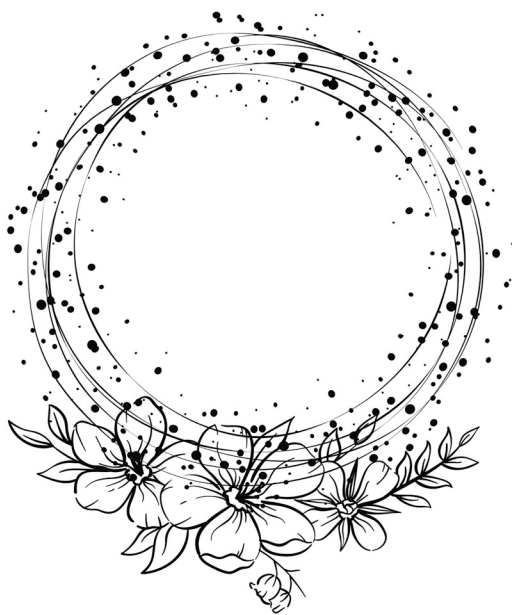


THE
LIGHT AFTER
THE ORANGE



Beverley J. Hall

THE LIGHT AFTER THE
ORANGE

THE TUNDRA STONE SERIES: BOOK 1

BEVERLEY J. HALL

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*For my mother, Elizabeth Haggerty,
for teaching me everything was possible.
It was.*

For everybody that finds the beauty in an ugly world.



PROLOGUE

JENNIFER SOMERVILLE

“Do you still remember it?” asked the small voice, so full of wonder and curiosity, from such a wonderfully curious thing. A daughter. Something I had never wished for. Never dreamed of. Never dared imagine. My little princess.

“Remember what, sweetheart?” I said, pulling her closer. Her little fingers around my neck sent a warm wave of love through every fiber of my body, relaxing every muscle and creating a feeling of time standing still.

“Life before.”

My heart ached. She was too small to remember life before but I did. “You mean before the day? Before the war?” As I ran my fingers through her wild red hair, tears welled up in my eyes. Not tears of sadness for what we had lost, rather for what we had gained. “Yes. I remember clearly.”

“Was it wonderful back then? Danny says it was.”

“Danny was a child. He saw it with a child’s eyes.” The words stuck in my throat. Was there anything better than a child’s eyes? How wondrous the world seemed through them. Even now.

“I have a child’s eyes. Is that bad?”

“Oh, no, sweetheart. That’s not bad. It is beautiful. I wish I saw the world through your eyes. The world, the mortal world, was busy. There were so many people back then. So much of everything, except time.”

“Did time change?” Her icy-blue eyes stared through me as though she was trying to see more than my shell. More than my body. How I wished I

had seen the world as she did, before. I wished the world had been able to look at itself that way, before.

“No, the world did. Nobody ever had time. Until there was none.” I knew she didn’t understand what I meant. I hoped she would someday when I was a memory. “We were all so busy, we never saw each other. We never saw people the way you see people. We only saw bodies. Skin. Clothes. Age. Gender. Not like now.”

“I’m glad I see more.”

“Me too. Now, I need to sleep. I’m tired.”

“Okay, Mom.” The feel of her kiss on my cheek brought a happiness I never thought I’d feel. “Love you.”

“And I love you. Every bit of you.”

“I know. Pink.”

How strange it seemed even now, to see love. Not in actions. In color. How much better the world would have been if we could have seen that before.

I wished I hadn’t seen before. Sitting in the old chair, staring across what used to be a city, the springs poking through the patched-up fabric, I was too tired to care.

I wanted to explain to Alex, so innocent and unaware, what the world was before. How do you tell someone that your generation destroyed everything and left them nothing? Yet, her nothing was worth more than my everything. I rarely thought about the old world anymore. Did I still remember? Unfortunately.

I remember us laughing at the farce that was politics back then. He had been amusing at first. A man building a repertoire out of division and hatred. It had been funny until we realized he might do it! He might win!

As we watched the country rip itself apart, turning people against each other, we still believed it would sort itself. We let him do it. I let him do it. I watched as he started arguments and wars nobody could win. We watched. We moaned, but we watched. Until the Orange.

We watched as most of the world died. We were glad to be the five percent left alive. The human instinct to survive was never more amazing than when we had nothing left to lose, and we had nothing left to lose.

