

Girl Behind Glass

By Abby Wilder

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Chapter One

I sit with my face pressed to the glass. Below me, lush, green trees litter the rolling hills. Waterfalls cascade down sharp rocks, and streams of water cut through the landscape. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, wiping away the fog that spreads over the glass. Only just audible over the chatter of the other students, a monotone voiceover plays in the background.

“The Protected Area,” it says, “is the only part of our country, and one of the only parts of the planet, left to remind us of what was. Uninhabited by man for decades now, it extends as a border around Nuovo. Under the leadership of the Establishment, and the protection of the Guardians, it shows what we can accomplish when man is separated from earth . . .”

Ash’s voice distracts me from the monologue. “You better be careful,” she says. I look over at her holding onto the railing, knuckles white, eyes fixed firmly on the ceiling. “People are going to think you’re obsessed. They’ll assume you were a Mudder in a previous life or something.”

I smile a little and turn back to the window. Our gondola moves at one pace along the wire. Slow.

The ground is far below me, and for an instant I imagine myself falling.

What would it feel like to have the wind rushing across my skin and through my hair? How would it feel to have no control, to let myself free fall with no thought of the consequences?

My heart heaves a little at the thought. Only the picture of my body slamming against the ground brings my reverie to an end with a shudder.

In the distance, the panels of the dome glisten in the sun. It looks dark from here. Black. The framework sticks out like a spider web against the dark panels.

It won’t be long until we dock and a twinge of regret twists inside me. What I wouldn’t give to stay out a little longer. I could watch the sun set, see the stars, see what the earth looked like bathed in moonlight.

I look back at Ash who refuses to look out the window. She refuses to look anywhere but the roof. “Is this going to last much longer?” she groans.

Our home teacher, Miss Swan, drags her eyes away from the article she is reading. “Ten minutes,” she says dryly.

“Thank goodness for that.” Ash forgets herself and her gaze slips out the window and down to the ground below. She groans again and covers her eyes. “Tell me when we’re there.”

There is something about the outside that draws me, like a fragile thread that stretches from my chest. I can feel its fibre tug with every breath of the fresh air seeping in through the slits at the top of the glass. Back inside the dome it will weaken, but it will still be there, buried down deep, pulling me somewhere unknown. I know it’s wrong of me to feel this way, but I can’t help it. It’s like I was born with it already there.

“I can’t believe they make us do this every year,” Ash says. “It’s like torture or something. Don’t they realise that some of us consider it our worst nightmare to be dangling from a wire in a glass box?”

“And yet you seem to survive it,” I remind her.

“Only just.”

As we approach the dome, a panel opens and we glide through and into Nuovo. I fix my eyes on the last glimpses of green.

Louder now, the generic tone fills the small space as we dock. “Welcome back to Nuovo. We trust you enjoyed your experience with us and hope to see you back again soon.” It fluctuates, falling and rising without altering, the soundtrack to Nuovo.

“Not bloody likely,” Ash mutters as she squeezes through the door before it has fully opened. Miss Swan sends her a hard look, but I can tell from the pallor of her skin that she feels the same way.

The station bustles with activity. Miss Swan urges us to stay close, but we ignore her. It’s not as though we can get lost. People push past me, jostling to catch a tram into the centre of the city. A family rushes by, the children wide eyed, ready to catch their first glimpse of the outside.

Not that long ago it was me. My hand engulfed by my father’s, dragging me along for my first trip on the gondola. As I pressed my face to the glass, my mother cried. I was confused by how someone could cry in the face of such beauty. I thought perhaps they were tears of joy. But when my father drew her close and she cried into his shoulder, I knew they weren’t. My questions were brushed aside. They didn’t want to talk about it, but I never forgot. Later, I wondered if she had that same invisible thread that I had. Maybe the pressure of it tugging against her chest was just too much.

The buzzer sounds as soon as we take our seats in class, and we bolt from the room holding in our laughter.

“Meet you on the steps in ten,” Ash yells as she runs down the corridor towards her locker.

Bracken leans against the grey, concrete wall at the entrance to school, arms crossed over his chest and staring into the distance. I creep up

behind him and playfully shove him with my shoulder. He stumbles before regaining his balance.

"Last day of school," I say, taking a seat on the steps. "What could be better?"

He gives me a sideways scowl before sitting down. "There's still graduation tomorrow."

"Yours, not mine," I remind him.

Bracken rolls his eyes and throws his arm around my shoulder. It's heavy, but I don't shrink away. We are more like brother and sister than friends.

"You excited about tomorrow?" I ask.

Bracken ignores me. "You know what annoys me most about the last day of school?"

I groan and resist the temptation to roll my eyes. "What?"

"How utterly pointless it is. There are no lectures to attend, and nothing of any value gets added to our education, unless you can count that little loop on the gondola. I mean, how many times have we heard that speech?" Bracken clears his throat and copies the voiceover from the clip we watched this morning. "Ours is a world not based on greed. The Establishment is founded on Protection, Preservation and Sustenance. The city of Nuovo is proud to uphold these strong ideals as the pillars of our society." He snorts.

"We'd be better off staying at home," we say in unison, me imitating his deep voice.

"Am I that predictable?" he asks glumly.

"Yep." I grin. "Don't worry, I still love you though."

Bracken steals a glance my way. He searches out my eyes and I keep grinning, hoping that this awkwardness between us will pass as quickly as it came. He's doing it a lot lately. Staring at me, searching for something. Finally he looks away, not finding whatever he was looking for in my expression.

"Crap! I forgot my ciid," I say, and jump to my feet. "Walk with me?" Bracken nods and follows me back inside the school. "So?" I leave the question hanging and he looks at me, confused. "Tomorrow?" I prompt.

"Oh, yeah . . . that," he says.

"Oh yeah, that? That's all you have to say?" We reach my locker, and Bracken leans against the wall as I wave my wrist, tattooed with the lines of my ID, over the scanner. It beeps twice and the door pops open, allowing me to grab my communication device and strap it around my wrist.

"I don't know why you bother to take it off," Bracken says.

"Unlike some, I actually had classes today. Well, P.E. anyway, if you can count walking in circles as physical education. It annoys me when I

wear it. But getting back on subject, if I was you, I would barely be able to sleep. This time tomorrow you will be a Guardian Cadet.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, come on. I’m so jealous. There’s hardly a maybe about it. Your father would have made sure you made the cut.”

It’s true. I’m jealous. Insanely jealous. Becoming a Guardian is the only hope I have of ever getting outside, but the chances of me being selected are slim. No, less than slim. They are minuscule. Infinitesimal. Lilliputian.

Bracken’s shoulders slump. “Yeah, I know.”

“Cheer up. I would kill to be in your position.” I try to say it without jealousy working its way into my tone, but I don’t succeed.

“Only because you’re slightly crazy.”

“Nothing crazy about wanting to become a Guardian,” I quip, as I slam my locker door and head down the corridor.

Bracken follows a step behind. “About tomorrow—”

I hear footsteps running behind me and someone leaps on my back. “You ready?” Ash shouts in my ear, her twinge of green obviously gone. I twist to the side and she slides off. “I said, are you ready?” She jumps up and down, clapping her hands and doing some strange dance movement. Bracken and I laugh as we watch her jig in the middle of the corridor.

“I’m ready, though clearly not at the same excitement level as you, by the look of it,” I say, as her dancing settles to on the spot bouncing. She is petite. The top of her head barely reaches my shoulder. Her short, dark hair sticks out haphazardly from her head, and her brown eyes sparkle mischievously.

“I can’t wait,” Ash gushes. “I’ve got the perfect outfit picked out. It’s gold. Perfect, shiny gold. And I’ve got the perfect wig to match it. Shoulder length,” she says, indicating with her hands. “Straight. I mean perfectly straight. Dead straight. Not a kink in it.”

“Sounds perfect,” I say with a playful smirk.

“Damn!” Bracken says.

“What?”

“The damn dance.”

I look at him warily. “You promised,” I say. Usually the dance is for graduating students only, but because of the Fifteen Year Celebrations the next day, the Education Sector decided to include all the senior classes.

Bracken looks sheepish. “It’s just my parents are putting on this little get together, and I wanted you to come. It doesn’t mean we will miss out, but it does mean we might be a little late.”

I stop walking and lift my eyebrows. I haven't been invited over to the Rush residence in years, not since our mothers had a disagreement and stopped talking.

"Don't look at me that way." He tilts his head to the side. "I asked if I could invite you."

"And they agreed?" I ask sceptically.

"I told them I wouldn't be there unless I could bring you."

"Great. So I'm to be the unwanted guest at your parent's shindig?"

"Shindig?" Ash pipes up. "What on earth is a shindig? And Bracken, do you seriously want Wills to miss out on the most important party of the year in favour of an appointment with your parents?" She shakes her head. "And you call yourself a teenager."

"Not miss it," he corrects, and shoots Ash a sharp look. "Just a little late. Maybe. The dance doesn't even start until eight, right? That gives us enough time to call in, say hello, and still make it. Besides, Falcon and Skylark have to make an appearance later anyway."

"Well, I'm not waiting for you two," Ash says.

I give her a dirty look. "Like Bracs said, we won't be long."

Ash sighs and shrugs her shoulders. "Fine then, I'll meet you at my place after you've done the parent thingy. You still want to borrow a dress, Wills?" I nod. "Good. Because your taste in clothing is pretty crap." I glare at her as she tries to contain herself from cracking into laughter. "I mean seriously, Wills. There is no way you'll get a guy to look at you the way you dress."

Bracken looks away and pretends to be interested in something else, like he always does when Ash brings up the subject of boys. I guess he's not comfortable when we talk about things like that, even if we are his best friends.

"Well maybe that's because I've got my eye on different things," I shoot back at her.

She groans. "Oh please, don't tell me you are still on about that? Seriously Wills, it would take a miracle for you to get admitted to the Guardians and you know it. Besides, I don't know why you want to go roll about in the mud like some animal. That sort of behaviour belongs in the history books."

"They don't roll about in the mud. They—"

"I know what the stupid Guards do, Wills. And I don't care."

"Guardians." I correct her terminology.

I can't describe this feeling, the desire to go outside. It's a type of yearning, a longing for something lost, even though I never remember it being part of me. I want to experience the outside, see and touch nature, experience the world. Becoming a Guardian is the only way to accomplish that while still vowing to protect it.

“Fine. Guardians. Whatever.” Ash is distracted by one of the new girls waiting in the hallway. The poor girl looks anxiously up and down the corridor, hands fanning her face. All the new kids do this. The warm temperature takes some adjusting to when you are from the outside. Her school uniform is worn in patches and doesn’t fit her properly. Greasy, dark hair parts in the middle of her head and falls limply down each side of her tanned face. The new ones are always easy to pick.

Ash stops in front of her and blinks innocently. “Are you alright?” she mouths. The girl looks confused and shakes her head, so Ash mouths the words again more slowly, but still with no sound.

“I’m sorry,” the girl stutters. “I can’t hear you.” Her green eyes move my way, and I see fear and confusion. I know what Ash is doing, but I don’t interfere. There’s no point. I would only end up making it worse. Ash likes to torment the newbies. I think it makes her feel a little better about her own reputation.

“Ash, come on,” Bracken says, taking pity on the girl.

Ash takes the girl’s head between her hands and tilts it from side to side. She slips a strip of material out of her pocket and wipes the girl’s ear, repeating the same on the other side. “There we go,” she says normally. “That’s better.” The girl nods, eyes wide. A hesitant smile plays at her lips. “Must have been all the mud. It had caked dry inside your ears.” Ash prances away laughing, and the girl’s eyes fill with tears as she covers her face and runs off.

“That was mean,” Bracken says to me.

I nod. Ash is unnecessarily cruel at times. Mudders are what we call anyone who comes from the outside. Fifteen years ago the city was enclosed in its own bubble, cut off from the outside. There were those who disagreed with this, but life outside Nuovo is harsh and cruel, and many came begging to be let inside the city. These people are second rate citizens in the eyes of the Establishment, and are assigned to work the conveyor belts at the recycling plant for a minimum of two years before they can apply for a transfer. The kids are just thrown into school with the rest of us.

“There was no need for that,” I say to Ash, once we catch up with her.

“But it’s such fun! She really thought I was being nice. But seriously,” she continues, the girl already dismissed from her mind. “Don’t you think it’s time you faced reality? Maybe consider another career option, just in case?”

“But seriously,” I say, mimicking her tone. “Do you think you could stop saying, but seriously? It’s seriously annoying.”

“Fine. Whatever.”

“Whatever, too. It’s just as annoying.”

“Fine. Is it okay if I say fine?”

“I suppose.”

She groans. “Now I’ve forgotten what we were even talking about.”

“Before harassing the new girl to tears, you were telling Wills how badly she dresses,” Bracken reminds her, and I give him a foul look.

“Oh, that’s right.” Ash grins at me and turns back to Bracken. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure she looks good enough not to embarrass you.”

“Wills could never—”

Bracken starts, but Ash, caught in her own world, is off again. “Getting back to my original question, you guys will come over to my place before the party, won’t you? You can get into your dress, and we can all arrive together. Don’t make me walk in there alone.”

“Haven’t you got a hot date?” Bracken teases.

“Hot date,” Ash scoffs. “He’s okay, I guess. He’s got his uses anyway.” She grins. “I’ve told him I’ll just meet him at the gates.”

“Yes. We will meet you at your place,” I assure her. “Happy now?”

“Very.” She wraps her arms around me and squeezes tightly. “Hey, if you get the chance,” she whispers, and pulls me away from Bracken. “Do you think you could bend Lady Rush’s ear to find out what next season’s styles are? I would love to get a head start on ordering some outfits, and if I knew the trends—”

“Absolutely not,” I say firmly. Bracken’s mother is one of the leading fashion designers. Her choices can determine the latest trends. The fact that she is married to the Governor, makes her one of the most well-known faces in the city. In short, she is Ash’s idol. She has both fashion and fame.

“Why not?” She pouts. “You know I’d do it for you.”

“What’s she trying to rope you into?” Bracken appears at my shoulder, and Ash releases her grip on me.

“She wants me to press your mother for the latest in fashion news.”

“She won’t give anything away. She’s all business with stuff like that. You would think it a matter of city security or something.” As soon as the words are out of his mouth, his eyes dart to Ash. “Sorry, Ash. I didn’t think . . .” Bracken’s voice dissolves to nothing.

“It’s all good.” Ash plasters a smile on her face, not a very convincing one. “Guess I’ll just have to wait like everyone else. Catch you tomorrow!” She waves and runs off.

“Idiot.” Bracken shakes his head.

“She’ll be fine.” I rest my hand on his shoulder. He looks up at me and smiles gently before covering my hand with his.

“She’s lucky to have a friend like you, Wills.”

I smile back and try to tug my hand free, but he doesn’t let go. He stares deeply into my eyes and I look everywhere but at him. After a

moment I jerk my hand free, avoiding his gaze. How long is he going to keep this up?

“She has you, too,” I say, and walk towards the door.

Ash's father was found supplying illegal fruit, dried and stored in an obscure part of the underground pipeline where he worked. Rumour has it that Ash's mother turned him in after he caught her having an affair with an Establishment Official. Ash never talks about it. They captured a whole gang of people working together to supply the illegal produce. Even a Mudder from outside was captured by the Guardians. Images of him flashed across every device in the city. He looked feral. Long, stringy, grey hair covered his head as well as his face, which was marred with deep wrinkles. His eyes darted back and forth, pointlessly looking for escape as he struggled against the Guardians that flanked him. They pulled him by his armpits, his feet dragged along the ground behind him. Ash's father was taken away in a similar fashion, and she hasn't seen him since. Ash was close to her father, and being friends with the Governor's son helped calm the gossip. People were less likely to huddle in corners and discuss her if Bracken was by her side. Still, it didn't stop her making fun of people in worse off situations.

