

AT THE EDGE OF THE HAIGHT

CHAPTER 1

Root skimmed the sidewalk with his nose, sniffing at food wrappers, a black boot, and a pair of red tights someone had tossed in a perfect Z. I put my hand on his neck and nudged him past. “Not your business,” I said. He locked his eyes on me because he knew I had bread and cheese in my pack. They always kicked you out after breakfast, but you could take whatever you wanted if you stayed late to help clean up. It meant splitting from Ash and everyone, but I knew where they’d be, sitting at the front of the park, waiting for things to get started. I should have been there too, but of course I didn’t know that until later.

It was too early for tourists to be out. Two men stood at the bus stop, coats drawn up against the fog and whatever else had blown in overnight. Jax was slumped on the corner in his wheelchair, snoring in small puffs, a gray blanket draped over his head. Otherwise, no one was around except for hardcore sleepers twisted in doorways, still too wasted to hear the cleaning truck brushing water against the curb, as if that did anything. You could always see what was left behind.

I kept trying to hurry Root along, but he was taking his time, until the truck churned alongside us and he stopped and tilted his head to the smell like he was thinking about it. Then he took off, racing down the street, his tail flicked up straight. He crossed at the corner and disappeared into the bushes. I tore after him, my pack slapping against my back.

“Root!” I yelled in a frantic voice. I’d taken him to the free clinic downtown a few weeks ago, foam spilling out of his mouth from something he found. They’d pumped his stomach and lectured me to take better care of him, as if I could make him act right when we stayed in Golden Gate Park. They told me I should think about giving him up so he could be adopted and be safe, in a house. They didn’t get it. We took care of each other.

“Root, get your ass out of there,” I screamed. “I mean it!”

There was no trace of him, but he knew his way around the park. We all did. I reached in and rattled the brush, which was waist high.

“Root!”

He came halfway out, his muzzle crusted with dirt. He looked at me the way he did when he knew he was in trouble. I grabbed for his collar, but missed, and he scrambled back in. I followed him through the brush into a small clearing and I kept talking to him, what did he think he was doing, he was crazy, so I didn’t see right off what was in front of me. But Root was looking down, at a kid lying on the ground, perfectly still, his eyes wide open to the sky. His head was turned a little to one side, his arms spread out as if he was making an angel in the dirt.

Root sniffed his face and neck. The kid stuttered in a single long breath and I stood there, watching, holding my own. Root licked his cheek and edged his nose down the kid's chest toward a seeping stain of blood. In the middle, almost hidden, was a tiny slit in his shirt. I couldn't stop looking at the blood, the kid's halo of light brown hair, and for once in twenty years on this earth I couldn't seem to move.

I knew I would see it for the rest of my life. Whenever I closed my eyes, he would be there, his life leaking out on the ground. Maybe it was true what my stand-in of a mother said. *You are going to end up damaged goods.* I couldn't help copying her voice. "You are going to be sorry," I said to Root and pulled him away from the kid. I wanted to put my hand on the kid's chest to see if it was moving, but I couldn't get myself to do it. My heart was banging against my chest. Who was I going to scream for? Ash and everyone else, they wouldn't hear me.

Root startled and growled with his mouth closed, a slow deep rattle he made when he knew he was on guard. We both looked over at a man standing at the edge of the clearing. He could have been there the whole time, waiting, or maybe he'd walked in right after us. He was a head taller than me, his black and gray hair pushed back into a stringy ducktail. I had a sweatshirt hood pulled up over my head so nothing about me stood out, but Root was something you'd remember. He looked like he'd been sewn together, his face soft Labrador, the rest some short, wide pit bull creation.

The man stuck his hands in the pockets of his camo pants and stared at us. I tried to stare back, but all I could do was reach for Root, who moved from a muffled growl to an all-out bark. I didn't usually make people nervous, but the man shifted back and forth, crunching sticks and leaves under his boots, which made Root bark louder. The man lunged toward us, then stopped, like he forgot something. I thought how easily he could come after me. No one would know. I'd be lying there, next to the kid. The cops would think we'd done it to each other.

"Keep a handle on the fucking dog," he said, wiping at what looked like blood on his forehead. I could tell he was used to ordering people around.

It seemed like minutes passed, but it must have been less because neither of us moved. Even Root stood still, his eyes on the man. And then, not thinking where I was headed, I turned and ran. Root kept up, loping next to me. "You heard me?" he yelled after us. "I know where to find your ass."

I scrambled across the uneven dirt and past some trees, until I had to bend in half and gulp air. I listened for the man, but all I could hear was my own quick breath, or maybe it was his, or the wind. I couldn't tell what was real. The carpet of yellow and brown leaves where I stood looked too bright. They smelled sweet but rotten. When I straightened up, my muscles were ready for more, but I couldn't do it. The loop had started playing in my brain, of the kid on the ground and the look in the man's eyes.

I knew something about getting away. I'd been doing that most of my life, but not like this. No one had tried to stop me when I left the house where I'd lived longer than anywhere else. They had no idea where I was, standing in a park hundreds of miles away, alone in a whole different way. Root whined softly and I put a finger sternly to my lips, as if he'd know what that meant. Quiet, I mouthed. No one was coming to help. I could run through the park all the way to the ocean, but then where would I go? I turned toward the other direction, which led back to the street, and my body took over and I was running again, pretending I was someone who knew what she was doing.