

XXY
by S. Bushman

Part 1:
Chapter 1: Birth

“Hey!” With a raw voice, the orderly screamed, sprinting to the nearest nurses station. His rubber-soled shoes squeaked against the linoleum floor. “I need help in room 216!”

A small head popped up from behind the curved desk. The nurse looked to be young, in her mid-thirties. She slid her hand over her holo pad that she had been browsing, trying to obscure the view of the light from her co-worker as she gave him an irritated look. It was late and she was tired.

“216, isn’t due yet. I already checked,” Her head lowered as if she had something more important to do. Curly blonde waves bobbed around her face as her attention went back to shuffling the papers on her desk to stack on top of the small device.

“She’s bleeding through her gown, you should call the obstetrician,” the orderly blinked a few times while trying to catch his breath.

“You’re an orderly, you take orders. You don’t give them. I’ll have a look at the patient,” she huffed as she pushed away from the desk and stood up, walking down the hallway at a leisurely pace. Once she reached room 216 and saw the blood pooling beneath the gurney, she made the call to the doctor.

When Alex was born, the on-call obstetrician at the NRP birth center had been in the middle of dinner. Her biological mother, quietly bleeding out, was not given the attention and care she needed in those last desperate moments of her life. Sterilized and sedated, Cassandra had laid in a pool of her own blood for hours until the orderly in the birth center noticed. She thought she was too old to be selected for Motherhood, yet here she was, unconscious and pregnant. She didn’t even know she was still eligible for the National Reproduction Program. As she lay dying, comatose to the world with blood seeping through her cotton gown, Alex was begging for escape.

When the obstetrician finally did arrive, he determined that Cassandra needed a cesarean and called for a surgical consultation. As her mother lay dying, two gowned and gloved men pulled Alex from her warm incubator and into the harsh lights of the operating theater.

“What the hell is that?” Reaching around to clamp the cord, both doctors examined the bloody newborn. She was smaller than most, but screaming all the same. Little wrinkly fingers clutched at the air as she cried out, but the doctors were much more interested in what was between her legs.

"It's a little tiny cock," The surgeon replied nonchalantly. "Call it."

"No it isn't, it's just a big fold of skin." The obstetrician raised an eyebrow as he cradled the infant in his arms, ignoring the surgeon.

"Time of death, 2:15 a.m." The surgical physician was not an endocrinologist, but he thought he could tell the difference between a boy and a girl. He raised his hands and backed away from the dead woman as the obstetrician placed the infant on a towel in the arms of the nearest waiting nurse. The nurse cocked her head, looking down at the screaming, squirming newborn before she wrapped the light blue towel around Alex. She saw it, too.

Both men shot each other quick glances before they looked back at the scrub nurse holding the newborn. A pregnant pause filled the room, as all three tried to decide what needed to be done, unspoken questions lingering in the air. Atypical anatomy on an infant was one of the things they looked for upon birth, and any newborn who was deformed or diseased was supposed to be terminated. After a few uncomfortable minutes, the surgical physician recommended they call into the Gender and Sex Development Agency's headquarters.

As the nurse took the baby into the neonatal unit, both doctors spoke in hushed voices as they made their way to an empty conference room. The same orderly who found Cassandra bleeding had to be the one to zip her into a bag and wheel her down to the morgue. After being put on hold for a few minutes, a chipper GSDA receptionist answered and they relayed all the information about Alex to him.

"The child is perfectly healthy." The obstetrician reiterated, feeling helpless.

"We have no doubt." Came the voice at the other end of the line. Both doctors' looked at each other again, trying to find a way to save their small patient. "Luckily for you, this kind of thing happens way more often than anyone will admit."

The obstetrician narrowed his eyes in suspicion. *How common could this be?* He had never delivered a baby where he was unsure of the sex before. Usually, it was obvious to the naked eye.

"Since you already have a surgeon there, you can just go ahead and fix it yourselves. If the infant is, in fact female, all you need to do is reduce the size of the clitoral hood. Anything over one centimeter should be removed. You don't want some girl out there who is thinking she is too big and might be a guy right?" The voice chuckled over the line. Peeking up slightly at the mention of another operation, the surgeon leaned forward, hands folded over each other. "It's the same for male, too. Just like a routine circumcision. If the penis is shorter than two and a half centimeters, remove it."

If either doctor was startled by the suggestion to remove the infant's penis, they didn't show it. The surgeon was nodding as if what he was hearing made sense, but the obstetrician felt he needed to speak.

"If he is genetically male, won't that be a problem?" He asked softly.

"Not necessarily, he can be raised as a girl. There would be subsequent operations no doubt, but you can't have a little boy out there living with basically no dick. What if he turns gay? Standard procedure is to fashion a neovagina and raise him as a girl, to fit in with the rest of society."

The surgeon nodded his head a few times before turning his intense gaze back to the obstetrician. There was no other choice if they wanted the infant to survive.

