

# **Beneath the City**

## **Also by David Boles**

The EleMenTs Series

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Fractional Fiction

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# **Beneath the City**

*Book One of The EleMenTs Series*

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*For those who have been underestimated.*



Part One

# **The Girls**

## Chapter 1

# Elle

The man's mouth was moving again.

Elle watched from her seat near the subway doors, tracking the shapes his lips made, the way his jaw worked around syllables she would never hear. He was maybe forty, wearing a coat too thin for January, and he had been trying to get her attention for three stops now. First with glances. Then with the little wave people used when they thought you hadn't noticed them. Now with words aimed at her like stones, each one landing somewhere she couldn't reach.

She knew what he wanted. Her seat. The 6 train was crowded, standing room only, and Elle had claimed one of the last available spots at 14th Street. The man had boarded at 23rd, seen a teenage girl taking up space he felt entitled to, and decided to do something about it.

His frustration was visible in the tension around his eyes, the way his hand gripped the overhead rail. He said something else, and this time she caught the shape of it: didn't you hear me?

Elle almost smiled. Almost.

She raised her hands and signed, deliberately, clearly: I am Deaf.

The man's expression shifted. She had seen this particular shift hundreds of times, maybe thousands, the recalibration that happened when hearing people discovered her difference. First confusion, then

recognition, then the thing she hated most: pity. His anger collapsed into something soft and uncomfortable. He looked away, muttered something to himself, and pushed through the crowd toward the other end of the car.

Elle watched him go, feeling the familiar cocktail of relief and loneliness that followed these encounters. She had won, if winning meant being left alone. But being left alone was not the same as being seen, and being seen was not the same as being understood, and being understood was something she had stopped expecting from strangers years ago.

The train shuddered through the tunnel, and Elle felt the vibration in her bones, in her teeth, in the small hairs on her arms. The world spoke to her through texture and pressure and movement, a language she had learned to read because it was the only one the world offered freely. She could feel when the train was approaching a station by the subtle change in velocity, the way the air pressure shifted as tunnels widened into platforms. She could feel the difference between local and express tracks by the rhythm of the rails beneath her feet.

She noticed things hearing people missed. The woman across from her, fiftyish, professional clothes, whose hands trembled slightly as she scrolled through her phone. Early Parkinson's, maybe, or essential tremor, or just too much coffee. The teenager two seats down, head bobbing to music Elle couldn't hear, whose foot tapped a rhythm that suggested something with a strong bass line. The child standing with his mother near the doors, his small hands moving in shapes Elle recognized immediately: American Sign Language (ASL). He was maybe six, signing something about wanting a snack, and his mother responded with the patient fluency of someone who had learned the language for love.

Elle's chest tightened. She wanted to catch the child's eye, to sign something, anything, just to feel the connection of shared language.

But the mother was already steering him toward the opening doors, and then they were gone, swallowed by the 42nd Street platform, and Elle was alone again in a car full of people.

She turned her attention to the window, watching the tunnel walls blur past. Her reflection looked back at her: pale skin, gray eyes, straw-colored hair cut short and practical. She was small for thirteen, built like a runner though she had never run competitively. Her hands rested in her lap, fingers twitching slightly, always moving, always ready to speak.

A few more stops to her transfer at 59th. Then the 4 train express uptown to 138th Street-Grand Concourse. Then the walk from the station to the group home that had been her address for three months and twelve days. Not home. Elle had stopped using that word. Just the place where she slept, where she kept her clothes, where she waited for the system to decide what to do with her next.

The train stopped at 51st Street, and more people pushed in, filling the spaces that brief departures had created. A man with a rolling suitcase positioned himself directly in front of Elle, blocking her view, his back forming a wall of dark wool. She could smell his cologne, sharp and citrus, too much of it, probably applied in a rush that morning.

She didn't mind the blocked view. There was nothing to see but more tunnel, more darkness, more of the underground world that carried millions of people through the city every day. What she minded was the way he stood so close, the assumption that her space was available for his convenience, that she was small enough and young enough and different enough to be encroached upon without consequence.

Elle shifted her bag on her lap and felt, beneath the fabric, the outline of her phone. She could text someone. Meen would be home by now, probably listening to an audiobook with that expression of

total absorption she got when information was flowing into her faster than she could process it. Teena might still be at her mother's, or maybe on her way back, navigating the accessible routes she had memorized through trial and error and frustration.

She didn't text. She would see them soon enough, and there was something about this moment, suspended in the dark beneath the city, surrounded by people who would never know her, that felt worth preserving in its isolation. This was her life: transit, transition, the space between places that were never quite hers.

The train reached 59th Street, and Elle stood, shouldering her bag, preparing to transfer. The man with the suitcase didn't move, so she pushed past him, using her shoulder more firmly than strictly necessary. He turned, startled, and his mouth formed words she didn't bother to read.

She was already moving toward the doors, toward the platform, toward the stairs that would take her to the 4 train. The station was a chaos of bodies and movement, and Elle navigated it the way she navigated everything: by watching, by anticipating, by being smaller and faster and more aware than anyone expected.

A busker was playing guitar near the turnstiles, his case open for donations. Elle couldn't hear the music, but she could see the way people's steps changed as they passed, the slight slowing that suggested something pleasant, something worth a moment's attention. She dropped a dollar in the case without breaking stride, a transaction conducted entirely in gesture, and the busker nodded his thanks without interrupting his song.

The 4 train platform was less crowded, the uptown traffic thinner at this hour. Elle found a spot near the end of the platform, away from the clusters of commuters, and settled in to wait. The electronic sign promised a train in four minutes. She counted the seconds by the pulse in her wrist, a habit she had developed in childhood, a way of

measuring time that didn't require sound.

A pigeon had found its way onto the platform, pecking at something between the rails. It moved with the jerky confidence of an animal that had adapted perfectly to its environment, unafraid of the trains that could crush it, unimpressed by the humans who towered over it. Elle watched it for a moment, feeling an odd kinship. They were both creatures navigating a world that hadn't been built for them, surviving through attention and adaptation.

The train arrived, and Elle boarded, finding a seat near the window. The car was half-empty, the quiet of the uptown line a relief after the chaos of the crosstown transfer. She pulled out her phone and scrolled without purpose, past notifications she didn't want to read, past messages from her caseworker about upcoming meetings, past the group chat with girls from her school's Deaf program who were friendly but not friends.

She stopped on a news article about Water Tunnel No. 3, the massive infrastructure project that had been under construction since before her parents were born. The tunnel was supposed to provide backup water supply to the city, insurance against disaster, but decades of delays and cost overruns had made it a symbol of bureaucratic failure. Elle had written a report on it last semester, fascinated by the scale of the thing, the idea that people were building something so enormous beneath the streets she walked every day.

She saved the article to read later and put her phone away. The train was approaching her stop, the familiar rhythm of the final stretch before 138th Street. She gathered her things, stood, positioned herself near the doors.

The platform was quiet when she emerged, the evening cold biting at her exposed face. She pulled her coat tighter and began the walk she had memorized weeks ago: left out of the station, past the bodega with the orange cat in the window, past the church with the broken sign,

past the lot where someone had dumped a couch that was now slowly decomposing into the concrete.

The group home was a brownstone that had seen better decades, its facade weathered, its steps cracked, its windows glowing with the yellow light of institutional bulbs. Elle climbed the stairs and pressed the buzzer, waiting for someone to check the camera and unlock the door.

It was Marcus who let her in, the overnight staff member who had been working here since before Elle arrived. He was young, maybe mid-twenties, with a kind face and the tired eyes of someone working his way through graduate school on inadequate sleep. He signed hello as she entered, the gesture clumsy but genuine.

Elle signed back: Hello. Cold outside.

Marcus nodded, his hands moving slowly as he formed his response: Your friends are upstairs. Dinner soon.

She thanked him and headed for the stairs, feeling the familiar creak of old wood beneath her feet. The group home housed eight children at the moment, ranging from ten to sixteen, all of them wards of the state, all of them waiting for placements that might or might not come. Elle knew their names and their stories in the vague way that proximity required, but she didn't know them. She had learned not to know people in places like this. Attachment was expensive when everything was temporary.

The second floor hallway was dim, one of the bulbs out again, and Elle navigated by memory to the door at the end. The smallest room in the house, barely big enough for three beds and three dressers, chosen because it was the only room where Teena's wheelchair could maneuver with any dignity.

She opened the door and felt the shift immediately: the warmth, the sense of presence, the particular quality of air that meant she was no longer alone.

Meen was on her bed, headphones in, her phone propped against a pillow. She couldn't see Elle enter, but she turned her head slightly at the change in air pressure, her awareness tuned to frequencies most people never noticed.

Teena was at the small desk by the window, her wheelchair angled to catch the last light of the fading afternoon. She looked up as Elle entered, her face breaking into a smile.

"There you are," Teena said, and Elle read the words on her lips, felt the vibration of voice through the floor, knew she was welcomed.

She dropped her bag and crossed to Meen's bed, touching her shoulder gently to announce her presence. Meen pulled out one earbud and reached for Elle's hand, placing it on her own so she could feel the signs.

I'm home, Elle signed, the words forming beneath Meen's fingers.

Meen smiled, her sightless eyes directed somewhere past Elle's left shoulder. "Finally. We were starting to worry."

"Starting?" Teena rolled closer, her wheels quiet on the worn carpet. "I was fully worried an hour ago. The trains are a nightmare today."

Elle signed, and Teena translated automatically, the hybrid communication system they had developed over months of shared space: "Signal problems at 14th Street. I waited forever."

"Ugh." Teena shook her head. "This city."

"This city," Meen agreed.

Elle looked at them, her roommates, her unlikely family, and felt something loosen in her chest. The loneliness of the subway, the isolation of the transfer, the cold of the walk: all of it faded in the warmth of this small room, this cramped space where three girls had built something that felt like belonging.

She sat on her bed, the mattress sagging beneath her weight, and let herself breathe. Tomorrow there would be school, the Deaf

program in Manhattan with its long commute and complicated social dynamics. Tomorrow there would be caseworkers, maybe, or meetings about her future that she wouldn't be invited to attend. Tomorrow the system would continue to grind forward, processing her like data, reducing her to a file that said "hard to place" in clinical language that meant we don't know what to do with her.

But tonight there was this: three beds, three dressers, three girls who had found each other in the wreckage of families that couldn't hold them. Tonight there was Meen's audiobook playing softly through her headphones, and Teena's homework spread across the desk, and the radiator clanking its irregular rhythm against the January cold.

Elle felt the air move through the cracked-open window, a breeze that shouldn't have reached this deep into the room. She dismissed it as draft, as building settling, as nothing important.

She didn't know yet that the wind had started listening.

. . .

End of Chapter 1

## Chapter 2

# Meen

The audiobook narrator had a voice like warm honey, slow and deliberate, and Meen let it pour into her ears as she lay on her bed, mapping the world through description.

"The construction of Water Tunnel Number Three began in 1970," the narrator said, "making it one of the longest continuous construction projects in American history. The tunnel, when completed, will provide a critical backup to the city's aging water infrastructure, capable of delivering over one billion gallons of water per day to the five boroughs."

One billion gallons. Meen tried to imagine it, the weight and volume and pressure of that much water moving beneath the streets she walked. She couldn't picture it, obviously, couldn't visualize the way sighted people did, but she could feel it as concept, as force, as the invisible system that kept eight million people alive without most of them ever thinking about it.

The radiator clanked twice, its rhythm as familiar as a heartbeat. Meen tracked the sound automatically, placing it in her mental map of the room: three feet to her left, beneath the window that faced the street. The radiator was old, temperamental, prone to extremes that made the room either stifling or frigid depending on factors no one had successfully explained. Right now it was producing adequate heat,

enough to keep the January cold at bay, and Meen felt the warmth radiating from it like a small sun, a localized source of comfort in a world that offered few.

She paused the audiobook and listened to the room.

The building spoke to her in its own language: the settling of old wood, the hum of electricity through ancient wiring, the distant clatter of someone in the kitchen preparing dinner. She could hear footsteps two floors up, heavy, probably Darius Jr., the ten-year-old who had arrived last week and spent most of his time stomping around as if testing whether the building could withstand his fury.

Closer, she could hear breathing. Not her own, which she had long ago learned to tune out, but the softer, steadier rhythm of someone else. Teena was at the desk, working on homework, her wheelchair creaking slightly when she shifted her weight. Meen could track her location by the sound of pen on paper, by the occasional tap of her phone screen, by the particular quality of silence that surrounded someone concentrating.

Elle wasn't home yet. Meen would have felt her enter, would have noticed the change in the room's atmosphere that happened whenever the third member of their small family returned. Elle moved differently than other people, quieter somehow, more deliberate, her footsteps carrying intention rather than just momentum.

"What are you listening to?" Teena asked, and Meen turned her head toward the sound even though direction didn't help her see.

"Water tunnels," Meen said. "The infrastructure under the city."

"Romantic."

"It's interesting. Did you know the tunnel they're building now has been under construction for over fifty years? There are workers who started on it and retired before it was finished. Some of them died of old age."

"That's depressing," Teena said, but her voice carried the warmth that meant she was teasing rather than criticizing. "You find the weirdest things interesting."

"Knowledge is never weird. It's just knowledge."

"That's exactly what a weird person would say."

Meen smiled, feeling the expression on her own face without needing a mirror to confirm it. Four years of blindness, and she still sometimes forgot that her expressions were invisible to herself, that the face she wore was known only to others.

She hadn't always been blind. For the first nine years of her life, she had seen the world, though never the way everyone else did. Her vision had always been unreliable, patchy and dim, the world rendered in shapes without edges, colors without clarity. Leber Congenital Amaurosis, they called it, an inherited retinal dystrophy that had been stealing her sight since before she was born, so gradually that Meen had learned to compensate before she understood what she was losing.

She remembered light, vaguely, the way it fell through windows and made patterns on floors. She remembered her mother's face, though the memory was fading, growing less precise with each passing year, a photograph left too long in sunlight. She remembered the fire, too, the orange glow of it through smoke, the last thing her damaged retinas would ever process.

The doctors said the smoke inhalation had accelerated what was already inevitable. Hypoxic damage to visual pathways already compromised by her condition. Her eyes still existed, still moved in their sockets, still responded to light in ways she couldn't perceive. But the connection between eye and brain had severed completely in that hospital room, and Meen woke to darkness that would never lift.

She didn't miss sight the way sighted people imagined she should. She had never fully trusted her eyes, had always known they were failing her, had spent her childhood learning to navigate by sound and

touch because some part of her understood that vision was borrowed time. When it finally ended, there was grief, yes, but also a kind of relief. The waiting was over. She could stop compensating for something that was disappearing and start building something new.

What she had instead was this: hearing sharp enough to echolocate in quiet spaces, temperature sensitivity that let her feel bodies and heat sources across a room, spatial memory that built three-dimensional maps from touch and movement and time. The world as she experienced it was full of texture and sound and thermal gradients that sighted people ignored, and sometimes Meen wondered if she knew more about physical reality than they did, simply because she had to pay attention to things they could afford to overlook.

The door opened, and Meen felt the change before she heard it: a shift in air pressure, a slight drop in temperature as the hallway's cooler air mixed with the room's warmth. Then footsteps, Elle's particular rhythm, and the soft thud of a bag being dropped on a bed.

Meen pulled out one earbud and reached for Elle's hand, the gesture automatic now after months of practice. Elle's fingers were cold from outside, and Meen felt them warm against her palm as Elle positioned their hands for tactile signing.

I'm home, Elle signed, the shapes of the words pressing against Meen's skin.

"Finally," Meen said, not signing back because Elle could read her lips when she was looking. "We were starting to worry."

She felt Teena's wheelchair roll closer, heard the exchange of words between her two roommates, felt Elle's hand shift beneath hers as the conversation flowed through their hybrid system. This was how they communicated: Elle signing, Meen feeling, Teena translating when necessary, all three adapting constantly to bridge the gaps between their different ways of being in the world.

"Signal problems at 14th Street," Teena relayed. "She waited forever."

"The MTA," Meen said. "Always reliable in its unreliability."

Elle's hand moved again, and Meen felt the sign for hungry. "Dinner soon," she said. "Mrs. Washington is making something. I can smell onions."

Meen had smelled them too, had been tracking the progress of dinner through scent and sound for the past hour. Tonight was some kind of stew, probably, the default meal for January evenings when the budget was tight and the children were many.

She sat up, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, feeling the carpet beneath her feet. Her mental map of the room was precise: three steps to the dresser, two more to the door, a slight turn to avoid Teena's wheelchair when it was parked in its usual spot. She navigated these spaces without cane or assistance, moving with the confidence of someone who had memorized every obstacle, every dimension, every inch of the small territory that was hers.

"I need to finish homework before dinner," Teena said. "History. The Revolutionary War."

"Who's winning?" Meen asked.

"So far? The British. But I have a feeling there's going to be a twist."

Elle's hand found Meen's again, signing something that took Meen a moment to parse: The war we learned about in fifth grade?

"That's the one," Meen said. "Teena's school is making her learn it again. Apparently the hearing version is different."

"The hearing version has more lectures," Teena said dryly. "So many lectures. My teacher loves the sound of her own voice."

Meen felt Elle's silent laugh, the slight shake of her shoulders, the puff of air against Meen's cheek. Laughter without sound was something Meen had learned to recognize, one of the many

adaptations required to be close to someone who communicated in a language she couldn't hear.

She thought sometimes about how strange their friendship must look from outside: the Deaf girl, the blind girl, the girl in the wheelchair. Three disabilities that the system had treated as problems to be solved, deficits to be managed, reasons to shuffle them from placement to placement until they landed together in this cramped room at the end of a hallway in a group home that no one would choose if choice were an option.

But the system had gotten it wrong, the way the system usually did. Their disabilities weren't the point. The point was the way Elle's hands moved through air that Meen could feel, the way Teena's voice carried warmth that both of them could recognize, the way three girls who had been failed by everyone had figured out how to stop failing each other.

"I'm going to check on dinner," Meen said, standing. "See if I can speed things along."

"You mean see if you can steal a taste," Teena said.

"Quality control is important."

She made her way to the door, counting steps, brushing her fingers along the wall to confirm her position. The hallway was cooler than the room, the air carrying the smells of the group home: institutional cleaning products, the ghost of a thousand meals, the particular mustiness of a building that had been housing transient children for decades.

The stairs were the hardest part, and Meen took them slowly, her hand firm on the banister. She had memorized the number, the depth, the way the third step from the bottom creaked. Stairs were danger, the place where blindness became most obviously limiting, and she had developed her own methods: counting, touching, moving with a deliberation that sighted people might mistake for fear but was

actually precision.

The kitchen was at the back of the first floor, and Meen followed the smell of onions and something meaty, probably the cheap ground beef that appeared in the group home's meals with depressing regularity. Mrs. Washington was there, she could hear, moving between stove and counter with the efficiency of someone who had cooked for crowds for years.

"Mingzhu," Mrs. Washington said, using Meen's full name the way she always did. "Dinner in fifteen minutes. You can tell the others."

