

SHAY AND KAI CAN'T OTRUN THE EPIDEMIC . . .
CAN THEY SURVIVE IT?



CONTAGION

T E R R I T O R Y

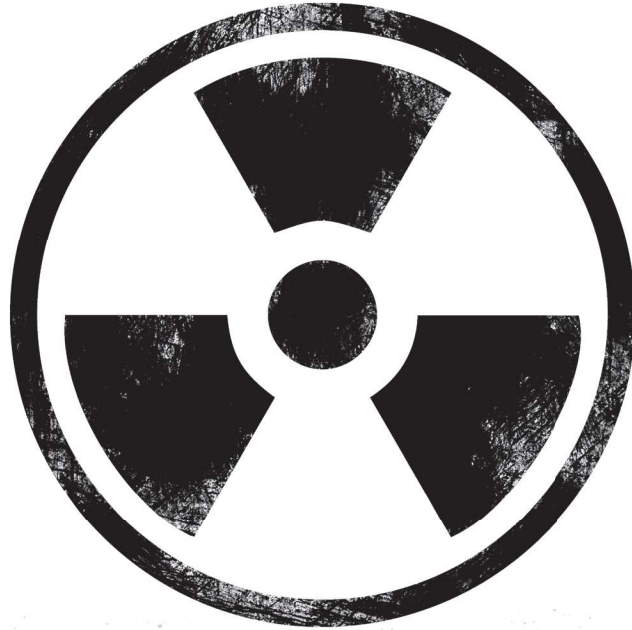
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THE
DARK MATTER
TRILOGY

CONTAGION JULY 2019

DECEPTION OCTOBER 2019

EVOLUTION SUMMER 2020



CONTAGION

T E R I T E R R Y



CONTAGION

BOOK I OF THE DARK MATTER TRILOGY

T E R R I T O R Y



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In memory of Sue Hyams,
whose story ended too soon

SCOTLAND

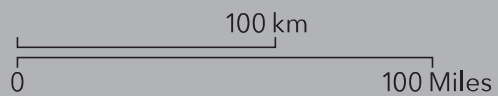


SHETLAND ISLANDS



NORTH SEA

ENGLAND



PROLOGUE

XANDER
DESERTRON, TEXAS
1993

EROOOO . . . EROOOO . . . EROOOO . . .

Alarms reverberate through my skull, high-pitched and insistent. I scramble out of bed. Disbelief fights reality: how do you think the unthinkable? The fail-safes have failed. This is really happening.

We run.

Henri barks orders; Lena and I rush to comply. My hands are shaking on the controls, fear and adrenalin rushing through my body, but we've nearly finished the manual shutdown now. It'll be all right, we'll be all—

BANG

Waves of sound knock us from our feet. Intense cold.

Shards of metal fly towards us, and worse.

Much, much worse.

It gets out.

It finds us.

There is pain.

PAIN

PAIN

Screams mingle and join to become one—Lena’s, Henri’s, mine. Three sing together in the perfect pitch of agony.

But then my voice fades away. A duet of pain is left behind.

Cells, tissues, and organs are destroyed from the inside out, a chain reaction that rips them apart. A brief moment of lucidity at the end shows what could have been before Henri and Lena—friends, colleagues, brilliant scientists, both of them—slip away. *Lena, my Lena*. Dead.

I survive. They’re gone, but their last moments are imprinted inside me, forever.

No one notices how I am changed—the things I’ve lost, the skills I’ve gained. Part pleasure, part curse.

My new senses register waves I liken to sound and color; they come from all things—inanimate, animate, human. *Especially* human.

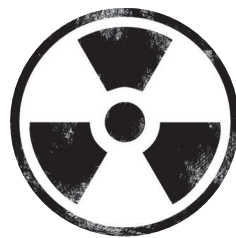
Each man, woman, and child has their own unique pattern that emanates from them without their knowledge—more individual than fingerprints, more telling than thoughts or actions. It’s as if I can see their very *soul*. Their Vox, I call it—a voice they do not know they have.

But I do. And with knowledge comes power.

And I want *more*; always more.

To know all that can be known.

First came the accident. Then came the plan . . .



PART 1

THE STRAY

The state of Schrödinger's cat is not the paradox he thought. If the finite, observable world is left behind—and the infinite accepted—the cat may live and die, both at once.

—Xander, *Multiverse Manifesto*

CHAPTER 1

SUBJECT 369X
SHETLAND INSTITUTE, SCOTLAND
Time Zero: 32 hours

THEY SAY I'M SICK. and I need to be cured. But I don't feel sick. Not anymore.

