

THEY ARE NOT ALONE.

FEEDBACK

Sequel to **VARIANT**

ROBISON WELLS

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DEDICATION

To Dan, Brandon, Ben, and Nate, the guys who taught me how to write.

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CHAPTER ONE

Jane stared back at me, motionless. She was older than I remembered—older than the Jane I knew. Her skin, which had always been smooth and perfect, was now freckled, and her cheeks and nose were red from the cold.

“I thought you died,” she said again.

I shook my head, too startled to speak.

She stepped forward, and I flinched. I knew what she was. She may not have been Jane 117C, but she was something like that. An older version, another experiment. An enemy.

Becky was out in the forest, alone and dying, and I’d walked right into a trap.

“They’re going to be looking for you,” she said. “It won’t take them long.”

I paused, staring back at her. She was just like Mason, or Carrie, or Mouse, or any of the others from the school—she didn’t know what she was. She thought she was helping me.

I took a step back.

“Don’t go,” she said. “We can hide you.”

“No.” I picked up the tarp that lay at my feet, the one I’d come into this barn to steal—something to keep Becky warm. I backed away from Jane, toward the door.

“Wait,” she said, pleading.

“It’s not true,” I said, grasping the old wooden handle. “Everything you think you know. It’s a lie.”

I didn’t know what else to say. How could you tell a person she wasn’t real?

“Wait,” Jane said again. “I know. I know about the robots.” She unzipped her thin cotton coat and pulled it off. She held up her forearm.

From the pocket of her dress she pulled out a box cutter and held the blade in the flame of the lantern.

The ridge of her arm, where the bone met the skin, was speckled with dozens of thin scars—some smooth and healed and pink but others scabbed and new.

I couldn’t speak.

“I’m human,” Jane said. “We all are.”

She pulled the blade from the fire and touched it to her skin.

CHAPTER TWO

You can do this," I said, my arm around Becky's trembling body, trying to keep her on her feet. "Just over the next hill and we'll rest again."

"I don't understand," she repeated, her words starting to slur. As cold as it was outside, she was hot with fever. I could only guess that infection was setting into the vicious wound in her arm.

"We have to keep going," I said.

She nodded, but even that seemed half-conscious, like she was losing the strength to hold her head up.

"Fifty miles?" she breathed.

"We don't know that," I said. "That's just what we've always guessed. For all we know, we'll hit highway in two or three miles."

Her eyes were closing while we walked. She was drifting away. She'd lost too much blood.

"Where did you get the tarp?" Becky asked. She'd already asked that, twice now, and I'd tried to explain.

"There's a town," I answered.

"Why don't we go there?"

"We can't."

"You talked to them? The people at the town?"

"Yes. We can't go there."

She was slowing, and I tried to help her walk faster.

"Do they know about the school?"

She slipped on a patch of loose leaves. I caught her, but she cried out when I grabbed her tight. The T-shirt that was wrapped around her wound was soaked dark with blood.

"I'm not going to make it," she mumbled.

"Yes, you are."

"Leave me here." Becky slid to her knees. Her eyes opened, wide and exhausted, and she tried to focus on my face. "Leave me with some supplies—the tarp, some food. Go get help."

"The school is looking for us," I said. "They'll find you."

"Then go fast."

"It could take days. I'm not leaving you."

"What about the town?"

I paused, not knowing how to answer.

Jane had cut her own flesh, the blackened tip of the sterilized razor blade splitting the skin and exposing the pink, bloody bone underneath. She'd winced, but hadn't hesitated. She'd done it before dozens of times. Maybe hundreds.

Becky's eyes closed again, and I knelt next to her, taking her dirty face in my hands to keep her awake.

"What about the town?" she asked again. "Did you tell the police?"

"They don't have police there."

I could feel her body shuddering against mine as she fought for air. "Why not?"

"We have to keep moving." I helped her to her feet, tried to force her to walk. Her weak legs

stumbled forward, but she fought back.

“Tell me what’s there.” Becky was staring at me now, her face almost as white as the clumps of snow covering her hair. She didn’t look scared. She didn’t look worried or fierce or confident or anything. She simply stared. She was half-conscious. Half-alive.

“Jane is there,” I said. “And others.”

She blinked. “Jane is dead.”

“This Jane isn’t. She’s real. Human. Everyone who was a robot at the school—they’re a human here.”

“It can’t be Jane. It’s more robots,” Becky said. “It’s a trap.” The shock of what I was saying seemed to bring her back to her senses for a moment.

“She’s human,” I said. “She cut her arm. I saw the bone.”

Becky looked at me, eyes wide.

“They’re human,” I repeated. “She didn’t explain it all—there wasn’t time. But they have something in their heads. They’re connected to the robots.”

“If they’re connected to the robots, then we don’t want to be there.”

“No, that’s not it.” I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t have good enough answers. “She said they don’t control the robots. They just—I don’t know—they’re just connected.”

“It’s a trap. We can’t do it.”

“I know. We’ll keep going.”

“They won’t find me,” she said, almost pleading. “It’s snowing. I can wait here.”

“If we don’t keep going, you’ll die.”

Her body shook as she cried. We both knew it was true. She’d lost too much blood. I’d bandaged her arm, but the gash was deep and open—I doubted it could even be stitched closed, with all the exposed muscle and ripped skin.

I pulled away from her and looked into her eyes. Our faces were almost touching as she stared back, her tears clinging to her eyelashes. She was pale and gray.

“You’re going to be okay.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I’m going to take care of you. I know that this sounds crazy, but—”

Becky’s face turned to confusion, and she cocked her head. “Shh.”

I listened, straining to hear whatever she heard. Her eyes weren’t on me anymore—they were darting around the forest, wild and terrified.

