

THE EQUALS

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{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK

New York



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To any thief that would steal this sequel, suffer a curse without any equal.

PROLOGUE

YOU KNOW INSTANTLY that this will be what kills you. You might have a few minutes left, but nothing more. What will you do with your last moments alive?

You wonder how this even happened. You look over at the mayhem exploding around you, and you realize it was probably inevitable. This is what you signed up for, isn't it? This is what you wanted. In a way, you caused all of this to happen.

And now you have a bullet in your chest to prove it.

The specifics of how this happened no longer seem important. There is the big picture to consider now. Isn't that what these final moments should be about? And in the big picture, you can feel good about dying like this—with honor, with pride, with the knowledge that you fought until your dying breath to protect the Ones.

This fight defined your brief life, but it was meaningful enough to be worth it. You stood up for a group of people who needed help. A group that was vulnerable to the powerful forces of society and the whims of an older, fearful generation. When the government outlawed genetic engineering and then turned the Ones into second-class citizens with the Equality Act, you helped nurture this fight into a movement, a tidal wave that won't end with your death. Dying is a lot easier to accept knowing that you will leave behind a legacy, that your peers will always remember the echo of your name.

Easier, maybe, but still painful. The wound in your chest is making a weird sucking sound, and you know this means a lung has been punctured. The bullet somehow exited your lower back, which means it smashed into a rib bone and ricocheted around your torso like an angry wasp.

Each breath burns now with searing pain, even as a chill descends over your body. *Just a few more minutes*, you ask of your weakening heart. There are just a few more thoughts you'd like to have.

You think about family and what that word means to you now. You think about your mother and the bridge you tried to rebuild. You think about the generation to come and how they might remember you.

You dig your fingers into the cool grass, look up at the perfect bluebird sky, and almost smile. The world will keep

spinning without you. The universe will keep humming. And in the blink of a cosmic eye, your body, your country, your planet will swirl away like specks of dust in the wind. It's just that you will be going a moment earlier.

And finally, you think about the person you love.

You suddenly catch sight of this person, moving through the trees, staring back at you. It's too dangerous to get up, not that you'd be able to anyway, so this final look will have to do. You are thankful for the look and thankful for everything you shared. In a life that became overrun with hate and violence and tragedy, at least you also learned about love. It reminded you why the fight was worth it.

You die in amazement at the contradictions that can exist in this world. Awestruck by what our species has accomplished and also what we are willing to do to each other. Societies built on miracles of human ingenuity and societies destroyed just the same. It is hard to fathom, yet you watched it happen in your own short lifetime. But with your last breath, your final thought is about an even greater contradiction. Something that is harder to swallow, yet still undoubtedly true. Something, ironically, that you wouldn't be able to live with even if you survived. It is about the person looking back at you through the trees.

You love this person. This person betrayed you.

CHAPTER 1

Three weeks earlier

CODY COULD BARELY breathe. It had nothing to do with the thick cloud of ash that descended on her or the grueling trek through the woods. No, the vise grip on her chest was entirely about James.

As she ran free, he was in chains. And even worse, she ran free *because* he was in chains. He had come back for her. Saved her. Sacrificed himself for her. His reward for all that was being apprehended by his own brother and an Equality Team, shipped off to an internment camp, and subjected to the Vaccine—the government’s brutal attempt to somehow undo the genetic engineering bestowed upon the Ones.

Cody had watched James’s capture from across the river, helpless to intervene. Now she knew that if by some miracle she ever saw him again, he would be a totally dif-

ferent person. Almost too distracted to run, Cody gasped for air, desperate for it not to be true.

“Come on, Cody, keep moving!” came a yell from up ahead.

Kai stretched back his arm and yanked her over a fallen tree, while Taryn pushed branches out of the way. It was just the three of them now, and Cody was struck by how calm Kai looked. Apparently she was the only one still traumatized by what had happened at the river’s edge. It had only been a few minutes, but Kai was already in planning mode.

It was a small relief for Cody to be trailing after him. Kai was the unofficial leader of the New Weathermen, the group fighting back against the government on behalf of the Ones. Although their battle that morning had ended in defeat at the Shasta quarry, she was confident Kai had a contingency plan.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Kai exchanged a look with Taryn, who seemed equally calm about the whole situation. Cody had to admit that a part of her resented their easy nonchalance. A forest fire was raging behind them, on the far side of the valley they had just crossed. All the other Ones who fought with them had been captured and were on their way to internment camps. From Cody’s perspective it seemed pretty bleak. They had nowhere to go, no one to help them.

“We can camp in the woods tonight,” Kai said. “But the

Equality Teams will still be looking for us tomorrow. We're going to have to disappear."

Disappearing was going to be difficult. There was a federal order for all the Ones to be rounded up, and a travel party with their looks was sure to stick out. Still, Kai and Taryn pressed ahead, into the unknown. Cody followed, but already, in her own mind, a different plan was starting to take shape.

"And what about James?" she said.

"What about him?" Taryn asked. "You saw what happened. Now you need to forget about him."

So much for the brilliant contingency plan, Cody thought. But Taryn's suggestion wasn't going to work, either. Cody knew that forgetting about James was impossible.

She had a promise to keep.



Later that day, after they had put enough distance between themselves and the fire, Cody, Kai, and Taryn stopped at a dry creek bed. A muddy rock overhang provided some shelter, and they collapsed against the angled wall, unlaced their boots, and tossed aside the guns they had been carrying from the quarry. Even in their exhaustion, they were mesmerized by the sight above them; as the sun dipped below the horizon in the distance, the smoldering forest painted the sky with psychedelic reds and oranges.

Cody remembered the beautiful dawn of this same day and couldn't believe everything that had happened since.

The New Weathermen had made their stand at the quarry to resist the Equality Team. Cody—suddenly a runaway, a fugitive, an accomplice in the death of her boyfriend’s father—had determined she was prepared to die for this cause, and she took up arms against her own government. Somehow, amid all that chaos, she experienced a moment with Kai that was loaded with feelings she was afraid to acknowledge. And he had revealed something to her also—secrets that no one was supposed to know. Again, she was almost too scared to understand him fully. She hadn’t even bothered to try at the time, knowing that she was about to die.

