THE CHANGELING

JG FAHERTY

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This book came out of my combined loves of superhero comics, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and all the teen urban fantasy novels I read while growing up, plus a good helping of superhero/action adventure movies involving teenagers and young adults. I hope I've captured the thrills and coming of age insecurities that this genre is famous for, and that I do justice to the work.

A big part of growing up is feeling like you're not normal. Well, if this book has any kind of message, it's that it's okay to be an outsider, a weird kid, someone who's different. We're all different. And that's something to celebrate, not make fun of or be ashamed of.

Most of all, I hope you enjoy it, because in the end, that's what books are for: taking us out of the real world for a few hours and letting us have an adventure.

JG Faherty
March, 2020

PROLOGUE

In the moments before she died, Chloe Olivetti was enjoying the bright sunshine of an early spring day and anticipating some overdue snuggle time at Vanessa's.

Crossing the wide expanse of the old Wood Hill Sanitarium property, she couldn't help smiling at the thought of two whole days without homework, pop quizzes, or the immature antics of her high school classmates.

Two bicyclists sailed by, the only people besides herself and a couple walking a dog that she'd seen while taking her shortcut. Abandoned for nearly a decade, the wide acreage and old stone buildings served as sort of a secret park for locals and urban explorers alike.

She'd only taken another couple of steps when a tingling sensation crept across her winter-pale skin. A moment later, the hairs on her arms sprang to attention. She stopped as the mild tingling escalated into a full-blown, itching discomfort, like a thousand invisible mosquitoes were jabbing her flesh. At the same time,

all her various piercings—ears, eyebrows, nose, and tongue—began to vibrate.

"What the..."

Before Chloe could finish her sentence, the world exploded around her in a tremendous flash of white and then she was flying through a sea of blinding colors, neon reds and yellows, fiery oranges, ultra-vibrant purples, fluorescent greens. The dazzling universe spun around her and formed three-dimensional blocks, circles, arcs, and lines. Revolving mazes sailed past. Colors bent and twisted, creating bizarre shapes that made her head hurt. She couldn't feel her arms or legs, couldn't even tell if she was breathing or not. When she tried to scream, the words echoed painfully around in her skull but no sound emerged from her mouth.

The colors moved closer, creeping in from all sides until the lines and hoops were actually passing through her body. She wanted to cry for help, to run away, to do anything, but her body refused to respond.

A black rectangle appeared in front of her and suddenly she wasn't floating, she was flying, faster and faster, heading right for it. Bright lights glittered in the inky depths, things that looked like stars and planets.

And then there was only darkness.

CHAPTER ONE

"I know you've been hearing this a lot lately, but you sure are one lucky girl." Doctor Wilson Bloom lifted his stethoscope from Chloe Olivetti's chest and flashed a grandfatherly smile. "The odds of being struck by lightning..."

"I know, I know. One in three thousand in a lifetime, or one in six hundred and fifty thousand in any given year." Chloe rolled her eyes and let out that special exaggerated sigh only seventeen-year-olds seem able to harness. "That's all my dorky little brother keeps talking about. *Did you know only one out of a hundred and twenty-five thousand people are actually injured when they're hit by lightning? Or that a park ranger in Virginia was struck eight times during his life, including once when he was in an office, and once while walking across the yard to get the mail. He lost his big toe and his eyebrows.* If I hear one more word about lightning or how lucky I am to be alive, I'm going to scream."

Chloe stared up at the Olivetti's family doctor, who was looking at her with an amused expression on his face, one bushy gray eyebrow raised higher than the other. With his thick

mustache and glasses, thin face, and slightly pointed ears, he reminded Chloe of a scholarly imp.

"I guess you're feeling better if you can be so sassy," Doctor Bloom said. "I suppose we'll have to let you out today before you start making everyone's life miserable, like you did a couple of years ago when you had your appendix out. But before I go, here's one last bit of trivia for you. A few years ago there was a movie made about the life and death of Jesus. During the filming, the actor who played Jesus was struck by lightning. *Twice*. Tell me that's not strange," Doctor Bloom finished, raising his eyebrow once more.

"Yeah, that's so fascinating." The stud in Chloe's tongue added a slight lisp to some of the words. When she'd woken up in the hospital and learned what happened—*I died, like, totally died!*—she'd been afraid it might have melted. Then the reality of everything set in and she'd had a minor panic attack, although she hadn't admitted it to anyone except Vanessa. Even now, with all the test results back showing she was perfectly healthy, she still had moments where she felt like freaking out. Especially the part about her dying. The EMTs who'd brought her in from the park had used the shock paddles to get her heart started. Sure, it was kind of cool and all, but still....

I died. I'll bet I'm the only kid in school who can say that!

On the other hand, it'll probably be just another thing for everyone to make fun of me about. Linda Hudgins and her bitch squad will have a field day.

She could already hear the insults. Zombie Girl. Dead in bed. "Hey, I smell dead people."

Yeah, so okay, maybe not cool after all.

Chloe let out another sigh. The only thing more boring than sitting in a hospital bed was dwelling on her total lack of peer acceptance while sitting in a hospital bed.

"So, like, can I get out of here now? You said there's nothing wrong with me."

"Whoa, hold on. Not until your parents get here. You're still a minor, which means they have to sign your release papers before you can trade that hospital gown for your street clothes."

As if on cue, Aldo and Kerri Olivetti entered the room. Chloe's brother, Benny, trailed behind, his big, brown eyes glued to the game he was playing on his phone. He was wearing the Sailor Moon sweatshirt Chloe had bought him for Christmas, his subtle way of saying he was glad to see her.

Not that she'd acknowledge the gesture to the little turd. She'd have to be on her death bed before that would happen. At least in public. Maybe later, when no one was around.

Maybe.

"Doctor, how's our little girl doing?" Aldo shook Bloom's hand. Wilson Bloom had been Chloe's doctor since she'd been born, and was Benny's pediatrician as well.

Kerri set down the bag she carried and gave her daughter a crushing hug, despite having seen her only a few hours earlier. Chloe endured it, knowing it would be days—probably weeks—before her already over-protective mother got over what she'd taken to calling Chloe's "brush with death."

"Fresh clothes and shoes," she told Chloe when she finally let go. Her voice trembled slightly and she wiped at her eyes. "Your old ones had to be thrown out because they were all burnt."

"Crap! Those were my favorite jeans! It took me months to get them all faded like that." Chloe shook her head, her bobbed hair shaking back and forth. At least the lightning had only ruined her clothes. Losing her hair would have been a whole 'nother level of disaster, especially considering how much money she'd spent getting it cut and colored at a salon only a month ago.

It was worth it, though. She was totally psyched about the new

style, and so was Vanessa, which was even more important. They'd dyed everything bright blonde except the last two inches at the ends; those she'd colored raven black. She'd fallen in love with the look after watching an old music video on VH1 Classic by the '80's new wave group Berlin, whose lead singer had worn her hair the same way. When she'd mentioned how much she liked it, Vanessa had told Chloe it would look ultra retro cool on her, so they'd decided to give it a try. As usual, Vanessa had been right. Which was only to be expected, since Vanessa Garcia practically lived fashion, was planning on majoring in it in college next year. Unlike Chloe, who was perfectly happy to spend her days in baggy jeans and t-shirts. Except when they went to clubs, of course. Then she couldn't resist getting her glam on.

"Watch your mouth and don't complain about your clothes," her mother said. A former school teacher, she couldn't stand cursing of any kind. Or poor grammar. "You're lucky to be alive! Only you could get hit by lightning without a cloud in the sky."

Chloe ignored her and rummaged through the items in the bag, mostly to make sure her mother wasn't trying to sneak in something lame. She gave a sigh of relief when she saw her mother hadn't surprised her, had actually picked out an outfit similar to what she'd have chosen herself.

"Actually, it happens fairly often, Mom." Benny flicked his long bangs back from his pudgy face and spoke without looking up from his game. The muted beeps and bloops of the animated characters provided electronic counterpoint to his words as his fingers blurred across the buttons. "A lightning bolt can travel horizontally up to ten miles from a dense cloud, so you can get hit by lightning way before a storm reaches the area. Something like seventy-five percent of the people who get hit by lightning say it occurred when there was a clear sky."

"I don't want to hear another word about it," Kerri Olivetti

said, hands planted firmly on her slim hips. In her fashionable pink blouse and white pants, she looked ready for an early afternoon brunch or a stroll through a shady garden. "Chloe's safe, and that's all that matters. Oh, and by the way, dear, your glasses are in the bag as well. You must have been going crazy in here, not able to see anything."

"What do you mean, Mom? I can see fine. I've got my contacts in. Do you really think I could go two days stuck in bed without watching TV? Bad enough my phone got fried."

"Contact lenses? You aren't wearing contact lenses." Dr. Bloom frowned. "What would make you think that?"

"Um, mostly 'cause I can see everything perfectly fine? I was wearing them when all this crap happened."

"Language, young lady," her mother warned.

"Chloe, you had nothing in your eyes when the emergency room physician examined you. Even if you had, they would have removed them as a safety precaution. And noted it on your charts. That's standard for all incoming patients, let alone anyone who's encountered high voltage electricity. They don't want to take the chance of tissue damage to the eyes."

"That can't be right." Chloe bugged her eyes out at him. "Check for yourself. If I didn't have them on, you'd be nothing but a gray blur right now."

"I've looked into your eyes at least a dozen times, including just a few minutes ago. Even if the ER team missed them, I would've seen them. Are you saying your vision has improved?" Bloom was already pulling out his ophthalmoscope.

"Improved? I can see perfect." To demonstrate, she pointed at an instructional sign hanging over the small sink on the other side of the room and read it to them, word for word.

"How could her vision have gotten better? I mean, that doesn't happen, does it?" Benny asked.

Mrs. Olivetti's light blue eyes grew wide and her hand went to her mouth, her pink fingernails standing out against the suddenly pale skin of her face. "Oh, my God! You don't think her contacts melted onto her eyes, do you?"

"Hush, Kerri. It's a hospital. I think they would have noticed something like that." Aldo Olivetti placed a heavily callused hand on his wife's arm.

Bloom peered into Chloe's eyes while he answered her mother's frantic question.

"No, Kerri, the contacts are definitely not there. As for why she can see better, I can't answer that. There's always a chance that the heat of the lightning strike did have a physical effect, but it's highly unlikely. Whatever is causing this is probably temporary, perhaps due to some slight swelling that's changed the shape of her corneas."

Bloom pulled back and slid the 'scope into the pocket of his lab coat. "What I do think is that Chloe should go see her ophthalmologist right away. He'll be able to perform a much more thorough examination than I can."

"We'll make the appointment as soon as we get home," Mrs. Olivetti assured him.

Her husband nodded. Chloe started to object, but stopped when she saw the look on her mother's face. If there was one thing you learned growing up in the Olivetti household, it was to pick your battles wisely. And after all she'd put them through the last couple of days, a trip to the eye doctor was not a big enough deal to argue about.

Besides, maybe she'd get to leave school early for the appointment. Now that would make it totally worth it.

"Hey, maybe getting struck by lightning gave you superpowers or something. I can totally picture you turning into the She-Hulk." Benny laughed at his joke but no one else smiled.

"Ha, ha. At least my superpower wouldn't be stinking up the bathroom, turd-boy."

"Oh, yeah? You're not so—"

"Stop it, both of you." Kerri gave them her "I mean business" glare. Benny looked ready to continue, but wisely closed his mouth and went back to his game.

Mr. Olivetti ran a hand through his short, salt-and-pepper hair. "We can still take her home now, though, right?" When Bloom nodded, Aldo turned to Chloe. "How about we sign your discharge papers and then order some Chinese take-out tonight, have a little celebration? And then after that, maybe a game of Scrabble?"

Chloe knew her father hated Scrabble; he was just trying to show how happy and relieved they all were that she was okay. But after two nights in the hospital, she was itching to see Vanessa, who'd only been able to stop by the hospital briefly each day because her work schedule overlapped the hospital's visiting hours.

Still, tofu and veggies sounded good, especially after the crappy hospital food she'd been eating. And her father's face seemed to have aged five years since the accident had occurred. For the first time, she had a glimpse of what he'd look like at sixty, or older, when his tanned skin began to sag and his stocky body, the product of generations of hard workers, finally lost its muscle tone.

Someday my parents are going to get old and die. A wave of melancholy crashed over her, but she forced a wide grin in spite of how she felt. The answering smiles from her parents made the effort worth it.

Vanessa would understand. She was good that way.

"Sounds great, Dad. Now, everyone get out so I can get

dressed. My pillow and my computer are calling me. And I need to get a new phone."

"Hold on. There's one more thing we need to take care of," Dr. Bloom said, his hand held up in a 'halt' gesture.

Chloe groaned. "What? You said I could go home."

"Is something else wrong?" The worried expression was back on Mrs. Olivetti's face.

"No, but I want to make sure we cover all the bases. Being hit by lightning isn't a joke. There's intense heat and electrical energy involved, and no two people react the same way when hit. Lightning can affect the brain and central nervous system."

"Affect them how?" Mr. Olivetti asked.

"Well, the most common symptoms are memory loss, learning disorders, depression, fatigue, sleep disorders, headaches or hearing problems, and sensitivity to light. It wouldn't be unusual for Chloe to experience one or more of these."

"She gets like that every month," Benny muttered.

"Shut up, gnome-boy."

"That's enough," Kerri warned.

"However," Bloom continued, "we've been monitoring her closely the last couple of days and so far there's been nothing unusual. All of her neurological tests have come back perfect, so I'm sure she won't experience anything serious or permanent. But that doesn't mean mild symptoms might not crop up."

"So you're still concerned." Mr. Olivetti didn't phrase it as a question.

Bloom smiled. "No, just thorough. I want Chloe to come to my office a week from today for a follow-up physical. Just a precautionary measure. And of course, in the meantime, if she should have any unusual symptoms, or feel strange, call me right away or take her to the emergency room."

"Okay, fine, a week from today," Chloe grudgingly acquiesced.

It was beginning to seem like her whole week was going to be nothing but doctor visits.

"Good. Now, let's move it, people. We need this bed for someone who's actually sick." Dr. Bloom herded the family out into the hallway and shut the door.

Once she was alone, Chloe pulled on the artfully ripped jeans and faded black, long-sleeved Avril Lavigne concert tee her mother had packed, and then slipped her feet into a pair of black checkered Vans. Socks, bra, and underwear went back into the bag, as did the toothbrush and comb the hospital had supplied her with. After a moment's deliberation, she tossed the baby-blue hospital gown onto the bed. Scrubs would've been worth keeping, but the gown was so ratty it wouldn't even make a decent Halloween costume.

Before leaving, she stepped into the bathroom and used the mirror to give herself a quick once over. Hair combed and then shaken to give it a carefree appearance. No make up, but she wouldn't need any tonight. Her eyes the same iridescent blue-green as always, demanding attention even without mascara. Her face, which had just enough of a round shape to look pudgy if she pulled her hair back, was framed perfectly by the straight, nape-of-the-neck haircut. Dark circles under her eyes stood out clearly under the harsh hospital lighting, but sleeping in her own bed—or, better yet, Vanessa's—would take care of that. Her complexion was the same pale color it had been before she'd gotten fried, which had earned her the nickname 'vampire girl' even before her wardrobe choices became mostly shades of black.

She'd heard a lot worse since then. About her looks and her life style choices.

A careful check assured her the heavy t-shirt did a decent job of disguising the fact that her 'guns were unholstered,' as Vanessa liked to say. She wouldn't have to hear her mother complain. Not

that her boobs were ever going to turn heads. Like the rest of her, they were on the small side. As in, any smaller and she'd be back to a training bra. The slightly baggy jeans hid her slim waist and made her butt look flat, but she preferred it that way. She had no desire to be one of the zombie-brained, fashion model wannabees who populated Rocky Point's East End High School and spent their days and nights worshipping reality TV stars and rehashing all the celebrity gossip rumors. As long as Vanessa enjoyed looking at her, nothing else mattered.

Thinking about Vanessa sent a happy shiver down her back. Although her girlfriend had been to the hospital several times since the freak accident, they hadn't been able to do more than hold hands and sneak a few quick kisses, thanks to doctors and family always being around. Now that she was back on her feet again, Chloe was looking forward to catching up on lost time.

Maybe I can sneak out for a while after Scrabble.

With a happy smile, she slung the bag over her shoulder and left the hospital room, ready to resume living a normal life again.

CHLOE CLOSED her eyes and let herself get lost in the moment. She was curled up under the covers in Vanessa's bed, Vanessa's arms warm and soft where they wrapped around her. Across the room, the small color television was tuned to a music channel, providing all the atmosphere they needed. There wasn't much to Vanessa's studio apartment, just the combination bedroom-kitchen-living room and a small bathroom, but it was like heaven to Chloe. A space without parents or little brothers, where they could do what they wanted when they wanted, without any guilt trips or disapproving looks.

Of course, Vanessa's reasons for moving out were much worse

than any of Chloe's home life complaints. Between an overbearing stepfather who'd made her life a living hell for years, and a stepbrother who'd tried to rape her on her sixteenth birthday, she'd been desperate to leave. Compared to that kind of upbringing, Chloe's seemed damn near Disney.

A month shy from her own eighteenth birthday, Chloe didn't have those kinds of issues with her family, but she knew once she graduated high school she and Vanessa would be looking for a bigger apartment, one they could share. Although legal status was close enough that she could smell it, Chloe knew it would be better, grade-wise and family relations-wise, to finish high school before moving out. She'd given her parents enough problems over the years without adding the fear of her dropping out to their list.

"I still can't believe I almost lost you to lightning, of all things. It's so bizarre," Vanessa murmured into her neck. Chloe shivered slightly as Vanessa's breath tickled through her hair.

"Yeah, it was really whacked, all right. I mean, I don't remember much. I got itchy all of a sudden and then there was this totally gigantic explosion in my head, and all these bright lights and colors, and then, like, everything went white. Next thing I know, I'm lying in a hospital bed surrounded by the family unit going all drama on me."

"You still don't remember anything that happened in between?"

"Not really. Although I did have this crazy dream. I was floating through the air and everywhere I looked there were these totally weird images all around me. Like I was looking at movie screens, or through windows. I saw you, and my parents, and people from school. And there were hundreds of others, places and people I didn't recognize. They were so real-looking."

Chloe sat up and grabbed a glass of water off the nightstand. Even though it was only April, Vanessa's apartment was already

warm. For some reason they'd never been able to figure out, it was always twenty degrees warmer inside than outside. Now that spring was getting into full gear, they had to keep the windows open even at night. The apartment had been cozy during the winter, but in the summer it would probably suck because they had no money for an air conditioner.

"Majorly weird."

"Totally," Chloe agreed.

"I'm so glad nothing happened to you." Vanessa ran dark-red fingernails down Chloe's arm, making the fine, blonde hairs stand up in response. "You were so lucky."

"That's what everyone says. The first day I was in the hospital, I saw spots in my vision sometimes, and I had a funny taste on my tongue. They went away after a couple of hours. Doc Bloom said they were just temporary effects from the electrical shock. But you want to hear something really freaky?" Chloe turned her head and looked down at Vanessa, who stared back with her soulful, deep-brown eyes.

"What?"

"Notice anything different about me?" When her girlfriend shook her head, Chloe continued. "Look at my face. What am I not wearing?" She wiggled her eyebrows and bugged out her eyes, trying to give a hint.

"I don't know, what?" Vanessa frowned and her voice took on a hint of annoyance.

"My glasses, doofus! I haven't had my glasses on since it happened."

"You wear contacts most of the time anyway. What's the big deal?" Now Vanessa sat up as well, her dark skin making her almost invisible in the dim light.

"No contacts either, *chica,*" she said, using their favorite pet name for each other. "I don't need them."

"Whattya mean, you don't need them? You're half-blind without them." Vanessa flipped a lock of long, auburn hair back from her face as she leaned forward to peer at Chloe's eyes.

"Not anymore. When I woke up, I could see perfect. Better than if I had my glasses on. At first I just thought my contacts were in, since I'd been wearing them when I left the house that day. But Doctor Bloom told me they hadn't been there when I arrived in the ER. That's why I had to go to the eye doctor today. They want to know why I can see so well all of a sudden."

Chloe felt bad breaking the news this way, but Vanessa had pulled a double at work the day before, when Chloe got out of the hospital, so they'd only been able to speak on the phone for a few minutes. And this was something she'd wanted to talk about in person.

"Why didn't you tell me? What did the doctor say?" Vanessa asked, jumping up and kneeling on the bed. "This is serious! What if they're melted to your eyes? You could end up with some kind of infection, or even go blind!"

Chloe moved back a little, giving Vanessa a calming smile. "You sound just like my mom. Don't worry. The contacts aren't in there, they checked. Doctor Ling, my eye doctor, said there's absolutely nothing wrong with me. She did, like, a total workup, including checking to see if the heat modified the shape of my corneas, like instant laser surgery. But nothing's different since my last visit. According to her exam, I should still be near-sighted, but I'm not. In fact, I'm better than twenty-twenty now."

"So what does she think caused it?" Vanessa was still peering close into her eyes, as if she could spot something all the doctors had missed.

"She doesn't know. The best she could come up with was a whole bunch of big words that basically mean either the electricity zapped my brain and changed the way I interpret the signals from

my eyes, or it altered the shape of the back of my eyes, where the light gets focused. They don't know if it's permanent or not, but for right now I'm lovin' it. No glasses to reach for in the morning, no lenses drying out or popping loose. It's great!"

"Nothing else is different?"

Chloe shrugged. "Different bad? No. Different good? Totally killing it. Colors seem brighter, like I can see shades that I didn't know existed. It's so cool. I never realized how much I was missing by having bad eyesight. In fact," she added, hoping to lighten the mood, "I can see every freckle on your nose."

Vanessa's lips curled up in a smile and Chloe felt better than she had all week. She'd missed that smile. When Vanessa's soft lips touched hers, she marveled at how such a simple gesture could convey so many emotions—relief, love, worry.

Then one kiss led to another, and no more words were necessary.

CHAPTER TWO

Twenty miles away from Rocky Point, behind miles of electrified fence and barbed wire, lay the sprawling grounds of Fort Stone. As far as the people in the surrounding towns of Rockland County knew, Fort Stone had been closed down from active status decades before and now served as nothing more than a training center and document storage depot. Town supervisors would have been surprised—and alarmed—to learn just how functional the military base was.

And that it housed a top secret research facility, where a technician had just delivered some surprising data to her commanding officer.

"Are you sure about the results?"

The technician seated before the bank of computers and imaging equipment paused before answering. She was well aware that the stocky, square-jawed Colonel demanded accuracy at all times, and he had a reputation for destroying the careers of people who made mistakes. So she mentally double-checked her facts and then nodded.

"Yes, sir. The tests have all performed within expected parameters. Confirmed lightning strikes were all within one meter of target coordinates." The technician tapped her finger on the flat panel monitor to indicate a line of data. "And the energy expenditure is actually nineteen percent lower than the original calculated values, which means we could probably produce as many as sixty or seventy full strength strikes before the satellite needs to recharge the onboard solar batteries."

She handed the man a folder containing several pages of test data. In the dim, greenish-blue light of the computer screens, his close-cropped black hair and slightly oily skin seemed to glow with pale luminescence.

"Well done, Sergeant. I'll review this tonight, and I'll want the full report on my desk no later than sixteen hundred hours tomorrow. In the meantime, begin preparations for Phase II. I want us ready to start within two weeks."

"Yes, sir." The sergeant flipped a crisp salute, but the base commander was already heading for the door.

Just as well. Glad to be free of his intense gaze, she prepared another data set for graphing.

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, Chloe headed for Vanessa's apartment after school, relieved that the day was over and she could finally relax. Vanessa wouldn't be home from work for a couple of hours and Chloe was looking forward to some quiet time by herself. Her first day back to school had been crazy hectic; all she'd wanted to do was return to her normal routine, but no one would let that happen. Everywhere she went, kids were asking her what it was like to get struck by lightning. Even students who didn't know her followed her around. It was

almost like being popular, except more annoying. And her teachers didn't make things any easier, going overboard expressing their concern and asking if she felt well enough to return to class.

Sure, now *they're all making a big fuss over me. But when I want to go home early 'cause I have cramps that could knock down a horse, none of them gives a damn.*

It wasn't all instant celebrity. There were the usual jerks who made her life hell on a daily basis. Neanderthals who couldn't comprehend that not everyone wanted to conform to their idea of normal. If you dressed different, or didn't like sports, or didn't listen to the same popular music as everyone else, you were automatically a freak.

Once they heard about her near-death experience, they'd wasted no time putting together a whole new list of insults to toss her way in the halls and the cafeteria. Most were crude sexual innuendos having to do with the imagined effects of electricity on her piercings, including some painful-sounding places she didn't even have one. The rest, as she'd expected dealt with her coming back from the dead and being a zombie or vampire.

By the time she heard the tenth "Guard your brain!" or "Dead girl walking!" she wanted to shout at them to at least go get some original material. But she'd learned over the years that responding only made things worse. Like monkeys in a zoo, the hallway beasts craved attention.

They worship reality TV stars and spend their weekends wandering through the mall like zombies, but I'm the weirdo.

She sighed as she dug her key out of her pocket. *Another wonderful day in the public school system.*

Chloe let herself into apartment and locked the door behind her. As she tossed her schoolbooks next to Vanessa's sketch pads on the kitchen counter, she noticed the red light on Vanessa's

ancient answering machine was blinking. She'd asked Vanessa once why she even had it.

"Because I don't want my family or work to have my cell number. Some people just shouldn't be able to get through to you whenever they want."

At first, Chloe had found it a bit annoying to use the machine. But over time, it had grown to be a key part of their relationship. She looked forward to coming home each day and finding a message just for her. Or, if she left while Vanessa was at work, she'd leave one of her own. Nothing urgent, just little love notes to say "I miss you" or "Surprise! Let's get sushi tonight." The electronic equivalent of post-it notes stuck to the 'fridge. During those few seconds, she could almost imagine they were living together in their own place.

Chloe pressed the play button and listened to the message while she poured herself a glass of ice tea.

"Hey, cutie. Netflix and couch tonight. Don't start anything for dinner. Mainly 'cause the 'fridge is empty. I'll stop on the way home and grab take out. Love you, bye!"

Take out and Netflix; their version of dinner and a movie. The perfect date night. Plus, no dishes to wash.

Loving it!

She threw herself onto the bed, then leaned over and grabbed a candle. Candles were so much cooler than lights. With the right style, color, and scent, you could give even the crappiest room "atmosphere." Digging through the pockets of her black cargo pants for some matches, she came across her cell phone and gave it a quick check before tossing it on the nightstand, next to a bra and an empty water glass, thinking how nice it was to not have to clean up. One of the many advantages of having your own place was you didn't have to worry about keeping your room spotless.

Not that she minded the few chores she had to do at home. As

much as she complained about having to live by her parents' rules, she knew she had it easy compared to a lot of other kids her age. As long as she kept up her grades, which was a breeze most of the time, she pretty much had free license to do what she wanted. Within reason. They still wouldn't let her sleep at Vanessa's on school nights, but gradually they'd eased up on the restrictions about overnights on Fridays and Saturdays, once she'd proven that it wouldn't lead to any problems with school or drugs.

Chloe couldn't help but grin as she remembered the night she'd broken the news that she and her long-time friend were now dating. God, she'd been so afraid. Especially after the uproar it caused with Vanessa's old-fashioned mother and ultra-conservative step-father. Vanessa's already strained relationship with them —thanks to their not believing her regarding what her step-brother had done—hit rock bottom. She moved out not long after.

But in the end, Chloe's parents had surprised her. They'd always liked Vanessa, and even after finding out their daughter was in a non-traditional relationship they'd never stopped treating the half-Puerto Rican, half-Scottish girl like one of the family. Although after-school study sessions had suddenly required keeping the door open at all times.

Still smiling to herself, Chloe lit the candle and blew out the match. As she went to drop it in the ashtray, something caught her eye and made her hold on to the wooden stem. Swirling lines of purple, dark red, and violet rose up from the match head. The subtle shades all twisted together, creating a complex rope of entangled hues. The dark but vibrant colors mixed with the duller gray of the smoke as it snaked toward the ceiling.

The entwined lines whirled around like holographic streamers for a few seconds and then gradually faded away. Chloe glanced at the nightstand and found a similar but much brighter effect occurring over the candle flame. She reached out and passed her hand

through the streams of color, which flattened and blurred, flowed over the edges of her hand, and then resumed their animated ascent.

"Holy crap." She watched in amazement as the breath expelled by her words changed the shape of the translucent lines, scattering them into rainbow clouds.

What the hell?

The colors grew dimmer and more transparent as they moved further from the flame, until they disappeared. She lifted her hand higher. The heat from the candle diminished in corresponding fashion.

Chloe thought back to her earth science classes on light and energy. There were several wavelengths that existed outside the normal visual spectrum. It seemed impossible, but somehow she was seeing those light waves, or at least *some* kind of energy waves.

Like ultraviolet or infrared or something like that.

She knew right away it had to be connected to her improved vision. A nervous shiver ran through her. She bit her lip as she stared at the weird light show.

It might be nothing, she told herself. *Remember, the doctors said you could have episodes with your sight.*

Episodes that included suddenly having a super-power? Once the question popped into her head, she couldn't get rid of it.

Chloe took several deep breaths. *Calm down, calm down...* After a minute, her heart obliged, slowing enough so she didn't think she'd totally freak out. She decided to test the theory. She turned on one of the bedside lamps, let it get hot, and then turned it off again. Sure enough, the unlit bulb was now a seething mass of energy lines, like someone had filled the glass with hundreds of glow-in-the-dark worms.

It's real! How the hell do I explain this *to anyone? Maybe I'm*

actually turning into the freakazoid the brain-dead cave dwellers at school always say I am.

At that moment, the idea of candle light didn't seem so soothing after all. She blew the flame out and waved the smoke away, purposely not looking at the candle. Abruptly more depressed than excited over what had happened, she shut her eyes and lay down on the bed, face buried in her pillow.

She'd almost cried herself to sleep by the time Vanessa came home.

"CHLOE, Doctor Bloom and I both agree you should see a specialist." Doctor Ling was performing her third go-round with the ophthalmoscope as she spoke. "I just don't have the necessary equipment to accurately determine what's happened with your eyesight."

Chloe gave a grudging nod. After two days of arguing, she finally given in to Vanessa's demand that she tell her doctors about the unusual colors she'd been seeing. Chloe had been expecting that Ling would suggest a specialist; after all, nothing about her problem was normal, so how could a normal eye doctor handle it?

Ling switched to the other eye. "Well, the good news is everything else seems fine. Have you had any unusual symptoms? Headaches, dizziness, any spots in front of your eyes?"

"Nope. I mean, I can see better, but no pain or blurriness."

"Good. I'm going to refer you to a doctor I know in the city. We were in medical school together. He's a well-known surgeon and a specialist in the area of eye-related injuries and he does a lot of emergency room work as well, so he's seen all sorts of unusual accidents. Chemical burns, electrical shocks, heat damage, you name it. He even helped develop robotic vision systems for the army. I'll

let him know you'll be calling to make an appointment. Once he hears the details of your case, I'm sure he'll fit you in quickly."

Chloe took the card with the phone number on it and went out to the waiting room, where Vanessa was waiting, looking as worried as Chloe felt.

This whole fiasco just gets better. Now I have to tell my parents I need to make an appointment with another doctor, which means I have to tell them about my crazy new and improved vision. Mom's gonna totally lose it.

Sure enough, two hours later the scene at the Olivetti household was just as she expected, her mom freaking and her father not far behind. After trying several times to explain that she hadn't said anything to them because she didn't want to worry them if it turned out to be nothing, Chloe gave up and retreated into silence.

"I just don't understand!" her mother kept saying. "You're a smart girl, smarter than this. Straight A's in school, a science major, and you still can't figure out that changes in your vision is something you should share with your parents, instead of sneaking off to the doctor?"

Kerri Olivetti grabbed the phone off the wall charger. "What's that specialist's number? We're calling right now. I wouldn't want you to forget, after all," she added, expertly playing the guilt card.

Chloe handed over the number. "Fine. Just let me know when the appointment is. I'm going to Vanessa's."

She ducked out the back door to the sound of her father yelling that she "better not leave the house, dammit!"

It was only a ten-block walk to Vanessa's. At least there she could discuss the situation without being criticized.

Halfway to Vanessa's, the world exploded into sudden fire all around her as the streetlights turned on in response to the setting sun. The pain brought tears to her eyes, but then the intensity of

the overhead sodium lamps retreated back to normal. Chloe blinked a few times, but the streetlights remained pale dots rather than burning flares.

Well, Dr. Bloom did say I might experience light sensitivity. I guess that was it.

By the time she'd reached Vanessa's, her anger had pushed away her concern over the momentarily disturbing symptom.

It never occurred to her that even after the sun dipped below the horizon, she'd had no trouble making out the faces of people she passed in the dark.

DOCTOR PRIYADAR GUPTI leaned back from the complex array of instruments set up in front of Chloe's face and adjusted the dimmer switch on the wall, raising the light level just enough so Chloe could see to get around but wasn't blinded after an hour in the dark.

"Okay, Miss Olivetti, we are being all done here. Please step outside—carefully, remember—and I will be joining you and your parents in moments, yes?"

Chloe nodded and rose from her chair. The Indian doctor with the light British accent and terrible grammar had already warned her that the drops in her eyes would make her especially sensitive to light. That had to be the reason she was able to see in the darkened room like it was a sunny day.

Her parents were waiting for her in the comfortably appointed sitting area of the Park Avenue office. Both looked up as she entered the room, their faces tight with worry, but before they could ask any questions, she shook her head and repeated what the doctor had said about being right out. Gupti was true to his word,

opening the door and motioning them into his office less than two minutes later.

After they had all taken seats, the fiftyish, dark-skinned doctor got right to the heart of the matter, his command of English improving as his words grew more technical.

"Mr. and Mrs. Olivetti. I am being concerned over some aspects of your daughter's examination. On the one hand, she most definitely has perfect vision. Better, in fact, than the standard of twenty-twenty most people refer to. However, there have been some physical changes which I can only assume are related to her recent accident."

"What kind of changes, Doctor?" Mrs. Olivetti asked. She was wringing her hands in her lap, and her husband reached out with one of his own and calmed their motion.

"There appears to be a slight clouding of the cornea, the clear layer of the eye which is overlaying everything. At the moment, it is only being noticeable under extreme magnification. What worries me is that according to the charts I received from both Doctor Bloom and Doctor Ling, no signs of any such cloudiness were present when they examined her. That indicates it is something that has begun to happen only in the past two days.

"And then there is the other matter," Gupti continued, his voice a little less sure. "Chloe tells me she can now see colors the human eye should not be able to detect. My equipment cannot verify this, but because of the detail in which she describes what she sees, I believe she is, indeed, able to view wavelengths outside the normal spectrum. I would like to run further tests, as well as monitor the physical changes to her eyes."

Gupti leaned forward, chin resting on his steepled fingers. "I will not lie to you. Damaged corneal cells can prevent adequate oxygen from passing through to the eye. It could also mean the lightning strike has triggered a case of glaucoma. If that is so, we

are needing to be prepared to treat it aggressively, before it is advancing further."

"Doctor, whatever it takes to save Chloe's sight, we'll do it. Just tell us."

Aldo Olivetti grasped his wife's hand in a tight embrace. Chloe wished she could convince them everything would be all right. How she knew that, she couldn't say. She just did. But she kept quiet, doubting that 'intuition' or 'a feeling' would do much to sooth her mother's nerves.

"I would like to be checking Chloe into my clinic for a period of two or three days. I am having the more advanced equipment there. During this time, we will examine her thoroughly. We will also begin preliminary treatment for glaucoma. If it is turning out she is not suffering from the disease," Gupti held up a small, thin finger, "then no harm is being done from the medicine. If, however, she has the glaucoma and we catch it early, we can perhaps treat it without resorting to corneal replacement surgery."

Chloe tuned out the sound of her parents asking more questions and making arrangements for bringing her back to the clinic the next day.

Surgery? On my eyes? The very thought of it made her want to throw up. *Please, God, don't let that happen!*

Forgotten in her sudden worry about eye surgery was the question she'd intended to ask Gupti. If the cloudiness in her corneas was only visible when the doctor examined her with his equipment, then what was the shiny, mother-of-pearl haze she'd seen over her eyes when she looked into the mirror earlier?

AFTER THE OLIVETTIS made their arrangements and left the office, Priyadar Gupti sat down at his desk and stared at Chloe's

chart, considering all the possible ramifications of her case. Twice he reached for the phone and then let his hand fall back. His indecision stemmed not from a feeling of guilt, but rather that he was torn between the selfish desire to keep Chloe's condition a secret and possibly publish a career-defining study of her case, or to place the call and fulfill the requirements of his contract. A contract that promised severe consequences—or worse—if he didn't honor it.

In the end, fear won out over greed and he punched in the number from the plain white business card he'd been holding onto for years.

"Yes?" The gruff voice that answered gave away nothing.

"Hello, this is Doctor Priyadar Gupti; I believe I have something that will interest you. Perhaps we should meet."

The voice told him to stay put for the next several hours and to have copies of everything ready. Then the connection went dead.

Gupti replaced the receiver in its cradle and chewed on his thumbnail while staring at Chloe's chart.

Wondering why he felt as if he'd just made the worst decision of his life.

CHAPTER THREE

Three days in Gupti's clinic did nothing to help Chloe's nerves. She endured hours of having her head stuck in front of, or inside, a confusing array of instruments while Gupti and his team looked into her eyes, injected dyes into her system, performed CAT scans, and generally made her life miserable. In between, they had her sit at a series of lamps with odd-shaped bulbs and describe the colors she saw emanating from the various heat sources.

On the morning of the third day, Gupti wasted no time in getting down to business, entering the examination room in brisk fashion and launching into a monologue about Chloe's condition before she or her parents could say a word.

"Our tests are revealing that Chloe can definitely see outside the normal spectrum. She can, in fact, be identifying three different colors in the ultraviolet range and four in the infrared. On the physical side, we have eliminated glaucoma as a cause for the clouding of her corneas, which has shown a moderate increase.

Paradoxically, her vision continues to improve. This is, of course, being technically impossible, and yet we have our proof."

He jiggled a clipboard filled with papers at them as if annoyed by the data it contained. Dressed in his usual crisp white lab coat, the diminutive doctor could have been a poster child for research scientists everywhere. The ruby in his medical school ring glinted in the bright overhead lights and, for a moment, Chloe was sure she saw a rainbow trail behind it. Then she returned her attention to what the doctor was saying.

"According to our findings, the level of clouding, what we call opacity, in Chloe's eyes should translate to approximately a five percent loss of visual acuity. And yet this is not being the case at all."

Chloe noticed the confused looks on her parents' faces and quickly interrupted Gupti's explanation. "Doc, can you say that again, but in English?"

"Chloe, mind your manners," Kerri said, but her relief at being spared the embarrassment of asking the same question was obvious.

"Oh, um, yes, of course." Gupti cleared his throat and then continued. "Quite simply, her vision is improving when the opposite should be happening. Her tests placed her at twenty-seven, as of earlier today. Far better than average. Most remarkable, most remarkable indeed."

Before her parents could comment, Chloe asked a question from among the dozens whirling through her head.

"Doctor Gupti, why do all the new colors and everything come and go? I mean, sometimes it's like my vision is totally normal, and then other times, pow. Super girl."

She didn't add that since she'd gotten up that morning, her vision had changed again. Now she could see what seemed to be a pale white glow around certain people. And at times the lines of

heat and the wavy colored beams of light were actually obscuring her regular vision, as if she was viewing the world through a poorly-choreographed laser show. This was the most irritating aspect of her new abilities, although it wasn't bad enough yet for her to mention it to anyone. Plus, some inner voice kept telling her to keep quiet; the more the doctors tested her the more reluctant she was to reveal any additional changes. It seemed dumb—she knew the doctors needed information if they were going to diagnose her correctly—yet she couldn't shake the feeling that she shouldn't tell them everything.

Kerri Olivetti reached out and patted Chloe's leg.

"Chloe, you have to be patient. Dr. Gupti and his people will figure this out and find a way to cure you." Her red, puffy eyes belied the comforting words.

"Cure me? What if I don't want to be cured? So far this hasn't been a bad thing, Mom. In fact, it's been totally awesome. I don't wanna go back to the way I was."

Her mother started to object, but Gupti overrode her.

"Your daughter is quite correct, Mrs. Olivetti. The ability she has is unique and should be cherished. More importantly, I am feeling more and more certain there is not a way to be reversing her condition."

That quieted everyone down.

Gupti returned his attention to Chloe.

"What I believe has happened is that somehow the extreme voltage of the lightning enacted electro-chemical changes in your brain. Because of these changes, you are gradually becoming able to discern wavelengths of energy that exist around us, wavelengths our eyes normally take in but cannot interpret."

"Doctor, I don't understand. You mean her brain is different?" Her father sounded more anxious now that when she'd gotten struck by the lightning.

Chloe looked at her parents. Couldn't they see that if there was a real problem, the doctors would be worried instead of confused or excited?

"Yes, it is most definitely on the different side. Consider this: All around us are many wavelengths of energy." He waved his hands at the room. "They travel through our eyes, but our brains do not have the ability to process the signals; they, um, cannot form a picture. Just as some people are blind to certain colors while others can see the entire spectrum. However, Chloe now has the ability to see extra colors. This is no different than if she could hear sounds you cannot, or smell an odor you could not. Her brain is not only working differently, but in a more improved fashion."

