

CHAPTER

1

RIVES

DAY 241, JUST AFTER NOON

The ground shook, like Hades had lost his temper.

Or his favorite toy. Or both.

Given the last ten minutes of sheer insanity, I'd pick both.

Three gates, twin exits, and one massive quake, all packed into today's manic noon. Aftershocks tore through the black rock field as the island fought to win, and the battle seemed personal with the devil himself.

Right now I was doing my damndest not to meet him in person.

Cracks tore through the rock, ripping the ground into a fresh jigsaw puzzle. One lava field away, red blurred like liquid rust. A buffalo lurched awkwardly in the distance, bracing against the very island that held it hostage. Quakes always scared the animals—me included. I scrambled over the trembling rock, aiming to retrieve Charley's gear and not kill myself in the process.

Nil wasn't happy—that was clear.

Another aftershock hit. The ground jerked; black rock splintered on my right. I shifted direction with the wind, already calculating a safer route.

The grizzly roared; I spun to place him. I'd forgotten he was my new sidekick.

I caught the bear in my line of sight and skidded to a sharp halt; my current vector put me on a crash course with the grizzly. He barreled toward me, erratic and unsteady, pointlessly trying to outrun the quake. It was a toss-up as to who was more terrified: me or the jacked-up bear. But it didn't matter. All that mattered was staying alive, a personal mandate that did *not* include me playing chicken with the grizzly.

I backpedaled, unwilling to take my eyes off the bear, and stumbled five steps before I tripped and caught myself one-handed on a large chunk of shifting rock. Three meters out, the ground where I would've been standing cracked into a cruel smile—one with teeth. Jagged black rock, dripping decay, lining a wide hole. The grizzly's eyes were wild, his pace uncontrolled. He hit a patch of gravel and slid—and then he fell. Sideways, into the chasm, a brown blur clawing at empty air. The island jerked, the toothy trap clamped shut. Rock crumbled into the dwindling crack as the island settled, then stilled.

No shake, no quake.

Done.

The only animal left was me.

The stillness was profound. I gingerly let go of the rock and stood. Alone in the field of black, I marveled at the quiet. At the abrupt calm, which was as remarkable as the preceding fifteen minutes of mayhem.

Thad's shocking play.

Charley's escape.

The bear. The quake. Thad leaping toward a gate floating over a deadly black rift, Thad hanging in midair like a crazed long jumper, one heartbeat too long. But he'd made it.

Nothing like cutting it close, bro, I thought.

I exhaled a breath I'd been holding for days.

Days.

I had 124 left.

I took a breath, steady and deep, reveling in the feeling of being alive, then I turned in a slow circle, absorbing the look and feel of the island in the wake of today's noon. The red rock in the distance jutted crisply against the cloudless blue sky, all blurred edges gone. On my right, Mount Nil stretched high like an island sentinel. A near-vertical black rock peak slapped with patches of stubborn green, its tip spearing the only clouds in sight. Wispy steam bleached the sky on the backside, visible if you knew where to look, where hidden vents released deadly pressure. Directly in front of Mount Nil sat the meadow, lush and green and more than a little deadly. I couldn't see the meadow from where I stood, but I knew it was there, just like the rain forest to the northeast and the City due west. So much of Nil was unseen. I understood that now more than ever.

As I stood alone in the wake of today's noon, the island looked exactly the same—and felt completely different. Foreign and new.

I gave a sharp laugh.

Of all the people here, you'd think I'd be the most accustomed to change as the constant, but then again, in my pre-Nil life, the places didn't change; *I* did. *I* moved; *I* traveled; *I* adjusted to new cities and countries as easily as changing my shirt. Here, *I* was the constant, forced to continually reassess the island and everything I knew, which made it impossible to get a handle on where I stood. Every time I thought I had something figured out, it changed.

And with the twin losses of Thad and Charley, things had definitely changed.

Welcome to Nil, Rives, I thought.

Again.

I'd just finished my full rotation when the breeze shifted. Dulled, as if interrupted. Or expectant.

Incoming, I thought.

I soundlessly fell to one knee beside the rock.

A moment later, a gate dropped a few meters away in midair and

glittered, a writhing disco ball no one wanted to play anywhere near, especially me.

Perfectly still, I remained crouched by the boulder, once my anchor, now my shield. And I waited.

One second.

Two.

On three, every speck of the disco ball turned matte black. Deep black, the color of a night with no stars, the color of birth on Nil. This gate was an inbound, and now that it churned black, I knew it had a rider.

Friend or foe?

I'd barely finished the thought when the gate coughed out a flash of gold. An animal, with tawny fur the color of the waking sun and a thicker mane of the same, lay motionless on the black rock, his paws facing me.

Foe, I thought.

As the lion lifted his head, another gate popped up a meter farther out and dropped. It too shifted into charcoal black, a dangerous aperture primed to open. One tick later, the second gate dumped another golden animal, only this one lacked a mane.

Lion number two rose to her feet as inbound gate number three appeared and instantly flashed black. Three gates, all inbounds. All with riders.

This time the newcomer wasn't a lion; it was a large, scrawny beast covered with dark splotches and a nasty mop of scraggly fur running down its back. It dropped out of the gate, rolled to a stop, and had barely stilled before raising its wobbly head. It sniffed once, swung its head around toward the lions—and me—and bared its teeth.

I didn't move.

With a high-pitched keen, it rose to its feet and took off after the lions at a blistering pace. Hyena, I guessed, although I'd never seen one

so large. The trio sprinted away, toward Mount Nil and the meadow, the mangy mutt chasing the lions, an unsettling visual if ever there was one.

On Nil, even the king of the beasts ran in fear.

I stood, alone again.

Assessing again.

Charley, gone. Thad, gone. The grizzly, trapped in rock, lost for good. Three out, three in, the island's balance still intact, only today the Nil scales took a hard tip toward the deadly.