And she no doubt would have died, if not for James. He set the fire and led them out of it, then made sure they got away safely. James’s actions had provoked an even more powerful feeling, one that she wasn’t afraid to name. It was true love. A feeling of desperate attraction, awestruck admiration, and perfect understanding. And then, just minutes after she felt it, her chance to share it was torn away. James had fought to make that brief moment possible. Now it was her turn to get it back.

“We need to save James. I don’t care how hard it is,” she said.

Kai looked over at her, almost irritated. “Cody, we have to be smart,” he said. “Obviously we want to get all the Ones out of the camps. But we can’t just run straight after James. We have to think bigger.”

“We can’t waste any time,” Cody said. “They’re going to give him the Vaccine. I’m going to save him with or without you two.”

Cody stared at Kai and Taryn. They looked exhausted, filthy, and defeated. She was reminded that they were only nineteen, a few years older than her. And she knew their dreams of a successful rebellion had taken a powerful hit that morning.

Kai had promised they would win the day or become echoes—everlasting reminders of the fight for freedom. But somehow neither of those results had come to pass. They were just tired and dirty and stuck in the woods. Cody could hardly believe it.

She stood up. “Seriously—I am going after James.” She waited, but no one moved. “You’re really just going to lie here? Kai? Is this how you planned to end ‘the loudest day of our lives’?”

Kai wouldn’t meet Cody’s eyes. But Taryn glared at her.

“You heard him,” Taryn said. “We can’t risk it right now. A lot of people got taken today. A lot of our friends. So how ’bout you sit down and quit whining about it.”

Kai touched Taryn on the arm. “It’s fine. Let her go if she needs to.” He turned to Cody. “I’ll understand if you go alone, and I won’t stop you. It’s stupid and it’s reckless, but I’ll understand.”

“Wow,” Cody said. “So you’re just a phony with a cool motorcycle and a nice speech?” Disgusted, she started to

gather her things. “Good luck with the rest of your revolution.”

Cody could see that Kai wanted to respond, but he swallowed it. There was that ice cold self-control again. Kai’s emotions were his and his alone to reveal.

She stood up and looked out from under their embankment. Night had descended upon the pine trees, but a bright moon filtered through. Cody didn’t know exactly where to start, but she knew that she couldn’t help James from here. James had saved her all on his own, and he was a choir boy, allergic to trouble. She didn’t need Kai and Taryn. She’d do it herself.

But as Cody stepped away from their meager campsite, she heard a shotgun cock behind her. She turned around to find Taryn pointing the gun up at her.

Cody froze, surprised and confused. Kai tried to reach out and gently take the gun from Taryn. But Taryn rose to her feet, stepped forward, and kept it leveled at Cody.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

“Taryn. Put the gun down, okay?” Kai said softly. Cody looked at him, pleading with her eyes for him to intervene. “Just let her go,” he said.

“Believe me, I’d love to. But I can’t,” Taryn said.

With her heart racing, Cody finally had the nerve to lash out at Taryn. “What’s your problem? I mean besides the sullen attitude, the fake toughness, the practiced condescension—what’s your problem with *me*?”

Cody had a guess. It was probably the way that Kai looked at her that pissed Taryn off so much. Now she wondered if Taryn would actually cop to it.

Taryn just laughed, though. “Let’s start with the fact that you’re a liar. That you’re not even a One. And then add that you need to be rescued every two minutes like some helpless puppy dog. First you get caught by the cops at the school takeover. Then you run into the blast zone when we bomb the vaccine lab. And today you get us stuck in a forest fire. I’m tired of having to look out for your utterly normal, non-genetically-engineered ass.”

Cody’s anger made her forget that she was staring at the wrong end of a shotgun. “I didn’t get us stuck in that fire; James did. And you’d be dead if it wasn’t for him. That’s the person I am going to save. So how about you let me leave? Wouldn’t that make you happy?”

“I’d throw a freaking parade,” Taryn said, then paused. “But unfortunately for all of us, I heard what Kai told you.”

Instantly, Cody could see that this changed everything. And Kai grimaced, too—it was clear that he knew Taryn was right.

Taryn turned to him. “You shouldn’t have told her that stuff.”

“I thought we were about to get killed,” Kai said. “She deserved to know.”

Cody knew what this was about now. It was about Edith Vale and the Ark.

That morning, Kai had started to tell her a secret that didn't make any sense. Prior to that, Cody had only known that Edith Vale was the government agent who had released the list of Ones, exposing them all to targeted persecution. And the theoretical, gigantic, secret Ark was the reason why Agent Norton had tortured Cody so ruthlessly. Edith Vale and the Ark shouldn't have anything to do with each other.

But Kai had implied something different. He said Edith Vale was at the Ark right now. He said Cody would have enjoyed meeting her.

So the Ark was an actual place. Edith Vale was with the Ones, on their side. And now Taryn was pissed that Cody knew.

"We can't risk her blowing our cover," Taryn said.

"I would never do that," Cody responded.

"Maybe not intentionally. But what if you get captured?" Taryn asked. "Again," she added sourly.

"I already proved I could handle that. They did everything they could to me when I was captured the first time, and I didn't say a word."

Kai stared at her, unmoved, and Cody felt her stomach sink. "Yeah. But that was before you actually knew something. You didn't have anything to reveal," he said. "Taryn's right. I'm sorry, Cody, it's too risky to let you leave by yourself. We have to stay together, the three of us."

"Wow. What a great silver lining," Taryn grumbled

sarcastically. But to Cody's relief, at least she lowered the gun.

"I still need to save James. If you're not going to help me, you can either shoot me now or tie me up, but I'm going to sneak off the first chance I get."

Taryn looked at Kai and shook her head. For all their arguing, they were in the same place where they'd started. But Cody saw Kai start to nod, as if he was finally accepting an outcome that was inevitable the whole time.

"There's only one person who can help you save James now," he said, looking Cody square in the eyes. "So let's go to the Ark and meet Edith."

CHAPTER 2

KAI WOKE UP before dawn, as the birds in the trees above them began to squawk in the darkness. He was pissed that both Cody and Taryn were still sleeping. There was a lot to do that day, and they had to get moving. There was a lot to do every day, Kai knew by now. Fighting the entrenched majority for freedom wasn't easy, and Kai had come to accept that he was going to shoulder a disproportionate share of that burden. He didn't resent this duty, though. In fact, he was damn proud of it.

