

CHAPTER 1

CHARLEY
AUGUST 10, NOON

Heat.

Inexplicable, consuming heat—choking like smoke, burning like fire.

That was my last memory before the invisible flames spiked into icy nothingness, along with the crazy thought that if I survived this bewildering bonfire, my dad would freak when I was late returning his new car.

CHARLEY
AUGUST 10, 11:56 A.M.

Dang, it's hot.

I'd been out of the car for all of one minute, and I was already roasting like a skinny rotisserie chicken. The asphalt radiated heat. Shifting my feet, I fumbled with Dad's keys, dying to climb back into his Volvo with its arctic air-conditioning and new car smell.

Instead, I grabbed the plastic bag from the backseat and slammed

the door. I had fifty dollars' worth of clothes to return. Fifty dollars of my hard-earned summer babysitting money, wasted on two silly skirts I never should've bought in the first place. The minis were crazy short, and on me, they looked downright skanky. I'd never wear them, and had Em or Jen been with me, they wouldn't have let me put the darn skirts in the cart.

But yesterday, like today, it was just me.

Well, crap, I thought, biting my lip as I stared at the empty car. I hated being alone. I always had, and I hated that I hated it. I mean, I'd never even gone to see a movie by myself and secretly envied people who could. The truth was, I'd never had to be alone. My sister, Em, was always around, or Jen, my best friend since second grade. Or both.

Until now.

A fresh wave of loneliness washed over me with the heat; it was the same wave I'd felt when we'd dropped Em off at college last week, and again yesterday when I'd watched Jen board a plane bound for Milan. My two favorite people, gone.

Not forever, I reminded myself. I refused to pitch a pity party in the Target lot. *It's just a few months, four at the most*. Jen's study abroad program ended in December. By Christmas, life would be good, and our senior spring would rock. Until then, I had volleyball. Practices would keep me busy, and games would keep me focused. And I'd visit Em in Athens every chance I could.

Feeling slightly better, I locked Dad's car and faced the open lot. Asphalt as black as coal stretched before me, broken only by lonely white lines. *Park in the far corner*, Dad had said, tossing me his keys and a wink. Catching the keys, I'd smiled. *I love you too, Dad*.

Of course I'd parked in the far corner. No other car was anywhere close.

Now that I was walking, far wasn't the word. It was like I'd parked

in dadgum Egypt, and I'd swear it was just as hot. Not that I'd ever been to Egypt, but I couldn't imagine it was any hotter than Georgia in August. The Target bull's-eye flashed like fire in the distance. Near the lot's center, the asphalt shimmered in the heat. I watched the ground blur, absently thinking of a desert oasis. It was the kind of shimmer that moves with you . . . moves away, always out of reach.

Not this one. This shimmer stretched into the air, rippling like a wall of wavy glass. Then it rolled.

Swiftly.

Strangely.

Toward me.

In the time it took to blink, the air in front of me melted. It undulated, like a wave of liquid crystal, and before I could breathe, the wave engulfed me in a silent rush.

Hot air gripped me like a vise, then burst into flames. Every speck of skin screamed; every nerve ending exploded.

I'm being fried alive in the Target lot! The thought ripped through my brain as the invisible flames drove deeper. I tried to scream, but choked on the heat; it was in my mouth, in my lungs, in *me*, like a living darkness I couldn't shake. Blistering tar coursed through my veins, then filled my chest, stealing my air and slicking behind my eyes.

A darkness blacker than asphalt rushed at me; I fell to meet it. My last sensation was of icy cold. A biting cold as raw and as painful as the heat had been seconds before, and then—nothing.

No light. No sound.

No air.

CHAPTER

2

THAD

DAY 267, DAWN

Two days ago, Kevin went renegade, bolting to Search alone.

Yesterday his clock ran out.

And today—well, today seriously sucked. Maybe for him, and definitely for us, because one day later, we still didn't know if Kevin had made it or not. All we knew was that today was his Day 366, and on the island of Nil, no one got a Day 366.

Swallowing bile, I realized my brutal beach run had done absolutely nothing to clear my head. If anything, I felt worse. Now I was exhausted *and* edgy. Not the way to start a Nil day.

