

Prologue

There's no way to mask the fact that people die in hospitals. It happens with a regularity that a disinfectant can't wash away. Souls enter and leave the world in hospitals with such consistency that it's nothing more than another day for the people working there, or passing by on their daily business.

It's different when it's someone you know. It's not just another death. This time, it's Uncle Carson.

Kalea blew out a sigh as she fanned herself in the stifling room. "Why is it so hot in here?"

No reply. Just the hiss of the air conditioner and Uncle Carson's rattled breathing. The same as the last two hours: a machine that wouldn't cool below eighty degrees, and that awful death rattle. The nurse called Aunt Tabitha and her cousin, Avery, out of the room for a "conversation" five minutes ago, leaving her alone to watch Uncle Carson just in case—of what? Maybe he could still hear, but if his demise was inevitable to everybody else, then surely it was inevitable to him. He was the one stuck in the bed. He was the one hooked to machines. He was the one rattling. She heard a muffled sob escape her aunt in the hallway.

"Geeze!" she leaned over to unlatch the thin, stabilizing rubber mesh wrapped around her left foot and ankle. "It's a hundred degrees outside, and this broken foot is so swollen that it's almost the size of the pumpkins you used to grow. Remember the pumpkins?"

No response. So much for reminiscing over the good times.

Kalea leaned back in the chair, propping her foot on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry, Uncle Carson. I'm sorry the cure came too late." She raised her water bottle in a mock salute. "Here's to the world's best technological advance in the world's worst timing."

Rattling—from the air conditioner and from Uncle Carson.

Kalea sat the bottle on the table and leaned back in the chair. "This is crap," she pressed her hand over her head where she felt a migraine coming on. Great, one more problem. Her uncle was dying because the nanotech that could have reconnected his neural pathways was put on the medical market too late to help him. She was hobbling around on a broken foot because she couldn't afford the same tech that could have healed it in a matter of hours. And now her head hurt, and her medication was in her office, forgotten in the "your only uncle is dying" haste of picking up Avery at the airport and rushing here, just to sit and wait. She pressed harder, trying to press out pain, the rattle, her aunt's sobs in the hallway, the deep murmur of Avery's voice; all of it.

Kalea groaned as she squinted at the late afternoon summer sun streaming through the window. She reminded herself that whatever chaos reigned in here, the world was going on as normal out there, and she'd be part of it again as soon as they got through this. Tomorrow would come and they would make it through that day, and the next, and every day after that, until they faced this moment themselves.

That was the Chaplain's logic an hour ago.

"Uncle Carson," she studied his thin face, "Mom and Dad are on the way. Remember that I told you Mom is teaching the advanced physics class in Tennessee for the fall semester? They're living in the mountain cabin until the semester is over. She'll sing in the church choir at Christmas. You always enjoyed hearing her sing."

More rattling. Kalea fanned her shirt, pulling it away from the sweat. "You like *The Canticle of the Turning*. She'll do it again this year. She's probably singing it already for Dad. He laughs about how she sings a Christmas song year round."

Kalea thought she heard him stir, but couldn't perceive movement. She looked toward the sunlight shifting through the window. "I can't sing as like she can, but I remember your favorite verse. It's the third one, isn't it?" She closed her eyes and sang.

"From the halls of power to the fortress tower,

Not a stone will be left on stone.

Let the king beware, for your justice tears

Every tyrant from his throne.

The hungry, poor shall weep no more,

For the food they can never earn;

*There are tables spread, every mouth be fed,
For the world is about to turn.*

Kalea relaxed, sinking into the chair. Peace seeped into her—a quietness that told her that everything would be all right. Tomorrow wouldn't come for Uncle Carson, but it would for everybody else.

A hand grabbed Kalea's foot. She jumped, her brown eyes widening to see Uncle Carson sitting up on the bed, grasping her broken foot

"Kalea?"

Kalea tried to pull back her foot, but his grip tightened. She whined.

"Kalea, it's going to be all right."

"What?"

Carson smiled, his own brown eyes glinting. "We've been chosen."

Kalea stopped fighting his iron grip on her foot. "For what?"

Carson stared at her with a strange glimmer in his eyes. "You're right. The world is about to turn."

Kalea resumed her struggle, pulling harder on her foot against Uncle Carson's grip. His fingernails pierced into her skin, causing blood to seep from the small piercings in her skin. A shock went through her as she jerked free from his grip, leaped out of the chair, and dashed out of the door. She ran down the hall to the nurse's station where Aunt Tabitha and Avery had retreated with the nurses, her left foot leaving bloody prints on the linoleum. They stopped as they saw her approach, her long, brown hair flying behind her. Avery hurried to meet her, catching her in his arms. "Kalea, what is it?"

Kalea gasped, staring at Avery. "He's awake."

Aunt Tabitha turned from the nurse she was talking to. "What did you say?"

"Uncle Carson is awake!"

"That's impossible," the nurse pushed past them. They followed her to Uncle Carson's room, where they found him sitting up and calmly removing the morphine IV from his arm. He smiled at them.

"Hello everybody. Isn't it a beautiful evening?"

Aunt Tabitha and Avery rushed to Uncle Carson, engulfing him in a hug.

