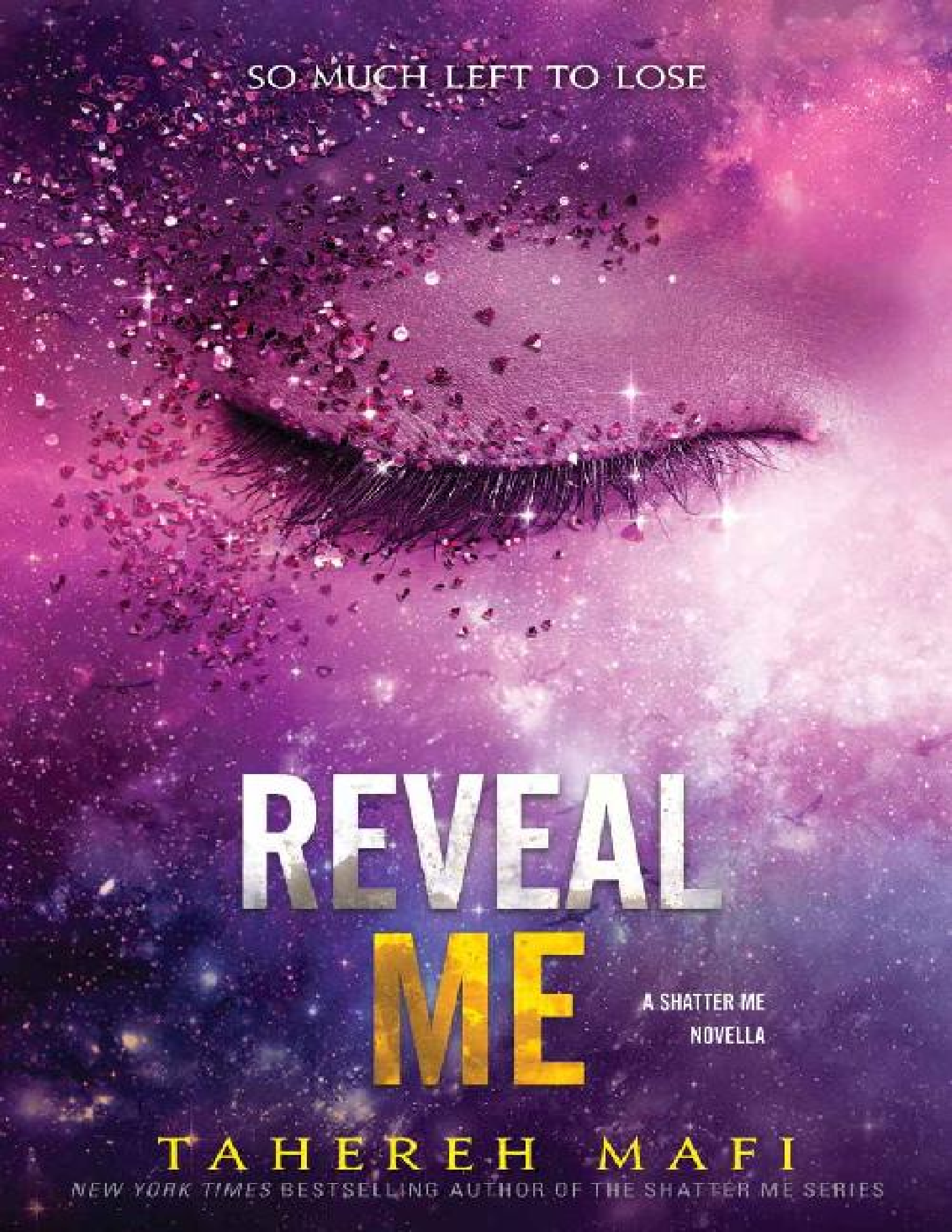
SO MUCH LEFT TO LOSE
REVEAL
ME
A SHATTER ME
NOVELLA
TAHEREH MAFI
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE SHATTER ME SERIES

REVEAL ME

TAHEREH MAFI

HARPER
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Contents

Cover
Title Page

One
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve

About the Author
Books by Tahereh Mafi
Back Ad
Copyright
About the Publisher

One

I’ve lost my appetite.

I don’t think I’ve ever lost my appetite.

But I’m staring at a perfectly good piece of cake right now, and for some reason, I can’t eat it. I feel queasy.

I keep tapping the cake with the tines of my fork, each time a little harder, and now it’s half-collapsed and the frosting is scarred. Mutilated. I never meant to disfigure an innocent piece of cake—it’s downright criminal to waste food, especially cake—but there’s something soothing about the repetitive motion and the soft, gentle resistance of the vanilla sponge.

Slowly, I drag my free hand down my face.

I’ve had worse days. Greater losses. Shittier nights. But somehow this feels like a new kind of hell.

Tension gathers in my shoulders, knotting together to generate dull, throbbing pain that branches across my back. I try to breathe it out, try to stretch the stress out of my muscles, but nothing helps. I don’t know how long I’ve been sitting here, hunched over an unfinished slice of cake. Hours, maybe.

I take a glance around the half-empty dining hall. Room? Tent?

Definitely a tent.

I squint up at the long, whitewashed wooden beams supporting the ceiling. Maybe tent-adjacent. There’s a cream-colored canvas shrouding everything on the outside, but it’s obvious from the interior that this is a solid, freestanding building. I don’t know why they bother with the tents. I hope they serve some kind of practical purpose, because otherwise it seems dumb. Everything else is pretty spare. The tables are pieced together with unfinished slabs of wood made smooth by time. The chairs are simple. More wood. Very basic. Nice, though; everything is nice. This place feels

newer, cleaner, and brighter than anything we had at Omega Point. It's like a fancy campsite.

The Sanctuary.

I stab at the cake again. It's late—long past midnight—and my reasons for being here are growing more tenuous by the minute. Nearly everyone is bailing, chairs scraping, feet shuffling, doors opening and closing. Warner and Juliette (Ella? Still feels weird) are here somewhere, but that's probably because she's trying to force-feed him his own birthday cake. Or maybe he's eating it voluntarily. Whatever. When I'm feeling really sorry for myself, I hate him more than usual.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I'm so goddamn tired.

I know I should leave, get some sleep, but I can't make myself abandon the warm glow of this room for the cold loneliness of my tent. It's so bright in here. It's obvious that Nouria—Castle's daughter and the head of this resistance—is really into light. It's her specialty. Her superpower. But it's also everywhere. String lights strung across the ceiling. Lanterns lining the walls and doorways. There's a massive stone fireplace against one wall, but it's full of warm light, not fire. It feels cozy.

Plus, it smells like cake in here.

For years all I ever did was complain about having to share my privacy with people, but now that I've got my own place—a little stand-alone home entirely for myself—I don't want it. I miss the common areas at Omega Point and Sector 45. I liked seeing friends when I opened my door. I liked hearing their stupid, inconsiderate voices when I was trying to fall asleep.

So.

I'm still here.

Not yet ready to be alone.

Instead, I've been sitting here all night watching people pair off and disappear. Lily and Ian. Brendan and Winston. Sonya and Sara. Nouria and her wife, Sam. Castle trailing behind.

Everyone smiling.

They seem hopeful. Relieved. Celebrating survival and the rare moments of beauty in the bloodshed. Me, on the other hand, I want to scream.

I drop my fork, digging the heels of my hands into my eyes. My frustration has been building for hours now, and it's finally beginning to peak. I feel it, feel it closing its hands around my neck.

Anger.

Why am I the only one who's scared right now? Why am I the only one with this pit of nervousness in my gut? Why am I the only one asking the same question over and over and over again:

Where the fuck are Adam and James?

When we finally got to the Sanctuary, we were greeted by fanfare and joy and enthusiasm. Everyone was acting like this was a big family reunion, like there was hope for the future, like we were all going to be okay—

No one seemed to care that Adam and James were missing.

I was the only one doing a head count. I was the only one looking around the room, searching the eyes of unfamiliar faces, peering around corners and asking questions. I was the only one, apparently, who didn't think it was okay to be missing two of my teammates.

"He didn't want to come, man. You already know that."

This.

This was the bullshit explanation Ian tried to feed me earlier.

"Kent said he wasn't leaving anymore," Ian said. "He literally told us to make our plans without him, and you were sitting right there when he said it." Ian narrowed his eyes at me. "Don't lie to yourself about this. Adam wanted to stay behind with James and try for immunity. You heard him. Leave it alone."

But I couldn't.

I kept insisting that the situation felt wrong. The way it all went down—it felt wrong. *Something isn't right*, I kept saying, and Castle kept telling me, gently—like he was talking to a crazy person—that Adam is James's guardian, that it's not my business, that it doesn't matter how much I love James, I don't get to choose what happens to him.

The thing no one seems to remember is that Adam pitched that dumbass idea about staying behind and asking for immunity *before* we knew Anderson was still alive. *Before* we heard Delalieu say that Anderson had made secret plans for Adam and James. This was *before* Anderson showed up and murdered Delalieu and we all got thrown in an asylum.

Something is wrong.

I don't believe for a second that Adam would've wanted to stay in Sector 45—and risk James's life—if he'd known Anderson was going to be there. Adam can be a dickhead sometimes, but he's spent his whole life trying to protect that ten-year-old from their father. He'd sooner die than put

James within close proximity of Anderson—especially after hearing about Anderson's nebulous plans for them. Adam wouldn't do it; he wouldn't risk it. I know this. I know it in my *soul*.

But no one wanted to hear it.

"C'mon, man," Winston said softly. "James isn't your responsibility. Whatever happens to him, this isn't your fault. We have to move on."

It was like I was speaking a foreign language. Screaming at a wall. Everyone thought I was overreacting. Being too emotional. No one wanted to hear my fears.

Eventually, Castle stopped answering my questions. Instead, he started sighing a lot, like he did when I was twelve years old and he caught me trying to hide stray dogs in my bedroom. He shot me a look just before he left tonight—a look that clearly said he felt sorry for me—and I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do with that.

Even Brendan—kind, compassionate Brendan—shook his head and said, "Adam made his decision. It's been hard for all of us to lose them, Kenji, but you have to let it go."

Fuck that.

I didn't let it go.

I won't let it go.

I look up, homing in on the remains of Warner's massive birthday cake. It's unguarded, sitting on a table in the center of the room, and I'm struck by a sudden urge to put my fist through it. My fingers flex around the fork again, an unconscious impulse I don't bother to examine.

I'm not mad that we're celebrating Warner's birthday. Honestly, I'm not. It's nice, I get it, dude's never had a birthday before. But right now I'm just not in the mood to celebrate. Right now I'd like to punch that piece-of-shit sheet cake and throw it at the wall. I'd like to pick it up and throw it at the wall and then I'd—

Electric heat shoots up my spine and I stiffen, even as I watch, as if from miles away, as a hand curls around my fist. I feel her tugging, trying to pry the fork from my hand. And then I hear her laugh.

I feel suddenly queasier.

"You okay?" she says. "You were holding this thing like a weapon." She sounds like she might be smiling, but I wouldn't know. I'm still staring into space, my vision narrowing into nothing. Nazeera managed to get the fork

free of my hand and now I’m just sitting here, my fingers frozen open, still reaching for something.