They wear shiny jumpsuits that cover everything, from their shoes to the paper hats that hide their hair, making them look strange and alien—more Doctor-Who villains than anything human. They reach hands to me through heavy gloves in the transparent wall, push me into the wheelchair, and do up the straps that hold me in it tight.

They wear masks, as do I, but theirs stop air getting to them from outside, in case whatever it is they are afraid of makes it through the wall, the gloves, and the suit. They can still talk in murmurs behind an internal breathing thing, and they think can choose for me to hear what they say, or not, by

flicking a switch. They shouldn't bother; I can hear enough. More than I want to.

My mask is different. It stills my tongue. It lets me breathe, but stops me from speaking—as if any words I might say are dangerous.

I don't remember coming to this place, or where I came from. There are things I know, like my name is Callie, I'm twelve years old, and they are scientists searching for answers that I may be able to give. When things have been very bad, I've held on to my name, saying *Callie, Callie* over and over again inside my head. As if as long as I can remember my name, all the forgotten things don't matter; at least, not so much. As long as I have a name, I am here; I am me. Even if they don't use it.

And the other thing I know is that today I'm going to be cured.

My wheelchair is covered in a giant bubble, sealed all around with me inside, and a door is opened. Dr. 6 comes in and pushes my enclosed chair out through the door while Nurse 11 and Dr. 1 walk alongside.

The others seem awed that Dr. 1 is here. Whenever he speaks—his voice like velvet, like chocolate and cream and Christmas morning all together—they rush to do as he says. He is like me—known only by a number. The others all have names, but in my mind I number them. They call me Subject 369X, so it only seems fair.

I can walk; I'd tell them, if I could speak, but I'm wheeled along a corridor. Nurse 11 seems upset, and turns. She walks back the way we came.

Then we stop. Dr. 1 pushes a button in the wall, and metal doors open. Dr. 6 pushes me in. They follow and the doors close behind us, and then another opens, and another, until

finally they push me into a dark room. They turn and go back through the last door. It shuts with a *whoosh* behind them, leaving me alone in darkness.

Moments later, one wall starts to glow. A little at first, then more, and I can see. I'm in a small square room. No windows. Apart from the glowing wall, it is empty. There is no medicine. There are no doctors, needles, or knives, and I'm glad.

But then the cure starts.

I'd scream if I could make a sound.

Callie, Callie, Callie, Callie. . .

CHAPTER 2

SHAY

KILLIN, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 31 hours

I SHRINK DOWN behind the shelves, but it's too late—they saw me.

I bolt to the left, then stop abruptly. Duncan stands at the end of the aisle. I spin around the other way—again, too late. His two sidekicks, the ones I'd seen over the shelves, are there now. Not good: no one else is in sight.

“Well, well. Look, guys: if it isn't *my Sharona*.” Duncan swaggers towards me, while the other two start to sing the song, complete with pelvic thrusts. Nice touch. I'd hoped when I moved to Scotland last year that they wouldn't find out my real name. I'd hoped that if they did, they wouldn't know the song. I mean, how old is “My Sharona,” anyway? About a million years? But as if I wasn't weird enough already,

someone found out, and someone else played it on the school bus. And that was it for me.

“How about it, baby?” Duncan says and guffaws.

“Just as soon as you grow one, loser.” I scowl and try to push past him, but it was never going to be that easy, was it?

He grabs my arm and pushes me against a shelf. I face him, make myself smile. Duncan smiles back, surprised, and it makes me angry, so *angry* that I’m letting him get to me—letting myself be scared of this idiot. I use the fear and the anger to draw my knee up and slam it between his legs, hard.

He drops to the floor in the fetal position and groans.

“Well, my mistake. I guess you have one, after all.”

I run for the door, but an old lady with a walker is coming through it just as I get there. I cut to the side to avoid knocking into her and slam into the wall.

The guy behind the cash register by the door glares, and I turn, rubbing my shoulder, and realize I’ve knocked the community noticeboard to the floor. I glance back, but there’s no sign of them; Duncan’s friends must still be helping him up off the floor.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” I say, and bend to pick it up and lean it against the wall. As I do, a few notices that have come loose flutter to the floor, but I’ve got to get out of here.

That’s when I see her.

That girl. She’s staring up at me from a paper on the floor.

Long, dark, almost black hair. Blue eyes, unforgettable both from the striking color that doesn’t seem to go with her dark hair and the haunted look that stares at me right from the page—the same way she did that day. Not a trace of a smile.

