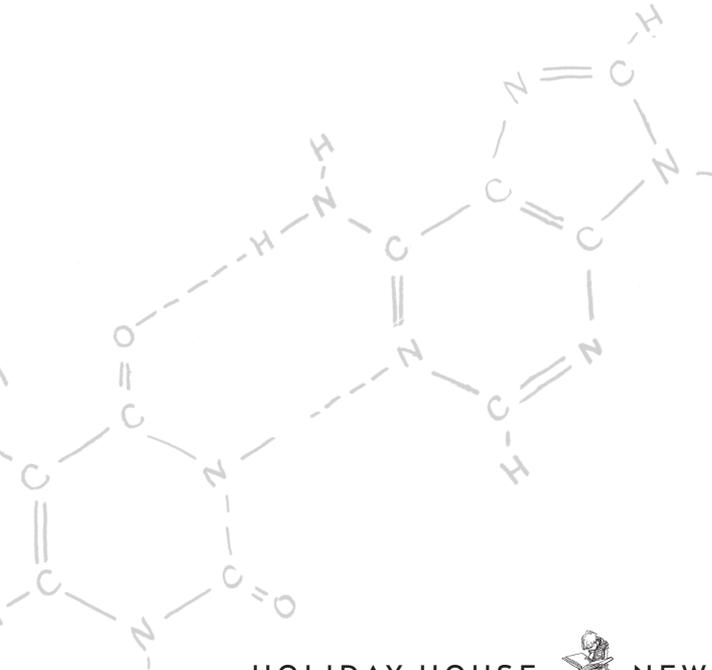


SPLICED

JON MCGORAN



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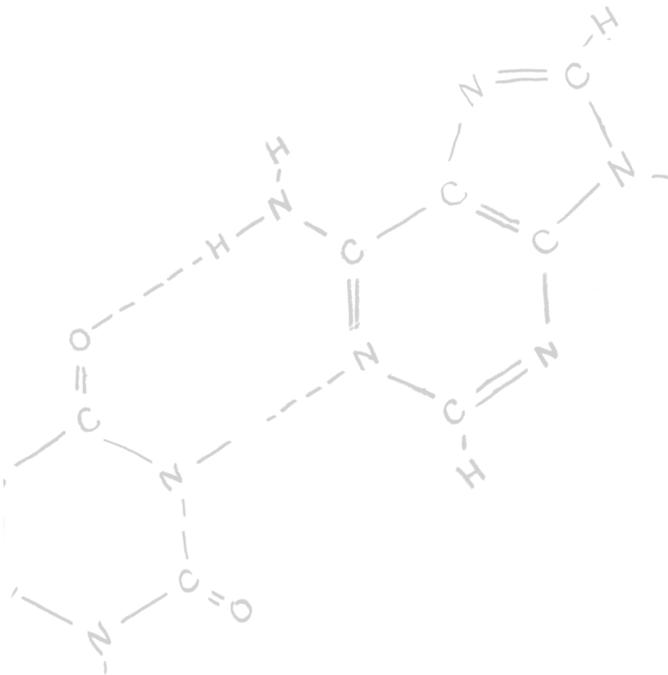
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To people deciding who they want to be,
and to Earth for everyone



PART ONE



ONE

I awoke with a start to the sound of yelling and the sight of spaceships doing battle above my bed.

It wasn't the first time this had happened. If I left the Hologrid set to automatic, it turned off when I fell asleep but started playing again as soon as I woke up. I waved it off and looked at the clock.

Six fifty-six.

The yelling was coming from next door. Nothing new there, either. But in the two weeks my mom and Kevin had been gone, I'd gotten used to our house being extra quiet. When there was noise, I really heard it.

My alarm was set for seven, and I closed my eyes, determined to enjoy those last few minutes in spite of the ruckus. Then I heard a crash.

I jumped out of bed, yanked on a bathrobe over my thin tank top, and looked out my window as Del came half running, half falling down his back steps. His momentum took him across the stretch of grass that separated our houses. I was almost down the stairs when he started banging on the back door.

He didn't stop until he saw me through the small panes of glass. His face always got red when he was angry, but this morning it was redder than usual. Especially the hand-shaped mark that took up the whole left side.

I opened the door, and he flew past me, stomping around the kitchen table twice before he uttered a word.

"I *hate* Stan," he finally said, his face twisting with emotion.

This was not news.

Lots of kids say they hate their parents, but Stan—Del's dad—was truly bad, mean in a crazy-strict kind of way. He'd always been a jerk,

but he'd gotten more vicious over the last few years. Sometimes when he'd bring his patrol car home, I'd look at the TO SERVE AND PROTECT written on the side and wonder if it was supposed to be ironic or just plain sarcastic.

I poured us two glasses of orange juice. It was kind of a ritual between us, something my mom started doing when we were younger and Del would come over upset about something.

I put the glasses on the table and sat in front of one of them. Del circled the kitchen a few more times, eyes burning with rage, before settling in front of the other.

I took stock of him while he seethed, and it struck me how different he looked compared to just a few months ago, maybe even a few weeks ago. Lately my mom wouldn't shut up about how much we were both changing, how quickly we were growing up. It was annoying, the way she went on about it, but looking at Del that morning, I could sort of see what she meant.

He wasn't anywhere close to physically intimidating Stan. But he was tall—almost six feet now—and getting more solid, more muscular. He still had that Del vulnerability, but skinny had turned to slender. Below his prominent cheekbones, his jawline looked stronger, too, but that could have been because it was clenched so hard. This morning, his unruly dark hair could pass for tousled.

It occurred to me that objectively speaking, Del was sort of hot. But he'd be the last person on earth to own it, which was one of the many reasons I liked him.

I waited until he sipped some juice before I asked, "You okay?"

His eyes were still burning, but then they rolled, annoyed. He started laughing. I did, too. I had meant it seriously, but we both knew it was a ridiculous question.

"Yeah, Jimi," he said. "I'm just great."

We'd come a long way since the first few times Del's dad had gone off on him. Back when we were little, Stan scared the living crap out of

us. These days, the whole situation was more depressing than scary. It wasn't the end of the world; it's just how the world *was*. Or at least Del's corner of it.

It would have been nice if he had more people in that corner with him. But besides me, Del didn't have any real friends, and Stan was his only family. His mom had committed suicide a few years ago, after the last big flu outbreak, a year after the one that killed my dad. Del didn't like to talk about it. Stan had been a mess ever since.

"You got any bagels?" Del asked.

"Yeah." I reached behind me and grabbed the bag out of the fridge. As I tossed it onto the table, Del gave me a funny look.

"What?" I said.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Moons and stars?"

He was smirking but blushing, too, and at first I had no idea what he was talking about. Then I realized my robe had come open.

"Don't be an idiot."