“What?”

“Isaiah,” she whispered. “He’s coming.” Her body tensed, and her hand gripped my arm. “We have to get back to the dorms. Before they lock the doors.”

I felt like I’d been hit in the stomach. She was hallucinating. We didn’t have much time.

I tried to speak, but my words came out shaky. “Becky, we have to run.”

She nodded her head, her tears flowing again. “Don’t let him get me. I’m not a traitor.”

“I won’t.”

We stumbled forward through the forest. My tracks from earlier were completely obscured by the heavy snowfall, but I could smell the wood smoke, and in the growing light I could see the haze from chimneys in the distance.

“He’ll kill me,” Becky mumbled. “He was always worst to us. He said we knew better.”

“Isaiah’s not coming,” I told her. “Isaiah’s not in charge anymore.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“We left him back at the school, tied to a radiator.”

Becky stopped. “You did what?”

Her eyes were different now; her whole face was different. It was like I was looking at a different person.

Jane had promised they could help Becky. I had to trust them. I had no other choice.

Becky’s eyes were drooping, and I was carrying more of her weight now. “Can’t you hear Isaiah?”

I peered into the forest. “We’re almost there,” I said. I still couldn’t see the town, but it had to be close. She stumbled, and I tightened my grip around her waist.

I’d done this to her.

I’d done it to everyone. Isaiah had been right. He’d told me that I was playing a numbers game—that I didn’t care how many died, as long as I was one of the lucky ones who got out. I’d told him I was wrong. That we would all make it out. That if we left as a group they couldn’t stop us.

More than fifty had tried to escape, but only Becky and I made it. Some had died right there at the fence—I could still see the images of Oakland being shot in the chest, of Gabby lying on the ground, a pool of blood.

And they’d all gone to the fence because I talked them into it.

“Stop,” Becky said, and pulled away from me. “Stop it. Stop.” Her words were slurred, but for a moment her eyes focused on mine.

“We have to—”

She put her hand up. It looked like it took all the effort she could muster. “Listen.”

I could hear my own breathing, steady and low, and hers, rapid and shallow. I almost thought I could hear my own heartbeat, but that had to be in my head.

Her eyes popped open and she pointed, but I heard it now, too. The engine of a four-wheeler somewhere in the distance, behind us.

“Damn it.” I dropped the tarp and picked Becky up in my arms. She buried her face in my chest. I hurried forward. I didn’t bother trying to hide my tracks. The only thing that could help us was to get as far away from that four-wheeler as possible, to hope that our path was covered by the storm.

The moment Becky lost consciousness was obvious. Her body went limp, one of her arms falling off my shoulder and hanging loosely down.

There was a flash of red up ahead, the faded paint of an old chicken coop.

“We’re almost there,” I whispered.

CHAPTER THREE

I stopped at the tree line, gasping for air. The town lay before us, silent and still in the rising light.

Jane stood in the doorway of the barn, just where I'd left her. It didn't look like she'd seen us yet.

The Jane at the school had been pretty, with soft, creamy skin and perfect makeup. This Jane—the real, human Jane—was harder and stronger. If it was possible, she was thinner now, the softness of her arms replaced with the muscle of years of daily manual labor.

She was still beautiful. More so, maybe.

Two more people appeared at the barn door. The first was a stocky guy with a rough goatee and a shaved head. He couldn't have been much older than me. He was arguing with Jane, gesturing fiercely.

The second, standing quietly beside them, was someone I couldn't forget. Unlike Jane, Mouse looked exactly like her robot version. Tall, tan, brown hair. Gorgeous and dangerous. She stood quietly with arms folded, ignoring the others and staring out at the forest. The last time I'd seen Mouse she was lying on the ground, her robot chest impaled by a machete.

They didn't seem to have any kind of uniform here. All three wore jeans and heavy work boots, but Jane had an apron on that fell to her knees and a thin cotton coat. Mouse was bundled in a leather jacket that was too big—her fingers didn't reach the end of the sleeves. The guy didn't even have a coat—just a thick long-sleeved shirt.

Mouse reached over and touched the guy's arm, and then pointed to me.

I took another gulp of air, and jogged out of the trees toward them.

As I approached, Jane put a finger to her lips.

"Let's get inside."

I nodded.

Jane's smile faded as she looked back at Becky. "Is she alive?"

"Yeah."

Jane walked in front of me, trying to inspect Becky's bandage while we moved.

"How bad is it?"

"I don't know. She landed on a broken log, and a branch tore her arm up pretty bad. Lost a lot of blood. And I think it's infected."

I expected the guy to help me with Becky, but he didn't even look at her.

"Are they following you?" he snapped.

"They're out there," I said, breathing heavily. "We could hear the four-wheelers. I don't think they've found our trail, or they'd be here already."

He swore and turned to Mouse. "Get the cows out and see if you can coax them into the woods without mess up the tracks."

Mouse nodded and jogged back to the barn.

I watched Jane's face as she fiddled with Becky, taking her pulse and feeling her head. She was acting like a paramedic, but I knew it was mostly an act. The robot Jane had been sixteen—this Jane looked maybe a year or two older. She wasn't a doctor.

"How long has she been unconscious?" Jane said, looking up at me. Everything about her was different except those eyes—bright, vibrant green. I looked away.

"Just a few minutes," I said. I felt a tear roll slowly down my cheek. With Becky in my arms, the

was nothing I could do about it. I didn't even know what caused it—was it Becky? Jane? Was it the I'd accomplished nothing?

The guy pointed to my arm, his face cold and stern. "Roll up your sleeve."

I paused for a minute, confused.

"Put her down," he said, talking to me like I was an idiot.