It had been a Monday. I remember being seated in a classroom with thirty children, sure we were about to die. We watched the news of the first blast of Orange (somewhere so far from us it wouldn’t matter). Deep down, in the gnawing pit of our stomachs, we knew it would matter. I had seen this a million times before in the school playground. The I-can-hit-

harder-than-you-can solution to every argument. This time, the playground was the world.

Of course, it had mattered. Most children had been collected by parents and family following the evacuation warnings. Most of them were never seen again, and I have lived my life fearing they never survived. I remained with those who were never collected, which probably proved my salvation.

By the end of that day, there was blackness. The Orange that had blasted around the world, as bomb after bomb exploded, disappeared. The Orange had left black. Ash, dust, and death. That video had been the last thing I saw before the blackness. No electricity. No telephones. No internet. No . . .

Yet, as we appeared from the black, we had something amazing. Something we didn't really appreciate at the time. A new start.

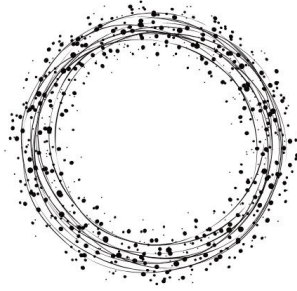
Strange—the way we all try, at some point in our lives, to figure out our purpose. I was a school teacher. Society never really perceived it as much of an aspiration. We didn't seek glory, or fame, or fortune, or even celebrity (all the things society held so highly, before). That's what I did before and that's what I did after. I found the children's strengths and helped them develop them.

I don't pretend to know why. I don't care why. Maybe it was because we stopped labeling and medicating the children. Maybe it was because we stopped trying to make them workers for tomorrow's society. I still don't know what tomorrow's society will be. What I do know is that, one by one, the children developed gifts. They saw the world differently. They felt the world. Perhaps we were already developing, before? Perhaps it was the Orange?

What they learned most of all was love. Hate died in the Orange. We had no room left for hate.

The small voice of my princess, Alex Chegasa, returned. "I've got you something, Mom . . . Mom . . . Is it beautiful where you are?"

PART ONE



Surviving the Orange



ONE

ALEX

I stared at the dust covering my Converse sneakers, willing my feet to move. My eyes followed the shadows of the skeletal trees behind me. Their dead silhouettes, like fingers, pointed and directed me toward my past. My eyes rested on the debris filling the street, and I struggled to remember, even imagine, the houses, the homes, the families who lived here, before.

This was my world and my time, but the lone white house, hemmed in by what must once have been other homes, was a lie. With its paint peeling from the wooden boards, it stood as a memory of a world long gone. A time that was gone. A life that was gone. A life that was taken from me.

The silence filled me, allowed me freedom, but the house dragged me back to a time I didn't truly remember. How many of my earliest memories were real? Were they the result of stories told to me as a child?

Fear flooded through my veins, pulsing faster and faster, in time with my heart. Today I turned eighteen, I became an adult. I had been sure I would cross the road and step back in time, to my childhood.

I sighed, kicking the rubble and creating a dust storm. How should I spend my eighteenth birthday, if not remembering my mother? I reached to break off a blackened finger from a tree, and the pathetic click it made as I pulled it matched my mood. I held it tightly between my palms as it grew leaves and then small orange flowers.

A small smile curved my lips as I twisted my mass of orange curls and pushed the branch through them to hold them off my face. I picked up a ragged, clay-colored brick and threw it at the house. It bounced off, as I

knew it would. The magic that protected it still stood guard. I knelt on the ground, stones poking through the holes in my jeans and scratching my legs, and drew in the dry mud covering the road. My fingers traced an M-O-M in the dirt, which the wind soon hid as it danced along the street.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, I would go in.

Tomorrow, I would forget I was all alone.

I stood, brushed hands over my clothes, and headed for home, knowing Danny and Calesta would be annoyed I'd sneaked out of the school, again. Faced with over an hour's walk back, I regretted my choice.

As I climbed over the debris and mud of what had once been streets, the sunlight fighting through the clouds tried to warm me. After the Orange, clouds of dust and darkness filled the sky for the winter that followed. The sun was making a comeback and those of us who survived were beginning to appear from our hidings.

The lines where roads would have been, now covered in debris and mud, were lined with the shadows of once-trees and barely-dressed homes. Gone were the roofs and windows, along with many walls, from when those that lived through the Orange found themselves perishing in the earthquakes and tsunamis that followed. The final roar of a devil.