I feel her sit next to me.

Even from here, I can feel her heat, her presence. I close my eyes. We haven’t really talked, she and I. Not about us, anyway. Not about how hard my heart beats when she’s around, and definitely not about how she’s inspired all the inappropriate daydreams infesting my mind. In fact, since that brief scene in my bedroom, we haven’t discussed anything that wasn’t strictly professional, and I’m not sure why we would. There’s no point.

Kissing her was stupid.

I’m an idiot, Nazeera is probably crazy, and whatever happened between us was a huge mistake. She keeps messing with my head, confusing my emotions, and I keep trying to remind myself, keep trying to convince myself to understand logic—but for some reason my body doesn’t get it. The way my biology reacts to her mere *presence*, you’d think I was having a stroke.

Or an aneurysm.

“Hey.” Her voice is serious now, the smile gone. “What’s wrong?”

I shake my head.

“Don’t shake your head at me.” She laughs. “You murdered your cake, Kenji. Something is obviously wrong.”

At that, I turn an inch. Stare at her out of the corner of my eye.

In response, she rolls her own eyes. “Oh please,” she says, stabbing my fork—*my fork*—into the collapsed cake. “Everyone knows you love food. You’re always eating. You rarely stop eating long enough to speak.”

I blink at her.

She scrapes a bit of frosting off the plate and holds up the fork, like a lollipop, before popping it in her mouth. And only after she’s licked the thing clean do I say:

“That fork was in my mouth.”

She hesitates. Stares at the cake. “I thought you weren’t eating this.”

“I’m not eating it *anymore*,” I say. “But I took a couple of bites.”

And there’s something about the way she straightens—something about the mortified way she says, “Of course you did,” as she puts down the fork—that unclenches the fist around my spine. Her reaction is so juvenile—as if we haven’t already kissed, as if we don’t already know what it’s like to taste the same things at the same time—that I can’t help it. I start laughing.

A moment later, she's laughing, too.

And suddenly I feel almost human again.

I sigh, losing some of the tension in my shoulders. I rest my elbows on the wooden table and drop my head in my hands.

"Hey," she says quietly. "You can tell me, you know."

Her voice is close. Warm. I take a deep breath. "Tell you what?"

"Tell me what's wrong."

I laugh again, but this time the sound is bitter. Nazeera is the last person I want to talk to. It must be some kind of cruel joke that, of all the people I know, she's the one pretending to care.

I sigh as I sit up, frowning into the distance.

I spot Juliette across the room—long brown hair and electric smile—in less than a second. Right now my best friend has eyes only for her boyfriend, and I'm both annoyed and resigned to the fact. I can't blame her for claiming a bit of joy tonight; I know she's been through hell.

But right now I need her, too.

It's been a rough night, and I wanted to talk to her earlier, to ask her what she thinks about the situation with Adam and James, but I'd only made it halfway across the room when Castle pulled me back. He made me promise to leave her alone tonight. He said it was important for J to have alone time with Warner. He wanted them to have a few moments of peace—an uninterrupted night to recover from everything they've been through. I rolled my eyes so hard they nearly fell out of my head.

No one ever gives *me* an uninterrupted night to recover from all the shit I've been through. No one really cares about my emotional state; no one but J, if I'm being honest.

I keep staring at her, my eyes burning holes in her back. I want her to look at me. I know if she could just see me, she'd know something was wrong and she'd come over here. I know she would. But the truth is, it's not just Castle keeping me from ruining her night; after everything they've been through, she and Warner really do deserve a proper reunion. I also think that if I tried to pry her away from Warner right now he'd try to murder me for real.

But sometimes I wonder—

What about me?

Why don't my feelings matter? Other people get to experience a full range of emotions without judgment, but I can't be anything but happy

without making most people uncomfortable. Everyone is used to seeing me smiling, being goofy. I'm the fun guy, the easygoing guy. I'm the one everyone can count on for a good laugh. When I'm sad or pissed off no one knows what to do with me. I've tried talking to Castle or Winston—even Ian—but no one has ever clicked with me the way J does. Castle always tries his best, but he doesn't approve of wallowing. He gives me thirty seconds to complain before he's offering me a motivational speech, telling me to be strong. Ian, on the other hand, gets itchy when I tell him too much. He tries to be sympathetic, but then he bolts the first chance he gets. Winston listens. He's a good listener, at least. But then, instead of responding to what I just said, he takes a turn talking about all the things he's been dealing with, and even though I understand that he needs to vent, too, by the end of it I feel ten times worse.

But with Juliette—

Ella?

With her, it's different. I never even realized just how much I was missing until we really got to know each other. She lets me talk. She doesn't rush me. She doesn't tell me to calm down or feed me bullshit lines or tell me everything will be fine. When I'm trying to get things off my chest she doesn't make the conversation about her or her own problems. She understands. I can tell. She doesn't have to say a word. I can look into her eyes and know she gets it. She gives a shit about me in a way no one else ever has. It's the same thing that makes her a great leader: she genuinely cares about people. She cares about their lives.

"Kenji?"

Nazeera's touching my hand again, but this time I pull away, jerking awkwardly in my seat. And when I finally look up, into her eyes—I'm surprised.

She seems genuinely worried.

"Kenji," she says again. "You're scaring me."

Two

I shake my head as I stand, trying my best to look unbothered.

"It's nothing," I say, but I'm still staring out across the room when I say it.

J is laughing at something that pretty boy just said to her, and then he smiles, and she smiles back, and she's still smiling when he leans in and whispers something in her ear and I watch, in real time, as her whole face turns red. And then he's touching her, kissing her here, right in front of everyone and—

I turn away sharply.

I definitely wasn't supposed to see that.

Technically, they're not *right in front of everyone*. There is no *everyone*. There are like five people in this room. And J and Warner are actually as far away from everyone as they could manage, tucked in a corner of the room. I'm pretty sure I just violated their privacy.

Yeah, I should definitely go to bed.

"You're in love with her, aren't you?"

That wakes me up.

I spin around. Nazeera is looking at me like she thinks she's some kind of genius, like she's finally figured out the Secret Mysteries of Kenji.

As if I were that easy to understand.

"I don't know why I didn't see it before," she's saying. "You guys have such a weird, intense relationship." She shakes her head. "Of course you're in love with her."

Jesus. I'm too tired for this.

I move past Nazeera, rolling my eyes as I go. "I am not in love with her."

"I'm pretty sure I know wh—"

“You don’t know anything, okay?” I stop. Turn to face her. “You don’t know shit about me. Just like I don’t know shit about you.”

Her eyebrows fly up her forehead. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Don’t do that,” I say, pointing at her. “Don’t pretend to be dumb.”

And I’m out the door, halfway down the dimly lit path leading to my tent, when I hear her voice again.

“Are you still mad at me?” she says. “About the thing with Anderson?”

I stop so suddenly I nearly trip. I turn around, and now I’m looking at her, and I can’t help it: I laugh out loud, and it sounds crazy. “The *thing* with Anderson? Are you serious? You mean the *thing* where he showed up, back from the dead and ready to murder all of us because you told him where we were? Or do you mean the thing where he killed Delalieu? Or wait, maybe you mean the thing where he put all of us in an asylum to rot to death—or maybe it’s the thing where you bound, gagged, drugged, and dragged me onto a plane with him all the way to the other side of the goddamn world?”

She moves lightning fast, standing in front of me in seconds. And then, fury making her voice shake: “I did what I did to save your life. I was saving all of your lives. You should be *thanking* me—and instead you’re standing here shouting at me like a child, when I single-handedly saved your entire team from certain death.” She shakes her head. “You’re unbelievable. You have no idea what I risked in order to make that happen, and it’s not my fault if you can’t understand.”

Silence steps between us, pushes us apart.

“You know what’s hilarious?” I shake my head, look up at the night sky. “*This*,” I say. “This conversation is hilarious.”

“Are you drunk?”

“Stop.” I turn back, level her with a dark look. “Stop underestimating my mind. You think I’m too dumb to understand the most basic shit about a rescue mission? Of course I understand,” I say angrily. “I get that you had to do some shady things in order to make our escape happen. I’m not angry about that. I’m angry right now because you don’t know how to *communicate*.”

I see it when her face changes. The fire goes out of her eyes; the tension leaves her shoulders. And then she blinks at me—

Confused.

“I don’t understand,” Nazeera says quietly.

The sun has been dead for hours now, and the dark, winding path is lit only by low lanterns and the diffused light of nearby tents. She's bathed in it. Glowing. More beautiful than ever, which is nothing short of terrifying, to be honest. Her eyes are big and bright and she's staring at me like she's just a girl and I'm just a guy and we're not both just a pair of dumbasses headed directly for the sun. Like we're not both murderers, more or less.

I sigh. Shove a hand through my hair. The fight has left my body and I'm suddenly so exhausted I'm not sure I can keep standing.

"I need to go to bed," I say, and try to move past her.

"Wait—"

She grabs my arm and I nearly jump out of my skin at the sensation. I pull away, unnerved, but she steps forward and suddenly we're standing so close together I can practically feel her breathing. The night is quiet and crisp and she's all I can see in this flickering darkness. I breathe, breathing her in—something subtle, something sweet—and the memory hits me so hard it knocks the air from my lungs.

Her arms around my neck.

Her hands in my hair.

The way she pinned me against the wall, the way our bodies melted together, the way she ran her hands down my chest and told me I was gorgeous. The soft, desperate sounds she made when I kissed her.

I know now how it feels to have her in my arms. I know what it's like to kiss her, to lick the curve of her lips, to feel her gasp against my neck. I can still taste her, feel the shape of her, strength and softness, under my hands. I'm not even touching her and it's like it's happening again, frame by frame, and I can't stop staring at her mouth because that damn diamond piercing keeps catching the light, and for a moment—for just a moment—I nearly lose my mind and kiss her again.

My head is full of noise, blood rushing to my ears.

She drives me insane. I don't even know why I like her so much. But I have no control over how my body reacts when she's around. It's wild and illogical and I love it. I hate it.

Some nights I fall asleep running back the tapes—her eyes, her hands, her mouth—

But the tapes always end in the same spot.

“It would never work, you know? We’re not—” She makes a motion between our bodies. “We’re so different, right?”

“Kenji?”

Right. Yeah. Shit, I’m tired.

I take a step backward. The cold night air is sharp and bracing, and when I finally meet her eyes again, my head is clear.

But my voice sounds strange when I say, “I should go.”

“Wait,” Nazeera says again, and puts her hand on my chest.

Puts her hand on my chest.

She’s got her hand on me like she owns me, like I’m so easily stopped and conquered. A flame of indignation sparks to life inside of me. It’s obvious she’s used to getting whatever she wants. Either that, or she takes it by force.

I remove her hand from my chest. She doesn’t seem to notice.

“I don’t understand,” she says. “What do you mean I don’t know how to communicate? If I didn’t tell you anything about the mission, it was because you didn’t need to know.”

I roll my eyes.