I didn't respond. We were in six inches of snow, and Becky was unconscious. I wasn't going to lay her down.

"Do it," he said, taking a step toward me.

"Let's get inside."

His voice was steady and firm. "Those four-wheelers are coming."

Jane glanced up at me, and then at the guy. She didn't say anything.

Carefully I knelt down, wishing I hadn't left the tarp back in the woods. Jane's eyes met mine, and she sat in the cold, wet snow, cradling Becky's head.

When I stood back up, the guy was holding a box cutter. "Roll up your sleeve."

I nodded. I'd expected this—he was going to cut me just like Jane had done to herself. They needed to make sure that we were real, too, and not some infiltrators from the school.

I tugged at my sweatshirt, pulling it back to my elbow.

His face darkened and he swore.

"Are you stupid?"

"What?"

He grabbed my wrist and shared a look with Jane.

"What?" I asked again.

"The watch," Jane said, her voice hollow and small.

"You led them right here," he said angrily.

I stared at the beat-up watch, thinking back to when Becky had clamped it on my wrist the first day I'd arrived.

"I thought they just opened the doors."

"They track you," he snapped.

"We don't know that," Jane said quietly. She was talking to him, not me. "We've always assumed that, but we don't know it for sure."

"Of course it tracks you," he said.

"So cut it off," I said. I couldn't believe I'd been so stupid.

"It's too late."

I looked back at him, suddenly hopeful. "Maybe Jane's right. Maybe it doesn't track you. We were in the woods all night, but we're probably only a mile or two from the wall. If they knew where we were they would have found us in minutes."

He stared at me and then at Jane. It felt like forever. We didn't have time to argue. Mouse was herding the cows—five of them—past us. The four-wheelers could be here any minute.

I tapped my watch, pleading with him. "We'll cut them off, and then when they come looking for us you can say that we stopped here and kept going."

He lit a match on his pants and held it to the blade of the box cutter. "Tell me why we should put our necks on the line for you."

I stammered for a moment, not sure what to say. I'd just made dozens of others risk their lives stupidly, and they'd all suffered for it. But if these people didn't help us, then Becky would die.

I took a breath.

“You’re trapped here,” I said. “Right?”

“Of course.”

“What keeps you here? There’s no fence, no walls. You all have a tracker like this? If you leave the town they’ll chase you?”

The guy ran his hand over his shaved head and looked out into the woods. “Worse. So what?”

“So whatever it is, Becky and I don’t have it,” I said. “Cut off my watch, and I can help you escape.”

“You can help us by leaving, now.”

Mouse rejoined us, a heavy pair of gardening clippers in her hand.

“Here,” she said, taking my wrist.

The guy held my hand steady. Mouse slid one end of the clippers under the metal watchband and then sliced through. It fell silently into the snow at my feet.

She then crouched beside Becky and cut through her necklace gently. Becky never stirred.

I picked up both the tracking devices.

“If you help Becky, I’ll work on finding a way out.”

He didn’t move, just stood his ground. I could understand everything he was feeling—the paranoia, the anger—but I couldn’t back down.

“She’s human,” Jane said, breaking the silence. She’d pulled back the bandage around Becky’s upper arm enough to examine the gaping wound. I couldn’t see it from where I stood, but I knew Jane was inspecting Becky’s bone and muscle.

The guy looked down for a moment, watching Jane, and then finally crouched beside her.

I wanted to say something, but it all sounded too argumentative in my head. I needed their help, I needed to shut up.

Mouse bent beside him. “Where will we put them?” she said, her voice quiet and nervous.

He stared at Becky’s wound for several seconds, deep in thought. Finally, he stood back up and grabbed my wrist.

“Don’t move,” he said, his face unchanged. He held the box cutter to my forearm, where the bone was closest to the skin. “This is going to hurt.”

Mouse and the guy walked straight down the dirt road, which was visible through the snow only because of the deep ruts now frozen in the mud. Jane and I followed behind, Becky again in my arm. Maybe I was filled with adrenaline, but she felt lighter.

We passed farm buildings, chicken coops, rabbit hutches, and a few sheds before getting into the heart of the complex, where there were five green rectangular wooden buildings that reminded me of too many war movies—they looked like barracks for POWs.

Past them were two squat cement buildings, both of which looked several decades older than the five green ones. The larger of the cement structures had a sign on its plain steel door that read MAXFIELD COMMISSARY. The other, which had a row of narrow windows running along the top of each wall, read, WASHROOM. Steam was trickling out through a broken pane of glass.

“What’s a commissary?” I whispered.

Jane paused, only for a moment, her eyes darting nervously from door to door. “It’s an old word for *cafeteria*. Everything here is old.”

As she moved in front of me, all I could think of was that night, only weeks ago, when the beaten and broken android of Jane had stumbled away from me and I’d learned the truth about her.

The truth. The concept seemed impossible now. What was the truth, and how would I ever know I'd thought she and I had something. And then she was dead. But she wasn't dead—she'd never existed at all. I'd been friends with a computer program. I'd kissed a machine.

But now she *was* real. I didn't understand it at all.

The door of the washroom opened, and two girls appeared. They stopped instantly, and one reached for the door frame for support. I knew them both—Shelly and Tapti. Tapti—a Variant, like me—had revealed herself as a robot last night. Shelly was in the Society, and I thought I'd seen her fighting on our side last night.

The girls stared at us, gaping. I didn't know what to do.

"It's okay," the guy said to them, his voice hushed as we walked past. "Keep it quiet. We'll have a meeting later."

"Tapti was one of them," I whispered to Jane once we had moved past the washroom. "Like ..." I stammered for a moment.

"Like me," she said, her eyes on the road.

I nodded, uncomfortable. "But I don't think Shelly was. She wasn't fighting against us last night."

