

**Midnight Sun**  
Savage North Chronicles, Book Two

By Lindsey Pogue

An Ending World Novel

## Dedication

This book is for my rock star, word-wielding posse.

*My beta readers:*

*Holly – you're a salve to my questionable sanity. How did I ever get on without you?*

*SLF – thank you for reminding me to laugh. I'll never look at popcorn the same way again.*

*Katelyn, Jennifer, Michelle, Ana, Fred, Gretchen, Kathy, and Jessica – you've helped me weave hundreds of thousands of words into magic for readers all over the world. Thank you.*

*And to the women who polish my chicken scratch  
and humor my made-up words—my editors and proofreaders:*

*Lauren – you're more than an editor, you're a wonderful friend and human. You treat each of my books as if they were your own, and I couldn't imagine this journey without you.*

*Nicole, Annette, and Sarah W. – if not for you, readers would think I only graduated the fifth grade. Thank you for loaning me your brain and your eyes, as needed.*

This series is epic because of each and every one of you.

Thank you. Thank you. *Thank you.*

Xoxo, Linds

## Prologue

### Elle

“Everything is flourishing in this area right now,” Stanley said, scratching his cheek as he surveyed the covered side yard outside the first cellblock. “I hate to move it all.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, a tick of his I’d come to notice when he was either deep in thought or nervous.

If I’d been told a year ago that my life would be so completely altered now, I wouldn’t have believed it. But here I was, inspecting a makeshift greenhouse in the walls of a state-of-the-art prison—our fortress and second home. It had taken months for all of us to get to know one another, especially since our first meeting with the prison crew had been Sophie and me locked in a jail cell here at the prison against our will.

All of that was sorted now, though, and despite the time it had taken us to get to know one another’s quirks, it had only taken weeks for us to learn to trust one another, especially when we shared a common threat: General Herodson.

“Do you think I have to?” Stanley asked.

I bent down to test the moisture in the soil, admiring Stanley’s hard work. The beanstalks and tomatoes inundated the northern corner after weeks of trial and error, looking for just the right spot. I wasn’t sure if it was Stanley’s patience, or if he had a green thumb, but he was a much better gardener than Woody, despite his many failed attempts over the summer. But then, Woody was so scatterbrained, I wasn’t all that surprised.

The place was silent without him, without *them*. I’d told myself I wouldn’t dwell on Jackson being gone, even if it was lonely without him. He’d become my other half, the warm

body beside me in bed, and my daily reassurance that what we were doing, that all we'd accomplished, was right. I wished he'd come home.

"Elle?" Ross prompted, and when I looked up, I realized he and Stanley were both staring at me. "I assume we should move it," he said, "but I'm not the head landscaper around this joint," he joked.

"Oh, sorry." I looked at Stanley with a quick nod. "Yes, as frustrating as it is, when the time comes, I think the garden should be moved indoors. Unless we want to turn this old workout area into a greenhouse, like ours at the farm. Then you'll be able to plant here year-round—"

*"Elle!"*

I froze as a voice cried my name, and a cold chill trickled down my back. I glanced around the side yard.

"Elle?" Ross's voice held the same concern that made the hair on my arms and neck stand on end. "Are you okay? I swear your skin just turned ten shades paler." He shifted the rifle hanging over his shoulder and leaned closer.

"I—" I swallowed thickly. "I could've sworn I heard someone call my name."

Stanley and Ross looked at one another. "Perhaps you should sit down, Miss Elle," said Stanley, but I shook my head as they began to fuss over me, and I pushed Ross's hand away. "Something's wrong," I told them, even if I didn't understand it. "There was a voice . . . in my head—it said my name." My heart began to pound in my chest, and I tried to catch my breath. It made no sense. I'd never heard *anyone's* voice in my head, and somehow it seemed familiar . . . and urgent.

“Miss Elle, sit down for a moment,” Stanley insisted.

*“Elle, hurry!”*

I whipped around frantically searching for the voice, though I knew it was for naught.

“Hurry? What—where?”

“Elle, you’re scaring the shit out of me,” Ross chided. “Jackson will kill me if you lose your mind while he’s gone.”

I clutched his arm, my fingers pressing into his flesh as I tried to convince myself I wasn’t crazy, and how somewhere deep down I knew it was somehow linked to the kids.

“Something’s wrong.”

Without another second of hesitation, I reached for my pistol, holstered on my hip, and ran through the side yard toward the truck.

As Thea and Sophie’s faces flashed to mind, my fear and dread were dwarfed by a sudden ferocity I’d never felt and the resolve to get to them. “Hurry up!” I shouted, but Ross and Stanley’s frantic footsteps and my voice were barely audible as every flame-enveloped nerve inside of me turned cold with deadly determination. If someone hurt them, I would set their world aflame.

**Part I**  
**A year earlier**

**August**

## Chapter 1 Sophie

*“Where was she, RV-01?” the General demanded, eerily calm. He clasped his hands behind his back, a telltale sign he wasn’t pleased, and turned away from the young woman.*

*I saw it all through Stanley’s mind as clearly as if it was my own. He was General Herodson’s Truth Guard, after all, part of an entourage that was never to leave the General’s side. I, or Stanley, rather, was there for the sole purpose of confirming RV-01 was telling the truth.*

*Despite whichever words followed, I knew the General had already made up his mind to do something terrible.*

*Herodson leaned against his cluttered desk. “She was in your charge—I gave you very specific orders.” Even if I didn’t know the missing Re-gen’s purpose, I knew the General had one intended for her—he had a purpose for everyone at the Colony, a designated role in his capital of the New United States. His word was law, which was why he was so displeased with RV-01.*

*The Re-gen’s eyes lowered with shame. “Yes, Father. I know I have let you down.”*

*“Yes, you have.”*

*“She was in the cafeteria. CL-01 is new,” she said, and drew in a slow breath, devoid of much apprehension because the poor girl had no idea what was coming next. “She did not understand why she must wait. I was only in the restroom a few minutes. I do not know why she left.”*

*Every robotic word was a reminder of all that he’d done to her, and it had taken me weeks to get used to the way the reanimated humans spoke after they were brought back to life. Their minds were wiped clean. Their knowledge of the world was only what the General—their “father”—allowed it to be during programming. Their Abilities were what was important, not*



*“pesky memories,” as the General had called them. Memories led to feelings, which led to independent thoughts, and the last thing Herodson wanted was a Spartacus situation.*

*The General looked at me for confirmation that RV-01 was being truthful.*

*I dipped my chin. Of course the poor creature was telling the truth, she knew nothing different, but in this, her naivety might get her killed, again.*