"What? It's a pretty shirt. What there is of it."

"I didn't have time to get dressed because some wacko was banging on my door. Besides, you've seen me in tank tops a million times."

"Well, the moons-and-stars one is especially cute."

I rolled my eyes at him, but the way he had been looking at me was messing with my head. The morning had already gotten off to a sucky start. I didn't need things getting awkward, too. "I have to get ready," I said, standing up and tying my robe tight.

Del cleared his throat and pulled a bagel out of the bag. "Do you want one?" he asked as he started hacking at it with a knife, sprinkling poppy seeds everywhere.

"Sure," I called back as I ran up the stairs.



I tend to shower pretty quickly, but for some reason, knowing Del was downstairs, and after the way he'd been looking at me, I finished

up even faster than usual. We'd been friends forever—we'd probably even been in the tub together at some point—but things were different now.

It occurred to me as I rinsed off that maybe my mom's daily comments about us growing up weren't so much about the physical changes. Those were pretty obvious, and every kid who'd taken fifth-grade health class knew they were coming. Maybe it was more about who we were becoming as people.

I was out of the shower before the mirror had fogged, and I paused in front of it. My mom told me—constantly—that I was pretty. But she said it in this wistful way that made me wonder if she was really talking about how much I looked like my dad: the small curve at the end of my nose, the faint freckles, the light hair, the brown eyes. People said all the time that I looked like him. I never used to see it, but lately even I had been struck by the resemblance.

I put on jeans and a light sweater, tied back my damp hair, rubbed some moisturizer on my face, and ran back downstairs.

Del had a bagel waiting for me—hacked, toasted, and buttered—on a plate.

"Thanks." I took a giant bite, then looked up at the clock. "Yikes. We need to go."

Del looked over my shoulder and out the window. "Crap."

"What?"

"Stan's car's still there. He hasn't left for the station yet."

"So?"

"So, I need my bag."

My stomach sank. I looked at the clock again. "Okay," I said, steering him toward the door with my hand on his back. "Just get in and get out. Fast and quiet. He won't even know you're there."

TWO

The shouting started up again as soon as Del slipped back inside his house. As I wolfed down the rest of my breakfast and headed out the door, I could make out Stan's voice now and again saying "disgrace" or "heathen."

I tried not to roll my eyes. Stan loved the word *heathen*. He used to be a normal guy who went to church once a week like lots of people did. But then Del's mom died, and it was like, once a week just wasn't enough. So he found another church—a different kind of church, called the Church of the Eternal Truth. It was pretty intense—like, I think they spent a lot of time talking about who was going to hell—and Stan got into it big-time. He volunteered for all sorts of things there. Sometimes I wondered if he spent so much time there because he was afraid to be home with Del. If so, the feeling was mutual.

Standing outside in the almost-chill of early autumn, I could hear them going back and forth—not the words anymore, just their voices, taking turns trying to hurt each other.

The mail drone flew past our houses, and I looked at my watch. It was almost 7:30. I hated running late, and we were really pushing it. The drone stopped down the street and left a package on the Merricks' porch, then it shot off into the sky and disappeared.

I was starting to get seriously antsy when I heard two noises—the screech of Del's screen door as he finally came out and the hum of the school bus cruising past our stop, right on schedule.

We ran to the end of the block and got there just in time to watch the bus disappear around the next corner.

I scowled at Del.

"Sorry," he said with a shrug. "What can I say? My dad's a jerk."

I stifled a growl and started speed walking. I could hear him coming up behind me. “Let’s just ditch,” he called.

I turned to look at him, trying to read his face. He had a mischievous twinkle in his eye and a half smile. He had one earbud in his ear, the other clipped to his shirt. If we’d made the bus, we’d probably be sharing a song by now, something he’d found on some weird playlist I’d never heard of.

I’d never ditched school in my life. But for a moment, the expression on Del’s face had me thinking about it—wondering what the day would look like, what we would do. What it would feel like to let loose a little.

Del seemed to sense my resistance wavering. “Come on,” he said. “We deserve a mental health day.”

I laughed. “You need a mental health *month*, at least. Maybe a year. But I can’t ditch.” I turned away and kept walking. “Besides, we have a test.”

“Oh, come on. That class is a joke.” Honors calculus was the one class Del was better in than I was. I got mostly As, but for me, calc was work.

Del came up beside me. “We can just take a makeup.”

I turned and looked at him again, trying not to let him know how seriously I was considering it. He bobbed an eyebrow at me, and we walked that way for a few seconds, neither of us looking where we were going.

I turned away first. “I can’t ditch,” I said again. “And neither can you. It’s not like we’re a shoe-in for Temple U, or anywhere else. We can’t afford to be screwing around. Not junior year. And you know what my mom would do if she found out.”

He stayed quiet, sulking. Okay by me, I thought. *I* should be the one sulking, since he was the one who’d made me miss the bus. Luckily, since our bus route was so long and convoluted, walking wouldn’t get us to school much later than usual. If I’d *really* been worried, I could have just run and gotten there in no time. I probably would have

enjoyed it. But Del was no athlete. And annoyed as I was, I didn't want to leave him behind.

We hopped fences and snuck through backyards, cutting diagonally through our neighborhood. Oakton was a decent neighborhood on the northwest edge of Philadelphia, not far from Broad Street, which bisected the city going north and south. My mom thought we were a little too close to the zurbs, but there were lots of trees and grass, and it was better than a lot of other neighborhoods in the city. My dad used to say it reminded him of how the zurbs used to be, but with electricity and stuff that you could only get in the city now.

We'd walked about a block without saying anything when Del got over himself and broke his silence. "Okay, I was going to save this for after school, but check this out," he said, stepping closer.

He rolled up his sleeve to show a massive chameleon freshly tattooed onto the inside of his right forearm. Its tail was coiled in a tight spiral that perfectly hid the scar at its center, where Stan had held a lit cigarette several months earlier. Del had made me promise not to tell anyone about it, and I still wondered if I should have.

"A tattoo?" I said. "Seriously? When did you get that?"

He laughed. I didn't. He knew I didn't like tattoos. I couldn't believe he had gotten it without telling me. Then again, he probably knew I would have tried to talk him out of it.

"Last night, while Stan was at his Bible study meeting. There's a parlor by the Avenue that does them cheap. Pretty cool, right? It looks just like Sydney."

Sydney was Del's nine-inch pet tiger salamander. He'd wanted to get a chameleon, but Stan wouldn't let him. Technically, he didn't let him get a salamander, either—Del just went and got it.

"You do know that's a chameleon, and that Sydney's a salamander, right?"

Del shrugged. "Artistic license. Besides, I think it captures Sydney's spirit."

Sydney was cute, as amphibians go, and Del loved him more than a salamander should really be loved. It was like an obsession.

I shook my head. “What is it with you and that salamander?”