"They went one at a time." Her voice sounded pained. "As they were needed."

"What does that mean?"

"The Shelly you knew was a robot. She just hadn't popped yet."

The guy shot back an angry look. We were being too loud.

Jane stood closer to me, her voice barely a whisper. "Most of the robots popped at the fence."

"What's 'popped'?"

"It's when the link between us and the robot is broken, and someone else takes control."

I nodded slowly. I'd seen it happen—the blank look on Mason's face when he attacked Becky, and when Carrie shot Oakland. They suddenly weren't themselves anymore.

In my arms, I could feel Becky's muscles tense and then relax again. It wasn't much, but I took it as a promising sign. She wasn't completely gone.

"Where are we going?" I asked. The road was dipping down into a dense row of trees.

"It's safer on the other side of the stream," she said. "Warmer, too."

I bent my neck, my head touching Becky's. "We're almost there," I whispered. "You're going to be okay."

She didn't respond.

The trees were hiding a small creek, maybe fifteen feet wide, and shallow. There was no bridge, just a ford, and the water wasn't entirely frozen over.

Jane ran across it easily, hopping from stone to stone like it was second nature. Carrying Becky, she didn't dare attempt balancing on the slippery rocks, and stepped through the icy water. It was only a few inches deep—just enough to seep into my shoes—but it sent shivers up my legs.

Jane paused at the edge of the trees and I caught up with her. Mouse and the guy were twenty yards ahead of us, continuing up the dirt road.

"There it is," she said. "Where it all started."

Breathing heavily, I stared at a large adobe building that stood in a clearing. It was only one story but probably a hundred feet or more on each side—from where I was, it appeared to be a square. At each corner was a squat tower, two of which were crumpled and broken. The one door was enormous, made of wood and iron. Other than the door, the only break in the thick brown walls were tiny window slits every ten or twelve feet. They couldn't have been more than four or five inches wide. They had no glass, but a single iron bar ran up the center of each.

I'd seen this building a dozen times—or buildings like it—in every John Wayne Western.

"Fort Maxfield," Jane said. "You'll be safe here."

We crossed the field of snow to the door, where Mouse and the guy stood.

As we approached, I could tell this wasn't a replica of an Old West fort—this thing really was old. In many places the smooth stucco surface had flaked off, revealing the rough brown interior of the mud walls. Even the massive door seemed to be falling apart, and I could see some obviously recent repairs: one of the massive hinges was brass and shiny, out of place from the other blackened antique metalwork, and a two-by-four was nailed vertically up one side of the door to hold the decaying boards in place.

A wreath of flowers, long since dead, hung just above eye level.

This place wasn't anything like I'd hoped it would be. It wasn't safe; it wasn't welcoming.

The door almost immediately clanked and then swung open, revealing another guy—tall and skinny, his thick black hair dreadlocked.

"Everybody check out, Birdman?" the new guy asked.

The guy with the shaved head nodded. "They're good. Take them to the Basement."

The dreadlocked guy looked at me and smiled enthusiastically. "I'm Harvard. Need a hand?"

I nodded, exhausted, and he scooped Becky out of my arms. I followed him along a rough wooden walkway.

The fort had a large open courtyard in the middle—now covered in a blanket of untouched snow. It looked like each of the four sides was lined with rooms, like a motel.

The farther we walked, the older the fort seemed. The adobe walls were crumbling and broken, and the wooden planks under our feet were cracked; about every fifth one was missing entirely. Harvard walked with careless expertise—stepping back and forth, left to right, avoiding weak boards without giving them a second thought. I copied his path, but even so I could feel the wood bowing under my weight.

As we continued around to the far side of the fort, I saw faces peering out of cracks in the centuries-old doors. I looked for others I knew, like Mouse and Jane, but couldn't really get a good look at anyone.

"Do they watch you guys?" I asked.

Harvard shook his head. "They used to try, but we keep a pretty good eye on it. We have people whose job it is to watch for cameras. We can't do much about the animals in the camp—you know about those?"

"Yeah," I said, even though we'd figured it out only the day before. "Raccoons and deer and that kind of thing."

"Right," Harvard said. "The good news is we can keep them out of the fort. So far, we've never found a bird with a camera in it." He stopped and nodded toward a room. "Can you get that?"

I opened the door—the antique brass knob like ice—and held it for Harvard.

Becky looked asleep in his arms, her face calm, mouth slightly open. I could hear her raspy breath as we entered a quiet, dark room.

"Hang on," a voice said, and I turned to see Jane catching up with us. She gave me an awkward smile and then hurried past.

Coming in from the white of the snow—even in the early morning—made it hard to adjust to the darkness, but after a moment Jane lit a lantern and the room filled with warm yellow light.

It was smaller than the dorms back at the school. The only furniture was a bed—narrow and low, like a cot—and a small wooden table and chair. A cardboard box at the foot of the bed was filled with

folded clothes, and cans of food were stacked in the corner, under the narrow slit of a window. The walls were covered with drawings of all sizes, some on paper, others on large pieces of cloth. Some of the pictures were of the town—the fort, the barn, the stream—but others I knew well: the school, the cafeteria, the wall, and the gate. There were three pictures of Curtis, the leader of the Vs. He was standing at the school, and I knew he was human.

Before I could ask about him, Birdman and Mouse joined us, stepping inside and closing the door.

“We’re taking a big risk,” Birdman said, looking at me out of the corner of his eye as he passed by. He shoved the bed to the other side of the room and climbed up onto it. “Not everyone in this town gets to live in the fort, but I want to keep an eye on you. Nothing you see or hear leaves this room, okay?”

I nodded. Even here there were secrets. That didn’t surprise me.