When the trio vanished from sight, I went after Charley's gear. Her clothes, sandals, and satchel lay in a clean pile. Inside the satchel, Charley's maps and fire bow waited, intact and undamaged. Thad's knife glinted like a dull gate, like life and power and something primitively badass. An island offering, just for me.

Thank you, Nil.

I took it all and didn't look back. The City was waiting.

I hoped it was still standing.

CHAPTER 2

SKYE

NOVEMBER 16, 9:00 P.M.

Six weeks ago, my mom gently informed me she'd been chosen to oversee an exciting new dig in Africa, and, oh by the way, I wasn't invited.

Two weeks ago, I moved in with my dad.

Today, he handed me my uncle's journal.

Nothing will ever be the same.

NINE HOURS EARLIER

My dad's official title is Daniel J. Bracken, PhD, Professor of Astrophysics and Solar-Terrestrial Physics at the Institute of Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space, a Department of the University of New Hampshire. His unofficial titles? Island explorer, NASA consultant, stargazer extraordinaire. And the title that fits best? Forty-four-year-old bachelor obsessed with news of the weird.

At least he was consistent.

One step into Dad's home office on the day I moved in confirmed that his last title was still the most accurate. Three walls were completely plastered with overlapping newspaper clippings of unusual happenings and missing-person reports, Internet printouts of similarly odd

stories, and Google Earth snapshots. Paragraphs and headlines were circled in various colors; if there was a rhyme or reason for the rainbow-marker madness, it was lost on me. One wall contained a ginormous map of the South Pacific. Chalk lines marked a grid. White tacks dotted the map like stars.

Since my visit last summer, the number of white tacks had grown.

And Dad still insisted I exercise like a fiend. Morning runs, interval workouts, and a ridiculous amount of arm-strength exercises that bordered on fanatic. That's the other thing about my dad: He's a cross between the Nutty Professor and Sarah Connor from *Terminator 2*, only he specializes in Survivorman techniques instead of semiautomatic weapons. Obsessed with fitness, he's pretty ripped for a dad, possibly because he's lived the Paleo lifestyle for as long as I can remember. I've never eaten anything processed at Dad's house. Then again, usually when I visit, we go off somewhere remote where sushi is tame.

I came inside from a run, sweating and tired but feeling pretty good. I'd figured out years ago that my visits with Dad were easier—or at least less painful—if I made a decent effort to stay in shape back home in Gainesville. And by decent I mean sticking to a schedule of regular runs. As a result, I was thin, on the wiry side, but I'd no hope of building big muscles anyway; I had my mom's small-boned build that topped out at a whopping five feet five. I'd also been cursed with the absolute nightmare that was my mom's hair: curly blond ringlets that defied any kind of styling. I relied on massive amounts of ponytail holders and gravity to make it behave, with mixed results. At least I'd inherited my dad's eyes. Neither blue nor green, my eyes were an equal combination of the two, with specks of mica mixed in like salt. My dad said the stars touched my eyes. *It's what makes them shine*, he liked to say. If so, I guess the stars touched my dad's eyes, too. It was the one feature we shared.

"How was it, Skye?" Dad called from his office. "Did you sprint at the end?"

I kicked off my shoes. "Yes, Dad, I sprinted at the end. The last fifty yards, as hard as I could."

"Good girl. How about push-ups? Did you knock those out yet?"

"Not yet."

"Make time for them, Skye. A strong body makes for a strong mind," he continued. "Don't dismiss skills you may need just because you haven't been called on to use them. And hopefully you never will, but better to plan for the worst and hope for the best." His voice lightened. "But if you're not busy with your push-ups, I've got something I want you to see."

"Let me guess," I said, stretching. "Another video on edible plants of the South Pacific? Or a documentary on rudimentary tool making?"

"At least you remember." He laughed.

One thing I'll give my crazy-sweet dad is that he's one of the biggest optimists I've ever met. He wasn't faking his delight in my comments. He wasn't totally balanced, either.

It's why my mom left.

"Seriously, come in here for a sec," he said.

"Coming." I sighed. Nothing in Dad's office ever took just a "sec."

If possible, the walls of Dad's office seemed more covered than usual. A new folding table hugged the wall under the window. Paper coated the table like frosting: piles of white, with handwritten notes scrawled everywhere. Yellow Post-it notes containing hand-drawn arrows pointing to other notes lurked haphazardly among the mess.

As I entered, Dad's eyes lit up like he'd just found leprechauns *and* their pot of gold.

"Skye." He held up a piece of paper and grinned. "I think I'm close."

"To what, exactly?" I tried to muster some enthusiasm and failed.

"To finding the original home of my guide last year. Or rather, his grandmother." He waved the paper animatedly. "According to his stories, his grandmother was relocated from her island birthplace in the late 1940s—a place of secrets and spirits, he said—and that's the island

I need to find." Paper in hand, he walked over to the huge wall map of the South Pacific. "I've narrowed it down to a small cross-section of islands along the equator. I think I'm finally close."

The secret island, I thought, my heart sinking. *Of course.*

Crazy-obsession number one, the one that pushed my mom over the edge and out the door.

"Dad." I spoke slowly, careful to keep my tone level. "I understand you think you're close. But I also love you. And I think"—I paused, making sure he was giving me his full attention—"it's time to stop. You've been fantasizing about this secret island for years. You've fixated on something that doesn't exist—or if it does, it's not part of our life. And you're missing out on this life." He'd gone still as he listened. Maybe that was what encouraged the words I'd been dying to say for the last few years.

"Dad, Mom left because you wouldn't let this island obsession go. She *left*, Dad. Four years ago. And you've been alone ever since. You don't date, barely have friends, and every free minute you're not working at the university or lecturing on solar flares or electromagnetism, you're researching islands or traveling to one. For what, Dad? Where has it gotten you?" I swept my hand around the cluttered office. "Dad, you need to let it go," I said softly. "As your daughter, I'm telling you: Let it go."

