

SHADOW GAMES

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CHAPTER 1

August 11, 2013

1:16 a.m.

Emily Heart pushed through the burning pain in her chest and thigh muscles, convincing her legs to run faster. She dodged a park bench before jumping over a homeless man lying under a pile of cardboard.

Her mind's eye could see the gunman aiming his sights at the back of her head and squeezing the trigger, sending the bullet out of the barrel and downrange with supersonic intent. She leaned to the left, letting the round whiz past her fifteen-year-old body. It took out the headlight of a cement truck parked across the street near the alley behind Glassford Street.

The flickering specks of blue light were fading in her vision. It wouldn't be long before she turned normal again. She would then be unable to see through the gunman's eyes, or sense the cold blackness of hate she could sense in his heart.

She bent forward at the waist, using a low-profile running pattern, hoping she'd make it safely to the alley. She ran through the grass at the edge of the park, over the sidewalk and hit the asphalt, racing across the empty lanes of the street.

More gunshots rang out, one after another in quick succession. She couldn't see where the bullets were headed, telling her the link with the shooter was broken. Bricks and mortar exploded all around her as the hailstorm of rounds missed her. They hit the side wall of an old warehouse covered in spray paint and gang signs. She turned right, just before the cement truck, and ran down the alley.

"Don't lose me!" she yelled at Junie, who was sprinting in front of her, a book bag bouncing on the back of her rail-thin body. Emily was falling behind, unable to keep up with the speed and endurance of her twelve-year-old friend from the homeless shelter.

A minute later, she heard another round of weapons fire erupt as she was nearing the far end of the block-long corridor, plinking and ricocheting off the walls around her. She felt the wisp of a bullet fly through strands of her flowing red hair. It took out the painted window on the wall ahead of her, shattering it into a million shards of colored glass.

She looked back and saw the gang leader standing at the entrance to the alley, changing the magazine in his weapon. His crew came running into view, just catching up to him.

She made the corner and ran further down the passageway, which stank of garbage and sewage. She hurdled a pothole, then flew over a garbage can laying on its side, almost losing her balance in the process. But she managed to keep her feet under her while her shoes pounded the pavement ahead.

Faster, she told herself, *faster!* She pushed her feet to their tripping point, trying to draw more blood and oxygen than her teenage body could deliver. Her legs wanted to quit—so did her lungs—but she wouldn't let them.

She pressed on, looking ahead, trying to spot Junie, but she couldn't see her anymore. She turned another corner and saw a scrawny, dirt-covered leg sticking out from behind a pile of stained mattresses leaning against the wall. She ducked in and grabbed her friend by the shoulder, dragging her eighty-pound frame forward.

"Run, baby, run! Don't stop! One more corner and we're there! It's on the left!"

Emily had learned over the past two years of living on the streets of Phoenix that the blistering summers were endless and miserable, and so were the nights, keeping most of the normal people indoors. She knew that nobody was watching, and nobody cared. There would be no rescue. Not at this time of night, and not in this part of town. It was up to her to get Junie to safety before the shooter and his crew killed her.

She felt a familiar tingle start to grow at the base of her spine when she turned the last corner. "Oh, no! Not now! Not again!" she cried, trying to steady her nerves as she caught up to Junie, who was squeezing her skinny body behind the dumpster.

She couldn't let it happen. Not so soon. She'd barely recovered from the last time. She needed to focus all her attention on Junie, and let the balance of her emotions run dry. It had only been four days since she'd met her fiery companion in the homeless shelter, but she felt a strong connection with this girl, even though she barely knew her. She didn't know why, but something inside of her told her to protect Junie. She was important somehow, not just another homeless girl with a deadbeat mother nobody cared about.

She followed Junie behind the garbage bin and into the hidden doorway; darkness engulfed them. "Down the stairs. And stay quiet," she told Junie in a whisper, locking the door behind her.

"But I can't see."

"Go slow and use the handrails. There are twelve steps. Count 'em as you go."

They made it down the steps and through another doorway that led into a basement storeroom. It was piled high with junk and old restaurant equipment that had been mothballed by the owner. Emily knew this place well, spending at least one night a week there in recent months. It was her secret hiding place where she could escape the insanity of the city.

An emergency exit sign hung over the inside of the door that she'd just entered, showering an eerie redness over the scene. On the wall to the left stood another door. It led to a flight of stairs that rose up to the kitchen of a high-end Italian restaurant. Emily had made friends

with the eighteen-year-old busboy, Parker, who was also a volunteer at one of the local shelters. When he was the last one to leave for the night, he'd push the red dumpster close to the door as a signal to Emily that the door was unlocked and she was welcome. She'd swoop in around midnight, and lock the door behind her.

"Over here," Emily said, gesturing to a huge metal cabinet with rusty hinges that was standing next to a stack of Styrofoam coolers. "I think we lost them."

Junie's chest heaved in and out as it worked to recharge her lungs after the long run. "How do you know?"

"I can't feel them anymore," Emily replied, equally as winded.

Emily quickly opened the white cooler sitting on top and put her hand inside, pulling out a cellophane-wrapped peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a banana. As usual, Parker had left the food for her in the top cooler with a chilled Pepsi acting as ice to keep the contents from spoiling until she arrived. She tore the cellophane off, split the bread down the middle, and gave half of it to Junie.

"Here, eat while you can," she said, before stuffing the sandwich into her mouth, chewing it with abandon.

Junie did the same, smiling, with peanut butter stuck to her teeth. "Sea food," she said with her mouth full.

Emily laughed. "We have a banana for dessert."

She popped the Pepsi open and waited to see if the contents would bubble up. It did. She sucked the cola off the top of the can until the carbonation settled down, then gave the soda to her friend.

Junie guzzled several swigs before giving it back to her. Emily swished the can around in a circle to test its volume—only a quarter of the liquid remained. Emily finished her half of the sandwich, then washed it down with the last bit of Pepsi.

They plopped down against the wall beside the cabinet. Junie wrapped her arms around her knees, keeping the dual-strap backpack sandwiched between her thighs and flat chest.

"Junie, that's not yours. Where did you get it?"

"I—" Junie hesitated. "I took it."

Emily sighed, feeling disappointment spread across her body. "What's in it?"

She shrugged. "I snatched it from those boys right before you showed up."

"Lemme see."

Junie gave her the backpack.

Emily unzipped it and peered inside. "Uh-oh," Emily groaned. "We're in big trouble."

She tipped it to the side and opened it wide so Junie could see the money inside. Lots of it. Bundles and bundles of wrinkled \$100 bills, each wrapped with a blue rubber band and slip of notepaper with a four-digit number written on it.

* * *

Outside, the group of West Side Locos that had been pursuing the two street girls were becoming agitated. Their leader, Flaco, was more than agitated: he was pissed. The chase had taken them several blocks outside of their home turf and into enemy territory. He knew it was only a matter of time before a member of the Glassford Gatos noticed their trespass. His crew was light, no match for a full-out fight with a two-dozen-strong gang.

The crew stood in a loose bunch on the sidewalk at the far end of the alley where the girls had disappeared. Flaco was sure that the girls couldn't have made it all the way to the end before his crew rounded the corner. They must be hiding in the alley somewhere.

"Where'd they go?" he yelled at his lieutenant, Nesto, shoving him against the wall, his gun pointed up under his chin. "*El stupido!* You let that street *chica* snatch the buy money?"

Nesto shoved him back, hard.

"Get the fuck off me!" he yelled. "I didn't do anything. She was already there. It was your dumb-ass idea to set up the buy at the rec center. Back the fuck up."

Flaco backed away, lowering his gun. He looked down the alley, the way they had come.

"Okay. They have to be in this alley somewhere. No way they made it all the way through here before us. Split up. You two, this side; you two, that side," he said, gesturing down the alley. "Search everywhere. Garbage cans, dumpsters, everything. We gotta get it back. Nesto, go back to the other end and keep eyes. I got this side."

The crew split up, following his orders.

Flaco knew that if they didn't find the money, he was a dead man. His uncle would kill him without a second's remorse. He'd trusted him to make this drop with the Russians—the first really big one since he'd decided to quit high school and join the family business. He paced back and forth, trying to find a way out of the situation. He was about to give up on the search when one of his crew whistled from down the alley. It was the new kid, barely 14 years old. What was his name? Derek? Kid didn't look Latino, but he swore he'd grown up in Hope Gardens on the West Side. Not that it mattered. His uncle told him to take him along and break him in, so he did. "Do as you're told, and don't ask questions" was a phrase that he knew all too well.

The new kid was waving at him to come take a look at something.

Flaco ran down the alley at full speed. "What you got?"

"Doorway," Derek replied, pushing the dumpster away from the wall. He pointed at the doorframe where a torn shred of clothing was hanging on a nail. "Check it out. Wasn't the older girl wearing a blue T-shirt?"

Flaco smiled. "We got 'em. Good eyes, new boot."

Flaco heard a cry from Nesto, who was running toward them in a full gallop. "*Policía! Policía!*"

A police cruiser came screeching to a halt, blocking the alley at the end where they'd originally entered. The cop gave the siren a quick double blast and then called over the loudspeaker.

"You there! Stop where you are! On the ground! Hands behind your head!"

Flaco and his crew took off running in the opposite direction, but another police cruiser with lights flashing and engine roaring skidded into the mouth of the alley, trapping them.

"This way!" Flaco yelled, instantly reversing direction. He ran a few feet, then veered and kicked in the door that the new kid had found. He ran into darkness, not expecting the ground to disappear from under his feet. He yelled as he fell down the void face-first. He bounced and flipped, cracking his head on one of the steps on the way to the bottom.

* * *

Emily's spine tingled again, deep down at the base, but the tingle was stronger than before. She knew *it* was coming, and she wasn't going to be able to stop it this time. The gunshots must have started the countdown. Guns always sent her mind into a blur and her heart racing, charging her body with a rush of uncontrolled emotions that seemed to act as the trigger for the blue light. Gunfire and gangs were two things that she had fought hard to avoid during her time on the streets.

The jump was coming, but she couldn't leave Junie to fend for herself. She needed to think of something. She usually had seventeen minutes from the first tingle until the blue light consumed her and she'd vanish. The pre-jump process used to proceed like clockwork, but lately it had been different. The lead time was now ten minutes, tops, from the first indicator to the last moment. Barely enough time to find seclusion before it happened. She didn't understand why the timer suddenly decided to change, it just had.

Now that she had a friend in tow, she couldn't slip away into the shadows and let it take her. Not with Junie depending on her. *This is why you never break the rules*, she scolded herself, as she reviewed the list in her head. Her mind highlighted rule number seven in bold—*never get involved; nothing good ever comes from it*.

Junie was babbling on and on, trying to explain what she was doing on the playground next to the shelter in the middle of the night, and why she'd stolen a backpack from a bunch of West Side Locos.

"I was sitting in my secret place under that little arbor thing, ya know, in the corner by the bathrooms. I was waiting for some drunk to finish his dump and leave so I could wash up. I heard the Locos coming up the walkway through the trees by the picnic tables so I hid. I knew the bag was important because they were arguing about it. Then they all turned their backs and kept yelling at each other. English mostly, but some Spanish sprinkled in. They just left it sitting there on the picnic table. I thought I could sneak up and grab it and get away, then sell whatever

was in it. I hate living in that shelter, Em. Too much touching. I don't like all those hugs, and people wanting to give me a bath all the time. They think they have to help me just because Mom leaves me alone for an hour to go out and get high. Plus it smells like vomit all the time."

The tingle in Emily's spine crept up to her shoulder blades, confirming what she already knew—the countdown had started.

"Shhhhh," she said, covering Junie's mouth with her hand. "I hear voices outside."

"Are they coming in?"

"I don't know. I can't sense them. The walls must be blocking."

They listened. There were muffled voices just outside the door, at the top of the stairs where the dumpster had hid their escape route. Emily's pulse started to pound even more, thumping in her eardrums. The tingly feeling shot up to her neck. She took a deep breath, trying to focus her thoughts away from the ticking bomb inside of her. She had to do something with Junie, and fast. She only had minutes.

"We have to get out of here," she whispered. "We can sneak out through the upstairs—it's a restaurant, and they close early. I doubt anyone is there this late, but we'll probably set off the alarm when we leave."

"Alarm?"

"Do you remember my friend Parker that I told you about? The busboy?"

She nodded.

"He disabled the sensors on the back door so I can sleep here whenever it's raining, or when he leaves food out for me. Nobody ever comes down here except him when he takes the trash out, so he leaves food for me whenever his boss leaves early. I never go beyond this basement. That's our deal. But we don't have a choice this time. Just stick close and we'll be fine. If I run, you run. Got it?"

Junie's eyes widened. She looked scared, but she nodded.

They got up and made their way across the room as shouting rang out from the alley above. They froze. Emily heard a police siren chirp twice, then an amplified voice that sounded like it was coming over a loudspeaker. Shit. Cops. Definitely cops.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"The Locos are trying to kick the door in!" Junie said.

Thump! Thump! Crack! The door at the top of the stairs to the alley slammed open, and one of the West Siders came tumbling down head over heels. He fell through the door at the bottom and landed on his side in a heap, just inside the entrance of the storeroom. His eyes were closed and his head was bloody. He started to moan.

Junie screamed.

Emily covered her mouth.

"Flaco?" a Latino voice called out from the top of the stairs. "Flaco? You okay?"

Emily held a finger to her mouth, reminding Junie to be quiet.

The same voice spoke again. "Send Derek down to check." A few moments later, footsteps pounded the wooden steps, getting louder with each beat.

"Run!" Emily whispered in Junie's ear, shoving Junie across the room toward the door that led to the kitchen upstairs. Junie opened the door and ran up the steps. Emily was about to follow her friend, but stopped when she heard another person breathing heavily behind her. Something told her to turn and look at him. It felt like curiosity, but it was more than that.

He was young—too young. Maybe a little younger than she. The red glow of the exit sign made it difficult to be sure, but his spiked hair looked to be jet-black, with triangle sections cut down to the scalp above his ears. His eyes were either blue or green. She hoped blue. Tattoos covered both of his forearms like a sleeve, and a single gold earring hung down below his left ear. She didn't recognize its unique shape—maybe it was a symbol, or something that he'd made. He was two inches taller than she, with high cheekbones that perfectly offset his narrow, aquiline nose and full lips.

Emily couldn't help herself. She stared into the eyes of the pretty boy. A thought came unbidden into her mind: *he's way too cute to be part of this.*

"Damn girl, you're smokin'," he said, with a voice much lower than she had expected. His eyes moved down across her figure, then back up.

She smiled when he made eye contact with her again, sensing that he wasn't going to shoot. He was calm and quiet on the inside. There was no malice in his thoughts, just a growing feeling of desire that excited her.

He lowered his gun.

She relaxed.

Then a voice came flooding down the stairs, as did more footsteps, breaking the calm. "Derek?"

Derek bolted across the room at her. Emily came to her senses and lashed out with her right foot, just like Master Liu had taught her. The lightning-fast front kick struck him in the groin and he fell back to the doorway and landed on top of Flaco, temporarily blocking access for the rest of their crew.

Emily ran upstairs and shut the door behind her, jamming a metal garbage can under the doorknob to slow the gang down.

Junie stepped out of the shadows in the dimly lit kitchen. She was holding a stainless steel skillet cocked by her ear, ready to brain whoever came up the steps.

"It's me!" Emily hissed, taking the weapon from her friend. She put it on the counter next to the prep station. "Hurry, out the front. This way."

She ran past Junie through the double swing doors where the dining room of the elegant restaurant was waiting. Lights from the street cast shadows across the empty chairs, wooden tables, and the bubbling lobster tank. The tables were covered with white tablecloths and folded

linen napkins, wineglasses, and elegant cutlery. The floor was spotless and shiny, and there was a fresh scent of pine in the air.

Emily felt a tremor rise up through her body. What had begun as a tingle in her spine was now an overwhelming, full-body sensation. She felt electrified and alive, like she always did right before a jump, meaning that her senses had now been supercharged, allowing her to have visions of the immediate future. Normally, she would use this ability to know where to hide until the jump came and she could disappear. But this time, she couldn't just use her abilities to protect herself. She had to make sure Junie would be okay before she vanished.

She knew that another thug was about to start kicking at the door to the kitchen behind her, and then bolt through it and find his way into the dining area, where he'd start shooting his machine gun. She could sense his plans, and felt the anger boiling inside his chest. It wasn't the pretty boy that she'd kicked in the basement. This one was itching to kill.

She waited a few seconds for what she knew would come next. It did—the extra strength that hard-charged her muscles, allowing her to become stronger and faster, but only for a short time. It would fade from her body the moment time began to slow down, which was the last step in the process right before the jump.

She scooped Junie in her arms like a rag doll, ran across the dining room in a flash, and dove over a low wall that separated the foyer from the dining room. Junie sat in a ball, clutching the backpack to her chest, holding onto it for dear life.

"You know they don't serve peanut butter in a place like this," Junie mumbled.

"What?"

"My mom used to be a hostess, so I know. Your friend must have brought it from home. I think he likes you."

She took Junie's head in her hands and looked her in the eyes. "Listen to me. We don't have much time. As soon as I'm gone, wait for the glass to break on the front window. Then go through it and run outside. Hide the backpack somewhere safe and go find the cops."

"Cops? We don't like cops!"

"This time we do. They'll protect you. They're holding back now, but they'll be here in a few minutes."

"When do I run, again?"

"After I'm gone, you'll hear gunfire, but don't be afraid. The bullets won't be coming at you. A man will scream, and then glass will break. That's when you run. After the glass breaks. Got it?"

Junie gulped as tears began to flow, but she seemed to pull it together. She sniffed and nodded. "Thank you, Em."

"You should use a tablecloth so you don't get cut," she said, helping Junie put her backpack on.

"When will I see you again?"

“It might take me a while, but I’ll find you. Now cover your ears, and don’t scream when you hear gunshots. He won’t be aiming at you. Just wait for the glass.”

Emily heard the double doors swing open and smash against the walls on either side of them.

Emily took a breath and steadied herself for what she was about to do. The closer she got to a jump, the more it happened: time got slow and she got fast, but only for about fifteen seconds of her time immediately preceding a jump.