"It smells good," Meen said, and she meant it. The food here was never excellent, but it was warm and consistent, which was more than some placements had offered.

"It's stew. Nothing fancy, but it'll fill you up."

Meen lingered in the doorway, listening to the sounds of cooking: the bubble of liquid in the pot, the scrape of wooden spoon against metal, the hiss of steam. She liked Mrs. Washington, who treated her with straightforward practicality rather than the excessive concern or awkward avoidance that many adults displayed around blind children.

"Mrs. Washington," Meen said. "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask. Whether I answer depends on the question."

"The water here. Does it taste different to you lately?"

Mrs. Washington paused, the stirring stopping for a moment. "Different how?"

Meen wasn't sure how to explain it. She had noticed something over the past few weeks, a faint metallic taste to the tap water that hadn't been there before. It was subtle, almost beneath perception, but Meen's senses were tuned to subtle things. "I don't know. Just... off. Like iron, maybe. Rusty."

"Old pipes," Mrs. Washington said, resuming her stirring. "This building's got fifty years of plumbing problems. I've told the city about

it twice, but you know how that goes."

Meen nodded, accepting the explanation even if something in her still felt uneasy. Old pipes made sense. Old pipes were the kind of mundane problem that explained metallic tastes in buildings like this. She filed the information away, adding it to the map of concerns she carried: the creak on the third stair, the draft from the window in the hall bathroom, and now the taste of the water. Probably nothing. Almost certainly nothing.

She made her way back upstairs, slower on the ascent than the descent, and returned to the room where Elle and Teena were waiting.

"Fifteen minutes," she reported. "Stew."

"Shocking," Teena said. "I never could have predicted stew."

Elle's hand found Meen's, signing something: I have news.

"What kind of news?" Meen asked, and she felt the tension in Elle's fingers, the way the signs came quick and sharp.

The caseworker came to school today. Wants to talk about a new placement.

The words landed like stones in Meen's stomach. New placement meant separation, meant the system doing what the system always did: breaking apart anything that worked, shuffling children like cards, prioritizing administrative convenience over human connection.

"They can't," Teena said, and her voice had gone hard. "They can't just split us up."

They can do whatever they want, Elle signed. We're not family. Not legally. We're just files that got put in the same folder.

"That's not true," Meen said, but she knew it was. The law didn't recognize what they had built here. The law saw three unrelated minors in temporary placement, each with her own case number and service plan and projected trajectory. The law didn't see family. The law saw paperwork.

"What did you tell them?" Teena asked.

I told them I'd think about it. There's a meeting next week.

"We'll figure something out," Meen said. "We always do."

But she heard the uncertainty in her own voice, felt the fear that lived beneath the words. They had been lucky to find each other, lucky to be placed together, lucky to have these months of belonging in a system designed to prevent exactly that. Luck ran out. Luck always ran out.

The dinner bell rang, a sound Meen felt as much as heard, the vibration traveling through the old building's bones. She stood with the others, began the familiar navigation toward the door, and tried not to think about the meeting next week, the placement that might take Elle away, the fragile thing they had built that could be dismantled with a single signature on a single form.

She thought instead about water, about the billion gallons flowing beneath the city, about infrastructure that took fifty years to build and could be destroyed in a moment.

She thought about the taste of metal on her tongue.

She thought about heat, about the fire that had taken her mother and her sight and everything she used to be.

She didn't know yet that fire was waiting inside her, patient as embers, ready to wake.

. . .

End of Chapter 2

## Chapter 3

# Teena

Six hours earlier, before Elle's train and Meen's audiobook and the dinner bell that would gather them all together, Teena had been staring at an elevator with an "Out of Order" sign taped to its doors.

The sign was handwritten, which somehow made it worse. Someone had taken the time to find a marker and a piece of paper, had carefully lettered the words that would reroute Teena's entire morning, and hadn't thought for a single second about what those words would mean for a student who couldn't use the stairs.

"You could use the service elevator," the security guard suggested, not unkindly. "In the back."

The service elevator was in the back. Through the cafeteria. Past the loading dock. A ten-minute journey through the building's least accessible corridors, all to reach a classroom that was thirty feet above her head.

"I'll be late," Teena said.

"I can write you a pass."

"I have a test."

The guard's face arranged itself into the expression Teena knew well: the sympathy face, the I'm sorry but there's nothing I can do face, the face that people made when they wanted credit for caring without actually having to solve anything.

"I'll call ahead," he said. "Let them know you're coming."

Teena didn't thank him. She turned her wheelchair toward the cafeteria and began the long way around, her arms already aching from the morning's push through January slush, her legs cramping in the way they did when spasticity decided to remind her that her body was not entirely under her control.

The cafeteria was empty at this hour, chairs still upturned on tables from the previous day's cleaning. Teena navigated between them, her wheels catching on the uneven floor where tiles had cracked and been improperly repaired. The loading dock doors were propped open, letting in cold air that bit at her exposed hands, and she had to wait for a delivery person to move a stack of boxes before she could access the service elevator.

The service elevator smelled like old vegetables and industrial cleaner. It moved slowly, groaning between floors, and Teena counted the seconds: forty-five to reach the third floor, plus the time to navigate back through the building to her classroom. She would be twelve minutes late, minimum. Her test would have started without her.

Mr. Harrison was mid-sentence when she finally entered, her wheels announcing her arrival with the particular squeak they made on linoleum. Twenty-three heads turned. Twenty-three pairs of eyes registered her lateness, her chair, her difference. Mr. Harrison paused, checked his watch with theatrical precision, and said, "Nice of you to join us, Christina."

"The elevator's broken," Teena said.

"Perhaps you should have left earlier."

She didn't respond. Arguing with Mr. Harrison was pointless; the man had decided on her first day that she was a disruption to be managed rather than a student to be taught, and nothing she said would change his assessment. She wheeled to her desk, the one in the front

row that had been cleared of its attached chair to make room for her, and pulled out her pencil.

The test was already on her desk, face-down, a stack of pages that would determine twenty percent of her semester grade. She flipped it over and began to read, but her mind kept snagging on the injustice of it: twelve minutes lost to an elevator that should have been working, to a building that should have been accessible, to a system that demanded her presence while making her presence as difficult as possible.

She finished the test with three minutes to spare, not because the questions were easy but because she had learned to work fast, to compensate for all the time the world stole from her in small increments. She turned in her paper and wheeled back to her desk, ignoring the looks from classmates who were still working, who hadn't had to navigate a cafeteria and a loading dock and a service elevator to reach a room they had accessed by walking up a single flight of stairs.

After class, she went to the bathroom. This was its own ordeal: the accessible stall was at the end of the row, and someone had left a mop bucket in front of it, requiring Teena to move the obstacle before she could enter. The grab bars were positioned for someone taller, requiring her to stretch uncomfortably. The sink was too high, requiring her to lever herself partially out of her chair to wash her hands.

She did all of it without complaint, because complaining changed nothing, because the building was what it was and her body was what it was and the gap between them would not close because she pointed out its existence. She had learned this lesson early, in the first years after her diagnosis, when her parents had still been together and still believed that enough advocacy, enough therapy, enough trying would make her normal.

She wasn't normal. She had stopped wanting to be.

What she wanted was to get through the day without being made to feel like her presence was an imposition. What she wanted was to exist in spaces that acknowledged her existence. What she wanted was small and reasonable and somehow still too much to ask.

The rest of the morning passed in the blur of classes and hallway navigation and the constant low-level exhaustion of being the only wheelchair in a school that had been built before accessibility was a consideration. By lunch, Teena's arms were shaking, her legs were cramping, and she had missed her afternoon dose of muscle relaxant because her bag had been searched at the door and her medication counted like she was a drug dealer rather than a thirteen-year-old with cerebral palsy.

She ate alone, at a table near the window, because the cafeteria tables were too close together for her chair and the few students who had tried to befriend her had eventually given up, worn down by the logistics of including someone who couldn't follow them to their usual spots.

Her phone buzzed with a text from her mother: Still coming today?

Yes, Teena typed back. After school.

Can't wait to see you. Love you.

Love you too.

She put the phone away and stared at her sandwich, not hungry but knowing she needed to eat. The visit to her mother was the bright spot in her week, the few hours when she felt like someone's daughter rather than someone's case file. But even those visits were complicated now, shadowed by her mother's illness and the guilt Teena couldn't quite shake, the sense that she had somehow caused this, that her needs had broken her mother the way they had broken her parents' marriage.

The afternoon classes were better. English, where Mrs. Lawson actually provided accessible materials without being asked. Art, where

the teacher had arranged her workstation at a lower table and never made a big deal about it. These small accommodations, unremarkable to anyone else, felt like gifts to Teena, evidence that it was possible to be included without being made to feel like a burden.

By the time the final bell rang, she was exhausted but functional, her body settling into the familiar ache that accompanied every school day. She navigated to the accessible entrance, the one at the back of the building that required a key card, and emerged into the weak January sunlight.

Her mother's apartment was in Brooklyn, accessible by bus if Teena timed the routes correctly. She made her way to the stop, waited in the cold, and boarded when the bus arrived, using the ramp that the driver deployed with the air of someone performing a great favor.

The bus was crowded, but the wheelchair space was empty, and Teena locked herself into position and watched the city scroll past the window. Brooklyn was different from the Bronx, more gentrified in parts, the neighborhoods she passed through showing the evidence of money flowing in while longtime residents flowed out. Her mother's building was in one of the cheaper areas, a walk-up that Denise could barely afford on her disability payments, and Teena felt the familiar anxiety rising as the bus approached her stop.

The walk from the bus stop to the building was three blocks, manageable in good weather, treacherous when snow and ice accumulated on sidewalks that were rarely cleared. Today was cold but dry, and Teena made good time, arriving at the building's entrance with only a minor confrontation with a cracked curb cut.

There was no elevator. There had never been an elevator. Denise's apartment was on the second floor, fourteen steps that Teena could not climb independently.

She pressed the buzzer and waited. A moment later, the intercom crackled: "Teena?"

"It's me, Mom."

"I'm coming down."

This was their routine: Denise descending to meet her, helping her up the stairs, a process that had become more difficult as Denise's MS progressed. Teena waited by the door, watching through the glass as her mother appeared in the hallway, moving slowly, one hand on the wall for support.

Denise Williams-Okonkwo was forty-three and looked older, the disease aging her in ways that medication couldn't prevent. She was thin now, thinner than she'd been even six months ago, and her gait had the careful quality of someone who didn't trust her own legs. But her smile when she saw Teena was genuine, warm, the smile Teena remembered from before the diagnosis, before the divorce, before everything fell apart.

"My baby," Denise said, opening the door. "Look at you."

"Look at you," Teena said. "You look tired."

"I'm always tired. That's just MS. Come on, let's get you upstairs."

The stairs were their shared enemy. Teena transferred from her chair to the first step, and Denise folded the wheelchair with practiced efficiency. Then began the climb: Teena pulling herself up step by step, her arms doing the work her legs couldn't manage, while Denise carried the chair and provided stability when Teena's grip faltered.

They stopped halfway, both of them breathing hard.

"I hate these stairs," Teena said.

"I know."

"Why can't they put in a ramp? Or a lift? Something?"

"I've asked. The landlord says it's too expensive." Denise leaned against the wall, her face pale. "A few more steps, baby. We're almost there."

They finished the climb and entered the apartment, a small one-bedroom that Denise had filled with evidence of the life she used

to have: photographs of Teena as a baby, artwork from a period when she'd had the energy for hobbies, books she no longer had the concentration to read. Teena's wheelchair unfolded in the narrow hallway, barely fitting between the walls, and she wheeled into the living room while her mother collapsed onto the couch.

"Do you want water?" Teena asked. "Tea?"

"I'm fine. Just catching my breath." Denise patted the cushion beside her. "Come sit with me. Tell me about your week."

This was what Teena came for: the chance to be a daughter, to talk about normal things, to pretend for a few hours that their lives were not shaped by illness and disability and the slow grind of systems that failed them both. She transferred to the couch, leaving her chair nearby, and curled against her mother's side the way she had when she was small.

"School is school," she said. "The elevator's broken again. Mr. Harrison is still a jerk. I probably aced my history test."

"My smart girl." Denise stroked her hair. "And the group home? How are your friends?"

Teena thought about Elle and Meen, about the room they shared, about the way they had built a language between them that no one else could speak.

"They're good. Elle's caseworker is trying to move her to a new placement. We're fighting it."

Denise's hand paused. "Can you fight it?"

"We can try."

"The system doesn't care about what you try, baby. The system does what the system does."

Teena knew this. She had learned it from her mother's fights with insurance companies, with social services, with every institution that was supposed to help and instead created obstacles. She had learned it from her own experience, from every broken elevator and inaccessible

bathroom and teacher who treated her like a problem rather than a person.

But she wasn't ready to give up. Not on Elle, not on Meen, not on the small family they had built in defiance of a system designed to keep them apart.

"We'll figure something out," she said. "We always do."

They spent the afternoon together, watching television, doing Teena's hair in the intricate twists that Denise had perfected years ago, talking about everything except the things that hurt too much to discuss. Teena didn't ask about the MS or the medication or the prognosis. Denise didn't ask about the foster system or the group home or how long Teena would remain a ward of the state.

By evening, Teena knew she had to leave. The buses ran less frequently after dark, and she had homework, and Mrs. Washington would worry if she was late for dinner.

"Same time next week?" Denise asked at the door.

"Same time next week."

They hugged, carefully, Denise's thin arms trembling with the effort of holding tight. Teena breathed in her mother's smell, memorized the feel of her embrace, and then pulled away before the tears could start.

The stairs down were easier than the stairs up, but not by much. Teena descended backward, lowering herself step by step, while Denise watched from the top landing with an expression of helpless love that Teena couldn't bear to acknowledge.

"I love you, baby," Denise called.

"I love you too, Mom."

The bus ride back to the Bronx was long and quiet, the city lights blurring past windows that reflected Teena's face back at her. She thought about her mother, about the disease that was slowly taking her, about the distance between them that couldn't be measured in miles or

bus stops.

She thought about the stairs she couldn't climb and the elevator that didn't exist and the landlord who found accessibility too expensive.

She thought about Elle's placement, about the meeting next week, about the system that would tear them apart without asking whether they wanted to stay together.

The bus jolted over a pothole, and Teena felt the vibration travel through her chair, through her legs that couldn't feel it, through her body that was always fighting battles it couldn't win.

When she finally reached the group home, Elle and Meen were waiting, and for a moment, just a moment, the weight lifted. She was home, or as close to home as the system would allow, and her family was here, and tomorrow's problems could wait until tomorrow.

They ate dinner together, the three of them at their usual table, forming their usual island in the sea of other children. They talked about nothing important: homework, television, the stew that was mediocre at best. They didn't talk about placements or meetings or the futures that other people would decide for them.

After dinner, after homework, after the lights-out bell that signaled the end of another day, Teena lay in her bed and felt the floor beneath her, solid and unyielding, the foundation of a building that had housed a thousand children and would house a thousand more.

She pressed her palm flat against the mattress, reaching past fabric and springs to the wood beneath, the concrete beneath that, the earth beneath everything.

Something stirred.

She couldn't name it, couldn't explain it, but for a moment the ground felt less like a surface she rested on and more like a conversation she was part of. Like the building was aware of her weight, her presence, her need.

She dismissed it as exhaustion, as the residue of an emotional day, as nothing important.

But her palm stayed pressed to the mattress, and the ground stayed listening, and somewhere beneath the city, systems older than any tunnel began to remember what they could do.

. . .

End of Chapter 3

## Chapter 4

# The Room

The room measured twelve feet by ten, and every inch of it was negotiated territory.

Elle's bed was against the wall nearest the window, positioned so she could see the door and the window simultaneously, exits mapped even in sleep. Meen's bed was opposite, closest to the radiator, because she felt temperature changes more acutely and needed the warmth. Teena's bed was between them, angled to give her wheelchair clearance on the right side, where she transferred in and out.

Three dressers stood like soldiers along the remaining wall, each one marking the boundary of its owner's space. Elle's was neat, almost empty, containing only what she needed and nothing more. Meen's was organized with tactile logic, items arranged by size and texture so she could find them by touch. Teena's was chaotic, stuffed with books and papers and the collected debris of a life lived between placements.

The desk by the window belonged to no one and everyone, a shared surface where homework happened and plans were made and the occasional contraband snack was consumed away from staff supervision. Tonight it was covered with Teena's history notes, spread out in the aftermath of her test preparation.

"So the placement," Teena said, breaking the silence that had settled after dinner. "What exactly did the caseworker say?"

Elle was on her bed, legs crossed, hands moving through signs that Meen felt through their joined fingers and Teena watched directly. A family in Queens. Deaf-friendly, supposedly. They want to meet me.

"Deaf-friendly," Meen repeated, and the quotation marks were audible in her voice. "What does that even mean? They've downloaded an app?"

They have a Deaf child already. A son, eleven years old. They say they're looking to expand their family.

"That's not terrible," Teena said cautiously. "A real Deaf environment. Access to your language."

Elle's signs came sharp and fast: They want to fix me. The caseworker showed me their application. They think cochlear implants should be reconsidered at every developmental stage. They're looking for a project, not a daughter.

Meen felt the anger in Elle's hands, the way the signs struck rather than flowed. She squeezed gently, a gesture of support that didn't require words.

"Can you refuse?" Teena asked.

I can say I'm not interested. They can't force me to go. But if I refuse every placement, eventually I age out of the system with nothing. No family, no support, no transition plan.

"You have us," Meen said.

Legally, I don't. Legally, we're three strangers who happen to share a room.

The words hung in the air, true and terrible. Teena felt the weight of them settling into her bones, the reminder that everything they had built could be dismantled by a stranger with a pen and the authority to use it.

"Okay," she said, her voice steadier than she felt. "So we make a plan. We've done it before."

"What kind of plan?" Meen asked. "We can't kidnap Elle."

I'd like to see them try to stop you.

"I'm serious. What's the play here?"

Teena thought about it, her mind cycling through options the way it always did when obstacles appeared. She had spent her whole life finding ways around barriers that shouldn't have existed, and this was just another barrier, just another problem to solve.

"The meeting is next week?" she asked.

Wednesday. Two o'clock. At the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) office in Manhattan.

"So we have six days. Six days to find a reason why this placement is wrong, why you should stay here, why the system should leave us alone."

"The system doesn't respond to reasons," Meen said. "The system responds to paperwork and liability and budget constraints."

"Then we find paperwork. We find liability. We make it more expensive to move Elle than to keep her here."

Elle's hands moved: How?

Teena didn't have an answer yet. But she had six days, and she had Meen's analytical mind, and she had Elle's determination, and she had the furious energy of a girl who had lost too much to lose any more.

"We'll figure it out," she said. "We always do."

The conversation shifted, as conversations between them often did, from crisis to normalcy and back again. They talked about school, about homework, about the stew that had been worse than usual. Meen described her audiobook about water tunnels, and Elle signed something funny about a man on the subway, and for a while they were just three girls talking, the weight of their circumstances temporarily lifted.

