

PART I - ARIANA

CHAPTER 1

He runs quickly and quietly through the dense woodland, his breathing is shallow yet steady. Beads of sweat glisten on the translucent skin of his forehead. His intense brown eyes drink in the surroundings of the forest as they flash by. The muscles flex in his arms and legs as he runs and the sun reflects the contours of his body, showcasing his strong physique.

I wake with a start; I can feel the blood pumping ferociously through my veins and a ringing in my ears. My heart is pounding so loudly that I'm sure it will wake Mom, Dad, Lily and Deacon. I take deep breaths, slowly inhaling and exhaling, in an attempt to calm my beating heart.

This is the tenth night in a row that I've dreamt of him: Zane. I'm surprised we've retained the ability to dream, that they hadn't programmed it into the Vita. I have no idea what the dreams mean, or if they mean anything at all. No doubt I'll spend the rest of today thinking of him, instead of concentrating on my classes and maneuvers.

A slight movement in the corner of my eye catches my attention. The Medicet has entered the room so quietly that it startles me, my heart pounds again in response. I don't think I'll ever get used to these medical drones, sophisticated robots that work with assigned doctors; to provide the high quality medical care essential to ensure the continuation of the human race. It's just one of the many changes that we've had to get accustomed to on Novo. I obediently hold out my arm and the Medicet administers the shot. I instantly feel relaxed, my previous anxiety over the dream a distant memory. I immediately fall back asleep.

When I wake again, I reach out to my left, to the panel over my bedside locker and press the top right-hand button. 5.30 a.m. displays on the commiboard in the corner of the room. It's too early, but I know there's no point in trying to go back to sleep. I pull off the covers and swing my legs over the side of the bed. I get up slowly and stretch my arms out over my head, I gently twist my neck from side to side. As I move I can feel the slight metal edge of the Vita, it rests at the base of my neck just above my spinal cord. I remember how difficult it was to get used to the sensation of it at first, but now it's practically seamless, it has become an accepted part of my body. It's only my daily morning stretch that reminds me of its existence. I think back to the day it was inserted—the day we had to vacate Earth. I still can't believe the events of the last two years, it almost feels like it was something straight out of a Hollywood movie.

I shake myself from my melancholy, pull off my pajamas and head straight for the shower. As I stand under the steaming hot water, my mind wanders back to Zane. Is he a figment of my imagination? A memory fighting to be restored? Or is there something else at play here? Except Dr. Victus says it's impossible, the whole point of the nostalgia elixir was to make the transition from Earth to Novo as easy as possible. Its sole function to wipe our memories of those left behind.

So who is Zane? And why am I dreaming of him? I visualise him as I've seen him in my sleep. Chocolate brown eyes, short dark hair, average height. On his right upper arm is an apparent tattoo, it's too indistinct in my dreams to decipher. He's clearly athletic and very fit. My heart quickens as I recall the images of him showering and dressing, and I feel a natural stirring throughout my body. There's no one else in the room, but I still blush furiously—I have to stop this! Maybe I *am* going crazy and it's my mind's way of saying 'enough'! I step out of the shower and pull on

my jogging pants and top, I lace my sneakers tight. I swiftly dry my hair and tie it up, before heading out of my room.

I tiptoe down the stairs as quietly as I can, no point in disturbing my family this early. As I enter our living space, I see that my father is already up and dressed for work. I look at him with pride, so handsome, so strong in his uniform. My father is the center of my universe. Period. He's standing at the far end of the large circular glass wall that spans the entire structure of our home, overlooking the man-made lake, staring pensively at the calm water outside. "Hey Dad, why are you up so early? Penny for your thoughts?" I ask. My father turns around, a frown quickly forming on his face.

"Ariana, I could ask you the same thing."

"Weird dreams again," I say by way of explanation. "What's your excuse?"

"We're piloting the latest model stealth-craft this morning. We thought it least disruptive to the citizens of Novo if we conducted our tests early," he says. "Are you going out for a run?"

"Yes, I thought it might help clear my head."

"Well, make sure to stick to the running track and keep safe."

I inwardly laugh; Novo is about the safest place you could live. All citizens have been carefully chosen from Earth based on a variety of specific assessments including personal characteristics, medical status, age and possession of—at least one—desired talent from the requisite 'skills list'. No one is older than forty-five, apparently there's no place in the new world order for the elderly or the sick. I'm fairly certain they didn't do any recruiting in prisons either, and the intense personality screening ruled out any supposed 'undesirables'.

There's also the Magna Superiore: an invisible force field that surrounds Novo, shaped like a dome, it acts as a protective shield. No one can enter or exit without permission. It's practically invisible to the naked eye except where it glints in parts and reminds us of its existence. Dad says it's to protect us from unknown enemies. I think it's further evidence of the extent to which the authorities desire to control everyone and everything in Novo.

My father has always been very protective of his family, because of all the things he has seen as a Command Major Sergeant in the Army. He's now a Level 1 Commander, which is a position of high seniority and great responsibility; I see it weighing on his shoulders, as if the stress is a real living thing. My sixth sense goes into overdrive again as I get the feeling there's more to this than meets the eye. I wonder what has him so preoccupied lately. There's no point asking him though, he has a natural ability to easily deflect any uncomfortable topics. I know he'll confide in me when he feels the time is right.

I cross to the kitchen, at the center of our large open living space, and find my water vest. I deftly fill it and pull the vest on, one arm at a time, securing it tightly in the middle. I position the tube down along my arm until it clicks into place on the data-cuff on my left wrist. The data-cuff is another new addition to modern life. It's a fully interactive communications device which looks like a high-tech watch, but is actually a cell phone, GPS device, video communicator, notice board and channel for receiving official government communications. It enables mobile access to my n-mails and personal photos, and I can download books, music and movies on the go. It also serves as an identifier, once scanned at an official entry gate, to any of the facilities and services in Novo.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stay safe,” I placate him as I leave while simultaneously blowing him a kiss. He raises his hand and catches the kiss in one swift motion, we both smile. We’ve been doing this since I was a little girl and I cherish the comfort, closeness and familiarity of the gesture; I’ll never get too old for it. My mom says the term ‘Daddy’s girl’ was invented for us. I smile as I think of my father, the love I feel for him knows no bounds. If only I had the same relationship with my mother, but the dynamic of that relationship couldn’t be more different at the moment. I sigh as I shut the door behind me and start the short walk to the running track. I allow myself to reflect on the events that brought us here.

Disaster upon disaster wreaked havoc on Earth, completely wiping out most countries and landmass, making it largely uninhabitable; except for parts of America which survived to this day. What I hadn’t known, until that fateful day, was that the alliance had been formed between some of the key nations on Earth in preparation for doomsday. Novo had been under construction since the 1960’s.

Novo is the name of our new planet, nestled in space approximately twelve hundred miles above the surface of Earth. This planet was chosen for its proximity to our original homeland and the Sun, the consistency of its climate and the pliable terrain. The Magna Minore securely encloses our environment and maintains the synthetic atmospheric composition which is aligned to Earth.

