

Gabriel – before Book 2:

I waved the tailgating car around us on the first straight swath of highway since leaving the tiny blip of a town called Rachel. I kept the BMW at forty-five and my eyes peeled on the shoulder.

“Do you see that?” I asked Cassie when a flash of white peeked through trees. “Looks like a trailer maybe.”

“Probably his.” From the passenger seat, Cassie’s gloved finger pointed to the Hulk of a man peering into a dinky mailbox at the end of a gravel drive. The plume of smoke from his cigarette matched his salt and pepper beard. The sun glinted off his dark, bald head as he turned narrowed eyes on the car. I slowed to a stop and couldn’t help but stare back. This stranger easily matched me for size—a rare feat. His mitt of a hand pulled a letter from the box, and a junk mailer flew out with it. The breeze carried it to our windshield. “Carl Simmons,” the first line of the address read.

As I pushed down the gas, the mailer slid off, and we left Mr. Carl Simmons and the last glimpse of civilization behind.

Cassie sighed her disappointment, so softly I knew she didn’t realize she’d done it.

I gave her thigh a soft squeeze. “He’s around here somewhere.” We’d hoped to find Vin’s father, Alec, somewhere in Rachel because finding him in the desert would be like finding a tick on a bear. But no such luck. “Maybe he’ll find us. And if not, your sister can probably help, once we get her out. She knows him better.”

“You know it’s super annoying you’re always right.”

Cassie’s fiery curls shifted, turning toward my chuckle, and I risked looking away from the road to spend a moment in her eyes. Her soul glowed through them, like halos of gold around her irises. I saw the good in everyone’s direct gazes, felt their happiness and kindness like a warm drink of cocoa settling in my gut, but Cassie’s soul swelled my chest with a warmth like a summer breeze through the pine forests of Meeker. Invigorating. Cleansing. Sanctuary. As I lingered for another brief breath, an image forged of gold sparks leapt out at me. I’d never seen this moment, but I recognized the headboard behind her and Vin, cross-legged on a guest bed in my family

home. *Vin rested his head in his hands. "I should have moved faster, gotten there. If you could still remember her, you'd be furious with me. She was always at the pool. I should've known."*

Cassie's arm encircled his shoulder. "I may not remember her, but I know you. So, I know for a fact you did everything you could."

Vin's head raised at her comforting words.

The sparks fizzled away, and I was back in the present.

What remained were worry lines around Cassie's mouth and scrunched on her freckled nose. My gift let me feel her conviction to find the sister she'd once loved but couldn't remember, to rekindle that connection she'd thought unattainable. At the same time, her face let me know she feared we'd waited too long giving ourselves two weeks to recover from Aaron's attack, and Ellis was forever out of reach. Worse still, that she'd let Vin down by not finding her.

I reluctantly tore myself from the beautiful depths of her soul and swore I'd keep her fears from coming true.

Taking a breath so I'd sound casual, I said, "Where to now, navigator? We're getting close, aren't we?"

"Mm-hmm." She tapped the map in her lap. "We follow this highway for another five miles, and then take an access road that loops around back of the facility and up a mountain. Gives us the high ground, but we'll have to do some off-roading once we get up there to find a vantage point."

"Alec probably had a similar idea. We may stumble right into him."

Cassie made a noncommittal "mm" sound but paused her brooding out the window long enough to flash me a little smile. I didn't press for her thoughts. Just followed her instruction, continuing down the road, past a long stretch of barbed wire and a security gate fitted with a bright yellow warning sign:

Private Property of the US Government. Trespassers will be shot on sight.

Friendly.

I tried to snag a glimpse of the real facility, well aware they had higher security around the place than barbed wire, thanks to the blueprints Cole snagged through the dark web last week. No cigar, as Dad would say. Just desert, some large rocks, and scrub. They'd put this mystery base far from prying eyes on the road.