But the weight returned, as it always did. It lived in the silences between words, in the way their eyes (those who had them) drifted toward the door as if expecting someone to burst through with news of

more placements, more separations, more evidence that their togetherness was borrowed rather than owned.

"I talked to my mom today," Teena said during one such silence. "She asked about you both."

"How is she?" Meen asked.

"Tired. The MS is..." Teena trailed off, unsure how to describe the slow diminishment she witnessed each week, the way her mother's body was betraying her in increments. "It's hard."

Elle signed: I'm sorry.

"It's not your fault."

I know. I'm still sorry.

Teena felt tears threatening and blinked them back. She didn't cry about her mother, not anymore. Crying didn't help, and the energy was better spent on problems she could actually solve.

"Let's do homework," she said, changing the subject with deliberate force. "I have history questions, and Meen, you said you'd help with the Revolutionary War."

"I said the British were losing. That's not the same as offering help."

"Close enough. Come on."

They arranged themselves around the desk, Teena in her chair, Elle perched on the edge, Meen standing because sitting required her to reorient herself to the new spatial configuration. Teena read the questions aloud, Elle signed commentary that was sometimes helpful and sometimes sarcastic, and Meen provided context that her audiobook habit had made her expert in.

"The Battle of Saratoga," Teena read. "What was its significance in the Revolutionary War?"

"Turning point," Meen said immediately. "It convinced France to enter the war on the American side. Without French support, the Revolution probably fails."

"How do you know this?"

"I read. Well, I listen. There was a series on the Revolutionary War last year. Twelve episodes. Excellent narrator."

Elle signed: I learned about this in fifth grade. The Deaf version focused more on the communication challenges. How do you coordinate an army when half your officers are French and don't speak English?

"Sign language," Teena said, writing down her answer. "They could have used sign language."

They didn't. But they should have.

The homework continued, the three of them collaborating in their usual way, their different strengths combining into something more capable than any of them alone. This was what the system didn't understand, what the caseworkers and placement coordinators and well-meaning bureaucrats could never quite grasp: that they weren't just three girls with disabilities sharing a room. They were a unit, a system, a way of being that had evolved to fill the gaps that each of them carried.

Elle provided visual alertness that Meen lacked and social navigation that Teena often struggled with. Meen provided analytical thinking that Elle sometimes rushed past and historical context that Teena had never had time to accumulate. Teena provided practical problem-solving that Elle sometimes rejected on principle and physical assistance that Meen sometimes needed but hated to ask for.

Together, they were whole. Apart, they were three hard-to-place girls that the system would process and forget.

"Done," Teena said, closing her history textbook. "What time is it?"

Elle checked her phone: 9:47. Lights out soon.

They began the nightly ritual of preparation. Meen retreated to her bed, her route memorized, her movements economical. Elle changed

into pajamas with the efficiency of someone who had learned to be quick about vulnerability. Teena transferred from her chair to her bed, a process that had become smooth with practice but still required concentration.

The radiator clanked its evening complaint. The window rattled against a wind that had picked up since sunset. Somewhere down the hall, one of the younger children was crying, a sound that reached them through walls that should have been thicker.

"I'm scared," Meen said suddenly, her voice small in the darkness.

Elle's response came through Teena's translation, her hands moving beneath the covers: Scared of what?

"Everything. The placement. The system. What happens if we get separated."

Teena didn't have reassurance to offer, not honest reassurance, so she offered presence instead. She reached across the gap between their beds, her arm stretching into the darkness, and felt for Meen's hand.

"I'm scared too," she said. "We're all scared. But we're scared together, and that's different from being scared alone."

Elle's hand found Teena's other side, completing a chain that stretched across the room, three girls connected in the dark.

They stayed like that for a while, breathing together, fear shared and therefore diminished. The crying down the hall stopped. The radiator settled into its rhythm. The wind outside continued its conversation with the window.

Elle felt the air move around her, responsive in ways she didn't yet understand. Meen felt the warmth radiating from her own body, steadier and stronger than it should have been. Teena felt the floor beneath her bed, solid and patient, waiting for something.

They didn't speak of these sensations. They didn't have words for them yet. But in the darkness of their shared room, in the vulnerability of almost-sleep, each of them knew that something was different,

something was changing, something was waiting to be discovered.

The lights-out signal came. The hall monitor made her rounds. The group home settled into the quiet of institutional night.

And beneath the city, water flowed through tunnels that had been building for fifty years, carrying with it the taste of something wrong, the promise of something worse, the first stirrings of a crisis that would bring three girls together in ways the system could never predict.

. . .

End of Chapter 4

Part Two

# **The Powers**

## Chapter 5

### **Elle's Wind**

A week passed, and Elle found herself sitting in the group home's common room, watching a woman's mouth move around words that would decide her future.

Ms. Patterson was her caseworker's name, a middle-aged woman with sensible shoes and a folder full of forms. She had arrived at two o'clock, precisely on time, and had been talking ever since, her lips forming shapes that Elle caught in fragments: wonderful opportunity and Deaf-friendly environment and what's best for you.

There was no interpreter. Elle had requested one when the meeting was scheduled, had followed up twice through email, had reminded the office that she was legally entitled to communication access. Ms. Patterson had responded that she would "speak clearly" and that they could "work through any confusion together."

This was what working through confusion looked like: Elle reading maybe sixty percent of what Ms. Patterson said, filling in the gaps with context and guesswork, nodding at moments that seemed to require nodding, and feeling the familiar fury building in her chest.

"...really think you'll love the Hendersons," Ms. Patterson was saying, or something close to that. "Their son Tyler is such a sweet boy, and they're so committed to Deaf culture..."

Elle had met families like the Hendersons before. She knew what "committed to Deaf culture" meant in their vocabulary: committed to the idea of Deafness as a problem to be solved, a deficit to be remediated, a challenge to be overcome with enough therapy and technology and determination. They would learn some signs, the basics, enough to say I love you and good morning and did you take your cochlear implant processors to school? They would celebrate her "progress" when she managed to lip-read their dinner conversation. They would cry at inspirational videos of Deaf children hearing for the first time and show her the clips as if she should be moved rather than horrified.

She had written a statement once, at eight years old, refusing cochlear implants. That statement was somewhere in her file, but files were thick and caseworkers were busy and Ms. Patterson probably hadn't read past the first page.

"...the meeting with them is scheduled for next Wednesday," Ms. Patterson continued. "I really think once you meet them, you'll see what a great fit this could be."

Elle didn't respond. She had learned that silence was sometimes more powerful than argument, that hearing people became uncomfortable when their words fell into a void, when they couldn't tell if they were being understood or ignored.

Ms. Patterson's discomfort was visible in the way she shifted in her seat, the way her eyes darted around the room looking for someone to help translate a conversation that should have had a translator from the start.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked, enunciating with exaggerated care.

Elle pulled out her phone and typed: I've requested an interpreter for every meeting. You didn't provide one. I'm not discussing my placement without proper communication access.

Ms. Patterson read the message, and her expression cycled through surprise, defensiveness, and finally a kind of tired resignation.

"I understand," she said, slowly enough that Elle could follow. "We can reschedule with an interpreter. But I want you to keep an open mind about this family. They really are wonderful people."

Elle typed: Wonderful people don't need others to tell me how wonderful they are.

She stood before Ms. Patterson could respond, gathered her bag, and walked out of the common room. Her hands were shaking with anger she couldn't express, her chest tight with the effort of remaining calm when she wanted to scream.

The back door of the group home led to a small concrete yard, a rectangle of cracked pavement surrounded by a chain-link fence. In summer, some of the residents used it for basketball; in winter, it was empty, forgotten, a space between spaces.

Elle pushed through the door and let the January cold hit her face like a slap. She needed air, needed space, needed to be somewhere she couldn't see mouths moving around words she wasn't meant to understand.

She stood in the center of the yard, breathing hard, watching her breath form clouds that dispersed into the gray afternoon. The anger was still there, coiled in her chest, demanding release.

She thought about the Hendersons, about their Deaf-friendly home, about the son named Tyler who probably had cochlear implants and probably spoke and probably was held up as evidence that Deafness could be overcome. She thought about Ms. Patterson, about the interpreter who hadn't been provided, about the system that demanded her compliance while denying her the tools to comply.

She thought about her grandmother, dead for nine years now, whose hands had been the first hands Elle learned to read. Her grandmother who had been Deaf and proud, who had lived a full life

without ever hearing a sound, who had told Elle again and again that there was nothing wrong with her, nothing that needed fixing, nothing that required her to become something other than what she was.

The anger swelled, and Elle raised her hands without thinking, signing into the empty air the words she couldn't say aloud: I am not broken. I do not need to be fixed. I am whole.

The wind answered.

It came from nowhere, from everywhere, a gust that should not have existed in the sheltered yard. It moved around Elle, not against her, responding to the motion of her hands like a partner in conversation. A plastic bag skittered across the concrete, caught in the current. A loose paper from somewhere flew past her face, spinning in patterns that followed her gestures.

Elle froze, her hands still raised, her heart suddenly pounding.

The wind settled as her hands settled, returning to stillness as she returned to stillness. The plastic bag drifted to the ground. The paper landed against the fence.

She didn't move. She barely breathed.

Then, slowly, experimentally, she raised her right hand and moved it in a slow arc from left to right.

The wind followed.

She could feel it, not just against her skin but in some deeper way, as if the air itself had become an extension of her body. When she pushed with her hand, the air pushed with her. When she pulled, it pulled. When she twisted her wrist, she could feel currents responding, eddies forming, the invisible medium of atmosphere suddenly visible through its effects on the dust and debris of the yard.

Elle's breath came fast, her mind racing through explanations that didn't fit. Static electricity. Coincidence. Some kind of draft from the building's heating system. But none of those explanations accounted for the way the wind responded to her gestures, the way it obeyed her

will.

She signed again, the same words as before: I am not broken.

And the wind signed back, if wind could sign, forming patterns around her hands that felt like agreement, like acknowledgment, like the first conversation she'd ever had that didn't require translation.

Elle stayed in the yard for an hour, experimenting. She learned that the wind responded best when she used her hands, when she shaped her gestures with the same intention she brought to signing. She learned that strong emotions made the effects stronger, that the anger she'd felt toward Ms. Patterson had been the spark that ignited whatever this was. She learned that she could create gusts, redirect currents, still the air in small pockets around her body.

She learned that she was not, had never been, as powerless as the system assumed.

By the time she returned inside, the afternoon had faded to early evening, and the group home was stirring with the rhythms of dinner preparation. Elle slipped through the back door and made her way to the stairs, avoiding eye contact with the staff who might ask where she'd been.

In the room, Meen was on her bed, headphones in, lost in some audiobook or podcast. Teena was at the desk, surrounded by papers, her face scrunched in concentration over what looked like legal documents.

Teena looked up as Elle entered, and her expression shifted from concentration to concern.

"You were gone a while," she said. "How did it go with the caseworker?"

Elle didn't know how to answer. The meeting with Ms. Patterson felt like ancient history now, like something that had happened to a different girl in a different life. She had discovered something in that cold concrete yard, something that changed everything, something she

couldn't explain and wasn't sure she wanted to.

The meeting was useless, she signed. No interpreter. She wants to reschedule.

"That's illegal," Meen said, pulling out an earbud. She must have been tracking the conversation through vibration and context. "Federal law requires communication access for Deaf people."

I know. I reminded her.

"Good." Teena leaned back in her chair, wincing slightly as her legs spasmed. "I've been researching. There might be a way to delay the placement process, buy us some time."

Elle nodded, but her mind was elsewhere, still in the yard, still feeling the wind respond to her hands. She wanted to tell them, wanted to share this impossible thing she'd discovered, but the words wouldn't form. How could she explain something she didn't understand? How could she ask them to believe something she barely believed herself?

What did you find? she signed instead.

Teena launched into an explanation of foster care regulations, of legal challenges and procedural delays, of the maze of paperwork that might, if navigated correctly, keep them together a little longer. Elle followed the words but didn't absorb them. She was too aware of the air around her, too conscious of the way it moved, too distracted by the knowledge that she had touched something that shouldn't exist.

That night, after lights out, Elle lay in her bed and felt the wind through the cracked window. It was just air, she told herself. Just molecules moving in patterns determined by temperature and pressure. There was nothing special about it, nothing that answered to her will.

But when she raised her hand beneath the covers and made a small gesture, the curtains moved.

She smiled in the darkness, the first real smile she'd felt since Ms. Patterson had walked through the door. The system might think she was powerless. The system might think she was a file to be processed,

a problem to be solved, a Deaf girl who needed to be fixed.  
The system didn't know that she could speak to the wind.  
And the wind was listening.

• • •

End of Chapter 5

## Chapter 6

# Meen's Fire

The group home was quiet on Saturday mornings, most of the residents sleeping late or watching television in the common room, and Meen used the stillness to navigate.

Her school was closed for a staff development day, which meant no bus ride, no classroom navigation, no exhausting performance of competence in spaces designed for sighted people. She had the morning to herself, and she spent it the way she often did: mapping and memorizing, adding detail to the mental architecture that let her move through the world.

She walked the hallways with her hands trailing along walls, counting doors, feeling for the subtle differences in texture that distinguished one room from another. She found the places where the floor changed from carpet to tile, the corners where air currents shifted, the spots where the building's age showed in creaks and drafts and the particular smell of old wood giving way to decay.

The group home was a living thing, in her experience of it. It breathed through its ventilation system, groaned through its pipes, shifted its weight against the January cold. She knew its moods by the sounds it made, its temperatures by the way heat distributed unevenly through rooms that had never been designed for efficiency.

By mid-morning, she was in the common room, alone except for the distant sounds of other residents elsewhere in the building. She sat in a chair by the window, feeling the sunlight on her skin, the warmth that was the closest she ever came to experiencing light.

The sun felt different today. Stronger, somehow, more present. She had always been sensitive to temperature, always known when she was in sunlight versus shadow, but this was something else. She could feel the heat not just on her skin but deeper, as if it were penetrating to her bones, as if her body were absorbing it in ways that went beyond normal sensation.

She thought about her mother, as she often did when she was alone. Liling, who had worked twelve-hour days at a nail salon, whose lungs had been damaged by chemicals, whose love had manifested as silence about the daughter who was different and the world that couldn't accommodate that difference. Liling, who had died trying to save a daughter who had already escaped, whose last act had been running into a burning building that had already let its most precious occupant go.

The fire had taken everything. Meen's remaining sight, the dim and fading vision that the doctors had warned would disappear eventually, accelerated into permanent darkness by smoke and hypoxia. Her home. Her mother. Her sense of safety in a world that she had already known was dangerous.

And now, four years later, she sat in another building that someone else controlled, feeling the sun through a window that someone else had installed, waiting for a future that someone else would decide.

The anger came without warning, as it sometimes did. She wasn't an angry person by nature, had learned to channel frustration into analysis and problem-solving, but sometimes the sheer injustice of it all broke through her defenses. Her mother was dead. Her family was gone. She was blind in a sighted world, and the system that was

supposed to help her treated her as a burden to be distributed rather than a person to be supported.

The warmth intensified.

Meen noticed it first as a change in her skin, a flush that spread from her hands up her arms. Then she noticed the air temperature around her rising, the comfortable warmth of the sunny window becoming something closer to summer heat. Then she noticed that the chair beneath her was warm, warmer than it should be, as if she had been sitting in it for hours rather than minutes.

She stood, suddenly frightened, and the warmth followed her. It was coming from her, she realized. Radiating from her body like heat from a stove. The chair she had vacated was hot to the touch; she could feel it when she reached back, the fabric carrying a temperature that couldn't be explained by sunlight alone.

"Okay," she said aloud, to herself, to the empty room, to the universe that had apparently decided that blindness wasn't complication enough. "Okay. What is this?"

She held out her hands, palms up, and focused on the sensation. The heat was there, coiled in her chest, connected somehow to the anger that had triggered it but separate from the emotion itself. She could feel it waiting, ready to be directed, like a muscle she had never known she possessed.

She thought about fire, about the flames that had destroyed her home, and the heat surged. She pulled back, frightened, and the surge subsided.

She thought about warmth, about the gentle heat of the sun on her skin, and the energy shifted, became softer, more controlled. Her hands grew warm but not hot, comfortable rather than dangerous.

This was real. This was happening. She, Meen, who couldn't see the world, who navigated by sound and touch and memory, who had been told again and again that her blindness was her defining

limitation, could somehow create heat from nothing, could somehow channel the warmth of the sun through her own body.

She stood in the common room, hands extended, feeling the fire inside her, and for the first time in years, she laughed.

The laughter brought footsteps. She heard them on the stairs, descending, approaching. A younger resident, she guessed from the weight and rhythm. One of the boys who had arrived recently and hadn't yet learned that Meen's blindness wasn't an invitation to cruelty.

"What's so funny?" a voice asked. Darius Jr., the ten-year-old. The stomper.

"Private joke," Meen said, lowering her hands, willing the heat to subside.

"Talking to yourself. That's crazy."

"Not talking to myself. Just laughing."

"Same thing."

She heard him moving closer, circling her the way predators circled prey. He had been testing her since he arrived, small cruelties designed to exploit her blindness: moving her things, blocking her paths, speaking from places she couldn't pinpoint so that she turned toward the wrong source.

"What's that in your pocket?" he asked.

Meen's hand went automatically to her jeans, where her phone rested. "My phone."

"Let me see it."

"No."

"Why not? You can't even use it."

"I use it more than you use yours."

He was close now, close enough that she could feel his body heat, could smell the cereal he'd eaten for breakfast. Close enough to grab.

His hand shot out and snatched the phone from her pocket. She felt the motion, tracked it, reached for it, but he was already stepping back,

already laughing.

"Let's see what's on here," he said. "What do blind girls text about?"

"Give it back."

"Make me."

The anger returned, hotter than before. Meen felt the heat building in her chest, felt it trying to escape through her hands, through her skin, through every point of contact with the air. She clenched her fists, trying to hold it in, trying not to let whatever this was hurt someone, even someone who deserved it.

"I said give it back."

"Or what? You'll bump into me?"

His hand was on the phone. Her phone, the device that connected her to the world, that read text aloud and described images and made a sighted world partially accessible. He was touching it with his grubby ten-year-old fingers, and the heat was rising, and she couldn't stop it, couldn't control it, couldn't—

The phone screamed.

Not a ringtone, not an alert, but the shriek of overheating electronics. Darius Jr. yelped and dropped it, and Meen heard it clatter to the floor, felt the heat radiating from it like a small sun.

"You burned me!" the boy shouted. "You burned my hand!"

Meen crouched and found her phone by temperature, by the warmth it was still emitting. The case was hot but not melting, the device functional but stressed. She pressed it against her palm, willing it to cool, and felt the heat transfer into her body, absorbed rather than dispersed.

"What did you do?" Darius Jr. demanded. His voice was scared now, the bravado cracking. "How did you do that?"

"I didn't do anything." The lie came automatically. "You must have held it near the radiator."