"And as your father, Skye, I'm telling you I can't." No judgment, no resignation, just pure astrophysicist matter-of-fact.

He strode over to his desk and picked up a small, worn black journal. With equal purpose, he handed it to me.

"This is your uncle Scott's journal. He wrote it when he was seventeen. Your age. Read it and then we'll talk."

I didn't move. "I want you to think about what I said. I'm serious, Dad. It's time to move on."

His smile was hard. "I know you're serious, Skye. So am I. Read."

"Did Mom ever read this?" I held up the journal.

Dad's voice softened into a pained tone I didn't recognize. "Yes, she did. But she never looked into his eyes. She never saw the truth."

The truth was, I'd never looked into my uncle's eyes, either. I'd never had the chance. My dad's twin brother had died in a freak accident at age eighteen.

I went upstairs, took a quick shower, opened the journal, and began to read.

CHAPTER

3

RIVES

DAY 241, AFTER NOON

It was all me, trekking solo.

The last time I'd been this far inland without backup was the day I'd arrived. Just like then, I had zero food, but unlike that hellacious first day, now I had supplies and clothes. Nudity didn't bother me, but that didn't mean I wanted to walk around with my junk on display either.

Because of Charley's escape, I even hauled an extra pair of shorts.

I'd taken for granted that I'd have Charley beside me on the return trip. Taken for granted that she'd be my Second, maybe even the next Leader. Taken for granted that she'd help me decode the rest of Nil, uncovering the secrets that made Nil tick.

Because I knew that Nil was holding back.

Memories flashed, a million fractured mental pixels. *Talla laughing, her blue eyes fierce. Talla whispering, "Be fearless, Rives." Talla silent, lifeless in my arms.*

I needed to stop taking things for granted. Like time, and people. *Got it, Nil,* I thought.

I guess I was just a slow learner.

I glanced around, and struck by fierce island déjà vu, I laughed. I was retracing my steps from my Day One. Same solitary hike, right down to the afternoon arrival. I'd woken in this black rock field months ago and made it to the City by nightfall; I'd now spent 241 consecutive days in this deadly arena, more consecutive days than I'd spent in any place ever. Staying in one place so long implied roots, at least to me.

But I damn sure wouldn't call Nil home.

Nil was more like purgatory, a place trapped between Heaven and Hell, with heavy doses of both. Maybe Nil was the devil's playground, maybe it was Heaven's testing ground. Maybe it was both. Or neither. Nobody stuck here had a clue.

But lately I was desperate to find one.

Surviving wasn't enough anymore; I had to know why I was here. Why we *all* were here.

Focus, Rives.

Daydreaming was a dangerous pastime on Nil. Then again, daydreaming was risky anywhere. Daydreaming was what landed me here in the first place, that and blowing off my dad's advice.

Memories ripped through my head, moments I hadn't replayed in months.

Landing in Phuket. My dad laughing, my mom kissing his cheek. The slowing whir of the plane's engines, the lazy wink of the hot flight attendant. The sleek feel of my sick new Canon with a telephoto lens. The annoying weight of the mandatory books on Thai history and culture.

Part extended vacation, part work trip for my dad, it was the three of us, as always. Dad was researching a Thai crime ring, a massive operation with international ramifications and disturbing political ties, or so he'd said. The engine's drone faded, and my dad had seized the vacuum of that moment. *Look around*, he'd counseled as the plane taxied to a stop. *Watch the people. Watch the cues. And watch your back. Never*

forget you're a foreigner. Never take your security for granted. Inattentiveness means missed chances and lost opportunities. But, worse, it puts you at risk. Then his eyes had softened. *Got it, son?*

Sure, Dad, I'd said.

I wondered if he'd known then I was all talk.

The next day, I'd gone to Freedom Beach to take pictures. I was checking out some girls chilling on the sand, watching their butts and not my own. A gate caught me from behind; I never saw it coming.

Got it now, Dad, I thought grimly.

On Nil, inattentiveness could get you killed.

I shifted my full focus to my surroundings, to the general post-quake status. *Clear sky, solid ground. No movement.*

A kilometer away, a black rhino marked the intersection of the red and black flows, his head swung toward me. Sweeping wide, I gave him all the space he needed, opting for the "I won't mess with you if you don't mess with me" approach.

The rhino didn't budge.

Win for me, but the closer I got to the City, the more uneasy I grew. No people, no animals. No movement at all. Enough *nothing* to put me on edge.

Stillness on Nil was like the calm before the storm; stillness here felt weighted.

Every muscle tensed, the island's weight pressing on me.

Then I saw it: two skinny boys, dressed in City garb, sprinting bare-foot through the Flower Field, running away from the City, carting nets. *Our* nets. The ones Miya just finished last week.

"Hey," I shouted, taking off in their direction. "Stop!"

Of course the boys didn't stop; they didn't even turn. And then they were gone, lost in ribbons of color.

I'd never gotten close.

My concern for the City jacked up to panic level.

I spun back around and stopped. A boy built like a man stood at the edge of the field. His skin matched mine, only his upper left arm and shoulder were laced with lines and swirls of crisp black ink. He wore a ring of flowers around his neck and a brown loincloth low on his waist. A homemade spear in his hand flowed like a deadly extension of him. Facing the field, he studied the raiders' retreat.

Friend or foe?

Like he'd sensed my thoughts, our eyes met, and I'd have sworn his held pity. He turned away first. Away from the City, away from the field, moving toward the southern tip. And then he disappeared into the island like he belonged.

My grip on Nil wavered in the wake of today's noon.

Charley always joked that I was Thad's wingman, but he'd also been mine, and his absence felt like a hole in the fabric of the island itself. Possibly a tear in the fabric of *me*. I'd never realized how heavily I relied on Thad's guidance, or his friendship. Nil was different now. More dangerous, with more variables, and fewer people to lean on to work it all out. Now I had confirmed raiders, a loner, a new Second to appoint, and a City to hold together in the quake's aftermath.