Already a few of the nurses and orderlies had already begun to spread the rumor of the anomaly delivered from the dead woman. Many employees didn't believe the first-hand accounts and went instead to try and go and talk to the doctors, only to find they were on a phone call with the GSDA behind closed doors. Once the rumor was whispered around the entire birth center, the main questions on everyone's mind was about the size, shape, and determination of the infant's genitals. A baby with atypical sex anatomy was rare, not a single employee at the birth center had ever heard of it happening before. Was it a boy or a girl? Could she possibly be both, or neither? What were the doctors going to do? Would they let her live? Would it be cruel to let her live?

That evening, under the cover of darkness in the parking lot outside, both doctors came together to talk about what they had done. They were alone, and the sun had just dipped below the horizon once again. Alex had been alive for only 24 hours and both doctors were unsure if she would survive until the next morning.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there to help you finish," The surgeon leaned his back against his new helicar and took a long drag of his cigarette. "I got paged for another cesarean, you wouldn't believe how many I do in a single shift."

"That's alright," The obstetrician shifted his weight from foot to foot, debating if he should voice his concerns. Surgeons were notoriously confident, and the man standing in front of him looked the spitting image of one. "It took longer than expected, you know, I've never needed to do an operation like that."

"You didn't get surgical training in school?" The surgeon cocked his head to the side, exhaling a puff of gray smoke into the night air. It curled up into the atmosphere before fading like dust, dissolving and dying with the wind.

"Of course I did," He bristled at the accusation. "But I've never seen an infant who looked like that before." He thought to himself, *How can you be sure we made the right choice?*

The surgeon didn't look up, he took another drag from the cigarette before dropping it and squishing the butt under his shoe. *We did what needed to be done.* "The baby is alive, at least. She's a fighter."

"She'll be placed with her adoptive family tomorrow," the obstetrician locked eyes with the surgeon. *There will be questions asked.* Neither man spoke for a long moment, the crisp night air seemingly sharp around them, listening to every unspoken word in the silence, the only witness to their uncertainty.

"Let's hope they can afford it," the surgeon said nothing else, turning his back on his co-worker and opening the door of the ruby red helicar. The obstetrician watched as the vehicle flickered to life and lifted up into the air above the parking lot, bewildered as the conversation replayed in this mind. *He said it, not her.*

The next morning, Elliot and Olivia Norton arrived to meet their daughter for the first time. They took an immediate liking to Alex, who looked almost biologically related to them with the same chestnut brown hair and bright green eyes. She could have been made using one of their genetic profiles. They had been waiting for a baby girl for what felt like forever. Even the mixed warnings and extensive paperwork given to them by Cassandra's obstetrician didn't deter their immediate love for Alex. The physician explained the surgery that had been performed, and tried to impress the likelihood that she would need more operations. They nodded along intently and asked questions when they were supposed to, but neither parent had any clue the kind of care Alex would need as she grew older. Olivia and Elliot were given a referral to the best pediatrician in the state of Utah, who would see the child as she grew and address any issues that might arise. The couple brought their new daughter home that day, equipped with everything they would need to care for the newborn and her surgical wounds.

That evening, when the couple bathed Alex for the first time in the porcelain kitchen sink, they saw the extent of what had been done to their baby girl. Elliot said nothing, but he stiffened as he watched his wife clean the dried blood from between Alex's stubby, sausage legs with a trembling hand clutching a washcloth. When he saw the water in the sink turning pink and the glistening tears on his wife's face, he decided to speak up. Placing his hand on Olivia's shoulder protectively, he said softly, "She's beautiful."

Olivia sniffled lightly as Alex began to cry, pulling her baby from the sink and wrapping her in a soft blanket. Alex stopped wailing as Olivia brought her to her chest. "She's perfect."

As the couple gazed down at Alex, drifting to sleep comfortably in her mother's arms, they worried about what the future would bring for her. She would never be enrolled in the National Reproduction Program, she would never have the ability to pass her genes onto the next generation. She was an abnormality and she had already been marked.

“How could they do such a thing to my perfect baby girl?” Olivia cried out suddenly, jolting Elliot back into his body. “Oh, she’s beautiful, she’s my baby. Look what they have done to her.”

“Olivia,” Elliot began before looking back down to Alex in his wife’s arms. It was as if the sentence he had meant to say had been suddenly replaced with a fearsome urge to protect this baby, to nurture her and see her grow. He placed his palm on Alex’s forehead softly, “Olivia she’s perfect the way she is. We don’t need to see any more doctors. Let’s her heal here, with us.”

GSDA: OUR HISTORY

During the middle of the twentieth century, the United States was faced with an unprecedented health crisis. The HBV-CUL22 virus most likely originated in Singapore before spreading across the globe in a matter of months. ‘The Culling’, as it came to be known, was not especially fatal, but survivors and carriers suffered from a permanent infertility after exposure. It was recorded that as much as 85% of the population of the United States at that time was infected.

In the year 2053, the Gender and Sex Development Agency was founded, with the mission of increasing the nation’s abysmal birth rates. With cutting edge research and contributions from generous donors, the Agency established the National Reproduction Program in 2060. As the first of its kind, the program enabled the Agency to craft the next generation of American citizens. Mass enrollment facilitated the creation of countless viable embryos, and the GSDA was quite literally ‘adopted’ into American life.