He knew the rest of the Ones needed people like him, people on the front lines who were devoting their lives to this cause. Kai didn't begrudge some of the Ones for being too scared or too young to throw themselves into the fight. They would need to step up eventually, of course.

But it was his job to lead the way, to spark that fire, and he was confident they would rise to the occasion.

Kai took his responsibility literally for the moment and got to work poking at the dying embers of their campfire. Small flames kicked back to life, and Kai debated waking up the girls. *Maybe it's better to let them rest now*, he thought, considering the trek ahead of them. He sat back against the overhang and found himself staring at Cody as she slept, the first light from the sun bouncing warmly off her cheeks.

It was hard to sort out exactly what had happened just a day earlier. So much had gone wrong in their fight against the Equality Team, but Kai's thoughts kept drifting back to that moment with Cody on the ridge. Both of them were certain they were about to die, so they locked hands and shared something. But that moment was impossible for him to understand now, the tenderness so foreign to him, and so unlikely for Cody, that he didn't trust his memory. It was a confusing blur, and most of all, it was a distraction.

Figuring out that moment with Cody wasn't going to help the Ones. And that's all that Kai cared about.

It was a small miracle that Kai was even able to sit around considering this problem. He had woken up the day before prepared to die for this cause, and it had looked like he would do exactly that. The Weathermen at the quarry were surrounded and outgunned. Kai sure as hell

would have never let himself be taken away to one of the internment camps, so his death seemed only minutes away. He remembered making his peace with that.

It hadn't exactly been a shock to prepare to die like that. Kai never pictured himself making it to retirement age, kicking back on a rocking chair, playing with his grandchildren. Those were working-stiff aspirations that had never appealed to him. Maybe he had the genetics for a long life, but he definitely didn't have the disposition. So a violent death at nineteen was something Kai considered a job hazard. The fight to protect the Ones was his life's work, and he knew the most likely way it would end.

Kai hadn't figured on James, though. It pissed him off to admit, but James had saved all of them, and in spectacular fashion, no less. He had come out of nowhere to pull off a hell of a move, and it threw Kai for a loop. He had started that day resolved to end up as either a hero or a martyr, yet somehow he was neither. Instead, he was just humbled and indebted to James.

More important, though, he had been given a reprieve. Kai tried to fix his mind only on this: He now had a second chance to accomplish his goals. He wasn't used to getting favors or handouts, so he might as well take advantage of this one. As he sat alone staring into the fire, Kai resolved to keep up the fight and aim higher. First, he would need to make it safely to the Ark and reunite with Edith Vale.

They would expand their fight against the government's far-reaching Equality Act. Protect all the Ones who couldn't fight for themselves. Save their peers from the Vaccine. And most enjoyably, strike back at the lunatics in the Equality Movement. Kai began to relish this unlikely opportunity. He would grab it by the throat and accomplish something greater. With this second chance he would live on in the echoes of history, after all.

Newly energized, Kai stood up and brushed the twigs off his clothes. He stepped out from the embankment and walked downhill to a thin stream trickling through the creek bed, where he knelt and cupped some water into his mouth. Spending an afternoon racing away from a forest fire had left him ravenous and dehydrated.

"Save some for me, please."

Kai lifted his head and saw Cody walking up behind him. She was rubbing the sleep from her eyes and stretching her back like a cat. Not for the first time, Kai marveled at the fact that Cody wasn't actually a One. It was still hard to believe someone could look like that without the help of a very talented genetic engineer. As she got closer, Kai finally remembered to stop staring.

"Permission for the prisoner to take a drink?" Cody asked.

"Cody, you're not a prisoner."

"Right. I'm just not allowed to leave."

"We're all going to the Ark. Edith is going to want to

liberate James and everyone else just as much as you do. She's going to help us."

"Edith Vale released the List. She changed my life. And she put a target on the back of every One in the country. Why would she help us?"

"She's not who you think she is. Trust me."

"How about you trust me? If you're going to hold me hostage over this information, the least you could do is actually tell me the truth," Cody said sternly.

Kai had learned by now that sharing information just made things worse for everyone. When he had hinted about this stuff on the ridge yesterday, he didn't think it mattered anymore. Now he clearly saw that the less Cody knew, the easier it would be to proceed without everyone fighting.

"Edith isn't an enemy. She's on our side. You'll understand once we get to the Ark." And then Kai couldn't resist pushing Cody's buttons. "And besides, prisoners don't need to be looped in on the plans."

Cody shook her head and tried not to smile. "I'm serious," she said. "Have you met her before?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known her?"

"She reached out a couple years ago, when the New Weathermen were just getting started. Before the List, obviously."

"And why do you trust her?" Cody asked pointedly.

Kai stared at her. “Because she’s exactly like you.” He meant it, but, more important, Kai also knew that would shut her up.

Cody appeared a bit taken aback, but was apparently satisfied for now. She turned and walked back toward their camp. Again, Kai held his gaze on her. He had determined to make his second chance about fighting for the Ones, but he knew there were other reasons to celebrate being alive. Keeping that all straight was the hard part.



They trudged through the woods back toward civilization and eventually found a quiet country road. Kai pointed them south, keeping them at the edge of the forest, out of sight. He knew that the roundup of all the Ones was still in progress. They’d been ordered by the federal government to report to internment camps—and any Ones who didn’t comply were being forced into the camps against their will. Which meant Equality agents were bound to be everywhere, and a trio of fit, good-looking teenagers were sure to draw attention.

For two days, they stayed concealed during the day and moved quickly at night. Once, Kai risked going into a run-down country store to buy food. The bored clerk barely even looked at him as Kai scooped up an obscene amount of jerky, nuts, and water.

Finally, with their feet aching, Kai knew they were close. Not to the Ark—that was tucked away high up in

the Cascade Mountains—but to a rail yard outside of Sacramento. That’s where they were going to hitch their ride.