After I crossed under the highway, I quickly turned up Nichols Street to use the once-trees as cover for my return. A house still standing and looking like a house peered out from between the trees. Houses in anything resembling one piece always attracted my attention. We went scavenging weekly, hunting for anything we might need, but today I looked for myself. I loved collecting the unclaimed memories of those long gone: photographs, jewelry, ornaments, clothes, relics of a life from when purpose could be beauty.

I clambered through an overgrown hedge, now brown and lifeless, its branches scratching at my skin and pulling me. I cursed as I scowled at the new holes in my woolen jumper, which would cause more moans when I got home. I ducked my head as I entered under the rotten wood of what must have been a front doorframe. Furniture scattered and piled in the hallway blocked my path. I stooped to squeeze through a small gap between two sofas, only just managing to pass through.

As I dragged myself out, I looked at the dirt now covering my clothes. I shrugged my shoulders, already imagining the faces of Danny and Calesta.

I had climbed out of the window as the sun reached the horizon, the glow illuminating the tops of the ruinous buildings and once-trees. They

would have realized I was gone by breakfast, but I still harbored the hope they had left me to sleep late for my birthday.

I placed my feet on the stairs, holding my breath with each footstep as I waited for the crack of the rotten wood to give way. I reached the top and took long, deep breaths, one step closer to finding the trinkets I loved to collect. The floorboards of the landing creaked under my weight, but I carried on, staying close to the walls, curiosity driving me beyond the point of recklessness.

The first door I met was closed, sealed against the years that had ravaged the house. I pushed it open to reveal a small pink room, its curtains still pulled shut to hide the atrocities of the outside. I stared for a moment at the small bed with teddy bears and plush animals, knowing this belonged to a child, the bed made and pristine. Somebody made this bed, unaware nobody would sleep in it again. The toys sat waiting pointlessly for the child that never grew up.

I lifted a small grey bunny. Its floppy ears shed ashes and soot when I stroked it. Dust filled the air, creating a hazy halo around the toy. I was lucky to be eighteen. I had a bedroom like this once, in the white house I couldn't bring myself to enter. A bedroom I couldn't quite remember. I wondered if my mother placed a bunny like this on my bed, waiting for me. I closed the door gently before moving on to the next room.

The door lay ajar, allowing me to glimpse into somebody's past. I pushed the door and peered at the enormous bed, still made and covered in a dirty quilted bedspread. I walked in, suddenly aware of how scruffy I looked. I opened the wardrobe to stare at the rows of colorful garments and the countless boxes of shoes at the bottom. How different life must have been to need that many clothes.

I pulled them out and scattered them on the bed, hoping there would be something practical I could borrow. Not that I intended to return it but I rationalized it would be a birthday present to me. They were all too small. My frame was as tall as most men I had met, and the lady of the house had clearly been more feminine than me.

I moved to the opposite wall and opened the wardrobe doors, no longer faced with colors and femininity. I pulled out jeans and tried them on. Although perhaps a touch wide in the waist, their skinny fit allowed my hips to hold them up. I grabbed a t-shirt and sweatshirt, about to put them on when a noise stopped me. I squashed myself into the wardrobe. Closing the door, I listened for footsteps that never came.

The sound of my breathing filled the space as the air grew hotter. I

edged the door open to look for any signs of life. The silence greeted me. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply in through my nose and out through my mouth. My heart rate calmed and I stretched out my aura to feel for life. I got no reply.

I squeezed out of the half-open door and rolled under the bed, still holding the stolen clothes. I crawled to the far side of the bed, sticking my head out when I heard the creak return. Again I reached out with my aura, probing for a response. It stopped as it bounced off another aura. An aura that didn't know it was an aura. Unguarded energy, full of happiness and kindness. I poked my head out farther to squint around the door when suddenly a wet, slobbering tongue washed my face.

I spluttered, rubbing my face with the t-shirt, looking at the owner of the aura and of the tongue. A large bundle of golden fur, remarkably clean and clearly well fed, looked back at me. Its dazzling blue eyes stared at me as it tilted its head, its pointed ears sticking up like antennae, waiting for me to speak.

Most dogs died during the Orange, or soon after. My mother had explained animals didn't understand that they couldn't drink the water and they slowly poisoned themselves. We had taken some in and tried to heal them, but none of them withstood the poisons of our bombs. I couldn't imagine how this dog survived, but her beautiful face caused me to squeal and roll around the floor, stroking and rubbing her fur.

I looked at her. Her eyes as blue as mine, as my mother's, stared back, and I knew she was a gift from beyond. My mother may be dead, but she wouldn't miss my eighteenth birthday. "You're called Jen now because my mother gave you to me."