The nurse pushed her hair out of her face, her shaky arm exposing a phoenix tattoo. "I don't understand."

Aunt Tabitha looked up from her embrace, tears dripping down her cheek. "It's a miracle!"

Kalea sagged against the wall, smearing the blood trickling from foot over the floor. "The world is about to turn."

Chapter 1

Kalea rushed in the restaurant, pushing down her hair in a futile attempt to smooth out the damage from the hard hat she had to wear on her last job inspection. There's nothing like mid-August heat in Columbia, South Carolina, to undo hair and makeup. She pulled herself as straight as she could at five feet tall as she approached the greeter. "I'm here to meet Avery Kerner."

The greeter stared at Kalea with wide eyes. "You're Kalea Kerner. You're the 'miracle girl!'"

Kalea took a deep breath, trying to keep her face from getting any redder than it already was from the heat. "I think you have me confused with my Uncle Carson. He's the one that came back from the dead."

"But he healed your broken foot, didn't he?"

"Kalea!" Avery's tall, lanky frame swept past the greeter to hug her. "I'm glad you made it. Our table is back here."

Kalea followed Avery to the back of the restaurant, where he led her to a table next to a window. "Thanks for the save."

"Does that happen a lot?" he stared at her with concern in his brown eyes. Everybody swore the "Kerner kids," as they had been called since they were babies, looked alike. Kalea and Avery's fathers were brothers, and all the children in the family had dark brown hair and eyes. Avery was lucky to have some height to him, at six feet tall. Kalea and Annaliese, Avery's sister, were short. They were lucky to grow up together on the two hundred acre family estate that housed their families just outside of Columbia, but jobs had taken Avery and Annaliese out of state.

"It's better than the doomsday crowds. There was a group of them gathered outside the last school I inspected." Kalea shrugged. "I guess it's better to be the 'miracle girl' than the herald of the end times." She sighed as she laid down her menu. "Actually, it's irritating. I'm not the one that came back from the dead."

"He wasn't dead. And you were the one that limped in the room on a broken foot, and ran out healed two hours later."

"I know. Leave it to me to make a bloody dash down the hall of a hospital in plain view of a security camera." She had been heralded as one of the youngest business owners in the state of South Carolina at age thirty-six, after taking over the Presidency of Kerner Electrical and Mechanical Engineering from her father, who started the firm when she was five years old and retired the previous spring. It had been her claim to fame until that footage of her mad dash down a hospital hall trumped her professional integrity.

Avery waved it off. "They'll move on soon."

"I don't know. I hear there have been more cases like it in the past week. I was the only one stupid enough to get caught on video."

"You're also the only one not talking to the media. What gives?"

Kalea paused as the waiter appeared to take their orders. She smiled as he walked away with their menus, hoping the interruption was enough to change the subject. "When do you go back to Houston?"

Avery stared at her. "Tomorrow and you never answered my question. You haven't been around since Dad recovered a week ago, and you won't talk about it. What's going on with you?"

Kalea took a sip of her water. "I'm busy. I've missed a lot of work since Uncle Carson went in the home and I broke my foot last month." Kalea was helping her Uncle Carson in the house after a doctor's visit on a rainy afternoon in mid-July, and they both slipped on the porch steps. He hit his head on the wall of the house and suffered a subdural hematoma; while she twisted and broke her foot. "You and Annaliese aren't here, and Mom and Dad have been at the mountain house in Gatlinburg since Mom agreed to teach summer and fall classes at the University of Tennessee. I've been the only one here to help out Aunt Tabitha on a regular basis, which has been difficult with a broken foot."

"I realize that, and I'm grateful. It's not fair that you have to play the role of the daughter since Annaliese is too sucked in her own little world up there in D.C. She's married to a Congressman, for

goodness sakes. It seems she would be able to break away for her dying father, especially since it's been hard for you to get around on that foot that's no longer broken."

Kalea pointed at Avery. "But as you just pointed out, he isn't dying anymore, and my foot isn't broken anymore. Don't be so hard on her. I know she's busy with her psychiatry practice."

"But you're a business owner too, and you made time for Dad."

"I've also known the partners my whole life. We have personal connections. Annaliese moved up there with no connections and had to build everything up herself. I had it easy compared to her." Kalea took another drink of water. She was shocked to find her glass empty already. "Those two school inspections this morning must have dehydrated me more than I realized." She raised her hand to motion for the waiter, who nodded and brought a refill.

Avery's brow scrunched. "I thought you weren't doing inspections until your foot fully healed."

She smiled. "It did heal, remember? Everybody that watches any national news stream knows that."

Avery shrugged. "I thought you might take some more time to make sure you're really healed. Don't bones usually take a while to heal?"

"The orthopedic said six weeks in the splint, and three months after that for the bone to set."

"When did you break it?"

"Three weeks ago."

Avery raised an eyebrow. "There's no way you're completely healed."

Kalea sighed. "It hasn't hurt since Uncle Carson grabbed it. I don't know what happened. My doctor thought it might have been adrenaline."

"That's temporary. It doesn't completely heal something that usually takes months to heal without nanotech."

Kalea shrugged. "It isn't even swollen. I'm not asking why. I'm just glad I don't have to struggle to get around anymore, especially in that splint. They're lightweight, but you still can't wear a shoe with them. That's uncomfortable."