*“Interesting,” the General mused, and he sat down in his leather desk chair, calm and collected as always. I saw the glint of satisfaction of what was to come in his cold, gray eyes.*

*“I will speak with her, Father. I will determine the right course of action—”*

*“No, you won’t. Your carelessness is unacceptable. Grant!” he called, not sparing her another glance.*

*The door opened and I held my breath, my stomach churning as bile rose in my throat.*

*“Sir?” Grant’s angled features were hard-set and determined.*

*“Take RV-01 to the interrogation room,” he said so nonchalantly, chills rolled down my spine. “Make sure she realizes how important my orders are and what happens when they’re not obeyed.”*

*“Father—” RV-01 stepped forward. “I will—”*

*“No,” he said, his voice flat. He finally looked at her. “And never let this happen again. I won’t be as kind next time.” Then he glanced at me, as if her punishment was also to serve as a reminder of what would happen to me if I were ever to disobey him. The General’s gaze flicked to Grant. “If she struggles, do it again.”*

*The guard obediently gathered the Re-gen’s hands behind her back with more force than was necessary.*

*Words locked up in my throat, my tongue a rutted stone in my mouth. I wanted to beg for his forgiveness on the Re-gen's behalf, but I was too much of a coward; I didn't want her fate to become my own, and I turned on my heels and followed Grant toward the interrogation room.*

*As the three of us made our way down the vacant hallway, I wasn't sure which was worse: the ominous sound of our footsteps or the fact that RV-01 put up no struggle at all. Re-gens no longer had previous life experiences to draw from, I knew that much, but they still felt fear, didn't they? They still had to have feelings, even if they couldn't understand them.*

*Clearing my throat, I clasped my hands behind my back and followed Grant and RV-01 to the door of the cement room that housed the worst atrocities committed in the Colony. Despite my internal panic, I could not let such things show—the General could not know my allegiance wavered, or I would be interrogated instead of the Re-gen.*

*The door swung open before Grant could reach for the handle, and Dr. Wesley stepped out. Her striking, teal eyes narrowed imperceptibly.*

*“Doctor,” I said in greeting, and Grant and I both nodded politely. If General Herodson was the father of the New United States, Dr. Wesley was the mother, and there was a flash of uneasiness in her eyes when they locked on RV-01, her first successful child in the new world she and her husband were creating.*

*For a fleeting moment, I thought the doctor might demand the girl be let go. Instead, Dr. Wesley stepped out of the way. “As you were,” she said, and without another moment's pause, she walked past us and disappeared down the hall, leaving Grant and me alone with the Re-gen.*

*My gaze didn't settle on the vials, utensils, and syringes set up along the counter and surrounding carts, but on the giant tub of water beside the long, wooden table in the center of the room.*

*My palms were slick and my hands knotted behind my back as I tried to keep myself from having any sort of visible reaction.*

*RV-01 didn't fight Grant as he shoved her onto the table. "Lay down," he ordered. "And rest assured, if you were lying to the General in there, I will get the truth out of you."*

*"She wasn't lying," I reassured him, but Grant ignored me because Grant didn't care what was true or humane. He was Herodson's enforcer, and all he cared about was what the General willed him to do with his mind control, which was to punish.*

*Grant restrained RV-01's feet first, then strapped her arms at her side before the hydraulic mechanism in the table clicked on and hummed to life. It was only seconds—painstakingly slow, horrific seconds—before she was tilted downward, her feet angled above her head. She lay there completely lifeless and compliant as Grant draped a square linen cloth over her face and tucked it under her head. Then, he lifted a pitcher of water from the water barrel and began to pour.*

*As abhorrent as it was, I couldn't look away. The Re-gen gasped for air as the water splashed over her face, one pitcher after another. The gurgling. The choking. Her body thrashed as she gasped for air. I could feel my lungs constricting in my chest, pulling for the air she couldn't breathe. She was drowning.*

*"That's enough!" I said, and took a step forward. "You'll kill her if you don't let her breathe."*

*Grant's soulless eyes cut straight through me with a sneer. "What was that, Stanley?" he taunted.*

*"I said that's enough. She's learned her lesson, I'm sure."*

*His shoulders straightened and he popped his neck, like the monster inside him was so close to the surface he had to force what human parts of him were left back into place. “Are you suggesting I defy the General’s orders?”*

*“No, you’ve done what he asked. She’s not struggling against you, she’s choking.”*

*“Do you want me to tell Herodson you’re not letting me do my job, Stanley?” He bit out my name like I was one of his many playthings he was allowed to torment.*

*Forcing myself to remain calm, I narrowed my eyes at him. “He’ll be displeased if you kill her.”*

*Grant glanced down at the Re-gen as she drew in one lungful of air after the other in her reprieve. He considered stopping, but then he grinned and picked up the pitcher again.*

*“Just once more.”*

My eyes flashed open and I gasped, trying to catch my breath. Despite the cool air that bit at my nose, my body was drenched in sweat, and I pulled air into my lungs like it wouldn’t reach deep enough.

Blinking, I stared above me and licked my lips. *I’m okay . . .* My tumbling heartbeat proved it.

I was in the tent; its blue nylon top arched a few feet above me. *We’re camping. Everything is fine.* It was the first hunting trip I’d been on in the three months since we’d decided to settle in Whitehorse for good, and the clawing fear—General Herodson, the destroyer of humanity himself—was only a dream. For now.

But that wasn’t completely true. They weren’t just dreams, they were bits of memories that burrowed their way into the cracks of my mind, wriggling around until they found their way out again, and I shuddered.

Shutting my eyes, I let out a steadying breath and brought my hand to my forehead.

We all knew that as long as the man behind the world-ravaging virus breathed, none of us would ever be safe. It hadn't been an accident or natural selection, but part of a tyrant's lifelong plan to create the world as he wanted it.

The lengths the General had gone to in order to implement the first phase of his plan were decades in the making, but it was the second part of his plan—the unknown—that scared us most. If there was anything I'd learned about Gregory Herodson through Stanley's memories, it was that the General had a plan and a purpose for everything he did, only we weren't certain yet how survivors and their Abilities fit into his plans now.

Since meeting Woody, Stanley, and Phil, all that we'd learned about the General and the Virus lingered in the everyday, in every shadow. Unlike the rest of them, though, I knew the dullness of Herodson's eyes. I knew the harsh reserve of his tone and his constant displeasure. Through Stanley, I knew more than the nuances of the Virus; I knew every inhumane, unthinkable step General Herodson had taken to make his vision a reality, and it was terrifying. But unlike me, Stanley didn't have the luxury of waking up from the nightmares, because the memories were his to bear, and I pitied him for that.

