

CHAPTER THREE: CRUMPLED

I sped home, eyes alert to anything that moved. It was almost midnight and well past the newly established curfew. Except for the pulsing red light from the alarm my father recently installed, the house was dark. Its cavernous, black eyes watched me. Artos met me at the door, sniffing my shoes with vigor, the lingering scent of Augustus teasing his nose.

Even before I read my father's note that was scribbled on a pad in the kitchen—**Gone to work on a story ... be back soon**—I knew he wasn't there. His jacket and **Eyes on the Bay** press pass that usually hung on the door hook were gone. I was relieved. At least, I wouldn't have to lie to him again.

I poured myself a bowl of cereal and flopped down onto the sofa, exhausted. With a click of the remote, I had instant company: Barbara Blake.

“SFTV is reporting live from the scene of another grisly drive-by between warring street gangs, Oaktown Boys and Satan's Syndicate. Since early December, violent crime in the Bay Area has exploded, with a forty percent increase in homicides. Most are believed to be related to recreational use of Onyx. The death toll keeps climbing with three teenagers caught in the gangs' crossfire tonight. Mandatory military checkpoints and a 10 p.m. curfew have done little to quell the brutality.

The violence in San Francisco has spurred increased use of Emovere in other large cities like Los Angeles and New York, prompting government officials to consider requiring the use of EAM monitors. Responding to the public's growing panic, Chief of Police Caesar Gonzalez announced the arrest of two additional suspects linked to disgraced Drug Czar Augustus Porter. Gonzalez called these men “instrumental” in illegally obtaining and distributing Emovere and Eupho. Porter, missing since November, is believed to be responsible for burglarizing several Zenigenic storage facilities, using his public office to traffic EAMs, and introducing Onyx to the streets of Oakland. In other news, workers are finishing repairs on the Bay Bridge, set to reopen—”

Another click sent Barbara back into a dark and soundless oblivion. I headed for my room.

“C'mon, Artos.” He galloped ahead of me and onto the bed, where he circled his favorite spot and nested inside it. With my head overfull of secrets that needed spilling, I opened my journal.

January 14, 2043

It's been 75 days since Quin left for L.A., but who's counting? And 61 since I made a deal with the devil. I'm not sure which is worse.

Speak of that devil, I saw him again today. He's not himself—a good thing, right? But he's no good to me like this. Do psychopaths get depressed? Because that's what it seems like. Maybe he's just hoping I'll feel sorry for him, which I do . . . a little. I haven't even really pushed him about telling me what he knows—yet.

Suffered through another Elana/Edison-arranged date tonight. Epic failure. I try to stop thinking about Quin—I really do—but this not-thinking-about-him thing makes me think about him even more. Pathetic, I know, since I practically sent him away. The worst is the not knowing. What is he doing, thinking, feeling? I guess I gave up my right to know, but I never expected this—not one word from him.

Lifting pen from paper, I sighed. Quin's complete silence rubbed my heart raw. For the past month, he'd been ignoring Mr. Van Sant's calls.

I tucked my journal into the nightstand drawer alongside my mother's poetry book, unopened for weeks now. Feeling the pit in my stomach, I took it out and turned to the dog-eared page. Closing my eyes—**I couldn't look**—I snatched Quin's old notes, a fistful. I balled them in my hand, squeezing so tight my fingers hurt. Part of me wished for the magic to make them disappear. I imagined opening my hand and watching tiny, white doves take flight from my palm. Instead there was only a crumpled wad of paper.

CHAPTER FOUR: UNLIKELY HERO

I opened my eyes to terror. A man sat at the foot of my bed. He faced the wall, unmoving. His shoulders were broad, his posture rigid and nearly transfixed. **I know him.** I said his name aloud—*Augustus*—but he didn't answer. An awful sound slithered out of him—a hiss. His golden-brown skin began to pulse as his long, soft-bellied body stretched slowly to the floor. His unnatural curve slowly disappeared inch by inch from view. Then suddenly, like the strike of a whip, his tail writhed and he was gone. A silent scream rattled in my throat.

I woke to the electronic hiss of my cell phone vibrating against the nightstand. Still suspended in nightmare, my heart was beating fast. Artos was curled near my feet, nose buried in his tail, completely unaware. I reached for my phone with lightning speed, pulling my hand back to safety under the covers. My father had texted me.

2:34 a.m. Are you awake?

2:35 a.m. Turn on the news.

2:36 a.m. Call me.

A cold dread crept through me. Beneath the blanket, I shivered. It was 2:40 a.m. As I padded barefoot to the living room, I dialed my father's number.