"This isn't like you."

"What do you mean?"

"You usually like to understand things. Aren't you curious as to how a broken bone healed instantly? Are you even sure it's completely healed?"

Kalea looked down. "The doctor did an X-Ray and didn't see the break anymore. Yes, I'm surprised. But no, I'm not going to beat it to death with questions. Frankly, I'm ready to move on. You weren't in the room when he grabbed me. Nobody was, and there were no cameras in there. Nobody has any idea what it was like to have a dying person sit up and grab you."

"I understand you're traumatized, but don't you care that Dad recovered?"

"Traumatized?" Kalea said, indignant. She crossed her arms. "I've never been so insulted in my life. Of course, I care! I'm the one that's had a front row seat to watching him slip away with Alzheimer's for the past seven years while you were at your fancy job with the Space Exploration Society that your larger than life brother-in-law got for you."

"All right, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you don't care."

"I know you and Annaliese are busy with your jobs and families and lives, but I am too. We're all busy professionals, but just because I'm not married doesn't mean that I don't have a life. I run a business, I'm a sponsored and assistant coach with the archery team at our old high school, and I'm on the property committee at church." She pointed her fork at Avery. "In fact, I'm surprised you stayed for a week. Elise must be frantic running after a three and five-year-old. How are Skyler and Susanna?"

"Skyler's starting kindergarten, and Susanna is in pre-school. The neighbors are helping Elise. Stop trying to distract me. It's no secret that you've been avoiding us. I know work is busy, but school's out so the archery team isn't an issue and the church just finished their renovations. What gives?"

"You're imagining things, that's what gives. I'm not avoiding anybody. Work really is in peak season right now with school renovations. I talk to Mom and Dad at least twice a week, and Annaliese called me last night."

Avery raised an eyebrow. "What did she say?"

“She’s the only person outside of the media and doomsday hounds that sincerely asked me how I’m doing. It was nice for somebody to care about me for a change, and not a disease or a story.” Kalea stared at Avery. “You haven’t talked to her?”

“Only for five minutes when Dad woke up. Mom’s talked to her a couple of times since then, but never for long. All she says to us is that her schedule is full and she’s trying to clear it so she can come home.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Kalea munching on her salad and Avery cutting his steak. Finally, Kalea spoke up. “I don’t mean to be dismissive, but this is overwhelming. It’s easier for me to dive into my work than to bat off calls and e-mails looking for another sound bite. I’m embarrassed by that video. I hoped I could ignore it and it would go away, but now I’m not so sure. Have you seen these news stories breaking since they started running that video a couple of days ago?”

“I’ve been too busy getting Dad moved back home and settled in to watch the news.” Avery paused. “He wants to see you. One of the national networks is sending a reporter to interview him for a special on Friday, and we hope you’ll come.”

Kalea raised an eyebrow. “Come, as in to watch him do it?”

“You’ll be interviewed with him.”

Kalea laid her fork down and leaned back in her chair. “So that’s why you wanted to take me out to lunch.”

“The family is asking, Kalea. It’s just one interview. Who knows, maybe talking to them will get everybody off your back. You’ll be able to go back to being an engineer and practicing your archery on our old tree houses. Dad does want to see you. He’s asked about you every day since he woke up.”

“I know, and I meant to go by sooner, but you know how it is.” Kalea sighed. “What time on Friday?”

“They’ll be there at six o’clock to set up. Mom has a cleaning service coming to fix up the place. The interview starts at eight.”

Kalea raised an eyebrow. “It’s going to be a live stream?”

“Of course.”

Kalea took another drink of water and wiped her mouth. “Fine, I’ll do it if it’s the only way to put this to rest. I’m ready for life to get easier and go back to being boring again.”

“Thank you, Kalea, and that’s not the only reason I asked you to lunch. I wanted to see you. I’m concerned about you. You’re my cousin and like another sister to me.” He tilted his head. “You never answered my first question. How are you?”

Kalea crumpled her napkin in her hand. “I’m scared.”

“Why?”

She dropped the napkin and sighed, looking at the sweltering summer day outside the window. “I don’t know.”

Chapter 2

Annaliese Kerner Boyce twisted a strand of her shoulder length, brown hair around her finger as she watched her father and cousin, Kalea, being interviewed about his “resurrection experience” the previous week. “I guess I should have tried harder to get down there.”

Kieran Boyce hugged her and sat on the couch beside her. “You did the best you could. You run a business specializing in mental health. You can’t drop your patients and run whenever you want to leave town. They need you. I’m sure the family understands.”

“Avery’s mad. He said I have partners that can take over the load and thinks I should have been there when the whole thing happened. And I wanted to be there, Kieran. You don’t know how hard it was to know my father was dying, and I was nearly five hundred miles away.” Her eyes welled up with tears. “I envy the freedom he had to jump on an airplane, without worrying about clients, or secret service, or reporters, or any of that stuff.”

Kieran crossed his arms over his medium built frame, his blue eyes dark. “He has that freedom because of the work my committee did to reorganize the entire United States Space Program into the Space Exploration Society. Otherwise, he’d still be at NOAA in Columbia.”

“I know he’s grateful, but this was our father.”