"The radiator's cold! I felt your phone get hot in my hand!"

"Then maybe you're allergic to electronics. Go run cold water on it."

She heard him backing away, heard him turn and run up the stairs, his footsteps heavy with fear. He would tell someone, probably. He would claim that the blind girl had burned him with a magic phone. They would assume he was lying or confused, because that was what people assumed about children, especially children who had been cruel.

Meen stood in the common room, holding her phone, feeling the last of the heat fade from its surface. Her hand where she'd touched it was warm but not burned. The fire had come from her, had flowed through the phone, had hurt the boy who had been hurting her.

She should feel guilty. She didn't.

She felt powerful.

For the rest of the day, she experimented. Carefully, alone, in spaces where no one could observe. She learned that she could raise her body temperature at will, that the heat came from somewhere inside her chest and radiated outward through her hands. She learned that the sun seemed to fuel her, that she was stronger in direct light, weaker in shade. She learned that she could heat objects she touched, could warm water in a glass, could make metal too hot to hold.

She learned that she was afraid of what she could do if she lost control.

The fire had taken her mother. The fire had taken her sight, had triggered whatever dormant flaw had been waiting in her visual system. And now she had fire inside her, fire that could hurt people, fire that could burn down buildings if she wasn't careful.

She thought about telling Elle and Teena. She thought about the secrets they shared, the trust they had built, the family they had become. She thought about the way Elle's hands had been moving

strangely lately, the way she kept glancing toward windows, the way the curtains in their room had moved last night without any apparent breeze.

She thought about telling them, and she decided to wait. One more day. One more experiment. One more attempt to understand what was happening to her before she tried to explain it to anyone else.

That night, in the darkness of their room, Meen lay in bed and felt the warmth radiating from her own body. She was warmer than she should be, warmer than the blankets required, warmer than made sense in a room where the radiator had chosen tonight to be temperamental.

She thought about her mother, about the fire, about the heat that lived inside her now.

She thought about Darius Jr.'s hand, red and aching.

She thought about power, and fear, and the strange new world she had discovered in the space of a single morning.

"Meen?" Teena's voice, soft in the darkness. "Are you okay? You feel warm."

"I'm fine," Meen said. "Just the blankets."

"Your whole side of the room is warm."

Meen didn't have an answer for that. She lay still, trying to contain the heat, trying to be ordinary, trying to be the blind girl who was difficult to place rather than the girl who could burn with a thought.

"Go to sleep," she said finally. "It's nothing."

But it wasn't nothing. It was everything. It was the first hint that Meen's limitations had never been what she thought they were, that her blindness was not the most significant thing about her body, that she carried inside her something that the world had never seen and wouldn't know how to handle.

She lay in the darkness, radiating warmth, and waited for sleep that wouldn't come.

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End of Chapter 6

## Chapter 7

# Teena's Earth

The pharmacy was three blocks away. Three blocks of sidewalk, curb cuts, and the unpredictable terrain of a Bronx winter. Teena had made the journey dozens of times, knew every obstacle, every danger zone, every spot where her wheelchair might get stuck or tip.

Today, she was going alone.

"I can come with you," Marcus Chen had offered when she'd told the staff her plan. "It's cold out."

"I need to do this myself."

"It's not about need. It's about—"

"It's about me being able to go three blocks without a babysitter."

Marcus had backed off, the way he always did when she pushed. He was kind, but kindness wasn't what she needed right now. She needed independence, even if that independence was just a trip to pick up her own medication.

The medication was baclofen, a muscle relaxant that helped with the spasticity in her legs. Without it, the cramps became unbearable, the involuntary movements unpredictable. With it, she was merely uncomfortable rather than in constant pain. The prescription had run out two days ago, and the refill had finally been approved after a fight with the insurance company that Mrs. Washington had handled while Teena listened, helpless, from the next room.

She bundled into her coat, pulled on gloves, and wheeled to the front door. The group home had a ramp, one of the few accessibility features that actually worked, and she descended carefully, feeling the cold air bite at her exposed face.

The first block was easy. The sidewalk was cracked but navigable, the curb cuts properly aligned, the foot traffic light enough that she could maintain her own pace. She passed the bodega with the orange cat, passed the church with the broken sign, passed the empty lot where the decomposing couch had acquired a friend in the form of a rusted shopping cart.

The second block was harder. Construction had closed half the sidewalk, forcing pedestrians into a narrow channel marked by orange cones. The channel was too narrow for her wheelchair, so she had to divert into the street, rolling along the edge of parked cars, vulnerable to traffic that might not see her.

A car honked as it passed, the driver gesturing angrily. Teena kept her eyes forward, kept pushing, kept moving. She was used to anger from strangers, used to the way her presence in shared spaces was treated as an imposition.

The third block was where things went wrong.

A tree had grown too close to the sidewalk, its roots pushing up through the concrete, creating a ridge that her small front wheels couldn't climb. She hit it at speed, her chair jolting to a stop, her body thrown forward against the seatbelt she always wore.

She backed up, tried a different angle, hit the same barrier. The root system had cracked the sidewalk across its entire width, creating an impassable obstacle. She would have to go around, which meant the street again, which meant more cars, more honking, more strangers deciding that her existence was their inconvenience.

Or she could go back. Return to the group home, ask Marcus to come after all, accept that three blocks was too far, that her body had

limits, that the world had not been built for her and never would be.

The familiar rage rose in her chest. Not at the tree, which was just doing what trees did. Not at the city, which couldn't possibly maintain every sidewalk to wheelchair-accessible standards. At the universe itself, which had decided before she was born that her brain would be starved of oxygen for two crucial minutes, that her legs would never work right, that every journey would require negotiation with terrain that others walked without thinking.

She sat in her chair, staring at the root, feeling the cold seep through her gloves, and let herself be angry.

The concrete cracked.

At first she thought it was coincidence, the cold weather causing expansion and contraction in the already-damaged surface. But the crack spread from her front wheel outward, following a pattern that made no sense, reaching toward the root that blocked her path.

Teena held her breath, watching, not understanding.

The crack widened. The concrete shifted. The root, which had been pushing upward, settled back as the material around it gave way, creating a gap, a channel, a path.

Not a perfect path. Not smooth. But passable, where before there had been barrier.

Teena didn't move. She stared at the concrete, at the crack that had appeared from nowhere, at the impossible rearrangement of solid matter that had cleared her way. Her hands were gripping her wheel rims hard enough to hurt, her heart pounding in her chest.

She looked around. No one had seen. No one was watching. The street was empty, the construction crew on their break, the usual flow of pedestrians diverted by the narrow sidewalk.

Slowly, carefully, she wheeled forward. The crack held. The path remained. She crossed the obstacle and emerged on the other side, her chair rolling smoothly onto the undamaged portion of the sidewalk.

She made it to the pharmacy in a daze, collected her prescription, and began the journey home. The crack was still there when she passed it, evidence that she hadn't imagined what had happened. She stopped, this time deliberately, and looked at the concrete beneath her wheels.

She could feel something. Not with her hands, not with her eyes, but with some sense she couldn't name. The sidewalk was talking to her, or she was listening to it, or there was a connection that hadn't existed before, a channel of information flowing from the ground into her body.

She pressed her palm against the cold concrete and felt it respond. Not movement, not yet, but awareness. The ground knew she was there. The ground was waiting to see what she would do.

"This is insane," she whispered to herself. "This is completely insane."

But insane things happened. Insane things happened to people like her all the time: random medical complications, unexpected turns in the system, placements that made no sense and separations that made even less. If the universe could give her cerebral palsy for no reason, why couldn't it also give her whatever this was?

She made her way home, taking the long route around the construction, not ready to test her new ability in public. Her mind raced with questions she couldn't answer: How did this work? Why her? What else could she do?

The group home was warm when she returned, the radiator actually functioning for once. She hung her coat, stashed her medication in the drawer where she kept her medical supplies, and made her way upstairs to the room.

Elle was there, sitting on her bed, her hands moving through patterns that weren't quite signs. She looked up when Teena entered, and there was something in her expression that Teena couldn't read.

"Where's Meen?" Teena asked.

Elle pointed toward the bathroom, her gestures distracted, her attention clearly elsewhere.

Teena rolled to her usual spot by the window and looked down at the floor. Hardwood, old, worn smooth by decades of feet. Beneath it would be subfloor, joists, concrete foundation, earth. Layers of material that connected to the world outside, to the sidewalk where she had cracked concrete with her anger, to the ground that had somehow decided to obey her will.

She pressed her hand against the floor, feeling the wood grain beneath her palm.

The floorboards creaked.

Not the normal settling of an old building. A creak that followed her fingers, that responded to her pressure, that seemed to be saying something in a language she didn't yet speak.

Elle was watching her now, Teena realized. Watching with an intensity that suggested she had noticed something, suspected something, was waiting for Teena to explain.

"Elle," Teena said slowly. "I need to tell you something."

I need to tell you something too, Elle signed.

The door opened, and Meen entered, her steps careful, her expression troubled. She crossed to her bed without speaking, and Teena noticed that she was warmer than usual, that the air around her seemed to shimmer slightly with heat that shouldn't exist.

"Meen," Teena said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." But her voice was tight, controlled, holding something back.

The three of them were in the room together, each carrying a secret, each aware that something had changed. Teena looked at Elle, at Meen, at the floor beneath her wheels that was still humming with the connection she had discovered.

"I think," she said carefully, "we need to have a conversation."

Elle's hands moved: About what?

Teena pressed her palm to the floor again, and the boards groaned, shifting slightly beneath her touch. Elle's eyes went wide. Meen's head turned toward the sound, tracking it, understanding it.

"About that," Teena said. "And I'm guessing you both have stories too."

The room was silent for a long moment. Then Elle raised her hand and made a small gesture, and the curtains by the window billowed in a breeze that couldn't possibly exist in an enclosed space.

Meen held out her hand, palm up, and Teena could feel the heat radiating from it, could see the air above her fingers warping slightly with temperature.

Three girls. Three impossible abilities. Three secrets that were no longer secrets.

"Okay," Teena said, her voice shaking despite her best efforts. "I think we have some things to discuss."

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End of Chapter 7

## Chapter 8

# Revelations

The door was locked. The window was closed. The radiator clanked its evening rhythm, and somewhere down the hall, the sounds of the group home continued without them: children arguing, staff redirecting, the institutional machinery grinding through another night.

But in the room at the end of the hall, three girls sat in a circle of silence, each holding a secret that had suddenly become shared.

Teena spoke first, because someone had to.

"When did it start for you?"

Elle's hands moved, and Meen translated through touch: "Last week. The day the caseworker came. I was angry about the meeting, about the interpreter they didn't provide, about everything. I went to the backyard, and the wind..." She paused, searching for words to describe something that had no words. "The wind started listening."

"The wind started listening," Meen repeated aloud, her voice carrying the wonder that Elle's signs had conveyed. "That's actually beautiful."

"It's terrifying," Teena said. "It's all terrifying. I cracked a sidewalk this afternoon. The concrete just... broke. Because I was angry at a tree root."

"Anger," Meen said thoughtfully. "Mine started with anger too. Darius Jr. stole my phone, and I got so mad, and then the phone was

burning in his hand." She paused. "I burned a child. Not badly, but I burned him."

He deserved it, Elle signed.

"That's not the point. The point is I didn't know I could do it, and I didn't mean to do it, and what happens next time? What happens when I'm really angry, when I can't control it, when someone gets seriously hurt?"

The question hung in the air, unanswerable. They were children with powers they didn't understand, abilities that had appeared without warning or explanation. They had no teachers, no guides, no one to tell them what was happening or why.

"We need to figure out what this is," Teena said. "Where it comes from. What it can do. How to control it."

How do we do that? Elle asked.

"We practice. Carefully. We learn what triggers the powers, what strengthens them, what makes them fade. We document everything."

"Document?" Meen's voice was skeptical. "You want to keep notes on our supernatural abilities?"

"I want to understand them. And yeah, that means keeping notes. You're the one who listens to audiobooks about water infrastructure. Don't tell me you don't understand the value of systematic research."

Meen was quiet for a moment. Then: "Fine. But not written notes. Nothing that could be found. We remember, we compare, we learn."

Agreed, Elle signed. But first, we need to see what we can actually do.

"Now? Here?"

Where else? The backyard has cameras. The common room has people. This is the only private space we have.

Teena looked around their cramped room, at the beds and dressers and desk, at the twelve-by-ten space that was supposed to contain three lives and was now apparently supposed to contain three impossible

abilities.

"Okay," she said. "But carefully. Nothing that makes noise, nothing that leaves evidence."

Elle nodded and raised her hands. She began to move them in patterns that weren't quite signs, gestures that seemed to be reaching for something beyond language. The air in the room shifted. Teena felt it against her face, a breeze that moved in circles, following Elle's hands, responding to her will.

"I can feel that," Meen said, her voice awed. "The temperature is changing. You're creating pressure differentials."

Elle's hands moved faster, and the breeze became a small whirlwind, contained in the center of the room, visible only through the dust motes it caught and spun. Papers on the desk rustled. The curtains swayed. The air itself seemed to come alive.

Then Elle lowered her hands, and the wind settled, and the room was still again.

Your turn, she signed to Meen.

Meen hesitated. "I don't want to set anything on fire."

"Start small," Teena suggested. "Just warmth. Can you make your hands warm?"

Meen held out her hands, palms up, and focused. Teena watched, and gradually she could see it: a shimmer in the air above Meen's palms, a distortion that came from heat radiating upward. She reached out and touched Meen's fingers, flinching at the temperature.

"You're hot. Not burning, but definitely above body temperature."

"I can make it hotter," Meen said. "I just... I don't know how hot is too hot."

"Can you cool down? Control it in both directions?"

Meen concentrated again, and the heat faded. Her hands became warm, then normal, then cool, then cold enough that Teena pulled back in surprise.

"That's amazing," Teena said. "You're not just generating heat. You're controlling temperature."

"I think I'm absorbing it too," Meen said slowly. "When I cooled down, I felt... fuller? Like the cold I was creating had to go somewhere, and it went into me."

Elle signed something, and Meen translated: "She says that makes sense. Heat is energy. If you're moving energy around, it has to balance somewhere."

"This is physics," Teena said, the realization crystallizing. "Whatever we're doing, it's not magic. It's physics. We're just doing it in ways that shouldn't be possible."

Your turn, Elle signed to Teena.

Teena looked at the floor, at the old hardwood that had creaked under her touch. She pressed her palm flat against it and reached for the sensation she had felt earlier, the connection to the ground beneath her, the awareness of earth and stone and everything solid.

It was there, waiting. The floor spoke to her in a language of pressure and composition, of wood grain and nail heads and the concrete foundation beneath. She could feel the building's weight, its age, its slow settling into the earth that held it.

"I can feel everything," she whispered. "The whole building. The ground underneath. It's all connected."

"Can you move it?" Meen asked.

Teena pushed, gently, and the floor groaned. One of the boards shifted slightly, rising a quarter inch from its neighbors before she released it and let it settle back.

"That's enough," she said quickly. "I don't want to damage anything."

They sat in silence for a moment, three girls who had just demonstrated abilities that broke every rule of the world they had grown up in. The room felt different now, charged with potential,

heavy with the weight of what they had discovered.

"Why us?" Meen asked finally. "Why the three of us, in the same room, at the same time?"

"Maybe it's not a coincidence," Teena said. "Maybe there's something about us, something we have in common, that made this happen."

"We're all disabled," Meen said. "All three of us have bodies that don't work the way the world expects."

Elle signed: Maybe that's the point. Maybe our brains compensated for our disabilities by developing in different ways. And those different ways allowed us to access something that typical brains can't.

"That's a theory," Teena said. "Not a very scientific one, but it's a theory."

"It feels right, though." Meen's voice was thoughtful. "I've always sensed temperature more acutely than sighted people. Maybe my brain was already partway to doing this, and something just... unlocked it."

My hands have always been how I experience the world, Elle signed. ASL, tactile learning, everything. And now my hands control the air.

"And I've always been hyperaware of surfaces," Teena added. "Every curb, every threshold, every place where the ground might betray me. Maybe I was already listening to the earth without knowing it."

The theory felt right, in the way that true things sometimes do. Their disabilities had shaped their perceptions, had forced their brains to develop alternative pathways, had created the neurological conditions for something extraordinary to emerge.

"Okay," Teena said, her practical mind reasserting itself. "So we have abilities. We have a theory about why. Now what?"

Now we keep it secret, Elle signed. If anyone finds out, we lose everything. They'll separate us, study us, turn us into projects instead of people.

"Agreed. No one can know. Not the staff, not the other kids, not our caseworkers." Teena looked at each of them in turn. "This stays between us. Always."

"Always," Meen agreed.

Elle's hands moved in a gesture that wasn't a word but was a promise, a commitment made in the language of her body, binding and absolute.

The smoke alarm went off.

Not in their room, but somewhere downstairs—its strobe lights flashing beneath the crack under their door, the alarm's vibration traveling through the building's bones. The hallway erupted with commotion: staff shouting, feet pounding, the evacuation protocol snapping into motion.

"Kitchen fire," Meen said, her head tilted, listening. "I can smell it. Grease, probably."

They moved without discussion, Teena wheeling toward the door, Elle and Meen falling into formation beside her. This was routine; the group home had fire drills regularly, and actual incidents weren't uncommon in a building with old wiring and a constantly used kitchen.

The hallway was chaos, children being herded toward the stairs, staff counting heads and directing traffic. Teena took the elevator because she had to, arriving in the backyard after the others, finding Elle and Meen in the crowd of shivering residents.

It was cold, January cold, the kind that bit through coats and made fingers ache. The children huddled together, the younger ones crying, the older ones stoic, everyone waiting for the all-clear that would let them return to warmth.

Teena felt the cold acutely, her spastic legs cramping in response, her body fighting against itself in ways that the other children couldn't see. She caught Elle's eye, saw her shivering, saw the concern on her face.

Then Meen did something.

It was subtle, so subtle that Teena almost missed it. Meen shifted her position, moving closer to both of them, and the air around them warmed. Not dramatically, not enough to draw attention, but enough to take the edge off the cold, to create a small pocket of comfort in the January night.

Elle noticed too. Her hands moved, and then the wind that had been cutting through their coats stilled around them, creating a calm space where Meen's warmth could collect.

They stood together, three girls in a crowd of shivering children, warm and calm while everyone else suffered.

"You too?" Meen whispered, feeling the wind change.

Elle signed: You too.

Teena felt the ground beneath her wheels, solid and reassuring. She didn't have anything to contribute to this particular collaboration, but she felt part of it anyway, connected to the others through something deeper than proximity.

The fire was minor, a grease flare that had been extinguished quickly. Within twenty minutes, they were back inside, climbing stairs or riding the elevator, returning to their room at the end of the hall.

But something had shifted. They had discovered their powers separately, had revealed them to each other hesitantly, had shared secrets that could destroy them if they ever got out.

And then, in the cold of the backyard, they had used those powers together for the first time. Warmth and wind, combined, creating comfort for each other without anyone else noticing.