Prior to the advent of the NRP, birth was a potentially deadly experience. Children were regularly born addicted to drugs, with birth defects, with incurable illness and disease. It wasn’t uncommon for women to find themselves unexpectedly pregnant; infanticide, abortion, and neglect were common occurrences without pre and post natal support. Incest and rape cases filled court dockets, and women were rarely given justice.

Today, the Gender and Sex Development Agency is headquartered in Washington DC, but has satellite offices in every state. As well as providing comprehensive prenatal testing and care, the National Reproduction Program has been providing families with the gift of risk-free parenthood for centuries. Children are no longer an unwanted burden, a fearful unknown; today we stand assured that America’s youth are designed to be exceptional.

Chapter 2: Afterbirth

At the age of five, Alex developed a cough and the Nortons had no other option but to take her in to see the recommended physician. Doctor Dorner was well known, he did everything in his power to keep his patients healthy and set up for bright futures. He wasn’t a

pediatric endocrinologist, but he knew enough to see something wasn't right with Alex. After requesting her records from the birth center and seeing her again for a follow-up, he knew he had to say something.

"I don't think you understand, Mrs. Norton. Your child is genetically and phenotypically male, but his testes have been removed." If Doctor Dorner had to warrant a guess, he would say that whoever had done the previous operation had botched it completely. Alex had hardly any external genitalia left at all. But he didn't dare mention his suspicions to the parents. "When he was adopted, the doctors surely told you that Alex would need subsequent operations, in order to actually live as a female. A vaginal opening must be constructed, if he is ever to have a normal life."

Elliot Norton pressed his lips into a hard line, as he bounced Alex up and down on his knee in the small office. He tried not to bristle. He didn't want to fight this fight anymore. Elliot Norton understood the benefit of having a son, but at the age of five, Alex was already a little girl. She loved playing in the dirt and exploring outside, but she also loved playing with dolls and putting on her mother's high-heeled shoes, stomping up and down the stairs of the home pretending she was a princess, duchess, countess of some far-off land. He remembered one afternoon in particular when she had run into the house, interrupting an important city meeting that had been taking place quietly in front of the fireplace, in order to show him the flowers she had proudly embroidered on the sleeves of one of her dresses. Like any good father, he couldn't find it in his heart to be upset with her, giving her a smile and a proud "good job kiddo" before he returned back to the city business. It seemed obvious to the Nortons that their daughter was a girl. Having more cosmetic surgeries to make her look more like a girl seemed like cruel torture for a child who was just starting to understand who she was in the world.

"But why though? She won't be fornicating or ever enrolled in the NRP, why does she need to have more expensive operations?" Olivia asked impatiently, folding her arms over her chest as she stood in front of Dr. Dorner. Her mind was already made up, Elliot could see. His fearsome wife was a sight to behold, a mother bear protecting her cubs.

Dr. Dorner sighed loudly, "Because, anatomically, he is not female, he is male. If you don't want to have any more operations, then you should just raise Alex as male."

Olivia was taken aback, blinking at the doctor while Alex babbled quietly to her father. He said something soothing to her as Olivia pleaded with the doctor. "But she isn't male. Look at her. She is a healthy little girl."

Dr. Dorner shook his head, wondering how she could be so obtuse. He considered himself to be one of the best pediatric physicians in the state, and he had a reputation to uphold. He scheduled another follow-up appointment to discuss their options, but when the Norton's never showed up he had no other choice but to report his findings to the GSDA. He felt as if he had a moral obligation to do so, to report such an egregious lie.

The National Committee for Sex and Development was supposed to be made up of the best and brightest geneticists and sexual reproduction experts in the country, although these days it looked more like the board of directors at a private company. The members were all white, and majority male. A few of the sitting women were “family and education” experts – rich women whose husbands’ bought their degrees and experience. Only one was a geneticist, presumably the only one who was qualified to make the decision in regards to Alex. He didn’t take much time looking over her data, if he even checked at all. The majority of decisions made through the Committee were about funding and outsourcing, less and less about the children of the nation.

When the deciding letter arrived at the Norton’s home accompanied by three Guardians of Morality, Alex was 9 years old. She wasn’t aware of the ways her parents had been fighting all her life, protecting her from more operations and intrusive examinations, so everything came as a shock to her. When she walked downstairs to find three Guardians sitting in the living room with her father one chilly autumn morning, Olivia was already crying hysterically.

“You can’t take her! I’m a stay at home caregiver! Who else is more qualified to take care of her?” Olivia was standing, her small frame shaking as Alex came to stand beside her and take her hand, as if protecting her mother from the strange dark men.

“It’s not up to us to decide, ma’am,” One of the officers replied, eyeing Alex curiously. “Is this him?”

“She isn’t ready just yet,” Elliot said curtly as he walked over to his wife. “Olivia can you go pack up Alex’s things? We can get the van running and be on our way by noon.”

Olivia clutched Alex’s hand tightly, and Alex looked up to see the broken expression on her mother’s face. She was horror-struck, as if they were discussing killing her child right in front of her. They might as well have been. As a 9 year-old child, Alex didn’t understand what she had done wrong. Once they decided to send her away, she lost all hope left of a normal adolescence. The perfect childhood had come to an abrupt end. She knew her parents loved her, but everything she read or heard reminded her that children were replaceable.