“He’s still your father,” Kieran pointed to the screen over the fireplace at the streaming webcast. “There he is; alive and well.”

“I should be seeing it from that living room in South Carolina, not a townhouse next to Capitol Hill.”

Kieran frowned, running his hand through his short, dark hair. “Do you regret marrying a politician?”

Annaliese stared at Kieran. “Absolutely not! I’m happy with my life here. It’s been tough knowing that Dad was slipping away and I wasn’t there to help.” She looked down. “Kalea’s done more for him than I have.”

Kieran leaned back, studying the screen. “Kalea looks scared. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her frightened. I always thought that girl could slay a dragon.”

Annaliese laughed as she stared at her cousin’s wide eyes staring into the camera, talking about how Uncle Carson grabbed her foot while she was lying in a chair. “It sounds like it was quite a shock for her.” She broke off as the reporter played back the footage of Kalea running down the hall. He stopped to zoom in and point out dark spots on the floor, asking what they were.

“That’s blood,” Kalea said. “The place where grabbed my foot left a scar.”

“Can we see it?” the anchor asked.

The camera focus dropped as Kalea removed her sandal to reveal four half-moon gashes on the top of her foot. She turned the foot to show the scar of his thumbnail on the bottom of her foot. Annaliese leaned forward, studying the scar.

“Is it infected?” the reporter asked.

The camera pulled back up to focus on Kalea, whose eyes flashed a sliver glint in the camera. “No, it’s fine.”

“It looks infected,” the reporter protested. “Have you had it checked out? Are you sure you’re healed?”

Kalea smiled, but it looked forced. “Yes, I’m fine,” she said, as Uncle Carson leaned over to hug her. “We both are. It’s a miracle. He’s cured, and so am I. I’m thankful to be back on my feet again.” She laughed. “It’s good to be back on my feet, and even better to have my uncle back.”

Uncle Carson leaned over and kissed Kalea on the cheek. “I’m thankful little Kalea and I are both back.”

Annaliese turned to look at Kieran. “Can you get me a flight back home?”

“When?”

“As soon as possible. I’ll take a red-eye if they can get me on one.”

“What’s wrong?” Kieran asked.

“We’ve talked and messaged. She sent me before and after pictures of her foot on Monday, and there was no scar. She hated that miracle talk, too. That doesn’t sound like her.” Annaliese leaned back,

shaking her head. “It doesn’t look like her, either. She’s done plenty of local interviews for her work with Uncle Gerald, and she never got camera fright or laughed. She was always professional and pulled together on camera. That’s not the Kalea that I know. Something isn’t right. It’s time that someone who knows what they’re doing talked to both of them about what happened in that hospital room that day.”

Kieran picked up his phone. “Do you want me to come with you?”

Annaliese stared at her cousin’s face on the screen. “No, she needs a doctor, and I intend to do things right this time.”

Chapter 3

Annaliese scanned the pickup line outside of Columbia Metropolitan Airport, searching for her cousin's car. She checked her watch. Four o'clock on Monday afternoon, right on time. Kieran tried to get Annaliese a flight on Saturday, but the President and Vice-President were traveling over the weekend, so it was easier for her to wait until they returned on Monday to get flight privileges. She fanned herself in the sticky summer air. Kalea may not have seemed like herself on the webcast Friday night, but she still had a bad habit of running late. Then again, Annaliese should have known better than to wear a black pantsuit and two-inch high-heeled sandals on the flight. Congressman's wife or not, southeastern summers are too brutal for formal dress.

Kalea finally pulled up five minutes late in her metallic blue luxury car. Annaliese raised an eyebrow, thinking that her cousin was taking well to her role as a successful business owner, until Kalea stepped out of the car in light blue jeans, a pink shirt, and slip-on walking shoes.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Kalea hugged Annaliese. Annaliese stooped slightly into the hug. She was five feet five inches, but the heels made it awkward. "I just got finished with a school inspection, and they ran late."

"They make you do that in this heat? I'm surprised your foot isn't swollen. You just healed a broken bone."

Kalea held up her left foot. "No pain, no swelling, just a few small scars. I'm fine, Annaliese." She hit the button on her key fob, popping the trunk. "Work doesn't wait or take a break. School starts Monday. We have to make sure it's safe for the kids to walk in the building by the time the first bell rings."

Annaliese stashed her bag in the trunk and ducked in the car, where the air conditioner blew her dark brown, shoulder length curls. She knew the flat iron would be pointless in this humidity, so she left it at home, envying Kalea's long, straight hair hanging obediently down her back in a neat braid.

"Other than the foot, how are you?" she asked as Kalea pulled away from the curb.

"Busy, but I think that will settle down over the next few weeks. I've had a lot of catching up to do from the time I missed with the broken foot and helping with Uncle Carson over the past few weeks. They had me home with the foot for a week, and by that time, things were rolling with Uncle Carson. He was in the hospital, had surgery, and then went in the nursing home. They decided to skip the rehab facility since the nursing home had the people and equipment they needed to do it with his dementia. It's been a whirlwind."

Annaliese drew a sharp breath. "I'm sorry I didn't come sooner. I wanted to, and I feel guilty about you having to play my role in this, especially since you were dealing with an injury you got while helping him."