With another steadying breath, I turned my head to ensure the others were still asleep on their pallets beside me. Phil snored softly on the other side of the tent, his sleeping bag pulled over his face. Jackson wasn't on the pallet beside him, and when I looked at Beau, his eyes were open, heavy with sleep as he blinked lazily at me.

"Did I wake you up?" I whispered with an apologetic smile. It was hard to tell what I'd said in my dreams.

Beau bowed his head slightly. "Are you okay?" His voice cracked from disuse.

I pulled his sleeping bag further up around his neck to keep him warm in the chilly air, and ran my hand softly through his hair. “Yes. I’m fine. I promise. It was just a bad dream. Go back to sleep, okay?” Beau might not have believed me, but his eyelids won out, and they flitted closed again.

Sitting up, I listened for movement outside the tent. Owls hooted from somewhere up in the trees surrounding us, and leaves rustled in the breeze. Then I heard the quiet crackling of embers, and I imagined Jackson outside, stoking the early morning fire.

I unzipped my bag, and let out a deep breath. Having slept in my clothes, I was already dressed, and I climbed to my feet.

I’d never been a country girl, but things changed pretty fast when you lived in the Yukon. Giant prehistoric-looking insects, dirty hair, cuts, and bruises were all part of life now, and even if I would never come to terms with what I could only assume were alien spiders the size of my palm, I was adjusting well enough to the rest. I had to.

Hunched over in the tent’s confinement, I unzipped the door and met Jackson’s gaze across the fire. His elbows rested on his knees as he poked at the embers, eyeing me carefully. His beard made his dark features appear ominous in the predawn light, but I knew better.

I stepped out into the frigid morning as discreetly as I could, careful not to step on Luna’s black tail as the wolf lay curled up beside the tent, keeping watch over her human. She and Beau had become inseparable.

I closed Phil and Beau back up inside the tent to get another hour or so of sleep, and pulled my boots on, leaving the laces untied.

“Dreams again?” Jackson said, his voice low. He could be a formidable presence when he wanted to be, but beneath Jackson’s dependable protectiveness, he was a teddy bear. “Yes,” I admitted.

He glanced at the percolator sitting beside the fire. “There’s enough coffee for one more cup,” he offered. If the pot was nearly empty, it meant he’d been up for a while already.

I walked around the fire to where he sat on a fallen log. I didn’t talk about my dreams with anyone other than Stanley most of the time, because unlike everyone else, he’d seen what I’d seen. He lived through what the others had only heard about. And, sometimes, I confided in Phil because he was easy to talk to and be around. He didn’t have a past he wanted to forget about like Alex did. In fact, Phil wanted to remember everything—his mother and sister who he’d been vacationing with in Whitehorse, and everything about his life before the Virus. If anything, he wanted to learn from it all. He wanted to grow and was determined to be stronger and ready for *next time*, like me.

I sat down beside Jackson, keeping a couple of feet between us. A buffer was something I always built in these days. That way, everyone else didn’t have to, and it was just easier. Though my ability to open and close the memory floodgates had grown a little stronger in the past few months, thanks to Stanley helping me practice, accidental transference in this case was more than a smudge on a piece of paper. It was more like an incriminating fingerprint people didn’t want to leave behind—the world the way they experienced it and all the thoughts and feelings that went along with it.

“Is it weird to be homesick?” I asked, since we had only been away from the others a couple of days. Without Beau and Thea’s bickering, Alex’s warm laughter, and Elle’s endless tasks of things to do around the lodge, my mind wandered more than I liked it to.

“No,” Jackson said with a small smile. “It’s not weird at all.” He had bad dreams too. They were different, though, and filled with monsters of his own making. He dreamed of his dead wife, Hannah, and baby Molly, which left him with a hearty dose of survivor’s guilt each and every time. I knew part of him yearned for his life before and that he wondered how different things would be if Hannah had lived, but he was also happy in the life he had with us now, and he was in love with Elle. For him, that was sometimes the hardest part.

I stared at Jackson’s profile as he gazed into the fire.

“They were about the General,” I told him, looking into the flames. “My dreams.”

Jackson, in his stoic silence, simply listened.

“When I ignore *how* I know about the General and what I’ve seen, and I forget about what I can do—what *all* of us can do—it still doesn’t feel real, you know? It’s more like a movie, or a nightmare. But not real . . . It’s too horrifying to be real.”

“Yeah, I know. I have a feeling it’ll be a while yet before we can breathe easily.”

With a groan, I leaned forward. “I never thought I’d say this, but . . . sometimes I actually miss things like homework and being grounded.” Although it was a joke, it almost wasn’t. If I were grounded, it would mean that my mom was still alive. “I guess I’d have graduated high school by now though,” I mused. “I might have hated college homework.”

With an amused sigh, Jackson poked at the fire again, and in our silence, I thought about Alex’s first day of school. It was still surreal to think that the moment I saw him for the first time, I had no idea what our lives would be eight months later.

“Why didn’t Alex come with us?” I asked, wondering if Jackson would give me a straight answer. It wasn’t that I followed Alex around like a lovesick puppy dog or anything, but I’d



definitely looked forward to spending time with him away from the house. It felt like we barely saw each other anymore, and I hated it.

“He said he wanted to finish the barn before it rained again.”

“Oh.” But I couldn’t help but think the only reason he changed his mind about coming was because I’d decided to go on the trip too. Since the day we both discovered we’d survived the Virus, we’d gone from best friends to somewhat estranged—which I took full responsibility for when I thought I was losing my mind in Slana—back to sort-of-friends, even though he claimed he could deal with my Ability. Sure, he still laughed and joked with me sometimes, but it was different. Everything about us was different.

I could feel Jackson’s eyes on me, but he didn’t say anything, and I appreciated it. I was pretty sure everyone, including Alex, knew how I felt about him, even if I’d only recently admitted it to myself.

I’d always been drawn to Alex, but how I felt about him was more than intrigue now. It was admiration when I saw him with Beau and Thea, so kind and fun and gentle. It was how hard he and Jackson worked to make sure we were all as safe as we could possibly be. It was what I felt when I touched him, the physical, primal feeling that tingled in my fingertips and made me warm with a comfort I’d never felt before—like Alex was part of me.