“So you'll come tomorrow night?” Bracken asks.

“Of course I will. It's not every day that one of my best friends becomes a Guardian.” I knock shoulders with him.

“Maybe.” He smiles sadly.

“Don't be so negative. Of course you'll make it. And then you and I will be able to explore the outside world together. Well, once I've passed the training, that is.”

“You didn't see me complete the physical testing.” Bracken groans, then smiles a little. “I'm not as good as the virtual me.”

When we were younger we spent hours playing games on the massive image mirror in his room. Our favourite was entitled, Dirty Mudders. His father had it commissioned and gave it to him on his sixth birthday. It replicates scenarios and training missions for the Guardians. It's corny and the graphics basic, but we loved it and wasted hours playing it.

Bracken crooks his arm and offers it to me. “Feel like going to the Depot for a bit?”

We catch the tram, swiping our ID tattoos over the scanner in front of the illusion driver which takes us through the centre of the city. On every billboard the Governor's face smiles at us, the Fifteen Year Celebration logo plastered in the background. It's basically a roadmap of Nuovo with a big fifteen over it. Creativity at its highest.

My ciid flashes and the voiceover starts. “Nuovo. The City of New Beginnings. Protection. Preservation. Sustenance. These are the words that define us,” the soothing voice sounds in my ears. I switch my ciid

off 'networking mode', and the voice disappears. Bracken keeps his eyes glued to the floor.

"Do you hate it?" I ask.

"What?" he asks, without looking up. I point out the window at all the shameless promotion of his father plastered on billboards and buildings alike. Bracken looks up and groans. "I can't wait until the stupid celebrations are over. At least then I won't have to see his face every time I look up. Every second time maybe, but not every time."

We pull up outside the Depot. It's a huge building, the tallest in the city. Situated at the centre of Nuovo, its top level nearly brushes the roof of the dome. Bracken's eyes scan the building and come to rest on the curved, golden top, shaped as a replica of Nuovo. No doubt, he is picturing his father seated at the desk directly below it. His expression darkens as the image stretched across the midsection of the building fades, and Governor Falcon's face is projected instead. The Governor's lips move, the words echo through my mind even though I can't hear them. Displayed next is one of Governor Falcon and his wife smiling at each other. The final one in the series is of the whole family. Bracken's smile is stretched across his face awkwardly, as he poses with his arm slung over his father's shoulder.

"Oh please, make it stop." Bracken covers his face with his hands.

"But it's so sweet," I gush.

Bracken just shakes his head and keeps his eyes down.

We exit the tram, walk up the steps, and enter through the sliding doors. Our ciids beep as we cross the entrance, the 'networking mode' automatically turning on.

"Welcome to the Depot where you will find your every need met," the voice of Nuovo sounds in our ears. "All our products are endorsed by the Establishment and available for your pleasure and entertainment. May I assist you with anything in particular? If so, please state the name of the product into your ciid. I will endeavour to help you obtain the product indicated. If you wish to just browse then please—" I look down at my ciid and swipe the cancel button. "If you should wish to reactivate your personal shopper, please press the activate button on your ciid," the voice says. "Good day."

Below the one way glass floor of the Depot, people assigned to the conveyor belt sit sorting through the lines of rubbish.

"Let's go up a level," I say to Bracken, and tug at his arm. He sees the direction of my gaze and moves without a word to the elevator. The entrance of the Depot spans the first six levels. Bright red, digital banners hang down the walls, fluttering in a non-existent breeze, the fifteen year logo boldly depicted in the middle. In the elevator we can't escape the

voice of Nuovo. It fills the empty space, urging us to try this product, luring us with a free trial of another.

On the first level I find myself gazing at the dresses in the windows, wishing for a moment, that my family had enough credit to buy a dress of my own for the dance. I gaze wishfully at the silver one and my ciid beeps, displaying text that informs me they have it in my size. And then it tells me I don't have enough credit.

"I could get it for you, if you like," Bracken says, his reflection stepping closer to mine in the window. I glance at my ciid, wondering if he read the text, but even as I do, I know it's not possible. The images wavering in the air are only visible to the user.

I shake my head. "It's all good. I'll just borrow one of Ash's. I don't mind. Truly," I say, when he looks at me sceptically. "Besides, when would I ever wear something like it again?"

After seeing the dress, my enthusiasm for window shopping dwindles.

"Feel like a hot chocolate?" Bracken asks.

I grin back at him. Bracken always buys me a hot chocolate when I'm feeling down. It's not something everyone in Nuovo can afford, and if it wasn't for Bracken, I don't think I would have ever had the pleasure of tasting one. We walk to the barren kiosk and Bracken keys in our order. Both of us swipe our ID tattoos for the automated dispenser to scan. As usual, the monotone voice declares that Willow Stanton, of accommodation block E, does not have enough credit to process this order. Bracken hurriedly keys in the request to process it against his account, trying to cut off the voice.

"Thanks," I say, as soon as the hot chocolate is in my hand. I take a sip, and the warm liquid slips down my throat and into the pit of my belly. Tendrils of sweetness creep through my veins.

Afterwards, we climb back on board the tram and head towards my accommodation block. Apartment buildings loom high into the air, almost scraping the side of the dome. The buildings are indistinguishable apart from the block numbers jutting out from each level.

"Accommodation Block E," the digital voice of the illusion driver says. It waves as we depart, looking but not seeing.

Bracken jumps back onto the tram only once the elevator outside my apartment building rises to the 23rd level. I scan my wrist and the door opens. Light panels brighten the empty apartment. It will be a few more hours before Dune and Bear get home. I flick on the television and flop down on the couch. My stomach grumbles, but it's two more hours before I'm due for my next pill. I'll just have to wait. The pills may not stop the empty feeling inside me, but at least they quieten the grumbling.

The hunger pangs are becoming more intense. The sooner they perfect the serum the better.

My ciid starts beeping. The control panel activates and an illusion of my mother materialises in the air. “Hey Dune,” I say, after pressing accept.

“Hey yourself,” she says, smiling. “I’m going to be a little late home tonight.”

“Ah huh.” Nothing different there. She always works late at the laundry plant. Lately, I have barely seen either of my parents, and when they are home, they are always distant and distracted.

“I’m sorry, it’s just an extra few hours of work came up, and we could use the extra credit.”

“It’s okay, Dune. I get it.” I sweep my finger through the illusion of her image, distorting her perfectly straight, blonde hair. Even though the image stops just below her shoulders, her hair actually travels down past her waist. My mother is very proud of her hair and I must admit it’s beautiful. Golden blonde, while mine is red like my father’s. Well, not exactly like Bear’s, darker than his, auburn. Thankfully I received my mother’s olive complexion rather than Bear’s ruddy skin tone. Though I did get his eyes, hazel, rather than the piercing blue of Dune’s.

I tune back into what Dune is saying, something about work. A hand taps her on the shoulder but I can’t see who it belongs to. She turns and whispers something to whoever is behind her. “Look I’ve got to go, but I’ll see you later,” she says, after a moment of head nodding and whispering to the other person.

“Okay.” My finger wavers over the end button.

“Don’t forget your pill.”

“How could I forget?”

Dune laughs a shrill laugh that sounds foreign on her lips, and then she is gone, her image dissipating into thin air.

When six o’clock rolls around, my stomach is rumbling so loudly that I’m pleased no one is around to hear it. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to live on the outside, just to see what it feels like. I imagine it would be nice, not having this emptiness inside me, this constant feeling of something missing, but I shove the thought away.

Waving my wrist over the pipeline opening, the control panel appears, and out of the shoot slides a pill. Light grey one side, white the other. Officially they are called Rhinehart Nutrition Pills, or RNP’s, but most people just call them rhineharts. I roll it across my palm, throw it into my mouth, and swallow. Almost immediately I feel the effect on my stomach. The hunger not sated, but dulled. I grab a bowl out of the cupboard beside the television and place it on the tray in front of the pipeline. I press the ‘sustain’ option, and little white balls flow out the pipe and

clatter into my bowl. Next, a stream of water fills the bowl, covering them. I remove the bowl, set it aside, and replace it with a glass. Once again, water flows out and fills my glass to halfway. Since water became the highest sought after commodity, there is a set daily allowance. This is the last of mine.

I savour the liquid, drinking it sip by sip, and watch as most of the little, white balls slowly turn translucent in the water. Once a thick, cloudy substance forms around the sustain, I flop back down on the couch, bowl in hand, and lift the spoon to my lips. The thick gloop sticks to the roof of my mouth. It's only once it's all consumed that my stomach stops grumbling. I look at the bowl, wishing for more, not because I am hungry, but because the ache within me remains.

Out the window the light panels of the dome ceiling have darkened and the front door beeps. Dune walks in with a small bag slung over her shoulder. I turn my attention back to the screen.

“Good day?” she asks.

“Huh?” I pretend to be enthralled in a documentary about the lack of nutrients in the soil before muting the television. “What’s in the bag?”

“This?” She waves it in the air. “Why it's just a little something I picked up on the way home.”

My curiosity piqued, I get up and walk over to inspect the bag. “What?”

Dune runs her finger down the seam, and it splits open to reveal a bunch of purple grapes. I hold my breath and stare at the plump fruit.

“Surprise!” Dune says, grinning from ear to ear. “I thought we could do with a little treat.” She rips the bag off, and the grapes are left alone and tempting in her fingers. She plucks one and offers it to me. “Well, go on then.”

I take the grape and pop it into my mouth. The rush of flavour that pours onto my tongue as I bite into the firm flesh is intense. I close my eyes and savour the sensation buzzing around my mouth. “But how did you afford them?”

“That’s nothing for you to worry about.” Dune pops one into her mouth and then hands the rest of the bunch to me. “They are for you.”

“But what about Bear?”

“Your father would want you to have them.”

“You sure?” I say, eyeing up the rest of the fruit. Pools of saliva have already gathered in anticipation of my next mouthful.

The elevator signals its arrival, and Dune walks towards the door. “Are you expecting anyone?”

I shake my head, not taking my eyes off the grapes, and head back over to the couch. I need to be sitting down to enjoy them fully.

“Evening.” A messenger smiles politely at my mother. “This was sent over from the Rush residence, Accommodation Block A, for a Willow Stanton of Accommodation Block E.”

I jump up from the couch, the grapes forgotten as the messenger hands over a large white bag. I wave my wrist over his to accept the package and close the door.

“What is it?” Dune asks, peering over my shoulder.

“No idea.” I inspect the bag. There’s a small note attached, a digital message. I wave my wrist over it and an image of Bracken’s mother appears.

“Hello Willow.” She smiles sweetly. “My darling son has informed me that you will be joining us tomorrow evening.”

Dune raises her eyebrows, but I wave aside her unasked question.

“What he failed to explain to you, is that there is a vintage dress theme. I know outfits like that don’t just lie around in people’s closets, so I took it upon myself to provide one for you. I hope you don’t think this gesture too presumptuous, as I don’t know your personal style or tastes, but if the dress does not suit, please feel free to return it and order another of your choosing. Simply contact me, and I will have it arranged. It has been a long time since you were in our house, dear, and I look forward to the pleasure again.” The image wavers and then vanishes.

I look over and see Dune, arms crossed and frowning. “Condescending wench,” she says.

“Mother!” I exclaim, surprised by her vehemence. “She is just trying to be nice.”

“You mean by implying we can’t even dress you appropriately?”

“I don’t think that was her intention. I think she was just genuinely trying to help.”

Dune opens her mouth to say more, but decides against it and closes it firmly, shaking her head. She walks over to my discarded bunch of grapes and pops one into her mouth. “So, what’s this all about, anyway?”

I look longingly at the package. Even the material of the bag is soft under my fingers. “What?” I say absently, before mentally absorbing her question. I explain Bracken’s invitation and then turn my attention back to the dress.

“But you and Bracken are still just friends?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, Dune. Bracken and I are nothing but friends, and always will be, as far as I’m concerned.”

“And Bracken? How does Bracken feel?”

“Will you drop it, please? I’m not interested in him. We are friends, nothing more.”

“Well, I guess if you two are just friends, then it’s alright. I just don’t want you getting involved with—” I glare at her, and she holds up her

hands in surrender. “Subject dropped,” she assures me. “Well, open it up and let’s look at it.”

I run my finger along the bag and the seam opens to reveal shimmering silver. I stroke it longingly. It’s not the dress in the shop window, but I think it may be even more beautiful. The material is soft. There’s nothing synthetic about this fabric.

“Are you going to try it on?” Dune says, after a few minutes pass of me staring speechless at the dress in my arms.

I turn, run into my bedroom, rip off my clothes, and slip the dress over my head. It fits perfectly. The bodice is a different material than the skirt, almost like lace. Intricate embroidery covered in silver jewels that sparkle when they catch the light, cover it. The back is scooped low, then flows out to form the skirt. I have never seen anything so beautiful. I twirl in front of the mirror, happy with the reflection staring back at me. The silver compliments my auburn hair and brings out the flecks of green in my eyes. If I could only get rid of the few freckles sprinkled across my nose and cheeks.

Ash would love this dress, even if there is too much material for it to appeal to her personal choice. Only my arms and back are bare. I press the ‘still image’ option on my ciid and send a picture through to Ash. Immediately my ciid starts beeping.

“Oh my goodness! Bracken is not going to be able to keep his hands off you!” Ash’s squeals fill the room.

I ignore the Bracken jibe and twirl so the skirt balloons out around me.

“It’s so beautiful, Wills. I’m jealous. Never thought I’d say that, but really, I am.”

“Thanks . . . I think,” I say, trying different poses in front of the mirror.

“But you’ve still got to come to my place before the party so I can do your makeup and hair.”

“Of course I will. Nothing too outrageous though, it’s a vintage replica,” I say with a hint of pride. Fashion has never been my strong point, and it’s nice to have Ash exclaiming over my outfit for a change. Usually she just frowns. “Hey, I better go. Dune’s waiting in the other room for me to show her.”

A beep from the door wakes me from a sleep laden with dreams of twirling skirts and pulsating multi-coloured lights. I get out of bed, wrap a gown around me, and slip out of my bedroom. I skip down the stairs and lean against the wall, arms crossed, and watch Bear as he hangs his jacket. He runs his hands through his red hair clipped close to his head and then over his face. He looks tired.

“Hi,” I whisper.

Bear jumps, clutching his hand to his chest. “Wills! You scared me,” he says in a loud whisper.

“Sorry, Da.” I tiptoe over and place a kiss on his cheek. “How was your day?” I sit down and hang one leg over the arm of the couch.

“You don’t want to hear about it.” He joins me on the couch and slings his arm over my shoulder.

“What about you, kid? Anything exciting happen today?” His green eyes twinkle happily, as if he already knows the answer, and my mind instantly flies to the dress, but he wouldn’t know about that. Then, the bunch of grapes comes back to me, sitting discarded on my bedside table. I had forgotten about them with the excitement of my dress.

“You knew didn’t you?”

“I might have.” His smile betrays him. “So? Did you like them?”

“Loved them!” I hug him. “They must have cost a lot.”

“Don’t you worry about things like that, you’ve got a special day coming up tomorrow with the dance and all. You only get to do things like this once, Wills. We need to celebrate the things we can.”

“Twice, Da. Twice.” He looks at me questioningly, and I sigh and shake my head. “Next year? You know I’m not graduating till next year, Da.”

He smiles slowly. “Yes, I know. But still, a dance like this is special. I want you to make the most of it, have some fun, enjoy the time with your friends.”

Bear can lean towards the emotional side but he’s not normally this soppy. I look at him quizzically, but he just smiles. “Okay, Da.” I kiss him on the cheek. “Goodnight.”

As I lay in bed, peeling the skin off each of my grapes and sucking on them in turn, I hear Dune and Bear’s mumbled voices. I press my ear close to the wall, but I can only make out the occasional word. Something about forgiveness, the celebration, and trains.