I hear movement behind me, shove the paper in my pocket, and run for the door. I sprint across the road to where I locked my bike and fiddle frantically with the lock; it clicks off. I get

on my bike just as they're nearing and pump the pedals as hard as I can. They're getting close, a hand is reaching out; they're going to catch me.

Fear makes me pick up speed, just enough. I pull away.

I glance back over my shoulder. His sidekicks have stopped running; they're wheezing. Duncan follows more slowly behind.

In case they have a car and cut me off, I don't go straight home. I veer off-road to the bike path and then take an unmarked branch for the long, twisty hill through the woods: up, up, and more up.

The familiar effort of biking miles settles my nerves, makes what happened begin to fade, but honestly: what was my mother thinking, naming me Sharona? Not a thought I am having for the first time. As if I didn't stand out enough with my London accent and knowing the kind of stuff I should hide at school but too often forget to: like the crazy way quantum particles, the teeniest tiniest things in existence, can act like both waves *and* particles at the same time; and—my current favorite—how the structure of DNA, our genetic code, is what makes my hair dark and curly and Duncan such a jerk. And as if calling me Sharona wasn't bad enough, Mom will tell anyone who'll listen why I got the name from the song. How I was conceived in a field at the back of a Knack concert.

No matter how I try to get everyone to call me Shay, even my friends sometimes can't resist *Sharona*. As soon as I'm eighteen—in a year, four months, and six days—I'm legally changing my name.

I stop near the top of the hill. The late-afternoon sun is starting to wane, to cool, and I need to go soon, but I always stop here.

That's when I remember: the girl. The paper I'd shoved in my pocket.

It had been here, almost a year ago, that I saw her. I was leaning against this same curved tree that is just the right angle to be a good backrest. My bike was next to me, like it is now.

Then something caught my eye: a moving spot, seen below me now and then through gaps in the trees. I probably only saw her as soon as I did because of the bright red of something she was wearing. Whoever she was, she was walking up the hill, and I frowned. This is *my* spot, picked precisely because of the crazy hill that no one wants to walk or bike up. Who was invading my space?

But as she got closer I could see she was just a kid, much younger than me. Maybe ten or eleven years old. Wearing jeans and a red hoodie, with thick, dark hair down her back. And there was something about her that drew the eye. She walked up the hill at a good pace, determinedly, without fuss or extra movement. Without looking around her. Without smiling.

When she got close, I called out. “Hello. Are you lost?”

She jumped violently, a wild look on her face as her eyes hunted for the source of the voice.

I stood up, waved. “It’s just me; don’t be scared. Are you lost?”

“No,” she said, composed again, and kept walking.

I shrugged and let her go. At first. But then I started to worry. This path leads to a quiet road, miles and miles from anywhere, and it’s a long walk back the way she came. Even if she turned around now, it’d probably be dark before she got there.

I got my bike, wheeled it, and followed behind her on foot. Ahead of me she stopped when she reached the road and looked both ways. Right led back to Killin—this was the way I generally went from here, flying down the hill on the tarmac. Left was miles to nowhere. She turned left. I remember

thinking, *She must be lost. If she won't talk to me, I should call the police or something.*

I tried again. "Hello? There's nothing that way. Where are you going?"

No answer. I stopped, leaned my bike against a tree, took off my pack, and bent down to rummage around in it for my phone. My fingers closed around it just as a dark car came from the direction of Killin. It passed me, slowed, and stopped.

A man got out.

"There you are," he said to the girl. "Come."

She stopped in her tracks. He held out a hand; she walked towards him but didn't take it. He opened the back door and she got in. The man got into the driver's seat, and the car pulled away seconds later.

I remember I'd felt relieved. I didn't want to call the police and have to talk to them and get involved. Mom and I were heading out the next morning for our summer away, backpacking in Europe, and I still had to pack. But I was uneasy, too. It was weird, wasn't it? That was a long walk for a kid that age, all on her own. The way he'd said, *There you are*, it was like she'd been misplaced. Or had run away. And if she'd really been lost, wouldn't she have smiled or seemed happy when she'd been found?

But how many times would I have liked to run away from home at that age? Or even now. It wasn't my business.

I biked home and forgot about it.

Until today.

I take the scrunched paper out of my pocket. It's dusty, like it's been hanging on that board forever. I smooth it out, and draw in a sharp breath. It's definitely her, but it is the words above her image that are making my stomach twist.

Calista, age 11. Missing.

She's *missing*? I feel sick, and lower myself down to sit on the ground and read the rest of it. She's been missing since last June 29th: almost a year ago. She was wearing—I swallow, hard—a red hoodie and jeans when last seen, just miles from here.

Oh my God.