She felt the blue energy rise up through her body, telling her that it was time to act.

She sprang over the wall and ran at the gunman in a cloud of blue. She could see three bullets just leaving his gun, hanging in midair, with smoke trails behind them. She touched the bottom of each bullet with her finger as she zipped past them, then grabbed the wrist on the man’s gun hand and added a twisting force to it.

She turned her attention to the second villain who had been frozen in time, stepping through the double swing doors. There was another man in the kitchen behind him, but she didn’t see the pretty boy, Derek, anywhere. She grabbed the second man’s shoulders and spun him around so that his gun was facing the third man, who was not far behind. She gently touched the trigger finger of the second gunman, then moved to the third Loco and did the same with his trigger finger.

She dashed out of the kitchen and into the dining room, where she applied pressure to the underside of a table built to seat eight people, calculating the trajectory of its flight in her head.

She knelt on the ground, then curled herself into the fetal position and waited for the last second of the countdown to tick by. It did.

The jump pain hit as her body began to sizzle with blue lines of energy, like tiny lightning bolts crisscrossing her skin. A searing bolt of agony shot from the back of her skull to the center of her forehead, just as she was consumed by the blue fire and vanished.

* * *

Junie heard things happen just as Emily had described: first there were three shots of gunfire that tore through the ceiling panels above her, then a man screaming in pain, then more gunshots, then more screaming, then glass breaking, and a second after that, the alarm system began to wail.

She took a deep breath and ran to the front window, seeing a man on his knees holding his wrist, and two bodies a little further back lying on the floor, bleeding from their chests. She snatched a tablecloth, stepped on the wooden chair closest to the broken window, spread the tablecloth over the bottom of the frame, and climbed out. She heard sirens coming from the right, but she decided to go left instead, running as fast as her feet could take her.

CHAPTER 2

August 11, 2013

4:23 a.m.

Emily woke up after her time jump from the restaurant, feeling as though her entire body had been squeezed through a sausage press and stuck in an oven. Every inch of her skin was burning from the inside out, and her bones ached. The pressure inside her head was intense, making her skull feel every thunderous beat of her racing pulse. She licked her lips and tried to swallow, but there was no saliva to force it down. A twinge of pain hit her stomach, highlighting the endless flip-flops going on inside of it. She wanted to vomit, but didn't. She held it together, somehow.

The aroma of freshly turned soil, pine needles, and her own sweat filled her nostrils. The time jumps were always accompanied by a massive adrenaline dump, which left her completely spent, as if she'd just run a marathon. Jumps also left her naked. She'd learned quickly that the blue fire consumed whatever clothes she was wearing and sent only organic, living matter through the time travel process, adding to the misery of it all.

Then there was the issue of her spotty, irregular period that she assumed was caused by the genetic changes taking place inside her body. Only twice had she been in the middle of it when a time jump occurred, but somehow jumping through time put an end to the menstrual flow.

This revelation confirmed what she'd already suspected: time travel was the result of a biological transformation process and not a technical achievement. On those rare occasions when she needed to deal with it during normal time, most of the homeless shelters provided the necessary hygiene products.

She felt hard-packed dirt and pebbles digging into her side, and her head was resting on something rough and scratchy. She took a couple of slow, deep breaths, consciously trying to lower her heart rate using the breathing control exercises Master Liu had taught her years ago in a previous time period. She'd learned the hard way that it's best not to rush herself right after a jump. Never sit up or try to walk right away. Not if she wanted to avoid the puking and a day-long migraine.

Breathe, center your thoughts, get your bearings, and go from there.

One step at a time.

She peeled her eyes open, rolled to her back, let her arms flop out to her side, and enjoyed the beauty of the night sky, knowing that it would take time to let her body acclimate. Far above the pink glow of the city lights, thousands of stars twinkled in a rhythmic pattern, partially obscured by the low-hanging branches of an evergreen tree.

Had she come out in another park? The odds of that were low, with stellar drift involved in the equation, constantly changing the destination point of each jump.

However, her last couple of jumps had been different than all those that had come before. Each of the recent jumps featured shorter times forward and smaller distances covered, as if the jump process was winding down—heading for some type of fundamental change. But what? The pain was getting worse, too, which told her that as the jumps got shorter, the pain escalates in reverse proportion to the lessor time traveled forward.

The fact that she had landed at night was good, though. Not just because it protected her from the blistering daytime heat of Arizona, but because it's much easier to come out unnoticed under the cover of darkness, especially when you're naked. She closed her eyes and slowed her breathing, focusing on each thump of her heartbeat. She knew this would help taper the pain and get her moving sooner.

Emily had been jumping for almost two years, in her timeline of days. For the rest of humanity—for the normal people—it had been decades. The first jump had been terrifying—a bad ending to an even worse three days that ultimately took her mom, her childhood, her friends, and her future away. One moment she'd been living the relatively normal life of a teenager in high school, then, in a flash of light on the eve of Easter in 1985, it was all taken away.

When it first happened, she'd jumped two and a half years forward in time. She woke up in the middle of the day, naked, scared, and alone, curled in a ball in the parking lot at the edge of Metrocenter; a bustling shopping mall in central Phoenix. Now that same shopping center was a ghost town, covered in gang signs painted on its cracked, aging walls—nothing more than a distant memory for those wide-eyed investors who'd built the place.

She'd been through fifteen excruciating jumps, covering almost thirty years of calendar time for the normals. She was an unwitting expert, memorizing every detail of the process and every nuance of pain. The process started out predicable, like clockwork. She could bank on the pre-jump process and its countdown, knowing the order and timing of each step exactly.

But now it was changing, leaving her to rewrite the protocols she'd grown to depend on in order to keep some level of sanity in her existence. Granted, none of this was something that she wanted to learn, but she had no choice. Not if she wanted to survive another day.

Her mind drifted past the pain as she lay still, thinking of the first time that she had come out of a time jump.

* * *

October 11, 1987

2:41 p.m.

Emily woke from her first jump in a daze. She had no idea what just happened. She was lying on her right side, feeling dozens of sharp objects digging into her body, and dizzying pressure all around her. Her skin on the left side was cooking. She was incredibly thirsty and she smelled—tar. Tar?

The previous three days had been something out of an episode of the *Twilight Zone*. The nightmare had started on Easter Sunday, when she and her mom were walking to midnight Mass at their local church, and then—she could barely bring herself to say it—abduction, torture, pain—her life twisted inside out and sideways.

“Hey, kid, you all right?” A male voice penetrated her mental fog, and she felt something kicking at her ribs. A foot. Someone was nudging her in the ribs with their booted toe.

She opened her bleary eyes and saw a spider crawling up the base of a small tree that had been planted only a few inches from her face. Beyond that was a concrete border and the silhouette of a man. The sun was blazing behind him, but she knew by the silhouette that he was in some kind of uniform. A cop?

“I . . .” she said with a weak, trembling voice. “I don’t know . . .” She tried to move, but her muscles wouldn’t react.

“You need help?”

She hadn’t gathered enough strength to answer.

“Listen, I don’t know what’s going on here, but you can’t sleep here. Not in the parking lot. Not without clothes. There are laws, young lady, and the sun is going to burn you to a crisp.”

Emily looked at her body and discovered that she was, in fact, naked. Not a stitch of clothes. The revelation sent a charge of adrenaline into her system. She squealed, sat upright, threw up, then hugged her knees to her chest. She looked around, trying to gain control of her senses. It took a minute, but it worked.

She was in a six-foot-wide landscaped area with a concrete border around it. Inside of it was a tree, a neatly-trimmed bush with red berries on it, a layer of pink-colored rock, a smattering of gum wrappers, a crushed soda can, and a few cigarette butts. Beyond that, there was an acre of black asphalt with painted lines stretching all the way to a multi-story building that was painted in a southwestern theme. There was a small collection of parked cars near the building, where a crew of men with ladders and a crane were lifting a sign off of the building. It said Falconio Fashions. Her eyes were stinging, making it difficult to focus for more than a few seconds. She got to her feet with wobbly knees. She threw up again, and her head started to ache.

“Here, take this,” the cop said, handing her an ugly yellow poncho. “I don’t know why they give us these, because it hardly ever rains, and never for very long.”

“Thanks.” She took the poncho in her shaking hands and slid it over her head and pulled it down over her breasts, then let the garment slide down past her thighs. It took some effort to take a step to the edge of the jagged landscape where there was no rock, but with the help of the man, she managed. “Where am I?”

“Metrocenter,” he replied, with his powerful arm wrapped around her waist. “Never in a million years did I expect this, not on my first day.”

“Where?”

“Metrocenter. It’s a mall. You know what a mall is, right?”

She nodded. Her eyes came into focus, and she started to make sense of her surroundings. The man standing with her was not an actual cop. He was a mall security guard, in his early twenties. He was about six foot two, slender, with cocoa skin, an easy smile, and friendly eyes. His short afro was trimmed in a neat, flattop fade, with a shooting star design worked in on the left side of his head.

A three-wheeled vehicle was parked ten feet away. It looked like a modified Vespa scooter with an enclosed driver’s area over the front wheel, and a small flatbed cargo area in back that was carrying three stacks of orange traffic cones.

He helped her over the concrete border where her feet found the pavement to be boiling hot. She jumped back onto the landscape rock.

“Shit!” he said, running to his scooter. He got in and fired its engine. The triangle-shaped vehicle puffed blue smoke out of its tailpipe as he pulled it around to her. He hopped out, and then removed the orange traffic cones from the flatbed, tossing them next to the tree.

“Hop on. Let’s get you inside.”

She hesitated, unsure of what to do. She gave him a blank stare.

“Like I said, I don’t know what’s goin’ on with you and frankly, I don’t want to know. But we need to get you inside. I have a niece about your age, and I know if someone found her like this, I’d want them to help.”

“No cops!” she snapped, darting her eyes everywhere. If she’d had shoes and the energy, she would have taken off running.

He held his arms out, palms up. “Calm down. No cops. I promise. Just you and me. Alejandro is at lunch, so you can rest in the security office. He won’t be back for at least an hour, okay? Let’s see if we can’t find you some shoes and clothes, and then maybe something to drink. Then you can go on your way. How does that sound?”

Emily knew she shouldn’t trust anyone, but she had a good sense of people. She could tell he was sincere. His kind face and soft hands reassured her somehow.

“Deal,” she replied.

“My name’s Duane.”

“I’m Em—I’ll tell you later.”

He laughed. “Whatever you say, Red. Come on now. Let’s go.”

He picked her up by the waist with his hands and carried her two feet across the hot pavement, sitting her butt on the vehicle with her legs dangling off the back.

Duane started the two-stroke engine and they puttered off, crossing the mostly empty parking lot as they headed toward the far end of the mall.

* * *

August 11, 2013

4:58 a.m.

Emily dug through the donation boxes in the basement of the Irish Cultural Center, only a ten-minute walk from Glassford Park where she had jumped to from the restaurant shootout several hours before. She drifted into her thoughts, letting her hands switch to autopilot, while an intense vision of pretty boy’s face took over the video player in her head. She decided that Derek’s eyes were blue, not green, once she adjusted for the color shift of the exit sign in the storeroom. The feelings inside of him were unique, like the gold earring hanging from his ear. They were something she’d never felt before, and she’d taken a read on hundreds of people ever since she came back after the night of The Taking.

His smile may have been slight, but his inner brightness was full, lifting her heart to a place it had never been before. She didn’t believe in love at first sight, but figured that’s what most people would say she was experiencing. There was no denying she was attracted to Derek. But love at first sight? She laughed—a silly concept.

She convinced herself the gift of second sight was to blame for everything she was feeling. It had allowed her a brief, but profound look inside the mysterious boy. That level of deep emotional connection with another human being would probably change a girl, she decided. That’s what it was. Not love at first sight. She’d captured a glimpse of him—the real him and was attracted to his gentle and kind spirit. She smiled, knowing the explanation was based in logic and not part of some ridiculous fantasy.

But why was he in that gang? Was it a dare? Was he desperate, like her, just trying to survive another day on the streets? Maybe he owed the gang money and this was how he needed to repay it. She was sure there was a reason. A valid reason. There had to be. Something everyone would understand and forgive. No, she told herself, he wasn’t a criminal like the rest of them. He didn’t want to hurt people. He had to be a good person. She felt it stirring around inside of him, bubbling just below the surface of his fake gangster facade. The streets can do that to a person, make them pretend to be someone they’re not.

Since she'd only jumped three hours ahead this time, a fact that she'd confirmed on the digital calendar clock upstairs, it meant she could go looking for him. He was probably close, since she'd only jumped a short block away from her launching point. She continued rummaging through the endless stacks of clothes, thinking about the parameters of the last jump. She was concerned that the process was getting shorter in distance traveled and in time forward. Shorter jumps meant more blue energy and more pain, with a greater possibility that it wouldn't be an effective escape maneuver. Things were changing. Things she couldn't control.

First things first, she told herself, returning her focus to the task at hand. She ran through the post-jump checklist in her head: clothes, food, and a place to crash. Once she had those covered, she could spend time trying to figure out why the jump scenario was shortening. Later, she thought. Focus, Emily. Focus. You got this.

She knew that the old Irish ladies held clothing and food drives at the center once a month. They kept everything in a downstairs storage area until they were ready to hand it out at one of their quarterly charity events.

She'd befriended them after her last jump, and found that they treated her like a long-lost granddaughter. She assumed that they took a shine to her because of her ginger looks, probably reminding them of some of their family members who also had red hair and freckles.

"Bingo," she said, stopping her frantic search. "Perfect."

She pulled out a faded maroon-colored Arizona State University T-shirt with gold letters and a pair of orange board shorts. She held them up to gauge their size, then quickly put them on. She always felt a little out of sorts until she found some clothes and enjoyed a good night's rest. Some food and water didn't hurt, either. The shorts and top that she found were a little loose, but that was fine with her. She didn't like showing off her figure, since it drew too much attention and always seemed to get her into trouble. She played with the fit of the clothes, then nodded. "Better to blend in and not get noticed."

She kept searching the boxes, knowing that donations had patterns to them. You could look for hours and not find anything in your size or style, and then all of a sudden, you'd come across a goldmine of stuff that looked like it was left there just for you. She figured when people pulled items from their closet, they'd naturally jam it all into the same container, keeping everything separate and organized by default. A big guy would donate big guy clothes, which of course, were no good to her. People with toddlers would donate toddler stuff, and so on.

Or maybe, people subconsciously kept similar items together just in case they changed their minds on the way to the drop-off point, turned the car around, and took their stuff home. Either way, donations had patterns. She just needed to find more of the right boxes, hopefully donated by a teenager who was roughly her size. She couldn't afford to be picky, as long as the clothes kept her warm and weren't too small. Baggy was better than skintight, especially when living on the streets. Baggy gave you more places to hide stuff underneath, and helped keep the creepers' eyes in check.

“What’s this?” she asked the empty room, finding what she could only describe as a girly stash. Four big boxes that looked like they had been donated by a sorority of conforming girly-girls. Yuck. Or maybe a family with several teenagers who idolized Britney Spears. Double yuck. The next two boxes held a trove of adult-size T-shirts, low-rise blue jeans and sweatshirts that said *LOVE PINK*. Triple yuck. They were all too big for her, and they’d be too embarrassing to wear in public anyway.

The next box was filled with a stack of low-cut sexy tops, a few ultra short-shorts, and some nicer, dress-up-and-go-out-items. She rolled her eyes, thinking about her mom trying to squeeze her into the revealing clothes, especially the stylish little black dress with the slit up the front.

The only way she’d be caught dead in a dress like that would be if she ever had the chance to go on a date. A real date, like for the prom. She thought of Derek again, this time with his arm around her waist, his strong fingers caressing, walking her though the entrance to the dance where all her old friends from high school were waiting with eyes wide and mouths gaping. She’d wear her best makeup and find a matching pair of shoes that made her look tall, refined, and elegant. She’d need some pretty lace panties just in case she decided to let him see them. Maybe even let him remove them. Then she snapped back to reality. Not likely, she reminded herself. That life’s not for you. “Rule number one: no close friends. Rule number ten: no boys.” Her heart ran cold.

The third box was the money: clothes that might have belonged to a tomboyish sorority sister, a small fraternity brother, or a teenage boy. Sports-themed T-shirts, soccer shorts, jeans that might just fit her properly, a couple pairs of khaki pants, and even a few button-down shirts that weren’t too worn out. She smiled. She was set for a while, until the next jump.

She cast her eyes around the room and found what she needed. A smallish Nike gym bag sat in the corner. It was filled with infant onesies and what looked like a hundred pairs of tiny socks. She dumped the contents out and put them into a partially filled box of adult clothes that she’d passed over. She began to pack the gym bag with all her new stuff.

The tiny socks reminded her—shoes. They were the hardest thing to find, and the most sought after thing on the street, other than drugs and cigarettes, and probably the most asked-for donation item. The good Irish ladies must have already separated the shoes out of this round of donations and taken them to the shelters, because there were absolutely no shoes in any of the boxes. All she could find was a pair of flip-flops that were way too big, covered with some type of disgusting white crust, and about to fall apart. The crust worried her, but they would have to do until she snagged some from Payless Shoes later. She didn’t like to break in and steal, but her feet had to come first. She planned to leave the owner of the shoe store something of value or clean the place for him; then it wasn’t stealing.

Next up, food.

Emily crept out of the closet and down the hall to the base of the stairs. She paused and listened carefully. It was still too early for anyone to be in the center, but you could never be too careful. Everything seemed quiet upstairs. She counted to one hundred just to make sure, then walked up the steps and found the kitchen.

She loved the Irish Cultural Center: everything was laid out perfectly for her. After she'd helped herself to some cold potatoes from a Tupperware container in the refrigerator, a can of corned beef from a box on the counter, and several glasses of apple juice, she noticed a schedule pinned to a bulletin board on the wall. She studied it carefully. Nothing was happening in the center until Bingo at four o'clock that afternoon. No events, no cleaning scheduled, nothing. *Nice*, she thought. She had the place to herself for a while.