Cassie indicated the turnoff that took us high into the mountain north of the facility and then indicated a trailhead where we pulled off onto the shoulder. While she rolled the map, I hurried around the car to open her door and offer her a hand down. She rolled her eyes, as expected, but took it. Instead of leaping down, she jumped onto me, clinging like a monkey. That was less expected. She pecked a kiss on my lips, and though I leaned in for more, she slid down with a wink. The scarred skin around my mouth pulled taut, stretched by my smile at her playfulness. Few saw that side of her because she could so rarely relax. Instead of keeping her arms tight to her sides to avoid being touched, she swung them freely while approaching the split in the tree line. She still favored her right knee a tad, but the hobble was gone, thank goodness.

“Come on, Lancelot. We've got a long hike ahead. Let me know if *you* need a hand.”

I grinned at the nickname she'd used to taunt me for any act of chivalry since the start of our road trip five days ago, when I'd asked to carry all the luggage to the car. There were far worse titles. And I think she'd finally realized I didn't lend a hand because I thought she was weak or incapable, but because she shouldn't have to do it all. Her teasing came with more smiles these days. And kisses. Still, I wasn't about to push it, so I handed over her pack and only shouldered my own. Although, mine weighed about four times as much.

The “trail,” which I suspected was more of a deer path, headed northeast after a mile or so. We abandoned it to carefully inch down a slope headed south. We ran into some more barbed wire and another warning sign, but I made short work of the barbs with a quick shift of my arm into bear form and a few swipes of my bear claws.

When we reached a cliff's edge, the grey blocks of the facility appeared in the desert below, like toys in a sandbox. We settled on a spot a few feet back from the edge, protected by a few saplings. While I unpacked the beige camouflage tent and a snack, Cassie sat on a boulder and studied the pages Cole printed. She focused on the above ground layout, putting the page showing the dotted lines of underground rooms aside for the moment. I handed her a protein bar and started on the tent.

A few minutes later, I had a shelter, and she had a plan.

She crumpled the metallic wrapper and held up the blueprint to show me Xs she'd marked with the pencil tucked behind her ear.

"There's a transformer on the outskirts of the inner security fence that I can definitely get to. I think we should also go after the repeater, here." She tapped the blueprint. "Maybe do that first, since it's farther from any of their guard stations. Or maybe we could coordinate it so that we hit both at once."

"Sounds like a good start, but where's the entry point?"

"Only one, it looks like." Cassie pointed between the papers and the biggest square down below. "It's a small building up top. As far as I can tell, we go in there and then head for the basement, I guess." She drew the underground layout into her lap. "These rooms are tiny and lined up beside each other like cells. I'd guess that Ellis is in one of them."

"Sounds like a lot of guessing."

She cut her eyes up at me, and though I saw the annoyance, I couldn't help but smile basking in the twin halos' warmth. The gold sparks danced between us like sunbeams, but I didn't focus on them, preventing them from solidifying so I could stay with her in the here and now.

When her eyes narrowed to slits, I raised my palms. "I'm just saying, maybe we should get a closer look and try to figure out the details. Like how many men are stationed and where. Maybe there's even a hidden entrance, less conspicuous than charging through the front door."

She raised a hand, pulled off her glove, and squinched up her nose, puckering her lips unconsciously in an adorable look of concentration. Fire sparked to life in her uplifted fingertips. Still working her mouth, she flicked her fingers outward in a star, and the fire jumped from her hand onto the ground. It formed a snake that slithered through the scrub grass and the grainy dirt to form a ring around the mini camp. She'd practiced her new powers at every stop since Meeker, including a detour to visit two old friends Grandpa had insisted would help us with their alternate abilities (unfortunately, it turned out they were a bonded pair and had passed within days of each other this summer). All her training was really starting to pay off.

She looked up at me with a brow arched in triumph. “We don’t need subtlety. I can burn through whatever or whoever’s in the way. Ellis doesn’t have time. She’s already been in there way too long.” Her gaze left me and scolded the ring of fire itching to jump to the dry saplings. The small blaze went out with a hiss.

