

I wind my watch and check the tanks. I need to remember to refill the propane. Grabbing my coat, I head for the door, my movements waking Pen. She sees me and shrinks back into a corner, then relaxes as recognition sets in. But not completely. There's still a wariness, like she doesn't quite trust me. I don't blame her.

"Where are you going?"

"I need to check on a few things."

"What should I do?"

*Go home. Go back to whatever shit-hole precinct you were born in.* But of course, she can't. She's a shade like me—untagged. Was that her idea I wonder, or something Devon talked her into? There are always kids who think they can live outside the system. Most end up dead, shot by Counselors or overdosing on coal or dying of starvation when they realize they don't have the skill set to survive. Once you remove your tags there's no going back—you can't buy; you can't sell; you can't work. You don't exist.

But all I say is, "Wait here. There's more food in the box. Water too. Take all you want."

"When do you think we'll be able to get Abby out?"

I stop with my hand on the door. I want to laugh, but I don't because it's not funny even though it is. Anyway, she's not in on the joke and it's not my job to explain it to her. We'll talk about it when I get back, I tell her.

I leave through the tunnel and up the steps wondering how long she'll wait. There's only enough food for a couple of days. Same for the propane. I hate to do it this way—just run out—but maybe it's for the best. She'll leave eventually, cursing me for the rest of her undoubtedly short life, but it might be worth it if she never has to learn the truth. Then she can go on believing her sister is out there somewhere, alive, even if she'll never see her again.

Being sent to any precinct house is bad enough; a windowless granite interrogation chamber where confessions are extracted and people are shipped off to work camps. But the One Twenty Seven isn't your typical precinct. The One Twenty Seven is a crematorium.