“You think I didn’t need to know that you’d given Anderson a heads-up? You think all of us didn’t need to know that he was (a) alive, and (b) on his way to murder us? You didn’t think of giving Delalieu a warning to shut his mouth just long enough to keep himself from getting murdered?” My frustration is snowballing. “You could’ve told me that you were going to throw us in the asylum *temporarily*. You could’ve told me that you were going to drug me—you didn’t need to knock me out and kidnap me and let me think I was about to be executed. I would’ve come voluntarily,” I say, my voice growing louder. “I would’ve *helped* you, goddammit.”

But Nazeera is unmoved. Her eyes go cold. “You clearly have no idea what I’m dealing with,” she says quietly, “if you really think it was that simple. I couldn’t risk—”

“And *you* clearly have no idea how to work in a group,” I say, cutting her off. “Which makes you nothing more than a liability.”

Her eyes go wide with rage.

“You fly solo, Nazeera. You live by a moral code I don’t understand, which basically means you do whatever you want, and you change allegiances whenever it feels right or convenient. You cover your hair

sometimes—and only when you think it's safe—because it's rebellious, but there's no real commitment in it. You don't actually align yourself with any group, and you still do whatever your dad tells you to do until you decide, for a little while, that you don't want to listen to The Reestablishment.

"You're unpredictable," I say to her. "All over the place. Today, you're on our side—but what about tomorrow?" I shake my head. "I have no idea what your real motivations are. I never know what you're really thinking. And I can never let my guard down around you—because I have no way of knowing whether you're just using me. I can't trust you."

She stares at me, still as stone, and says nothing for what feels like a century. Finally, she takes a step back. Her eyes are inscrutable.

"You should be careful," she says. "That's a dangerous speech to give to someone you can't trust."

But I'm not buying it. Not this time.

"Bullshit," I say. "If you were going to kill me, you'd have done it a long time ago."

"I might change my mind. Apparently I'm unpredictable. All over the place."

"Whatever," I mutter. "I'm done here."

I shake my head and I'm gone, already walking away, five steps closer to sleep and quiet, when she shouts angrily—

"I opened up to you! I let my guard down around *you*, even if you can't do it for me."

That stops me in my tracks.

I spin around. "When?" I shout back, throwing up my hands in frustration. "When have you ever trusted me? When have you ever opened up to me? Never. No— You just do your own thing, whatever and however you want, consequences be damned, and you expect everyone to be cool with it. Well I call bullshit, okay? I'm not into it."

"I told you about my powers!" she cries, her hands in fists at her sides. "I told you guys everything I knew about Ella and Emmaline!"

I let out a long, exhausted breath. I take a few steps toward her, but only because I don't want to shout anymore.

"I don't know how to explain this," I say, steadying my voice. "I mean, I'm trying. I really am. But I don't know how to— Like, listen, I get that you telling me you can be invisible was a big deal. I get that. But there's a huge difference between you sharing a bunch of classified information with

a large group of people and you actually *opening* up to me. I don't— I don't want—" I cut myself off, clenching my teeth too hard. "You know what? Never mind."

"No, go ahead," she says, her own anger barely contained. "Say it. What *don't* you want?"

Finally, I meet her eyes. They're bright. Angry. And I don't know what happens, exactly, but staring at her cuts something loose in my brain. Something unkind. Unfiltered.

"I don't want this sterilized version of you," I say. "I don't want the cold, calculating person you have to be for everyone else. This version of you is cruel and unfeeling and loyal to no one. You're not a nice person, Nazeera. You're mean and condescending and arrogant. But all of that would be tolerable, I swear, if I felt like you had a heart in there somewhere. Because if we're going to be friends—if we're going to be *anything*—I need to be able to trust you. And I don't trust friendships of convenience. I don't trust machines."

Too late, I realize my mistake.

Nazeera looks stunned.

She blinks and blinks, and for one long, excruciating second her stony exterior gives way to raw, trembling emotion that makes her look like a child. She stares up at me and suddenly she looks small—young and scared and small. Her eyes glitter, wet with feeling, and the whole picture is so heartbreaking it hits me hard, like a punch to the gut.

A moment later, it's gone.

She turns away, locks the feelings away, slips the mask back on.

I feel frozen.

I just messed up on some cosmic scale and I don't know how to fix it. I don't know what protocol to follow. I also don't know how or when, exactly, I turned into such a grade A douchebag, but I think hanging out with Warner all the time hasn't done me any favors.

I'm not this guy. I don't make girls cry.

But I don't know how to undo this, either. Maybe if I say nothing. Maybe if I just stand here, blinking at outer space, I can turn back the clock. I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. I only know that I must be a real piece of shit, because anyone who can make Nazeera Ibrahim cry is probably some kind of monster. I didn't even think Nazeera *could* cry. I didn't know she still did that.

That’s how stupid I am.

I just made the daughter of the supreme commander of Asia *cry*.

When she finally faces me, the tears are gone but her voice is cold. Hollow. And it’s almost like she can’t even believe she’s saying the words when she says, “I kissed you. Did you think I was a machine then, too?”

My mind goes suddenly blank. “Maybe?”

I hear her sharp intake of breath. Pain flashes across her face.

Oh my God, I’m worse than stupid.

I’m a bad human being.

I have no idea what’s wrong with me. I need to stop talking. I want to not be doing this. Not be here. I want to go back to my room and go to sleep and not be here. But something is broken—my brain, my mouth, my general motor controls.

Worse: I don’t know how to get out of here. Where is the eject button for escape from conversations with terrifying, beautiful women?

She says: “You honestly think I would do something like that—you think I would kiss you like that—just to manipulate you?”

I blink at her.

I feel like I’m trapped in a nightmare. Guilt and confusion and exhaustion and anger fuse together, escalating the chaos in my brain to the point of pain and suddenly, incomprehensibly, my head pops off.

Desperate, stupid—

I can’t stop shouting.

“How am I supposed to know what you would or wouldn’t do to manipulate someone?” I shout. “How am I supposed to know anything about you? How do I even get to be in the same room as someone like you? This whole situation is *bananas*.” I’m still shouting. Still trying to figure out how to calm down. “I mean, not only do you know how to murder me in a thousand different ways, but, considering the fact that you’re, like, the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in my life— I mean, yeah, it makes a lot more sense that you were just messing with me than it does for me to believe in some alternate universe where you actually find me attractive.”

“You are *unbelievable*!”

“And you’re clearly insane.”

Her mouth falls open. Literally falls open. And for a second she looks so angry I think she might actually rip the throat out of my body.

I backtrack.

“Okay, I’m sorry—you’re not insane—but twenty minutes ago you were accusing me of being in love with my best friend, so, to be fair, I think my feelings are warranted.”

“You were looking at her like you were in love with her!”

“Jesus Christ, woman, I look at *you* like I’m in love with you!”

“I— Wait. What?”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Nothing. Never mind. I have to go.”

“Kenji—”

But I’m already gone.

Three

When I get back to my room I shut the door and sag against it, sinking to the floor in a sad, pathetic heap. I drop my head into my hands and, in a jarring moment, I think—

I wish my mom were here.

The feeling sideswipes me so fast I can't stop it in time. It grows quickly, spiraling out of control: sadness breeding sadness, self-pity circling me mercilessly. All my shitty experiences—every heartbreak, every disappointment—choose this minute to tear me open, dining out on my heart until there's nothing left, until the grief eats me alive.

I crumble under the weight of it.

I duck my head into my knees, wrap my arms around my shins. Shocks of pain unfurl in my chest, fingers breaking through my rib cage, closing around my lungs.

I can't catch my breath.

At first, I don't feel the tears running down my face. At first I just hear my breathing, harsh and gasping, and I don't understand the sound. I lift my head, stunned, and force out a laugh but it feels foreign, stupid. I'm stupid. I press my fists against my eyes and grit my teeth, driving the tears back into my skull.

I don't know what's wrong with me tonight.

I feel off, unbalanced. Aching for something. I'm losing sight of my purpose, my sense of direction. I always tell myself that I'm fighting every day for hope, for the salvation of humanity, but every time I survive only to return to yet more loss and devastation, something comes loose inside of me. It's like the people and places I love are the nuts and bolts keeping me upright; without them, I'm just scrap metal.

I sigh, long and shaky. Drop my face in my hands.

I almost never allow myself to think about my mom. Almost never. But right now, something about the darkness, the cold, the fear, and the guilt—my confusion over Nazeera—

I wish I could talk to my mom.

I wish she were here to hold me, guide me. I wish I could crawl into her arms like I used to, I wish I could feel her fingers against my scalp at the end of a long night, massaging away the tension. When I had nightmares, or when Dad was gone too long looking for work, she and I would stay up together, holding each other. I'd cling to her and she'd rock me gently, running her fingers through my hair, whispering jokes in my ear. She was the funniest person I ever knew. So smart. So sharp.

God, I miss her.

Sometimes I miss her so much I think my chest is caving in. I feel like I'm sinking in the feeling, like I might never come up for air. And sometimes I think I could just die there, in those moments, violently drowned by emotion.

But then, miraculously—inch by inch—the feeling abates. It's slow, excruciating work, but eventually the cataract clears, and somehow I'm alive again. Alone again.

Here, in the dark, with my memories.

Sometimes I feel so alone in this world I can't even breathe.

Castle's got his kid back. My friends have all found their partners. We've lost Adam. Lost James. Lost everyone else from Omega Point, too. It still hits me sometimes. Still knocks me over when I forget to bury the feelings deep enough.

But I can't keep going like this. I'm falling apart, and I don't have time to fall apart. People need me, depend on me.

I have to get my shit together.

I drag myself up, bracing my back against the door as I find my footing. I've been sitting in the dark, in the cold, in the same clothes I've been wearing for a week. I'll be all right; I just need a change of pace.

James and Adam are probably fine.

They've got to be.

I head to the bathroom, hitting light switches as I go, and turn on the water. I strip off these old clothes, promising to set them on fire as soon as I can, and pull open a few drawers, sifting through the amenities and cotton

basics Nouria said would be stocked in our rooms. Satisfied, I step in the shower. I don’t know how they got hot water here, and I don’t care.

This is perfect.

I lean against the cold tile as the hot water slaps me in the face. Eventually I sink to the floor, too tired to stand.

I let the heat boil me alive.

Four

I thought the shower would perform some kind of restorative cure, but it didn't work as well as I hoped. I feel clean, which is worth something, but I still feel bad. Like, physically bad. I think I've got a better handle on my emotions, but— I don't know.

I think I'm delirious. Or jet-lagged. Or both.

That has to be it.

I'm so exhausted you'd think I would've fallen asleep the second my head hit the pillow, but no such luck. I spent a couple of hours lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, and then I walked around in the dark for a little while, and now I'm here again, throwing a pair of balled-up socks at the wall while the sun makes lazy moves toward the moon.

There's a sliver of light creeping up the horizon. The beginnings of dawn. I'm staring at the scene through the square of my window, still trying to figure out what the hell is wrong with me, when a sudden, violent banging on my door sends a direct shot of adrenaline to my brain.

I'm on my feet in seconds, heart pounding, head pounding. I pull on clothes and boots so fast I nearly kill myself in the process, but when I finally pull the door open, Brendan looks relieved.

"Good," he says. "You're dressed."

"What's wrong?" I ask automatically.