I reached out a finger that she took with a contented look, letting me pull her against my chest, where her palms moved over my shirt to reach my neck. “As much fun as storming the castle with my own personal dragon sounds”—she laughed softly and tickled my ear with a bare finger, her other hand working to banish rationality with slow circles in my hair—“wouldn’t it be easier if we knew where we were going and how many bridges we had to burn instead of searching the whole place after we’ve turned it into a bonfire?”

“Can’t take the heat?” she asked, standing on tiptoe to bring her lips level with mine.

What was my argument again?

The only thing that restored my focus and kept my hands planted firmly on her hips was the desire to keep her safe from all the guns down there in the desert.

“Heat I can handle. Forty assault rifles might be another story.”

“And what’s to keep the forty assault rifles from getting tipped off early while we do surveillance? They’re bound to have sophisticated cameras and sensors. Hell, maybe even lasers or land mines.”

“Because all they’ll see on their cameras is a bear minding his own business. Maybe a little odd in the desert, but nothing to get up in arms about.”

She unraveled from me and stepped back to prop her hands on her hips. “So, you’re not letting me come along in this plan?”

“No, I’m *asking* you to please wait while I look around down there for one afternoon. Then we can strategize and make our move in the morning.” When her stance relaxed, I smiled and added, “I may even find Alec hiding out down there, and he can help us charm our way in. But if I get nothing, you burn through it all. One afternoon. There’s no catch.”

She smiled back, scrunching one eye. “I’m getting serious déjà vu.”

“Of what? Me bugging you?”

She snorted. “Yeah. But more specifically, that day by the cave in Meeker, when you went down the mountain for more supplies and I convinced myself you’d left me up there to freeze. I may or may not have condemned you to Dante’s first circle of Hell.”

I laughed, though somewhere in the back of my mind I still cringed remembering her blue lips and chattering teeth. “I’m surprised it wasn’t deeper, with how shady I acted. So what circle am I in now, or have I managed to claw my way out into Purgatory?”

She trapped me in that golden glow, sweet and sticky as honey, as she sashayed her hips closer. “I think you’ve done plenty of penance.”

“So this is heaven?” I asked as she wound her arms around me.

Her mouth met mine, soft as angel wings brushing my lips as she whispered, “Pretty damn close.” Then her tongue caressed my mouth as she deepened the pressure, and my brain went fuzzy, leaving sensation free to overtake me. She was everywhere, burning through my veins. When she pulled back, I kept my lids heavy, slow to return to reality, my thumbs threaded through her belt loops. Her curls touched my cheek, and her mouth went to my ear. “You know, even then, my heart kept telling me I could trust you. I just didn’t want to listen. But I could have left that mountain, and I didn’t. And I won’t leave this one.” She gave my cheek a peck. “Go do your surveillance. And take all the time you want. I’ll have the fire waiting for you this time.”

As she turned to walk back to her boulder, I tickled her side. “Metaphorically, right? We don’t want them seeing anything.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She waved me off as she dug Vin’s copy of *Wuthering Heights* from her pack. Ducking in the tent, she flopped down on a sleeping bag.

“You know, Gram would’ve called you a miracle worker, getting me to hang back and chill out.” She spoke of Rose without any hitch in her voice and winked at me underneath the hardcover. “She’d be right, as usual. She told me I could trust you from the beginning. Took me way too long to listen, but now I trust you more than anyone in the world.”

I paused midway through pulling my shirt over my head in preparation for the shift, struck by the casual profoundness of her words. Such a momentous occasion deserved a moment of

reverent silence. But while I listened to the triumphant crash of her biggest, most stubborn wall falling away, she nestled deeper into the sleeping bag to read like nothing had happened.

“At least your lone bear mission means I get some time to read,” she said. With the book over her head, she cracked the spine about three-fourths of the way through, and a piece of paper fell onto her face. She jolted up. “What the— How did a page rip out?”

Cassie snatched the paper off her chest where it had slid down, and the book dropped from her other hand. I froze with my fingers at my shorts’ button, shocked that she’d dumped the book unceremoniously onto its pages. That’s when I noticed the tape on one side of the folded sheet in her grip, and the college-ruled lines. She opened it, flattening the creases, and her fair skin paled to match the stark white of the paper. Fingertips hovering by her lower lip, she exhaled his name. Vin.