One meter from the tree line, I stopped, and in a move that would've stunned my coach back home, I forced myself to breathe. To consciously take in air. *Focus the breath, focus the mind*—it was my coach's classic send-off before we hit the mountain, not that I'd ever really listened. I inhaled through my nose, breathing from my gut. *Breathe in . . . hold . . . breathe out*. Coach always swore that if we were doing it right, our breath would sound like a roaring ocean. Ironically, all I heard *was* a roaring ocean. Behind me, potent liquid avalanches crashed into shore, crumbling one after another.

Breathe.

A black streak flashed on my right. Instantly amped, I pulled my knife and spun, fully aware I might already be toast. The blur dropped something near my toes, and my adrenaline rush died on the spot.

"Nice." I stared at the dead bird at my feet. "Burton, you shouldn't have." Of all the cats on Nil, Burton stood out the most. A jet-black cat, his paws were pure white. They looked like they'd been dipped in snow.

Sheathing my knife, I nodded at Burton. "Really, you keep it."

Now the cat looked annoyed, like he'd hoped for more. Burton and I had come to a truce months ago. I tossed him fish scraps, he hissed in return, and occasionally he brought me dead stuff to show he actually cared.

Nothing like starting the day with a corpse, even if it was just a bird.

Abruptly, I felt like the bird. Dead on my feet, like I'd spent the day shredding fresh powder, but here on Nil, the day had barely begun. And thanks to Nil, I hadn't touched a snowboard in exactly 266 days.

Dwelling on snow and corpses and breathing exercises not worth a crap, I trudged down the path, the one that led to the Wall.

I found my name and touched the letters like a blind man reading Braille. I did this every morning. Part of me knew it was borderline obsessive; the rest of me didn't care. After nine months on the island, I'd earned the right to a few whacked-out rituals. The Wall was a memorial, *our* memorial, even for those of us still here.

The longer I traced, the calmer I felt, and by the time I finished my name a third time, I was almost Zen. Then I glanced at Kevin's name and my fragile Zen shattered: five letters, then a blank space. His empty space screamed at me, begging to be filled. But to fill the space, I had to know what to carve; the ugly void was a cruel reminder that

I did not know. I closed my eyes. My head felt ready to explode. And if I felt this crappy, I couldn't imagine how Natalie was holding up.

Not so great, I thought, picturing her face as she lurched into the City last night. Both hopeful and hopeless, she was a different kind of lost. And the worst part—the part that made me want to slam my head against the Wall—was that there was nothing to do but wait. Wait to grieve, wait to celebrate, wondering if Kevin's fate was a sneak peek at our own. This was Nil's favorite game, the one where she messed with our heads.

I prayed Kevin had won. But either way, he was gone, and he wasn't coming back. There was no overtime on Nil.

"Thad!"

Hearing my name, I turned away from the Wall. Rives was walking toward me, his dreads tied back, his face all business. A sleek wooden board rested against one hip.

"Any word on Kevin?" His eyes darted over my shoulder.

"Not yet."

"Maybe today." Rives looked as frustrated as I felt.

"Maybe." We may as well have been discussing the weather. *Think it'll rain today? Maybe.* Meaningless small talk about something over which we had no control.

I glanced at his board. Remembering this morning's monster swells, I frowned. "You going out alone?"

"You know it," Rives said, breaking into a grin. "Unless you're game."

For a half second, I actually considered it. Then I sighed. "I can't."

Rives gave me a long look. "You sure, bro? I'll wait."

"Thanks, but I'm out. I promised Natalie I'd do sweeps."

There was no way Rives would argue with that. As he walked away, I called, "Rives!"

He turned. "Yeah?"

"Be safe. Watch your back, eh?"

"Always." Grinning again, he threw me a quick salute.

Rives vanished into the trees. The sky was clear, and the clean air smelled like salt. It was like every other morning for the past 266 days—and yet it wasn't. A cagey vibe hung in the air. More than just the anticipation of the verdict on Kevin, it was something else. Something new, something I couldn't quite nail. But it was there; I felt it. And it was something to do with me.

What are you cooking up now, Nil? I wondered, stifling a twinge of dread. Looking around, I saw nothing but leaves shifting in the wind.

Nil says wait, she giggled in the breeze.

Like I had a choice.

CHAPTER

3

CHARLEY

DAY 1, TIME UNKNOWN

A sharp pain in my hip woke me. When I opened my eyes, I saw red.

Literally.

Jagged rocks the color of rust stretched as far as I could see. Boulders as big as buses, small chunks like cars, and a million smaller rocks the size of balls—golf balls, baseballs, basketballs, you name it. All were uneven, with weird serrated edges, and all were the same exact shade of burnt red. I lay on a raised outcropping, on my side.

