

## The Stone Hand

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Georgia loved the desert around the Colony, no matter what the others said. Let them talk endlessly of places they would rather be. She would stay alone where no one stared at her shoulder where her left arm should be, and no one asked about her parents—the favorite topic of conversation at the Colony, and the one she was least interested in discussing. Out here the wind played with her long black hair, the sun caressed her freckled skin, and she climbed with one arm better than others with two. The jewel-bright sky, the rocks with more shades and hues than she could name, and the ever-present wild scent of the creosote bushes were company enough for her.

“So, I know I said I was going to do the play, but I really don’t think I have time. You wouldn’t believe how much extra training Jewel’s giving me.”

The voice broke the magic of the wilderness. On the plains below, tiny dots had gathered in typical circle formation. On a clear day like this, their voices travelled across the hundreds of feet with ease, and Georgia could understand every word.

She saw no escape. She could remain alone in the hills with their voices echoing forever in her ears, or she could join them and stand in awkward silence, waiting for them to notice her. But maybe this time things would be different. The conversation would turn to something she knew about, and she could speak up and be heard. They knew all the same people, and did mostly the same things—it had to happen eventually.

Mind made up, she began clambering down the rocks.

Her path soon took her out of view of the others, but she didn’t need to see them. She’d grown up with them— most had arrived as children, like she did, unwanted, uncared for, unloved. The older kids were always there, too young for her to ignore, too old for her to understand, but that was a long time ago. She was fifteen now, and they weren’t much older. Why did they not see she wasn’t a little child anymore?

Soon she stood at the top of a steep incline, where lines of rocks raised their heads out of the gravel like crocodiles in surf. The others were gathered at the bottom. One of the boys looked

up and saw her. He nudged a companion, and soon they were all staring. She tried to ignore the looks and concentrate on the climb.

The thick gravel slid under every step. At first she waited for the sliding to stop before moving, but soon she gave up. She stepped as soon as she'd caught her balance, before the mountain had a chance to drag her down. Step, slide, step, slide. It was almost fun, beating the tiny rockslides. In no time she was at the bottom.

"That was cool," Brand Flintin said.

"No, it was dangerous." Ruby Bergen, tall and lanky, looked down at Georgia. "It looked like you were going to fall over the edge."

"That's what made it cool," Brand replied.

Ruby ignored him. "You should be more careful."

Georgia bristled at the bossy tone and turned her back. Behind the rocky ridges, the slope dropped several feet straight down. If she'd gone over, she'd probably have tumbled all the way to the bottom. It took skill to navigate something like that.

For several seconds no one said anything. Then blonde Levina Bowen put her hand on Ruby's shoulder. "Guess what? I just finished my application for an internship in Telosa, and the interviewer said he thought I could make it!"

"That would be great!" Ruby said.

The talk moved on, covering everything any of them knew about the city of Telosa. In Georgia's case, it wasn't much. She stood there, listening to the talk, eyeing the desert around them, and she was the first to see that something wasn't right.

The dirt path leading to the Colony's sheltering hills stretched to the horizon. Two spots were making their way up the trail, one taller than the other. Georgia bit her lip. She knew exactly why they were coming.

No one else noticed the newcomers until they passed within feet of the gathered teens. The taller spot became a broad-shouldered man, his brow set in a perpetual grimace. He slowed when he saw them, but his eyes darted quickly away again. The boy met their eyes, but he followed in his father's wake without a word. Georgia saw the length of the hike in his stooped shoulders, and the fear of his father in his hesitating gate, but the lack of panic on his face meant he did not yet know why he was here.

"Poor kid," Brand said, as the strangers disappeared through the Colony's gate.

He wasn't a kid, Georgia thought. He couldn't be much younger than she was, and much older than the little kids usually brought to the Colony.

No one else spoke, and in the stillness they were one. Every eye remained on the gate, knowing what they would see and praying they did not. It came anyway. The man returned alone, arms swinging, head high.

Georgia eyed a fist-sized rock at her feet, wondering how much damage it would cause if she threw it at his head.

"I can't imagine what that's like." Ruby's voice held less meaning than the breezes in the brush. "His parents must have known for years, but they're only leaving him now."

Georgia knew what came next. They would be sharing their stories, lingering over every detail that led them to the Colony, and she wanted no part of it. Before the others could chime in, though, Ruby went on, "Jewel might need help. We should probably get back."