Brendan sighs. He looks sad—and then, for just a second:

He looks scared.

"What's wrong?" I ask again. Adrenaline is moving through me now, dousing my fear. I feel calmer. Sharper. "What happened?"

Brendan hesitates; glances at something over his shoulder. "I'm just a messenger, mate. I'm not supposed to tell you anything."

"What? Why not?"

“Trust me,” he says, meeting my eyes. “It’ll help to hear this from Castle himself.”

Five

“Why?” is the first thing I say to Castle.

I burst through the doorway with maybe a little too much force, but I can’t help it. I’m freaking out. “Why do I have to hear this directly from you?” I ask. “What’s going on?”

I can hardly keep the anger out of my voice. I can hardly keep myself from imagining every possible worst-case scenario. Any number of horrible things could’ve happened to merit dragging me out of bed before dawn, and making me wait even five extra minutes to find out what the hell is going on is nothing short of cruel.

Castle stares at me, his face grim, and I take a deep breath, look around, steady my pulse. I have no idea where I am. This looks like some kind of . . . headquarters. Another building. Castle, Sam, and Nouria are seated at a long wooden table, atop which are scattered papers, waterlogged blueprints, a ruler, three pocketknives, and several old cups of coffee.

“Sit down, Kenji.”

But I’m still looking around, this time searching for J. Ian and Lily are here. Brendan and Winston, too.

No J. No Warner. And no one is making eye contact with me.

“Where’s Juliette?” I ask.

“You mean Ella,” Castle says gently.

“Whatever. Why isn’t she here?”

“Kenji,” Castle says. “Please sit down. This is hard enough without having to manage your emotions, too. Please.”

“With all due respect, sir, I’ll sit down after I know what the hell is going on.”

Castle sighs heavily. Finally, he says—

“You were right.”

My eyes widen, my heart still hammering in my chest. “Excuse me?”

“You were right,” Castle says, and his voice catches on the last word. He clenches and unclenches his fists. “About Adam. And James.”

But I’m shaking my head. “I don’t want to be right. I was overreacting. They’re fine. Don’t listen to me,” I say, sounding a little crazy. “I’m not right. I’m never right.”

“Kenji.”

“*No*.”

Castle looks up, looks me directly in the eye. He looks devastated. Beyond devastated.

“Tell me this is a joke,” I say.

“Anderson has taken the boys hostage,” he says, glancing at Brendan and Winston. Ian. The ghost of Emory. “He’s doing it again.”

I can’t handle this.

My heart can’t handle this. I’m already too close to the edge of crisis. This is too much. *Too much.*

“You’re wrong,” I insist. “Anderson wouldn’t do that, not to James. James is just a child— He wouldn’t do that to a child—”

“Yes,” Winston says quietly. “He would.”

I glance over at him, my eyes wild. I feel stupid. I feel like my skin is too tight. Too loose. And I’m looking at Castle again when I say:

“How do you know? How can you be sure this isn’t another trap, just like last time—”

“Of course it’s a trap,” Nouria says. Her voice is firm but not unkind. She glances at Castle before she says: “I’m not sure why, but my dad is making this sound like a simple hostage situation. It’s not. We’re not even sure exactly what’s happening yet. It definitely looks like Anderson is holding the boys hostage, but it’s also clear that there’s something much bigger happening behind the scenes. Anderson is plotting something. If he weren’t, he wouldn’t have—”

“I think,” Sam says, squeezing her wife’s hand, “what Nouria is trying to say is that we think Adam and James play only a small role in all of this.”

I glance between them, confused. There’s tension in the room that wasn’t there a moment ago, but my head feels too full of sand to figure it out. “I don’t think I understand what you’re getting at,” I say.

But it’s Castle who explains.

“It’s not just Adam and James,” he says. “Anderson currently has custody of all the kids—specifically, the children of the supreme commanders.”

And I’m about to ask another question before I realize—

I’m the *only* one asking questions right now. I glance around the room, at the faces of my friends. They look sad but determined. Like they already know how this story ends, and they’re ready to face it.

I’m floored by the revelation. And I can’t keep the edge out of my voice when I say, “Why was I the last to be informed about this?”

My question is followed by perfect silence. Harried glances. Nervous expressions.

Then, finally:

“We knew it would be hard for you,” Lily says. Lily, who never gives a shit about my feelings. “You’d just been on this crazy mission, and then we had to shoot your plane out of the sky— Honestly, we weren’t sure if we should tell you right away.” She hesitates. And then, aiming an irritated look at the other ladies in the room: “But if it makes you feel any better, Nouria and Sam didn’t tell *us* right away, either.”

“What?” My eyebrows fly up my head. “What the hell is going on? When did you first get the news?”

The room goes quiet again.

“*When?*” I demand.

“Fourteen hours ago,” Nouria says.

“*Fourteen hours ago?*” My eyes widen to the point of pain. “You knew about this *fourteen hours ago* and you’re only telling me now? Castle?”

He shakes his head.

“They kept it from me, too,” he says, and despite his calm demeanor, I notice the tension in his jaw. He won’t look me in the eye. He won’t look at Nouria, either.

Realization dawns with sudden, startling speed, and I finally understand: there are too many cooks in this metaphorical kitchen.

I had no idea what kind of complicated shitshow I’d just walked into, but it’s clear that Nouria and Sam are used to running this place on their own. Daughter or not, Nouria is the head of this resistance, and it doesn’t matter how much she likes having her dad around, she’s not about to cede control. Which apparently means she’s going to keep him from accessing

classified information before she deems it necessary. Which means— Hell, I think it means Castle has no real authority anymore.

Holy shit.

"So you knew about this," I say, looking from Nouria to Sam. "You knew it when we landed here yesterday—you knew then that Anderson was rounding up the kids. When we had cake and sang happy birthday to Warner, you knew that James and Adam had been abducted. When I asked, over and over and over again, why the hell Adam and James weren't here, you knew and *said nothing*—"

"Calm down," Nouria says sharply. "You're losing control."

"How could you lie to us like that?" I demand, not bothering to keep my voice down. "How could you stand there and smile when you knew our friends were suffering?"

"Because we had to be sure," Sam says to me. And then she sighs, heavily, pushing wisps of her blond hair out of her face. There are purple smudges under her eyes that tell me I'm not the only one who's been losing sleep lately. "Anderson had his men feed this information directly underground. He planted it in our networks on purpose, which made me doubt his motives from the start.

"Anderson seems to have figured out that your team took refuge with another rebel group," she says. "But he doesn't know which of us is protecting you. I figured he was just trying to lure us out, into the open, so I wanted to verify the information before we spread it any further. We didn't want to take next steps without being certain, and we didn't think it would be good for morale to spread hurtful information that might, ultimately, be false."

"You waited fourteen hours to spread information that might've been *true*," I cry. "Anderson could've decided to kill them off by now!"

Nouria shakes her head. "That's not how a hostage situation works. He's made it clear he wants something from us. He wouldn't kill off his own bargaining chips."

I go suddenly still. "What do you mean? What does he want from us?" Then, looking around again: "And why the hell isn't Juliette here right now? She needs to be hearing this."

"There's no reason to disturb Ella's sleep," Sam says, "because there's nothing we can do at the moment. We'll fill her in in the morning."

“The hell we are,” I say angrily, forgetting myself. “I’m sorry, sir, I know we’re not at Point anymore, but you have to do something. This isn’t okay. J led a goddamn resistance—she doesn’t want to be coddled or protected from this shit. And when she finds out that we didn’t tell her she’s going to be pissed.”

“Kenji—”

“This is all some sort of bullshit, anyway,” I say, my hands caught in my hair. “A bluff. More lies. There’s no way Anderson has all the other kids. He’s obviously trying to mess with our heads—and it’s working—because he knows we could never be sure whether he’s actually taken them hostage. This is all some complicated mind game,” I say. “It’s the perfect play.”

“It’s not,” Brendan says, putting his hand on my shoulder. His eyebrows pull together with concern. “It’s not a mind game.”

“Of course it—”

“Sam saw them,” Nouria says. “We have proof.”

I stiffen. “What?”

“I can see across long distances,” Sam says. She tries to smile, but she just looks tired. “Really, really long distances. We figured if Anderson was going to take the kids anywhere he’d do it somewhere close to his home base, where he has soldiers and resources at his disposal. And when Ella told us Evie was dead, I felt even more certain that he’d head back to North America, where he’d need to do damage control and maintain his power over the continent. In the event that another rebel group tried to take advantage of the sudden upheaval, he’d have to be here, exercise his power, maintain order. So I focused on Sector 45 in my search. It took nearly all fourteen hours to do a proper sweep, but I’m certain I’ve found enough evidence to support his claims.”

“What the hell kind of— You’re certain you’ve found *enough* evidence? What kind of vague nonsense is that? And why are you the one who gets to decide wh—”

“Watch your tone, Kishimoto,” Nouria says sharply. “Sam has been working nonstop trying to figure this situation out. You will recognize her authority here, where we’ve offered you refuge, and you will give her your gratitude and your respect.”

Sam places a calming hand on Nouria’s arm. “It’s all right,” Sam says, still looking at me. “He’s just overset.”

“We’re all overset,” Nouria says, narrowing her eyes at me. Anger gives her a sudden, ethereal glow that makes her dark skin seem almost bioluminescent. For a moment, I can’t look away.

I give my head a quick shake to clear it.

“I’m not trying to be disrespectful,” I say. “I just don’t understand why we’re buying into this. ‘Enough evidence’ doesn’t sound convincing, especially not when Anderson pulled this exact same shit before. Do you remember how that turned out? If it weren’t for J, who saved all our asses that day, we’d be dead. Ian would definitely be dead right now.”

“Yes,” Castle says patiently, “but you’re forgetting one important detail.”

I tilt my head at him.

“Anderson did indeed have our men. He never lied about that.”

I clench my jaw. My fists. My whole body turns to stone.

“Denial is the first stage of grief, bro.”

“Fuck off, Sanchez.”

“That is *enough*,” Castle says, standing up with sudden force. He looks livid, the table rattling under his splayed fingers. “What’s the matter with you, son? This isn’t like you—this angry, reckless, disrespectful behavior. Your harsh judgments are doing nothing to help the current situation.”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Anger explodes in the blackness behind my eyelids, fireworks building and breaking me down.

My head is spinning.

My heart is spinning.

A bead of sweat travels down my back and I shiver, involuntarily.

“Fine,” I snap, opening my eyes. “I apologize for my disrespectful behavior. But I’m only going to ask this question one more time before I go and get her myself: Why the hell isn’t Juliette here right now?”

Their collective silence is the only answer I need.

“What is really going on?” I say angrily. “Why are you doing this? Why are you letting her sleep and rest and recover so much? What aren’t you telling m—”

“Kenji.” Castle sounds suddenly different. His eyes are pulled together, his forehead creased in concern. “Are you feeling all right?”

I blink. Take a sudden, steadying breath. “I’m fine,” I say, but for a second the words sound strange, like I got caught in an echo.

“Bro, you don’t look okay.”

Who said that?

Ian?

I turn toward his voice, but everything seems to warp as I move, sounds bending in half.

“Yeah, maybe you should get some sleep.”