Emily did a sweep of the building: totally empty of volunteers, though she did find a half-empty bag of mini candy bars, like the kind parents gave out on Halloween. She took three of the Milky Way bars and put them in her pocket. It made her think of Junie, wondering how she was doing, and if she'd followed her instructions and gotten out of the restaurant safely. She must have, she decided, because her visions were never wrong. And she sensed that Junie was still alive, somewhere. Probably back with her deadbeat mother, snuggling next to her in the shelter. Emily decided to wait a few days before she'd go look for her. Let things cool down a bit first. Time to lay low.

She returned to the kitchen, flicked on the small TV set in the corner, sat down, and put her feet up on a footstool. She planned to zone out for a while and think about why her time jumps were changing and what it meant. She looked at the clock on the wall: 5:15 a.m. Time for the morning news and talk shows. Good. Something boring and mindless. She gave herself until 6:15, then she'd head out.

Two minutes later, she sat upright when something caught her ear. The talking head on the news—Angela Grimes, with heavy makeup and hair that never moved—intoned in her most dramatic voice:

“A fierce gun battle broke out last night with police in an upscale Italian restaurant in downtown Phoenix, leaving three members of the West Side Locos street gang and two veteran officers dead, and one young girl missing. The missing girl, June Wright, whose picture you see on the screen right now . . .”

Emily was horrified to see Junie's smiling face, cute little pigtails and all, in what must have been a school picture from the previous year, before her mother and she had been evicted from their apartment.

“ . . . was the temporary resident of a nearby children's shelter where she lived with her mother, Abigale Wright, who's shown here talking with detectives. The mother declined to be interviewed on camera, but did seem agitated and overcome with grief, saying that she had no idea why her little girl was inside the restaurant when the after-hours burglary took place. Police are also looking for this young woman in connection with the incident.”

She almost fell out of her chair when a two-second grainy video clip showed her and Junie running across a section of the upper screen. Based on the angle and direction, it must have been from when the two of them ran into the seating area from the kitchen to find a place to hide. The bottom of the screen showed a pair of point-of-sale computer terminals sitting on a pedestal desk near the double swing doors on the back wall. Parker never mentioned that the restaurant used surveillance, so she never thought to look for cameras. Maybe he didn't know they were in use. She worried that there might have been additional cameras and if so, they may have captured her culpable activities as she arranged the scene so the gangbangers would shoot themselves and Junie could escape.

"A spokesman for the Phoenix Police Department did say that the restaurant's video surveillance system malfunctioned before the shootout with police started, leaving them with more questions than answers. Police ask that anyone with any information at all about this young woman and her whereabouts contact them immediately. She's five foot six, around 125 pounds, with long red hair, blue eyes, and freckles. She was last seen wearing a blue T-shirt and baggy green cargo-style shorts."

"I'm screwed," she said. "This is why you never get involved, Em!"

CHAPTER 3

August 11, 2013

5:17 a.m.

Jim Miller fell out of his chair when Emily's picture flashed across the screen, tumbling to the kitchen floor along with a full cup of hot coffee, a plate of bacon and eggs, and a brand-new computer tablet he'd just removed from its packaging and was trying to figure out how to use.

"Damn!" he yelled. "Ugggh. Cuh-rap. What the—"

He tried to simultaneously survey the wreckage that was now his breakfast nook and watch the news report. Not possible. He checked to make sure his tablet was undamaged. It was. The mess could wait. The picture he saw on the news could not.

It was a big deal. Big for him, at least.

He picked himself up off the floor, brushed scrambled eggs from his pants, and gawked at the television set.

"... Police ask that anyone with any information at all about this young woman and her whereabouts contact them immediately. She's five foot six, around 125 pounds, with long red hair, blue eyes, and freckles. She was last seen wearing a blue T-shirt and baggy green cargo-style shorts."

Jim had plenty of information about the girl on the TV screen, none of which he was willing to share with the police. She'd been a personal conundrum of his for almost twenty years. Ten years ago, he'd tried to bring the story to the police, but they'd laughed him right out of the precinct. He wasn't about to go down that road again, not in a million years, not with retirement still twenty-plus years away.

He still had to earn, and that couldn't be done if they throw you in the nut house. His career had stalled recently, but he was still motivated to cover the story of a lifetime. And this girl was that story. He knew it was a major gamble, but as a former Marine, he was used to taking risks.

Risks got his blood pumping and helped him focus, pushing him to succeed even though the quote under his high school yearbook picture from twenty years earlier said, "Least likely to get laid or paid." His answer to that humiliation was to enlist in the Marines the day after he graduated Magna Cum Laude. It was a bold move that surprised everyone, even himself, when

he scored off the charts in nearly every assessment the Corps threw at him. “Fuck ‘em,” he said, thinking of his classmates.

Emily Heart was his Holy Grail. The story of all stories. The missing red-headed girl who hadn’t aged in decades.

He grabbed his remote, hit rewind, waited until he found the image of the girl, and then pressed pause. He picked up the phone and called his nineteen-year-old nephew, Andy, who he knew would still be asleep in bed after his late-night men’s hockey league game.

The phone buzzed for thirty seconds, then a groggy voice answered. “Hello? Mom? Is that you? What’s the matter?”

“It’s not your mother, sunshine. It’s Uncle Jim. Wake up. I need your help. Tell me how to save a screen shot from the TV onto my new tablet.”

“You need what?”

“I need to know how to do a screen capture of something on the news and save it to my tablet.”

Andy yawned. “Why don’t you get one of the geeks from the newspaper to help you? It’s their job. Not mine.”

“That might be a little difficult.”

“Why?”

“Well, technically, I don’t work there anymore.”

“You got fired?”

“I quit. They wouldn’t let me cover the stories I wanted. So, I walked.”

“Not that Emily Heart nonsense again. You need to let it go already.”

“Look, I know you and your mother think I’m nuts, but I’m telling you, there are things in this world that defy explanation. I’ve seen it with my own two eyes. Like this girl. She’s real. As a matter a fact, she’s on the news right now. That’s why I’m calling. Will you help me or not?”

* * *

“Not now!” Emily screamed at herself, fighting back a wave of panic as she watched the TV news in the Irish Cultural Center. Her body wasn’t ready for another jump, not yet. She did a quick breathing exercise she’d learned from Master Liu, a kind and enigmatic Kung Fu teacher she’d met back in the beginning, between her third and fourth jumps. It worked—she averted the adrenaline rush that would have pushed her over the top, triggering the countdown.

A sense of dread chilled her bones when various street reporters and the talking heads at the news station discussed the shootout and took turns theorizing what might have happened. In the end, what did all of their conjecture matter? The facts were clear. A little girl was missing, and two policemen were dead. She hated cops, but didn’t want any of them to die. They were

only doing their job. She just wanted them to leave her alone. She knew that if the cops ever got their hands on her, they'd eventually discover who she was and where she was from, bringing her time jump ability to full light. Once they knew her secret, they'd lock her up at some black site government lab where there'd be endless experiments, blood samples, CT scans, and God knows what else. She'd be studied and dissected like a rabid dog.

Then her mind latched onto the broadcast while the anchorwoman mentioned the three dead gang members. Wait a minute—three? The two in the kitchen she could understand, but who was the third? Was it the asshole that she had given the broken wrist to? He could have picked up the machine gun with the other hand and used it when the police showed up. “Damn it,” she said, wishing she'd hurt him worse than she did. Then the officers would still be alive.

A thought popped into her mind. “Oh my God! Derek?” Her heart was hit with a sharp pain that nearly split it in half. Did Derek decide to join his pals and shoot at the police? She couldn't bring herself to accept the possibility that he might be casualty number three. It would mean that everything she had sensed about the pretty boy in the basement was wrong. Was she losing her ability to read people and sense their intent? Jumps were getting shorter, so maybe her gifts were fading, too.

And what about Junie? Where did she go? The only explanation Emily could come up with was that Junie had heard the shootout with the cops and took off running instead of enlisting their help. That's what Emily would have done if she'd been there and seen the situation spin sideways.

She returned her focus to the screen when someone else on the broadcast started talking about rumored connections between the Locos gang and a Russian white slavery ring that had moved into the area. They reported that the older female accomplice may have escaped the shootout, absconding with the young girl to complete the sale. Older accomplice? Absconded? What? Her mouth dropped open. They just accused her of kidnapping Junie to sell her.

“Sell her? Disgusting,” she mumbled.

Emily was furious with herself. “I only have myself to blame. I broke rule number one: no close friends, and rule number seven: don't get involved. And look what happened.” She put her head in her hands, thinking of only Junie and her tiny smile. “She's missing and alone, and it's all your fault. Now the police are after you. So much for blending in. Dumb, Em, dumb.”

She had to come up with a plan, fast. She needed to think, but she wanted to cry. Had anyone seen her? Would they know her whereabouts? She'd bumped into one homeless guy in the park after her jump, but he was totally out of it. She doubted that he even knew what was happening. Ugggh. She didn't know. She hated not knowing. She was a mess. And when she was a mess, only one thing really worked. Master Liu's meditation. His words echoed in her mind. No thoughts, Em. No emotions. No extremity. Return to center, embrace the moon, find the calm within.

She stood up and put her arms over her head, stretching from side to side. She let her arms fall to her sides and rolled her shoulders seven times—each with more rotational force than the previous. She sat on the floor, cross-legged, and followed the steps Master Liu had taught her ages ago. He was long dead, just a pinpoint in the distant memory of history for the rest of the planet; but it was only a year ago in her time. She missed him. She needed him.

Breathe, Em. Breathe. Lean forward. Lengthen the spine. Relax the shoulders. Center the head over the sacrum. Cup the hands together, palms up, just in front of the lower belly. Cradle the lower Dan Tian. Expand your diaphragm as you breathe in, relax as you breathe out, letting all external thoughts fade to black.

Emily closed her eyes and followed her breath into the shadows of calm.

* * *

“Okay, bud, got it. Thanks. I owe you one, Andy,” Jim Miller said before hanging up the phone, ending the call with his nephew. He walked out of the kitchen to the closet in the hallway, where he kept a box filled with all his spare computer cables. Andy had told him exactly how to grab the image from the TV and transfer it to his computer. Not too complicated, after all. He’d cleaned up the mess in the kitchen while listening to the instructions.

He returned to the kitchen with what he thought was the right HDMI cable, plugged it into the side of his tablet, and was about to run it to his flat screen when he heard the police scanner on the coffee table begin to crackle.

“All units, all available units. Code 2 Irish Cultural Center. Possible 10-29F from Code 187/207 last night downtown disturbance. Repeat, all units, all available units. Code 2 Irish Cultural Center. Repeat, possible 10-29F from Code 187/207 last night downtown disturbance.”

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Could it be true? Could it be her? The redhead who didn’t age? “Code 2” meant urgent, proceed to location without lights or siren. “10-29F” meant suspect wanted in a felony. “187” meant homicide, and “207” meant kidnapping.

Jim threw on some clothes and then decided he didn’t want to take the new tablet along. He wasn’t sure how to operate the new recording software, so he grabbed his smartphone instead. Its video resolution wasn’t as good, but the battery was charged, and it would be enough to document scenes and tape interviews.

Reporting sure had changed, he thought. It wasn’t like the old days of pad, pencil, and mini-cassette recorders. Technology was a wonderful thing, when it worked. Scratch that, it was a wonderful thing when it came with a set of instructions written in true English. Not those wafer-thin, microscopic manuals that start out written in Japanese, then get translated to German, then to Swahili, and then finally into some form of English that’s missing all the important stuff. Good God, the insanity of it all.

He ran out the door and hit the sidewalk in a full sprint. The Irish Cultural Center was just five blocks away from his refurbished Glassford Park bungalow.

* * *

Emily opened her eyes after her meditation trance in the Irish Cultural Center. She had made a plan.

Step One: Get the hell out of downtown. Any suburb will do. At this point, even Glendale by the Cardinals stadium, where all the hookers and pimps hung out would be better. Step two: Find a drugstore, snag supplies. Step Three: Find a bathroom. Cut hair short, dye it black. Step Four: Find shelter. Step Five: Lay low. Step Six: Repeat number 5. Don't get anxious.

She loved Master Liu's meditation. She would go in a total wreck and come out completely put back together. Just like this time. She was confident she could handle this situation. She'd been through worse. "It's all gravy, Em. Just avoid the cops long enough to change your look."

She grabbed the gym bag and stuffed as much food as she could into it. Dried goods and canned food kept the best, but they were heavy. She took a can opener from one of the drawers—clutch. A can of food was no good if you couldn't open it. She was tempted to get another bag and fill it with food, too, but she had to keep it light. She might have to run at any moment. *Stay fast*, she told herself.

She slung the bag over her shoulder and checked the clock on the wall.

5:47 a.m.

Good, she thought. The streets will still be mostly empty. She could walk out the front door and act like she was supposed to be there and on her way to school. Blend in. Stay calm. Don't make eye contact. Don't run.

She ran downstairs and snatched a weathered Arizona Diamondbacks baseball cap she'd seen in one of the boxes. She pulled it low over her eyes and managed to stuff most of her hair into it. She took the steps two at a time on the way back up. The infusion of activity had cleared her head even more. She felt normal. Well, normal enough. The front door was a bad idea. She let herself out the side door, into the rose garden that led to North Central Avenue, right by the park.

As soon as she stepped outside, she saw cops everywhere: on the sidewalk by Central, in the park past the garden right in front of her, and coming around the side of the building to her left. There were squad cars parked in the middle of the street at both ends, blocking traffic at those weird cop angles that only cops know how to pull off.

"That's her, man, right there!" yelled a homeless guy wearing a long, tattered overcoat, baggy blue pants that hung well past his feet and a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. He was standing

on the sidewalk with a group of four cops, not fifty feet away from her. “See, I told you I saw her. Now where’s my fifty bucks?”

She turned and tried to go back into the building, thinking she could confuse them and leave from a different door. No luck. The door had locked behind her. The two cops that had been coming around the corner of the building to her left started running with guns drawn.

“Stop right there!” they both shouted. “Down on the ground, NOW!! Hands behind your head!”

She ignored them, knowing that they couldn’t shoot an unarmed girl. She sprinted across a patch of grass and vaulted herself over a low, green-painted wrought-iron fence that led to the park. The gym bag caught on one of the narrow iron caps sticking up past the top rail of the fence. She spun, off balance, and fell to the ground on her back, knocking the wind out of her. She gasped for breath as the baseball cap fell off her head, releasing her hair into the grass. The two cops were on her in a heartbeat.

One of them dug a knee into her lower back, grabbed her right arm and twisted it behind her, and then slapped a handcuff on her wrist. He grabbed her other arm and repeated the process. She felt like a twisted pig, being hog-tied for slaughter. He pulled her to her feet and got in her face. He had an ugly, sunburned bulldog face, pushed together like a twisted mashed potato. His beady brown eyes were filled with anger and his breath smelled awful, like stale coffee and cigarettes.

“Where’s the girl?” he demanded. “Is she inside?”

“She’s my friend. I didn’t kidnap her.”

“Where is she!” he yelled, pulling her arms up her back.

She screamed in pain, worried that the cop was going to break her arms. “You’re hurting me!”

“That’s the point, Red. Tell me what I want to know before I snap them like breadsticks.”

She was angry. Intensely angry, feeling her adrenaline kick in. She opened her mouth to say something, but thought better of it. She clamped it shut and held it in a tight, grim line. She was determined not to say anything. She let her anger build. Now she needed to jump—never mind the pain that waited for her on the other side.

“You want to play it like that, huh?” he growled. He turned to the cops on the sidewalk. “Search the building. The girl might be in there!” He turned back to her, running his hand over her butt. “Where you’re going, little girl, they’re going to love this little ass. Every night.”

He dragged her to one of the waiting squad cars and shoved her into the backseat face-first. Her knees hit the edge of the seat, sending her flying across the back of the vehicle, hitting her head on the door on the opposite side. She turned over, sat up, and looked back at him. He slammed the door and snarled at her through the window. Blood trickled down her forehead. She couldn’t hold back the hint of a smile that played at the corners of her mouth.

She turned away from the ugly cop and looked out the window. A man was standing six feet away, holding a cell phone at arm's length from his body, half-watching the screen, half-watching her. He had obviously just videotaped the whole scene.

Emily's spine tingled, deep down at the base. *Finally*, she thought, knowing that the countdown had started.

CHAPTER 4

Jim Miller stood outside the Irish Cultural Center, letting the video on his cell phone roll as the police car made a U-turn and sped away. He couldn't believe his luck—it was her. The redhead. And now he had primary video evidence that he could compare with all the photographs that he'd collected over the past eighteen years.

If someone had asked him a day earlier to be honest, he would've told them that he never really thought he'd crack this investigation. In the back of his mind, he'd always worried that he was wrong, or that he was missing something obvious. He'd spent countless hours studying the face of the girl in the photographs, memorizing every line, every detail, and every curve of her budding beauty. He saw her face in his sleep, and was consumed by the thought of finding her, knowing that if he ever spotted her again in a crowd or on the street, it would only be for a second, so he needed to be able to identify her instantly.

But what if he was wrong? What if the girls in the photos were not the same girl? What if they were cousins, sisters, or maybe even mother and daughter? Or just random lookalikes that his brain merged together and convinced him that they were the same girl?

His moment of doubt passed. He was one hundred percent sure. It was her. It had to be.

What he wasn't one hundred percent sure of was why the police car had turned around and headed north, when the processing center was nine blocks south and three blocks west, depending on how you counted the blocks on the grid. Maybe the cop was agitated and had gotten himself turned around. Maybe he wanted to take the girl for a ride and cool her off before booking her. Impossible to say. Either way, Jim knew exactly where he had to take her.

He walked south, deciding to take the shortest route to West Madison, where he'd turn right and head over to wait at the entrance to the Maricopa County Jail. He knew they'd never let him inside to interview her, but there was nothing to stop him from poking around and asking a few questions. Freedom of the press was a wonderful thing. So was the new "Transparency Initiative" recently undertaken by the Phoenix Police Chief after what had happen two months earlier at a grade school only four miles away. So many senseless deaths. A misread by two of his rookie cops on patrol.