At least I had brought good news back.

The deadleaf plants at the City's edge greeted me first, their bright green leaves broadcasting danger. Green usually meant go, but with these plants it meant death. One plant was trampled, its cracked leaves limp and weeping. I noticed it even as I avoided it, my dad's training instinctual. *Pay attention, Rives. Notice what others ignore.* It's what made him an Emmy-nominated journalist, and it's what made me notice the small things. The odd things, the things out of place—even people. People in the wrong place at the right time, people with tells, ticks giving away truths.

Eyes wide open, Thad used to say. I'd smile, even as I'd think, *Always.*

Inside the perimeter, the City was organized chaos. I slowed,

relieved to find that no one seemed hurt and all huts were intact. The chicken coop was already reinforced with fresh hemp twine and new logs. By my count only one chicken was lost. The goats roamed loose. One currently nosed around the firepit's edge, scavenging the last of the fish wraps.

Thank God for Dex.

He stood on a black boulder directing salvage teams, his tattoos adding an air of tribal authority to his gestures. Ink was the one accessory that made it to Nil, and Dex's was impressive. Skulls and words paired with flaming crosses and bloody daggers wove together across his torso like a painted shirt, one jacked with color.

Now that I'd seen the kid by the Flower Field, Dex's tats screamed hard-core rocker rather than tribal statesman. To Dex's credit, he held the City's attention like a lead act.

Seeing me, he raised his hand, his expression hopeful.

"He made it." I gave a double thumbs-up. "Thad's gone."

Jason covered his face with his hands, his shoulders shaking. My heart twisted. He'd seen more death than any fourteen-year-old should ever see. Miya gently rested her small hand on his shoulder, as if passing on her quiet strength to him. As I watched her, my heart twisted again, for a different reason.

Because of a different person.

Around Jason, people hooted; Ahmad hugged Jillian; Julio threw his fist in the air as Johan crossed himself, smiling. Macy beamed. Zane, Michael, and a few others clapped, almost politely. They'd barely known Thad. A dark-haired girl with a purple flower tucked behind one ear stood quietly, shoulders back, chin lifted, no clapping. Sy looked relieved.

Dex hopped down and strode over. "Where's Charley?"

"Gone," I said. "Nil sent a triple. Charley caught a ride home, too."

Dex's eyes widened. "A triple? And both Thad and Charley made it? Blimey. Did you go for the third?"

"Never had the chance. Thad missed the first one, so they took the next two." I smiled. "Not my noon, bro." I glanced toward the Flower Field. "Or the City's. I just saw two raiders sprinting east, and they were hauling our nets."

Dex groaned. "Tell me they weren't the new cast nets?"

"Yup."

"Bloody bastards," Dex fumed. "We need those nets." He ran a hand through his half-bleached hair, frustration written all over his face.

"We'll need to set up watch on the Shack again." I sighed. "We can't afford to lose supplies to raiders."

"Maybe." Dex looked thoughtful. "But the nets weren't at the Shack. They were hanging by the firepit to dry." He mumbled a string of expletives, all starting with the word *bloody*.

By the firepit. Near the trampled deadleaf bush.

I dropped my gear and took off at a full sprint, retracing my steps to the Flower Field, but this time I went farther. This time I went *into* the field, starting at the point closest to the City, tracking the trail of crushed flowers.

Sloppy, I thought. *But helpful*.

"What is it?" Jason asked. He'd followed me soundlessly. His innate stealth put the raiders' clumsiness to shame.

I didn't answer until I saw what I was looking for: a large brown net, abandoned in the field, its weight flattening a swath of purple. "Just recovering stolen goods. Sit tight."

I tossed it over my shoulder, and as rocks pressed into my back, I smiled. Small rocks weighted the net's bottom, added kilos that made the difference. The breeze rustled the flowers, whispering without words.

Sensing company, I stilled.

I turned around slowly, fully expecting to see the inked boy's eyes on me. But when I surveyed the field, a lone zebra stared back. Head held high, the zebra stood motionless, ears pricked, its monochromatic

stripes a sharp contrast to the brilliant colors of the field. Somehow I knew it was seconds away from being spooked—by us.

We were the foe.

No one else was around.

I turned away. The zebra deserved peace, especially after today's quake.

"How'd you know they dropped it?" Jason pointed to the net when I drew close.

"They didn't drop it; they left it. Too heavy to carry with a numb foot. Or maybe they panicked when they lost feeling in their feet and ditched it to get away faster. Either way, we got one back."

I pointed out the trampled deadleaf plant as we walked back. "Our savior."

Jason laughed. "Nasty plants. I like 'em." He paused. "Thad's idea worked."

I nodded, abruptly choked up.

When Dex saw us, he pointed to the net and grinned. "Pulled out a bit of island magic, did you, Rives?" He clapped me on the shoulder. "Well done, mate."

I returned his grin. "Just a hunch that panned out."

"Right," he said, watching me shrug off the net. "Well, it was a bloody good one." Dex gestured for the net and hefted it over his shoulder, and, with a comical salute, he stepped away. Then he turned back, swallowing hard. "One more thing. I didn't carve for Thad, or Charley. I thought you should be the bloke to do it."

The knot in my throat was back. "I'd be honored." I turned to Jason, fighting to sound chill. "Why don't you carve for Thad, and I'll carve for Charley. Sound good?"

Jason broke into a broad smile, telling me I'd made the right call. "Sounds good."

"Right, then." Dex looked toward the island's interior. "Well, I'm off." But he didn't move.

"Anything else, D?" I asked.

He cocked his head at me. "You didn't spot any leopards out there, did you, Rives? Skulking about the island and such?"