When *exactly* did I see her? Was it before or after she went missing? I think, really hard, but can't come up with a date. I know it was around then—we get out early for summer in Scotland. Mom and I had left the week after school finished, but I can't remember what day.

She couldn't have been missing yet, could she? Because we'd have heard about it if we'd still been at home. It would have been all over the news.

Underneath her photo are these words: *If you think you've seen Calista, or have any information about her disappearance at all, no matter how minor it may seem, please call this number. We love her and want her back.*

CHAPTER 3

SUBJECT 369X
SHETLAND INSTITUTE, SCOTLAND
Time Zero: 30 hours

THERE IS PAIN. like no other pain before. It sears not just flesh but every thought and feeling from my mind, leaving only one word behind: *Callie, Callie, Callie*. Naming myself to try to hold on to who I am, but all I am is pain. Flames eat my skin, my lungs, every soft part of me.

And then, abruptly, the pain stops. The flames carry on, and I'm above myself now. I see my body and the chair. The fire must be so hot; even my bones burn. Soon they are rendered to ash along with the rest of me.

Am I dead?

I must be. Right?

I stand in fire and feel no pain. Living things can't do that. I hold out a hand, and I can see it—it soothes my eyes, cool

darkness in the midst of an inferno. I look down: my legs are there, dark and whole.

After a time, the flames stop. Shimmers of heat fade away, and the brightness of the walls fades.

I explore the walls, every inch, the floor and ceiling, too, but there is no way out of this place. I lie on the floor and stare at the ceiling; then, bored, I lie on the ceiling and stare at the floor. Gravity doesn't seem to apply to whatever I am now. But if I was a ghost, I could sail through the walls, couldn't I? And get out of here. But no matter how I push, I can't get through. The walls taste of metal, many feet thick.

CHAPTER 4

SHAY

KILLIN, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 29 hours

"I'M HOME." I YELL. kick off my shoes, and start for the stairs, breathing hard. No phone on me today, I'd pedaled home as fast as I could.

Mom comes into the hall. "So I see. Have you been forgetting the milk again?"

"Uh, not exactly," I say, not wanting to get into a long explanation when something else can't wait.

"Honestly, Sharona, for someone who is supposed to be so smart, I don't know what is in that head of yours sometimes."

"Shay. Please, call me Shay."

She rolls her eyes, laughs, then looks at me more closely.

"Is something wrong?"

For all that she drives me crazy, Mom is good at that kind

of stuff. Like the hippy throwback that she is, she's standing there in some sort of long skirt; her dark hair is curly like mine, but where mine is cropped at my shoulders hers hangs down to her waist, and there are long strings of beads around her neck. She's one to talk about forgetting things; half the time she'd forget to eat if I didn't remind her. But she notices the important stuff.

"Yes. Something's very wrong."

"Is it those boys bothering you again?"

"No. Well, not really. It's this." I pull the crumpled paper out of my pocket. She smooths it out, reads it. Looks back at me with a question in her eyes.

"I saw her; I saw this girl. I have to call them."

"Tell me." So I tell her the whole story, everything, while she draws me into the kitchen and makes a special herbal tea that is supposed to be good for nerves. It tastes pretty strong.

"Are you *sure* it was this girl? That was a long time ago: were you paying attention? Are you really sure?"

"Yes."

"This isn't one of those crazy stories your friend Iona reports on her blog, is it, Shay?" she says, hesitantly. "You're not getting confused between one of them and this, are you?"

"Of course not!"

"I just had to make sure. I believe you."

"What day did we go away last year?"

She frowns, thinking. Then she rummages in a bottom drawer and holds up last year's calendar. She opens it, and . . . her face falls. "It was the thirtieth of June."

"So the day I saw her was the twenty-ninth—the day it says she went missing."

"Do you want me to call them?"

I shake my head. "No. I'll do it."

She gets the phone and holds it out.

I dial the number, hands shaking a little. If only I *had* called the police that day; if that car had been a minute later, I would have. But was it even after she went missing that I saw her? Maybe that man I saw was her dad. Maybe she went missing later that day, and nothing I could have done would have changed anything.

It rings—once, twice, three times, four times. I look at Mom, shake my head. Finally it picks up.

“Hello. Sorry we can’t answer just now, please leave a message at the beep.” A warm male voice and a posh English accent, with a touch of something foreign.

“It’s a machine,” I hiss to Mom, wondering what to say.

Beep.

“Uh, hi. I saw this flier in a shop. About a girl named Calista. And—”

“Hello, hello? This is Kai Tanzer. I’m Calista’s brother. Do you know where she is?” His voice is the one from the machine; his words come out in a rush, full of hope. Without even knowing who he is or anything about him, I hate to crush that hope.