“It’s a letter from Vin,” she said louder. She flipped the sheet around so I could see his script. A tear fell past the page to her thigh, and I was in motion.

The whole tent shifted as I squeezed past the support poles to take her in my arms and dry anymore tears before they could fall. But they stayed pooled on her lashes, and she swallowed hard to compose herself. I kissed her hairline, holding her tight, and felt her breathing relax.

“Are you all right?” I murmured into her curls.

She nodded against my shoulder. “It just took me by surprise.” She wiped her cheek and sat straighter, pressing the letter to her chest like a hug.

Her eyes flicked to mine and down to the letter, then crinkled with something like an apology. I got the hint. But I bit my lip, wanting to hold her until those distress lines between her brows subsided. She kept her gaze down and tucked a curl behind her ear, fingertips fiddling with a corner of the letter. I knew she deserved privacy to read her best friend’s unexpected gift of words, but an ugly little piece of me wondered what sort of words they were. Platonic? Or romantic? It wasn’t really my business, though.

I cleared my throat and loosened my hold, scooting toward the flap. “If you’re sure you’re okay...”

“Yeah,” she said hastily, the letter still clutched above her heart. “I’m okay.”

“I’ll leave you to it then.”

“I don’t mean to boot you out, it’s just... Well, it’s private, you know?”

“Yeah. Totally get it.”

With a gentle smile, she traced my jaw with her glove, pulling me in for a goodbye kiss. “Thank you,” she said as she drew back.

Assured she’d be all right, I slipped out of the tent and started my transition into bear form, inviting my animal spirit forward as my shorts and boxers fell to the underbrush. The prickles lasted a few seconds, while my body expanded and fell forward onto hands already covered in fur. I shook from head to tail, itchy from the spontaneous sprouting of hair over every inch of my skin. My vision sharpened, zeroing in on a now-obvious path down the mountainside toward the thick concrete perimeter fence at its base. Before heading out, I looked back at the tent. Cassie’s voluminous curls concealed her face and the letter while she bent over her cross-legged lap.

Knowing the best way to help was freeing Ellis, I trundled my way down the mountain, using my claws for purchase on the steep slope. For the first fifteen minutes or so of the tedious trip, I kept my focus on the facility. At this height, I had a bird’s eye view. Inside the three-foot-thick concrete perimeter wall and its steel gate, a lower metal fence topped with barbed wire encircled a building that looked like a nondescript office complex. Instead of an employee lot, it had a couple of UTVs outside. A guard outpost stood at the gate of the inner wall, on the opposite side of the building from me. I couldn’t detect movement from the mountainside, but it could have been automated for all I knew. Both gates faced away from the mountain, out into the vast, unforgiving desert. If we wanted to use a main entrance, or flee through one with Ellis, we’d leave ourselves exposed. We’d be sitting ducks for bullets on that flat, barren plain. I’d need to scan the perimeter for weaknesses, a back way in, something. I easily spotted the radio repeater tower, standing between both fences at the back of the facility. I didn’t immediately see the transformer. They probably had it tucked against the inner fence, from what Cassie said.

But after my initial observations and setting my sights on a gathering of trees where the mountain leveled before reaching the desert, my mind drifted back up the ridge to Cassie and that letter. I tried to dwell on what she’d said to me before she found the note. *Now I trust you more than anyone in the world.* A big step in any relationship, but for Cassie, it was colossal. She’d

trusted no one, not even herself, when I'd first met her. Yet, a malignant whisper said, *She trusted Vin first.*

I'd seen it myself, their quick connection. She'd trusted him with Rose's will, trusted him to go through her home and peruse the inner sanctum of her life, while keeping me at arm's length.

I'd liked Vin. I really did. I mean, he saved my life. And I knew he and Cassie went way back, that he'd always be a part of her. But thinking of Cassie spilling tears onto his letter, cherishing his sentiments, curdled my stomach because I couldn't help but wonder who she might have chosen if he were still alive. Or if he'd been able to touch her without causing pain, too.