He'd just crossed McKinley Street when a police cruiser passed him, speeding erratically down the street. Was it the same cruiser? He couldn't tell. He thought so, but the car was driving too fast for him to be certain.

He watched the car swerve hard to the right, bouncing onto the sidewalk and taking out a trash can and a bus stop in the process. The car just missed two pedestrians as it caromed again, this time to the left and back into the street. The driver over-corrected and fishtailed—the back of the car swung all the way around to the left and the vehicle skidded to a stop in the middle of the road, facing the wrong way in the middle of the intersection, directly adjacent to the downtown post office.

Jim took off running and was there in less than thirty seconds. The cop who'd manhandled the redhead into the back of the car was slumped over the steering wheel, not moving. Jim looked into the backseat of the car, expecting to see the girl either struggling to get out or incapacitated by injury—but he saw neither.

What he saw was a black, smoking hole in the middle of the backseat. The redhead was nowhere to be found. He'd been watching the car the whole time—there was no way she could have escaped without him noticing.

Where had she gone?

Jim took out his cell phone and began taping the scene.

* * *

A car horn blared frantically, and the sound of skidding tires brought Emily back to consciousness—if you could call it that—after her time jump from the backseat of the police car.

She was in a mental fog and her legs and arms were shaking, making it difficult to keep her hands wrapped around her throbbing temples. Every sharp noise from the city bustling around her sent waves of pain into her ears, landing in her temples. She heard another horn and more skidding tires, followed by a loud crash—metal on metal—and the sound of breaking glass, making her head feel like it was going to explode. A wave of nausea came over her and she threw up. People were yelling. Angry people. More horns blaring.

She pried her eyes open. All she could see was asphalt and a storm drain. Then a pair of shoes stepped in front of her vision. She looked up.

“Hey, girl, what the hell are you doing? What’s the matter with you? You trying to get yourself killed!?” a gruff, agitated voice said.

“Shit!” she snapped. “Where am I?”

She struggled to her knees and looked up and into the face of a hairy, olive-skinned, middle-aged man wearing boy-sized khaki cargo shorts and a red and black plaid shirt. He had a thick mustache, a bulging belly, and a face that was covered with gray and black stubble. A lit cigar jerked up and down in the corner of his mouth as he talked. Behind him was a yellow taxicab with its engine running, and a street sign that said Glassford Street.

He kept talking, but her ears started to ring and she could no longer make out his words.

She decided to stand up but her legs weren't ready. She dropped to one knee, feeling her skin smash into the hot pavement. She tried again and this time she made it, though her head was spinning, making it difficult to balance. She steadied herself and looked around. She was in the middle of a street, with traffic rushing by in the opposite lane across the median. Behind the taxi, one car had rear-ended another. The sun was pounding down on her from directly above. *Noon*, she thought. Lunch rush hour. A small crowd of people began to gather around her. Two jumps in eight hours. Not good.

"—Going to call the cops. You must be crazy!" the short dark man said, throwing his hands up as he walked in a tight, angry circle with a cell phone stuck to his ear.

No cops, she thought.

Emily turned away, searching for an escape route.

The man—he must have been the cab driver—grabbed her above the elbow and tried to spin her around. Emily reacted instantly. She pulled away from him, twisting her dominant hand into her body, then folded her arm at the elbow as she prepared to strike. She completed a 360-degree body spin, bringing her elbow around with enough force to make contact with the man, cracking his nose. She followed her elbow strike with another roundhouse maneuver, this time landing a blow with her foot into his chest. He fell to the ground in an awkward clump.

"Compliments of Master Liu," she told him with attitude, as her mind cleared a bit more. Her eyes began to focus normally.

She looked at each member of the small crowd that had gathered around her. Their eyes were wide and full of astonishment. Or was it fear? She couldn't tell which.

"Did you see that?" one of them said.

"No, never," answered one of the others.

"Back up," a third one told the rest of the group.

Obviously, they'd never seen a naked, red-headed teenage girl take out a stout Greek cabbie with a wicked two-blow karate spin in the middle of lunchtime traffic in downtown Phoenix.

So much for laying low, she thought.

Some of the dozen onlookers took out their cell phones and pointed them at her, and then aimed them at the cab driver who was on the ground, groaning and holding his face. She'd landed both shots perfectly. Center mass, just like she'd been taught. Behind him, the cab's door was hanging open, its tailpipe still pumping pollution into the air.

"Take the car," a female voice said from the crowd behind her. The voice sounded familiar. She replayed it in her mind. It was her mother's voice. But how can that be? "Mom?" she said, spinning around to find her; but Candi wasn't there. Everywhere she looked, all she saw were men with their mouths agape and their eyes checking out every inch of her body. She covered up her breasts and pressed her legs together. She kept looking, but there was not a single woman in the crowd. But she couldn't give up, not yet.

“Mom? Where are you? Mom! Mom!”

“Someone call 9-1-1,” one of the men said.

“Already done,” someone else said. “Cops are on their way.”

“Grab her. Don’t let her get away.”

Emily decided that it was time to disappear, and fast. She didn’t know how to drive, but decided to try it. It was better than running down Glassford Street, especially in broad daylight and with no clothes on. It’s pretty easy to follow the trail of a naked girl through the streets. You can’t exactly blend in with your cookie exposed for all to see.

She kicked the first man who approached her in the knee, sending him to the ground. Then a firm jab to the next man’s throat. The other men froze. She ran past the cabbie and through the growing crowd of gawkers, who spread apart and made a path for her down the middle. Cell phones were out, and she knew she was being videoed by at least a half a dozen people.

She hopped in the cab, slammed the door, grabbed the wheel, and pressed the accelerator hard to the floor. The engine revved wildly, but nothing happened. The cab didn’t move.

The people standing near the cab scattered in all directions.

The cab driver got to his feet, ran to the driver’s side and began pounding on the window. “Hey! What are you doing? That’s my cab! You can’t take my cab!”

She moved the shifter on the steering column to “D” and jammed on the gas again. The car lurched forward and sped south on Glassford Street with squealing tires and a fishtailing rear end. She figured she had five minutes, tops, before the police had the area cordoned off. Maybe only three minutes.

She thought quickly. Where to go? She turned left on East Van Buren Street, then left again on North 12th Street. If she could get to the other side of Glassford Park, she knew a spot where she could ditch the cab and score some clothes.

Then it occurred to her; she didn’t have all the facts. She knew where she was, but she didn’t know *when* she was. She’d assumed that this jump was like the last, only taking her three hours into the future, landing on the same day. She’d assumed the cops were still in the middle of their womanhunt, scouring the city for her after what had happened in the basement of the restaurant.

She was in full-on panic mode, trying to think while driving a car for the first time—and at high speed, no less. She aimed the cab for the narrow entrance of a four-story parking garage and went inside, stopping to take one of those ticket stubs from the machine. She waited for the security arm to rise, then jammed on the gas, hearing the tires spin and squeal on the slick surface beneath them. She was proud of herself for getting this far with the cab. She’d only hit one Toyota Corolla and a blue mailbox along the way, sending the outgoing mail high into the air. She passed seven rows of parked vehicles and pulled around the back, picking a spot behind a bread delivery truck.

She put the cab in park, took her foot off the brake pedal and put her head against the headrest. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths, trying to deal with the tingle that had just started to take root in her bones. Breathe, Em. Slow. In and out. Let the stress melt away. Focus on your breathing. You're safe now. You escaped. Find your center. Find your calm. A minute later, the jump tingle washed away.

A cell phone was sitting on the floor in front of the passenger seat, connected by a cord to a funky charger sticking out of the cigarette lighter. It was shaped like Bullwinkle. The device looked just like the fancy smartphone that Parker carried and had taught her to use when they first met in the shelter. His was an Android phone and she assumed this one was, too.

Moment of truth, she thought.

She leaned forward and pulled the phone to her hand using the charger cord. She touched its screen and found that the phone was not screen locked.

The display read: 11:48 a.m. September 24, 2014.

Emily let out a sigh of relief. Over a year. A year! She was so happy she could almost cry. The cops must have stopped looking for her long ago. The pressure was off. *Well, almost*, she thought. She did just assault a few guys and steal some dude's cab. Then she remembered that cab drivers carry cash so they can make change for fares. She checked the glove box, but found nothing. She opened the visors overhead, but only found pictures of the man's wife and three small children—two boys and a girl, standing in front of Disneyland's entrance. Each of the kids had the man's pug nose and pinched face.

She ran her hands along the underside of the dash and then around and under the passenger's seat. Again nothing.

She searched under the driver's seat and stopped when her fingers hit something. It was soft, three inches thick, and rectangular. She pulled it out. It was a leather wallet stuffed with money. She opened it and thumbed through the bills. All of them were twenty-dollar bills—thirty-two of them, to be exact. Nothing smaller. Just twenties. He must have just come from the bank, she decided, because who carries around this much cash? Maybe he'd just cashed his paycheck. She pulled the wad of green out and put the empty wallet back under the seat.

A faint voice called out to her, echoing gently like it was coming from the other end of the parking level. "He has a family to feed, Em."

She recognized the voice. "Mom? Is that you?"

"Only take what you need."

She flew out of the car. "Where are you? Mom?"

"Do the right thing, Em."

She looked at the money in her hand, thinking about how much it would buy. She'd never have to scrounge again; at least not for a long time. She could buy trendy clothes and shoes that actually fit, go find Derek and take him out for a night on the town. She could rent a room in one

of the flophouses that bordered the south side of Glassford Park and not have to sleep on the streets for months.

“Mom?” she called out, hearing only the echoes of her own voice.

She looked to her left and then to her right, searching the area for any sign of her mother. She didn’t see anyone. Just parked cars and the bread truck. She waited for the voice to answer her, but it didn’t.

She got back in the cab, took two bills out of the stack, and put the rest back in the wallet. She put the wallet into the glove box, figuring it was safer there than under the seat where she’d found it.

It was time to search the rest of the vehicle. There was nothing in the backseat except empty food wrappers, an unwrapped condom stuffed between the seat cushions—gross—and a few squashed beer cans. She opened the trunk and found a lug wrench with a pry bar on the end of it sitting next to a black gym bag. She pulled the zipper to open the bag. Inside of it was a pair of running shoes, men’s size 11, and a change of clothes. She stuck her face inside the tote and took a whiff. The stench was overpowering. The cabbie must have worked out a week ago and then left the clothes in the truck to bake.

“I don’t need clothes that bad,” she said as her stomach growled, reminding her that it needed to be fed. She smiled, grabbing the lug wrench with the pry bar and turning her attention to the bread truck parked in the stall next to her.

* * *

Four hours later, Emily walked through the front door of the Burton Barr Central Library after she’d ditched the cab in an alley a mile from Glassford Park, and snatched a pair of loose-fitting jeans and a long-sleeved white T-shirt off a backyard clothesline. She had bought a pair of fake Adidas running shoes for ten bucks from some *cholo* selling them out of the trunk of the car near the Five and Diner Cafe on Central Ave. He had offered her the clothes for free if she’d blow him in the backseat, but she flashed him ten bucks and told him that she was jail bait and would scream if he didn’t give her a good deal. He did, then started his car and sped off. The shoes were worth the hassle and the money. They felt great.

She stopped at a 7-Eleven to pick up a snack, then walked to Barr Central Library. The Phoenix Public Library System had been a lifesaver over the past two years, and Barr Central was easily her favorite among the plethora of book depositories funded by the city. Barr was the only one that stayed open until midnight, and it was the busiest, allowing her to slip in and move around without too much fuss. The staff at the front desk never paid her any attention; they were always distracted greeting visitors and answering questions.

She waited outside the main entrance for the right moment, then ducked in behind a group of elderly women as they waddled in and headed straight for the front desk, chatting and

laughing like old women do. She veered off and went straight to the computers in the back, where she knew Sheldon would be working. She knew Sheldon's shift started at four and ran until midnight, and he didn't mind her having free access to the research computers for as long as she needed, provided that she brought him something sweet as payment. During the first few of her many visits, Sheldon had taught her how to use computers and the Internet. Sometimes he would carry on a little too long about movies and superheroes but she felt comfortable around him.

She stood at the check-in counter, waiting for him to look up from his physics book. Sheldon was in his early twenties, six feet tall, skinny as a straw, blond hair, always wore a bright-colored comic book T-shirt, and had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Almost an aqua color. Deep and inviting. He was studying for his master's degree at ASU and reminded her of the captain of the chess club at her high school back in 1985. She had learned not to break his train of thought when he was buried neck-deep in a book, otherwise, he'd snap at her and tell her to leave. There was a better way to get his attention. She put a four-pack of Twinkies on the counter and removed the plastic wrap.

Sheldon sniffed twice, then craned his neck to look at her. Actually, he was looking at the snack, with a full smile on his lips. "Ummm. Golden sponge cake."

"I missed you, too, Sheldon."

"Long time no see, Red. What's it been? A year?"

"Something like that," she answered, wanting to change the subject. "I'll bet if I had opened these at the front desk, you would've come running."

He walked to the counter, never taking his eyes off the yellow sweetness. "They are my favorite."

"I know, you've told me like a hundred times."

"So, you *were* paying attention."

She touched his hand and winked. "I always pay attention. To everything."

"There's a special showing of *The Butterfly Effect* this Friday. Director's cut. Wanna go with?"

She didn't have the heart to tell him that she was only fifteen, or that she lived on the streets. "Can't. Busy."

"Thought I would ask," he said, jamming a full Twinkie into his mouth all at once, then handing her an access card. "Station 9 is open. Been saving it for you," he said with his mouth full, garbling all the words. He smiled, showing her a creamy river of white filling across his teeth.

"That's a good look for you, Sheldon."

He bowed, smacking his head on the edge of the counter. He stood upright, rubbing his forehead.

She laughed, then turned and walked to Station 9 at the far end of the grid of half-wall cubicles. She sat at the computer station and logged on to the Internet, hoping to figure out exactly what had happened in the past year while she'd been traveling.

She wanted answers. First, where was Junie? Was she okay? Second, was she still wanted by the police in connection with the restaurant killings? After that, find a quiet corner and sit down to figure out what was going on with her jumps. The protocols were changing, and she couldn't get a handle on whether the changes were good or bad.

She focused on the computer, brought up a browser window, navigated to a search engine and typed in: "missing girl downtown shootout restaurant August 2013."

She leaned back, cracked her knuckles, and waited for the results.

It only took her five minutes to discover that Junie was fine and back with her mother. She'd hidden in an abandoned warehouse for a day and a night because she was so scared. When she came out the next morning she went straight to the police and told them the whole story—the Locos, the bag of money, everything. Emily was relieved—she was off the hook.

"Thank you, Junie," she mumbled, leaning back in the chair with her hands behind her head. She let out a moan, stretching her arms and hands out as far as they would go. She needed sleep. She closed her eyes, letting her mind float off into dreamland, thinking about her life before The Taking.

CHAPTER 5

April 6, 1985

11:47 p.m.

Emily hung up the phone after a late-night conversation with her best friend, Stacy Hester, who lived three doors down. Stacy had called from a pay phone at the mall, trying to convince her to sneak out of the house and come join her and the rest of the girls. Emily thought about climbing out her bedroom window more than once during the call, but eventually she had to say no to Stacy, which brought about a quick end to the phone call.

Emily looked at the clock and sighed. It was almost time to leave. She'd kept the hope alive all day that somehow she'd be able to wriggle out of going to midnight Mass with her mother. She was thirteen, and would rather be out with Stacy and her friends, trying to meet boys at the food court, only to find that they'd been ignored by the pretty ones and pestered by the gross ones. It had become their routine on Friday and Saturday nights.

Boys were of interest to her, but not because of some primal need or pubescent yearning. It was more out of necessity. It was the one common interest she could share with Stacy's friends, who seemed obsessed with the idea. Emily didn't enjoy sitting around a table at the mall, spreading gossip about who cheated on whom, or which girls lost their virginity that week. She didn't see the point. Hers was intact, and it hadn't been difficult to keep it that way. Emily loved Stacy and was thankful to have her in her life, so she put up with Stacy's friends and their pointless endeavors. Otherwise, she'd never be invited anywhere.

She put the Michael Crichton novel she'd been reading on the nightstand next to an empty pint of Rocky Road ice cream and a plastic sleeve that used to be filled with a dozen Oreo cookies. She slid off the bed and walked to her TV stand, hitting the eject button on the VCR. The machine handed her the VHS tape that contained her favorite science fiction movie of all time, *Runaway*, with Tom Selleck. She was still fascinated by the acid-spitting spider-bots and the smart bullets unleashed by the antagonist, even after watching the blockbuster eleven times. She stacked the tape on top of her other movies, all of which were science fiction-related.

She grabbed her notebook from inside the top drawer of her dresser, turning to page nine. She added another checkmark next to *Runaway*, which was number one on the list of her top twenty-five favorite movies. She flipped to the next page and wrote "Popular Science Magazine"

at the bottom of her list of ten things that she wanted to try this year. It was number eight on the list, right below “Knott’s Berry Farm” and “Kennedy Space Center.”

Emily loved the sanctity of logic and the mathematical precision of science, spending most of her private time learning about the latest breakthroughs in technology. She’d become a deep thinker, dreaming of what life would be like in the year 2000 and beyond. She couldn’t wait to grow up and see who’d she become.

She looked at the clock again and then stared at the bottom of her bedroom door, hoping not to see a pair of shadows break the uniformity of light. *Anything but church, again. Please, Mom. Just this one time.* No such luck. The shadows appeared and then the triple knock came, right on schedule.

“You ready, Em? We need to leave now if we’re going to get a seat. Meet me downstairs in two.”

“Okay, be right there.”

Tomorrow was Easter, and midnight Mass was part of the drill. It was their tradition. Something that she and her mother had started right after Dad walked out on them five years earlier.

Emily had a deep respect for her mother’s religion, but at around age twelve, something changed inside of her. There were certain things that just didn’t make sense—take Easter, for instance. Was she actually supposed to believe in the Resurrection? Transubstantiation of the flesh? Transmutation of souls? Life after death?

Over the course of the last two years, Emily had become somewhat of a skeptic. Her thoughts and her beliefs had now become her own. She’d found a love for science and math, and appreciated the perfection of both. They offered her clarity, a sanctuary for her beliefs. A perfect balance in an imperfect world. A world with so much pain and injustice.

