention. He was tired. He'd been holding it for hours, fighting Beth. His tank must have been incredibly large.

Jo felt his sudden, terrified realization at what had happened.

He came around in his own head and threw the whole weight of the lid down on Beth's channel, seeking to find any of the leakage that her high efficiency might still miss. And he found some of it. Jo felt Beth take it, felt her set her shoulder against a thing that was not built to be held by one person and hold it anyway, the channel screaming thin under the weight, narrowing, going to a hair—

Beth's face was screwed up. There was no cool composure. No aristocratic ease.

And blood.

Blood began pouring from her nose. Her eyes. Her mouth.

"GO!" Beth screamed, and it came out of her like something torn.

Jo went. She put herself through the tunnel and she got a hand on the Suppressor. He was so braced against Beth — so committed to crushing her — that his metaphorical back was turned.

She did not crush his will. She would not do that again. Instead, she simply knocked him out. And the entire world came back in an instant.

The gel was gone. The lid was gone. The whole building bloomed open in her head at once. The nexus rearranged itself around her — Marcus, Chris, Paddy, Thomas, Beth.

Beth.

Talk to me, English! Thomas was yelling through Jo. Beth was on the floor and Jo rolled her over. She wiped the blood from Beth's face, hair clinging stubbornly.

"Come on, come on," Jo heard herself saying.

Beth opened her bloodshot eyes and then pushed herself slowly up into a sitting position.

Jo let out a breath, pressed both hands on either side of Beth's face, and pulled her into a kiss on the forehead.

Then she cast out past the building, past the platform, fifty yards down the rail to the cold steel car. And she found him. Diego.

Chef's there, she said. He's in the car. He's alive. He's cold and he's under something and he's alive.
Paddy—

"Go," Chris said. "All of you. I'm coming to you, Beth."

They came down off the stair and out onto the platform into the gray daylight, and the men from the SUV were already moving to meet them. There were four of them across the open ground. Jo lifted her hand.

It was the most wonderful feeling she had ever felt. The nearest two went off their feet and into the side of the SUV hard enough to crunch in the door panel. The other two she simply held. She took them off the ground and let them hang there, kicking, while Thomas's rifle shot twice from the dark of the platform.

Marcus and Paddy ran past them to the car.

The reefer stood on the dead rail with its plug doors shut, a length of locking bar across them and a padlock through the hasp, frost feathered white in the seams where the cold inside met the warmer air.

Paddy hit it at a dead run and dropped to the lock.

Jo reached the car a step behind him and put her hand on the cold steel and read through it. Diego, right there, just behind the door, slumped against it. A slow failing point, his heart going too quiet and too slow.

She could have torn the doors off. She could have ripped the whole car open like a tin. But she could feel Diego right against the door, his weight slack on the inside of it.

"Hold it." Paddy had the padlock open already and he was on the locking bar now, both hands, heaving it up out of the keepers where the cold had seized it. "Hold the door when the cams go. Don't let it swing."

“I’ve got it.”

He threw the bar off. He got his fingers into the seam and worked the latch. The cams, the plug seal. Jo felt the seal break, the door wanting to swing out under Diego’s slack weight.

She caught all of it and let it out slow. Slower than gravity. Slow as setting something fragile down so that the door swung wide and gently and Diego came with it, sliding down into Paddy’s arms instead of onto the rail bed.

The cold rolled out of the car like water.

Diego was gray. There was a bruise the color of a plum down one side of his jaw and a needle mark gone angry at the side of his throat. His lips had a blue cast to them. Paddy had him under the arms, on the ground, his own knee under Diego’s head, saying his name.

“Chef. Chef. Diego. Reyes. Come on, you lazy son of a bitch. Come on! No time for sleeping yet.” Paddy slapped him hard across his face. Diego’s eyes came open and took their time before landing on Paddy. “Oh, thank God!” Paddy said as he patted Diego’s face where he had slapped him. Paddy was crying, tears streaming down his face.

He’s fine. He’s fine. We have him. Jo sent it to Chris, Beth, and Tom. She felt their relief flood the link.

“...you cooked,” Diego croaked. His voice was wrecked. “Without me. I can—” He had to stop and breathe. “—smell it on you. Eggs. Omelet, I’d wager. You burned the—” Another breath. “—the butter, didn’t you? You heathen.”

Paddy’s laugh came out wrong. Wet. He put his forehead down against Diego’s for half a second and then pulled it back.

“You snob. It was perfect. Ask Saint.”

“It was pretty good,” Jo said through her own tears. She had her hand on Diego’s chest, and she could feel the bead of him back on the string where it belonged. With her. With Orion.

“He needs a med bay,” Marcus said from beside her. He crouched and got Diego up off the rail bed and against his chest, and Diego made a sound of complaint that was the best sound Jo had heard since the theatre.

Paddy stayed at Jo’s shoulder the whole way out, quieter than she had ever seen him. Behind them the stockyard stood empty in the gray afternoon, the office box dark at the top of its stair, the hooks swaying very slightly on the rail where the open shutter still let the wind in.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GREYBRIAR (LOCATION: CLASSIFIED) — JULY 2007

THE DRIVE DOWN FROM WISCONSIN had swallowed the whole night and left nothing but gray morning behind. Dr. Patel had taken Diego at the door of the medical bay on a gurney. That had been the last Jo had seen of him. The others had scattered. Marcus kissed her and went to strip his kit and shower. Thomas gone wherever Thomas went. Which nowadays, Jo supposed, was wherever Beth went.

Paddy had planted himself on the bench outside the bay with his elbows on his knees, refusing to move until somebody gave him an update he was satisfied with. Jo had given him a long hug before carrying the case to Ross herself.

She did not entirely know why she had insisted on being the one. She did not want to put it down until it was in his hands. It had cost more than any of them had bargained for.

Jo was halfway there when she heard Chris's voice calling for her. She stopped and he was next to her a moment later.

"I'll come with you," he said. "I need to give my debrief."

"Oh, are you talking to me again?" she poked as she began walking again.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Right. Of course. It's not the talking. It's the looking at me part that you have a problem with," she said.

Chris was silent for a moment. The only sounds were their boots on the concrete floor of Greybriar hall. When he spoke again, his voice was low, almost a confession.

"*Looking* at you isn't the problem, Jo."

She slowed. He was a few steps ahead of her before he realized this and turned back to face her.

Chris's dark brown eyes finally met hers for what felt like weeks. Months, even.

"What in God's green earth does that even mean, Chris?" She felt something hot burning inside her. An anger and frustration that far outstripped the situation. He looked away and before she could help it, she was saying, "No. You look at me, Chris McIntyre."

It took him a beat before his eyes met hers again.

"Well?"

"It doesn't mean anything."

“Then what’s going on?” She didn’t say she thought they had been making *some* sort of progress. If not towards friendship, at least away from their hostility.

“I—” His normally composed face seemed strained. He took a deep breath. “I just didn’t know you and Marcus were dating.”

She blinked at him.

“What?”

“I didn’t know you two were seeing each other. That’s all. You’ve just—changed the dynamic of the team.”

“Thomas and Beth. You’re not weird with her. *And* she thinks you’re ‘sexy.’” He puffed through his nose.

“Yeah, well, that’s just her,” he said very softly. She opened her mouth, but he waved it away. “I’m sorry, Jo. If I’ve been treating you differently, it wasn’t my intention.”

“And that’s all?” she asked. There was something like a held breath before he replied.

“Yes. That’s all.” He turned and began walking again toward Ross’s office.

. . .

ROSS WAS AT THE SHELF along the wall, fitting a book back into its gap. He turned, and his eyes went over the two of them. Did he only see the last two days on them — the dirt, the tears in their uniforms, the case under Jo’s arm — or did he see something more? Jo couldn’t be sure.

Jo thought shamefully of her outburst in the hall. Chris had remained silent the rest of the walk to the office.

“Good morning, Chris. Jo.” He turned back to his shelf, contemplated for a moment, and then pulled another thick volume from it. He crossed the room, placed the book squarely in front of his chair, and then sat down. “Please sit.”

Chris and Jo both took their seats. She wasn’t sure why she always felt twelve years old in this room, hands folded, sins lined up, waiting to be told what she had done wrong.

“You all did exceptionally well. I am glad to hear that Diego made it back safely.”

“We lost him for two days.” Chris’s voice came out sharp in a way she had never heard it in front of Ross. “Sir.”

Ross said nothing to that.

“*Someone* knew we were going to be there,” Chris said.

“I don’t think that’s true. I think that the man who held on to those files very much wanted to make sure they did not get into other hands. *Whose* hands, I do not think he cared about.”

“We weren’t prepared, sir.” Chris’s voice was rising. Jo wondered how much it had to do with the exhaustion, losing Diego, nearly losing Beth. Or the argument with her in the hall. This was as un-Chris as it came.

Jo set the case on the desk.

“This is the file, sir. We went through a lot to get this. And Chris did a wonderful job as field leader. Everyone did.” She felt Chris look at the case for a moment. She saw him choose to let whatever accusation was rising inside him go. He looked over at her for a fraction of a second before he looked down at his own hands.

Ross set two fingers to the lid and left it shut.

“You’re not going to open it, sir?” she asked.

“Not tonight.” He drew it to the side of the desk, closed, and laid his hand over the wood. “We have what we went for. That’s a great deal to have done. The rest of it keeps until the sun’s up.”