It was small. It was nothing compared to what they might eventually become. But it was a beginning, a proof of concept, a demonstration that they were more powerful together than apart.

That night, after the lights-out bell, they lay in their beds and felt the room differently than they ever had before. Elle felt the air moving through the cracked window, responsive to her attention. Meen felt the warmth of her own body, steady and controlled, available when she needed it. Teena felt the floor, the foundation, the earth that stretched beneath the city in all directions.

They were not just three girls with disabilities anymore. They were not just three hard-to-place foster children sharing a room. They were something new, something unnamed, something that the world had never seen before.

And in the darkness, hands reaching across the gaps between their beds, they made a silent promise: whatever came next, they would face it together.

. . .

End of Chapter 8

Part Three

# **The Tunnel**

## Chapter 9

# Sharing

The next two weeks became a curriculum of the impossible.

They practiced every night, after lights out, in the cramped space of their room. They developed protocols: Teena would press her palm to the floor to ensure no one was approaching in the hallway; Elle would still the air near the door to prevent sounds from escaping; Meen would monitor the temperature to ensure nothing overheated unexpectedly. Only when all three confirmations were in place would they begin.

Elle's control improved fastest. Her hands had always been her primary tools for understanding and communicating with the world, and directing air felt like an extension of signing, a new vocabulary in a language her body already spoke. By the end of the first week, she could create precise currents, channeling wind through the room in patterns that followed her gestures exactly. She could still air in defined spaces, creating pockets of calm. She could feel changes in pressure that indicated weather shifts, doors opening elsewhere in the building, even the breathing patterns of people nearby.

"It's like echolocation," she signed one night, Meen translating for Teena. "But instead of sound bouncing back, it's air pressure. I can feel the shape of the room through the way the air moves."

"Can you feel us?" Teena asked.

Elle concentrated, her hands moving in small exploratory gestures. "You're there," she signed, pointing accurately at Teena despite having her eyes closed. "And Meen is there. You displace air differently. Teena, your chair creates a larger signature. Meen, your body runs warmer, so the air around you moves differently."

Meen's progress was slower but deeper. She was afraid of her power in ways the others weren't afraid of theirs, and the fear created hesitation that limited her growth. But she learned to modulate her heat output, to warm objects without burning them, to draw warmth from the environment into herself when she needed to cool something down.

"I think I understand it now," she said during the second week. "I'm not creating heat from nothing. I'm moving it. Redistributing thermal energy. When I warm my hands, the air around them gets cooler. When I cool something down, the energy has to go somewhere, so it goes into me."

"What happens if you absorb too much?" Teena asked.

"I don't know. I haven't tested that." Meen paused. "I'm not sure I want to test that."

Teena's power was the most difficult to practice in their small space. Moving earth was loud, disruptive, potentially destructive. She settled for feeling rather than acting, spending hours with her palm pressed to the floor, mapping the building's structure through the vibrations and pressures she could sense.

"The foundation is cracked," she reported one night. "On the east side, near the kitchen. There's a gap where water is getting in. And the pipes in the walls, I can feel them. The building is like a body, with bones and veins and all these systems keeping it alive."

"Can you affect any of that?" Meen asked.

"Maybe. I haven't tried. I don't want to accidentally collapse a wall."

They learned about each other's limits through careful experimentation. Elle could generate winds up to perhaps twenty miles per hour, enough to knock objects off tables but not enough to cause serious damage. Her range was limited, maybe fifty feet in any direction, and the effort exhausted her quickly. After particularly intense practice sessions, she developed nosebleeds that took time to stop.

Meen could heat objects to burning temperatures, but doing so required concentration she couldn't maintain for long. Cooling was easier than heating, drawing energy into herself rather than projecting it outward. But when she pushed too hard, her own body temperature dropped dangerously, and the others had to wrap her in blankets until she recovered.

Teena's power was the strongest in raw terms but the hardest to control. She could sense earth and stone and concrete within a large radius, could feel the composition and stress of materials, could understand structures in ways that engineers might envy. But moving that material was another matter. Small movements, cracks and shifts, she could manage. Anything larger risked consequences she couldn't predict.

"We're elementals," Meen said one night, testing the word. "Wind, fire, earth. Like something out of mythology."

"Mythology had four elements," Teena pointed out. "We're missing water."

Maybe there's someone else out there, Elle signed. Someone with water abilities who hasn't found their people yet.

"Or maybe water doesn't matter. Maybe three is enough."

They didn't know. They couldn't know. They were making this up as they went along, inventing a science of the impossible based on nothing but their own experiences and observations.

But they learned. Every night, they learned.

They discovered that their powers worked better together than apart. When Elle created wind and Meen added heat, they could generate warm currents that moved where they directed them. When Teena stabilized the ground beneath Elle's feet, Elle could push harder without losing her balance. When Meen raised the temperature of a stone Teena was manipulating, the stone became easier to move, more responsive to Teena's will.

"Synergy," Meen called it. "Our abilities complement each other. They're designed to work as a system."

"Designed by who?" Teena asked.

No one had an answer.

The placement meeting came and went. Elle attended with an interpreter this time, a small victory, and listened as Ms. Patterson described the Hendersons with enthusiasm that felt rehearsed. Elle said little, asked few questions, gave no indication of whether she was interested or opposed.

But she had met them. That was the part she didn't tell the others, not at first.

Ms. Patterson had arranged a "casual introduction" at a coffee shop in Manhattan, neutral ground, the Hendersons sitting across from Elle with their perfectly practiced signs and their son Tyler between them like evidence of their qualifications.

Tyler was eleven, with cochlear implant processors visible behind both ears and the slightly too-loud voice of someone who had been trained to speak rather than sign. He was polite, friendly, clearly rehearsed in his role as ambassador for his family's Deaf-friendly credentials. He signed in Signed Exact English (SEE), an artificial English-based system hearing people preferred because it mapped onto their grammar rather than Deaf grammar, instead of ASL.

We have a room ready for you, Mrs. Henderson signed, her movements careful and slow, the way people signed when they had

learned from books rather than from Deaf people. Tyler picked out the paint color.

"It's blue," Tyler said aloud, not signing. "I thought you'd like blue."

Then, unexpectedly, he tried to sign something. His hands moved in a pattern that wasn't quite SEE and wasn't quite ASL either, something in between, as if he were reaching for a language his parents hadn't taught him. Do you... like... He frowned, frustrated, and switched back to speaking. "Sorry. I'm still learning. My Deaf mentor at school says ASL is different from what we do at home."

Elle's chest tightened. Tyler knew. On some level, this eleven-year-old boy understood that there was a difference between what his parents had given him and what Deaf culture actually was. He was trying to bridge that gap, even if he didn't have the tools.

She watched him, this boy who had been raised by hearing parents in a "Deaf-friendly" home, and saw something more complicated than she had expected: a child caught between worlds, who spoke instead of signing because that was what he had been taught, but who sensed that something was missing.

He seemed happy. That was the worst part. He genuinely seemed happy, and loved, and secure in his family's affection. The Hendersons weren't cruel. They weren't neglectful. They simply didn't understand that their version of Deaf-friendly was a kind of erasure, a loving but thorough replacement of Deaf culture with hearing culture wearing Deaf accessories.

What do you think? Mr. Henderson asked. Would you like to visit the house?

Elle looked at them, at their hopeful faces, at Tyler's eagerness to have a Deaf sibling who might finally understand him in ways his hearing friends couldn't. She felt the weight of their good intentions pressing against her like the walls of a room that was too small.

I need to think about it, she signed.

They nodded, understanding, patient. They would wait. They were committed to Deaf culture, after all.

Elle went back to the group home and didn't tell Meen or Teena what she had seen. She didn't know how to explain that the Hendersons weren't villains, weren't monsters, weren't the evil foster family of orphan stories. They were just hearing people who thought they understood Deafness and didn't, and who would love her into becoming something she wasn't.

"You're stalling," Teena said afterward.

I'm thinking, Elle signed. There's a difference.

"What is there to think about? You're not going. We're not letting you go."

And how do we stop them? How do we convince the system to leave me here when there's a Deaf family who wants to give me a home?

They didn't have an answer to that either. The system was powerful in ways that wind and fire and earth couldn't touch. The system had paperwork and authority and the weight of bureaucratic momentum. Three teenage girls with supernatural abilities couldn't fight that, not directly.

But they could prepare. They could practice. They could get stronger.

And somewhere in the back of Teena's mind, a thought was forming: if they couldn't fight the system through normal means, maybe they would have to use abnormal ones. Maybe their powers weren't just for personal survival. Maybe they could do something with them, something that mattered, something that proved they deserved to stay together.

She didn't share this thought with the others. Not yet. It was too vague, too dangerous, too far from anything they had discussed.

But she kept thinking about it, in the quiet hours, in the moments between practice sessions, in the darkness after lights out when she felt the earth beneath her and wondered what she might be capable of.

That night, after practice, Elle told them about the Hendersons.

She hadn't planned to. The meeting felt like a private failure, a moment of weakness she wanted to forget. But the combination practice had left them all raw, their defenses lowered, and when Meen asked if she was okay, the truth came out in her hands before she could stop it.

I met them, she signed, and Teena translated for Meen. Tyler. The parents. They were... nice. That's the problem. They were nice, and they didn't understand anything, and Tyler was so happy, and I wanted to scream.

"What was he like?" Meen asked. "Tyler."

Eleven. Cochlear implants. He signs SEE, not ASL. He introduced himself by speaking, not signing. Elle's hands moved faster, sharper. He's what they want me to become. A Deaf girl who acts hearing. A success story they can brag about.

"You're not going," Teena said. "We already decided."

But what if I should? Elle signed, and the question hung in the air, unexpected. What if Tyler is happy? What if the Hendersons are good people who just don't know any better? What if refusing to go is the wrong choice?

"Do you believe that?" Meen asked.

Elle was silent for a long moment. Then: No. But I wanted to. It would be easier if I did.

Teena reached for her hand in the darkness. "Easy isn't the same as right. And we're not letting you go."

I know, Elle signed. I know.

But the meeting stayed with her, a splinter she couldn't remove, a question she couldn't answer. Tyler's smile. His too-loud voice. The

way his parents had looked at her like she was already theirs.

The answer would come soon enough. The crisis that would test them was already building, deep beneath the city, in tunnels they didn't know existed.

And when it came, they would need everything they had learned, and more.

. . .

End of Chapter 9

## Chapter 10

# The Threat

Hundreds of feet below the streets of the Bronx, in a tunnel that had been under construction for half a century, a man named Jorge Reyes noticed that the water was wrong.

He'd been working the night shift in Shaft 17B for three years, part of the sprawling crew that was slowly, expensively, building Water Tunnel No. 3. The tunnel was a monument to ambition and bureaucracy, a sixty-mile engineering project that had started before Jorge was born and might not finish before he retired. But it was good work, union work, the kind of job that let him pay his mortgage and send his kids to college.

Tonight, something was different.

The tunnel section he was inspecting was nearly complete, a massive concrete cylinder that would eventually carry billions of gallons of drinking water to Manhattan and the Bronx. Water was already seeping in through the usual channels, groundwater that had to be pumped out continuously until the tunnel was sealed. But this water didn't look right.

Jorge crouched by a small pool that had collected near the base of a support column. He pulled out his flashlight and shined it into the liquid.

The water had a slight shimmer to it, an oily quality that shouldn't have been there. And the smell, when he leaned closer, was chemical rather than mineral, something sharp and wrong.

"Hey, Tony," he called to his partner, who was checking electrical conduits farther down the tunnel. "Come look at this."

Tony ambled over, his hard hat bobbing in the work lights. "What you got?"

"Look at this water. Smell it."

Tony crouched beside him, sniffed, and pulled back with a grimace. "That's not groundwater."

"That's what I'm thinking."

They looked at each other, two men who had worked enough construction jobs to know when something was wrong. This deep in the earth, with toxic waste laws and environmental regulations and years of legal liability at stake, wrong water was serious water.

"We should tell Reilly," Tony said.

"Yeah." Jorge stood up, his knees protesting. "I'll file a report. You keep checking the section, see if there's more."

There was more. By the end of the shift, they had found contaminated water in three separate locations, all in the same tunnel section, all with the same chemical smell. Jorge photographed everything, documented everything, submitted a report through the proper channels.

The proper channels led to his supervisor, who forwarded it to the project manager, who made a phone call.

The phone call went to Victor Asher.

Asher took the call in his office, forty stories above the street, in a building that had been built with money from contracts exactly like this one. He listened to the project manager's carefully neutral description of the situation, asked a few clarifying questions, and told the man he would handle it personally.

Then he hung up and cursed.

The contamination wasn't supposed to be detectable yet. He had calculated the dilution rates, had planned the disposal timeline, had worked out exactly how long it would take for the waste to disperse into the aquifer beyond any hope of tracing. The tunnel section should have been sealed before anyone noticed anything.

But Jorge Reyes had noticed. And now there was documentation.

Asher pulled up the project files on his computer, reviewing the schedule, the personnel, the security arrangements. The tunnel section in question was scheduled for sealing in two weeks. Too long. Word could spread. Inspectors could be called. The entire operation could unravel.

He made another call, this one to a number that wasn't in any company directory.

"I need a problem solved," he said when the line connected. "A worker who's seen too much. I need him reassigned, effective immediately. And I need the sealing schedule accelerated."

The voice on the other end asked no questions. There were never questions, not at these prices.

"The documentation?"

"Lost," Asher said. "Misfiled. However you want to handle it. Just make sure it doesn't reach anyone who matters."

"And if the worker talks?"

Asher hesitated. He didn't think of himself as a man who hurt people. He thought of himself as a pragmatist, someone who made difficult decisions in a complex world. But pragmatism had a price, and sometimes that price was paid by people who got in the way.

"Handle it," he said. "Whatever that means."

He hung up and sat back in his chair, watching the city lights through his window. Out there, somewhere, eight million people were drinking water from systems that men like him maintained and

protected. They didn't know about the toxic waste buried in the tunnels. They didn't need to know. By the time the contamination reached them, years from now, it would be untraceable, unexplainable, just another minor health concern in a city full of them.

That was the math that Asher did every day, the calculation that let him sleep at night. Small harms to many were preferable to large disruptions to the system. A few parts per million of industrial chemicals were acceptable losses compared to the economic damage that would result from shutting down the tunnel project, investigating the contamination, holding anyone accountable.

He was protecting the system. He was protecting himself. In his experience, those two things were usually the same.

Across the city, in a group home in the Bronx, three girls lay sleeping, unaware that beneath their feet, in tunnels they had never seen, a crime was being covered up that would eventually bring them into its orbit.

And in the tunnel itself, Jorge Reyes finished his shift and went home, not knowing that by tomorrow, his report would be lost, his schedule would be changed, and his questions would be met with silence.

The water continued to seep into the tunnel, carrying chemicals that shouldn't exist, contamination that no one was supposed to see, poison that would spread through the aquifer like ink through paper.

The threat was building. The crisis was coming.

And the only people who might be able to stop it didn't yet know they had any reason to try.

. . .

End of Chapter 10

## Chapter 11

# Marcus

Marcus Chen didn't show up for his shift.

Teena noticed first, because Marcus's absence changed the rhythm of the evening. He was usually there at six, taking over from the daytime staff, bringing his particular energy to the group home: patient, quiet, willing to engage with the children as people rather than problems. When the clock hit six-thirty and the front door remained unopened, the building felt wrong.

"Where's Marcus?" she asked Mrs. Washington, who was covering the gap with visible frustration.

"Running late, I assume." Mrs. Washington checked her phone again, her third check in ten minutes. "He hasn't called."

"That's not like him."

"No. It isn't."

By eight o'clock, Mrs. Washington was making calls. By nine, she was visibly worried. By ten, when the night shift relief arrived (a temporary worker who didn't know any of the children's names), she was on the phone with Marcus's emergency contact, his mother, who said she hadn't heard from him since yesterday.

"Something's wrong," Meen said in the girls' room, after lights out. "I can hear Mrs. Washington downstairs. She's still on the phone."

Wrong how? Elle signed.

"Marcus went to visit his cousin—Jorge Reyes, on his mom's side. He works on Water Tunnel No. 3. And now Marcus is missing."

Teena felt a chill that had nothing to do with the room's temperature. The water tunnel. The infrastructure project she'd seen in headlines, that Meen had listened to audiobooks about, that ran beneath the Bronx like a concrete artery.

"What does his cousin have to do with anything?" she asked.

"I overheard Marcus talking to Mrs. Washington last week. His cousin was reassigned suddenly, without explanation. He was worried. He said his cousin had found something in the tunnels, something wrong with the water."

You think Marcus went looking for answers? Elle asked.

"I think Marcus went to the tunnel site to ask questions about his cousin. And now he's missing."

The three of them sat in the darkness, processing the implications. Marcus was kind, thoughtful, the first adult in this placement who had treated them like people. He was learning sign language for Elle, described environments for Meen without being asked, always made time for Teena's questions. He was the closest thing to a friend they had among the staff.

And he was gone.

The next morning, Teena found something.

She had gone to the staff office to ask Mrs. Washington about Marcus, hoping for news, hoping for anything. Mrs. Washington wasn't there, but Marcus's locker was, the small metal cabinet where he kept his personal things during shifts. The door was slightly ajar, as if someone had checked it hastily and not bothered to close it properly.

Teena hesitated. Going through someone's belongings felt wrong, even someone who was missing, even someone she was trying to help. But something was sticking out of the locker's edge, a corner of paper that had prevented the door from closing fully.

She pulled it free. A spiral notebook, the kind Marcus used for his graduate school notes. But this page wasn't about social work theory. This page was a hand-drawn map.

The sketch showed a section of tunnel, labeled in Marcus's careful handwriting: "Shaft 17B access - Section 17B - Jorge's route." Arrows indicated a path from a surface entrance marked "Old maintenance access - Bruckner lot" down through what looked like a service shaft, then through a series of corridors to a circled area labeled "Hidden storage - what are they keeping here?"

Below the map, Marcus had written a string of numbers: 7-2-9-4. And a note: "Jorge's door code - backup entrance only, no cameras."

Teena's hands trembled as she held the notebook. Marcus had been investigating. He had gotten this information from his cousin, had mapped out a route, had even obtained an access code. And then he had disappeared.

She photographed the page with her phone and returned the notebook to the locker, closing it properly this time. Mrs. Washington would find it eventually, would give it to the police, who would add it to a file that might or might not ever be investigated.

But Teena had the information now. And she knew exactly what she was going to do with it.

"The police," Teena said later that night. "Mrs. Washington must have called them."

"She did. I heard her. They took a report." Meen's voice was bitter. "You know what that means."

They knew. A young man from the Bronx, missing for less than twenty-four hours, was not a priority. The police would file the report and move on to cases they considered more urgent. Marcus would be one of thousands of missing persons in a city that didn't have the resources to find them all.

"We could look for him," Teena said.

The words came out before she had fully formed the thought, but once they were in the air, they felt right. They had powers now. Real powers, capabilities that no one else had. They had spent weeks learning to control those abilities, practicing in secret, wondering what they might eventually be used for.

