Chapter Three

J osh listened to the voices around him, exhausted and motionless. Where was he? The pad or mattress he rested on meant he was no longer washed up on a sandy shore. God had sent rescuers. Josh vaguely recalled his journey to Midway's hospital.

"It's shocking." Josh recognized the deep bass as the doctor's voice. "This man has suffered explosions, falling debris, shrapnel, blunt force trauma, burns, severe sunburn, infections, parasites, prolonged hunger—you name it. There's no reasonable explanation for how he reached shore, let alone survived. Nurse, do we have a name yet?"

"No," a pleasant voice answered, "At times, he's semi-conscious and mumbles but nothing coherent. His dog tags weren't on him or in the rotting rags clinging to him when they brought him in."

"Strange. Maybe the medical transport team knows something about them."

"I'll ask. And I'll start a chart. How shall I label it?"

"John Doe for now."

Josh struggled to rise from crippling fog, but it was too thick

"Well," the doctor said. "The more he rests, the faster he'll recover. Check him for identifying marks."

The nurse's cool hands skimmed Josh's body. As she brushed both ears forward, she said. "There's a one-inch scar behind his left ear."

"Noted." The doctor's writing implement scratched. "He's been through rough stuff even before these injuries. Record everything. Any moles or other distinguishing marks?"

"No more that I see."

"Fine. I'll send an update to headquarters of his approximate age, height, weight. Some family's waiting to hear the good news that their son's alive. Having a last name should help someone claim him. Unless he has no family."

"Doctor, no. That would be too awful to think about."

Josh ordered his body to move, but nothing. He could not surface again. He was as entombed in sleep as if he'd been handcuffed inside a coffin. Did trauma do all this? Or had the medical team given him sedatives? Muscle relaxants? A treatment-induced coma?

"What are the odds of this man's recovery?" Concern edged the nurse's voice. "Will he return to normal?"

Josh focused. *Yes, answer her question!*

"That depends on many things. There's always a chance. At least he's alive. His lack of alertness concerns me. What medications is he on?"

"Just morphine." Papers shuffled before the nurse continued. "Goodness, his admit slip says the evacuating medics gave painkillers too. I'll note in his chart that he got a double dose."

"Make sure that's not repeated. I'll check his pupillary reaction." The doctor lifted Josh's eyelids one at a time and shined a penlight into each eye. "He's deeply under. I'm not seeing a response."

"I see slight constriction. That would be a good sign, right?"

"Yes, if you truly saw that." The doctor hesitated then repeated the action more slowly.

Josh's insides screamed. *Yes! See me! I'm here. I'm alive.*

He heard the nurse's voice again. "I thought I saw—but perhaps not."

"Well, keep checking. His overall condition is improving," the doctor said. "I see no physical cause preventing consciousness unless there's brain damage we can't see. Have you seen any signs of alertness?"

The nurse hesitated. "I'm not sure. Yesterday, when metal shelving fell, he flinched, so he's hearing. Twice when I brought water to his lips, he swallowed small sips."

"Really? That's remarkable, but it might be instinct."

"Sometimes he moans but with indistinguishable sounds. There's little involuntary movement, but if he's over-medicated—"

"Yes, that complicates things. We'll reevaluate him soon." The doctor snapped his clipboard shut. "Keep up the good work, nurse. If he becomes conscious and remembers anything at all, he should have quite a story to tell. Somebody upstairs protected him. If you see any changes in his condition, let me know." His voice faded as he stepped away.

"Yes, doctor."

The nurse's cool, comforting hand brushed Josh's forehead once again. His mind calmed and he slept.