Now I grinned easily. "No leopards, skulking or otherwise. But Nil is now home to a pair of lions and one very ugly hyena. Oh, and a black rhino. Not sure if he's new, though."

"Fantastic," Dex said. "Bloody cats. I may have to change my stance on declawing. My mum was much opposed, but I'm reconsidering in the nature of survival."

I thought of Bart, found with claw marks raked down his back, Nil karma at its best—or worst. "I hear you, bro. But better to just avoid all Nil kitties, especially the big ones." I paused. "Anyway, good news. The grizzly's gone."

"Gone?" Jason asked. "Did the lions get him? Or did he take a gate?"

"Neither. The island ate him for lunch."

"Well, that's not creepy much." Dex paled slightly. "Bears are Nil's lunch? Then what are we?"

"Dinner?" Jason offered.

I laughed. "Entertainment. But at least that gives us a better chance to make it, right?"

"Absolutely," Dex said with feeling. "And better here in the City than out there with the leopards." For an instant, I saw a flash of the shell-shocked boy I'd met on his Day One. But when he leveled his clear eyes on me, he looked every inch my Second. "It's bloody good to have you back, Rives." With a quick nod, Dex strode off, gripping the net with both hands like a weapon.

Jason and I walked toward the Wall in silence.

The Wall was less a wall, more like rows of wooden planks running horizontally, tacked to vertical posts. Both sides were coated with names—first names only. Life on Nil simplified quickly; the Wall was hard proof of that. Beside each name sat a mark. A check, for those

lucky enough to win a ticket home. A cross, for the unlucky ones doomed to rest on Nil forever, hopefully in peace. A few other names had marks known only to the owner. Other names begged for a mark, the spaces beside their names conspicuously empty. Some spaces belonged to people still here, like me. Other names had blank spaces long after their owners' days ran out, their fate known only to the island and God himself.

I constantly wondered what became of those people. Maybe because I constantly wondered what would become of *me*.

Without discussion, we stopped in front of Thad's name first. I pulled Thad's blade from my waistband, flipped it around, and handed the knife to Jason, hilt out.

"It's Thad's. The one he used to carve his name."

Jason nodded, and, gripping the knife, he bowed his head before he stepped up to the Wall. A slight move, a show of respect. Even though he was the youngest person on Nil, Jason intuitively understood the island; he always had. It's why he was the best Spotter I'd ever seen, and it's why I'd bet money Jason would catch a gate when it was his time.

Time.

It defined our days and haunted our nights; we were all on the clock. It was one of Nil's rules.

Rules we lived by.

Rules we died by.

Rules we didn't make, rules we were still fighting to figure out. But there were two island rules as unyielding as Nil rock.

First, there's only one way off the island: a gate. Grab one and you're gone—but there's a catch. The moment you open your eyes on Nil, your personal hourglass tips. You've got exactly 365 days to escape, or you're done. Six feet under or lost, but either way, it shook out the same: If you didn't catch an outbound gate by the end of your year, you were toast.

And that was rule number two. Nil gives you one year, with zero chance of overtime. Nobody got an extra grain of Nil sand in their hourglass.

It was a deadline written in blood.

Jason finished carving Thad's check, then pointed the blade at the top of the Wall, where *NIL* was carved in block letters.

"Thank you," he said quietly, blade aimed at the *I*. "For letting him go."

He offered me the knife, the same way I'd offered it to him. Striding to my right, I touched Charley's name, remembering the girl who fought so hard to give us all a better shot at making it home.

"Way to go, girl," I said quietly. "When you find your boy on the other side, you tell him I said he's a dumbass. Shoot, knowing you, C, you'll probably tell him yourself." I smiled, thinking of the piece of her mind Charley would give Thad when he showed up.

Not if.

When.

"And when I get back," I whispered, "I'm going to tell him, too." I kissed my fingers and pressed them against her name in good-bye, knowing Charley and Thad would find each other on the other side. *Believing* it, because I had to. To lose hope was a death sentence, and I refused.

But Thad had scared the crap out of me today with his white knight move, and for one tortured moment, my faith had wavered.

Focus on the good, live in the moment.

Thad's words, a flashback perfectly timed. A stark reminder that if I wanted to live to see tomorrow, I'd better live in the *now*. I'd better get my head straight.

I focused on Charley's check, a mark of victory, fully aware that the last two Wall marks I'd carved had been crosses. One for Li, the first person I'd met in the City. And one for Talla, the last person I'd buried.

The less time I spent at the Wall, the better.

I'd just turned around when Jillian threw her arms around me. She shook like a quake.

"Jills, you okay?" I gently lifted her chin so I could see her face. Half-dried tears stained her cheeks. A twine piece holding her hair had slipped, making one auburn braid unravel. Today Jillian looked younger than sixteen. She also looked conflicted and worried. The rest of her expression I couldn't read, and that worried *me*. "What happened?"

"Nothing. I'm okay." She nodded. "I am." She smiled, as if convincing herself. "It's just—everything, I think. On the way back from the Shack—which is fine, by the way, nothing missing, nothing damaged—I started thinking about Thad and Charley and it's so awesome, but then I thought—what if Rives had caught the third gate? I heard you tell Dex it was a triple. And if you'd caught a gate, it would've been awesome, too, but we'd be totally clueless."

"Clueless about . . . ?" I frowned.

"About *everything*. We wouldn't know whether Thad made it, and we wouldn't know what had happened to Charley or *you*. All three of you would have blank spots on the Wall, and we'd never know if we should be celebrating or mourning or searching for you because you needed help, because there would be no one to tell us." She pressed her cheek against my chest. "Then I felt guilty for being glad you're still here." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "You're my best friend here, Rives. I really want you to make it. But I'm glad it wasn't today."

She looked up at me, her eyes wet again. "Does that make me a bad person?"

"No," I said, pushing her bangs from her eyes. "It makes you human."

We stood unmoving, Jillian's head on my shoulder.