A yawn overcomes me and my stomach grumbles. I roll over and am soon asleep, lulled by the dull murmurs of my parents talking in the next room.

Chapter Two

Governor Falcon is the only person I've ever met with grey hair. He wears it proudly, like a metallic halo crowning his head. Standing in front of the entire school, he announces each of the graduates and their assigned profession. His voice is trapped, muted by some invisible bubble at the base of his throat. "Bracken Rush," the Governor announces, a wide smile stretched over his tight, wrinkle-free skin.

I wave at Bracken as he rises from his seat and walks towards the front of the stage. Dressed in his black robes, a tradition kept from years ago, he looks every bit the distinguished son of the Governor. They billow out behind his lanky frame as he makes his way to the centre of the stage. His expression is solemn under the mop of brown hair that hangs low over his eyes. The applause from the crowd dies down, and we wait for the announcement of his profession.

"Bracken Rush," Governor Falcon says gravely. He pauses and scans the crowd until every snatch of chatter is silenced. "Based on the tests administered, and taking into consideration your profession request, the Establishment Officials of the Education and Industry Sectors have deemed that you are to become a cadet of the Guardians of the Earth!" He claps Bracken on the shoulder, and the crowd breaks into thunderous applause.

Bracken's brown eyes harden, but the Governor's smile doesn't waver as he turns and waves to the crowd. As the applause grows, Bracken's brows furrow until they hunch heavily over his eyes. I always thought Bracken's objections to becoming a Guardian were founded in the belief he wasn't good enough, he wasn't fit enough, or brave enough. But watching him now, staring at his father with ice in his eyes, there has to be more to it.

When Bracken finally tears his gaze away from his father and looks out to the crowd, I feel like a piece of him has broken off and died. Before, his eyes always radiated warmth, but now they are a perfect reflection of his father's. Cold and determined.

I look across to where Ash sits with her mother. Already looking in my direction, she shrugs her shoulders and shakes her head. She sees it too.

Only when Bracken sees me elbowing my way to him through the crowd of people, does he smile. Becoming a Guardian is considered one of the highest successes a graduate can achieve, and people are keen to slap him on the back and offer their best wishes.

“Congratulations?” I offer quietly, a nervous smile playing at my lips. I place a chaste kiss on his cheek. He looks at me. It’s a look that leaves me nervous and staring at the ground, the same intense look he gave me yesterday. The heat rises to my cheeks as we stand unspeaking in the crowded hall. I twist my foot on the tiles and cast quick glances up at Bracken, who has his gaze still fixed on me. Finally I clear my throat. “So all that protesting about the Guardians was real, huh?”

“I never wanted to join.” His voice doesn’t portray any emotion, it’s cold and calm.

I look back up at him, but his attention turns to Ash running through the crowd, cursing at people who happen to get in her way. She leaps into his arms and plants a sloppy kiss on his cheek, covering the spot I had placed mine seconds ago. He twirls her around and laughs, the tension broken, before placing her back down.

“I told you you’d make it.” She punches him in the arm.

I roll my eyes. Ash never said anything of the sort. In fact she has been insistent that neither of us would make it, ever since the subject was first mentioned.

“So you’ll be moving soon?” I ask. All graduates move into the single accommodation assigned to their profession.

“Not until after the holidays. Only two more weeks of freedom.” His shoulders slump momentarily before he pushes them back again. “You see Sorrell got assigned to the Nutrition Department? He’s gutted he didn’t make the force.”

“And so he should be,” a deep voice interrupts us.

Bracken’s face falls before he turns to see the person behind him. The voice is so distinctive, I doubt you could ever mistake it. “Governor,” Bracken says, and nods to his father.

I follow suit, doing something in between a simple nod and a curtsy. Being around Governor Falcon has always brought with it a certain nervous fear. It’s the way he looks at me, his gaze never wavering, yet still taking in everything that goes on around him. His eyes are lighter than Bracken’s, almost golden.

“Mighty proud of this young man, I am.” He places his hand on Bracken’s shoulder and squeezes. “Mighty proud. This has put a lot of good things in motion.”

Ash and I both smile and nod, our mouths silent in the presence of this imposing man. He towers over his son, both in height and width. Bracken looks more like his mother than his father. Tall and lanky, with mousey brown hair and a full bottom lip that sags, giving his appearance a look of bittersweet sadness. But he has the mind of his father, sharp and inquisitive.

“So Willow, you will be coming over to our place for a little private celebration later on, I take it?”

“Only if that is okay with you, Sir . . . I mean Governor,” I stammer.

“Call me Falcon. We’ve got a few very special things in mind for this evening. I hope you come prepared!” He laughs heartily.

Beside me, Bracken sighs loudly and Falcon sends a quick look of annoyance his way.

“I’m looking forward to it, Governor. I mean Falcon, Sir.” Again the heat rises up my cheeks.

He laughs. “Yes indeed, my dear, as am I.” He rests his hand on my shoulder for just a moment before excusing himself.

“Nice to see you again too, Governor,” Ash says, as soon as he is out of ear shot. She curtsies dramatically, her head almost scraping the floor. “Sheesh, one bad seed for a father and I’m invisible. Sorry Bracken, I know he’s your father and all, but what a jerk! Like hello? I was right here the whole time.” She crosses her arms and stands with one hip jutted out to the side.

Bracken shrugs. “Say what you like. I’m not my father.”

My parents didn’t make it to the graduation ceremony, both of them too busy at work, so Bracken walks me to the tram station. I look over at him, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his black pants, shoulders stooped. Occasionally he looks my way and our eyes meet, and I look away quickly.

Finally, after a whole block of silence, I talk. “You’re really not happy about it, are you?”

Bracken takes a deep breath and opens his mouth, only to shut it again.

“What?” I ask.

“I failed the test for the forces.”

I look at him, puzzled. He can’t have failed the test. He was just accepted into the Guardians. If he had failed, he wouldn’t have been accepted. “What do you mean? You can’t have.”

He stops walking, looks around, and pushes his hands further into his pockets before answering. “I failed, but I still got in. Falcon must have done something to sway them, or even changed my test results.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re being way too hard on yourself. You’re a heck of a lot better than you give yourself credit for. Maybe you did better than you think you did.”

“No. Wills, you’re not listening. I don’t *think* I failed the test. I *know* I failed.” He pauses, and I can see the worry in his eyes. “I made sure I failed.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I told you.” He pauses. “I *never* wanted to apply. That’s something else Daddy dearest did for me. I’m not him, no matter how much he wants me to be.”

“Why don’t you just refuse? Tell the Governor—I mean Falcon—you want to do something else?”

“I’ve tried telling him, but all he ever does is slap me on the back and tells me what a terrific Guardian I’ll make. He thinks I’m just nervous. He even went as far as to say he was, when he got accepted.”

Everyone knows that the Governor was once a Guardian. It’s a common starting point for anyone wishing to move up in the ranks of the Establishment, it shows you are willing to follow the rules. Of course, he was a Guardian before Nuovo was sealed off. After that, he became the Governor.

The tram comes into view and slows to a stop on the tracks. The doors open, and the illusion driver waves blindly at the people entering. I place one foot on the first step. “I’m sorry, Bracs. Really, I am.”

I feel foolish for all the time I spent gushing over joining the Guardians while with him. Why did I never stop to notice he wasn’t doing the same?

“I’ll come get you later, okay?” he says, peering up at me through the hair brushing his lashes.

“Later.” I scramble up the rest of the steps as the tram starts to pull away.

Bracken salutes, turns with shoulders slumped, and walks back to the school hall.

I adjust the temperature of the steam until it feels like needles all over my body. It swirls around me and I breathe deeply, enjoying the warm, muggy sensation. All too soon, I hear the familiar clunk. The steam stops, and jets of hot air blow over my body, removing the sheen of water.

The mirror is fogged, so I wipe it clear with my hand before strapping my ciid back onto my wrist. The reflection that stares back is pale, the sprinkle of freckles across my nose and cheeks standing out more than usual. My mouth is a little too wide, and my nose a little too big, but my eyes are my saving grace. Soft hazel, speckled with flecks of green and gold. Ask people what colour they are, and for every person you will find a different answer. Some say brown, some hazel, some say green, and I’ve even had some think they are yellow. Only Bracken has ever looked into them deeply and called them indescribable. A small shudder passes through me, and I wipe at the mirror as if to erase my reflection.

Bracken has feelings for me. I know this, even if I don’t want to admit it. Lately his looks have been filled with such tenderness and longing, his embrace lasts a little too long, and his touch lingers to the point of

awkwardness. The problem is, I've only ever regarded Bracken as a friend, a brother. Not a boyfriend. And even though I'm pretty sure every girl at school is envious of my relationship with him, I simply can't see him in any light other than friendship.

And now I'm attending the most important event of the year with him. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Simple. But that was before. Now, I'm not so sure. The last thing I want to do is hurt him by making him believe there is more between us than I feel.

My reflection stares back, and I address her sternly. "Enough. Bracken knows you are only friends." I ignore the little voice in my head that tells me otherwise. "You will go to the celebration at his parents, you will attend the party, and you will have a good time."

I try out a smile. It's not entirely convincing, but it will have to do. My hair becomes a fountain of auburn, reaching past my shoulder blades as I pull it back and wrap it with a tie. Ash can fix it into a more elaborate style later. I remove my dress from the hook on the wall and slip it over my head. The smooth fabric feels nice hugging my body.

Both Bear and Dune are waiting in the living room when I appear. Dune holds her hand over her mouth and Bear has tears in his eyes as I twirl in front of them. I rock a little on my new heels, black with bows on the toes, as I'm not used to wearing them. They were another gift included with the dress.

"Kid, you look wonderful," Bear says, his voice thick with emotion. He engulfs me in a strong hug.

"Help," I squeak as the air oozes out of me. "Too tight."

Bear steps back, laughs, and wipes the tears from the corners of his eyes. "So beautiful," he says, shaking his head.

"Okay enough. Bracken will be waiting for me."

Dune and Bear exchange a look, and then Bear wraps one arm around Dune's shoulder.

"We're proud of you, honey," Dune says.

I look between them, both overcome with emotion. "Is something going on?" I ask. "You're not normally this..." I pause, searching for the right word. "Gushy."

Dune flaps her hands in the air and lets out a strangled noise that is half laugh, half cry. "No honey, everything is fine. Our baby girl is just growing up so fast."

I roll my eyes and head for the door. "Bye." I wave without looking back at where they stand, locked in an embrace.

"Wait," Bear calls after me. I turn back around to find him holding out my jacket. "You might need this." I look at him quizzically. The whole city is covered by the dome. The temperature never varies. "Just

take it. It'll make your old Da feel better." I smile and step back so he can wrap the black jacket over my shoulders.

Once in the elevator, I see Bracken staring at the concrete wall projecting images of trees swaying in a breeze. He turns when the elevator door beeps and his mouth falls open. I can't help but feel a rush of pleasure that I immediately scold myself for.

"Wills?" he says in a reverent tone. He swallows and takes a step forward. "You look fantastic."

"You're not bad yourself." I take in his dark, exquisitely tailored suit. It's black with silver lining, and his tie is encrusted with jewels similar to those covering the bodice of my dress.

"I guess Mother knew what dress you were going to wear." He laughs, and it sounds nervous, forced. "She designed my suit." He runs his hand through his hair which is slicked back over his head instead of hanging in his eyes. A strand falls out of place and he smiles nervously.

"Mine too."

"Excuse me?"

"Your mother sent over this dress. Didn't you know?"

Bracken shakes his head and swallows again. "She chose well."

"Shall we go then?" I say, and hold out my arm.

He lets out a deep breath. "Sounds good." He starts walking only to stop and come back to my side. "Sorry," he mumbles, and tucks my arm in the crook of his elbow. "I was momentarily distracted."

We walk most of the way in silence. He seems to have forgotten we could have taken the tram, but it's nice walking. The light panels are beginning to portray the night sky, pin pricks of light shining out of the darkening panels. They will never reach total darkness, as it's never dark in Nuovo. Shops, factories, and people, all work around the clock.

"You look really good, Wills."

"Why thank you." I smile at him and curtsy as we walk, but he looks at me without smiling back. Again, his eyes intently scan my face, searching for something I don't want him to find. "Stop it," I say.

"Stop what?"

"Looking at me like that."

"Like what?" His eyes soften as his gaze steadies on mine.

"Like that."

He swallows again, his adam's apple bobbing up and down, and he nods, grinning ever so slightly.

"We've known each other forever, Bracken. You can't look at me like that. Ever. It feels wrong. Almost incestuous." I laugh nervously, and it comes out high pitched and awkward.

"Is that how you feel? Like it would be," he swallows, "incestuous if we were to . . ." He lets his voice trail off.

“Well, obviously it wouldn’t be. But don’t you feel like we know each other too well? I mean, we’ve been friends for as long as I can remember.”

“No, I don’t feel that way at all.”

I try to think of something more to say to break the tension, but by the time I pluck up the courage, we’re already standing outside his accommodation block.

The Rush residence takes up the top four levels of the housing complex. Just like in ours, the apartments stack on each other, each level one block of the tower. They are white. White walls, white window frames. Only the numbers, as tall as each level, are black. The only visible difference between this one and ours, are the images projected over the glass of the elevator that runs up the centre of each tower. Tonight, the images are bursts of fireworks exploding on a night sky, spelling out, ‘Congratulations Bracken!’

Bracken looks at it fleetingly as he approaches the entrance of the elevator and swipes his wrist across the scanner. He doesn’t look impressed. The doors beep and a mechanical voice greets us by name.

“Nice touch,” I say.

“There’s been quite the number of changes since you were last here.”

I try to think back to the last time I visited Bracken’s home. I used to spend hours here, playing games on the huge illusion projector, before our mothers put a stop to it. Things changed then, and Bracken and I spent less time at each other’s places, and more time riding the trams and visiting the sites around Nuovo.

Music trickles into the elevator as it rises. Bracken leans against the wall, crosses his arms and tilts his head back, closing his eyes. “You ready?” he asks, without opening his eyes or moving a muscle.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

The elevator slows to a stop. He heaves his body off the wall and loops his arm through mine. With the push of a button, the door slides open. His parents stand waiting for us, Falcon’s arm draped around his younger wife.

“Willow, dear!” His mother walks over and takes my face in her hands, looking at me intently before kissing me on each cheek. “It’s been too long,” she admonishes, casting long looks between Bracken and myself.

Skylark is stunning. Everything about her is perfect. She has thick, long, black hair that curls at the ends, flowing down below her waist, and bright, blue eyes that twinkle like Bracken’s when he’s in a playful mood. She smiles slowly, the warmth of it gradually overtaking her face until her eyes radiate. “How have you been?” she asks.

Like with the Governor, I become a little tongue tied in her presence. Skylark looks at me. Each blink, each tilt of her head, deliberate and practiced, yet graceful. She wears a skin tight dress that clings to every part of her slender body. It looks impossible to move in.

“Fine, thank you.” I make another nod curtsey movement, and Bracken snorts beside me, covering his mouth and coughing.

Skylark turns to him and gently pats his back. “Are you alright, dear? Let me get you some water.” She walks with no hesitation in her movements, the dress stretching and complying with her body.

“Excuse me,” the Governor says, and heads towards a door. He stops and pops his head back through. “Give us a minute and then come on in.” He winks, then slips through the door, leaving Bracken and me standing at the elevator entrance.

“Coat?” Bracken holds out his arm and steps into the entrance of the house. Even though the accommodation blocks all look the same from the outside, inside is another story.

Behind Bracken, an illusion of a fountain gushing water in the centre of a lush forest, shimmers in the middle of the room. The walls are covered in images of rich, green trees. Bright flowers with big petals bloom on the ground, and exotic birds rest on the branches, occasionally taking flight and flapping overhead. The sound of trickling water plays through the air, joined by birdsong.