Once they arrived at the perimeter of the Union Pacific rail yard, Kai led them around to the northern edge, to where they wouldn’t have to climb a fence. The trains heading north emerged slowly from the yard into flat, dusty fields. After the sun went down, it was the perfect catch-out, a free ride across the rocky scrubland and eventually into the mountains of the Pacific Northwest.

As they looked down at the trains, waiting for darkness, hoods pulled up against the wind, Taryn turned to Cody.

“You’ve rail-hopped before, right?” she asked.

Cody, uncomfortable, didn’t respond. Taryn shook her head angrily at Kai. “Don’t worry, Cody,” Kai said. “It’ll be no problem for you. Easy as riding a bike.”

“Yeah, if a bike could knock your head clean off when you slip on the pedals,” Taryn said. “Seen it before.”

“Got it,” Cody said. “Then I hope no one slips.”

They sat down and watched the trains in silence until it was dark enough to sneak down, then started walking to the rails. Kai wasn’t worried about Cody; she had risen to greater challenges than jumping on a meandering train car. He was more concerned that Taryn was going to do something reckless. Maybe it’d be best if they quarantined her in a separate compartment.

A train edged out of the yard and started chugging

along. Kai pointed to the chain of open-sided boxcars in the middle, and they all stepped closer to the track.

“Let’s go,” he said. “We need to run alongside it.”

The train’s engine car whirred past, and they started to run. At first the train pushed past them, but they soon matched its speed. The boxcars came into view. Kai let the first one pass. Then, in one fluid motion, he grabbed the lowest rung of an iron ladder, leaped into the air, and swung himself into the dusty car.

Kai turned quickly to look down at Cody, still jogging alongside. “Just like that,” he yelled over the clanging metal wheels.

Cody kept pace with the train and grabbed the ladder. She jumped awkwardly and tried to swing herself in, but only her upper body made it. For a second her legs flopped wildly outside the boxcar, dangling just over the rail. She looked up desperately at Kai.

“Kai!”

He was already reaching for her, leaning out of the train and grabbing hold of her jacket to yank her inside. Cody scurried across the floor, away from the opening. A moment later, Taryn popped in easily. She shuffled to the back wall and sprawled out on a tarp.

“All aboard?” Kai asked.

Cody, dusting herself off, nodded. They had all made it in one piece.

Kai went back to the open edge of the boxcar. He felt

the train pick up speed. The clanging underneath built to a perfect percussive rhythm. The shrubby desert outside raced backward into black shadows. And Kai just couldn't resist—he grabbed the ladder, swung his entire body into the darkness, and howled into the wind at the top of his lungs.



Out of habit, Kai made sure he was the last one to fall asleep. Taryn was conked out on the tarp, Cody had nestled into a corner, and Kai finally allowed himself to shut his eyes. The train was loud, but its rhythm was soothing. And most of all, for Kai, it was familiar.

He had spent countless hours in train cars like this one. Crisscrossing the country, running scared for some of it, running wild for the rest. That was the life of an orphan who no one wanted.

Kai could barely trust his earliest memories, but he knew the basics. Dead mother. Disinterested father. And then one institution or foster family after another. Each new family always intrigued because he was a One—Kai was forever the shiniest trinket in the orphanage. Of course it never worked out like the adoptive parents thought. Sure, Kai looked like a perfect child, but he was impossible to handle—out of control behaviorally and impossible to reach emotionally.

When these ill-equipped families inevitably sent him back to the state agencies, the feedback loop would only

speed up: Kai would grow angrier; someone new would take a chance on him; he'd be even quicker to reveal that he wasn't worth the trouble. And back he'd go. Ditched again. Story of his life.

When he was thirteen, a nice woman named Christine took him in. Things weren't so bad, Kai remembered. Christine understood he needed time to trust her. She didn't force things. Of course Kai never said it out loud, but he started to imagine sticking around this time.

"I've got your back," Christine would always tell him.

Kai knew that normal parents and children said "I love you." But Kai didn't need that. He had given up on finding it. "I've got your back" was enough. It suited him. And Christine kept her promise. After every fight or problem at school, she took his side.

Which is why Kai didn't regret tossing her punk-ass boyfriend down a flight of stairs.

Vince deserved it. He was mean to begin with, and after three drinks he was a terror. He'd toss Christine around their house. Blame her for his miserable life. Scream at her. More and more often, the rants would circle back to the Equality Movement, which was just gaining steam at the time. Its followers longed for a familiar era that didn't exist anymore—an era when all the unwritten rules of society benefited them. Vince believed every word of the propaganda, and he was certain that Ones were ruining

the country. During his rants, he'd start eyeballing Kai, the "genny" that Christine had brought into her home. Christine would stand up for Kai, but that just made Vince angrier. One night he had her pinned against the wall, forearm against her throat, choking her, and Kai knew he had no choice.

He was fourteen then, his body almost done transforming into a man. The genetic engineers had set him on a journey toward a perfect physical specimen, and the fruits of their labor were ripening. Kai rushed over and pulled Vince off his foster mom like a rag doll. Vince started swinging at him, but Kai hardly felt it. He had the older, larger man by the collar, and he pushed him forward, crossing the kitchen, ignoring the blows raining down on him, rage building.

And then Kai tossed him against the door to the basement. The door swung open and Vince bounced down the staircase and landed limply on the concrete floor. Kai stood in the doorway and looked at the body below. Vince was sprawled on his chest, but the blank eyes on his twisted head stared straight back up at Kai.

As quickly as Kai knew he was dead, he also knew he had done the right thing. He had to protect Christine. He needed to have her back. And that's why what happened next was so devastating. It was the moment that haunted Kai every day of the four years he spent in a juvenile

detention center. And it was the moment when he learned for the final time that growing close to someone could only lead to betrayal.

He looked across the kitchen and saw Christine. Instead of being relieved, she was terrified. And she was dialing 9-1-1.



Kai woke with a start when he felt the train slow to a halt. Immediately he knew they shouldn't be stopping. He crawled to the opening of the boxcar and stuck his head out. It was obvious they were at some kind of checkpoint, maybe on the border of California and Oregon. Kai had never seen something like this in his previous experiences on the rails, but he kicked himself for not considering it. The roundup of Ones was still going on, and security everywhere was heightened. The floodlights and bouncing flashlight beams ahead of him confirmed this.