For a moment he only looked at the two of them. Then, lower:

“This is the nearest anyone has come to seeing Victoria plainly. Before the attack, we didn’t even know who she was. Now we have this. This means a great deal more than either of you realize, I think.”

The cold of it went down the back of Jo’s neck.

“You both should get some rest. You’ve been through a great deal. Chris, I will read your mission report. That is all for now.”

She and Chris rose and left the room.

GREYBRIAR, RECOVERY WING (LOCATION: CLASSIFIED) — JULY 2007

THE RECOVERY WING AT GREYBRIAR always smelled faintly of bleach and sour coffee. The flowers, arranged in a square glass vase on the counter beside Diego’s bed, had been from Priya. He was propped up in bed with two pillows behind him and a fleece blanket over his lap. It had absolutely been stolen from somewhere else in the building. A kid’s room maybe? There were tiny blue sailboats on it.

“I am not saying that Chef looks bad,” Paddy said from where he was slouched in the visitor’s chair by the wall. “I am simply saying that when I found him, I thought he was an inedible sea creature.”

Diego turned his head on the pillow and looked at Paddy with patient exhaustion.

“And yet,” he said, his voice roughened but amused, “Nurse Ayala still brought these for *me*. When has she done that for you, Cabbage?”

Paddy put a hand over his heart. “Nurse Ayala only has eyes for me. Bloody proposed to me she did. You, on the other hand, have your hands full with the cute mouse with big eyes.” Jo threw the nearest object at him — which happened to be a pillow.

“Don’t call Priya a mouse,” she said.

Thomas, who had been leaning against the sink with his arms folded, looked over at Jo. "I wish we had left him."

"Oh, I don't know," Jo said. "I think it's sort of endearing. In a brain-damaged, bless-his-heart kind of way."

Paddy pointed at her. "Ha! Brain damaged. She's got you pegged, Chef."

"I wasn't talking about Diego," Jo said. Diego began to laugh and then winced.

"You be careful!" came Nurse Ayala's voice. She had her arms crossed across her not inconsiderable bosom. It was not the first time the guys had flirted with Ayala, and Jo could see why. The nurse was tall, with the kind of striking Malay-Spanish features that turned heads without her seeming to notice or care. Dark eyes, thick dark hair pinned back off her face for work, warm brown skin. Late twenties, and the most sought-after nurse in all of Greybriar. "And all of you need to pipe down. Diego needs his rest."

"Yes, Nurse Ayala," Diego and Paddy said in unison like scolded boys.

The nurse turned and left the room.

"I think we should've traded them," Marcus chimed in. "I'll take Reyes over Quinn any day."

"You say that, Miles." Paddy waved a finger at him. "But one day, you're going to miss this handsome mug."

"Can't come soon enough." Marcus yawned and crossed his legs. He was sitting on the ledge of the window that doubled as, apparently, a bench.

Chris was at the little rolling tray table with a paper cup of coffee he had not drunk. They were technically gathered for Chris's twenty-sixth birthday. There were streamers, balloons, and presents. Most of them were for Diego. But it worked out nonetheless.

"Open your present. Here." Beth was sitting on the radiator cover near Marcus, one boot hooked on the rung beneath it. She tossed the small object to Chris. Chris examined it, looking surprised.

"Thanks, Beth." He opened the brown paper to reveal a plain white cardboard box. He opened the box and lifted out a blue mug with simple black lettering: *World's Sexiest Boss*.

Everyone laughed and Chris's face turned faintly pink.

Thomas strolled over to her as if staking his claim. He sat down beside her on the radiator cover, though there was only really room for one. It made for a close fit.

"Feeling the competition, Cupid?" Jo asked with a grin.

"It's only a competition if you've a fighting chance, love," Beth said, touching the tip of his nose with her index finger.

"Alright, alright," Chris said, putting the mug down onto the rolling tray. Then he thought better of it and returned it to the white box before putting it on the tray again. Jo found it endearing how much the attention flustered him. She didn't know why.

"Ross got you something," Beth said, indicating a card by the flowers. "Saw it on my way in." Chris picked it up and opened it.

"What's it say?" Paddy asked.

"Happy Birthday," Chris read flatly.

"Emotional, that one," Marcus snorted.

"I wouldn't be too hard on Ross," Paddy said, and there was something in his voice.

"How's the food?" Marcus asked Diego.

Diego looked at the plastic tray on the side table. The potatoes had gone gray. "They realize that my father is a Michelin chef, yeah?"

"That's because you are in America," Beth said. "In Britain we would call feeding you that euthanasia. And not the humane kind."

"Thank you, English. That's exactly how I feel."

"I'm here to serve." She made a twirling gesture with her hand.

Paddy crossed his arms and tipped his chair back onto two legs in the most Paddy-like posture Jo had ever seen. "You know what we should do? We should sneak you something decent. Real food. A steak. A bottle of red. Some kind of cake."

"You mean for yourself," Marcus said.

"Naturally I would reap the benefits of such an endeavor."

Diego laughed once, softly, and then winced again at whatever the laugh pulled in his ribs. Jo saw the wince before anyone else did. Or perhaps everyone saw it and pretended not to.

She had spent the day telling herself not to watch him too closely. People looked wrong after being hurt. People moved strangely after blood loss, after drugs, after whatever they had him on to get him back to what he was.

And yet...

He would look at whoever was speaking and smile correctly and answer correctly and then his eyes would slip. Not away, exactly, but inward. Once, earlier, she had watched him reach for a cup of water and stop with his fingers around it as though he had forgotten what came next. Then he had shaken it off and made some joke. But he hadn't had the water.

Now he was looking at Chris. Diego had been saying something about his gift for Chris, which he had had Paddy purchase. But he had stopped. And he was just staring at Chris.

"You with us, Chef?" Chris asked.

Diego blinked.

"Yeah," he said. "What were you saying?"

"You were saying something about a present."

"Yeah, of course." He turned to Paddy, who passed him a box. "Happy birthday, Cap."

"Thanks," Chris said, frowning. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Give it a rest," Marcus said. "The diva hasn't gotten her beauty sleep."

Paddy grinned. "You do look pretty princess-y. And not in a sexy way."

Dr. Patel appeared in the doorway with a chart in one hand.

"Time's up."

"Doctor," Diego said warmly, as though greeting a lover.

"No. Don't flirt with me, Diego. It only works on Ayala. Now out." Patel pointed at the door with his pen. "He needs rest, and none of you are restful. *Especially* not you, Paddy."

Paddy stomped both feet on the floor with theatrical reluctance. "Doctor, I think my presence is medicinal."

Patel did not look amused.

Jo lingered by the foot of the bed while the others filed out around her.

Diego looked tired suddenly. Not merely exhausted. She had seen him exhausted. This was a kind of inward drain, as though whatever effort it took to remain wholly in the room had become more expensive.

Patel was adjusting the flow on the IV. He eyed her and then looked at Diego. "You got five minutes."

"Yeah," Jo said. "Thank you."

Marcus touched her elbow on his way past. She looked up. He tipped his head once toward Diego.

You see it too? she asked through their link. He nodded once and walked out, Patel close behind him.

Chris said something to Patel in the corridor. Paddy's voice carried briefly and then was swallowed by distance. A cart rattled somewhere farther down the hall.

Jo looked back at Diego.

He was looking at the blanket over his lap. At one of the little blue sailboats, specifically, with a concentration she did not understand.

Then he seemed to feel her eyes and looked up too quickly.

"You should go," he said. "Before Patel murders you with one of his tiny little syringes."

She smiled. "I can take him."

"I don't know," Diego said. "He's completely immune to my charm. He's gotta be a high-level Suppressor."

"Diego—"

"Saint," he said softly. "Come back in an hour. Patel will be watching his favorite telenovela at that time."

"Alright." She reached out and took his hand, squeezed once, and left the room.

The hall lights had gone to evening setting. The polished floor reflected them in long pale strips. Beth and Chris were standing halfway down the hall talking in low voices. Paddy and Thomas already gone. Marcus, she knew, was heading to the gym.

She turned away from the windows and went to find a vending machine coffee.

• • •

AN HOUR LATER, WHEN SHE RETURNED, the room was dark except for the lamp over the bed.

Patel had lowered the overheads and pulled the door nearly shut, leaving the room in a pool of light that made the corners look farther away than they were.

Diego was awake but looking very tired.

“Hey, Saint,” he said.

“Hey, yourself.” She let the door close quietly behind her. “You get any rest?”

“Nah,” he said, pushing himself up with some effort. He shifted a little, making room for her to sit on the bed beside him. She sat and held his hand, which had several lines of IV coming out of the back of it.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

He looked better in lamplight than he had in the fluorescent wash of the afternoon. Softer. More himself. But the thing she had felt earlier was there too. It reminded her unpleasantly of those old film strips in school that burned for half a second in the projector and jumped.

“You don’t have to make that face,” he said.

“What face?”

“The one where you’re pretending not to be worried about me.”

“Of course I’m worried about you,” she said. “It’s not every day a friend gets kidnapped. I have every right to be worried about you.” She brought his hand up to her lips and kissed it.

Diego let his head settle more fully against the pillow. He watched her in silence for a moment longer. She let out a wet sigh.