We wouldn't know. Blank spots on the Wall.

Jillian had a point. The unknown was the worst part of Nil. Today,

the island had saved the lives of two people and saved the sanity of many more.

Maybe Nil wasn't evil after all.

"I still miss her." Jillian's soft words made me stiffen. "I know you do, too."

I knew Jillian was talking about Talla, Jillian's other best friend on the island. Talla, whose grave lay near the Flower Field. Talla, whose presence I felt near the water. Talla, the first girl who saw through me.

Who saw *me*.

If she had lived, would we be together now?

I didn't know. I'd never know.

I thought of the one night I'd spent with Talla, the one before she'd gone on Search. The night she'd slept in my arms—actually slept, her first full night's sleep since she'd landed. As fierce as Talla was, she'd had her demons, the worst of which was chronic insomnia. On Nil, exhaustion made you vulnerable. And Talla hated feeling vulnerable. It was why she'd pushed herself physically, she'd confided, because she was sure that if she pushed her body to the limits, eventually it would have to cave and rest. Talla was determined to beat even herself.

But the island won. First it broke her body, then her spirit.

I would not let Nil break me.

Maybe the island wasn't evil, but it certainly could be cruel. Then again, cruelty and evil weren't confined to Nil. Neither were love and loss; it was just that Nil's hourglass distilled love, life, and loss into a heightened version of the same.

Today's emotional roller coaster was a ride I hadn't bargained for, but in hindsight, I should've seen it coming, at least with Thad.

Like I said, slow learner.

Jillian pulled away. "I'm so glad they made it. I couldn't have taken another funeral today."

"Another funeral?" My blood ran Cove cold.

Jillian's eyes watered as she nodded. "Zeus. You know, the cocker

spaniel? He limped into the City yesterday. He'd gotten into a fight. I knew he wouldn't make it; I could just tell. Ahmad and I buried him this morning. And then I found a baby bird on the way back from burying Zeus. It had fallen out of a tree. It was already dead. It was so small, Rives, it fit in my palm. I couldn't just leave it there." Jillian lifted her chin, then sighed again. "So I buried it where I found it underneath the tree. I know they weren't people, but still. If Thad hadn't made it—" She broke off, clearly fighting back tears. "I can't even. Zeus was bad enough. And the bird." She rolled her eyes. "I know you think I'm crazy."

"No," I said softly. "I think you're kind. And I think you did the right thing." On Nil, death rivaled life for attention, and the way we treated the dead said more about us than the deceased. With animals, usually we ate them. But sometimes our humanity was more important than a meal. And we sure as hell didn't eat puppies.

I was also thinking we shouldn't have named the dog Zeus.

"Thanks." Jillian nodded. She bit her lip. "Have you seen Burton lately?"

"Nope. Maybe he hitched a ride home." I smiled.

"Maybe," Jillian said. Only she didn't smile.

Burton was a Nil cat Thad had adopted, much like Jillian had been taken with Zeus. Thad had asked me to keep an eye out for Burton, but I hadn't seen the black cat since Thad left. Not a good sign for Burton.

"So tomorrow night's a Nil Night, right?" Jillian said.

I hesitated.

"Rives, we need this." Her voice was quiet. "Everyone needs this."

I thought of the relief on Jason's face when I announced Thad's fate, and the sleepless bruises under his eyes. I thought of the weight on Dex's shoulders that had nothing to do with the net. And I thought of the girl standing silently near Dex, her face unreadable.

"You're right," I said, unwilling to bring my baggage to the party. Nil Nights *were* a party, a short-lived distraction from Nil's rules. With

today's double departure, a Nil Night was definitely in order. "Tomorrow night," I agreed. "We all need a decent night's sleep."

"Rives!" Ahmad's deep voice boomed behind me. "There's something you need to see! You busy?"

"On my way," I called, already moving toward him.

Jillian fell in step beside me. "Does he even need to ask?"

"I hear that," Jason said, jogging to catch up. "With an intro like that, it's got to be good."

"You know it." But it wasn't Ahmad's words that had me stoked; it was his tone: pumped, with absolutely no trace of fear.

Nil had shifted, again.

Time to see how the island wanted to play.

CHAPTER

4

SKYE

NOVEMBER 16, AFTERNOON

The journal handwriting was slanted but neat. Written in black ball-point pen, the printed letters pressed into the paper with an intensity I could touch. No line was skipped.

I began with the first.

My name is Scott Bracken, and this is my journal.

Dr. Andrews says the first step in my recovery is to write down all my thoughts on paper. That the exercise will help me differentiate between reality and delusion. She tells me that once my thoughts are written down, I'll be able to "separate the wheat from the chaff," as if somehow by turning my thoughts into concrete words, they will magically distill into clear columns of truth and lies, of fiction and nonfiction.

She's wrong.

Because it's all true.

Every word.

My name is Scott Bracken, and this is the truth.

Entry #1

I read once that the most powerful memories are triggered by smell. Not mine. My most powerful memories are triggered by heat.

Blistering, burning, brutal heat—the kind of heat that you think you won't survive and yet you do, and then you spend the next ten months wondering if it would've been easier not to survive after all, even as you spend every waking minute fighting to live. To feel the heat again because it's life. Or maybe it's death, because no one really knows.

But I know now.

It's both.

Yesterday Mom was baking brownies. I was standing next to her when she opened the oven door. Searing, airless heat hit my face—and I choked. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Couldn't stop thinking.

I flinched, waiting for the fiery pain that never came. I didn't want the brownies.

I've been home for 28 days.

Nothing is the same. I am not the same. I feel the fracture inside myself, inside my head, even as I know I'm sane. But if I'm not, it's because the island made me crazy.

My name is Scott Bracken, and this is the truth.

Entry #2

This is how it began.