Kalea waved it off. "I'm right there. Our houses are within a few acres of one another. It didn't make sense for you to come down here when I can do it. We are family, after all."

Annaliese stared at the passing scenery. "It's crazy up in D.C. between my practice and Kieran fighting to fund his projects with the Commerce, Science and Transportation committee. As chair, a lot of the burden falls on him. The President is still threatening to discontinue the Space Exploration Society. Kieran is fighting to keep it alive."

"What's the President's problem with it?" Kalea asked. "Kieran's committee worked tirelessly to reorganize it into everything the Cabinet required to save the program. Then they developed the nanotech and revolutionized the medical industry. Why would you destroy the entity that brought you humanity's biggest achievement?"

"It's ironic," Annaliese said. "Kieran did everything they asked, the Space Society produced something that's saving millions of lives, and Congress is still threatening to pull the plug on the Society."

Kalea snorted. "I thought President Hastings's tirade would end after the controversy over his comment on wasting resources on empty space."

“The President’s supporters on cutting the program claim that the funding would be better spent on building up our military. The unrest in the Middle East is building to proportions we haven’t seen since World War II.”

“How will funding our military help? The United States stopped getting involved in national matters five years ago when Communist and the Middle Eastern Sectors started butting heads.”

“That whole side of the world is at war, and it’s spreading. The United States is under pressure from most of Western Europe and Australia to support the cause for democracy.”

“I didn’t know democracy was under attack. I thought it was this battle of theocracy and communism in that region.”

“It isn’t now, but no matter what the outcome is, it’s not favorable for democratic governments,” Annaliese said. “A lot of people believe we’re on the brink of World War III.”

“This is why I don’t watch the news.” Kalea laughed. “Of course, if they cut the Space Exploration Society and an asteroid smacks the planet, all bets are off. Then everybody will be arguing over why we didn’t keep our eyes on the skies.”

Annaliese returned the laugh. “The things that undo us usually hit where we aren’t looking.” She looked down, studying her two-carat diamond ring and gold, diamond studded wedding band. “I try to help Kieran as much as I can. Some of my clients are well-connected, and if I help them personally, then they’re gracious with helping politically. Kieran needs all the support he can get to keep the Space Exploration Society alive. Most of our technological advances have come through it.”

Kalea held up a hand. “You know politics blow up my brain, so you don’t need to explain. I trust that you’re both busy with matters of National importance.”

“Family is more important than anything. I should have been here for Dad. There’s no excuse for that.” Annaliese paused. “I’m a psychiatrist, and I couldn’t help my own father.”

“There’s nothing you could have done. His Alzheimer’s was too advanced by the time the nanotech was released to the public.” She paused. “He’s fine now, so it doesn’t matter.”

“I still should have been here more. You’re stronger than I am. I couldn’t face seeing my father slip away.”

Kalea smiled. “I’m an engineer. I don’t have feelings. I’m all logic and function, remember?”

Annaliese returned the smile. “So are shrinks, but I didn’t pull it off this time. My baby cousin showed me up.”

“I think six months hardly makes me a baby,” Kalea said. “Did Avery give you a hard time? He hasn’t been around a lot either. It’s ironic that he was fussing about you not being here last week, but before Uncle Carson took that bad turn it had been,” she paused, thinking. “Easter. He brought Elise and the twins for a long weekend at Easter.”

“He did nag me, but I passed it off as his emotions getting the better of him. He just turned thirty. He has yet to gain our perspective.”

Kalea smiled. “Give him six more years to grow up, eh?”

“He did make a point. I felt guilty about not being around since Dad fell three weeks ago. He went downhill fast.”

“He had been going downhill before that. Aunt Tabitha was just trying to ignore it and hope it went away.”

“As if that ever worked,” Annaliese grumbled.

“The problem is that it usually grows and smacks you in the face. Or in this case, Uncle Carson’s head and my foot.” Kalea released a short laugh. “But maybe she was onto something, because it did go away.”

“It’s still so strange. There have been a few more cases like that over the past couple of weeks. How is Dad? Had he had a physical to see if the dementia is really gone?”

Kalea shook her head. “They did a scan and full check-up before they released him last week and it was gone. In fact, he’s the picture of health. Uncle Carson is the man you remember again; mostly.”

“What does that mean?”

“He seems different.”

“How?” Annaliese asked.

“I don’t know, its little things. Sometimes he looks at me like he can see right through me, or like he sees something that nobody else can. And he says strange things like he’ll be watching the news and he’ll blurt out ‘what a waste of energy when there are worse things coming.’ Then when you ask what that means, he either passes it off as a joke, or he doesn’t remember saying it.”

“I imagine coming back from the brink of death has shifted his paradigm. Didn’t the nurses say he only had hours left just before he woke up?”

Kalea nodded.

“When you fight the reaper and win, then I imagine a lot of what we worry about seems silly.”

“I suppose so. You can talk to him and decide for yourself.”

“I will,” Annaliese paused again. “I saw your interview Friday night. It was good.”

“I shouldn’t have done that,” Kalea said sharply.

Annaliese stared at Kalea, shocked at the bitterness in her voice. “Why not?”

“I made a fool of myself. I looked as bad as those people proclaiming that we’re living in the end times.”