What if this was it? What if the first test of what they could do was finding Marcus?

That's dangerous, Elle signed. We don't know where to look. We don't know what happened to him. We could get hurt.

"We could. But we could also get hurt by sitting here doing nothing while the only adult who treats us like humans disappears."

She has a point, Meen said, her hands finding Elle's for tactile translation. Marcus would look for us. If one of us went missing, he wouldn't just accept the police report and move on.

Elle was silent for a long moment. Then her hands moved: What's your plan?

Teena didn't have a plan. She had an impulse and a sense of justice and powers she barely understood. But she started talking anyway, letting the plan form as she spoke.

"Meen, you've studied the water tunnel project. You know where the construction sites are, how the tunnel system is laid out."

"In theory. I've never been there."

"You know more than any of us. Elle, you can sense things through air pressure, feel where people are. If Marcus is being held somewhere, you might be able to find him."

And you? Elle asked.

"I can feel through the ground. If we're near the tunnel, I can sense the structure, find passages, maybe even detect if there's been recent activity."

It was thin. It was dangerous. It was exactly the kind of plan that three thirteen-year-old girls should not be attempting.

But Marcus was missing, and no one else was going to look for him.

"Tomorrow night," Teena said. "After lights out. We slip out through the back, make our way to the tunnel access point Meen identifies, and see what we can find."

"That's insane," Meen said.

"I know."

"We could get caught. We could get hurt. We could make everything worse."

"I know."

"We have to do it anyway, don't we?"

Teena reached for Meen's hand in the darkness, squeezed it. "Yeah. I think we do."

Elle's hand found both of theirs, completing the connection. Together?

"Together," Teena said.

"Together," Meen agreed.

They sat like that for a while, three girls holding hands in the dark, contemplating a mission that terrified them. Somewhere beneath their feet, in tunnels they had never seen, answers were waiting.

And somewhere in those tunnels, Marcus Chen might be waiting too.

. . .

End of Chapter 11

## Chapter 12

# The Decision

The next day passed in slow agony. School was an exercise in distraction, lessons that couldn't compete with the thoughts racing through Teena's mind. She caught herself staring out windows, calculating distances, imagining routes through underground tunnels she had never seen.

Elle reported similar struggles through the hybrid signing system they had developed. Couldn't focus. Kept thinking about Marcus. About what we're going to do.

Meen had spent her free periods listening to everything she could find about Water Tunnel No. 3: construction documentaries, engineering podcasts, archived news reports. By the time they reunited at the group home, she had built a mental model of the tunnel system that was as detailed as anything Teena had ever heard.

"The main construction access is in Van Cortlandt Park," Meen explained, keeping her voice low as they gathered in their room. "But that's heavily monitored, active twenty-four hours."

Teena pulled out her phone and showed them the photograph she had taken that morning, the map Marcus had drawn, the access code his cousin had provided.

"This isn't the main construction access," she explained. "It's an old maintenance entrance from the original tunnel boring, back in the

seventies. Marcus's cousin Jorge must have discovered it during his work. A back door that the current security team doesn't know about, or doesn't care about because nothing valuable is supposed to be down there."

"But Marcus had a code," Meen said, listening to Teena's description. "7-2-9-4. That suggests the entrance is still functional, just not actively monitored."

Elle signed: Unless something valuable is down there. Something they're hiding.

"That's what Marcus went to find out. And now he's missing."

Meen nodded slowly. "There was a podcast last year about urban explorers trying to access the tunnel system. One of them mentioned that these auxiliary shafts from the seventies aren't on modern security grids. Jorge must have figured out the same thing."

So we have a way in that others don't, Elle signed.

"We have a way in that Marcus found for us. We just have to follow it."

They spent the next hour planning. Meen drew a mental map of the route from the group home to the service entrance, describing landmarks and turns that Teena committed to memory. Elle practiced sensing air currents through the room's window, trying to determine how far her perception could extend in open space versus enclosed tunnels.

Teena pressed her palm to the floor and reached downward, trying to feel the layers beneath: wood, concrete, earth, the distant presence of pipes and foundations and the vast infrastructure that underlay everything.

"I can feel something," she said. "Deep down. There's a... a hollowness? Like an echo in the ground. It might be the tunnel system."

"How far down?"

"I don't know. Hundreds of feet, maybe. But I can sense it."

The plan took shape. They would leave after midnight, when the night staff was settled and the group home was quiet. They would take the accessible route Meen had mapped, reaching the service entrance in twenty minutes, maybe thirty. They would use Elle's air sensing to detect guards, Teena's earth sense to navigate the tunnel system, and Meen's heat abilities to... well, Meen wasn't sure what she would do, but she would figure it out.

"This is still crazy," Meen said as they finalized details. "We're three kids with abilities we barely understand, going into an underground tunnel system to look for someone who might not even be there."

"I know," Teena said.

"We could call someone. The police again, or a news organization, or—"

"And tell them what? That we think our friend is trapped in a water tunnel because of something we heard in a phone conversation? They won't believe us. They won't even take us seriously."

She's right, Elle signed. We're foster kids. Disabled foster kids. No one listens to us about anything. Why would they listen to this?

Meen fell silent, the truth of it settling over them. They had spent their whole lives being ignored, overlooked, dismissed. Their concerns were managed rather than addressed. Their fears were medicated rather than acknowledged. The system that was supposed to protect them had made them invisible, and invisible people couldn't be witnesses, couldn't be believed, couldn't make anyone pay attention.

But they had power now. Real power, the kind that couldn't be ignored or dismissed or managed away. And tonight, they were going to use it.

"We need signals," Teena said. "For the tunnels. Elle can't hear us, and we can't always sign in the dark."

They worked it out together: two taps on the shoulder meant stop. A hand squeeze meant danger. Teena would send vibrations through the ground when she needed them to move. Elle would create a quick pulse of air pressure to signal all-clear. Simple, physical, independent of sight or sound.

"We should eat," Teena said, practical as always. "Dinner is in an hour, and we're going to need our strength."

They ate in the common room, trying to act normal, trying not to draw attention. Mrs. Washington was still distracted, still worried about Marcus, and the temporary night staff member was too unfamiliar with the routines to notice three girls acting slightly off.

After dinner, after homework, after the lights-out bell, they lay in their beds and waited. The group home settled into nighttime quiet: the creak of old pipes, the hum of the refrigerator downstairs, the occasional footstep of the night staff making rounds.

At midnight, Teena signaled by pressing her palm to the floor and sending a small vibration through the boards: their agreed-upon code.

They moved in practiced silence. Meen gathered their coats and gloves, stacked by her bed for easy access. Elle collected the small headlamp she had bought at a dollar store weeks ago, along with her phone for backup light. Teena grabbed the cheap work gloves she had taken from the group home's maintenance closet, distributing pairs to each of them. They weren't much, but they were something.

Elle eased the window open, the one she had been quietly loosening for weeks, creating an exit route for exactly this kind of emergency. Teena transferred from bed to chair, the movement smooth from years of repetition.

The window led to a fire escape, and the fire escape led to an alley behind the group home. The night air hit them like a wall, January cold biting through their layers. They had maybe thirty seconds before the motion sensor on the backyard camera would trigger an alert.

Elle moved first, her hands shaping the air, creating a pocket of stillness around them that muffled their sounds. Meen followed, already radiating warmth, raising their temperatures just enough to combat the cold. Teena came last, her wheels silent on the pavement, her senses extended into the ground.

They made it to the street without incident. The neighborhood was quiet, the Bronx sleeping around them, streetlights casting orange pools on sidewalks that glistened with frost.

"This way," Meen said, leading them along the route she had memorized.

They traveled in formation: Elle in front, sensing the air for approaching people; Meen in the middle, providing warmth and serving as communication hub; Teena in the rear, feeling the ground for any threat that might come from below or behind.

The streets were empty, mostly, the few pedestrians they passed paying no attention to three girls moving through the night. Who would notice? Who would care? They were invisible, as they had always been, and for once that invisibility was an asset.

Just under twenty minutes of travel brought them to the industrial area Marcus's map had indicated. The Bruckner lot was exactly as described: a fenced-off rectangle of cracked asphalt behind a warehouse that had been abandoned long enough for the red paint on its door to fade to rust. The main construction site was visible in the distance, floodlights illuminating the active entrance, but this corner of the lot was dark, forgotten.

"There," Teena said, pointing to a concrete bunker barely visible behind a stack of rotting pallets. "That matches Marcus's drawing."

They approached carefully, Elle's hands extended to feel for any sign of surveillance. The bunker door was metal, industrial, marked with faded warnings from the 1970s about authorized personnel and construction hazards. A keypad was mounted beside it, newer than the

door itself, its LED light blinking red.

"The code," Meen said. "7-2-9-4."

Teena wheeled closer and reached for the keypad. Her fingers hesitated over the buttons. If Marcus's cousin had given him the wrong code, or if the code had been changed since Jorge's reassignment, this would trigger an alarm. They would have seconds to flee before security arrived.

She entered the code.

The LED turned green. The lock clicked. The door swung inward on hinges that groaned with disuse.

Beyond it was darkness, the smell of damp earth and old concrete, and a ladder descending into depths they couldn't see. But Teena felt something else, too, a vibration in the metal door frame, a subtle electronic pulse.

"There's a sensor," she said quietly. "The door opening triggered something. Security could check at any time."

"Then we move fast," Elle signed.

Teena pressed her hand to the concrete and felt the tunnel system below, a vast network of passages extending in all directions. The sensation was overwhelming, like suddenly being able to see in a direction she had never known existed.

"It's there," she whispered. "I can feel it. The service level is maybe a hundred feet down. The main tunnel is deeper, but there are connecting passages."

Can we make it? Elle signed.

"We have to try."

Elle went first, her hands extended, feeling the air in the shaft below. "It's clear. No one down there that I can sense."

Meen followed, her hands on the ladder, her heat radiating enough warmth to combat the chill rising from below.

Teena went last, the hardest descent. She couldn't use the ladder normally, not with legs that didn't respond to her commands. Instead, she lowered herself to the shaft's edge, gripped the top rung, and began the slow process of climbing down using only her arms, her wheelchair left at the top like an abandoned shell.

It was exhausting. It was painful. But she had done harder things, and she would do harder things again.

Rung by rung, she descended into the earth.

Above her, the January sky was a circle of stars that shrank as she went deeper.

Below her, the tunnel waited.

And somewhere in that darkness, Marcus Chen might still be alive.

. . .

End of Chapter 12

Part Four

# **Beneath**

## Chapter 13

# The Descent

The ladder ended in darkness.

Teena's arms were trembling by the time she reached the bottom, muscles pushed far beyond their usual limits. She found a ledge to sit on, a concrete shelf that seemed designed for exactly this purpose, and let herself rest while her body recovered.

Elle was already moving, her hands extended, mapping the space through air currents. "Large chamber," she signed, Meen translating aloud for Teena's benefit. "Maybe fifty feet across. Tunnel branches in three directions. Air is moving from the northwest passage, which probably leads to an active ventilation system."

"We avoid the active areas," Teena said. "We're looking for somewhere abandoned, somewhere they might hide someone."

Meen was standing still, her head tilted, listening to sounds that Teena couldn't hear. "There's machinery running somewhere. Pumps, maybe. And water, lots of water. Some of it is flowing normally, but some of it sounds... different."

"Different how?"

"I can't explain. Just different."

Teena pressed her palm to the tunnel floor and felt the structure extend in all directions. The concrete was thick, reinforced, built to withstand the pressure of billions of gallons of water. She could sense

the passages branching outward, could feel the difference between completed sections (smooth and sealed) and construction zones (rough, unfinished, full of gaps and air pockets).

"There's a section to the east that feels wrong," she said. "The concrete is newer, less settled. And there are voids behind it, spaces that don't match the tunnel's original design. Like someone added rooms after the fact."

"That's where we go," Meen said.

The passage sloped downward, a gradual descent that Teena felt in her ears before she consciously registered the incline. The air grew colder, heavier, pressing against her chest with the weight of all the earth above them. They were dropping from the service level toward the main tunnel, another hundred feet of rock and concrete settling overhead.

They moved through the darkness, three girls navigating by senses that didn't rely on sight. Elle led, her hands constantly moving, feeling for obstacles and openings. Meen walked beside her, one hand on Elle's shoulder for guidance, her other hand extended to feel temperature changes.

Teena followed, and it was agony.

She had known it would be hard. She had prepared herself mentally for the crawl, had reminded herself of every obstacle course she had navigated in physical therapy, every flight of stairs she had conquered through sheer determination. But the tunnel floor was worse than anything she had imagined: rough concrete scattered with construction debris, sharp edges that bit into her palms, her forearms, her knees. Within the first fifty feet, she could feel blood soaking through her jeans.

"Stop," she gasped, and the others halted immediately.

Meen was beside her in seconds, her hands finding Teena by the warmth radiating off her skin. "You're bleeding. I can smell it."

"I can keep going."

"Not like this." Elle signed something, and Meen translated: "She says she can help. Create an air cushion beneath you, reduce the friction."

Teena felt it before she understood it: a pocket of compressed air forming under her body, lifting her slightly, taking the weight off her bleeding knees. Not flying, nothing so dramatic, but enough to let her slide forward rather than drag.

"Better?" Elle signed.

"Better." Teena began moving again, her arms still doing the work of propulsion, but the sharp concrete no longer tearing into her. "How long can you maintain this?"

Elle's hands moved: Long enough. Focus on the earth. Guide us.

They continued, but slower than before, the physical cost of their mission already mounting. Teena pressed her palm to the tunnel floor and felt ahead, mapping the passages through vibration and density, looking for the hidden section Marcus's map had indicated.

Not far. Maybe three hundred feet of tunnel between them and wherever Marcus was being held. It should have been nothing. It felt like miles.

They traveled for what felt like hours but was probably only minutes. The tunnel branched and split, passages leading in directions that Teena tracked through the vibrations in the stone. They passed abandoned equipment, stacks of materials, the detritus of a construction project that had been running so long that its earlier phases were already archaeological.

Elle checked her phone, glancing at the time. They had been underground too long. Every minute made the sensor more likely to matter, more likely to bring someone checking.

The air down here was wrong, Meen noticed. Nothing like the rusty-pipe taste from the group home. This was something else

entirely: acrid, solvent-sharp, industrial in a way that made her lungs ache. Whatever was poisoning the aquifer, they were getting closer to its source.

"Stop," Elle signed suddenly, her hands sharp and urgent. "People ahead."

Elle tapped Meen's shoulder twice. Freeze. The signal passed down the chain: Meen squeezed Teena's arm. They stopped instantly, no words needed.

Teena pressed her palm to the floor and felt what Elle must be sensing: footsteps, maybe two hundred feet away, moving through a parallel passage.

They waited, barely breathing, until the footsteps faded in the opposite direction. Elle pulsed the air once: all-clear. They continued, slower now, more careful, the knowledge that they weren't alone adding weight to every movement.

The section Teena had sensed drew closer. She could feel it through the ground: the newer concrete, the hidden spaces, the wrongness that didn't match the tunnel's official design. They turned a corner and found a door.

It was metal, industrial, set into a concrete frame that had been installed after the original tunnel construction. The door was locked, but more than that, it was hidden, positioned in a shadow where casual passersby might not notice it.

"This is it," Teena said. "Whatever they're hiding, it's behind this door."

Elle pressed her hands to the metal, feeling the air on the other side. "Large space. Multiple people, at least four, maybe more. One of them is moving erratically, like they're injured or restrained."

Meen found Elle's hand in the darkness and signed into her palm: Marcus.

Maybe, Elle signed back.

Teena studied the door, the lock, the frame. This wasn't like the surface entrance, where she could crack concrete and loosen moorings. This door was reinforced, designed to keep people out.

"I can't break through this," she said. "Not quietly, not quickly."

"Then we need another way in," Meen said.

Elle's hands moved in patterns of exploration, tracing the door's edges, the walls around it, the ceiling. "There's a vent. Up high, in the corner. Small, but..."

"But what?"

"But maybe big enough. For one of us."

They looked at each other in the darkness, making calculations none of them wanted to make.

"I can't climb," Teena said. "Even if I could reach the vent, I couldn't navigate a duct system without my legs."

"I can't see," Meen said. "I'd be useless in there, fumbling blind."

Which left Elle. Elle, who could see the vent's location. Elle, who could feel air currents through the ducts. Elle, who was small enough to fit and mobile enough to navigate.

I'll go, she signed. Find Marcus, find a way to open the door from inside, let you in.

"That's too dangerous," Teena said. "You'd be alone in there."

I'm Deaf. Being alone is what I know. Her hands moved with a certainty that Teena couldn't argue with. I can do this. Trust me.

They didn't have a better option. They didn't have time to find one.

Meen boosted Elle toward the ceiling, straining with the effort, her arms trembling. Teena braced Meen from below, providing what stability she could from her position on the floor. Elle's hands found the vent cover, pried it loose with a strength that came from years of using her hands as her primary tools, and pulled herself into the darkness of the duct system.

And then she was gone, swallowed by the walls, invisible even to Meen's heat sense and Teena's earth connection.

They waited in the tunnel, two girls alone in the dark, hoping that the third would find what she was looking for.

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End of Chapter 13

## Chapter 14

# The Discovery

The duct was barely wide enough for Elle's shoulders, a metal tube that extended into darkness she could feel but not see.

She crawled forward on her elbows and knees, moving by touch, her hands reading the duct's surface like Braille. The metal was cold beneath her, the air stale and recycled. Every few feet, she paused to extend her air sense, feeling for openings, for obstacles, for any sign that she was heading toward the space Elle had detected beyond the door.

The silence was absolute. No sound reached her here, not that sound ever did, but she was accustomed to feeling vibrations, the subtle tremors that told her when people were moving nearby. In the duct, even those were muted, swallowed by the metal walls.

She was truly alone. The realization settled over her like a familiar weight.

But alone didn't mean helpless. She had her hands, her air sense, her determination. She had spent her whole life navigating a world that wasn't designed for her. A vent system was just another obstacle.

The duct branched, and Elle paused at the junction, extending her awareness in both directions. To the left, she felt nothing, just more duct extending into distance. To the right, air moved differently, suggesting a larger space ahead, an opening.

She went right.

The duct narrowed, then widened, then opened into a vent grate that looked down into a room below. Elle pressed her face to the grate and saw Marcus.

He was tied to a support column, his hands bound behind his back, his face bruised and bloody. He was conscious, barely, his head lolling forward, his breath coming in shallow gasps. Around him, the room was filled with barrels, industrial containers marked with chemical hazard symbols.

This wasn't just a hidden space. This was a storage facility, and from the smell that reached Elle even through the vent, the barrels contained something toxic.

Three men were in the room, guards in civilian clothes who moved with the casual alertness of security professionals. They weren't watching Marcus closely; they were playing cards at a folding table, their attention on the game rather than their prisoner.

Elle assessed the situation. Three against one, all of them adults, all of them presumably armed. Even with her wind abilities, she couldn't take them in a direct fight. She needed to be smart.