There are 15 Regions on Novo, we live in Region 2, or Aqua as it’s more commonly known. All of the Regions have been given their own identity and each has been created in the likeness of different places we knew back on Earth. While I appreciate the efforts being made to retain this element of familiarity, the resulting outcome is a planet with a dual persona. The manufactured edges are too austere and hard to ignore, it’s like looking at a life-size model replica of Earth.

Aqua has been modelled on one of the Great Lakes of North America and there's a huge artificial lake taking center stage in the middle of the Region. The architects and engineers are busy constructing other uninhabited Regions in preparation for the projected population growth. At the moment, only Regions 1 through 7 are occupied and we have huge capacity to develop as a new society. One of the key stated aims of our government is to increase the population size and see the human race grow and evolve under their command. At all costs it would seem, as I think of their latest policy. A shudder runs involuntarily down my spine.

I look up and see that I've already reached the entrance to the running track. I scan my wrist at the data panel on the gate. Instantly my credentials flash up on the screen and I'm granted access. I walk down the steps to the ground level running track and press the button on the data panel to access the scenery grid. I don't need to review the options: I know which scenery I prefer. I touch the screen where it displays 'Woodland' and instantly the running track disappears and the woods materialise before my eyes.

Except, of course, that it's not real; it's another Novo initiative thought up by Team Reminiscence. This team exists purely to ensure that we don't lose our humanity, our memories of Earth and to replicate as much of our home as possible. This is one of their better ideas, and as I run it feels like I'm in the woods back home in Connecticut. I hear the birds singing in the trees, smell the pine needles, feel the cool breeze on my face, and detect the crunch under my foot as I run across imaginary branches, twigs and the undergrowth of the woods. This is one of the few places in Novo where I can lose myself and feel like me again. So much of what we do now is controlled and contrived, part of the great master plan to ensure that humanity flourishes in our new regime. I try and shake all concerns of our new

government and their grand schemes from my mind, I will only become frustrated and anxious at how powerless we all are when it comes to our future, and our destiny. Instead, I allow my thoughts drift back to Zane and try to make sense of what I have seen in my fragmented dreams.

It feels so real, *he* feels so real. Did I know him? What was his relationship to me? Does he reside on modern day Earth or are my visions a recall of Earth as I remember it? It's all so confusing. Dr. Victus is certain it's my imagination playing tricks on my mind. He's adamant it isn't a regurgitated memory and the fact that the dream isn't recurring—they are always different—is indeed perplexing. Dr. Victus says the nostalgia elixir we were injected with represented years of research and development, and was subject to rigorous testing. Every unique elixir contained identifiers and transmitters that wiped programmed memories for each person. According to the good doctor, it's impossible to remember wiped memories, once the elixir is administered the memories are permanently erased—never to be recovered.

I wonder if I should mention to him, at my next check up, that I've had another dream. While he assures me that our conversations are private, my mind is naturally distrustful, and my sixth sense tells me that I shouldn't have been so open. I wonder now of the wisdom in confiding in him at all. The last thing I need on my record is any reference to, or statement of, mental instability. I have no idea what they do if you're deemed mentally unsound or delusional. Probably cart you off to some asylum or force other foreign objects into your body, in an attempt to control the part of your brain causing the malfunction. I shudder at the thought and subconsciously press the Vita at the back of my neck.

The Vita was inserted in all residents of Novo on the day of our evacuation from Earth. It's a small metal device the size of a fingernail, circular in shape, and

minutely thin so that it's barely detectable under the skin. It contains a unique, personal tracker that can locate us whenever and wherever we are. It also conveys messages to our doctors, alerting him or her to any changes or irregularities in our health. Being supremely healthy is of vital importance on Novo.

The human race was decimated in the near destruction of Earth, yet only those in peak health were granted access to Novo. It didn't matter if you aced the other assessments with flying colors, only those who successfully passed the stringent medical exam was given permission to reside on our new planet. Once on Novo, each resident was assigned a doctor, medical team and team of Medicets. Between them all, they monitor the health of the nation on a daily basis. Finally, free healthcare for everyone yet I'm not jumping for joy. It's degrading being routinely subjected to a battery of medical tests, to ensure I continue to deserve my place in this new world.

All of a sudden the woodland disappears. I have completed the circuit and I'm back at the access stairwell. I press my data-cuff; it reads 6.25 a.m., time to head home and get ready for NSAFTA. NSAFTA is the Novo Special Armed Forces Training Academy, which is my daily home for ten hours each day. Sunday, thankfully, is still viewed as a day of rest. It's the only day of the week when I don't have any set agenda, and I have the freedom to choose what I want to do with my time.

I sprint home and immediately smell the fresh orange juice as soon as I open the door. Lily, my fourteen year old sister, and Deacon, my ten year old brother are sitting at the breakfast counter in their pajamas. "Hey Lil, where's Mom?" I ask.

"In bed, she said to get ourselves ready today."

Predictable. It would be laughable if it weren't so heartbreaking. My mom used to be so energetic, but she took the move to Novo badly, and things are definitely going from bad to worse. I worry what will become of her. If it wasn't for my father and his value to NSAF, I doubt she would even have received her access pass to Novo in the first place. NSAF is the Novo Special Armed Forces, located in Militia or Region 15. NSAF maintains law and order on Novo and Earth, and its responsibilities include military planning, security, peacekeeping and policing. As time goes on, I think the chances of our mother returning to us get slimmer and slimmer.

"No sweat Lil, we can eat and walk to school together." I go up to my room and jump quickly in the shower, to freshen up after my run, taking care not to get my hair wet.

Once I'm towelled dry, I grab my Cadet uniform from the wardrobe and pull it on, zipping it fully from top to bottom. It's not too bad as school uniforms go. It's a black fitted jumpsuit with red moulding on the shoulders and a slim gray metallic belt that clips into place at my navel. There is a light hood fitted under the uppermost part of the suit for when it rains, which isn't that often. Soft leather, calf length boots complete the look. I don't know what the suit is made of, but the material is porous and adapts to the weather conditions. It's part of the new textiles being manufactured on Earth for our consumption in Novo.

I stride downstairs and bound into the kitchen. Lily has made eggs and bacon for breakfast; yum. We don't have access to the same variety of foodstuffs anymore, but food production is one of the key activities and primary source of work on Earth now. In time, our government promises that the food choices will be more diverse. I miss Earth so much and welcome the weekly official information bulletins we receive with updates on the latest developments. The government is investing heavily in

rebuilding the economy, and new technology and infrastructure projects have been commissioned. Rebooting employment and industry is well underway, and each state has been awarded separate distinctive status as subject matter experts in a particular field. Connecticut, where I was born and raised, has been classified as a military infrastructure and pharmaceutical center of expertise.

I see that Lily has also changed into her school uniform. Unlike me, Lily has chosen to attend the Novo Medical Facility, NMF, and she's training to be a doctor. A good career choice given the importance placed on health in Novo. She regularly tries to tag along when I am studying at Eve's. Her parents are doctors, and they are an invaluable source of information for Lily—unofficial mentors you might say. Eve is my best and only friend here.