Birdman lifted a large cloth picture—a mural—and I saw him prying something off the wall.

“There aren’t many places to hide things,” Harvard said, grinning as he watched Birdman. “But last year we figured one out. This adobe is thick. Most of the walls are more than a foot deep, but because there’s a big fireplace on the other side of this one, it’s more than four feet of solid adobe. It took us months, but we hollowed out the top part of the wall.”

Birdman pulled a square panel loose and then slipped it into the hole it had been covering. He glanced down at me. “It’s not perfect. If they look under the picture it won’t be hard to find.”

“Nice.” I forced a laugh. “*The Shawshank Redemption*.”

He nodded. “Except this hole doesn’t get you anywhere.” He motioned to me, still scowling, but some of the harshness was gone from his eyes. “You’d better get up there first so we can hand her to you.”

The hole was high enough on the wall that even standing on the bed I could only just see inside. With one foot on the rickety bed frame, I clambered up into the Basement.

It was more like a cave than a room. The walls were all bare adobe—dry, uneven mud—and they had laid down a few broken wood planks to serve as the floor. It was narrow, probably less than four feet wide, but almost the full length of the room below. The ceiling was low enough that I had to crouch to fit. At each end a tiny slit of light shone in.

“You call this the Basement?” I asked.

Jane handed me a stack of blankets, and Harvard spoke. “Just a little joke. In case someone overhears us talking about it. They’ll think we’ve dug a tunnel or something.”

I turned away from the opening and laid one of the blankets—the thickest I could find—on top of the rough boards.

None of this was supposed to be happening. This wasn’t what our escape was going to be like. We should have been running, not hiding.

Harvard and Birdman were both on the bed now, with Mouse holding the cloth picture out of the way. They lifted Becky, and I gently pulled her in. I tried not to let her arm drag or pull too much on her shoulder, but it was an awkward move. My hand slipped off her wet sweater, and even though I caught her, the jolt caused her to gasp and groan.

But she was in the Basement now. I put my hand on her forehead, which was red and hot. Her hair was wet with snow and sweat, and I brushed it away from her face.

Jane climbed into the hole, a Ziploc bag of medical supplies in her hand.

Birdman looked in after us, speaking to Jane. “We’re clearing out—need to make sure no one sees this.”

Jane nodded, and Birdman stepped down. I heard the bed scrape across the floor as he pushed

back into position. Mouse let the picture drop over the entrance.

~~“There are vents that open up on each end, and one in the ceiling,” Jane said. She was obscured by the dark, but I could tell where she was pointing.~~

I crawled to the end of the room and saw that the slit of light was a loose board. I pulled it out, creating a hole about a foot long and three inches tall. From here I could see the empty courtyard, the fort and the doors and walkway on the other side. Two girls were standing there, talking. I didn't recognize them.

Jane crawled to the other slit and removed that board. She spoke again before I did. Her voice was soft and pained. “I thought you died last night—both of you.”

She moved back to Becky's unconscious body, but was looking at me.

“What do you mean?”

She forced a small, humorless laugh. “We can see some of the stuff our dupes—duplicates—do. She opened the bag, pulled out a pair of blue latex gloves, and began to untie the dark bandage around Becky's upper arm. “The last time anyone saw you, Mason was running behind and then his dup popped. We thought he killed you.”

“She fell on a log,” I said, suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion. “It was a broken branch—stabbed her.”

“Tripped?” Jane asked hopefully.

I shook my head, the images replaying in my mind. “Mason hit her, and she fell.” It hurt to even say his name. He'd been my friend, my roommate. “Is he here, too?”

She nodded. “But you have to understand. It's not the Mason you knew.” Jane raised the bandage on Becky's arm to peer at the gash. “The one who ... who did this—it isn't him. Isn't the real him. When he did this, it was after he popped.”

She pointed toward a cardboard box in the corner. “There should be a lantern in there.”

I dug through what looked like an emergency kit—matches, first-aid supplies, packets of crackers, a milk jug filled with water. Everything was covered in dust and grit.

The lantern looked antique—glass with a cloth wick—but it didn't seem too hard to figure out. I turned the handle to raise the wick like I'd seen her do minutes earlier, and then lit it with a match. A bright yellow flame flickered to life.

“No electricity?” I asked, moving the lantern over to Jane.

“Not here,” she said absently, her eyes focused on Becky's bandage. “But there's running water and lights in the washroom and commissary.”

“What's the point of that?”

Jane removed the last strip of cloth from Becky's arm and looked up at me. “Gives us more work to do. Keeps us out of trouble. Idle hands and all that.”

In the full glow of the lantern, the gash looked bigger and deeper and far more violent than I remembered. It wasn't a clean stab—the broken branch had torn into Becky's muscle, ripping and tearing it. Her skin was caked with dried blood, but with the bandage removed the gash had begun to ooze again—dark red and thick.

My stomach churned.

“Is she going to be okay?”

Jane bit her lip and moved the light closer.

Somewhere a bell rang. It sounded like the old bells of the cathedral back home.

Jane's head popped up, and she looked into my eyes, terrified.

“I need you to do something,” she said.

“What?”

“If I pass out, push me out of the hole and close it up again.”

I almost laughed, but I knew she was serious. “What do you mean?”

“If you promise me you’ll do it,” she said, “I’ll stay and clean her arm. If not, I need to go.”

I nodded, though I didn’t understand what was going on. Jane immediately turned back to Becky.

I wanted to watch, to make sure everything would be okay, but every time I looked at Becky’s arm I was overcome—with nausea, with panic, with guilt. This wasn’t right. This wasn’t how things were supposed to happen.