I threw my ripped jumper on the floor, pulling on the borrowed clothes. All the while, she watched me, her eyes full of love. I placed my hand on her head to share my feeling of love, and she licked me.

"So, up for being my friend, Jen? Just a word of advice, though, people who I love tend to die. Just so you know." A dull ache squeezed at my heart as I spoke, knowing the truth of my words. Those of us who survived were lucky, but lucky meant lonely.

We exited the house and cut through the open land and once-trees, heading for North Street. Jen ran behind me, her tail wagging as we passed the remnants of the houses until we reached the Rocky Hill Conservation Area. I darted in among the once-trees and slowed down, hidden among their dark silhouettes.

Jen panted and I pulled my water bottle from my bag. I poured some

into my palm and she lapped it up. I took a mouthful before pouring the rest into my cupped hand. She drank the water before licking me and barking her thank you. We walked through the trees toward the rear of the school. I looked at Jen and realized my plan to climb back in the window needed to change. I would have to walk through the doors.

I paused to look at the trees as I approached the school, noticing small green buds on them. Was the magic escaping from school, or was the world beginning to live again?



BILLEY

Loneliness ate me up from the inside, nibbling away at me and leaving an aching emptiness. I didn't know what I missed or who I missed but knew, deep in the part of my soul that holds my intuition, there was a person-size hole nobody could fix, except for the one.

The person we all hunt for but so rarely find.

The person we were made to fit with.

The one imperfect, perfect, mismatch our soul longs for.



The trees swayed in an elegant dance, keeping time with the breeze that, even on the calmest days, blew on top of the hill. I closed my eyes and lay back on the grass. The cold and damp of the earth chilled me.

My State-sponsored family had long since stopped worrying about where I was and if I would be alone. It was rare to meet anybody up here and it had unofficially become my place.

I hated living in the Rural but I loved this place. I found it soon after being placed here when I tried to run away. The trees called me, even now, when the strange and disjointed tune of the wind flitting through the branches sent the leaves bobbing frantically in the air. I imagined I could hear them.

Adults talked about me, not to me, and they rarely heard what I said. They discussed how my grief caused me to act out, how I needed to make

friends, and how I would settle into school. I was one of the lucky ones, being schooled.

Nobody ever asked what I wanted.

I wanted to belong somewhere. To be a part of something. To feel like more than a weird burden.

The trees listened to me. They asked nothing of me and didn't care about my life, before. The death of my parents didn't matter to them, and they never demanded I behave, or be quiet, or tidy my room, or do my homework. They were content to share their time and space with me.

Out of the corner of my eye, a red streak attracted my attention and I leaned forward to see the source. A small man, no more than the height of a child, strode down the hill, oblivious to my presence. I peered through the long grass at the pointed red cap of the funny little man disappearing at the bottom.

So few people lived here, in this area of Bearaig. The cost of maintaining life so far from the capital of Nuadh Eidyn was too expensive unless there was a socially beneficial reason. I was here to be educated. My parental unit, Brigina and Gaevoin, were stationed here because they were the foremost botanists and were often credited with saving humanity after the environmental collapse. They denied this but I sensed there was some truth in it.

I couldn't stop staring at where the man and his red cap vanished. The sight of anybody wearing anything other than State Grey was almost unheard of. Red was a vulgar color, prevalent before the disaster. Now, equality was marked by uniform grey.

I jumped with a start when the man appeared from the long grass and glared at me for a few seconds, his stare piercing my soul as he penetrated beyond my eyes to something deeper. The evil painted in his old face, contorted with anger and hatred, was visible for the first time beneath his red cap.

Hidden behind the tree, my breathing dragged me into an unknown panic. I closed my eyes, his face etched into the darkness behind them.

When I opened my eyes and stared at the sky, the white clouds began to dissolve and hinted at the obscured blue. The sun battled through the cracks to create moments of light and shade, and my worries evaporated, soaked up by the trees. He was no longer visible. I shook my head and let out a small chuckle.

"You're losing it, Billey. Your imagination's getting the better of you." I wriggled to get comfortable and sat up, pulling my knees up to rest my head

on them, and stretched my hands to untie my shoes. Dragging my heels along the grass, my shoes landed in a bundle on the ground. I wiggled the toes of my left foot in the damp grass and it tickled. I ran my hand down the cold wood of my right leg from the wood of my foot to the grass in one sweeping movement. Leaning back against the rough bark of the tree, I laced my fingers through the grass. The moisture clung to my skin and sent a chill through my hands. I dug my fingers deep into the soil.