After he ducked back into the train, Kai nudged Cody and Taryn awake.

"Stay quiet," he whispered. "We're at a checkpoint." Kai pointed to the darkest corner of the boxcar and gestured for them to move into the shadows. Then he peeked outside one more time. A guard with a flashlight was walking down the line.

As Kai pressed against the wall, Cody grabbed his arm. "What if they find us?" she asked, barely audible.

Kai shook his head, unsure. He certainly didn't plan to

get taken down by some two-bit security guard on the graveyard shift. But he could hear the man's boots crunching on the gravel, getting closer and closer.

Taryn clicked her tongue and got his attention. With her foot, she pushed back the edge of the tarp she'd been sleeping on. There was a crowbar underneath. Kai nodded. Taryn picked it up and tossed it across the car to him. He caught it silently and edged up to the door.

The guard was close to their car now. Kai could see him stopping at each compartment, shining his light inside and inspecting them, but only very briefly. Maybe he'd see them and maybe he wouldn't. But Kai knew what he would have to do if the guard discovered them. He tried to build up the rage that he would need, the violent, singular energy that would allow him to kill this person. He thought of Vince.

There it was. That familiar adrenaline spike. Kai knew he would do what he had to.

He raised the crowbar above his head as the guard stopped at the edge of their car. The beam of light flitted around inside. Somehow it missed Cody and Taryn's corner. But the guard kept looking in. Kai tightened his grip, his body taut as a spring.

And then the guard kept walking. He was just a lazy, regular guy, who probably wanted to go home. That attitude had just saved his life.

Kai let out a slow, relieved sigh. He placed the crowbar

back on the floor and lowered himself to sit across from Cody and Taryn. There was no chance of sleeping anymore, he knew, not after gearing himself up like that.

Cody looked over at him. “Are we there yet?” she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Almost,” Kai responded. “Almost.”



A few hours later, after they had jumped off the train during its long uphill climb into the Cascades, Kai led them deep into the woods. It was a crystal-clear morning, and he was navigating toward the Ark using a distant peak as a landmark. They stopped to rest frequently, out of breath in the thin mountain air. But Kai kept pressing onward, his excitement building.

They were almost at the Ark.

Kai had been there only once before, a year earlier. The Ark was in the process of being built then; it was just a few wooden structures at the bottom of a glen. Edith was obsessed with the construction plans, and she oversaw every beam being put in place. They had felled trees for timber and scavenged everything they needed from the forest. There were only about a dozen Ones working on it, so progress was slow. But Kai knew that the Ark would be finished now, and he couldn't wait to see it.

The Ark was conceived by Edith as a refuge for the Ones—and more specifically now, the New Weathermen. It was a secure, undetectable home base where they could

convene and plan their operations. And although no one ever said it outright, it was also designed as a safe haven of last resort. If the rest of the country got too dangerous for them, the Ones could come here. It was almost impossible to find from the outside world, nestled in a remote valley and shrouded from above by towering pines.

As Kai thought about seeing Edith again, he was surprised to feel a pit in his stomach. She was a hero to him, the mastermind behind the Ones' resistance movement. And she was a hard woman to impress. Even as Kai took a leadership role within the Weathermen, he couldn't remember a single moment of praise from Edith. And now he was rolling up to the Ark with Cody, who wasn't even a One. Kai was ready to do more, and he wanted Edith to see that. He'd successfully planned the bombing of the vaccine lab. He'd led a face-off and avoided capture by the Equality Teams. He hoped Edith had taken notice.

Kai was also dying to hear what Edith had been planning. She'd been cryptic with him a year earlier about how they were going to win this fight—how they would finally defeat the Equality Movement. But she made clear she had an ace up her sleeve. It was too early to talk about it, she said. But she assured him the Ones would never be destroyed.

Kai could feel how close they were now. He pointed Cody and Taryn down the slope of a valley, and they slid through the last wall of trees. At last, he saw the buildings

up ahead, more of them now, improvements everywhere. And then he saw a figure in a white lab coat step outside.

Edith Vale walked out to greet them. As she took in the traveling party approaching her, Kai saw she didn't look very pleased.

CHAPTER 3

CODY STOOD FROZEN as the woman in the white coat extended her hand.

“Hello. I’m Edith Vale.”

After an awkward hesitation, Cody managed to reach out and shake hands. She still couldn’t believe she was meeting the woman who had turned her life upside down. If not for Edith Vale and her reckless release of the List, the world would be a lot safer. Everyone wouldn’t have gotten a thorough report on the name and location of every single One, right in their in-box. But without the List, Cody also wouldn’t have known the truth about herself, how her mother, with the best of intentions, misled Cody, telling her she’d been genetically engineered, that she was a One—even though she wasn’t. So as much as she wanted to punch the tall, fit, forty-year-old woman in

front of her, Cody also knew that she owed Edith a debt of gratitude and forced herself to stay calm.

“I’m Cody. It’s nice to meet you,” she said, holding Edith’s gaze.

Then Edith turned to Kai and Taryn. “I’m glad you both made it back. I know it’s not easy out there right now.”

“We found a way,” Kai said. He nodded toward Cody. “She deserves a lot of the credit.”

Edith looked at Cody. “Hmm. Good to know.”

“What the hell did *she* do?” Taryn blurted out. “Am I forgetting something?”

Kai started to respond, but Cody jumped in ahead of him. “Taryn’s right. I didn’t do anything; it was all James.” Cody met Edith’s eyes again. “My boyfriend saved us. He’s a One, and he’s in an internment camp right now. I need you to help me rescue him.”

“We hope to save all the Ones stuck in the camps,” Edith replied.

“I need to save James *now*. Before he gets the Vaccine. Kai said you would help me.”

Edith shot him a look, leading Kai to lower his eyes deferentially. “I just meant that you’d have the best idea about what to do,” Kai said. “I didn’t mean to suggest that—”

“It’s fine, Kai,” Edith said, her tone curt. “It’s good you’re all here.”

Cody couldn’t believe Kai’s behavior. She had never

seen him scared before, never seen him defer to someone else. His body language reminded her of a family dog after being caught neck-deep in a bag of cookies. Cody had always considered him the leader of the New Weathermen, and his confidence was like nothing she'd ever encountered. It was why Cody shivered when he whispered in her ear and tensed up when she felt his eyes on her. But everyone had a boss, it seemed.