“I’m sorry about what happened, Diego. It was my fault. I—”

“Oh, shut up, Saint.” There was no malice in his voice. “You and I both know that without you I would’ve been dead plenty of times already. You have nothing to apologize for. You understand?” He squeezed her hand.

“Diego—” Jo’s throat tightened. “Okay.”

He drew a breath and let it out slowly through his nose.

“Now, to the part of why I’m being nice to you. I need you for something.” He smiled at her, but the smile contained nothing of his warmth.

“Something’s wrong,” she said, and he nodded.

“Something is very wrong.”

“Tell me.”

“I don’t know, really.” He gave a small, frustrated shake of the head. “That’s the problem. It’s like...” He searched for it. “It’s like there’s a splinter somewhere I can’t reach. I keep thinking around something.”

He looked past her for a moment, toward the door. Toward the dark beyond it.

“When I woke up, I knew your names. I knew where I was. I knew Patel has really minty breath. I knew I could get Ayala to get me an extra blanket.” A ghost of a smile touched his mouth and went. “But every now and then I feel something move. Not a memory exactly. More like... I don’t know. Not a hole. What am I trying to say?”

“The shape memory leaves when it’s dragged away.” Her own words made the back of her neck go cold.

“Yes!” he said, animated. “That’s exactly it.”

“Did that man do something to your mind?”

His eyes came back to hers. “I don’t remember, Saint. I don’t remember anything.”

She took a breath. Held it. Let it go.

“Do you want me to look?”

He was already nodding before she finished the sentence.

“Yes.” Then, because he knew her too well: “I’ve nothing to hide from you, Saint. Look as deep as you want.”

“You sure? I mean—”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re going to know me real intimate after this. Just make sure Marcus doesn’t get too jealous, huh?”

She let out a breath, leaned forward and put one hand on the mattress by his arm. “I don’t really want to do this. But I will.”

She reached out and put her fingertips gently at his temple.

He closed his eyes at once.

“Easy,” she said softly. “Don’t fight it. Let me in.”

“If only Cabbage were here.”

“Shut up.”

Jo closed her own eyes and went in.

Diego felt like sunlight on the back steps at Mamaw’s house in June. The old familiar texture of him came up around her first: kindness, laughter, appetite, a thousand small, affectionate impressions. Him teaching Thomas how to hold a knife properly in the kitchen. Him teasing Marcus for pretending not to

care about the fish stock. Him sitting cross-legged on the floor inside Jo's room one bad night in January after a nightmare she had not told anyone about. He had spoken about the difference between authentic Japanese sushi and American sushi until she laughed despite there being nothing funny about it.

Then underneath all of that she felt it.

There, she murmured into the shared space between them.

You feel it? Diego's thought came back faintly, as though from another room.

Yeah.

It was subtle. Like a place where the weave had been lifted and laid back down by somebody with steady hands. If she had not known to look, she might have slid right over it.

Whoever had been in him had not only searched. They had searched carefully and then stitched it all back together.

Jo followed the seam.

The memory under it shivered and opened.

She was not in Diego's room anymore. Images flashed in her mind.

Sunlight. A porch. Summer heat rising off wood.

Paddy was laughing.

But it wasn't the laugh he used when he wanted the room to turn toward him. This laugh was quieter and came from lower in his chest. He was sitting on porch steps in a white t-shirt and jeans. A little girl with light freckles dusting her nose and cheeks was there. She was standing between his knees, back to him, as he braided her hair badly enough that she kept trying to swat his hands away.

"Hold still, bub," he said.

"You're hurting me."

"I am not. I'm making you beautiful."

"I'm already beautiful. That's what Uncle Diego says."

Diego was there too. He was laughing.

Jo felt the whole world in her body stop.

The little girl was maybe four with soft, strawberry-blond curls. She had wide pale eyes. She was wearing a yellow dress with one sock fallen down around her ankle. She was absolutely adorable.

A woman came out through the screen door carrying two glasses of lemonade, all the while balancing a plate with orange slices on it. She was slim, blond-haired, pretty in the easy natural way. Nothing showy about her. She was, in fact, *not* the type of woman Paddy ever hit on. And yet when her friend looked up at the woman, his face lit up in adoration. He was in love with this woman.

The woman handed him a glass and bent to kiss the top of the little girl's head.

"You're brave to let him near your hair with those hands," the woman said. Paddy reached out and pulled the woman into his lap, pushing the little girl forward to make room. The woman laughed as he began attacking her with kisses on her neck.

"He's learning, mama," the little girl said.

"See, Mare? I'm learning. I'm a quick study, I am."

"No, you're not," came a boy's voice from the yard. Nine, maybe. Darker red hair than Paddy's, all knees and elbows and confidence, kicking a soccer ball through the dead patches of grass. "I bet Uncle Diego would be good at it. He's got those chef hands."

Jo could not breathe. The boy looked like the spitting image of Paddy.

The memory shifted before she could anchor herself.

A church. Small. Midwestern. A baptism or a birthday, perhaps; the details blurred because Diego had not cared about the liturgy or the cake, only about the people in the room. The same little girl in white tights half asleep on his shoulder. Paddy in a dark suit that fit badly because he had likely borrowed it or outgrown it. The woman — *Paddy's wife, Maribel* — smiling at something Diego had said. Ross in the back.

Ross?

Jo turned toward him in the memory and the whole structure of it changed.

Now she saw not one day but many. Ross meeting someone in a car outside a school. Ross speaking quietly to Paddy in a kitchen while the children slept in the next room. Ross standing in the doorway of a little house with blackout curtains and security glass, telling Paddy something low and grave that Diego had not been meant to hear but had.

Protected. The shape of it came through. The memories flooded not as images or words but as understanding. Moved twice. New names in records. No photographs anywhere public. No school under the true surname.

Then another fragmented memory.

Diego sitting at a kitchen table with the little girl in his lap while she traced her finger through the condensation on his water glass. She was frowning. The room was quiet in the late-afternoon way houses go quiet when older siblings are elsewhere and mothers are hanging laundry out back.

Uncle Diego. Why are you sad? the little girl had thought at him.

Not spoken... thought at.

Diego had gone very still. He looked at the girl then and Jo felt through him the clean electric recognition.

Charism.

"Hey," he had said aloud, because there had been no one else in the room to hear the mismatch. "I'm not sad, bonita."

The little girl had tilted her head. *You heard me?*

The memory lurched.

Paddy was in the gym at Greybriar, laughing too loud, talking too much, letting everyone believe exactly what he wanted them to believe. Beneath it, through Diego's eyes, the iron discipline of a man playing stupid because stupid was safe. Stupid, harmless men were not watched with the same scrutiny.

Deep down, Paddy could not, *would not*, let anything or anyone harm his family.

Jo pushed deeper. Too deep, perhaps. She felt Diego flinch under her hand in the bed.

Sorry, she thought, but kept going.

She needed the edge of it. The fresh part. The parts that had been touched.

She found it like stepping onto ice over deep water.

Cold.

A recent memory ragged where another mind had passed through. Diego restrained, half-conscious, the tiled room in Chicago. Blood in his mouth.

And with a sudden, terrifying horror, Jo saw the person standing in front of him.

The long legs. The skirt. The blonde hair. The piercing blue eyes. The haunting, wicked smile.

Victoria Auchincloss.

The Harvester's interest sharpening at the memory of the little girl that had sat on Diego's lap. And then a deep hunger crossed Victoria's face. It was an animal finding its prey.

No. Oh no.

Jo tore herself out of Diego's mind so fast the room pitched around her. She caught herself on the side of the bed with one hand.

Diego inhaled sharply, as if surfacing from underwater. His eyes were open. Wide. Fixed on her face.

"What is it?" he asked, though the answer was already moving through him now that she had disturbed the seal. "Jo. What did you—"

"She knows," Jo said.

Her own voice sounded strange. Thin. Not enough air in it.

Diego pushed himself up too quickly and winced. "Knows what?"

"Victoria. She knows about Paddy. About his daughter."

He stared at her.

"Dios mío." The terror on his face was something Jo could not unsee. "Jo. Jo. You need to go. You need to get there. GO!"

For a moment she felt frozen in place. Then she bolted from the bed and yanked open the door.

The corridor outside was empty except for the nurse's cart by the far wall and the dark run of windows at the end. Only two people from her team were still there.

“Chris! Beth!”

. . .

JO WENT THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR first.

The room was lit by one under-cabinet bulb, blinking in and out. Glass littered the floor. A four-year-old girl was three feet above the kitchen table, suspended upside down, her small bare feet pointed at the ceiling and her head tipped back, strawberry hair spilling downwards in a curtain onto the dark wood.

She was convulsing in slow, shallow tremors. Her mother was on the floor by the sink and was already gone. Blood pooled around the once blonde hair, matting it against her shattered face.

A boy was under her, his arms and legs at unnatural angles. Gone. Both gone.

Jo’s eyes fell on the limp figure of Paddy and the horror of it all struck her with a force that compressed her chest. The handle of a kitchen knife was sticking out of his neck, and his eyes were on the girl. His breathing was wet and ragged, a gasping that bubbled the blood around the blade.

Chris had come in through the back door and was already on his knees at Paddy’s side, both hands flat at the base of the blade, his mouth moving low and steady against Paddy’s ear. He looked up once at Jo and then past her to the girl in the air.