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t know where she is. But I saw her.”

“Where? When?”

“It wasn’t recently. I just found your flier today, but it was on the twenty-ninth of June last year that I saw her, the day it says she went missing.” A flier that was pinned to a shop board I must have walked past a hundred times since then and not noticed. “It was late afternoon. She was walking and got into a car with a man. I thought it was her father.” Did I? Did I *really*, or am I just covering for the fear that if I had questioned what was going on, I could have stopped something happening to her?

“Oh. I see.” There is pain in his voice. “She was missing in the morning, so this was after. Do you remember what he looked like?”

“I think so.”

“Where are you?”

“Just outside Killin, in Stirlingshire. Scotland.” I give him our address, tell him the single-track road to follow, explain the hill and our lane, with the signpost to *Addy’s Folly*.

“Wait. Right there. I’m coming to talk to you. Don’t go anywhere—do you promise?”

“I’ll be here.”

“It’ll take me about two, maybe two-and-a-half, hours to get there. What’s your name?”

“Shay.”

The line cuts off.

CHAPTER 5

SUBJECT 369X
SHETLAND INSTITUTE
Time Zero: 28 hours

TIME TICKS SLOWLY BY.

Finally, something moves. A door starts to open on one of the walls, and I shrink into a corner of the room. Suited figures come in.

They ignore me, and after a while I come out of my corner. I wave my hands in front of one of their faces; no reaction.

They have instruments and are testing the ash on the floor, taking little scoops and putting it in some sensor. They seem happy, and out comes a broom. That's a little low tech. They sweep what is left of my body into a pile and then pull in a silver piece of equipment, attach a nozzle, and then. . . oh. It's a fancy vacuum cleaner. They vacuum me up. Just like that. Gone.

They take the bag out of the vacuum cleaner and write “Subject 369X” on the bag.

And now I’m angry. *So angry.*

“It’s Callie!” I shout.

They stop, uneasy. Look at each other, then shrug and continue to gather up their equipment. They start out the door, with me close behind. I don’t want to get trapped in this empty place.

Their reaction said that they could hear me, at least a little. Whatever I am now, my mask is gone—I can talk, and it’s been so long since I’ve had a voice that finding it makes me happy.

I can sing! I begin a song one of the nurses sometimes sang when I was in bed, sick, and one of the techs starts to whistle along in time.

CHAPTER 6

SHAY

KILLIN, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 27 hours

"ARE YOU SURE you don't want me to stay?" Mom says and hovers uncertainly by the door.

"No, as I've told you the other ninety-nine times you asked me: *go*. I'll be fine."

"You'll call if—"

"If what? He's an ax murderer? I'm not sure it'd work if I said, 'Excuse me, could you please put your ax down while I call my mother?'" She gives me a look. "It'll be fine. You've got his name and number, right? Go."

She leans over, kisses the top of my forehead. And walks out the door.

Part of me wants to call her back, but I quash it down. Sixteen—not far from seventeen—is far too old to want to hide behind my mother. Why am I so nervous?

I sigh and flop on the sofa, leaning against Ramsay, my giant, plush polar bear. “Be honest, at least to yourself, Shay.” I say the words out loud in the quiet house, and the sound of my own voice makes me jump. What has me wound up is that when he hears the whole story, all that I saw, all that I *didn't* do, he might think it's my fault, that I could have saved his sister from whatever has happened to her.

Maybe there is a little voice inside me that thinks the same thing. A chance meeting with a stranger almost a year ago wouldn't normally have stayed with me—there'd have been no reason to give it enough attention to remember it. That's the real reason I remember her so clearly: it felt wrong, didn't it? And I did nothing.

Time ticks slowly past. Finally there is a distant rumble outside, and I get up, pull the curtain aside to look. The sun is just about to dip behind the mountain when a motorcycle rounds the corner. For a second the big bike and rider, dressed in black, are outlined in a bright halo from the sun. Then all is darkness.

I open the front door just as he's pulling off his helmet. He runs his fingers through his hair to pull it away from his eyes.

“Shay?” he says. “I'm Kai.” He takes off his gloves, and holds out a hand; he takes mine, and holds it in his. His eyes are locked on mine—intense, wanting, *needing* something from me—and I can't look away. Hazel eyes, with gold around the pupils blending to green.

I blink and let go. “Come in,” I say and step inside. He follows. “Would you like a cup of tea, or—“

“No. No, Shay. Tell me what you saw. Please.” There is tension and anguish in his voice. His sister, his little sister, has been missing for almost a year. How must that feel? I have to tell him exactly what happened, not try to cover for myself in any way.