And I was *naked*.

Outside, in a creepy rock field I'd never laid eyes on before in my life.

I scrambled to my feet, and brushing off grit, I stumbled toward the edge. Spiky gravel covered the rock like sprinkles on a cupcake. *That explains the pain in my hip*, I thought randomly. I slipped twice but didn't fall.

My rock, shaped like a mushroom with a fat stem, was mashed against a clump of smaller rocks masquerading as petrified red cauliflower. Using the smaller rocks as stairs, I worked my way down, moving as fast as the prickly rock would allow. At the bottom, I scrunched into the wisp of shade.

Frozen against the rock, I listened.

The only noise came from me. Air whistling in and out of my lungs, blood slamming against the chambers of my heart. The surrounding silence was so vast, so complete, it had a presence all its own: it was eerie, almost otherworldly. And with the desolate red landscape stretching for miles, I felt like I'd woken on an alien planet.

An. Alien. Planet.

I began shaking, violently, with the kind of icy fear I'd felt only once before, when Em and I were T-boned by a drunk driver and I'd seen Em sandwiched behind the wheel, bright red blood running down her forehead into her closed eyes. She'd turned out to be fine. I couldn't say the same for myself right now. Stark naked, goodness knows where, wherever *here* was. My last memory was of scalding heat, burning cold, and pain.

Jerking my head down, I expected my skin to be fried, but it looked fine. All of it, which I could see, because I was *naked*.

Slowly, I pressed my head back against the rock. The red rock landscape stayed silent, and still. At least the sky was blue. Brilliant, clear blue.

Maybe I'm dead.

I thought I'd passed out, but maybe I actually *passed*. Did that awful heat mark the entrance into death? Absorbing my God-forsaken surroundings, I abruptly thought, *Hell*. Hell was a red rock desert, where you woke up naked and alone. I'd always thought Hell was an underground cavern teeming with the moaning damned, but maybe we all got our own personal Hell, crafted just for us, because mine sure looked a lot like this: no clothes, no people, and definitely no clue.

But it didn't feel like Hell. And even though I'd skipped church lately, I was a pretty good kid. Sneaking out at night to drink beer on the local golf course with Em was the worst thing I'd ever done, and that really wasn't so bad. Not bad enough to wind up in Hell anyway. My gut told me I was alive, then my gut told me I should be afraid. Very afraid.

My Em-bleeding-behind-the-wheel fear was back. *Was the air thinner here?* I couldn't seem to get enough air.

Around me, nothing moved.

I swept the area, looking for something to tell me where I was, or wasn't, but all I saw was rock; it coated the ground, hunkered in clumps, and giant piles of it blocked my line of sight. If I wanted to see anything, I'd have to climb. But I knew if I could see past the rock hills, then anything lurking out there could also see me.

Trapped, I thought humorlessly, *between a rock and a hard place*. Revealing myself seemed like a really bad idea. On the other hand, I couldn't stay plastered against this rock forever.

Hunching over, I crept toward the largest pile and started up. Scaling the rocks was like walking barefoot over spiky balls from our giant sweetgum tree—uncomfortable, but doable, as long as I watched my step. Near the top, I peeked over the edge. All I could see was more rock. I hesitated, hearing my volleyball coach's voice in my head. *Use your height, Charley. Make it work for you*. Okay, well, on the court in a uniform is one thing, outside stark naked was another.

I took a deep breath—and then I climbed. On the summit, I stood, but I couldn't help covering my chest with one arm and my privates with the other. Feeling like an idiot, I surveyed the broken landscape.

A blue haze rose in the distance, speckled with green. *Mountains*, I thought, feeling a spark of hope. Green meant life, and more importantly, water. *Are there mountains on Mars?* I wondered. Then I wanted to slap myself. I didn't—because that would mean flashing more of my already overexposed self—but I wanted to, because mountains or not, there was no oxygen on Mars, and I was definitely breathing oxygen-filled air. This wasn't Mars.

But that didn't mean it was Earth.

The sun—only one, thank heavens—hung high in the cloudless sky. Feeling heat on my bare shoulders, I knew I needed to find cover. Even with my olive skin, eventually I'd burn, especially certain parts that had never seen the sun.