The other teens passed through the gate, but Georgia did not move. No one glanced back. Not one of them noticed she was missing. Once they had disappeared, she turned and scrambled back into the hills.

She was sitting on a ledge halfway down a steep cliff when she saw him. The new boy crouched in the shadow of a boulder, looking like a starved coyote trying to judge if she was predator or prey. She tried to ignore him as she climbed, but she could feel his gaze follow her every move. Step down, step down, lean on shoulder, reach and grab, step down, step down.

He was waiting at the bottom. Up close he was taller than she, though a year or two younger. His hair, allowed to grow shaggy, curled in ringlets across his head. "What happened to you?"

Georgia jerked back, hiding her empty sleeve behind her. "Hasn't anybody taught you to mind your own business?"

"Well, you're not doing it either, following me like this."

"I'm not following you."

"Why else would you be out here alone?"

She had no answer. Instead, she walked away, striding through the soft sand at the bottom of a wash.

"Who are you anyway?"

Georgia looked up. He had followed her, and now stood on a ridge above her head, which made him look shorter and squatter, a bad-tempered dwarf. "I'm Georgia Finix. I live here," she answered.

"My name's Reece. Reece Alamar." He slid down from the rock and stood beside her. "What is this place?"

"The Colony. It's where crossovers go when no one else wants us."

She expected him to flinch, or to cry, or to start complaining. Maybe he'd get so upset that he'd go away. She did not expect him to lean toward her with eager eyes. "There are more people like me?"

Georgia extended a hand. Flames leapt from her skin, glowing with orange light that reflected in the boy's eyes. She reached for his hand, and the fire danced onto his palm and stayed, reaching ever upward. "There are more of us," she said.

The news seemed to overwhelm him. He leaned against the dirty ridge, eyes closed, and the fire in his hands went out. "Tell me more," he said. "What are crossovers?"

Normally she would have changed the subject. It was too painful. But she didn't want the conversation, even a painful one, to end. "Crossovers are fire-users whose parents shape stone. Used to be, people would do anything to get rid of crossover kids. Things are better now. They don't kill anymore, but they still bring us here."

Reece didn't speak again. Georgia looked down the wash, which lead into the valley where the Colony lay. She could see a corner of the wall that hid their barracks, and the director Jewel's office, and the large covered pavilion that smelled of porridge even when they had something more interesting to eat.

"What was your name again?"

Reece's dark eyes were once more fixed on her face.

"Georgia Finix."

"I know some Finixes."

Cold dread like a chilly breeze crawled across her skin. She looked up for the cloud that had covered the sun, and saw nothing but blue.

"There's a kid who played with my brothers, Cephus Finix. He's... I dunno, six? Black hair, green eyes... darker than yours. I met his parents a couple times. They were okay. Cairn and... I dunno, something that started with a vowel..."

“Afra?”

“Yeah, that sounds right.”

Georgia’s insides burned. How many times had she imagined what she would say if she met them again? How many questions had she asked Jewel and the team who had rescued her, hungry for any detail? Yet now her mind was blank. She couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“So they are your folks?”

“I didn’t know I had brother.” Her voice cracked. “He’s a stone-shaper?”

“Yeah.”

Of course he was. He wasn’t at the Colony.

Reece picked up a pebble and rubbed it in his fingers. “I could take you to them.”

She stiffened.

“It’d be easy enough. They live in Clarebridge. It’s not too far off.”

“It’s a full day’s travel on foot. And what makes you think I want to see them?”

“Because I want to see my brothers.” He clenched the pebble in his fist. “It’s stupid. They all hate me. But I still want to see them.”

“They didn’t try to kill you, did they?”

She wished she hadn’t said it as soon as the words left her mouth. Reece’s pebble dropped unnoticed at his feet. “So, that... that’s what happened to your arm?” He tried for a casual tone, but she could hear the alarm underneath.

“Part of it. The rest from infection.” She forced a shrug. “I’ve heard of people petrifying crossovers—turning them into stone, you know. I guess my folks lost heart and quit part way in.”

His eyes were bigger than they had a right to be. “That had to hurt.”

“I don’t remember. I was probably in shock.”

Reece considered this. “I would want to see them again,” he decided. Then his eyes grew dark and angry, and he added, “I’d want to get back at them.”

“I couldn’t!” The thought had entered her mind before, but the fierceness in his face was terrifying.