“Of course. I’m sorry.”

He follows me in and I point him to a chair and sit on the sofa. He pauses, unzips his bike jacket and takes it off. He’s tall, with wide shoulders. Sun-streaked hair that is somewhere between blond and light brown. Probably a year or two older than me, and what my friend Iona would call *pure dead gorgeous*. He sits down and faces me, quiet and still. Waiting for me to speak.

“Okay. I’d been biking in the woods, and there’s a place I always stop. It was late in the afternoon. I know it was the twenty-ninth of June, because we went away for the summer the next day. Otherwise I’m sure I’d have heard she was missing.”

He nods, his eyes intent.

“I could see someone walking up the path below. A girl. She had jeans on and a red hoodie. It’s a steep ride and a long walk from town, and I almost never see anybody up there. So I was watching her get closer, wondering who it was.”

He reaches into his pocket, takes out a photo. “And you think it was my sister, our Calista?” He holds it out to me.

I take it in my hand. It’s a different photo from the one on the flier, but there’s no doubt: the long dark hair, those blue eyes, a faint quizzical look. I nod. “It’s her. I’m sure of it.”

“Even after all this time?”

“Yes.” I hesitate, not really wanting to go there, but needing to at the same time. “It’s kind of this thing I can do. If I’m paying attention, my memory is photographic. I remember stuff.”

“All right; go on. And then?”

So I tell him the rest. How she said no when I asked if she was lost, and I followed her. How a car stopped on the road and a man got out, and she got into the car.

“Describe him to me.”

“He looked ordinary. Sorry, I know that isn’t helpful. Short

hair, a bit balding. Average height. Maybe forty-something. If I think about it for a while, I might come up with more detail.”

He frowns. Shakes his head a little.

“I’m so sorry. I wish I’d made her talk to me, or called the police, or done something. Anything.”

He looks up, and sees my face; his softens. He shakes his head. “Whatever has happened to my sister, it isn’t your doing. I just thought—well.” He reaches into his pocket again, and takes out another photo. “I thought it might have been this man.” His glance at the image says more than words: he *hates* him.

I take the photo. Of an older man, with longish silvery-grey hair, lots of it. Piercing blue eyes, movie star looks—or presence, or something, even just in a photograph. He is vaguely familiar, as if he’d been in a film I’ve seen and then forgotten. But it’s not the man I saw with Calista. “It’s not him. He’s nothing like him.”

“Are you sure? Are you really sure?”

Because I know he wants me to, I look again; *really* look. And it’s weird, but there definitely is something about him that triggers some memory inside. But not quite as he is in the photo. Not with silver hair? I frown, trying to find the memory, then shake my head; this isn’t what Kai wants to know. “It’s not the man I saw with your sister.” I look back at Kai. “Who is he?”

“He was my stepfather. Mom divorced him a few years ago.”

“And you think he’d take your sister?”

“He would do *anything* to hurt Mom. Will you come with me to talk to the police, to tell them what you saw?”

“Of course.”

“Can you show me where you saw her?”

I nod. “Yes. It’ll have to be in daylight.”

“I’ll come back tomorrow.”

The fierce energy that had me caught so intently in his gaze is fading. He looks drawn, tired.

“Where have you come from today?”

“Newcastle.”

“You don’t sound very Geordie.”

He half smiles. “No. We’ve only lived there for about five years; before that, many other places. Germany originally. You don’t sound very Scottish. . . ?”

I shake my head. “I’m not. Well, my mom is. She’s from around here, but we moved from London over a year ago. Her Aunt Addy died and left her this house, so I got dragged to the middle of nowhere, and—” I stop abruptly when I realize I’m babbling. *Shut up, Shay. He doesn’t want to know about your pathetic family dramas.*

“I’d best get going.” He stretches and reaches for his bike jacket.

I hesitate. I know what Mom would do if she were here. “Newcastle is a long way to ride tonight and back tomorrow. The sofa is free if you want it.”

“Complete with company?” he says, and heat climbs in my cheeks. His eyes move to Ramsay the bear and back again, and he grins. Laughter is in his eyes as if he knows what I thought he meant, as completely stupid as it could be to think he’d want anything to do with me.

“Well, you’ll have to ask Ramsay about that. He might prefer solo on the chair.”

“Don’t you need to check with your parents?”

“It’s just me and my mom. She’s at work at the pub and will be back in a few hours. Besides, she’ll be fine with it.”

His smile falls away, like it is an expression that rarely settles on his face for long. “That reminds me. I’d better call my mother and tell her what you’ve said.”