I imagined roots spiraling away from my hands and feet, drawing deeper and deeper into the earth, growing closer to the core of the earth.

“Hello,” I said, not expecting an answer but hoping the trees understood I was glad to see them again.

“Hello,” came a small voice behind me and I turned to face it.

A beautiful young woman I guessed to be about the same age as myself stood leaning against a tree, her head tilted slightly. She scanned me from top to bottom with eyes that sparkled with a mischievous glint. I found a smile on my face.

“I’m Geilis,” the beautiful young woman said, stepping forward and holding out a delicate hand.

I stared at her, a comfortable sense of recognition embracing me. “Sorry, do I know you?” I asked, reaching my hand out toward Geilis. “You look familiar and yet I don’t remember you.”

“I’ve seen you but I don’t think we’ve met,” she replied, taking my hand in hers. Her opalescent skin was so delicate I worried touching it might, somehow, damage it.

When I pulled my hand away, I took a step back and took a good look at Geilis. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Billey.” My mouth, usually so articulate and full of opinions, froze, hunting for words. I stared at Geilis’s long dark woven dress. Dresses and skirts, although regulation wear for breeders, were rarely worn, and something about the way it floated around her hips seemed so wasteful of fabric. Who would be allowed to be so extravagant with natural resources?

Without a word of explanation, Geilis sat cross-legged on the ground, tucking the billowing dress between her legs. Her eyes gazed up at mine as I sat to face her, mirroring her position. Geilis stared without making a sound, forcing me to fidget, the shape of the tree roots no longer fitting my body.

“How long have you lived in Bearaig?” I asked, my usually loud, brash voice sinking into silence. My eyes watched my index finger following the lines of my palm.

Geilis laughed a low, contented chuckle. “I was born here.”

I wondered if I had ever felt the confidence and comfort of Geilis. The abandon and freedom of it tinged the edges of my discomfort. “I only arrived here a few harvests back. I was sent here to learn at the Institute. What’s your assignment?” I asked, raising my eyes to look at Geilis, desperate to sound more like the girls who usually made fun of me. The girls who laughed at everything and always managed a smart reply to everything. For once in my life, I wished I could be like them, just once.



When I first arrived in the Rural four harvests ago, I had been unprepared for life outside of Nuadh Eidyn.

Since my parents died I’d been passed from home to home after the State took me into their care. I hated every family I had been housed with. I never quite fit in anywhere and gave up trying after a while.

My mass of curly hair and my funny accent all made me stand out. But, more than any of those, was the fact nobody knew where I came from. I didn’t remember anything from before the accident that killed my parents. Everybody assumed the memories would return, but as time moved on and I still never regained any memories, everybody started to doubt me.

I saw the mistrust in their eyes when they looked at me, wondering what I was hiding.

I hadn’t hidden anything. I never remembered anything. I wanted to belong, to be like everybody else.

With time, I stopped trying to blend in. I realized the futility of trying to belong. Every new home brought somewhere else to escape from. The ruinous ramshackle streets of Nuadh Eidyn provided many hiding places in the dark and deserted corners for somebody hoping to be invisible.

I hadn’t been very good at being invisible.

By the time I was found, again, I had passed my thirteenth harvest, and this time I was sent to be assessed for use. It was decided I was to be sent to be a brain. My intellectual ability allowed me to avoid the breeding centers most of the other girls I saw went to, but it also saw me sent off to the Rural to be schooled.

When I arrived at my new home with Brigina and Gaevoín, a tiny part of my soul had sparked to life. I wanted to hate them but I couldn’t. They may be part of the State but they seemed different.

They were different but then so was I.

The trees gathered around me, although I understood it was my imagination, and protected me from the breeze that grew and took on a new life. I rested against the rough bark of the largest tree, my rear now fitting into the roots that formed a seat in the ground. The tree, I almost believed, was shaped for me. Its branches wrapped around my tiny form as I snuggled among the roots. The wind grazed my cheek and I pulled my scarf around my face, desperate to stay here for every second possible.

The sound of the wind howling through the branches vibrated the leaves and created a voice I longed to understand. I closed my eyes, listening, imagining I could hear the voices of the trees. I felt my soul combine with the tree, and contentment that existed nowhere else in my life melted my anguish and pain.

My eyes shot open and I stared at where Geilis had been moments earlier.

Empty space filled my view.

I was, again, alone.