“I don’t mean I’d kill them or anything.” He thought about it another moment. “I’d want to tell them what they did to me. Make them regret it. Make them see I’m a person as much as they are.”

That was more appealing. A voice in the back of her mind told her this would be a stupid thing to do. She ignored it. “All right,” she said, “but we’d better move fast, before Jewel sends people out looking for us.”

Within minutes they were out of the hills and travelling north. The annoying voice in Georgia’s head was drowned out by her thoughts. She needed to plan exactly what she was going to say. Hopefully she wouldn’t freeze up and forget. Maybe Reece could help her out of spots like that—from his angry stride, she gathered that he had his own speeches to give.

They hiked in the flat country, walking around piles of rocks which seemed sifted through a giant’s fingers. A few times, Georgia caught sight of the river, a glimmer in the east. It would bend closer before they reached the city.

“Is your family in Clarebridge?” she called.

Reece looked up from his dusty shoes. “Nah. They’re in Priceton. Our folks—yours and mine—met at the annual fair.”

Our folks. She was quiet again.

The sun set behind the great mountains, purple shapes on the horizon. Orange and pink crept across the western sky, and the few clouds wore gilded frames. Reece was still staring at his feet, missing the whole show. Georgia watched for both of them until the last light vanished. The sky grew from blue to grey to black, and still they walked on. Her head drooped, until her only thought was to keep her legs moving. Left. Right. Left. Right.

She didn’t notice that they’d entered the city until she felt packed dirt beneath her feet. Reece steered through the streets, and she could do nothing but follow.

“I think it’s here.”

Georgia looked up. He pointed at a cottage separated from its brick neighbors by weed-strewn ground. It didn’t look familiar.

“Want to burn it down?” His voice had grown harder and angrier over the walk

“No. Especially if you’re not sure this is it.”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“Not sure enough. Wait for morning.”

“Where?”

The reality of what they were doing slammed into Georgia’s stomach like a rolling stone. They were in a strange city, miles from home, with nothing to eat and no place to stay. No one

knew where she was, she didn't know what she was doing, and her only companion was an angry boy she'd known for less than a day.

The cottage door opened. Georgia froze, swamped by the lamplight spilling into the yard. A woman-shaped shadow stood in the doorway. "I thought I heard voices. What are you doing out there?"

Georgia's throat was too dry for speech. She didn't realize she would recognize that voice.

The figure bent nearer. "You don't live in Clarebridge, do you? I don't think I've seen you before."

Reece stepped into the light. "Hello, Mrs. Finix."

"Reece Alamar!" she gasped. "What on earth are you doing here? Are your folks in town?"

"Nah. Me and a bunch of friends came down to check out the river. Gia and I ran ahead—we thought we were closer to town."

His ability to lie so easily made Georgia's stomach churn—or maybe that was from walking most of the day without eating. Good smells were wafting through the open door—meat, perhaps in a stew.

The woman studied them for a long time. Then she said, "Well, you can't be hanging around out there all night. You can stay in Cephus's room. And your friend... let me see, we can find something to do with you."

Georgia flinched, but she followed Reece into the house. Before her eyes adjusted, the woman had put out the light and directed her to an overstuffed couch. Georgia curled up on top of it, but she knew she'd never sleep.

The next thing she knew, morning light reflected in a pair of solemn green eyes hanging an inch from her face. She yelped and jerked back, and the boy did the same. Georgia sat up, keeping her empty sleeve between herself and the couch. From across the room, she and the boy regarded one another. She'd pictured him younger, but she didn't doubt for a moment this was Cephus. The waves of black hair, the dark green eyes, the rounded face—he looked like her, except for the missing freckles that marked her as a crossover. More than that, there was something familiar in his wary gaze.

"Want to look at the river with me?" he asked.

She blinked. “What?”

“We can see the bridge from the end of the road. It’s pretty cool.”

A handful of denials blew through her mind. She reached for one, and then realized that every one of them spoke in Ruby’s bossy voice.

“Sure, I’ll check it out,” she said.

It didn’t take long for her to admit that the boy was right about the view. The river ran right beside the road, filling the early morning chill with wordless music. Sunlight played in the rivers’ white ridges. The bridge that gave the town its name appeared upstream, gleaming white against the green banks while tiny dots that were swallows flitted in its shade. She turned to thank the boy and found him scampering across the bank, picking up smooth stones.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Adding to my collection.”