The door. If she could reach the door, open it from inside, let Meen and Teena in, they might have a chance. Three girls with elemental powers against three guards with whatever weapons they carried. It wasn't good odds, but it was better than one girl alone.

She traced the duct system in her mind, mapping it through air currents. There was another vent on the far side of the room, near the door. If she could reach it without being detected, if she could drop down without alerting the guards, if she could get to the door before anyone stopped her...

Too many ifs. But there was no other option.

She began crawling again, slower now, more careful. The duct groaned once beneath her weight, and she froze, heart pounding,

waiting for shouts of alarm. None came. The guards continued their card game, oblivious.

She reached the second vent and looked down. The door was maybe ten feet away, a manual latch that she could see from her position. Between the vent and the door, there was clear floor, no obstacles. But one of the guards was facing in that direction, which meant she would be in his line of sight the moment she dropped.

Unless she wasn't.

Elle gathered her focus and reached for the air around the guard's face. A sudden gust, strong enough to make him blink, to turn his head away. It had to be timed perfectly: distract and drop simultaneously.

She positioned herself over the vent grate, legs ready to push through, hands ready to catch her fall.

Now.

She sent the wind at the guard's face, sharp and sudden. He flinched, raised his hand to shield his eyes. Elle pushed through the grate, dropped, hit the concrete floor with a roll that absorbed most of the impact.

By the time the guard turned back, she was at the door.

The latch was stiff, stuck from disuse. Elle pulled with both hands, her arms straining. Behind her, she felt the air shift as bodies moved, felt vibrations through the concrete as chairs scraped back, felt the pressure change of people rushing toward her.

The latch gave. The door swung open. Meen and Teena were on the other side, waiting, ready.

Everything happened at once.

Teena pressed her hands to the tunnel floor and the concrete cracked, sending spiderweb fissures toward the approaching guards. One of them stumbled, caught in a gap that opened beneath his foot. Another drew a weapon, some kind of baton, and advanced toward Elle.

Meen stepped forward and raised her hands. The air around the advancing guard shimmered with heat, and his baton glowed red, too hot to hold. He dropped it with a cry and staggered back.

Elle added her own contribution, a wall of wind that swept through the room, knocking papers and debris into the air, creating chaos that the guards couldn't navigate.

The third guard ran. He bolted for a door at the far end of the room, a door the girls hadn't known about, and was gone before anyone could stop him.

"He's going for help," Meen said. "We have to move."

They ran to Marcus. Teena reached him first, her arms burning from the crawl through the tunnel but still strong enough to work at his bonds. The rope was tight, professionally tied, and her fingers struggled with the knots.

"I'll burn them," Meen said. She placed her hands on the rope, concentrating, raising the temperature slowly enough to weaken the fibers without burning Marcus's skin. The rope smoked, frayed, and finally gave way.

Marcus slumped forward, barely conscious. Teena caught him as best she could from her position on the floor, lowering him gently.

"Marcus," she said. "Marcus, can you hear me?"

His eyes fluttered open, unfocused, confused. "Teena? What... how..."

"We came for you. Can you walk?"

He tried to stand, failed, tried again. "Maybe. With help."

Elle positioned herself on one side, Meen on the other. They lifted him between them, his weight distributed across their shoulders. It was awkward, difficult, but possible.

"The door we came through," Teena said, already moving toward the exit. "The ladder up. We have to get out before whoever that guard went for comes back."

They moved as fast as they could, which wasn't fast at all. Marcus was heavy, barely able to support himself. Teena was on the ground, crawling, slowing them down. Every step felt like it took forever.

Behind them, the room full of barrels remained, the evidence of whatever Meridian had been doing in these tunnels. Teena knew they should document it, should take pictures, should do something to prove what they had found.

But there was no time. The crisis was survival now, getting out before they were trapped.

They reached the junction where the hidden room connected to the main tunnel. They turned toward the shaft they had descended, the ladder that led back to the surface.

And found four men blocking their path.

Teena's heart sank. These weren't the guards from the storage room, still trapped behind them. These were different men, arriving from the direction of the entrance.

"The sensor," Meen breathed. "The door. They came because we triggered the alarm."

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End of Chapter 14

## Chapter 15

# The Fight

The men were not security guards. Teena could see it in the way they stood, the way they held themselves, the professional alertness that suggested training beyond what a construction site would require. They were private contractors, mercenaries, the kind of people who got hired when problems needed to disappear quietly.

One of them stepped forward. "Well," he said, his voice echoing in the tunnel. "This is unexpected. Three little girls and their friend, playing rescue mission in the middle of the night." He looked at Marcus, slumped between Elle and Meen. "You shouldn't have come for him. You should have left him alone and forgotten you ever knew his name."

Teena positioned herself in front of the others, her arms aching, her position on the floor making her feel even more vulnerable than usual. "We're leaving," she said. "You're going to let us go."

The man laughed. "And why would I do that?"

"Because if you don't, we'll make you."

More laughter, from all four of them now. Teena understood how they must look: three teenage girls, one of them on the ground, one of them blind, one of them Deaf, none of them armed. They were children, obviously lost, obviously in over their heads.

They had no idea what they were dealing with.

Teena sent a sharp vibration through the ground: move now. Elle felt it through her feet, Meen through her connection to the earth beneath them. The signal they had practiced.

Elle moved first.

She raised her hands and brought them down in a sharp gesture, and a wall of wind slammed into the two men on the left. They staggered backward, caught off guard, one of them falling to the concrete floor. The wind howled through the tunnel, a sound Elle couldn't hear but Teena could feel, primal and furious.

Meen followed instantly. She extended her hands toward the third man, who was reaching for something in his jacket, and the air around him shimmered with heat. His jacket began to smoke. He yelped, pulling at the fabric, trying to get it off before it burned him.

The fourth man was faster, smarter. He charged toward them, ignoring the chaos around him, focused on the girls. He had a baton in his hand, some kind of security weapon, and he was closing the distance fast.

Teena reached for the ground.

She pressed both palms flat against the tunnel floor and pushed with everything she had. The concrete cracked, fissures spreading outward from her hands like lightning frozen in stone. The floor buckled, a ridge rising directly in the charging man's path, and he tripped, his momentum carrying him into a sprawling fall.

"Go!" Teena shouted. "Get Marcus out!"

Elle and Meen hesitated for a fraction of a second, looking at her, but Teena's expression left no room for argument. They started moving, dragging Marcus between them, heading for the junction that would take them around the blocked path.

The first guard was getting up, shaking off the wind blast, reaching for a weapon. Teena cracked the ground under his feet again, opening a gap that swallowed his ankle, trapping him in place. He screamed,

the sound echoing off the tunnel walls.

She hated it. She hated hurting people, even people who had hurt Marcus, even people who would hurt her without hesitation. But there was no time for guilt, no space for mercy. Her friends were escaping, and she had to buy them time.

The fourth man, the one who had tripped, was on his feet again, angrier now, his face twisted with fury. He came at her again, and this time Teena was ready. She pulled at the concrete around her, creating a rough barrier, a wall of rubble that rose between them.

It wasn't much. A trained fighter could climb it in seconds. But seconds were what she needed.

She began crawling backward, arms screaming with exhaustion, following the path her friends had taken. Behind her, she could hear the men shouting, regrouping, preparing to pursue.

Elle appeared at the junction, her hands extended, wind swirling around her. She sent a blast down the tunnel, a sustained current that slowed the men's advance, made every step forward a battle against pressure that shouldn't exist.

"Come on!" Meen called from somewhere ahead. "There's another way out!"

Teena crawled faster, her palms scraping raw against the concrete. The junction loomed ahead, and then she was through, and Elle was sealing the passage behind her, a wall of compressed air that wouldn't hold forever but might hold long enough.

They found themselves in a different section of the tunnel, older, less finished. The walls were rough-hewn stone rather than poured concrete, the floor uneven and difficult to navigate. Meen was feeling her way along one wall, her free hand trailing over the surface.

"There's a draft," she said. "Air coming from somewhere. Another exit, maybe."

They followed the draft, Elle and Meen supporting Marcus, Teena dragging herself behind. The tunnel narrowed, twisted, and finally opened into a space that wasn't a tunnel at all but a natural cave, the kind of geological formation that sometimes underlay the city, remnants of an ancient landscape buried by millions of years of development.

And at the far end of the cave, starlight.

An opening, a crack in the earth, just wide enough for a person to squeeze through. Beyond it, Teena could see the night sky, could smell fresh air, could feel the world outside calling to her.

"Can you make it wider?" Meen asked.

Teena was nearly spent. Her arms were trembling, her palms were bleeding, her entire body felt like one continuous ache. But she pressed her hands to the stone around the opening and reached for the last reserves of her power.

The rock groaned. Fissures spread. The opening widened, just enough, barely enough.

Elle went first, pulling herself through. Meen followed, then Marcus, who needed help from both of them. Teena went last, crawling through the gap, feeling the stone scrape against her back, against her useless legs, against everything that had ever made her feel limited and small.

And then she was out.

They emerged into what looked like the edge of a park, a narrow strip of grass between the stone outcropping and a chain-link fence. Beyond the fence, Teena could see streetlights, a road, the distant glow of buildings. Civilization, maybe two hundred yards away.

Two hundred yards. It might as well have been two hundred miles.

"I can't," Teena said, and the words cost her everything. Her arms had stopped responding to her commands, trembling so violently she couldn't push herself upright. Her legs were cramping, the spasticity

triggered by exhaustion and cold, muscles seizing in ways that made her want to scream. Her knees were still bleeding through her jeans, the fabric stuck to wounds she couldn't see in the darkness.

"We'll carry you," Meen said.

"You can't. You have Marcus."

Elle was already moving, signing instructions that Meen translated: "I'll support Teena. Meen takes Marcus. We go slow."

"The guards, the tunnel, they'll find another way out eventually—"

"Then we call for help now." Elle pulled out her phone, and the screen's glow felt blinding after the darkness of the tunnel. "There's a signal. I'm calling 911."

Teena wanted to argue, wanted to insist they could make it on their own, wanted to protect their secret from the questions that emergency responders would ask. But her body had made the decision for her. She couldn't move.

Elle typed the text. New York had implemented Text-to-911 years ago, one of the few accessibility accommodations the city had gotten right, and Elle had the number saved for exactly this kind of emergency: Four people need help. Location: Crotona Park, near the rocks. One adult male, injured, possible head trauma. Three teenage girls, minor injuries. Please send ambulance.

Then she pocketed the phone and knelt beside Teena, positioning herself to lift.

"Together?" she signed.

"Together," Teena whispered.

They moved toward the fence, toward the road, toward the help that was coming.

But they were alive. They were together. And they had Marcus.

. . .

End of Chapter 15

## Chapter 16

# The Combination

They weren't safe yet.

Teena could hear voices in the distance, echoing from somewhere behind them, the guards pursuing through the tunnel system. It was only a matter of time before they found the cave exit, before they emerged into the park, before the chase resumed.

"We need to move," she said.

"Where?" Meen's voice was strained. "We don't know where we are. Marcus can barely walk. You can't..." She trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence.

"I can't crawl fast enough," Teena finished for her. "I know. But if we stay here, they'll find us."

Elle was scanning the area, her hands extended, feeling the air. Buildings that way, she signed, pointing. A few hundred yards. And... wait. Her hands moved more urgently. The guards are coming. They're in the cave. They'll be here in minutes.

The crack in the earth that had been their exit was still open, a dark wound in the grass. Teena could feel the men moving through the cave below, could sense their footsteps vibrating through the stone. Four men, angry, armed, coming fast.

"I can seal it," she said. "Collapse the opening. Buy us time."

"Can you do it from here?"

Teena pressed her palms to the grass, reaching through the soil to the stone beneath. She could feel the crack, the weakness in the earth that they had exploited to escape. If she pushed hard enough, pulled at the right points, the opening would collapse, would become impassable.

But she was so tired. Her power felt distant, muffled, like trying to shout through cotton. She didn't know if she had enough left.

"I need help," she said.

Elle and Meen looked at each other, then at her.

"How?" Meen asked.

"I don't know. But when we were in the backyard, during the fire, your powers worked together. My earth, maybe it can work with your heat, with Elle's wind. Maybe if we all push at the same time..."

It was a guess, a hope, a desperate improvisation. They had never tried to combine their powers deliberately. They didn't know if it would work.

But they were out of options.

"Elle," Teena said. "I need you to compress the air around the crack. Create pressure, force it into the stone."

Elle nodded, understanding without needing the concept explained.

"Meen. Heat the air that Elle is pushing. Hot air expands. If you can raise the temperature while she compresses it, the pressure will increase exponentially."

"And you?" Meen asked.

"I'll feel for the weak points. Guide the pressure to where it needs to go. And when the moment is right, I'll pull."

They positioned themselves around Teena, Elle on her left, Meen on her right. Teena kept her palms flat on the ground, her awareness extended into the earth.

"Ready?" she asked.

Ready, Elle signed.

"Ready," Meen said.

"Then let's do this. Together."

She didn't know why she said what she said next. The words came from somewhere deeper than thought, some instinct that understood what they were doing better than her conscious mind.

"Elle," she said.

Elle raised her hands, and the air began to move, spiraling toward the crack in the earth.

"Meen," Elle signed, her hands shaping the name.

Meen extended her own hands, and the air grew hot, shimmering with heat that made the grass around them wilt.

"Teena," Meen said.

And Teena pulled.

The earth responded like nothing she had ever felt. The power flowed through her, not just her own but theirs too, wind and fire and earth combining into something greater than any of them could achieve alone. She could feel Elle's compression, Meen's heat, her own connection to the stone, all of it weaving together into a single unified force.

It was too much.

The crack in the earth didn't just groan. It screamed. Stone shifted, then avalanched, the collapse spreading faster than Teena had intended, wider than she could control. The ground beneath them shuddered, and for one terrible moment Teena thought they had miscalculated, that the combination was going to bring down the entire hillside, burying them along with the guards below.

"Stop!" she tried to shout, but her voice wouldn't come. Her body had seized, every muscle locked in spasm, the power flowing through her like electricity through a wire that was burning out. She could feel Elle beside her, nose bleeding freely, hands still extended but shaking

violently. She could feel Meen, whose skin had gone ice-cold, the heat she had generated draining from her own body in a way that couldn't be healthy.

Then, finally, it stopped.

Rock fell in on itself, filling the gap, sealing the cave below. The guards' escape route disappeared in seconds, tons of stone settling into place with a finality that couldn't be undone.

"The guards," Meen said suddenly, her voice sharp with fear. "Did we just—"

Teena pressed her palm to the earth, feeling through the collapse. The cave exit was sealed, impassable, but the tunnel system beyond remained intact. She could feel four sets of footfalls through the stone, weight shifting and retreating, moving away from the collapse back through the cave toward the main tunnel network.

"They're alive," she said. "They can get out through the tunnels. We just blocked this exit."

The relief on Meen's face was visible even through her shivers. They had stopped the pursuit. They hadn't killed anyone.

But the cost was immediate.

Elle fell forward onto the grass, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Blood dripped from her nose onto the green below. Meen was shivering uncontrollably, her teeth chattering, her body temperature dangerously low from the heat she had channeled. Teena couldn't move at all, her muscles in full rebellion, spasms rippling through her legs and arms and back.

"That almost killed us," Meen managed to say through her shivers.

Teena couldn't speak, but she thought: Yes. It almost did. And next time, if we're not more careful, it will.

"That was..." Meen started.

"That was new," Teena finished. "That was definitely new."

Elle's hands moved: I felt you. Both of you. Inside my power. Like we were one thing, one person with three parts.

"Is that possible?" Teena asked. "Is that something we can do?"

No one answered, because no one knew. They were inventing this as they went, discovering abilities that no one had ever documented, exploring territory that had no maps.

But they knew one thing: together, they were stronger than apart. Together, they could do things that seemed impossible. Together, they might just survive.

Marcus groaned, stirring on the grass where they had set him down. His eyes were clearer now, more focused, the shock of the escape wearing off.

"What..." he said, looking at the collapsed earth, at the three girls who had saved him. "What are you?"

Teena shared a look with Elle and Meen.

"We're just kids," she said. "Kids who weren't going to let you disappear."

Marcus stared at her, at all of them, with an expression that mixed fear and gratitude and something that might have been wonder.

"We need to get you to a hospital," Meen said practically. "And we need to get back before the group home notices we're gone."

"The group home." Marcus laughed weakly, painfully. "You snuck out to save me. Mrs. Washington is going to kill you."

"Probably," Teena agreed. "But that's tomorrow's problem. Right now, let's just get out of here."

They helped Marcus to his feet, and together, slowly, painfully, they began the long walk toward civilization.

Behind them, the collapsed earth settled into silence.

Beneath them, the tunnel system continued its slow contamination, the crisis that had brought them here still unresolved.

But they had won this battle. They had saved their friend. And they had discovered something about themselves that would change everything.

The combination. The power they created together. The thing that made them more than three girls with individual abilities.

Teena didn't have a name for it yet. None of them did. But as they walked through the night, supporting Marcus between them, she knew that whatever came next, they would face it the way they had faced this: together, combined, unstoppable.

. . .

End of Chapter 16

## Chapter 17

# Aftermath

The hospital was bright and cold, a shock after the darkness of the tunnels. Marcus was taken immediately, wheeled away by nurses who asked questions the girls couldn't answer, and they were left in a waiting room to explain themselves.

The story they told was close enough to truth to be believable: they had snuck out of the group home looking for Marcus, following clues he had left behind, and had found him staggering out of a drainage culvert in Crotona Park. He had been beaten, confused, barely conscious. They had called 911 immediately.

The police noted the mud on their clothes, the scrapes on Teena's hands, the exhaustion evident in all three of them. The detective who took their statements, a tired woman with kind eyes, asked how three girls had ended up in that particular corner of the park at two in the morning.

"We knew he'd gone to ask questions about his cousin," Teena said. "The cousin who works on the tunnel project. We thought maybe he'd gone to the construction area, and when we couldn't find him at the main site, we started searching parks and green spaces across the Bronx."

"You should have called us," the detective said.

"We did. Two days ago. No one came looking."

The detective didn't have an answer to that. She looked at the three of them, at their injuries, at the wheelchair Teena was back in (retrieved by ambulance crew from the service entrance after Meen gave them directions, which raised questions the girls deflected with vague answers about "following Marcus's path"), and decided that whatever had really happened, these were children who had risked themselves to save someone they cared about.

"I'm going to recommend you not be charged with anything," she said finally. "But I need you to understand how dangerous this was. You could have been killed."

We almost were, Elle signed, and Teena didn't translate.

The ride back to the group home was silent. Mrs. Washington didn't yell; she was too relieved that they were safe, too overwhelmed by Marcus's return, too busy managing the chaos of a night that had exceeded anything her training had prepared her for.

"We'll talk about this tomorrow," she said as she ushered them inside. "All three of you, my office, after breakfast. Right now, just... go to bed."

They went to bed. They didn't sleep.