I hear the school bus pull up outside our house, and I shout out to Deacon.

"I'm coming," he calls out as his blond head appears at the top of the stairs.

"Quick, before it leaves without you," I say as I grab his coat, and hurriedly pull his arms through the sleeves. I reach down and lift up his schoolbag and fix it securely around his shoulders. "Right, little muffin, off you go. Have a good day," I tell him as I kiss the top of his head. He runs out the door and onto the bus. I watch until it has driven off down the road and around the corner.

Lily and I grab our backpacks and pull the front door shut behind us. We turn left and begin the short walk to the Velo station. Velo's are the main form of mass transit on Novo. They are high velocity shuttles, modelled to look like sleek trains, which transport us all over the planet, through an intricate network of tubes and tunnels. They run above and below ground, and they're super fast; I still get a rush whenever I use them.

“So Lily, what’s on the curriculum today in school?” I ask. I love to listen to Lily talk about her studies. She’s so passionate about medicine, so keen to have the knowledge and expertise to enable her to help others. It warms my heart.

“We’re studying the anatomy of the central nervous system, it’s a continuation of our research on the brain. It’s fascinating how the brain controls so much more than we think. On Friday, we are going to the R & D Laboratory to see the work they’re doing on the Vita advancement. I cannot wait,” she says excitedly.

“Sounds riveting,” I tease, as I deftly squat down to avoid her arm while she playfully attempts to push me. “I’m only joking Lil, I love that you’re so into it. I feel comforted knowing I will have someone to look after me when I’m old and decrepit,” I admit, somewhat in jest.

We have arrived at the Velo station, and we scan our wrists at the data panel on the electronic entry barrier. It automatically registers us and slowly lifts to allow entry into the station. We go down to the platform and wait for the next Velo to arrive. I press a button on my data-cuff and identify that it’s due in thirty seconds. Sure enough, the Velo then appears in the distance, and in the blink of an eye it’s static in front of us on the platform.

We enter as the doors glide open and find two adjoining seats on our left. As soon as we sit down, the electronic harness automatically lifts from behind and fastens over my shoulders, across my chest and locks on both sides of my waist. This activity always serves to remind me of the countless rollercoaster rides I have been on. Happy memories of holidays in Orlando flicker through my mind and I suddenly feel unbearably bereft. Lily takes my hand and looks at me with a puzzled and worried expression.

“I’m fine.”

“More bad dreams?” she asks.

“No, and I wouldn’t call the dreams *bad* dreams as such, more confusing than anything else. Anyway let’s not discuss this here,” I say as I look at her with raised eyebrows, and she understands that the subject is closed.

The doors shut and an electronic voice says, “Acceleration in ten seconds.” I take a deep breath in readiness before we take off, like a bullet in a gun, whizzing rapidly through the tunnels until we come to a swift but smooth stop. We are in Region 3, or Prism as it’s generally referred to. This is Lily’s stop. She presses a button to release her harness and rises.

“Love you big sis, have a great day.” And with that she’s gone.

Immediately I feel someone sit down beside me. Without pausing for thought, I look to my left into the brightest, most intense blue eyes, staring straight into mine. I know the owner: Cal Remus. He is the best Cadet in our year, a natural athlete, destined for greatness in NSAF. He also thinks he’s god’s gift to women and the way in which my female classmates fall at his feet makes me sick. He is unnaturally beautiful; golden blond hair gelled back off his forehead, sparkling blue eyes, sculpted jawline and perfectly proportioned features. He is tall and strong, as a result of all the physical training we undergo in the Academy, and he has a natural prowess and passion for all kinds of sports. He loves the sound of his own voice and can usually be relied upon to make some kind of contentious or witty remark during class. I know he pushes some of the Instructors to breaking point at times. I sometimes see him at the running track, but I always go out of my way to take the opposite course to him. He has this uncanny ability to completely unnerve me, just as he’s doing at this moment.

“Good morning, Ariana,” he says, pronouncing my name slowly and distinctly.

“Good morning Cal,” I say politely.

“You look gorgeous today,” he says grinning sarcastically at me.

I suppose you could call me pretty, but I definitely wouldn't label myself as gorgeous. Everyone says my eyes are my best feature; big, bright blue, with a wide fringe of long lashes. They complement my long dark brown hair, pale skin and heart shaped face. I am curvy, but thin and toned, thanks to my natural athleticism and passion for jogging. I scowl at him. He is constantly teasing me like this, and I really don't know what I've done to deserve it. I avoid him like the plague, and I'm never part of the group of girls who hang off his every word, and follow him around campus like lovesick puppies.

“Are you going to be difficult? Because I'm not in the mood for your banter today. Why don't you sit with one of your groupies and tease them mercilessly?” I reply.

“Because it's much more fun sitting here, torturing you,” he says grinning.

He's so smug; I cannot stand him. I'm grateful when the announcer communicates our imminent departure and in mere seconds we're on our way. The silence is golden. We quickly stop at Regions 4, 5, 6 and 7 to allow more passengers alight and exit. Because Regions 8 through 14 are still under construction, the Velo travels without further stops, all the way to Militia.

All of Novo's armed forces infrastructure are housed in Region 15, Militia, including the Training Academy. Militia is a miniature replica of the Grand Canyon. It's rugged, dusty terrain combines with steep inclines and voluminous, colorful rock formations. NSAF occupies a prime position at the forefront of the Region. It's a huge facility spanning fifty thousand acres in size; it totally dominates the landscape. There are several separate units dotted around the ground, including a massive warehouse which is the main stealth-craft hangar. Military barracks are located to the

western front. The new penitentiary is nearing completion; it's built into the rock-face, directly underneath the NSAF building. My dad says it's been deliberately constructed to the highest security specification; however, I struggle to understand the necessity for a prison of this magnitude. The Training Academy, my home from home, is to the far east of the Region, on a huge plot which has enabled the authorities to build a state of the art campus. We want for nothing there.

I release the harness and swiftly rise but stagger to my left unsteadily. Cal quickly places his arm across my back and clutches me at my waist, to help steady me. "My very presence makes you weak at the knees," he says. He releases me, once he sees that I can stand without falling over, and strides out the door, grinning to himself. I shake my head in severe frustration.

"Aaaggghh," I say out loud before I can stop myself.

"Fun ride?" asks Eve, coming up alongside me as we exit the Velo. She loops her arm amiably through mine.

"Cal is so annoying!" I exclaim.

"Well, you know my theory," she says.

I sigh inwardly; Eve is convinced that Cal has the hots for me. It's the most ridiculous assumption I've ever heard. Someone like him would never be interested in someone like me, especially when there are so many other gorgeous girls who would literally give their right arm to be with him. My theory is much more plausible; I'm an easy target, someone he can make fun of without even trying. I feel myself getting annoyed at my own ineptitude. I have always considered myself to be strong and resilient, but he makes me feel foolish and weak, and I hate him for it. Even if Eve's theory is correct, which I doubt, I have no interest in someone so arrogant and vain and selfish.