I cleared my throat and held my palms to the flames. Alex wanted his privacy, and I got that—I even understood it—but each time I tried to hand him something, he hesitated to touch me. When we walked side by side, it was with a measurable distance between us, when all I wanted was to take a step closer. And the few times we did happen to touch, and Alex felt the connection between us like I did, he would pull away like it was unbearable. Talk about an ego deflator.

“It seems like it’s been a lifetime since Anchorage, like I should be used to how fictional life feels by now,” I thought aloud.

“You mean, humans talking to animals, and turning themselves into flames is still strange to you?” Jackson nudged me, and his mouth lifted in the corner.

“I know,” I said, shoving my hands into my sweater pockets. “Call me crazy.” I peered up at the sky, washed in a cloudless blue haze. Crazy was exactly how I felt sometimes.

Feeling emotions that aren’t my own—check.

Seeing memories that belong to someone else—check, check.

That Alex could amplify them with his Ability seemed . . . like a cruel joke, because the one person I wanted to be closer to pushed me further away.

I’d never been one of those girls who planned her future wedding to her dreamy, Ken doll look-alike husband, or imagined our perfect lives together with a white picket fence, driving our one-point-five kids to soccer practice, and making Christmas cookies. It might’ve been because my mother and father’s relationship had always been loveless. I didn’t believe in soulmates, or put much faith in destiny either. Somehow though, meeting Alex felt fated, and I blamed my jumbled, Ability-infused brain on that inexplicable feeling.

The day we met, I knew something was different about him. I was drawn to his bad boy exterior, even if that’s not at all who he was anymore. The unexpected kindness of him buying me a pregnancy test and keeping my secret only reinforced those feelings. But it was after the Virus, when I saw him standing in the hallway outside my apartment in Whitely, like he was my own personal miracle come to save me, that I *felt* something humming between us the moment we touched.

“Do you believe in fate, Jackson?”

He leaned forward and poured the rest of the coffee into his mug. “I don’t know,” he said, thoughtful.

“I know it’s a little early in the morning to be getting so deep, but I have to wonder if there’s a reason why we found you at the bus depot, a reason you took us in even though you didn’t want to.”

“You’re right, that is a little deep. The sun isn’t even up yet.”

“Humor me,” I said.

Jackson straightened and took a swig from his copper cup. “It’s hard not to believe in something like fate,” he said, more quickly than I’d expected, like he’d thought about it before. “My life would be much different without having met you guys. I’m not sure I’d even be alive right now, to tell you the truth.”

“Same,” I breathed. “If we hadn’t met Elle.” Alex had promised me we’d figure things out, and maybe we would have, but without Elle, who knew what we would have decided to do. And what about Beau and Thea?

“My mother believed in destiny,” he added. “But in the stories she told me of her people, man made his destiny through his own choices, and he would be rewarded based on the worth of his soul.” He pointed to the whimsical Haida tattoos I knew were beneath his lightweight jacket. “They are symbols meant to protect me, and remind me of the man I want to be.”

I imagined the black and red mural on his arm—the moon on his shoulder, the guardian of the earth; the wolf, which embodied strength and family; and the sun, which represented the peace Jackson was still searching for below it. It all seemed too perfect to chalk up to coincidence.

“If you hadn’t been a trooper, you never would’ve been by the bus depot either, getting those maps for your trip here,” I realized. And it was in that moment that I knew Alex and I were definitely fated in some way, something I think he knew at some level too.

“I’m scared,” I heard myself say, and fleetingly, I understood how Alex might be afraid to hope for something good. “I know he’s far away, but what if General Herodson or his goons really do come for the rest of us survivors? What if everything we’ve been working on has been for nothing? What if there’s nothing we can do?”

Slowly, Jackson’s eyes shifted to mine. “If he comes, we’ll be ready, Sophie. I can promise you that.”

## Chapter 2

### Elle

The sun was hot against the back of my neck, pouring through the exposed beams of the unfinished greenhouse, half built a dozen yards from the south side of the lodge. Even though the greenhouse still needed a roof, windows, and a door that closed, I'd started planting the vegetation that would hopefully root and thrive there, even in the changing seasons. When the ground froze and the wilderness around us went dormant, we'd still have this protected place to grow currants, perfect for pectin and jam making; keep the citronella alive for next summer's mosquito infestation, which we'd come to rely on daily; and we'd have lettuce and potatoes through the winter.

I packed the dirt in around a blueberry stalk, the moist, rich earth staining the beds of my fingernails as I thought about the past eight months. It had been a perfect, terrifying storm—first the outbreak and death, then mad men and a grueling winter, and yet somehow, we'd endured it all.

I wasn't sure if General Herodson cared at all that we'd survived, or if he was coming to collect us for his Colony. The only thing that mattered now was being as prepared as we could if he tried to, and the days I thought too much about it, were the nights I couldn't sleep either. Those were the nights everything we still needed to do to outlast the harsh winter, holed up and hidden away, kept me up until the sun peeked over the ridge. It didn't feel like we had enough time to do it all before the first snowfall, despite how many hands and Abilities we had at our disposal; the more people we had, the more preparations we needed to make, and the list went on and on.

If it hadn't been for Woody's experience with the General decades ago, which we were all still a bit in the dark about, and Stanley's life at the Colony up until the Re-gen Rebellion, I'm not sure I'd believe what I now knew, even if I was living proof of it each and every day. I'm not sure I'd be half as worried either, and briefly I wondered if that wouldn't be preferable.

I stared down at my dirty fingers, my blood practically molten beneath my skin. Every time I began to second-guess the impossible stories about the General, I thought about the fire inside and what I could do now. I thought about Woody and Stanley, both of them experiments in the General's Great Transformation. And I thought about the horror on Sophie's face on the days she'd seen too much from Stanley's memories, and the tears in her eyes the nights she woke from her nightmares.

I wiped the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand, feeling bits of soil stick to my skin. It had only been three months since we'd all come together, something I had to keep reminding myself. We were all still trying to figure things out. Sophie would too, in time.

I glanced out the framed but glassless windows, toward the barn. Like many projects, the greenhouse was only partially finished. We were behind, according to my timeline, and there was still so much to do as the long days of summer continued ticking by. *We'll get it done, in time*, I reminded myself again.

Blowing out a sigh, I poured a few ounces of well water into the freshly potted shrub and slid it against the wall with the others. Then, I started scooping soil into the next pot. I tried to focus on the scent of sunshine and warm earth. I listened to the ravens in the treetops and the rustling of spruce tips in the breeze, but no matter what I did, there was the incessant *tick-tock* in the back of my mind, telling me to plant faster and move on to the next project.