While the nation was publicly functioning as a controlled society, children were being dumped from placement homes at alarming rates. None of the officials wanted to admit it, but there had been a rise in child runaways and trafficking cases. The GSDA did their best to keep track of all the kids in the nation, but it seemed too daunting of a task for one agency alone to handle. There would always be runaways and prostitution in the streets, but the agency was better at cherry-picking data to prove their political points than actually creating the next generation of American citizens. While political leaders and elected officials scrambled trying to find a way to stop child slavery and trafficking, the GSDA official policy was to turn the other way and pretend it wasn’t happening. Like an ostrich with its head buried in the sand, the Guardians ignored the problem until it started becoming too big to avoid. When the social order began to

break down, they directed their massive funding directly to the Guardians of Morality. Any break in the perfectly manicured system was their problem to deal with.

Alex trailed her father upstairs as Olivia stayed in the living room with the three Guardians, arguing with no avail. Some inexplicable black hole seemed to open in her abdomen, swallowing her whole.

"Now listen baby," once they reached the top of the carpeted staircase Elliot crouched down, eye-level with his daughter. "You are going away to school. The Guardians will escort us there to keep us safe on the road."

Alex nodded, uncomprehending. She knew what her father was saying was important, so she tried to remember his words. But the echo of her mother's pleading with the Guardians downstairs replayed in her mind as she listened, fear snaking up her spine. *Will I ever see my home again?*

"Once you are there, you will still be Alex, do you understand?" Elliot patted the top of her head, admiring her long hair. "But the school is only for boys. You need to pretend to be the best boy you can be."

Alex blinked a few times as he stood up and pulled her into her bedroom. As he began to grab her clothing and dolls, she started to cry tears of confusion and fear. She still didn't understand what was happening, but Olivia heard her daughter and flew upstairs to comfort her. Alex had never heard her father talk this way, and she tried to frantically understand why the monsters had come for her and why her parents were choosing to send her away. The pieces didn't fit together. Would she ever see them again? *This can't be the end*, she thought.

"Oh my baby, my sweet precious baby," Olivia picked Alex up and twirled her around as Elliot continued packing up Alex's bedroom. "I made a brand new dress for you. I was saving it for your birthday, but would you like to have it now?"

Elliot ignored his family's tears and started folding Alex's childhood and packing it into small suitcases to bring with her, making everything fit. It would only gather dust once she arrived.

The new dress was cream colored and had little embroidered flowers on the sleeves and the collar, made of thick expensive cotton. Had Alex known she would never get the chance to wear it again, she would have stuck her nose directly in the fabric to inhale, to keep the scent of her family with her as long as she could manage. Olivia Norton was crying silently when Alex pulled her arms and head through and looked at her reflection in the bathroom mirror.

"Oh sweetie, you're beautiful," Alex folded herself into her mother's warm embrace. She smelled like vanilla. "I love you, don't you ever forget that."

Alex was paralyzed, still sniffing away tears. She was supposed to be helping her mother make breakfast and getting ready for the day, not tearfully saying goodbye to the only family she had ever known. Instead, she was being picked up by her mother like a baby again, and being carried back downstairs to the Guardians and her father. They stood tensely, waiting for Alex as she tore herself from her mother and said her confused goodbyes. As the three men packed the car with her few belongings, her mother squeezed her hand and kissed her on the forehead before walking over to the vehicle and opening the passenger side door, smiling sadly as Alex climbed inside and looked over to her father. When the door shut, he gave a sad but determined look to his wife through the window before the engine turned and the vehicle lurched forward.

"Now, Alex, you need to remember. What are you at school? Who are you at school?" He reached up and adjusted the river-view mirror, eyeing the large black truck following them nervously.

"I'm Alex. I'm a boy." She said with an upward inflection, as if it were a question. Her father nodded stoically. "But why? What is happening?"

He clenched his jaw, glancing back at the truck again as they pulled the van onto the highway. The Guardians of Morality were following them, making sure they went where they were supposed to.

"When you were born, you were a girl. You have always been a girl." He hesitated, white knuckles gripping the steering wheel. "The government decided that you aren't anymore. From now on, you have to be a boy. Because we didn't raise you as a boy, they are sending you off to school. It's like breaking the law, but before it's illegal. A decision was made retroactively, and now we have to change everything to follow the law."

"That doesn't make sense." Alex said stubbornly, scratching her nail at the peeling leather armrest. "I *know* I'm a girl. I've never been a boy before. It's not illegal to be a girl."

"I know you haven't, and I know you don't, and for that I am sorry." He looked down to Alex, tears brimming in his eyes. "I never thought this would happen. Your mother and I, we knew that something like this was possible, but we never thought we would lose you. Not like this."

His jaw was set into a hard line, and Alex suddenly felt very afraid. She looked out the window and then back to her father before saying, "You won't lose me. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be at school."

"You might be there for a while, Alex. If we can't contact you, know that we love you and will always fight for you." His foot was heavy against the accelerator as he glanced backwards in the rear view mirror, as if he was considering trying to outrun the Guardians.