I hand Bracken my coat and step into the mirage. The illusions of ferns adorned with droplets of water, look so real, I reach out and try to brush them with my fingers.

“Not bad, is it?” Bracken’s shoes squeak on the tiles as he turns around. “Whoa—” Bracken breaks off.

“What?” I turn to face him and he stares at me, one eyebrow raised higher than the other.

“That dress is a whole other outfit from behind, isn’t it?” Bracken smiles and shakes his head.

I twist, trying to look at myself over my shoulder. “Is it that bad?”

“No, It looks great.” The corners of his lips tug upwards. “Trust me,” he says with a gleam in his eye. I narrow my eyes and put my hands on my hips. “Honestly. I would tell you if it didn’t.” He steps through an archway and sweeps his hand in front of him. “This way, Madam,” he says, bowing deeply.

I step past him and into the next room, which takes up the rest of the level. It’s decorated sparsely; a few couches, some foot tables. But the main feature is an entire wall covered with an illusion. It reflects an image of sail boats bobbing on water. The shine from the moon casts milky reflections on the surface, and I stand and stare, mesmerized. Does the moonlight really shimmer across the water like that?

The sound of applause brings me back. People mill around the room, clapping for Bracken. In the centre of it all, Falcon and Skylark stand in the exact same pose they were in when we entered. I slip to the side and leave Bracken in the spotlight. He stands tall, acknowledging the applause, and smiles brightly. It's as if another version of him takes over his body and he transforms into Bracken, son of the Governor. Lily, a girl from his class, steps forward and places a kiss on his cheek. She blushes furiously and gives him a coy smile. Bracken's eyes slide over to me and I smile widely. He flashes a hesitant grin at the girl, and walks towards the front of the room. Her eyes follow him hungrily.

Skylark steps forward, her strides fluid, and kisses Bracken on each cheek. She holds her hand behind her and someone places a glass of water in it which she gives to Bracken. He takes a sip before handing it back to his mother. Governor Falcon comes forward and embraces Bracken, his larger frame engulfing Bracken's slender one. It's quite the performance. The applause continues until the Governor holds up his hand. He waits until the room is completely quiet before talking. Skylark takes a step back.

"Thank you everyone for coming. Of course, we are here to honour the selection of our son," he looks over to Skylark and they share a smile, "to the Guardian Forces!" Falcon slaps Bracken on the back. "Welcome to the pack, son. And, of course, to all the cadets that made it in this year." Falcon nods over to Lily. She was selected to train as a Guardian. Lucky thing.

"And to celebrate," Skylark says loudly to calm the din, "this!" She holds a bottle into the air. It's champagne, something I have only ever heard about and never seen. The bottle is green glass and little droplets of moisture adorn the surface.

"This bottle," the Governor says, and grasps the neck, "was given to me by my precious wife after I was announced as the Governor of Nuovo." Applause erupts, splattering over the room. "And now, I will open it on this very special occasion, to celebrate the success of my son!"

The bottle gets moved to another room for opening, but soon, long stemmed glasses of translucent, gold liquid come back on black trays. Floating in each glass, a strawberry glistens with tiny bubbles of air trapped in the pitted skin. I take one as the tray passes, waving it under my nose and inhaling the scent as bubbles burst on my skin.

Once everyone has a glass in their hand, the Governor raises his. We follow suit, lifting our glasses, and the amber liquid sparkles in the glow from the light panels.

"To Bracken!"

"To Bracken!" Everyone echoes.

I take a sip and it stings my tongue. My taste buds constrict, not used to such intense flavour, and saliva pools in the bottom of my mouth. I take another sip, and then another. I'm not sure if I like the sensation. The liquid cools my tongue but burns as it flows down my throat. Part of me wants to savour it, swirl it around my mouth and over my tongue, but another part wants to spit it out. Tiny bubbles burst in my stomach, which decides to become rather vocal about the process. No one notices, because, for a moment, the whole room is transfixed by the sparkling liquid. Some of them drain their drink and pop the strawberries, full and plump, straight into their mouths. I shave off small slivers with my teeth, savouring it for as long as I can. Exclamations of surprise fill the room when trays of thinly sliced meat on tiny pieces of bread come out. I think I am in heaven.

"All legal, of course. Depot sourced and approved," Falcon says with mock severity, and people laugh. "One more thing," he adds.

I look up from my food, only one bite taken, as he holds a small case out to Bracken. The lock opens when he swipes his ID over the case. Bracken's smile falters, just for a fraction, but he's quick to rectify it.

"Father, thank you." This time it's Bracken who slaps his father on the back. Hard. Falcon winces, but it's so brief, I might have imagined it.

Applause breaks out again as Bracken holds out a handgun, careful not to put his fingers anywhere near the trigger. It's a special edition. A black Guardian's pistol with a stencil of a falcon about to land on some bracken, imprinted on the butt. Father and Son. I look on with envy as Bracken handles it gingerly, unimpressed with the lavish gift.

Bracken and I float around the room. He makes small talk with the guests, while I smile at all the right times... I hope. I barely listen to what is being said, my attention keeps slipping to the platters of food still wafting around the room. Each time one passes, I take a nibble and slip it into my mouth, intent on discovering each new flavour. The conversation is revolving around whether Nuovo should continue to let Mudders into the city. Bracken smiles politely while two men debate next to him.

"There is only so much space," one guest states. "And once the room runs out, that's it. We need to ensure there will be space for our children's children, and their children after that. They made their decision years ago. It's not our fault if they are regretting it."

"So you think we should just leave them out there? Let them destroy the land? You've seen the progress made, we can't just sit by and watch them destroy it."

"Of course not. We need to take action. We need—"

“Come on,” Bracken whispers in my ear. Now that the attention has been drawn away from him, he has the chance to slip away unnoticed. “Let’s go play with my new toy.”

“Really?” I look over at where the pistol lies admired by the guests, but untouched by Bracken.

“Anything to get out of here. Come to my bedroom and I’ll let you touch it.” He grins wickedly, and I roll my eyes as he walks over to the pistol, grabs it, and saunters out the door. Lily’s eyes follow us.

Bracken’s room, like the rest of the apartment, doesn’t contain much furniture. It has a bed, a rack to store his clothes, and a bookcase laden with old fashioned books with paper pages, the likes of which I’ve only ever seen in the museum. His image mirror is covered in words.

“What’s this?” I ask, pointing to the mirror.

Bracken groans. “It’s my speech. I have to introduce Falcon at the Fifteen Year Celebrations.”

“Lucky you.” I grin and take a seat on his bed. “Well? Let me hear it.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Bracken stands in front of me, glances at the words on his mirror, and pulls his stance straight. “Citizens of Nuovo, I welcome you here today on behalf of the Establishment. Nuovo is the flagship of the new world, a city of firsts. First to protect the land. First to . . . blah, blah, blah. Do I have to do this, Wills?”

“Yes! Now do it properly. No more blahing.”

He sighs again. “Fine.” He clears his throat. “Citizens of Nuovo, I welcome you here today on behalf of the Establishment. Nuovo is the flagship of the new world, a city of firsts. First to protect the land. First to develop the Nutrition Pill. First to build a domed city. And now, my Father is here to yet again announce how we are leading the world in another first!

“When the world began to crumple, this man had the foresight to save us before we knew we needed saving. While others were running around, stripping the earth bare of what little commodities there were left, this man was working with the powers that be to build this fine city. For fifteen years he has been our leader. He has protected us from attack, saved us from hunger and poverty, and in their place created order and industry. This city has become a symbol of life, untouched by nature. A world created anew, founded on equality, preservation, and sustainability. Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls, tonight I give to you our leader, my father, Mr Falcon Rush!” Bracken’s shoulders slump as I clap heartily. “Can you tell I didn’t write it?” he says drearily.

“It was very . . . impassioned. I take it the new first is the serum?”

“Yeah, though they are only rolling it out to the Guardians, I think.”

I pick up the pistol from where Bracken discarded it on the bedside table. "I can't believe your father gave you this. Do you know how amazing it is?" I run my fingers over the cool metal.

"No, but I bet you're going to tell me, oh wise one of the Guardians."

"Well first off, you're not supposed to be issued a weapon until you are in your second year."

Bracken groans. He sinks to the bed, rests his elbows on his knees, and places his head in his hands. A loose strand of hair, slick with gel, flops down into his eyes. "Fantastic. That's just what I need to prove that Daddy dearest didn't fudge my acceptance. Special attention."

I pick the pistol up and feel the weight in my hand. "And standard issue weapons never look like this. Yours has all the latest additions." I turn the pistol over in my hands and let out a long, low whistle. "But it's been modelled off an older pistol, like something that they would have used decades ago, not now." I look up at Bracken sitting dejectedly on the bed, head still resting in his hands. "You know, I think your father actually tried to please you with this one. It's one of a kind, designed just for you. You know, with your love of old crap and stuff." I grin.

"Well that makes it better then." His face twists into a sarcastic smile.

I hold the pistol out, displaying the symbol. "How sweet, daddy and son."

He laughs mournfully and pushes the pistol away. "Whatever."

Posing in front of the mirror, pistol in hand, I cut a conflicting picture. Silver pools at my feet, with little black bows peeping out from underneath. The crystals on my dress reflect the light, and the cold, black pistol at the end of my extended arms is cold and cruel in comparison.

"A Mudder, huh?" I ask in a mock drawl to my reflection in the mirror. "Not on my watch you're not." I jerk the pistol pretending to fire.

"Really?" In the mirror I see Bracken come up behind me, an exasperated look on his face.

I grin and wiggle my eyebrows. "I'll catch those dirty Mudders," I say, mimicking the voiceover from the virtual game we used to play.

"Shhh!" Bracken says, covering my mouth before we both collapse on the floor in laughter.

The door opens and Skylark appears. She looks at us sprawled on the floor and narrows her eyes. "Your father wants you," she says sternly.

She exits, leaving the door open, and Bracken pushes himself off the floor and holds his hand out to me.

"She really doesn't like me, does she?" I take Bracken's hand and let him pull me to my feet.

"Of course she does. How could anyone not?"

"Did you see the look she just gave me?" I smooth out the wrinkles in my skirt. "She is clearly afraid I'm a bad influence on you."

“That would be right, the terrible rebel, Willow Stanton, leading the innocent Bracken Rush astray. It has a certain ring of truth to it, don’t you think?” Bracken smirks as he takes back the pistol. I push past him through the door and back out to join the celebrations.

Chapter Three

Ash greets us at the door, arms crossed, gold wig on her head, and wearing a multi-coloured dress with a ragged hem across her thighs. She's a lot taller than usual. The heels on her shoes put mine to shame.

"You're late." She storms into the room, leaving the door open, expecting us to follow. Ash's apartment is bigger than mine by an extra level, but here in the living room, there is very little difference. Ash's mother sits on the couch, watching models strut down the runway on the television while spraying her nails. Her white-blond hair is piled in an elaborate style on top of her head, makeup fully applied with deep red lips, and wearing her bathrobe. A single bunch of grapes sits on the table. I eye them, wondering if they were a gift from her not-so-secret lover. She smiles and pops one in her mouth.

"Enjoying those, Mother?" Ash asks coolly.

Her mother ignores her and turns to me. "Willow." She nods and smiles, and then Bracken steps out from behind me and her smile widens. She gets up, sways a little on the heels poking out from under her robe, and walks over to embrace him. He throws a comical look of desperation over her shoulder as he pats her on the back, barely touching her.

"Bracken," she gushes. "How are your parents? Well, I hope." She plucks one of the grapes from the bunch and pops it in her mouth before running her hand along his shoulder.

"As well as they can be, Ivy. Thanks."

"For goodness sake Mother, take your hands off the boy. He's traumatised enough from the last time he came over."

Ivy laughs and holds her hand to her chest. "Oh rubbish. He loves me, don't you Bracken?"

Bracken turns bright red. I grab his arm and tug. "This way," I say, and drag him into Ash's room. "What happened last time you were here?"

Bracken shakes his head then leans against the wall. "I'd rather not think about it."

Ash follows us into the room. "Let's just say Mother popped a few too many pills and got a little too friendly."

Bracken shudders. "You can just stop there."

"She tends to do that with anyone she thinks might spend a few credits on her. No offence Bracken, it's just with your father's position and all..."

"I'm not my father," Bracken says.

“Ivy is rather good looking though,” I taunt. “You weren’t tempted to indulge her a little?”

He gives me a foul look. “Just get on with your makeup stuff, would you.”

“Yes. Thanks to you,” Ash jerks her head at Bracken, “we’re already late. Sit.” She points to the seat in front of her mirror and pulls out an array of brushes, potions and powders. “Eyes closed.”

After a few minutes of being poked and drawn on, I open my eyes to find Ash running her tongue back and forth over her lips in concentration. “Closed!” she orders, stamping her foot.

I squeeze my eyes tight.

“Not that hard.” She lets out an exasperated breath before I feel the brush sweeping my eyelid again. After what seems like a very long time, she stops. “There,” she says.

I open my eyes. They are huge. Smudged shades of grey cover my eyelids, and a line of sparkling silver follows the curve under my eyes with a thick, black line accompanying it. It matches my dress perfectly, and makes my eyes greener, my pupils darker. My lips are soft, plump, and glossy, a shade of pale pink. The same shade that now stains my cheeks.

“Well?” Ash looks at me expectantly as I study my reflection in the mirror.

I blink, checking that it's really me. It feels like I'm in someone else's skin. The image mirrors my actions, but it doesn't look like me. My lips and eyes feel heavy, my skin tight.

“Great,” I say hesitantly, twisting my head from side to side, catching my reflection from every angle. I notice my eyebrows are furrowed, and I lift them in an effort to look pleased.

Ash sighs again. “You’re impossible.” She swings my chair around so I face the other way. “Bracken?”

He looks up from his chair and stares wide eyed.

“Well?” Ash demands, while tapping her foot.

He clears his throat. “Good,” he says. “She looks good.”

He only meets my eyes briefly, but it's enough to see the longing in his look. For the second time tonight, I reconsider the sensibility in my choice to accompany him to the dance, but there's no changing it now.

Bracken picks my jacket up from the bed and places it around my shoulders. He doesn't say anything as we follow him out of the apartment.

Ash's partner meets us on the steps to the Great Hall. He wears a pale blue suit, pant legs cut off at the calf, and three quarter sleeves. His dark hair is shaggy and hangs over his eyes. He crooks his arm out to Ash as we approach, scanning her briefly, appreciation showing in his eyes.

The Great Hall's high peaked ceiling reflects the night sky. A large, pale moon and stars that glisten in varying shades of colour. The walls, a scene from a cold winter's night, project frost clinging to the branches of bare trees. Lit by fairy lights, they fade into the distance, growing dim, but never ending, reflecting the image a thousand times over. Even though the temperature is no different from the rest of the city, I pull my jacket around my shoulders, a shiver running through me just at the sight of the ice-covered trees. Only the Fifteen Year Celebration banners hanging from the ceiling spoil the effect.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Bracken startles me, his breath hot on my ear.

I murmur in agreement as he peels my jacket off my shoulders. As he rests his hand on the bare skin of my lower back, and guides me further into the room, warmth spreads up my spine and tingles at the base of my neck.

Illusion singers crowd the stage, framed by the barren trees. The main singer clings onto the microphone, holding it as if her life depends on it, agony etched into her face as she sings. The two either side of her mimic her moves. The music is fast, yet eerily haunting. Ash stands beside me, her foot tapping in time to the beat.

"Wouldn't you have loved to live on the outside just for a little while?" Bracken says, his gaze directed at the wintry scene that surrounds us.

"We did," Ash says. Her brow creases as it does when she is confused.