I stuck another shrub root into the pot and packed the dirt around it, like the last one. Planting was easy and mindless, in a way. It was planning for the unknown that seemed to be an endless rabbit hole of uncertainty. There was still the matter of protecting ourselves against superhuman forces to consider, if it ever came to it. While Phil was able to tell which Abilities people had, it wouldn't save him or us if Woody wasn't around to block the dangerous ones, and we couldn't rely solely on their presence to save us.

Luckily, we still had electricity, thanks to the Whitehorse hydro power plant, powered by the Yukon River, which meant we had a fully-functioning prison in Whitehorse, if we needed it. Operating on the pretense that the more barriers we had between crazy Ability-wielders and us the better, Jackson and Ross led the prison reinforcement project. Sometimes Thea helped when they needed a little extra brawn to move things around.

Mostly, I led scavenging trips throughout Whitehorse—into homes, stores, and businesses—and worked around the lodge. We needed enough food and storage to get eleven people through the winter, and to ensure we would be self-sustaining by the end of fall. Most of the food that had been frozen since the outbreak was at our disposal, save for the dwindling supply of boxed and bagged food, feasted on by rodents, and the domesticated pets and livestock, most of which had starved to death or died in the cold.

With so many of us, we'd need a lot of meat on hand, and would have to grow plenty of vegetables. So, Jackson hunted, I planted, and having an abundance of both meant enough fat and oil for us to make biodiesel, in case we needed to get out in an emergency.

For everything else, we went foraging for berries and fireweed to make jams and jellies, and scavenged for machine parts to keep our vehicles and snowmobiles running when the roads were too thick with snow. There were supplies we'd learned from experience were crucial to

surviving the winter, like candles, games, woolen socks, and lip balm—one of the most important items, according to Sophie.

Bert worked tirelessly to retrofit the vehicles with biodiesel for when the fuel was outdated and useless, snowmobiles and ATVs included. Like Woody, Bert was a colorful addition to our group. Ross had said that Bert was more than a drunk on a couch the night we'd met them, and Ross had been right. It wasn't only Bert's engineering background that made him crucial to our progress. His Ability to make an engine rumble to life with a single touch—cranes, chainsaws, rusted old trucks blocking the road—had shaved days off of our projects. Keeping the engines going after he left, however, had proven a little more difficult for long periods of time, but that's where Bert's Ability ended and his brilliant mind began problem solving.

I pressed fresh earth around another blueberry stalk, and rocked back on my feet, my legs slick with sweat as I stood.

Days like this, when we were all separated and the property was too quiet, I grew even more restless. Maybe it was because Jackson was gone, and not just ten miles down the road, like usual. He was out in the wild unknown with Sophie and Beau, which left me on edge. Jackson was the most capable of all of us—with his knowledge of the wilderness, his trooper and survival training, and his Ability to sense trouble before it came—but that didn't mean he was untouchable. Even if it had been a while since we'd had a run-in with any crazy people, it didn't mean they weren't out there.

I wiped the sweat from my brow again, glad we'd had a dry spell for the past week, and I peered down the hill at Alex and Ross, digging fence post holes and hammering cross beams for our soon-to-be pasture. One of our many goals was finding a couple of dairy cows, if we could be so fortunate, and a few chickens. We had three usable acres, and we had plans to use every



single one of them. That was another item I needed to add to my list of things to do: find a book about caring for livestock. I'd worry about that when the time came.

Ross straightened from bending over a pile of two-by-fours and picked up a water jug from the ground. I hadn't trusted him when I'd first met him. He'd been hiding something, even Jackson felt it, but that was before we knew what it was. Before Sophie had told me what she'd seen when she'd touched him.

He tipped his water jug back, chugged a few gulps, then he wiped his mouth with the back of his arm, freckled and pink like he'd gotten too much sun.

He was big like Jackson, not as tall, but just as strong, and I could easily imagine him in the Middle East, where I knew he'd spent most of his twenties with his brothers in arms. It was the way he carried himself, with a thoughtful, determined quietness that imbued awe and respect— just like his best friend.

I had difficulty imagining Ross before the outbreak; the Ross who was going to propose to “the one who got away” on Christmas before she got sick; the Ross who wanted to be a family man, like Jackson once dreamed of, and who'd lost his baby sister the day Jackson lost the love of his life.

My chest tightened thinking about her. I'd never known Hannah, but I'd seen a photo of her once in Ross's house. I'd seen what she looked like standing beside Jackson, beautiful and smiling. I knew what he'd lost when she died, and somehow, it still felt raw, even to me.

I'd thought Sophie's Ability to see and feel horrible, unwanted things was a harsh reality, but Ross had learned what dying felt like as it passed from Kelsey and into him as she died in his arms. He knew what awaited him in the end. And if that wasn't enough to screw him up, his time in the infantry didn't help.

*“He spent six years in the army, and who knows how many people’s lives he’s taken. It haunted him before, so I hate to imagine what it does to him now, knowing what death actually feels like.”* Jackson’s words were a constant echo, and even if I knew it wouldn’t keep the memories away, I didn’t blame Ross for disappearing to drown himself in beer and booze now and again.

Ross ran his hand over his cropped, red hair and set his water jug down as Thea trotted up to him. Her almond-colored pigtails swayed and she stopped beside him. “Look!” she chirped and showed him something in her tiny, cupped hand.

My heart warmed when Ross smiled at her. Thea and Jackson seemed to be the only ones who could make his face light up. I often wondered if her contagious goodness was a power she possessed over everyone, rather than a side effect of her curiosity and youth.

Ross pointed toward the greenhouse with a few muttered words, and with a hop and a skip, Thea skipped her way up the hill with a grin. She stopped as she drew closer to let a frog jump out of her hands and onto a birch tree, then she skipped around the greenhouse, like she didn’t have a care in the world.

“Elle,” she said and stopped in the open doorway. “I think I got bit again.” Her freckled face crumpled with pain as she scratched the red welt on the side of her left cheek, then she scratched her arm for effect.

Brushing my dirty hands off on my pants, I walked closer. “I think you did too.” I eyed the bites on her arms and legs. “I count five now. They must really like you.”

“Yeah, they do. I don’t think the citronella works.” She reached for her cheek again.

“Don’t scratch it,” I said, and pointed toward the house. “Let’s put some honey on it, okay?”

Thea nodded so happily I wondered if a bit of honey wasn't her endgame from the beginning.

Taking her hand in mine, I led her across to the gravel path between the mudroom and the greenhouse.