Gupti made some notes on Chloe's chart, frowned at them for a moment, and then continued speaking.

"I am of the opinion that as time goes by, Chloe will be able to see these wavelengths more consistently. Perhaps right now her brain is overwhelmed by the new information. It must adapt to this sudden influx of data and learn to separate and process the data in a manner she can understand and use, much the same way a person with an injury learns to use a limb again."

"So what's the next step?" asked Aldo.

"I would like to keep her here for more testing and observation," Gupti replied. "I have other scientists coming in, with additional equipment. I want to measure the exact wavelengths Chloe can visualize, and chart the growth, if any, of her abilities. And, of course, we need to monitor the opacity of her corneas, to ensure no vision loss occurs."

Gupti's voice took on a distinct note of anticipation. "This has startling ramifications for the field of physics, as well as for optics."

Chloe groaned. More testing meant more time stuck in the clinic.

I studied science all my life, and now I've become the lab rat!

It also meant more time away from Vanessa, who'd only been able to come by for a couple of hours each evening, and even then not every night. Visitors had to be out by nine, not that she'd have been able to stay much longer anyhow, since she had work most mornings and it was an hour drive to the hospital. And today was the day for one of her two weekly double shifts, meaning she wouldn't be visiting at all.

Which totally sucked.

On the other hand, she was seeing her parents more now than when she'd been at home. Her father had taken off work and they were spending approximately sixteen hours a day at the center, either in Chloe's room or in the waiting areas outside each diagnostic lab while Chloe underwent her testing. They would have spent their nights with her, too, except they had to get home each evening to fix dinner for Benny and make sure he did his homework and got to bed at a decent hour. Between too little time with Vanessa and too much time with her parents, Chloe was ready to jump out the window.

And now they wanted her to stay longer? No freaking way!

One more day. That's all I'll give them. And then I'm going to demand they let me out of here. I refuse to become some kind of lab specimen.

"THIS NEW EYESIGHT is really taking some getting used to." Chloe had her cellphone cradled between her ear and the pillow. Despite being alone, she felt weird using speakerphone, the way Vanessa was doing on the other end. She didn't want anyone coming in and hearing her conversation. She pictured Vanessa lying in bed while talking, and wished she could be there.

Forty-five miles had never seemed so far.

"At first, it was like trying to see the world through a prism, or a rainbow. All the new colors were superimposed over the old ones, and everything was all messed up. Way confusing. But now it's getting better."

"The colors are going away?" Vanessa asked.

"No, but I think Gupti was right. I'm getting used to them, like how sunglasses make everything seem really dark when you put them on, and then after a minute or two all the colors look normal again. But like, every time I think I have a handle on things, something changes, you know? Like whatever is going on inside me is growing is spurts. It's totally, like, messing with my head. Literally."

There was a slurping sound in the phone. Vanessa was enjoying a late-night Caramel Frappuccino from Dunkin' Donuts. Chloe felt a twinge of jealousy. All she'd had after dinner was herbal tea.

Herbal tea sucked.

"What do you mean?"

"Like today. The freakiest thing happened. I've been worried about what Doctor Gupti told me and my parents about my brain changing to interpret the information it's receiving. I started thinking, what if my brain's mutating the way my eyes are? I mean, who knows what could be happening deep within these lobes of mine, right? I could be turning into a giant-headed alien." Chloe switched her phone to the other ear, trying to get comfortable.

"Damn, Chloe, that's so dark. Besides, haven't they run tests, like CAT scans or whatever?"

Chloe heard the nervousness in Vanessa's voice, so unusual for the usually strong girl, and hurried to reassure her.

"That's just it. I started bugging Gupti to do another CAT or an MRI, and he finally agreed. I think he did it just to calm me

down. The results came back A-plus. No weird mutations in my skull."

"Thank God. So what was the freaky thing that happened?"

"We were on our way back to my room after the test, walking down the hall, and all of a sudden these little flashes of light go speeding by. They were like tiny, glowing arrows, or shots from a ray gun, like in a sci-fi movie. They came out of one wall, zoomed across the hallway, and went right through the wall on the other side."

"That is weird. What were they?"

"Uh, that's what I wanted to know? I told Gupti about them and he just gave me that look. The same one my parents get when I try to explain how to put an app on their phone. So I asked him what was behind the wall where they'd come from, and he said it was one of the x-ray rooms. So, like, I told him, "Well, I think your machine has some major leakage.""

"What did he say?"

"He got all adulty with me, totally pulled an attitude. "It is being impossible for the machines to leak." Kind of like how Mr. Sanibal sounds in Math class when I ask him why I have to show my work when I can do the problems in my head."

"Like, you're just a kid and you don't know anything."

"Yeah. *"The machines are being tested all the time."*" Chloe mimicked Gupti's clipped accent again and was pleased to get a short laugh from Vanessa this time.

"But you don't believe him, do you." It wasn't a question.

Chloe lowered her voice to a whisper. "Not a chance. My spider sense tells me I'm right. There's a machine in there that's not working properly. I'll bet a week's worth of lattes that I saw x-rays, or some other kind of rays. And I think Gupti really believed me but he didn't want to let me know."

"Why would he lie?"

Chloe shook her head, even though Vanessa couldn't see her. "That's the million dollar question, *chica*."

A KNOCK on his office door caused Priyadar Gupti to hurriedly switch off the video program he'd been watching on his computer, a live feed from Chloe Olivetti's room.

"Come in," he called out.

"Doctor Gupti, I have that report for you." A technician entered the office and placed a file folder on the desk. "You were right, there was a hairline crack in the shielding on Machine Three. How did you know?"

Gupti kept his eyes on the report while side-stepping the question. "Thank you, Marsha. Please make sure the machine is repaired immediately."

"I will. Good night."

"Good night." Gupti waited until the technician had shut the door on her way out, then called up a new file on the computer, carefully entering the multiple passwords that would allow him access to the encrypted material.

After a moment's thought, he began a new entry.

TUESDAY MORNING BROUGHT another surprise for Chloe. Her parents walked in with coronas of dark colors dancing around them. Purples, indigoes, and maroons mixed with licorice twists of blacks and grays. Unlike the heat signatures she could see rising off any almost objects now, these colored bands didn't float up towards the ceiling. Instead, they outlined her parents' bodies in

prismatic shrouds, as if emanating from their very pores and then held in place by gravitational forces.

Ohmygod! I'm seeing their auras. That brought a smile to her face. She'd heard about auras, but never believed in them. Even cooler was that somehow she understood what each color meant, comprehended the different emotions represented by each shade. Concern, worry, and fear mixed with love and determination.

"You're upset about something," she greeted them. Their eyes widened in surprise and bursts of dark blue appeared in the luminous outlines, confirming her theory. Chloe hit the mute button for the television, cutting off a repeat of the MTV Music Awards in mid-performance, and sat up in bed. "What's wrong?"

"Doctor Gupti says you need to stay here a while longer," her mother said, after a brief glance at her husband. "He says the tests they ran yesterday showed the...disease is still progressing, and they're no closer to finding out what's causing the...corneal clouding."

Kerri Olivetti placed one hand over her mouth and nose and stifled a sob. Her father started to say something comforting, but Chloe interrupted him.

"Forget it. We're leaving today, so you might as well tell Gupti to get the discharge papers ready."

Chloe got up and went to the little dresser next to the bed, where she proceeded to pull out the few clothes and personal items she'd brought with her and stack them in a pile.

Her statement was greeted by a moment of stunned silence from her parents, and then her father spoke up. "What do you mean? Didn't you hear your mother? The doctors want you to stay here for more testing. You can't just throw a tantrum and walk out of here."

"I heard her. I'm not throwing a tantrum. And yes, I can,"

Chloe responded, zipping her beat-up, camouflage-style duffel bag closed. "If not today, then for sure on Wednesday."

"Don't take that tone with us, Chloe Marie. And what does Wednesday have to do with anything?"

Her father's voice had risen in volume, a sure sign he was reaching his boiling point, as was his use of her middle name. Usually the next step was cutting off her driving privileges or taking away her cellphone.

Of course, all that would end Wednesday, too.

At the same time, his aura changed with his voice. Pulsing dark red streaks of anger flashed within the deeper bluish-black background, tiny alien discharges of electricity inside the dark cloud of his emotions.

"Gee, thanks for remembering, Dad." Chloe made no effort to keep the sarcasm from her voice. "It's only my eighteenth birthday. Which means, among other things, that I'll have the legal right to sign myself out of this place. So the longest you can make me stay here is another day and half. Then I waltz out and no one can stop me. So why not save everyone the aggravation and fighting, and just have Gupti release me today?"

Chloe crossed her arms across her chest and stared at her father, daring him to argue further. His eyebrows turned down over squinting eyes, and he seemed ready to shout at her. Kerri reached out and placed a gentle hand on his arm.

"Aldo, maybe Chloe's right," she said in a soft voice, shocking Chloe, who'd expected her mother to side against her, not with her. "The doctors can't figure anything out, and Chloe can still see fine. And I really want her home so we can celebrate her birthday together."

"Have all the women in this family gone crazy?" Aldo yelled. Tiny veins bulged in his temples and his already dark complexion took on a red hue that matched the lightning in his aura. "There's

something wrong with her eyesight. She needs to stay here until they can figure out what it is, and cure it!"

Now sweat was starting to dampen the front of the white t-shirt he wore under his plaid short-sleeved button down. His usual weekend attire, along with dark blue jeans that always looked brand new.

In seventeen years, she'd only seen her father in sweatpants once, and that was the day he'd had fluid drained from a sprained knee. He'd been back in his jeans the next morning.

"Maybe it doesn't need to be cured, have you ever thought about that?" Chloe countered. "Maybe what's happened to me is a good thing. Sure, it's kind of weird, but there haven't been any bad side effects. You heard the doctor yesterday. All my tests have come back negative. Physically I'm fine, and I can see better than I ever did before. Besides, all these new colors are wicked."

"Is that all you can think about? This isn't like dyeing your hair crazy colors or having your ears pierced for the tenth time. There haven't been any side effects so far, but what about later on? You're only seventeen. You don't know how to look at the big picture."

He raised his hands in the air, waving them for emphasis. "What happens if we take you home, and tomorrow you wake up blind?"

"Aldo! Don't say that!"

"I have to, Kerri. No one else seems to care that our daughter's eyes could be deteriorating away."

Chloe pushed past her father and went to the closet to get her sneakers. "What's the difference if it happens here or at home? We're only an hour away from the clinic if anything goes wrong. I just want to go back to a normal life. Is that too much to ask?"

Hot tears ran down Chloe's cheeks, which shamed her because she hated to lose control. But the tears worked to her advantage, too. She'd learned over the years that nothing diffused her father's

anger like tears. So as embarrassed as she was, she didn't try to hide them.

Right on cue, Mr. Olivetti shut his mouth and exhaled deeply, as if expelling all his anger through his nose. The color faded from his face and his features relaxed, letting Chloe know she'd won this round before he even said anything.

"Fine. I'll go talk to Gupti."

Chloe went to hug him but he held up his hand.

"We need to make a deal," he told her, his face still stern. "Every Saturday you come back here so they can run their tests and monitor your eyes for changes. Agreed?"

Chloe nodded. "Agreed. As long as I can come home every Saturday night." Giving up Saturday afternoons was no major hardship. Vanessa worked until four, so Chloe usually just slept late, did her chores, and then ran errands or worked on her homework for a couple of hours.

Mumbling about how children weren't supposed to be running the family, Aldo Olivetti left the room to find Doctor Gupti and inform him of their decision.

Chloe gave her mom the hug instead, who would be sure to pass it along to her father. With a lighter heart, she flopped back on the bed to text Vanessa the good news.

Soon, everything would be normal again.

CHAPTER FOUR

"You are not understanding. There was nothing I could do." Priyadar Gupti's knuckles ached from clenching the phone in his fist, but it kept him from screaming at the person on the other end of the line. Who was definitely not someone you wanted to scream at.

Not if you valued your life.

"Then it's time for me to bring her in." The colonel's voice was just as hard and cold as Gupti remembered from his research days. Perhaps even more so. Like the years had stolen away even more of what little humanity the man had possessed.

Why couldn't I be dealing with other scientists? They would understand.

"No, no, I do not believe that is necessary yet. I was able to convince her of the necessity for returning each Saturday to continue the testing, and to allow us to further monitor the progression of her corneal changes."

Gupti saw no reason to mention the idea hadn't been his. He'd been on the verge of calling security until the girl's father had

presented him with a gift-wrapped opportunity to salvage a small triumph from a possible disaster.

"Listen, Doctor, it's vital that we learn all we can about this kid's powers. Are you sure one day a week is enough?"

"Yes, yes, I realize how important it is to determine the limits of her talents. In fact, that is why too much testing could be detrimental. Right now her abilities are still sporadic, although the episodes occur more frequently. But I cannot tell her directly to try and focus on learning how to control these things. She would wonder why I ask that. Instead, I trick her into practicing them, by repeating certain tests over and over. And you must remember, she is young. Children distrust authority, but they always love to experiment. I have no doubt she will be continuing to play with her new skills at every opportunity once she is away from here." Gupti purposely didn't mention the information he'd gotten from listening to Chloe's conversations with her girlfriend. She was already keeping secrets from him, and from her parents. There was much to learn from the girl's private thoughts, and he wasn't yet ready to give up that opportunity.

"I assume you're documenting everything for us?"

"Of course. Perhaps when she is in custody I could continue to..."

"No." There was no chance of negotiation in the frigid tone.

"I understand. Is there any chance of publishing..."

"That would be a breach of the secrecy agreement you signed. I assume you know the consequences of violating your oath?"

"Yes, I was just hoping... not now, of course, but perhaps in a year or two, after..."

Dead silence one the line gave him the only answer he needed.

"Never mind. I will call again on Saturday after she leaves."

"I'll expect a full report."

The sound of a dial tone replaced the man's voice. Gupti hung

up the phone and stared down at the file on his desk. Since coming to America to obtain his medical degree, he'd learned a great deal about U.S. culture. And political maneuverings. Things a research scientist shouldn't have to be concerned with.

Not for the first time, the concept of making deals with the devil seemed all too real.

His hands were damp and cold when he returned to his computer and began backing up all the data he had on Chloe Olivetti.

This time into a new file labeled "Office Supplies."

A WEEK later Chloe was torn between regretting her decision to leave the clinic and agreeing to ever come back. Gupti had argued with her father about her leaving, saying the strange condition affecting her eyes was still advancing and soon the effects would become more pronounced.

After Mr. Olivetti had explained how Chloe felt, and given his word they'd be back every Saturday, Gupti had finally relented, telling them to contact him immediately if Chloe suffered any ill effects during the week.

Ill effects? Guess that depends on what you consider an ill effect.

The visible changes in her eyes continued to grow more pronounced, to the point where on Thursday she'd started wearing sunglasses whenever she went out in public. Not because the light bothered her vision, but because her eyes were beginning to bother other people.

When she examined herself in the mirror, it now looked like she was wearing opaque, bluish-white contact lenses, like the zombie contacts some people wore on Halloween, the ones that

made your eyes look dead. It was the one aspect of her changing vision that she resented, because she'd always thought her sea-foam green eyes were one of her best features. On the rare occasions she didn't dress in black, she made sure to choose shirts and make-up whose colors drew attention to her eyes.

Now they took care of that all by themselves.

Of course, in some of the clubs I've been to, having corpse-eyes would make me more attractive.

School had totally sucked, of course. She'd told everyone she needed the sunglasses because the tests the doctors had run were making her eyes overly sensitive to light. Her teachers expressed their sympathies; a few of her classmates did the same. Most just ignored her, like always. And then there were the usual haters and missing links who thought it was funny to tell everyone she was going to start taking the special bus to school, or to ask her when she was getting her cane and guide dog.

At least my relatives don't still live in trees, she was tempted to say, but she didn't. No telling how a punch in the eye would affect her.

On the bright side, no one had tried to steal her glasses or trip her in the hallway.

Thankfully, her vision remained unaffected. If anything, it continued to improve. And along with it, her ability to see into the far ends of the spectrum as well. She no longer had to squint or scrunch up the muscles around her eyes to shift between 'normal' vision and 'special' vision. Instead, all she had to do was think about it and it happened. Same thing for reading the emotional auras that surrounded people, and, as it turned out, all living things, even plants.

That last discovery had shocked Vanessa pretty bad. They'd been on their way back to Vanessa's apartment after birthday dinner and cake with Chloe's family, a dinner which had gone

surprisingly well. Truly happy for the first time in days, they'd been holding hands and walking through the park when Vanessa spotted a rosebush and said she wanted to pick a few blossoms for the apartment. She's plucked one off and suddenly the pale green aura around each stem had shifted to a throbbing, angry red, shot through with jagged black lines.

"Don't." Chloe placed a hand on Vanessa's arm. "You're hurting the plant."

Her statement had drawn a soft laugh. "What, now you're reading the plants' minds, too?"

"Sort of, yeah. I can see that it's in pain."

Vanessa, who was earning major snuggle points by taking all of Chloe's new abilities in stride, had stopped immediately. And then she'd felt guilty the rest of the night about all the plants she'd picked over the years, just to have flowers in the house.

The changes didn't stop there, either. Perhaps that was why, despite how different her life was from just a couple of weeks ago, Chloe only felt a dull sense of surprise when, during the drive to Manhattan for her first Saturday appointment, she saw right through her own flesh.

She'd been checking her ClipChat feed and trying to ignore her iGame-addicted brother. One second, everything looked normal, two fashionably pale hands with black-painted fingernails holding her phone. Then, *wham!*—she was looking at the veins and arteries and muscle tissue that lay underneath her skin.

Instead of freaking out, she found herself captivated by the blood coursing through the different vessels, and by the way the striations and bands of muscle shifted and twitched as they performed the slightest movements. Like she told Vanessa later that night, it was mad crazy, like a virtual reality medical documentary. Then she blinked and her hands were normal again.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't bring her new x-ray vision back.

But it will come back. And who knows what else will come with it?

The idea of changing into something new no longer brought any fear, and no excitement either. It was just a statement of fact, with no more emotional impact than 'my shoe is untied' or 'the cafeteria is out of tater tots again.' Instead of astonishment, all she could muster was a sort of clinical curiosity, like she was observing a lab experiment.

As she stared at her hands, she realized she was in a kind of shock, and probably had been for a while now.

For the life of her, she couldn't decide if that was a good or bad thing.

CHLOE EXPECTED Dr. Gupti to be alarmed by the increasing changes in the appearance of her eyes since last week, and he didn't disappoint her.

"I am not understanding how this extreme opacity in your corneas is not impeding your vision," he muttered, more to himself than her, while he peered into his ophthalmoscope. Even without seeing the yellow and orange streaks in his aura, she could tell his frustration level was reaching critical mass.

He asked her to lean her head back and she complied, bracing for the by now familiar cold drops that would dilate her pupils for the next part of the exam. His hand approached with the dropper.

And then he jerked back with a gasp, his eyes wide. Jagged bands of purplish-blue and gray surrounded him.

"Doc? Is something wrong?" His sudden alarm set Chloe's heart racing. What had he seen?

"Um, no. No, nothing," he said, while the colors of his aura shifted again. Green and sky blue.

Fear and excitement? Chloe noticed that his hands shook as he put the dropper bottle away.

Something happened. But what? He never even put the drops in.

For the rest of the morning, Gupti did his best to act normal. He ran several tests before telling Chloe he was done and she could go home.

"I will see you next week," he said, after going over the results with her parents. By then, whatever had spooked him no longer had him on edge. Still, on the drive home, Chloe couldn't help but wondering at something she'd noticed.

After the episode with the drops, none of the tests he'd run had involved anything touching her eyes, not even liquids or blown air.

CHLOE SPENT the rest of the week thinking about what Gupti had said, that she shouldn't be able to see through her clouded corneas at all. She'd come up with a theory that she shared with Vanessa one night over iced lattes on the couch.

"I think it's like looking out of mirrored sunglasses. You can see through them perfectly fine, but no one can see in."

Vanessa had looked worried. "Not exactly the way your eyes are supposed to work."

Chloe thought about mentioning her idea to Gupti, but again she stopped herself. She'd been having growing misgivings about the doctor, something deeper than just her normal general distrust of authority. But she couldn't figure out what it was about him that bothered her, other than the occasional odd, dark-blue lines that appeared in his aura, usually after she told him about some change

in her abilities. It was a color she hadn't seen with anyone else, and she had no idea of how to interpret it.

Things weren't much better at home. She'd given up talking to her parents about her vision for a completely different reason: it only led to arguments, and she was sick of arguing. Instead, she just avoided them as much as possible while at home and spent every free moment at Vanessa's. If her parents would have allowed it, she'd have slept there, too. But it had taken months for her to convince them she was responsible enough to spend Friday and Saturday nights there, and that was before all the eye-crazy happened. Sleeping away from home on a school night wasn't even in the realm of possibility. They wouldn't even consider extending her weeknight curfew past ten.

On the rare occasions she crossed paths with her mom and dad, the looks of worry and fear on their faces made her want to cry. She wished there was a way she could have her new abilities without her eyes looking any different. Then everything would have been awesome sauce.

Instead, her days and nights just grew more depressing.

As far as any of the adults in her life knew, she still only had the ability to see extra wavelengths of light at either end of the visible spectrum. She couldn't hide the fact that her eyes had changed color, but she could hide the other details, and for some reason that made her feel better. Safer, in a way, although she couldn't say why.

On her next visit, Gupti and several associates spent the first part of the day re-running many of the tests they'd done the previous week—including the eye drops, which this time he filmed—and then added a whole new battery of examinations, most of which she couldn't understand even after all the time she'd spent searching "ophthalmological procedures" and "mechanisms of vision" on the internet.

At six o'clock, the team of scientists and doctors gave up. Gupti called Chloe and her family into his office, where he tried once again to change their minds. "I think it is still being the better choice to have Chloe stay here, rather than go home. We should be running tests every day."

"No way." Chloe expected an argument from her father, but this time he was on her side. She had the feeling that even if she'd still been seventeen, her dad would have put his size ten workboot down.

"Doctor Gupti, you said yourself it wouldn't do any harm to only come in once a week. The last thing Chloe needs right now is to miss more school, not with graduation only a couple of months away. Besides, your testing hasn't done a damn thing up to this point. You still don't have the slightest idea of what's going on or how to reverse it."

"Mister Olivetti, there are other tests we could run, perhaps. One of my colleagues has, in fact, come up with a novel hypothesis for reversing the effects to Chloe's vision by administering an electrical shock through the use of a miniature defibrillator against her corneas."

Aldo Olivetti stood up and placed his hands on Gupti's desk, leaning forward over the files and papers. Although the desk was wide enough to keep Gupti out of physical danger, the doctor still slid his chair back from the desk.

Six generations of bricklayers and masons lived on in her father's genes, and although he'd spent more time behind a desk than at job sites the last few years, his own decades of manual labor were still evident in his bulging arms and shoulders. Chloe smiled to herself. It would take a lot more backbone than Gupti possessed to stand up to her father when he got angry.

"No damn way you're going to start electrocuting my daughter just to see what happens. Chloe's not some kind of lab rat you can

experiment on, and I won't let that happen to her. Remember that before you try anything funny."

Gupti wisely didn't press the issue.

Chloe stifled a laugh at the doctor's expression. *Maybe he'd have had better luck if he cried.*

By the time they left the building, Chloe was ready to call it quits altogether, but she knew she had to stick it out for as long as her parents wished, if only to keep peace in the family and make them feel like they were doing something to help. Secretly, she'd already accepted that her condition was probably permanent and she was ready to embrace the new, improved her—if not wholeheartedly, then at least with a minimum of worry.

Over a leisurely dinner of nachos, vegetarian tacos, and bean burritos at a Mexican restaurant around the corner from Gupti's office, everyone purposely avoided the topic of Chloe's vision. Even Benny seemed eager to have a pleasant meal for a change, going on and on about the comic book convention he'd gone to and the new X-Men movie that was coming out, instead of acting like his usual obnoxious self and teasing Chloe.

As they headed towards the parking garage, Mrs. Olivetti turned to Chloe. "Are you going to Vanessa's tonight?"

Chloe nodded. She knew her mother was hoping she'd say no, and she felt a twinge as she answered. "Yeah, she should be getting home about the same time as us. We're gonna 'flix the new Johnny Depp movie and snarf some cheese doodles and popcorn. A nice, normal teenage night..."

Chloe's voice trailed off as the world around her mutated into an alien nightmare. She paused on sidewalk, trying to fathom the bright green and black landscape suddenly surrounding her. People still hurried past on the sidewalks and cars filled the streets with the beginnings of weekend traffic. The sun had set, and it was full dark.

But not for her.

It took her a moment and then she remembered where she'd seen something similar: When she'd borrowed Benny's night vision binoculars.

I'm seeing in infrared!

"What's the matter?" her mother asked.

Chloe made an effort to smile and started walking again. "Nothing, just some refried beans backing up on me. Guess I ate too fast."

"You better not stink up the car," Benny said, never looking up from his game screen.

"Tool," she said, but her heart wasn't in it. Thankfully, Benny didn't notice her weak comeback. Or add one of his own. At that moment, she couldn't have won a battle of words with a three-year-old. And she certainly couldn't tell anyone the reason why.

That she felt like she was in a video game herself.

As her father pulled out of the parking garage and guided the car towards the West Side Highway and her mother chatted on about what a beautiful night it was, Chloe struggled to hide her growing unease. Wanting to rid herself of the creepy green, white, and black vista surrounding her, she squeezed her eyes shut and counted to ten. In the past, this had always worked to return her vision back to normal from whatever strange place it had taken her.

...nine...ten.

She opened her eyes, and found her infrared vision had dissipated.

Only to be replaced by something else entirely new.

Cars went by with their headlights on, and the streetlights cast their glowing cones of yellow, green, and orange down on the roadway, but if she hadn't been paying close attention to them, she wouldn't have noticed any of the luminous beams.

Because the entire landscape was already as bright and vivid as if it was noon, rather than almost eight at night.

She could make out all of the colors of everything around her, and yet at the same time discern the stars overhead and the brightness of the lights. It was like being in a well-lit room whose walls and ceiling were all dark blue. Dark and bright at the same time.

She'd exchanged one type of night vision for another.

This is getting too hardcore. The changes are coming faster and lasting longer. I'm a giant snowball rolling down a hill.

She wiped away a tear before anyone could see it.

Call it what it is, girlfriend. Mutation. That's what you're doing, mutating into some weird, new version of yourself right before your very own freakish eyes.

Up until then she'd done a good job avoiding thinking about herself and her enhanced eyesight in those terms, but now she couldn't help it. Visions of turning into a monster, like in the movie *THE FLY*, took a firm foothold in her mind and wouldn't let go. Her stomach became a rumbling gastric volcano as the beans and cheese gurgled and churned, and it took all her willpower not to cry. Or scream in frustration.

The worst part was, as depressed and scared as she was feeling, she still didn't want to go back to the way she'd been before the accident. Her new powers were scary, but epic. Knowing what people were feeling, seeing through things like Superman...it made her feel *special*. Something she'd never really experience before. She'd always been the outsider because of the way she dressed, the grades she got, the fact that she was dating another girl. She'd never fit in with any of the cliques at school. The smart kids didn't like her because she looked weird. The party kids didn't like her 'cause she was smart. She didn't enjoy sports, she didn't do drugs, and she hardly ever got in trouble.

As much as she prided herself on not conforming, it was still

no fun to count all your friends on one hand and get teased almost every day.

Now, for the first time, she was different in a good way.

She didn't want to give up the new her, she just wanted to understand what was happening and find a way to control it so that it wasn't a constant surprise.

"You're awfully quiet tonight, Chloe. Is everything okay?" Her father's eyes glanced back at her from the rear-view mirror.

"Yeah." She didn't trust herself to say anything else.

"You sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"Because if you want to talk..." Aldo stopped as Kerri poked his arm.

"Leave her alone, dear. She'll talk to us when she's ready."

Chloe was happy to drop the subject. Hopefully they'd put her reaction down to a typical teenage mood swing rather than anxiety. Telling them she was scared or confused would only frighten them as well, and possibly lead to more time at Gupti's office. Or maybe sessions with a shrink. And she didn't want—or need—that. She turned and stared out the passenger window, watching the day-bright scenery go by. She almost wished Bennie would chime in with one of his usual snarky comments, just to get her mind off things, but he was too busy blasting dinosaurs into oblivion to even notice what was happening around him.

Of course, the way she was feeling right then, the wrong words just might push her over the edge and start a crying jag, and then she'd have to explain *that* to her parents, which would lead to explaining why she was scared...

No, better to be left alone. This way, no one asked any questions and she didn't have to lie to anyone.

"COLONEL, I believe we have something you should see."

The man in charge of Operation Sky Strike glanced up from the file he was reading to see his head technician standing at the door with a memory chip in her hand, her eyes alight with excitement. Knowing there had to be a damn good reason for her to burst in on him without even knocking—he made a mental note to correct that breach of protocol at a future date—he motioned for her to come in.

"This better be important," he said. His own anticipation went up a notch when his thinly veiled threat didn't faze her. He took the chip and plugged it into his computer.

A grainy image of Chloe Olivetti came up, showing her lying on a bed in an institutional-looking room that he recognized as her quarters at Priyadar Gupti's clinic. She was speaking to someone on her cell phone and appeared to have no idea she was being monitored.

"...walking down the hall, and all of a sudden these little flashes of light go speeding by. They were like tiny, glowing arrows, or shots from a ray gun, like in a sci-fi movie. They came out of one wall, zoomed across the hallway, and went right through the wall on the other side."

There was a pause as Olivetti listened to the person on the other end, and then she spoke again.

"That's what I wanted to know! I asked Gupti what was behind the wall where they'd come from, and he said it was one of the x-ray rooms. So I told him, "Well, I think your machine has a leak.""

Pause.

"He got all huffy and said that it was "being impossible for the machines to leak."

The screen went blank for a moment and then a new video appeared, this one clearer and in perfect color. A close up of the Olivetti girl's face. She was in an examination chair, leaning back,

one of her altered eyes closed and the other opened wide, revealing her opaque cornea in detail. A gloved hand came into view holding a plastic eye drops bottle. A single droplet of amber liquid emerged from the bottle's tip and fell into Olivetti's eye.

Where it proceeded to boil away into a miniature cloud of steam, like cold water dropped into a hot frying pan.

The Colonel stopped the video. *So, Gupti's been keeping some secrets. I had a feeling.*

Well, the time for watching was over.

"I want all the records from that clinic tonight. Maintenance, medical, everything. Clean out their entire system, down to the last purchase order. And confiscate every piece of paper and storage media in Gupti's office and house."

"Yes, sir!" The technician saluted and hurried from the room.

The officer in charge picked up one of his two desk phones, the one not colored red.

"This is Garcia. Operation Retrieve is an immediate go."

CHLOE WASTED no time heading for Vanessa's, looking forward to just the two of them alone together. The ride home from the city had seriously messed up her head and she needed to chill. While cutting through the park, she glanced up at the sky several times, a habit she'd developed ever since the lighting strike. As if she could actually see any lightning that was about to hit her.

Maybe one day soon I'll be able to. That thought stirred up her unease again and she was glad to reach the apartment and put the idea out of her head.

"Ooh, it looks like you and I were thinking the same thing," she said, walking in and finding the lights off, the candles burning, and two bottles of hard root beer on the counter.

"Great minds think alike," Vanessa replied from under the covers. "I... oh, damn."

Chloe's eyesight was still in hyper-night vision mode, so she had no trouble seeing Vanessa's smile change into a look of concern, or the way her bright pink and green aura faded to a dull blue as her voice trailed off.

"What's the matter?"

"Go in the bathroom and look in the mirror," Vanessa told her.

Chloe flipped on the light and looked at herself, hoping she wasn't getting a pimple or something from all the junk food she'd been eating lately. But as far as she could tell, nothing had changed since that morning.

"Wait," Vanessa said from the doorway. She flicked off the light. "Now look."

Chloe's stomach clenched and she gasped. Her eyes were no longer just cloudy.

They glowed.

Not bright like a flashlight. More like the soft glow of a light-up watch or the display on a VCR. Except instead of green or red, her eyes smoldered with a pure white radiance. She thought she could make out tiny sparkles of rainbow colors in the white, but she couldn't be sure.

"What the fuck is happening?" she whispered, more to herself than to Vanessa. The murky image staring back at her was like something out of a sci-fi movie. A shiver ran through her.

"I saw it when you came into the apartment," Vanessa said, coming up behind her and placing a hand on her arm. "But I thought maybe it was from the candles, you know? Then, when you got closer, I could tell it was all you. Why didn't the doctors notice?"

"I don't think I was like this until just now." Chloe turned away from the mirror, pushed past Vanessa and into the kitchen,

talking while she walked. "I mean, if I'd been all glowy like this in the car, my parents would have seen it. I... I think the changes are happening faster. A lot faster."

She grabbed her drink from the counter and tried to bring it to her mouth, but her hand shook so hard she had to put it down.

That's when the tears finally came.

"It's okay, baby, come here." Vanessa led her to the bed and sat down, cradling Chloe's head in her lap. "I'm here for you. We'll get through this."

"I don't know what to do," Chloe said through her sobs. "I feel like I'm turning into a monster."

"You're not a monster. Except when you're hungry. Tell me about what happened today."

Chloe didn't try to speak right away, just let Vanessa comfort her. The feel of long nails running through her hair in easy, slow motions always had a calming effect on her, and she let them do their work. After a few minutes, she regained enough control to talk about her totally whacked out day. When she finished, Vanessa leaned down and kissed her cheek.

"I know how hard this must be, everything changing and all. And I'm proud of you for handling it so well. But I'm starting to get a little freaked."

"A little? I feel like someone slipped roofies or something in my drink and I'm tripping balls. Part of the time, it's like something magical is going on inside me, like I'm moving to another level of being, someplace special. But then reality sinks in and I get scared. 'Cause I know it's not drugs or magic, and that makes me think I'm just dying from some weird brain melt the doctors don't know how to test for."

"I don't think you're dying. You're right, something wonderful is happening to you. It's totally unlikely you're gonna go blind or have a brain implosion."

"Gee, thanks."

"I thought that'd cheer you up. The thing is, I'm not worried about what's happening inside your head. I'm worried about what's happening at Gupti's clinic."

"What do you mean?"

"You can do some amazing things, chica. And that's just the stuff they know about. Can you imagine if they knew everything? It's gonna be hard enough as it is for Gupti and his people to keep their mouths shut."

"Keep shut about what? Me?"

"Hell, yeah. This is like the science equivalent of finding a buried treasure. He'll write papers, maybe even a book about you. Think how many people he's already talked with. And who have they told? If the wrong people find out what you can do? You might end up stuck in some laboratory forever, hooked up to machines and stuff. And I might never see you again."

Chloe sat up and grasped Vanessa's hands, returning the comfort she'd received moments before. "You sound like those conspiracy shows on the History Channel. I don't think some government agency's gonna kidnap me. I mean, that's, like, Men-in-Black crazy talk. Not real life. People can't just come and take a person away in the middle of the night. My parents would have them in court faster than they could say scandal."

Vanessa shook her head. "Baby, you are so wrong. Even though I stay as far away from my buttwipe of a stepdad as I can, I've grown up an Army brat since I was three. He wasn't allowed to talk much about what he did, but even that was enough to know that there's some serious shit going on that no one in the real world ever knows about. And then there's the CIA and FBI and who knows what other secret agencies. Those kinds of people get what they want, and they don't stop until they do. If they got wind of what's happening to you, I could see them turning you into their

personal lab rat, a top secret experiment. Or maybe they'd just cut you open to find out how that lightning affected your brain."

"Why would they even want me? It's not like I'm a superhero or something."

"Really? Hello, anyone home?" Vanessa tapped Chloe on the head. "You're supposed to be the straight-A science major, remember? Start acting like it. You can see radiation and heat. You have perfect night vision. Sometimes you can even see through things. All without special equipment. That's the closest to a superhero I've ever heard of. Do you know how valuable those qualities would be to a soldier, or a spy?"

Chloe started to respond, and then paused. Vanessa had a point. She'd been so busy trying to learn how to control her new abilities, and half-sick with worry that something nasty was going on in her head, she'd never even thought about all the ways her powers could be used. She picked up her drink and took three long swallows, barely tasting the sweet soda-alcohol mix.

"Oh, great. That's way scarier than a brain tumor. Now I'm double worried."

"See? And it wouldn't just be our military. What if the Chinese find out, or terrorists? I mean, scientists all over the world would want a piece of you. Eyesight like yours would be an amazing benefit in medicine, physics, hell, even construction. And if you really do develop some kind of X-ray vision, you'd be even more valuable."

"Me, valuable. Who'd have thought?"

"I would. If it wasn't you we were talking about, I'd say we should figure out a way to turn you into a business. You could use your vision to examine people for cancer, or be a human lie detector, or any one of a hundred things. But we can't, because then everyone know what you can do."

A shiver ran through Chloe and turned into a series of trem-

bles. "This is seriously creeping me out. I'm not a spy. I'm not even out of high school yet. What should I do?"

Vanessa put an arm around her and hugged her close. "I don't know, but we have to think of something, and soon. We need to figure out how to keep your secrets secret. And I think you'd better start wearing your sunglasses all the time."

"Wait." Vanessa's mention of sunglasses had reminded Chloe of something. "Maybe there's another way to hide my eyes so I won't look like a walking freak show. You've still got those colored contacts you wore for Halloween, don't you?"

Vanessa had done a dramatic makeover on herself for a party they'd gone to. Instead of opting for a traditional costume, she'd put on a blonde wig, disguised her brown eyes with bright blue contact lenses, and put on cherry-red lipstick and blue eye shadow. The transformation had been amazing. No one at the party had recognized her until she'd spoken. She still wore the wig once in a while, but only for Chloe. And only when they were alone.

"Yeah, I do. Do you think they'll work on you?" Vanessa got up and went into the bathroom to get the lens case. Chloe followed her.

"If they covered your brown eyes, they should hide my white ones, right?" Chloe popped the contacts into her eyes, with a speed born of years of practice. Then she turned to face Vanessa. "Well, did it work?"

"Sort of. I..." Vanessa leaned forward and then had to cover her face when a flash of bright light burst from Chloe's eyes.

"Ow!"

"Are you all right?" Anxiety blossomed in Chloe's stomach.

"I'm fine. That light, it just startled me. Like two explosions."

"From my eyes?" The nervous sensation grew worse.

"Yeah." Vanessa looked at her again, this time not approaching

as close. "Your eyes look the same as before. Are the contacts still in?"

Chloe returned to the bathroom and stuck her face up to the mirror, using one finger to pull her lower lids down.

"Damn, they're gone."

Vanessa started going around the room, turning on the lights and blowing out the candles. "I think you vaporized them or something. I guess you can't wear contacts anymore even if you want to."

"Crap. That means we're back to sunglasses, and me looking like some sort of druggie or dork at school." Chloe threw herself backward onto the bed.

"Yeah, and I'd be careful next time you're at the doctor's," Vanessa told her. "You wouldn't want to zap some piece of equipment by accident."

"Well, on the plus side, maybe I'm turning into Super Girl. I always thought she was kinda hot."

"Ha, ha. Seriously, what if the doctors try to put something in your eyes and you go all heat-ray on them?

"I don't think I can go back to the doctor," Chloe said. "I mean, if what you say is true, that's where the biggest danger is. I can't let Gupta or the others find out anything else about me. For all I know, they're already writing papers and stuff."

"Yeah. It wouldn't surprise me if they're going gangbusters on that. Gupti's a big research guy, right? Besides being a doctor?" Vanessa paced back and forth in the small room, a frown etched on her normally smooth features.

Chloe nodded. The problems were mounting faster than she could catalog them in her brain. "Yeah. And he used to work for the government. Dr. Ling told me he invented some kind of robot eye or something."

"That's totally not good."

"So what do I do? It's not like I can erase their memories of me, or bribe them not to write their papers. I'm screwed. This is like one of those Bourne movies, where the government is after some innocent guy and—"

Vanessa's eyes narrowed and she snapped her fingers. "That's it!"

"What?"

"Movies. In those action movies, people go on the run. That's what you'll do."

"What?" Chloe sat up. Leave town? "That's crazy. I can't do that."

"Yes, you can. With my help. And it has to be soon. Real soon. If the wrong people don't already know about you, it's only a matter of time before they do. That means we need to act fast and get you someplace safe."

Vanessa went to the closet and started throwing clothes into a worn overnight bag. Makeup and toiletries followed. While she dashed around the room, Chloe followed, still voicing objections.

"What, you mean like now?"

"Yes, now. If you go home, your parents will either talk you out of it or stop you from leaving.

"What about school? What about my parents? They're gonna go crazy if I don't come home tonight."

"You'll only miss a couple of days. And I'll tell your folks everything. They have to be part of this. We'll need their help."

"Vanessa, stop!" Chloe grabbed her arm, spun her around. "This is nuts."

"No, it's not. We have to protect you. Your parents can go see a lawyer, set things up so that if the military, or someone else, does try to grab you, every newspaper and television station will get the story. Not even the CIA could cover that up. As soon as the arrangements are made, you can come back home."

"But..." Chloe stopped. Vanessa's idea did kind of make sense. And if it was only for a couple of days... "Where would I go?"