Save her, she heard Paddy through the link she had opened. His voice came loud. Clear. As if he wasn’t holding onto the knife at his neck as if holding onto life itself.

Victoria Auchincloss was at the head of the table in a long gray coat over a black sweater, her too-pale hair contrasting against it. She had a hand half-raised toward the girl. Her body was still as she turned her head toward them, blazing blue eyes locking onto Jo.

And that smile that had haunted Jo for six months spread across Victoria’s face once more.

Oh, Joan! Victoria said with a lilt that accented her voice. *Obbbb! And you brought friends to play with me.*

Beth tensed behind Jo.

Please don’t, Jo said stupidly to Victoria. As if words would do anything to stop what was happening. *Please let her go.*

But don’t you see, Joan? Don’t you feel it deep down? We aren’t like the rest of them. We’re meant to be so much more. This? Victoria waved her hand at the girl. Then at Beth. *They’re just food.*

Something broke inside Jo and the next thing she knew, she was throwing the kitchen.

She did not pick a weapon. She picked everything. The cast-iron pan off the stove. The block of knives at the corner of the counter. The pot still warm on the back burner. The chairs. The microwave. Everything and anything she could carry, Jo tossed at once. It came crashing, converging at the tall, lean form of the ancient teenaged girl.

Victoria's free hand came up.

The room stopped.

Every object hung in the air between them, all momentum dissipating in an instant.

Victoria did not even look at the bouquet of furniture and metal. Her glowing eyes were still locked on Jo.

Jo pushed again. Nothing moved.

Now! Jo yelled, and Beth surgically pushed past Victoria's hold. The girl broke out of the air and sailed for a foot before she fell. Her head hit the table edge and then the kitchen floor with a sickening thud.

Chris was already scrambling forward, bear crawling towards the girl. He reached her, got an arm under her, and hauled her back low across the glass into the corner where Paddy sat. The three of them made one heap against the cabinets. Chris hunched over the two of them and put his body between them and everything else.

Mmm. I don't like you, Victoria said, and her eyes were fixed on Beth now. *That was very, very rude. I will make you suffer before I kill you.*

Every object Victoria had been holding came at Beth. Jo's wall went up and split, half over Beth, half flung across the kitchen to the corner where Chris had pulled the girl in against Paddy. It slowed but did not stop the objects, like a jaw closing slowly.

You good, Saint? Beth asked.

For now. Go, go!

Beth pushed on a specific knife that was making its way towards them. It broke through Victoria's diffused focus and shot like a bullet. Jo heard the *snap* in the air as it flew straight at Victoria's face. It sailed and then—

Victoria moved her head the slightest bit at the last moment. The knife pierced and cracked the white tiled backsplash behind her.

For a moment they all looked at one another. And then a thin red line appeared on Victoria's pale face. Blood slowly seeped from it. And Victoria's smile turned into a snarl.

The refrigerator came off the wall.

Four hundred pounds of steel slid at Beth like a battering ram. Jo caught it with everything in her. There was nothing left for the corner. She felt a cabinet door tear loose and go at the girl, and she could not reach it.

Chris stood up and slammed his wide shoulders against the cabinet. She heard him grunt as the impact sent him off his feet.

The whine in her head spiked so high she nearly bit through her own tongue. The refrigerator protested and inched forward.

You are better than last time, Victoria said. *I like that.*

And then Jo felt the cold place that she had not felt since the corridor at Marseilles.

Victoria was inside her again, rummaging through everything. Every moment of her life. Every memory. Every relationship.

She smelled the incense of Mass.

She felt the warm kiss of her mother's lips on her forehead.

She—

Jo was back in the kitchen. Beth had somehow concealed Jo's mind. The hate in Victoria's eyes promised nothing good for Beth.

I'm going in, Beth said. Jo felt Beth enter Victoria's mind. She felt Beth standing in the middle of the clean, cold room in Victoria's mind. A smile formed on the Englishwoman's lips. And then she began punching the walls.

Pound.

Pound.

Pound.

The walls began to crack, spidering across the surface.

Victoria went *inside* of herself. Into the room with the cracking walls. She grabbed Beth by the throat, lifted her up into the air—

Jo *pushed* with everything she had. The entire kitchen exploded and objects flew in every direction. The refrigerator hit Victoria and sent her flying out through the kitchen window into the backyard.

Beth gasped and nearly buckled.

Outside, on the wet grass, the refrigerator was blasted clean into the air, some forty feet. It came crashing onto the roof of Paddy's house. Jo could feel the entire place shaking from the impact.

She and Beth propelled themselves out of the same broken hole into the warm summer night air.

Victoria was telekinetically lifting herself up, floating from her back onto her feet.

Her eyes went from Jo to Beth. The blood at her mouth was tracking down her jaw now.

It looks like I've underestimated the company you keep, Joan. I will not be making that mistake again.

Victoria floated higher, as if levitating. Flying. Jo and Beth both tensed, ready to continue the fight, but Victoria raised her hands and then pulled both down. The roof crunched.

Jo spun and threw everything she had left up into it: the joists, the weight of the floor above, the entire groaning house. By the time it stopped shaking and she turned, Victoria was gone.

Jo, came Chris's voice.

Chris. Chris, are you okay?

Jo. It's Paddy.

CHRIS WAS ON THE FLOOR NEAR THE SINK. He had pulled Paddy up against his own knees so Paddy was half-sitting against him. He had laid the girl down against Paddy's side. He had put Paddy's good hand on her hair and was holding the hand there because Paddy did not have the strength left to hold it himself.

And Chris McIntyre was crying.

Tears were running down his face. Jo could hear him sobbing as he pressed his forehead against Paddy's. That was when she knew.

Paddy's face was wrong. His eyes were swollen and his nose was running blood. The handle of the knife was still in his neck. Chris had known better than to remove it. The blood at the base of the handle had slowed to a thin, steady run that was no longer arterial, only the run of a man whose body was approaching the bottom of its reservoir.

Jo went down beside him.

Beth went down on the other side of the girl.

Maribel was eight feet away. The boy was still under her. Jo did not let her eyes go to them. Paddy was in front of her and she would have the rest of her life for everything else. Right now, all she wanted to do was to be there with him.

Hey, Cabbage, she said.

His head moved a quarter of an inch.

Is that you, Saint?

It's me. Chris is here. Beth is here.

He drew a breath that did not sound right and let it out. He patted his daughter's head. *This is Mary-Beth. Mary after her mum Maribel. Beth after my mum. Not you, English. Sorry. My mum's name was Bethany. I always — I always liked that name in the Bible.*

Oh, Cabbage.

He coughed, a wet, gurgling sound.

She's okay, yeah?

Jo looked at Beth. Beth had her hand on the side of the girl's face and was reading the small unconscious body.

"She's alive, Paddy," Beth said out loud. "She is breathing well. She hit her head. I'm not sure what that did or how much damage Victoria inflicted. But she is asleep. She is going to wake up."

His thumb moved against his daughter's hair.

Thank God, he sent. *Oh, thank God.* He took in another ragged breath. Wet and raspy.

Beth looked at Paddy for a moment, then Jo felt her move telepathically. It was a small, precise thing, almost like a blanket that wrapped around Paddy, numbing his pain.

Paddy closed his eyes.

Jo's face was wet with tears. She leaned in and put her mouth at his forehead and kissed him. She kissed his temple. She kissed his cheekbone above the place where the blood had tracked down. She kissed the corner of his eye and his eyebrow and the bridge of his nose.

"Don't leave," she said into his face. "Cabbage, you don't get to do that to me. You don't get to make me love you and then just leave me."

It's okay.

It is not okay!

His eyes opened.

Maribel's there. Seamus is there. They're waiting. I can almost see them, Saint. I can almost see them.

Paddy—

Take care of her for me, huh? He moved his thumb in the girl's hair again. *Promise me she grows up loud and fun. Promise me she grows up the way Quinns are supposed to grow up.*

She was sobbing and she couldn't stop. She pressed her face into the side of his face. She felt his breath go in and out, wet and shorter than it had been a minute ago.

"How are you going to marry me if you leave?" she said into his cheek. "You promised me a wedding and red-headed babies. You owe me that."

He laughed. And the laugh tore something open inside the wound and a bright wet pulse came up around the handle of the knife. But Paddy did not stop laughing. He laughed in the link, and he laughed in the air, and his shoulders shook.

Hey, Saint? he said again after he finally did stop.

I'm here.

He brought her closer with the link in a way he had never used the link before — not as communication but as the simple pull of his mind on hers.

You know what I told Maribel about you?

Do I want to know?

He smiled.

I told Maribel I'd finally found a sister. I've all these brothers. Diego. Chris. Tom. Marcus. But you? You're my first sister. That makes you extra special, you know?

I love you, Cabbage.

I love you too, Jo.

His breath went short. The link narrowed by a hair. He was working harder for each one now and the work was running out.

Make sure Diego never blames himself, huh?

I promise, she said.

He looked down at the girl one last time. And then his hand on the girl's hair went still.

Jo did not move. She held the link open with everything she had because she did not want him to be alone in the last second.

The last second came.

The link closed.

She did not pull back. She heard, distantly, Beth gather the little girl into her arms and stand. She heard Chris choking, and before she knew it, she was holding him. She felt Chris's tears seep through her shirt. He was shaking uncontrollably. She pulled him closer, pressing him tight against her as she stroked his hair.