"You have to leave the honey on the bite though, Thea," I told her. "You can't wipe it all off and eat it, like last time." With a sideways glance, I opened the side door and nudged her into the house.

The mudroom was a slate tiled entry filled with dirty shoes and coats hanging from hooks so full, I was afraid if I brushed past them, they might all come tumbling down. Winter boots were discarded and long forgotten in the heat of the summer, and I stepped over them and up into the laundry room before entering the kitchen.

"All right, up on the table," I said, letting go of Thea's hand. I reached for one of the jars in the cupboard above the counter.

Like most rooms in the lodge, the kitchen was large, with modern white accents, and industrial chrome appliances fit for an elite, exclusive Yukon getaway. And luckily, there was a place for everything in the floor to ceiling cabinets. While Woody, Phil, and Stanley preferred to keep an eye on things at the prison, the rest of us stayed at the house most of the time, and when we were all together, we needed room and storage to accommodate us all.

"This will only help the swelling and itching if you leave it alone," I warned her. "Capiche?"

Again, Thea nodded, but my hopes weren't very high. She felt the need to push any bruise she saw, pick any scab she had, and itch anything that needed a good scratch. "We'll stick some cedar bark in your pockets this time, for good measure." Though I was teasing, I'd decided

it was worth a try. The mosquitoes preferred Thea and Alex's blood the most, though we'd all grown used to finding a few new bites by the end of the day, despite our best efforts to repel them.

Unscrewing the top of the honey jar, I stuck a Popsicle stick inside and wound a string of honey around it before spreading a smidgen of it on Thea's bite. She wiped a bit of honey from the rim of the jar with her index finger and snuck it into her mouth. Her eyes held mine the entire time, waiting for a reaction.

I only lifted an eyebrow. "I'm glad we have three jars of that," I muttered. The good thing about being the only group living in Whitehorse was that the city was well stocked with most of what we needed, the non-perishables anyway, and honey was one of Thea's guilty pleasures. She'd been known to make herself sick a time or two, that's when I'd learned that blanket yes or no answers didn't work with a six-year-old—if she asked to have a little bit of honey, I had to quantify exactly how much she could have or she'd go wild.

"When will they be home?" Thea asked as she stuck her finger in her mouth to suck off the final bit of sweetness. *They* meant Jackson, Sophie, Beau, and Phil.

"Tonight, I hope. If they can get a moose today." We needed at least one more if we were going to have enough meat stored for our winter food reserve, and they'd already been gone nearly two days.

I felt an aching void when Jackson was away—an unease. Even if our relationship was relatively new, it also felt like ages had passed since we'd arrived, Woody had kidnapped me and Sophie, and everything just . . . changed. Life sped up and the days were filled with so many to-dos, it was like Jackson and I barely saw one another. Our nights, though, were precious, and when the house was silent and everyone had gone to bed, we could finally just . . . be. I'd grown

so used to him sleeping in bed beside me, that when he was gone, I missed his strong arms around me, and his whiskers tickling the side of my face and neck. I treasured the moments the ghosts of his past abandoned him and he allowed himself to let go and be playful with me.

Thea's tummy rumbled, and I glanced at the clock. "Oh, shit. It's late."

"You said a curse word," Thea pointed out. "You have to cook again."

My shoulders slumped. She was right, and cooking in a house that fed so many people was the worst punishment. I was still horrible at it.

"All right, fine." I grabbed the wet sponge from the sink to wipe the counter down. "But it *is* late. Do you want a snack—a real one?"

"No thank you, I'll just eat honey."

"I'm sure you would, gladly," I said, and dipped the popsicle stick into the jar a final time, and wound another bit of honey on the tip for her. "This is all you get. It's nearly nine and I'm going to make something quick for dinner." Accidental late dinners seemed to be a natural occurrence and byproduct of the midnight sun—early to rise, late to set.

Thea reached for the honey stick, and I pulled my hand away. "First, recite the rules, please."

"Eat it outside," she recited with a huff. "And don't touch anything, not even the door handle."

"Until?"

"Until I wash my hands, because of the ginormous ants." She groaned.

With a satisfied nod, I handed the stick over to her and pointed to the living room. "I'll open the screen door for you, and you can eat it outside while I make some real food to eat."

Thea headed for the sliding door to the wraparound deck. I opened the screen, it squeaking in protest, and I made a mental note to oil it later.

Fingers and mouth already sticky, Thea bounced out onto the deck and over to sit on the steps, happily content.

“How is it?” I asked her as she stared and licked at the Popsicle stick with complete focus.

“*Amazing.*” She licked the honey off the side of her hand.

“Good,” I said through a chuckle. In a different kind of world, Beau wouldn’t be out hunting, and the two of them would already be tucked into their beds. But for now, we all seemed to just go with the flow, stopping when we could to catch our breath.

Hands on my hips, I walked up to the pine railing and stared down the hill at the pasture where Ross and Alex were working on opposite ends. The deck afforded a lookout to the rest of the property, but instead of seeing the smokehouse, the skinning shed, and the new irrigation we’d put in from the river, and appreciating what we’d accomplished so far, I saw what still needed to be done—the pasture, the barn loft and greenhouse, the uncut and unstacked wood for our winter fires . . .

Ross walked toward the house with his empty water jug, and reached for the unwound hose underneath the deck. “Ross,” I said, remembering the time. “I thought you were going to check on the hydro plant today?”

He rinsed his face off with a splash, then shook the excess water drops from his head. “I wanted to help Alex with the fence. The kid seemed determined to get it done today. The hydro plant can wait.”

“Oh, well . . . you didn’t have to do that.” Ross had plenty of his own projects to work on, he didn’t need to take on ours too. “Can I at least get you something to eat? Thea’s having honey, apparently it’s *amazing*.”

Ross eyed her on the steps as she ran her tongue around her mouth.

“As delicious as that looks,” he said wryly, “I’m okay. I snuck inside and had some of that leftover pasta a few hours ago.”

“Oh, good. I can’t believe I’m only just now thinking about food. Alex must be starving. He’s working himself to near death out there. I told him I would help him do it tomorrow, after I was finished getting the plants potted. But he didn’t want to wait.”

Lips pursed in a flat line, Ross stared out at Alex, a small crease pulling at his brow. I’d come to know Ross’s quirks well enough by now to recognize his expression.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “What? You might as well say it. You and Jackson have the same pinched look when you want to tell me off about something.”