“No, you didn’t. I thought it was a great interview. But there was a point where you didn’t seem like yourself. It’s when the reporter asked about your scar.”

“I don’t know what came over me or why I said that,” Kalea said, “and I don’t know why that scar flared up right before the interview. It had been faint until that day, and once they turn on the cameras its neon red.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No.”

“Have you had it checked?” Annaliese asked.

“I did this morning. They scanned it again and said it’s cosmetic. They offered me nanotech to fade it, but I said no.”

“Why?”

“It’s expensive, and avoiding a scar isn’t worth it, especially if there’s no medical reason for it,” Kalea said, “and I don’t like the idea of robots doing stuff in my body.”

“You’re one of those types that don’t believe in mixing biology and technology.”

“I don’t believe in doing it indiscriminately, especially for something that isn’t life-threatening. Nanotech is too new and too expensive, especially for something as small as a few pricks in my foot. I thought you of all people would understand that.”

“I do,” Annaliese said.

“The body has a remarkable capacity to heal. Just look at Uncle Carson. He recovered completely without nanotech.” Kalea smiled mischievously. “You can’t let robots perform all the miracles, can you?”

Annaliese stared at Kalea, surprised by the out of place comment. “Do you believe what happened to Dad was a miracle?”

Kalea thought. “I’m not sure what it was, but I’m certain we’ll find out soon enough.” She turned on the gravel driveway mostly hidden from the main road. “Welcome back to The Kerner Complex. Do you want me to take you to my house, your house, or your parent’s house?”

Annaliese thought as Kalea wound through the road leading to the houses spread out on their family land. “Take me home. I’d like to unpack and change into cooler clothes. I’m supposed to go to Mom and Dad’s for dinner. Will you join us?”

Kalea shook her head. “Thanks, but I have to pass. I have some work to do from home tonight. Maybe another time.”

“Maybe,” Annaliese said softly, still staring at Kalea.

“You enjoy some time with them,” Kalea’s eyes sparkled in a shaft of afternoon sunlight streaming through the trees. “I’m sure you’ll be amazed at what you find at home.”

Chapter 4

Kalea sat in the bay window in Uncle Carson and Aunt Tabitha's kitchen with a glass of red wine, watching storm clouds gather overhead away from the music, chatter, and laughter coming from the den.

"Hiding out?" Annaliese sat next to Kalea.

"Those clouds are charged," Kalea said.

Annaliese wrinkled her brow. "What?"

"All of this heat has the atmosphere electrified. We're going to have a storm soon."

Annaliese sipped her own wine. "You're never off work, are you?"

Kalea turned and stared at Annaliese. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"Yes, you need a vacation. That's what I said!" Annaliese poked Kalea. "This is a party. You're supposed to be celebrating!"

"I'm sorry," Kalea finished her wine and sat the glass on the oak kitchen table. "You know I'm not fond of crowds."

"Neither am I, but I suck it up every now and then."

"You have to do it more often than I do."

"That's true," Annaliese finished her own wine and sat her glass next to Kalea's. "I've hardly seen you these past few days. You're working too hard."

"I know," Kalea said. "I'm still freaked out by what happened in that hospital a couple of weeks ago. I can't seem to shake this anxiety that something else is going to happen." She paused, staring at the darkening sky. "How does Uncle Carson seem to you?"

"Remarkably recovered, but you're right. Something's off. I can't put my finger on it." Annaliese turned to the window and followed Kalea's stare. "Well, maybe I can. I asked Dad if I could see his neurological scans from when he was discharged, and he said no."

Kalea stared at Annaliese. "Why?"

"I don't know. He said he's fine, and he doesn't want anybody prodding him anymore. He said he's had enough of that."

Kalea turned her stare back outside. "He had nurses and doctors coming and going all the time the past few weeks. I imagine he wants peace and quiet."

Annaliese shook her head. "He never refused to give me access to his medical files before. This is strange. It seems he'd want me to look at them to confirm everything's all right."

"He's scheduled for a follow-up on Monday, isn't he?" Kalea asked.

"He is, but he doesn't want to go. What worries me is that Mom is fine with it. She said he's had enough, and if he doesn't want to see any more doctors, that's his right."

"It's his right, but is it wise?"

"My point exactly," Annaliese said. "Nobody knows what happened. The doctors need to keep an eye on him to figure out what's happening. We need to make sure he's alright. We need to make sure—"

"That it isn't coming undone," Kalea interrupted.

Annaliese paused. "Yes, that it isn't coming undone." She picked the wine bottle up from the counter and refilled her glass. "Do you want another glass?"

"No thanks," Kalea said. "Do you have any idea how he could have gone from stage seven dementia to completely cured in seconds?"

"Not without nanotech and that doesn't work beyond stage two of cancer and stage four of dementia," Annaliese tapped her fingernail on her glass. "I'm glad he's better. He's alive for the first time in years, and I couldn't be more grateful. It's just that what happened to him is medically impossible."

Kalea looked at Annaliese. "You don't believe it's a miracle like everybody says it is?"

Annaliese sighed. "I'm not counting it out, but I'm not counting it in, either. My gut is telling me something more is going on." She stared out the window. "There have been other cases."