Winston?

I turn again, and this time all the sounds speed up, fast-forwarding until they collide in real time. My ears start ringing. And then I look down, realizing too late that my hands are shaking. My teeth are shaking. Chattering. I’m *freezing*. “Why is it so cold in here?” I ask.

Brendan is suddenly standing next to me. “Let me take you back to your room,” he says. “Maybe y—”

“I’m fine,” I lie, lurching away from him. I can feel my heart racing too fast, the movement so quick it’s a blur, practically a vibration.

It freaks me out.

I need to calm down. I need to catch my breath. I need to sit—or lean against something—

Exhaustion hits me like a bullet between the eyes. Suddenly, ferociously, digging its claws into my chest and dragging me down. I stumble over to a chair, blinking slowly. My arms feel heavy. My heart rate begins to slow. I’m liquid.

My eyes fall closed.

Instantly, an image of James materializes in my mind: hungry, bruised, beaten. Alone and terrified.

Horror sends an electric shock to my heart, brings me back to life.

My eyes fly open.

“Listen.” My throat is dry. I swallow, hard. “Listen,” I say again, “if this is true, if James and Adam are really being held hostage by Anderson right now, then we have to go. We have to go right now. Right the hell *now*—”

“Kenji, we can’t,” Sam says. She’s standing in front of me, which surprises me. “We can’t do anything right now.” She’s pronouncing the words slowly. Carefully, like she’s talking to a child.

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t know yet exactly where they are.” Nouria, this time. “And because you’re right: this whole thing is some kind of a trap.”

She’s looking at me like she feels sorry for me, and it sends another shot of anger through my blood. “We can’t go into this unprepared,” she says. “We need more time. More information.”

“We’re going to get them back,” Castle says, stepping forward. He drops his hands on my shoulders, peers into my face. “I swear to you we’ll get them back. James and Adam are going to be fine. We just need to form a plan first.”

“No,” I say angrily, breaking away. “None of this makes sense. Juliette needs to be here. This whole situation is fucked.”

“*Kenji—*”

I storm out of the room.

Six

I must be out of my mind.

That's got to be it. There's no other reason why I'd swear in Castle's face, scream at his daughter, fight my own friends, and still be standing here at dawn, pressing this doorbell for the third time. It's like I'm *asking* to be murdered. It's like I want Warner to just punch me in the face or something. Even now, through the thick, dumb fog of my head, I know I shouldn't be here. I know it's not right.

But I'm either (a) too stupid, (b) too tired, (c) too angry, or (d) all of the above, to give a proper shit about their personal space or their privacy. And then, as if on cue, I hear his muffled, angry voice through the door.

"Please, love. Just ignore it."

"What if something's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," he says. "It's just Kenji."

"Kenji?" I hear some kind of shuffle, and my heart picks up. J always comes through. She *always* comes through. "How do you know it's Kenji?"

"Call it a wild guess," Warner says.

I ring the doorbell again.

"Coming!" *J*. Finally.

"She's *not* coming," Warner shouts. "Go away."

"I'm not going anywhere," I shout back. "I want to talk to Juliette. Ella. Jella. Jello. Whatever."

"Ella, love, please—let me kill him."

I hear J laugh, which is sweet, actually, because it's clear she thinks Warner's joking. Me, on the other hand—I'm pretty sure he's not.

Warner says something then, something I don't hear. The room goes quiet, and, for a moment, I'm confused. And then I realize I've been bested. Warner probably got her back into bed.

Goddammit.

"But that's exactly why I should answer the door," I hear her say. More silence. Then rustling. A muted thud. "If he needs to talk to me this early in the morning, it must be important."

Warner sighs so loudly I actually hear it through the wall.

I press the doorbell again.

A single, unintelligible cry.

"*Hey*," I call out. "Seriously—someone open the door. I'm freezing my ass off out here."

More angry mutters from Warner.

"I'll be right there," Jello shouts.

"What's taking so long?" I ask.

"I'm trying to—" I hear her laugh, and then, in a soft, sweet voice clearly directed at someone else: "Aaron, please—I promise I'll be right back."

"J?"

"I'm trying to get dressed!"

"*Oh*." I try really, really hard not to picture them both, undressed, in bed together, but somehow I can't fight the image from materializing. "Okay, ew."

Then: "Sweetheart, how long do you plan on being friends with him?"

J laughs again.

Man, that girl has no clue.

I mean, okay . . . It's true that if for five seconds I stopped to put myself in Warner's shoes, I'd understand exactly why he wants to kill me so often. If I were in bed with my girl and some needy asshole kept ringing the doorbell for no reason except that he wanted to talk through his feelings with her, I'd want to murder him, too.

Then again, I don't have a girl, and at this rate, I probably never will. So I kind of don't care—and Warner knows that. It's half the reason he hates me so much. He can't push me away without hurting J, but he can't let me in without sharing her, either. He's in a shitty position.

Works out for me, though.

And I've still got my finger hovering over the doorbell when I hear footsteps, growing closer. But when the door finally flies open, I take a sudden, jerky step back.

Warner looks furious.

His hair is disheveled, the sash on his robe tied too quickly. He's shirtless, barefoot, and probably naked under that robe, which is the only reason I force myself to meet his eyes.

Shit.

He wasn't joking even a little bit. He's, like, genuinely pissed.

And his voice is low—lethal—when he says, "I should've let you freeze to death in Kent's old apartment. I should've let those rodents devour your carefully preserved carcass. I should've—"

"Listen, man, I'm really not trying to—"

"*Don't* interrupt me."

My mouth snaps shut.

He takes a sharp, steady breath. His eyes are like fire. Green. Ice. Fire. In that order. "Why do you do this to me? Why?"

"Um. Okay, I know this will be hard for a narcissist like you to understand, but this has nothing to do with you. J is my friend. In fact, she was my friend first. We were friends long before you ever came around."

Warner's eyes widen with outrage. And before he has a chance to speak, I say—

"My bad. I'm sorry." I hold up my hands in apology. "I forgot about the whole memory-wiping thing for a second. But honestly, whatever. As far as *my* memories are concerned, I knew her first."

And then, all of a sudden—

Warner frowns.

It's like someone hits a switch, and the fire in his eyes goes out. He's studying me closely now, and it's making me nervous.

"What's going on?" he says. He tilts his head at me, and, a moment later, his eyes widen in surprise. "Why are you terrified?"

Jello shows up before I can answer.

She smiles at me—this big, bright, happy thing that always warms my heart—and I'm relieved to discover that she's fully clothed. Not naked-under-a-bathrobe-clothed, but, like, she's wearing a coat and shoes and she's ready to walk out the door kind of clothed.

I feel like I can finally breathe.

But in an instant, her smile is gone. And when she goes suddenly pale, when her eyes pull together in concern—I feel the tiniest bit better. I know it sounds strange, but there's something reassuring about her reaction; it means that at least something is right with the world. Because I *knew*. I

knew that, unlike everyone else, she'd see right away that I wasn't okay. That I'm not okay. No superpowers necessary.

And somehow, that means everything.

"Kenji," she says, "what's wrong?"

I can hardly hold it together anymore. A dull, throbbing pain is pressing against the back of my left eye; black spots fade in and out of my vision, pockmarking everything. I feel like I can't get enough air, like my chest is too small, my brain too big.

"Kenji?"

"It's James," I say, my voice coming out thin. Wrong. "Anderson took him. Anderson took James and Adam. He's holding them hostage."

Seven

We're back in the war room.

I'm standing at the door with J by my side—Warner needed a minute to pick out a cute outfit and braid his hair—and in the fifteen minutes I was gone, the atmosphere in this room changed dramatically. Everyone keeps glancing between me and J. Glaring, more like. Brendan looks tired. Winston looks irritated. Ian looks pissed. Lily looks pissed. Sam looks pissed. Nouria looks pissed.

Castle looks *super* pissed.

He's staring at me through narrowed eyes, and our years together have taught me enough about Castle's body language to know exactly what he's thinking right now.

Right now, he's thinking that he's more than a little disappointed in me, that he feels betrayed by my reneging on a promise to stop using the f-word, that I deliberately disrespected him, and that I should be grounded for two weeks for shouting at his daughter and her wife. Also, he's embarrassed. He expected more from me.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper, sir."

Castle's jaw tenses as he appraises me. "Are you feeling better?"

No. "Yes."

"Then we'll discuss this later."

I look away, too tired to drum up the necessary remorse. I'm too spent. Depleted. Wrung out. I feel like my insides have been scraped out with blunt, rusted tools, but somehow I'm still here. Still standing. Somehow, having J by my side is making this whole thing more tolerable. It feels good to know that there's someone here who's on my team.

After a full minute of awkward silence, J speaks.

“So,” she says, letting the word hang in the air for a moment. “Why didn’t anyone tell me about this meeting?”

“We didn’t want to disturb you,” Nouria says too sweetly. “You’ve had such a rough couple of weeks—we figured it best not to wake you unless we had a firm plan of action.”

J frowns. I can tell she’s considering—and doubting—what Nouria just said to her. It sounds like bullshit to me, too. We pretty much never make special arrangements to let people rest or sleep after a battle—not unless they’re injured. Sometimes, not even then. J, in particular, has never been given special treatment like this before. We don’t treat her like a child, handling her like she’s made of porcelain. Like she might still shatter.

But Jello decides to let it go.

“I realize you were trying to be kind,” she says to Nouria, “and I’m grateful for the space and generosity—especially last night, for Aaron—but you should’ve told us right away. In fact, you should’ve told us the minute we landed. It doesn’t matter how much we’ve been through,” she says. “Our heads are here, in the reality of what we’re dealing with right now, and Aaron is going to be fighting alongside us. It’s time for all of you to stop underestimating him.”

“Wait— What?” Ian frowns. “What does underestimating Warner have to do with James?”

J shakes her head. “Aaron has everything to do with James. In fact,” she says, “I can’t understand why he wasn’t the first person you talked to about this. Your biases are hurting you. Holding you back.”

It’s my turn to frown. “What’s the point of this speech, princess? I don’t see how Warner is relevant to the conversation. And why do you keep calling him Aaron? It’s weird.”

“I— *Oh*,” she says, and frowns. “I’m sorry. My mind— My memories are still . . . I’m having a hard time. He’s been Aaron to me much longer than he was ever Warner.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I think I’ll stick to calling him Warner.”

“I think he’d prefer that from you.”

“Good. Anyway. So you think we underestimate him.”

“I do,” she says.

This time, Nouria speaks up. “And why is that?”

J exhales. Her eyes are both sad and serious when she says:

“Anderson is the kind of monster who’d take hostage a ten-year-old boy and throw him in prison alongside trained soldiers. As far as we know, he’s treating James the same way he’s treating Valentina. Or Lena. Or Adam. It’s inhumane on a level so disturbing I can hardly allow myself to think about it. It’s hard for me to fathom. But it’s not hard for Aaron to imagine. He knows Anderson—and the inner workings of his mind—better than any of us. His knowledge of The Reestablishment and Anderson, in particular, is priceless.