The smallest hint of a smile twitched into place, and Ross shook his head. “Not tell you off,” he said, glancing up at me, and I leaned against the railing, waiting. “It’s just . . . you have all of this.” He swept his hand from the garage and outbuildings on our left, to the new barn and greenhouse to the right. “And you’re so busy being afraid of winter and what’s happening in the lower forty-eight, you forget you’re all still alive and that you get to live.”

My frown deepened, and I waited for him to explain.

“Enjoy your second chance a little, Elle,” he said more quietly. “Most people didn’t get one.”

His words sobered me—shocked me, even.

“Don’t have regrets.” When his eyes met mine, I knew exactly what he meant. Ross knew regret more than anyone—his own regrets and everyone whose death he’d ever felt. It was the very reason he preferred not to go hunting with Jackson anymore. Death was different for him now. *Living* was different.

“Jackson tells me to slow down,” I told him. “To stop worrying so much. But it’s not that easy.” I looked at Thea on the steps, then at Alex. “It’s not myself I’m worried about anymore. And staying busy keeps my mind from spinning,” I admitted.

Ross cleared his throat. “Just . . . don’t let Herodson take all of this from you too. Not on top of everything else.” His blue eyes shimmered when they met mine, though I wasn’t sure if it was a trick of the setting sunlight or bottled up emotion.

Leaving me with that, Ross grabbed his water jug and headed back to the fence.

My chest ached as his words sank into the off-limit memories in my heart: the dark, unwanted parts of my past, and the sad memories that kept the fear above the surface of everything else. I didn’t want to wonder if one freezing-cold night would be our last ever again. I didn’t want dangerous men to find us like they had in Slana, threatening our lives. I didn’t want any of that, and with the General doing God knows what somewhere else, it felt like it was only a matter of time before another bomb dropped and we were caught unprepared.

I never wanted to feel that way again, even if it meant a few restless nights of sleep. Even if it meant we had to work a little longer and a little harder for now.



### Chapter 3

#### Alex

I never thought I'd miss snow. Not when I'd lived in Alaska and was surrounded by it most of the year. I definitely didn't miss it when my feet were so cold I couldn't feel my toes. And when I'd told Gale, my foster mom when I was ten, that I needed new boots, she gave me a lecture about how money was tight and there were other things more important than new shoes. She said the same thing when I told her I needed a new jacket. Now, a jacket was the furthest thing from my mind.

With a deep breath, I continued my lift and pull of the post pounder as the steel rod broke ground. At least the ground was still damp from the intermittent rain.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Without the ocean nearby, summer in Whitehorse was hot as hell. And the swarms of mosquitoes that came whooshing in after the rain, like a toxic cloud of death, were what nightmares were made of. My skin crawled just thinking about them.

Alaska had been known for mosquitoes, but not so much where I'd always lived. Here, in the Yukon, they could smell my blood from miles away, and seemed to come in masses. Hot days were a blessing in that way only; the mosquitoes didn't hang around much on a sweltering, dry day.

Using my arm to wipe the sweat from my temple, I glanced at the twelve steel posts along the pasture's fence line. Progress was progress, I supposed. Slow going, but progress all the same.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

My arms burned with fatigue and sweat trickled down my cheek as I continued post pounding, yet somehow, the more holes I made, the quicker my pace became. Once I was a good two feet into the ground, I moved on to the next one. When we were finished with everything, the farm wouldn't be huge, but it would be big enough to sustain us, if we could find the livestock to fill it.

Pulling my baseball cap from my head, I wiped the sweat from my brow and glanced around the property. I'd never built anything like what we'd done with this place. I'd never stayed anywhere long enough for it to feel like home, let alone be part of a family. It sounded pathetic, but it was true; this place felt more like home than anywhere I'd ever been.

I hated to think of the possibility that it could all be taken away in the blink of an eye by the General, or by greedy-bastard survivors that wanted what we had worked so hard for. Or worse, that somehow, I would fuck things up—because that's what I tended to do—and have to leave.

Ross headed from the house, back down the hill to the pasture gate.

“Hey, Alex!”

I looked at Elle, who was leaning against the deck railing. She pulled her long, dark hair up into a knot on top of her head.

“What's up?” I straightened, and grabbed my water bottle off the ground, unscrewing the cap.

She cupped her hand above her eyes, and peered out at me. “I didn’t realize what time it is. You hungry?”

“Nah,” I called back. “I’m good.” It was probably past nine, but dinner was the last thing on my mind. It was the hottest day of the week, and I could hear the sound of the river rushing beyond the tree line. It was the best part of being out here, and today it was calling for me, like a meaty bone to a hungry dog.

“Let me rephrase that,” she called. “I’m making us something to eat. Come up in twenty.”

I gave Elle a thumbs up, because what was I going to do, argue with her? If you were smart you didn’t argue with Elle. It wasn’t only because she could burst into flames if she wanted to, either. For me, it was because Elle was so damned nice all the time, and the moment her openness became guarded and unhappy, it gutted me. I’d never had anyone willing to set the world on fire for me before, and I knew Elle would quite literally do it for any of us if she had to. She was the closest thing I ever had to a maternal anything, and I didn’t want to disappoint her, ever. And deep down, I didn’t want her to change her mind about loving us the way she did—about loving me.

“I want caribou!” Thea shouted as she ran down the deck steps, past the garage and skinning shed, to the smokehouse. Elle ambled after her.

“We should make enough for the others,” Thea called behind her. “In case they come home.”

I thought they would’ve been back already, and wished I’d gone with them the moment I changed my mind. It was Beau’s first trip, and even though I didn’t think Jackson was going to let him actually hunt, I’d wanted to be there when he shot the rifle for the first time.

But the moment Phil had said he wanted to go, to represent Woody's group, I'd decided to stay behind. The way he flirted with Sophie annoyed me. And the way he kept urging her to be stronger and faster—better than she already was—pissed me off too. She was perfect, she didn't need to be something she wasn't just to suit him. And even if everyone else seemed to forget that Phil and Woody kidnapped her and Elle, I hadn't. I glanced at the cabin Sophie slept in and the one Phil stayed in sometimes beside it.

Things between Sophie and me were far too complicated to insert myself more than I'd already tried. She was my best friend, at least the closest thing I'd ever had to one, but anything beyond friendship felt impossible. She saw too much. She could feel things in me that *I* didn't want to feel—at least, if I let her get close enough. The stronger her Ability grew, the harder it was for me to ignore all the things about myself I hated, and all the things I never wanted her to see seemed to push their way to the forefront of my mind—horrible decisions, regrets, and the moments I was at my absolute worst. She didn't need to see that, hell; I didn't want to remember it. I didn't want her to think about me differently or for things to change between us more than they already had, and I knew they would if I let her get too close.