The streets were quiet and deserted for a while, until the sidewalks began to fill with sad-looking pedestrians. Alex's gaze stopped on a young man riding a crimson bicycle, ruffled blonde hair and a crisp button down shirt fluttering in the wind as he crossed the road in front of them. His body turned as he flew down a side street, and Alex watched as he disappeared from view

The only people left were the ones camped on the sidewalks. Like shadows, they looked at the cars passing as if watching some entertaining story that was better than real life. Ashy skin and dirty clothing, Alex wanted to ask her father what was wrong with these people, why they were so dirty, but she bit back her questions as the van pulled onto the main boulevard. After passing a few more camps of people, the vehicle pulled into a dirt drive – waiting until two large iron gates opened and allowed them and the Guardians entry. Alex's jaw dropped as they drove slowly into the iron-protected campus, a looming castle to her. The stark poverty contrasted with the ornate campus was lost on her, at that age.

When they arrived at the American Christian Academy for Boys, she was tentatively excited. The school looked like a gilded palace, made almost entirely of old dusty red bricks and with a large wall enclosing the entire campus. Parked atop a few of the rectangular buildings, Alex saw three fancy helicar resting on a flat rooftop. They sparkled in the sunlight and Alex couldn't take her eyes from the colors, red and orange and yellow glimmering like jewels above the building. She hadn't ever seen a helicar before. She had never seen so many boys her age before either, all playing and enjoying themselves. Wrestling in the overgrown green grass and playing baseball on distant fields, they all looked well-fed, not bruised or frightened at all. The scary stories of her youth didn't seem to be true at all, the little boys acted just like her. With wide grins, they tackled each other and ran through the halls of the campus like they owned the massive academy. Alex even noticed a few handsome older boys with windswept hair and sparkly eyes, wandering at a steady pace and leaning against walls as if they had nowhere in particular to be. *This can't be that hard.*

As Alex opened the back door of the van, she ran face first into the large Headmistress who had been standing at the wrought-iron gate to meet them. She pulled back quickly, embarrassed. With dark black hair and a thick, wide frame, the woman felt like a wall blocking any movement Alex made, immobile like a tree trunk. Two smaller women wearing dark habits quickly scurried around the car to help Mr. Norton unload his daughter's belongings, before he gave Alex a parting kiss on the forehead, reiterated that he loved her and to behave herself.

As he drove away, Alex didn't think that was the last time she would see him. She wasn't expecting to be dumped there, but then again she knew exactly what was happening. She just wasn't old enough to understand yet. She watched as the van reversed and then drove back down the dirt drive, passing through the gate and slowly becoming smaller until he was just a smudge in the distance. *Surely, they'll come back. Surely, he doesn't mean to leave me here. This is just some elaborate joke.*

Both nuns stood on either side of Alex and the Headmistress touched her shoulder gently as if to lead her away. Alex sniffled and turned to follow the women as they led her through the wide expansive courtyard which housed several brick classrooms and lecture halls. She stopped for a moment to watch as her father turned the corner and disappeared from sight, the Guardians of Morality following him back the way they had come from.

As they walked farther into the campus silently, Alex noticed a boy leaning against a large white column and sheepishly grinning at her. The nuns didn't seem to notice him as the Headmistress opened a heavy door leading them into one of the brick buildings. Alex averted her gaze and tried not to blush as the Headmistress and two nuns pulled Alex through the corridors and turned abruptly to face a door with the words 'ADMINISTRATION BUILDING' written in gold ink across the windowpane.

Unfortunately, her parents hadn't sent anything with her to help her blend in as a boy. Her hair was still long, swinging down past her shoulders in dark brown waves, but she had a more masculine face with a square jaw and wide brows. Before being introduced to her classmates or touring more of the campus, the two nuns roughly pushed her down into a wooden straight-backed chair in front of a large mahogany desk. The headmistress shut the door and walked around the trio silently, as the nuns pulled out an electric shaver and began to take Alex's hair off so quickly she didn't even notice at first. When she clutched a few strands that had fallen in her lap and looked up at the Headmistress with tears in her eyes, the woman shook her head as if there was nothing Alex would find by looking at her. Her expression was so disgusted, Alex started crying harder about missing her loving family than the loss of her beautiful hair. No one came to console her, Alex could only tell the job was done when the buzzing of the electric shaver stopped and all she felt was the cool air blowing across her scalp.

The Headmistress sat across from Alex, studying her features carefully as the two nuns descended again with a broom and dustpan to sweep up the locks of brown hair from the floor. Alex's family had sent everything they had received over to the school; her birth certificate, the conflicting information from her yearly growth charts, and finally the letter from the National Sex and Development Committee. While the headmistress shifted through the papers on her desk, she let out an annoyed sigh before looking back to Alex across from her who was still sniffling and wiping her nose on the dress Mrs Norton had given her for the trip. The headmistress looked back to her desk, picking up a small handheld data pad and letting her holographic mail program appear in front of her while Alex continued sniffling. Her thin fingers swiped across the air quickly, deleting two rows of messages before peaking her eyes back to Alex and shutting down the data pad, the hologram dissolving just under her fingers into the screen. Alex was slightly intrigued, Elliot Norton had never liked the devices and Alex had never seen the handheld kind in person before. She wondered if there were any games on it she could play.