He held up a round, red-hued stone. As she watched, it began to shift and mold like wet clay. “Dad’s better at it,” he admitted. “I just started shaping this year.”

Dad’s better at it. Dad makes him pretty rocks, because he can learn to do it, and I can’t. Georgia scowled and faced the water, making her empty sleeve flap in the wind.

“Are you Georgia?”

She whirled to face him. “What?”

“Are you Georgia?” he repeated.

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean, yes, but I don’t... how do you know?”

She waited for the usual disgust to cross his face. It didn’t appear. If anything, he looked pleased that he’d guessed right. “Mother and Dad talk about you when they think I’m not listening,” he answered. “They think you’re dead, and it makes them sad.”

“Sad?” Georgia repeated. “They wouldn’t feel sad. The kind of people who do this don’t regret it!” She pointed at her shoulder.

His eyes were wide and frightened. He took a step back, and a pebble shifted under his feet. Georgia picked it up. It was brown, not terribly exciting, but she handed it over. “Want it for your collection?”

His fear faded instantly. He grinned at her and pulled it from her hand.

Georgia didn’t know how long they stayed by the river before they heard Cephus’ name floating across the yards. He looked up, and a pebble slipped from his hand. “Uh, oh,” he said.

“What?”

“I’m not actually supposed to be out here by myself. I was thinking you counted, but...”  
He looked over his shoulder toward his home. “Maybe we should go back now.”

Georgia wasn’t so sure. She followed in her brother’s steps, but her thoughts were far away. He’d seemed nervous when he realized he might be breaking rules. Was he unhappy too? People who would harm one child might harm another, stone-shaper or not. Maybe she ought to be taking him away. The Colony wouldn’t be so bad if they had each other.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn’t realize where she was until Cephus crossed the threshold of the cottage door. From inside, she heard a shout, and then the woman appeared, throwing her arms around her boy. “What did you think you were doing? You were gone for hours. Anything might have happened!”

“Aw, Mom, I’m okay. I was with her.”

Georgia looked up and met a pair of eyes that had haunted her dreams for nine years. Every detail was at once strange and familiar. She had remembered that her eyes were brown, but not that they were streaked and spotted like a granite boulder. Her face, pointed and narrow, was the same, but it seemed softer, framed by dark hair she used to always wear up. A single word squeezed through Georgia’s throat. She choked it back, and it escaped only as an inaudible whisper. “Mother.”

Mother turned back to Cephus. “Well, that’s better than taking off alone, but you need to tell me if you’re leaving. I couldn’t bear to lose you. Do you understand?”

His lower lip jutted out, and he didn’t speak.

“Off to your room, then. You can come out after dinner.”

Cephus disappeared, and Mother rounded on Georgia, who shrank back. “I’m sorry you got mixed up in that,” Mother said. “Come sit down. Reece ought to be waking up soon—probably as soon as Cephus slams the door.”

From somewhere out of sight, a door slammed. Georgia almost smiled, until she turned and caught the woman’s eye.

She was alone with Mother.

Her insides were all tied up in knots, and she seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Maybe she’d had a stroke in the night. Mother waited, her smile a little unsure now.

Padding footsteps and a lanky shadow preceded Reece's entrance. He seemed more at ease than the night before, but something—his expression, maybe his posture, Georgia wasn't sure—suggested he was still broken.

"All right, mister," Mother said. "I've talked to everyone in town, and nobody knows anything about a group of kids from Priceton. I want the whole story. Now."

Reece glanced at Georgia, who tried to convey without words what she wanted him to say. His expression hardened. "All right," he said. "You'll get the whole story. But first I want to know if you would have let me in last night if you knew I was a crossover."

Mother's brow knit. "Of course I knew."

"You knew? Did my father tell you? My father who tried to leave me at some colony because I'm not like him? Or was it my brothers, who rubbed it in my face whenever they got the chance? Or maybe my mother, who warned me against ever telling anybody in the community, who couldn't bear for the neighbors to know what I was? Is that why you did it?"

Georgia grimaced. "Yes, tell us the whole story," she said. "Tell us about a seven-year-old girl who couldn't shape stone."

The effect was immediate. Mother staggered back as though she'd struck her. For a moment she seemed unable to speak. Then she straightened her shoulders, and answered. "It was different back then. People said that crossovers were dangerous, setting off fires, destroying homes... People said they can't control themselves, that they're not the same as us... that they're not really human."