"Shh," she heard herself saying to him. "Shhh."

And then the prayer came. The one she had learned when her father died.

In your hands, O Lord,

I humbly entrust my brother.

In this life you embraced him with your tender love;

deliver him now from every evil

and bid him eternal rest.

THE SAINT OF ORION

PART TWO

CHAPTER NINE

GREYBRIAR (LOCATION: CLASSIFIED) — JULY 2007

JO FELT TEARS RUNNING DOWN HER CHEEKS, hot and ugly. She did not wipe them. She was ambivalent about them as they rolled down, collecting at her chin.

On the one hand, Paddy deserved tears. He deserved tears because he was one of the bravest, most *alive* men Jo had ever known. And she would never hear his contagious laughter again. That — that deserved tears.

On the other hand, Paddy would've hated the tears. No. He would have wanted *stories*. He would have wanted *laughter*. He would have wanted jokes made at the expense of the buttoned-up priest conducting the buttoned-up service that wasn't anything like the man they were attempting to commemorate.

Jo was standing at the back of the small gathering with some of the team. The priest had a soft Midwestern voice, not an altogether bad cadence to tune out to. He'd come from somewhere the agency trusted. That meant he knew the file, knew discretion, but knew nothing about who her dear friend truly was.

It couldn't have been helped.

The grounds smelled of cut grass and turned earth. The morning had stayed warm and bright and indecently alive through the entirety of the somber and suffocating service. Even the birds were carrying on in the tree line as though nothing had happened.

All the while, there were graves in front of her.

To the left of Paddy's were two others. One was small, set close to the other, the way the bodies had been laid in the kitchen of a house with blackout curtains and security glass.

Jo looked at the false names a long time. She thought about that unassuming woman handing Paddy a glass of lemonade on a porch and bending to kiss the top of the little girl's head. She thought about a boy kicking a ball through dead grass.

She clenched her jaw — the uncontrollable rage threatening to overflow again — as she looked at the box that was not big enough to hold a man like Paddy Quinn.

The little girl was not here. Mary-Beth Quinn was several floors underground in the special recovery wing for the gifted, asleep because of whatever medication they were pumping into her system. The girl could not come and bury her own family because she did not yet know she had lost them. What else had

she lost? It was a miracle she was alive at all.

The priest came to the part Jo knew. She mouthed along with it but felt an emptiness the words could not touch.

When the priest finished and the service was over, Marcus did not let go of her hand. He turned her, gently, so her back was to the graves and her face was against the lapel of the dark suit he had on.

Jo stayed against Marcus a moment and then made herself step back. The group had begun to disperse, walking back toward the entrance of Greybriar. Beth was a little apart from the others, as she'd been all morning, grieving a man she'd known for a single month but had grown to care for anyway. Thomas was behind her, quiet, head bowed low, looking at his shoes. Diego was already gone. And behind them, Priya and Addy — but no Theo — trailed.

She kept her own walls as high as they would go. It helped... a bit.

Grief was loud. It got under everything, and there was too much of it. She felt hers and theirs all at the same time, and it multiplied in her until she almost couldn't take it anymore. She wanted to scream.

That was when she saw Chris.

He had not joined them, instead opting to walk by himself to a low stone wall at the edge of the grounds, where the mowed part gave way to the long grass. He was sitting on it alone with his forearms on his knees and his head down. He looked like a man defeated.

Chris McIntyre was good at a great many things, Jo had learned. This was the part he was never good at. Marcus stopped and followed her eyes to the wall.

"Go on ahead," she said.

Marcus looked at Chris for a long moment, seeming deep in thought.

"Don't be long," he said. Something about that bothered her. She pushed that away too, nodded instead, and watched Marcus head to the door — the broad dark shape of him moving through all that obscene green. Only when he had gone through it did she cross the grass to sit down next to Chris on the wall.

Up close she could feel the effort in him. He had not loosened his tie. The man never loosened anything, truth be told. Not ever. Every part of him was coiled so tight it was bound to explode one of these days. He reminded her of the crossbow her father used to keep for hunting. That thing, with all that stored-up energy in its taut string, had always frightened her.

One of his hands hung off his knee and kept opening and closing, slowly, around nothing. For a long moment Jo didn't say anything. She put her hand over the one that kept opening and closing and stilled it, her palm over his knuckles. His hand was large, his knuckles cracked as if he'd recently gotten in a fight.

They sat for a while. The birds went on chirping. A vehicle started somewhere across the grounds, and the sound of it faded toward the gate. Chris finally exhaled, and he was like a half-deflated balloon letting out the rest of its air.

"I didn't know," Chris said. His voice came out low and wrecked. "I've known Paddy... I *had* known Paddy for a long time. I didn't know about—" He choked on something and cleared his throat. "I was responsible. I *am* responsible for the team. And Diego. Paddy. I—I keep replaying it in my head. What could I have done? How could I have prevented any of this?"

"There wasn't anything you could have done, Chris. There's no version of this that is your fault. Being a leader does not make you responsible for everything."

He didn't answer. The blame was going to live in each of them in a different shape. She carried her own already — and there was nothing she could say to alleviate that burden. So she didn't try. She held his hand on his knee and let him have it.

After a while, because the silence was getting heavy enough to crush them both, she said, "He wouldn't want you sitting around crying, you know?" She looked over at him, saw the tears dripping from his eyes, down to the tip of his nose, and onto his pants. A wet, dark spot had begun to form. "Lord, he would be making fun of you right now."

"What do you think he'd say?" Chris asked, no humor in his voice.

"Oh, I don't know." She was smiling, thinking about her friend. "Something about your jaw, I reckon. I'm not as quick-tongued as he was, but it'd be about your jaw, whatever it was."

Chris huffed through his nose.

"He did always make fun of me, didn't he?"

"Kind of hard not to. Look at me. I'm Chris. I'm so serious." She lowered her voice and scrunched her face into the best imitation she had of Field Leader Chris McIntyre. A small smile made its slow way across his admittedly handsome face. "That was Paddy for you. He made fun of the ones he loved. And I know he loved you, Chris. We all do."

Chris turned to look at her, and she saw something in his eyes she had not expected. The hand under hers turned over so they were palm to palm, and he interlaced his fingers with hers.

She looked away but let her hand remain in his.

"Thank you," he said, and he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it very gently. Something in the way he did it, in the way his eyes came across to her face and stayed, made her catch her breath.

"For what, Chris?"

"For being here. For being my friend."

She met his eyes again. They were large and earnest and lonely. So lonely. She'd felt it before, when they were linked. She felt it now without the link.

He coughed, let go of her hand — almost abruptly — and checked his watch.

It was the kind of thing he did without knowing he did it, the instinctive protective reflex of a man who couldn't sit inside a moment without one foot already moving to the next. Chris looked at the dial, and she watched some part of him take the time on it as an exit strategy.

“I have to—” he started.

“Of course.”

“It’s just... Ross wants to see me. He says there’s a lot to discuss.” He was already half-standing. “I’m already late, so—”

“Chris,” she said, laughing because she didn’t know how else to respond. He stopped. She wanted to tell him to stay. To let her *be* the friend he’d just said she was. Chris shifted his weight uncomfortably where he stood. She shook her head.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just... your watch is still fast.”

It wasn’t much of a joke. But he laughed, a full-throated thing that set her laughing too. When he had recovered, he looked down at the watch on his wrist as though he’d never properly seen it before.

“Maybe it’s the owner and not the watch,” he said.

“You think?” she said, giving him a sidelong look.

“Fair enough.”

“I’ve come to accept it.” She shrugged. “It’s part of your charm.”

He looked down at her on the wall a moment. The green went on being obscene all around them, and the birds went on, and Paddy lay forty feet away, and all she saw were those brown eyes looking down at her with something she couldn’t name. Then his face changed, and he was smiling down at her.

“Cabbage would have pointed out that you just called me charming, you know,” he said.

“Yeah, he would have, wouldn’t he?”

His eyes moved side to side as he held her gaze. “I’ll see you later, Saint.”

“See you later, Cap.”

He went back across the grass the way Marcus had gone. Jo stayed where she was a little longer in the warmth. She felt him get steadier with every step he took.

• • •

JO SAT IN THE CHAIR BY THE WINDOW. Diego was on the other side of the bed in a chair too small for him.

He had not gone back to his own room since the funeral. He still had the dark suit on, the tie pulled loose, the jacket over the chair back. He had said almost nothing for an hour, which was its own kind of wrong. His usual moustache and goatee were now accompanied by a beard growing in across his cheeks.

Between them, in the bed, was the girl. Mary-Beth Quinn.

She looked smaller than four. Or perhaps Jo wasn’t around four-year-olds enough to know what they looked like anymore.

The machines made her look smaller still. The needle taped to the back of one little hand, the monitor drawing its slow green line above her head. Someone had tucked the fleece blanket with the blue sailboats up to her chin.

The door opened, and Nurse Ayala came in with a fresh bag for the line. Her normally sharp, pretty eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, the lids gone pink. She finished what she had come in for, but she did not leave. She stood a moment over the girl, and then she reached down and smoothed a piece of the strawberry-blond hair off the bruised temple, very gently.

Jo did not mean to listen in on Ayala's mind. But grief was, as she had been reminded all day, loud. Ayala's thoughts came through no matter what Jo intended. She felt the weight, and under the weight a shape Jo had never bothered to see before.