She didn’t dare bring up her faith questions with her mother. Candi Heart would be mortified that her daughter was teetering on heresy. She’d freak out and become convinced that her only child was on the fast road to a fiery perdition.

She had tried to open a discussion with her mother’s favorite preacher two weeks earlier, shortly after Sunday brunch had finished and the Men’s Club was clearing the tables. But he’d been so condescending that she wanted to puke. He patted her on the head—a thirteen-year-old girl! And told her what amounted to “don’t you worry your pretty little head about things you can’t possibly understand.”

Uggh.

She had a right to ask. She had a right to think for herself. She needed answers, but there were none. How could she be expected to have blind faith when nobody listened to her? It was like she didn’t exist.

She loved her mother, and she loved the idea of religion as well. It was a beautiful premise, and often moved people to perform glorious, selfless acts—she just loved thinking, too.

And she felt like she should be able to question things and get answers. After all, didn't the greatest Christians in history wrestle with doubt? Mother Teresa? Martin Luther? Calvin?

She stood up from the bed and headed for the door, wondering if her mom knew what she was doing. Not that she blamed her mother. Candi was still reeling and hurting ever since Dad left in the middle of the night and never came home. Not a peep from him since. Not a card on her birthday. Not a phone call. Nothing. He just disappeared from the face of the Earth.

She left her room and met her mom at the bottom of the stairs.

"That dress looks nice on you, Em. You should really wear them more often. You're a beautiful young lady, and you can't hide behind your tomboy clothes forever," her mother said, tucking a white flower in Emily's hair. "This symbolizes your faith in God and your purity of faith. I want everyone at church to know that we are true believers."

"Trust me, Mom, they already know. How could they not? We're always there, sitting in the same pew next to old man Brogden and his creepy son. What's that guy, like thirty, and he still lives at home?"

"Don't judge, lest ye be judged," Candi said, leading her out the door.

"Yes, Mom, I know. Matthew 7-1. But you're not the one who Leonard is staring at all the time. Doesn't he know I'm only thirteen?"

"You look much older. So did I at your age."

"But still."

"He has a condition. A little compassion, Em?"

"I didn't know being a thirty-year-old pervert was a condition."

"We should cut across the clearing to make sure we'll get there in time for the opening procession."

"Can't we just drive? These shoes aren't exactly designed for cross country."

"I'm almost out of gas, and payday isn't until Wednesday. Besides, the exercise will do you good. You might want to think about cutting back on the Oreo cookies. They're starting to show."

Emily rolled her eyes, following her mom to the clearing across the street. The undeveloped section of their neighborhood led to St. Thomas Church a mile away. Emily didn't see the big deal if they were a few minutes late. So what if they missed some of the really boring stuff; who cares? If Emily had grumbled about it, her mom would have just turned and shushed her. She knew it was pointless to argue with her, so she decided to stop. Just make the best of it, she told herself. It's only an hour, and then it'll be over.

They struck out across the empty field and were about halfway to their destination when Emily looked up at the stars and admired their beauty.

"Aren't the stars amazing, Mom? Don't you ever wonder what's out there, waiting for us?"

"God is waiting for us."

“I mean besides that. Given the vastness of space and the sheer number of stars, mathematically there has to be something else out there. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

“Only God knows the answer to that.”

A gentle breeze blew in from the west, taking a slight edge off the warm evening. Insects chirruped, and rodents scuffled about in the underbrush nearby. The pleasant odors of sage and earth comforted her. This was home.

In an instant, the wind, the insects, and the rodent noises stopped. Everything was deathly still. Emily felt an awful tingling raise the hairs across the back of her neck. She touched her mom’s arm, only to be met with a loud crack of static electricity.

A horrendous humming noise was accompanied by an intense white light emanating from above—as bright as the noonday sun. She put her hands over her ears and looked at her mom. Candi spun around in an instant to face Emily, holding her body stiff, like a soldier at attention.

Emily wanted to scream but her lungs didn’t obey. She put her hand out for her mother to grab onto, but Candi never moved or blinked. Her eyes were glazed over, her platinum-blond hair blowing in every direction at once, whipping about her face like a tornado.

Emily watched her mom float into the air as the light seemed to be lifting her to heaven.

Emily wanted to help, but couldn’t. She was too afraid, and backed away from the light. She called out for her mother, but Candi didn’t answer.

Emily could see what looked like a black hole in the sky above her mother. It must have been the source of the light—a vent in the fabric of the universe, she decided. In an instant her mother zoomed up and disappeared from sight.

“Mom!” she screamed, but there was no answer.

The light disappeared, and the desert clearing fell dark and silent, as if nothing had happened. Emily stood and stared at the sky where the black hole had been. “Mom?” she said softly, fighting back tears, not wanting to admit to herself what her eyes had just seen and her heart had just felt.

Then the humming noise came roaring back—and the light, too. Emily felt the wind whip up around her, taking control of her body and straightening her like a pencil. She knew that whatever had just happened to her mom was about to happen to her.

She felt her feet leave the ground as the wind continue to lash against her skin. She wanted to crane her neck to study the black schism in space, but she couldn’t move a muscle. Up she went, feeling the air pressure change as she traveled higher into the night sky. The noise grew louder and the light intensified as she floated closer and closer to the source. Then she felt a charge of electricity build along her spine as the pull of the Earth seemed to fall away. She zoomed into the nothingness above.

The blackness had her.

CHAPTER 6

September 24, 2014

8:36 p.m.

Emily opened her eyes to find that she had fallen asleep at her Internet station in the library. Her mind shifted into analysis mode, realizing that two things were off. One: she hadn't dreamt about her mom in over a year, and two: there was a red and white tabby cat curled up in her lap, purring gently. A cat? In the library? That was a new one. The gentle vibration against her belly was one of the most soothing things she'd ever felt in her life.

The kitty looked up at her and let out a high-pitched meow that caught the attention of the computer users in the cubicles next to her.

"Sorry," she whispered to her neighbors, stroking the cat's neck and ears to keep it quiet.

* * *

Jim Miller looked up from a book that he was reading when he heard a cat's meow break the silence in the library. He stood up and tracked the source down to one of the computer stations on the other side of the book stacks that separated him from that area. He moved a couple of the books on the shelf, allowing a better look. He saw a red-headed chick sitting at one of the computer stations facing him, not twenty feet away, petting a tabby cat in her lap.

He did a double take when he looked at her face, nearly jumping out of his skin. "Holy shit! She's back!"

* * *

Emily stopped rubbing the feline and turned her head when she felt a pair of eyes wash over her. *Be careful not to look up*, Emily told herself. Just act normal, like nothing is wrong. She didn't want to tip off whoever was watching her—and she was sure someone was watching her. Probably from beyond the bookshelves to her left. That's where she'd do it from. Stand behind the stacks while looking through a crack in the row of books.

Emily arched her back, easing out the stiffness that had accumulated during her slumber in the chair. She could see through the windows on the fifth floor from her position, and was

struck for the hundredth time by the beauty of the nighttime view of Phoenix and the desert beyond. Her cat purred louder, as if the animal could sense her astonishment.

Whoever was watching was being careful. She couldn't see or hear anyone near her, but she could feel the weight of their eyes. She knew it wasn't Sheldon; his stare felt different. She couldn't sense the stalker's thoughts, probably because the person on the other side of the eyes wasn't focused solely on her, or they weren't close enough in proximity.

She got up slowly, cradling the cat in the crook of her arm—but the cat woke up, meowed at her, then swung its head around and hissed at the stacks. It leapt out of her arms and disappeared around the corner in the hall by the drinking fountain.

Shroedinger's Cat, she remembered from a physics book that she had skimmed a few weeks earlier. She recalled the theoretical basis for the thought-provoking experiment proposed by the renowned physicist to explain the indeterminate nature of quantum particles. She played some words in her mind—a random melody to help her make sense of the moment.

Now she's here, all soft and red. Is kitty alive? Or is she dead?

Dear little Shroedy, my cute little kitty who's trapped in a box today. Will you jump ready or let the poison take your breath away?

She walked nonchalantly down an aisle of books, coming out facing the balcony that overlooked an enormous and breathtaking open space—five floors of etched glass installed in opposing angles that ran down to the indoor Koi fish pond on the ground floor. Five glass elevators were directly across from her. Three cars were stopped on level one, but one was leaving the second floor, heading up. Another was coming to a stop at the third floor.

She circled the elevator entrance, trying to survey as much of the fifth floor as possible. There were a couple of people in the wide-open reading room that faced the south windows, preoccupied with their books and laptops. She made sure they weren't paying attention to her, then ran to the door that led to the stairs and elevators, opened it, and slammed it shut. She scampered around a corner and waited. She peered from her hiding place, trying to catch someone rushing to the doorway to see which way she'd gone.

Nothing. No one. Whoever was following her was very sneaky indeed.

She counted to one hundred, just to be sure, then walked casually through the door that she'd slammed and took the main staircase down to the ground floor. First, she needed to get to the shelter before they ran out of available beds and second, she had to do it without being followed.

The first was easy. The second—not so much. Not yet. Not without knowing who was following her.

She still had a trick or two up her sleeve, though. She came to the bottom of the stairs, turned right, then quickly turned right again, heading to the south end of the building. She passed a string of wooden study carrels, an empty librarian's desk, and three rows of towering

bookshelves before ducking into a doorway. She looked over her shoulder to see if anyone stood out—no one did. Just two people gathering their things, getting ready to leave together.

She ran down a narrow hallway past a pair of meeting rooms, then snuck through a door on her right and through a service stairwell to an external door near the southeast corner of the building. If everything was the same as it had been a year ago, she'd find the door hidden on the outside by an out-of-control vine crawling up the wall. Ten feet beyond that, there'd be a chain-link fence with a section missing in the middle of it. She slipped through and surveyed the scene outside. Yep. All the same. She ran across an RV-sized patch of concrete, past the trash dumpster, and hid behind a disabled UPS truck, sitting on jacks, with a tire missing.

She waited, not bothering to peer out from behind the truck. She stood still and listened, instead. Two minutes later she heard the door from the library open. Her pulse quickened. She picked up a loose piece of concrete from the ground to her right—small enough to handle, but big enough to do some damage if it came to that. She listened, but all she heard was the sound of footsteps, a dragging noise, and then the unmistakable metallic screeching as someone opened one of the swing doors on top of the dumpster. More noise—a grunt and a muffled cascade of smaller sounds as someone emptied a garbage can into the dumpster.

Faint footsteps headed away, then the door opened and closed, then nothing.

She couldn't be absolutely positive, but she thought she'd made it out without being followed. A second later, she almost jumped out of her skin when she felt something moving against her leg. She looked down—there was the tabby cat from the fifth floor.

Shroedy, she thought. An impossible cat in an unlikely place.

She reached down to pet her new friend, but the cat was already gone.

Oh well, she thought.

A quick glance around the corner of the van confirmed that no one was lurking in the shadows. She couldn't shake the sense that she was being watched, though. The feeling of it had changed—up on the fifth floor, there had been a sharp curiosity. Now, the eyes watching her felt as though the person was amused.

If her sixth sense was a gift, it was getting in the way of living a normal life, whatever that meant. It had been so long, she'd forgotten what her life was like before The Taking. One minute she was sitting in the library, and the next minute she was hiding next to a disabled UPS van simply because of a feeling that she couldn't confirm or identify. She realized that it wasn't always a good thing to sense what people around you were feeling or intending to do to you.

She ran to a brick wall standing a hundred feet away from the library on the opposite side of the street, climbed to the top, then dropped down to the ground and rolled like a commando to hide in a stand of orange trees, the citric scent tickling her nose.

Sometimes, she thought, you need to be a total ninja. Not always. But sometimes.

A quick dash across an open grassy park on the south side of the library, and she was walking down North 1st Street, cool as a cucumber.

* * *

Jim Miller let out a low, soft whistle from his spot in the shadows on the east side of the library. He was impressed. The redhead was better than some of his fellow jarheads had been. Her moves inside the library were almost textbook, yet he was sure that she'd never received any formal training. Certainly not in urban, close-quarters escape and evasion. She was smart; damned smart, and calm under pressure.

He'd been able to beat her to the punch with instinct and experience. He knew the layout of the library, and had memorized every escape route over the years. It was a byproduct of his covert training. When he saw the direction she was headed after she came down the stairs, he played out the possible choices in his mind and selected the one with the highest degree of probability, given all he had learned about this girl over the years. He then calculated an intercept vector and ran outside, positioning himself in the shadows near the service door on the southeast corner of the building.

Five seconds later, she came out the door, bolted across the concrete area, and hid behind the teetering UPS van. Her patience and self-control was off the charts. She didn't look out from behind the vehicle. She waited and listened, then made her move like a trained operator.

Pretty damned cool for a teenager, he thought. He certainly wouldn't have been able to play it that smooth at her age. But then again, he thought, how old is she, really? She never ages, so she could be seventy for all he knew. She did act with the experience of someone with a lifetime of tactical training; practiced and honed like a regiment commander in Spec Ops.

* * *

Emily spent the next half-hour looking over her shoulder while taking a circuitous route that crisscrossed downtown. She went from the library to past the courthouse. Then over to Roosevelt Row. Then back beyond the library to the Japanese Friendship Park and finally to Glassford Park, right across from where she'd started. She was planning to spend the night at the biggest homeless shelter in the city, known to the local urban outdoorsmen as Central, a few blocks north of the library. But her last move was in the opposite direction. She headed back to the courthouse again, then slipped into an alley and sprinted to the other end, making her way north, sticking to side streets and the shadows.

By the time she rounded the final corner and had the entrance to the shelter in her sights, she was ready to collapse. There was no way anyone could have followed her. She'd done it. She smiled to herself and slowed to a walk, breathless.

She was almost there—half a block away—when she felt someone step out of a doorway behind her. She turned. She didn't know how she knew, but she did. The man's eyes were the same ones that she'd felt watching her at the library. How had he beaten her?

“Don’t run. I’m not here to hurt you,” the stranger said.

CHAPTER 7

Emily felt her entire body tense as the precursor to an adrenaline rush mounting inside of her. Sure, she could run from the stranger, or she could lash out with a back kick aimed low between his legs. Nothing was stopping her from getting away. But then she heard her mother's soothing voice telling her not to run. Not to fight. There was no reason for any of it.

She felt his intentions, and realized there was nothing malicious hiding inside the stranger. Not a speck. His mind was filled with curiosity mixed with excitement, like a kid on Christmas morning waiting to open the first present. Or maybe it was curiosity mixed with satisfaction. Hard to tell the difference, with her heart pumping at a full gallop. She took a moment to read his eyes. They were brown, kind, intelligent, and compassionate. An old soul trapped inside a middle-aged body.

She exhaled and let her shoulders relax. She was safe with him. Good thing, too, because she didn't think she had any more fight left in her. Or the energy to run.

"What's your name?" he asked in a soft, friendly tone filled with expectation.

"Emily."

"Emily Heart?"

"Maybe."

He smiled and nodded, as if her name just gave him validation for something. He stood with a posture that showed that he meant her no harm—hands up, held back close to his shoulders, palms out. He was doing his best not to threaten her. He stood a couple inches taller than six foot, judging by the height of the standard-sized doorway frame behind him. Slender, but strong.

He had the air of a trained athlete, but didn't radiate arrogance like most jocks did. He had a deeply tanned, clean-shaven face and faint smile lines that ran from outside of his nose down to his jawline. She guessed that he was in his early thirties, but he dressed like a college student. He wore a pair of khaki shorts, a white T-shirt that read Cartoon Network in black lettering across the front, and Nike running shoes with no socks. To finish off the college look, he carried a black book bag, slung around his shoulder with one strap.

"You a cop?" she asked, trying to sound tough. He didn't really look like one, but the question jumped out of her mouth before she could stop it.

He let out a laugh, then smiled.

She waited for an answer with one eyebrow raised.

“No,” he laughed again. The lines on his face deepened, and a pair of crow’s feet appeared in the corners of his eyes. “I’m no cop.” He hesitated. The smile faded from his mouth, but didn’t leave his eyes, which narrowed as he cocked his head slightly and stared at her intently. Scrutinizing her.

She revised her assessment—early forties. Lines like that only come from the wear and tear of life. Like her mother’s.

He kept staring at her with that same look on his face. Like—well—she didn’t know what it was like. She was out of descriptors. No one had ever stared at her like that before, not unless they wanted something from her or were looking to hurt her.

“What?” she asked. “What do you want from me?”

“I just want to talk, that’s all.”

“I don’t talk with strange men. Or normal men, for that matter. It’s one of my rules. Number ten, to be exact.”

“I’m sorry. How rude of me. My name is Jim Miller. I’m a writer.”

He extended his hand, but she ignored it, keeping her eyes trained on him, waiting for his facade to wither and reveal something else.

“Forgive me if I don’t want to hold hands,” she said, mirroring his cocked head, narrowed eyes, and scrutinizing gaze.

He dropped his hand.

Just then, a group of three homeless people brushed by them—one woman and two men—heading to the shelter. They were late, and probably weren’t going to get in once all the beds were taken for the night. But Emily realized something. Even though all three of them glanced at her, she couldn’t sense what they were feeling.

She looked back to Jim. She could still sense what he was feeling. Anticipation. But not in any negative kind of way.

“Okay,” he said. “Emily Heart. Tell me if I’m wrong, but you look hungry. Why don’t you let me buy you something to eat, and I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Emily’s instincts were in conflict with her stomach. It was gurgling and hissing at her like her missing cat. Rule number one: no close friends. Rule number seven: don’t get involved. Rule number ten: no men. But something about Jim seemed right. She didn’t want to trust him, but she already did, and that was a problem. She was hungry; more than hungry. And that, she decided, was the most pressing need, more so than the exhaustion pulling her eyes closed. She could figure out where to sleep later. Right now, the need for stomach fuel won.

“I’m not that hungry, Jim, but I’ll let you buy me some dinner. I’d hate to be rude. But no funny business or I’m gone like your last paycheck. Agreed?”