He slips outside. I can hear him speaking, in another language—they're from Germany, he said; it must be German. The words have no meaning to me, but his voice is music. When he speaks English, the deliberate way he frames words is almost textbook perfect. No trace of Newcastle or anything else to place him.

I text Mom. He's here and hasn't murdered me. Can he have the sofa tonight? Wants me to show him where I saw his sister tomorrow and talk to the police.

She texts back in seconds, so quick I know she had her phone in her hand waiting for word from me. Of course. Make him some dinner. Are you okay on your own? Is he nice?

His voice still sounds like music outside in the darkness; sad music now, like the scene in the opera where everything goes wrong. Is he nice? Not like puppies are nice. There is something deeply unsettling about the intensity of his eyes—a sense that he has too many demons inside him.

He comes back in, stands awkwardly in the doorway. The anger has been replaced by sadness, one so deep it isn't something I've ever felt in my own life. I wish I had something to tell him that could take it away.

I text back: **Yes.**

CHAPTER 7

CALLIE
SHETLAND INSTITUTE
Time Zero: 26 hours

I FOLLOW THE whistling tech and the vacuum bag marked *Subject 369X* down corridors, through doors. Every one has a double locking mechanism, so you go through one door, wait for it to lock behind you, then go through another door. I stay close to them so I don't get trapped.

But then one door doesn't lead to another. Instead, when we go through it, we are in a room with benches and fancy equipment—some sort of science lab? There are two scientists there, also suited up like the techs in shiny jumpsuits.

The whistling tech stops whistling. "Got another one for you, doc," he says, and one of the scientists gets up and takes the bag with *369X* on it.

"Ah yes, the X girl," he says. "How interesting."

The techs leave; I stay in the lab, stay with my bag. One of the scientists takes it. He opens a door at the back and steps into a room. I follow. Where his breath exits his suit there is white mist. It must be a cold room, not that I can feel it, and it's huge. Inside are bags hanging on a sort of conveyor belt thing from the ceiling by hooks, all like my one. All with numbers.

He presses a button near the door, and the conveyor moves on a track—like at a dry cleaner's. Bag after bag goes slowly by. Then it stops. There is an empty hook between 368 and 370; he hangs my bag there.

Were all these bags once people, like me? With *names*, not numbers.

I'm not 369X. I'm not!

I will never, ever be a number again.

I AM CALLIE!

CHAPTER 8

SHAY

KILLIN, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 25 hours

MY BLANKETS ARE pulled around me, but I'm not sleepy.

Mom came home early. She said it was quiet at work, but I doubt that is true.

But I was glad when she got here. We'd already had dinner—pasta, the only halfway decent thing I can make—and Kai had been polite, said it was good, and generally spoke when spoken to. He answered my pathetic attempts at conversation enough for me to know that it is just him and his mom in Newcastle, that he finished his A levels this year and should go to university after the summer. The way he said *should* sounded like he wasn't going to go. That his mom is some kind of doctor and does research. And he even helped me wash up. But I could tell he didn't want to talk, that he wanted to be alone. Even

though it was early for a Friday night, I was about to fake a yawn and escape upstairs when Mom got home. But it still rankled when she pretty much sent me to bed like a child.

Below, voices rise and fall—a murmur, not words I can make out. Just Mom mostly; his short replies.

So he won't even open up to Mom?

I'm surprised. Whenever somebody has a problem—a broken heart, a death in the family, a bad hair day, whatever—they seek her out. That's why they love Mom at the pub: people come in to talk to her and have a few drinks while they do. She says it's all about how you listen.

After a while their voices have stilled. The house is silent, dark. It's taken me a long time to learn to fall asleep in complete silence. After London traffic, sirens, and people singing or shouting at all hours in the street below, the silence of this isolated house is deafening.

What I must try to do now is this: I *must* remember. If I can picture the moment I saw Calista clearly in my mind, maybe there will be something that will help.

As I told Kai, my memory is photographic, but only if I'm paying close attention. And I must have been, to recognize Calista from a photo so readily. The trick is retrieving the memory after so much time—finding the links that will lead me there. Then I'll be able to study it in detail, as if my memory is a video I can watch—one I can pause, rewind, and go over again and again.

Think, Shay, think. . .

CHAPTER 9

CALLIE

SHETLAND INSTITUTE, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 24 hours

MY FAULT. I should have followed the scientist out of the cold room, but I was so *angry* I didn't realize he was leaving until the door clanged shut. Then the lights dimmed, and I was alone.

I press myself against the walls, the door, the floor, even the ceiling, but it's no good. The room is completely sealed. What is the point of being a ghost if you can't even pass through walls?