I looked left. West, perhaps. The ground sloped gently away. No mountains, but I sensed that direction was safer. *Follow the lead*, my dad would joke as he tapped his nose, his golden-brown eyes twinkling. Along with his looks, I often thought I'd inherited his lead. Heading west *felt* right.

I turned and my breath caught. Twenty yards out, the red ground was shimmering. The air lay still. And if it was quiet with the wind, without it, this place was dead calm.

The shimmer lifted into the air, and then it moved—straight toward me.

I scrambled right, aiming not to outrun it but skirt *around* it, likening it to a tornado; we'd had one in Georgia once. Running over the crumbly rocks and leaping to hit flat spots, I missed. Pain slashed across my heel, making me stumble, and when I looked back up, the shimmer hovered fifteen feet away and closing. Not speeding up, not slowing. Just drifting . . . toward me.

Kicking into high gear, I sprinted across the rocks, leaving a trail of red on red. A flat portion of rock caught my eye; behind it was a small cave—more like a scoop carved out of the rock face, just big enough for me. I darted toward the opening. Folding like an accordion, I tucked inside the shallow hole.

Shade dropped like a curtain. I pressed my back against the cool rock, letting my eyes adjust.

The shimmer approached, silent and sinister.

Seconds later, the wall of wavering air drifted so close I could reach out and touch it, not that I did. But I couldn't look away. Glistening like water under glass, a million pinpricks of translucent

light winked at me. Every color was there, rippling and moving, filled with an unnatural iridescence.

Then the shimmer's edge hung directly in front of me. A razor-thin streak of silver back-lined in black onyx; the air in front and behind was clear and as blue as the sky above. I sat completely still, afraid to move, afraid to breathe, terrified the shimmer would suck me in and take me goodness-knows-where.

The shimmer kept moving, drifting out of sight.

A second ticked by, then two.

Outside my hole, the wind was back. It blew fine dust across the landing near my toes, miniature funnels of red.

I stared at the funnels, thinking of tornadoes and shimmers. Tornadoes were definitely bad. I didn't know whether the shimmers were good or bad, but I felt I should avoid them. One had obviously brought me here, which was bad, or at least not good. It was like some twisted Wizard of Oz experience, minus the red sparkly shoes to take me home.

I uncurled myself in time to see a second shimmer form off to my right, in virtually the same place that the first one had appeared.

Without hesitation, I ducked back into my cave. The dust lay flat. This shimmer drifted farther out than the first, and when it passed, its edge lurked yards away, not inches. Like the first one, the second shimmer passed without stopping.

Tucked into a silent ball, I watched the dust, waiting.

The wind stalled; the dust funnels collapsed. A third shimmer swept across the red field in my line of sight, this one farther out than its predecessors, much farther. It too disappeared off to my left, shrinking into itself in the time it takes to blink, and then was gone. The shimmers looked less ominous in the distance, less sentient. Most important, they didn't seem intent on finding me, but they were still as freaky as Dorothy's tornado.

And that's when I thought, *If one shimmer brought me here, maybe one will take me back.* When the fourth shimmer appeared, I ran for it. I loped toward the wall of wavering air, ignoring the pain in my heel, feeling ridiculous in my galloping nakedness but hell-bent on catching the shimmer anyway. It moved slowly across the red rock, hovering inches from the ground and stretching ten feet high and half as wide.

As I gained on the shimmer, I wondered exactly what would happen when I hit the roiling air. *Will it burn? Feel like ice?* In ten feet, I was about to find out.

Five.

Two.

I was inches away when the shimmer crumpled into a black dot. Then the dot vanished. The wind instantly returned, whipping my hair with a vengeance.

The shimmer was gone.

I stood naked on a strange rocky plateau, feeling a sense of failure for something I didn't even understand. I'd missed it, whatever it was. And with the distance between the shimmers widening, I knew I couldn't run fast enough to catch the next one.

But unable to help myself, I waited, my eyes scouring the ground for movement.

No new shimmers appeared.

Did the shimmers come in sets like waves? How often did they come? I'd no idea. And I had no clue what they really were.

Without warning, I was totally aware of my vulnerability without clothes or cover. *Get out!* my gut screamed. *Out of this field, out of the sun, and out of sight.* Something told me this field was a dead end, and to *move*.

I spun, took a step, and buckled in pain. Glancing at my heel, I winced. It was shredded, bathed in blood, and there was nothing I could do—except keep moving.