Except, Cody suspected, Edith Vale.

"There's a lot to talk about," Edith said. "A lot of plans to make. But you just trekked across a mountain range. Let's get you settled in, and we can figure everything out later."

Cody started to open her mouth, ready to insist they focus on saving James, but Edith put a firm hand on Cody's shoulder. "Welcome to the Ark," she said. "Now let me show you around."

Even as she judged Kai for cowering, Cody somehow felt compelled to listen to this woman. Maybe it was the firm grip on her arm or the look in Edith's eye. As Edith started walking toward the group of wooden buildings arranged in a haphazard semicircle, Cody decided, for the time being, to follow.

Rapid-fire, Edith began explaining each structure. "Mess hall, bunkhouses, generator, tech lab, greenhouse, food storage, armory, forge. That's my little cabin back there. And the big structure behind it, we call it the barn;

it's going to be our research facility. If we ever have time to get it together.”

Each building looked to Cody like a log cabin designed by an ambitious architecture student. Made entirely of wood, the structures blended into the surroundings but were clearly constructed with precise tools and measurements. They were all small and modest, with standard doors and windows—except for the research building behind Edith's quarters. Cody could see, even from a distance, its solid steel door, complicated lock, windowless walls, and the vent system on its roof. She wanted to see more, but Edith kept walking.

They passed a few other Ones who nodded at Edith and eyed Cody suspiciously. Most of them seemed a little older than Cody, closer to Kai's age. There was clearly a high-functioning community already in place at the Ark, and Cody was increasingly aware that, not being a One, she might upset its balance.

“You can see it's a nice little spot we've carved out for ourselves here,” Edith said as she stopped outside one of the bunkhouses. “Has Kai explained why we built this place?”

Cody shook her head.

“First and foremost, this is a refuge, somewhere off the map where we can always be safe. Who knows how long we'll need to stay here, but I happen to think it could be quite a while. It could be forever. It all depends on the

behavior of this planet's most destructive force—a large group of human beings. The predictability of their self-interest eclipsed only by the unpredictability of their stupidity. But no matter how that plays out, I promise you, we'll be ready.”

Cody was now more confused than ever about what Edith Vale was trying to accomplish. First she released the List, which threatened all the Ones. Then Kai assured her that Edith was some mastermind who would help their fight against the Equality Movement. And now she was talking about the Ark like an idyllic resort that she never planned to leave. Cody couldn't figure out if this woman was a revolutionary or a cult leader.

As Edith gestured for Cody to enter the bunkhouse, Cody couldn't bite her tongue any longer.

“Why'd you release the List?”

Edith smiled at Cody but didn't answer right away.

“I don't get it,” Cody continued. “Do you want to help the Ones or not?”

Edith waited a moment, then finally spoke. “I know who you are, Cody. I know your story, and I know what you went through when you were detained. I know why you endured that, even after you found out the truth about yourself. If you're as smart as I think you are, then you also know why I released the List.”

Even as she remained totally clueless, Cody felt a wave of pride crest over her. Edith Vale knew who she was,

respected her, knew what she'd been through. It was easy to see why Edith had such sway over her followers. But Cody, still wary, reminded herself not to be seduced so easily.

"Rest up for a bit and find me at dinner later," Edith said. "I'll tell you a pretty crazy story."



That afternoon, Cody lay awake on her thin cot, staring up at the spiderwebs on the ceiling. She could hear Kai and Taryn snoring softly on their beds behind her. Even though she was bone-tired, Cody's mind was racing, and sleep wasn't coming. The mystery of Edith Vale consumed her, and her concern for James hadn't diminished, but she realized there was something even more urgent than that: She was starving.

It was nice that dinner had been offered, but Cody was accustomed to eating like five times a day. And that was under normal circumstances, without leaping aboard cross-country trains and climbing up the Cascades. Cody was so ravenous now, she abandoned any hope of getting rest. She sat up, put her shoes on, and tiptoed out of the bunkhouse. Maybe the Ark had a snack bar. If it was truly a refuge for the healthiest teenagers in the country, it better.

As she wandered through the unfamiliar wooded footpaths, Cody contemplated how much her life had

changed. This was technically a school day, after all, but the routine of classes, homework, and soccer practice was gone. She couldn't just pop in for a bite at her favorite diner. Even crazier, she couldn't see her mom.

Cody felt a pang of guilt. She hoped her mom wasn't worrying, but that was absurd. Since Cody had taken off, she'd almost died several times. That type of track record kind of justified her mom's concern. At the very least, Cody hoped her mom understood why she had to leave and why she had to commit to this fight. That's what Cody had hoped to convey in the note she had left—that her mom had raised her to be proud of who she was, and even if her superficial identity had changed, her moral compass had stayed intact. A small group of young people were being persecuted unfairly for how they were born. They were Ones and Cody wasn't. It didn't matter. Cody was going to stand by them.

The sun had disappeared behind a mountain, and a cool wind had risen in its absence. Cody realized she had circled around the entire compound and she hadn't even sniffed a vending machine. She looked up to find herself in front of Edith Vale's cabin. A little embarrassed to be caught walking around aimlessly, she hustled away quickly.

Her scamper led to the front of the research building, what Edith had called the barn. And at the moment Cody

passed by, she saw the thick steel door start to open. Caught off guard, Cody jumped behind a tree to conceal herself.

This was silly, Cody knew, but she felt like a cat burglar caught with one foot dangling out the window. She didn't know all the rules of this place, and she sensed that sneaking around the entrance to this building would be frowned upon. So now she was stuck with her body pressed to the bark, hoping no one would discover her.

As Cody waited, she heard the door close and the heavy-duty lock engage. It was only a few feet away from her, and surely whoever was leaving the building would be walking right past her in a second.

Cody held her breath and tried to shrink into herself. She pinned her hopes on rotating around the tree in perfect unison with the person walking by, a maneuver she had to admit was cribbed straight from Looney Tunes.

Unfortunately, the trunk of the tree wasn't very thick. Cody could tell from the sound of the footsteps pausing that she'd been discovered.

"Hello?" she heard.