"You'll take the Bug. I just filled it today. I'll give you my spare bank card. A couple of hundred bucks should hold you until we get everything settled. Use a cash machine here in town and then don't use the card again. Drive all night, and wherever you are in the morning, stop and get a room at some cheap motel. Pay cash. Then call me and let me know where you are. Use a payphone, not your cell."

"You sound like you planned this all out."

"In a way, I have. You grow up in a family like mine, you think about running away a lot. I used to dream about stealing a car and taking off, just drive across the country and start over."

"You never told me about that." Chloe knew things had been bad for Vanessa growing up; although her step-father had never hit her, he'd been verbally abusive to the whole family for as long as Chloe could remember. From what Vanessa said, he'd never been the nicest guy, but as he moved up in rank to colonel over the years he'd gotten progressively more hot-tempered and unstable, prone to angry outbursts at the least little thing. He also started spending more time away from home, either at the local base where he worked, Fort Stone, or on the road. When he was home, the Garcia household tended to be a tense, cold place where everyone walked on eggshells.

Things between Vanessa and her step-father had gotten worse after he found out about her 'immoral' sexuality. He considered it an affront against God, but Chloe believed that was just a cover for his own homophobia. Her parents went to church just as much as Vanessa's, and they had no issues with their daughter dating another girl.

It was, as she'd told Vanessa more than once, all bullshit.

"It was silly fantasy stuff. I could never go through with it. But this is different. You need to go, for your own safety."

Chloe frowned. "You keep saying me. Why can't you come with?"

Vanessa added candy bars and a bottle of water to the bag. "I have to stay here and tell your parents what's going on, and make sure they take this seriously and contact the right people. Here's the card. I have about a thousand dollars. Don't take it all. And don't stay anywhere nice."

"You mean, I have to go right now? Why not in the morning?"

Vanessa shook her head. "Tomorrow could be too late. There's no telling when they're going to start keeping tabs on you. Besides, if you don't go now, neither one of us will have the guts to do it later." She pulled Chloe close, kissed her hard. "I love you, sweetie. Be careful, and call me as soon as you find someplace to hide."

"I love you, too," Chloe whispered against Vanessa's soft lips. She still was trying to accept the fact that she was about to go on the run. It seemed like a bad nightmare.

I hope that's all it turns out to be. Then we can laugh about it later.

After a few more wordless goodbyes, they walked down to the beat-up Volkswagen Beetle Vanessa had bought last year. They'd nicknamed it the Love Bug—shortened to Bug—after a particularly heavy backseat session one night. When Chloe's parents asked if they'd named it after the movie, they'd said yes and shared a secret laugh.

In a loud voice Vanessa said, "Call me when you get home. And be careful driving. The Bug's been acting up lately. Okay?"

Chloe nodded and started the car. She headed in the general direction of home, intending to just drive past her house and then keep going through town and out to the freeway. In the rearview

mirror she saw Vanessa watching from the sidewalk, growing smaller as the distance between them increased.

She missed her already.

IN A NON-DESCRIPT OFFICE deep beneath Fort Stone, the head of Sky Strike answered his cell phone on the second ring.

"Mobile comm reports the target is on the move."

"Bring her in right now. In fact, bring them all in. Call me when it's done."

"Yes, sir."

The Colonel smiled as he thought about what his partners would say when they found out he'd deviated from their plans. *Screw them.*

The time for waiting and watching was over.

CHLOE CAME to a stop at an intersection three blocks from her house and stared at her reflection in the windshield, courtesy of her glowing eyes. She tried to think if they'd packed sunglasses. She didn't think so. Should she go back? Or just drive until daylight? She couldn't walk into a motel looking like Storm from the X-Men.

Headlights appeared behind her and she took her foot off the brake. Before she could move forward, two large trucks, their backs covered in green canvas, pulled up from opposite directions and barricaded the road in front of her. She threw the car in reverse but the vehicle behind her slammed into her, the force of the impact throwing her forward into the steering wheel. The horn let out a startled *beep* and then soldiers converged on both sides of the

car, guns in hand. A pair of hulking men in combat fatigues yanked open her door and she had time for a single scream before one of them jammed a needle into her arm.

Then everything went black.

CAPTAIN NATHAN GERRICK climbed into the cab of the lead truck and signaled the driver to move out. As the truck rumbled forward, Gerrick's cell phone chirped and he answered it.

"Team Three. Target obtained."

"Roger that." He thumbed the switch once. "Team Two. Report."

"Targets bagged and tagged, sir.

"Good work." Gerrick closed the connection and then punched in a number from memory.

"Yes?"

"Mission complete, Colonel" he said. "Strike teams Two and Three have also acquired their targets. Our ETA is thirty minutes.

"Any problems?"

"No, sir."

"Good job, Captain. I want a full report on your return. Out."

Gerrick closed the connection and slipped the phone into his pocket. Despite the mission's need-to-know status, he couldn't help but wonder.

Why all the fuss over a teenage girl?

And what was going to happen to her now?

CHAPTER FIVE

Chloe awoke in a gray room. Walls, ceiling, bed linens, floor, and furniture, all depressing shades of gray. Even the small sink and the toilet next to it blended into the dismal canvas. The padding on the walls and door, together with her blurry memories of what had happened after she'd left Vanessa's, led her to conclude their worst fears had come true, they'd waited too long.

She'd been taken prisoner.

She still felt foggy from the drugs they'd shot her with, but the waves of adrenaline coursing through her and making her skin tingle were doing a good job of waking her up.

Her heart thudded so hard she could hear it thumping in her head. Shivers ran down her back and she had to jam her fist against her mouth keep from shouting for help. What was the point? It was pretty obvious that wherever she was, no one would be running to her aid. The only questions were why she'd been taken—to be experimented on or killed?—and by whom.

Now it was just a matter of staying alive and safe until Vanessa and her parents got the police looking for her.

Fighting back tears, she looked around the room. Aside from the unornamented furniture, all it contained was two mirrors. A small one over the sink, and a larger that took up most of one wall.

How obvious.

She focused her gaze at the long, rectangular piece of glass, her new and improved eyesight immediately responding to her thoughts and shifting into a different spectrum of vision. She didn't even have to squint or force herself to concentrate. She wanted to see through it and in the next instant the mirror became as transparent as ordinary glass.

On the other side of the wall was a small control center, filled with all sorts of high-tech computer and recording equipment. A man in a white lab coat manned the console, his hands moving here and there as he adjusted various controls. Two other men, both in green military uniforms, stood behind the technician, staring at her through the glass. One was tall and broad-shouldered, with a blond crew cut. The other was a few inches shorter and had dark skin. An array of shiny medals decorated their chests and shoulders. She saw their mouths move and guessed the two officers were talking to each other, no doubt about her.

She let her vision slide up to another next level, so she could see the auras surrounding the three men. The technician's was a normal greenish-blue. He was focused on his work. The other two were a different story.

Reddish-violet swirls, interlaced with streaks of harsh orange, surrounded both of them, indicating excitement and anticipation, with a touch of old fashioned hostility thrown in for good measure.

The uniforms look like army. That means I'm probably at Fort Stone. And those creeps look like big-time officers. I guess we didn't think this through as well as we should have. It never crossed her

mind that Vanessa might be involved with her capture in some way.

Not even when the door to her cell opened and Colonel Rafael Garcia walked in.

"Hello, Miss Olivetti. I'm sorry we have to renew our acquaintance in this manner. I do hope we can work together civilly." Garcia's swarthy face had a painfully false smile plastered onto it. With his wide shoulders and short, stocky body, Vanessa's stepfather looked more like a construction worker or day laborer than an army officer. Only his dress blue uniform and close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair gave any indication of his occupation.

That, and his cold eyes and straight-backed, humorless attitude.

Chloe leaned back against the padded wall, giving Garcia her best stare. "Fuck off. I'm not gonna do anything for you. You kidnapped me and you're holding me against my will. When Vanessa and my parents get me out of here, I'll see your ass in court."

He stared at her as she spoke, giving her a slimy look that made her feel naked and dirty, even though she knew he was more interested in what was happening in her head than what was under her clothes. She wished she had her sunglasses on; without them, there was no hiding the changes in her eyes.

"Chloe, Chloe, Chloe." Hearing him say her name added to the sensation of being violated. "I'm sorry you feel that way, although I expected nothing less from the likes of you. Would it make you feel any better if I told you it was my daughter who informed me of your unusual, ah, circumstances? She was worried about you, and wanted you to have the best care, the kind of care only the U.S. government can provide."

A coiled eel of fear unwound itself in her stomach and began darting around.

Could it be true? Was that why Vanessa had suddenly come up with the idea to run and hide?

Garcia smiled.

IN THE CONTROL ROOM, Corporal Lance McGruder adjusted the levels on the hidden microphones and pretended not to listen to the whispered conversations the two officers were having behind him. He hadn't been introduced to them and didn't expect to be. Generals didn't normally associate with corporals, which was exactly the way McGruder preferred it. Out of sight and out of mind; it was a slower road to promotion but also the best way to avoid being collateral damage when the proverbial shit hit the fan.

As it usually did at some point.

"His daughter? How is she involved in all this?" the tall, blond man asked.

"From the look on her face, I'm assuming she's Olivetti's girlfriend." the second officer responded, his gaze never shifting from the scene before him.

"Girlfriend? You mean...?"

"That's my guess, although maybe they're just good friends. Either way, it appears Garcia has kept some important information out of the files."

"Hmm. Perhaps we should keep a better eye on Garcia. There's a lot riding on this project."

McGruder adjusted the angle on one of the cameras and wondered if it might be smart to take some of the personal leave time he'd built up. Nothing good could possibly come of kidnapping teenage girls.

In fact, it sounded like the beginning of a total shit storm.

CHLOE'S WORLD WAS TEETERING, poised to come crashing down around her, when she saw the change.

Garcia's aura, previously a sunburst of orange and red, suddenly took on a distinct, oily yellow appearance.

He's lying. He's a total skeeve.

Chloe smiled to herself, appreciating her new abilities like never before.

"I call bullshit on that."

"Excuse me?" The creepy smile dropped off Garcia's face, replaced by a look of honest confusion. His aura changed at the same time, vacillating between purple and dark blue.

"You're lying. See, the way I figure it, you've had me under surveillance for a couple of days, maybe longer. It was probably Dr. Gupti who told you about me, or someone on his staff. I know he worked for the military and he has government connections. What's the deal, he gets some kind of payoff for passing on information that might be useful?"

Chloe crossed her arms and tried to project an air of self-assured calm that she didn't feel. "It doesn't matter who the narc was. If you've been watching me, you probably also had my house bugged. And Vanessa's. That's how you knew I was planning on leaving tonight. It also means you know everything I told Vanessa before I left, so you ought to be able to figure out how I know you're lying. Your aura says so. Before, it was orange and red, which told me you were anticipating something, and also a little bit angry. Then it turned a nasty booger-yellow when you said that stuff about Vanessa. Now it's all dark and jittery. That means you're getting nervous. What's the matter, you don't like being alone with the freak?"

Garcia took a deep breath. "Well, so nice of you to confirm what our intelligence told us. That's a good start."

"Don't waste my time, Colonel. I'll be out of here soon. Vanessa figured someone would try this, and she'll have my parents making plans with their lawyers right now. Not to mention the press. So maybe you should let me go before you end up on the front page."

Garcia approached the bed, his face relaxing once more into his oily grin. "Before you start planning your family reunion, you might want to take a look at these." He tossed some pictures onto the small table next to the bed.

"I'll come back later. Perhaps you'll be feeling more cooperative then."

Chloe didn't bother checking to see if the door locked behind him. Military minds were sometimes slow, and often unimaginative, but she couldn't believe they'd be that dumb. Besides, there were still the people watching her from the other room.

Instead, she picked up the photos.

The first one showed her mother, father, and Benny bound, blindfolded, and gagged on their living room floor, with two armed soldiers standing behind them. The next one showed Vanessa in a similar position, looking considerably more rumpled. The last photo showed all four of them on the floor of a large truck or van, with several soldiers seated on benches to either side of them.

That asshat! He kidnapped his own daughter!

He was going pay for that, and for getting her family involved.

Chloe stared at the three pictures while a large seed of hate took root in her heart. Then she stuck them in her pocket. If she looked at them any longer she'd end up crying, and she refused to give Garcia or her other watchers the satisfaction.

She glanced up at the two-way mirror. Garcia had joined the two officers inside. They were in a circle, talking. She rose and

walked closer to the glass, waved her hand at them. The technician noticed and said something to the other three, who also looked her way. When she saw that she had their attention, she slowly pointed to each of them, including the technician, making sure they knew she could see exactly where they were standing. Then she raised both middle fingers at the glass.

"Bite me, Garcia, and your butt-buddies too. I'm going to get out of here, and when I do, you're gonna regret what you did to Vanessa and my family."

The technician's eyes opened wide in surprise, and his aura took on a healthy dose of icy blue fear. Garcia gave her one of his lazy cat smiles, while the other two officers kept their faces expressionless. Their auras remained filled with anticipation and violence.

They think they have me. They think they're invulnerable.

Chloe lay down on the bed, turned her back to them, and closed her eyes.

Maybe they are, too. Right now. But I have a feeling things might change.

And when they do, everyone better watch out.

"WELL, Garcia? What's your opinion? Can she really do everything she told your daughter?"

Colonel Rafael Garcia thought a moment before answering General William Ferguson, who occupied one of the two extra chairs in Garcia's spartan office. General Polk, Ferguson's right-hand man, occupied the third seat.

Ferguson, a veteran of several military campaigns dating back to the first Gulf War, exuded authority from every pore of his body. His blond hair, just now starting a transition to pure white,

was still cut in the close-cropped style usually only worn by recruits and cadets, giving his rectangular head an even more cinder block-ish appearance.

Charles Polk, a black man in his early fifties, had earned his stars by successfully planning and carrying out the secret execution of a major Middle East leader back in 2000. The action hadn't been sanctioned by the government. Polk had gone to Ferguson with his plan on the sly and the two of them had taken a great risk in carrying it out. Had it failed, Ferguson would have denied everything and Polk would have been busted out of the service. As it was, they'd both been promoted and Ferguson had been handed command of his own top secret military research unit, with Polk as his second-in-command.

Garcia was well aware that his own record, while unblemished, was never going to be strong enough to elevate him to their level. A back injury as an enlisted soldier had kept him from serving in any front line action, forcing him to work his way up through the ranks slowly and methodically as an administrator. Time and again he had to watch as his peers were promoted past him, thanks to a few extra medals on their chests. He'd all but resigned himself to putting in his twenty-five and getting out, maybe do contract work, when an opportunity fell into his lap. The chance to oversee a small, underfunded research program whose function it was to monitor and evaluate scientific progress in the U.S. and appropriate any research deemed to have potential for military use.

Most of the time, that simply involved making an offer to the researcher or team, almost all of whom were more than willing to sacrifice possible patents in exchange for access to tax-free funding and the latest technologies. On rare occasions, additional persuasion had been required in order to bring an uncooperative scientist into line. In those instances, he'd had no problem resorting to

blackmail or threats of physical violence, or, in one instance, the 'disappearance' of a top chemist.

That particular incident had brought him to the attention of General Ferguson. He'd thought he'd covered his tracks until Ferguson and Polk showed up at his office one evening. When they confronted him about what he'd done, he'd been sure he'd spend the rest of his life in the brig.

Instead, Ferguson offered him a position directing a new weapons technology team, which had ultimately led to the development of Sky Strike. Based on the potential of the research, he'd used what little leverage he had and gotten himself put in charge of the entire project. It was his fervent hope that Sky Strike would end up successful enough for him to earn a hefty promotion, something his old position would never have delivered.

At the same time, he'd made sure to keep his previous network of eyes and ears open.

After being contacted by Doctor Gupti about Chloe Olivetti, it hadn't taken his team long to figure out she'd been struck by lightning in the exact same place, at the exact same time, as one of their Sky Strike tests. He'd recognized the girl's name immediately; it was pure serendipity. What were the odds that his daughter's slutty squeeze would end up being the discovery that finally earned him the promotion he'd deserved for years?

If she could do even half of what she'd mentioned to Vanessa, he might even end up with a star or two on his shoulders. And then he could write his own ticket, the way Polk and Ferguson had.

"General Ferguson, not only do I believe she can do everything that's in my report, I am positive that's only the beginning. What we have here is a power unlike anything we've imagined."

"What do you mean?" Ferguson demanded.

Garcia didn't let his smile show. You didn't want to piss these

two off, but it amused him to think that a person so high up in rank could be so dimwitted when it came to potential military breakthroughs. Science wasn't Ferguson's particular forte, and yet he'd been given command of a billion-dollar organization based on hard science. Typical Army. Strategy, joining the enemy in battle, those were Ferguson's—and Polk's—specialties. The fact that he hated relying on the advice of others when it came to science and technology was written all over his face.

"Sir, it's been less than a month since her powers first manifested. In that time, they've grown tremendously. There's no reason to think they've stopped developing. I believe that as time goes by, not only will she get a better handle on how to use her abilities, but she'll also acquire more of them. A perfect example is the episode she had where she was able to see through solid flesh for a moment. As far as we know, that hasn't happened again, but I bet it will. I wouldn't be surprised if she could eventually see through walls or even solid stone the way she can see through the two-way glass."

"Garcia, that's all well and good, but we still have two big problems." Polk's bald head reflected the ceiling lights as he held up two fingers. "First, how can we get her to cooperate with us? She doesn't strike me as the type who's going to roll over and become a good soldier, if you know what I mean. And second, how can recreate what happened to her, so we can duplicate these powers in our own soldiers?"

Polk is definitely the smarter of the two of them. Garcia made a mental note to be more careful around him.

"Actually, those two problems might be easier to solve than you think. As far as her cooperating with us, there are plenty of ways to take care of that particular problem. If holding her family as leverage doesn't do the trick, we have other options. Drugs.

Torture. Psychological manipulation. Any or all of these will no doubt be effective if being reasonable doesn't work."

"Just make sure you don't do anything to block her powers," Ferguson warned.

"Of course not, sir. I wouldn't be that careless. To address General Polk's other concern, my men have gathered all of Gupti's notes, and those of the other scientists he consulted with. Our science team is going over them as we speak. I don't want to jump the gun, but the early consensus seems to be that the surest way to recreate the results we've seen in Olivetti is to recreate the event itself."

Garcia took a sip of coffee and waited to see which one of the two would realize what he was talking about first. He had his money on Polk, and he was right.

"You mean, subject our men to being struck by lightning?" Polk's voice never rose in volume, but the quality of it deepened as he gave Garcia a startled look. "What do you intend to do, Garcia, send them out into storms with big metal poles in their hands?"

"No, sir, it would be a controlled experiment. First, we would need to determine the exact circumstances of the original event, the additional parameters that weren't part of our experimental calculations. By that I mean the variables she introduced by entering the test zone. The clothing she was wearing, what she ate, what type of soil or material she was standing on. Then we would recreate the same conditions in the laboratory down to the tiniest detail, using a smaller version of the Sky Strike apparatus to produce the artificial lightning bolt."

"And what happens to the subjects if your calculations are off? People die from getting struck by lightning, Colonel."

"I realize that, sir, but I feel it's an acceptable risk. We'll use volunteers at first, men with no families, and once we have a more precise handle on the parameters and can guarantee the subjects

will survive the experiment, we can begin selecting the personnel we feel should make up the team. Will there be casualties? It's entirely possible. But a few lives sacrificed will be well worth the incredible benefits the military will reap when we're successful."

Garcia struggled to keep his gaze neutral as they considered his words. This was the big moment. Top brass was always willing to fork over billions of dollars in resources and send thousands of men into battle, but bring up the possibility that a few volunteers might lose their lives during a scientific experiment and suddenly they became nervous about committing to the project, worried about potential backlash should word get out.

As if either of them would ever let that happen. They'd deny any responsibility or knowledge and let me get a death sentence for treason and murder.

After a few moments of deliberation, Ferguson nodded his head. "If you're right about this, then certain, shall we say, sacrifices in the line of duty would most certainly be acceptable. Okay, Garcia. You've got the green light, at least for the preliminary stages. We'll talk again after you show us some results."

Ferguson and Polk stood up and exited the office, leaving Garcia alone at his desk. Left unsaid were what the ramifications would be if the experiment didn't work and several men were killed for nothing.

I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. The most important thing is that I have the chance. And it will succeed. I know it!

Before anything, though, he had to get the Olivetti girl in line. He went to the door and paused, taking several deep breaths before stepping into the hall. More than ever, he had to keep up the pretense that nothing out of the ordinary was going on at the base. No hint of these new aspects of the project could leak out, or there would be hell to pay. Even though he'd vetted every member of the Sky Strike team himself, there was always the chance of a

leak somewhere. So it was essential that as much of the operation as possible be kept on a need-to-know basis.

Now let's see about getting that little brat motivated.

He strode briskly through the corridors, eyes straight ahead, mind already focused on what had to be done next.

Totally unaware of the storm he was about to unleash.

CHLOE LAY ON HER SIDE, eyes closed but wide awake. She'd barely dozed at all over the past few hours. Even though she felt exhausted, she was too frightened—and too angry—to sleep. She'd spent a good amount of her time alternating between trying to figure out a way to escape, praying that her family and Vanessa were all right, and wondering if she would ever see them again.

There was no doubt in her mind that Garcia, or his superiors, would be more than happy to use threats of violence against her family as a way of getting her to cooperate. Maybe if she did what they asked, her family would be kept safe, or let go, or allowed to see her.

Maybe.

As good as that sounded, as much as she wanted to believe, she knew in her heart she was just lying to herself. There was no way he could ever let any of them go. That meant he'd either keep them as prisoners forever or kill them once he had no use for them.

Chloe didn't have much hope for the former. Therefore, it was up to her to figure a way out of the mess she'd gotten herself—and everyone else—into before it was too late.

That was why she'd also spent time practicing using her powers while pretending to sleep. With a little concentration, she could keep her eyes closed and still see everything in the room as clear as day. She tossed and turned on the bed, arranging herself in

different positions, in order to scope out the whole cell. She'd found two more cameras, one behind the mirror over the sink and one in the ceiling above the door. The only others were the ones in the observation room.

Which meant as long as her back was to them, she could open her eyes and they wouldn't know.

Once more she shifted position on the bed. Then she opened her eyes just a fraction.

She almost gave herself away by shouting. The room was awash in colors. Waves, lines, multi-sided shapes, complex geometric patterns she couldn't even describe. It was like she'd fallen into some kind of funky special effects program. She was trapped in a kaleidoscope cast in a hundred different shades, to the point where she could barely make out the real room behind the dizzying array of hues and shapes superimposed over everything.

She forced herself to focus on just the white wall and it snapped into place. The shapes and colors didn't disappear, but she was able to distinguish solid objects from the now-translucent theoretical patterns and effects.

At the same time, she found she could actually understand what some of the energies existing around her were. Whether it was another fundamental shift in the way her brain worked or just her own natural intelligence asserting itself, she couldn't say. But in the space of just a few hours, not only had her vision jumped to another level, so had her comprehension of what she was capable of.

She knew without a doubt she was visualizing electromagnetic energy, viewing the actual magnetic fields of the Earth and all the objects around her, actually seeing the waves and lines that represented the movements of atomic and subatomic particles. With just the slightest bit of concentration, she could blank out all of the energy patterns and make the room look normal again. With a

little more effort, she could change the degree of their presence, forcing them to fade away, become semitransparent, or come back in full force, one at a time.

Now to try a real test.

She focused hard on the wall in front of her and thought about what lay beyond it. It instantly faded away and she was able to see through to the next room. And the one after it. And the room beyond that. The previously solid building became a three-dimensional blueprint of the rooms and corridors around her. Furniture and equipment were just as transparent as the building, stick-shaped outlines that didn't impede her vision. A moving figure caught her attention, and she realized it was a man walking down a hallway.

She shifted her concentration to the figure and found herself watching a living anatomy lesson. Heart, lungs, brain; all were visible in three-dimensions and life-like color, blood vessels and organs pulsing and beating with the rhythm of life.

After a few minutes of practice, Chloe was able to pick and choose just how deep she wanted her gaze to penetrate. She wanted to keep honing her skills, but just then the door opened.

"Hello, Chloe. No need to pretend you're sleeping. We're also monitoring your heart rate and breathing, so we know you've been awake for some time now. In fact, it seems you've been rather anxious, which is smart. You should be."

Garcia leaned against the wall in front of her. She'd been watching a man two rooms down, fascinated by the pacemaker in his chest; the electrical impulses it put out were hot yellow flashes that integrated themselves with the white lightning of the man's heart to create a normal rhythm. Now Garcia's transparent form placed itself between her and the wall. She refocused, returning her eyesight to normal. Lifting her head, she opened her eyes wide and was rewarded with the sight of Garcia's jaw

dropping down in surprise and his aura shifting to a cowardly yellow.

"What's the matter, Colonel? Don't you like my pretty eyes?" Chloe smiled and blinked as flirtatiously as she could, while wondering exactly what he was seeing.

Judging from the way he tried to back away, she figured her orbs must be pretty freaky indeed.

"What, what..." Garcia stopped, and then got control of himself. "Well, it seems my assessment of you was more accurate than even I expected. Am I correct in assuming your powers have grown in tandem with your...er...physical changes?"

Something in the tone of his voice filled her with a need to see for herself. She rolled across the bed, not wanting to step near Garcia, and walked over to the mirror, purposely choosing to look into the big two-way mirror rather than the little one over the sink.

Might as well give them all a shock.

After Garcia's reaction, she wasn't too surprised to find that her once-blue eyes were now totally clouded over. But the changes didn't stop there. The milky color whirled and rotated, as if filled with other-dimensional currents. Scatters of glittering, prismatic sparkles, random multi-colored fireflies, floated in the swirls, flickering and swimming around in haphazard patterns. No signs of her pupils or irises remained.

As she stared at the mirror, in awe of what was happening to her, a hint of movement behind her caught her attention. Garcia's reflection reached into his jacket and withdrew an odd-looking pistol from a concealed holster. She wondered why she didn't feel afraid, even as she turned and dove to the side, hoping to get out of his line of fire. Not that there was anywhere to go in the confined space of the small room. If he wanted to shoot her, all he had to do was walk around the bed.

When nothing happened, she looked over the bed at him and

found him standing there, mouth open, hand still in his jacket pocket.

What the hell? I saw him pull the gun out. Why did he put it back?

They stared at each other for a moment, and then she said, "Don't bother with the gun. I'll go with you and take whatever tests you want me to. But first I want proof that my family and Vanessa are still alive."

Garcia continued to stand there, frozen in place. Then his mouth closed and he let his hand drop down to his side. A questioning look came to his face. "What makes you think I was going to use a gun?"

Chloe thought hard. What kind of game was he playing? Or was it was a game at all? "I, uh, saw your reflection in the mirror, saw your hand move. I figured you had a gun." She managed to put some belligerence into her tone. "Don't all you soldier types carry guns?"

Garcia stared hard at her and she prayed he wouldn't pursue the issue. Finally, he nodded. "I was hoping you'd see the sense in cooperating. Let's go." He waved his hand toward the door, as if he'd never thought about shooting her.

"Uh-uh. My family and Vanessa."

He gave her his oily smile. "As soon as you prove you're willing to cooperate."

Round one to you. She couldn't win a stalemate, so she followed him to the door.

Two armed guards waited for them in the hall. They marched Chloe to another room, this one filled with a complex mix of ophthalmologic equipment, most of which she recognized from all the testing at Gupti's clinic, along with several video cameras and a computer terminal. In the center sat a table with two chairs. Two technicians stood by the equipment with nervous looks on their

faces. Neither of them were introduced to her, and Garcia never spoke their names, just told them to get started and call him when they were done.

Chloe took a seat, barely listening while the technicians explained what the first tests would be. All she could think about was what had happened in back in her cell. The only explanations she could come up with were that she'd either read his mind or seen the future.

That meant her abilities weren't just limited to the physical world, but the supernatural—*or maybe the word is metaphysical?*—as well.

Great. I'm not just a freak, I'm a super-freak.

Yeah, but how will it help me escape?

That was the big question.

OVER THE COURSE of the next few hours, the nameless scientists in their fatigues and white lab coats subjected Chloe to a battery of tests, first repeating the standard ones Gupti had performed and then moving on to more complex ones that used a variety of confusing equipment.

She made no attempt to hide any of the powers Garcia obviously knew about, such as seeing into both ends of the spectrum or visualizing some of the basic energy and magnetic waves. She also pretended to be able to look through one wall, on an intermittent basis.

Her goal was to give enough of a demonstration that they'd want to keep her around, but at the same time make sure they didn't consider her a threat. The last thing she wanted was for Garcia to keep her sedated, or under heavy guard. Then there'd be no chance of getting away.

Not that she had the faintest idea of how any of her new abilities could help her free her family and escape from a secure military base. Having X-ray vision and reading minds was great, but not much help if she was locked in her room.

But if the opportunity arose, they might provide the extra edge she'd need.

AFTER FOUR HOURS, Chloe pleaded exhaustion and told the technicians she'd never used her powers so much at one time and she was getting a pounding feeling in the back of her head. They stopped the testing and one of the techs called Garcia, who showed up two minutes later and told the scientists they could continue their work in the morning. He feigned concern over how she felt, but she didn't need to see the color patterns in his aura to know he was lying. He was just worried about her burning herself out.

"We'll let you rest and get you something to eat. Two of my men will escort you back to your room."

Chloe crossed her arms and refused to get up from her seat. This was the moment she'd been waiting for.

"No. I want to see my family, and Vanessa, before I do anything else."

"Of course." Garcia's voice practically dripped with phony acquiescence. "I promised you could see them, after all. I'll be happy to alleviate any concerns you might have regarding their health." Turning to the guards, he nodded his head and tapped his watch. "Take her to the observation room, and then I want her back in her quarters in ten minutes."

The men executed sharp salutes and one of them opened the door while the other came and stood by her side.

"They'd better be okay," she said softly, staring right in Garcia's eyes.

He smiled and waved her away.

The guards led down her down a long, drab hall to a much smaller room. Like the rest of the facility, everything was concrete and steel, and painted either dull gray or olive green.

This time Chloe found herself on the other side of a two-way glass, looking down into a large space. Her heart jumped a beat when she saw her parents, Benny, and Vanessa inside.

"Don't bother shouting," one of the guards said in a harsh tone. "We're completely soundproofed up here."

Chloe didn't acknowledge him. She put her face up to the glass, wishing she could just pass right through and down into the arms of the people she loved.

The cell was set up like a military quarters, with two bunk beds on each side and a small bathroom cubicle in one corner. The cubicle afforded a measure of privacy from the other occupants of the room, but not from the watching eyes overhead.

Changed they might be, but Chloe's eyes were still capable of producing old-fashioned tears, and she made no effort to hide them as she stared at the scene below her. Her parents were sitting close together on one bed, her father's arm wrapped around his wife's waist, her head on his shoulder, her eyes closed. Wet streaks on her face told that she'd been crying. Across the room, Vanessa lay on her back, one arm over her eyes, her hair a tangled mess. On the bunk above her, Benny leaned against the wall, still playing his electronic game, but without any enthusiasm. All of them were dressed in the same clothes as the last time Chloe had seen them.

Physically they seemed unharmed, although their sunken, shadowed eyes and dull, depressed expressions showed how much of a toll their abduction had taken on them. Chloe's enhanced vision allowed her a deeper glimpse into their emotional state.

Dark blues and violets in their auras represented despair. The harsh red blotches in Vanessa's showed she was wide awake, with a terrible fury burning behind her closed eyes.

"All right, you had your look." Garcia had silently entered the observation room. "As you can see, they're still alive and unhurt. How long they remain that way is up to you, sweetheart."

Garcia grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the window. "Do what we ask, and who knows, maybe I can arrange for you all to have a meal together in a few days. Or get you some private time with Vanessa. I'm sure two little godless whores like yourselves would like that, wouldn't you?"

The colonel's grip on her arm tightened. She'd have bruises there in the morning. Although Vanessa had told her he objected to her lifestyle choice, she'd never realized how much he despised his daughter because of who she was.

Figures. Not only is he a kidnapper and a bully, but he's also a total hater. He can't stand that his daughter's in love with another girl, but I'll bet he's got no problem watching girl-on-girl porn. What a douche. As much as she wanted to scream at him, tell him what a dirty pig he was, she kept her thoughts to herself. She might be relatively untouchable, but the people she cared about weren't.

Garcia motioned to the guards and they led her back to her cell. After they'd locked her in, she lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling. Contrary to what she'd told Garcia, she wasn't the least bit tired. In fact, she felt more alive than at any time she could remember, like an overflowing fountain of energy. It was almost as if she'd tapped into the lines of power that zigged and zagged and wavered everywhere around her.

I'm part of the cosmos now.

The idea popped into her head out of nowhere, and once it was there she couldn't shake it. It didn't really make sense, but it felt *right* just the same. She wanted to examine it, think about

what it meant, but more important considerations needed her attention. Like keeping her family and Vanessa safe, and figuring out a way to escape. So she filed the random idea away to contemplate later, after things were back to normal.

If that ever happened.

Chloe tried hard to come up with solutions to her problem, but her thoughts kept gravitating to Vanessa. As great as it had been to see her, to have her worries alleviated somewhat by knowing everyone was okay, it also broke her heart. Her family and Vanessa were captives because of her, because of the changes that had happened to her. For the first time since her accident, she hated the new her and wished she could go back in time and relive that day. She'd go to the mall, stay in the house, do *anything* to avoid getting struck by that lightning.

All her frustration, guilt, anger, and worry boiled and bubbled inside her, until finally her body couldn't handle the growing pressure of her emotions any longer and they erupted into a major crying jag.

Chloe rolled over, putting her back to the viewing glass. She knew they could still tell she was crying, but the illusion of privacy helped. She stuffed her face into her pillow and wept until she soaked the rough, bleach-scented cotton with tears and her body finally said enough is enough.

Still sobbing, she fell into the first real sleep she'd had in two days.

THE DREAM PICKED up where Chloe's conscious thoughts left off. She was lying in the bunk bed with Vanessa, snuggled against the dark-haired girl's back, face buried in the fresh apple shampoo smell of Vanessa's hair. On one level, she was aware of

the dream, that physically she was still locked away in a different part of the base. But at the same time, everything in the dream seemed so real. The scent of Vanessa's skin, all body wash and perfume, tainted with more than a hint of sweat. The tickle of stray hairs against her cheek. The coarse feel of the sheets. The cell was dark, but her heightened vision allowed her to see every detail, in her choice of infrared, blazing color, or any one of a dozen other ways.

"Are you awake?" she whispered into her lover's ear.

Vanessa moaned, and then opened her eyes, turned to face Chloe.

"Chloe? Is that you? Where are you?"

Vanessa's hands moved, feeling for a body in the darkness. When one of them passed right through her, Chloe's heart sank.

It *was* just a dream.

But if it was a dream, how could Vanessa hear her?

Considering all the other crazy things that had happened lately, Chloe decided it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Sshh, don't talk loud, they're watching you," she said, keeping her own voice as low as possible. "I think this is all a dream, but I don't care. I want to talk to you. I need to. I miss you so much," she added, her voice cracking on the last words.

"I miss you too, baby-love. You know I didn't have anything to do with this, right? They took me right after you left. Your parents, too. We're at Fort Stone, and my asshole step-father is the one to blame. I always knew he was a bastard, but I never realized how bad."

Vanessa's aura flared an angry red, matching her scowling face.

"Hey, it's okay. I know all about it. I'm here in the building, too, in one of the other wings. They let me see you today, through the two-way mirror on the wall in your room. That's where they watch you from. They can see into the bathroom, too, so don't

think you've got any privacy. And your father already told me the soldiers are getting their kicks looking at the two of us in our beds."

"What are they doing to you? Have they hurt you?"

"Not yet. They've just been running tests on my eyes. Like Gupti. We were right about him. He's the one who told your dad about me. Your dad's had my house and your apartment bugged for days. They heard everything I told you. They knew I was gonna run away. Now they want to find out everything I can do. Your dad...he said they'd hurt you and my family if I didn't cooperate. He wasn't lying, either. I could see it in his aura. But they don't know everything. My powers are still growing. I can do all sorts of mad crazy stuff now. It's like I'm turning into one of the X-Men or something."

Vanessa sighed. "Be careful, chica. My father... you can't trust him. All he cares about is his job. He thinks the Army is the greatest institution on earth."

"Yeah, I'm vibing on that. I'm gonna stall them, give them little bits and pieces, just enough to make them hungry for more. When I need to slow things down, I can always say I'm getting tired from using my powers too much. They don't want anything to happen to me. In the meantime, I'm gonna figure out a way to get us all out of here."

"Chloe, don't take any chances. Don't get yourself hurt, or killed, trying to save us. If you do get away, go for help. Go to the newspapers or something."

Tears rolled down Vanessa's smooth, tan cheeks, matching the ones burning Chloe's face.

"Yeah, like I could ever leave you behind. Benny, maybe. But not my booty queen."

"How can you joke about this?" Vanessa snuffled back snot and wiped her eyes. "We could all end up dead, all because my dad's the biggest asshole on the planet."

"Hey, you can't blame everything on him. There's two other guys with him and they've got even more medals on their uniforms than he does. Besides, if it wasn't him, it would be somebody else. I was feeling guilty before, too, thinking if it wasn't for me you wouldn't be in trouble. But now I think there's a reason this happened to me. I just haven't figured out what it is. You wait and see. We're gonna get out of this."

Chloe reached out to stroke Vanessa's long, soft hair, and was disappointed when her hand passed right through the other girl. It wasn't fair! She could feel some things but not others.

"Yeah, well you better hurry and think of something fast, 'cause he doesn't have much reason for keeping any of us alive now that they've got you."

"I'll tell him I won't cooperate unless I see you guys every day. But you're right. I'll start working on a plan pronto. Meantime, find a way to let my parents know I'm all right, and be ready for when I come for you."

Chloe slid out of the bed. It felt like she was standing on the floor even though she didn't have a real body, which was majorly weird.

Just like everything else in my life lately.

"How will we know?" Vanessa whispered.

"I'll talk to you, just like I'm doing now. If I can do it in my sleep, I should be able to do it when I'm awake." As she said it, she realized that at some point she'd gone from thinking their conversation was just a dream to something much more than that.

Something real.

"You mean you can read minds now too?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Chloe said, although she had the feeling she wasn't reading Vanessa's mind; she was actually in the room with her somehow, really talking to her. Astral projection, maybe. If, in fact any of it was real. She hoped it was; waking up

and finding out it had been nothing but a dream would be too much to bear.

"I think before this is over, there's a lot more I'll be able to do. I can feel the power growing inside me, every minute. I'm going back to my room now, but I'll talk to you again tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay, love. Take care of yourself. I wish I could kiss you goodnight."

Vanessa's face wrinkled up in the sad, puppy dog look she liked to use whenever she wanted Chloe to hug her. Chloe's heart felt like it would burst with all the sadness and anger inside her.

Which is weird, since right now my body has no mass. How can I feel anything?

"Me too, baby. We will, soon enough. I promise. In the meantime, I've got work to do. Love you."

Chloe heard the resolve and hardness in her voice, wondered if Vanessa could hear it too. Vanessa had always been the strong one, Chloe more relaxed and willing to take things as they came along. She coasted through school, getting A's and B's because of her natural intelligence, and she'd only ever had part-time jobs, because she couldn't stay interested in anything for too long.

Now it seemed like a new side of her personality had blossomed, a force of will that wouldn't let anything stand in its way. It was scary, but it felt good.

Am I growing up, or have I just found something worth fighting for?

With Vanessa's *"Te amo, mi amor"* still echoing in her head, Chloe wished for her dream form return to her solid body. The moment she thought it, she snapped back to herself like a rubber band retracting. In her cell, she opened her eyes briefly and looked around the room, confirming that this time she really was awake. Then she fell back into a dreamless sleep.

IN THE OBSERVATION booth above Chloe Olivetti's cell, a sudden change on one of the monitors caught Sergeant Lyle Overby's eye. At first he couldn't determine what the change was, but then he looked from his screen to the window facing down into the room.

Where previously the room was barely lit by one 30-watt bulb in the ceiling, now it was much brighter, especially near the bed. He leaned towards the glass, trying to figure out where the light came from. Then the girl rolled over, and he saw it.

Bright white light flaring out from her wide open eyes.

Overby stared at the scene below him, and then glanced over at the equipment monitoring her vital signs. According to the sensors, she was still asleep, just dreaming.

Her eyes closed and the room went dark again.

He checked his cameras, made sure the video equipment was still recording.

Oh, man, this is way too strange. No one would ever believe my report, not without the video to back me up. That is one messed up girl down there.

BEHIND CHLOE'S CLOSED EYES, cells shifted and reformed, synapses changed, and ripples of energy, undetectable even by the Army's sophisticated equipment, flowed and pulsed in rhythms sometimes in sync with, but more frequently independent of, the normal electrical patterns of her brain.

And as each ripple expanded, Chloe Olivetti slowly became something else.

CHAPTER SIX

Chloe was still asleep when Colonel Garcia came for her in the morning. He entered the room without knocking and roused her from a deep slumber by calling out her name. When she opened her eyes, a confusing jumble of images greeted her and for a moment she thought she was still dreaming. Garcia seemed to be in several places at once. As he walked towards her, ghostly doppelgangers of him moved behind and in front of his body. A maze of unfamiliar energy lines and waves filled the room, ranging from translucent pastels to dark, ominous hues.