The going was slow, and painful. I fell into a pattern of taking several steps, then pausing to get my bearings, not that I really had any. I took two awkward steps to my left, then hopped forward, aiming for a flat spot and feeling like I was playing Stephen King's version of naked Twister. I was so intent on my footing that I almost missed it: a flash of cream among the red.

Hobbling over, I found two sandals and some cloth. No, *clothes*.

Beside a deep crevasse, a pair of shorts and a bandana lay in a heap. Both were a strange off-white. Giddy with hope, I snatched up the shorts, and something bright went flying; it whistled past my ear, disappeared into the crevasse, and landed with a muffled *crack*. I wondered what it was, but I wasn't about to peer into the dark hole to see what fell. At the rate I was going, I'd probably fall in myself. Whatever it was, it was gone.

I held up the shorts. The fabric was soft and worn. Straight cut with rough stitching and a jagged lace-up fly, they looked like primitive boy's Bermudas. One side was torn, but they were definitely wearable.

"Sweet," I said.

The word rolled through the open air like a shout. I stopped, instantly freaked out, realizing these clothes belonged to someone.

Someone who might be watching.

A fresh jolt of panic made me shake. Clutching the shorts like a thief caught red-handed, I scanned the rocks, every muscle taut as I waited for someone to leap out shouting, "Those are mine!"

No one did. The land stayed silent.

This morning I would've never picked up random clothes off of the ground and put them on, but then again, this morning I was not stranded buck-naked in a creepy red rock desert. *Beggars can't be choosers*, I thought, slipping on the shorts. Then I laughed, because in some weird twist of fate, they actually fit.

I'd always been skinny, built like a boy, with a boy's name to

match. When all the girls grew curves, I'd just stretched, growing like crazy until I hit six feet. Recently my chest had made a small effort to catch up—the key word there was *small*—but I still had no hips. The boyish Bermudas were perfect.

I wrapped the bandana around my chest like a contestant on *Survivor*. *Where the heck's my tribe?* I joked. Glancing around the silent rocks, I realized that if there was a tribe here, I may not want to meet them. They might not be friendly.

No longer naked, I felt a million times better.

The sandals were big but better than nothing, and with protection for my feet, I moved quickly through the sea of red. Some rocks slid, others held firm. Soon the back of my right sandal looked like I'd dipped it in red paint. *Lookin' good*, I thought wryly, watching where I put my bloody foot. These rocks seemed made for snakes. But nothing moved, except me.

Working my way around another deep crack, I slipped. Shards of red skittered away, like they were running too. One looked like a dagger. I picked it up, hefted it once to gauge its weight, then whacked it against a boulder to test the dagger's strength. It held; if anything, the dagger scraped the boulder. *Like rock, paper, scissors*, I thought. *Dagger beats boulder*.

I tucked the shard into my waistband, thinking it might come in handy. *Dagger beats snake—or worse*. Then, the idea of me engaging in hand-to-hand combat, armed with a piddly rock dagger was so absolutely ridiculous that I laughed, which was better than crying, but both emotions were so raw, so powerful, like two sides of the same coin, I feared too much laughing might flip me into tears and if I started, I wouldn't be able to stop. I stopped laughing, took a deep breath, and trekked on.

But I kept the dagger, just in case.

Eventually the red rock gave way to wavy black, like asphalt that

had been poured but never flattened. Cracks split the black like snakes, but other than the cracks, this rock was fairly smooth. Best of all, it didn't shift under my feet.

Scrub brush popped up, dotting the black like dry tinder. As I passed an especially large thicket, a zebra peeked out. *Do zebras charge?* I wondered. Unsure about zebra aggression, I took a slow step backward.

I blinked and the zebra was gone.

Of course I'd hallucinate a zebra. Why couldn't I dream up Robert Pattinson or, better yet, a river of Gatorade? My mouth felt as dry as the cracked ground under my borrowed sandals.

The flat black rock gave way to rocky black earth with strange trees, trees with gray, skeletal trunks and crispy green leaves dripping off branches like rain that wouldn't fall. Odd trees like skinny pines cropped up, and then I heard a familiar sound: the ocean—distant, but real. Before I could celebrate, the ground flashed like a mirror, and for one agonizing second, I thought it was a shimmer ready to rise. I was still conflicted as to whether the shimmers were good, or bad, or both.