She proposed to me, she did. Paddy with his hand on his chest.

Nurse Ayala only has eyes for me. Diego flirting.

Ayala with her hands on her hips, shaking her head.

Ayala swatting them off with a towel.

Ayala laughing at a joke Paddy had made.

And then just Paddy.

Paddy asking her if she needed anything after she had lost a patient.

Paddy bringing by coffee on a late-night shift.

Ayala caught Jo looking and straightened.

"Page me when she stirs, hon," Ayala said.

"Thanks, Ay," Diego said. She reached out a hand and touched his shoulder on her way out.

Diego watched the door close.

"They were close," Jo said.

"Yeah," Diego responded. "She had a soft spot for him, you know? Brought him soup every time he got banged up."

"She likes you too, you know," Jo said.

"Yeah," he said. "She always did have the hots for me over Cabbage."

Jo laughed, but the laugh was choked, and the next thing she knew, there were tears again.

"I'm so sorry," she said, dabbing her cheeks.

"Nah." Diego leaned back. He was still looking at little Mary-Beth. "If anyone can make you laugh and cry at the same time, that's Paddy."

Jo didn't trust her own voice, so she put her hand over his on the rail.

The door opened again, and the room changed.

Patel came in first with the chart, and behind him Ross.

“Cranial trauma,” Patel said, low, reading it off the chart rather than to them. “The girl took the table edge, then the floor. There’s swelling, and then there’s... the other thing.” He didn’t say what the other thing was. He looked at Ross instead.

“Besides you, Jo, she is the only other person to have survived a Harvest. Something was taken from her. We don’t know how much,” Ross said.

“What was left is not whole. And for a child—”

“She tried taking it from me. And I’m fine. The whining in my head has gone away, as you predicted. Bring her out.”

“This girl is not you. Whatever it was that stopped Victoria from taking your powers is *not* what stopped her from taking Mary-Beth’s.” He looked down at the small, bruised face. “You resisted Harvesting because of who you are. She was extracted mid-Harvest. Whatever is left of her powers — if there is anything at all — is volatile. Unstable.”

“Bring her out,” Jo said again.

Ross nodded, and Patel went to work. They waited. And as they waited, Jo held on to the little girl’s hand, searching her mind. And just as the girl began to surface, something else stirred. It *recognized* Jo for an instant, the way one deep thing recognizes another across dark water—

Then it was gone. Jo was breathing too hard and didn’t know when that had started.

Mary-Beth’s eyes fluttered.

It came slowly. A small frown, the hand with the needle in it curling and uncurling. Diego was on his feet. Patel moved in with his light. The eyes opened, pale and unfocused, swam, found the ceiling, found the lamp, and then moved across the faces leaning over her. There was nothing in them. No fear of strangers, because there were no strangers and no anyone. She did not know the room. She did not know Diego. She did not know herself.

“Hey,” Diego breathed. “Hey, *bonita*. You’re okay. You’re safe.”

She did not turn to look at him.

“Mary-Beth,” Diego said, louder, leaning into her field of view because some part of him already knew and was refusing it. “Mary-Beth, can you hear me — can you—”

“She can’t,” Patel said quietly. He lowered his hands. “She’s lost her hearing, Diego.”

The girl’s lip began to tremble. Whatever she was, wherever she’d come up from, she had surfaced into silence and into a circle of faces she didn’t know. The fear was arriving now, the ordinary animal fear of a child who can’t find anything she recognizes. Her breath hitched. Her eyes were starting to fill.

Jo reached back into the girl’s mind. Past the deafness, past the blank, into the surface of the frightened little mind. She sent just a feeling, the only thing Jo had to give that could cross into the silence. *Safe. Warm. Held.* Light through a window. A hand that was not going to let go.

The girl went still.

Her eyes left the lamp and tracked, slowly, across the room, and found Jo's face, and stopped there. She did not know who Jo was. She held on to Jo's hand, and she kept her eyes on Jo's face, and in all that new silence Jo was the one thing she had found to hold.

I've got you, Jo told her, where she could still hear. *We've got you, Mary-Beth.*

• • •

SASHA'S PLACE SAT TWENTY MINUTES past the last working streetlight, a low cinderblock box at the edge of a gravel lot. It had a sign over the door where enough letters had died that the surviving neon spelled nothing a person could say out loud.

Dan used to call it church. Marcus had told her that once, the way he told her most things about Dan. Sideways, in passing, like it had gotten out before he could close the door on it.

The lot was empty when they pulled in. Beth was not with them, as she had flown back to England for an Eastbourne debrief of Victoria Auchincloss. It was a Tuesday, and the card in the window said CLOSED in someone's hard, slanted hand.

Jo had never met Sasha. It was odd, realizing that. She had heard so much about the woman that she felt like she knew her. But then all at once, she also felt self-conscious. Jo had replaced Dan as Orion's telepath, hadn't she? How would Sasha, Dan's would-be fiancée, feel about that? About her? And now she had let Paddy—

The door opened. And Jo instantly understood that Ross had been right. The photograph did not, in any way, capture the woman.

"Well." Sasha leaned in the frame with a dishtowel over one shoulder and took the five of them in, one at a time, slow, like a woman taking inventory of a delivery she'd been expecting and dreading. "Look what the cat finally dragged back. I was starting to think you'd found yourselves a nicer bar."

"There isn't a nicer bar," Marcus said, and he embraced her in a way Jo had never seen Marcus embrace anyone but herself.

"Damn straight," Sasha agreed, kissing Marcus on the cheek. Then Sasha looked away from him and found Jo.

"You must be Jo," Sasha said.

"Y-yes," said Jo. Then Sasha was holding her, close and fierce, and Jo felt her own body jolt with the unexpectedness of it. "I'm glad to finally meet you, sweetheart," the older woman said.

"Me too," Jo said.

"Alright, alright. Get in before the bugs do. Chef, I've got the good ginger beer in the back. Junior—" this to Chris, and Jo felt it land on him like a hand on a bruise, "—you look like hell. Sit down before you fall down. The rest of you know where the stools are."

Inside it was dim and smelled of beer gone into the wood over years. Christmas lights nobody had taken down, even in July, ran along the top of the back bar.

And Jo understood why it had been called church. Not because it was holy, but because everyone knew where to sit, who was missing, and what name not to say until someone poured.

Sasha poured without asking — whiskey, neat, four of them, and the ginger beer for Diego in a bottle she set in front of him with a little extra force, like a dare.

For a while nobody said much of anything. Grief had a weight, and the room held it the way the wood held the smell of the beer. Jo drank to have something to do. She hated the taste.

It was Sasha who broke the silence.

“You know the idiot proposed to me,” she said.

Diego looked up.

“I thought Dan—”

“Not Dan. He was too much of a coward. *Quinn*.” She nodded at the third stool from the end. It sat empty. “Right there. Drunk as a lord, on his knee — took him three goes to get down there — and he told me, very serious, that he’d leave Dan for me if I’d only have him.”

A sound came out of Diego that was a laugh but also very wet.

“Could he get back up?”

“Hell no! Idiot went down and then just — stayed. Dan had to haul him off my floor by the collar, and he was *still* proposing while Dan dragged him out. Told me to think about it.” Sasha’s mouth did something complicated. “Said he’d wait for me.”

The whole table came apart at once. They were laughing, all of them — even Chris — that ugly helpless laughing that’s only ever a stone’s throw from the other thing.

“He proposed to me too,” Jo heard herself say.

The table turned.

She was smiling, and her eyes had gone hot. “Told me we’d get married and have redheaded babies.”

“He proposed to me once,” Thomas offered, dry as a stick. “I told him I’d shoot him through the eye.”

“He proposed to a *departures board* once,” Marcus said, and that sent them all over the edge laughing.

“I miss him.” Jo looked up and was surprised to find it was Chris who had spoken. He was looking at the glass of whiskey in front of him. He’d only taken a sip. “One time he made a poster of me — a Girl Scout recruitment poster but with my face on it. I was so angry with him.” Tears were coming down his face. “Now I would dress up as a Girl Scout if he would come back.”

“Can I fake *my* death so you’ll dress like that, then come back?” Thomas asked. Everyone was bent over again laughing.

The door went, and a woman came in out of the dark, late, in a denim jacket Jo had never seen.

“Ayala?” Jo said.

“Don’t look so shocked, hon. I do leave the healing wing.” Ayala let the door swing shut and stood there a second, taking in the lights and the bottles and the wrecked faces. Diego had half-risen. “Reyes invited me,” she said. “Hope you don’t mind me crashing.”

“Anyone who’s a friend of Chef is welcome here,” Sasha said, pouring another glass of whiskey.

“You knew Paddy well, Ayala?” Jo asked.

Ayala came to the bar and thanked Sasha for the drink. “That man proposed to me in the supply closet on B Ward with an orange pipe cleaner for a ring. Got down on one knee and everyone was gasping and clapping. Had to say *yes*, so I didn’t look like a bitch!”

Jo started out laughing but ended up crying, and Diego put his arm around her without a word. She leaned into the size of him.

Sasha refilled what needed refilling. Then she picked up her own glass, and the room understood, and the noise settled out of it.

“Go on, then,” she said to Diego. “He was yours longest.”