I chugged the last of the water in my bottle and was about to toss it aside and dive back into work, when I heard laughter coming from down by the river.

My heart pumped an extra, excited beat, and I dropped my tools and headed toward the river crossing, behind the barn. Three heads bobbed between the tree line as they crossed the walking bridge.

Feeling a wash of relief and excitement that they were home, I took my baseball cap off, drenched with sweat, and ran my hand over my head, waiting for Sophie and Jackson to step

fully into view. I saw Jackson through the trees first, the butt of his rifle poking up behind his back on one side, and a large bag of meat slung over his other shoulder and backpack.

Sophie walked beside him with a sack of her own slung over her shoulder. Her dusty rose t-shirt was wet with sweat around her armpits and neck, as well as under her breasts, though I tried not to notice. Her hair was pulled up into a high ponytail, and strawberry blonde wisps of hair fluttered around her face.

She wasn't like the Sophie I'd first met, with scared, crystal-like blue eyes and a frantic smile. She was more confident now, and as much as I hated to admit it, Phil was probably to thank for that. He wasn't a self-defense master or anything, but he'd taken what Woody had taught him and shown her. Now that Ross was around to help them too, Phil and Sophie were attached at the hip. Always practicing. Always laughing. Always tired. But despite the circles under her eyes, she gleamed in the sunlight as she drew closer.

I reddened with a different kind of heat as I walked toward them, realizing how much I'd missed her.

"Race ya!" Beau called as he and Luna shuffled past her, a smaller sack of meat in his arms, and his back loaded with his camping gear, like the others. Luna trotted toward Taiga, her mate and beta, and Little Foot and Rocky, who scurried out from whatever shade they'd been lounging in, happy to have their mother home.

"You'll win," Sophie called after him, and she grinned automatically at Phil as he came up the wooded path behind them.

My smile fell. Fucking Phil. Exhaling my displeasure, I hurried closer to help them with their gear. When my gaze met Sophie's, her grin broadened, making her eyes twinkle, and relief washed over me. She was excited to be home too, maybe even happy to see me. "You survived,"

I teased, taking the sack of meat from her. They had to have walked a couple dozen miles, at least.

“It was Sophie’s hit,” Jackson said proudly. “She didn’t even try to be humble about it either.” He chuckled, as we all continued toward the house.

“Yeah, Sophie’s a badass.” Phil leaned closer so that his shoulder brushed hers. “Everyone watch out.” With a wink, he squeezed her biceps gently, and I nearly lost my lunch.

“Here.” I forced myself to ignore him and switched the meat to my other hand, feeling my forearm strain. I took Sophie’s backpack to lighten her load, my nostrils filled instantly with the scent of citronella and sunblock wafting off of her skin.

“Thanks,” she said with a huff of relief, and when her eyes met mine, she smiled.

Jackson stopped mid-step, his eyes fixed forward. When I glanced up, Elle was standing in the smokehouse doorway, a barely contained grin pulling at her lips.

Thea poked her head out from behind Elle. “What did you get?” she called happily, and she shuffled up to us, eyeing the bags of meat.

“A moose,” Phil told her, and he ruffled her head as he passed her. Thea glared at him and smoothed the top of her hair back down again. *Get ‘em, Thea*, I silently cheered.

“Well,” She put her hands on her hips. “I hope it wasn’t a baby.” Her voice softened with concern.

“Of course it wasn’t,” Beau snipped from the smokehouse. He dropped his pack in the dirt and frowned, waiting for us slowpokes to catch up.

Thea shrugged. “How would you know?”

“It was a bull, I could tell. Trust me.” Beau turned and started for the house.

“Hey—” Elle called out, glancing back at him. “That’s not where your pack goes.”

Beau grumbled as he lugged it back up onto his shoulder again.

“Put your stuff in the garage, bud,” I told him. “We need to unpack and put it all away.”

Elle hurried toward Jackson, her eyes locked with his. A smile parted his lips, his mustache and beard taking on a life of their own as a massive, happy grin engulfed his face. Watching them was both heartwarming and heartbreaking in a way I wasn't sure I quite understood. The instant Elle wrapped her arms around him, I felt like an intruder in their private moment and looked away to find Sophie staring at me.

Her eyes caught the sun, brightening her whole face, and we walked over to the skinning shed to unpack the meat. “It looks like you've been busy,” she said, pointing toward the pasture.

When I glanced at our progress down the hill, I saw Ross making his way up from the gate. “Yeah. We put a good dent in it.”

“You're always working on something.”

“That's how it works, right? Pull your weight or get the boot.” I smiled, but something in Sophie's eyes held my gaze. It was a flash of pity, and I didn't like it.

“It's not like *Survivor*, Alex. You don't get voted off the island. This is your home now—we're your family.”

My heart did a triple pump and I swallowed thickly. She had no idea how much those words meant to me, but I didn't like that knowing gleam she sometimes had, so I flashed her a smile instead. “I don't know, Soph. You got pretty freaked out when I accidentally used your shampoo. I think I was on the blacklist for a while. But don't worry, I've steered clear ever since.”

Sophie rolled her eyes and took her pack from me to set by the door. “Come on. Let's get this meat cleaned before I put you back on it.”

Sun from the skylight filled the twelve-by-twelve space, the knives and pans hanging on the wall blinding us when they caught the light.

“It looks like you guys brought home a bunch more work,” I joked.

Jackson came into the shed behind us, followed by Thea and Elle, who stopped in the doorway.

“Does that mean we don’t have to go to bed soon?” Thea asked, leaning against Elle.

I opened the sack, and pulled out a hunk of thigh meat.

“I was just going to make dinner and get her ready for bed,” Elle said, glancing at Jackson. “We were thinking tacos.”

“No dinner yet?” Jackson looked surprised.

“We’ve been working all day,” Thea explained with exasperation. “Like, *all* day.”

Jackson eyed Elle for a moment, then glanced from Thea, to me, then to Sophie. “I have a better idea.” He looked at Thea again. “You guys get something quick together to eat, we’ll get the meat cut and hung, and then we’ll all go for a late-night swim. We’ll be in bed before midnight.”

“Really?” Thea chirped.

“I think it’s okay to bend the rules once in a while,” Jackson admitted, and a silent conversation passed between him and Elle before the corner of her mouth lifted with the hint of a smile. “*I* think,” he continued, “we could all use a night off from chores and pesky bedtimes.”

“I’m in,” I said, the water still calling to me. It was the perfect end to a long, hot day.