A hand stroked my head and I jumped with a start. My eyes darted around, taking in the empty scene. My hands fumbled on the ground, grasping for the books I had been reading, throwing them in my bag and tripping over the roots that, moments earlier, comforted and cradled me.

“My soul recognizes your soul,” a voice said. Except the words weren’t spoken. I heard them not with my ears but inside my head.



My leg ached with a burning I had never known by the time I caught sight of the dilapidated stone building of Brigina and Gaevoïn’s home, my home.

I threw my belongings over the wall that circled the house, or at one time had. Now it was a strange collection of stones piled on top of each other with a height that changed every meter or two and then vanished. I jumped the gate, unwilling to battle with the rusted relic today.

My breathing echoed in my ears, my heart threatened to pound through my rib cage, and my body screamed at the exertion. Landing in an unceremonious heap on the yellowed grass, I tried to calm my breathing and found a laugh filling me, starting from a place deep inside. I rolled over onto all fours, about to push myself up when Gaevoïn appeared from around the corner of his workshop.

With no top on and a dirty old apron wrapped around his body to protect his regulation-grey trousers, his presence was so unlike anybody else

I knew. The State was clear on dress and presentation, but somehow Brigina and Gaevoïn managed to get away with it.

“Hey Billey, what you doing down there and why are your books everywhere? Are you having a weird moment?” he said with a laugh, gesturing at the belongings I had thrown over the wall. He tilted his head, genuine concern sparking in his eyes. “Are you okay?” he asked, holding out his hand.

I placed my hand in his and he bent to grab my elbow with his other hand, pulling me to my feet in a swift movement. “Sorry. Yeah, just a weird moment, I guess.” I forced a small smile in an effort to avoid telling anybody about the feeling of something or someone being with me at the trees. My head was swimming with insecurities about my mental state, and it was unwise to say it out loud, even to Brigina and Gaevoïn.

“Ah well, the greatest minds among us are always a bit weird. Told you before, take it as a sign of greatness.” He bent to pick up my books while I straightened myself. “You better hurry inside. Brigina has a guest she wants to introduce you to.” His face took on a slight grimace, with the small creases around his eyes deepening to form cracks on his perfectly tanned face. He ran his fingers through his wild mass of long grey hair, twisting his fingers through it.

My shoulder sunk as I sighed. “They’ve sent another child for the Institute, haven’t they?” My words merged with a sigh and formed a despondent answer to my own question.

He handed me the books and patted my shoulder. “Sorry, but it’s only for a few days, supposedly. They say they don’t want to interfere with our work but they can’t find another home for him.”

“Him? Oh, joy of joy. Just what I need.” I took the books from him. Eyeing the top book, I said, “We were learning about you and Brigina today in botany.”

He laughed. “And what nonsense were they telling you about us?” he asked, guiding me toward the house. His modesty prevented him from admitting what I already knew. After the environmental disaster that wiped out most of humanity and a huge chunk of life on Earth, they developed seeds and plants capable of self-fertilization and produced food for those still alive.

They probably saved those who had survived.

“Oh, you know. Just how the two of you helped save humanity from starvation.” The way he would brush off the compliment, and the modesty of both Brigina and Gaevoïn, were two of the reasons I had grown to love

them despite my desire to hate them when the State housed me here. I also loved the fact they never considered me weird when my mind wandered in strange ways. They encouraged me to follow my brain's strange paths. They also taught me to avoid attracting attention from those who ruled Nuadh Caled.

"Nonsense, now let's get washed up before Brigina murders both of us for being late and dirty."

When we entered the kitchen, Brigina's soft, round face glowed in the way only she could. Even as a sullen teenager, when I first arrived so desperate to hate them both, Brigina's face always managed to make me feel like I was the best thing to happen, just by being there. Despite being so much shorter than Gaevoin, in fact than everybody, her massive presence filled the room in a way that made it impossible to ignore her.

Gaevoin walked to wrap his arms around her and a pang of something—longing, jealousy, or maybe teenage hormones—caught my breath. After all these years, they still looked at each other as though they were the most important thing in the world. In the years I had lived with them, I had come to realize they not only looked it, they felt it. It was inspirational and so in contrast to life for most people in our society.

They weren't hampered by being able to breed or not breed. Their use was academic and therefore the State ignored their nonconformity. I doubted I'd be so lucky.

The smell of food wafted toward me, tempting me from the bubbling pots on the old wood-burning stove, and reminded me how little I had eaten. I moved to wash my hands, knowing Brigina had been waiting for us. I was washing my hands when Brigina put her hand on my shoulder.