"We have dealt with types like you before," The headmistress sighed again as if she was bothered by Alex's tears, putting the small data pad back on top of the pile of papers sitting on her desk. Her voice was loud and carried authority, sending Alex upright in her chair as she

watched the woman's thin dark lips. "I don't know how your parents let you behave, but here we follow rules."

Alex said nothing, partly because she had no idea what was being said to her. She had lived for nine years as a little girl and none of this made sense. She was still in shock from all her hair being cut off, and she didn't know what to say. With her attention commanded by the Headmistress, Alex could only stare wide-eyed.

"Here, we only teach boys." The headmistress waved her pale hand, dismissing the nuns who were standing behind Alex. After all her hair was swept up off the wooden floor, the other women exited, leaving Alex alone with the headmistress. She eyed them warily as they left before reaching into a drawer under the desk and producing a box of cigarettes. As the headmistress lit her cigarette and took a long drag, she gave a look over to Alex again. "You are young. I don't think you realize the opportunity that has been afforded to you."

Alex marveled at the words, she would remember them later. The way the Headmistress spoke felt like everything she was saying was important, more authoritative than anyone she had met before. She had never seen a woman smoking a cigarette before either and it made the Headmistress seem even more intimidating than she already was to Alex. The Headmistress exhaled a smoky breath and tapped the butt of the cigarette on a small crystalline ashtray on the other side of her data pad, letting bits of ash fall into the rim of the dish. She took another long inhale and the end of the cigarette looked like it was burning yellow, inhaling the fire which would surely burn up her lungs. Alex wanted to ask if smoking hurt, before she could get a hold of herself and resist the urge to act like the child she was. The headmistress leaned back down her leather armchair in a masculine and detached manner, her dark eyes turning back on Alex.

"As a boy at this institution, you will learn to read and write, to handle a gun and how to defend your family and country." She looked past Alex, as if she didn't really see her sitting in front of the large desk anymore. The headmistress's gaze wandered out the window, past the boys who were still playing baseball and definitely late for afternoon lectures. "You will have the option to pick a specialty education when you are older. You will stay here until you are a man, civilized and educated."

"I know how to read and write and arithmetic, my mom taught me at home." Alex had, at last, found her voice though it trembled when she spoke. The headmistress arched an eyebrow and reached forward tapping the cigarette on the edge of the ashtray as if she didn't quite believe Alex. Maybe she was curious about the little girl, turned boy.

"I suppose she could see you were really male. It would be unfair to set up a young woman for a life of learning, it spoils her natural maternal instincts." She looked at Alex inquisitively and blinked a few times in silence, as if she was studying Alex's features for any mistake, any hair out of place. "Here, you will forget your girlhood. We will make a honorable man out of you."

Alex caught a false tone in her voice, as if the headmistress didn't quite believe what she was saying. None of this made sense to Alex, her family had avoided talking about her gender except for the conversation about the pediatrician wanting to do another surgery when she was five years old. Alex hardly remembered that experience, she didn't remember the first surgery at all. It all seemed like a bad dream. She pinched the side of her forearm in the chair, but the room stayed exactly as it was.

AMERICAN CHRISTIAN ACADEMY: GROWING THE CITIZENS OF TOMORROW

Last week, our publication was invited to the annual raising of the flag ceremony hosted by the beautiful American Christian Academy. Commemorating the brave warriors who fought against the Californian terrorists, the raising of the flag was accompanied by the Youth Boy's Choir and a 21 gun salute from the academy's top ranking students. After a somber moment of silence, guests were regaled with song and military displays from the young academics.

Nestled within the Salt Lake City historic district, the American Christian Academy prides itself in rehabilitating even the most obstinate boys with discipline. The Academy fosters an atmosphere of strength, providing structure through rigid routine. While not technically a military school in the ways other academies funnel graduates into the military, American Christian Academy has produced some of the most forward faces in government and technology.

Since its founding in 2160, the American Christian Academy has continued to produce excellence. Future President and Security Advisor, Nathan Mullholand, was among the first four students to graduate in the first class. Notable graduates include Tracy Walker, who served as the Guardians of Morality chief officer, Morgan Harvey, inventor of the holo net, Norman Yates, who was the CEO of Antiplanet Enterprises, and Brigham Talbot, the senator of Utah from 2189-2197.

With enrollment just days away, American Christian Academy provides new students with housing, meals, friendship, and a bright future. Enrollment for the next semester begins on October 9th.

Chapter 3: Friendship?

In the first few years of her life as a boy, Alex managed to make one friend at the American Christian Academy.

Trevor was excluded from the NRP, same as her. They first met after they were both excluded from sex education classes at the age of twelve as introduction into the NRP.

All of the other students who were eligible to participate were required to take classes in preparation for when they turned sixteen and were fully enrolled in the program. Alex had always wondered what they needed to learn, it seemed like the classes were less about the actual biological functions of human reproduction and more about the ethics of the NRP and the

horrors humanity faced before the programs' inception, things like rape and child abuse were eliminated with the NRP and Alex frequently heard the boys discussing what they had been taught when they thought she hadn't been listening. Trevor was also curious about the program, she knew, but since they were both excluded they didn't find many opportunities to learn more about it. Those rare students who would never be eligible to reproduce made close friendships after spending so much of their free time together, almost like a form of defiance against the powers who said they were unworthy of life to begin with. But at least they were ostracized together. Alex and Trevor became fast and loyal friends after the first year of teasing and bullying from their peers.