As I entered the copse of trees, not half a mile from the perimeter fence, my nose twitched. Animal instinct overpowered human thought. A new scent mingled with the heady pine and musk of varmints. People. I meandered to a tree trunk and raised up on hind legs to scrape my claws through the bark and sniff at some berries on a bush nearby. Secretly, I searched for a trail cam of some kind, something that would bring patrols to this spot frequently enough to leave a clear, day-old scent. I found nothing hidden in the branches.

Making sure to move at the leisurely pace of a bear minding his own business, I did a half loop around the facility on an uneven, hopefully random-looking path. I found the transformer, snuggled into a corner of the inner fence. What I didn't find was any flaw in the outer wall. We had climbing gear, but it bugged me that I couldn't spot any cameras or soldiers. Without a visual on their line of sight, I couldn't determine a blind spot. Without an idea of how many people waited inside, I couldn't target a weak link. Maybe we could use the repeater tower for some cover, but then we'd have to resort to brute strength and the element of surprise to get us inside. I could hear Cassie saying "I told you so" already. Still, it meant the world that she'd let me try.

The journey back up took more muscle but less concentration. When I crested the ridge where I'd concealed our tent, Cassie flew to me in a streak of red and flung her arms around my neck. "Hurry up and shift back."

She released me and held out my shorts in two hands while I returned to my human self. After I'd buttoned myself up, she slipped back into my arms and held my face in her palms. Her eyes stole my breath and filled me with fresh life all at once as she deliberately met my gaze.

"I want you to read the letter."

Lost in her glow, I blinked at her. “What? Really?”

She nodded, mouth curving upward as she stroked my jaw with her glove. “I’m sick of bottling up my feelings and my past. I’m sick of overthinking. Sick of controlling every moment and trying to wait for the exact right time to do or say things. I want you to know everything. My past included.”

I hugged her tighter. “That means the world to me, you know.”

She flashed me her teeth before turning serious. “And I don’t want you to have any doubts. I know how Vin felt about me, but I know how I feel about you. I want you to know that”—she drew the letter from her back pocket—“this is special to me because he was my best friend. As close to family as Gram. And I want to honor him as both our friends, and all that he and his dad did for me and my sisters, even if I can’t remember it. Having you know what I know, being able to talk to you about it, will make it more meaningful.”

I lifted her off her feet, earning the music of her laughter when I spun her in a circle. When I set her down, I held out my hand for the letter and opened it with the same care she’d taken to refold it. Vin’s pen wrote in clean, slanted print.

Cyn,

You may never see this, but I’d like to think there’s a chance I’ll have the courage to say these things to you.

When my hacker found that buried report, I knew it was you they’d pulled from the river. Or maybe I needed it to be you because the amnesia meant you hadn’t stayed away by choice. That you hadn’t put me in your past. But that hope made me arrogant, and I convinced myself that you could never truly forget me. When I stepped into that classroom today, I just knew you’d recognize me. Instead, you looked at me with that moony, slack-jawed smile that is my curse. It wasn’t yours. And though you started to fight it, I knew in that moment that I’d lost my best friend. I intend to get her back, but now I have little hope of restoring what might have been before you left. That history is erased for you. But never for me. And I don’t want the memories to fade away, so here I hope to immortalize them in some small way.

Before Dad got the call that sent us to your farmhouse, I’d convinced myself I didn’t need friends. I’d rather have none than have unwitting slaves to my abilities. I had my father, for company and stimulating conversation. I had the beautiful artifacts we procured for his collectors to use as fodder for imagining a different life where connections were possible. I was content to live in daydreams. And then you, Ellis, and Alanna plowed into my tiny world and knocked down the walls of my hermit cave. Ellis and Lana eventually became mildly immune to me, if I didn’t smile much—able to irk and challenge me as sisters are supposed to do (and I loved them all the more for it). But from the first day, outside that solemn farmhouse, I knew you were different. You

were so strong, guiding them out to the car with your chin high. When I forgot myself and smiled at you for the blink of any eye, you narrowed yours at me and said, "Can you pop the trunk, or do we have to stand here all day?" I nearly fell over. For you, it was a wretched day of sorrow. You'd lost half your family. But that was the day I gained one, and in that very moment I dared let myself believe I could have a friend.