"I think he means live on the outside and remember it," I offer. I was only a year old when they sealed the dome. Even then, we still lived inside the city, it just wasn't sealed off from the rest of the world yet, so life on the outside is something we have never experienced.

"Oh." Her brow pops back up and a smile crosses her mouth again. "No." She shakes her head. "Not really."

"I think I would have," Bracken says. "It must have been beautiful."

"You've been to Nuova though, haven't you?" I ask. I'm sure I remember him travelling with his father to our sister city at the top end of the country only last year. The trip is made on the rail train that connects the two cities. Surely he had seen the beauty of the outside then.

"Twice. But it's not the same shooting through it, as it is actually being among it. The train moves so fast anyway, everything is a blur. Being able to touch it, breathe in the scents and smells, feel the wind on your face, it must be heaven."

"My goodness! Mushy much?" Ash says, and snorts.

Bracken ignores her.

"Now that you're a Guardian Cadet you probably will get to go outside," I say, hoping to ignite some enthusiasm for his profession within him. "It would be nice. As long as we didn't have to kill any animals or anything like that. I don't think I could handle that." A

shudder runs through me as I think back to the documentary shown at school. Lines of dead animal carcasses hung limply as they made their way through the slaughter houses. The part showing the slitting of their throats was what got to me most. Blood pooled onto the white, tiled floor, thick and dark and red. The thought still makes my stomach turn.

“Some Guardian you’re going to make,” Bracken says, laughing.

“Guardians don’t kill. They're there to protect, not damage,” I reply, lifting my chin a little higher.

“Don’t you think it would be nice, though? I mean, just for a bit. Experience how things used to be done before all this?” He waves his hand through the air. By all this, he means the dome. Nuovo. The thing that separates us from the outside world.

“Without all this,” Ash copies his movement, “the world would be starving and the population would be a hell of a lot less than what it is now.”

“Some people would disagree,” Bracken says evenly, meeting her defiant look with one of his own.

“Well, don’t let your father hear you say that. He’s likely to strap you on the conveyor belt and throw away the key.”

We fall silent, each of us no doubt thinking about Ash’s father, and pondering his fate. Ash assumes he's on the conveyor belt, but the truth is, no one actually knows.

Bracken’s hand moves to rest on the curve of my waist. I step closer to Ash, and he lets it fall. “Where’s your partner, what’s-his-name?” I ask in an attempt to change the subject.

“He was just to get me in the door,” Ash replies sulkily.

“You want to dance then?” I nod to where the other students have gathered on the dance floor in front of the stage, the group moving as one, pulsating in time to the music.

Ash doesn’t answer, but instead, grabs my hand and drags me in the direction of the dancers. I look back at Bracken, but he motions for me to go ahead without him. We push our way into the crowd and join the movements of the group.

“Someone’s got eyes only for you,” Ash shouts at me, and nods over to where Bracken stands, his shoulder pressed to the wall, giving the impression of leaning against the trunk of a tree. His arms are crossed, his eyes following my every move.

I wave at him. He smiles and waves back, using only the tips of his fingers. “It’s getting more and more awkward,” I lean over and say into her ear as I move, half dancing and half swaying.

“The poor boy.” She pouts then throws her head back in laughter. “Are you sure there's nothing going on?” She wriggles her eyebrows suggestively.

“Not on my behalf. It wouldn’t feel right.”

“Poor kid,” she says, even though Bracken is a year older than both of us. “You sure you’re not just denying it while secretly you’re in love with him and you just haven’t realised it yet?” she says in one long breath.

“My life isn’t the plot of some romance novel, Ash.”

“I know. He just looks so sad.” She pulls her lip down and blinks at me, feigning sorrow. “He’s rich, too. Don’t you think you could fake it?”

“Ash!” I exclaim.

I wish I could feel differently about Bracken. I wish I could muster up some of the feelings that I know he has for me, but they’re simply not there. When I look at Bracken, I see the boy who sat on the bedroom floor and played virtual games with me, the boy that protected me when I was teased about wanting to become a Guardian, the boy who has been my best friend for years.

“You’re going to have to put him out of his misery, Wills. It’s cruel watching him pine after you like this. Look at him, miserable sod.”

Bracken still leans against the wall, a serious look on his face, his eyes trained on me. Lily sidles up to him, smiling sweetly. He glances her way, but brings his gaze back to me.

“But he’s my best friend,” I wail pitifully.

Ash looks at me, mock shock on her face, her mouth open in a perfect circle.

“Apart from you, of course.” I flash a smile. “Maybe you could say something?”

“Hell no,” she says firmly, and holds up her palm. “I’m not getting in the middle of whatever this is. It’s your mess to clean up.”

“But I didn’t make the mess.”

“You did. Just by being you.” Ash pokes me in the chest. “You look great, by the way,” she adds.

“You too.”

She does. The dress clings tightly to her body. Different neon-coloured threads hang from it, bouncing and swaying with each move.

The music fades, and the illusion singers flicker then disappear as the Governor and Skylark step onto the stage to be greeted with a collection of applause.

“I want to show you something,” Bracken says, once again startling me with his closeness.

“But—”

“You’ll like it. I promise.” He holds his hand out and waits.

I look between him and his parents standing on the stage, waving to the crowd. “We haven’t even been here an hour yet,” I say, slightly annoyed.

He lifts his hands up in defeat. “Fine. Later then.” And he stalks off.

My whole body slumps, and I sigh deeply before following him. I have to push my way through the crowd, and as a result, a few people curse at me as they attempt to listen to what the Governor is saying. It's something boring about the development of the serum and the plans for tomorrow's celebrations.

"Bracs!" I whisper loudly.

He strides through the crowd until he reaches the edge. Lily spots him and bounds over. She clamps onto his arm, drapes her body off him, and blinks furiously as she tugs his arm. He casts a quick glance my way, before breaking into a smile and allowing himself to be dragged back in the crowd. A flicker of annoyance ignites within me. I'm not sure if I'm annoyed that he has gone off with the girl, or if it's because he's resorted to playing stupid games.

I look back at the stage to see Skylark's dress changing. An illusion of a long, sweeping, red dress replaces the black. I can just make out Ash in the crowd as she stands, hands locked together and clasped under her chin, a look of pure rapture on her face. Skylark twirls and the dress transforms into a short, tight, pink one, translucent, where before it was red. Ash bounces up and down clapping as the Governor and Skylark head off the stage. The illusion flickers back to life with a different group of singers. Music with a fast beat pulsates through the room.

"Oh my goodness, did you see that!" Ash exclaims when I join her. "Hey, where did you go?"

"Boy problems."

"Well, things seem to be fine now." She nods to where Bracken dances. Lily, dressed in reflective yellow, moves her body seductively up and down his. He's smiling, though I can tell he's uncomfortable. One glance in my direction confirms it. I smile and wave, but Lily reaches up and directs his face back to her.

"Tramp," I mutter under my breath.

"Is that a little jealousy I detect there, Willow?" a soft, velvet voice asks. Her blue eyes examine mine, and it takes all my strength not to look away.

"Skylark," I stutter.

"You're quite right though, dear. She does look like a tramp. And no one has worn a reflective shade in years. I'm going to have to talk to her about that if she has eyes for my son. Good breeding doesn't always mean good fashion." She sighs loudly and pats me on the shoulder. "I was just stopping by to say thank you for coming earlier tonight. I know it means so much to Bracken."

"It was my pleasure." Inwardly I shake my head. My pleasure? Where did that come from?

“And I wouldn’t worry about the little tramp. Even if I approve of her, I know Bracken only has eyes for you.”

I start shaking my head before the words even come out. “It’s not like that. I mean, Bracs and I are just friends. He can dance with whoever he likes.”

Skylark smiles knowingly and taps her nose, and I can do nothing but smile half-heartedly back at her.

“Well, that’s good to hear. Although I do fear that you will leave Bracken rather heartbroken.” Her eyes slip to Ash. “Nice choice of dress, dear.”

Ash beams, the widest of smiles crossing her face. “Thank you Mam, I mean Mrs Governor.” Ash frowns. “Lady Rush?”

“Skylark is fine.” Her slow, serene smile creeps back over her face. She strokes my arm before turning to leave. “So, are you excited about the release of the new serum?”

“Excuse me?” I say, wishing I had listened to the Governor’s announcement earlier.

“Are you excited about tomorrow, dear?”

I falter and look to Ash, my mind blank.

“Have you not been discussing it at home with your parents? The Fifteen Year Celebrations? They were one of the founding families, I would have thought they would be rather eager to celebrate.” She looks at me pointedly, and I blush, embarrassed by my complete brain fade. Clearly she can see I’m no match for the son of a Governor. No wonder she prefers Lily to me.

“I’m afraid we don’t much discuss that sort of thing at home.” Once again I can barely believe the words coming out of my mouth. Don’t much? I wish the ground would open up and swallow me. Why didn’t I just say yes, and leave it at that? Skylark raises her eyebrows in such a manner as to claim that I’m not telling the truth, then turns and glides into the crowd.

“Does everyone think that Bracs and I are more than friends?” I say, as soon as she is out of ear shot.

“Oh. My. Goodness! She said my dress was a nice choice!” Ash grabs my arm, her fingers gripping into my flesh. “Did you hear that? Did you? Nice choice. N.I.C.E!” She shakes my arm until a smile breaks over my face and I laugh.

“Yes, I heard.” In the background, I catch flashes of reflective yellow sliding up and down Bracken’s black suit.

“Oh, and yeah, everyone thinks you are Bracken are together,” Ash says, noticing the direction of my gaze.

I cover my face with my hands. “Argh! Can’t two people just be friends?”

“Not that I’ve noticed.” I look at her, stricken. “Joking! Sheesh, Wills, you really need to lighten up. What’s the worst that can happen? Bracs makes a pass at you. You reject him. End of story. He won’t do it again.”

“Not end of story. End of friendship. Why does he have to go and ruin everything?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Bracken hasn’t actually said anything to you, has he?”

“Not really.”

“Has he tried anything, you know, like to kiss you or anything?” Ash puckers her lips together and makes kissing noises.

“No.”

“Well, what are you getting your knickers in a twist about?” Ash snorts. “I love that saying. Knickers in a twist. It’s almost as funny as panties in a bunch, or wad. I think I like wad better.”

I lift my eyebrows.

“What?” she says. “I read it somewhere.”

I raise my eyebrows higher.

“Okay, so maybe it was on a movie or something.”

I sigh. “So you really don’t think I should worry?”

“You worry too much. I know someone who could help with that.” She wriggles her eyebrows and scans the room.

“What are you thinking about doing, Ash?”

“Nothing for you to worry about. I can’t see him at the moment anyway.” She tugs at my dress. “Come on, let’s go find some hunks to dance with. Don’t you love the word hunk? It’s so robust, so visual.” She shudders excitedly.

I start to follow her, but notice Bracken making his way through the crowd. “Ready now?” he asks, as he holds out his hand, his face expressionless.

I frown.

“I’ll behave,” he says.

I deepen my frown.

“I promise. Now are you going to keep me here looking like a fool, for much longer?”

I take his hand and follow. Ash frowns, and I mouth, “Sorry,” as we walk away.

“Where are we going?” I ask, as he leads me out the door and down the steps. The street is deserted, not even a tram in sight. Across the road, the zoo is stacked high into the air. My favourite place in the entire city, it’s filled with plants and animals. Real plants and animals. But we are not going to the zoo. Bracken crosses the rail in the middle of the street, and swipes his ciid to activate a tram.

“It’s a surprise.” His eyes twinkle.

“Bracken, I really don’t think—”

He cuts me off. “Hush. You’ll love it.”

I look at him sceptically and pull away my hand.

“Come on, Wills. I pulled a lot of strings to make this happen.”

“But the party,” I say, looking back to where the hall shines brightly, beams of light flashing across the surface.

“We won’t be long.”

“But what about Lily? Won’t she miss you?”

“It’s not Lily I want.”

“Your mother seems to like her.”

“Come on, Wills, where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Fine then.” I sigh and cross my arms.

The tram pulls to a stop, and we enter and take a seat near the rear. Through the windows, the city passes before us as we travel to the outskirts of Nuovo. I can’t imagine what he wants to show me all the way out here, but as the tram travels along the edge of the dome, and we pass the black apartments of the Guardians, it dawns on me.

“No!” I exclaim in disbelief. My heart beats faster with excitement. “Just like Dirty Mudders, but real?”

Bracken nods, and breaks into a goofy smile as we slide to a stop outside the locked gates of the Guardian training grounds. “I told you you’d like it.”

First, Bracken swipes his wrist across the scanner, then, he holds out his thumb to the red laser, and finally, he enters a code. “Sometimes it’s handy being the son of the Governor.”

The thick, metal doors pop open just a fraction, and we pull them the rest of the way, ensuring they are locked shut once we are inside.

It’s black, pitch black. I hold my hands in front of my face, testing whether I can see them, but nothing materialises in my vision. I hear Bracken fumbling, his hands searching the wall. He turns on his ciid and uses the light to find the control panel. After keying in another code, the light panels in the ceiling buzz and flicker to life, grey and dull.

We are in a big, open space covered by trees and grass. The ceiling of the dome is high above us, with the surrounding walls reaching all the way to the top to avoid prying eyes. The trees are close together, and grass covers the ground sporadically. Patches of bare dirt show in places, and dead leaves are scattered over the rest. I bend down and brush the tips of the blades with my fingers. They are sharp.

“Synthetic,” Bracken says.

I’m too dumbfounded to speak, so I simply nod. Slipping my shoes off, I lift the hem of my dress and step out into the forest. The leaves crackle under my steps and the blades of grass are sharp against the soles

of my feet. It may not be real, but apart from staring at the trees through glass at the zoo, it's as close as I can remember getting to physical nature.

"Amazing," I whisper under my breath.

Bracken leans down, collects a bag from the ground and tosses it to me. "Here. I thought the dress might not be the best for what we're about to do."

Opening the bag, I find a camouflaged body suit, the same as the Guardians wear. I give an excited squeal and grab for it. "This is way better than the game!"

"I'll turn my back," Bracken says. He turns to face the wall, whistling, and undresses to pull his own suit on.

I push the straps of my dress over my shoulders and wriggle out. The suit is tight, and I have to drag it up my body before I tug it over my shoulders. I slide my finger along the seam and it seals shut, fitting against my body like a glove. I place my dress into the bag and leave it on the ground.

"Ready," I say, and turn to see Bracken dressed the same. My eyes follow the lean angles of his body.

"Suit me?" He holds out his hands and laughs. The echo bounces around the space and gets lost among the trees. He bends down and rummages through the bag until he pulls out two pistols. "Practise ones." He presses the patch on my left shoulder. "If I hit you, this will turn red and signal an alarm. You hit me, and the same thing happens. Best out of three?"

"Are you for real?"

"Sure am. This is an actual training exercise, so master it, and you might just have a hope of making the force. Plus, having a friend on the inside can't hurt." The control panel beeps as Bracken alters the settings. "Weather?"

I shrug my shoulders. It's always a calm, even temperature inside the dome, anything different will be welcome.

"Random it is."

The ceiling dims and grey clouds begin to darken the edges. Bracken and I stand, eyes lifted to the ceiling, and watch as the clouds gather until they collide above us. There's a loud rumbling, then flashes of light brighten everything, and it starts to rain. One droplet splashes on my face. And then another, until we are pelted with sharp shards of water. I open my arms and let the water pour over me. Tilting back my head, I open my mouth and try to capture the drops. A few land on my tongue. They are bitter and I spit on the ground, laughing as I look over to find Bracken doing the same. The rain gets heavier and heavier until I can barely see, and the water travels in rivulets down my face.

"Better than the dance?" Bracken shouts.