He was the first to explain his genetic disadvantage to Alex, when they were still young teens. Alex was a closed book regarding her unenrolled status, but Trevor seemed like a loyal person she could trust, so she listened when he explained.

"It was the 500-meter relay, I was super excited for it. I had been training all week. But that day when the race started, it must have been too hot or something, because I didn't even make it to the finish line," Trevor said. He paused as he pushed his long index finger through the dirt, tracing the letters of his name under the shade from the large oak as they sat cross-legged underneath. Alex's spine was pressed against the thick bark of the tree and she blinked a few times, imagining. After a moment Trevor looked back and continued, "My parents were there, too. It couldn't have happened at a worse time. They carried me to the car and gave me my inhaler, but I think they were too embarrassed to send me back to school."

Trevor grinned his little crooked half-grin, and Alex couldn't help but to nod in understanding. Trevor was the only African American boy in the school, and he stuck out like a sore thumb. Even without his asthma he would have still been an outcast in the Academy. She, on the other hand, managed to try to blend in before her unenrolled status became common gossip to all the other boys. After she and Trevor were publicly excluded from the prep classes, everyone knew she was broken. Defective. *Wrong*.

As everyone got older and the years passed like seasons right after one another, it became more obvious Alex was different from her male peers. She couldn't ignore how the other boys looked at her in the locker room, how different her body seemed to be from theirs. She was tall and lanky with dark brows and thick head of hair with bright green eyes, but after puberty she never grew any facial hair and her voice never dropped. She didn't have noticeable breasts at least, that torture was reserved for other unlucky male students, oftentimes the overweight ones. Alex couldn't stand to be ridiculed even more than she already was at school. The other boys called her names and said her arms and legs were too long, like a spider. They called her a sissy and a faggot, they said she'd never get married or have children. They treated her as if she was contaminated, contagious. When Alex learned about the diseased illegal children, she resonated with their struggle, forever burdened by their parent's error in judgement. The feeling scared her, realizing she had more in common with the enemy than the nation she was supposed to resonate with. She pushed it down, ignored the feeling and tried to

make it go away. But still, resentment rose up from time to time. What had she done to deserve such a defective body?

Alex chose math as her specialty at the age of sixteen, even though she wasn't particularly fond of it. Math problems made sense in her mind, the numbers never changed and the answer was always either correct or not. It was easy to grasp. There was no middle ground or grey area with math, no ethical issues or moral conundrums. Numbers were the same in every language. She happened to be pretty good at most math too, breezing past the other boys in algebra and trigonometry. When it came time to pick specialties, she gravitated back to the thing that comforted and made sense to her while Trevor looked for something to satiate his thirst for knowledge.

His parent's were high achievers, she knew that. She was sure one, if not both of his parents, were fancy high-paid physicians. Trevor had been raised believing that if he worked as hard as they did, he had no excuse for not being successful. It was a lot of pressure, but as he would tell her, it was good pressure. The pressure to excel, to be better than he currently was. He picked biology as a specialty, narrowly avoiding the medical track his family had wanted for him.

In his first year as a biology student, Trevor learned about sexual reproduction in mammals. He said he learned how sperm and ovum worked, how they combined to create a new being, unlike their parents. Not copies or clones, but a combination of both parents' genetic biology; he explained to Alex. Human reproduction was reserved for medical students and other advanced specialties, but Trevor was interested to learn everything he could. It bothered him, being the only one who had no clue how the NRP functioned or operated; like the exclusion was based on an assessment of his personal worth rather than genetic. Alex didn't care much. She heard the rumors, she didn't think those classes were worth anything anyways.

When Trevor explained what he had learned in class to Alex one night up on the roof of their dorm building, a little lightbulb lit up her mind. It was like she could suddenly pinpoint all blame backwards at Cassandra and the NRP for the confusion she had been feeling since she had arrived at the school.

"So your bio mom," Alex hesitated slightly, trying to comprehend the ongoing lecture, "She gave you half of what she had, and half got diluted and mixed with your dad's genes. So which half gave you the asthma?"

"The fucked up half." Trevor smiled, suppressing a laugh as Alex poked him in the ribcage while they lay together on the tiled roof of the dorm building and stared up at the stars together. It was late at night and no one ever noticed when two young boys unlocked their windows and met up on the roof for a midnight rendezvous. The younger students were supervised much more than the older ones who had more freedom to act as they wished and misbehave. Although the threat of the Headmistress and the Guardians of Morality kept anyone

from doing anything too foolish or illegal. "But look, I'm trying to explain to you, that's how sex is decided too."

Alex didn't like talking about her gender, or much about herself for that matter. Trevor was the only person who actually knew about Alex's childhood as a girl. He was interested to hear more, but Alex never wanted to discuss it further than saying she was raised female. As she grew older, she just wanted to stop thinking about it all together, like a silly childhood fantasy. If Alex was forced to be a boy, she was going to have to forget about her youth anyway. She didn't like being reminded by the only other person who knew about her secret girlhood, despite the fact that Trevor wanted her to feel safe talking about it.