Cody peeked out from behind the tree to find a dazzling young woman who immediately smiled at her.

"Hi there."

Cody tried to cover her embarrassment. "Hi. I was just stretching my legs and got a little lost."

"It's beautiful out here, isn't it?"

“Yeah. And a little quieter than I’m used to,” Cody said.

“So you’re new, I take it. I’m Ramona.”

Cody reached out to shake Ramona’s hand. “Cody. I just got here today. With Kai and Taryn.”

“Oh, I’m so glad they’re back. That they’re safe, I mean. And it’s good to see that they brought reinforcements. The more the merrier up here,” Ramona said.

Cody was having trouble following along—that’s how strikingly beautiful this girl was. But more than her beauty, Cody was struck by the warmth of her energy—the sincerity of her smile and the kindness of her gaze. The only thought Cody could formulate was how desperately she wished Ramona was her big sister. With her few functioning brain cells, Cody still realized that would be a weird thing to blurt out. So she tried to compose herself.

“I didn’t mean to sneak up on you, I swear,” Cody said.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve been here for more than a year, and I still remember what it was like my first few days. It feels like some kind of top-secret fortress, right?”

Cody couldn’t believe that some of the Ones had been here for that long. It made her even more curious about the research building Ramona had just exited. “Yeah, especially that,” she said, nodding toward it.

Ramona didn’t turn around. She just looked up toward the treetops. “The air is so fresh up here, I love it. I forget about the altitude now, but I could barely breathe for the

first few weeks. I needed to take a rest just from brushing my teeth.”

Cody laughed. She had definitely been feeling pretty zapped.

“Anyway, it’s not meant to be intimidating here,” Ramona continued. “The Ark is just a place where we can all feel safe. A place where Ones can be proud about what makes us special. A place where we can keep that progress going forward.”

“I’m actually not a One. Technically, I mean.” Cody hadn’t planned on being so forthcoming with this stranger, but Ramona seemed trustworthy, and it was a relief to get it off her chest. She knew people would find out anyway.

Ramona looked at her quizzically. “What do you mean?”

“I thought I was. I was told that I was for my whole life. And then—”

“Edith,” Ramona said quickly. She looked intently at Cody. “You weren’t on the List.”

“Exactly. It was a pretty big surprise.”

“Well, you certainly look like a One. And if Kai brought you all the way up to this place and Edith is letting you stay, I’m sure there’s a good reason for you to be here.”

Cody thought about that for a second. Why exactly was she at the Ark? She had committed herself to fighting for the Ones, and apparently this was the best place to do it,

and also her best chance at helping James. At least that's what Kai said.

Or was it just that Kai and Taryn wanted to keep an eye on her now that Cody knew their secrets? It was hard to know.

Cody had to remind herself that without Kai, without the New Weathermen, she would still be alone in Shasta, fighting pointlessly with Ms. Bixley and her idiot classmates and screaming into the wind. She had to trust that this was the place where she could really accomplish something that mattered.

"So . . . what do you think of Edith?" Ramona asked. "She must have really changed your life, I bet."

Cody could barely answer that question herself. And even with Ramona's warmth, Cody stopped herself from spilling her guts about Edith Vale. She remembered that she was the outsider here. The only non-One. The newest member of the community. The least informed and the least important. Ramona seemed trustworthy, but Cody wasn't ready to test that.

"What Edith did was brilliant," Cody said assertively. "I really like her."



Whatever Cody really thought about Edith Vale, she was open to changing it as she walked to dinner that night. Edith hadn't answered Cody's question about releasing the List, but she had promised a story instead. It would

take a pretty powerful yarn to change Cody's mind. Dropping the List on the Internet like a secret new album had sowed havoc; what could possibly justify that?

Following Kai's lead along the wooded trail, the two made their way to what Edith had identified as the mess hall. At least a dozen other Ones from around the compound were also streaming toward it. Before they reached the entrance, Kai slowed and leaned into Cody.

"Remember, you're new here. Try to make a good impression," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cody asked.

"I know you think you're in charge of whatever room you're standing in. I respect that. I'm the same way," Kai said. "But neither of us is in charge here. Edith is."

They reached the mess hall, and Kai held the door for her. Cody was about to respond to him, but she was instantly overwhelmed; for the first time in days, she could actually smell food. She practically knocked Kai over trying to get inside.

Laid out on a giant wood table were several steaming pots of stew—dark, chunky, and fragrant. Cody rushed to take a seat, finding an empty bowl at the place setting in front of her. With all her willpower, she refrained from serving herself immediately. *Make a good impression*, she remembered. She needed these people to help her save James.

As everyone else came inside and sat down, Cody

looked around the table, which was lit by the dim glow of gas lamps. There were about twenty other Ones there, all a little older than Cody and appearing like they'd been stuck in the mountains for a while. In other words, it looked like an advertisement from a trendy camping catalog. Everyone was strong, healthy, and beautiful in their own way. And they had a seriousness that reminded Cody of her first meeting with the New Weathermen. These were Ones who had chosen to devote their lives to fighting the Equality Movement.

Suddenly, Cody felt someone standing over her. "That's where Edith sits," a voice growled.

She looked up into the face of a glaring twenty-year-old whose muscles were straining the seams of his flannel shirt. Cody felt all eyes turn to her.

"Oh, I didn't realize," she said, and started to stand.

But before she could get up, Edith breezed into the mess hall and placed a hand on Cody's elbow, imploring her to stay seated.

"Don't be silly, it's fine," Edith said. She cast her eyes toward the flannel-clad piece of granite who'd admonished Cody. "Cooper likes to keep everyone organized here. Thank you, Cooper, I'll just sit right here."

Cooper nodded obediently and circled around to the other side of the table. Edith took the seat next to Cody, and everyone immediately clasped hands.

"Ones first, to the last," they all declared in unison.

Finally, people started serving themselves. Cody tried to wait politely—she managed to let three people go ahead of her—before gleefully savoring her first bite and then cramming her mouth to capacity. It was a glorious feeling.

Of course, while she was chewing, Edith turned to her. “You had a question for me, right? About the List?”

Cody managed to nod.