Jane was working fast, scrubbing out the dried blood, the splinters of broken wood, the dirt. Becky was stirring, unconscious but in pain. I was at her feet; the Basement was too narrow for me to get up to her head while Jane was at Becky’s side. The best I could do was lean across her, holding her good hand while Jane worked on the other arm.

Jane paused, looking at my fingers intertwined with Becky’s, and then she focused again on the gash.

“You’re going to need to rebandage this,” she said, still scrubbing, using a toothbrush that she doused with rubbing alcohol. “It’s bleeding a lot, but I think that’s a good sign.”

“What about gangrene?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it infected?”

“I don’t know,” she said again, agitated. “I’m not a doctor.”

She set down the toothbrush and picked up a small silver packet.

“What’s that?”

Jane tore the top off and sprinkled a white powder onto the bare wound. “It comes with the supplies they send us. Good stuff. Amazing stuff.”

She laid a small piece of what looked like aluminum foil over the wound, and then opened a pack of gauze. She looked up at me. “Can you help?”

I nodded and let go of Becky’s hand.

“There are gloves in there,” she said, gesturing to the bag.

The cloth over the entrance moved, and a face peeked in. Carrie.

I froze. The last I’d seen Carrie she’d turned on us, taking the gun from Curtis and shooting Oakland in the chest. I remembered the drawings on the wall of the room below us. Three of Curtis. This must be Carrie’s room.

This Carrie was human. The one at school was a robot. That didn’t help my nerves.

She didn’t look at me. Her voice was timid and soft. “Birdman rang the bell.”

“I heard,” Jane said. “It’s okay.”

Carrie nodded grimly, and then let the cloth drop back into place.

I pulled on the latex gloves. “What’s going on?”

Jane kept her eyes down. She pulled Becky’s arm away from her body. “Can you hold it like this?”

It didn’t seem like enough—there were no stitches, there was no surgery—but as I held Becky’s arm, Jane placed a thick gauze pad over the wound, and then gently began wrapping the soft white gauze around the arm.

Jane paused, and then looked at me, eyes wide.

“You—”

She collapsed, her body dropping forward. I wasn’t ready for it, and I let go of Becky’s arm to stop Jane from falling. Becky jerked in pain.

“Carrie,” I called, then stopped myself, worried I was too loud. I laid Jane on her side—her eyes still wide open—and peered out the hole into the room.

Carrie was on the floor, facedown by the door.

I swore under my breath, terror coursing through my veins. What was going on? Maybe they were all robots—turned off with the flip of a switch. I could barely stand to look at Jane; her lifeless, dead-eyed body was something I’d seen before, something I never thought I’d see again.

I remembered what she said, though. It didn’t make sense, but I wasn’t going to take any chances. I lifted her into a sitting position, and then pushed her feet through the hole. It was awkward and clumsy—I had to straddle Becky to get any leverage—but slowly I nudged Jane out, feetfirst. I tried to hold her under her arms, to lower her into the room, but she was limp, and my arms were shaking from fatigue, from carrying Becky, and from the cut on my forearm.

There was an engine outside—it sounded bigger than a car, too big to even be a pickup. It was getting closer.

I grasped her wrists and gently pushed her out with my foot. When she finally crossed the edge of the opening and fell, she jerked and I lost my grip on one of her hands. She dropped to the dirt, held by only one arm, and I knew immediately that I’d hurt her shoulder. But she made no sound, no movement. She was in a pile on the floor below.

The engine outside was louder, idling. It had to be in front of the fort.

I took the small wood panel that covered the opening and fitted it back into place. If someone moved that picture—if they wondered why Jane was where she was, and they looked on the wall above her—we’d be sitting ducks.

I blew out the lantern.

CHAPTER FOUR

Moving slowly on the wooden planks so I wouldn't make a sound, I crawled past Becky to the vent on the other side of the Basement—the one that looked out onto the road.

A short flatbed loaded with lumber had stopped in front of the fort's door. A man climbed out of the passenger side of the cab—and I knew him instantly. Iceman. The man who had directed us every day in the school, giving us our schedule and doling out punishments. I'd wondered whether he was a robot, like Ms. Vaughn, and he certainly looked it now. Despite the cold and snow he wasn't wearing a coat, just the same uniform he always wore on the school's screens.

He pulled a chain saw from the bed of the truck and yanked on the cord. It fired up on the second try, and then he walked up to the heavy fort door, out of my view. The saw whined briefly as it cut through something, and then the engine shut off. I heard the heavy thump of the wooden door slamming open.

Whoever was driving the truck—I couldn't get a clear look—put it into gear and rumbled forward down through the trees and ford, toward the barracks.

Carefully and silently—almost too scared to breathe—I scooted back along the length of the room to the far side, to the loose board there.

I couldn't see Iceman in the courtyard. We were above the awning over the walkway, so while I could see all the doors on the far side of the fort, the rooms on the left and right walls, and the snow-covered courtyard, I couldn't see anything along this front wall.

Becky groaned, and I jumped. I slid back over to her.

"Shh ..." I whispered, my hand on her cheek. She was burning up.

She groaned again, and her body shifted, accidentally putting weight on her bad arm.

Her gasp was muffled by my hand, clamped tightly over her mouth. My lips were almost touching her ear now. "It's okay, Becky. I'm here. You're okay."

She struggled, and I released my hand so she could breathe.

"You're okay," I whispered, almost pleading.

"Bense," she said.

"I'm here, Becky. I need you to be really quiet for a minute, okay?"

There was a crash outside. It sounded close.

"Where are we?"

My cheek was touching hers now, and I was still afraid that I was whispering too loudly. "We're okay. I'll explain later. Trust me."

"Are we safe?"

I wished I could hug her and tell her everything was fine. I touched her hair. It was wet with sweat but still smelled a little of her shampoo.