Diego looked at the ginger beer in his hand a moment like he wasn’t sure it counted. Then he lifted it anyway.

“To Cabbage,” he said, and stopped, because that was as far as the words would carry him. “The world’s biggest and most lovable *idiot*.”

Jo raised her whiskey with the rest of them. She could still see his grin, his orange hair, his large eyes. She could still feel his love.

They drank.

After, the noise went soft and broke into smaller pieces — Ayala and Sasha low at the end of the bar, Thomas turning his glass, Chris with his head down and Marcus saying something to him too quiet to carry.

Jo looked at Diego.

He was watching all of it — the bar, the lights, the people he’d called and gathered into one place — and there was something in his face she didn’t have a name for.

“How are you, Chef?”

“I’m good, Saint. I’m good.”

Jo just leaned her head on his shoulder and took his hand in hers. He held her and kissed her on the head.

The half-dead neon over the door continued to spell nothing at all out into the dark. But inside, the group that had a hole in it felt a little more whole.

THE BRIEFING ROOM DOOR looked the same as it always did, and Jo went through it the way she always had — half her attention on the bench beside Diego, the other half on whether there'd be donuts, because there were sometimes donuts. Jo had been raised to believe bad news went down better with sugar.

There were no donuts.

Instead, there was a man at the front of the room with Chris.

She had seen him before, when the Field Leaders had tried to recruit her to their teams. Tall, with a beard going gray and the flat look of a man whose emotions had been sanded down to something far worse underneath.

Tavin Ronald of Team Taurus.

The man she'd thought looked like he enjoyed torturing bunnies. He still looked it.

He was bigger than the memory. He stood the way certain men stood, taking up not just his own space but the suggestion of everyone else's. Chris was up there beside him looking, for the first time since Jo had known him, small. He seemed young and uncertain next to Tavin.

Then she realized that Tavin's whole team was already seated in the room. Her own team filed in behind her — Marcus, Thomas, Diego. Beth was back in England on some business she hadn't told the rest of them about.

Tavin's eyes fell on Jo, slow, top to bottom and back up, his attention turned all the way into her. Lingering where it had no business lingering. His gaze reached her face last, like it was an afterthought he'd finally gotten around to.

Marcus stepped half a pace so his shoulder came even with hers, up between her and the front of the room.

I can handle a man looking at me, Marcus, she sent him.

She didn't need a wall built in front of her. She could have put Tavin through the one behind him.

I'm sure you can, Freckles. But Marcus did not move.

"Sit, everyone." Ross was already at the head of the table. "For those who have not had the pleasure, this is Field Leader Tavin. His unit — Team Taurus — and yours are running this op together."

"Together?" Marcus asked.

"Co-led by Chris and Tavin," Ross said. "Yes."

She saw Theo as she sat down.

He was at the end of Tavin's row, and she almost did not recognize him. He had gained muscle since she had last seen him, and grown a thick beard that matched Tavin's.

Ross threw up an image of a facility, gray and low. “Since Team Taurus currently does not have a Linker, Jo will be in charge of carrying both teams.”

“You don’t have a Charism at all?” Thomas asked.

“Ours is on special duty today,” Tavin said. Then he turned to Jo, and his smile was a wicked thing. “Never had a girl in me before. It’s usually the other way round. Be gentle for my first time, huh, Byrne?”

There were things a girl raised right was supposed to color up at and pretend she hadn’t caught. Jo had four brothers. She caught plenty. Tavin’s team sniggered, and Jo caught Theo’s eye. Her old friend’s smile faltered. His eyes skittered away.

She felt Marcus shift next to her.

“Oh, Lord. It’s your first time? Bless your heart. Most men make it past the first slide.” She indicated the projector. Chris’s eyes met hers, and there was something like warm approval in them. And a caution.

Tavin waited Diego’s booming laugh all the way out.

“Letting you in’s easy, sweetheart. It’s getting back out that you’ll have trouble with. So, make yourself at home when you come.”

Beside her, Marcus was about to push himself up from his seat.

“The site,” Chris said, dragging the room back to him. His face remained calm, but his voice held an edge that made even Tavin stop and look. Chris put up the next slide. “is an Aviary transfer point. They hold their ‘cargo’ here, they process them here, and they move people out from here. The intel comes from the Chicago file, which contained a lot more than just some notes about Victoria Auchincloss.”

“It’s got contractor security,” Tavin said, stepping into Chris’s slide like it was his. “Heavier than your team’s used to. And they’ll have people in those rooms we’re there to bring *out*, which is why it’s two units and not one. Somebody clears, somebody carries, and you can’t do both with four operators and a little girl who reads minds. My crew breaches. Yours runs the extraction.”

“My crew breaches with yours,” Chris said. “We don’t hand you the building and stand outside holding coats, Tavin.”

“You’ll do what keeps your people breathing, Junior.”

Jo had come to know her team very well. When they were relaxed. When they were angry. What she felt now was her team going still right before they exploded into violence. If she didn’t do something soon, the room would go up. So she reached out, a light touch against each mind. *Let Cap handle it*, she told them.

Chris’s face didn’t move at all. He took in a breath and stood to his full height, which still left him an inch or so shorter than Tavin.

“Field Leader McIntyre,” Chris said.

“I’m glad you know your own name, Junior,” Tavin laughed.

“Yes, it is my name. And you will refer to my teammates by *their* names. Perhaps you need introductions.” He began pointing at each of them without looking, eyes boring directly into the taller man. “Reyes. Whitfield-Sterling. Miles. Byrne.” He paused, then gestured at Tavin with an open, upturned hand. “Your turn. Or do you need me to repeat it for you, Field Leader Ronald?”

Jo found herself holding her breath.

And then, mild as ever, Ross said, “You’ll work the execution between you. I expect a single plan by tomorrow, not two. Jo, see me after. I want to walk the comms load.” His eyes went, briefly, to Tavin. “We bring out everyone who’s in there. Including each other. Am I understood?”

“Crystal,” Tavin said.

The brief broke up around her. Chairs, voices, Thomas asking something about sightlines.

Jo gathered her things. At the door, Tavin had paused to say something to Chris that made Chris’s shoulders go rigid, and on his way past, Tavin let his gaze cross Jo’s one more time, taking the last of her he hadn’t gotten to yet.

As Chris passed, he put a hand to her elbow, very gently.

“Keep your head on a swivel out there, Jo,” he said.

“You watch my back, and I watch yours, Cap,” Jo said. He smiled at her, and they walked out of the room together.

THE SAINT OF ORION

DELETED SCENES

THE KITCHEN

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This was initially part of chapter four. It is a scene that takes place in the kitchen at Greybriar in December, 2006. Team Orion spend time cooking a Christmas dinner they never get to eat. I wrote it because I felt like I wanted the team to just be together. To breathe. To spend time. I want to explore their personalities and voices and relationships. It was one of the first scenes I wrote in my initial draft, and it was the first time I really got to explore Diego's voice before I truly knew him. The first time I got to play around with Paddy's personality. It was where I landed on his nickname "Cabbage."

I cut it because nothing happens in it. It's one of those scenes that I want everyone to read. I love this scene. But I'm not sure others would. In hopes that some might. This is for them.

—*Jackson*

GREYBRIAR (LOCATION: CLASSIFIED), TEAM ORION'S KITCHEN — DECEMBER 2006

THE KITCHEN WAS ON THE FIRST floor at the back of the south wing. Section Six had built it the way someone might have built a kitchen for a family of fifteen — too many burners, two refrigerators, a long oak table that could seat the cohort and the kitchen staff at once.

She paused outside the open door. She could hear them, and it made her smile. Three months in and she had already fallen a little bit in love with them all. She hadn't expected that.

"—I told you the cabbage doesn't need that much water, Paddy. You're such an idiota."

"It needs water, Diego. It's cabbage. I know cabbage, okay? I'm Irish."

"You're Irish. But you're also an idiot. And your idiocy wins."

"Listen, Diego. You're not in charge of the cabbage. I'm in charge of the cabbage. I am Cabbage."

"No, I'm in charge of the kitchen. The kitchen contains the cabbage. By the transitive property—"

Jo stepped through the door.

Heat met her first, thick with garlic and butter and the sweeter smell of onions going soft in a pan. Under it was something bright and wintery — orange peel maybe, or cloves — and the faint wood smoke smell that seemed to cling to Greybriar all through December. Somewhere near the sink a radio was playing Christmas music low and tinny, one of the old ones her mother liked, half lost beneath the clatter of pots and Paddy's voice.

Diego was at the stove with an apron tied at his waist and the sleeves of a dark green thermal pushed to the elbow. He had a wooden spoon in his hand the size of a small oar. Paddy was at the counter next to him in a gray Henley, gesturing with a head of cabbage. Thomas was at the far end of the long counter with a small saucepan and a magazine clipping pinned under a saltshaker. Chris was at the table with a board of onions and a knife, a black sweater pulled over his undershirt.

And Marcus was at the other end with three fish on a board, dark sleeves rolled forearm-high.

There were six pots on the stove, two cutting boards in use. Someone — Diego, no doubt — had strung a cheap line of colored Christmas lights along the top of the window over the sink, and the glass beyond it was black with early winter dark. Snow feathered softly against it. The room smelled like sweat and garlic and wood smoke and something citrusy simmering in one of the back pots.