“Okay, Miss Emily. You’re in charge here. You call all the shots, okay? How about something down in Evans Churchill? Nice new places down there.”

“Fine,” she replied, trying to contain her rumbling stomach. “We can walk. You lead the way.”

“Fine,” he replied, using the same tone as she just did. He headed south, back toward the library.

She couldn’t help but get a little excited. It had been far too long since she’d had an actual sit-down meal in a restaurant. Her stomach bubbled again. It was about a twenty-minute walk to Evans Churchill, if they weren’t in a hurry. She hoped Jim didn’t mind a little peace and quiet. She wasn’t in the mood to talk just yet.

It had been a long, tough twenty-four hours. She reviewed it all in her mind: she’d arrived at the shelter early in the morning, way after hours, planning to sneak in and find a spot to curl up for the rest of the night, when she saw Junie out in the playground by the rec center, cornered by a group of Locos. She’d reacted on instinct—she had to protect Junie. She’d found a late-model car on the street next to the playground and sat down hard on the hood, setting off the alarm on purpose. She ran across the playground toward the group, waving her arms and yelling: “COPS! COPS!”

In the ensuing confusion, she swooped in, grabbed Junie by the hand and took off running. Which led to the shootout in the restaurant, which led to her first jump. Then she woke up in Glassford Park. Then she went to the Irish Cultural Center, then came the police and her second jump the same day, taking her forward another year. After that she’d come to in the middle of the street, freaked out, beat the crap out of some ugly cabbie and a couple of wannabe good Samaritans, stole the cab, and broke into a bread truck.

Yeah, she thought. *A long day*. She could use a real sit-down dinner and some peace and quiet.

* * *

An hour and fifteen minutes later, Emily and Jim sat in a secluded booth in the back corner of The Fourth Street Café and Eatery. Jim said he knew the owner, a claim which was verified by the fact that the entire staff seemed to know his name and treat him like an old friend.

Maybe he’s just a good tipper, Emily thought.

She put her fork on the plate, pushed it away from her, leaned back, and belched like a sea-weary sailor on shore leave. She’d just wolfed down a triple cheeseburger, a side order of cheesy fries, half a baked chicken with mashed potatoes smothered in brown gravy, two servings of steamed broccoli, a side salad with ranch dressing, another order of fries, and half an apple pie.

Jim started to say something, but Emily beat him to it.

“You should see me when I’m actually hungry.”

“Next time I think we’d better call ahead and make sure they have enough food on hand.”

The server arrived and cleared away the dishes.

Emily waited until he was gone. “Okay, Jim. What do you want from me?”

Jim reached under the table and pulled a battered old leather document satchel out of his backpack. The case was soft, and looked very old. Emily had seen that same style briefcase being carried by law students who seemed to spend more time in the library than she did. It was big enough to hold stacks of legal documents, folders, and even a few small books.

“I’m lucky I had this with me. I was at the library doing some research—on you—as a matter of fact.”

“On me?”

“Well, on your case, actually. Your mother’s name is Candi, am I correct?”

“Have you been following me? Are you some kind of creeper?”

“I told you, I’m a writer. I’ve been looking for you.”

He undid the rawhide thong that held the case closed and removed a thick manila folder. A picture slid out the end and onto the table. He set the folder down over the picture, but Emily was sure it was a picture of her.

He opened the folder, leafed through its contents for a moment, then took out a piece of printer paper with a photograph color-copied in the middle. He placed it on the table facing her.

“Exhibit A. The ninth-grade yearbook picture of one Emily Heart. Dysart High School, 1984-1985.” He took out a newspaper clipping attached to a sheet of card stock with a pair of red paper clips and placed it on the table beside the first photograph.

“Exhibit B,” he continued, without looking down. “It’s about a girl named Emily Heart and her mother, who went missing on Easter weekend in 1985 from a sparsely populated neighborhood in northwest Phoenix.” He pulled out two more articles from the *Sun City* newspaper and put them on top. “That very same night, dozens of reports came in about strange colored lights shooting at the desert in the same area. One report even mentioned some type of an explosion.”

He took out an official-looking piece of paper and set it next to the newspaper clippings. “Exhibit C. A police missing persons report about the same incident. It looks like your mom’s friend Angela—” he said, picking up the report and glancing at it. “Angela Montgomery, was worried when Emily and Candi didn’t show up for Saturday night Mass before Easter, or any of the planned church events on Easter Sunday. The report is dated April 8, 1985.”

Emily was getting nervous and her mouth started rambling. “Just because I said my name is Emily Heart, doesn’t mean it’s true. I could be anyone. Maybe I’m someone she met. Someone who decided to start using her name. Why would I give my real name to a stranger? Would you? There are a lot of redheads in the world, and I’m sure there are lots of Emily Hearts right here in Phoenix. It’s a pretty common name. There’s what, four million people living here now? How can you really be sure? Of anything? Especially all that alien nonsense.”

“I never said anything about aliens.”

“Well, the lights in the desert. Aliens? Right?”

“There’s more,” he replied, tilting his head as if he found her answer annoying. “I’m not anywhere near the most interesting part of my story yet, not even close. And actually, there aren’t as many true redheads in the world as you might think. It’s a relatively rare phenotype. That means—”

“Yeah, yeah, genetics,” Emily shot out. “A set of observable characteristics in an individual resulting from the interaction of their genotype and the environment. Don’t patronize me.”

Jim raised his eyebrows at her. “You’re full of surprises, Ms. Emily Heart. May I continue?”

“Sure. If you have to. But stop calling me Ms. Emily Heart. It makes me want to puke.”

“Okay, I won’t,” he said, pulling out yet another piece of card stock, this time with a picture stapled to it. He handed it to her. “Exhibit D. This is a still photo taken from a mall video camera in a parking lot back in 1987. Again, it looks just like you.”

Emily looked at the picture. She was stunned. It showed her in the back of that weird scooter thing at Metrocenter Mall with Duane, the nice security guard who’d helped her out. It seemed like so long ago. It wasn’t a high-resolution shot by any stretch, but it was her. She would never forget that day. She couldn’t believe it, but there it was, right in front of her in black and white.

“Where—how did you get that?”

“You have no idea what a pain in the ass it is to transfer VHS to digital. Total hassle.”

He smiled at her. She didn’t get it.

“Ohhh—” he said with a proud voice. “I have a good friend who still works security at that mall. His name is Duane.”

She gave the photo back to him. “So, you have a friend. Big deal.”

“In fact, I have lots of friends, all around Phoenix.”

“Jim, I don’t know what you think you’re proving, but none of these girls are me. I mean, c’mon. That girl—this Emily Heart character that you keep showing me—” She picked up the yearbook photo. “—She was in the ninth grade when? Like thirty years ago? How could I possibly be her? That’s insane.”

“My point exactly. How, indeed? But don’t interrupt me. I’m just getting started.”

Emily looked past him to the main dining room of the restaurant. The staff was beginning to put the chairs on the tables and sweep up. “I think this place is closing. I think I need to go.”

“Don’t worry about that. You know how I said I knew one of the owners? Well, I wasn’t being entirely forthright. I *am* one of the co-owners of this place. A silent partner-type deal. So we’re okay, I promise. Shall I go on?”

“If you insist,” Emily said, feeling her back slump into the booth.

Jim insisted. He went on for another twenty minutes. He had pictures of her from multiple sources. Security cameras, mostly, but he'd also managed to find a YMCA ID card and a library ID card—both with her picture, but neither with her name. They were from 2002 and 2005 respectively, after she had learned to start using aliases. Taken en masse, he had documented most of her time-jumping experience over the past two years of her life. She was amazed. Two years in her time, just under thirty years of normal time. How on Earth had he done it? When Jim finished, he leaned back and crossed his arms behind his head.

“Well, dear Emily?”

She rolled her eyes “That’s worse. How about just Emily?”

“Would you care to tell me how it’s possible that one girl can show up over and over in all these pictures in and around Phoenix for the almost three decades and not seem to age at all?”

CHAPTER 8

Emily was at a loss for words, which didn't happen very often. Up until this moment, she'd assumed she was the only person in the world who had any idea of what she'd been through over the past two years—or almost thirty years—she wasn't sure which definition was more accurate. She'd have to do more research in the library to figure that question out.

Now, right in front of her, someone she'd never met before in her life had almost her entire journey organized and stacked inside a satchel that he carried around with him like a squirrel with an acorn—though he'd missed a few pieces along the way. And she sure as hell wasn't about to fill him in, either.

The restaurant manager came to the table and stood a few inches from Emily's shoulder. He spoke to Jim. "I'm ready to close up, boss."

"We're not done here. I'll lock up for you before I leave."

"Be sure to kill the lights and set the thermostats to 85."

"Will do."

"Oh, and the alarm," he said, staring down at Emily before he walked away.

The look made Emily feel gross inside. Not like your typical creepy old man checking out your ass kind of gross—she actually felt the blackness surrounding his sickness. It oozed out of him and crawled across the space between them, seeping into her skin, making her want to throw up.

Okay, she thought, she was starting to understand her gift. She was right. The sixth sense only works when someone is focusing directly on her. And only for that moment, like a flash on a radar screen. It didn't work with random people she passed on the street, or with people sitting in a booth across the restaurant. She couldn't sense them because their attention was focused elsewhere, not solely on her.

Jim looked at Emily and was about to say something.

"You know that guy is a total pervert, don't you?" she asked, before he could start talking.

"Who? Rob?"

"Whoever that guy is. The manager? He's bad news. He's a sick bastard."

"I'll admit, he can be a little gruff at times, and needs to mouthwash more often, but he's basically harmless. He's good at his job, but I know some of the female servers don't really like him much."

“They don’t like him because he’s gross. All twisted inside.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do. All women know when a total douche is too close to them. I call it creeper radar.”

“Hmmm.” Jim paused. “Interesting. Anyway—back to the topic at hand.”

He took a sip of his water and then continued. “I didn’t become aware of you—I mean, of Emily Heart—until 1995.”

He picked up a picture from a drugstore security camera. “I’d just gotten out of the Marines, and I was a journalism major at ASU. I was helping a cop friend of mine with an odd case that he was working on. A girl had disappeared under unusual circumstances while she was being held for shoplifting at a Walgreens. She was in the security office at the store, when all of a sudden, the electronics in the entire place went haywire. The video feed from the security office went blank after the camera shorted out. Luckily, we were able to still view the tape up to a certain point. When I saw this picture,” he said, holding up a still photo of her, sitting handcuffed in the office, looking nervous, “I remembered the story from back in ‘85. I was only a kid at the time, but I remembered how sad it made me feel that a mom and daughter had vanished on their way to Mass—poof—and no one could figure out what happened to them. I remember seeing pictures of the two of you in the papers. Your mom had bleached-blond hair, right? A Marilyn Monroe-type look? I did some digging, and I found the original newspaper picture. Then I put the two pictures next to each other, the one from the drugstore and the one from the newspaper—and I thought, well, that’s odd. They really *do* look the same. So, I made a file. And over the years, you, I mean, Emily Heart, kept popping up here and there, always in the middle of something and caught on camera. I found pictures of you in all kinds of places. Homeless shelters, alleys, drug stores, 7-Elevens, you name it. Same girl, same city—same age. The time span started out at ten years, then twelve . . .” he picked up another photograph. “Then fifteen . . .” he pointed to a photocopy on the table. “Then seventeen . . .” he held up the YMCA ID card. “Then twenty . . .” he gestured to the library card. “It became a hobby of mine. Well, maybe more of an obsession, I have to admit. Figuring it out. Figuring out how a girl could stay the same age all these years. Wouldn’t you want to know? Wouldn’t you be curious?”

“Well, yeah,” Emily replied, finally finding her voice. “I would. But, Jim, maybe I’m a vampire. Did you think of that? Right now, maybe I’m biding my time, waiting to feed on you. Or maybe I’m some type of ghost, or alien from outer space. They do exist, you know.”

“Maybe,” he surprised her. “Anything is possible. But for one thing, I have photographs of you in direct sunlight. I’ve seen you in direct sunlight.” He held up a photo taken on his cell phone, from outside of the Irish Cultural Center a year ago. “And anyway, I don’t think vampires eat cheeseburgers. Neither do aliens or ghosts.”

“But you don’t know for sure, do you? How could you?”

“No, dear Emily. I don’t know for sure that vampires don’t eat cheeseburgers. Besides, everything we’ve heard about vampires might be total bullshit. But I don’t think you’re a vampire. Are you a vampire? Or a ghost?”

“Well if I was, you wouldn’t know it until it was too late. I sure as hell wouldn’t just tell you, first,” she said. “And stop calling me that.”

Emily was stalling. She didn’t know what to do. The only other person who might have known there was anything unusual about her was Master Liu. She’d studied Wing Chun Kung Fu with him for almost six months, during one of her longest non-jump periods since it all began. One night after leaving his studio, she’d been attacked downtown by a lecherous asshole that she was actually trying to help. She fought him off, but her adrenaline kicked in and she jumped—four years into the future.

A few weeks after that jump, Master Liu saw her on the street and stopped her. He acted like no time had passed, and he made no mention of the fact that she looked exactly the same age as before. He told her to come back to the studio. She was wary, but she did anyway. She managed to remain in time for three months, then something happened and she jumped again.

That second stint with Master Liu was different. He accelerated her training and started teaching her meditation, breathing, and a whole range of stuff he called “Chi Kung.” Chinese energy work, he called it. She went to his studio almost every night. He’d finish up the regular class, but ask her to stay after. He worked with her for hours on end, sometimes well past midnight, drilling her over and over on various techniques that were specifically designed to allow a small, relatively weak fighter take on bigger, stronger opponents. He taught her how to fight multiple attackers, and how to use anything at hand as a weapon. Sometimes they trained until dawn, never stopping to take a break. She had no idea how Master Liu did it. He had to be at least seventy, if not older.

She knew she was getting something special from him. One night, she asked him why.

“Because you are lost and in need, dear Emily,” was all he would say.

His words were etched in her brain. “If someone attacks you, or if you know for certain someone has ill intent and they’re about to cause you harm, then they’ve forfeited their right to safe passage. Your responsibility is to yourself first, and use whatever is at your disposal to incapacitate them. Do not hesitate. Do it hard and do it fast. Be decisive. Be merciless.”

Jim’s voice cut into her memory. “Emily?”

She was peering over his shoulder, eyes glazed over and unfocused, completely zoned out. She snapped out of it. She brought her eyes to him. He had that scrutinizing gaze again. Scrutinizing, but not judgmental. He was seriously intent on figuring her out.

“Sorry. I was thinking about someone.”

“No problem. It’s getting late. And I stopped you from getting into the homeless shelter. All the beds are probably taken by now. Do you have a place to stay tonight?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

He laughed. "I live just two blocks from here. In a house on Roosevelt Row. I have a spare bedroom. It's yours if you want it."

"Forgive me if I don't want to cuddle just yet."

He guffawed.

"Dear Emily, you're quite a funny young lady. And you know that's not what I meant."

"I asked you not to call me that."

"So what's it going to be? Do you need a place to crash, or will you let me give you some cash for a room somewhere?"

"I'm not sure yet. Let's leave, though. Either way, I'll let you walk me to wherever it is I decide. I don't feel like dealing with street urchins tonight. I'm tired." She stood up from the table.

He did the same and started to walk away. She grabbed his arm. "Aren't you going to leave a tip?"

"For who? There's nobody here."

"That doesn't matter. Someone served you and deserves a tip. It's only right."

"I am the owner—"

"So?"

He pulled three one-dollar bills from his wallet and tossed them on the table. "Happy?"

She smiled. "Yes. Now it's my turn."

"For what?"

"To ask questions."

"Such as?"

They walked through the empty dining room toward the front door.

"What's your deal? You keep files? What kind of writer are you? What do you write about, exactly?"

He pulled out a set of keys, then opened the front door of the restaurant.

"You go ahead. I need to set the alarm." He walked at a fast pace to the adjacent wall of the dining room.

She waited outside at the top of the steps leading to a porch just beyond the entrance of the restaurant. She looked at the sky. Everything was peaceful, and she could see the Big Dipper. For a moment, her mind took her back to a time when she was standing in the desert, looking up at the stars, when the great shadow came and took her away. She took control, snapping herself out of that nightmare. She brought her eyes down to the street.

A dark-colored Chevy lowrider with fancy rims and two primer spots along its hood cruised by slowly, the beat of its music sending out a rhythmic series of thumps that she could feel hitting her chest. She couldn't see inside. It was too dark, and the windows were tinted black. It stopped for a moment directly across from the restaurant. The rear window on the driver's side rolled down two inches, then stopped. Emily could feel two sets of eyes on her and

a strong sense of curiosity emanating from the passengers in the vehicle. The window rolled up a few seconds later, then the driver gunned the engine and sped away.

Looking for someone, she thought. *Obviously, not me.*

Jim came out the front door, turned the lock with a key, and joined her on the steps. His hands were empty.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” she asked.

He looked down at his body, then back at her. “What?”

“Your files. Or should I say, Emily’s files.”

“I locked them in the safe in the office. You never know when someone who knows Emily might want their contents to disappear. Forever.”

“Good point.”

“Let’s walk,” he said, gently resting his hand on her back.

The front yard of the restaurant, which was actually a re-purposed house, was surrounded by a wall six feet high. Between the porch and the wall was a nice garden. They walked down the stairs and along the garden path, heading for the sidewalk at the bottom.

“I’ll tell you ‘what my deal is’ on the way. It mostly has to do with some seriously weird paranormal shit that I saw on the battlefield when I was in the Marines. I did a tour in the Middle East. You wouldn’t believe what goes on in the night sky over a combat zone. I think my background might be able to help you. At least I think I can.”

“Help me? Why do you think I need help?”

The moment they stepped onto the sidewalk, four gang members appeared out of nowhere to surround them. Their guns were drawn.

“Hello again, *rojo*. Been a long time,” said the shortest one of the group. He touched her hair. She knocked his hand away. “You think I’d forget or something? I never forget a face. Especially a *bonita* face.”

The light from the lamppost highlighted his face well enough for her to see detail. She studied him closely. Something was familiar about him. Then she had it. He was the same gangbanger who had fallen down the steps in the basement of the Italian restaurant, right before the shootout started. Her eyes went wide.