To her left, on the wall opposite the two-way mirror, an oval, swirling mass roiled and pulsated. It reminded Chloe of satellite images she had seen of hurricanes or tornadoes from high up in the air, except in vivid colors.

Actually, it looks like someone a whole bunch of different food dyes into a toilet bowl and then gave it a good flush. The thought should have been funny, but she was too disoriented to laugh. Her thoughts mirrored the confusing pattern. It hurt to even look at

things. She closed her eyes tight and concentrated on seeing 'normally.' It worked. When she opened her eyes, the room was just a room again.

And Garcia was shouting at her.

"Olivetti, did you hear me? Get your ass out of bed. There's a lot to do today, don't keep me waiting." Garcia stood at the end of the bed, arms crossed, staring down at her. If her powers, or the strangeness of her eyes, still bothered him, he didn't show any signs.

"All right! Good morning to you, too, Mr. Grouchypants." Chloe grumbled. *At least there's only one of him now.*

She'd never been much of a morning person, and waking up in this place, in the manner that she had, didn't improve her mood. She went over to the toilet, hoping Garcia would have the decency to turn away. He didn't. Embarrassed about having to pee in front of watching eyes, she did her business as fast as she could, with her hands folded across her lap. She purposely didn't flush when she was done.

Let the maid take care of it.

"I don't suppose I can get some clean clothes? I've been wearing these for two days. A shower might be nice, too, while you're at it. And some coffee."

Garcia grabbed her arm. "You think you're in a hotel here? This isn't a country club, missy. It's the United States freaking Army, and you're my prisoner. Is any of that getting through your drug-soaked brain? Now put your shoes on or you're walking out of her without them."

Garcia gave her arm another shake and then let go, stepping back just far enough so she had room to pick up her sneakers and put them on. Then he walked over to the door and gave it two hard raps with his knuckles. There was a click as the latch unlocked and the door opened, revealing two armed guards.

"Take her to the lab. If she says anything, or gives you any trouble, you have permission to rough her up. I don't care if she's bruised, as long as she can think and see."

Garcia strode out of the room and around the corner. A moment later she caught sight of him in the observation room, talking with the video technician. The tech seemed to be trying to explain something to him. He handed over a memory stick, which the colonel stuck in his jacket pocket. She wanted to keep watching, but the guards took her by her arms and marched her down the hallway. Mindful of Garcia's orders, she kept quiet and didn't raise a fuss.

In the lab, she found the same table and chair waiting for her. This time there was a cup of cold black coffee and two stale doughnuts on a napkin on the table, along with a notebook and a pen. As soon as the soldiers let go of her, she ran to the table and attacked the food. She was finishing the second doughnut, washing it down with the bitter coffee, when Garcia came in.

"You've been fed. Now it's time to work. See that notebook? School's in session. I want you to write down every detail of what happened to you the day you got struck by the lightning. What time it was, what clothes and jewelry you were wearing, how the air smelled, if you'd taken a shower that morning, what you'd had to eat that day, if you were high on anything. Understand? I mean everything. If you took a crap, I want to know about it. Now, get to work."

The colonel left Chloe alone amidst the instruments and equipment. She flipped open the notebook, picked up the pen, and then paused. Pretending to think, she cast outwards with her thoughts.

Vanessa? Vanessa, can you hear me?

Chloe heard a whispered response, and was able to match the sound to a particular line of rose-colored energy that speared

through the room. Following the thread, she let her consciousness leave her body and move through the building until she came to Vanessa's room.

...Chloe, I said, is that you? I heard you, but you're not answering me!

Relax, babe, I'm here, Chloe said. *I had to get closer to hear you. Listen, they've got me down at the lab again, but this time they're not running experiments. Your dad wants me to give a detailed description of what happened to me. They must have all my medical records already, why would they want me to do this again?*

Chloe was hoping that growing up in a military family would give Vanessa some insight into what was going on. The tall brunette didn't let her down.

I don't like the sound of that. I think maybe they want to repeat what happened to you.

They want to zap me with electricity? No thanks, been there, done that.

Not you, baby doll. Somebody else.

Why would they want to do that? Chloe asked. *If they're so scared of what I'm turning into, why would they want to create another monster?*

Think about it. Not just someone, lots of someones. As in, military people. Remember what we talked about? Can you imagine what a bunch of soldiers could do if they were able to see at night, or through walls, or do even half the crazy things you can do? Add in mind reading, and they'd be practically unstoppable. My dad and his men could take over the Army, and then the Army could take over the friggin' world. In fact...

What?

Chloe felt more than saw Vanessa's eyes narrow. *Well, I was just thinking that this whole thing sounds like an Army experiment. I mean, people get struck by lightning all the time, and nothing like*

this has ever happened, right? Maybe this wasn't a coincidence. Maybe they were testing a new weapon and something misfired, and you just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The idea sent a chill through Chloe. *Why would the Army be using lightning as a weapon? They've got smart bombs, and bioweapons, and drones, and who knows what other kinds of things to kill people with.*

Are you kidding? It would make an awesome weapon. You could zap power plants, communications towers, airports, all without anyone even knowing there'd been an attack. There'd be no way to trace it back to the military.

Something much nastier than her breakfast gurgled in Chloe's stomach as she listened to Vanessa's words. *I never thought of that. This is really turning into one of those late night SyFy Channel movies. Next thing you know, there's gonna be a bug-eyed alien running through the halls, killing everyone. Oh, wait, that would be me!* Chloe tried to lighten the mood, but her joke had the opposite effect.

Don't say that! came Vanessa's mental shout. *You're not turning into an alien, and you're not going to kill anyone.*

I hate to say it, but we can't be sure of either of those things. We both know I'm turning into something that's not quite human anymore. And I might have to kill people to get us out of here. I'm ready. I can do it. Your dad and his goon squad have me pissed off to the max. All I've had to eat since yesterday is some crappy coffee and donuts, I stink, I haven't had a shower, and I'm majorly PMS-ing. People better start watching out.

Vanessa was quiet for a moment, and Chloe wondered if maybe she was mad at her, or worse, afraid of her. Vanessa's next words soothed her mind.

Chloe, if you have to hurt people to save us, I understand. It's just that, he's the only dad I've ever known. My real father left us

when I was three. I don't even remember him. Growing up, there was never a lot of affection, but the first few years weren't totally bad. Not like... Vanessa's mental voice took on bitter sadness.

I know. Not like now.

Yeah. As a kid, I used to look forward to seeing him when he'd come home from wherever. But as I got older, things changed. Nothing mattered to him but work. And when that didn't go well, he took it out on us, especially me and my mom. Even then, even growing up like that, I wanted him to love me. That's why it's so hard to deal with this. I hate him, hate him more now than ever, yet part of me still wants him to love me.

Chloe tried to send comforting thoughts as she responded. *I understand. And I'll try not to hurt him, unless he really forces me to. For what it's worth, I don't think he's totally Dr. Evil, just nuts. He's put his country and the Army before everything else for so long, he doesn't know any other way. He might be willing to kill us all if he thought it was for a greater good, but I'll bet afterwards he'd still hate himself for it.*

Chloe made it a point not to mention the colonel's thoughts on lesbianism and his daughter. Better she think he had some shred of decency in him.

Wow, that makes me feel a whole lot better. Not.

Vanessa's sarcasm was a solid thing, and Chloe chuckled.

Vanessa didn't.

Sure, you laugh. Your father isn't trying to take over the world.

Vanessa looked up into the air as if she could see Chloe. *You better get back to work. Write some stuff down, the things that happened that day. Remember, they can check on the weather, where you were, even the soil in the park. But if you can make some things up, little things, do that too, just to screw them up. Then figure out a way to get us out of here.*

Will do, honey love! Chloe replied, with more cheer than she actually felt.

She sent her consciousness back to the lab. Opening her eyes again, she looked up at the clock, surprised to see that only about two minutes had gone by.

Telepathy takes a lot less time than talking. Too bad I can't market it. Forget texting or tweets or vid chat. Mental IM's. I could be a bazillionaire if I could market that!

Then she started writing.

AN HOUR LATER, she put down the pen and shook the tightness out of her hand and arm. She'd done what Vanessa suggested, leaving out a couple of details and adding in small lies that would hopefully make it harder for anyone to repeat what had happened to her. It hadn't been easy. She'd needed to make sure she didn't contradict or omit anything she'd already told Bloom or Gupti, or any of the other doctors. As soon as she closed the notebook, the door opened and Garcia marched in. He'd obviously been watching her, and she was glad she hadn't gotten up to search the room for something to use as a weapon, like she'd been tempted to.

"Is that everything?" he demanded. He picked up the book and ruffled through the pages.

"Yeah, as much as I can remember. What was the point? I'm sure you already confiscated all the notes from my doctors." Chloe felt obligated to act the part of the angry, confused teen so Garcia wouldn't become suspicious.

"None of your business." The door opened again, and four soldiers entered the room.

"What, back to my cell already? Or am I finally getting that shower I've been asking for?"

Chloe looked at Garcia's aura, and didn't like what she saw there. The colors were shifting wildly, indicating he was in the midst of a major decision.

"Neither. In fact, I've got some bad news for you. We've documented your basic powers, and now we have the information we need so we can recreate what happened to you. That means you're no longer essential to our project."

Chloe's slumbering fear came alive, sending thousands of tingling arrows from her stomach to her arms and legs. "What? You mean you're going to kill me?" She jumped from her chair and moved around the table, placing it between her and the soldiers.

"I wish we could," Garcia said. "But in your case, non-essential doesn't mean disposable. There's still a chance we might have to run more tests for comparison purposes, later on. And we'll continue to monitor your condition, see what other changes occur. In the meantime, we're going to transfer you to a real cell, maximum security. I hope you enjoyed your look at your family yesterday, it's the last one you'll ever have."

"No! Do what you want with me, but let them go! They didn't do anything wrong."

Garcia laughed, a nasty sound that didn't touch his eyes or mouth. "Let them go? You can't be that stupid. They're completely expendable. Always have been. We'll be terminating them later tonight, when there's only a skeleton crew on duty. Wouldn't want too many nosy eyes wondering what happened to them."

"You fucking tool! You'd really kill your own daughter?"

Another short laugh, mean and spiteful. Masochistic pleasure flared pumpkin orange in his aura. "She's not my daughter, remember? Even if she was, her mother ruined her by coddling her. If I'd had my way, she'd have gone to military school like my son."

"Yeah, look how that turned out. He's a freakin' rapist."

"Better than a left-wing sodomite with a head full of dreams. Besides, what did she expect, always parading around the house in those revealing outfits. That's the problem with you kids today. No common sense. You live in dream worlds."

Chloe was glad Vanessa couldn't hear her father talking this way. Cold, hard truth emanated from him in harsh blue waves. There would be no grief inside him when he gave the order to kill his own flesh and blood.

Or my family.

Right then Chloe vowed that he had to die. She'd tell Vanessa he'd forced her to do it.

"Take her to the cell block," Colonel Garcia ordered the men.

She couldn't let them lock her up. She'd have no chance then of saving Vanessa, or her parents and Benny.

But what could she do?

The four soldiers started forward, two armed with security batons, the others resting hands on their side arms.

Chloe's back was already pressed against a bank of equipment, and there was no other exit from the room. As she desperately glanced around, hoping for some miracle, her vision shifted again and a toilet-bowl energy hurricanes appeared, identical to the one she'd seen in her cell, except with a major difference. All the passing lines of radiation curved into it, pulled down inside the vortex of color. At the same time, she felt drawn to the psychedelic storm somehow, a mental tugging rather than a physical one.

Praying she wasn't committing suicide, she took a deep breath, darted past the advancing soldiers, and dove into the swirling energies.

Oh, hell...!

It was like the time she'd jumped off the cliff at Mannawauking Lake, just closing her eyes and purposely not thinking about the consequences. That had been scary.

But at least that day she'd stayed in her own world.

GARCIA and the four soldiers watched in stunned silence as the girl sailed headfirst into the wall and disappeared. There was a moment where no one moved, and then Garcia rushed forward, running his hands across the wall and rapping his knuckles against the plaster.

One soldier silently crossed himself, while the others just stared at the spot where the girl had vanished. Someone cursed in a low voice.

Garcia whirled around and shouted at the two-way mirror. "The video! Was the video running? Did you get that?"

A disembodied voice came over a speaker mounted in one corner of the room. "Yes sir, we did. I don't know what the hell just happened, but we got it all."

Garcia pushed past the soldiers and went into the adjoining observation room. "Make a copy, now!" he ordered the technician. The tech hit a button on the console, and a minute later handed Garcia a USB drive, which the Colonel stuffed into his pocket.

As he headed toward the door, Garcia motioned to the soldiers, who were still trailing behind him. "I want a total lock down, immediately. No one leaves the base, for any reason. If anyone tries, shoot them. Initiate a full-grounds search for the girl. I want every man on this. Go over the entire facility from top to bottom, and when you find her, don't let her get away. Knock her out. If tranks don't work shoot her in the goddamned leg. No questions. And for God's sake, be careful. I want her disabled, but don't kill her or I'll see to it you spend the rest of your life in a cell at Gitmo. I'll be in my office. Keep me updated every fifteen minutes."

The soldiers saluted, and one of them got on the radio to relay instructions. Waiting until the colonel was out of earshot, the soldier who'd crossed himself turned to the man next to him and asked, "Do y'all think we'll find her?"

"Not unless she wants us to," the other soldier said. "That girl could be in outer space for all we know."

GARCIA WENT TO HIS OFFICE, where he sat down and stared at the phone. Ferguson and Polk had to be informed, but he didn't want to make that call.

How do I explain this?

It was not going to be a pleasant conversation. He'd let the most important piece of the experiment escape. And he had no way of knowing where she'd gone, of if they could ever get her back.

With a sigh, he reached out for the phone, a dozen possible explanations and defenses running through his head.

If he was lucky, he'd still have his job when it the conversation was over.

CHLOE FLOATED, buoyed by an unimaginably vast expanse of energies that stretched into infinity in all directions. There was no sound, no movement, just a peaceful suspension amidst the fantastic array of light and color. Everything she had experienced up to this point, all the shades, spectrums, and storms of energy filling the world around her, all of that would have occupied less than a billionth of a percent of what she now witnessed in this 'otherness.'

And yet she didn't feel overwhelmed. In fact, she felt right at home, as if she belonged here.

And where, exactly, is here? Where the hell am I?

At first, the magnitude of the vista around her kept her from concentrating on any details. Gradually, though, she started to pick out individual features and focus on them. Either her growing powers or the fact that she'd been transported to some other reality gave her the ability to process what she was seeing, and with that processing came flashes of comprehension.

Certain patterns, such as the whirling pools of energy, and a few of the specific beams and waves of subatomic particles, were familiar to her because she'd seen them many times over the past several days. Others were completely new, although the more she looked around, the more she understood.

The whirlpools are like doors, bridges between one place and another. The giant balls of color and energy, they're planets, or maybe entire solar systems or galaxies. Far away, but somehow accessible to me while I'm in this place.

Although she found herself able to grasp the essential fundamentals, she knew her limited knowledge of physics and astronomy was holding her back from complete understanding. She'd had the basics in school, same as any other science major, but her interests had always gravitated towards English and Biology; her dream had been to go to college and then run an educational program at a zoo or nature center. Hard science, like math and physics, had never been one of her strong points.

Of course, if I'd known that someday I'd be traveling through some kind of whacked-out cosmic wormhole, I might have studied a little harder.

Then again, probably not.

As much as she wanted to explore her new surroundings, Chloe knew it was time to exit wherever she was and go back to

the real world. There was no way to tell how fast or slow time passed while she remained in limbo, and she couldn't leave Vanessa and her family at Fort Stone, not when Garcia was planning on murdering them tonight.

Now I just have to figure out how to get back.

When she'd been in the lab, concentrating on Vanessa had helped her incorporeal self choose the right direction. So she tried it again, focusing on an image of Vanessa in her mind.

Instantly there was a sense of movement, and the colors and shapes surrounding her seemed to blur, as if rushing by. The otherverse became a tunnel of sparkling light and bands of swirling energy, and she let out an ecstatic shout as she body-surfed the Einsteinian waves.

This is way more awesome than snow boarding!

As she raced forward, she caught glimpses of blurred images, barely discernable as places and people. Slowing herself with a mental command, she tried to focus on one of them, and found herself staring a clear picture of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, framed in a square of neon yellow as perfectly as if she was looking through a window. She'd never been there, but she'd seen it plenty of times on television and in books.

The only difference was, this time she was staring down from the sky, watching it being built.

No way! I'm seeing into the past. This place not only allows me to move from place to place, but between different times as well.

I'm like a teenage Dr. Who.

She slowly extended her hand, feeling a sudden desire to know if it was possible to physically visit the past, or if she could only look at it.

Wait. What if you fall through?

She stopped with her hand inches away from the picture.

Could that happen? If she crossed some kind of line, would she get sucked into the past and tumble down to her death?

The temptation was great, but her fear stronger. Better to test her theory in a safer situation, like, say, an empty room. Instead, she leaned closer to watch the past unfold below her.

I wonder what those people down there would see if they looked up. Me, framed in a square, like a painting in the sky? Or is it like a two-way mirror?

The temptation to shout, to make people look up, was so strong she had to bite her lip to control it.

Stop farting around. No time to play time traveler here. You've got more important things to do.

Reluctantly, she moved away. A dull ache throbbed behind her eyes, the kind of pain that sits and waits for just the right moment before escalating into a full-blown, teeth-grinding headache.

What I wouldn't give for some aspirin right now.

She told her body to move forward again, focusing on Vanessa's face, picturing her black hair, dark eyes, and large, pouting mouth. She picked up speed and shot down the tunnel once more, then came to an abrupt stop. Another picture frame formed in the wall of energy. Inside it, Vanessa was sitting just as she'd been the last time Chloe saw her, her hair matted and oily, clothes mussed up, eyes red from crying.

Across the room, Chloe's parents lay in their own bunk, crowded together on the single mattress.

Time to see how this works.

Taking a deep breath, Chloe stepped into the image. There was the barest hint of resistance, like walking against a mild breeze, and then she passed right through the picture and into the room.

"Shit!" Vanessa shouted, pushing herself across the bunk and up against the wall.

Chloe realized it must look like she'd just appeared out of nowhere.

"Sorry." A sudden dizzy spell made her waver on her feet and she grabbed the bed frame to keep from falling over.

"Chloe!" Her parents were up now, yelling out joyous greetings to their daughter. From the top bunk, Benny echoed their shouts.

"Quiet!" Chloe shushed them, and then turned to Vanessa. "There's no time to explain. We've got to get out of here right away! Your dad's planning on killing all of us, and he's probably already put out the alarm for my escape."

"But... but, how did you....?" Vanessa looked like she was in shock. "I..."

The deafening wail of a siren drowned out anything else she might have said.

"Damn it!" Each wave of sound seemed to boost the pain in Chloe's head up a level, until the sharp spikes blended together into a throbbing internal torture.

She held her hands to her ears and tried to think. It was immediately apparent to her what had happened. She hadn't been careful in choosing when she entered the cell, and so she'd arrived in real time, right after her own escape from Garcia. And she'd forgotten about the people in the observation room, who'd obviously seen her entrance.

Vanessa and her family were bombarding her with questions, and between their voices and the insistent clamor of the alarm, she couldn't concentrate.

Before she could say anything, the door burst open and several soldiers rushed in, guns already up and aimed at the occupants of the room.

Chloe looked at her watch. 10:42 a.m. "I'll be right back! I promise!" Shifting her vision, Chloe spotted one of the energy

whirlpools, which she had begun thinking of as time gateways, and stepped into it, just as the guns began firing.

She watched helplessly as her brother went down, red stains blossoming on his Men in Black t-shirt.

Then the colors claimed her again.

THE QUIET OF the otherworld did nothing to relieve the pounding in Chloe's skull. If anything, the effort to fight back the tears from seeing her family gunned down only made things worse.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she tried to will the demons in her head to stop firing cannons at each other, so she could concentrate on using what was left of her brain.

Okay, get it right this time, Chloe. Think. I can move backwards in time. But how far can I go back? What happens if I'm in two places at once?

Damn it! I'm not a theoretical physicist. I have to take the chance. So how do I stop the alarms from going off when I appear in Vanessa's cell?

The control room. All I have to do is go into the control room first and stop them from sounding the alarm. Garcia will still do it from his end, but I'll have a couple of minutes before they realize where I am.

Chloe pictured her watch at 10:40, and thought about Vanessa. Once again an image of the cell, with Vanessa sitting on the bunk crying, appeared against the wall of the tunnel. A wave of relief washed over her, and a heavy weight disappeared from her chest. No soldiers, no dead brother. Tiny balls of light flickered at the edges of her vision, a sure sign her pounding headache was getting ready to turn into a full-blown migraine that would make

rational thought impossible. She didn't have much time if she wanted to complete her rescue mission before she was totally incapacitated.

Chloe shifted her view to the big two-way mirror on the wall and looked through it. Two technicians sat at the console. One was reviewing data on a computer, while the other, who was ostensibly manning a camcorder, had his attention focused on the screen of his smart phone.

She was about to step through into the booth when another thought hit her.

I have no idea how to disarm two men. I need a weapon.

She pondered her problem while around her auroras of unimaginable color and light sparkled, flowed, and lasered in all directions.

A gun would be perfect, if I knew how to shoot one. Or where to get one. There's probably an armory on the base somewhere, but even if I knew where to go, I'm sure I'd set off some kind of alarm if I took anything.

So what did that leave?

Now, if I had a baseball bat...

That's when it came to her. She'd been on the softball team her freshman year in high school, and she'd been pretty decent. Her old athletic gear was still hanging in a duffle bag in the garage.

She conjured another window. This time it was much easier.

Ten minutes later in her subjective time, but still at 10:40 a.m., she stepped into the observation room, her old aluminum bat gripped tight in her dusty hands as she took aim at the computer technicians' heads. Two swings, two direct hits, two Army jerks out for the count. Holding onto the bat, she re-entered the cell on the other side of the viewing glass. Once again she had to quiet her family and Vanessa, assure them that everything was all right even though to them it looked like she just stepped through a solid wall.

"Listen, I can't explain this right now, you have to trust me; I'm getting us out of here, but I need you to all hold hands tightly and follow me."

Demonstrating what she wanted them to do, she grabbed Vanessa's hand in one of hers, and her mother's with her other. Mrs. Olivetti clasped her husband's hand, and Chloe made sure Vanessa had a good grip on Benny.

"All right, close your eyes, and don't open them until I say so."

Chloe looked for a portal, found one across the room.

Why do they keep moving around? And how come no one ever walks into them by accident?

The evil creatures in her head were no longer shooting cannons. Instead, they'd fired up jackhammers and were busy trying to shatter her skull. A wave of nausea threatened to buckle her knees. Taking a deep breath, Chloe led everyone into the tunnel and used it to locate someplace where she knew they'd be safe, at least temporarily. This time the resistance was stronger, a stiff breeze instead of a mild one.

"Okay, open your eyes," she said, letting go of their hands.

"That was so cool!" exclaimed Benny. "How'd you do that?"

Crap. Should've known the little troll wouldn't listen to me.

"What did you see?" she asked him.

"We walked through the wall, and then there was a big, dark room with a giant picture of this place, and then we were here. It was awesome!"

"What...my God, how did we get here?" Mrs. Olivetti stammered out her question in a tremulous voice.

A soft breeze ruffled their hair and carried the smells of fresh flowers and salt water to their noses. To their left, just across the empty street, a white-sand beach stretched off in both directions, the surf making gentle *swooshing* sounds in the darkness. On their right, a line of hotels and motels paraded off into the distance.

The warm, damp breeze acted like a wet cloth on Chloe's head, soothing her brain and easing the headache somewhat.

"This is Fort Lauderdale. That's the hotel we stayed two years ago," Mr. Olivetti whispered, looking around. "How did you do this? And why is it nighttime?"

Chloe looked down at her watch. It was twelve hours after they'd left the base, just as she'd planned.

"I'm not exactly sure how I do it, Dad. You just have to trust me that you're safe, at least for now. Check into the hotel. Pay cash and don't use your real name. Wait for me. I might not be back until tomorrow."

"Wait! You can't leave us! Don't go back there!" Vanessa grabbed Chloe's arm so hard that her nails actually broke the skin.

"Back where?" Mrs. Olivetti asked, still looking around in disbelief at her new surroundings.

"I have to," Chloe answered Vanessa. "If I don't, your father will just keep looking for us until he finds us again, especially since he knows what I can do now. He was already planning on killing all of you. And he wants me pumped full of drugs and locked away in a cell forever. He told me that today. I mean yesterday. Whatever. And you were right. He wants to make soldiers like me. I can't let that happen."

"And what are you supposed to do about it?" Vanessa put her hands on her hips and glared. "You can see stuff, and move from place to place, but you're not a superhero. A bullet can still kill you dead."

"What's all this talk about killing? Chloe, what the hell is going on?" Mr. Olivetti pushed past his wife and up close to his daughter.

"Stop it, all of you!" Chloe shouted. The pounding was growing worse again, and she pressed her hands against her temples to keep her skull from flying apart into a million pieces.

"You don't get it. This is something I have to do, or none of us will ever be safe. We'll spend the rest of our lives running like criminals, with no money and no place to call home. Mom, Dad, I'll be fine. Vanessa will explain everything to you."

Turning to Vanessa, she said, "I love you. And I promise I'll come back." She pulled Vanessa close and gave her a long kiss. Then she pulled her arm from Vanessa's grasp and stepped away. Adjusting her vision was harder than before because of the tears in her eyes, but she located a nearby portal and walked through it without looking back.

TO THE OLIVETTIS AND VANESSA, it was as if Chloe had vanished into thin air.

"Holy crap," Benny muttered. For once, his mother paid no attention.

"Vanessa Garcia, I think you better tell us everything that's going on. How... how can Chloe... how did she do what she did? And where did she go?" Mrs. Olivetti waved her hand in the direction where her daughter had disappeared.

Staring at the empty space Chloe had occupied a moment before, Vanessa didn't know whether to cry or be pissed off that she'd been left behind to explain things she didn't even understand.

"You'd better come back, chica," she whispered to the darkness, "so I can kick your ass!"

CHLOE DIDN'T IMMEDIATELY RETURN to the base. First

she went to Vanessa's apartment, carefully choosing a time three months in the past, when she was in school and Vanessa at work, and way before she ever been struck by the lightning. It took all her remaining strength to push through the barrier between the energy tunnel and the image of the apartment. Once she got across, she collapsed on the floor and had to take several deep breaths before she could move without the room spinning around her.

The first thing she did was stagger to the bathroom and down three ibuprofen tablets. Then, holding on to the walls for support, she took a long, hot shower, letting the water relax her muscles while the pain killers soothed her aching brain. When she could move without setting off jack hammers in her skull, she scrubbed herself until her skin hurt.

Feeling halfway normal, she put on a pot of coffee and got into clean clothes. Thinking ahead to what the next hours, or days, might bring, she purposely selected a pair of old, green cammo pants and a matching tank top. The outfit had been purchased for a paintball excursion they'd never got around to taking. Black hiking boots completed the ensemble.

She hoped the cammo fatigues would help her blend in when she returned to the base, although if anyone really looked at her they'd know she didn't belong. Her hair and piercings screamed 'outsider,' and besides, no way she looked old enough to be in the service.

Savoring her cinnamon and cream coffee—the next best thing to a double-sized frappuccino—she retrieved Vanessa's old backpack from under the bed. She'd need something to carry her weapons when she returned to the base.

Right. What weapons?

The caffeine and painkillers were eating big chunks away from her headache, making thinking easier. Moving through the apart-

ment, she filled her oversized pockets and the pack with anything she thought might be useful.

The bat was too large to lug around, so she tossed it. She found two small cans of pepper spray, Vanessa's pocket taser from when she'd worked the night shift at a 7-11, a lighter, and a steak knife. She considered bringing a larger knife, but she was afraid she'd stab herself. Finally, she filled a thermos with the remaining coffee and closed the pack.

Then it was off to her next stop.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Chloe emerged in total darkness and paused as her eyesight automatically adjusted itself to provide full color—if slightly grainy—visuals, not unlike the graphics depicted in her brother's 3D video games.

This time there'd been almost no struggle to cross the barrier, and the thought occurred to her that maybe it had something to do with the times she'd chosen. Going back seemed much harder than moving between places in her own time.

I'll worry about that later.

At just after two a.m., the Garcia home was deathly silent. Chloe stepped carefully through the rooms, trying to keep squeaking floorboards to a minimum but not overly concerned with encountering the Colonel. She'd picked a night two weeks before the day she'd been struck by lightning, so there'd be no reason for the house to be under surveillance. And since he always spent most of his time either at the base or traveling, odds were he wasn't home.

Although she hadn't been to the house in over a year, she

remembered the layout just fine, and made her way to Colonel Garcia's den without any problems. It was on the opposite end of the house from the bedrooms, so she wasn't worried about waking Mrs. Garcia. Vanessa had mentioned once that her father kept a pistol hidden behind some books. The conversation had come up when Vanessa, after a couple of drinks, had admitted she'd considered on more than one occasion using the gun on her step brother.

"In the end, I figured that no matter what he'd done to me, it wasn't worth going to jail just to get my revenge." She'd cried then, while Chloe held her and rocked her. It was one of the few times she'd let down her barriers concerning the abuse she'd experienced, and Chloe was glad she'd been there to offer some comfort.

Now, though, the important thing from that conversation was what Vanessa had said afterwards.

"As far as I know, no one's ever taken the gun out of its box, except when my father cleans it."

Thinking back on that night, Chloe felt a renewed sense of purpose. No way was she going to let the Garcia family hurt Vanessa again. Not when she'd finally gotten herself free of them.

And maybe, when all this is over, I'll pay a visit to her brother myself.

The bookcase took up an entire wall. Most of the titles were military histories and management books, which didn't surprise Chloe. The colonel didn't strike her as someone who'd sit down and get lost in a Harry Potter story or Maya Blair mystery. The only problem was, she didn't know which books hid the pistol, so she picked a spot in the center of the bookcase and started to carefully remove books from the shelves. She'd emptied half a shelf before she realized she was being stupid.

You've got x-ray vision, dummy. Use it!

A step back and a spectrum shift later, she found what she was

looking for. The gun sat in an ornately decorated wooden box two shelves up.

Between my headache and being exhausted I'm not thinking straight. She had to be more careful or she'd end up making a dumb mistake at the worst time.

She took the box down and opened it. The gun looked enormous, and when she picked it up it felt as if she was holding something made of iron and cement.

How the hell do people shoot these things with one hand?

Along with the gun was a box of bullets and the warranty. After replacing everything back on the shelves, Chloe shoved the gun, bullets, and paperwork into her backpack then used a portal to make her next stop.

This time her destination was the school library. After careful thought, she chose a Sunday evening, so there'd be no chance of anyone seeing her. No sense trying to sneak around a public library in the daytime—with a gun—when she could go someplace she knew would be empty and that had no security cameras. Her headache ratcheted up a notch when she emerged, a warning that she couldn't take too many more trips without it coming back full force.

While she waited for the workstation to boot up, she sipped some of her coffee, took another ibuprofen, and skimmed through the warranty until she found the make and model of the gun. It was a Smith & Wesson Model 915, .9mm pistol.

Whatever that means.

Then it was just a matter of getting onto the 'net and looking up the instructions for how to load the gun and work the safety. She figured she could handle pointing and shooting, although she'd have to use two hands.

She spent the next half hour practicing with her new weapon, carefully following the directions. Load the clip with bullets. Push

clip into the grip. It sounded easy when she read it but it was harder than it looked; she had to shove the metal rectangle up hard and she was afraid she'd pinch her skin or something.

Once she reached the point where she could do everything without looking or dropping bullets, she placed the gun in her backpack. She had no intention of carrying a loaded gun in her pocket, safety or not. As she tucked it away, she found herself thinking about karma. How perfect would it be if Garcia ended up getting shot with his own gun?

Chloe shut down the computer and ducked through a portal. This time she didn't emerge right away. Instead, she took some time to consider her next move, letting the energy currents float her along. She wanted to be sure she returned at a point in time *after* she escaped from Garcia in the laboratory, but not too much later. She didn't want the whole base waiting for her.

Ten minutes. Long enough for them to figure out I set everyone free, but not so long that they've stopped running around like headless chickens.

Then there was the matter of where she should make her entrance. So far, she'd been running on instinct, not giving things too much thought, but that wouldn't be good enough now.

Put that brain to work, girl. You've got these powers, how can you use them? Instead of acting like a teenage girl, you have to think like a soldier. What would Garcia do?

Figure out your advantages.

Yes. She had powers. So which ones could help her? Chloe ran off a checklist in her head. She could visualize magnetic and energy waves. Not much help there, unless she decided to get a job repairing X-ray equipment. She could see outside the normal spectrum of light. That was good, especially in the dark. She had the ability to read peoples' auras and use them as barometers for deciphering feelings and truth. Definitely handy.

Then there were the energy portals. Moving from place to place, and between times, was a big plus, but she had to be careful. There was no telling where one would be. A portal across the room did no good if the person standing between it and you had a gun in their hand.

"There has to be something," she said to the coruscating universe around her. "Superman always found a way to use one his powers when he was in trouble. And he always had a backup plan if something went wrong."

Finally, there was her ability to see into the future. A very useful trick, but so far it was the one power she still couldn't use on command. Even when it worked, it only provided a few seconds of premonition.

Great. The one thing that would be really helpful, and either there's a limit on my power, or I can only see as far into the future as it's been decided. Maybe there's too many branches or possibilities, and after a few seconds the original path divides into too many potential ones.

God, she was starting to sound like a Vulcan.

"Oh, whatever."

Chloe realized she was talking to herself, but didn't bother to stop.

After all, it wasn't like anyone was listening.

"How about this? I materialize somewhere where they wouldn't be looking, like on the roof or inside a truck. I use my X-ray vision to find Garcia, and I go there. I've got a gun. I can come in behind him, maybe even take his weapon away, and then use him as a hostage. Make him destroy all the records of me. I'll know if he's done it, because I can see if he's telling the truth. Then I get him to write a signed confession about how he kidnapped me and my family, and his own daughter. Tell him that I'll turn it over to the authorities, and the newspapers, if he ever tries to revive the

experiment again. I can always threaten to take him to the Antarctic or something if he goes back on his word."

Chloe tried to find any major holes in her plan. There were lots of ifs, and more than a few gray areas where things could go wrong, but overall, it seemed like it would work.

Drawing a deep breath, she summoned a picture of the laboratory in her mind. She needed to return to a familiar place before she could find somewhere better to carry out her plan. Immediately an image of the laboratory appeared in front of her, and she stepped through. As soon as she touched solid ground, she switched to her x-ray vision and located an empty storeroom at the deepest level of the base. Another trip through the portal and she found herself standing before stacks of crates and boxes, all covered with a layer of dust.

Perfect. No one's been down here for a while.

She glanced at her watch. Eleven minutes had passed in the real world since she'd made her original escape. No alarms were sounding, which meant either Garcia was trying to keep her escape a secret for as long as possible, or he'd gotten tired of the noise.

Unless he hasn't even discovered that Vanessa and my family are gone, too.

Regardless, things were going to change. Soon.

A wave of dizziness hit her and she had to lean against the wall to stay on her feet. She realized she was exhausted. The events of the past two days were catching up with her.

God, a nap would be great right now.

But she couldn't rest, not yet. Instead, she settled for sitting down on some boxes, opening her thermos, and taking a long drink. Normally she preferred to sip slowly, savoring the way the sweet cream and flavorings contrasted with the bitter, full flavor of the coffee, but today it was strictly for energy purposes, so she

gulped down the whole cup and poured another, flooding her system with caffeine and sugar.

The tantalizing odors of the cinnamon-laced brew made her think of Saturday mornings when she and Vanessa would sit on the front steps of the apartment building, sipping steaming cups and talking about everything from movies to the latest music to their plans for the future. Venting about work or school. Deciding what to do over the weekend. That could be anything from staying home in sweats and binging on movies and junk food to dressing up in their sexiest outfits and hitting clubs.

Sometimes it just meant doing ordinary things together, and often that was the best. Shopping, cleaning, going to the corner market for flowers. Even chores were fun when you did them with someone you loved.

Vanessa was more important than anything to her and she couldn't imagine them not being together. Just the thought of anything happening to her brought sudden moisture to Chloe's eyes, and she had to put down her coffee and wipe away the tears.

Get a grip, girl. This is so not the time to go full-out breakdown mode.

She glanced down at her watch and was startled to see fifteen minutes had passed. She'd been doing more than getting lost in thought. She'd almost fallen asleep.

Oh, that would be just great. Super-girl returns to end the evil empire, but instead falls asleep drinking coffee and gets captured. How freaking embarrassing would that be?

Chloe drained the thermos cup and stood up, stretched a few times, and put away the thermos. It was time to put her plan into action. She had a goal. And now a time limit as well. Having polished off two cups of strong coffee, she figured she had an hour at the most before she had to pee.

Can't be in the middle of a life and death struggle when that

happens. The bad guys probably don't let you stop for bathroom breaks. Although they might die from laughter if I wet my pants in front of them. Maybe that should be my secret weapon. Potty Girl to the rescue.

Chloe allowed herself a small grin and then opened the backpack, emptied it onto the floor, and started stocking her pockets. She didn't want the heavy pack getting in the way during a fight.

One pepper spray into a left side pocket, and one into a right. Stun gun into the left pocket. Pistol very carefully into the big right pocket, where she could reach it easily. The one spare clip she had went into a back pocket. The steak knife went into her boot.

She felt like she'd gained ten pounds, and when she tried to walk, her pants immediately sagged down below her waist, threatening to slide right off.

Great. I should've brought a belt. Now what? I can't be running around and trying to keep my pants up at the same time. It'd be like one of those episodes of Cops. *I'll end up falling down, and I'll get captured lying on my face, my bare ass smiling at dozens of horny soldiers. And then I'll pee myself, which will just totally top things off. Total epic fail.*

A quick search of the storeroom revealed some old rope in a corner. Using the knife, she cut off a length of the scratchy hemp and fitted it through the loops in her pants. Tying it in the front, she found it made an adequate belt.

Armed and energized, it was now time to locate Garcia.

She summoned a portal and entered the space between times. There she concentrated on a mental image of Garcia. A window opened, displaying a real-time view of the Army colonel. He was standing in front of two older men in sharply pressed military uniforms, their chests festooned with medals and ribbons. She recognized both of them right away. They'd been the ones in the

control booth when she'd first woken up in her cell. Garcia's mouth was moving, and he wore an expression that reminded her of a cornered dog, part fright and part aggression.

Probably explaining my escape to his superiors.

Chloe smiled to herself. At least she'd managed to make his day harder. She stepped closer to the image, and sound reached her as well, a little muffled but understandable.

"...do you mean, she's gone? Garcia, you'd better have a goddamn good explanation for this. Polk and I put our asses on the line for this damn experiment of yours, and now you tell us you couldn't even keep a teenage girl locked up?"

The fair-haired man's face was beet red as he chewed Garcia out. Next to him, the black officer, who Chloe assumed was Polk, had a deep scowl on his face and his arms crossed over his chest as he glowered at Garcia.

"General, it was an unexpected use of her powers, something we didn't have any idea she possessed. You saw the video. She disappeared into thin air. This has to be a power she's developed since we captured her, or she would've used it to escape from us on the road that night."

Garcia looked like he was ready to blow his stack, but was holding back in front of the two generals.

"Yes, we saw what happened." This time it was the black man who spoke. "Do you have any explanation for it?"

"Sir, in scientific terms, she has the ability to teleport, to move her body from one place to another instantly. We weren't prepared for that, because there was no indication of anything like it before. Up until that moment, all of her abilities had been related to changes in her vision. She could see magnetic waves, heat, colors outside the normal spectrum. We suspected she might have limited telepathic abilities, possibly from being able to visualize the electrical impulses that surround people's physical forms. But

she never displayed any major psycho-paranormal abilities before."

Psycho-paranormal? God, he makes me sound like a cross between a werewolf and a serial killer.

"The real question is, what do you intend to do about this? Do you have any idea where she's gone?"

Polk's voice was quieter than his associate's, but the anger and tension in it reached Chloe perfectly well, even in her alternate dimension. She would not want to be in Garcia's shoes.

"Yes, we already have a plan in motion. We're conducting a floor by floor search of the facility, on the off chance that she wasn't able to take herself far. At the same time, we're going to place a heavy guard on her family and girlfriend, in case she tries to rescue them. Our soldiers will be armed with tranquilizer guns and gas grenades, so we'll be able to incapacitate her immediately, before she can disappear again. Then we'll keep her sedated while we carry out our experiments on the volunteers."

Chloe wanted to laugh out loud, but wasn't sure if sound would carry across the barrier. *They don't even know about the escape yet! This is too good.*

Garcia paused to wipe a thin line of sweat from the side of his nose. "If the first rounds of experimentation don't work, we'll wake her up and carry out another interrogation, this time with some judiciously applied truth serum and physical coercion. Once we're sure we know everything, then we can dispose of her like we'll be doing with her family. My team will burn down her house and make sure that it looks like a terrible accident claimed the whole lot of them."

"And what about your daughter, Colonel? She's involved in this as well. What do you intend to do about her?" This time it was the blond man who spoke.

"I've already given the order to take care of that, General

Ferguson. She'll be eliminated along with the Olivetti girl's family."

"You expect us to believe you'll murder your own daughter?" Polk asked, his face displaying his skepticism.