"Lex." He sounded relieved. "I've been trying to reach you." I clicked on the television while I paced in front of the sofa. Artos watched me with curiosity from the bedroom door.

"What happened?" I stared at the screen with anticipation.

"Are you watching?" I couldn't answer, couldn't even move. *Quin*. The sight of his face knocked the wind from me. Through the camera's eye, he looked older, harder somehow. Stubble shadowed his jaw. His mouth was set—firm, fierce. His hair was mussed from the wind. Behind him, Zenigenic's headquarters towered like a beacon into the sky, so tall that the top of the building was hidden from view. An oversized metal **Z** was anchored into the concrete at its entrance, replacing the statue of Jackson Steele, Xander's father, which was vandalized in the riots after the McAllister verdict. Police officers traveled in packs around it, herding bystanders to the periphery. Barbara Blake, microphone at the ready, was watching it all unfold.

"Lex?"

“I’m here.”

ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON ZENIGENIC CEO THWARTED BY UNLIKELY HERO scrolled at the bottom of the screen. “Did Quin . . . ?” The words got lost on their way to my mouth. “Try to kill . . . Xander?” He wasn’t in handcuffs, but I still felt the heat from his words when I told him and Mr. Van Sant about my encounter with the tattooed man just before the verdict. “I knew it,” he’d said. His voice simmered, only part of its steam meant for me.

“Just the opposite,” my father answered, disbelieving. “He **saved** him.”

Barbara Blake turned toward Quin, jabbing at his face with the microphone.

“Mr. McAllister, can you tell us what happened tonight?”

Not taking my eyes from Quin, I sat down on the sofa. “Dad, I’ll call you back.”

CHAPTER FIVE: STRANGER THINGS

When my father opened the front door three hours later, I was stuck in that same spot. My eyes felt like sandpaper, sleep tugging at their lids. Still, I couldn't stop watching. SFTV replayed the interview again and again until I knew Quin's words as if I had spoken them myself.

"I was taking a walk to clear my head." Quin gestured over his shoulder to Zenigenic's headquarters, as he explained the incident to Barbara. "I noticed the lights were on in the lobby. I thought that was strange, since it was so late. Then, out of nowhere, there's this guy in a mask running up to the building. He had a gun. That's when I saw Mr. Steele coming down the stairs alone."

"Then what happened?" Barbara asked.

Quin shrugged. "I guess I did what anybody would do."

Wide-eyed, Barbara countered, "I'm not sure just anybody would tackle an armed gunman. Mr. Steele has called you a hero."

"I'm no hero. I was in the right place at the right time. That's all."

"You are a humble young man, Mr. McAllister." She seemed a lot more convinced by Quin's story than I was. But then, maybe not. "However. . . your father's attorney, Nicholas Van Sant, has been quite vocal about his belief that Zenigenic played a role in framing your father for murder."

"Is that a question, Ms. Blake?" Quin's eyes flashed to the camera, mischievous. In my imagination, they connected only with mine.

"Just an observation," Barbara answered. "It is ironic, to say the least—you rescuing Xander Steele."

"Stranger things have happened." Quin smiled a little.

Barbara turned her face away from him toward the camera. "They certainly have, Mr. McAllister. They certainly have. This is Barbara Blake, reporting live from San—"

The television went silent, muted by my father. "Dad!"

“Yes?” My father raised his eyebrows at my protest. “I’m guessing you’ve already memorized the entire broadcast.” He collapsed onto the sofa with a deep sigh. His eyes looked as tired as mine.

Ignoring his sarcasm, I asked, “Have you heard anything?” I stopped myself from adding, *about Quin*.

“They’ve released the name of the suspect. Peter Radley.”

“Radley,” I repeated, trying to place the name. On just a few hours’ sleep, thinking felt strenuous.

“Sound familiar?” My father handed me his computer tablet. “Press *play*,” he instructed. “I think you might’ve seen this before.” He was right. On the screen, George McAllister addressed a crowd of anti-EAM activists.

“I wish that I could say that my life was the only one impacted by the government’s greed, but I am not alone. Tonight, you will hear from Mr. Peter Radley, a Guardian Force survivor like my son, and—Emma, come on up here—Ms. Emma Markum.”

I hit *stop*, before the camera panned to Emma. I had heard those words before. “So he’s a former Guardian?”

My father nodded. “And a member of the New Resistance.”

“Who knows Quin.”

“It seems likely.”

“Is that it?” I asked, desperate for more.

“That’s all they’re telling us right now. What about you?” He looked toward my phone on the coffee table, its screen dark, lifeless.

A flame of anger—**how could he not call me?**—licked through my exhaustion. “If you’re asking if I’ve heard from Quin, the answer is no.”