You didn't believe I was your age at first. I had to catalogue the years of my life with dates in photo albums to convince you. Horribly embarrassing by the way; I didn't exactly plan to show you naked baby pictures so early in our relationship. Not to mention the awkward phase between 11 and 12 where my unnatural aging began in horrendous stops and starts. You laughed particularly hard at the one where I, and I quote, "Look like a baby super model posing for an acne product commercial." After that, you warmed to me, began to confide in me. As much as you'd ever let yourself anyway. I'm not sure you ever knew what those late-night talks in the courtyard meant to me. Cyn, no matter what we said, whether it was serious or sorrowful or absolute hysterical nonsense, those hours were the best of my life. I could be me. I could smile without thinking, and you always made me smile.

You kissed me by a replica of the Venus de Milo in that courtyard. For a moment, I thought I'd fallen back into old habits, daydreaming wild, impossible scenarios, and then the truth hit me. More exhilarating and terrifying than any fantasy ever could be. I'd loved you for a long time, but suddenly that word meant so much more. It still does, even now, after I ruined my chance to deserve your love, after you told me that's not what you want, I still feel it. But no matter whether you ever feel it too, I will be here for you, Cyn. Always. In whatever way you need. Say the word.

With all my heart,

Vin

I folded the paper and gave it back to her, my chest tight. I had no doubt that letter was a priceless personal treasure to her, full of bittersweet remembrance. And she'd shared it with me.

"He was a great guy," I said. How could I fault Vin for pining for her? He'd seen her just as clearly as I did, it seemed. How could he not love her? "I'm so glad you found that."

She blinded me with her smile as she pushed it back into her pocket. "Me too."

"It's also nice to hear you gave him as hard a time as you gave me."

She snorted. "But that's what I was talking about. My default is distrust. I question everyone and make them hurdle endless obstacles to earn a fraction of my trust."

"Hey, you have good reasons."

"Yeah, I know. And I'm never going to accept anyone at face value, but I'm done making you and other people I love jump through my hoops. But I can't promise I'll stop giving you headaches."

“I’ll keep the aspirin on hand.”

She tilted back her head as she laughed, the most beautiful creature on Earth with her hair catching the last pink-orange rays of the setting sun. Her hands slid up my chest, and then she stiffened, looking over my shoulder.

“What?” I turned.

I saw them before she pointed. Four guys in camo skirted the perimeter fence, coming from the outer gate toward the mountain. From this distance, they were toy soldiers. With guns. I sank into a crouch and moved into deeper cover behind the bushes, Cassie moving in sync with her hand on my back.

“Think they saw the camp?” she asked.

“That or I set off some kind of alarm by the fence. I didn’t see cameras, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t there.”

“Maybe we should make our move now, while they’re away from the facility. Did you find a back door?”

While the soldiers made their way up the slope in a beeline for that grove of trees where I’d smelled previous patrols, I gave Cassie the rundown of what I’d seen.

Cassie thought for a moment. “So we grab the climbing gear, avoid those bozos, climb the wall. I’ll blow up the transformer while you take out the repeater. Then we—”

“Wait,” I said, “hear me out. Maybe we can spy on that patrol and see if they let anything slip. Or maybe see if they take another entrance into the main facility that I didn’t see. We could get more to go on.”

I looked over my shoulder to find her chewing her lip. Finally, she scrunched her eyes and sighed through her nose. “All right. Let’s try it your way.”

“That hurt, didn’t it?” I teased her with a raised eyebrow.

She swatted my back. “I’m working on it, okay?”

“If we get nothing or if things go south, I’ll get out of your way and let you light up the place.”

“Deal.”