"SAINT." Diego saw her first and threw both arms in the air, the wooden spoon sweeping a half-arc that almost caught Paddy in the side of the head. "She made it. She made it! Cabbage, she made it. We did not lose her after all your hitting on her. Thank the Lord."

"Maybe it's because I kept hitting on her," Paddy said with a wink. "You ever think of that, Chef?"

"You said she'd skip. She didn't skip. God, I love you, Saint. I bet twenty dollars you'd show. Hand it over, Cab."

Paddy looked at her with what he probably thought was a charming expression. "How much do I get if I get a kiss from her under the mistletoe?"

She turned to find the mistletoe above the door she had just walked through.

"Patrick Quinn, you are fixin' to meet Jesus before dessert?" she said.

"Ahh, but one of us will get a kiss though, don't you think? There's a good chance you'll find one of us good-looking enough." Paddy looked around the room. "Well, there's me, obviously. The sexual tension is so thick I can almost slice it." Diego snorted. "Hmmm... Cupid? I mean, look at the guy. I thought Tom was a buff girl when I first met him. Tried kissing him and everything."

Thomas threw a tomato, and Paddy caught it.

"Thanks. I needed that. Then there's Captain America himself." Paddy eyed Chris, then shook his head. "Nah. And certainly not Mr. Smiles over there." He indicated Marcus. Jo had loved his nickname the moment she'd heard it two ops in. It worked even better because he hated it. "I just can't help but think it comes back to me, you know? Christmas is a time for miracles, mistletoes, and a little snogging. I'll get that kiss eventually."

Jo caught Marcus's eye and then looked away.

"Paddy, you've got to stop digging," Chris said from the table, not looking up from the board. He was sniffing, with tears in his eyes from the onions. It was the strangest sight she had ever seen.

"You know she's been learning how to throw things with her mind, yeah?" Diego said.

"Thank you, Cap," Paddy said. "Thank you, Chef Reyes. I appreciate the supervision."

"That's what I'm here for," Chris said with a wave.

Thomas, at his end of the counter, looked up from the saucepan. "Will someone tell me what brown butter is supposed to look like?"

"I think," Diego said, wiping sweat from his brow, "and I know this might be crazy. But I think it's supposed to be brown, Cupid."

"Yes, thank you, Chef Smart Ass. But how brown?"

"Like my skin." Diego gestured at his arm. "Not yours. That's for sure."

"That is not helpful. I am asking you a serious culinary question."

"Hazelnut," Marcus said, without looking up from the fish.

Paddy, who must by now have been rather grateful to anyone for not being the topic of the room, walked across to Thomas and looked into the saucepan.

"That's not brown, Tom. That's black."

"Damn it. I am following the recipe."

"You clearly didn't learn how to read right in your fancy boarding school."

Diego pointed at Thomas with the spoon, having recovered enough to speak again. "Tom. My friend. My brother. That recipe was written by an American woman in a magazine."

"She's probably blonde and looks kinda like Tom too," Paddy said, and the room burst into laughter.

Jo was laughing too. She did not remember when she had started.

"Saint," Diego said. "Apron. There." He gestured at a hook on the wall with three aprons on it. "The green one. The red one is mine, and the blue one looks too sad for Christmas."

"What else is Christmas law?"

"That I get a kiss—" Paddy began, but this time Jo used her mind to throw the tomato at him. It splattered across his face.

"Forget Christmas law. You've passed it all," Diego said with an approving grin at Paddy, who had tomato bits falling off his face.

"Sorry! I thought you'd catch that. Mostly," Jo said, cringing.

"I think I'm even more in love," Paddy said, wiping it off his face with a towel. "Saint. You and I will one day be married. We'll have little redheaded babies."

Jo rolled her eyes and took down the green apron. It was, she realized as she put it on, a child's apron. It had a small chicken on the front of it. The strings did not quite reach around her back.

"This is a child's apron, Diego."

"I am aware."

"Where did you even get this?"

"From a... child."

"You took an apron from a child?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny anything."

"He totally stole an apron from a child," Paddy said, and there was a fondness in the way he was looking at the apron. As if there was history there she didn't know about.

Jo finished tying the apron. Diego nodded approvingly and turned back to the stove.

"What am I making, Diego?"

"Go to Mr. Smiles. He's going to teach you a thing or two about fish."

Marcus, at his end of the counter, looked up at her. He had a fillet knife in his right hand and the edge of a fish under his left.

"Come on," he said, and Jo walked the length of the kitchen to him. He was watching the fish. "You've done this before?"

"I have never cooked before."

"You've never cooked before?" He looked up at her as if offended by the very idea.

"Oh, you expect because I'm a girl—"

"Cooking is an art, Jo."

She realized she liked very much the way he said her name.

"I didn't realize you were so poetic."

"And filleting is an art in and of itself."

He gestured with the knife at the spot just behind the gills.

"Cut here, angled toward the head. Down to the bone. Then turn and follow the spine. Let the blade ride the bone. Don't try to think your way down. The bone tells you where to go."

He set the knife down. He took a half-step to her left.

"Try one."

Jo picked up the knife. She put her left hand on the fish.

"Not there. Here." He moved her left hand two inches, his palm briefly over the back of hers. She would very much have wanted this to be happening somewhere other than over a dead fish, with a bunch of guys throwing food at one another while colored lights blinked idiotically over the sink.

Jo took what she could get, though.

She made the cut. It went in at the wrong angle. The blade slipped off the spine and into the meat.

“That’s too steep. Lay it down. Almost flat.”

She pulled the knife out and tried again. The blade rode the bone. She felt it for the first time — the small, constant push of the spine against the metal, the way the knife wanted to go up and the bone wanted it down, and the place where they agreed.

“There,” Marcus said, and he smiled at her. She could distinctly remember the feel of his scar on his lip, and she swallowed and focused back on the fish.

She made it all the way down the fish. The fillet came up clean.

“That was... okay, yeah,” she said.

“That was lucky. Do another one.”

He pressed his thumb into the flesh of a second fish, watched it come back up, and passed it to her.

She made the second cut. She did not get lucky this time. The blade went too deep at the tail, and she had to come back and clean up what she’d left on the bone.

“Good,” Marcus said.

“I’m pretty sure that was worse.”

“You learned more on that one. Mistakes are a good thing.”

He put a third fish on the board.

“Three?”

“We need eight,” came Diego’s voice.

“Eight?”

“Diego brought twelve. I’m doing the other nine.”

He stepped back to his side of the board and started on his own fish.

They worked in parallel. He did three to her one. She watched him out of the corner of her eye and tried to match his rhythm and failed. He was perfect at it. His hands did not move much. The knife did most of the work, and his hands provided only the suggestions the knife needed.

He talked to her once while she worked. Quietly, so the rest of the kitchen did not hear.

“How are you after yesterday?”

“Me?” She looked over at him again. “I’m fine. How are you?” They had just gotten back from an op where Jo had to lift all of them onto a platform landing. She had felt a rib crack. Sore was an understatement.

“It was a hard op. You kicked some serious ass.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smiles. That means so much from the king of ass-kicking,” Jo said. From the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Chris turning away from them.

Marcus made a sound that could have passed for a laugh.

“Where’d you learn this?”

He finished the cut he was on before he answered.

“Home.”

Jo waited. The knife went back in behind the gills.

The kitchen carried on around them. Diego was correcting Thomas’s grip on a whisk. Paddy was telling someone about something that had happened at the gym. Chris was on his second board of onions.

Jo finished her third fish.

“Saint,” Diego called from the stove. “Status.”

“Three down, five to go.”

“That’s not three. That’s two and a half. I see the tail you left on that one.”

“I can throw more than tomatoes.”

“Five to go, Rojas. Move.”

Paddy came past her with a colander and bumped her hip.

“Sorry, Saint. Didn’t see you there.”

“I’m learning how to remove flesh from bone. You watch it.” But Jo was laughing again. Her hands had not stopped working. Three fish became four. Four became five.

Thomas, at his pan, said, “The butter is brown this time. Diego. Tell me when to take it off the heat.”

“Now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Take it off, Cupid.”

Jo finished the fifth fish.

“Three more,” she said.

“Two,” Marcus said, sliding one of his own finished fish toward her board. “I had extra time.”

“Show-off.”

She was starting on her sixth when Diego stopped stirring the pot in front of him.

He had been facing the door. He was not facing the door now.

Diego had gone very still.

Paddy, at the colander, registered Diego’s stillness and turned. Then Thomas. Then Chris. Marcus and Jo turned at the same time.

Ross was in the doorway.

He was in a gray sweater and dark trousers and leather boots, snow melting dark at the shoulders.

“Two minutes,” he said. “Gear. Then briefing room two. We have a situation, team.”

He turned and left.

The cohort was moving before the door closed.

Diego turned off the burners. All of them at once, with one sweep of his hand across the dials. Paddy dropped the colander in the sink. Thomas pulled the pan of brown butter off the heat and set it on a trivet and then, after a half-second of indecision, abandoned it.

Chris was already at the door.

Marcus wiped the knife on the rag at his hip and put it down.

“You’ll want to wash your hands,” he said as he turned to begin washing his.

He waited for her. He did not move toward the door until she was done.

She untied the green apron. She set it on the hook. The small chicken on the front of it stared up at the kitchen.

Then she followed Marcus down the corridor.