Then I realized I was watching water. A pool of clear water, the size of a Ping-Pong table, nestled in the black rock. I scooped up a handful and smelled it. Fresh, or possibly brackish, the hint of brine could be from the pool or blowing in from the sea. Figuring I had nothing to lose, I tried a sip. Cold and crisp, it tasted like heaven. I gulped handfuls until I was no longer thirsty. As I sat up, a blur of white glinted in the sky.

I ducked into the nearby thicket and pressed deep. Keeping completely still, I watched. To the east, two white-winged creatures soared high overhead, too far away to see. Other than the possibly imaginary zebra, these were the first creatures I'd seen. I spied legs—human legs—which totally creeped me out.

Bird men?

Where *was* I?

Twenty minutes later, I knew. I was in the most beautiful place I'd ever seen.

I stood at the tree line, gaping at the view. There was the ocean, dappled in late-afternoon sunlight, rolling into a black sand beach tucked into a small bay. Black rocks sprouted near shore, glittering like dark crystal. On each side, black cliffs rose in the distance, covered with patches of green. Close to me, majestic palm trees swayed in the breeze.

It was the kind of awesome beauty I'd only seen on the Travel Channel, when I'd watched an episode of private islands owned by people with more wealth than everyone but God.

Holy crap, I thought, watching a towering wave roll and break. *I'm totally lost*.

I took another step, and my toe hit something hard. My sandal caught and stuck. I looked down, and when I realized what I'd kicked, I screamed.

It was a human skull.

CHAPTER

4

THAD

DAY 267, LATE AFTERNOON

What a waste of a day.

Despite three solid flyovers, we saw nothing. *Make that nothing good*, I thought, remembering the black rhino foraging near the groves. Another two tons of fresh Nil fun, complete with a built-in deadly weapon. Lucky us.

Right.

I dreaded the look on Nat's face when we came back empty-handed.

Shutting down that visual, I focused on the wind. In the first stroke of good luck today, the afternoon gusts blasted onshore, giving us the brakes we needed. Right now I'd take any advantage Nil offered. My arms were spent, and my eyes felt gritty. I was done, and if I had to guess, so was Jason.

Our landing site stretched less than half a kilometer ahead, sprawled between twin fissures of black. *Aim straight, drop nose, hold steady.*

Slowing in the headwind, we glided over the rocks about seven meters off the ground. Jason cruised ahead of me. Landing was its own little rush, not quite like takeoff, but close.

Then I heard it: a crack; it echoed through the air like a firecracker. A half second later, Jason's glider dipped erratically and nearly pitched him off.

"Jason!" I shouted. "Shift your weight!"

Jason slid right, switched his grip, and landed like a seasoned pro, even though he was only thirteen. And thanks to his cool head, he still had a chance to see fourteen.

I landed a wingspan away, my adrenaline pumping like I was still fifteen meters high.

"You okay?" I called.

"Yeah. Support rod broke." He held up his glider. One side bar dangled limply, like a broken arm.

As I stared at the wounded flyer, I had the weirdest sense that the break was a message from Nil. A not-so-subtle reminder of how close death really was—like we could forget. After all, the support cracked high enough to scare, but not high enough to kill. First the dead bird, now a broken glider.

Message received, I thought grimly. Nothing like a little Nil overkill.

We hiked back, hauling the crippled glider, knowing Natalie was waiting. Unfortunately, Bart found us first. He ambushed us as we approached the Shack.

"Thad," he started, his nasal whine sending my annoyance level off the charts, "we need to talk. I haven't been on Search in almost a month. Twenty-nine days."

"Hello, Bart," I said, peeling off my fly rig. "No, we didn't find Kevin. Or his clothes. But thanks for asking."

"Sorry," he said. His eyes flicked over Jason before circling back to me. "But I'm due, Thad, you know I am. It's not fair."

"It's not fair," I repeated, working to keep my voice level. "Really?" Sarcasm seeped in, and then for the first time since Kevin bolted, I lost it. "In case you haven't noticed, nothing about Nil is *fair*. It's not *fair* that you landed here. It's not fair that leaving is a crashshoot and

that every damn day brings you closer to death. And it's definitely not *fair* that our past Leader, who spent months working her butt off for everyone else, is sitting by the fire, wondering if her boyfriend is dead, terrified she might never find out."

Bart sputtered, waffling between agreement and protest, neither of which I wanted to hear. *Why am I wasting my time?* I wondered.