“Any more dreams?” asks Eve.

I rub my left temple subconsciously. “Sssh,” I hiss, “not out here.”

“I don’t know what you’re so suspicious of, you need to learn to be more trusting,” she says bluntly.

“Eve, I’m not like you, there are many times when I wish I was, but I can’t be something I’m not.” I mean it; Eve is the gentlest soul, so caring, warm and genuine. The best friend a girl could hope for. Nonetheless, I’ve come to trust my inner sixth sense, my ability to tune into feelings and senses has been perceptive in the past. I’m not going to start ignoring it now.

“Come on,” she says, “we don’t want to be late and incur any offences.”

The Training Academy foundation is built on rules, if you break one you’re issued with an immediate offence. Penalties apply if you accumulate more than a reasonable amount, and potential suspension if you acquire more than twenty. We both have perfect records so far this semester; it’s a position I’m desperate to hold onto so I grasp Eve’s hand and make a hasty exit. We sprint rapidly down the road towards the Academy. We are at the top of the steps when the siren rings out, announcing the thirty second warning, before the front doors are permanently closed for the day.

As we enter the building we join the queue for body scanning, DNA screening and health check. They are ridiculously identity and security conscious in Novo. That must be how my father developed his preoccupation with my safety, I think. My sixth sense tingles.

Eve is directed to the left lane and I walk straight forward, as the Ranger calls me to him. I remove my backpack and set it on the scanning belt to my right. I stand completely still as the Ranger runs the hand scanner over my Vita, which confirms

my identity; he then guides me forward through the body scanning unit. I walk into a large steel scanner and stand motionless while a laser scans my full body and displays an image of my skeleton on the nearby screen. I daren't move until he tells me the scanning is complete and I can proceed to the next station. I grab my backpack and head over to the Medicet for my health check. I place my wrist against the hand-held device and a green light flashes brightly. The Medicet moves slowly aside to allow me pass, and I walk into the large, brightly lit entrance hall.

Eve is waiting by the nearest pillar for me.

"There's a change of plan," she says.

I look at her questioningly as we hear the announcement. "All those eligible for 'The Calling' must report to room 4101 immediately."

I stand rooted to the spot; this is the moment I have been dreading.

CHAPTER 2

I walk silently down the hall with Eve ambling companionably by my side, she knows better than to state the obvious. Since the government formally announced the introduction of their new policy, ‘The Calling’, some three months ago, I’ve been absolutely dreading this moment. Not that we know too much about it, but I’m sure all that’s about to change.

Everyone knows one of the biggest concerns for the authorities is the continuation of the human race. Our numbers were severely depleted in the atrocities on Earth and our current population doesn’t even occupy thirty percent of the landmass of Novo. In order to build a new world, the government needs to significantly increase the population, and they have been mulling over various ideas for the last two years.

I still remember the day the official announcement was streamed on the commiboard. All boys and girls are required to participate in an assessment pageant, ‘The Calling’, once they reach age seventeen. The process will identify the person—or suitor as the authorities have proclaimed it—with whom they are most ideally matched, to become his or her spouse. This arranged marriage must happen before each suitor turns eighteen and all newly married couples must produce at least three children by the time they are aged twenty-two. So, I will basically become an official baby-making machine, whether I like it or not. I am aghast at the brutality and unfairness of it.

I have big ambitions for my military career, and boys just weren’t factored into my plan, well not yet. I do want to get married and start a family one day, but on my terms, in my own time, when I’m good and ready. I always took it for granted that I had the freedom to choose my life partner, now everything has been turned on its

head, and I have lost control over my future. I am both devastated and terrified. I've had recurring nightmares for weeks, too often there's been a need to sedate me, and the Medicet is like my new BFF.

On certain days, my overwhelming devastation has brought me close to the edge of inflicting violence. My father has gone into super charm mode to quiet me down, but I can tell that even he's disconcerted by the whole notion. It's not that I don't understand the necessity, but forcing young adults into marriage and babies is surely not the answer. Eroding basic human rights is no way to advance society. The president has appealed to the nation for understanding and sacrifice, telling us that everything needs to be redefined in the context of our new world. The fact that it seems so easy for him and his cabinet to accept and promote this new standard makes me very uneasy.

Eve and I enter the elevator along with some of our other classmates and someone pushes the button for the fourth floor. The elevator soars silently upwards. No one speaks, we're all too engrossed in our own thoughts. It comes to a sudden halt and we file out one at a time. We follow the crowd down the hall; Eve remains close beside me.

"Don't worry Ari, we'll find out everything we need to know now," she says as she pats my arm.

I wish I could share her natural enthusiasm and positivity, but I don't. Considerate of the fact that I must seem so negative to her all the time, and conscious of the many cameras that stalk our every move, I force a smile on my face and whisper, "I hope so."

We enter room 4101 which is one of the bigger lecture halls in the Academy. Eve, eager as ever, starts descending the stairs towards the front of the room. “Eve,” I call after her, “I’m not sitting at the front like some goody two shoes.”

Eve turns and takes one look at my face and says, “Sure” in a pleasant tone.

We move down a few rows and I identify seats that look precisely center stage. “Happy?” I ask.

“Completely,” Eve says with a smile. It’s practically impossible to dampen Eve’s natural sunny disposition. For the second time today, I wish I could be more like her.

I look all around me as other Cadets take their seats. I recognise some Cadets from my class, but there are a lot of faces that I don’t know. There is a mixture of expressions on display in the room—anxiety, inquisitiveness, fear, apathy.

Two tall men appear on the podium from the left hand side of the room. “Good morning Cadets, I require your complete attention please. My name is Commander Remus and you have been invited to this session today to explain the process involved in ‘The Calling’ and how it will apply to you. Firstly, I need to ensure that everyone is aged seventeen at this time.” He nods to the other man who promptly rises and moves forward to the front. It strikes me instantly that Commander Remus must be Cal’s father—the similarity is uncanny.

The unidentified man extends a hand-held device, no bigger than the size of a data-cuff, and presses a button which emits a thin green light that spans out over the whole crowd. An electronic map of the room lights up in front of the Commander, and a few red lights flash brightly, indicating some individuals who don’t belong here. They immediately get up and leave. Why they were here in the first place confounds me; curiosity must have gotten the better of them, or possibly they were confused

over the qualifying criteria. Confident in the knowledge that only those eligible for 'The Calling' are in the room, Commander Remus begins the formal presentation.

He starts by introducing the other man as Zolt Rada, Operations Director for the pageant. He is tall and rail thin, with black hair, green eyes and a neatly trimmed beard. He looks like a real stickler for the rules and I bet he will not tolerate any infraction. He is intensely scrutinising the crowd when suddenly his eyes lock on mine; I bravely hold his stare until he reluctantly retracts.