“That’s right, *puta*,” he snarled. “Now you remember, don’t you? Let’s see if you remember this: where the fuck is my *dinero*?”

Emily’s mind turned in on itself, deciding to replay the events from April 1985, shortly after she and her mother were taken by the light in the desert.

CHAPTER 9

Emily could hardly breathe as she watched her mother scream in agony while lying on the razor-thin platform that was hovering in the middle of the room. The telescoping robotic arm of the great machine positioned itself over her mother's terrified face, then extended four writhing, snake-like tentacles, each tipped with a six-inch-long gleaming needle. The needles spread themselves apart like a hand, reaching for her mother's face, headed for her mom's eyes and ears, just like it had done so many times the previous day.

Emily guessed that it had been twenty-four hours since the light in the desert had appeared and taken them into the void, because of how hungry she was. If she was correct, then today was the day after Easter. She actually had no idea how long they had been held captive, or whether it was day or night, or where on Earth she was—if she was even on Earth. There were no windows or doors in the room, and she couldn't see movement of anyone else other than herself and her mother.

She figured she was inside some type of test chamber, plastered in a spread-eagle position against a vertical wall. The semi-transparent stretchy material that was holding her down gave a bit when she tried to move, but only an inch or so before it snapped back. She felt like an insect trapped on a specimen board, ready to be dissected and torn apart at the whim of a demented scientist.

The chamber was about twenty feet across, octagonal, with a high ceiling which sloped down to meet the walls about eight feet from the floor. In the middle of the ceiling was a black circle, with eight beams that looked like lasers radiating outward from it like spokes. The beams glowed with a pulsing blue light, giving the chamber a medieval glow as they danced around the room, but didn't reflect off any surface. The black, featureless floor seemed to suck the light energy into its molecules, showing circular echoes of the light penetrating its surface before it disappeared.

The wall surrounding the chamber was divided into eight equal-sized panels that were situated between the glowing spokes of the ceiling. The panels were fully articulating, and able to adjust their position on either axis, depending on what type of advanced technology emerged. Sometimes the panels morphed into an iris, with overlapping sections that would expand or shrink to control its center opening. Other times, a snake-like apparatus would emerge from within that section—like the one hovering over her mother right now—and sometimes the panels

would simply slide back to allow more room for the angular robotic arm to move about the chamber.

Whoever or whatever designed the space seemed to have an equal fascination with sharp, clean angles and flexible, serpentine appendages that, at first glance, seemed to move in chaotic, random directions. But they always managed to land with absolute precision somewhere on her mother's body—usually inserting themselves in her eyes, ears, nose, or spine.

A metallic pedestal was attached to the floor in the center of the room, clearly the central focal point of everything that happened in the room.

Emily could only guess at the true purpose of the complex array of machinery that the room was capable of generating at a moment's notice. The logical assumption was that this was some type of human experiment, one designed to inflict massive amounts of pain for some unknown purpose. Her mom was still screaming, and Emily knew that the procedure and the screams wouldn't stop for at least another hour. She could close her eyes, but that wouldn't stop the bone-rattling screams of her mother.

Candi Heart lay naked on her back, held to a paper-thin, rectangular slab the resembled a metal table. It was floating two feet above the floor pedestal with intense flashes of static electricity shooting back and forth between the underside of the platform and the pedestal.

Emily assumed that her mom was on an examination table. But it was no ordinary table, and the material couldn't have been metal—at least not any type of metal that Emily had ever seen or heard of before. It was capable of contorting itself in any and all directions, depending on what technology was currently active in the room. It could bulge upward from its center to raise her mother's midsection up to meet a probing set of implements, or it could raise the top half of the table, bending at its midpoint to lift her mother into a sitting position. Several times, it turned itself upside down and opened holes in its surface to give access to her mother's spine. The holes would seal themselves as soon as they were no longer needed.

When the room was dormant, all of the wall panels remained smooth—a clean, unbroken gunmetal gray that was waiting to morph again at someone's beck and call. The pulsing blue light from the spokes in the ceiling gave the panels a purplish tinge that was both comforting and terrifying: comforting because Emily loved the color purple, and she'd never seen a shade quite so beautiful, but also terrifying, because she knew that it was only a matter of time before she would hear a deep humming noise and then feel vibrations in the wall behind her. They signaled the start of another round of injections and tests, meaning the screaming would start again and she'd have to watch the machines hurt her mother.

Twice the previous day, two sections of the far wall had become see-through after the overhead beams were energized to full intensity and crisscrossed, spreading out and catching the wall panel at just the right angle. For a flicker of a moment, she could see a crowd of large heads on the other side of the wall, watching the proceedings in the room.

The worst part of the nightmare was when her mom would disappear near the end of the procedure. The vanishing immediately followed a predictable pattern of mechanical steps. The table would flip over and she'd be injected with something multiple times along the length of her spine, then the platform would right itself and she'd be injected in her ears and then her eyes. The painful series of injections—spine, eyes, then ears—were always followed by a wave of extreme sound vibrations that shook the room and rattled Emily's teeth. Seconds later, the intensity of the light pulsing from the spokes in the ceiling would increase the speed of their strobe effect and continue to do so until each light reached a constant stream. Then everything would go dark except for the blue glow of her mother's body.

The first time Emily saw it happen, she tried to scream, but no sound could escape from within the transparent cocoon holding her to the wall panel. She had thought the procedure was over, but it wasn't. Speckles of blue energy played across her mother's skin like miniature lightning bolts shooting out in a spiral pattern that originated at her belly button. When the vanishing moment was near, her mom's back would arch and hold for ten seconds, then her body would tuck itself into a fetal position right as the energy bolts stopped pulsing and turned a solid color, covering her mother in a glowing blue light. An instant later, she'd disappear, leaving the chamber silent and empty.

Next, there'd be a loud crack, and a flash of light that seemed to wash out the black in the featureless floor. The bottom of the chamber would energize into what she could only describe as a transparent movie screen, revealing a patch of desert and cactus roughly twenty feet below the room. Her mother would then materialize somewhere on the surface below, but not as her present self. Sometimes she was younger—in her twenties, and other times she'd be a much older version of herself, elderly in fact, with a face full of wrinkles and age spots. But regardless of her age, her mother would always look up, seemingly to make eye contact with Emily right before a chirping sound would ring, like an alarm, then the room would begin to fill with a hazy vapor. Eventually, the fog was so thick that Emily couldn't see her mother through the transparent floor anymore. A minute later, one of the panels would open, and the fog would be removed from the chamber, like a vacuum sucking the smoke out, leaving Candi lying on the floating table. Each time she returned, she'd be the same age as she was before she disappeared.

Fifteen minutes later, the entire process would start over, with slight variations in the order and timing. For about ten seconds at the start of the process, a vertical array of red lights would appear over her mother's body and change their appearance and location, like a scoreboard, or a scene marker for a movie. Then it would start: the injections, the humming, the vibrations, the light, the agony, the shooting lines of energy leading to her mom being encased in the blue fire before she'd disappear. Silence, a loud crack, a flash of light. The chamber floor flashing transparent. Her mother looking up at her, then the haze before Candi was back on the table.

Emily watched this happen over and over again, so many times that she'd lost count. Hour after unbearable hour passed, all the while her mother screaming and writhing in pain once the injections started. Each time her mother appeared on the table after the fog, she seemed skinnier, a little more fragile, like she was being eaten alive by the pain. Her skin eventually became drawn, her face pinched and frail. She looked like she would crumble into pieces if touched, or blow away in a cloud of dust if someone whispered in her ear.

Emily knew the end was near. Her mother couldn't take much more of this. Candi hadn't eaten or drank anything for hours, if not days, and neither had Emily.

Finally, after one trip to the surface, her mother didn't come back. There was no loud crack, no flash of light, no fog, and no more Mom. Emily's nightmare had gone from the unimaginable to the incomprehensible. She had held on to the fact that they were together as a family on that ship, until that moment; but now that comfort was gone. She was alone, trapped, and starving. Her lips could barely pry themselves apart from each other. She needed water. She needed help.

Emily could hear the chamber humming and vibrating differently than before. The flat rectangular object that her mother had been lying on floated across the chamber toward her, with the electrically charged pedestal remaining directly beneath it as it moved. The wall panels on either side of her swung open. Four mechanical arms reached out and took hold of her arms and legs just as the stretchy material dissolved, freeing her body from the wall.

Emily was surprised—the arms felt gentle, almost delicate. She knew what was coming, though. She knew what was next, and it wasn't going to be gentle or delicate. There had to be some form of intelligence behind the actions of the machines. Something or someone must be controlling them. Then she remembered the flashes of the big heads in the crowd that she'd seen on the first day. She tried to call out to them to stop what they were about to do, but she was too weak, and her lips too dry.

She waited, resigning herself to the same fate as her mother. She floated across the room on the rectangle, hoping to die before it began. Mechanical arms removed her clothing, tearing them into strips. The table was cool against her skin. A few silent moments passed.

The chamber hummed, and the array of lights appeared overhead, marking the start of the procedure. The lights turned from red to blue; a new development that she hadn't seen before.

She felt a slight warming beneath her, and knew it was beginning. Her body felt heavy, as if it were glued to the table. She had expected to see the robotic arm with the needle tentacles working its way toward her face to inject her, like the process had started each time with her mother, but she didn't.

The platform slowly rotated until Emily was facing the floor. She didn't feel it happen, but she knew a hole was appearing in the table directly over her lower spine. She had expected a terrible pain to follow, and was surprised when she felt only the tiniest of pin pricks. The table flipped back to its original position, and she watched the telescoping robotic arm descend and

position itself above her head. The four serpentine needle-tipped tentacles appeared and snaked their way to her eyes and ears. Emily was prepared to scream when the pain hit, but she barely felt a thing when the needles pierced her eyes and ears.

Something was different. Much different than her mother's time on the table. Maybe the order of the experiment had been changed, or maybe this was a different experiment. The arms receded and she stared at the ceiling of the chamber, waiting for whatever came next.

Emily's spine tingled, deep down at the base. Slowly, the tingle crept up between her shoulder blades. Her pulse started to quicken. The feeling crept up to her neck and transformed into an intense, throbbing pain. She was overcome by an adrenaline rush, the intensity of which she had never experienced. Her body began to sizzle with electric-blue lines of energy. Tiny lightning bolts crisscrossed her skin. A searing bolt of agony shot from the back of her skull to her forehead. The containment grid of energy let go of her body just as she curled into the fetal position and was consumed by blue fire.

She couldn't help but focus on the pain. A single, agonizing point between her eyes. She felt like she was floating, disconnected from her body. She had no idea how long she was floating, but it seemed like a lifetime. Two lifetimes. No, more than that. An eternity of pain and darkness, focused on a single point between her eyes. A blackness so intense that she never wanted to see black again: the beautiful night sky, yes. Regular darkness, yes. But empty voids of blackness mixed in with pain, no.

Then she heard a loud crack. A bright light blinded her eyes. Once again, she felt her body. The pain faded and was replaced by numbness, then coolness against her skin. She didn't have to open her eyes to know that she was back in the chamber and lying on the hovering platform. She flexed her hands and feet, then her legs and torso, realizing that she could move. The containment field hadn't begun to cover her yet.

It was now or never, she thought.

She gathered all her strength and leapt from the table, running blindly to the wall panel that had opened each time to let the hazy vapor rush out. She'd seen the sequence so many times that the dimensions of the chamber were etched permanently into her mind. She dove head first, praying she'd gotten it right, hoping that her assumption was correct and that the open panel led outside where the fog was being released.

She half-expected to slam her head into the wall and break her neck, but she didn't. She felt a rush of cool air hit her face as gravity and the laws of physics took control of her body. She began to fall, smelling desert flowers and sage along the way. The moon was nearly full, just like the night they were taken. The moonlight provided enough light that she could see the desert floor twenty feet below her.

She hit the ground hard, landing on the right side of her body, knocking the wind from her lungs with a thud. She gasped for breath, waiting for her lungs to recharge. They did after at

least thirty rapid breaths. She rolled over, expecting to find a broken bone or some other damage to her body. She didn't. She'd made it out in one piece.

She stood up and looked around, trying to get her bearings. She needed to run, but wasn't sure which way to go. She heard a roar that sounded like a powerful jet engine, and then a massive shadow slid over the top of the area and blotted out the moon and stars, leaving only darkness and cold. A beam of white light shot out of the bottom of the hovering shadow and made contact with the desert floor a dozen yards in front of her. It began to move in a grid-like pattern, swinging from one end of the area to the other. She knew they were searching for her.

She took off running in the opposite direction from the light, but stopped when the light turned off. She couldn't see more than a foot without the moonlight to direct her. She figured that she was in for a repeat of what had happened when she and her mother had first been taken. Then, hundreds of bright-red beams of light shot out of the shapeless shadow above her, each with their own origination point, striking the Earth in random locations. Columns of dirt, cactus, brush, and rock erupted from the ground wherever the beams pummeled the surface.

The red beams were everywhere, and getting closer. Emily knew she couldn't escape—there were too many—she was hemmed in on all sides. Then one struck her in the stomach. She had expected to double over in pain, which never happened. The redness bounced off of her and struck the dirt twenty feet in front of her, sending surface material into the air like a mortar shell hitting a structure. More beams hit her skin, but they didn't seem to harm her. Instead, they ricocheted off in crazy directions, making geysers of debris all around her.

An idea came out of nowhere and landed in her brain. It was a crazy idea that didn't make sense. But somehow she knew that it was the right thing to do. She faced the dark shadow looming above her and put her right hand above her head and waited, with her palm turned up, facing the sky. A red beam struck her hand and she adjusted her wrist so that her palm was perpendicular to the dark shadow above.

It worked—but not exactly as she'd planned. Instead of striking the shadow above her and then disappearing, the red stream stuck to the object. Whatever was floating above her was now tethered to her hand by the beam of red energy. The red grew wider and brighter as the impact area began to glow the same color. Emily's mind lit up with visions that told her things she couldn't possibly know. They were like snapshots of thought, mini-flashes of knowledge.

The object above her was a ship. She assumed it was an alien ship. She could see their faces looking at each other inside the ship. Much clearer than before. Their big heads were covered with boils and lesions. They were all sick, and looking for answers. Some disease was killing them, consuming their flesh one painful cell at a time.

Two thoughts kept popping into her mind over and over. The creatures wanted to go back to fix something, and humans were at fault. *Invaders* was the name they called us. It didn't make sense—the creatures invaded *our* planet, not the other way around. She could sense the visitors' panic, trying to stop her and the beam that was now connected to their systems. Somehow their

experiment had changed her genetic structure, allowing her to seize the power of their beam and turn it around and use it against them. The visitors didn't plan for this to happen. It was a lab accident, or a side effect of the experiment that they were running on her. The creatures thought that they had perfected the process when they started it on her, but they were wrong. She could see flashes of their emotions, feeling their hatred toward humanity growing inside them.

The beam continued to get thicker, and crackle with a power that Emily felt connecting to her bones. It seemed to charge her entire body like an energy matrix. The ship began to rattle and hum. Emily grew stronger with each passing second, like the beam's power was healing her somehow. She was no longer hungry, thirsty, or tired. She felt invigorated, and more alive than ever before.

Her palm began to glow a brighter red. The ship started to shake violently, making the stars and moonlight shine through in short bursts, like seams in the ship were cracking open and letting the starlight through. Whatever was happening was not hurting her, but she could sense that it was hurting them and their ship. She could feel the fear in their minds as they scrambled inside their ship, trying to end what she sensed was some form of energy feedback loop.

Time to get even, she decided, as her mind took control of the communication link and she sent flashes of thought to the occupants of the ship: *You kidnapped my family. You ran horrible experiments on me and my mother. You tortured us. You hurt us. You had no right to try to turn us into something else. You killed my mom. You need to pay for what you've done. You need to die.*

A few seconds later the ship exploded on one side, then shot to the heavens in a flash.

Time slowed down as dust, rock, and shards of black material from the ship began to swirl around her in a vertical column, moving in ultra-slow motion as if her body had been polarized with a force field, keeping the debris away from her. Suddenly all the broken pieces of the ship stopped moving around her, hanging in mid-flight for a few moments, then they winked out of existence in speckles of blue light.

She felt the red energy leave her body and dissipate into the air around her.

Time resumed.

The dirt and rock stopped spinning around her and fell to the ground.

She stood alone in the moonlight, trying to make sense of what had just happened. A faint breeze blew across her face and brought the pleasant aroma of cactus and sage into her nose. It reminded her of home. All her thoughts turned to her mother. A tear dripped from her eye and ran down her cheek.

Then her spine began to tingle, deep inside its base. She could feel it moving up her back and growing stronger. She didn't know what it was, but something was coming. She could sense it. But it was coming from inside of her. She wasn't the same Emily. Her captors had changed her more than she initially thought.

She decided to call out, just in case she wasn't alone. "Mom? Mom? Are you here? It's me, Emily. Mom? . . . Mom! Please, Mom, answer me! I need you!"

She waited, then called out over and over again. There was no answer. Just the sounds of the desert night.

She fell to her knees and the tears came. Lots of them. More tears than she thought could ever be in her teenage body, streaming down her face and flooding off of her nose. She just wanted to go home and hug her mom. She wanted to go to Mass with her mother just one more time. To sit next to her and hold her hand when the priest spoke. To sit in the wooden pew and lean her shoulder against her mother's so she could feel safe and loved.

"Mom!" she screamed as loud and as long as her lungs could manage. But there was no answer. No movement. No hope.

The tingle swelled to her neck and then shot to her forehead.

Blue light covered her body and she felt dizzy.

Something was about to happen.

CHAPTER 10

September 25, 2014

12:01 a.m.

Emily's mind snapped back to reality. She was standing next to Jim, with her eyes focused on the barrel of the gangbanger's gun. Panic churned deep in the pit of her stomach as she locked eyes with the shortest member of the Locos gang. It was clear that he was their leader based on his attitude and motions.

A tingle ignited in her spine, signaling the start of the countdown. She smiled, knowing that these *bandidos* would never see it coming.