He looked at me with mock indignation. “Are you serious? You mean apart from the fact that salamanders are the only animals that can regenerate limbs? Salamanders are *awesome*. And Sydney is the best one there is.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Okay, I’ll admit, Sydney *is* pretty cool, for a lizard.”

“Sydney’s an amphibian,” Del said, correcting me.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. So is that why your dad’s so angry?” I asked, pointing at the tattoo.

He rolled down his sleeve as we turned onto Devon Street. “Are you kidding? Stan hasn’t seen this. He’d go nuts.”

I was going to ask Del if *he* was the one who’d gone nuts, doing something he knew was going to set his father off.

Instead, I stopped in my tracks and said, “Oh no.”

Our chances of getting to school on time suddenly looked an awful lot slimmer.

THREE

The red plastic fence spanned the entire road, sidewalk to sidewalk. A sign attached to it said DEVON STREET BRIDGE CLOSED. I ran up and peered over it.

The bridge wasn't just closed; it was gone. Empty space yawned where it used to be. I looked right and left, up and down the rails that stretched each way into the distance.

"When did this happen?"

The mail drone flew over our heads, effortlessly crossing the void where the bridge once stood. It seemed to be rubbing it in.

Del stepped up next to me and said, "Huh."

The tracks were sandwiched between two tall fences. Together, they stretched into the distance. To the right I could see the Forrest Avenue Bridge, a mile away. To the left was the old McAllister Street Bridge, a quarter that distance. But outside the city. In the zurbs.

Del spat into the ravine, watching the little white dot as it arced up into the air and landed on the dusty rocks between the two sets of tracks.

I punched him in the arm.

"Ouch," he said, kind of laughing, but not completely.

"What are we going to do now?" I demanded.

He hooked his fingers into the construction fence and gave it a little shake. Before I could tell him we were *not* going to climb the fences, a soft whispering sound grabbed our attention, and we both looked down at the tracks. The sound grew for a second, then exploded into a roar as a long, silver Lev train flashed below us. It was moving so fast you couldn't see the gaps between the train cars—just

an uninterrupted silver blur. Trash and freshly fallen leaves whipped around violently as the train tore through the air.

A shorter train going the other way appeared on the other track, startling us both.

Then they were gone, replaced by the drizzly sound of the debris settling back to the ground.

“We could ditch,” Del said.

I punched him again.

“Stop it,” he said, rubbing his arm.

“Damn it, Del, for the last time, I can’t ditch! And I can’t be late, either. I barely managed to talk my mom into letting me stay on my own. You know she said if I screw up I’ll have to stay with Aunt Trudy.”

Trudy was my eccentric aunt—my dad’s sister. She ran an art gallery in the city, but lived out in the zurbs, in an area called Perkins Park. She seemed nice enough, but I hardly knew her. She’d moved out to the West Coast when I was little, and I’d met her exactly twice since then: once for a few hours at my dad’s funeral, and once a year ago after she moved back east and my mom invited her over for what may have been the most awkward dinner of my life.

Aunt Trudy was the only family we had. When Mom agreed to let me stay in the house alone while she was doing college visits with Kevin, she made it clear that if she later decided it wasn’t working out, I’d end up staying with Aunt Trudy. My mom wasn’t known for bluffing.

I glared at Del and kicked the fence.

“It’s not my fault we’re late,” Del said defensively. “You know how my dad is.”

“Yeah, and I know how you are, too.”

“What do you mean by that?” he said, his voice rising.

“I *mean*, just because he’s an abusive jerk who’s always looking for a fight, doesn’t mean you always have to give him one.”

He glared back at me.

“I’m serious, Del,” I said, softening my voice. “You’re not going to change him. Sometimes you have to just walk away and let him be his miserable self.”

He turned and started walking away from me instead.

“Del!” I called after him. I felt bad, even though what I’d said was true. I started to follow him, but when he got to the corner, he turned right instead of left. Toward the McAllister Street Bridge. The one outside the city.

“Uh, Del?” I called after him, running to catch up. “Where are you going?”

“You said it yourself. You can’t be late. This way is fastest.”

“Well, yeah,” I said, hurrying to keep up with him. “But it’s outside the city.”

“It’s not the edge of the world,” he said with a sharp laugh. “You’re not going to sail off the edge, for God’s sake.”

I didn’t like the way he was taunting me, and I really didn’t like the fact that it was working. I’d been outside the city, plenty of times. We used to go all the time when I was little. But the zurbs had gotten weirder since then. I wasn’t scared. I just didn’t like it.

On the last block before North Avenue, the northern edge of the city, the houses turned ratty. Some had beat-up cars out front, old gasoline models retrofitted with electric motors. Half a block from the Avenue, the Super-E utility lines came out of the ground in huge gray pipes that rose onto metal structures taller than the nearby houses. The Super-E lines didn’t cross the Avenue. That’s where the city ended, and so did the reach of the city’s electricity. The lines made a faint, high-pitched hum, but it was mostly drowned out by the whine of the cars whooshing past us on the Avenue.

The blur of cars looked a lot like the Levline, except instead of silver it was all different colors blending together. The Avenue wasn’t

technically a Smart-route, since it had traffic lights and pedestrian crossings. But your car had to be in autodrive to be on it, or else you could get major fines.

The sound of the traffic grew louder as we approached, then it fell away altogether as the crossing light turned green.

I stopped walking, but Del didn't. The numbers on the pedestrian light were counting down. Soon it would turn red, and it would be at least five minutes before it turned green again.

Where I was standing, on the city side of the Avenue, the sidewalk was trashy and unkempt, but the other side was a hundred times worse—there was twice as much litter, and the concrete was cracked and split and overgrown with weeds. The houses lining the far side of the Avenue were vacant and covered with vines.

“You're going to be late,” Del called over his shoulder, taunting me again. He was halfway to the other side. The light clicked to yellow.

I ran after him, across six lanes. We both stepped onto the curb just as the light clicked to red.

Del grinned down at me.

“Now what?” I said, shouting over the sudden rush of cars accelerating behind us.

He shrugged and started walking down the road. “We cross the McAllister Street Bridge, and we go to school.”

A block off the Avenue, the traffic sounds faded away to an unsettling quiet. The houses were more and more run-down the farther we walked. Dark, vacant windows stared down at us.

Two blocks from the Avenue, the street was pocked with sinkholes. Some of the houses were completely hidden by foliage. Some had been torn down, with the debris piled into what used to be the basements and half-covered with dirt. The rest had been left to fall down on their own, and many were well on their way. One had a tree growing through the second-floor window. The window wasn't

even broken; someone had left it open, and now a tree was growing through it.

I would never have let on to Del that I was the slightest bit nervous, but as we walked, I could feel imaginary eyes watching my every step.