"Step-daughter," Garcia corrected. "And yes. I'm prepared to do whatever has to be done. She means nothing to me anymore."

You bastard! Chloe couldn't believe what she was hearing. His own daughter? How could the man be so...

Wait. She looked closer at the colonel. Something about his aura... streaks of dark blue and green mixed in with the angry reds, fearful yellows, and fanatical oranges.

He's feeling guilty. There's still some part of him that cares a little about her, regrets what he has to do. But he's willing to do it anyway because he's so power-hungry, so desperate to achieve his goals. Nothing matters to him anymore except his own ambition.

What a dick.

"How do you intend to explain it?"

"Her apartment will be sanitized. The landlord will simply assume she packed up and skipped out on her rent."

"Not good enough." The man called Ferguson shook his head. "Burn the entire building down, same as the Olivetti's house. There may be neighbors who've spoken to your daughter, or know something about the Olivetti girl's transformation. And terminate all the civilian doctors who've examined her."

"Yes, sir. I'll take care of it right away."

Garcia started to say something else, but just then two things occurred simultaneously. An alarm started a shrill ringing in the hallway, and a phone buzzed on the desk. General Ferguson moved aside so Garcia could reach the phone. When Garcia moved around the desk, Chloe caught site of a name plate reading Colonel Hector Garcia.

So, this is his office. That's good to know.

"Garcia here. *What?* When? Well, go back and look at the tape, mister! And call me as soon as you learn anything."

"What's going on, Garcia? I assume this has something to do with your escaped prisoner?" Polk leaned forward, hands resting on Garcia's desk.

"Yes. The Olivetti girl did return, just like I though she would. She blindsided the two technicians watching her family and let them out of their cell. I have my men checking the video to see if they can learn where they might be headed."

"So not only has this high school girl managed to elude your soldiers, but now she's overpowered two armed men and broken civilians out of a security cell at an Army base? Colonel, I can't tell if you are running the sloppiest team in the U.S. Army or you've dramatically underestimated this girl, or both. Either way, you're not impressing us with your capability for directing this project."

"General, this is only a temporary setback. In fact, it might even be considered a partial success."

"Success? How in the world could any of this be considered a success?" Polk demanded.

"Olivetti would never have revealed this new power to us willingly, and we had no reason to test for it. If I hadn't threatened her, even she might never have known what she can do. It's very possible the power only manifested in response to her stress level. In the overall scheme of things, her actual escape isn't nearly as important as how she accomplished it."

"Not that important?" Ferguson's eyes bugged out, and the red flush on his cheeks was now spreading to beneath his bristle-cut hair. "Colonel, you've got a girl with superpowers running around loose, taking out trained soldiers. She could expose us to the world, attack us in our sleep, or do any number of things. And you say it's not important?"

"Let me explain, sir. First of all, if she is really gone, then I

don't imagine she would want to come back. Most likely she'll take her family and try to go into hiding. She's not going to want to expose us to the world, because that would mean exposing herself, and her powers as well. Then it wouldn't just be the Army after her, but every branch of the government, and God knows how many foreign agencies as well. She'd never have a moment's peace.

"Secondly, if she does come back, we're prepared for her. We'll take her out. Either way, the focus of our work now should be on recreating these powers in our own soldiers. Think about it! More than ever, it's vital that we complete this experiment. Can you imagine a troop of soldiers with the ability to appear and disappear instantly, anywhere they please? A single soldier could take out an enemy headquarters, just by teleporting in, planting a bomb, and leaving again. Instantaneous movement of troops to where they're needed, with no way to detect them. We *must* continue our work."

Garcia was leaning forward now as well, practically pleading his point. Chloe watched as his aura flashed outward, radiating lust, greed, and desire.

He's planning on using those soldiers for his own purposes. Like some kind of crazy dictator. He's become obsessed with power.

Similar emotions radiated outward from the two generals. They were just as bad. Three people, all planning to double-cross each other and take control of an unstoppable force as soon as they had the opportunity.

Not good.

The silence dragged on for several seconds until Ferguson finally broke it. "Colonel, I hope for all our sakes you're right. Start work with the science team immediately. I'll want to see the first list of volunteers on my desk by tomorrow, as well as your initial testing schedule. I assume you've got the laboratory version of Sky Strike up and operational?"

"Yes, sir," Garcia snapped off a stiff salute. "It's ready to go. Thank you, sir."

"And find that girl," Polk added as the two men left Garcia's office. "We don't want any loose ends." He didn't wait for a reply, leaving Garcia nodding to a closing door.

Chloe remained where she was for another minute or two, just to make sure Garcia didn't leave and the other two men didn't return. While she waited, she watched Garcia make two phone calls, one to tell someone that 'Phase Three' was a go, and the second to find out what had been gleaned from the video tape of Vanessa's cell.

Evidently he didn't like what he heard, because he slammed the phone down and punched his hand against the top of his desk.

That's my cue. Time to make my big entrance.

She experienced no difficulty stepping through the portal into Garcia's office, not even a hint of pressure. Garcia's eyes went wide as she appeared out of nowhere and she couldn't help smiling as she greeted him with a cheery "Hey, Colonel Dumb-ass. Looking for me?"

She had her gun out and pointed at him, making a point of flicking the safety off so he could see she was prepared to shoot. A sudden vision came to her, a stop-motion movie of him reaching for the holster inside his jacket. Before he could actually do it, she added in a harder voice, "Don't even think about pulling that gun. I will shoot."

Another future scene came to her. "And no going for the phone, either. Place both hands on the desk and keep them there."

Chloe moved forward and yanked the cords of both desk phones—the regular one and the one with the red casing—out of the wall.

Garcia narrowed his eyes and glared at her. "I can't believe what a stupid fool you are. You were gone. Home free. You could

have taken your family and my whore of a daughter and gone anywhere. It would be months, maybe years before we could find you. And yet you came back."

Chloe choked back her anger at his words and gave herself props for not shooting him right then and there.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Me running around the rest of my life trying to stay ahead of your men. 'Cause, like, it's so easy to keep a low profile when your eyes glow like spotlights. Not to mention having to get new identities for my family and Vanessa. And I'm so sure you wouldn't do everything you could to find me, because it's not like Polk and Ferguson will rest until I'm dead."

Chloe was happy to see some of the color drain from Garcia's swarthy face when she mentioned his superiors' names.

Good, let him wonder how I was able to spy on him.

"So why did you come back? Going to shoot me if I don't agree to your terms? Tell me you'll spill your guts to the newspapers if I don't let you go? Just how naive are you?" Garcia gave her a sarcastic smile, echoed by his aura. "You know none of that can happen."

"Oh, I know all right. I heard you talking all about it. Even if I told the world about the kidnappings, the murders you planned, even ordering your own daughter killed, you'll end up in prison but I'll still be the freak who's wanted by every government in the world. The Army would probably find some way to classify me as a national security risk and blame everything on me."

Chloe kept a tight grip on the gun with both hands. "No, I'm not that stupid anymore. I'd thought about doing what you said, but thanks to you I know it's hopeless. You're a butt weasel. Polk and Ferguson are bigger butt weasels. I can't let weasels rule the world. So what we're going to do, you and I, is destroy all of your equipment and all the data from your experiment. Everything. Computer files. Documents. Memory sticks. And you're going to

tell your men to destroy the all records you took from every doctor who ever worked on my case. I know you can do that. Finally, you're going to call off all of the death warrants and sign a confession, naming yourself, Polk, and Ferguson as the people in charge of this whole thing."

"You *are* crazy." Garcia said. "You're asking me to throw away my career, maybe my life. Why should I do that? What's in it for me?"

"Have you been listening? It's the only way to *save* your worthless life. You cooperate with me and you'll live to ruin another day. I'll even transport you to anyplace you choose. You seem to think it's easy to start a new life, a new identity. So you can do it. Or, you can refuse to cooperate and I'll kill you. Then I'll have to destroy everything myself. It'll take longer, but I can get it done. And before you answer, remember: I can tell if you're lying or not."

"What about the technicians who've seen you? The doctors? And people like Ferguson and Polk? Are you going to kill them, too?" Garcia sneered at her, a thoroughly vile look that made her stomach turn. "You're out of your league, brat."

"If I were you, I'd be worried about myself right now, not what's gonna happen to anyone else. You've got thirty seconds to answer me or later tonight I'll be telling Vanessa how I had to kill you in self-defense."

"You're bluffing."

Chloe had been afraid it would come to this. She wasn't a killer, but there was more at stake here than her morals.

She aimed the gun and fired.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Garcia winced as the bullet thudded into the wall inches from his head. He'd never seen action, never been shot at. He'd always wondered how he'd react. Now he knew. A hot trickle of urine ran down his leg and clammy sweat broke out across his body.

At the same time, he got a good glimpse of Olivetti's face. Her glowing, multi-colored eyes no longer gave away any emotion, but any well-trained leader is good at reading expressions, and he considered himself one of the best. On Chloe's face he saw a mixture of surprise, fear, and relief.

Dammit, the girl wasn't bluffing! That wasn't a warning shot, she just missed. Better change tactics, and fast!

"Okay, okay! You've made your point," he said, raising his hands off the desk. She motioned with the gun and he put them back down.

"I'll do what you ask. There's a room next to the laboratory. That's where all the tapes and files on your case are stored. You

know where the two observation rooms are. You can go there yourself and destroy the equipment."

"What about the files from the other doctors?" Chloe asked him.

"Already here. We confiscated them right after we captured you." Garcia was glad he didn't have to lie about that. He believed her when she said she could tell if he was telling the truth or not.

Another ability we didn't realize she had. What else don't we know about her?

Chloe gave him what he could only assume was a suspicious glance.

If the eyes are the windows of the soul, does that mean hers is gone, or is it as far advanced beyond a normal soul as her vision is beyond a human's?

"Why are you suddenly so helpful?" Chloe asked. "I didn't expect a career soldier like you to give in so easily. All that training, all that 'death before dishonor' crap. What's the deal?"

"The deal is this: I don't want to die. I promise I'll leave you alone, never bother you again. In return, you can have it all. The files, the videos, Ferguson, Polk. All of it, and them. Destroy the whole base if you want to. Thanks to you, my career is already over. I'll be drummed out of the military, probably get court-martialed for helping you do this. I'd rather just disappear. All I want is the chance to get out of here before you destroy everything."

Chloe frowned. "I'm thinking that's not such a good idea after all. If I let you go, you'll just start all over someplace else. Set up some kind of laboratory somewhere, with mercenaries or whatever criminals like you use. And then what? In a few years, we'll be doing this all over again. You know what? Screw you. No way."

Garcia made sure he chose his next words carefully. He couldn't hide the truth, but he could phrase it in a way that was

more likely to get her to spare his life. The important thing was to keep her talking until she slipped up somehow, or got distracted.

"Look, Olivetti. I won't lie to you. Like you said, I can't. Yes, if you let me go, I'll probably spend the rest of my days trying to recreate what happened to you, produce soldiers with your powers. But that will take more than just a couple of years. Without you, without my scientists and their data, can you imagine how hard it will be to find someone listen to me? Who'll fund a new laboratory and find scientists who can build the equipment?

"And then what are the odds of it being successful? I think it's a safe bet you haven't been completely honest with us in your description of what happened, which means recreating the events of that day will be close to impossible. Besides, you could always keep an eye on me and step in again if you felt I was getting too close.

"And there's one more thing," he added, playing his trump card. "I think you're going to end up needing me as much as I need you."

"How's that again? What are you, smoking crack or something?" Chloe snorted, the totally teenage reaction incongruous with the alien eyes staring at him.

"You said it yourself. How are you supposed to blend into normal society when you've got two spotlights for eyes? Think you're going to be able to go back to school anytime soon, looking like a science fiction movie reject?" Garcia purposely made his voice hard, devoid of compassion.

"I can get my GED," Chloe responded. "And then get a college degree online. That's easy these days."

"Sure, and then what? What kind of job do you think you can get? Beacon in a light house? Fog light on a tugboat? How will you even go on interviews when you can't take your sunglasses off?

Everyone in the world is going to treat you like you're a freak. And if you try to blend in, go out to the store, act like a normal person, sooner or later someone's going to find out there's something weird about you. Then it will only be a matter of time before our government, or someone else's, starts paying attention and comes looking for you. And you'll be back where you started, except you'll have no idea who the bad guys are."

"So I should just turn myself over to you and become your guinea pig, your hostage? Let you lock me up in a base somewhere?"

"Sounds like hell, I know. But it doesn't have to be. Think of it this way. You would have Vanessa with you. Your family would be free, and you could see them whenever you want. Hell, it's not like I could stop you from leaving anytime you felt like it. You wouldn't be a prisoner, you'd simply be living a safe life in a secure compound. A mansion, if you want. Like a rock star. I can make that all happen. The only thing standing in my way is Ferguson and Polk. Once I'm completely in charge, you could write your own ticket and I'd back you."

"So now you want me to do your dirty work, kill Polk and Ferguson for you? Ain't gonna happen. I'm not a cold-blooded killer."

Garcia nodded at the gun in her hand. "You were ready to kill me a minute ago. Ferguson and Polk are the ones who put you and your family on the death list. Do they deserve to live?"

Chloe was silent for a second, and then asked him a question in a quiet voice. "What about you creating the soldiers and taking over the world? I don't want that on my conscience."

"Not the world, just a small part of it. Maybe my own little country. Or maybe we'll make just a few soldiers, sell their services out as spies, make a few million dollars. That doesn't sound so bad, does it?"

"No, it sounds just freakin' great, Doctor Evil. The sad part is, you really think it's okay to take over a country and make people your slaves. Our government might be a conservative, right-wing bunch of old farts who want to stifle my freedom to talk the way I want or marry who I want, but at least they were elected. The people had a choice. You'd be nothing more than a Bin Laden or Hitler with supernatural soldiers. Once you took over one country, that wouldn't be enough for you. You're greedy, arrogant, and messed up in the head, and there's no way I'd do anything to help you."

Her arms sagged down from the weight of the gun as she focused more on arguing with him than guarding him. It was the moment he'd been waiting for. There'd be no better chance to make his move. He dodged to the side as fast as he could, trusting that her reflexes wouldn't be as sharp as a soldier's. As he dove to the floor, he swung his hand upward to hit the button mounted under his desk that would trigger the silent alarm.

Before his fingers made contact, there was another deafening bang and a giant hammer hit him in the shoulder and sent him tumbling away from the desk.

Shot! I've been shot! How could she aim that fast?

Pain blossomed through his shoulder and left arm as his back slammed into the wall.

And then the dark clouds closed in and blotted out the world.

CHLOE WATCHED Garcia bounce off the wall and fall face-forward onto the hard tiles of the floor with a *thud-crunch-splat* that she heard even over the roar of the pistol still echoing in her ears.

I really shot him!

And on the heels of that thought, *Ooh, that's gonna hurt when he wakes up.*

An irregular spray of red decorated the institutional-gray wall behind the desk and a crimson smear trailed down to where Garcia's body had slid to the floor before toppling over.

Damn, the bullet must have gone right through him.

Chloe went around the desk and checked Garcia's pulse and breathing. The shoulder wound was still bleeding, but it wasn't gushing, so she felt safe in assuming he wasn't in any immediate danger of dying.

Gobs of blood and mucus oozed from his broken nose, and she turned his head so he wouldn't choke. Once she was sure he was safe, she crossed the office and stepped through the nearest portal. No use sticking around. Garcia was out cold, and sooner or later—most likely sooner—someone was going to check on the two shots that she'd fired.

From inside the energy zone, she conjured a window to the laboratory and stepped through. Once again, there was no resistance, which she attributed to not trying to shift through time.

Opening the first of the two filing cabinets in the room, she was dismayed to find it completely filled with data on her. The second cabinet was just as packed. She'd hoped to just pile everything in a box, but the scientists had been more thorough than she'd anticipated. On top of that, all of Gupti's files, and those of her other doctors, were there as well.

"Dammit!" It took all her willpower to not scream. Or kick the file cabinets. Why couldn't anything be easy? How was she supposed to get rid of so much stuff? It would take a dozen trips to carry it away, and if she tried to light it on fire the automatic sprinklers would just come on and soak everything.

Work smarter, not harder. One of her father's favorite sayings. He used to come home from job sites laughing about the new men

who exhausted themselves by relying on muscle instead of technique on construction sites.

Why should I carry anything if I don't have to?

It only took a good hard shove to push the first cabinet over; it landed on its back with a resounding *clang!* that made her jump. The second one toppled over just as easy, and then she just had to push them into the nearest portal and shove them through. It was during this process that Chloe learned another fact about her powers, and the portals themselves. She couldn't send anything through unless she was touching it at the time it entered the swirling doorway.

That explains why no one else can use them. I guess more than just my vision's been affected. I wonder what the hell else is going on inside my body.

For a brief moment, Chloe thought that maybe she *should* let herself become a research project, if only to learn what had really happened to her. That idea went away as swiftly as it had come.

I've done okay so far learning on my own. As long as nothing bad is happening to me, there's no reason to put myself and my family back in danger. Besides, I'd rather be free and ignorant than locked away forever like a lab rat for the sake of some answers.

After pushing the second cabinet into the energy tunnel, Chloe took a moment to consider the best way to get rid of them. Theoretically, she could dump them anywhere she wanted, but that left the chance, however small, of someone discovering the files someday.

Then it hit her: fire. Chloe pictured the local junkyard, but at night. A window formed, and she used it to locate a remote section of the yard. It took just as much effort to move the cabinets through the window as it had to slide them across the office floor; somehow they still retained their mass even in the otherness of the

portal. The time difference didn't help. The dark square resisted her efforts at first before finally giving way.

After making sure no one was around, she opened all the drawers and used her lighter to set the papers alight. The DVDs she broke into pieces, and the memory sticks she tossed into the fire.

Chloe stepped back to avoid the harsh, black fumes from the melting plastic. The billowing flames, together with the crumbling ash and shooting sparks, created a beautiful, dancing vine that twirled and rose, subsided momentarily, and then thrust new tendrils upwards again. Flakes of charred paper floated up on the thermals, surrounded by miniature red, orange, and yellow stars that flared and dimmed.

With a start, Chloe realized she'd been lulled into something like a state of hypnosis as she stared at the fire.

God, I'm so freakin' tired. I'm losing focus. What I really need is a nice, long nap in a comfortable bed. But there's still work to do.

She took a moment to stretch her stiff back and shoulder muscles, then returned to the laboratory, after a quick side trip to retrieve her backpack. She had no way to destroy the equipment, at least not yet, and it was too heavy to push into a portal, so she moved on to the two observation rooms she'd visited previously. Luckily, both were empty; she figured the soldiers and techs had left since there was nothing to watch.

Probably out searching for me.

Working as quickly as she could, she checked the cameras for memory chips or DVDs. When she found nothing, she unplugged the three CPUs and used a portal to take them to Mannawauking Lake, where she and her friends had hung out during summer vacations and on the weekends when the weather was nice. The far end of the lake was rumored to be over a hundred feet deep. Unaffected by the chill water like only teenagers could be, they'd

spent their days swimming and daring each other to jump from the thirty-foot cliff into the murky, frigid depths. No matter how many times she jumped, it was always the same. The fearful leap out into nothingness, the wind rushing past her face. The gnawing rat of wonderful dread in her stomach. And then the sudden immersion in bitter cold and darkness. All overlaid with the worry in the back of her mind of striking a hidden rock and ending up paralyzed or dead.

Even now, the memories of those afternoons carried more substance than she'd expected, as if they'd happened yesterday instead of months or years ago. More than ever, she was beginning to appreciate that time had substance, was more than just an abstract thing divided arbitrarily into hours and minutes.

Chloe pushed her happy memories aside and tossed the computers into the lake. They sank quickly, and after one last deep breath of the fresh air, Chloe left the lake behind.

Despite her advancing exhaustion, there was still one more thing she had to do.

Inside the energy tunnel, Chloe used a window to find Ferguson and Polk. They were in an office similar to Garcia's, busy studying something on a computer screen. She stepped through her window and emerged right behind them.

"Excuse me, but I think we need to talk."

The two men reacted instantly, turning around and going for their side arms. Her future vision didn't kick in, but it didn't matter. She'd expected them to be armed, and she already had her own gun aimed at them.

"Forget the guns. I said we were going to have a talk."

Ferguson scowled but moved his hand away from his holster. Polk looked like he might still be thinking about drawing his pistol, but this time her unreliable power reacted, showing her a blurred image of Polk's hand dropping the gun to the floor.

"General Polk, you're not going to get to the gun before I shoot you. We both know it. So put it on the floor. You too, Ferguson." Confused looks on their faces, the officers did as she said.

"Miss Olivetti." Ferguson made no attempt to hide his anger. "So nice to finally meet you. To what do we owe the honor of this visit?"

His physical appearance radiated calm authority, but Chloe wasn't fooled. His aura churned and roiled, indicating he was torn between anger and fear. Polk's aura, on the other hand, hadn't changed. It still displayed the blues and grays of deep thought with just a tinge of angry red. He was the more calculating of the two, and the one she'd really have to watch.

"Actually, Colonel Garcia and I just finished a long chat, which unfortunately left him lying on the floor with a broken nose and a hole in his shoulder. Don't worry, he's still alive," she said, as Ferguson's eyes went wide. "We had an interesting conversation. First he tried to get me back into the program, then he tried to bribe me into joining his other plan. You know, the one where he uses his enhanced soldiers to take over the world? I'm sure you're familiar with it, since you both had the same idea."

Polk and Ferguson glanced at each other, eyebrows raised, but neither said anything.

They're not even surprised by each others' treachery. Gotta love the Army.

"He was entertaining, but I had to shoot him to keep him from sounding the alarm. You'll probably want to send a doctor to his office after we're done."

"Done with what?" Polk's voice was as controlled as his expression.

"I came here to, like, warn you. I want you all to stay the hell out of my life. Drop the project. Forget I ever existed. Or else I'll burn this whole place to the ground."

Ferguson laughed. "That's pretty tough talk for a kid."

"I'm not just some kid. I can come and go as I please, and I can destroy everything in this building if I want, just like that." She snapped her fingers.

Chloe purposely didn't mention she'd have to use a bomb to do it. Let them think it would be with her own powers. "Besides, you'll never be able to repeat what happened to me. I didn't tell the doctors or Garcia everything."

Polk shook his head slowly, his dark eyes narrowed into a cold, reptilian stare. "I hate to break this to you, but you're just one scared little girl who's in over her head. This is the United States government you're dealing with. We don't give in to demands. You can kill us both, even wipe out this entire base. But there will always be someone searching for you. You think we're the only ones who know about this project? We report to people, too. People much higher up the ladder. And they won't give up until they find you. The project will go on, with or without us."

"Bull. I heard you talking to Garcia. You three were in on this together, keeping it a secret all to yourselves. Like some kind of black op, right? No way you'd let anyone else know about it."

Ferguson laughed. "You have a lot of power, but you're certainly no spy. Do you honestly think General Polk and I have risen as far in rank as we have by not hedging our bets? Even before Garcia screwed everything up, we had contingency plans in place. Ever hear of the cloud? One push of a button and every piece of data we have will be uploaded to places you'll never find."

Chloe watched his aura. Sure enough, he was telling the truth. That changed everything. She couldn't let the information get out.

"Well, then, I guess I just have to make sure you don't send it," Chloe told him, aiming the gun at his broad chest.

"Go ahead, shoot." Ferguson spread his arms. "I've been shot before. Got a Purple Heart and some other fancy trinkets to prove

it. But you can't shoot both of us before one of us hits that send key."

The general smiled, and Chloe knew he was right. Even using her future sight, she'd only be able to see who made the first move. As soon as she aimed, the other soldier would have his hand on the keyboard.

"No problem," Chloe said, returning his smile with one of her own. "I don't need to shoot either one of you."

She shifted her aim to the monitor and pulled the trigger. Glass fragments exploded everywhere. But Chloe's moment of triumph was short lived as Polk jumped forward and stabbed a finger down on the keyboard. At the same moment, she realized her mistake.

Destroying the monitor did nothing. It was the drive she should have shot. Now the message was transmitted and all her work wasted. Worse, she'd once again put herself and the ones she loved in danger through her own stupidity.

"I hate you both!" she screamed.

What am I doing here? I can't fight the government! I'm just freaking kid. I should be out shopping for clothes or eating Mexican food with Vanessa, not trying to outsmart the entire U.S. Army!

Without thinking, Chloe moved towards a nearby portal, her vision blurred by all-too-human tears. She didn't even know where she was going, just that she had to get away from this place.

Just as she stepped through the vortex, a hand grabbed the waistband of her pants, pulling her down to the ground. The gun went skidding across the floor and past the portal.

"Let go!" She kicked out with her feet and connected with something that might have been a neck or arm. The grip on her loosened slightly, enabling her to pull herself forward and over the edge of the swirling energy doorway.

Safe inside the other-where, Chloe lay on her stomach and tried catch her breath.

Until a terrified cry made her jump to her feet.

Who-? Then she saw him.

Ferguson.

She'd dragged him into the vortex with her, thanks to his grip on her legs. She backed away from him, wary of another attack, but he didn't move. Instead, he cowered on his hands and knees, eyes closed, moaning softly. Seeing him that way put her more at ease, and she took a moment to get herself under control.

This is my element now. As long as we're in the energy tunnel, I'm in charge. I should have thought of this sooner. Let's see how General Destroy-the-World likes being the helpless little kid.

"Get up, jerk-wad," Chloe told him.

When he didn't respond, she stood up and kicked him as hard as she could, right in the ribs. The violent act served as a release valve; all her frustrations and fear boiled up and poured out, and she kicked him again. And again. On the fourth blow, he finally came out of his stupor, grabbed her foot, and tossed her to the side. Chloe landed on her back, but there was no pain as the tunnel floor absorbed the impact as easily as an inflatable mattress in a child's bouncy house.

Somehow it's solid and yet it's not. There has to be more at work than just energy particles.

It was the first time she'd stopped to think about how the colors and beams of light managed to support her when she moved through the tunnels. That made her realize that up to that point she'd been running mostly on emotion and instinct, reacting instead of planning.

Gotta watch that. "Think before you act;" another of her father's sayings.

Maybe I should have listened to him more often.

"Where the hell are we?" Ferguson looked around as he slowly got to his feet, keeping both arms out to steady himself. His voice sounded normal, but the ghost-white color of his face and his sickly green aura gave a truer indication of how he felt. "And how the hell do we get back?"

"Well, *I* can go back anytime I want," Chloe said, unable to keep a smug tone from her voice. "You, on the other hand, are stuck here until I decide you can leave."

"Here? And where exactly is here?"

Chloe shrugged, wondering if he was seeing the tunnel like Benny had, all dark and empty, or in another way. If he wasn't such a lying, arrogant tool she'd have asked him. "Honestly? I don't have a clue. Your people asked me a lot of questions, but no one told me anything. Maybe you should ask Garcia, if you ever see him again. He seems to have all the answers. All I know is that I can come here and then leave again anytime I want. It's like some kind of multi-dimensional tube. Or maybe one of those wormhole thingies. I didn't always pay attention in physics, so don't ask me for a better explanation."

Ferguson's eyes grew wide and beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he digested the fact he was no longer on Earth and he might never get back.

Good, let him taste real fear. He turned my life into a bucket of crap, now it's time to piss on his parade for awhile.

She turned and walked away. She'd gotten about fifteen feet down the tunnel before he called out to her. "Wait! Where are you going?"

He started after her, but before he could catch up, she conjured a window back to the office they'd just left. She jumped through, leaving him screaming for her to come back.

Time to test a theory.

"Hey, Polk!" she yelled. The general was on the phone, his

back to her. At the sound of her voice, he turned around, the whites of his eyes showing starkly against his dark skin. "Just wanted to let you know that your bestie Ferguson's with me, someplace where you'll never find him, unless you've got one of those Stargate portals hidden down in the basement. It's up to you if he ever comes back. I'll be in touch."

Instead of stepping back into the portal she'd exited from, Chloe ran across the room to a different one and entered it. This was her first chance to see if the all led to the same place, or if she'd end up somewhere else in the energy tunnel.

When she arrived on the other side of the portal, there was no sign of Ferguson.

So, either there's more than one tunnel, or it's really long and he's someplace else on it.

She called up a window and located Ferguson. He was on his knees, still calling for her. Since the entire tunnel was composed of the same ever-changing light show, it was impossible to tell if he was close by or an astronomical distance away, but she figured it didn't really matter. She could get to him any time she wanted, and he certainly wasn't going anywhere.

Closing the window, Chloe decided it was time to go see Vanessa and her family. She wanted to hold Vanessa in her arms, tell her she loved her, and hear the words back. But more importantly, she had to let them know what had happened. How she'd screwed things up. She focused her thoughts on Vanessa, and immediately a new window formed, showing a drab-looking hotel room with twin beds and a small desk. Vanessa sat on one bed, and her father and Benny the other, watching something on TV.

Relief filled her. With a smile, she stepped through time and space to join them.

CHAPTER NINE

Chloe stumbled and almost fell crossing the divide between dimensions. This time the transition felt like pushing past a wet blanket and she hadn't expected it.

"Holy shit!" Vanessa yelped, jumping up from the bed. Eyes wide, she grabbed Chloe, wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug.

"I'm glad to see you, too," Chloe whispered into the soft warmth of Vanessa's hair, while breathing in the comforting scents of apple and botanicals.

Her father and Benny rushed over and joined in the group embrace. Questions hammered at Chloe from all directions and she shook her head, unable to keep up.

"Give me a minute, guys." She moved over to the bed and sat down, Vanessa next to her. Steamy air, ripe with the odors of soap and shampoo, filled the room. Apparently they'd all had time to shower. Chloe realized she hadn't even thought of a specific time when she decided to leave the energy tunnel. Before she could say

anything, the bathroom door flew open and her mother emerged, wrapped in a cheap bathrobe, her hair still wet.

"Chloe!" She gripped her daughter in a damp bear hug. "Are you all right? We've been so worried!"

"I'm okay, ma," Chloe managed to get the words out even though she was having trouble breathing. "Let go, and I'll tell you everything that's been going on."

She took a deep breath, enjoying how Vanessa pushed up tight against her and refused to let go of her hand. Her family sat on the other bed, across from them.

Chloe quickly brought them up to speed on what she'd been up to, giving them a carefully edited version that included the important details but omitted a few of the more dangerous aspects. Even then, she had to take frequent pauses to reassure her mother she hadn't been hurt. After she finished, she leaned back against Vanessa and sipped a cold soda that Benny had gotten her from the vending machine. She hadn't realized how keyed up she'd been, and it felt wonderful to finally relax for a moment in a place where she was safe and loved. Even the headache that had been burrowing through her brain all day seemed to have died down a bit.

There was a short silence until Vanessa, who'd been gently stroking her hair, asked the million dollar question.

"Okay, so what do we do next?"

"That's the problem. I don't have a freaking clue. I really messed things up when I shot the monitor instead of the hard drive. Now it doesn't matter what we do. Somewhere, somebody knows about me. No matter where we go, sooner or later they'll find us. Even if I got rid of Ferguson and Polk, hell, even if I blew up the whole base, it wouldn't make a difference. We'll always be looking over our shoulders and we won't even know who's after us. The Army, the FBI, the CIA. Or some other government. One day

they'll find us, and then *pow!* A few shots from a high-powered rifle, a tranquilizer dart for me, and that's it. Plus, they'll have scientists working on recreating my accident, just like your Dad was gonna do before I shot him. Either way, it's the end of the world time."

As Chloe finished venting, she realized Vanessa had moved away from her.

Smooth move, Chloe. Way to open your big mouth.

"Oh, crap, Vanessa, I'm so sorry! I wanted to talk to you about your dad privately, not just blurt it out like that! My brain is totally fried. He's not dead, I just pegged him in the shoulder. I had to. He didn't give me a choice. He had a gun, he was ready to shoot me."

Vanessa shook her head, her dark mane flicking across her shoulders. "No, that's all right. I told you he was a dirty skeez. He deserves it, for what he did to you and to us. It's just hard to believe, you know, that my own father would be willing to ..."

Chloe didn't let her finish. Instead, she pulled Vanessa close and cradled her head.

"Shhh, it's okay. You don't need him anymore. You've got me."

"He was going to kill me." The words were muffled against Chloe's neck, but she understood them. Just like she understood the hot tears dampening her skin, and Vanessa's shaking as she held back her sobs.

"I won't let him, I swear."

"I always had the feeling he didn't love me. Now I know."

Chloe just held her. What did you say to someone who'd just learned their father wanted them dead? Any words of comfort would only sound lame. She glanced over Vanessa's head at her own parents, who looked like they might cry, too, and tried imagining how she'd feel if she found out they'd tried to kill her. It was impossible; she couldn't even think about how horrible it would be.

"If it helps, I think he did love you at one time. He just, changed. Nothing matters to him anymore except his need for power." Chloe didn't bother explaining how she knew.

Vanessa shook her head. "It doesn't. He's a piece of shit. I wish you'd killed him."

Aldo Olivetti cleared his throat. "Vanessa, it's a terrible thing you're going through, but you're not alone. You're part of our family now."

Chloe stared at her father. He nodded, and she saw the truth of it. The warm, comforting sunlight-yellow glow of his aura matched the smile on his face. At that moment, she loved him more than she ever had in her life.

Kerri Olivetti reached out, patted Vanessa's leg. "It's true, sweetheart. We love you, and you're welcome to be with us for as long as you want."

"Thank you both." Vanessa wiped tears away. "It doesn't change the terrible things my father's done, but I've always felt more at home with your family than mine, anyway."

Chloe hugged her closer. "We *are* your family, baby-love. And trust me, in a few years it might not seem like that great a deal."

Benny laughed. "Ain't that the truth!"

"Benny, proper English, please," Kerri said. "And Chloe, this is no time for jokes."

Before Chloe could respond to her mother's good-natured scolding, Benny brought them all back to Earth by reminding them of the main problem.

"So, like, does this mean we're officially on the run?"

GENERAL AMADEUS POLK unplugged the ruined monitor. Maybe it wouldn't start a fire, but he wasn't taking any chances.

After a moment's thought, he pulled out his cell phone and punched a number on speed dial.

"Polk here. There've been some unexpected developments. First, beginning as of now, all communications between us should be scrambled or encrypted. I'll have the techs here set up the software on my end. And don't send any texts or data to my phone or email. It's no longer safe. I'll be back in touch as soon as I have a new protocol in place for sharing information."

He slipped his cell into his pocket and leaned back in the hard chair. After a deep breath, he reached across the plain, military-green metal desk, pulled the phone over, and punched in a three-digit code.

"Security? This is General Polk. We've had a situation. A prisoner has escaped and Colonel Garcia has been injured. Send a medical team to his office at once. As of this moment, the base is on a Level Three lock down. No communications with the outside unless they are addressed specifically to me. I repeat, this is a Level Three lock down. And have someone from IT bring a new computer monitor to my office."

At the same moment he hung up the phone, the ear-piercing wail of an alarm klaxon filled the halls and a computerized voice announced the new lockdown status. The siren and voice cut off after thirty seconds, but red light remained flashing throughout the base, and would keep doing so until he gave the stand-down order. He took a deep breath and considered his next moves, beginning with Ferguson. The general's disappearance with the Olivetti girl created an entirely new set of issues, several of which held the potential to deliver major benefits in the long run. Contingency planning was a particular strength of Polk's, and now he began reviewing options, shifting priorities around, determining how to turn the events of the past hours to his advantage. In fact, that process had actually begun earlier in

the day, when they'd had Garcia's access to certain data restricted.

Now two new courses of action needed to be prepared, one taking into consideration that Ferguson would return, the other moving on without him.

Both strategies involved the elimination of Garcia.

Five minutes after Polk's phone call, the computer tech came in and installed the new monitor. When Polk told him he needed an encryption program, the man nodded.

"I can download one now from our main server. Just take a few minutes."

Fifteen minutes later, Polk was opening a special screen and entering the three new passwords he'd created so that he could access his secure files. He had just opened one when the desk phone rang.

"Polk here."

"Sir, this is Doctor Melwick in the infirmary. We've finished patching up Colonel Garcia's shoulder. He got lucky. It was a clean through and through, no arterial involvement or bone splinters. No surgery necessary. We stitched him up and put him in a private room. No other injuries except a broken nose."

Polk's level of respect for Chloe Olivetti rose another notch. *She might be a kid, but she's got balls.*

"Good. I want a twenty-four hour guard on him, one in the room and two outside the door. No phones or other communications devices. And no visitors other than myself or General Ferguson."

Polk hung up, cutting off the "yes, sir" on the other end.

Things were moving along nicely.

CHLOE GOT up from the bed and walked across the room, and then back again. Pacing. A new habit for her. It annoyed her that she couldn't stop. Sitting still simply wasn't possible; it was like all the different thoughts running through her head were forcing her legs to move, too.

"Wearing a hole in the carpet isn't going to help." Vanessa smiled as she spoke, taking the sting out of her words.

"I can't help it. I've been wracking my brain, trying to figure this out. Our lives are ruined, we can't go back home, and probably the whole government is after us. All because I'm an idiot."

"It's not you're fault, honey. You did what you could." Vanessa tried to take her hand, but Chloe pulled away.

"It is my fault!" She picked up the remote and threw it across the room. "One bullet. That's all it would've taken. One stinking bullet in that hard drive and we'd be safe."

Mr. Olivetti started to say something, but Benny interrupted. "Not likely, sis."

She whirled around and glared at him. "What? What do you mean?"

Benny, his plump face serious for once, didn't back down. "Think about it, doofus. When you use a computer, what do you do every time you're done?"

"I don't feel like playing guessing games. Just tell me."

Benny shook his head and sighed. "Man, how do you ever pass any classes? I mean, it can't be your looks."

"Benny..."

"Okay, okay. You save the file, right? But if you really want to make sure nothing happens to your data, you also save to a backup, like a USB drive or second hard drive."

"Or to a remote location, like Polk did. Tell me something I don't know."

"Well, if this information was so important, why would Polk

wait until today to send all the files someplace else? Wouldn't he have been sending reports all along? I mean, do you really think there's someone sitting in Washington who all of a sudden just got this whole thing out of nowhere? They've probably got some top-secret type of automatic backup that copies everything to the cloud on a regular schedule."

"What do clouds have to do with anything?" Kerri asked, with a confused expression. Benny rolled his eyes and Vanessa hurriedly spoke up before he could inflame things further with another sarcastic comment.

"Benny's right, Chloe. Being a military brat for so long, you learn how the Army thinks. There's always someone looking over your shoulder. Even the most top secret operations are monitored. People like Polk and Ferguson have bosses, too."

"See, even Vanessa gets it." Benny shrugged. "If you'd shot the hard drive, the best you'd have done is stop the last few hours of information or a couple of reports from getting sent."

"It sounds like this isn't your fault." Mr. Olivetti added, his gruff voice gentle for a change.

Chloe wasn't mollified. "So maybe I couldn't have ended things there. It doesn't change the fact that lots of people—bad people—are gonna be coming after us. I can take us anyplace in the world, but what good will that do? As soon as we use a credit card, or get a job, we'll be found."

"Why not just go back in time and change what happened?"

Chloe stopped her pacing and stared at Vanessa. Of course! Why hadn't she thought of that?

"Oh, my god! That's brilliant! All I have to do is go back and stop Doctor Gupti from ever reporting me to your father, and we're in the clear."

"No way, sis. It won't work." Benny's voice had the same self-

assured tone he used whenever he'd brag about how he'd aced another math test.

"Why not?"

"Because you can't just zip back and undo things that have already happened. That's messing with time. Depending on which time travel theory you believe, either you'll end up changing all of history by sending us down an alternate time branch or time is basically unchangeable and you'll stop Gupti but one of the other doctors will report you to a different Army guy and everything that's happened will happen again the same way."

She shook her head. "You're wrong. I already changed things once, when I saved all of you from being shot. I went back to before the guards sounded the alarm and I knocked them out."

"Yeah, but maybe that's just time fixing something else you did, because we were never supposed to die in the first place. If you hadn't appeared in our cell, no one would have come in to shoot us."

"That doesn't make any sense! Either I can change the past or I can't. Which is it?"

Benny rolled his eyes. "Am I the only one with a brain here? Do you watch anything besides sitcoms? The more you go back in time, the bigger the chance of creating a paradox."

"I'm totally confused," Vanessa said.

"For god's sake, just tell us already. What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's all about you." Benny pointed at Chloe. "You can't be in the same place with yourself at the same time. That's one paradox. And the bigger the change you try to make, the more time will fight against it."

"Saving your butt was a pretty big change."

He nodded. "But that was in our timeline. It didn't really affect you. It's easier for you to change what's happened to other

people than things that change what happens to you. Otherwise, all you'd have to do is go back to the day you got hit by lightning and stop yourself from walking in the field. But you can't do that, because you're here now, which means it happened."

"You're wrong. I've been back to my own past. I went to Vanessa's apartment."

"Yeah, but you didn't meet yourself. And you didn't change anything. 'Cause if you try to, things will get even more messed up than they are now."

Chloe thought for a moment. There had to be a way around Benny's argument.

"I can write a note to myself, explaining everything. Tell myself not to go that way. That would stop me from getting zapped."

"No, because if you change your past, then in the present you won't be the you that you are now. You won't have the memories you do, which means you won't be able to write the note in the first place and everything will still happen just like it did."

Mrs. Olivetti put her hands to her head. "This is all too confusing. If Chloe can't change her past, what can she do?"