The next day, as promised, brought consequences. Mrs. Washington was furious in the measured way of someone who cared deeply and expressed it through rules. They were grounded, obviously. Their outings would be supervised for the foreseeable future. Their caseworkers would be informed of the incident.

But beneath the anger, Teena could see something else: pride, maybe, or at least grudging respect. They had gone looking for Marcus when the system had given up. They had found him when professional searchers hadn't even tried.

The larger consequences unfolded over the following days.

Marcus remembered.

He told them so during their first visit to the hospital, after the police had taken their statements, after Mrs. Washington had finished crying with relief and stepped out to make phone calls.

"I saw what you did," he said quietly, his voice hoarse from whatever they had done to him in that room. "The wind. The heat. The ground cracking under your hands. I wasn't hallucinating. I know what I saw."

The three girls looked at each other, a silent conference conducted through expression and gesture.

"You can't tell anyone," Teena said finally. "If anyone knows what we can do—"

"You think I'd turn you in?" Marcus almost laughed, then winced at the pain it caused. "You saved my life. All three of you, risking everything, breaking into a place you had no business being, fighting people who would have killed you." He shook his head slowly. "Whatever you are, whatever this is, I'm not going to be the one who exposes you to a system that would turn you into lab specimens."

"You really mean that?" Meen asked.

"I've spent two years watching that system fail you. Every caseworker who didn't listen, every placement that fell through, every time someone decided you were too complicated to help. You think I trust that system with something like this?" He met their eyes, each of them in turn. "Your secret is safe with me. I'll tell anyone who asks that I don't remember anything after they grabbed me. Head injury. Trauma. Whatever story works."

Teena felt something loosen in her chest, a fear she hadn't fully acknowledged until it released. Marcus wasn't just accepting their secret. He was choosing to protect them.

"Thank you," she said.

"Thank you," he replied. "For not leaving me down there."

It was Jorge who made the rest possible.

Marcus's cousin had disappeared from his job two weeks before Marcus was taken, reassigned to a distant project site with no explanation. But Jorge hadn't been silenced. Before his transfer, he had uploaded photographs to a cloud server, copies of the documentation he had submitted through official channels, evidence that someone in authority had buried.

When Marcus gave his statement to the police, he mentioned his cousin. The detective, following up, found Jorge in Arizona, working on a highway project, furious and frightened in equal measure. Jorge had copies of everything: water samples, chemical readings, photographs of the hidden storage area, emails from supervisors telling him to stop asking questions.

He had been waiting for someone to ask.

The federal government became involved three days after the girls' rescue, the EPA taking jurisdiction over what was now a potential drinking water contamination case. The FBI opened a parallel investigation into the assault on Marcus and the illegal waste disposal operation.

Marcus, recovering in the hospital, told the authorities everything he remembered about the legitimate parts of his ordeal. He described the tunnel section, the hidden room, the barrels of chemicals, the guards who had beaten him. He described his cousin Jorge, who had been the first to notice the contamination, who had been reassigned to keep him quiet.

The investigation that followed was swift and brutal. The tunnel section was sealed and inspected. The contamination was confirmed. Meridian Environmental Services was raided, its records seized, its executives arrested.

Victor Asher's face appeared on the news, hands cuffed behind his back, expression blank with the shock of a man who had believed himself untouchable. The charges were extensive: illegal dumping,

conspiracy, assault, attempted murder. The lawyers predicted decades in prison.

The girls watched the coverage from the common room, surrounded by other residents who didn't understand why they were so invested in a story about water tunnels and corporate crime.

"We did that," Meen whispered.

We helped, Elle signed. Marcus did the hard part. He was the one who got hurt.

"He got hurt because of what he found. And we got him out because of what we can do."

The water supply was protected. The contamination had been caught before it could spread to the municipal system. Millions of people would drink clean water because three girls had decided to go looking for a friend.

They weren't mentioned in the news reports. They weren't celebrated or credited or recognized. The narrative that emerged credited Marcus with the discovery, investigators with the arrest, the system with the justice.

The girls were invisible, as they had always been. And for once, they preferred it that way.

But the system had noticed them.

Three days after the tunnel, an emergency ACS meeting descended on the group home. Caseworkers, supervisors, a deputy commissioner, all of them demanding to know how three minors had slipped out undetected, had ended up in a park at 2 AM, had somehow been present when a kidnapping victim emerged from the earth. Mrs. Washington defended her staff. The night worker was suspended pending review. New protocols were drafted: bed checks every hour, window locks, motion sensors.

There was talk of separation. One supervisor suggested that the three girls were "feeding each other's risk-taking behavior," that

placing them together had been a mistake, that they should be distributed to different facilities for their own safety. Teena overheard this through the office door, her palm pressed to the floor, feeling the vibrations of voices she couldn't quite hear, and she felt the cold terror of everything they had built being dismantled by people who would never understand.

But the publicity saved them. A New York Times reporter had picked up the Marcus Chen story, had mentioned the "three disabled foster children" who had found him, had used phrases like "remarkable courage" and "failed by the system." The deputy commissioner, suddenly aware of how separating them would look, withdrew the recommendation. The girls stayed together, for now, under tighter supervision than before.

The nights were the hardest.

Teena woke from dreams of tunnels, of darkness, of her arms giving out while the ground stretched endlessly ahead. Her legs cramped worse than they had in years, the spasticity triggered by the trauma her body had endured, and she spent hours each night stretching and massaging muscles that refused to cooperate.

Elle slept with her window open, even in January, because the thought of enclosed spaces made her chest tighten. She had nightmares about the vent, about crawling through metal walls that narrowed around her, about silence that was more than deafness. She woke gasping for air she couldn't hear herself breathing.

Meen was afraid of her own hands. She had felt the heat pour out of her in the cave, had felt her body temperature drop to dangerous levels, and now she flinched when she touched things, afraid she would burn them or freeze them or lose control in ways she couldn't predict. She wore gloves to bed, a psychological barrier against a power that didn't care about fabric.

They didn't talk about it, not directly. But in the darkness, they reached for each other, hands finding hands across the gaps between their beds, and the contact helped. Whatever they had become, they had become it together.

"Do you think there will be others?" Meen asked one night, in the darkness of their room. "Other people like us, with abilities they don't understand?"

Probably, Elle signed. If we exist, there must be more. Somewhere.

"What do we do about them?"

"Nothing, right now. We protect ourselves. We stay together. We wait."

"Wait for what?"

Teena didn't have an answer. She didn't know what they were waiting for, only that the tunnel had been the beginning of something, not the end. They had discovered what they could do. They had used it to save someone they cared about. Somewhere in that equation was a future, a purpose, a reason why three girls with disabilities had been given powers that defied explanation.

But that future could wait. Right now, they had homework, and meetings with caseworkers, and the ordinary chaos of life in the foster care system. They had each other, and a secret that bound them together more tightly than any legal arrangement ever could.

Elle's placement meeting was rescheduled, then rescheduled again, then quietly dropped from the calendar. Something about the investigation, about the group home's involvement in Marcus's rescue, had changed the bureaucratic calculus. Elle was no longer a priority for transfer. She was staying, at least for now.

They didn't question the reprieve. They just accepted it, and were grateful, and promised themselves they would be ready when the system inevitably tried again.

The new restrictions made practice harder. Hourly bed checks meant they couldn't slip out to the backyard anymore. Window locks meant no late-night escapes. Motion sensors in the hallways meant every trip to the bathroom was logged and timestamped.

They adapted. Teena learned to sense the night staff's footsteps through the floor, giving them ninety seconds of warning before each check. Elle could feel the air pressure change when the hallway door opened. They practiced in whispers and gestures, their powers constrained to the smallest possible scale: a breeze that ruffled curtains, warmth that spread through their joined hands, a vibration in the floorboards that only they could feel.

It wasn't enough. They knew it wasn't enough. But it was what they had, and they used it.

One night, a week after the tunnel, they practiced their combination for the first time since the cave. They spoke their names in sequence, and felt the power flow between them, and marveled at what they had become.

"We need a name," Meen said. "For us. For what we are."

Elementals? Elle suggested.

"Too generic. Everyone uses that."

"What about just... Elements?" Teena said. "Simple. Direct. Wind, fire, earth."

"The Elements," Meen repeated, testing it. "Three girls. Three elements." She paused. "Wait. Elle. Meen. Teena. E-L-E-M-E-N-T-S. If you use the right letters from each name..."

She traced it in the air, though none of them could see the gesture in the dark: "E-L from Elle. M-E-N from Meen, from Mingzhu. T from Teena, and S from... what's your middle name?"

"Sarah," Teena said slowly, understanding dawning. "Christina Sarah Okonkwo."

"EleMenTs. Our names are in the word. We are the word."

Elle's hands moved in the darkness, and even without tactile contact, Teena could sense the shape of her response: wonder, recognition, rightness.

"The EleMenTs," Teena said aloud. "That's us."

It wasn't just a name. It was a declaration. Their identities woven into the power they shared, inseparable, encoded in a word that the world would eventually learn to respect.

The EleMenTs.

Three girls who had been overlooked and underestimated and dismissed by every system that was supposed to help them. Three girls who had found each other in a cramped room at the end of a hallway. Three girls who could move wind and fire and earth.

The world didn't know about them yet. The world wasn't ready.

But when the time came, when they were needed, when crisis called for a response that ordinary people couldn't provide, the EleMenTs would be ready.

Together.

. . .

End of Chapter 17

## Chapter 18

# Watching

The office had no windows.

This was intentional. The work done here required privacy, security, freedom from observation. The walls were lined with screens, each displaying feeds from different sources: traffic cameras, security systems, social media platforms, satellite imagery. Information flowed into this room from across the city, across the country, across the world, and the people who worked here sorted it, analyzed it, looked for patterns that might indicate something worth investigating.

Dr. Helen Vance stood before one particular screen, her attention fixed on footage that had been flagged by an algorithm and escalated through three levels of review before reaching her desk.

The footage had come through Prometheus Applied Sciences' federal partnership program, a quiet arrangement that gave the organization access to security feeds from critical infrastructure sites across the country. The official purpose was threat assessment, monitoring for potential attacks on water systems, power grids, transportation networks. The unofficial purpose was broader: looking for anomalies, for patterns, for evidence of capabilities that didn't fit known parameters.

The footage was from Water Tunnel No. 3, specifically from a security camera in Section 17B. The timestamp was three weeks old,

the night when everything had gone wrong for Victor Asher and his Meridian operation. Law enforcement had seized the footage as evidence of corporate malfeasance. But Prometheus had obtained copies through channels that didn't require warrants or official requests.

Vance had been scanning infrastructure footage for anomalies for twenty years. She had seen industrial accidents, criminal activities, security breaches of every variety. She had never seen anything like this.

Most of the footage was ordinary: guards patrolling, equipment sitting idle, the mundane rhythms of a construction site at night. But there was a section, approximately seven minutes long, that was anything but ordinary.

The camera showed a corridor in the hidden section, the space where Asher's people had been storing their illegal waste. Guards were visible, playing cards, relaxed. And then everything changed.

Vance watched the footage for the twentieth time. She watched a figure drop from a ceiling vent, a young girl, moving with purpose. She watched the door open from the inside, watched two more girls enter, one of them crawling on the ground in a way that suggested mobility impairment.

She watched the fight.

The air seemed to move with intention, knocking guards off their feet. The temperature shifted visibly, heat signatures spiking and dropping in patterns that couldn't be natural. The floor cracked, fissures spreading from the girl on the ground, concrete shifting like liquid.

Three girls. Children, from what Vance could determine. And they had displayed abilities that her department had been searching for across decades.

She paused the footage and zoomed in on the girl who had come through the vent. Young, perhaps thirteen, with pale eyes that suggested she might be visually impaired or... no, Vance corrected herself, studying the way the girl's hands moved. She was Deaf. The girl was Deaf, and she was controlling the air with gestures that looked almost like sign language.

The second girl, the one who had generated heat, was clearly blind. Her eyes tracked nothing, focused on nothing, but her movement through space was confident, precise, the navigation of someone who had rebuilt her relationship with the physical world from scratch.

The third girl was in a wheelchair. Or had been, until she entered the tunnel. Cerebral palsy, Vance guessed from the way her legs moved, the specific pattern of muscle tension visible even in the grainy footage.

Three girls. Three disabilities. Three elemental powers.

Vance felt the excitement building in her chest, the thrill of discovery that had driven her work for forty years. These weren't random anomalies, weren't isolated incidents. These girls had found each other, had learned to work together, had combined their abilities in ways that amplified their individual powers.

This was exactly what she had been looking for.

She pulled up the case files that her team had assembled. The tunnel incident had drawn attention because of the Asher investigation, but no one in law enforcement had noticed what Vance had noticed. They saw a rescue, a crime exposed, justice served. They didn't see what the security footage actually showed.

The files had come through the FBI's discovery process on the Asher case, police reports and hospital intake forms that mentioned three minors present at the scene. From there, Prometheus's liaison at Homeland Security had flagged the case under "critical infrastructure

threat assessment" protocols, pulling juvenile records that would normally require a court order. It wasn't strictly legal, but it wasn't strictly illegal either, existing in the gray zone where national security concerns created exceptions to rules designed for ordinary circumstances.

The files were sparse but sufficient. Three girls, residents of a group home in Mott Haven. Eleanor Hartley, thirteen, Deaf since birth. Mingzhu Shen, thirteen, blind since age nine. Christina Okonkwo, thirteen, cerebral palsy since birth. All three classified as "hard to place," shuffled through the foster system, eventually landing together in the same facility.

Coincidence? Vance didn't believe in coincidence. Something had drawn these girls together, or something had awakened in them because they were together. Either way, it represented a pattern, a mechanism, a phenomenon that could be studied and potentially replicated.

She made notes. She would need to place an operative, someone who could get close to the girls, observe them without raising suspicion. She would need surveillance, both electronic and physical. She would need patience, the willingness to watch and wait while the girls revealed more of what they could do.

Direct intervention was off the table, at least for now. The federal oversight committee that authorized Prometheus's partnership program had strict protocols about contact with minors, about domestic operations, about anything that might draw congressional attention. Vance could observe. She could document. She could build a case for eventual engagement. But she couldn't simply grab three foster children off the street, no matter how extraordinary their abilities.

The committee would need to be convinced. Evidence would need to accumulate. And in the meantime, the girls would need to remain unaware that they were being watched. Any sign of surveillance and

they might disappear into the foster system's chaos, transferred to different facilities, scattered across different boroughs, their power diffused before Prometheus could understand it.

Patience had never been Vance's strongest quality. But for this, she would learn.

And eventually, when she understood them better, when she had built an unassailable case for intervention, she would bring them in. For study. For protection, she told herself. For their own good.

The world wasn't ready for people like them. But Prometheus Applied Sciences was.

Vance closed the files and picked up her phone. "Get me Samuel Cross," she said. "I have a new assignment for him."

. . .

The group home was quiet after dinner.

Elle sat on her bed, practicing the small wind patterns that had become second nature over the past weeks. Meen was listening to an audiobook, something about hydraulic engineering that she said was "actually fascinating if you gave it a chance." Teena was doing homework, her pen scratching across paper in the steady rhythm of someone who refused to let the world slow her down.

They were together. They were safe. They were, for the moment, ordinary girls in an ordinary room, dealing with ordinary problems.

But Elle felt something.

She couldn't explain it, couldn't point to a specific sensation or observation. It was more like a change in pressure, an awareness that the air around them carried attention she couldn't identify.

She looked at the window, where the curtains moved in a breeze that came from her rather than from outside. She thought about the tunnel, about the guards they had fought, about the footage that those

security cameras must have captured.

We need to be careful, she signed.

Meen looked up from her audiobook, her head turning toward Elle's voice even though there was no voice to hear. "Careful of what?"

I don't know. Something. Someone is watching.

"Watching us? How?"

Elle couldn't answer. She didn't know how or why or who. She only knew that the feeling was there, a prickle at the back of her neck, an instinct that had kept her alive through years of navigating a world that hadn't been built for her.

"We'll be careful," Teena said, practical as always. "We've always been careful. That's how we survive."

Elle nodded, but the feeling didn't fade.

Somewhere out there, someone had noticed what they could do. Somewhere out there, plans were being made, resources allocated, attention focused.

They had saved Marcus. They had exposed the contamination. They had discovered what they were capable of when they worked together.

And now, without knowing it, they had attracted the attention of something far more dangerous than Victor Asher and his tunnel full of chemicals.

Elle looked at her friends, at the family she had found, at the room that had become her home.

Whatever comes, she signed, we face it together.

"Together," Meen agreed.

"Together," Teena added.

The word hung in the air, a promise and a warning, the only defense they had against a world that was about to change.

Outside the window, January stars glittered in a cold sky. Beneath the streets, tunnels stretched through darkness. And in a windowless office across the city, a woman with ice-blue eyes began to plan.

Downstairs, Mrs. Washington's phone lit up. She answered, listened, and wrote something on a notepad. When she hung up, her face was troubled.

Tomorrow, she would have to tell Elle that the Hendersons had requested another meeting. They weren't giving up. They had submitted a formal placement request to ACS, citing their "unique qualifications" to provide a Deaf-appropriate home environment.

The system wasn't finished with them yet.

The EleMenTs had announced themselves, whether they knew it or not.

And Prometheus was watching.

. . .

End of Chapter 18

End of Book 1: Beneath the City

## Coming Next

### **The Invisible Hand**

Book Two of The EleMenTs Series

Three months after escaping the tunnels, Elle, Meen, and Teena find themselves under constant surveillance. Prometheus Applied Sciences hasn't forgotten them, and a new operative named Sarah Miller has infiltrated their lives as a volunteer at the group home.

When a fourth powered teenager emerges—a girl named Tal who controls water and experiences the world through autism—the girls must decide whether to trust her. Her arrival forces them out of hiding and into a trap at the Museum of Natural History.

Faced with exposure or capture, the girls make a choice that will change everything: they go public. With the help of journalist James Lightfoot, they tell their story to the world, becoming overnight celebrities, symbols of resistance, and fugitives from powerful forces who will stop at nothing to control what they cannot understand.

## **The Reckoning**

Book Three of The EleMenTs Series

One year after going public, the EleMenTs have become symbols in a national debate about powered individuals. As Congress prepares to vote on the Protection and Integration Act—a bill that would require registration and monitoring of all people with abilities—the four teenagers are called to testify before the Senate.

Agent Vance, their old enemy from Prometheus, returns with shocking evidence: the registration program isn't new. It existed in the 1980s, and Meen's mother was one of its first subjects.

As the vote approaches, the girls uncover the truth behind Verdant Agricultural Holdings, the shell company funding both Prometheus and the congressional push for registration. The final battle isn't fought with elemental powers but with testimony, evidence, and the courage to face a nation that fears what it cannot control.

## About the Author

David Boles holds an MFA from Columbia University, where he studied dramatic writing at the Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theatre Studies. He is the founder of David Boles Books Writing & Publishing, established in 1975, and a member of the Dramatists Guild, the Authors Guild, and PEN America.

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