It wasn't until the next block that I discovered they were real.

FOUR

Chimeras.

Three of them. Two were on the front steps and one was in the driveway of a big old stone mansion that looked like it had been converted into apartments before being abandoned altogether.

None of them moved a muscle as they watched us. It creeped me out that we might have just as easily walked right past and never noticed them.

The two on the steps had bird splices. Beige feathers covered their heads instead of hair. Their huge black eyes stared at us, unblinking, above noses that were large but somehow graceful, with a pronounced curve. They looked exotic—maybe even beautiful. But they were also unsettling.

They wore jeans and T-shirts. The one on the left had a green stone set in her pierced nose. Apart from that they could have been twins. If they'd gotten their splices from the same batch, I guess in a way they were.

The one in the driveway, wearing khakis and a maroon jacket, had some kind of cat splice. His ears were pointy, his nose flat, and he had a thin sheen of striped fur on his face, more tabby than tiger. His upper lip was slightly puffed out. His eyes were different, too; they were still human in shape, but the pupils seemed elongated.

I realized I'd seen him before, in the city, getting kicked out of Genaro's Deli. Genaro was a cranky old guy, and a big-time chimera-hater. He had signs all over his deli saying HUMANS ONLY and ANIMALS MUST WAIT OUTSIDE. I'd heard that chimeras sometimes went there just to provoke him.

The cat was staring at me, but I couldn't tell if he recognized me.

"Jesus," I whispered involuntarily as we passed.

“Chimeras,” Del said softly.

“Don’t stare,” I said, quickening my step.

“They’re so cool,” he said, stopping to look back at them.

“They’re not cool,” I said. “They’re creepy. What are they thinking, doing that to themselves?” I stopped and looked back, too, and the cat chimera in the driveway narrowed his eyes. Maybe he sensed my disapproval, or maybe he did recognize me from the neighborhood.

There was a movement at the doorway, and I noticed a fourth chimera, looking out from the shadows inside the house. He stooped as he came through the doorway and out onto the porch.

I couldn’t tell what he was spliced with—maybe a dog or a wolf—but his face was striking. His skin looked smooth and fair, but tanned from the sun. His ears were slightly pointed and his nose was wide, ending in a flat triangle. He had a prominent mouth, full lips, and a strong jawline. His hair was kind of awesome, chestnut brown, peaking down into his forehead and spiked up as it swept backward. But his most arresting feature was his eyes—large and wide set, they were a deep, soulful brown; calm but wary, and radiating intelligence.

He was also massive—probably close to seven feet tall, and solidly muscled, like he was part mastiff and part landmass. Come to think of it, he may actually have *been* part mastiff.

The whole effect was not entirely unattractive, if you were into that sort of thing.

I’d never seen him before, but I got the sense that maybe he recognized us.

The two bird chimeras on the steps looked up at him with a quick, jerky, simultaneous movement. Then their heads snapped back in unison to stare at us.

“What’s up, Del?” said a voice, sudden and surprisingly close.

I turned to discover yet another chimera, leaning against a tree right near us. He had pale brown eyes in a face that narrowed to a point, with a faint coat of fur, reddish brown on the top half and

white along his jaw, chin, and neck. He might have been part fox. I was still trying to figure it out when I heard Del responding, “What’s up, Sly?”

I looked at Del as it sank in that he knew this chimera. Then the big guy in the doorway said something to his friends. His words were too soft for me to hear—just a low rumble that I felt in my chest—but the bird chimeras rose together in response and hurried inside. I turned to see that the cat in the driveway was gone, and so was Sly. The big dog chimera stared at me another moment, then stepped back through the doorway and disappeared into the shadows.

FIVE

We were half a block beyond the chimera house when I laid into Del.

“How did that chimera know your name?” I demanded.

He shrugged, like it was no big deal. “What do you mean?”

I glanced back over my shoulder, then gave him a stern look. He knew what I meant.

“I know some chimeras,” he said, shrugging again. “They’re cool.”

“They’re depressing,” I snapped.

“You’ve never seen one before, have you?”

“I’ve seen plenty of them,” I said. Chimeras had been a thing for at least fifteen years, after the bio-hackers started mixing with the body-mods to see what would happen. But people who actually got spliced had stayed pretty much underground until the last five or ten years. And up until two minutes ago, I’d only met or seen up close a dozen or so, including that cat from Genaro’s Deli.

The only chimeras I actually knew were pals of Nina Tanaka, who’d been one of my best friends until seventh grade, when she moved into a giant house on a much nicer block and started hanging out with the rich kids over there. One of her chimera friends had a single cheetah spot on her shoulder and the other had three tiny parakeet feathers in her earlobe.

It wasn’t illegal to get spliced. But it was illegal for anyone other than a doctor to give someone a splice—and since the American Medical Association had made it clear that any doctor caught giving someone a splice would lose their license, there weren’t a lot of medical professionals willing to risk it.

Some countries were more chill about splicing and it was legal and regulated, sometimes even promoted by the tourism board as a reason

to visit. Nina's friends had probably gotten spliced at some posh spa in Belize or Switzerland, or someplace else where one-percenters could pay big bucks for a licensed doctor to give them a targeted splice and come out with a tiny, discreet—and very fashionable—alteration.

The guys we had just encountered had probably gotten spliced by a “genie,” some weirdo in a basement or a garage somewhere. It was a hell of a lot cheaper, but they took their chances and got what they got.

“Splicing is stupid, Del,” I said. “It creeps me out, and so does the fact that you think it’s cool. Mixing animal genes into your DNA just to get some feathers or a tail or whatever? It’s nuts.”

“It’s not nuts.” He laughed, but his voice sounded hot.

“You know they use a live virus, right? They load the splice into a virus and infect you with it. That’s how they do it. They make you sick.”

“Doctors use the same technique to treat all sorts of things. It’s how Syngenius does their genetic enhancements, and they’re totally legit.”

I rolled my eyes. Syngenius did synthetic gene alterations for all sorts of physical traits. More hair here, less hair there. Brown eyes with green flecks, green eyes with brown flecks. Instead of splicing in new genes, they edited your existing genes. It was super expensive but getting more popular with the people who could afford it.

“Well, I’m not nuts about Syngenius, either,” I said.

“Of course you’re not, Jimi. You get squeamish about tattoos, for God’s sake.”

“That’s right, and splicing is a thousand times worse! You saw the same health vids I did, about people’s bodies rejecting splices and having bad reactions, their immune systems going haywire, their organs becoming malformed, infections, all that stuff! And even if everything goes right, what about the future? What about college?”

He laughed. “Not everybody is destined to go to college.”

Del’s grades had been tanking lately and he had been dropping hints that maybe college wasn’t for him—hints I tried to ignore,

because I didn't know where that left me. For years we'd had a plan: we were going to stay in Philly and go to Temple University, *together*.