“Before I answer that, you should know who I really am,” Edith said. She paused, and Cody felt herself lean in, rapt. “As far as I know, I am the first One ever born.”

Cody gulped, both from the mouthful of food and the bombshell. Edith couldn’t be a One, she thought. The National Institutes of Health only started their program twenty years earlier. Edith was twice that old, at least. Whenever Edith was born, there was no such thing as Ones.

“My parents were both scientists. Geneticists, in fact. And they really wanted to have a baby, but they couldn’t get pregnant. It was while I was being conceived in vitro that they just couldn’t help themselves. They took the little embryo version of me and made a few changes. Maybe more than a few, actually.” Edith laughed. “You would never believe that they’re my real parents. . . . They look just as dorky as they sound.”

Cody leaned back and regarded Edith with a discerning eye for the first time. Yes, she was in her forties, but

now Cody could see the genetic engineering at work: the perfect facial symmetry, the thick hair, the dark green eyes, the athletic build. Cody would have noticed it sooner, but she had never seen a One so old before. That meant Edith wasn't subject to the guessing game that everyone played with members of Cody's generation.

"When I was a little kid, my parents kept everything a secret," Edith said. "But as I was growing up, the debate over genetic engineering exploded. We finally had the ability to do it easily. Some people wanted to explore it; others wanted it banned. The NIH pilot program was set in motion as a compromise of sorts. And there I was, the only genetically engineered teenager."

Cody took all this in with amazement. Edith Vale was the first genetically modified baby. It sounded crazy, but somehow it also seemed to fit with her growing picture of Edith. And Cody couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy.

"So how did you find out?" Cody asked. She thought back to her own moments of discovery: her mother explaining to Cody that she was a One, and what that meant—and later, the shattering moment of identity theft when Cody discovered it was all a lie.

"My parents eventually told me when I was around your age, and I freaked out. Just by virtue of the fact that we had to keep it a secret, I knew that being modified was a threat to the rest of society. I understood why, of course,

but I also sensed how ugly it might get. So, by myself, I set the wheels in motion for what I called the Locust Project.”

Cody noticed some of the Ones around the table nodding with pride. Then Edith locked eyes with her, and she could feel Edith’s intensity building.

“Locusts mature underground and out of sight for seventeen years until they finally emerge and nurture the next generation. So that’s what I did. I went to college and took all the right classes and applied for all the right jobs. I didn’t know exactly how I was going to do it, but I had to find a way. I saw the rise of the Equality Movement, and I knew I might be the only hope for stopping it. Eventually I saw an angle at the National Security Agency. I began to work there, and I kept my head down and my nose clean. I started getting promotions. I got higher clearance. And I knew, somewhere in that NSA database, there was a comprehensive list of every genetically engineered baby born through the NIH program.”

Edith paused, clearly overwhelmed at the memory of her long struggle. Cody could sense all the other Ones were locked in on their conversation. There were no other conversations at the table, and even the clanking of utensils had gone silent. Somehow the soft yellow light from the lamps all seemed to shine on Edith. Cody snuck a glance at Kai, who was just as rapt as everyone else.

And then Edith gathered herself. “You asked me earlier why I did it?”

Cody nodded.

“Progress is never earned without a fight, Cody. Now it’s finally time for the Ones to join this battle and get our freedom back. The List was my wake-up call to all the other locusts.”

Cody felt chills creep down her back. It was thrilling to learn that she and the New Weathermen were not just a desperate ragtag militia thrown together by chance—they were actually part of a grand plan. While the world was playing checkers over the issue of genetic engineering, Edith Vale had snuck off with a chessboard and set up the pieces for her own game.

“So that brings us to you now,” Edith said, focusing on Cody. “Are you willing to do whatever it takes to save the Ones from annihilation? Are you ready to swear to put Ones first?”

“Yes, I am,” Cody said firmly. “But first I need to rescue James from the detention camp.”

“We don’t have personal agendas here, Cody. The camps are obviously a problem. But we can’t solve that right now. That’s not the plan.”

“That’s my plan,” Cody said. She looked at Kai across the table. His glare implored her to stand down.

Edith narrowed her eyes at Cody. “There’s only one plan

here. I've been working on it for decades, and everyone else at this table agrees with it. We are going to fight for our freedom and take our rightful spot in this world. So you can either join us or leave."

Before Cody could answer, Kai cleared his throat and jumped in. "I think what Cody means is that she wants to focus on freeing the camps *as soon as possible*. She didn't mean to suggest—"

"No, I meant right away," Cody said.

She appreciated Kai sticking his neck out for her, but he wasn't going to change her mind, and now she just hoped he'd be quiet. Cody had come to the Ark to get help in liberating James. That wasn't up for debate.

"Cody, I think that's admirable," Edith said. "But we can't help you. There are operations in place that are much more significant. We can't afford to jeopardize them."

Cody realized this wasn't a debate for Edith, either. She was never going to be won over by Cody's appeals to save a single, specific One. Cody needed more than an argument. She needed a trump card.

"I'm not asking for your help. I'm insisting on it," she said, a plan beginning to take shape in her head.

"Excuse me?"

There were gasps from the Ones around the table. Clearly no one talked to Edith Vale like this, let alone delivered an ultimatum.

"I'm here to make a deal," Cody said. "You have some-

thing I want—a determined strike force ready and able to raid the camps and free the Ones held inside. And I have something you want. Let's trade."

"What do you have that I want?" Edith asked skeptically.

Cody was committed now. She had to keep going. So she put everything she had into her performance.

"You know that I was captured by the Equality agents. You know that I was detained. You know that I spent time with Agent Norton. Lots of time."

Edith nodded, still wary. "Yes. I know all of that."

"And because of that experience, I know something about Agent Norton that can change this entire war. Something that can help us win. Something that you need to hear."

Edith glared at Cody. "What could you possibly know?"

"It's about Agent Norton and it's about you. She's obsessed with you. And I know exactly how she's going to catch you, the trap that she's laying for you." Cody stared at Edith and tried to speak as firmly as possible. "And I'm only going to tell you after you help me free James."

As everyone else looked on in shock, Cody saw Edith do the calculation in her head, saw the desperate self-interest overwhelm her beautiful, genetically perfect face. Cody knew she had her on the hook.

The bluff had worked.