"What are you smiling at, *puta*?" the leader asked, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

She swatted his hand away. "Just your ugly face."

Jim Miller pulled her close to him. "Tell us what you want."

Emily felt his hip, which was about the height of her ribcage, nudging her toward the street. Two cars were parked nearby, about three feet apart from each other. An old cream-colored Toyota Land Cruiser with a smashed windshield and missing bucket seats, and a black Monte Carlo that had been lowered on its suspension to the point that its undercarriage was only inches from the pavement.

Emily decided to play scared and dumb. *Stall*, she told herself. Stall long enough to let the jump process happen. Then take them all out when time slows down.

"I . . . I . . ." she stammered. "I don't know what you're talking about. I think you have me confused with someone else. Money? You want money?"

The leader laughed, flashing his single gold tooth. It looked odd next to the rest of his teeth. Gold and dirty brown didn't mix, not on any color chart that she liked. Emily noticed an ugly scar running from the corner of his mouth all the way to his ear. It wasn't there when she'd seen him that night in the basement over a year ago. Or at least she hadn't noticed it. Maybe it happened when he fell down the stairs. But she didn't remember seeing any blood on the floor. Then she remembered the pretty boy that she had kicked in the nuts. She remembered every detail of Derek's beautiful face. She checked the rest of the men in the gang; he wasn't there.

"Yeah, you stupid little *puta*," he spat. "I want the *dinero* you stole from me."

"That's right, *puta*," chimed in one of the thugs behind them. "You took money from the Locos. Flaco, show *chica* what we do to people who steal from the Locos."

Flaco's eyes darted to the man who just spoke. "Shut up! No names. How *estúpido* are you?"

She felt Jim nudge her again, ever so softly, pushing her toward the street. She sensed what he wanted: to work her between the gap in the two cars. She glanced at him. He was cool and relaxed. None of this seemed to bother him. His demeanor took her panic away, easing the adrenaline rush, which was not what she wanted. She tried to force her emotions to restart the jump process, but the tingle in her spine continued to fade. She wasn't going to jump.

She decided to take her act to a higher level. She sniffled and let her lower lip tremble, letting her eyes squint for a cry.

"Please, please don't hurt us," she told Flaco. She turned to Jim. "Daddy, do something! Give them what they want. Give them your wallet. Just make them go away." She threw her arms around Jim and began to sob into his chest, hoping that her acting job appeared genuine.

He wrapped his left arm around her. She felt his other hand slide to the waistband of his shorts. What was he reaching for? He wasn't carrying a gun. She would have been able to feel it with her arms hanging onto him.

Jim finally spoke. "You guys are complete fucking idiots."

There was silence from the Locos. She realized that the gang members were stunned. Jim's attitude wasn't what any of them had expected. Certainly not with four guns pointed at Jim's face.

Flaco moved a step closer to Jim, tilting his head back with attitude. "Seems to me like you're the fucking idiot who just got caught with his *pantalones* down in our territory. Isn't it past your bedtime, old man?"

The other three brutes laughed.

Flaco continued. "Why don't you leave the *chica* with us? We'll take really good care of her. Time for you to go nighty-night, Grandpa."

Jim turned slowly, shifting Emily across his body from his left side to his right, guiding her behind him. He freed his left arm, but kept his right on her, as if he were holding her in place to shield her from the gunmen. She looked back, glancing over her shoulder. They were almost to the curb, with the parked cars only a few feet away.

Emily knew Jim was about to do something, she could sense it; but wasn't sure what he was planning. His movements were calm, measured, and calculated. She realized that he'd shifted both of them to a position where he could see all four of the thugs at one time without turning his head in either direction.

She'd read in a defensive tactics manual at the library that you should keep your enemy in sight at all times and not allow them to out-flank you, then work yourself into a defensible position with escape routes identified and accessible. That's what Jim was doing—following his military training. The gang didn't seem to notice that he was slowly moving himself and her to the space between the cars.

Jim yawned. “As a matter of fact, I *am* a little tired. Been a long day. But before I take my nap—”

Emily felt his right forearm tense. There was something in his hand—somehow she hadn’t noticed it before.

“—I’d like to teach you boys a little something about proper ambush tactics.”

“Quit fucking stalling!” Flaco yelled, stepping forward and extending his right arm, pressing the muzzle of his gun against Jim’s left temple. “The only thing you’re gonna do, old man, is shut the fuck up and give us the *chica*. I’m not leaving without her *or* my fucking money!”

* * *

Jim made sure the triangle blade that he had pulled from the hidden pouch sewn into the lining on the back of his waistline was firmly in his hand. He slid the mini-knife between his knuckles with the razor-sharp edge sticking out. He was ready. It was now or never. He took a deep breath and launched his plan, using a series of lightning-quick moves.

“First,” Jim said as a distraction, pushing his hips hard, sending Emily between the two parked cars. Jim turned his head, allowing Flaco’s gun to slide off of his temple and slip past his face. He brought his right hand up and buried the knuckle blade into the back of Flaco’s right arm just above the elbow, severing the triceps tendon instantly, while reaching over Flaco’s now useless arm to snatch the gun with his left hand. “Your lines of fire are all wrong.”

Flaco screamed in pain as his arm fell sharply to his side.

Jim whipped his left elbow back and smashed Flaco in the face, breaking his nose with the blow. He sidestepped and wrapped his right arm under Flaco’s armpit and across his upper chest and neck, supporting him so he didn’t fall. He held Flaco’s gun in his left hand, pointing it at the remaining bandits to let them know that he had them covered. He brought the bloody tip of the blade in his right fist up until it pressed it into the soft area on the side of Flaco’s neck, slicing into the skin a quarter inch. He held Flaco’s frame tightly against his body, using him as a shield, as blood streamed out of Flaco’s nose and the wound in his neck, running down Jim’s forearm.

“Second, never set yourself up in a conflicting crossfire like that,” he added, pivoting on his right foot while turning left. His left foot lashed out and struck the bottom of the wrist of the killer to his left. The gun in the man’s hand flew into the air and landed ten feet away. “If any of you had fired, you probably would’ve hit each other.”

Jim took two steps back, dragging Flaco with him, until he was standing a foot from Emily between the two cars. He aimed the gun back and forth in a tight arc, making sure the gangsters knew they were each in his sights.

The men twitched nervously, shifting their weight side to side, glancing at each other and then back to Jim. They seemed confused, unsure of what to do. The two men with the guns wrapped and re-wrapped their hands around the grips, with their index finger resting on the trigger. Jim could see fear swelling in their eyes, making them even more unpredictable, and potentially desperate. But he also knew that he could turn their fear against them.

"Third," Jim said calmly, "know your enemy." He gestured to the man he'd just disarmed. "Hands up where I can see them."

The man stuck his chest out and raised his chin, but his hands never went into the air. "Fuck you. Know *your* enemy, punk. Nobody tells the Locos what to do. This is *our* territory. Something wrong with you? Are you *loco* or something?"

He spoke to Emily over his shoulder through the side of his mouth, never taking his eyes off the three men. "You okay, sweetie?"

"Can we leave now, Daddy? I want to go home," Emily called out from behind the hood of the car.

"In a minute. Daddy's almost done here."

"Kill him!" Flaco yelled to his men, still bleeding down Jim's arm.

"Not so fast," Jim said, flaring his eyes to get the other men's attention. He pressed the blade a little deeper into Flaco's neck, making Flaco call out in pain. "All I need to do is press this blade a little deeper and I'll sever his carotid artery. He'll bleed out in seconds."

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" Flaco yelled.

"Put the guns down, gentlemen, and walk away."

"Fuck you, *cabron!*" one of the men yelled, turning his gun sideways before shouting more insults.

"Fifty-one," Jim snapped, breaking the barrage of words.

"*Qué?*" the unarmed bully asked.

"That's the number of ways I can kill each one of you right now. Fifty-one. That's *cincuenta y uno* to those of you who *no habla*. And that's without a knife or gun. Imagine what I can do after I take those guns away from you. Trust me, boys, you're way out of your league here. Uncle Sam spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on my training, and all of you will be *dead* before the first one of you dumb fucks hits the deck. Let me assure you that I was tops in my class. I eat mutts like you for breakfast."

He waited five seconds, but the men ignored his demand. He was prepared to fire, but wanted to give the armed men one more chance to comply. "Now, listen. I don't want to kill you, and you don't want to be dead. So put down your guns and back away. That's all you have to do to walk away with your *cajones* still attached. Otherwise, your man Flaco draws his last breath, then each of you follows suit. I won't even break a sweat doing it. In fact, I'll enjoy it. Been a while since I got to kill me some *gangsters*."

"Just do what he says and let's get out of here," Flaco said. "This *pinche culero* is *loco*."

Jim shook the gun twice. "Now!" he said more forcefully.

"*Vete a la verga*," the one closest to Jim said. "West Side Locos don't back down to nobody."

"Just do it!" Flaco yelled with a mouth full of blood. "We'll handle this *cabrone* later. Quit fucking around. I need *médico*."

The two ruffians bent forward and put their guns on the cement. They didn't seem too happy to do it.

"Fourth, and finally," Jim said, with all the anger missing from his voice. "Choose your ground wisely. You guys say you are Locos? West Side Locos? Then you must be lost, because I know these streets, too. You're outside your home turf. This is the wrong place for you to pick a fight, not with the Glassford Gatos ruling this area. Now back up." He gestured down the sidewalk, past the guns lying on the ground. They did as he asked.

He walked them twenty feet away from Emily, past the guns, then shoved Flaco to the ground at their feet. He kicked his former captive in the ass. "Go on. Get, before I change my mind about letting you breathe."

Flaco crawled to his crew, holding his hand over his bloody face. "You have not heard the last from us!"

"Tell *El Padrino* that Jim Miller says hello. Tell him that this area is out of bounds, and that the redhead is off limits. If he has questions about any missing money, then he can come see me about it. Now get the hell out of here before I bend all three of you over my knee."

Emily stood next to Jim. She was holding a machine gun. He looked back. Only two guns remained on the sidewalk. He put his hand out, pushing down on her arm. She lowered the weapon.

"Keep it downrange. That way you don't accidentally shoot your foot off, or mine."

She nodded.

A second later, the same dark-colored Chevy lowrider with fancy rims from earlier careened around the corner, half a block west, with its tires squealing and engine roaring as it flew up the street. It skidded sideways to a stop directly across the road from the parked cars. The doors flew open and four tattooed, muscular men wearing wife-beater T-shirts and yellow bandanas over the lower half of their faces emerged with automatic weapons in hand.

"Gatos!" Flaco yelled.

The Gatos opened fire, spraying the area with lead.

CHAPTER 11

Emily pulled the trigger without thinking, shooting the cement in front of her. The gun recoiled hard when at least ten rounds shot out of its barrel, sending her arm up wildly. The sound of gunfire was so loud that all she could do was release the trigger, drop the weapon, and cover her ears.

Jim pulled her down behind the Monte Carlo on the curbside as the Gatos continued to shoot from the middle of the street at the Locos, who were sprinting away from them.

“We should run,” Emily said, feeling a strong tingle building inside. The countdown had restarted. She could feel a jump swelling deep within her, and she knew that this time she wouldn’t be able to stop it.

“They’re not here for us. It’s the code of the Gatos. Civilians are off limits.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m a beat reporter, remember? It’s my job to know everything there is to know about the streets of Phoenix. Plus, I’m friends with several members of the county’s Gang Task Force. Two of them were in my unit in the Marines.”

One by one, Flaco and his men were hit, sending hunks of tissue and spurts of blood flying from their bodies. One was hit in the shoulder, another in the leg, and two in the back. Each man dropped to the ground and skidded across the sidewalk like a skier wiping out on the slopes.

The Gatos ran to their enemies’ position and pumped round after round into their bodies until all movement had stopped. Then they turned their attention to Emily and Jim, walking toward them while changing the magazines in their machine guns.

“Stay low and crawl to the other side of the car,” he said to her in a normal tone. Normal, but directive. Well, utterly abnormal, considering the situation. “If it starts, I need you to run away as fast as you can and don’t look back. Understood?”

“What about you?”

“I’m trained for this; now go!”

His confidence-filled words cut through the chaos, and she knew that he was in total and complete control. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought it was going to crack through the front of her ribcage. She could feel the jump clock moving faster, building with intensity with each passing second.

Jim's fierce little knife had disappeared from his hand. He snatched the automatic that she had dropped earlier, then grabbed one of the other guns that the Locos had tossed. He turned to face the Gatos with a gun in each hand, both pointed down and away from his body. He didn't crouch or flinch. He didn't hurry. He looked like a robot on a mission, walking straight into the fires of hell without a speck of fear.

Emily heard police sirens in the distance and they were getting louder. They only had minutes to finish this and get away.

The Gatos broke apart from each other and swung wide, aiming their guns at Jim. They opened fire just as he lowered his right shoulder and rolled his body into a low-profile shooting position along the ground, bringing his guns to bear. He squeezed off several short bursts of his own, sending a thundering barrage at his enemies. A second later, all four Gatos fell to the ground.

Holy shit, she thought. *Who is this man?* The tingle was now sliding up her back and moving fast.

The police sirens echoed off the nearby buildings, making it sound like even more of them were closing fast.

"I hate cops," Emily said.

Jim stood up and walked to the Gatos' position. He stood near them for a minute with his guns trained and ready to fire. One of the Gatos moved, raising his gun at Jim, but Jim fired first, putting more slugs into the masked man. He walked to the next victim's body, rolling it over with his foot, never taking his eyes or his weapons off of the body.

A handful of squad cars flew around the end of the street with their lights flashing, laying rubber as they flew up the street and parked in what seemed like random locations across the area.

A pair of uniforms came out of each vehicle and took up positions behind them, aiming their guns at Jim.

None of them were looking at Emily, so she moved to the far end of the Monte Carlo, keeping her head down and moving slowly so they wouldn't notice her. It seemed to work.

"Drop your weapon!" they started yelling at Jim, using different variations and intensities of the same sentence. Some added: "Do it now!" or, "Asshole!" on the end, but it was difficult to know who was saying what, with all of them jacked up on adrenaline and shouting at the same time.

Jim held his gun over his head and turned around slowly. He dropped the gun to the ground and bent one knee to lower himself to the ground.

Just then, one of the Gatos that Jim hadn't checked for life signs aimed his gun and opened fire on the police from his position on the ground.

The police instantly erupted with a maelstrom of return fire. Emily saw Jim take two rounds in the leg and one in the back, spinning him around as he fell.

The gang member stood up and limped on one leg while holding his shooting arm up with the other. He was already covered in blood from Jim's attack, but he kept firing at the officers. He staggered each time he was hit—once, twice, three times—Emily lost count—but the masked man kept advancing on the officers, shooting and swearing.

Her eyes returned to Jim, lying in the street, motionless. She was overcome by anger. It coursed through her veins and boiled her blood. He was one of the good guys, and they'd killed him. She had finally found someone who was going to help her, but now he was gone. She felt the thick swell of black anger inside of her turn into pure energy as it pushed through her veins and energized her body. She knew this feeling, though it had been a while—two years, to be exact. Two years in her time, just shy of thirty years in calendar time. It was back when she'd stood in the desert and faced down the hovering ship after escaping from their torture chamber.

Then words came to her mouth. She didn't know why, just that they had to be set free. She opened her mouth and out they came. "Stop! Everybody! Just stop!"

An intense, high-pitched ringing sound flooded her ears and then faded out slowly. She looked to the street—bodies covered in blood, lying across the cement like motionless duffel bags. In front of them were the cops and the crazed Gato firing at them. All of them looked frozen in the moment, caught in mid-action, not moving.

She stood and moved closer to inspect. She could see all of them clearly now, their eyes focused down the barrels of their guns, their faces contorted in emotion—fear, anger, confusion, and even joy. A bullet casing hung in the air next to one of the cops, ejected from the chamber of his Glock semi-automatic a second before. She saw three bullets and smoke trails from the cops caught in mid-flight on their way to the gunman, who seemed to be stuck halfway between standing upright and doing a belly flop on the pavement, with blood trails sticking out like icicles from his body.

Time had stopped.

Emily figured the creatures were close. They had to be. It's what happened the last time that time had slowed down like this. She looked up, figuring the creatures had found her. She always knew they would. That they'd come back for her and seek their revenge, or to continue their heinous tests. She waited for the sky to darken and the ship to hover overhead. Seconds turned to minutes while she arched her back and held her palm above her head, facing the sky, ready to unleash her fury.

But nothing happened. The ship never came. She realized that this event wasn't the same as before. It was something else. Something new. She was changing again. Her anger was fading.

Then she felt the energy drain from her body, allowing time to resume.

The cops' bullets took off, resuming their course for the gunman, whizzing past her and hitting the man in the forehead and cheekbone as he fell. More blood. More tissue. A moment later, his body hit the pavement and didn't move.

"Where the hell did she come from?" one of the officers asked.

“Hands in the air!” another one shouted.

Emily put her hands over her head and let her knees buckle, hoping that the cops wouldn’t shoot her. They didn’t. Moments later, she was surrounded.

“Why is she naked?” an officer behind her asked.

She looked down at her chest and legs. Her clothes were gone. What? Had she jumped? If so, why hadn’t she gone anywhere? Where was the blue light? Did the process change?

“Wait a minute, I recognize her,” the same cop said. “She’s the naked Glassford Girl. The one who’s wanted for assaulting the cab driver and grand theft auto.”

She sighed as the last bit of energy eased from her body. There was nothing else to do but look at the night sky. The beauty and elegance of the Big Dipper soaked into her soul as law enforcement manhandled her, wrapping cuffs around her wrists and dragging her to her feet.

They wrapped a blanket around her and hauled her to the back of a police van, where two officers were waiting. They opened the doors and dragged her inside, spinning her around until her butt was planted on the bench. Someone else was sitting across from her, handcuffed, with his head slumped down.

“Who the hell are you?” she asked the criminal.

He craned his neck and made eye contact with her. It was Derek, the boy she’d kicked in the basement of the restaurant. His hair was the same as before, but his gold earring was missing.

He gave her a sly smile. “Hey, gorgeous.”