I nod enthusiastically, then salute, and run into the forest. I keep running until my breath comes out in short puffs. I stop and lean against the trunk of a tree to gather my breath. It's darker under the cover of the trees, and my eyes strain to catch a glimpse of Bracken.

Something snaps behind me. I crouch, pistol poised and aiming in the direction of the noise. Bracken creeps through the trees. His gaze flicks from watching his steps, to scanning the forest, searching for me. I take aim, the barrel of my pistol pressed against the tree. Taking a deep breath, I line up the patch just under his shoulder. In one swift movement Bracken spins and trains his pistol at me, a grin spread wide across his face.

"You're going to have to be a little sneakier than that, Wills." He pushes back his hair with his free hand. Water collects in a drop at the end of his nose.

I turn and run into the forest, his laughter chasing me. Once a reasonable distance away, I slow my pace to a walk and do my best not to betray my position. I avoid the branches and twigs on the ground, choosing only to step in the patches of grass. In a small clearing a single flower blooms. I stop to look at it, my fingers brushing the delicate petals growing up the stalk like little purple bells. It looks so real, but the way the petals spring back into place after my fingers bend them, tell me it's not.

A sharp shock rattles through my body as my patch emits a piercing noise followed by a flashing red light. "Ouch!" I yell at the tingling sensation under the patch on my shoulder. "Hey, no fair! I was looking at the flower."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't aware of the rule that prevents you from shooting your opponent if she stops to smell the roses." Bracken smirks.

"Ha, ha." I rub my shoulder patch. "You didn't tell me it was going to hurt."

"You didn't ask." He drops his arm, letting the pistol hang. "Round two?"

"You bet," I shout, and run off, crashing into the forest until I am sure distance separates us.

This time I take things slowly. I hide behind trees, crouch in long grass, and creep through the forest with the utmost caution. But once again a shock rips through me and my patch signals I've been hit.

Bracken jumps down from a branch above me. "Too easy." He laughs, shaking his head.

I shove him in the chest. "No fair. I didn't know you were allowed to climb trees. You're good at this."

The smile falls from his face. He shrugs. "Perhaps."

"Run," I say.

Bracken looks at me questioningly, and then a smile breaks over his face as he takes off into the forest. I wait two seconds and then follow close on his heels. He weaves through the forest, not attempting to hide his steps, and I follow at full pace, determined to catch up. I see flashes of him in front of me, a dark shadow slipping through the trees. I push harder. My legs burn, but I gain on him. Soon, he crosses a clearing and I dash after him, pistol raised.

“Stop!” I yell.

He halts and slowly holds up his hands, turning to face me, a grin spread from ear to ear. Puffs of breath rise into the air. “You’re fast,” he acknowledges, blinking as the rain drips over his eyelashes.

I take a step forward, the pistol trained on him. I am drenched everywhere the suit is not. I hate to think what my makeup looks like now. Underneath the suit I am perfectly dry.

“Come on.” He braces himself and screws up his face. “Shoot.”

Something stops me. I can’t pull the trigger. It feels wrong aiming at him. Bracken opens one eye and squints at me. I lower the pistol a fraction and his face relaxes. I don’t know why, but I can’t do it. My finger hovers over the trigger as Bracken walks towards me, hands still in the air. Soon, he is standing right in front of me, the pistol pushing into his chest. Any amusement in his eyes is long gone.

I breathe deeply and squeeze my eyes shut. Warmth presses against my lips, and I pull the trigger in surprise as my eyes spring open to find Bracken’s mouth against mine. The shock ripples through both of us, travelling through the joint path of our lips. I stumble back and cover my mouth with my hand, dropping the pistol in the process. My heartbeat hammers in my head and I look at Bracken, eyes wide.

“Wills,” he breathes, and takes a step closer.

Before he can reach me, I turn and run.

Chapter Four

Branches whip across my face and lash at my skin. They sting, but I don't stop. I shake my head and droplets of water fly from the ends of my hair. It has stopped raining but the forest all looks the same to me. Trees. Trees. Trees. I begin to panic, not sure if I'll find my way out, and consider turning back to find Bracken. But I don't want to face him. Not yet.

I keep running, anger and exhilaration pumping through my veins. I bring the back of my hand to my lips and rub them roughly, trying to remove the feeling of his lips against mine, leaving them feeling bruised and swollen.

Bracken kissed me.

The thought keeps running through my mind with each step I take, as if my mind is unsure how to process it. His lips were warm, soft even. But the kiss wasn't right. I don't like him like that. I love him as a friend, nothing more.

Why did he do this?

Why did he have to go and ruin everything?

I stumble, my foot trapped by a fake tree root. Above me, the door stands outlined on a dark wall. I pick myself up, reach for the handle and yank. Nothing happens.

I turn and lean against the wall, my breath coming out in puffs until my breathing slows, and I slump to the ground. I've got no choice but to wait for Bracken.

I'm annoyed, angry even. He knows that I don't feel that way, but he went ahead and tried to kiss me anyway. How are we supposed to feel normal around each other now?

The rain stops and storm clouds pass over the light panels before Bracken's figure materializes out from the forest.

"Wills—"

"Don't you Wills me!" I yell at him. "What on earth did you do that for?"

"I just had to tr—"

"Shut up!" I yell, and cover my ears. "I don't want to hear it."

"You did ask," he says quietly. He stands over me, hands hanging limply at his side. "Don't you feel anything for me?" His voice breaks, and I can't bear to look up at him.

"Not like that."

He moves, his feet no longer in front of me, and I hear the beeps of the keypad as the door opens with a release of air.

I get to my feet.

“I’m sorry,” he says as I pass.

I simply glare at him, before stepping through the door and slam it shut behind me. With it closed, I lean against it, hands splayed flat against the cold metal, and breathe deeply. As I close my eyes, I faintly hear Bracken calling my name. But I don’t want to talk to him, not yet. Not while my mind is a jumbled mess. I walk along the tram tracks, following them back into the city centre. My ciid, not used to the water, isn’t working. If I follow the tracks, I should come across an activated tram.

Each step I take brings a fresh wave of annoyance at Bracken. He has ruined things now. How can we go back to the friendship we shared now that he has made it perfectly clear how he feels? He should have kept his kiss to himself instead of dragging me into it.

Maybe that was it. I hadn’t made it clear. Maybe I hadn’t considered how my actions were seen by him at all. Perhaps my anger at him is misplaced. But then I think of all the times I’ve shied away from his touch, the times I never returned the intensity of his gaze, and the frustration starts to boil again. I want to forget this night ever happened.

Finally, I come across a tram. I have to wait for it to stop before I am able to hop on, as I have no way to signal it. There is a man already on board, swiping through the invisible pages of his ciid. He lifts his eyes as I board and his brows lift curiously. That’s when I remember I’m still in the Guardian uniform. I glare back, staring through him with contempt as I’ve seen Guardians do on occasion, and he looks away quickly.

The party is still in full swing. The bass from the music thumps through the walls, although no one guards the door now.

I feel as though all the energy has drained from my body as I push the doors open. They are heavy. The glass panels in the door reflect back the image of a girl in disarray. Long, wet hair, limp and clinging to her face which is smeared with makeup running in dark lines down her cheeks. All the colour is gone from my skin, my lips a pale hue of blue.

“Willow!” Ash says, as she runs over to me. Her eyes are glazed and wide, and even though I can tell she is worried, she has a lazy smile on her face. “What? How? What on earth?” She sweeps her gaze up and down my dishevelled appearance.

“Sheesh! What happened to you?” The boy who partnered her comes over. His words run together and he drapes himself over Ash, staring at me with his head resting lopsidedly on her shoulder.

“What have you taken?” I ask wearily.

She giggles and holds her finger out, pointing at me. “Don’t try to change the subject,” she says, attempting to be stern and wagging her finger. “You’re the one that’s under investigation.” She has trouble

getting the words out, and attempts it a number of times before smiling triumphantly, if not a little crookedly, when she gets it right.

“I’m under investigation?”

“Yes.” She nods. “For running off and coming back looking like this.” She waves her hand up and down the length of my body, shaking her head violently. She grips onto the boy to regain her balance, even though he appears to be relying on her as much as she is him.

I push my hair back from my face, and slide my hand over the back of my neck to rid it of wet strands. “What have you taken, Ash? Something of your mother’s?”

“Hell no! She wouldn’t let me near them, less for her, you see.” She turns to the boy with his head still on her shoulder and he nods. “They’re his.” She points to her shoulder and he lifts one hand to wave at me. “Leaf!” she exclaims suddenly. “His name is Leaf!”

I look between them, eyes glazed, movements lacking coordination, and hold my hand out. Feeling, thinking, coherent thought, they are the last things I want right now. Leaf grins, reaches into his pocket, and pulls out a golden pill. He deposits it into my outstretched hand, and I toss it into my mouth and swallow before I can change my mind.

“Good girl,” he says.

Ash grabs my hand, and pulls me over to a bench seat placed along one of the walls. A few people stare as we pass them.

Kale calls out, “This ain’t a fancy dress party, Willow!”

It takes a while for me to register what he’s referring to. I keep forgetting I’m still wearing the Guardians uniform, and I gesture rudely at him with my finger.

“Spill,” Ash demands as we sit. My hand, still in hers, is dragged to her lap. I relay the entire episode from when I left the party, until I pushed open the doors again, including how I just ran away like a little girl after a scolding from her parents.

“He kisses you and you shoot him?” Leaf says, his face locked in an expression of shock.

“And Bracs is still out there, wandering through some fake forest in the rain, looking for you?” Ash asks.

“No, he let me out. He knows I’m not there,” I say, and grin. “And it stopped raining.” I don’t know why I’m grinning, but my mouth seems to have decided it’s the position it wants to be in.

“Poor fellow,” Leaf says, tracing patterns on Ash’s back. She shoves his hand away, scowling at him.

“Poor fellow?” I say, my voice rising in pitch. “Poor fellow? I’m the poor one. I’m the one who has lost my best friend—sorry, one of my best friends,” I amend at Ash’s frown. “*He* decided to kiss *me*. Who made him think that would be okay? I sure didn’t. I didn’t ask for him to kiss

me. No, I did not. Why did he have to go and ruin everything? Stupid, idiotic moron.” My voice sounds whiney and high pitched, even to me.

Ash pats my hand reassuringly. “Boys are stupid.”

Leaf nods. “We are. But to be fair, you don’t make it easy on us. Take this one for example.” He inclines his head in Ash’s direction. “Chased her all night, and all I needed to do was offer one, little, golden—” Ash clamps her hand over his mouth, and his eyes bulge, twinkling blue.

I feel warmth bubbling inside me, rising until it ruptures out my mouth, and I double over with laughter.

“And it’s working,” Leaf says. “Do you feel like—”

“Let’s dance!” I jump to my feet. Thoughts of Bracken still linger in my mind, but they only play about the edges, faded by the magic of the golden pill.

Leaf, Ash, and I dance until time no longer exists. The music pumps through my body and sweat drips off my skin. I unseal the seam of the bodysuit to let some air cool me down, but I don’t stop dancing. The stars sway above me, swirling and blending into a ball of colour. Particles of light float through the air and I try to catch one on my tongue. Occasionally, Ash yells something over the crowd, but I don’t hear. I just keep dancing. It’s not until Ash drags me across the floor and out the doors that I stop.

“Brilliant!” I say. “Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant. It’s a funny word really isn’t it?” I spin around, trying to fix my eyes on Ash. I spin around again, and again, until I find myself on my bottom on the sealed surface of the tram tracks. A sharp pain scrapes across my ankle, causing me to wince, but I quickly forget about it as the world sways around me. I flop onto my back and wait for it to still. “Brilliant,” I say again. My tongue vibrates on the ‘r’ as I roll it over my tongue. Where’s Ash? I sit up, and regret it immediately as my head spins. “Ash!” I yell.

“What?” she yells back. I follow the line of the tram tracks down the street and find Ash teetering along one of the rails. She wobbles from side to side, but her feet never leave the track. “Come on!” she yells again. “I’ve had the most brilliant of ideas!” She rolls the ‘r’ over her tongue as I had been doing.

I hoist myself off the ground and follow her as she and Leaf stroll hand in hand. “Where are we going?” I ask, when I catch up to them.

Ash simply touches her finger to her nose and smiles mischievously. “It’s a secret.” She giggles.

The three of us walk hand in hand out of the centre of the city. We follow the tram tracks until we reach a part of the city I haven’t frequented many times before. Housing block G. There are only two things in this part of the city. Dried Mudders, and the entrance to the recycling plant.

The building that houses the recycling plant is long and low to the ground. Tall chimneys poke through the ceiling of the dome, letting puffs of white smoke drift out into the air. The conveyor belts are underground and extend below the city. We went there once, on a school trip. I remember all the people looking at me as I passed by them. They sorted through the rubbish, picking out the valuables, and recyclable materials, and sorting them into piles. Some of them wore chains attached to their feet and shackled to the ground. It was the only way you could tell the difference between the prisoners and the Mudders.

I stop in my tracks and shake my head. "What are you planning, Ash?"

Ash rolls her eyes. "Don't be a nana." She tugs at my hand and pulls me forward.

We walk past the recycling plant and into the housing section. It's deserted, and eerily quiet. Any enthusiasm for the excursion quickly leaves. Our footsteps echo off the walls and are deafening to my ears. Ahead, I see a man standing by a wall, arms crossed, and staring blankly in front of him. His head is shaved and you can see the outline of his muscles under his clothes. His neck is thick with muscles bulging either side.

"Ash," I caution as we approach.

"Stop worrying." She detaches herself from Leaf and walks over to him. She blinks rapidly and smiles, but the man looks unimpressed. Then, she leans forward and whispers something into his ear, a rhyme about thunder and lightning. The man looks at her, then at Leaf and me, and moves aside to reveal a black door. He twists the handle and Ash enters, waving for us to follow.

Once inside the doorway there is nothing but a staircase descending downwards. Ash is already on her way, her high-heeled shoes resounding sharp, clipped footsteps in her wake.

"I don't like this, Ash," I whisper into the darkness. I become aware I am still clutching onto Leaf's hand and shake it off.

"Don't be such a baby," her voice wafts back up to me. "I heard about this place from Ivy's boyfriend. I think the bouncer guy was rather surprised I knew of him, but since I knew the secret password, there was nothing he could do but let us in."

"What is this place? And why did he tell you about it?"

"You'll see what it is soon enough, and he didn't exactly *tell* me. It was the result of some creative listening."

I turn around and lift my eyebrows at Leaf. Even though the light is dim, I can see enough of his expression to know he has no idea where we are going either. At the bottom of the stairs there is another door. Ash knocks loudly and the door opens, letting a blast of music into the confined space.

“What?” a man yells. He comes out into the small space and closes the door behind him, cutting off the beat of the music. He has curly black hair that brushes his shoulders and a round face. He looks at each of us slowly, moving his eyes over every part of our bodies. “What?” he says again.

Ash smiles sweetly and leans forward to brush back his hair before whispering that same rhyme in his ear. He nods, and then turns and opens the door, letting the pounding music back into the stairwell. “Welcome to the black door,” he says as we enter.

Inside is crowded. Many people hold drinks in their hands, some appear to be eating. In one corner there is a display of dried fruit and nuts as well as a selection of fresh produce. I lift to my tiptoes to see over the crowd and spy dogs in cages, two of them let loose and fighting each other, a crowd of people urging them on. In another corner people are bartering and arguing over a game of cards.

Ash’s eyes twinkle as she looks around the room. “Can you believe a place like this even exists?” she squeals over the din.

I shake my head. “We need to get out of here.” Someone pushes past, and I stumble against Leaf who holds me upright as I regain my balance. “We could be arrested just for being here,” I yell.

“I know! Isn’t it exciting?” Ash grabs both Leaf and my hands, and leads us to the dance floor where people jump up and down, hands in the air, eyes wild with excitement. A man near to me shakes his head vigorously, his hair, slick with sweat, sending droplets across my face.