Benny shrugged. "Like I said, all she can do is change what happens to other people, and what other people do."

"You're not a physicist," Chloe said.

"No, but I read a lot of books about time travel."

"No, you don't." Chloe made a face. "You read science fiction. It's no the same thing. This isn't Star Trek or Doctor Who."

"At least I read instead of wasting all my time going to see sparkly vampire movies. And a lot of science fiction is based on fact, and those guys do their homework. Besides, there could be other dangers."

"Like what?" Mrs. Olivetti's frown grew deeper.

"Well, what happens if you meet yourself someplace, like at the doctor's office?"

"I'll be careful not to. I'll go back to a time before I ever went there, and tell Mom and Dad what will happen. Or better yet," the idea came to her in a flash, "I'll just never go to any doctor. Mom, Dad, I'll go back and demonstrate my powers to you, tell you what's going to happen if you make me see a doctor. Hell, I can even bring you forward in time and show you, if I have to!"

"So none of this will have ever happened, right?" Vanessa asked. "And that means we'll all be okay?"

"I guess. This time travel stuff is making my head hurt again."

"You can't mess with time," Benny insisted. "You might go back and change the wrong thing, and then none of this will have ever happened to us but we'll be living in a world where the Army finishes its experiment and mutant soldiers run the country."

"Well, I can't just sit her and do nothing! How can—"

Mrs. Olivetti put a hand on her daughter's arm. "Sweetheart, maybe you should listen to your brother. If this isn't safe, we could try something else."

"Like what?"

"Go to a lawyer," her father said. "Have him write some kind of order of protection so the Army, and the government, can't do anything to us."

Vanessa shook her head. "Mr. Olivetti, that wouldn't do any good. Something this big, the government wouldn't care about laws, or us going public, or anything. They'd just grab us as part of the Patriot Act or something, and then they can do whatever they want. We'll all just disappear."

"Enough already!" Chloe's shout made everyone turn and look at her. "All this talking is getting us nowhere. I'm doing it. I'm going back in time. If it works, great. If it doesn't, then we'll think

of something else. But we can't stand here arguing all night. For all we know, the troops are already on their way here."

"But..."

"No buts, Mom. This is what I have to do."

Chloe let her vision shift, picked out a vortex near the bathroom door. "Don't leave this room while I'm gone."

The last words she heard were Benny's.

"Man, nobody ever listens to me."

INSIDE THE ENERGY TUNNEL, Chloe resisted the temptation to check on Ferguson. There was no point. If her plan worked, he'd be returned to the real world without her help, because he'd have never been anywhere else in the first place. If not, she could always go back and get him later.

She stared at the masses of energy and theoretical particles whirling around her, trying to determine *when* she had to go to.

As wonderful as all these powers are, if I never had them, I wouldn't have to worry about anything. Life would be normal again. Vanessa and I could be happy, and safe, again.

Wait. That's it. Why not go back to *before* the lightning struck her?

Chloe thought hard, remembering the exact date of her accident.

I was walking through the field, it was just after three o'clock... she conjured a window, and found herself looking at the entrance to the park. The afternoon sun angled down on the new grass, and the budding leaves on the trees glowed yellow-green. Along the sidewalk, tulips poked the tops of their heads through the fresh mulch.

Movement caught her eye. Further down the sidewalk, her

past-self had just come into view. It was now or never. All she had to do was distract herself for a few minutes, just long enough so that she wasn't in the same place when the lightning hit.

Taking a deep breath, Chloe stepped through the window.

A shock ran through her body, accompanied by a booming explosion of sound and noise inside her head. The pain was greater than anything she'd ever felt before, even worse than the time she'd broken her leg in middle school.

A heavy force knocked the breath from her lungs and thrust her back through the window, which wavered and disappeared. The colors and whorls of energy that made up the tunnel walls changed to multi-colored blurs as she found herself rocketing through the energy continuum. She tried to concentrate on slowing down her motion, but the pain in her head was too great.

As her body flew down the tunnel, the colors grew dim around her.

Dimmer.

Black.

THE DOOR to the infirmary opened and the guard snapped off a quick salute.

"At ease, soldier. Go grab a smoke." General Polk strode past the guard, never looking back to see if his order was carried out.

Garcia looked up from his bed, trying not let his surprise show. He'd been expecting Ferguson, or Ferguson and Polk together. Not Polk alone.

Something's going on.

Out loud, he said, "General. Nice of you to come visit me. I take it you're not here to offer me any get well wishes."

Polk pulled up a chair, sat down next to the bed. "Looks like

the little girl did quite a number on you, Garcia. Lucky the bullet didn't hit anything vital."

"Yeah, lucky, that's me." Garcia's voice held a thick nasal quality from the heavy bandage surrounding his nose. His shoulder was still too sore to move.

Polk didn't respond, which was fine with Garcia. He used the time to study the general. The man was clearly distracted; he had the look of someone who needed to make a decision but wasn't sure about his choices. The fact that he was there at all was an important point.

He needs me. Garcia hoped his guess was true. Because that meant there might still be a chance to avoid federal prison, or a firing squad.

The silence between them stretched out, past uncomfortable and into irritating.

Polk broke first, clearing his throat. "By all rights, you should be hung for treason. We found your computer files, saw your plans. Build your own secret army, set yourself up as a half-baked dictator somewhere. Pretty grandiose. But it takes more than controlling a team of super-powered soldiers to achieve greatness. You need vision, Garcia. The ability to plan six, seven steps ahead. You need to have alternate plans ready to cover any possibility."

Polk removed his uniform hat, placed it on the bedside cabinet. "You're a linear thinker, Colonel. Not a strategist. That's why you've never moved up any further in rank. But that could change, right now, if you play your cards right."

"It must be pretty important, if you're suggesting a promotion instead of a bullet." Inwardly, he winced at the general's words, which hit too close to home. A career marked by failure and stagnation; that had been his career path, until Sky Strike came along. He'd thought he'd planned things so well. Instead, he'd screwed things up worse than ever.

If Polk was offering a second chance, he'd take it, whatever it might be.

Polk ran a palm across the shiny, smooth skin of his head. Unlike many people who shaved their heads, Polk didn't have an attractive skull. Subtle ridges and gullies marred the cranial landscape, lending an air of menace to the general's appearance.

As mean as the man looked, Garcia knew the real threat came from the power Polk wielded, not his physical presence. And right now that power had hit an obstacle. Garcia could almost see him trying to decide exactly how much to reveal.

"Ferguson is gone. Missing. Disappeared."

"What?" The words hit Garcia like a bomb. Of all the possible situations he'd imagined, this was not one of them.

"He tried to stop the girl from doing whatever it is she does when she vanishes, and ended up getting dragged along with her to wherever she goes. She came back. He didn't."

Ha! For once Olivetti did me a favor. Good riddance. "What does that have to do with me?"

"You're not the only one with bigger plans for this project, Garcia. All along, this was meant as more than simple weapons research."

"What? You mean you knew something like this could happen?" Garcia sat up straighter and then groaned as fiery daggers stabbed at his shoulder despite the pain killers in his system.

"Like this? Hell, no! No one could've expected anything like Olivetti. No, our intention, Ferguson and myself, was to take control of Sky Strike, if and when it proved viable, and bury it. Officially, it would be listed as a failed experiment, just one of hundreds the government wastes money on each year. But in reality, it would become our greatest tool for distance, ah, sanctions."

"Sanctions? You mean you were going to take one of the most

unique weapons ever built and only use it to assassinate foreign political leaders? That's like buying a Ferrari when all you do is go to the supermarket once a week."

"There you go, thinking small again. It wouldn't just be for foreign use. We have counterparts in the CIA and FBI with whom we work to keep this country safe. Imagine being able to neutralize anyone, anywhere. We could make terrorism a thing of the past. Put an end to bleeding heart liberals who want to cut military funding. The possibilities are endless. With a weapon like this, not only would there never be another Bin Laden or Hussain, we wouldn't have to worry about some anti-military president taking office. And no one in the world would be any wiser."

Garcia didn't need to hear any more. Polk was right. Political leaders, both the public faces and the ones pulling the strings from behind the curtains, would pay handsomely, in cash and power, to silence certain voices or points of view. Whoever held the reigns on Sky Strike would automatically become the most important players in American politics. And when you added in soldiers with Olivetti's powers on top of that?

Ferguson and Polk would be the kings of the world.

"So where do I fit in?" Garcia realized Polk's plan, and his disloyalty to both the service and the American people, was very similar to his own, just on a larger scale.

Which means he absolutely can't be trusted.

"It would be difficult for someone on my staff, or myself, to continue day to day involvement in Sky Strike if I've already killed the project. However, if we kept Sky Strike here, at a place everyone believes is a simple training facility, it would be easy for someone with intimate knowledge of the project to direct the day-to-day operations. Someone who's already stationed here."

"And what do I receive in return?"

"Advancement. Money. Your life." Polk looked down at

Garcia, a small smile on his face. "And maybe most important of all, the opportunity to eliminate the Olivetti girl, her family, and your daughter."

Garcia's nose shouted in pain as he smiled. He didn't care. He wanted to shout with joy. The general's offer was lining up perfectly with the scenario's he'd been thinking about while stuck in bed.

"Eliminate? No, General, that's the last thing we want to do."

"Really?"

"Yes. I have a much better idea."

CHAPTER TEN

At first, Chloe wasn't even aware her consciousness had returned and banished the darkness. As if it had always been so, nothing existed but the pastel blur flashing by on all sides.

And the pain.

It hammered the inside of her skull from all angles, a raging beast determined to break out of a cage. The agony was so great she couldn't hold on to the simplest of thoughts. She imagined it bursting free and leaving her head shattered and bloody, the pieces of her skull and brain shooting through the nothingness of the energy tunnel for all eternity, accompanied by her tortured soul, her lifeless body dragged along like a comet's tail.

Then a tiny thought carved a section out of the pain, made a home for itself. Grew larger and stronger.

Vanessa.

With the name came an image of a face, and she realized with a start that the beast in her head was no longer exploding dynamite between her ears. Instead, the non-stop artillery barrage had

subsided to something akin to a pack of starving wolverines trying to eat their way through her brain.

Painful, yes, but she could deal with hungry wolverines. At least now she could actually form coherent thoughts.

She focused on Vanessa and her body reacted, slowing down her light-speed race through the netherworld until she came to a stop. Once more, the immeasurable energies took on visible appearances, waves and particles becoming identifiable again, and the tunnel returned to its familiar pattern of multi-hued lines, clouds, swirls, and flashes.

It still hurt to focus her thoughts—hurt worse than any migraine or broken bone she'd ever had—but she gritted her teeth and conjured a window, one that would lead her to Vanessa. Instead of snapping into being, it formed slowly, the edges wavering. But the picture inside looked right.

With a groan, Chloe reached out to the sleeping form on the bed.

She managed two steps into the hotel room before she blacked out again.

ALTHOUGH SHE AND Vanessa spent a lot of time in clubs, Chloe wasn't a big drinker. A couple of beers, or vodkas, or glasses of wine at Vanessa's place, or maybe the occasional shot of something if someone bought them a drink—all on the sly, of course, since she was underage—and she was usually good for the night. She enjoyed taking the edge off but not getting stupid wasted. There'd been one occasion, though, on her sixteenth birthday, when she and Vanessa had snuck out and gone to a party at a senior's house. Chloe had done five shots of peppermint schnapps in rapid succession, foolishly believing that something so sweet

and delicious couldn't be very strong. The next morning she'd woken up fully dressed under her covers, the front of her shirt stained with vomit and a crew of nasty ogres drilling for oil inside her skull.

That hangover was nothing compared to how she felt when she regained consciousness in a cheap Florida motel room.

"Oh, lord, I think my head's gonna explode."

Even whispering sent pulses of misery across her forehead and down the back of her skull to the base of her neck. Like jealous children, every muscle in her body screamed for attention, but the various aches couldn't distract her from the near-blinding agony that had taken up residence inside her brain.

She tried to sit up, but the spinning room made her nauseous and she lay back with groan.

"Hush, baby. Just rest." Kerri Olivetti draped a wet washcloth across Chloe's forehead. "You had us so worried. You passed out on the floor. We put you to bed, and you slept for almost four hours. Since then, you've been waking up, saying your head hurts, and then falling asleep again."

"How long has it been?" Each word was a knife, but she had to know.

"Almost nine hours," Aldo Olivetti told her. "Your mother wanted to call a doctor, but we told her to wait."

Mrs. Olivetti shot her husband an angry glance, but kept quiet.

"You did the right thing," Chloe whispered. "I'm okay, I just need to rest. It was the time traveling. Benny was right."

"Ha. Told ya so." Benny's words were triumphant, but his voice carried enough concern to let Chloe know he'd been worried, too.

"I tried to warn myself about the lightning. I guess that was a bad idea. I'll just have to figure something else out instead."

"You'll do no such thing!" Kerri said. When Chloe let out a

groan, she lowered her voice but continued with her scolding. "You could have killed yourself, or gotten a brain hemorrhage or something. I won't let you do that again."

"It's all right, Mom." Chloe tried to smile, but even that slight movement of her facial muscles ignited new fireworks between her ears. "I'm fine, or I will be once I take some Advil."

"We figured you'd want something, so we sent Vanessa to the store a little while ago."

"What?" Chloe tried to sit up, but the room turned into a Merry-go-Round, and she fell back onto her pillows. "You shouldn't have let her go outside."

Aldo patted his daughter's hand. "Nobody knows we're here. I registered with a fake name and paid cash. We've been inside the whole time. Vanessa will be safe enough at the corner grocery. Even if people are looking for us, I doubt they've had time to inform every little neighborhood store owner of our descriptions."

Chloe tried to nod, but the dizziness and pain returned with a vengeance. Although she tried to fight it, the darkness claimed her once more.

VANESSA PURPOSELY CHOSE THE SMALLEST, seediest looking bodega she could find. Most of the items on the shelves were covered in dust, indicating people rarely shopped there for anything except lottery tickets and beer. The perfect choice if you wanted as few people as possible to see you.

The four-block walk to the market had been nerve-wracking. She imagined every person on the sidewalk was staring at her, and she'd kept looking behind her, certain she'd see men in black suits following.

Even now, as she placed her items on the counter for the foul-

smelling clerk to ring up, she found herself stealing glances out the grimy window, trying to spot anyone lurking outside. She knew she was acting suspicious, which might draw attention to her, but she couldn't help it.

Better than being grabbed from behind by the cops. Or worse.

She paid for the Advil, sodas, and snacks with cash and hurried out of the store with her package. Four blocks back to the hotel, and she could relax, at least a little. But then there was Chloe. She'd been unconscious for so long they'd begun to worry she was in a coma, until she'd woken up for a few moments.

A honking car distracted her from her thoughts as she crossed a side street. Two more blocks to go.

A payphone on the corner caught her eye and she stopped. You almost never saw them anymore, metal boxes that took actual coins, except in small towns and some airports that hadn't switched over totally to credit card-only models.

She wondered if it was some kind of sign.

Sooner or later, Chloe would find a way to get them out of trouble. And when she did, they'd be going back to their normal lives. That was the hope, anyhow.

But it couldn't hurt to have a little backup plan in place, could it? Right now, she, Chloe, and the Olivettis were MIA. Gone without a trace from their jobs, from school, from the neighborhood. Wouldn't it make sense to let someone know what had happened—even if she didn't give all the details—before the Army put their own spin on things and made them out to be criminals? Of course, it would have to be someone she trusted, someone who could keep a secret. But who?

Her mother was a definite no. She'd learned that the hard way, back when Martin, her stepbrother, had been waiting in her room one night. She'd stopped him with a knee to the groin and a fist to the nose, and then gone straight to her mother.

Who, after hours of arguing, had ended up siding with her husband.

"Just a misunderstanding." "You know how teenage boys are." "What do you expect, walking around the house in those kinds of outfits?"

That last had been her step-father, but her mother hadn't objected.

No, there'd be no trusting her at all.

So who did that leave? She had no other relatives she was close to, and she'd never gotten close to any of her teachers while in school...

Mr. Padgett.

Her supervisor at work. A crusty old man who was as honest as the day was long, like her grandfather used to say, and smart enough to know Vanessa wasn't on drugs or drunk just because her story seemed outrageous.

Chloe had said no phone calls, but what were the odds of tracing a quick call from a public phone? Under two minutes, that's how they did it on television and in the movies.

Besides, the last place her father would expect her to call would be her job.

She stared at the phone for another moment before making up her mind. She couldn't count on Chloe recovering before the Army put them on the Most Wanted List. And anyway, she needed to do something more than just sit around and wait for Chloe to save them all. They were in this together, and if she could help in some way, *any* way, she had to.

More than that, though, she had to do it because she needed to make things right. After all, it was her step-father who'd been the cause of all this, and while Vanessa knew his actions had nothing to do with her, she couldn't help feeling guilt by association.

Sorry Chloe, if you get mad. But I need to do this for you. To

make up for the shit my family has put you, and all of us, through.

She hurried to the phone and dug a handful of coins from her pocket before she could change her mind. After dropping several into the slot, she dialed Padgett's office number. As soon as the "leave-a-message" beep sounded, Vanessa began speaking.

"Mr. Pagdett. It's Vanessa Garcia. I've been kidnapped by the Army, and so has my best friend, Chloe Olivetti, and her family. We are not criminals. Please don't say a word to anyone. If I don't call you again tomorrow, please call a lawyer and let the newspapers know." She hung up and checked her watch.

Twenty-eight seconds. No way they could trace that.

With a tiny bit of weight removed from the remorse weighing down her soul, Vanessa resumed her walk back to the hotel.

"SIR, WE'VE GOT SOMETHING!"

Sergeant James Meade swiveled his chair around to look at one of the telecomm techs monitoring the communications grid.

"What is it?"

"The computer just picked up hits on both the Olivetti and Garcia names."

"Can you trace the call?"

"Already working on it. Just a minute...yep, here we go. Fort Lauderdale, a public phone. Grid seven, north end, down by the beach."

"That's as good as you can do?"

"The girl stayed on the line for less than thirty seconds. Even the best tracing software in the world can't narrow it down more than that."

"Wait a minute. You said, 'the girl?'"

The tech smiled. "Yes, sir. She specifically gave her name as

Vanessa Garcia. I think we've found our missing family."

Sergeant Meade picked up his phone and dialed a secure line. "Colonel? Meade here. We've got them. Down in Florida, Fort Lauderdale."

The brusque, nasal voice on the other end offered no congratulations. Meade hadn't expected any. He'd worked for Garcia long enough to know how he operated.

"I want a twenty-four hour sat-watch on the area, with full feature recognition. Traffic cams, satellites, security cameras, ATMs. Everything you can get. Go back two days as well. I want updates sent to me every hour. Monitor all law enforcement databases, too. And prepare the extraction team. I want them ready to move at a moment's notice, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want the Olivetti girl alive and unharmed. As for the others, if they put up any resistance, consider them expendable."

"Understood, sir."

Meade smiled to himself. He'd never had the chance to capture a real live traitor to the U.S. government right on American soil. This was one action he'd take great pleasure in performing.

He hoped some of them decided to fight back.

TWENTY-TWO MILES ABOVE THE EARTH, two unregistered military satellites shifted position, focusing their cameras on the southern Florida metropolis of Fort Lauderdale. Image enhancement and recognition software made it possible for computers to compare pictures taken by the satellites with images stored in the system, and to perform instantaneous comparisons of multiple facial features.

At the same time, other computers at various hidden installations across the country scanned private and commercial telephone lines, public security cameras, and cell phone communications for the same area.

Forty-three minutes later, Garcia's phone rang.

"We've got something," the voice at the other end said. "A picture from a traffic camera.

"Send it to me ASAP."

THE THUNDEROUS CRASH of the hotel room door flying off its hinges set off explosions of light and pain inside Chloe's head. She opened her eyes to a scene where reality seemed to have warped sideways. Glowing waves and geometric patterns crisscrossed the room, overlaid by multi-colored supernovas that appeared and disappeared as faster-than-light particles burst into life and then died. Partially visible through the prismatic display bug-eyed creatures stormed through the shattered door.

Aliens! They've come to get me!

The space creatures wore shiny black armor and carried radiant weapons in their hands. Each time one of the light beams touched her eyes, another clap of pain hammered at her consciousness. Adding to her suffering were the cries for help coming from her parents, Benny, and Vanessa, as the menacing invaders grabbed them and dragged them out through the splintered doorway.

The combined effects of sleep, pain, and trauma muddled Chloe's thoughts to the point where they seemed stuck in quick sand, but she tried to focus her vision enough to find an energy vortex to escape through.

Instead, a series of shockwaves raced through her brain. The

resulting disorientation robbed her of her balance and she fell onto the floor, helpless to do anything but gasp for air as three of the bug-men gathered around her.

One of them aimed something at her and returned her to her new favorite place, the one where there was no sound or light.

Or pain.

THE LEADER of the tactical squad watched his men shut the doors of the two transport vans. He flicked on his throat mic and gave the all clear for them to move out. Once inside the third van, he turned on the sat phone and switched to the pre-arranged channel.

"Meade here. We're packed and rolling. No problems."

"What about hotel staff?"

"We went with the bio-terrorist cover story. No one raised a fuss."

"What's your ETA?"

"Twenty minutes to base camp, two hours flight time to Stewart AFB, and then another twenty minutes for the helicopter to reach you. That places the arrival time at approximately twenty-three hundred hours."

"Excellent. Keep me informed of any changes, and let me know when you leave Stewart."

"Yes, sir."

The connection cut off on the other end, and Sergeant Meade leaned back in his seat. All this fuss to bring in three teenagers and two adult civilians? It didn't make sense. He could have taken them out himself with one well-placed gas canister.

But then, it wasn't his place to question orders.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bound hand and foot, deeply under the influence of the sedatives she'd been injected with, Chloe dreamed.

Unlike most dreams, the jumbled, chaotic images in which she traveled made more sense than they should have, and she was somehow aware that her visions went beyond her subconscious sorting through the day's events and releasing the stress.

She drifted inside the energy tunnel once again, a place that should have seemed as familiar as her own bedroom, except now the whirling, flashing light display surrounding her also contained images, like the ones in the windows she conjured when she wanted to return to the real world. Faces rotated around her as she floated along on her back. Vanessa, Colonel Garcia, Ferguson, Polk, her family, friends from school. There were strangers in the mix, too, and faces that were new yet familiar. Some of them she recognized because they were from her past. Others appeared to be from the future: Benny in his mid-twenties, dressed in a business suit, his unruly brown hair cut in a short but fashionable style.

Her father, gray and stooped over, making coffee in a kitchen she'd never seen before.

Not all the images in the windows were static pictures. In some of them, entire scenes played out, the figures warped and twisted as if projected onto movie screens battered about by heavy winds. In one such display, General Ferguson sat curled in a fetal position within the energy tunnel, eyes closed, hands clutching desperately at his own shirt while he rocked back and forth. In another, three men, dressed all in black and with dark makeup on their faces, stood over the body of Vanessa's mother. Two of them held smoking guns, while the third had a bottle of vodka and a pack of matches in his hands.

A third movie showed herself and Vanessa sitting on a beach. Behind them, a lush tropical jungle extended off into the distance on both sides.

I've never been further than the Jersey Shore with Vanessa. Is that a scene from my own future, or just my subconscious tossing out random images?

With that question came the sudden realization that the horrendous aching in her head had subsided to a mild throb. A second thought followed on the heels of her first.

I'm not dreaming. This is real.

Things are making sense again. Whatever effects my encounter with my other self had on me, they must be wearing off. And if I'm back in the tunnel again, I should be able to control what happens.

Chloe tried focusing on slowing down. Gently, so as not to shatter the fragile peace in her still-tender brain, she brought herself to a stop and then oriented her body in a standing position. Feeling better than she expected, she took a chance and let her mind conjure a window.

I want to see what's going on right now.

The window formed immediately, providing a vision of own

body, bound and gagged, bouncing around on the floor of some kind of truck or van. Two men dressed in black body armor sat on a bench along one wall of the van.

The alien bug men from the hotel. They were soldiers. Someone, either Garcia or Polk, managed to find us.

The van hit a particularly nasty bump and her body flew to one side, smashing into the base of a nearby bench.

"Damn, that's gonna hurt in the morning," one of the soldiers said with a laugh.

"It's gonna be a long time before she's awake enough to feel anything. She's got enough dope in her veins to keep her out for a week. Just don't let her roll under the bench," the second armored man responded.

Chloe was tempted to return to her body and surprise the hell out the two men by disappearing, but she wasn't sure if she would wake up. If her body was that drugged, she could end up trapped in it.

Maybe that's why my dream-self is here, because my body's still too weak to travel the energy tunnel. Or maybe it's the drugs they gave me. Besides, I have more important things to do. Like figure out how to escape again, and put an end to all this, once and for all.

But first there's one more thing I have to check.

Vanessa.

As soon as the thought bloomed in her head, the picture in the window transformed itself to a new view, this one of her parents, Benny, and Vanessa. They were bound like she was, but awake and sitting on a bench in another vehicle, a twin to the van her own body rode in. Heavy chains tethered them from their ankles to a metal bar running beneath the bench seat. One guard, still in his body armor but with his helmet off, sat across from them, holding a very large gun. They looked bruised and scared, but otherwise all right.

Good. Someone wants them alive, or they'd have been killed back at the motel, not kidnapped again. That means I have some time to figure out what's going on and maybe determine the changes in my powers. I have to understand what's happened to me before I can plan my next steps. And right now, there's only one person I can talk to who can help me with that.

She pictured General Ferguson as she'd last seen him, frightened and trembling. The moment she thought of him, she shot through the tunnel in a blaze of coruscating brilliance, faster than she'd ever moved before, easily keeping pace with the particles and light beams moving around her. Less than an eye blink later, she slowed to a stop next to the cowering figure.

"Hey, there, General McDouchy. Enjoying your stay at the Netherworld Hotel?"

At her words, Ferguson cried out and fell backwards, staring at her with haunted eyes. The drastic changes in his face gave Chloe a start. Pale and drawn, he seemed diminished somehow, as if his terror—or maybe the multiverse—had leached the energy and strength from his personality. Even his aura had dimmed to a weak blue.

"Olivetti! You're back. But...how come I can see through you?" A bit of bravado, or perhaps hope, entered into his voice. "Did they finally kill you?"

Chloe looked down at her hands and found the general was right. She was semi-transparent.

"I'm not dead, but I don't know why I'm here, like this. My body's knocked out in the back of a van right now, thanks to one of your goon squads. As near as I can figure, I'm either dreaming or experiencing some kind of freaky astral projection."

She knelt down next to him, and he scooted backwards from her.

"Relax, I'm not here to hurt you. I probably can't, not like this.

But it's time we had a talk. About me. I need to understand some things."

"Why the hell should I tell you anything?"

"Well, how about because I'm the only one who can bring you back to Earth, and I can't do that if your friends keep me drugged and locked away in some secret prison. Is that a good enough reason?" She stood up again. "Of course, if you don't feel like talking, I can leave. Don't know when I'll be back though. Maybe never, if somebody decides to kill me."

"Wait! What do you want to know?"

Chloe sat down cross-legged on the tunnel floor. For the first time, she could actually feel the thrum of the incalculable energies flowing beneath her. It was like sitting on a giant battery, or an electric motor running at full throttle.

"You had a chance to review Garcia's files, and the ones from my doctors. How do they explain what happened to me?"

Ferguson looked at her for a long moment and then gave a short, bitter laugh. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"It's because of Garcia, and us, that you even exist."

"I know it was some kind of experiment, but that's all Garcia told me."

"Project Sky Strike. It was an accident; or rather, you were. We were testing an orbiting weapon. Our scientists found a way to artificially trigger lightning at a precise location, at any strength we wanted, by exciting the electrons and protons in a focused area between the satellite and the ground."

"Lightning? You mean, you assholes zapped me with lightning just to see what would happen?"

"No." Ferguson shook his head. "We thought we were testing it in an empty field. No one knew civilians actually used that area; it's supposed to be abandoned."

"What the hell? Why wouldn't you test it on your own property, where it's safe?"

There was no shame on Ferguson's face as he answered. "The initial tests were done within designated restricted military areas. But we also needed to know how precisely we could target the weapon across different terrains, and if such a strike could be carried out in secrecy without the public noticing."

"What if I'd died? You were just going to keep that a secret, too?"

"Actually, we didn't know about you at all until Gupti reported your case to Garcia. But yes, if you'd died, we would have let everyone believe it was a freak lightning strike that did it. We couldn't risk exposure of the project just because of one regrettable death."

Regrettable death? Chloe wanted to bash Ferguson's face in, or at least kick him in the 'nads, but she kept hold of her emotions. Right now she needed to hear the rest of the story.

There'd be time later to hit him.

"How could you use lightning as a weapon anyway?"

"How? Think about it. Lightning is one of the most powerful forces in nature. One bolt, what the scientists call a flash or channel, can totally destroy a strike point. You could use it to knock out the power for an entire city, disable a plane or vehicle, even start massive fires. All without any way to trace the attack back to the U.S. It would be like having giant snipers in space."

"Yeah, just what the world needs. Like we don't have enough problems. So when Gupti went to Garcia, what happened? You abandoned your project and made me the new one?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. We needed to study you, but we never abandoned the project. Instead, we modified it. In addition to the original weapon, we started building a miniature version in the lab, with the idea of using it to create more, er, individuals like

yourself. Soldiers. An elite fighting force with unimaginable abilities."

"Except Garcia betrayed you."

"Yes. But then, we expected that might happen. We'd always planned on taking the project away from him once it was successful anyhow."

Chloe smiled. "Well, I've got news for you. Your BFF Polk is busy taking things over for himself." At Ferguson's surprised look, she added, "Don't act so shocked. I'll bet you had something similar planned. You military people amaze me. You're all bottom feeders. All your talk about unity and patriotism, but as soon as a little power comes your way, it's every sleazeball for himself."

Ferguson shrugged. "It's no different than business or politics."

"Like, that's supposed to be a good thing? What ever happened to honesty?"

"Honesty? When entire countries and fortunes are at stake? Do you really think there's ever been an honest government? You're just another ignorant little girl, blind to the realities of modern civilization, full of liberal ideals and dreams. Always hoping for some kind of utopia that can never exist, where everyone lives in peace and harmony and no one cares about color or religion or if you're straight or gay. Well, I've got news for you, kid. That's a fairy tale. It's never going to happen in real life."

Chloe shook her head. "Dude, I don't even know what you're getting on about. I'm lucky I can tell you who the Vice President is. All I ever cared about was graduation, college, and getting a decent job."

She pointed a finger at him. "But you can bet your stars I'll be getting more involved now."

Ferguson barked another of his short laughs. "How? You don't even have a body."

"I've got one, it's just, like, a little drugged at the moment." Chloe heard the defensiveness in her voice.

Don't let him get to you.

She took a deep breath before continuing. "I have some errands to run, General. Thanks for info, it's been enlightening."

"Wait. You're leaving? You said you'd get me out of here."

"I will. As soon as I have my body back. And after I find out the rest of what I need to know." She stood up and stared at him. "Or maybe I'm lying. Like everyone else."

Ignoring his cries for her to help him, Chloe let her herself flow into the currents again. The general's figure grew smaller and smaller as the energies swept her away.

STEWART AIR FORCE BASE lies fifty-five miles north of Manhattan. It shares space with a commercial airport and is officially listed as a New York Air National Guard base. As far as the general public is concerned, it is the home of the 105th Airlift Wing, which performs ground and air training and also carries out air transport of personnel and cargo to support war-time and peace-time missions.

At twenty-two thirty hours, while Chloe was preparing to take her leave of General Ferguson, two unmarked vans pulled up next to a Pave Low III special operations helicopter. Three armor-clad soldiers escorted four figures into the black-as-night 'copter, while two others carried a limp, bound body. A third van, identical to the others, arrived just as the cargo hatch slid closed.

"All the prisoners are on board, sir," one of the soldiers greeted the newcomer, snapping off a crisp salute at the same time.

"Good work. I want two men to accompany me on the flight. The rest of your team will follow in the vans. Report to me at oh-

eight hundred hours tomorrow. You'll get your next assignment then."

"Yes, sir." Another salute.

The moment the 'copter doors slammed shut, the heavily armed aircraft rose up and headed south at full speed.

CHLOE HAD LIED TO FERGUSON. She didn't have anything in mind when she left him, just a need to be alone and think. A ghostly cork bobbing amidst the swirls and eddies of the energy tunnel, she let her thoughts drift in similar fashion. A sense of disassociation—not unlike the state between consciousness and sleep—enveloped her, and she felt her body, or at least the incorporeal version she currently inhabited, relaxing for the first time in days.

How can I be falling asleep if technically I'm not even awake?

She tried to make sense of that incongruity, but the oncoming lassitude wouldn't allow it. Instead, she closed her eyes and let lethargy take over.

In her new dream-state, thoughts and ideas tumbled and fought for attention.

What's going on?

~ I'm learning. ~

What?

~ I'm learning. I can understand it. It answers my questions. ~

Thoughts in my head. Who's talking to me?

~ You are. Don't wake up, don't fight, or we'll lose it. ~

Lose what? Chloe struggled to stay calm. The idea of having a conversation with her own brain was even stranger than existing in an alternate reality.

~ The ability to understand. ~

I don't understand anything!

~ You will. I'm you, but I'm not of this time or place. In the future, or maybe a different time line, I've changed. We've changed. We can understand the energies surrounding us. They speak to us, tell us things. Things you need to know. ~

What do you mean?

~ We're in a nexus, a place beyond time and space. Outside of them. Another dimension. It's not alive, but it has knowledge. It's energy, all kinds of energy, from everywhere. Brains function on energy. Patterns, waves, electrical currents. Pulses between neurons. My—our—patterns can understand, or maybe translate, some of what exists here. ~

The longer the conversation continued, the more Chloe's fear faded. This was what she'd been searching for, what she needed to know. What the energy tunnel was, how it worked.

And how she could use it.

She didn't care if her brain had suddenly turned totally schizoid on her.

Talk to me, girl, she told her other-self.

And it did.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Colonel, I have the latest data report." The soldier placed a red file folder on the desk and saluted.

"Thank you." Garcia's right arm hung useless in its sling, so he nodded in response. He waited until the soldier exited the office, then sat down and opened the folder, mentally summarizing the data as he read through it.

Six more men dead from electrocution.

That brings the total to fourteen, with twice as many serious or life-threatening injuries. At this rate, we'll run out of volunteers before the week is over.

He'd almost reached the end of the file when he saw the notation from one of the Sky Strike technicians:

> A review of the laboratory experiments versus the field tests reveals only one difference: level of power. Field tests consistently produced strikes of between one billion and ten billion joules. According to the power settings listed in

the log books for the day in question, the Olivetti girl experienced approximately a six-billion joule encounter. Laboratory strikes, due to the nature of the smaller equipment and necessity for safety and fire precautions, have been limited to between nine hundred and nine hundred seventy million joules.

Based on this information, it is my conclusion that the Olivetti incident cannot be repeated inside the laboratory. Instead, I recommend moving the experiment back into the field, using the actual Sky Strike satellite.

"Goddammit!" Garcia slammed his good hand down on the desk. "Why didn't someone think of this sooner?" He picked up the phone and punched a three-digit number. "I want a technical staff meeting in thirty minutes, in the main lab. And hold off on any further experiments in the meantime."

He hit the disconnect button and immediately dialed another extension. "General Polk? I think we may have found the answer to our problems. Yes, sir, I'll be there in five minutes."

GARCIA SAT QUIETLY while Polk read through the report. He had no doubt the General would immediately catch the significance of the technician's recommendation, and he wasn't wrong.

"So," Polk flipped the folder closed. "Do you think it's really that simple?"

"I think it's very possible." Garcia held up a hand. "Not that it doesn't have its risks. For all we know, Olivetti was a fluke, a one in a million occurrence. But, in theory at least, it makes sense. Whatever was done to her, either at the molecular level, or atomic, or

hell, I don't know, spiritual, needs a certain amount of energy. If we're going to recreate what happened to her, we need to use the same energy level. I think we should try. Besides," he tapped the folder with two fingers, "it's not like we can do any worse."

"So what do you propose, then?"

"I've called a technical meeting for oh-nine hundred. I want to set up a series of strikes at various power levels, from four billion joules to ten billion. We'll use three subjects at each level."

"And where would you do this? We can't have any witnesses, either civilian or military."

"Agreed. The best place would be the old artillery range. It's not visible from any roads, residences, or commercial buildings. And the base is on lock down, so we don't have to worry about any uninvolved personnel seeing anything. Olivetti and the other prisoners are in cold storage. I can have the satellite ready by tomorrow."

Garcia didn't let anything show on his face, but he knew there was no way Polk could say no. The man wanted—*needed*—this project to be successful as much as Garcia himself. Maybe more so.

"Okay, Colonel. We'll try it. But," one finger, skin slightly dry and cracking, stood at attention. "There's one more matter to take care of."

"What's that?"

"For the time being, your services are not needed. You'll be joining the prisoners in confinement, until such a time that I require your assistance again."

For a moment, Garcia couldn't move, stunned into immobility by the unexpected double-cross. Then he bolted for the door.

Two MPs stood in the hallway, blocking his exit.

"Linear thinking, Garcia." Polk said. "I plan ahead, you don't. You've already proven yourself to be a traitor. Did you think I'd

give you the chance to do it again? I'm no fool. However, on the off chance that this new experiment of yours doesn't pan out, I think it's best to keep you around a little longer."

Polk waved a hand at the two guards and they took Garcia by the arms. Polk smiled and tapped a finger to his temple.

"Think carefully, Garcia. Keep working with me and I'll make sure the worst you receive is a mild slap on the wrist and a decent severance package. Screw with me and you'll never see the light of day again."

Garcia kept his mouth shut and let the guards lead him away. Anything he did at this point would only be counter-productive. Polk had out-maneuvered him again. But that didn't mean there weren't other ways to achieve his goals. For that to happen, though, he'd need help.

And a lot of luck.

CHARLES POLK WAS RE-READING the Olivetti file when Sergeant James Meade knocked at the open door.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Six of his team members, the same ones who'd carried out the extraction mission, stood behind him.

"Sergeant. I trust our guests made it here without any problems?"

"Yes, sir. I've got two armed guards outside the brig, as per Colonel Garcia's instructions."

"Yes, well, there's been a change of plans. A new team will be assuming responsibility for the prisoners. I have another assignment for you."

"Sir?" Meade's brow furrowed in confusion.

Polk strode forward, purposely placing his face less than a foot

away from Meade's. "Is there a problem, mister?" He kept his voice soft. It would take more than a change of orders for a sergeant to question a three-star general.

"No, sir!"

"Good. I want you and your men to report to the research laboratory at once. One of my men will have your assignment instructions."

"Yes, sir!" Meade saluted once more and then led his team away.

Polk returned to his desk, trusting his men to do their jobs. He'd already given orders that if anyone on the extraction team so much as voiced a single objection, they were to be shot, no questions asked.

He hoped they wouldn't have to waste good volunteers. After all, the sergeant didn't know it, but if everything worked the way it was supposed to, he and his team were about to make history.

A TRICKLE of sweat meandered from Polk's left armpit down across his ribs, but he allowed no sign of his nervousness to show on his face.

"All systems are good to go, sir," the technician reported.

"Begin sequence."

On the main monitor, a computer representation of the test grounds displayed a red 'X' at the target site. Polk knew that in reality, the 'X' was Sergeant Meade, standing out in the middle of the artillery field. In a nearby bunker, two medics waited to revive him, should it be necessary. A soldier armed with an HK XM8 rifle stood by just in case Meade's fear overrode his military training and better judgment.

"Sequence initiated."

Several cameras were also trained on the test subject, but Polk had decided it would be better for the technicians not to view yet another man getting fried at their hands. Morale was an important tool when dealing with soldiers, and even more important when dealing with egghead soldiers who'd never seen a day in combat.

Of course, if boosting morale didn't work, threats and intimidation went a long way to getting the job done.

"Here we go, sir. Energy levels reaching discharge point, and...now!"

On the screen, a zigzag representation of the lightning flare, black against the white background, struck the 'X,' which changed from red to green, indicating a successful strike.

"Direct hit on target, sir," the technician confirmed. Polk was pleased to see none of the scientists showed any reaction to him referring to another man as a target.

"Bring up the cameras, soldier."

"Yes, sir."

Additional screens lit up, showing live views of the test zone from different angles. On one, the jeep with the two medics was already bumping across the deeply pitted field. On another, the figure of Meade lay motionless on the ground, streamers of gray, wispy smoke rising from his prone form.

Polk tapped the fingers of one hand against his other arm as he waited for the medics to examine the body. One of them tore open Meade's shirt and began pounding on his chest, while the second man prepared a portable defibrillation unit. Although there was no sound, Polk imagined he could hear the second man's voice yelling 'Clear!' as the medic performing CPR stopped and leaned back.

Meade's body jerked as the mini-paddles touched his chest. The first medic dove back in with his stethoscope.

Polk felt a second rivulet of sweat begin the long trek from his armpit to his ribs. He made a mental note not to unbutton his

jacket anytime soon. A commanding officer couldn't walk around showing pit stains.

The medic sat back, gave the cameras the thumbs up. Cheers erupted within the control center as the driver helped his two companions load Meade into the back of the jeep. Even Polk allowed himself a smile.

Electricity killed him, and now it's brought him back. We're like modern-day Doctor Frankensteins.

But have we created a superior man, or a monster?

His grin faded away at the thought.