“More important: James is Aaron’s little brother. And if anyone knows what it’s like to be ten years old and tortured by Anderson, it’s Aaron.” She looks up, looks Castle directly in the eye. “How could you think leaving him out of this conversation was a good idea? How could you imagine he wouldn’t be the first to care? He’s devastated.”

And then, as if she conjured him out of thin air, Warner appears at the door. I blink, and Nazeera is following him into the room. I blink again, and Haider and Stephan come into view.

It’s weird, seeing them together like this, all of them little science experiments. Super soldiers. They all walk the same, tall and proud, perfect posture, looking like they own the world.

Which, I guess they kind of do. At least, their parents do.

Bizarre.

I can’t imagine what it must be like to be raised by parents who teach you that the world is yours to do with what you will. Maybe Nazeera was right. Maybe we are too different. Maybe it never would’ve worked out between us, no matter how much I would’ve wanted to give it a shot.

Nazeera, Stephan, and Haider give us a wide berth, standing off to the side and saying nothing—not even waving hello—but Warner keeps walking. Jello meets him in the middle of the room, and he pulls her into his arms like they haven’t seen each other in days. Somehow, I manage not to vomit. But then I hear her whisper something about his birthday, and a massive wave of guilt washes over me.

I can’t believe I forgot.

We were celebrating Warner’s birthday a little prematurely last night. Today is his proper birthday. Today. Right now. This morning.

Shit.

I dragged J out of bed on the morning of his *birthday*.

Wow, I really am an asshole.

When they break apart, Warner makes a sudden, almost imperceptible motion with his head and Nazeera, Stephan, and Haider make their way over to the table, taking their seats alongside Ian and Lily and Brendan and Winston. A little battalion ready for war. Sometimes it's hard to believe we're all just a bunch of kids. It definitely doesn't feel like it. But these four, in particular—they look pretty damn striking.

Warner is wearing a leather jacket. I've never seen him wear a leather jacket before, and I don't know why. It suits him. It has an interesting, complicated collar, and the black of the leather is stark against his gold hair. But the more I think about it, the more I doubt the jacket belongs to him. We had no possessions when we landed here, so I'm guessing Warner borrowed it from Haider. Haider, who's wearing one of his signature chain-mail shirts under a heavy wool coat. But all of that is nothing compared to Stephan, who's wearing a gold field jacket that looks like snakeskin.

It's wild.

These guys look almost like aliens here, among the normals of the world who don't wear chain mail to breakfast. But even I can tell that Haider looks like some kind of warrior with all that metal draped across his chest, and that the gold jacket really pops against the brown of Stephan's skin. But who sells shit like that? They're like outer-space clothes or something. I have no idea where these guys do their shopping, but I think they might be going to the wrong stores. Then again, what the hell would I know. I've been wearing the same ripped pants and shirts for years. Everything I once owned was faded and poorly mended and a little too tight, if I'm being honest. I considered myself lucky to have one good winter coat and a decent pair of boots. That's it.

"Kenji?"

I startle, realizing too late that I got lost in my head again. Someone is talking to me. Someone said my name. Right? I glance at their faces, hoping for recognition, but I get nothing.

I look to J for help, and she smiles. "Nazeera," she explains, "just asked you a question."

Shit.

I was ignoring Nazeera. On purpose. I thought that was obvious. I thought she and I had an understanding—I thought we'd entered into a silent agreement to ignore each other forever, to never acknowledge the

dumb shit I said last night, and to pretend that I can't feel the blood rush to all the wrong places in my body when she touches me.

No?

Okay then.

Shit.

Reluctantly, I turn to look at her. She's wearing that leather hood of hers again, which means I can see only her lips, which seems really, really unfair. She has a gorgeous mouth. Full. Sweet. Damn. I don't want to stare at her mouth. I mean, I do, obviously. But I also definitely don't. Anyway, it's hard enough to have to keep staring at her mouth, but her hood is hiding her eyes, which means I have no idea what she's thinking right now, or if she's still mad at me for what I said last night.

Then—

"I was asking if you'd suspected anything," Nazeera says. "About James. And Adam."

How did I miss that? How long did I spend staring into space thinking about where Haider does his shopping?

Jesus.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I give my head a slight shake, hoping to clear it. "Yeah," I say. "I kind of freaked out about it when we showed up here and I didn't see Adam and James. I told everyone, too," I say, shooting individual glares at my useless friends, "but no one listened to me. Everyone thought I was crazy."

Nazeera pulls back her hood, and for the first time this morning, I can see her face. I search her eyes, but I get nothing. Her expression is clear. There's nothing in her tone or posture to tell me what she's really thinking.

Nothing.

And then her eyes narrow, just a tiny bit. "You told everyone."

"I mean"—I blink, hesitate—"I told some people. Yeah."

"You didn't tell any of us, though." She gestures at the little group of mercenaries. "You didn't tell Ella or Warner. Or the rest of us."

"Castle said I wasn't supposed to tell you guys," I say, glancing between J and Warner. "He wanted you to be able to have a nice evening together."

J is about to say something, but Nazeera cuts her off.

"Yes, I understand that," she says, "but did he also tell you not to say anything to Haider and Stephan? To me? Castle didn't say that you had to withhold your suspicions from the rest of us, did he?"

There’s no inflection in her voice. No anger, not even a hint of irritation—but everyone turns suddenly to look at her. Haider’s eyebrows are raised. Even Warner looks curious.

Apparently, Nazeera is being weird.

But exhaustion has crashed into me again.

Somehow, I know this is the end. I’m out of lives. No more power-ups. There won’t be any more bursts of anger or adrenaline to push me through another minute. I try to speak, but the wires in my brain have been disconnected, rerouted.

My mouth opens. Closes.

Nothing.

This time the exhaustion drives into me with such violent force I feel like my bones are cracking, like my eyes are melting, like I’m looking at the world through cellophane. Everything takes on a slightly metallic sheen, glassy and blurred. And then, for the first time, I realize—

This doesn’t feel like normal exhaustion.

It’s too late, though. Way too late to realize that I might be more than just really, really tired.

Hell, I think I might be dying.

Stephan says something. I don’t hear him.

Nazeera says something. I don’t hear her.

Some still-functioning part of my brain tells me to go back to my room and die in peace, but when I try to take a step forward, I stumble.

Weird.

I take another step forward, but this time, it’s worse. My legs tangle and I trip, only catching myself at the last moment.

Everything feels wrong.

The sounds in my head seem to be getting louder. I can’t open my eyes fully. The air around me feels tight—compressed—and I try to say *I feel so strange* but it’s useless. All I know is that I feel suddenly cold. Freezing hot.

Wait. That’s not right.

I frown.

“Kenji?”

The word comes to me from far away. Underwater. My eyes are closed now, and it feels like they’ll stay that way forever. And then— Everything smells different. Like dirt and wet and cold. Weird. Something is tickling my face. Grass? When did I get grass on my face?

“*Kenji!*”

Oh. *Oh.* Not cool. Someone is shaking me, hard, rattling my brain around in my skull and something, some ancient instinct, pries the rusted hinges of my eyelids open, but when I try to focus, I can’t. Everything is soft. Mushy.

Someone is shouting. Someones. Wait, what’s the plural of *someone*? I don’t think I’ve ever heard so many people say my name at the same time. Kenji kenji kenji kenjikenjikenji

I try to laugh.

And then I see her. There she is. Man, this is a nice dream. But there she is. She’s touching my face. I turn my head a little, rest my cheek against the smooth, soft palm of her hand. It feels amazing.

Nazeera.

So fucking beautiful, I think.

And then I’m gone.

Weightless.

Eight

When I open my eyes, I see spiders.

Eyes and arms, eyes and arms, eyes and arms everywhere. Magnified. Up close. A thousand eyes, round and shining. Hundreds of arms reaching toward me, around me.

I close my eyes again.

It's a good thing I'm not afraid of spiders, otherwise I think I'd be screaming. But I've learned to live with spiders. I lived with them in the orphanage, on the streets at night, underground at Omega Point. They hide in my shoes, under my bed, capture flies in the corners of my room. I usually nudge them back outside, but I never kill them. We have an understanding, spiders and I. We're cool.

But I've never *heard* spiders before.

And these things are loud. It's a lot of discordant noise, a lot of humming, vibrating nonsense I can't separate into sounds. But then, slowly, they begin to separate. Find forms.

I realize they're voices.

"You're right that it's unusual," someone says. "It's definitely strange that he'd be experiencing any lingering effects this long afterward—but it's not unheard of."

"That theory makes no sense—"

"*Nazeera*." That sounds like Haider. "These are their healers. I'm sure they would know what—"

"I don't care," she says sharply. "I happen to disagree. Kenji's been fine these last couple of days, and I would know; I was with him. This is an absurd diagnosis. It's irresponsible to suggest that he's being affected by drugs that were administered *days* ago, when the underlying cause is unequivocally something else."

There’s a long stretch of silence.

Finally, I hear someone sigh.

“You may find this hard to believe, but what we do isn’t magic. We deal in actual science. We can, within certain parameters, heal an ill or injured person. We can regrow tissue and bone and replenish blood loss, but we can’t do much for . . . food poisoning, for example. Or a hangover. Or chronic exhaustion. There are still many ills and illnesses we can’t yet cure.” That must be Sara. Or Sonya. Or both. I can’t always tell their voices apart.

“And right now,” one of them says, “despite our best efforts, Kenji still has these drugs in his system. They have to run their course.”

“But— There has to be something—”

“Kenji’s been running on pure adrenaline these last thirty-six hours,” one of the twins says. “The highs and lows are devastating his body, and sleep deprivation is making him more susceptible to the effects of the drugs.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Nazeera asks.

“Not if he doesn’t sleep.”

“What does that mean?” J. Jella. Jello. That’s her voice. She sounds terrified. “How serious is the damage? How long could it take for him to recover?”

And then, as my mind continues to sharpen, I realize that the twins are talking in tandem, completing each other’s thoughts and sentences so it seems like only one person is speaking. That makes more sense.

Sara: “We can’t know for certain.”

Sonya: “It might be hours, it might be days.”

“*Days?*” Nazeera again.

Sara: “Or not. It really just depends on the strength of his immune system. He’s young and otherwise very healthy, so he has the best chance of bouncing back. But he’s severely dehydrated.”

Sonya: “And he needs sleep. Not drug-induced unconsciousness, but real, restorative sleep. The best we can do is to manage his pain and leave him alone.”

“Why did you do this to him?” Castle. *Castle is here.* But his voice is harsh. A little scared. “Was it necessary? Truly?”

Silence.

“*Nazeera.*” It’s Stephan.

“It felt necessary,” Nazeera says quietly. “At the time.”

“You could’ve just told him, you know.” J again. She sounds pissed. “You didn’t have to drug him. He would’ve been fine on the plane if you’d just told him what was going to happen.”

“You weren’t there, Ella. You don’t know. I couldn’t risk it. If Anderson had any idea Kenji was on that plane—if Kenji made a *single* sound—we’d all be dead right now. I couldn’t trust that he would remain inhumanly still and silent for eight hours, okay? It was the only way.”

“But if you really knew him,” J says, her anger changing, growing desperate. “If you had any idea what it was like to fight with Kenji by your side, you’d never have thought of him as a liability.”