"Billy, this is Codrin. He'll be joining us for a few weeks while his familial unit is in the Capital."

I turned on my heels, taking in a deep breath as I prepared to be pleasant for Brigina and Gaevoin's sake. I took a quick inhale of breath when I saw Codrin. A small, skinny boy, barely old enough to study at the Institute, stood there. He stared at the floor. His gaze moved to the rip in my trousers, the wood of my leg showing through. He glanced up at me for no more than a second before his eyes returned to their downward glance. A momentary feeling of discomfort filled me.

I knew he was still staring at my leg. I couldn't see his eyes but I could feel them.

He nodded at me. "Hi," he said, ignoring my outstretched hand and heading to sit down at the table.

THE LIGHT AFTER THE ORANGE

I glanced at Brigina and Gaevoïn, confusion scrunching my face. Gaevoïn placed his hand on my back, whispering in my ear, “I recall another young person that antisocial a few harvests ago.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ha-ha,” I muttered under my breath.

All memory of the hand that had touched me, or the voice that had spoken in my head, disappeared as I battled to make conversation with Codrin. Before long, I was drained from the energy wasted on the act of being sociable.

This was why I rarely bothered.



ALEX

Jen ran ahead as though she knew where we were headed. She stopped on the boundary between trees and the school that had been my home since the Orange. Her tail wagged, her head constantly turning to check I was still there, right behind her.

We were lucky to have this home. Before the Orange, my mother had been a teacher, and she explained the building had been protected by the same magic that had shielded the house I never entered. When the bombs landed, some of the children she taught were left in the school and, without parents, she became a surrogate parent to them. Her curriculum no longer one of academia, she set about teaching us all how to reach and use the magic that lay deep within the earth.

After she died and the children grew into adults, they moved on, searching for loved ones or a community to belong to.

Before long, only Danny, Calesta, and I remained. Although only ten years older than me, they had taken on the role of parents, teaching me the skills my mother had taught them and ensuring I knew how to use them to survive in our new world.

The modern glass and steel of the school's rear stood out, not only pristine and free from the damage inflicted on the rest of Danvers but also in contrast with the white-painted houses of the town. Now I needed to get to my room without being seen. Difficult to do on my own. Impossible with Jen.

I reached out to hold her and prevent any barking while I opened the

door. “Not a sound now, okay?” I tickled the fur under her chin and she rubbed her head on my arm. “Seriously, I’ve only ever done this on my own. Having you has meant I’ve had to change my plans, so, a bit of respect, please.” She licked my face and, for a moment, I convinced myself she nodded in agreement.

Holding my hand over the lock, I pushed my magic to open it. I inched it open, reaching my aura to sense Danny and Calesta. The empty harmony of my home was all that met me. I pulled off my shoes and padded toward my room, and Jen, following my cue, moved with stealthy steps, the marble-print flooring cushioning the sound of our feet. As we passed the central courtyard, now full of vegetables, fruit trees, and herbs, thanks to the magic of my mother, Jen wagged her tail. Her mouth opened, giving the appearance of a smile, and her tongue panted in time with her tail when her eyes fixed on the unique greenery.

I shook my head and whispered, “No, we need to get to my room without being seen. Shh!”

Her head lowered, her eyes registering she understood, and we climbed the stairs leading to my room. Reaching the top, we had turned toward my room when Danny’s aura reached me. I sighed and looked at Jen. “We’re busted.” Her tail wagged, no idea what I said, happy to be the source of my attention.

I paused outside my room, probing to gauge Danny’s emotions, immediately regretting it as he probed back. I hissed through my teeth and, with a deep breath, pulled my shoulders back and threw the door open. “Danny. How are you, and what are you doing in my room?”

He stared at me, his eyebrows creeping up his forehead. “Good morning to you as well. I came to say happy birthday, but you seemed to be missing . . . again.”

“Yeah, I know. I got a birthday present from Mom. Look. Meet Jen,” I said, stepping to the side as Jen ran in and jumped on Danny, licking him.

Danny’s eyes dimmed as the argument in them escaped. “You know it isn’t safe to go out alone. Not everybody out there is like us. Not everybody evolved the way we did.” He perched himself on my bed and combed his hand through Jen’s fur before his eyes glanced back at me. “So, did you go in?”

“You knew where I went?” I flung myself into the chair. Its springs poked in all the wrong directions. I pulled my knees under my chin, wrapped my arms around my legs, and sighed. “No . . . tomorrow.”