I was riding my bike to Stephanie's house. I remember how perfect the day was: Stephanie's call

inviting me over for lunch, the clear May Connecticut sky. I remember the Van Halen tickets in my pocket. A surprise, setting up the raddest date ever. She was obsessed with David Lee Roth. I like the Police better, but it wasn't about me. It was about her. We'd just started hanging out, and now that I could drive, my world had expanded.

But I wasn't driving that day.

Sometimes I wonder if that would have made a difference. Me driving, instead of biking, me not taking the road less traveled. I read that poem once in school—did a report on it, even. It seemed lame at the time. Now it seems fucking brilliant.

Daniel had the car, which was annoying since we shared the wagon. For all I knew, he'd forgotten I was supposed to have the car that afternoon. After Stephanie's, I was supposed to meet up with Will and Mark to go rent a movie at the new video store down the street. But Daniel was late, and I didn't want to wait. He was always late.

I've never asked him if he forgot. It seems so insignificant now. Sometimes I wonder about the concert tickets. Did anyone find them? Did anyone use them? But like with the car, it doesn't matter.

I never made it to Stephanie's house.

The heat got me first.

Two streets from my house, the road buckled and rocketed straight up into the air ten feet in front of me—then the street dropped away, leaving rippling air in its wake and me with no time to stop. I hit the shimmering air straight on. It burned; it hurt; it was like getting ripped one cell at a time through a

white-hot needle. The impact knocked me out, or so I thought. Later I figured out it was the heat.

I woke up on fire.

Literally—my right calf was melting; I lay on warm black rock, sprawled about six feet from a swath of steaming lava, and the skin on my right calf was red and blistering. BECAUSE OF THE FUCKING LAVA. Black and angry, the lava oozed downhill like sludge, its surface cracking into ribbons of fire as it inched forward. Hissing steam billowed to the right; huge mushroom clouds of scalding vapor that I knew would fry my lungs if I got anywhere close.

My bike was gone. My street was gone. MY CLOTHES WERE GONE.

And there wasn't a soul in sight.

But other than my calf, I wasn't burned. I wasn't even scratched.

All those realizations set in within three seconds flat.

Maybe my mind cracked that day after all; maybe it was the part I couldn't see that shattered on landing.

But I know it didn't.

I still have scars on my right calf.

Yeah, I'm still pissed off. Yeah, I'm angry. I have a right to be. Because I was there and NO ONE HERE BELIEVES ME.

My name is Scott Bracken, and this is the truth.

Entry #3

I ran with no idea where I was running to or what I was running from. All I knew was that

chilling out with an active volcano was a fast track to death.

I had no clue my fight with death was just beginning.

I ran away from the lava, away from the steam. Over the black rock, which cooled with each step. My calf burned, but I didn't stop to look.

I'm not sure how long I ran. I ran until I slowed. A stitch in my side made me stop. I was sweating, the soles of my feet felt raw—I didn't want to look—and it had just hit me again that I had no clue where I was. I searched for signs, roads, houses—something to tell me where I was, somewhere to get help. On a repeating loop my brain kept screaming, *WHERE AM I* mixed with the alternative, *WAKE THE FUCK UP*.

I needed clothes and first aid for my leg, and the farther I walked, the more I needed water.

Soon water was all I could think about.

I followed the coast, heading what I thought was west, because sticking near the sea seemed sensible—not that I was an outdoors expert. My extracurricular activities included golf, a shitty stint as a wrestler, and playing Atari on the weekends. I rocked at Space Invaders.

I wondered if aliens had grabbed me.

The rocky black cliffs went on forever. I broke some large leaves off a low plant, knowing it could collect rain if clouds moved in, but in the meantime, I could collect my urine. I'd seen a documentary on a pilot who crashed in the Sahara and survived ten days alone by drinking his own urine. Granted, he filtered it through his clothes, a luxury I didn't have.

For the record, drinking your own piss sucks. It's warm and foul and yeah—it's URINE. But until I found water, I didn't have many options.

I stopped at the cliff's edge, at the farthest outcropping. Blue-green water crashed against the black rocks below. To my left was the volcano, steaming. To the right, I couldn't see; I'd only know what was there when the cliffs ended. Straight ahead was only water. Endless, glinting water.

And none of it I could drink.

There was a poem about that once, too. Or maybe it was a song. All I know is that it was cruel. And totally right on.

Twilight came, fast and furious and beautiful and frightening. The sea was still too far a drop; the cliffs were vertical black, like slabs of earth chopped straight down. As night fell, I was freezing, shaking with cold and pain. My feet were bloody and my calf burned; one blister had broken open. It was bloody too.

With the stars and moon overhead, I dug a shallow hole with a rock, more like a low hollow, and I lay in it with a few dead palm fronds as coverage. If I slept, I don't remember it.

I got up with the sun. My lips were cracked. Dry, probably sunburned. I sat up, wide-awake in the nightmare that raged in daylight. I tried to pee but lost the few drops I had left; my hands were shaking so badly I dropped the leaf.

I needed water.

Fresh water.

I forced myself up, and when a break in the cliffs

seemed manageable, I climbed down, looking for fresh water as I went. I worked my way around the cliff's base, which was less steep now, more like a black rock bulkhead. It took hours. I moved slowly, wishing there was shade; I'd stopped sweating, which was bad. I kept thinking these low rocks would hold fresh rainwater in the nooks that pitted the edges near the cliff base, but everything was salty. I should've stayed up high, but too late now. I remember thinking that I wasn't thinking clearly, and I remember hoping that when I turned the corner, I'd find docks and houses.

But when I turned the corner, all I saw was a stretch of beach—wide and black, sand not rock, buffered by palm trees, and not a soul in sight. Endless. I managed to make it to the tree line, where I collapsed in the shade of a palm tree and closed my eyes to rest.

Now this is where it gets weird.

Make that weirder.

I woke in that odd wide-awake state that I'd been in since I opened my eyes by the lava. I was still naked. But I wasn't alone. A strange, elongated shadow stretched across the sand.