Once again, I changed the subject.

"Never mind about college," I said. "What kind of jobs are they going to get? Remember that article we had to read for Mr. Martinez? Kids who get spliced are *way* more likely to end up unemployed. What kind of future is that?"

Mr. Martinez was our US History teacher. I think I liked him a little more than Del did.

Del turned to look back at the chimera house. "An awesome future."

"Squatting in some abandoned house outside the city? That looks awesome to you?"

"Compared to working at a bank every day, or something like that? Hell, yeah!"

"Who says you have to work in a bank?" I rolled my eyes again. "You're being ridiculous."

"No, I'm not," he said, looking right at me, his eyes fired with intensity. "There's plenty of ways to make a living where you don't have to sell your soul. Those guys have the right idea." He pointed back at the chimeras' squat house. "You don't think every miserable drone working at a big-box store or sitting around in some crappy cubicle had said at some point they would never end up like that? Well, these chimeras made sure of it. They burned the ships behind them. That's awesome."

"It's not just jobs. What if they decide they want a family? Can you even have kids if you're a chimera?"

"Of course you can have kids."

"What if they come out as some horrible genetic jumble?"

"That's not how it works, and you know it, Jimi—or did you miss *that* part of the health class vid? It's somatic. The gene splices don't affect the genes you pass on."

He said *somatic* like it was his vocabulary word of the week, but

he was right. I was surprised he remembered—and that I’d forgotten. “Well, you’d have to be crazy to become a chimera these days, anyway,” I said. “So many people hate them.”

“Crazy people hate them.”

Del’s dad was one of those crazy people, even more than Mr. Genaro. But I thought I probably shouldn’t mention that. Instead I lowered my voice and tried a different approach. “I don’t know if you’ve been paying attention, but those crazy people are trying to pass laws against chimeras. Starting right here, Del. Did you know that? Have you heard of the Genetic Heritage Act? It’s already passed the Pennsylvania state legislature. If the governor signs GHA into law, chimeras would legally be considered nonhuman.”

“First of all, of course I know that. Everyone does. Second, it doesn’t say they would be legally *nonhuman*, it says they would be legally *nonpersons*, and third, there’s no chance in hell it’s going to become law. But if it did and I were spliced, I’d just go somewhere else. Somewhere less screwed up.”

It bugged the hell out of me that he was technically right about there being a distinction between *human* and *person*, especially since I knew that he had no idea what that distinction was. *Human* was a biological and social concept. Legally it had no meaning. But legally, a *person* was someone with rights and protections, compared to a *non-person*, which had all the rights of a cinder block or an apple. I almost called him on it but I wanted to hear more about his crazy plans.

“‘Go somewhere else’? And where exactly would that be? You know they’re pushing GHA laws in, like, thirty-something states.”

“And they’re going to fail everywhere,” he said smugly. “But if they succeeded, I’d just go to Chimerica.”

I laughed. “There’s no such place as Chimerica.”

“Sure there is. I know chimeras who have friends that have gone there.”

“Del.” I tried not to roll my eyes again but failed. “Chimerica is a

make-believe fairyland invented by people who want to pretend their kids or brothers or sisters or friends who were dumb enough to get spliced didn't die from it. Or die from living in a squat with no food or medical care because they can't get a job."

I may have laid it on a little thick, but that didn't make it any less true. I'd heard kids at school talking about some mysterious, secret, safe place that only chimeras knew about, the same way kids talked about UFOs and alien abductions. With all this Genetic Heritage Act crap in the news, Chimerica was a trending topic. In a way, I got it—if someone I cared about had ruined their life by getting spliced, I'd want to believe in a magical safe haven for them, too. Especially now. But really, the whole idea was ridiculous.

Del seemed entirely unfazed by what I'd said. "Then you can't come."

I felt a cold anger at him—for being so immature and condescending, and for making the future sound so bleak. But I also felt scared, and that made me even angrier.

"Just shut up," I said, picking up my pace as we crossed the McAllister Street Bridge. Doubling back toward the city, we passed through a neighborhood that seemed to be inhabited—smoke rising from chimneys, cars that were junked up but looked like they still ran. But after we crossed back into Philadelphia, the streets were oddly deserted. The fact that we weren't speaking to each other might have made them seem even more so.

We got to school before the end of homeroom, but we had to sign in late anyway. I gave Del a glare to let him know I was still annoyed, and we went our separate ways.

We passed each other in the hallway between classes a couple of times, but we didn't speak. We didn't even make eye contact during our calculus test. And when Del missed the bus after school, I went ahead and got on it. I wasn't going to let him make me late twice in the same day. Besides, I needed to be home when my mom called to check up on me.

SIX

Coming home to the empty house, I felt the usual mixture of loneliness on one hand and relief on the other.

Sure, I loved my family, but generally I was glad they weren't around. My brother, Kevin, was a hotshot athlete, the star center for the varsity basketball team, among other things. He was a senior, and my mom was taking him on a four-week US tour, visiting all the big colleges that wanted him to come play for them.

"This year is about Kevin," she had said when she told me she was taking time off from her job as a marketing consultant to shop him around.

I understood. His college ball career was about to take off, and he would probably make a lot of money someday. But I still had to laugh—because when was there a year that *wasn't* about Kevin?

Still, every day at four thirty, my mom called to make sure I wasn't burning the place down, to make her feel like she was a good parent, and to remind me that if I screwed up, I would have to stay with Aunt Trudy.

The call came right on time, a video call on the landline. When I was younger I had a personal web phone, but that was before the Cyber Wars. Then Russia and China and North Korea and everyone else—including the US—thought it would be a really good idea to send all these super viruses and killer malware at each other. The wars were brief and ended in a tie, pretty much, but they succeeded in making the Internet and the old cellular systems a useless tangle of garbage that collapsed under its own weight. Now mobile phones are for rich people, the Secure Web is for even richer people, and the richest people

of all have networked computer implants in their skulls. Everyone else is out of luck.

“Hey, Mom,” I said.

“Hey, Champ,” she said unironically. “How was school?”

“Good.”

“What kind of homework do you have?”

I went through the list of classes and assignments, getting more and more depressed as I realized how much my evening was going to suck.

“Well, that doesn’t sound so bad,” she said when I was finished. Like she hadn’t been listening.

“Nope, not too bad.”

She took a deep breath and seemed to hold it. At this point in the conversation, she either told me how my brother was doing or she paused, waiting for me to ask.

“How’s Kevin doing?” I asked.

She smiled. “He’s doing great. Working hard so he doesn’t fall behind on his schoolwork and impressing the heck out of all the coaches.”

“Yay.” Maybe I didn’t put enough into it, because her smile faltered. Since I’d gone to the trouble of asking and all, I beefed up my own smile so she didn’t launch into one of her “Kevin” talks. I was in no mood for a “Kevin” talk.