Polk let the cheers subside on their own before issuing his next orders.

"I want the test subject sequestered in the infirmary. No one except medical staff enters the room without my express authorization. Carry out a full physical examination, beginning with a complete ocular evaluation. As soon as he receives medical clearance, we'll start testing him for any new abilities. And initiate round-the-clock video surveillance."

A chorus of "Yes, sir's" sounded, and the control room bustled with activity as technicians got to work. Other techs began the standard post-test satellite checks.

"Lieutenant Davidson."

"Sir?" The senior technician stopped typing and swiveled his chair around.

"Begin preparations for the next test subject. I want all systems go in one hour."

"Yes, General."

Polk checked his watch and left the control room.

He wanted to be on hand when Meade regained consciousness.

THE ANGRY, blood-red jagged bolt of energy punched through the multiverse and tore Chloe away from her conversation with her other-self. There was no sound, no warning. The brutal force sent multi-colored shockwaves in all directions and tossed Chloe head-over-heels through the tunnel like a leaf on a windy day. The unexpected violation of the place she considered her safe haven vibrated her ethereal form to its core, each rapid wave compressing and tearing her atoms simultaneously.

The desecrating rape of her domain lasted no more than an instant, but her nerves continued to jangle even after she willed herself to a stop, her connection to the other-Chloe severed and gone.

Until then, the myriad kaleidoscopic patterns that encompassed all sides, top, and bottom of the energy tunnel no longer fazed Chloe. Although ever-changing, they remained a constant at the same time, like having clouds overhead, or watching waves flow up and back on the beach. The individual patterns continually mutated, but the overall feel was one of permanence and serenity. Now that peaceful feeling was lost, shattered as thoroughly as if a bomb had detonated in one of her classrooms.

She didn't need her future-self to tell her what had happened.

Sky Strike! They fired it again!

Thanks to the little bits of information she'd gleaned before being interrupted, she was able to understand some of the theoretical physics impacting her at that moment. According to future-Chloe, that was because the relationship between her altered brain and the other-dimensional energies was evolving, growing.

That's how the lightning they created was able to change me. Somehow, at a certain wavelength or energy level, the beam from the satellite passes through this other dimension. And it carried some freaky alien energy with it when it struck me. Energy that made me something more, something part of two worlds.

Or universes.

And now they've done it again. They've finally figured out how to change other people, soldiers. Make more like me.

I can't let it happen.

But what can I do?

Sent back to wherever it had come from by the blast, her otherself couldn't provide any answers.

Which means it's up to me.

ON HIS WAY to the control room after checking on the still-unconscious Sergeant Meade, General Polk paused by the cell holding the Olivettis and Garcia's daughter.

Two armed guards stood sentry outside the heavy steel door. Set at eyelevel was a twelve-inch square of tempered glass, reinforced with wire mesh. The inside surface was mirrored, creating a one-way window.

"Any problems?" he asked one of the guards.

"No, sir. All quiet."

Polk peered through the glass. Garcia's daughter sat on the dirty gray tile floor, head down. He couldn't tell if she was asleep or just lost in thought. The Olivetti girl's parents sat side by side on the single cot. The wife had her head on her husband's shoulder, eyes closed. The husband stared off into space, his blank expression and unshaved face giving him the look of a homeless panhandler. It never ceased to amaze Polk how quickly prisoners degenerated in captivity. It was more than just mussed hair, unshaven faces, and dirty clothes. It was a look in their eyes, something that projected helplessness, despair.

It meant they were close to breaking.

A slight movement caught his eye. The younger boy was also

on the floor, leaning against the cot. He held some sort of electronic device, thumbs and fingers moving rapidly on the tiny square.

"Soldier! What does that kid have in there?"

"Just a toy, sir," the guard on the left responded.

"Take it away from him. They're prisoners, not guests. If he gives you any trouble, you have my permission to use force, within reason. Bruising is acceptable, permanent injury is not. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" both guards replied in unison.

The guard on the left opened the door and stepped inside, taking a position just to the left of the door while the other soldier crossed the room and yanked the game away from the boy.

"Hey, that's mine!"

The boy, who looked to be about twelve or thirteen, grabbed for his toy. His parents came out of their stupor at the same time.

"Benny! Sit down. It's all right."

"No! I want it back!"

The guard held the game out of reach as the child grabbed at it again. "Listen to your mother, kid. You don't want me to hurt you."

"Bite me, you jerk, it's mine!" The boy jumped up in the air, trying desperately to grab at the small box the guard held over his head. In the process, he clutched at the guard's uniform to pull himself up higher.

The guard slapped the boy across the face, the sound of his hand on the boy's cheek echoing through the cell like a gunshot.

"Benny!" The boy's father stood up and took a step toward the soldier.

Polk's stomach clenched up as he got a sudden premonition that events were about to spin out of control. He opened his mouth to order the guards to stand down, but he was too late.

The second guard drew down on the father and fired with no

warning. In the small, cement-walled room, the report sounded like an explosion. The shot took the man at the base of the throat and spun him around in a drunken circle, the awkward dance ending only when he tripped over his wife's leg and fell to the floor.

"Cease fire!" Polk yelled as loud as he could, but once again he acted too late. Garcia's daughter was already lunging at the soldier who held the electronic game, her angry cries blending with the screams of the other woman and the ringing in his ears from the gunshot to create a cacophony of confusion.

"Stop! Stand down!" he shouted, taking a step forward and waving his arms. With their backs to him and their hearing just as impaired as his, neither guard paid him any heed.

The soldier met the Garcia girl's attack, dropping the toy and grabbing her by the hair with both hands. Taking a step to the side, he swung her out and away from his body and into the wall. Her head met the concrete with a heavy thump and she collapsed to the floor, her muscles slack and limp.

An inarticulate cry barely reached Polk through the continued ringing in his ears, but it was loud enough to draw his attention away from the girl. The young boy had gotten up from the floor and rushed forward again, this time at the soldier who'd fired the shot.

"No!" The boom of another gunshot drowned out Polk's order.

A bloody rose blossomed on the boy's t-shirt, dead center on his chest. The force of the bullet's impact knocked him backwards several feet and he fell in a heap right at his mother's feet. Within seconds, a pool of blood spread out from beneath him.

Through and through? Polk looked up out of habit, just in time to watch the other soldier drop to his knees, hands over his belly where the high velocity bullet had found a final resting place.

"Jesus Christ, cease fire!" Polk thought his throat might explode from the force of his scream.

Now the remaining soldier turned around, his face white with shock. "Sir, they attacked...they..." His voice trailed off as his partner toppled over.

For a moment, the only sounds were the cries and sobs of the Olivetti woman as she knelt between her dead son and her dying husband.

"Goddamn, this is a cluster." Polk took a deep breath, considered his options.

What the hell, they would have all been executed eventually anyway. He'd only wanted them around as leverage against the Olivetti girl.

"Get a cleanup crew in here ASAP. Take him," he pointed at the downed soldier, "to the infirmary. Put the other bodies on ice."

"Yes, sir. What about the women?" The soldier nodded towards the Olivetti woman and the unconscious girl.

"Set them up in one of the maximum security cells. Guards inside and out, understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

Polk exited the room, shutting the door behind him and cutting off the screaming pleas of the woman.

Sooner or later, Chloe Olivetti would wake up, and most likely escape again into whatever netherworlds she took herself to.

But she'll come back for her family. She did it once, she'll do it again. And when she does, she won't be happy.

I need to be ready.

BENNY'S DEAD.

The thought had suddenly sprouted from nowhere, like a

weed appearing overnight amid the garden of plans and schemes Chloe was pondering.

Why would I think that? The last time I checked, everyone was stuck in a cell on the base. In trouble, yes. But dead? Hardly. In fact, the little dork was sitting there, playing with his iGame like always.

Nevertheless, the thought wouldn't go away. Instead, it grew larger, a cancerous presence that made it impossible for her to keep her mind on how to rescue everyone and put an end to the Sky Strike experiments.

Maybe if she stopped and took another look, saw they were fine, she could focus on the job at hand.

Fine. I'll check on them again. She conjured a window.

And then stumbled away, her stomach threatening to hurl itself up through her throat.

Soldiers in white body suits were zipping her father and Benny into black body bags. Two more men were scrubbing the previously bare cement of the cell. Blood and disinfectant mixed on the floor and walls, creating a frothy, pink mess.

They killed them. They killed my family.

What about Vanessa? And Mom?

A quick adjustment of the window's viewpoint showed the two women in another cell, this one even more austere than their last. No chairs, no bed. Just a bare room with a toilet in the corner and a drain in the center of the floor. Two soldiers were hauling Vanessa's body into the room. At first, Chloe thought she was dead as well, but then the girl's dark eyes fluttered open and she moaned as they set her down.

Another man in green fatigues escorted her mother, who did nothing but cry and tug at her own hair.

Rage and grief launched an all-out war inside Chloe. She tried to push the sorrow away, let the anger come forward, but it never stood a chance.

The tears erupted out of her, racking sobs that forced her first to her knees, and then into a fetal position. Even without a body, the physical pain still existed. She felt the ache of her stomach muscles cramping and her jaw clenching, the sting of her nails digging into her palms. Hot, salty tears seared acid trails on the non-existent flesh of her cheeks. She screamed until her throat burned, punched her legs with her fists, and ground her fists into her eyes.

HOW LONG SHE stayed like that, she wasn't sure. Time had ceased to mean anything in the otherness she existed in. But eventually her outpouring of grief dwindled down, her river of tears reduced to a trickle.

And rage, which had been waiting for its turn, rose up like an ancient beast of Hell.

Her own aura blazed crimson red, red as the blood of her father and brother, red as the fires of hate burning inside her.

Now they'll all pay.

Chloe prepared to open another window, one that would lead her to her own body. What she intended to do after that, she had no idea. But she'd make them pay. She'd—

The world exploded around her in jagged flashes of black and purple.

Agony like nothing she'd ever felt clawed its way through her body, scorching blood vessels, bones, nerves, and tendons.

She opened her mouth to scream and glowing rays of crimson energy burst out, each one wrenching a piece of her with it, tearing her apart from both the inside and outside.

At the same time, the pain was familiar. Too familiar.

Sky Strike!

Then the beam was gone, and she floated within the energy tunnel again. The pain faded away and her breath returned.

Now she shouted, using her voice to release the pent up fury from inside her. Around her, the tunnel echoed her cries as if the man-made energy bolt had actually hurt it.

It's not a tunnel. It's a nexus.

How do I know that? Who told me?

Chloe dragged herself back to her feet. The pain had dissipated, but its passing seemed to have taken much of her remaining strength with it.

No matter. This has to end.

She conjured her window. It revealed her physical body, which lay motionless on the floor of a cell that could have been a duplicate of the one where they'd killed her father and Benny.

Don't think about them. Not now. Not yet.

Chloe focused on herself.

This time, when she placed her hand against the window, she didn't emerge into the real world.

Instead, her body came through to her.

IN THE OBSERVATION ROOM, the technician monitoring the unconscious girl watched as the prone body slowly faded into nothingness.

He hesitated, his heart hammering in his chest, waiting to see if she'd return.

When she didn't, he punched the alarm button.

And wished he'd never gotten assigned to watch her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Chloe felt no physical change as her body re-assumed solid form. Inside the nexus, there was no gravity, no sense of solidity. Yet somehow she felt more complete. Whole.

She also had barely enough strength to keep herself on her feet. As weak and dizzy as she'd been while incorporeal, the feelings were worse now.

It didn't matter.

She had more than enough left in the tank to do what she needed to do. Sky Strike and drugs had drained her body, but her mind felt charged.

It's my powers. They've grown again. The second lightning strike, it added more of the nexus to me, even as it removed some of my own essence.

Knowing she would need all her mental and physical strength for the upcoming battle she intended to launch, Chloe formed a window to the one person she was hoping might be able to help

her. It meant going into the past, but she knew she had the power to do that now.

The image formed, and Chloe pushed through the familiar wall of pressure.

Into the office of Dr. Priyadar Gupti.

She groaned as she let her body sink into one of the thick leather chairs facing his desk.

Gupti had his back to her, but he quickly turned around at the sound of her voice.

"Ms. Olivetti? How are you being here?" It was night, and in the glow of the overhead fluorescents the whites of his widening eyes appeared a sickly yellow-green.

She'd aimed for the night she'd been taken by Garcia's men, knowing there'd be no chance of meeting her past self in the office.

"It's a long story, Doc. The short version is, I have way more abilities than you ever thought I did. I've been to the future, and it sucks. The Army is going to kidnap me, kill my family, and most likely kill you, too. They want to make mutant soldiers with my powers. I need your help to stop them."

Gupti started to say something, closed his mouth. Chloe saw sparkling lights exploding in his eyes.

A reflection of my own freaky orbs. I guess that's what's got him tongue-tied.

After a moment, Gupti nodded his head. "Colonel Garcia."

"Right the first time. You've been ratting on me to him the whole time, haven't you." She didn't phrase it as a question, but he answered anyway.

"Yes. Not long after you came to me. It was part of my original contract with the Army. I..."

"Save the drama. I used to think this was all your fault for narcing on me, but I can't blame you, even though it was a totally crappy thing to do. The government would have found out

sooner or later. If it wasn't Garcia, it would've been someone else."

"But what is it I can be doing?"

"I'm exhausted. I need your help, as a doctor. But I also need you to explain what's different about me, how I've been changed."

"I don't understand." As he spoke, Gupti pulled out his ophthalmoscope.

"Uh, I wouldn't go near my eyes, Doc. These days, they seem to have a way of protecting themselves, and I wouldn't want to zap you."

"Zap...? Oh. I see. Perhaps you should tell me everything that has happened to you, so that I can be understanding."

Chloe leaned back in the chair, began telling her story. When she told him she'd been unconscious the past two days, and had barely anything to eat or drink before that, he went to a small refrigerator and retrieved a bottle of orange-flavored sports drink, a cup of fruit-flavored yogurt, and a banana.

"Here. These will help replenish you. No doubt you are suffering from dehydration as well as exhaustion."

"Thanks." Chloe drank down half the bottle and then peeled the banana, which she ate in two bites. She washed it down with more juice before she began spooning up the Raspberry Twist yogurt. Between mouthfuls, she continued with her story.

While she talked, Gupti conducted a quick physical examination—pulse, blood pressure, heart rate, breathing. They finished at the same time.

Gupti hung his stethoscope back around his neck and sat down. "Without running further tests, I cannot say for certain what, if anything, is wrong with you. But, it is my opinion that this energy, as you call it, has indeed affected your body. You see, the human body runs on electricity. Muscles, nerves, thoughts, all our actions are controlled by electrical impulses. Especially the brain.

If you are correct in thinking that some of this nexus's energies have been transferred to you, it is very possible your body is rejecting them."

"You mean, like, rejecting a liver or kidney?"

"Yes, exactly correct. Very good. Right now, your body is fighting against its own self, at the sub-atomic level instead of the cellular."

"But what's going to happen?"

"Either the two will integrate into a singular being," Gupti put his hands together, fingers wrapped around each other, "or the rejection will tear you apart."

He pulled his hands away from each other, then let them drop to the desk. "I'm sorry I cannot tell you more, or be giving you better news. We are dealing with concepts far beyond my—or likely anyone's—current understanding of relativity or astrophysics. I would imagine you are interacting with things our science hasn't even conceptualized yet."

"So I'm either gonna live or die, huh? Well, all the more reason to take care of what I need to do before it's too late."

Chloe stood up. "I gotta go, Doc. Thanks for the food, I do feel a little better. And some advice? Get out of town fast. Garcia's men are going to come for you."

"That is most kind, Ms. Olivetti. Good luck to you."

"Thanks, I'll need it."

Chloe let her vision shift, found a portal near the big window that looked out over Manhattan. She stepped into it and returned to the nexus.

GUPTI WATCHED CHLOE OLIVETTI DISAPPEAR. She'd told him how she did it, but seeing it was another matter entirely.

It was several minutes before he managed to return to his computer.

He'd almost finished downloading all his files on her to the private server at his house when four men in black armor burst into his office.

INSIDE THE NEXUS, it only took Chloe a moment to locate Ferguson. She had no idea how long it had been since she'd last spoken with him, in his subjective time, but he seemed a lot more agreeable to helping her.

I guess contemplating an eternity of nothingness gives you a different outlook.

"Ferguson. Every military base has an armory, right?"

His eyes narrowed, but he answered right away. "Of course."

"So where's the one at Fort Stone?"

"Second floor below ground level. You can't miss it, it's the only room on that level besides a storage section. There are always two guards posted outside and two more inside, round the clock."

"Describe it to me in detail."

CHLOE USED Ferguson's description to form a window that opened deep inside the armory, well behind the desk where the inventory clerk sat and out of sight from the two guards standing sentry inside the entrance.

The armory was not just cavernous; it was an actual cavern, carved out of pure rock by a team of Army engineers. It stretched hundreds of yards in both length and width, and had rows of metal shelving that seemed to go on and on forever, eventually fading

away in the dim light of fluorescent tubes in the ceiling and along the shelves. According to Ferguson, the room contained enough ordinance for several hundred men to defend the base against any kind of physical attack.

Using Ferguson's directions, it only took her twenty minutes to locate the items she wanted, and another five to quietly load everything into a cardboard file box.

The dim light combined with the oppressive silence to create an atmosphere of dread that had Chloe constantly checking over her shoulder. Each time she looked, she was positive there'd be soldiers standing there with guns pointed at her. When she finally finished and prepared to leave, her heart was pounding and her hands shaking so badly it took her two tries to close the lid on the box.

Back in the nexus, Chloe sorted through the box and armed herself while Ferguson looked on. She'd taken several egg-sized hand grenades, and now she stuffed two into each of the oversized, baggy front pockets of her cammo pants. Two hand guns followed, which looked similar enough to the one she'd stolen from Garcia's house that she felt confident she could use them without shooting off her own foot.

Ferguson watched her from his seated position. "So what's your plan? Pop into Polk's office or the laboratory and shoot him? Maybe blow up the control room? What good do you think that will do? The satellite will still be up there. Someone else will come in, take over the project, and rebuild everything you destroyed. At best you'll set the schedule back a few weeks."

"Um, hello? Do I look like a soldier to you? I don't have a plan. I'm winging this shit as I go. All I care about is getting my mother and Vanessa out of there before they get killed, too. And you're going to help me."

"What? You've got to be kidding."

Chloe pointed the gun at him. "Get up. We're going in together. I need someone there who can tell the guards not to shoot."

"No."

"I'm not fooling. I don't know if I can go back in time and save my father or Benny. The universe doesn't seem to like it when I try that. But I'm damn well going to make sure the rest of my family is safe. Then I'll take care of Polk."

"You're going to have to do it without me."

She flicked the safety to the off position. "Don't make this harder, dude. I've already put a bullet into one asshole this week. I've got no problem making you number two."

Ferguson's face turned red, but he stood up.

She conjured a window to Vanessa's cell. This time the scene was different. Vanessa sat against the wall, cradling a sobbing Kerri against her chest. Vanessa looked as if she hadn't slept in weeks. Dark smudges marred the skin below her eyes, and a large bruise covered one cheek.

"Let's go." Chloe motioned Ferguson forward with the gun.

The moment they stepped into the room, Vanessa's eyes grew wide and she started shouting.

"NO! Chloe, get out of here! It's a trap!"

Wispy, acrid-smelling fumes poured out from a series of nozzles in the ceiling. At the same time, one of the guards yelled a warning to his partner.

Chloe dove back towards the gateway as both guards lifted their guns and opened fire. Ferguson's body spun first one way and then the other as bullets riddled it with holes. His mouth opened and closed, but the deafening sound of gunfire drowned out his words.

Just as she reached the portal, sudden fire exploded in her left arm. She stumbled but still managed to reach the portal, her own

scream following her as she crossed the line between the two universes.

Her last look before the nexus enveloped her was of her mother and Vanessa lying in bloody heaps, red smears on the wall behind them.

Nooo!

FROM HIS POSITION in front of the video monitor, General Polk watched as the Olivetti girl managed to escape once more. Her cry cut off midstream as she disappeared into nothingness.

At least this time she's been wounded. It's going to be a while before she can bother us again. If we're lucky, she'll die somewhere from blood loss.

"Sir? What should we do with the bodies?"

Polk turned to the corporal standing behind him. "Dispose of them. No traces. I don't care how you do it, but I don't want this to ever come back and bite us in the ass."

"What about the General?"

Polk thought for a moment before responding. An autopsy would show he'd been killed by friendly fire. He was already listed MIA; why make things more confusing?

"Same thing. Do it yourself, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Polk left the corporal to his work. He wanted to check on Meade again and then get back to the control room for the next test.

He also had to make some adjustments to his plan. Thanks to this last fiasco, there were now several loose ends that needed tying up. Including the corporal and the guards.

No traces.

INSIDE THE NEXUS, Chloe shrieked as her body tumbled forward. She tried to right herself, but every time she moved, agony lanced through her arm until she could barely see straight. Finally, she focused her thoughts enough to slow her dizzying rolling motion and come to rest in a seated position against the churning, eddying backdrop of energies.

White hot fire burned outwards from her upper arm to her fingers, and across her back and chest.

I've been shot. Oh, God, I've been shot!

The pain was so intense she couldn't think of anything else, but she knew she couldn't just sit still; she'd end up bleeding to death in the nexus, and then she'd never be able to go back in time to save Vanessa or her family.

But, freaking hell, it hurt so much!

I have to see how bad it is.

Chloe took a deep breath and examined her upper arm. Halfway between her elbow and shoulder, a hole about the size of a quarter oozed thick blood. Red smears covered most of her arm.

A wave of dizziness crashed over her, and she closed her eyes. The wall of the nexus felt soft and cool behind her, yet firm at the same time, like a fresh-made bed on a summer night. She wanted that bed, wanted to just sleep until the pain went away...

Don't faint! Not now.

Several deep breaths helped her regain her senses. Thinking about her family, all of them dead because of her, helped as well. Her grief sat on her chest, a solid weight pressing down on her lungs and squeezing her heart so tight she feared it might stop beating. But the pain inside her countered the throbbing misery in her arm, kept her from giving in to the gray zone hovering at the

edges of her vision, the fog that threatened to close in and wrap her consciousness in a blanket of darkness.

Don't worry, you can go back in time and change it.

It was true, she could. But right behind that thought came a storm of despair.

Every time I try to end this, try to save them, someone else dies. I keep making things worse instead of better.

What if I can't save them? What if Benny was right, and all our destinies are predetermined? That fate intends for everyone I care about to die?

No! Chloe shook her head, physically denying the negative thoughts. *I can't give up. There has to be a way to keep them safe.*

She slammed her good hand against the insubstantial glow of the tunnel floor, the myriad energy beams and sparkling, twirling particles unaffected by the impact. At the same time, the movement sent red-hot jolts of pain up and down her arm, and everything around her went white for a moment, scattering her thoughts. When the world returned, she was careful to keep her body as still as possible.

"Got to see how bad it is, get myself fixed up before I can help anyone else," she whispered, unaware she was speaking out loud.

Using her good hand, she carefully pulled her tank-top off and used it dab at the bloody hole. Every touch sent arrows of pain through her arm, where they joined the constant jack-hammering that vibrated in time to her pulse, but as long as she didn't flex the muscle, it was bearable. Just.

Once she cleaned some of the blood away, another surprise awaited her. Clearly visible in the hole was a dark piece of metal, its circular edge sitting just below the surface of her skin.

The bullet? But how...?

Gritting her teeth, Chloe pinched the end of the metal slug with the nails of her forefinger and thumb. She didn't keep her

fingernails as long as some of her classmates, who often looked like they were trying to grow claws, but they were long enough to get a decent grip so she could pull it out.

Another drilling pain accompanied the bullet's removal, and although she tried not to let it out, a long, whining moan escaped through her clenched teeth. She dropped the slug in her lap and quickly wrapped the tank top around her upper arm as fresh blood welled up in the hole.

Once she had the shirt tied tight, Chloe picked up the bullet and examined it. Underneath a coating of blood, the front end of the copper-colored metal was slightly flattened right at the tip, as if someone had pushed their finger gently against soft clay.

It doesn't look anything like the bullets they show on CSI or the true crime shows. Those are always all wide and torn up at the front. Mushrooming, they call it. When the bullet hits something, it flattens out.

So why didn't this one? And why didn't it go through my arm?

Chloe replayed the events in her head. She'd been shot just as she reached the gateway.

Maybe the nexus had something to do with it. Maybe it slowed the bullet down. She couldn't remember if her arm had made it to the other side when the bullet hit her. It was hard to think clearly, between the hot poker in her flesh and the returning ache in her head. But it seemed logical.

Deciding to test her idea, she pulled out one of the pistols she carried, and looked it over until she found the safety. Flicking it to the firing position, she braced her good arm against her body and fired down the tunnel.

Unlike the loud roar she'd heard in the armory, the gun emitted a small 'pop.' When she'd previously fired Garcia's gun, it had felt like someone slapped her hand backwards. This time, there was no appreciable recoil, something she was grateful for.

Stranger yet, the bullet exited the front of the gun slow enough for her to follow its path as it sailed forward in a gentle arc and fell to the tunnel floor just past her feet.

Guns don't work in the nexus. Or is it acceleration that doesn't work? Either way, it saved my arm, and maybe my life. The moment I reached the gateway, all of the bullet's forward motion stopped.

Chloe remembered something from her Physics class, something about momentum and kinetic energy, and how they could be used to determine the striking force of a bullet. So where had all the bullet's energy gone? Into the nexus itself? Or had her body absorbed it?

Whatever. The laws of physics are totally different in here. That's all that matters. Hell, I knew that already. Got to keep on track, not let my mind wander. I've got more important things to worry about. Like how to stop that damn satellite before they use it again.

The satellite.

Chloe could almost see the light bulb over her head turn on.

It must have cost the Army like a billion dollars to build Sky Strike. I'll bet they wouldn't waste that money again if something went wrong.

Like if the satellite disappeared.

But how? The satellite was in space, and none of her powers were going to keep her alive there. She could use her abilities to steal a space suit from somewhere, NASA maybe, but the impracticalities of that plan were obvious even to her addled brain. Finding one, getting the right size, stealing it without getting caught, and then figuring out how to put it on and use it? Forget it.

How else could she do it?

I could create a window and just throw a hand grenade through. But that means pulling the pin, and judging the timing so that it explodes just as it hits the satellite.

What if it bounces off? What if it blows up in my hand?

Neither of those choices appealed to her.

If only I could just reach out and place the grenade on the satellite.

Wait. Why can't I?

It seemed simple enough. Just reach out through the window instead of stepping through it completely. But could she do that without freezing her arm off or getting sucked into the vacuum?

Only one way to find out.

Chloe slowly stood up, using one wall of the tunnel for support. One leg gave out a little, and her head spun for a moment, but she was able to stay on her feet.

So what do I need?

She thought for a moment, and then concentrated on her closet back home in her parents' house. A second later, she was looking at all her shirts and pants hanging in neat rows. Outside, the sounds of children playing and cars driving by told her it was daytime, probably a Saturday or Sunday. She hadn't pictured a particular time, so there was no way to tell the *when* her mind had chosen. She wasn't sure she could even say what day it was in her current time, thanks to being unconscious and then traveling back and forth in time.

Thinking hard about *not* leaving the tunnel, Chloe reached out with her good arm. There was hardly any resistance, which told her she had to be a recent timeline. Her hand touched soft cloth and she grabbed it, a plain denim button-down, as easily as if she was standing in the room. She pulled it back into the tunnel. She needed something to wear anyhow, since her tank was now a blood-soaked bandage tied around her arm.

So, it's possible, although I won't know if I'll lose my arm in the vacuum of space until I actually try. Now, how do I find Sky Strike?

The window in front of her obliged instantly, shifting the viewpoint from the closet to the blackness of space. Unlike images she'd seen on television and in movies, the colors were clear and crisp, each distant star a radiant beacon of white with hints of yellow, mother-of-pearl, or even oranges and reds. The image was so vivid and close that dizzying waves intense fear washed over her. Chloe cried out and stumbled back, the window obediently disappearing.

It took several seconds for her to regain her equilibrium. She'd never expected that the vastness of space, even the small portion she'd seen, would make her feel like she was going to fall forward and keep falling forever.

It was like being at the top of a skyscraper and looking down without a safety rail. Except in this case, falling down would mean a quick but painful death in an airless void.

Chloe took a deep breath and concentrated on the Sky Strike satellite again, hoping this time she'd be more prepared. The window opened, and with it came the nauseating loss of balance, but by kneeling down she was able to keep her dizziness under control and actually look out into the cosmos without feeling like she would tumble through the window.

No planets were visible in her field of view, but about a hundred yards away sat an odd-looking jumble of boxes and round modules. Two short wings, covered in gold reflective material, stuck out from the sides, and a small satellite dish sat on top. A dome-shaped protuberance occupied the front of the contraption.

Could it really be that easy?

Chloe concentrated on being closer to the satellite, and the scene shifted like a camera zooming in, the satellite moving closer and closer until it was less than two feet away and took up the entire window. She knew it had to be moving if it was in orbit around the Earth, but however the thought-windows worked, this

one was doing a perfect job of keeping stride with the satellite, making it appear stationary.

Close enough to reach out and touch, without even extending her arm all the way.

It's going to be so cold.

They'd learned in Physics class—or was it one of Benny's sci-fi movies, Star Trek or some other geek flick—that the temperature in space was as close to absolute zero as you could get. Cold enough to freeze a person into a solid block of ice, except the total vacuum would probably kill you first.

It would take two, maybe three seconds to reach out place the hand grenade.

What would happen to her arm? Frost bite? Or would it shatter like flower dipped in liquid nitrogen?

She didn't know, and it didn't matter. Hopefully, she'd only be exposed for a moment, not long enough for any permanent damage to occur.

Chloe removed one of the olive-green grenades from her pocket and looked at it. It was round, and about the size of a tennis ball. A large ring hung from one side of the top piece. She'd seen enough movies to know you pulled the ring, which removed the pin from the handle. The grenade wouldn't detonate until the handle fell off, or came loose.

Or at least it shouldn't.

She remembered that people always seemed to count to three or four before the explosion occurred. But that might just be movie drama.

How long before the thing really blew?

It would have to be long enough so you could throw it at someone, so at least two or three seconds. That should be enough time to place it and get away.

Jittering little bugs started crawling around in her stomach, and her bladder threatened to release.

If I stand here thinking any longer, I'll never do it.

Unable to use her bad arm, she lifted the grenade up and used her teeth to pull the tiny pin from the handle.

"ALL SYSTEMS ARE GO, GENERAL." The technician held his hand over the enter key on his computer keyboard, ready to depress the button as soon as the command to fire was given.

On the flat screen of the video monitor, a man stood alone on the semi-dead grass of a field that resembled a lunar landscape, pockmarked by craters and holes from decades of grenade and artillery practice. Scattered around him, several areas of blackened, scorched earth and grass provided sobering reminders of the previous tests.

"Confirm settings." Polk knew they'd double-checked them several times already, but he was leaving nothing to chance.

"Seven point five billion joules," responded another technician at a separate console.

"Target lock is green and ready to go," said a third.

"Fire." Polk stared at the monitor. After this test, there would be two more, and then they were going to wait one week and see if any of the subjects showed physical changes. That would determine the next steps.

"Firing. Impact in three, two, one...now."

The test subject received no warning. One moment he stood sullen and staring at the camera, the next a blinding flash of light flared all around him. Then the radiance disappeared, leaving purple after-images that did nothing to hide the body lying on the ground.

Polk watched as the two medics scrambled into their jeep and made their way to the twitching, smoking soldier. After a quick examination, one of the medics nodded and gave a thumbs up signal to the camera. Still maintaining radio silence, they lifted the test subject into the jeep.

Polk smiled. "Congratulations, soldiers. Let's get ready for number six."

CHLOE HAD EXPECTED cold when she thrust her arm through the window. Cold like ice; cold like bare skin on a freezing winter day. Cold worse than diving into a lake in early spring.

Instead, all she felt was a cool tingling across her arm, like an evening breeze blowing over sunburned skin. She was so surprised by the lack of pain that she paused, the grenade actually forgotten for a moment in her hand. Then she remembered she'd pulled the pin and a jolt of adrenaline rushed through her. She pushed the grenade as far out as she could reach and let go. At the same instant, the front panel of the satellite opened and a small tube extended outward.

A red sun exploded into existence around her, tossing her backwards through the tunnel. Power thrummed through her, engulfing not only her physical body but her inner being. Agony filled her to the very core, so far beyond pain that rational thought disappeared, replaced by a wordless screaming in her brain. Massive forces warred inside and outside of her, tearing her apart from the inside while simultaneously compressing her like thousands of pounds pressing on in from all directions.

Every cell, every molecule, every atom seemed individually distinct, each one attempting to leave her and integrate with the

energies of the nexus while her essence struggled to hold them in place.

Chloe fought to retain control of her 'self,' to keep her mind and body from fragmenting.

Until it became too much for her to take and she just shut down.

IN THE VACUUM OF SPACE, there was no sound as Chloe's grenade bumped against one of Sky Strike's solar panels and exploded. The resulting shrapnel shredded its way through the ceramic and metal of the satellite's main section, destroying microelectronic components and rendering Sky Strike permanently useless. Deprived of guidance and power, the wreckage tumbled out of its programmed orbit and fell into a path that would eventually end with it entering the atmosphere over northern Canada slightly more than a day later and burning to ash before it ever reached the ground.

"GENERAL! We've lost contact with Sky Strike!"

"What?" Polk dropped the folder containing the data on the next volunteer and crossed the control room in three long strides. "Get it back online."

"Trying, sir." The technician's voice held a note of exasperation. His fingers flew over the keyboard. "It's not responding to any of our signals."

A new voice spoke up. "It's no longer tracking, either."

"Meaning?" Polk turned toward the second technician.

"I can't locate it. It's not where it's supposed to be."

"Damn it!" Polk looked at his watch. They'd completed several runs since Meade, all of them successful in that the volunteers hadn't died. But with two remaining, they hadn't yet covered all the different energy settings the techs had set up. "All right. Keep working on it. Call me the moment anything changes."

"Yes, sir!" All three technicians chorused the response, even as they bent to their keyboards. The *clickety-click* of rapid keystrokes filled the small room with the sound of mechanical crickets.

Polk left the technicians to their work and took the elevator down to Garcia's cell. The colonel was sitting in bed, reading a three-day-old newspaper, which he folded down as Polk stormed in.

"Something the matter, General?"

"Can it, Garcia. Your technicians have lost track of the satellite."

Garcia sat up straighter. "What? Lost track, how?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be coming to you. I want to know if this sort of thing's occurred before."

"We've never had anything more than minor communication glitches. Tell me what happened."

"We completed a test on one of our volunteers. The process appeared to function perfectly. A few moments later, the satellite went offline and disappeared from tracking."

Garcia's face was contemplative for a moment, and then, ever so slowly, a smile crept across it. A low chuckle followed it.

"What the hell are you laughing at?"

"Isn't it obvious, General? The satellite's been destroyed." Garcia responded, still snickering to himself.

Polk started to ask what he meant, and then a picture flashed into his head: the Olivetti girl disappearing headfirst into a flat, solid wall.

"I can see by your expression you've figured it out, too." Garcia

wiped a tear from one eye. "Olivetti escaped, didn't she? And this time she decided to bypass the base and go directly to the source. How do you think she found out?"

Polk didn't say anything, but he had his suspicions. Ferguson had been killed when he reappeared with Olivetti. It wasn't much of a stretch to think maybe he'd spilled his guts, perhaps in return for being brought back to Earth from wherever she'd taken him.

"Ferguson." The word slipped out before Polk could stop it.

"Ferguson? He's back? He's the last one I'd have expected to give out that kind of information, especially to Olivetti. What the hell's been going on since you locked me in here?"

"Don't worry about it, Garcia. Ferguson's dead. He won't be opening his mouth to anyone again. You might want to think about that, since without the satellite I really have no use for you."

The look on Garcia's face was more than enough reward. *He thinks he can insinuate I'm not doing my job? Let's see how he likes contemplating his own execution.*

Polk stared at Garcia until the other man looked down at the floor.

Good boy, Colonel. I may be fighting a battle, but you've already lost the war.

Before he could say anything more to Garcia, his cell phone buzzed, indicating an incoming text message. He glanced at the display. *Satellite found.*

"Good news, Colonel. Your men have located the satellite. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Polk ignored the guard's salute as he left Garcia sitting on the bed. However, he couldn't pretend he didn't hear the Colonel's parting shout.

"Watch your back, General. She'll be coming for you next."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Chloe woke up in utter darkness. Her first thought was that she'd died. A dizzying rush of adrenaline and her heart doing a triple roll in her chest told her she was wrong. She was still very much alive.

But I can't see anything. Have I finally gone blind?

She reached up and touched her eyes, found them closed. Thick crust coated her lashes and prevented her eyelids from opening. The gritty pieces crumbled under her fingers as she rubbed the tacky mess away. She opened her eyes, and the world came alive around her in shades of green and gray.

Well, my night vision still works.

She sat up and looked around, trying to make sense of where she'd ended up. She was on the floor. Piles of unidentifiable junk littered the room, which seemed oddly familiar. Across from her was a small breakfast counter.

It's Vanessa's apartment. But what happened?

A sour, moldy smell, tainted with an odor she couldn't place

but felt she should recognize, filled her nose. She blinked and her vision shifted again, allowing her to see the room in full color.

"Holy..."

What remained of the apartment was in shambles.

All of the walls were charred, and the ceiling actually had holes in it, where you could see into the apartment upstairs. She assumed that was no longer occupied, either. What hadn't been burned was ruined from water damage. Debris filled the room, the skeletal remains of furniture jumbled with half-melted electronic equipment and appliances. Scattered around were bits and pieces of jewelry, clothing, and kitchen utensils.

Garcia's men. It had to be them.

Without a television or clock, she couldn't tell how far into the past or future she was, but she figured several weeks had passed since the fire had been put out, if not longer. The windows were boarded up and the stink of burnt, wet wood and clothes wasn't totally overpowering. That meant she'd somehow moved ahead in the time stream.

The closet door leaned half off its hinges, and Chloe pushed it back to see if there was anything salvageable in the closet.

Hey. My arm didn't hurt.

It occurred to Chloe that she'd been moving her injured arm the whole time since she woke up, without any pain. She pulled off the stained and dirty long-sleeve shirt and untied the tank top from her bicep. The bloody cloth was stiff and dry. Underneath, the oozing wound was gone, replaced by a puckered, white scar the size of a quarter.

Holy crap. How long have I been unconscious?

A look at her watch gave no answer, because the hot pink Glow watch was nothing more than a melted piece of plastic dangling from her wrist.

Melted? How did that...

The satellite.

Memories of the last few moments before she lost consciousness came rushing back.

The satellite looming in front of her. The grenade.

The explosion.

But if the grenade exploded before I was back in the tunnel, my hand would be gone.

She remembered the panel opening, the nozzle extending out towards her.

The blinding red light.

Oh, my God. Sky Strike fired right into me. That was the explosion I saw. It must have shoved me back into the nexus, or maybe I was already back inside when it hit me.

And somehow my subconscious made another window and brought me here.

She touched a finger to the scar. No pain. The skin wasn't even rough or hard.

To heal like that would take, like, months. No way was I out that long. I'd have died of starvation. Somehow the nexus accelerated the healing process. Unless I sent myself into a future time where I was already healed. Could I do that? But it would mean leaving my physical body again, like when I was drugged.

Of course, that's assuming I had a body. Who knows what happened when that satellite released its energy.

Lots of questions and no answers, but she didn't care. All that mattered was that she'd managed to survive. In fact, she felt strong and rested, like after a good night's sleep. No more dizziness, no weakness. She remembered what Gupti had theorized, that her headaches and exhaustion came from her body fighting back against the energies of the alternate universe, trying to reject them.

I guess the two parts of me came to an agreement.

Which means it's time to finish things once and for all.

A gateway whorled like a miniature nebula near the bathroom door. Chloe walked through and entered the nexus. As soon as she was inside, she called up a window, this time to her family's house, in current time.

The scene was even worse than she'd expected. Nothing remained but a blackened shell.

Our house is gone. Everything we had...

Oh, they are so *gonna pay for that.*

Chloe shifted the view in the window from the ruins of the house she'd grown up in to the interior of the Hot Topix store at the Palisades Mall. She purposely made sure to think of a time after closing. She contemplated finding a place to take shower first, so she could wash off the dirt, sweat, and blood plastered on her like a second skin, but decided not to worry. Time for that later. For now, clean clothes would have to do.

There was no sense of resistance as she stepped through, not even the faintest change in air pressure. She picked out a pair of baggy black cargo pants with multiple deep pockets and transferred the remaining grenades—*thank God they hadn't exploded!*—lighter, flashlight, and guns to them. A black retro Sex Pistols t-shirt with "Anarchy!" plastered across the front in bright yellow letters fit her mood perfectly. Her heavy combat boots she kept on, although her knife was no longer there.

Then it was back into the nexus.

UNLIKE HER PREVIOUS attempts at rescuing her family, this time Chloe had a clear idea of what to do and how to do it. She mentally called up a past time window that showed her the holding cell just before her father and Benny were killed. The

picture popped into being in front of her, and her throat tightened at the site of them all so perfectly alive.

Instinctively she started to move forward, and then had to stop herself.

Not yet, the time has to be just right.

She examined the scene, trying to memorize each detail. In addition to timing, her position inside the room would also be critical.