"And you believed them over her? Over your own experience? You'd been a family for seven years!"

Mother didn't meet her gaze. She was eyeing the hall door beyond, as if trying to decide how she could escape through it. One hand disappeared into her scalp, tugging at her hair.

"That's enough!"

Georgia jumped so badly she bumped into Reece. A man strode into the room and positioned himself between Mother and Georgia, his eyes sharp as knives. She knew his face too, but not the hostility on it. She shrank against the walls, watching the big hands held at his side, tensed to flee if he attacked.

"How dare you bring that all up again?" he growled, his voice low but deadly. "I've seen your type before. Judgmental juvenile, you hear one side of the story and assume that's all there

is. Well, you don't know anything about this family. You don't know how many sleepless nights we spent remembering her, how many times we worried we'd make a mistake with Cephus and destroy him too. You can't see her coming up from the river, her face all alight as she showed off her new skills, and her face again after... after we..." His voice faded.

Georgia looked for the door. This whole trip had been a mistake. She needed to get out of here, get back to regular life, before anything worse happened. She took a step back, but Reece took her shoulder and pushed, bringing her opposite sleeve into full view.

Time stopped. Georgia watched two pairs of eyes fasten on the empty sleeve, then crawl up to her face. Eyes like theirs. Hair like theirs. Face shaped right, but spotted. A spasm of a thousand emotions crossed two faces, and Georgia could only watch in horrified fascination.

Father recovered first. He had sunk to his knees, looking oddly like a child at prayer. The deadly rage was gone from his voice, replaced by a helpless plea. "I'm sorry, Geori."

She'd forgotten the nickname. She hadn't heard it in nine years, and she could still remember what it felt like to hear it, to know he loved her. But it was all a lie.

"Don't call me that."

He looked up with pain evident in every line of his face. Georgia knew that look. She'd seen it on countless kids at the Colony. It was pure shock, as you realized your worst nightmare had come true. She must have worn it herself, nine years ago, and her father wore it now.

Mother's face was white. "I hoped you survived," she said. "I kept dreaming I could see you, tell you how sorry I was, how foolish...and it was never true."

"You left me to suffer. You couldn't even end it."

"Of course not," Father said. "The second we began we knew we couldn't do it. You panicked and disappeared into the hills. We searched every day for weeks, but we couldn't find you."

Without her permission, a tear crept down Georgia's cheek and plummeted to the ground. What was wrong with her? She should be excited. Everybody at the Colony talked about finding their families, making things right again. But some things were too wrong to go right.

Mother's eyes had left her face and were snaking up the wall. Georgia followed her gaze to a shelf high above them. A ragged blankie, once vivid blue and white, now faded and yellowed, draped over the edges. Dusty fake flowers pierced the centers of wooden toy dishes, worn smooth by a child's hands. The sight awoke a dozen memories that stung like wasps, a

million days that should have been. And then, through the paper petals, she caught a glimpse of stone fingers.

It was too much.

Later, Reece said that both of them had done it. She didn't believe him. In any case, her memory of the next few minutes was clouded with heat and noise, bright lights and acrid smoke. Then she and Reece were standing side by side in the yard while the house burned. Warmth bathed her face, and popping sparks screamed nine years of fury.

She didn't understand the noises at first. Then she saw Mother, screaming, dancing, struggling to get nearer to Georgia's protective circle, but the heat drove her back. Father was in shock, staring at Georgia with his dark green eyes just like Cephus's...

Cephus! He was not beside his parents in the street. No sound of his escaped with the crackling flames and thuds of falling debris. For an evil moment she saw her mother's frantic dance and was glad. But the thought vanished, and she knew her brother was no more guilty of his parentage than she.

Georgia lunged toward the building, but a hand tightened around her wrist. "Stop," Reece said. "You can't breathe in there."

She yanked her arm from his grasp and charged into the flickering orange world. The front room was anger personified. Every surface glowed red, shimmering through heat and wisps of smoke. As she watched, the remnant of a child's hand fell through the crumbling shelf and shattered on the blazing wooden floor.