She took a few minutes to tell me about some of Kevin’s most spectacular plays of the day, and when she could tell I’d had enough, she paused, trying to think of something else to talk about. As always, she failed.

“Okay, then,” she said with a wise nod. “You’re doing okay, right?” She never asked me how I was doing without letting me know what the answer was supposed to be.

“Doing fine, Mom.”

“Great. We’ll be home before you know it. And we’ll get back on track with those driving lessons, right?”

“Sounds good.”

“Love you, Jimi.”

“Love you too, Mom.”



The next few hours were peanut butter crackers followed by homework. I had been hoping to go for a run, but by the time I finished my homework, I was tired and it was late. I was making some mac and cheese with ham and peas for dinner when the shouting started up next door. Apparently, Del had come home. It began with a quick back-and-forth followed by a door slamming deep inside the house—too brief to be the end of it.

I found myself wishing I’d been more forceful with Del when I’d said he shouldn’t push back so much with his dad. Stan was getting crazier by the day, and I didn’t blame Del for sticking up for himself, but usually the way he did it made things worse.

Even before Del’s mom died, Del and Stan hadn’t known what to make of each other, but when we were younger and Stan was still working as a chemical engineer, he was always at the office. He got fired after Del’s mom died and he kept missing work. She was gone and Stan was unemployed and the two of them were stuck in that house. It was awful.

Then Stan got temporary work setting up illegal gas drills and liquefied coal wells out in the sticks. He’d be out of town for a week or two at a time and during the school year, he’d leave Del with us, which was cool. But in the summer, he would drag Del along, and that was even worse than when they were home.

Stan loved the work, partly because he got to go hunting while he was out there—even though there wasn’t really anything wild left to hunt. Del was miserable, though, being dragged off to all these little towns where he didn’t know anybody. He got a hard enough time from

our classmates in the city, what with his amphibian fixation and his weird music. But some of those small-town kids would just tease him mercilessly.

He hated the hunting part, too. When he'd come home he'd entertain me with impersonations of Stan tiptoeing through the woods with his rifle. It was more Elmer Fudd than anything else, but I would laugh my butt off.

Stan didn't think it was funny at all. He wasn't supposed to see Del's impressions, but a couple times he caught us, and then nobody would be laughing.

Del was relieved when Stan got the job as a cop in the zurbs, but at that point, they were already at each other's throats.

By the time my mac and cheese was ready, Del and Stan were going back and forth again, louder and harsher than before. It reminded me of two gunfighters in an old Western movie, one going *bang, bang, bang*, then the other one going *pow, pow, pow*. Except the gunfight quickly escalated from six-shooters to machine guns, then bazookas and heavy artillery.

There was an ominous pause in the shouting and my shoulders tensed. In my mind I heard the cartoon whistle of a bomb falling from the sky, about to explode. What I actually heard was a jumble of sounds—furniture sliding, glass falling but not breaking, silverware hitting the floor.

Then I heard a scream.

SEVEN

I ran to the phone to call the police. Then I stopped, realizing how futile that would be. Stan might work out in the zurbs, but he was still police. Del was a troubled kid whom the other cops would never officially believe, even if they knew he was telling the truth. Besides, they would figure he probably did something to deserve it.

For the first time since she'd left, I wanted my mom.

I was weighing whether I should call her when Del's screen door screeched and slammed. Then there he was, running across the grass toward my house. His face was wet and he had a dish towel wrapped around his left arm. There was blood on his shirt. I opened the door just as he got there. He didn't slow down as he came in. Instead of running past me, though, he pushed into me, throwing his right arm around me, burying his face in my hair and sobbing.

I hugged him back, whispering "It's okay" in his ear. I pulled him inside, far enough that I could kick the door closed, then I reached out and locked it. Just in case.

After a minute I pulled back and looked at his face.

"What happened?" I asked quietly.

His head was still down, but his eyes looked up at me, the tears replaced by a haunted look, full of pain and smoldering with anger.

"Stan killed Sydney."

"He *what*?"

"He said he was done having a serpent in the house. He said something like, 'Let's see if he can regenerate *this*.' Then he stomped on him and flushed him down the toilet."

I put my hand over my mouth. "Oh Del." Then I noticed blood seeping through the towel wrapped around his arm. "What happened to your arm?"

He kept his eyes locked on mine as he gingerly unwound the fabric, wincing as he pulled away the last bit. The tattoo was in bloody tatters.

I looked up at him. “He did this to you?”

“With a cheese grater,” he said, his voice croaky. His face was like stone except for a twitch in his eye. “He said it was blasphemy.”

I put my arm back around him and pulled him tight. It was clear that Stan had gone off the deep end. This situation was out of control.

Eventually Del put his hand on my shoulder and stepped back, until he was at arm’s length. His eyes met mine, and the weird thing was, he looked like he felt sorry for me. And it wasn’t just sympathy, there was a tiny hint of condescension as well. Like he’d learned some truth about life I wasn’t yet ready for. Like he was suddenly older and wiser than me.

Then it vanished as a hint of a smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. “You making mac and cheese?”

I nodded. “You hungry?”

He shook his head. “Not right now.”

“I should clean that,” I said, looking at his arm.

He shrugged, like it didn’t matter, but his eyes looked afraid. I couldn’t blame him. It was going to hurt.



We sat in the living room—him on the sofa, me on the floor, the reading lamp shining directly on his arm.

I gingerly peeled away the towel again, and before anything else, I doused his arm with numbing spray. A lot of numbing spray. I gently cleaned it with damp gauze, then gave it more numbing spray, just in case.

Three sets of gouges crisscrossed his arm, obliterating most of the tattoo. All that remained was the coiled tail. I shuddered, wondering what kind of man would do that to his own son, again and again.

I guess the spray worked, or maybe Del was tougher than I thought, because he kept it together the whole time. As I finished

bandaging his arm, I noticed he was looking down at me with an odd smile.

“What?” I asked.

“Thanks,” he said softly.

His smile lingered. He looked like he wanted to say something important. Or do something.

His hand rested on my shoulder. I could feel its warmth spreading through my body. But I also felt awkward and self-conscious, and my head was spinning over what had just happened.

“We should eat something,” I said, looking down as I finished taping his bandage.

“Okay,” he said, and the moment dissipated.



Del might have said he wasn't hungry, but he ate with gusto, holding his fork like a little kid and shoveling it in. “This is really good,” he said, his mouth full of food.

When we were done, we sat on the sofa with the Holo vid on, but neither of us was really watching it. Del flicked through the channels absentmindedly and for some reason stopped on the local news, which was generally stupid and always depressing.

They led with the weather, then reported that the year was on a pace to break another record for global temperatures and sea level rise, the twenty-ninth time in the last forty years. They seemed almost excited about it, like they had a streak going and they wanted to see how long it would last.