I held up my hand. "You're right. It's not fair. But that's how it is. I don't pick the teams. So if you want someone to pick you, I'd suggest you pull your weight and then some." I looked evenly at Bart. "And hey, if you don't like the City rules, you can always leave."

Bart paled. "Fine." He turned, then spun back. "You know, losing the knife was an accident. It wasn't my fault."

"Yes, it was." Talla stepped out from the Shack, her blond hair tied in a hard knot. "You didn't secure it. And you lost it. Your fault."

"Of course you take his side. Everyone knows you're after his job. Or maybe you're just after him." Bart smirked.

Talla nearly snarled. "All I want is to get home. The sooner, the better. Isn't that what *you* want?"

"Enough," I snapped. I was too drained from sweeps to handle much more. "Drop it, both of you. I need to talk to Natalie."

"Too late," Talla said. She pointed to the fire, where Jason stood beside Natalie, his arm wrapped around her shoulders and her head hung in defeat.

God, I hated this place.

CHAPTER 5

CHARLEY
DAY 5, LATE AFTERNOON

I should have been a Girl Scout. Or a ninja. Or better yet a Girl Scout ninja with a black belt in self-defense.

That was my latest epiphany as another juicy fish darted past my outstretched fingers. I could forage through the local Kroger and cook up a mean feast of shrimp and grits, but I'd never caught a shrimp or ground a grit in my life. I'd never fished, camped, identified edible plants, or learned how to start a fire without matches. And I sure as heck had never taken karate.

Volleyball camp suddenly seemed lame.

Exhausted, I flopped down on the sand. This morning I'd collected bamboo and palm fronds to craft a shelter at the tree line, something to give me much-needed shade from the midday sun. I'd remembered my geometry teacher rambling on about triangles being the strongest shape in nature, and it turned out he was right. Using bamboo as scaffolding and fronds as coverage, construction had taken most of the day, but the result was pretty awesome, not that there was anyone to see it. The effort had turned my arms to jelly. I was bone-tired, and I was hungry. And I was still totally freaking out.

The last five days had been the longest of my life.

I didn't know where I was or how to get home. I'd seen no ships, no planes, and most disturbing of all, no people. *At least none alive*, I corrected myself reluctantly. The human skull was never far from my thoughts. A bleach-white skull, half buried in dirt, with my sandal wedged in the empty eye socket. I'd yanked my foot out and run away, and I hadn't gone near it since.

What happened to the dead-skull person? Did he starve to death? Was he killed? If so, by what? None of these thoughts brought me to a happy place, but then again, right now nothing did. It was like I'd fallen into my own personal *Twilight Zone* episode, and I had no clue how to get out. It had everything to do with that shimmer; I knew it. But I hadn't seen any shimmers since the red rock field. And believe me, I'd been looking.

At least I'd found food. Strange green fruits hung on trees to the north. I'd watched a bird eat one, so I figured it wouldn't kill me. I'd picked and peeled two. Although they were as sour as lemons, I'd devoured the green fruit anyway, eating everything but the rind.

Rounding out my all-fruit diet were pineapples and coconuts. Using my rock dagger, I could mutilate a pineapple in a quick minute, but the coconuts were tougher. I'd pierce the shell, tip back the fruit, and chug the milk like I was swigging a Sprite, then after drinking it dry, I'd bang the husk against a rock. But so far every single coconut had refused to break, and I'd been through at least eight. Not even my rock dagger could crack one, and shards of that stuff could slash through almost anything, including my heel, which was still tender and swollen. Soaking my foot in the ocean seemed to be helping, but each time I sat in the sea, fish teased me mercilessly, flaunting their edible selves.

I really wanted fish, even if it meant eating sushi. Unable to capture a fish by hand—I mean, who does that?—I made a spear using materials left over from my shelter project. Okay, less a spear, more

like a bamboo rod with a sharp rock tied to the end with a green palm frond strip. I figured maybe I could whack a fish.

But like cracking coconuts, spearfishing with a crappy, home-made spear proved impossible. Maybe it was my spear, maybe it was my poor technique. It didn't matter, the result was the same: no fish.

Frustrated, I picked my worthless spear up and chucked it into the sea. The spear flew over the water, skipped once, then sank. *Super*, I thought, regretting my impulsive throw. If I didn't find some decent food, I'd disappear too.

Leaving the water, I wandered south. *Maybe I'll find a nut tree*, I thought optimistically. Then I prayed I'd know an edible nut if I saw one.