Even if this doesn't work, as long as I don't get killed, I can always try again.

I think.

The myriad vagaries of time traveling were too confusing to consider, so instead she focused her attention on the events playing out in front of her.

Her parents sat side by side on the bed. Her mother was leaning against her father, eyes closed. Her father had a blank look on his face. His beard looked several days old, and his eyes were sunken and bloodshot.

Vanessa sat on the floor, head down, her hair falling forward and hiding her face. Benny was also on the floor, leaning against the bed next to their parents.

He's still playing with that iGame? I'm surprised they haven't taken it away from him.

As if summoned by her thought, two soldiers entered the cell. One of them stood by the open door, while the other marched across the room and grabbed the game from Benny's hands.

Just visible through the open door was General Polk.

"Hey, that's mine!" Benny tried to grab his toy back from the soldier.

And that's my target point.

Chloe stopped the re-enactment of the past and shifted the scene

back an hour further. This time she made sure to scope out the hallway before looking into the cell. The two guards were there, but they had their backs to the door. From there she checked the observation room and found it empty except for one video cam running on automatic.

Perfect.

A quick check of the video cam showed there was a blind spot just to the left of the door. Conjuring a new window, she braced herself for the expected resistance that came from fighting time and almost stumbled when she crossed over as easy as if it was a normal doorway.

Whatever happened to me, it also made time travel a lot easier.

She paused, making sure to keep herself out of the camera's line of sight.

At first, no one noticed her, and she actually had to whisper, "Hey, everybody. It's me. Keep quiet."

Her father gave a gasp, and Vanessa looked up in surprise, her mouth open to shout.

"Shhh!" Chloe held a finger to her lips.

"Chloe!"

Her mother's voice seemed like a shout, and Chloe desperately mimicked being silent. Then she pointed at the door. "Act like I'm not here."

Everyone in the room went back to what they had been doing. Chloe cringed inside, thinking it would look blatantly obvious to even the most dimwitted observer that something was going on. Her mother was trying not to smile, Benny was staring at her, and her father and Vanessa now sat up straight, awake and alert.

But the door didn't open, so she assumed either the guards hadn't heard anything or they'd just assumed their prisoners were talking to each other.

"I don't have much time. Listen carefully. In about one hour, some soldiers are going to come in and make trouble. When they

do, that's when I'll come back. As soon as you see me, I want you all to get together on the bed. No matter what happens, get on the bed as close together as you can, understand?"

Everyone nodded except Benny, who started to say something. "But what about..."

"No buts! Just be ready. I've got to go." She stepped into a gateway before he could say anything else. Benny would argue for hours if you let him, just for the heck of it. At least no one else had raised a fuss.

Back in the tunnel, she brought up another view-window, timed to just before the soldiers entered the cell. She double-checked that Polk was outside the door, and then oriented herself so she was facing that way, just in front of where Benny was sitting. Until she actually exited the nexus, Polk and his men shouldn't be able to see her, since she wasn't in their world yet.

Or so she hoped.

Chloe stood at the edge of the window, watching. A few moments later, the cell door swung open and the two soldiers entered. One of them stepped to the side, while the other appeared to be walking right toward her as he yelled at Benny.

Behind him, General Polk's stocky frame was visible in the hallway.

When the soldier was about half way to her brother, Chloe made her move. Stepping partially through her window, she spread her arms out and yelled 'Boo!' as loud as she could.

"Jesus!" The soldier nearly tripped over his own feet as he tried to back away.

Chloe laughed at the look of astonishment on his face, and then called out to Polk. "Hey, General. Guess who's back from the future?"

She mentally crossed her fingers, hoping Polk reacted the way she assumed he would.

He didn't disappoint her.

"Shoot her!" Polk shouted the command as if she were the world's most wanted terrorist.

"No!" screamed Vanessa.

Chloe's future sight kicked in, showing her both soldiers pulling their weapons in slow motion, which gave her more than enough time to shout a warning to her family.

"Look out!"

Now came the scary part. She stepped as far to the side from the window as she could, while keeping the tips of the fingers of one hand out in the real world.

The sound of the soldiers' guns firing assaulted her ears, and she prayed none of the bullets found her hand. As soon as the gunfire ended, she drew her hand back and let the window close.

Immediately she brought up a new window, aiming for five seconds down the timeline.

Time to get this party started.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The presence of the Olivetti girl wasn't completely unexpected, although her appearance from thin air caught Polk momentarily off guard. But not for long, as battlefield-honed instincts took over.

"Shoot her!"

Let's see if her magic is stronger than lead.

The thought died an angry death as the blonde-haired witch shouted a warning to her family and then disappeared again. That didn't stop the two guards from firing. They emptied their clips right where she'd last been.

Right at her bratty little brother, who even now fell to the floor and started crawling for his life. As if he could avoid the guns of two trained soldier from less than ten feet away.

Amazingly, he did.

Both soldiers fired until guns clicked empty, but somehow none of the rounds hit the boy.

Or the floor. Or the wall behind him.

"What the...?" Corporal Daniel LeCroy stood in the center of

the room, looking left and right. He still held his gun out in a firing position.

A second later he and the other guard were thrown to their knees, bodies jerking one way and then the other as a fusillade of bullets appeared from nowhere and tore through them, sending splashes of red in all directions. LeCroy managed a single scream and then fell to the floor, his blood-soaked clothes in tatters and his final breath foaming out over his lips. The second soldier never made a sound.

The Olivetti girl stepped into being again, this time next to the cot where her family huddled together.

"Hey, Polk. I'll be back for you, don't worry."

He tried to find his voice, but although his tongue pushed against his teeth, no sounds formed in his throat. All he could do was watch as the hateful creature guided her family forward and made them disappear.

Just before she joined them, she raised one hand and flipped him her middle finger.

"Smell ya later."

Then she, too, was gone, and the room was empty.

Charles Polk had worked for decades to build a reputation as someone who stayed calm under pressure. He'd endured combat in multiple countries, plotted counterattacks in life-threatening situations, and survived countless enemy engagements without losing his composure.

So as much as he wanted to scream, to pull his gun and shoot at the wall where Olivetti had disappeared, he held himself in check, knowing the cameras were still running.

Instead, he turned and hurried from the room, his face an expressionless mask. But inside, he seethed, seeing nothing but Chloe Olivetti's face, overlaid in a red haze, as he strode down the corridor, a single thought burning in his brain.

She's going to die.

CHLOE MADE the trip through the netherworld as short as possible for everyone. The moment they entered the dazzling light show that was the nexus, she brought up a new window and guided everyone out into reality again. Knowing they couldn't go anywhere there might be people or cameras, she picked the one spot she knew would be totally private.

"Oh, my goodness." Kerri Olivetti stumbled a little as she stepped onto the sandy strip of land that passed for the beach at Mannawauking Lake. Aldo had to grab her arm to steady her. "I still can't get used to doing that."

"Sorry, Mom, but, like, I didn't have a lot of options, you know? It's not like we could have walked out through the door. At least here no one will think to look for us."

"Chloe, what have you done?"

"It's a long story, but right now we have more important things to worry about."

"Yeah, like getting shot at!" Benny was patting himself all over. "How'd you do that? I thought I was gonna die!"

"We all did, dear," Kerri pulled him close and squeezed him in a tight hug.

"It's hard for me to explain. I used the nexus to change the direction of the bullets. Kind of like the loop-de-loop on the Monster Coaster at Great Adventure." It wasn't an accurate description, but she didn't feel like discussing theoretical physics with her family. Especially since she wasn't exactly sure how she'd done it.

"All that matters is everybody is safe, and we're back together." Vanessa opened her arms wide, and Chloe gratefully stepped into

them and wrapped her own arms around the warm body she'd thought she'd never hold again.

The memories of her loved ones, dead and covered in blood, crumbled away in Vanessa's loving embrace.

"I missed you so much," Vanessa whispered into her ear.

"Me, too. You won't believe what's been happening while you were in that cell, and after."

Vanessa leaned back. "And after? What's that mean?"

Chloe regretfully pulled away from Vanessa's soft hands and sat down on a nearby rock. Behind her, occasional splashes marked the presence of fish snatching bugs from the water's surface. A half moon sat low over the cliffs across the lake from them, and a gentle breeze kept the warm, humid night air from being too uncomfortable.

Where do I begin?

"See, here's the thing." Chloe didn't look up at any of the people standing around her. As she spoke, she picked up handfuls of gritty sand and let them run out between her fingers.

"Does anything seem different to you? I mean, here, right now."

Her parents looked at each other and shook their heads. Vanessa murmured a negative.

"It's night."

"That's right, Benny. That's because it's not the same day as when I took you from the Army base just now. In fact, it's not even the same month. It's September fifteenth. I picked that day because I knew no one would be here on a school night."

"You mean, you moved us ahead time? By six months? Cool!"

"Actually, we went back. Two years and seven months. Just to be on the safe side."

"Two... two years?" Now her father sat down as well, pulling

Kerri with him. In the semi-bright light from the moon, his face was as pale as the sand at their feet.

"Yes. I could give you a detailed explanation, but for the now the short version will have to do. I kept having those headaches, remember? And I was getting weaker every time I used the nexus. So I went and saw Doctor Gupti, and he explained that my body was rejecting whatever it was that the lightning did to me. Which, by the way, turns out to have been an Army experiment all along. Vanessa's father and some other goons were testing a new weapon, and I just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time."

"My father again. God, he's such a dick." Vanessa kicked sand out into the water.

"It's not all his fault. He's being used by the people above him, like General Polk, and they're a lot worse than he is."

"So what happens if your body rejects the changes?" Aldo brought the conversation back on track.

"He said I would die." She kept her head down, sifted another handful of sand.

"Oh!"

"Don't worry, Mom. It's not going to happen. See, my luck keeps getting better. Or worse, depending on how you look at it. This was actually the second time I tried to rescue you. The first time, I got caught inside the nexus right when either Polk or Vanessa's father tested the weapon again."

"You mean you were struck by lightning again?" This time it was Vanessa who had to sit down, perching herself next to Chloe on the rock. She draped an arm around Chloe's waist. "Are you all right?"

"It wasn't lightning. At least, not the same lightning that comes from clouds. Apparently, whatever energy their satellite creates, it penetrates the nexus before it hits the ground. Maybe because it comes from space instead of the clouds. Gupti said that when I got

struck by it the first time, it integrated some of the nexus's energy into my atomic structure. But my body was fighting the changes." Chloe looked up at her parents, the radiance from her eyes casting a soft glow on their faces.

"This time, I got a more powerful dose. Instead of hurting me, I think it healed me, either by changing my structure even more, or by reversing my body's rejection. I really don't understand it, and I probably never will, 'cause I'm sure as hell not letting any more doctors examine me."

"But how do you know you're all right?" her mother asked.

"And what aren't you telling us?" Vanessa added.

Chloe had a brief moment where she considered telling them about how she'd had to go back in time to rescue them, because in the real world, the old world now, they'd all died.

They don't need to know that.

"That's pretty much all of it, really. The point is," she raised her voice over the questions everyone was trying to ask, "my powers are stronger now. I can move forward or backwards in time as easy as going from one place to another."

"That is so wicked!" Benny shook his head. "Why couldn't I have gotten struck by that lightning? I'd be a superhero now, like The Flash. Lightning Man!"

"Benny! Don't say that! It's not something you wish for. Your sister is lucky she's not dead." Mrs. Olivetti shook a finger in Benny's direction as she scolded him.

Especially since it still might happen. Chloe knew her mother was only considering the dangers of what the lightning had done to her body. But there was a much more imminent threat, one that had a good chance of landing her in the morgue.

Moving around in space and time won't do me any good if I've got a bullet in my head.

"So what's the next step?" Vanessa ran her fingers up Chloe's

arm. Chloe shivered and leaned into her, enjoying the physical contact.

God, I've missed her.

"Yes, Chloe. We can't just stay here at the lake forever."

She knew her father was right. "No, you can't. Especially since you're not even in your own time." She stopped, unsure of how to tell them that there was only one thing to do.

Vanessa saved her the trouble.

"You're going back, aren't you." It wasn't a question.

"Absolutely not! I forbid it."

"Mom, I have to. I'm the only one who can stop what they're doing. If I don't, then pretty soon not only will the government be after me, and all of you, but they'll have an army of super-me types to do their dirty work. Next thing you know, the whole country will be run by the Army."

"What do you mean?"

"Polk and the others have been using their weapon to try and duplicate what happened to me. If they succeed, no one will be able to stop them. I can't let that happen."

"I won't allow it. You're staying with us." Usually her mother's ultra-firm voice ended all arguments. No one, not even her husband, defied Kerri Olivetti when she had her mind made up about something. But Chloe couldn't give in this time.

"Listen. I've already destroyed the satellite. I think. But if I don't stop the people, it won't matter. They'll just build another one. I have to eliminate all traces of the experiment, make it so they either can't, or won't dare, try something like this again."

"But..." Her mother paused as Aldo touched her chin and turned her face towards his.

"Kerri."

"Don't Kerri me, Aldo. She's just a girl. She can't—"

"Yes, she can. God knows I don't want her to do this any more

than you do. But she's right." He looked at Chloe and gave her a half-smile, the one that he usually saved for when she caught him by surprise by making an 'adult' decision on her own.

"Even more importantly, she's stubborn. Always has been. " Aldo kissed his wife, wiped a tear away from her cheek. "She gets that from both of us."

"Thanks for the support, Dad. I guess. Don't worry, this isn't like the time I thought one driving lesson was enough for me to take the car out on my own." That incident had cost her three hundred dollars in repairs to the mailbox and the fender, and she'd been grounded for a month.

Hopefully things would turn out better this time.

"Wait!" Everyone turned to look at Vanessa. "Chloe, why can't you just go back to before they ever fired the weapon and blow it up then? Or better yet, stop the people from inventing it in the first place?"

Chloe shook her head, hating the way Vanessa's excited expression crumbled, and that she was the cause of it.

"It won't work. If I blow up the satellite then, they might just think it was a glitch or something and build another one. And I have no idea who invented it, or how many people in Washington knew about it before your father."

"You couldn't do it anyhow," Benny said. "If you blow up the satellite before you get zapped by it, then you won't have your powers. And maybe none of this happens. Or maybe it happens to someone else, and things end up even worse down the road."

"See? Benny gets it. Now, we have to get moving. I'm going to take you all to Hawaii, at a time way before all this started. There's only one problem."

"What's that?" her father asked.

"You won't be able to use your credit cards or checks, because you might end up doing it at the same time your past selves are

buying something back home. That would trigger the credit card company to investigate."

"So how're we gonna get money?" Benny spoke up.

"I'll take care of that. Give me the security codes to the bank cards and wait here."

Chloe stepped into a vortex and used the nexus to go back to her house the night before they'd all been kidnapped. She reentered the world late at night in her parents' bedroom. They continued sleeping, oblivious to the fact that Garcia's extraction team sat right outside the house, waiting for the signal to move in and grab them.

The temptation to transport herself to their vehicles and plant grenades under each one was so great she had to pause and take several deep breaths.

This isn't the time or place. Stick with your plan.

She slipped her father's wallet from his pants and removed the ATM card, along with several of his credit cards. Since her current-time self was asleep at Vanessa's, there was no chance of meeting herself anywhere else in town. She moved on to an all-night ATM, where she withdrew the maximum amount, five hundred dollars. She did the same with the credit cards, until she had two thousand dollars.

Standing in front of the bank, she couldn't help wondering what it would be like to just teleport into the vault and help herself to a wad of cash. Enough so that they could all disappear forever in some foreign country and live like millionaires. But then she remembered they probably had dozens of security cameras and she'd most likely leave some kind of evidence behind, like hair or fingerprints.

I'm not ready to take that kind of chance. Not yet. And hopefully never.

Back at the lake, she gave her father the money and told him

what she'd done. "When we get to Hawaii, we'll find a cheap hotel that takes cash. Get a couple of rooms and wait for me." She gave her parents a hug and was surprised when Benny let her give him one, too. Then she turned to Vanessa.

"Don't bother saying goodbye. I'm coming with you." Vanessa crossed her arms and stepped back from Chloe.

"No, you can't. It's too dangerous. Stay with my parents." The look on Vanessa's face told her she was ready to argue this one for as long as it took.

"Not." Chloe shook her head. She'd already lost Vanessa once; she wasn't taking the chance of losing her again. "Nothing you say will change my mind."

"You have to let me. You're going back there to kill my father. I want to be there. I want to pull the trigger."

Except maybe that.

"What?"

A tear ran down Vanessa's face, but she didn't wipe it away. "He ordered his men to kill all of us. Me, his own daughter. He's using people like guinea pigs. I hate him, Chloe. I used to think I hated him, but that was nothing. Now I know what real hate is. You might not have it in you to pull the trigger when the time comes, but I do."

"Vanessa, you don't know what I'm capable of. I already shot him once, and I used the nexus to kill that soldier who tried to shoot you all."

Chloe's mother gasped and Aldo hushed her.

"That was self-defense. If you had to, could you walk up to my father and just shoot him? Stick the gun in his stomach and pull the trigger? 'Cause I know I can."

"You think you can. What if you do it, and then afterward you carry that guilt around, like, forever?"

"Maybe I will. But I'll know I did the right thing."

Chloe kicked sand, her frustration a boiling pit inside her that demanded physical action. How could she let Vanessa do something like this?

How could she not?

They'd always been there for each other, supported each other's decisions. So how was it all right to say, 'I'm going to kill your father,' but not give Vanessa the choice to do it herself?

"Fine." She pulled out one of her pistols and handed it over. Benny let out a small whistle at the sight of it but for once he didn't say anything, for which Chloe was immensely grateful.

Vanessa took it and placed it in the waistband of her jeans. "Thank you."

"Chloe, no. Don't..."

"Mom, we're going. No more talk."

Kerri closed her mouth, a look on her face that Chloe had never seen before.

Respect? Or disgust?

She located a vortex. "Everyone join hands and come with me."

Three minutes later, she and Vanessa looked out through a window in the nexus as her parents and Benny made their way down Kuhio Avenue in Waikiki, in search of a hotel.

Chloe let the window fade away, took a deep breath. "Are you sure you're ready?"

No emotion showed on Vanessa's face. Until you looked close at her eyes. Even with all of the sparkling lights from the nexus reflecting in them, they were cold and hard.

"Let's just end this, so we can start our lives over."

Chloe brought up a window to the military base, shifted it around until she found Vanessa's father.

In a cell. With General Polk standing in front of him, a large pistol aimed at Garcia's chest.

"Looks like we're just in time."

"Aren't we going to stop him?" Vanessa nudged Chloe towards the window.

"What? You came with me to shoot your father, Vanessa. Now you want us to risk our lives to save him? Why not let Polk do it for us, and then we can take Polk out afterwards?"

"You don't understand!"

Chloe started to respond, but Vanessa grabbed Chloe's hand, stepped forward, and dragged them both from one reality to the next.

"Vanessa..."

The scene shifted around Chloe.

"...wait!"

They emerged less than three feet away from Polk, who turned quickly at the sound of Chloe's voice, bringing the gun to bear on them. Before he could pull the trigger, Vanessa put her shoulder down and barreled into his gun arm, sending the weapon to the floor. Polk drew back his other hand to throw a punch at Vanessa, but then Chloe's erratic future-sight kicked in and showed her what he planned to do, and she had her own gun out and pointed right at his face while his fist was still moving back.

"Don't do it, Polk." She held the gun in both hands, making sure it didn't shake. "Back away."

Polk's eyes narrowed and for a moment she thought he'd ignore her warning, but then he did as he was told, stepping back several steps.

"Vanessa!" Colonel Garcia moved forward, his arms open wide. "I'm so glad to see you. He was going to kill me."

Vanessa drew her pistol and aimed it at her father. "Why should I care?"

"What are you doing?" Garcia stopped, his arms still spread. His eyes widened slightly but his smile barely faltered. "He's your

enemy, not me. Ask your friend. I already offered the both of you and her family complete freedom in return for my life."

"Really? Does that mean you've called off the execution of your own daughter?"

Chloe kept her gaze on Polk, not trusting him as far as she could throw him from one reality to the next, but the majority of her attention stayed focused on the father-daughter confrontation going on next to her. She risked a quick glance in their direction. The aura surrounding the Colonel radiated harsh purple hatred mixed with yellow fear and green dishonesty. She wondered briefly if Vanessa was aware of her father's duplicity, but then saw the cold anger in Vanessa's face that mirrored in the ice-blue aura pulsating around her, and knew there was nothing to worry about.

Seeing her lover like that, Chloe had no doubt Vanessa could pull the trigger. She turned her eyes back to Polk, while continuing to listen to the conversation.

"Vanessa, you don't believe I'd actually be capable of that, do you? That was Polk and Ferguson's idea. I just pretended to go along with it. You'd have been sent somewhere safe, given another identity. Of course, once Chloe got away and turned the tables on them, you would have been free to leave with her anyway."

"I don't believe you. I think you would have put a bullet into me the moment you had a chance."

"Me? No, I..."

The unexpected roar of a gun made Chloe jump and sent her heart into sudden overdrive.

"Vanessa!" She turned, a sudden vision of her girlfriend on the ground, dying, filling her head.

Instead, she watched as Colonel Garcia took two steps backwards, one hand outstretched towards his daughter, the other pressed against a bloody stain rapidly spreading across his chest.

Vanessa stood statue-still, the gun still clenched in her hands.

Only her eyes, hard and distant, moved as they followed her father's final steps.

"Damn you, child..." Blood bubbled out of his mouth and red froth drooled down his chin. He backed into the cot and then slowly collapsed to the floor.

"The hell with you." Vanessa whispered.

"Oh, God, Vanessa, why did you..." Chloe caught the movement from the corner of her eye as Polk dove for his gun, and she had time for a belated thought—*why can't I see into the freaking future when I need to?* —before her finger tightened on the trigger.

Polk cried out and landed hard on his chest but didn't stop scrabbling for his weapon. Chloe fired again and cement chips exploded on the wall over the general's head. Then he got to his knees, the gun coming up. The sound of gunshots was deafening in the small space, but Chloe still heard the insect buzz of a bullet by her right ear. She cried out and the gun fell from her hands.

Time seemed to slow down for Chloe, although she had no idea if it was another of her abilities causing the phenomenon or just shock. She saw the blood stain on Polk's thigh. Saw his eyes narrow as he took aim at Vanessa, who was bringing her own gun around. Saw that the nearest gateway was behind Vanessa, several feet away.

No!

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

"Everybody drop their weapons!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Chloe turned at the unexpected voice.

Five men dressed in black suits stood at the door to the cell, guns drawn.

This time Chloe's future vision worked the way it was supposed to, delivering a terrifying scenario in quarter speed. Polk's first shot took Vanessa in the stomach; his second in the chest. Blood sprayed as she tumbled over. Then he ducked behind the cot to exchange fire with the strangers.

No way, asshole. Not this time.

Chloe grabbed Vanessa and dragged her into the nexus. They landed in a pile and Chloe rolled over to watch through the window she'd left open.

Polk reacted instantly to their disappearance, turning and firing at the newcomers. One of his shots caught a man in the arm and spun him sideways. Two men returned fire as Polk ducked down. The shots sailed through the space where Chloe and Vanessa had stood moments before and thudded into the wall over his head.

The hell with this.

She grabbed Vanessa's gun from the floor of the tunnel and leaned out, firing two shots in quick succession. The first one missed Polk by inches. The second struck him in the arm and his gun fell from his hand as he toppled over.

"Cease fire!"

Chloe retreated back into the nexus but stayed close to the window so she could see and hear what was happening.

"Jefferson, help Jones. Chalmers, Davis, take care of the General. I want him bandaged and on his way in twenty." The man who'd spoken, a tall blond with a slightly crooked nose, holstered his gun and stepped to the side as two individuals lifted the general up and half-walked, half-dragged him out of the cell.

Polk never spoke a word, never looked back.

"Miss Olivetti, you can return now. I promise you, it's safe." The blond man stared at the place where they'd disappeared. He didn't smile, just glanced around with pale, murky, blue eyes. Chloe shifted her vision, but the stranger's aura was just as emotionless and neutral as his eyes. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or bad.

The man tilted his head slightly. "If you can hear me, I'd really like to speak with you. First off, to thank you for doing our job for us. And second, I have information I think you'll be interested in. I can wait for you to return from, well, wherever it is you go. But only," he glanced at his watch, "for another nineteen minutes. Then I'm on a plane back to Washington."

Sparks of green flickered in his aura. He was telling the truth, whatever that might mean. Plus, he had Polk, which meant her job wasn't finished.

Curiosity and caution warred inside her. She needed more information. But what if it was a trap?

Dammit! Why can't anything go right?

"I just want to talk. If you don't feel safe, you can always disappear. Look, I'll even put my gun on the floor." He bent down, put the pistol by his foot, and kicked it several feet away.

"Crap." Chloe took Vanessa by the hand. "C'mon."

"Are you sure?" Vanessa asked.

"No, but I need to know what's going on."

They stepped into the room just far enough to be seen, but Chloe kept them right next to the whirling gateway back into the nexus while she addressed the blond stranger.

"Funny, I don't feel safe. You look like FBI or CIA to me."

He nodded. "Close. A pleasure to meet you, Chloe. And you, Ms. Garcia."

"So now what? You take us back with your to Washington?"

"No, just the opposite. You're free to go. Not that I could stop you, I'm guessing." The man crossed his arms and continued to stare.

"Sure, for now. But, like, you've got your agents all over the world, waiting for us to appear, right? So you can do what? Have a sniper pick us off from a rooftop somewhere? Gas us in the middle of the night? Or maybe slip poison into our food?" Chloe tensed, ready to pull Vanessa into the nexus.

"Ms. Olivetti, if we wanted you dead, or taken prisoner, we'd have done it already, and I wouldn't have tipped our hand by announcing ourselves to you ahead of time. We've been watching Polk and Ferguson—and your father, Ms. Garcia—for a while now. Frankly, this whole experiment was unsanctioned. I'm just sorry we didn't act sooner. A lot of unpleasantness could have been avoided."

"Unpleasantness? Do you know what the hell those people did to us?"

He shook his head. "Some, but I gather not everything. I am

truly sorry. But it's all over, now. You have nothing to fear anymore."

"Bullshit." Vanessa's voice dripped venom. "That's not how the government works."

Chloe gave Vanessa's hand a grateful squeeze "What she said goes double for me. I'm supposed to believe that after everything that's happened, you're not interested in me or my powers anymore?"

"As a matter of fact, that's exactly what we'd like you to believe, yes. Because it's the truth."

For the first time, the man allowed a small smile to break through his stony facade. A minor upturning of the corners of his mouth, but it was enough to transform his nondescript face into something approaching attractiveness, in a smoldering, understated way. Against her better judgment, Chloe felt herself responding to that smile, relaxing a tiny bit.

"Of course," the man continued, "I understand how that would be hard for you to do. That's why I brought this." He pulled a thick manila envelope from his inside jacket pocket, unfolded it, and held it out to her.

"What's that?" Chloe made no move to take it from him. She had no intention of giving up her one advantage: standing next to a gateway.

With a small shrug, he tossed it onto the cot. "It's a letter from the Secretary of Defense, acknowledging the tremendous assistance you, Ms. Garcia, and your family provided in the apprehension of Generals Polk and Ferguson, and Colonel Garcia, who have been classified as traitors to the United States of America and charged with murder, conducting unlawful experiments against human subjects, and a variety of high tech criminal acts. It also states that the government apologizes for any physical or emotional distress these individuals caused you, will compensate you for all

property damages and loss of income, guarantees your total freedom as citizens, and grants permission for you to release the details of this entire operation to the press. Of course, we hope you won't do that."

"You're lying." Vanessa's voice carried the same chill her eyes had held when she confronted her father. "Something like this would be classified at the highest levels. The minute we try to tell someone, we'll all disappear."

The semi-handsome man exhaled slowly, and for the first time Chloe noticed signs of stress, or exhaustion, scattered through his aura. "Ms. Garcia. Obviously, we'd prefer that none of this ever came to light. It would be a huge black mark against the U.S., and create an uproar not only among the general public, but also within the various military agencies of other countries. Especially our enemies. But from your standpoint, even more important would be the fact that Chloe—and the rest of you, by association—would never have a private life again. In fact, things would be far worse than if you'd remained captives of the military. Once word of Chloe's abilities got around, every government and terrorist in the world would be after her."

"So what's the point? We're screwed either way."

"No, Chloe, you're not. It does leave you an option. We're offering you the chance to go back to your normal life, as best you can. We've arranged for your school to provide a test you can take at home for 'medical reasons,' so you can get your high school diploma. If you want to go to college, you can enroll at any one several online universities, paid in full by the U.S. government. A tuition fund has already been set up for you, and another for Ms. Garcia. That paperwork is in the envelope, too. Your family will be safe. In addition," he pointed at the envelope, "there is a check—a very large one, I might add—in there to cover everything else I mentioned, and more."

"And you're all just going to forget about us? Knowing the powers I have?"

"Forget? No. Enforce your rights as citizens? Yes. Although, we would like to keep you under observation. Not," he held up a hand, "to spy on you. We just want to make sure no one else is watching you. No phone taps, no guards outside the house. Only random spot checks for your own safety. Of course, we can assign guards if it makes you feel better, or, if you prefer, forget about surveillance altogether. The choice is up to you. And to ensure that, you can take those papers, make copies, and distribute them to as many attorneys as you want, to be opened in case of your unexpected disappearance or untimely death."

He held his hands out. "It's the best we can do, under the circumstances."

"Why?" Chloe and Vanessa spoke at the same time.

The blond man shrugged. "The people I work for believe that what happened to you was a once in a life time fluke. The attempts to recreate it have left more than two dozen soldiers dead or permanently disabled. The satellite is destroyed. All we have is you, and there's no way to hold you against your will. So the powers that be are trying a different approach and treating you in the way real people deserve to be treated. Maybe someday you'll help us when we need it. Maybe you won't—"

"Not a chance in hell."

"—but in either case," he continued, "we're admitting our wrongs and trying to right them. You might not believe it after all you've been through, but sometimes the government actually does the right thing."

Chloe thought about his words. It was everything she'd wanted, but now that she had it in her hands, it not only didn't seem realistic, it didn't seem like enough.

"Two other things." She looked directly at him, saw the glowing reflection of her eyes in his.

"I can't guarantee anything, but I can tell you if it's possible or not."

She had to give him credit, he didn't flinch or look away from her otherworldly stare. His aura remained a steady, subdued gray, totally unreadable.

"The Sky Strike project. I don't want it re-started."

The agent uttered a short laugh with no trace of humor in it. "You don't have to worry about that. My superiors have already agreed that the last thing we need is a group of soldiers with your powers. There'd be no way to control them. They'd probably end up turning on us. And while we're on that subject, I'm supposed to tell you it goes without saying that if you ever use your powers against the United States or any of its allies, or for any type of felony offense, all previous agreements are nullified and you'll be treated as an enemy of the state."

"The last thing I want is to become a spy."

"Good. I'd hate to see you dead." His vague smile seemed genuine, but Chloe didn't let it disarm her anger.

"I'm serious. If I hear about any more experimentation, I'll come back. And this time I'll do a lot worse than destroy a satellite. You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"Actually, I think we have a good idea of your abilities, based on the reports we've read."

"Really? Do the reports mention that I can do this?" Chloe dropped Vanessa's hand and stepped into the gateway, used the nexus to make two incursions into the past.

She timed her return to the present for exactly two seconds after she'd left. Vanessa started to ask her something, but Chloe shook her head.

The agent was nonplussed at her momentary disappearance.

"I already told you we're aware of the fact you can appear and disappear at will, and move from one place to another."

"Check your pockets."

The agent's eyes widened slightly, and he patted himself. His right hand froze when it reached his lower jacket pocket and his neutral expression faltered. The neutral glow surrounding him took on overtones of darker gray.

Chloe smiled at him. "It's a hand grenade. The label on it is HG80. It took me ten minutes to find it in the armory." She didn't mention opening a window and slipping the grenade into his pocket while he stood outside the door to the cell, preparing to give the order to enter. Better to let him guess how she did it.

He reached into his pocket and carefully pulled out the grenade. He examined it closely and then put it back in his pocket.

"Maybe we have underestimated you, but it doesn't change anything I've said."

"Fine. You've warned me not to go all rogue. I'm giving you the same warning. I'll be waiting and watching. If you try anything, it won't matter. I'll just go back in time and keep my family, and loved ones," she touched Vanessa's arm, "safe. Then I'll make sure no one is left alive who can hurt us, starting with you."

He nodded. "What was the second thing?"

"Your name."

Now the agent allowed himself a genuine grin. "It's a good thing you don't want to be a spy. You're not real good at it. You should have asked for identification right away."

The man reached into his breast pocket and drew out a square leather ID wallet. This time she reached out and took it from him.

Jackson Townsend

Defense Intelligence Agency

"Is this real?" She handed it back to him.

"You learn fast, Chloe. Let's just say my name really is Jackson, and I do work for the DIA. At least for the moment."

He slipped the wallet back into his pocket. "Well, I assume you can find your own way out. I took the liberty of placing my card in that envelope, if you ever need help."

"Help? What kind of help?" Vanessa's voice carried a note of concern.

"There are a lot of bad people in the world, Ms. Garcia. Although we're pretty sure we've rounded up anyone with any knowledge of this project, we can never be one hundred percent sure of anything." He turned to Chloe. "It's a harsh reality out there, especially now that you possess something that certain people will stop at nothing to obtain. Be careful."

Agent Townsend turned and started towards the door.

"Wait!" Chloe surprised herself by calling out to him. She didn't have a question in mind. But suddenly she didn't want him to go.

He paused, looked back at her.

She thought fast. "What, uh, happens to Polk?"

"The penalty for treason is death. But a public trial would be bad PR. Not to mention it would open a gigantic can of worms. If I were a betting man, I'd say it's likely the Army will announce his retirement, after which they'll quietly ship him off to a remote jail someplace where he'll spend the rest of his life wishing he'd never gotten involved with SkyStrike or you."

"Oh." She wanted him to keep talking, but had no idea how to do that.

"Goodbye, Ms. Olivetti, Ms. Garcia. Enjoy your lives. You've earned them."

Townsend smiled again, picked up his gun, and then made his exit, closing the door behind him.

Vanessa picked up the envelope from the bed. "I think we should do what he said."

"Yeah. We will. But there's something more important to do first."

"What's that?"

Chloe pulled Vanessa close and kissed her, deeply, something she'd been waiting to do for what seemed like months.

When they finally stopped to breathe, Chloe said, "C'mon. I'm ready for a vacay. How does two weeks in Hawaii sound?"

"What about my job?"

"No problem. We'll go back in time and you can put in for the days off!"

Hand in hand, Chloe led them into the nexus.

EPILOGUE

The facility had no name, just an identification code: UT-23. Half a mile below the surface of the Utah badlands, a circular warren of manmade caves stretched five miles out in every direction from a central point, and downward for eight stories.

Like the facility itself, the government agency operating it had no name. Members of several military and security branches made up its governing council, and all of the guards were carefully chosen members of the elite Ranger and Seal forces, men and women who had no families in the outside world and no allegiance to anything except their country.

On the seventh subfloor, two men in simple black business suits entered an unmarked room.

Inside, three technicians sat before a myriad of consoles, computer terminals, and electronic monitoring devices. A tall black man in a blue uniform with no insignia, his bald head reflecting the lights, stood with his back to the door, leaning heavily on a cane.

"How are they progressing?" the shorter of the two newcomers, the one with the brush-cut red hair, asked.

General Charles Polk turned around, one arm still wrapped in a sling. "That's why I called you. As of yet, none of them are displaying any of the abilities the Olivetti girl demonstrated, but over the past twenty-four hours some interesting developments have occurred. Bring up number three." The closest technician touched a button, and the large flat panel monitor sitting five feet above the consoles sprang to life.

A naked man sat in an almost barren room carved from the solid bedrock. The only amenities were a fold-up cot, a sink, and a toilet. The man's face was disfigured and scarred, his skin still raw where the severe burns inflicted on him hadn't yet healed. He sat with his chin in his hands, staring blankly at the floor. A series of wire leads led to a small box attached to a canvas belt around his waist, connecting him remotely to diagnostic equipment in the observation room.

A scrolling graphic at the bottom of a view screen displayed s series of vital signs: heart rate, breath rate, temperature, EEG values. Below that was a label reading Subject Name: Meade.

As the General and his two companions watched, a large lump grew out from Meade's bare back and coalesced into a third arm, complete with a perfectly formed hand. The hand commenced scratching at a patch of hair growing in on the back of his head.

"Jesus," whispered the second agent. He had blond hair and a slightly crooked nose that sat between two murky, pale blue eyes.

Its job done, the hand and arm melted back into Meade's body. Throughout the whole event, none of the readings on the screen changed, and he never opened his eyes.

"Is it always a left hand?" the red-haired agent asked. Both Polk and the agent who currently used the name Jackson Townsend turned and looked at him.

"Nice catch, Clark," Townsend commented.

One of the technicians answered. "No, sir. It can be left or right. And on two occasions, he formed a complete pair of appendages at the same time, both left and right."

Polk reached over the technician's shoulder and touched another switch. The image on the screen split into five distinct views, each one showing a different person, all of them in similar cells.

"Meade is the furthest along. The other survivors are just beginning to demonstrate various abilities. Initial data seems to indicate that each person is developing distinctive talents. One of our team members has postulated how this might be due to individual brain structures, and how the energy beam affected them. That's one avenue we're pursuing, to see if there's a way of determining ahead of time what powers exposure will bring out, based on genetics. Another theory has to do with the energy setting of the beam, that maybe different wavelengths cause different changes."

"What are you doing to prevent any problems with the subjects?" Townsend asked.

Polk gestured for them to move away from the technicians. Although two weeks had passed since he'd been shot, he still needed his cane to get around. "They're all heavily sedated. Barely conscious, in fact. We can't prepare a definitive testing protocol until we know in what ways each individuals' abilities are expressing. Part of the testing will involve a detailed evaluation of psychological status. And of course, as we've already discussed, any individuals showing the slightest capabilities in telekinesis, or any abilities that could be considered a serious threat to the security of the project, will be kept completely sedated until such a time as we can determine how to handle them safely."

"I take it you've implanted all of them with tracking devices?" Townsend asked.

"Yes, that was done first thing. In the chest, behind the ribs. Only a surgeon would be ale to remove them."

Clark nodded. "Good. And the generator?"

"We'll have the new model ready to begin experimentation next month. It will be housed in a special cavern below sub-floor eight."

"Is there any chance the Olivetti girl will be able to trace the energy pattern back to us?"

"We don't believe so, but we have no way to know for sure."

"I assume you've taken precautions?" Townsend ran his hands along his pockets, a habit he'd picked up after his encounter with Chloe Olivetti. Ever since that day, he'd had regular nightmares about finding a grenade, only this time with the pin missing.

"Every room in the base is armed with video devices programmed specifically to detect her presence. We're monitoring for facial recognition, body size, estimated weight, DNA trace, and voice. Each person's badge is also registered with the central computer, and a complete body count is performed every ten seconds and then compared to the number of individuals logged into the security database. Within five seconds of detecting Olivetti's presence, a highly potent gas is automatically released at high pressure into whatever room she is occupying, which will render her unconscious faster than she can escape into her alternate reality."

"I wouldn't be so sure. She can do a lot of damage in five seconds."

Polk's eyes narrowed. "I'm well aware of what she can do, Mr. Townsend. I'm also aware that it was you who convinced her no more threats existed against her. Would you care to explain how

you were able to do that when she can tell whenever a person is lying by the changes in their aura?"

Townsend didn't respond, merely stared back at Polk. There was no need to let anyone know he'd been specifically chosen for the Olivetti mission because of his own ability to defeat any lie detector ever built. Of course, that had been a calculated risk. No one had any idea if that would translate to fooling Chloe's extraordinary talents. Luckily for all of them, it had.

The face-off went on for a few more seconds before Polk finally looked away.

"Anyhow, we can't do better than five seconds. It'll have to be fast enough."

"Very good, General." The red-haired agent took a step closer to Polk. "We'll be staying a few days to monitor the project. And you. Please remember, you've got a lot more than a promotion riding on this."

"I understand perfectly, Agent Clark."

"We'll expect a full briefing tomorrow morning." Clark strode out into the hallway, his leather soles soundless on the thick carpeting covering the naked stone floor.

Townsend nodded once at Polk and followed.

THAT NIGHT, alone in his assigned quarters, Jackson Townsend called up a special program on his laptop. After double-checking the security settings, he tapped the curser on a button marked 'locate.'

A moment later a map of Honolulu showed on the screen. A red dot flashed somewhere inland from Waikiki Beach. He zoomed in until he had a clear picture of Kuhio Avenue.

At the bottom of the screen, an address and hotel name appeared in red letters.

She was still in Hawaii.

He wondered how fast she'd arrive when the testing started.

And if he'd survive long enough to put his plan in motion.

— THE END —

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A life-long resident of New York's haunted Hudson Valley, is the author of 7 novels, including the YA novels Carnival of Fear and Ghosts of Coronado Bay, along with 10 novellas, and more than 75 short stories. He's been a finalist for both the Bram Stoker Award® (*The Cure*, *Ghosts of Coronado Bay*) and ITW Thriller Award (*The Burning Time*). His next novel is *Sins of the Father*. He grew up enthralled with the horror movies and books of the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. Which explains a lot. Visit him at www.jgfaherty.com.


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