After the weather was a story about a big Humans for Humanity march tomorrow. H4H was the anti-chimera group pushing GHA. They'd been around for years, long before splicing became a thing. Mr. Martinez told us H4H was originally started to oppose efforts by groups that were fighting to win legal rights, or *personhood*, for animals—meaning that animals had *some* kind of rights, so there was a distinction between, say, a chimpanzee and a brick, and limits to the

messed-up things people could do to animals. The H4Hers tried to make it sound like these groups were trying to give animals the same rights as people, which they weren't, and everyone knew it. So it was an obscure fight, and H4H remained an obscure group. Then, about ten years ago, when splicing really started to become a thing, this billionaire named Howard Wells took over and transformed H4H into an anti-chimera group—and a pro-Howard Wells group.

Not that Wells needed the publicity. He was already a household name. He'd founded a bunch of big companies, and the first one, WellPharm, was one of the biggest drug manufacturers in the country. But he really got famous when he got into tech. He created WellPlant, which made super-expensive high-tech implants that securely streamed music, data, voice, and text; recorded video; and performed high-level computing, like the Secure Web on steroids, all inside your skull. Very cool stuff, if you could afford it.

Also very creepy, if you asked me.

It was Wells who came up with the idea for GHA, which said that once someone got spliced, once their DNA was anything less than one hundred point zero zero zero zero percent human, they were no longer legally a person.

That was crazy. I mean, if I squinted really hard, I could kind of see where Wells and H4H were coming from—splice in enough animal genes and at some point, maybe someone *wasn't* entirely human anymore—but saying that anybody who had any kind of splice is no longer a person? Saying they deserved to be discriminated against? That was just wrong. I might have thought splicing was idiotic, but I didn't hate chimeras.

The H4Hers really, really did, though. They blamed chimeras for *everything* that was wrong with the world—crime, unemployment, disease, and more—all totally made up and based on nothing.

The whole GHA thing was so out there that no one took it seriously at first. But late this past summer, against all predictions, Wells's buddies got it passed in the Pennsylvania state house. Suddenly, bills

just like GHA were being introduced all over—and H4H was a big deal across the country. So was Wells.

He seemed to be enjoying the notoriety. His face was everywhere—tanned and handsome, with his signature shiny black WellPlant embedded over his left eye. He was already a hugely successful businessman, but the pundits were speculating that as the leader of H4H, Wells seemed to have set his sights on something else. A lot of people thought he was going to run for governor, or even president.

The Holovid cut to a packed church basement where people were making signs and singing songs. The reporter, a young woman in a purple dress, was pressing her earpiece tightly against her head as she stood next to a guy in a white H4H shirt and a matching hat.

“I’m reporting live from Church of the Eternal Truth, where Humans for Humanity is gearing up for tomorrow’s march. With me is Philadelphia H4H chapter president Gus Joyner. Mr. Joyner, can you tell us why tomorrow’s rally is so important to you?”

Joyner was nodding the whole time she was talking, like he couldn’t wait to say his piece. He looked intelligent enough, but his eyes had an odd gleam. “We’re going to show the governor, and the whole world, that we are not going to rest until we have saved humanity from the ungodly taint of chimeras ruining our way of life.” He pronounced *chimeras* with a *sh* sound instead of a *k* sound.

“I believe they’re called *kimeras*,” the reporter said, correcting him.

Joyner scowled at her and pulled the microphone back. “These *mixies* are thieves and vandals. They spread disease. Look at the flu that killed millions, right at the same time this whole splicing thing began.”

This time the reporter pulled the microphone back, looking into the camera with a forced smile. “Of course, we all know that scientists have proven the virus from the flu pandemic originated decades before the splicing phenomenon began, so there is absolutely no connection between the two.”

Joyner put his face next to hers and shouted, “And they’re a burden on taxpayers and they’re an abomination before God!”

“Man, that guy’s really off the rails,” Del said as the guy kept going.

“Yup,” I said. “But look at that crowd. There’s a lot of people out there who feel the same way he does.”

When they finally cut back to the studio, the anchor segued to a report on the status of the Genetic Heritage Act along with a holo-clip of Howard Wells appearing at the state capitol with a bunch of his H4H pals from the legislature.

Del was getting worked up watching it, especially when the anchor-woman explained that while it was highly unlikely he would sign it, the governor could receive the GHA legislation as early as that week.

I took the remote away from him and changed the channel until I found an old Batman movie that was just starting. Del gave me a dubious look, but we watched the movie in silence, letting it calm us both down.

Halfway into it, I turned to him and asked, “What are you going to do?”

Del rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I’ll think of something,” he said. “Next year I’ll be eighteen, and I can move out. It’s not so far away.” He glanced in the direction of his house, his father. His eyes flared hot for a moment. Then they came back to meet mine. “I’ll be fine.”

I glanced at his arm, then looked back at the Hologrid.

The way his dad was getting, I couldn’t see Del lasting another year in that house. But I didn’t have any other ideas, either. It wasn’t like Stan would let him just move in with us, even if that were an option.

Del leaned forward to take off his boots. When he sat back, he was right up next to me. Touching.

I could feel the heat coming off him. We sat there, eyes ahead, pretending to watch the movie. He rested his hand on mine, and I let him.

EIGHT

I woke up slowly with a feeling of warmth and security that was slowly penetrated by the strangely distant sound of my alarm. With a jolt, I realized that it was morning and I was in the wrong place. Del's arm was around me, and my head was on his chest. The clock on the mantel said seven twenty. I jumped up with a yelp. "*Crap!*"

Del jumped up, too, startled and confused.

"We fell asleep," I said, pointing at the clock.

He raised a hand to rub his eyes, but winced at the pain, then looked at his arm, at the bandage around it. He stared at me for a second, thinking, then looked down at the bloodstain on the front of his shirt. "I need a clean shirt," he said.

We both looked out the window. Stan's car was gone. I was surprised he hadn't come over at some point, banging on the door and demanding Del come home. Maybe he was freaked out about what he'd done, figured he needed to cool off or give Del time to get over it.

"Okay, go get one," I said. "I'm going to brush my teeth. We can still make the bus."

Del half smiled, like maybe he was relieved but disappointed. Then he nodded. "I'll meet you at the bus stop. But if I'm late, don't wait for me."

I cocked my head at him. "We've got time," I said. "Just hurry up and grab your stuff."

I brushed my teeth, splashed water on my face, tied back my hair, and changed into fresh clothes. Four minutes later I was standing on the grass between our houses, looking at my watch and waiting for Del to come out. He didn't. I waited. And I worried.

The mail drone zipped by, high overhead. No packages for the Merricks today. I heard the bus approaching, then passing by.