"I know. I saw an article before I came over. There are five cases of sudden recovery from stage seven dementia and sixteen cases of it from stage four cancers in the past two weeks." Kalea paused. "It started around the time this happened with Uncle Carson." She stared at Annaliese, tilting her head. "Is that why you came? To figure out what's happening?"

Annaliese returned the stare. "I came because my father recovered from his deathbed, and I wanted to see him. But yes, I wonder if it fits in with these other cases."

"It's been striking me as odd ever since he grabbed my foot and sat up from his deathbed."

"I know," Annaliese reached over and patted Kalea on the hand. "I'm sorry that happened to you. I know everybody is saying it's wonderful that you witnessed a miracle, but I know that was a shock for you. Nobody realizes how traumatic it is to have something like that happen."

Kalea forced a smile. "Thank you. You're the first person to realize how startling that was. I wish it had been anybody but me." She looked away. "I have nightmares about it."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not that I wish he died. I'm glad he didn't. It was just so unnatural. "

Annaliese lowered her head, trying to force Kalea to meet her stare. "I'm here if you need to talk."

Kalea looked up. "I know, and I appreciate it." She stood up and stretched. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should take some time off over Labor Day weekend. The summer has flown by with work, Uncle Carson being sick, and the broken foot. Maybe I can go up to Mom and Dad's mountain cabin. It would be good for me to get away."

"What's that?" a voice said from the kitchen door. They turned to see Uncle Carson standing in the doorway, looking puzzled.

Annaliese stood to meet him, taking his arm. "Dad? What's wrong?"

"I heard voices," he said.

"Kalea and I were talking."

"Okay," he stared at Kalea. "A storm's coming."

"I know," Kalea said. "It looks like a bad one. Do you want me to get the generator?"

"Generator?" he asked.

"It's all right," Annaliese stood and guided him toward the den. "Come on, Dad, you're missing your party. Let's go back in here with your friends."

Thunder clapped. The lights flickered, and then went out. Kalea hit a button on her phone to activate the flashlight. "I'll go in the basement to flip the fuse box and fire up the generator."

"Dad, go back in the den with Mom. I'll help her," Annaliese followed Kalea down the staircase to the basement. She was amazed at how fast Kalea got down there, but then again she did have a head start. Kalea flipped open the fuse box and touched the main switch. A blue spark touched her finger, causing her to yelp. Annaliese rushed to Kalea's side.

"Are you all right?" Annaliese asked.

Kalea stared around, her brown eyes wide with shock. "What happened?"

"You got shocked flipping the switch. I don't know how that happened."

Kalea stood up and walked back to the fuse box, flipping the switch off and then back on again. A hum filled the room as the power flowed back through the house.

"Hmm," Kalea studied the box for a moment, and then closed the door to the fuse box. "I guess it needed a reset."

"Are you sure you're all right? That shock should have knocked you out!" Annaliese said.

Kalea waved it off. "I'm fine. I work with electricity all the time and have been shocked worse than that. Come on, we need to get back to the party." They mounted the stairs and returned to the den, where the party was back in full swing. Aunt Tabitha hugged Kalea.

"Thanks for hooking up the generator, sweetheart. I'm amazed you got it done so fast!"

Kalea stared at Aunt Tabitha. "It was just a blown fuse. I rebooted it. The power's back on."

Aunt Tabitha laughed. "That's impossible," she said, pointing to the screen over the fireplace showing the newscast where a red warning ran across the bottom of the screen. "They say the power is out in the entire city and will be for the rest of the night."

Annaliese stared at the red warning scrolling across the screen. "How is that possible?"

Kalea looked up, first at Annaliese, and then at Uncle Carson, who stared at her in confusion. "I don't know."

Chapter 5

“Welcome back!” Jenna Monroe, the short, perky receptionist chirped as Annaliese walked in the door. “How was your trip?”

“It was good to see the family again. That trip was long overdue,” she flipped through the mail in her inbox.

“How’s your father?”

Annaliese stopped and stared at the receptionist, who was staring at her intently with wide eyes. “He’s fine,” she rubbed her head. “They were right. He recovered. He gets confused every now and then, but I believe that’s normal for somebody in his situation.”

“To the brink and back, eh?”

Annaliese stared at Jenna, who flushed red and looked away. “I’m sorry. That was a ridiculous thing to say.”

Annaliese dropped her mail, which was advertisements and fliers for upcoming conferences, in the trash can. “No, it wasn’t. It’s strange. I’m glad he’s all right, but there’s something about the whole thing that seems off.”

“You aren’t the only one that feels that way,” Jenna tapped at her computer. “You got a ton of messages while you were out.”

Annaliese raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t see any when I checked my messages from home.”

“They weren’t your clients. They were other people, and they all came through my desk.” She tapped a key. “I just forwarded them to you.” She nodded to a young woman sitting in the reception area, beyond the closed glass partition. “That lady is also here to see you. Her name is Sidney Sinclair. She drove up from Raleigh to speak with you. I hope you don’t mind that I told her to come in. You don’t have any routine appointments until ten o’clock, and she said she’s in town for a conference that starts at noon.”