Slightly shaken, I force myself to focus my full attention on Commander Remus, as he begins to describe the format for 'The Calling'. He clicks a button on his data-cuff and the display flickers to life on a large screen at the back of the podium. President Calavero stares at us from the screen as he explains the context within which the pageant has been introduced. He reinforces the message that humanity must evolve and grow. Novo's motto then flashes in front of our eyes: LIVE. LOVE. PROSPER. Slide after slide is unveiled, outlining details of the process.

The initial assessment process will take place separately within each Region, culminating in the matching of male and female suitors. There is a variety of different assessments to be completed at the outset of the process. Physical strength, virility/fertility testing, skills and hobbies, a talent showcase, personality screening and intelligence testing. Every suitor will be appointed their own personal pageant coordinator, who will help beautify and prepare them for the televised dating stage, which commences immediately after the assessment phase has concluded.

Participants can only date from their published Top Ten list of potential suitors, and all dates must be rated and ranked by both parties. Results will be uploaded to the centralised pageant e-portal, which is a fully interactive intranet that Region residents will have full access to. The final matchmaking process takes place at the

termination of the dating stage. The ultimate result is reached based on all the data available to inform the decision-making process. The voting public have a say, as well as the pageant authorities, each suitor and their parents. In the event of a conflict, the results of the compatibility test will determine the overriding outcome.

In order to embed the pageant culture into Novo society, a nationwide annual pageant will be hosted in Region 1, Illumina. Known as the 'Amor Regale' each Region must choose a matched couple to represent them in this prestigious contest. All voting will be conducted via the pageant portal, accessible through the commiboard network. The winning suitors, named Novo Silentium couple, will be showered with gifts, bring pride to their Region and set a perfect example for future generations. This couple will also have the privilege of attending to official duties as decided by the authorities.

I sit stiffly, as if stuck to my seat by superglue. I have barely breathed throughout the course of the entire presentation, let alone moved. I sneak a quick peek at Eve from the corner of my eye. She looks ... exhilarated, as if this is the best thing to have ever happened to her. I feel nothing but extreme despair; this is worse than the worst nightmare I've endured in the last few weeks. Apart from the make-over, which I think I'll quite enjoy, the rest is wholly demeaning and superfluous.

I think back to Betty Friedan and the Feminism movement of the 1960's and 1970's, how they must be turning in their graves. I have never been a die-hard bra-burning feminist, or anything close to it, but that's because most of my generation accepted our free will and freedom of choice as a given. I thought the new world order was supposed to champion positive change, advancement and evolution. Not total regression. I think of what I learned on Earth, in history and social classes, about the different cultural views of women. I remember my shock at learning about

the restrictive birth policy in China, the oppression of women in the Middle East, the rape and abuse of women in many African states. I used to feel so grateful that I lived in America, where women could aspire to achieve anything they desired. Where following your dreams was not just a fallacy. But now our government has committed the ultimate betrayal to womankind.

The male population hasn't fared much better either, they have equally taken away their right to choose for themselves. And on top of that, there's no privacy in the process whatsoever. There is slim chance of developing any real feelings for my potential suitor, with big brother watching us all the time. It's a completely orchestrated PR exercise, aimed at entertaining the nation, and singular feelings, views or desires don't appear to have much of a place in the process. It sounds to me like one big popularity contest, and I've never been overly interested in popularity.

I vaguely hear Commander Remus invite questions from the crowd. I am immediately alert as soon as I hear Cal speak.

"What if I don't agree, and refuse to participate?" he asks contentiously.

"That's not an option. Participation is the law of this land, to refuse is an act of treachery, punishable by solitary life confinement in the penitentiary," Commander Remus says, as he glowers at his son. I sense friction between these two and briefly ponder the exact nature of their relationship.

I have pressed the button on the digital pad in front of me before my conscious mind has time to process the action.

"Ariana Skyee, your question," says Commander Remus, as he identifies me from the electronic map displayed in front of him.

“Is there an appeal process if I don’t like my proposed suitor? This is the rest of my life we’re talking about,” I say stoically.

“The process allows your input, as well as your parents. The majority consensus will decide on the eventual suitor. There’s no need for an appeal mechanism, given the democratic way in which the assessment and selection process is constructed,” he replies.

I snort with laughter before my brain kicks in, late again, and I clasp my hand over my mouth. I see the disdainful look on Commander Remus’ face.

“You find this funny, Ms. Skyee?” he asks snidely.

“No, quite the contrary. I just think the use of the word ‘democratic’ is misplaced, considering we’re being forced into marriage and motherhood whether we like it or not,” I say. My tone is becoming more aggressive as my pent up emotion threatens to rise to the surface.

Commander Remus looms over the podium as he responds in a raised voice. “Our government are gravely concerned about the continuation of humanity. If sacrifices are required we expect every resident to comply, as part of their civic duty. Quite frankly Ms. Skyee, our process will undoubtedly ensure a far better decision when it comes to your life partner than you would choose for yourself,” he says derisively. I clench my fists under my seat as I feel an uncharacteristic urge to jump up and punch him in the face. “Any other questions?” he shouts out to the room. No one else dares speak, so he calls the meeting to a close and advises us to check our e-mail for our individual schedule, and instructions on how to access the online pageant portal. Cadets stream out of the room quietly.

“I assume Cal inherited his charm from his mother and his good looks from his father,” Eve says, as she joins me.

“He’s quite formidable isn’t he?”

“Absolutely terrifying,” she agrees.

We head down to Level 2 towards our first class of the day. I’m grateful that this morning is all theory and academic studies, so that I can just sit there and zone out, and quietly go to pieces inside. For the first time since we moved here I can actually relate—in some part—to what my mother is feeling, as a form of depression kicks in. I struggle through the day and smile listlessly at Eve as she desperately attempts to cheer me up. I notice that Cal glances my way several times during lunch, but I purposely avoid his gaze.

I drop my backpack on the table in the living area as my mom approaches with her arms extended. I sink into the warmth of her embrace and my repressed frustration releases in a flurry of tears. She offers no words of comfort but continues to hold me like this until my crying subsides. I look up at her, and all I see is concern shining in her eyes. I’ve missed this closeness between us and realise how much I still need her.

“I saw the official communication today, outlining the procedure for ‘The Calling’. They’re very thorough, I’ll give them that,” she says.

“It’s like ‘The Bachelor’ meets ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’,” I croak—half laughing, half crying. “I’m too young to get married, I don’t even know if I’ve ever kissed a boy!” I sob. My romantic history since arriving on Novo has been non-existent, but I don’t know what, if anything, came before; thanks to the governments cerebral pilfering. “And all of it has to take place with the prying eyes of the nation watching my every move,” I say in disgust. My mother doesn’t need to be reminded of my abhorrence

for any type of spotlight. She looks pensive as she rubs my back soothingly. Just then my father comes through the front door and that brings a fresh bout of tears.

“Stay strong Ari, it will turn out all right in the end,” is all he says as he heads into his bedroom.

“I don’t feel like eating,” I tell my mother as I start to mount the stairs.