"If we stay quiet," I said.

I listened for Iceman. I caught a footstep, or a knock, or a door opening. But there were no voices—from him or anyone else. Were they all like Carrie and Jane?

I could tell from Becky's breathing that she was asleep again. I sat up and touched her fevered face. I needed to go back to the wall and see what was happening, but I almost couldn't bring myself to move the six feet away from Becky. She was so vulnerable, so helpless.

I kissed her cheek.

Cold air blew in the crack when I returned to it.

Someone was lying on the ground. They were only a dark mass in three inches of snow—I had no idea who it was.

Iceman came into view. He stepped up to a door and checked the knob. It opened easily, and he disappeared inside. An instant later he reappeared, pulling a limp body by the arms. It was a girl wearing a short-sleeved shirt and pajama pants, and he dropped her into the snowy courtyard. She didn't move. Iceman reentered her room.

A moment later he left and moved on to get the kid in the next room. It was Mash, one of the Havoc guys. He'd never revealed himself as a robot back at the school. He was even at the fight at the fence, but had been on our side.

Mash was big—tall and overweight—but Iceman didn't have any trouble dragging him out to the courtyard and dumping him in the snow.

After inspecting Mash's room, Iceman moved to the next door. Two people were there—some guy I didn't recognize, and Taylor, one of the girls from the Society. I didn't know she was a robot either.

Iceman was looking for us, searching each room.

Had they seen our tracks? Had Becky's blood dripped onto the walkways?

He was going to find something—I knew it. And then what would I do? If I waited here they'd search until they found both of us. But maybe if I ran, they'd chase me and leave her. Did they know how sick she was?

Iceman reappeared and moved to another door. It stuck, and he shoved it open with his shoulder.

My heart was beating heavily. I felt hot, like I was going to throw up.

He pulled a girl outside by one arm. He didn't bring her as far as the others, and one foot leaned up on the walkway as her body lay on the ground. She had a coat on, but wasn't wearing shoes. Her long hair sprawled across the powdery snow and looked like spreading blood.

I held my breath as he walked back inside to search.

Becky made a noise—a deep, heavy breath—but I couldn't take my eyes off the dark, open door.

This was all my fault, too. Maybe the people who'd followed me to the fence had done so because they wanted to—maybe—but these people in the fort hadn't done anything. I'd shown up, and now they were being tortured and searched. We were all just trying to survive, but trouble followed me everywhere I went. No, more than trouble. Death and pain.

Iceman reemerged. He saw the girl's foot resting on the walkway and pushed it off with his shoulder. He moved on to the next door.

From there he pulled a short, skinny girl and dropped her in a heap in the snow. It was Lily! I had no idea whether she was a human version of a robot Lily I knew, or whether the Lily I knew had been human and they'd caught her when she'd tried to escape. None of this made sense yet.

From other rooms I saw Mason and Tapti. There was a kid from Havoc who I didn't know, and a couple of girls from the Society.

I stared at Mason for a moment, trying not to hate him. It wasn't his fault. Or maybe it was. Maybe everything Jane had told me was a lie.

Becky breathed heavily again, and I slid back to her. Some of the tension on her face had eased, but I didn't want her to wake up now. I sat next to her, poised to cover her mouth or hold her body still.

Another door opened. It was close. It had to be just on the other side of the wall, the next room over. I heard him drag whoever it was, something bumping sharply. And then he was back in the room.

Something bumped, and then bumped harder. There was a clatter—maybe emptying a bucket? Or a box? And then a heavier thump and scrape, like dragging furniture.

And then quiet.

Carrie's door opened, and something below us crashed.

Becky's eyes shot open and she took a breath, about to speak.

I clapped my hand down over her mouth and looked into her wide, scared eyes. I put a finger to my lips and listened.

We heard one of the girls below dragged out of the room—the scuffling of Iceman's feet across the floor and the rattle of a body across the floorboards—and then he returned for the other. He came back a third time. Carrie had hardly any furniture down there, almost nothing for him to search.

There was a tremendous crash, like he'd thrown Carrie's bed over. Becky's good hand clutched my arm. Neither of us was breathing.

He was pounding now—on the floor?

Voices. Dozens of them, outside by the road. I wanted to look, but didn't dare move.

The truck rumbled closer, following the voices.

Iceman's feet stomped around in the room for a few moments longer, and then he was gone.

I looked at Becky.

She mouthed the words, *Where are we?*

I leaned close to her ear. "I'll explain later. Stay here." I scooted back to the vent that overlooked the courtyard.

Everyone was awake again now, shivering and struggling to their feet. Jane had moved toward the center of the courtyard and sat on the crumbling edge of what looked like a well. She was massaging her shoulder. A few of the other girls sat next to her. Mason stood by himself.

I forced myself to look at someone else. Carrie was sitting now, quiet and alone. It seemed like the only people who were talking to each other were the people I didn't know. Everyone I recognized from Maxfield was stony faced and somber.

Others were pouring into the fort through the main gate. It looked like whoever was driving the truck had gathered the kids from the green barracks. Unlike those with rooms here, the others were all wearing coats.

I recognized many of them from school. Some I knew had been robots—Joel was there—but others I had no idea about. Walnut and Jelly stood next to each other. Had they been robots, or had they come here through detention?

"Quiet!"

It was Iceman, though I couldn't see him.

"Two students entered the town this morning," he said, his voice unnaturally loud. "They received help. Someone cut off these tracking chips. They were probably also looking for supplies, possibly first aid."

No one spoke or moved.

"The first person to give me information about these students will be rewarded."

Still nothing.

"Extra food supplies. New clothes. Heavier coats."

