

Prologue

Dr. Alessandra Greco stared through her confocal laser scanning microscope. Her back ached, her hips tired from the metal stool she'd been perched on every day for the last two years, retreating only for sleep or the necessity of food. She adjusted the focus and pulled her head away, rubbing her dry eyes, blinking repeatedly to try and clear them.

It couldn't be. She had to be mistaken.

Taking a deep breath, she repositioned herself at the microscope. There it was, unmistakable. The fluorescent tags lit up the ALDH1A enzymes, which she'd seen countless times before. But something was different, this time the STRA8 proteins were gone, completely gone.

She pulled back from the eyepiece and stood there in the silence of the lab, illuminated by the blue glow of her monitors. Her body felt as if it were floating—untethered from the metal stool, from the lab, from the sleepless years that had led to this single moment.

She lifted the locket that hung in the center of her chest and pressed it against her lips.

For you Chiara.