“I will bring you some camomile tea. Why don’t you snuggle up in bed with a book?” she suggests. I choose to take her advice, and having whipped my clothes off in record-breaking time, I pull on my comfy pajamas and dive down under the covers. I am rifling through my small collection of novels when she enters the room. She places a cup and a plate of fruit down on my locker before sitting down on the side of my bed. “Ariana, I owe you an apology,” she says seriously. I sit up and prop the pillows behind my back, so that I’m more comfortable.

“An apology for what?” I ask, confused.

“For not being here for you all. I ... I think you know that I’ve found it difficult to adjust to life here,” she says quietly.

“I know you’re trying your best,” I say reassuringly.

“Things are going to change from now on. The three of you need me, and I intend to be here for you. I know you’re upset over ‘The Calling’, I understand and I’m upset for you too. Getting married should be one of the best days of your life, something you really look forward to. Being in love is magical; experiencing the rush of emotions and finding that one person you just can’t live without—it’s such an amazing feeling! I’m unhappy it’s being forced on you, at a time when you’re not ready. Marriage is a challenge at the best of times, and it requires a strong union to keep it on track. So even if the right choice is made, your life may be tougher than it needs to be. But there’s no option sweetie, this is what the government has decreed.

To rebuke it has dire consequences. At least we have some influence over the ultimate decision, that counts for something. I want you to know that I'm here for you, whenever you need to talk, just come find me." She ruffles my hair and places a gentle kiss on my forehead before closing the door on her way out. It is hugely comforting to feel mothered again.

I had a huge collection of books at home on Earth, and reading was one of my all-time favorite pastimes. We only had permission to bring a few belongings with us to Novo and paper books were seen as an unnecessary waste of our travel allowance, because of the vast e-library available to access via the data-cuff and commiboard. In my opinion, the experience isn't the same unless you feel the pages between your fingers. I remember many nights reading late into the early hours of the morning, unable or unwilling to put the book down. I decide to read 'Wuthering Heights', maybe its depiction of morality, inhumanity, cruelty and forced marriages in the eighteenth century will help put my situation into perspective.

Zane is one of many people walking towards a huge red bricked concrete building. As the crowd surges towards the entrance door, a young woman holds tightly onto his arm. She has short blonde hair and hazel eyes. She's throwing her head back in laughter. A grungy haired guy is on her adjoining side. They separate inside and the two boys descend several flights of stairs into a locker room. Zane is encased fully in a white latex bodysuit; goggles protect his eyes. He is seated at a clinical desk pouring liquid into vials.

I wake to the sound of the alarm with my hand still holding onto the book. I cannot recall at what stage I fell asleep, only that my dreams included a ghostly Catherine and a beastly Heathcliff. The intermittent flashes of Zane broke through the nightmares.

Shaking my head, I hop up and hastily pull on my running gear. I'm desperate to escape into the holographic woods; I really need to run this frustration out of my system. I grab my water vest from the kitchen and sprint out of the house all the way down to the running track. Once inside I head to the lower level track, choose my favorite scenery and I'm gone, like a bat out of hell. I deliberately try to empty my mind and just focus on my breathing and nothing else. I am running at enormous speed when I smack, full force, into something. I must have blacked out, because when I look up it's through a haze of misty fog, and I can just make out a shape hovering over me.

I instinctively raise my hand to my forehead and feel a large bump the size of an apple. "Ouch." I try to sit up, but steady hands gently keep me on the ground.

"You've hit your head quite hard, don't make any sudden movements, just lie there until you feel less dizzy," the voice says.

My vision is starting to come back into focus now, and gradually the shape begins to take on a more cohesive form. *Oh, no, not him*, I think. "You idiot," the words are out of my mouth instantaneously.

"Me?" Cal laughs. "You were the one running the wrong way around the track, like a demon possessed."

"I WAS NOT, I run this track every morning, I could do it in my sleep," I say. I'm fuming.

"Ah, that must be it then, you *were* asleep, because you were most definitely running the wrong side of the track," he says. I can feel the annoyance creep into his words.

"Don't like being wrong, do you?" I challenge him.

“Here, see for yourself then,” he says angrily, as he hoists me into a standing position and faces me the way I should have been running.

“Don’t touch me,” I say harshly as I push his hand away from my waist. Instantly my legs give out and I feel myself falling towards the ground. He grabs me just in time. He promptly lifts me off the ground, as if I was as light as a feather, and runs all the way back to the entrance stairwell, where he carefully props me up against the gate.

“Put your head between your legs, it will help get the blood flowing again,” he tells me. I obediently do as I’m told, and I don’t protest when he takes the water pump from my data-cuff and puts it to my mouth. “Drink,” he says firmly. I take continual little sips and gradually I feel myself becoming clearer and less fuzzy-headed. I immediately feel my cheeks flare bright red as I look over at him.

“Umm, sorry,” I say meekly.

“Sorry for what?” he asks haughtily.

“Isn’t sorry good enough?” I look at him imploringly.

“No, you were extremely belligerent towards me back there, and it’s not like I did anything wrong. I think I deserve a proper apology, don’t you?” he says in a superior tone.

I am seething as I spit out an apology, “Sorry for running into you.”

“And don’t forget to be grateful for the fact that I saved you from getting a second unattractive bump on your head,” he says with glee.

“I’m extremely grateful,” I say through gritted teeth, as I get up to leave.

“See you later at the skills assessment,” he says, as he leans in close to me “I’m going to make sure my father puts you at the top of my list.”

CHAPTER 3

“Surely that’s illegal, I mean, he can’t really do that, can he?” I ask Eve as we get changed for combat training. I had updated her on my eventful morning as we walked to NSAFTA.

“I don’t think so, but then his father is Commander Remus, and he seems to have some involvement in the pageant, so who knows?” she says.

“That’s not filling me with a warm and cozy feeling.”

“You know Ari, maybe he’s winding you up again or he could be on your list legitimately anyway,” she says carefully, gauging my reaction.

“Maybe he is teasing me, but as for being on my list, that’s ludicrous and you know it. There’s no way we could be matched up,” I say, trying as much to convince myself as her.

“I don’t know Ari, there are similarities; the two of you are the children of L1 Commanders, you both excel here in the Academy, love running and sports, you’re both feisty and headstrong ...,” she ruminates.

“Who do you hope is on your list?” I blurt out, in a desperate attempt to change the course of this conversation. My head is hurting a lot despite the shot the Medicet administered earlier. She takes the bait.

“I really, really want Evan Adams to be on my list,” she says longingly.

“Ah Evan, he’s the one you told me about, the son of your parents friends?”

“Yes, he’s training to be a doctor. My parents say he’s a genius and he has a bright future ahead of him. He is totally gorgeous and so intense, when he talks to you it’s as if he’s looking deep into your soul.” Yikes, she has it bad.

“Eve, what if he’s not on your list?” I ask gently.

“Oh, he will be,” she says with total confidence, “we have tons in common.” I open my mouth to protest but then clamp it shut. I’m not going to shatter her illusions, I feel my negativity impacts her too much as it is. I give her my best attempt at a winning smile and we push forward to the outdoor training arena.