The faces in the crowd were looking down, or up, or anywhere but at Iceman. He seemed content to wait.

There was movement somewhere below, something I couldn't see and could barely hear. I glanced back at Becky. She was sitting up now. Even in the darkness of our hidden room, I could see the re

splotches of fever on her cheeks.

“No one came,” a voice said—it sounded like Birdman.

Iceman’s reply was sharp and immediate. “The tracking chips were found in the barn.”

“Then they went to the barn,” Birdman said. “They probably found tools there, cut them off, and kept running.”

Someone screamed, and almost everyone in the crowd flinched. A moment later I saw Iceman marching through the center of the crowd, dragging Mouse by the arm. She was fighting him, trying to pry his hand loose while scrambling to keep her footing in the wet snow, but he pulled her along effortlessly as if she were a child.

He was moving toward Jane. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, and my fingers curled into a fist.

Iceman threw Mouse down, and she smashed into the stone well where Jane sat. I could hear her plainly, even from the far side of the courtyard.

“Don’t play games. We know you two were at the barn at the same time they were.”

Mouse said something, and Iceman reached down and slapped her before she could finish.

Jane didn’t respond. Everyone else was moving away, creating a wide circle around them. Mouse was facedown in the snow, breathing heavily.

I felt Becky touch my arm, but I didn’t take my eyes off the courtyard.

Jane finally spoke. I couldn’t hear. No one moved.

Everyone was looking at Iceman, waiting for a response.

I reached for Becky, and she took my hand in hers. Her skin felt burning hot—either her fever was raging, or my hand was bloodless and icy. Or both.

Iceman bent down and grabbed Jane by the coat, and with inhuman strength threw her twenty feet into the snow.

Birdman finally rushed forward.

“Leave her alone!”

Iceman turned. Lily was at Jane’s side now, bent over her, but keeping an eye on Iceman.

He spoke. “I don’t need to remind you that you’re at our mercy. You have two responsibilities here: to live and to not interfere with us. When you stop doing either, you will be of no further use to us.”

Out in the courtyard, Jane was shaking. Her nose was bleeding, and she was holding her left wrist in her right hand.

Mouse was sitting up now, motionless, with her back against the well.

Becky’s shoulder bumped mine, and I moved to let her look.

“Now,” Iceman said, straightening his jacket and adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves. “Two final bits of business. We have left the first of several loads of lumber by the commissary. You’ll need to build two more dormitories like the others. Hopefully, you’ll do a better job with these than your predecessors did with yours. Remember—you’re the ones who have to live in them. And the faster you build them, the sooner you won’t be sharing rooms and beds with the new kids.”

Birdman spoke. “More people are coming?”

Iceman ignored him. “The second item of business ...” He scanned the faces in the crowd, looking for someone.

He found who he wanted, and pointed.

Dylan. I hadn’t noticed him before—he didn’t look at all like he had the night he’d beaten Jane. His face was gaunt and gray, and he stood expressionless and still, watching Iceman point.

Jane struggled to her feet, and then turned away, sobbing. Lily hugged her.

~~Dylan fell to the ground. There was no sound, no struggle. He just collapsed.~~

Blood spilled out of his ears.

Becky let out a small, “No,” but her voice was drowned out by dozens of others. Some fell to the ground crying; others shrieked. Iceman ignored them all. He picked up Dylan’s body and strode out of view.

A moment later, the truck’s engine roared to life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Becky was sleeping calmly when I left the Basement. I didn't know whether the powder Jane had sprinkled in the wound was an antibiotic or a painkiller, but it definitely seemed to be helping.

"Where are you going?"

Birdman was standing a few doors down from Carrie's room talking with Harvard. Mouse sat on a wooden bench beside them, both of her eyes now black and swollen.

I stammered to answer, too focused on Mouse's face to think.

"Do you see why you shouldn't have come?" Birdman snapped.

"We'll leave as soon as Becky is healthy."

"No, you won't," Mouse said, her voice muted and pained. "You will get us the hell out of here."

Birdman touched her shoulder. He turned to Harvard. "When do you want to check out the perimeter?"

"It'll have to be tomorrow morning," he answered, "or late tonight. I don't want to go until the storm clears. And I want to take him by the Greens first."

"The Greens?" I asked.

Harvard smiled. "The kids in the other buildings. You were a Variant, right? Think of this fort like the Variants. Anyone who wants to live here can, but if you're here you fight. Greens don't want to."

Mouse seemed disgusted by Harvard's comparison of the fort to the V's, but she didn't say anything.

I nodded and turned away.

"Where you going?" Birdman asked again.

"I want to find Jane."

"Fifth door on the right," Harvard said. "And plan on tonight."

"Whatever."

I headed slowly toward Jane's room, trying to fight against the panic rising up in my throat.

"What's your problem?"

I turned to see Birdman following me, Mouse a few steps behind.

"I don't have a problem," I said, and kept walking.

He grabbed my shoulder and yanked me back, hard.

"You answer me when I ask you a question."

He was right in my face, maybe an inch or two taller than me. I could have taken him a month ago maybe even yesterday, but I felt like I could hardly stand now.

The whites of Mouse's eyes were completely red, making her bruised and blackened face look almost demonic.

I forced myself to ease my fingers out of a fist—they seemed to be clenching all by themselves.

I took a deep breath and then exhaled, long and slow. "What was the question again?"

Birdman's voice was ice-cold. "What's your problem?"

"You know what happened at that school last night?" I asked. "People died."

"Don't you think we realize that?" Mouse snapped. She pointed at her head. "We were there; a lot of us died. I died there, damn it. So don't pretend like you're some victim. You're the lucky one."

"I don't even know what that means," I said, throwing my hands up and turning away.

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