As soon as it was gone, the back door opened and Del poked his head out, rolling his eyes as he spotted me.

“I told you not to wait for me,” he said.

“What are you up to?”

He laughed, shambling down the steps. He had on a long-sleeved flannel shirt, covering the bandage. He wasn’t carrying his schoolbag.

“Traveling light, huh?” I said.

“I don’t need my stuff today.”

I nodded, not buying it and hoping my expression said as much.

He came up next to me and said, “Let’s go,” then kept walking past me.

As I turned to walk alongside him, he put his arm around my shoulders. “Thanks for taking care of me last night.”

I looked at him, trying to read his face and not getting anything. “Of course.”

At the end of the block, he turned left.

I paused. “Bridge is out, remember?” I said.

“I know. McAllister Street’s still quicker.” He turned around, walking backward away from me, watching to see what I would do.

I let out a sigh and followed him.

We crossed North Avenue, out of the city, walking in silence. Del seemed strangely excited, happy even. I wondered if he was in shock from the trauma of what his dad had done to him. But as we approached the chimera house, his demeanor turned serious and his pace slowed. He paused, looking around.

I was starting to suspect he had intentionally missed the bus so he could come this way and see the chimeras again. But before I could say anything about it, a police car came skidding around the corner. It roared toward us with its old-fashioned lights flashing on top, like something from an old movie. Then it screeched to a halt right next to us.

NINE

I had assumed it was Stan, coming for Del, but I didn't recognize the cop that got out. His badge said OFFICER CANTRELL. He had a scar across the side of his nose, and a quarter-inch black glass disk over his right eyebrow, a WellPlant. I did a double take at that—it was strange to see a cop with an expensive computer implant like that, especially a cop working out in the zurbs.

He scowled as he rushed past us toward the front door of the chimera house. He had a stun gun in one hand and a shock baton in the other. "Officer Cantrell, Montgomery County Police!" he barked, pounding on the door with the butt of the stun gun. "Open up!"

Instead of waiting for a response, he ran alongside the porch and jumped over the railing, disappearing around the side of the house. I wondered what those chimeras had done.

Del turned to look at me, his face churning with a mix of emotions I couldn't identify. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed me full on the lips.

It was deep and intense, and everything around me fell away as I kissed him back. Then it ended and I stood there, light-headed and tingling, wondering if this was where we'd been headed all along, knowing in that instant our entire relationship, a friendship that was older than I could remember, would never be the same.

By the time I came to my senses, Del was thirty yards away, running along the sidewalk to get a better angle so he could see what was happening.

"Del!" I called in a loud whisper. "Get back here!"

He ignored me and I started to run after him, but I was distracted when the side door flew open just as Cantrell ran up to it.

One of the bird chimeras burst through. Cantrell took two steps after her, then reached out with the shock baton. There was a faint crackling sound, and the chimera crumpled into a ball.

I gasped at the sudden violence. Cantrell prodded her again and again, making her convulse on the ground.

The other bird chimera ran through the door, followed by the fox, Sly. They tried to slip past on either side of him, but Cantrell reached out with his baton and tripped the other bird chimera.

Before she could get up, he was on her, pressing the baton into her midsection and holding it there as she squirmed and shuddered and made strange warbling noises.

“Stop it!” I yelled. “You’ll kill her!”

He finally pulled the baton away, but only when he spotted Sly running toward a shallow stream that fed into a storm drain and charged after him.

The first bird was up on her hands and knees, but the second one wasn’t moving. I ran over to her and saw her mouth frothing. The way she was lying on the slope, her head was lower than her body. I was afraid she was going to choke. I grabbed her arms and dragged her around so that her head was elevated. She was surprisingly light. I was wondering what to do next when she coughed and opened her eyes, deep black orbs that seemed wide and innocent.

She looked up at me and smiled.

We were both startled as Cantrell yelled, “Freeze!”

Sly was zigzagging through the trees toward the stream. Cantrell was standing with his legs braced wide and his stun gun out in front of him.

Del was running toward him. I didn’t know what he planned to do, but before I could call out, the cat chimera appeared from behind another tree, twenty feet away. His arm was cocked, a rock the size of a baseball in his hand. Then he whipped it forward.

The rock flew like a bullet, a straight line with almost no arc. It hit

Cantrell square in the back of the head, and he collapsed, sprawling across the top of the retaining wall that ran along the creek.

For a moment, the only sound was the rustle of feet shuffling through the grass and fallen leaves. Sly stopped and turned, then started creeping back. The cat stepped forward, tentatively, his nose twitching.

Sly looked over at him and smiled. “Hell of a throw, Ryan.”

Del walked over to the cop, then crouched down for a closer look. My stomach lurched when I saw the look on Del’s face—the same, still expression I’d seen after Stan shredded his arm.

“Del,” I called out, but he ignored me. Then I realized he was holding the cop’s shock baton. “*Del!*” I called again, louder, starting toward him.

He turned his head halfway toward me and said, “Run.” Then he jammed the baton against Cantrell’s neck, holding it there while the cop’s body trembled and shook.

“Del! *No!*” I screamed.

He finally pulled the baton away, but then pressed his foot against Cantrell’s midsection and rolled him off the wall and into the stream.

The cop landed with a splash and a thud, hitting both the shallow water and the rocks below.

The chimeras scattered, terrified, running in every direction. At the same moment, I heard sirens, seemingly coming from everywhere.

Del turned and looked at me, his face laughing and crying and somehow strangely blank, all at the same time. He mouthed the word *run*, and then that’s what he did.

I looked back at the cop, Cantrell, lying facedown in the water, a thin ribbon of red curling away from his head. I wanted to run, too, but I couldn’t let the man die. I couldn’t let Del become a murderer.

I thought I could get over there, flip him over, and still get away before things went horribly wrong.

I scrambled into the water, heaved Cantrell onto his back, and

started to run away. Even then I might have had time to escape, but he coughed and his head flopped to the side, half-submerged, his mouth blowing bloody bubbles in the water.

I paused, defeated, and went back, crouching in the water and pulling him out on the other side of the creek. He let out a soft groan and a gurgle. Then he coughed, spewing water across my shoes.

He was alive.

I dug in my toes to run again, but it was already too late.

Three cops were closing in on me. If I thought for a second maybe I could still get away, that ended when I saw their faces and their guns. I glanced down at the bloody figure at my feet, and I knew there was nothing they wanted more than an excuse to shoot me.

“Freeze,” the closest one said. His face was red, his eyes flickering back and forth between me and his fallen comrade. He said it so softly, I wondered if he was hoping I wouldn’t do as he said.

I thought about Del’s dad, about what he would do if he were one of these cops.

As the other cops shouted out a barrage of contradictory commands, I put up my hands and knelt down on the ground. And I prepared for my life to turn to crap.