We have showered and had our lunch, well as much as I could manage to force down my throat, and now we cannot delay the inevitable. We have to travel back to Aqua to the new convention center, which has been built specifically to facilitate the activities of ‘The Calling’. According to last night’s news bulletin, every Region has their own center to house the assessments. Overnight I’ve become more complacent, not totally accepting of my fate, but it’s fruitless and potentially damaging to resist. Lily swayed my mind.

She was so excited when she called into my room on her way to bed. She is caught up in the romanticism of it all and cannot understand my reluctance. I can’t help wondering if I wasn’t switched at birth with Eve—those two are like two peas in a pod. I tried to explain it to Lily as best I could, but I know she’s struggling to comprehend my point of view. Her parting words linger in my memory now.

“You’ll have to find a way to accept it because Dad says it’s futile to resist. The government is quite prepared to imprison those who won’t cooperate; they have no choice but to ensure the right example is set for future generations. I have managed to cope without Mom, but I couldn’t cope without you as well,” she said bluntly.

At that moment, I realised how self-obsessed I had become. I haven’t considered those who are important in my life, like my brother and sister who need my support as they mature. And I hadn’t even considered the potential impact on my father, as a

senior-ranking military official. So with a heavy heart, I walk to the Velo station with Eve, as ready as I'm ever going to be for what lies ahead.

The exterior of the convention center is truly awesome. It's a vast building stretching as far into the sky as the eye can see. Constructed mainly of concrete and steel, the front of the building contains giant shards of glass that jut out at diverse angles, forming a jagged entrance that glistens and sparkles in the light. Banners with 'The Calling' etched on the fabric stretch from the top of the building to the bottom. It looks very imposing, appropriate for the task at hand. We follow suit as people head into the building and duly comply with the standard screening procedures. Once through all the stations, I hook up with Eve as we are guided, by one of the many Rangers on duty, to a huge hall at the rear of the building. Rows and rows of desks and chairs are organised alphabetically, so we split up and make our way to our own designated space.

I find my desk and promptly sit down. The desktop commiboard springs to life in front of me, as a holographic image appears on the screen advising me to secure the headset on my ears, and connect the cable to my data-cuff. I oblige on both counts and listen intently as I'm instructed to upload my personal information to the pageant portal. I have three hours to perform this task before I will be escorted to meet my pageant coordinator.

I click into the e-portal and review the personal profile template page that has already been created for me. Certain information is already uploaded, including my date and place of birth, parents names, their occupations and there's reference to Lily, Deacon and my current status as an NSAFTA Cadet. They've even listed my training scores and year ranking. I click into the photo section and I'm amazed to see so many: my official NSAFTA picture, some pictures of me on the running track,

walking towards campus with Eve and on a day out with my family. A chill runs down my spine. I know there are cameras everywhere, supposedly for our protection, but I had no idea that they captured and stored images. It feels creepy, like we're all being stalked. I rouse myself and try to focus on the task at hand.

For starters, I need to upload some better photos; no one in their right mind will be happy to go on a date with me based on the existing picture content. I am not photogenic. It's tradition in our family to check every photo carefully to see if my eyes are open or shut. Lily identified the problem: I blink about twenty times faster than the average female, so it's pot luck when it comes to photos. In so many I look as if I am asleep, or worse, drunk. I quickly locate a few that are acceptable and upload them to the photo gallery. I try to remove the ones that have been auto-populated, with no success; at least there's some balance now.

Next, I move onto the hobbies and skills page. I have a list of drop-down options to choose from, as well as some free text. I tick all the sports options as well as reading, movies, fashion, beauty and painting. I tackle the personality page next, it proves challenging. It's a personality test with sixty statements; each has multiple answers and I have to choose the most appropriate response. After a while, it becomes a bit tedious but I persevere and finally finish. As soon as I click the submit button my character profile appears on the screen; I'm fascinated to see it's a pretty accurate description of me. I read the intelligence section of the portal and note that I have to complete both IQ and EQ tests, to be administered by a professional psychologist. Right on cue, a Ranger appears at my side, and asks me to follow him downstairs for psychological assessment. I save my profile page and log out of the portal and extract my data-cuff before following him out of the room.

He moves silently and quickly and I have to walk-jog in order to keep up. We follow the corridor to the end and then descend three flights of stairs into a wide, dimly lit corridor with a row of doors either side. The Ranger brings me to a room marked PSY009 and advises me to take a seat, and wait for the psychologist.

I am twiddling my thumbs for five minutes when the door opens and a small, rotund, bespectacled man enters the room. He introduces himself as Dr. Mexxles and explains that he's going to conduct a number of cognitive tests to assess my intelligence. The scores will be collated for all participants of 'The Calling', in all Regions, and in this way average scores will be defined. Each suitor will receive a resultant IQ and EQ score. He asks if I have any questions at the outset; I shake my head.

He proceeds to ask me a succession of general knowledge questions, most of which I ace. Next he holds up a page with sixteen images and gives me twenty seconds to memorise them. He asks me to recall as many of the images as I can. I only manage to remember six or seven, but I have a tendency to forget things in general. After that he hands me a selection of timed puzzles to solve, I get four out of the six completed before the buzzer sounds. Lastly, he shows me some numerical and shape sequences and I fare OK with those.

The doctor then explains the notion of emotional intelligence and how this will be measured. I listen intently out of ignorance and genuine interest. He tells me that the emotional intelligence testing evaluates a person's capacity to control their emotions, to cope with demands, and to monitor their thoughts and actions. The ability to assess and influence situations and relationships with other people also plays a part. He immediately starts asking me a list of questions which are self-analytical and

situational in context; I answer them to the best of my ability. He confirms that all assessments are now concluded, and to wait in the room until the Ranger returns.

I realise that my head is throbbing and I tentatively touch the bump— unfortunately, the swelling hasn't reduced. I probably have a mild concussion and should have been excused from the assessment today on medical grounds. I wish I had thought of this earlier. I look up and almost jump out of my skin. The Medicet is waiting silently to administer another shot of pain relief, but I swear, it's as if it just beamed down into the room. I hold out my arm and the shot is delivered; I immediately feel relieved.

The door opens abruptly and the same Ranger asks me to follow him. I get up slowly, feeling a bit disorientated from the shot and wishing that I had eaten something substantial at lunch. Eventually, I follow him out the door. This time we're going in the elevator right to the top floor. As soon as he presses a button the elevator shoots upwards at full velocity. I actually think I might throw up, but thankfully we reach the top floor quickly and I stagger out onto the corridor. The Ranger stares at me quizzically, but he waits patiently until I compose myself. We turn left and keep walking down a winding corridor. A huge circular glass wall resides in the middle, encasing the internal circumference of the entire top floor. I make the mistake of looking down and suffer near vertigo symptoms as the floor threatens to welcome me for the umpteenth time today.