Annaliese studied the woman sitting on the couch. Straight, chin length brown hair framed her oval face. She was fidgeting with a gold cross necklace and staring out the large window in the reception area with wide, green eyes. “Has she filled out the preliminary paperwork?”

“It’s in the system.”

“Give me a minute to get settled in. I’ll call when I’m ready for her.”

“Right, boss,” Jenna said as Annaliese walked to her office in the back corner of the building.

“What are these messages about?” Annaliese mumbled as she put her computer in her desk workstation and booted it up. She opened the vertical blinds to her back wall, which was a window overlooking the downtown D.C. area. Sunlight flooded across her desk as the messages popped up. Annaliese scrolled through them, studying the summary statements from other doctors she knew through her professional association asking about her findings with her father and cousin on her trip. She doubted they were asking from any concern, and her experiences hadn’t shed any light on the recent “resurrections and miracle healings,” as the media called them. More likely, they just wanted gossip. She snorted. “Nosy Nellies,” she mumbled, disconnecting the computer from the workstation and activating her notepad app in Sidney’s file. She called Jenna and asked that Sidney be sent back. Jenna escorted the nervous woman in a moment later. Annaliese rolled her chair in front of the couch across from the window. “Mrs. Sinclair, my name is Annaliese Kerner Boyce. How can I help you this morning?” She realized as soon as she said it that she didn’t read Sidney’s preliminary file.

Sidney shook Annaliese’s hand weakly and took a seat on the couch, huddling in the corner. “Thanks for seeing me on short notice. I know you were out of town last week and hated to crash in on you like this. I thought you would be the best person to help me.”

“I appreciate that. I know there are many fine doctors in Raleigh, so what brings you to D.C.?”

Sidney fiddled with the necklace again. “It was the media reports regarding your father and cousin. My situation is unique.”

“Who’s your doctor back home?”

“Olivia Werner.”

Annaliese nodded. "I went to school with her." She leaned back in her chair. "You said your situation is unique. How so?"

Sidney looked in her lap. "I'm one of those miracle cases that they're referring to. My father-in-law was dying of cancer three weeks ago. It's like your cousin's situation. The nurse called the family outside and I stayed in the room with him." She rubbed her neck. "I had an asthma attack while I was sitting by his bed. I was reaching in my purse for my rescue inhaler when he sat up and grabbed my neck."

"What did you do?"

"I screamed and tried to pull it away, but he grabbed it tighter. You can see a scar where he grabbed me," she held up her head to show Annaliese red scars on her neck. Annaliese leaned forward and studied the half-moon nail streaks in her neck that were nearly identical to the scars on Kalea's foot.

"Have the scars been there since he grabbed you?"

"No, that's the strange thing. They showed up a week later. My doctor looked at it, but said it was cosmetic and it would fade."

"Have you had any asthma attacks since this incident?"

"No," Sidney said. "I'd had it my whole life until he grabbed me. I quit taking my regular medication a few days later." She paused, looking out of the window. "I know nanotech could cure it, but my husband and I couldn't afford it."

Annaliese nodded. "Just like Kalea. Her foot completely healed."

Sidney scrunched her eyebrows. "I saw the interview. It's the same thing that happened to me."

Annaliese shook her head. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to say that out loud. Let's get back on topic. What brings you here?"

"Two things. The first is that I wanted to warn you. My father-in-law is dying, again. His cancer came back. He's stage three." She swiped a tear from her eye. "I don't know if you've been keeping up with the news reports, but that started happening with the cancer 'miracles' a week after they came back. The tumors grew back. Most of them are at stage three already."

Annaliese paled. "I didn't keep up with the news reports while I was out. I'll check into it."

"They say he doesn't qualify for nanotech because it's considered a relapse of the original condition, so they can't do it. There's nothing that can be done for my father-in-law. He's terminal, and I don't know if there's enough miracle to go around twice. I wanted you to know. I told your assistant, but she said she felt I needed to tell you this myself."

Annaliese tapped notes in her computer. "What was the other thing that brought you here?"

"It's about me," she pointed to Annaliese's left foot. "Does your foot hurt when you get up in the morning, and when you get up after sitting for a while?"

Annaliese thought. "Actually, it does. How do you know?"

"You have plantar fascia. I can see the tear in your ligament. You might want to get out of those high-heeled shoes before you make it worse."

Annaliese stared at Sidney. "You can see the tear inside of my foot?"

Sidney nodded. "Your receptionist is getting an ear infection, too. I told her to call her doctor. I hope she does."

Annaliese gaped. "You can see inside our bodies and know something is wrong?"

Sidney nodded.

"How is that possible?"

Sidney shrugged. "I don't know. It started last week. I'm a medical technician, so I work with a lot of sick people, files, and scans. Now I don't need the machines. I can see the bones and muscles and tendons and ligaments. It's like I'm a walking scanning machine. I see inside you and what's right—or wrong." She rubbed her eyes. "Am I going crazy, Dr. Boyce?"

Annaliese leaned back in the chair, thinking.

About her father's sudden confusion.

About Kalea restoring the electricity in an entire house by touching the fuse.

About the scars.

About the messages.

She sighed. "No, Sidney, you aren't crazy. I think we're dealing with something new."
Sidney leaned forward. "What is it?"
Annaliese leaned back. "I don't know."