Fresh fear coursed through me like adrenaline, bringing a rush of jumbled thoughts. I'm-naked-I-don't-want-anyone-to-see-me-but-oh-God-I-need-help-and-I'm-so-thirsty-and-maybe-they-can-tell-me-where-I-am-and-take-me-home-what-if-it's-an-alien-oh-please-God-help-me.

I turned slowly.

A giraffe stepped into the sunlight, working a

leafy green branch in its mouth, regarding me curiously. An honest-to-God GIRAFFE.

I began laughing hysterically, then started coughing. My tongue was swollen and dry. I coughed up blood and no longer laughed.

Maybe I'd inhaled some of the steam yesterday after all. Or maybe the blood was from my tongue.

The giraffe strolled away, bored.

Giraffe Land sucked.

I know what you're thinking. Get a coconut, dude. If there are palm trees, there must be coconuts, too, right? I tried. I shook a dozen trees, but the trees barely budged and the coconuts definitely didn't. None were on the ground, either.

Night fell again, fast. Twilight in Giraffe Land didn't hang around long. The black sand was warm, but the air was cold, and night number two in Giraffe Land was as bad as night number one.

I shook, like I had a fever. Maybe I did, because that night I drifted in and out of a weird sleepy-exhausted-shaky-thirsty state, and woke the same way. The sun came up, and I just lay there. So thirsty. My brain couldn't think, but it could imagine, and here's the one memory that I fully admit might be a delusion: I tilted my head toward the trees and a girl materialized from the brush. She had long dark hair falling around her shoulders, a white skirt and matching white tube top, and a thin halo of white flowers around the top of her head.

I think she was an angel. I'm still not sure she was real.

She was real.

She placed one finger over her lips, came forward, knelt, and placed an oyster shell to my lips. "Slow," she whispered. Brown eyes as warm as chocolate. "Drink."

I drank. Water. The cleanest water I'd ever tasted.

She lifted my hand to take the shell. "Go north," she said. "Find those like you. Find what you seek and Godspeed home."

She went to stand and I grabbed her wrist. "Wait! Who are you? Where am I?"

She shook her head and deftly slid her wrist from my grip. "The answers you seek do not lie with me." She pointed to the sand beside me. "Find what you need. The island helps those who help themselves. And stay away from the meadow."

I looked down, following her finger, and found a piece of dingy white cotton—a loincloth. Beside it rested a gourd. Heavy. Full of water.

When I looked up, she was gone.

I never saw her again.

My name is Scott Bracken, and this is the truth.

Needing a break, I closed the journal, feeling dirty even though Dad had told me to read it. Reading my uncle's journal was like prying into someone's mind—possibly a very fractured, damaged mind.

What Uncle Scott wrote couldn't possibly be real.

Could it?

I ran downstairs, journal in hand.

"Dad!" I shouted.

"In here," he called from his office. He faced the wall map of the South Pacific but turned the moment I entered. "Yes?"

"What is this?" I held up the journal, a private account of *something*. "Was Uncle Scott mentally ill? Is that why he was on that bridge?"

"How far did you get?" he asked. His voice was remarkably calm.

"I stopped after entry number three."

He nodded. "So you know that I was late, and that he might have never made it to that place—" He paused, visibly wrestling personal demons I'd never known he had.

"Giraffe Land," I added helpfully.

Dad tipped his head. "Giraffe Land, if it weren't for me. For my carelessness with time, my utter lack of awareness of it. It's a selfishness of another sort. And that's part of my drive, Skye. Because I'm partially responsible for what happened to him."

I thought about Scott's words. "The road less traveled."

"Indeed."

But Uncle Scott picked the route. I shook my head. "You can't blame yourself. He chose to bike rather than wait. He chose to take that particular street, and for all you know, the same thing would've happened if he'd driven. So to blame yourself for this"—I held up the journal again—"um, no."

"Perhaps I'm not fully to blame, but I shoulder a great deal of responsibility. Call it the butterfly effect, a ripple in time or fate. Our choices define and shape our lives, and our choices impact others. Because I was late—which was my choice, conscious or not—Scott was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

We were discussing the journal as if it were truth.

"So you're saying Uncle Scott wasn't crazy." I paused, trying to wrap my head around Giraffe Land and failing. "You're saying that his journal is fact, not fiction."

"Let me tell you what *isn't* in that journal." Dad sat on the edge of his desk and folded his hands in his lap. "A week after our sixteenth

birthday, Scott disappeared. The police never found a single lead except for his bike. Ten months later, Scott was found less than two hours away in Boston on someone's lawn, naked, scratched, and *tan*—mind you, it's March—with old, healed scars on his cheek and calf. He was taken into police custody and refused to talk until our parents arrived. He looked older, in ways I couldn't even begin to describe, and when he told us the story, I'd no doubt he'd survived something both wonderful and terrible. He'd survived Giraffe Land, as he called it."

He pointed at the journal in my hand. "I believe that what he wrote is the truth. Not a delusion, but a reality that he fought to understand after the fact. I looked in his eyes his first day back, Skye. It was all there. Not just the belief, but the depth of sorrow and growth and triumph and strength borne from his experience; it reached all the way to his soul. We were the same age, yet he was so much older. It was in his eyes." His voice softened. "And that's something your mom never had the chance to see."

He looked at me. "I'm the first to tell you I don't understand how he got there, and as a scientist, it's baffling. Maddening. Almost incomprehensible. But I firmly believe Giraffe Land exists. And"—his expression was as fierce and protective as I'd ever seen—"now you know why I've always driven you to be strong. To be resourceful. To be prepared in the event of any sort of catastrophe. So that if you—God forbid—find yourself on that island, you are as equipped to survive as you can be."

A long moment passed.

"The true name of the island is Nil," he said quietly. "And I think I know where to find it."