By the time we gathered the climbing gear, the sun had set, providing us cover while I led Cassie down the safest route toward the soldiers’ flashlights. They’d left the grove and fanned out into a geese-like formation while they climbed higher up the ridge. We met them halfway, just as they regrouped around their leader, easy to identify from the gold bar patches on his uniform. I coaxed Cassie behind a thicket of dying bushes and strangled saplings.

“Should’ve brought the night vision—” The crackle of a walkie talkie cut off the man’s complaint.

“Security Group Two, report with current status. Over.”

“Roger. Security Group Two, reporting. On the mountain. North Quadrant secure. No sign of the anomaly, over.”

“I knew it was a faulty heat sensor.”

So that’s what I’d set off.

“Sensors always on the fritz,” the team leader commiserated.

“Leave it to AJ to waste everyone’s time.”

One of the soldiers on the ground grumbled, “Leave it to Reyes and AJ bickering to send us all in circles, more like. When are Mommy and Daddy going to kiss and make up already?”

Someone snickered.

The leader swirled a finger by his head in a circular motion. “All right. Pack it up, boys. Let’s get some chow.”

The walkie crackled again. “Local Group Three, supplies at the main gate. Cafeteria shipment. New saline for Charlie too. Need it stat.”

“Charlie’s still kicking?” a patrolman asked no one in particular.

“Not sure the saline’s gonna help her much longer,” another said in an undertone.

Her?

Cassie and I exchanged worried glances. Who was Charlie and what were they doing to her? Were they doing the same—or worse—to Ellis?

“Who wants to take a tunnel run?” the walkie voice asked. “Over.”

Tunnels?

A new, gruff voice came through. “Shipment’s large. Better attach trailers to the UTVs.”

“Control forgot the extra receiver battery again,” our guy answered with a groan.

“Roger that. I’ll radio Test-Site HQ about scheduling a Janet flight,” another voice answered. “Who’s meeting the next shift by the airstrip?”

After a lot of secret, off-walkie cursing, the team leader of our group agreed to get the UTVs and meet the shipment at a utility access point. When they’d marched off to a safe distance, I stood up for a better view around the thicket, watching their lights head toward the gate.

“You were right,” Cassie said, looping her arm with mine. “So, we’re waiting to see where that tunnel access is?”

“Yeah. I’m thinking you take it while I cause a distraction—on top of your transformer explosion.”

“You thinking rogue bear?”

“Yep. At the front door.”

“So they don’t see me head into the tunnels after that shipment.”

“Exactly. First, I rip a few wires and bend a few poles on that repeater.”

“Better get a move on so I can hop the wall in time to follow those UTVs.”

We half jogged, half slid down the rest of the mountain, like baseball players sliding into home. When we reached the bottom, covered in dirt, and slipped into our harnesses, I heard the massive gate swing on its hinges to admit the soldiers on the opposite side of the building. I went first up the wall, using some of my bear strength to shove the climbing hooks into cracks in the concrete, so Cassie could follow my pegs to the top with ease. We dropped down right next to the

repeater. For the inner wall, I handed her a pair of wire cutters so she could half climb the fence and cut an opening through the barbed wire with a few snaps. Operating under the assumption that they'd already picked us up on heat sensors or surveillance, I pointed out the transformer and immediately turned toward the repeater. But she spun me back around and crashed her lips against mine in a fast kiss.

“I love you.” Those eyes found mine. Shining and bright, they promised forever as she pulled back and returned the wire cutters.

“I love you, too.” I winked at her as I added, “Hit 'em with all you've got, gorgeous.”

She made a fist and then splayed her fingers. A fireball roared to life in her palm, huge and magnificent. “Promise.” She winked back.

“Wow. That's new.” It used to take her a full minute of concentration to do something like that.

“I decided to stop making it jump through hoops.” She closed her fist, dousing the flame, as the engines of the UTVs fired up in the distance. She blew me a kiss and vaulted the fence.

Before I shifted, I risked a few seconds to watch her race toward the transformer, red curls flying like a banner. My untamable inferno.

Book 2 takes off from here, after one more bonus scene from Cassie!

To stay updated, and for more bonus content, sign up at www.cherylkahn.com.