We come to a swift stop at the door bearing a plaque with my name and the Ranger directs me inside. As I walk in the door, it's as if I've been transported to another world entirely. There is a plush gold carpet covering the entire floor that looks comfortable enough to sleep on. The walls are covered in an ornate wallpaper of deep purple, with gold patterns that alternate in perfect sequence. A long cream

chaise longue is situated beside the window with a mirrored table in front. To the left is a large commiboard, to the right an elongated mirrored sideboard with high stools and a variety of jars and bottles on top. The silver, steel door on the right-hand side of the room opens out into a narrow corridor with one door either side. Peeking behind the first door, I see a large jacuzzi bath and reclinable spa couch. There's an impressive counter running the length and breadth of the room with numerous drawers and cabinets. I open a few; they are packed full of beauty products and supplies. As I enter the other room, I have to pinch myself to ensure it's real. It's a vast walk-in wardrobe with an assortment of clothes, shoes, bags, jewellery and other accessories. The back wall contains a wall to floor length mirror, large commiboard and scanning device.

I wonder what Eve is making of all this, no doubt she's bouncing off the walls in delight, as I feel like doing. I have sorely missed having a decent wardrobe. I always love looking my best and my usual attire—when we lived on Earth—was skirts, tops, shorts, string vests and cute little dresses in the summer. I seldom wore jeans or pants. That all changed with the move to Novo: I could only bring a few items of clothing given our limited travel allowance. Everyone was issued with a standard wardrobe pack, tiding us over until the retail outlets had been established, and textile manufacturing had resumed. I've been to the square on various occasions in the last two years, but it's only recently that decent clothing has started to reappear, and the supply is still quite limited. I can't imagine what it must have taken to compile this wardrobe, but for once I don't question it. Instead, I stand there, soaking in all the different colors and fabrics, and bask in the warm ambiance.

I hear the front door open and someone calls out, "Hello there" in a slightly lilting tone. I drag myself away from the wardrobe and head back down to the front room,

where I'm immediately accosted by a petite girl with a mass of soft red curls. "Hi, I'm Fenuka Gray, your assigned pageant coordinator. It's nice to meet you. I'm so excited, aren't you? We're going to have so much fun!" she says eagerly.

Despite myself, I find that I'm beaming at this stranger, her attitude is infectious. "Ariana Skye, my friends call me Ari, nice to meet you too," I say as I extend my hand in greeting.

"Now, down to the matter in hand," she says, serious and business-like all of a sudden. "I need you to remove all your clothes so I can conduct a complete body analysis. Then we'll sit down and schedule out the work to be done. Thereafter, I'll run through your calendar with you. Any questions?" she asks me.

"Um, no," I say, as I take a huge gulp of air, and prepare myself to get naked. I'm a hugely private person and the thought of stripping naked in front of a total stranger terrifies me, but I know there's no point in protesting, so I just get on with it.

Fenuka directs me to the wardrobe room and hands me a light pink, silk robe. "Please remove all your clothes, including your undergarments, and put this on. I'll be there in a minute." I comply on all counts, and sit there patiently until she enters the room.

Fenuka removes the robe and kindly brings me to the scanner. She instructs me to stand very still as my body is scanned. This takes no more than a minute and once my naked image appears on the screen she hands me back the robe; I gratefully wrap it protectively around my body. I sit down and watch as she dissects every inch of my body and muses over a variety of options and treatments. Every so often she comes over and prods me, or peers at my face, or tousles my hair, or lifts up a hand or foot.

“Right, I think we have a plan,” she finally says. “Get dressed and meet me outside in the front room.” I don’t need to be told twice: I grab my jumpsuit and hurriedly zip it up. When I enter the front room, she greets me with a huge smile, displaying a perfect set of gleaming white teeth, that literally blind me. “Come sit beside me and we’ll go through this,” she says as she simultaneously pats the empty space on the chaise longue beside her. I readily sit down and listen.

I am scheduled to receive body polishing, spray tan, manicure, pedicure, brow shaping, mink eyelashes, facial resurfacing, laser hair removal and she wants to cut my hair. “So, what do you think?”

“I’m overwhelmed,” I say disconcertingly—it doesn’t do much for my self-esteem.

“You’re going to look fabulous” she gushes. I’m not entirely convinced.

“I won’t cut my hair,” I say brazenly.

“Oh sweetie, we won’t do anything drastic, but it hangs so limply, let’s give it some oomph. Trust me, everything will be fine.”

Fenuka asks me tons of questions about the type of clothes I like and she listens attentively to my views; that goes some way towards reassuring me. She then uploads my schedule to my data-cuff and explains the next stage in the process. I have to return tomorrow to start the fertility testing; on Saturday I have the physical skills test; on Monday it’s a talent showcase and the beautification process starts. Once these are completed my profile page will be finalised and then the coordinators begin to compile the initial suitor lists.

“You’ll have your Top Ten list within the next week and you can then begin the dating process,” she trills.

“Great, I’ll be counting down the days,” I say sarcastically.

“That’s the spirit sweetie,” she says, completely mis-reading my tone and facial expression. She gives me a quick peck on the cheek before telling me to contact her anytime. And with a sharp turn of her heel she’s gone.

I put my head in my hands and take a long deep breath. *I can do this, I can do this*, I repeat like a mantra. And after a few minutes reflection, I realise that today hasn’t actually been too bad. All the beauty stuff will be fun; it will be nice to feel pampered and cosseted for a change. Eve will be proud of me, I think, as I gather my backpack and prepare to make my exit. I dial her number on my data-cuff and her image flashes up before me. As anticipated, she’s ecstatic. We arrange to meet at the front entrance so I leave and pull the door shut behind me.

“How’s the head?” Cal is sitting cross-legged on the floor, his back to the glass wall, facing my door.

“Are you stalking me?” I ask. “I’m sure it’s against the law, I may have to report you to Daddy,” I say spitefully. He points to the right and I see that the room directly next door to mine is his. I stare in total disbelief. “I suppose you asked your father to organise that as well?” I say bitterly.

“No, it’s pure coincidence, although I don’t really believe in coincidences. I heard voices coming from your room; I thought I’d wait and escort you downstairs.”

“I’m well capable of making my own way out, I don’t need a chaperone,” I say tetchily.

“Well, you needed me twice today already, I didn’t want to risk a third time,” he grins mischievously at me.

“What do you want with me Cal? Why this sudden interest?” I ask in exasperation.

“You fascinate me Ariana. You have no time or patience for me whatsoever and I like that, I love a good challenge,” he says. I stare at him open-mouthed, for once

lost for words. “Come on,” he says, “let’s get out of here” and he grabs my hand firmly and starts towing me down the corridor.

I am in a slight daze over Cal’s words and the feel of his hand in mine, so I don’t notice him at first. But I feel eyes bearing down on me and it brings me sharply back to reality. I see him mounting the front steps towards us.

“Cadet Remus,” he nods at Cal. “Cadet Skyee,” he says, as he turns his attention towards me.

“Mr. Rada,” we acknowledge him in tandem as we move past him.

He edges in closely to me and I feel the warmth of his breath on my ear as he whispers, “I’m watching you.”

END OF CHAPTER THREE.

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TRUE CALLING

By Siobhan Davis.

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