I almost smile.

J always comes through. Always on the team.

“Kenji,” she’s still saying, “wouldn’t have done anything to compromise the mission. He’d have been an asset to you. He could’ve helped you more than you realize. He—”

Someone clears their throat loudly, and I’m disappointed. I was really enjoying that speech.

“I don’t think—” It’s one of the twins again. Sara. “I don’t think it’s helpful to place blame. Not now. And especially not in this instance.”

“Actually,” Sonya says, and sighs, “we think it was the news about James that pushed him over the edge.”

“What?” Nazeera again. “What do you mean?”

Sara: “Kenji loves James. More than most people know. Not everyone realizes how close they are—

“—but we used to see it every day,” Sonya says. “Sara and I have been working with James for a while, teaching him how to use his healing powers.”

Sonya: “Kenji was always there. He was always checking in. He and James have a special bond.”

“And when you’re that worried,” Sara says, “when you’re that scared, extreme levels of stress can badly injure our immune systems.”

Huh. I guess that means my immune system is screwed for life.

Even so, I think I’m feeling better. I’m not only able to distinguish the sounds of their voices, but I’m now realizing that there’s a needle in my arm, and it hurts like a bitch.

They must be giving me fluids.

I can’t really keep my eyes open yet, but I *can* try to force myself to speak. Unfortunately, my throat is dry. Rough. Sandpaper rough. It feels like way too much work to form complete sentences, but after a minute I manage to croak out two words:

“I’m fine.”

“*Kenji.*” I feel Castle rush forward, take my hand. “Thank goodness. We were so worried.”

“Okay,” I say, but my voice sounds foreign, even to myself. “Like spiders.”

The room goes quiet.

“What’s he talking about?” someone whispers.

“I think we should let him rest.”

Yes. Rest.

So tired.

Can’t move anymore. Can’t form any more words. I feel like I’m sinking into the mattress.

The voices dissolve, slowly expanding into a mass of unbroken sound that builds into a roaring, painful assault on my ears and then—

Gone.

Quiet.

Darkness.

Nine

How long has it been?

The air feels cooler, heavier. I try to swallow and, this time, it doesn't hurt. I manage to peek through two slits—remembering something about spiders—and discover that I'm all alone.

I open my eyes a bit more.

I thought I'd wake up in a medical tent or something, but I'm surprised—and relieved, I think—to find that I'm in my own room. All is still. Hushed. Except for one thing: when I listen closely, I can make out the distant, unexpected sound of crickets. I don't think I've heard a cricket in a decade.

Weird.

Anyway, I feel a thousand times better now than I did . . . was it yesterday? I don't know. However long it's been, I can honestly say I'm feeling better now, more like myself. And I know that to be true because I'm suddenly starving. I can't believe I didn't eat that cake when I had the chance. I must've been out of my mind.

I push myself up, onto my elbows.

It's more than a little disorienting to wake up where you didn't fall asleep, but after a few minutes, the room begins to feel familiar. Most of my curtains were pulled closed, but moonlight spills through an inch of uncovered window, casting silvers and shadows across the room. I didn't spend enough time in this tent before things went to hell for me, so the interior is still bare and generic. It doesn't help, of course, that I have none of my things. Everything feels cold. Foreign. All of my belongings are borrowed, even my toothbrush. But when I look out around the room, at the dead monitor stationed near my bed, at the empty IV bag hanging nearby,

and at the fresh bandage taped across the new bruise on my forearm, I realize someone must've decided I was okay. That I was going to be okay.

Relief floods through me.

But what do I do about food?

Depending on what time it is, it might be too late to eat; I doubt the dining tent is open at all hours of the night. But right away, my stomach rebels against the thought. It doesn't growl, though, it just hurts. The feeling is familiar, easy to recognize. The sharp, breathtaking pangs of hunger are always the same.

I've known them nearly all my life.

The pain returns again, suddenly, with an insistence I can't ignore, and I realize I have no choice but to scavenge for something. Anything. Even a piece of dry bread. I don't remember the last time I ate a proper meal, now that I think of it. It might've been on the plane, right before we crashed. I wanted to eat dinner that first night, when we arrived at the Sanctuary, but my nerves were so shot that my stomach basically shriveled up and died. I guess I've been starving ever since.

I'm going to fix that.

I push myself all the way up. I need to recalibrate. I've been letting myself lose perspective lately, and I can't afford to do that. There's too much to do. There are too many people depending on me.

James needs me to be better than this.

Besides, I have so much to be grateful for. I know I do. Sometimes I just need to be reminded. So I take a deep, steadying breath in this dark, quiet room and force myself to focus. To remember.

To say, out loud: *I'm grateful.*

For the clothes on my back and the safety of this room. For my friends, my makeshift family, and for what remains of my health and sanity.

I drop my head in my hands and say it. Plant my feet on the floor and say it. And when I've finally managed to pull myself up, breathing hard, breaking a sweat, I brace my hands against the wall and whisper:

"I'm grateful."

I'm going to find James. I'm going to find him and Adam and everyone else. I'm going to make this right. I have to, even if I have to die trying.

I lift my head and step away from the wall, carefully testing my weight on the cold floor. When I realize I feel strong enough to stand on my own, I breathe a sigh of relief. First things first: I need to take a shower.

I grab the hem of my shirt and pull it up, over my head, but just as the collar catches around my face, temporarily blinding me—my arm connects with something.

Someone.

A short, startled gasp is my only confirmation that there's an intruder in my room.

Fear and anger rush through me at the same time, the sensations so overwhelming they leave me suddenly light-headed.

No time for that, though.

I yank the shirt free of my body and toss it to the floor as I spin around, adrenaline rising. I grab the semiautomatic hidden in my pant leg, strapped to the inside of my calf, and pull on my boots faster than I thought humanly possible. Once I've got a firm grip on the gun, my arms fly up, sharp and straight, steadier than I feel inside.

It's just dark enough in here. Too many places to hide.

"Show yourself," I shout. "*Now.*"

I don't know exactly what happens next. I can't quite see it, but I can feel it. Wind, curving toward me in a single, fluid arc, and my gun is somehow, impossibly, on the floor. Across the room. I stare at my open, empty hands. Stunned.

I have only a single moment to make a decision.

I pick up a nearby desk chair and slam it, hard, against the wall. One of the wooden legs breaks off easily, and I hold it up, like a bat.

"What do you want?" I say, my hand flexing around the makeshift weapon. "Who sent y—"

I'm kicked from behind.

A heavy, flat boot lands hard between my shoulder blades, knocking me forward with enough force that I lose my balance and my breath. I land on all fours, my head spinning. I'm still too weak. Not nearly fast enough. And I know it.

But when I hear the door swing open, I'm forced upright by something stronger than me—something like loyalty, responsibility for the people I love and need to protect. A slant of moonlight through the open door reveals my gun, still lying on the floor, and I grab it with seconds to spare, somehow getting to the door before it's had a chance to close.

And when I see a glimmer of something in the darkness, I don't hesitate.

I shoot.

I know I've missed when I hear the dull, distant sound of boots, connecting with the ground. My assailant is on the run and moving too fast to have been injured. It's still too dark to see much more than my own feet—the lanterns are out, and the moon is slim—but the quiet is just perfect enough for me to be able to discern careful footfalls in the distance. The closer I get, the more I'm able to track his movements, but the truth is, it's getting harder to hear anything over the sound of my own labored breathing. I have no idea how I'm moving right now. No time to even stop and think about it. My mind is empty save one, single thought:

Apprehend the intruder.

I'm almost afraid to consider who it might be. There's a very small possibility that this was an accidental intrusion, that maybe it's a civilian who somehow wandered into our camp. But according to what Nouria and Sam said about this place, that sort of thing should be near impossible.

No, it seems a lot more likely that, whoever this is, it's one of Anderson's men. It has to be. He was probably sent here to round up the rest of the supreme kids—maybe going tent to tent in the dead of the night to see who's inside. I'm sure they didn't expect me to be awake.

A sudden, terrifying thought shudders through me, nearly making me stumble. *What if they've already gotten to J?*

I won't let that happen.

I have no idea how anyone—even one of Anderson's men—was able to penetrate the Sanctuary, but if that's where we are, then this is a matter of life and death. I have no idea what happened while I was half-dead in my room, but things must've escalated in my absence. I need to catch this piece of shit, or all our lives could be at risk. And if Anderson gets what he wants tonight, he'll have no reason to keep James and Adam alive anymore. If they're even still alive.

I have to do this. It doesn't matter how weak I feel. I have no choice, not really.

I steel myself, pushing harder, my legs and lungs burning from the effort. Whoever this is, they're perfectly trained. It's hard to admit my own shortcomings, but I can't deny that the only reason I've made it this far is because of the hour—it's so eerily quiet right now that even delicate noises feel loud. And this guy, whoever he is, knows how to run fast, and

seemingly forever, without making much sound. If we were anywhere else, at any other time, I'm not sure I'd be able to track him.

But I've got rage and indignation on my side.

When we enter a thick, suffocating stretch of forest, I decide I really, really hate this guy. The moonlight doesn't quite penetrate here, which will make it nearly impossible to spot him, even if I get close enough. But I know I'm gaining on him when our breaths seem to sync up, our footfalls finding a rhythm. He must sense this, too, because I feel him power through, picking up speed with an agility that leaves me in awe. I'm giving this all I've got, but apparently this guy was just having fun. Going for a stroll.

Jesus.

I've got no choice but to play dirty.

I'm not good enough to shoot, while running, at a moving target I can't see—I'm not Warner, for God's sake—so my childish backup plan will have to suffice.

I chuck the gun. Hard. Give it everything I've got.

It's a clean throw, solid. All I need is a stumble. A single, infinitesimal moment of hesitation. Anything to give me an edge.

And when I hear it—a brief, surprised intake of air—

I launch myself forward with a cry, and tackle him to the ground.

Ten

“What . . . the hell?”

I must be hallucinating. I *better* be hallucinating.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, oh my God, I’m so sorry—”

I try to push myself up, but I threw myself forward with everything I had, and I nearly knocked myself out in the process. I’ve barely got enough strength left to stand. Still, I manage to shift myself a little to the side and, when I feel the damp grass against my skin, I remember that I’m not wearing a shirt.

I swear loudly.

This night could not possibly get worse.

But then, in the space of half a second, my mind catches up to my body and the force of understanding—of realization—is so intense that it nearly blinds me. Anger, hot and wild, surges through me, and it’s enough to propel me up and away from her. I stumble backward, onto the ground, and hit my head against a tree trunk.

“Son of a—” I cut myself off with an angry cry.

Nazeera scrambles backward.

She’s still planted on the ground, her eyes wild, her hair loose, coming free of its tie. I’ve never seen her look so terrified. I’ve never seen her look so paralyzed. And something about the pained look in her eyes takes the edge off my anger.

Just the edge.

“*Are you out of your fucking mind?*” I cry. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” she says, and drops her face in her hands.

“You’re sorry?” I’m still shouting. “You’re *sorry*? I could’ve *killed* you.”

And even then, even in this horrible, unbelievable moment, she has the audacity to look me in the eye and say: “I doubt that.”