I passed the thick stand of bamboo, then the grove of palms, but desperate for more than coconut milk, I kept going, venturing farther south than ever. The vegetation thinned as the bay curved toward the sea, ending at a stern cliff. Black and massive, the cliff was bare rock. Near the base, a small bush with glossy green leaves grew alone. Tucked inside the leaves were bumpy yellow fruits.

More fruit, I thought without enthusiasm, but at least this fruit offered variety. The bush looked healthy, the warty fruit less so, and as I went to pluck a yellow fruit, the unmistakable stench of vomit hit me in the face. Gagging, I stumbled away, working not to retch.

Leaving the stinky plant, I climbed. The cliff was riddled with openings, perfect for hands and feet. I fell into an easy rhythm, and after turning the bend, I found myself inside a series of massive rock arches.

The view was stunning.

Blue sky filled the openings, perfectly framed in black. Below me, water hissed and spit against rocks, churning white on black. I turned in a slow circle, bathed in sunlight, and something caught my eye. Something smooth in a wash of crags.

The largest arch, still a volleyball court's distance away, boasted

a large flat spot at eye level. No, not flat, at least not totally. Fissures graced the rock face, too uniform to be natural.

Intrigued, I hiked closer. A carving decorated the rock face: a maze, etched in a perfect circle, with a human figure in the very center. *Like a primitive cave drawing*, I thought. But the longer I studied the carving, the more I realized the maze was too symmetrical to be primitive; it was more like one of those freaky designs that pop up on cornfields overnight. But that wasn't right either. Given the level of detail, this glyph was no overnight sensation. The human figure at the epicenter suggested the carver was human, or maybe that's what I wanted to believe. What I *needed* to believe. Despite my gruesome skull discovery, I hadn't shaken my alien planet worry.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, tracing the rings and trying to discern meaning from their existence. Long enough for my legs to cramp. Long enough for my stomach to rebel. Long enough for the air to turn cool.

The chill snapped my reverie. Looking up, I saw that the sun had dropped, and I couldn't scramble away fast enough. I didn't want to be caught out here at night.

Leaving the rock arches took longer than I expected. My original pathways were blocked by the tide, forcing me higher to avoid being crushed against the rocks by churning water. By the time I made it back to my hideout, I was shaking and sweating. And I was *starving*.

Unfortunately, coconuts were the only choice I had.

I drained one quickly, but gagged on the sweet milk and fought to keep it down. Wracked with stomach cramps, I longed for a bagel, or toast. And a Sprite. A fountain Sprite, on crushed ice, lemon-limey sweet with just enough bubbles to settle my stomach. Holding my stomach, I shuddered. Then, watching the sun drop close to the water, I shuddered again.

The nights were a million times worse than the days.

Nights were pitch-black, full of claustrophobic, creepy darkness.

Nights were when the shakes came, from cold, and from fear. I was absurdly terrified of nighttime critters, not just weird bird men or potential aliens. My greatest fear was snakes. I'd developed an almost paralyzing fear of them, ever since I'd found a cottonmouth sleeping in my rollerblade when I was six. I knew my snake phobia wasn't totally rational—that I had more to worry about right now than snakes—but for all I knew, the dead-skull person had died of a snake-bite. I'd spent the last four nights huddled against a tree, armed with my rock dagger, waiting. I'd been stood up, at least by anything creepy, but I'd barely slept.

And now the darkness was back.

I jogged over to a large black rock on the sand and curled beside it, soaking up the residual warmth from the sun. For the first time, I stayed on the beach as night fell, watching the stars come out. As the constellations took shape, I blinked. There was the Little Dipper, glowing brilliantly against the clear night sky, with Polaris shining brightest of all.

I was on Earth, but I had no idea *where* on Earth I was. Or when. I was totally alone.

Like a rubber band stretched past its limit, I broke. I bawled, like Em but not like Em, because there was no one to hold my hands and tell me everything would be okay. Nothing was okay, especially me. I wept until I was as empty as the beach around me and then I lay there, spent. Still cold, I no longer shook. I was oddly numb.

I'd just dozed off when a crunching sound echoed like an alarm.

The noise intensified, then stopped. Silence rushed in, louder than before. Pressed tight to my rock, I listened. A twig cracked, then another, snapping is crisply as the break of dry bones. A whoop, guttural and plaintive, reverberated through the night air.

Something was moving through the trees behind me. Something that didn't sound human.

Something that just might be as hungry as me.