I look around me and, hanging everywhere, there are bags. Like mine. I'm uneasy. If they are all full of the ashes of dead people too, are they ghosts like me? Where are they all?

How many are there?

So many.

Panic is starting inside. Breathe in and out and count to

ten, that's what they used to say when I panicked. Try to stop it before it really gets started. But how do you do that when you don't breathe anymore?

I'll count. Count the bags, from the beginning.

I follow the overhead conveyor around to the start, find a bag labelled number 1, and begin: 1, 2, 3, 4. . . 99, 100, 101. . . 243, 244, 245. . .

I count and count. They go all the way up to 368, then me: 369X. Then they carry on. 370, 371, 372, and on, up to 403. Many empty hooks wait past that. Why are there so many bags in place past mine? I must have been behind schedule.

None of the others have Xs on them; just numbers. What does the X mean?

Over four hundred dead people hang in this room.

Including me. My ashes hang, just there.

I'm dead. They're dead.

Where are their ghosts? Will they come out in the night?

Is it day or night right now? I don't know.

I'm scared. I roll myself into a little ball, and throw myself at the door.

"Let me out!" I howl, and do it again, and again, and again.

The panic and rage are growing, more and more, becoming a wave of heat that washes over me, and then—

Beep-beep. Beep-beep.

A faint alarm is sounding. Is it somewhere outside this door?

Beep-beep. Beep-beep.

A moment passes, and then the door starts to open. I throw myself through it while it is still moving, straight into the scientist who hung me up in there before.

He stops in his tracks. There are two technicians behind him; they push past him with an impatient look, and go in.

"I don't understand why the temperature was rising," one

of the techs says, after checking some dials and screens. “It’s correct now. All the settings are correct. Everything is working just the way it should.”

“It’s weird, though,” the scientist says. “When I opened the door, it felt like a blast of heat in my face.”

The tech turns to look at the scientist. “The temperature sensors are all normal now. And you can’t feel external temperature changes when you’re in your biohazard suit. You know that.”

The scientist draws himself up. “Well. Just keep an eye on it tonight.” And he stomps away to the door of the lab.

I follow quick behind him; I’m getting out of here. I slip through the door, close on his heels—leaving all the bags of ashes of dead people behind.

Including mine.

CHAPTER 10

SHAY

KILLIN, SCOTLAND

Time Zero: 23 hours

IT IS LATE AT NIGHT when I finally find the way to my memory of that day and replay it all in my mind as if it were happening *now*:

The sun shines, but it is cool in the shade of the wood.

I'm watching her—dark hair, red hoodie—catching glimpses through the trees, below. She walks closer and closer.

I want to yell out to her to wait for me there. Tell her to get on the back of my bike, that I'll double her back down and take her to the police, or call Kai. But I can't go back in time; I'm paralyzed, stuck. Forced to relive what happened.

Exactly as it happened.

She's nearly reached me.

“Hello, are you lost?”

“It’s just me; don’t be scared. Are you lost?”

She turns. Her eyes are blue, yes, but not a boring medium-blue like mine—hers are so dark they are almost violet. There is a shaft of sunlight through the trees where she stands, and something glints and sparkles around her neck. A necklace, with a pendant. I squint; she moves a little out of the sun. A pendant, something like a starburst—but not quite that. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before, yet reminds me of something at the same time.

“No,” she says, turns, and keeps walking.

Again I want to run after her, but I’m frozen. She is almost out of sight before I can finally move again and follow her to the road above. Just as I did that day, I bend down to find my phone in my backpack.

Really call the police this time, Shay. Do it!

The car comes.

It’s black, with four doors—a shiny Mercedes with tinted windows. I squint at the license plate, but from where I am, kneeling down by my backpack, it’s mostly blocked by green growing things on the side of the road. I can only see the tops of the letters and numbers. Not enough to work them out.

A man gets out of the car.

“There you are,” he says. He is half turned away; I can’t see his face very well. Thinning hair, bald on top. Dark, not grey. His height is hard to judge from my position, but perhaps five foot ten or so.

She goes to him, gets into the car when he opens the door, into the back seat.

He turns to get into the driver’s seat, and he looks this way for a split second. I drink in the details. The barely controlled anger in wide-set, brown eyes; a small scar by his left eye, red

and a bit puffy around his right eye, as if he'd recently been hit and would have a black eye tomorrow; a glint of gold at his neck.

There is someone else in the front seat—turned away—and I can't see anything beyond the form through the tinted windows. Just an impression of height; of strength. Another man?

The car pulls away, and then is gone.