The blackened inner wall crumbled. Georgia leapt back as sparks shot through the air. They alighted on her skin, her hair, her clothes, and slid off without a trace. A wave of fresh air washed her face, and lessened burning in her lungs that she hadn't noticed was there. A patch of vivid blue sky peered through a hole in the ceiling. The room beyond the fallen wall was indistinguishable, except for a small figure curled in the corner.

Georgia stepped back.

He couldn't be alive, not in this heat. The fire's cracks and pops spoke in her mother's voice. "People said that they can't control themselves, that they're not the same as us... that they're not really human."

Across the room, an arm twitched. At first she thought she'd imagined it. Then he straightened, unwrapped his arms around his head, and met her gaze. A flash of fear crossed his

face, but it faded into a hopeful plea. Georgia lurched toward him, stumbling over the rubble. Mixed in with coals were shards of stone, and she understood how he survived. He'd petrified the floor around him, and stone didn't burn.

"Come on. We've got to get out," Georgia croaked. Debris large as their heads rained everywhere she looked, exploding where they fell in clouds of ash and sparks. Her chest heaved as she gulped useless, stale air.

"I climbed up." He could barely speak through panting. "Up on the roof. I tried to change it, but it got too heavy. I can't get out."

She opened her mouth to reassure him but couldn't find breath. Cephus staggered to his feet, and without thought she wrapped her arm around him.

His shaking stopped.

Cephus peered up at her with wonder in his familiar eyes. "The hot doesn't hurt," he said. He was still panting, but the shiny redness on his skin was fading.

For a second she smiled. She hadn't realized she could share her abilities. But the expression faded fast. Heat or no, they still needed to breathe. "Come on," she gasped. "Up again."

They scrambled toward the wall. Georgia wedged her finger into the grooves of the rock and began to climb. Half way up, she stopped. Cephus had made it only one step. One hand was clinging to a handhold he'd created in the stone. His other hand clutched the box of river rocks. Unused to climbing one-handed, he couldn't make progress.

"Drop it!" Georgia shouted.

He shook his head.

"The rocks won't burn. You can get them later. If you stay there any longer, you'll pass out... and I can't carry you."

For a moment he hesitated. Then the box dropped with a thump they could hear even over the house's destruction. Cephus clambered up the wall like a tailless lizard, hands digging into the uneven rock like soft clay. Sister and brother reached the top and gulped the fresh air.

Another wall fell. From their perch, Georgia and Cephus watched it tumble over the top of the wreckage. Gilded wood crumbled into black dust. Smoke billowed into the air, reaching up in a black column that connected them with the sky. Somewhere beyond the fire, a howl of anguish pierced the din.

Cephus looked up at Georgia. “She really is sorry, you know.”

Georgia whirled on him. Her old argument was on her lips—they aren’t capable of being sorry. But the words burned her throat as she looked at her brother. Underneath the black soot covering his body, the skin was shiny pink. He could have died in there, and it was her fault. She was no better than her parents.

“I’m sorry too,” she whispered.

Her brother swung his legs over the wall so he faced the yard. “Come on then,” he said. “We need to go back now.” Without another word, he jumped. Georgia gasped, but he landed on hands and knees and got up again, with only a small yelp as his burnt palms brushed the earth.

Georgia slid off the wall and joined him. A few straggling weeds still burned, but the fire could go no further without more to consume. Cephus walked around the little orange plumes—whatever had happened in the house had worn off.

A handful of people had gathered around the front of the house. Mother was closest to the flames, and only Father’s sturdy hand kept her from dashing into the wreckage. Georgia stopped in her tracks, but Cephus did not. With a yell, he bounded across the remaining smoky yard. Their parents had only a second of disbelieving wonder before he hit. Then they were clambering around him, arms tight, wordless cries of joy piercing the smoky haze.

Through it all Georgia had not moved. She could see the empty desert beyond the river. That was the place she most wanted to be, alone until she could digest all that had happened. She edged forward, but Cephus peered out from under his mother’s arm and caught her gaze. He smiled, extended a hand, and Father and Mother looked up.

A million emotions played over their faces. Georgia expected the anger, the fear, the hurt, the regret. She did not expect the last one, the strongest emotion that took over all others and shone brighter than the angry flames. Hope.

Georgia glanced once more at the empty desert beyond the river. Then she shook her head, squared her shoulders, and let Cephus take her into their circle.

Arms encircled her, bodies entwined until she was no longer sure who was who. But it didn’t matter. They had escaped the flames. They were together, and that was what really mattered, after all.

The end.