I swear to God, my eyes go so wide with rage I think they split my face open. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do with this woman.

No fucking clue.

“I—I don’t even—” I flounder, fighting for the right words. “There are so many reasons why you should be, like, shipped off on a one-way ticket to the moon right now, I don’t even know where to start.” I run my hands through my hair, grabbing fistfuls. “What were you *thinking*? Why—why—” And then, suddenly, something occurs to me. A cold, sick feeling gathers in my chest and I drop my hands. Look at her.

“Nazeera,” I say quietly. “Why were you in my room?”

She pulls her knees to her chest. Closes her eyes. And only when I can no longer see her face—when she presses her forehead to her knees—does she say: “I honestly think this might be the most embarrassing moment of my entire life.”

My muscles go slack. I stare at her, stunned, confused, angrier than I’ve been in years. “I don’t understand.”

She shakes her head. Just keeps shaking her head. “You weren’t supposed to wake up,” she says. “I thought you’d sleep through the night. I just wanted to check on you—I wanted to make sure you were okay because it was all my fault and I felt—I felt so *awful*—”

I open my mouth. No words come out.

“—but then you woke up and I didn’t know what to do,” she says, finally lifting her head. “I didn’t—I didn’t—”

“Bullshit,” I say, cutting her off. “*Bullshit* you didn’t know what to do. If you were really in my room because you were worried about my welfare, you could’ve just said hi to me, like a normal person. You’d say something like, ‘Oh, hello Kenji, it’s me, Nazeera! I’m just here to make sure you’re not dead!’ and I’d say ‘Gee, thanks, Nazeera, that’s so nice of you!’ and you’d—”

“It’s not that simple,” she says, shaking her head again. “It’s just— It wasn’t that simple—”

“No,” I say angrily. “You’re right. It’s not that simple.”

I get to my feet, dust off my hands. “You want to know why? You want to know why it’s not that simple? Because your story doesn’t add up. You say you came into my room to check on me—because you claim to be

concerned about my health—but then, the first chance you get, you kick a sick man in the back, knock him to the floor, and then make him chase you through the woods *with no shirt on*.

"No," I say, rage building inside me again. "No way. You don't give a shit about my health. You"—I point at her—"you're up to something. First the drugs on the plane, and now this. You're trying to *kill* me, Nazeera, and I don't understand why.

"What happened? You didn't finish the job the first time? You came back to make sure I was dead? Was that it?"

Slowly, she gets to her feet, but she can't meet my eyes.

Her silence is driving me crazy.

"I want answers," I cry, shaking with fury. "Right now. I want to know what the hell you're doing. I want to know why you're here. I want to know who you're working for." And then, practically screaming the words: "*And I want to know why you were in my goddamn room tonight*."

"Kenji," she says quietly. "I'm sorry. I'm not good at this. That's all I can tell you. I'm sorry."

I'm so shocked by her gall I actually flinch in response.

"Truly, I'm sorry," she says again. She's backing away from me. Slowly, but still—I've seen this girl run. "Let me just go die of humiliation somewhere else, okay? I'm so sorry."

"*Stop*."

She goes suddenly still.

I try to steady my breathing. Can't. My chest is still heaving when I say, "Just tell me the truth."

"*I told you the truth*," she says, anger flaring in her eyes. "I'm not good at this, Kenji. I'm not good at this."

"What are you talking about? Of course you're good at this. Murdering people is, like, your life's work."

She laughs, but she sounds a little hysterical. "Do you remember," she says, "when I told you that this could never work?" She makes that familiar motion, that gesture between our bodies. "Do you remember that day?"

Something unconscious, something primal I can't control, sends a sharp needle of heat through my body. Even now.

"Yes," I say. "I remember."

"This," she says, waving her arms around. "This is what I was talking about."

I frown. I feel like I've lost track of the conversation. "I don't . . ." I frown again. "What are you talking about?"

"*This,*" she says, fury edging into her voice. "This. *This.* You don't understand. I don't know how to— I just don't do this, okay? Ever. I tried to tell you that day that I don't— But now—" She cuts herself off with a sharp shake of her head. Turns away. "Please don't make me say it."

"Say what?"

"That you're—" She stops. "That this—"

I wait, and wait, and still, she says nothing.

"I *what*? This *what*?"

Finally, she sighs. Meets my eyes. "You were my first kiss."

Eleven

I could've spent years trying to figure out what she was about to say to me, and I never would've gotten it right.

Never.

I'm beyond stunned. Beyond dumbfounded.

And all I can come up with is—

"You're lying."

She shakes her head.

"But—"

She keeps shaking her head.

"I don't understand."

"I like you," she says quietly. "A lot."

Something flashes through me—something terrifying. A rush of feeling. A lick of fire. *Joy.* And then denial, denial, fast and hard.

"Bullshit."

"Not bullshit," she whispers.

"But you've been trying to kill me."

"No." She hangs her head. "I've been trying to show you I care."

I can only stare at her, bewildered.

"I gave you a slightly stronger dose of that drug because I was so worried you'd wake up on the plane and get yourself murdered," she says. "I was in your room tonight because I wanted to make sure you were okay, but when you woke up I got nervous and disappeared. And then you started talking, and the things you said were so beautiful that I just"—she shakes her head—"I don't know. The truth is, I don't have an excuse. I stayed because I wanted to stay. I stayed and I watched you like a creep, and when you caught me I was so mortified I nearly killed you for it."

She covers her face with her hands.

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” she says, her words so small and quiet I have to step closer to hear them. “I’ve been prepared for literally every single other high-stress situation life can throw my way, but I have no idea how to properly reciprocate positive emotion. I was never shown how. Never taught how to do it. And, as a result, I’ve avoided it altogether.”

Finally, she meets my eyes.

“I’ve always avoided doing things I know I’ll be bad at,” she says. “And with this— Relationships? Physical intimacy? I just . . . don’t. Ever. With anyone. It’s too messy. Too confusing. There’s too much code, too much garbage to filter and decipher. Besides, most of the people I meet are either assholes or cowards or both. They’re rarely genuine. They never say what they’re really thinking. And they all lie to my face.” She sighs. “Except for you, of course.”

“Nazeera—”

“Please,” she says softly. “This is so humiliating. And if it’s all right with you, I really don’t want to drag this conversation out any more than I absolutely have to. But I swear—after today—I won’t come near you again. I’ll keep my distance. I promise. I’m so sorry I hurt you. I never meant to kick you that hard.”

And she leaves.

She turns on her heel and stalks off, and I’m seized by something, something that feels a lot like panic when I say—

“Wait!”

She freezes.

I run after her, grab her by the waist and spin her around, and she looks surprised, and then uncertain, and I say:

“Why me?”

She goes still. “What do you mean?”

“I mean— That day, when you kissed me. You chose me that day, didn’t you? For your first kiss.”

After a moment, she nods.

“Why?” I say. “Why’d you choose me?”

All of a sudden, her eyes go soft. The tension in her shoulders disappears. “Because,” she says quietly, “I think you might be the best person I’ve ever met.”

“Oh.”

I take a deep, uneven breath, but it’s not getting me enough oxygen. Feeling is flooding through me, so fast and hot I can’t even remember that I’m freezing.

I think I’m dreaming.

God, I hope I’m not dreaming.

“Kenji?”

Say something, dumbass.

Nope.

She sighs, the sound filling the silence. And then she looks down, at the ground between us. “I’m really, really sorry I kicked you like that. Are you okay?”

I shrug, and then wince. “I probably won’t be able to walk in the morning.”

She looks up. There’s something like laughter in her eyes.

“It’s not funny,” I say, but I’m starting to smile, too. “That was horrible. And— Jesus,” I say, feeling suddenly sick. “I tried to shoot you for it.”

She laughs.

Laughs, like I just made a joke.

“I’m serious, Nazeera. I could’ve killed you.”

Her smile fades when she realizes I’m serious. And then she looks at me, really looks at me. “That’s not possible.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help but crack a smile at her certainty.

“You know,” she says softly, “I think there was a part of me that was really hoping you’d catch me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she whispers. “Otherwise—why didn’t I just fly away?”

I take a second to let that sink in.

And then—

Damn.

She’s right. I never stood a chance against this girl.

“Hey,” I say.

“Yeah?”

“You’re completely insane, you know that?”

“Yeah,” she says, and sighs.

And somehow, impossibly—

I’m smiling.

Carefully, I reach out, grazing her cheek with the tips of my fingers. She trembles under my touch. Closes her eyes.

My heart stops.

“Nazeera, I—”

A wild, piercing, bloodcurdling scream brings the moment to a halt.

Twelve

Nazeera and I share a split-second glance before we're running again. I follow her through the woods, toward the source of the scream, but almost as quickly as it came—the world goes quiet. We rush to a sudden, confused stop, nearly falling over in the process. Nazeera turns to look at me, her eyes wide, but she's not seeing me, not really.

She's waiting. Listening.

Suddenly, she straightens. I don't know what she heard, because I heard nothing. But I've already realized that this girl is way out of my league; I have no idea what other skills she possesses. No idea what else she's capable of. But I do know that there's no point doubting her mind. Not when it comes to shit like this.

So when she starts running again, I'm right behind her.

I realize we're heading back toward the beginning, to the entrance of Nouria's camp, when three more screams pierce the night. Then, suddenly —

At least a hundred more.

And then I realize where Nazeera is headed. *Out.* Out of the Sanctuary, into unprotected land where we could too easily be found, captured, and killed. I hesitate, old doubts asking me if I'm crazy to trust her—

"Stealth, Kenji— *Now*—"

And she disappears. I take a deep breath and follow suit.

It's not long before I understand.

Outside of the protection of the Sanctuary, the screams intensify, rising and multiplying in the darkness. Except that it's not dark, not here. Not exactly. The sky is split, darkness and light melting together, clouds falling sideways, trees bending, flickering, bending and flickering. The earth

beneath us has begun to pucker and crack, divots forming midair, puncturing nothing and everything. And then—

The horizon moves.

Suddenly the sun is underneath us, searing and blinding and fracturing light like lightning as it skids along the grass.

Just as quickly, the horizon swings back into place.

The scene is beyond surreal.

I can't process. Can't digest. People are trying to run but can't. They're too overcome. Too confused. They make it only a few feet before something changes again, before they're screaming again, before everyone is plunged into darkness, into light, into darkness, into light.

Nazeera materializes at my side. We've pulled back our invisibility. It seems obvious now that there's no longer any point in stealth. Not here. Not in this.

And when Nazeera turns abruptly and starts running, I already know she's heading back to camp.

We have to tell the others.

Except, as it turns out, they already know.

I see her before we've made it back. Right outside the entrance, backlit by chaos:

Juliette.

She's on her knees, her hands clamped around her temples. Her face is a picture of pure agony, and Warner is crouching beside her, pale and terrified, his hands on her shoulders, shouting something I can't hear.

And then—

She screams.

Not again, I think. Please, God, not again.

But it's different this time. This time, the scream is aimed inward; it's an expression of pain, of horror, of travesty.

And this time, when she screams, she says a single, unmistakable sentence:

"*Emmaline*," she screams. "Please don't do this—"

About the Author

Photo by Tana Gandhi

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