“I really don’t like this,” I say, grabbing Ash’s arm and jerking her towards me. “We need to leave now!”

“You really are a bore at times. For once would you quit worrying and just enjoy yourself. Do you see any Guardians here? Do you see anyone with the authority to arrest you? Anyone that knows about this place isn’t the sort to tell tales,” she hisses in my ear.

She gives me a pointed look and wraps her arms around Leaf’s shoulders, drawing him close to her. Leaf nuzzles into her neck before reaching behind him and taking my hand. He pulls me closer until the three of us form a huddled circle.

“Just one dance,” he says to me, pouting.

At first I can’t relax. I scan the room nervously, certain that Guardians are going to burst out from the shadows. But the effects of the pill soon takeover and I find myself lost in the dance. The pulsating lights, the beat of the music, all of it draws me in until I’m unsure of how long we have been here. Once, I see a flash of red in the distance, over near the bartering table. I think it’s Bear, and duck behind Leaf, hiding myself from view. I end up on the floor, laughing, thinking how ridiculous it is to think my father would ever visit such a place.

Ash is helping me get up, when someone barges through the crowd. He trips over my feet and goes flying to the floor. Another man is quick to follow. A wart on his neck burns darkly, as he grabs the first man by the throat and lifts him to his feet. It's then that I recognize the boy from the door. As the lights flash brightly, I get a better look at his face. It's a baby-face, smooth and round, making him appear only a little older than me. He grins at the wart-man that has his fingers clasped around his throat. The crowd creates space around them and holds a collective breath, waiting for a fight to ensue.

"You promised!" Wart-face roars.

Baby-face laughs. "I never promised you anything." He spits in wart-man's face. And then all hell breaks loose.

People suddenly have weapons in their hands. The man dancing beside me with the sweat-slicked hair, draws a knife and wields it. I scream and force my way into the crowd, heading for the door. Ash and Leaf are nowhere to be seen. A shove to my back sends me sprawling to the floor. I look up to see a hand extended my way. Reaching for it, I manage to get to my feet as the hand drags me away, pulling me through the crowd as we spill onto the street.

"You alright?" Baby-face says, once we are safely outside.

My breathing comes out ragged, and it takes a moment for me to regain my breath and still my racing heart. "Thank you." I huff as I lean over using the wall for support. "What happened in there?"

The boy laughs. "Some people don't always stick to their end of a bargain. They don't like to be reminded when they don't." He pats me on the head as one might pet a child. "Look after yourself, okay?" he yells, as he slips back through the doorway.

The crowd of people dissipates and I look around for Ash and Leaf. "Ash?" I whisper loudly, scanning the surroundings for any sign of her.

"What?" she yells back.

It takes a while for me to find her. And then a while longer to focus so I can see what she is doing. Wrapped in Leaf's embrace, his mouth is at her neck, a lazy smile on her lips. Clearly the night's activities haven't drained her enthusiasm for enjoyment.

"Never mind," I mumble.

Without missing a beat, she diverts her attention back to Leaf's endeavours of seducing her. I push my hands against the wall, heave myself up, and find my way back to the tram tracks that lead towards the centre of the city. My heart rate slowly returns to normal.

The zoo shines against the dimmed light panels. The building's illusion screens show a lion leaping across the plains after a gazelle. I walk towards it. Nothing is ever closed within Nuovo and inside I will find peace and solitude. And maybe somewhere to rest my thumping head. In

the back of my mind I know I should make my way home, but I push it to the side. Thinking hurts too much.

I swipe my ID across the control panel. The door slides open and I stumble through it. Not all animals are in the Zoo, only the ones you would find in the wild in this country. Certainly no lions.

I make my way up to the third level. My stomach heaves in the elevator, and I consider lying on the floor, crawling into the foetal position, and closing my eyes. The warmth and excitement that swept through me earlier is fading, replaced by nausea and movement in my head that won't stop. I can't understand why people would ever choose to feel like this.

I stumble out of the elevator and lie on the observation seat in front of the glass panel that separates me from the exhibit. A stream of water cuts its way through the grass covered ground. A deer lifts its head as I stare sideways through my lashes. Its eyes are a soft shade of brown and they remind me of Bracken. I close my eyes to block the deer's mournful stare, but the darkness makes my head spin. I open them again, and the deer is still looking at me, unblinking. Large, flat antlers protrude from its head and white patches dot along its tawny spine.

I wonder if he gets lonely.

Images flash on the screen to my left and I consider turning my ciid on so I can hear the commentary, but then I remember my ciid isn't working. I will have to take it to get repaired, my entire life is wrapped within it.

A wave of nausea washes over me and I sit up, covering my mouth with my hand. Bile pushes at my throat and I swallow it back down. Sustain is bad enough going down, it's even worse coming back up.

Without my ciid I have no way to contact my parents, not that I would want them to come and collect me in this state anyway. Without my ciid, I also have no idea what the time is.

Cautiously, I lie back on my side as the deer lifts its head from the grass to watch me. I wonder if he realises he's trapped, or if he thinks that it's me who's trapped behind the glass.

My eyelids grow heavy.

I wake with someone shaking me gently. I open my eyes, and for a moment think that the deer has escaped and is beside me, looking straight into my hazel eyes with his soft, brown ones, but it's Bracken.

"Go away," I mumble. I'm annoyed at him but can't remember why. The memory slips around my head, yet I'm unable to grasp it.

The sick feeling in my stomach returns and I lean over the edge of the bench seat, certain that this time I will be unable to stop it. Bracken gently strokes my arm. My stomach heaves but nothing comes up.

“Go away!” This time I say it more forcibly. I wave my hand behind my back, hoping it will collide with his and push it away, and then I roll over until my back is against the seat, and I’m staring at the light panels in the ceiling.

Bracken sits at the end of the seat. He lifts my feet and places them on his lap. “I’m sorry, Wills.” His voice catches in his throat, a bubble muffling his words. He sounds like his father.

It comes back to me then. Bracken. The forest. The kiss. The whole reason I feel like this. I was foolish for running from him earlier. “So you should be.” I hold my hands over my eyes and rub them, breathing deeply, trying to regain control over my head. And my stomach.

“I just . . .” He takes a deep breath and starts again. “I hoped . . . It doesn't matter now anyway. You drive me crazy, Wills. I don't know—”

“Stop,” I say, my eyes still covered by my fingers. “Just stop, please.” My head spins. Thoughts gather then scatter into a million shards that I can't collect. “Can we not talk about this now? If you hadn't noticed, I’m not feeling the best.”

“Ash . . .?” He leaves the rest unspoken.

I nod. Even the motion of moving my head hurts. We both stare at the deer, only the sound of our breathing interrupts the silence. Gathering what little strength I can, I sit up, removing my feet from his lap.

“What happened?”

I look down to where Bracken is pointing. A trickle of dried blood sticks to my ankle. I can't remember how I did it so I shrug, but even that movement hurts my head.

Bracken walks over to the pipeline extruding from the wall and waves his wrist over the scanner. He returns with a small tube of salve and rubs it over the scratch. Instantly, the pain I wasn't even aware of, dissipates and the wound stitches itself back together.

“Open,” he instructs.

Obediently, I open my mouth and he pops in a pill. It sticks in my throat, dry and bitter on the way down.

“It will make you feel better.” He holds his hand over his stomach, and as he does, I feel my own stomach settling. The unsteady swell of nausea fades.

“Speaking from experience?” I mumble. I smile, but faintly. Peace descends over me, pulling at my limbs, weighing them down and tugging at my eyelids.

“I’m familiar with the effects, though I haven't experienced them for myself.” His voice is deep, and far away. I stretch my arms out, an attempt to keep his voice from fading away entirely.

“Don't leave me.” Even my own voice sounds far away, as if it's somehow trapped behind the glass.

“Never.” He says it so quietly, I wonder if it was only in my head. My body sways, pulled by an invisible force. Arms wrap around me and I hear a grunt as my body is lifted into the air. My head flops back. “Come on. Let's get you home.”

“But I don't want to go.” I kick my feet half-heartedly, suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to stay with the deer and his sorrow filled eyes. Bracken holds me securely, and I sink back into his arms. My head rests against his chest, the steady rhythm of his heart beating in my ear.

I only know we are outside the zoo when I open my eyes and see the light panels reflecting a grey and cloudy night sky. I hear the tram pull up rather than see it. My eyes only stay open for seconds at a time. He's gentle as he places me on the seat. My head rests in his lap and his fingers run through my hair. They get caught in a tangle and a vivid thought of how I must look jolts through me, but it leaves just as quickly. Why should I care what I look like in front of Bracken anyway?

I open my eyes enough to see that the tram is empty apart from the illusion driver at the front. His smile reflects back at me on the glass. The gentle sway of travel lulls me and I drift off, Bracken's voice a gentle murmur in the back of my mind.

“. . . can't figure you out,” he says.

I know he is talking to me, about me, but I lack the coherency to respond.

“Surely you knew how I felt—how I feel. Or did you just think I would be content to just be your friend forever?” His voice is soft and quiet, like he is talking to himself rather than me. I feel the rise and fall of his body with each breath. “. . . that dress.” He chuckles quietly and I feel as though I am invading his thoughts, eavesdropping when I shouldn't. “Heck, even in this Guardians suit.” He pauses. “Especially in the suit, your hair all damp like that. Damn it, Wills. Why do you do this to me?”

I strain to hear him, but sleep beckons and finally overtakes me.

I don't wake until I hear Dune's panicked voice. “Thank goodness!” she exclaims as we enter the apartment, Bracken still carrying me. Bear sits on the couch, one boot on, bent over, pulling on the other.

“Hi,” I say, though it comes out as a croak.

Bracken carries me all the way to my bedroom and lays me down on the bed.

Dune hovers over his shoulder. “Wait while I grab her a drink, will you?” she says.

I feel the bed dip, and Bracken's face appears in my vision, his hands resting on the pillow either side of me. "Hello." He smiles and blows the hair back from his eyes. "Feeling better, are we?"

I smile and nod, my body no longer feeling anything but a warm glow.

His eyes are softer than the deer's. They are flecked with gold splinters circling the black. His hair, no matter how many times he blows it away, flops in his eyes. His features are soft in the faded light. Shadows dip below his eyes, and delicate lines from his eyelashes splay across his cheeks. I reach up and stroke his skin. It's warm and soft. He nuzzles into my hand, and I envision the warmth from his skin traveling down my arm, across my chest, and into my heart.

"I know you love me," I find myself saying, even though he has never said it. I slip my hand behind his neck and pull him towards me. His eyes block everything. Our breath mingles. Somewhere, deep down in the back of my mind, I hear a voice. 'Don't,' it says.

Ignoring it, I crush my lips against his.

Chapter Five

I wake parched. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. A croak or a growl, I'm not sure which, escapes as I sit up. My joints are stiff. My eyelids, like sandpaper.

The memory of last night floods back. I clutch my hands to my face and hang my head. *Bracken*. The last thing I remember is kissing him. Looking into his eyes, feeling so happy, so warm, and kissing him.

I'm dressed in my favourite pyjamas. The fluffy ones, black, with little blue hearts. Last I remember, I was still in the Guardian body suit.

The door opens silently and Dune pokes her head in. She slips in, closes the door, and sits on the bed. A bowl of sustain appears outstretched before me. My stomach lurches at the sight of it. Thankfully it has no odour.

"Eat," she commands, waving the bowl in front of my eyes. I shake my head, and she stretches across to place the bowl on the bedside table.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"It's still night. Something in your stomach will make you feel better." She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a yellow pill.

I shake my head.

"Even if you don't eat, you should take this. It will make you feel better. Ease the headache a little."

"I think I've had enough pills. From now on, rhineharts only."

Dune pats my knee. "I'll go get you an allowance of water."

I flop back down on the bed as soon as she is out the door, and immediately regret the sudden movement. I feel miserable. No, I feel worse than miserable, whatever that is. Wretched, maybe.

I go to activate my ciid, but it's not on my wrist. Instead, it's lying beside the bowl of sustain. I pick it up and strap it to my wrist before remembering that it's broken. Talking to Ash would have to wait.

Dune walks back in with a glass of water. It's full. "You can have my allowance," she says, handing it to me.

I smile and scull back most of the water, leaving the remaining few sips to savour. I pick up the bowl of sustain and lift a spoonful to my mouth. The grey sludge sticks to the spoon, and I have to purse my lips to scrape it off.

"Yum," I say, and grimace at Dune, my mouth full.

"So?"

"Yeah." I sigh.

I don't know what to say. How do I explain my actions? I left the ball, possibly ruined my dress, then Bracken kissed me, and I took a pill that

made me ill. I went to some underground-black-market-come-dance-party, stared at a deer in the zoo, and then Bracken came and saved me. Then, I kissed him. Sound's pathetic, even to me.

I let out a long breath, take a sip of water, and roll my head back. "I don't remember what happened after I got to bed. Did you change me?" I look down at the fluffy hearts.

"Yes, and it was quite the mission. You were pretty much dead to the world, no help whatsoever." She looks down at the crumpled Guardian outfit on the floor. A flicker of annoyance crosses her face. "What happened, Willow? This isn't like you."

"Bracken kissed me."

"It looked more like you were kissing him," she says sternly.

"You saw that?"

She nods.

"He kissed me first, not that it matters, but he did. I didn't realise he felt that way about me. I mean I did, but I guess I thought he knew how I felt about him, which is not how he feels about me."

"But you kissed him," Dune prompts.

"I know that!" I say, exasperated. "It was a crap night, I made some bad decisions, and then I made some even worse ones, but it's over now, so can we just forget about it? Please?"

If I didn't know better, I would say Dune looks a little relieved at my outburst. The tension leaves her face, and she pats my knee firmly. "Fine with me. We're leaving soon anyway."

"Who's leaving?"

"*We* are leaving."

"You and me?"

"Yes. You and me."

"Where are we going?"

"To see someone," Dune replies.

"Who?"

"Be ready in twenty minutes. We'll be going to the train."

"But what about the parade?" I yell as the door shuts behind her. She doesn't answer, and I consider going after her, but I simply cannot be bothered. Groaning, I put down the bowl and flop on the bed, once again regretting the jolt to my head. Today, of all days, is not the day to be travelling. I grab my pillow, shove it over my face and scream until I have no breath left. I stay under the pillow for a few moments, before pulling it from my face and dragging myself to my feet, ready to attempt a shower.

The steams swirls around me, the pressure shooting over my body, ridding me of last night's grime. I get out into the cool air feeling

refreshed, ready to take on whatever the day throws at me. Unless it's Bracken. I'm not ready for that discussion just yet.

I open the door and yell at Dune, asking her how long we will be going for. She tells me she's already packed, and all I need to do is get dressed. I pull on a pair of jeans, a comfy sweater, and my sneakers. I may as well be comfortable on the trip. I strap my ciid onto my wrist even though it's broken. I feel too naked without it.

The tram ride to the train station is short, and Dune doesn't say much. I stare out of the window, head resting on my palm, elbow on the armrest. My stomach grumbles loudly and I regret not finishing my sustain. People are already milling about in preparation for the parade. Banners hang limply outside the Depot. Lights and streamers stretch from building to building. Guardians pace in unison, their faces a blank canvas of uniformity. I feel annoyed that I will miss it, but Dune is insistent.

Because of the parade, the train station is mostly deserted, making the white, tiled walls and sleek, grey lines even more dreary than usual. There are a few people milling about, though most of the illusions are yet to be activated. One person sleeps on a bench, waiting for his train to arrive. A few others flick through pages on their ciids and pace the platform.

"Please state the number of tickets you require," the sole on duty illusion ticket officer says. This one is female, a friendly smile on her face, nothing defining or individual about her. Generic.

"Two," Dune says into the speaker, then glances over her shoulder.