He stood and placed his hand on my shoulder on his way to the

doorway. "Calesta made breakfast and we've got you a present. When you're ready, maybe you could meet us in the cafeteria?" He turned to look at Jen. A small chuckle escaped his mouth and any chance he had of looking angry disappeared. "Don't be too long, we've already waited quite a while. I'll tell Calesta you were tired and slept in." He nodded at Jen. "And, you can explain that."

I pulled off my sweatshirt, throwing it on my bed before looking in the mirror. The dirt streaked my face and spoke of anything but a long peaceful sleep. I picked up a rag and soaked it in the bowl on top of the drawers to scrub away the telltale signs of my lie. My hair matted and twisted in all the wrong directions, and I sighed, looking at Jen. "You don't know how lucky you are to have fur. You should try having this," I said, pulling my fingers through my hair. "Never mind, c'mon, let's go and introduce you to Calesta. Best behavior, okay?"



Calesta's face smiled at me as I entered the cafeteria, her eyes moving past me to gape at Jen. "What is that?" Her mouth shrunk as it puckered. She glared at me. "Yours, I presume?"

I bent to stroke Jen and her tail wagged. I extended my aura, my being, toward her, sharing images of Calesta playing with her. She ran at Calesta, her tail and her tongue ready to play.

Calesta pretended to moan for two seconds before landing on the floor and rubbing Jen's stomach. Her eyes rose to look at me, a smile vanquishing the moan she was preparing for.

"You know dogs are a mistake. You can't leave them alone, but if you take them with you, they will give you away to attackers. Why would you want . . . this?" she said, turning back to Jen.

"Mom gave her to me for my birthday. Besides, If I can control a person's emotions, I think I can safely control a dog." I watched as sadness filled her eyes at the mention of my mother. She had been my mother, but she had also been a mother to countless others. "Anyway, happy birthday to me?"

"Sorry. Yeah. Happy birthday. That was a long sleep. Turning eighteen must be tiring work." She laughed, both of us knowing she knew better than to believe Danny's story. He had always been rubbish at shielding his emotions and thoughts. We could both read him too easily to fall for his

lies. Calesta liked to allow him to believe she didn't read him, but we both knew.

I looked at the cake on the table.

Before the Orange, people made cakes with eggs, but I had never seen a hen outside of a book. Like most animals, they died from the poisoned aftereffects.

I understood how difficult it would have been to make (and how awful it would taste), and a warm glow burned my ribcage thinking of the effort they had gone to.

I sat on the black plastic chair, of which there were hundreds scattered around the building, a hangover from when it was a school. At least when I had been little, there had been lots of others, those whose parents never made it to collect them before the Orange happened. Now that most had moved on, the rows of tables and chairs accentuated how alone we were.

"Gosh, thank you. The best thing about birthdays is the cake. Thanks," I said, sticking my finger in and pulling a corner off.

Danny stared at Calesta, bouncing on the balls of his feet. She nodded, and he pulled a box from behind a column, one of many in the large, open void of the cafeteria. "We got you a present. We got them a few months ago but kept them for today. I can't believe we found them. Almost a miracle." He held the box in front of me. "Happy birthday, Alex."

I opened the lid, hoping to shield my emotions from them, not wanting to upset them if I seemed disappointed by it. It would matter to them and they had been so good to me. I peered inside and a lump caught my throat. A brand-new pair of Converse sneakers, identical to mine, only without the holes. I looked up at their faces, expectant and proud. "Wow, how did you . . ."

Danny spoke, bursting to explain how lucky they had been to find them. "We were scavenging out toward Marblehead. Pure fluke. We were looking for wood and fuel and they were just there, hanging on a tree. Never figured why you like them—a solid, hard-working boot would make so much more sense—but we knew you'd love them."

A tear rolled down my cheek and I didn't bother to wipe it. "I'm absolutely thrilled. They're . . . they're . . ." I jumped from my seat and hugged them both. I held them, resting my head on their shoulders to hide my face. We enjoyed the moment and I shared my joy with them. We could have stood there forever, but Jen barked and broke the silent harmony binding us.

BEVERLEY J. HALL

We reminisced about my mother and the lessons she had taught, the people she had saved, and the fantastic stories she would tell. As a child, I cuddled up with her around a fire while she told me tales of other worlds she had seen, where she had visited with my father. After she had died, I clung to the dream of these worlds, basking in the possibility of the universe. I even clung to the idea my father would magically appear and sweep me away from this poisoned planet until I was old enough to take the stories for what they were—fantasy.