The illusion smiles, her eyes looking straight through us. "Please swipe your barcode and state into the ciid the purpose of your travel."

Dune swipes her wrist, then speaks. "Business."

The light flickers green.

"One of two processed," the illusion says in the same annoying tone.

I step up and swipe my wrist. "Dependant."

"Two of two processed."

The light flicks green again, and a door slides open. Dune glances over her shoulder as if she is looking for someone, worry burrowed into her forehead. The train is ready and waiting. It's long and sleek and white. Some people are already aboard, their faces peering at us from behind tinted glass. We are about to step onto the train, when Bear runs up to us, breathless.

"Da?" I say, surprised.

Bear works at the transport station. He is dressed in his usual overalls, sweat glistening on his brow and catching on his bushy, red eyebrows.

"I thought you weren't going to make it?" Dune says, and kisses him on the lips. This is who she was waiting for.

"Are you coming with us?" I ask.

“Not this time, kid.” He kisses me on each cheek, clasping them in his hands, and his eyes glisten with tears.

“Is everything okay?” I look between Dune and Bear, both of their faces etched with emotion, tears in their eyes. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. I’ll see you soon and listen to your Mother.” He turns to Dune. “Everything okay?”

She nods, holding back tears. “You think we’re making the right choice? You don’t think that maybe we should wait for you? Use the tunnel?”

Bear draws Dune to him and hugs her tightly. “This is the only way. The streets are crawling with Guardians. There’s no way we would be able to make it to the black door without being stopped.” Bear kisses her passionately. I want to look away, but there is something so desperate about them, I can’t. It’s like I’m watching from afar, drawn to them like a magnet. And then, with one last lingering look, he is gone.

“Okay, I’m seriously getting worried,” I say, as Dune climbs onto the rail train and sinks onto a seat. A fat tear rolls down her cheek. The doors slide shut, and she says nothing. “Mother?”

She shakes her head and looks up at me, a sad smile creeping over her face. “I’m sorry. Your father and I are just having some issues, I thought he was annoyed at me, he thought I was annoyed at him.” She waves her hand as if pushing the drama away. “It’s all fine now, though. Everything is good.” Her smile is extra wide, as if to prove her point. She settles back and swipes her ciid.

“What did you mean about making the right choice? What black door?” I ask, thinking of the door from last night.

Dune shakes her head and covers her face. “Just drop it, Willow, okay?”

Something is clearly wrong but she doesn’t want to talk about it. My ciid is broken, so I have nothing left to do but stare out the windows. It’s quiet in this part of the city. Bathed in a dim glow from the light panels, we follow the line of the rail track slowly. Ahead, I can see the gap in the dome where a panel is opening at our approach. The train slides effortlessly through and we are outside.

Really, truly, outside.

A shudder passes through me. I look back on the geometric shape of the dome. The shiny black panels, framed in white, blend into the dawning sky. The land this side of the dome is barren, just bare dirt with the occasional thorny shrub. The lush forest that I saw from the gondolas is only visible from the other side of Nuovo. It’s protected land. No one, not even the Guardians, enter it.

I keep my nose pressed to the window as we glide along the track, picking up speed the further we get from Nuovo. Soon the landscape is nothing but a blur of colour.

Dune keeps her eyes firmly fixed on the pages of her ciid, only glancing up occasionally to scan the windows. The sun begins to rise in the distance. I hold my breath as the entire landscape becomes washed in a golden glow.

We are alone in the stall. Dune's ciid starts to beep and a news flash hovers in thin air. She powers it off quickly.

"What was that? I ask.

She gets to her knees and starts to rummage through the cupboards under the seats. "Nothing," she mumbles.

I look back over the horizon and see a wisp of black smoke trailing into the air above the dome. "Dune, what's going on?" I ask again. Panic begins to pool in the pit of my stomach. The train begins to slow. Then, it grinds to a halt. The ground is dry and barren beneath us.

"What's happening?" I get to my feet. "Why has it stopped?"

"Sit," she instructs. She throws me a bag which I open to find hundreds of rhineharts.

Panic rises from my stomach to my chest. "Dune, what the heck is going on?" I rifle through the bag, but it has nothing but rhineharts.

"In short," she says on her knees, her hand deep in one of the cupboards, searching for something. "We are escaping." She pulls out a tangle of ropes and hooks, and jangles them roughly until they fall into shape.

"Escaping from what?"

"Honey." Her tone is gentle, like she is talking to a child.

"Don't honey me!" I say vehemently. "Just spit it out. What on earth is going on? What's happening with you and Da? And what are they for?" I jerk my head at the ropes, my hands wrapped tightly around the seat beneath me.

"It's a harness." She holds one out to me. "Take it."

"Are you out of your mind?" I shake my head. "This isn't right. What's happening?" I sound hysterical, but nothing is making sense. I hear people milling about in the other stalls, a murmur of confusion flooding the train. Dune locks the door.

"You and Da can work things out . . ." I let the words trail off as I see her stern expression.

"Your father and I are fine," she snaps. "Now put this on, and hurry up. This thing will only stop for so long, and if we aren't gone, this will have all been for nothing."

I am frozen to the spot, unable to move, even under direction. Her words tumble about in my head, colliding, only fragments of the answers I need to make sense of this.

“For goodness sake, Willow!” She stalks towards me, wraps the harness around my body and clicks things into place, jerking my body with each tug. “There. Now listen.” She pulls me close and engulfs me in an embrace. “You are going to climb out this window. And then, I will lower you to the ground. Hopefully, I will follow. But if anything happens to me,” she pulls back and holds me by the shoulders, “if I get stalled or captured, you must go on without me. Walk towards the sun and you will find a little shed. Stay in this shed until someone comes for you. Do not move. You hear me? Do not move from that shed.”

I shake my head before she is even done speaking.

“Willow, listen. I haven’t got time to explain everything to you right now, but this isn’t what your father or I ever wanted for you. The Establishment cannot control everyone. Now, do you trust me?”

I nod numbly, and the train lurches. We stumble and grab onto the railing that surrounds the walls. My stomach lurches. Dune looks around desperately as the train stills.

“Time to go,” she says.

I’m rooted to the spot. I look out the window and down at the ground below. It’s dry and dusty. Only some stones and broken branches litter the dirt at the base of the skeleton trees that shield the train from the rest of the world.

Dune takes a piece of material out of her bag and wraps it around her hand. “Ready?”

I shake my head and wobble out a no.

Dune looks foreign to me. Not my mother, not the woman who does cycle upon cycle of washing each day. But some distant woman from a time I don’t know, one who is ready to put her fist through a glass window.

She rams the glass. It shatters but stays in place apart from the hole made by her hand. She reaches through and attaches a hook to the rail. Next, she knocks all the glass out of the frame and throws our bags out. A small puff of dust rises where they land.

“You first,” she says, and nods to the window.

I shake my head, my feet refusing to move.

“You must!” She pushes me towards the empty space until I can feel the breeze across my face and asses the distance to the ground below.

I swallow the lump caught in my throat. “I can’t,” I whimper, my words barely audible.

“Kneel on the seat,” she orders.

I obey even though my entire body is shaking.

“Grab the rope and lean back. Rest your feet on the edge, and then I will lower you down. You don’t have to do a thing. I’ll do it for you.”

A hum buzzes through the train. Dune’s eyes widen. “Now!” she yells.

“What about you?” Tears smart in my eyes and burn in my throat.

“I’ll be right behind you, but I can’t leave until you’re on the ground. Please Willow, go!”

The wind is stronger outside the train, whipping my hair across my face. My feet cling to the edge. “I can’t.”

Dune reaches down and pushes the tips of my feet. I scream as I dangle below the train, my body in a state of shock, my mind a jumble. The rope sways as the train begins to move again.

“Mother!” I shout, petrified.

“It’s okay. Just hold on!”

There’s a deep rumbling and the wind picks up, tossing and twisting me in its current. A flight transporter crests the line of trees. I point at it while still clutching to the rope, trying to catch Dune’s attention. Her face pales. She looks at the transporter, and then back at me.

“I love you!” she yells into the air. I look up again to see her loosening the rope, her long blonde hair flying around her face. I stretch my hand out to her.

And then, I fall.

I’m weightless for a few moments, my heart hovering somewhere above my chest. Then, I hit the ground hard. The air gushes out of my lungs, and for a moment I lie on my back, unable to breathe. My heart pounds. My back aches. Terror wells within me, relieved only when I finally gasp in air. Above me, the train is picking up pace along the rail. Dune leans out the window, her hair whipping around her neck like a scarf. She brings her fingers to her lips and then holds them in the air as I watch the train take her away. The flight transporter hovers, then drifts away, ignoring me lying frozen on the ground.

I groan and attempt to roll over, but the pain in my back stops me. I fist my hands at my side and scream until there’s nothing left. And then I stare, unblinking at the pale blue, cloudless sky until tears blur my vision.

One by one I flex the various parts of my body, wincing as pins of pain stab into me. Cautiously, I get to my feet and pat myself, checking for injuries missed. Apart from the dull ache in my back, I’m fine. I dust off the dirt from my pants and wipe my hands on my sweater. The train is long gone, but still I wait, looking down the rail, hoping that it will appear again.

It doesn’t.

I think back to the instructions Dune yelled to me on the train. Walk towards the sun. Find a shed. Wait.

The sun stretches its way through the maze of trees, trickling golden beams of light through the naked branches. I face it, square my shoulders and start walking.

The outside is not what I expected. Within the walls of Nuovo, the outside had been romanticised. They made us believe there was something worth saving. Something worth protecting. But as I look around, I see nothing but barren land and dust. Once, this would have been a forest. But now the trees are grey skeletons left behind as scattered bones of a world gone wrong. No wonder they want to capture all the Mudders if this is what they are doing to our planet. We are better off away from it, locked in the domed cities where we cannot harm it anymore.

I stumble along, scanning the horizon for the shed, one backpack slung over my shoulder, the other hanging in my hand. Thankfully, it isn't far before a shambled silhouette breaks the line of trees. The walls, which were once painted white, are stained with dried mud, the wooden boards, rotten and crumbling. Surprisingly, all the windows are intact, although covered in a thick layer of dust. I wipe a line in the grime and peer through the window. It's dark, and I cannot see anything. The door is slightly ajar, attached by one hinge and leaning against the ground. It doesn't budge when I push on it, so I take off my backpack and squeeze through the gap.

Despite the sunshine outside, inside it's dark, and it takes a while for my eyes to adjust. There is a bed in one corner and a low lying table beside it. A bench stretches the length of a wall, and stacked on top are cans, some cutlery and crockery, a half burnt candle, some matches, and a large knife. A tattered blanket is draped across the bed, the edges of it brushing against the dirt floor. Someone has been here before, though not for a while.

"Hello?" I whisper into the forlorn room.

Nothing but the whistle of the wind blowing past the open door greets me. I pull the bags through the door and slump to the bed. There, I cover my face with my hands and sob until I have no strength left, and then I fall into a fitful sleep.

When I wake, it's darker. I can barely distinguish the windows from the walls. I get to my feet and grope around until I reach the table and seek out the candle and matches. I start to shake. I'm cold, my hands fumbling as I attempt to light the match. The first few break, but finally one ignites and I hold it to the wick of the candle. Soon a gentle glow fills the room, but all it does is highlight the hidden corners draped in a blanket of shadows.

I busy myself by attacking an unlabelled can with the knife, but all I manage to do is stab the top and let some of the reddish liquid dribble

onto my tongue. I shudder at the taste. Years ago, when domed cities were just a concept by the Establishment, these cans were the main staple of people's diets. A thick, reddish-brown gloop that tastes foul. They let us eat some in history class once. The taste doesn't get better with time. I open my bag, grab a handful of rhineharts, down one, and shove the rest into my pocket. Retreating back to my bed, I try not to imagine the unknown crawling insects that surround me. Drawing my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around them, I wait.

Someone will meet you here, Dune had said. But how long would I have to wait?

A branch cracks outside and my body stiffens. I decide having my shed lit up is a bad idea and blow out the candle. Plunged back into darkness, I instantly regret my decision. The door creaks and footfall crosses the doorway. I scream, and a rough hand is clamped over my mouth.

"Quiet!" a gruff voice commands. The stranger uncovers my mouth and blinds me with a bright light. "Are you going to keep quiet?"

I squint and nod my head. Sitting quietly, I breathe heavily as the stranger fumbles with his torch. A beam of light passes over him. His appearance is frightening. Dirt covers his face and his clothing. His hair is matted and stuck to his head. Sweat glistens on his skin, and his chin and jaw are covered in rough stubble. The end of a deep scar trails out from beneath his stubble and down his neck. Only his eyes show any hint of humanity. There is no doubt what he is. A Mudder. I stay mute and study his face, my pulse beating in my throat.

"Up you get," the man says, turning and extending his hand. It is weathered and worn. "We better get a move on."

Cautiously, I take his hand, wincing as he pulls me to my feet. "Who are you?" I manage to stammer out.

He looks at me, his expression blank. "Jake." He extends his hand which I hesitantly take and shake. He has a strong grasp that squashes my fingers together.

"Willow." I hope he isn't watching as I wipe my hands across my pants.

"I know." He picks up my bags, one filled with rhineharts, the other, a change of clothing. He opens them both and grunts. I wonder how long the rhineharts will last me, as the thought of living on the limited canned nutrition isn't appealing.

I clear my throat. "Did my mother arrange to meet you?"

"She's not here?" he asks suddenly, looking around the room and peering out the door.

I shake my head. "She didn't make it off the train."

“But it was successful, though?”

“What was?”

He looks at me, a strange expression on his face. “So she didn’t tell you anything?”

“Tell me what? Do you know her?” It doesn’t seem possible that my mother could have ever known this rough man.

Jake picks up my bags, hands one to me, and pulls the other over his shoulder. “Huh,” he says.

I wait for him to continue, but he walks off, leaving me no choice but to sling my bag over my shoulder and follow the outline of him in the dim light.

“All you have to say is, huh?” I call out.

He turns to look at me briefly before throwing his response over his shoulder. “Yes.”

I stop walking. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“You don’t.”

I slump to the ground and sit crossed legged, losing sight of him as the silhouette of his figure blends in with the dark lines of tree trunks. A single tear rolls down my cheek and drops onto my sweater, leaving a wet splotch.

I’m not following this man anywhere. I will sit here and wait. Surely the Guardians will stumble across me before I starve to death. I have nutrition pills to keep me going for a while.

The forest, or rather lack of forest, is beginning to come alive as the dawn threatens to spill over the horizon. Somehow the trees look threatening towering above me, the branches broken and split, jutting into the air. Sticks and stones on the ground dig into my legs. A spider moves beside me, lifting each leg high to navigate the terrain. The cracks in the earth must seem like canyons to it. I shuffle back until my spine rests on a trunk, and there's a reasonable distance between my legs and the travelling spider. Insects occasionally make their way inside Nuovo, but in general, it's a nature free place. A concrete jungle.

The tree beside me is mottled with moss. I reach out and run my fingers down the trunk and the moss crumbles under the pressure of my fingers, disintegrating and falling to the ground.

I’m not sure how long it is before Jake returns, but he’s annoyed. “You coming or not?” he says gruffly.

“Coming where?” I cross my arms and glare at him. I’m not going anywhere until I get some sort of explanation.

Jake’s expression softens as he sees my eyes, red from holding back the tears. He sighs and sits down beside me. “She really didn’t tell you anything?”

I shake my head.

“Well, let’s start over then.” He holds out his hand again. “Hi. I’m your Uncle Jake.”

About the Author

Girl Behind Glass is the debut novel of New Zealand author, Abby Wilder. A collection of scenes told from the perspective of Bracken Rush is available at her website, or for purchase in the Kindle store.

The sequel, Girl Beneath Stars, will be released in 2015.

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