"See, we have chromosomes, 46 to be exact." Trevor paused for a few seconds making sure Alex was still paying attention. He didn't bother lowering his voice, knowing everyone in the building underneath them was long asleep. As teenagers, students rarely snuck out after lights out, but when they did they certainly snuck out and away from campus; they weren't dumb enough to stick around and wait to get caught. Alex and Trevor weren't particularly rebellious or had a disregard of authority, but they were technically genetically inferior to their peers. His voice lowered slightly, "One of those pairs determines the sex we will be. Everyone gets an X from their mother, and either an X or a Y from the father. When combined, we are either XX or XY. XX is female and XY is male."

So far, Alex already understood most of what Trevor was talking about. Their elementary science education had taught them the basics of mammalian reproduction, and the foundations of knowledge to continue further into the sciences. Alex hadn't been incredibly interested during these lectures as a preteen, so Trevor knew she could use a basic review. Even now, the heat radiating from his body right next to hers gave her mind cause to wander.

"But sometimes, something goes wrong. It's not supposed to happen, but we can be born with different combinations, or an extra or missing chromosome." Trevor looked at Alex strangely, as if he had found a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. He always had questions about Alex, never satisfied with the answers she gave him. He was curious, Alex knew. But she didn't have any more information to give him. She wished he wasn't so hungry for knowledge sometimes, but then she also valued his inquisitive mind at other times, when it wasn't directed at her. "With you, I think we should start there."

Alex rolled her eyes, already irritated with the line of questioning. Sometimes, Trevor just wouldn't leave situations alone. He needed to pick and poke at a problem and see if from all angles before coming up with a plan of attack. She didn't want to believe she was broken and defective; but Trevor was treating her like she was some formaldehyde-laden specimen ready to be studied and dissected and she didn't like it. *It sure feels like I'm the problem*, she thought bitterly to herself.

"You've only been in these biology classes for a year, maybe less. Even if we could somehow find my genetic documents, we would still have no idea how to read them." Alex turned her gaze from the moonlight to look over at Trevor, shifting her body to lie on her side.

She knew she was wrong, her body was wrong; if she thought about it too hard she kept arriving at the same conclusion: that she shouldn't exist at all. She propped one elbow down against the grainy tile roof and rested her chin in her palm, still looking at Trevor's dark face in the moonlight. The stars twinkled for a moment in his eyes. If he wasn't so beautiful it would have been easier to get mad at him, Alex thought. He looked like a classical Greek statue, with a pair of broad lips and a wide nose under two amber golden brown eyes. Despite his dark skin tone, Alex knew all the girls would fall in love with him once he graduated. His illness didn't hold him back in the same way Alex's did. The only thing stopping Trevor from being a playboy were the laws against interracial marriage. And technically, racist Guardians.

Trevor sighed, face still tilted upward to the moon and breath curling upward as hot steam while he spoke in the cool night air. "Yeah, but I mean, it could be a start. And it would make a lot of sense."

"The NRP couldn't even figure it out. If they had tested me and noticed it, I probably wouldn't be here right now." Alex shook her head, trying to remember the rumors and gossip she had been told about the NRP from all the other students. She lowered herself back down on the roof of the dorm building, lying her neck on Trevor's muscular shoulder as he stretched an arm out under her. Alex could feel his heartbeat under his skin, thumping steadily like the rhythm to a song only his body knew. She sunk down into his chest, watching the starlight flicker behind his eyes. Being with him felt natural, like she didn't need to focus on pretending or acting just to be accepted into his arms.

Sometimes, Alex wasn't sure why she had trusted Trevor enough with her secret. His asthma didn't seem like as big of a vulnerability as her ambiguous sex determination. If anything, people seemed to think he was intimidating, more than her at least as they became adults. Trevor was social and outgoing, trying hard to shake the idea he was any less than the other students who were enrolled in the NRP. To Alex, it was obvious she didn't belong. Nine years as a girl and eight years as a boy had taught her that she was unlike everyone else, where other people were clearly defined, Alex was fuzzy and grey, blending the edges like watercolor painting.

When she thought back about it, though, she realized she wouldn't have changed anything. Telling Trevor about her life was a practical choice, if not nerve wracking. He could just as easily have pushed her away, refused to be friends. Maybe he saw they could be a team, and overlooked her faults. But no, he was understanding and inquisitive. He had to ask questions and dig deeper, drawing all her horrible secrets into the light.

The first time Alex witnessed Trevor having an asthma attack was while they had been experimenting sexually with each other at the age of seventeen. It hadn't been a particularly

memorable experience, neither had enjoyed themselves very much. They were uneducated and uncomfortable, but the experience taught them more about each other.

Shamefully, as they admired each other's bodies in the low light Alex felt awkward. She didn't know what Trevor saw when he looked at her, but his lack of breath seemed like a compliment. When she realized he was having some kind of attack, she freaked out, watching as he struggled to catch his breath, hiccuping as if there was something stuck in his throat. When he mouthed for the inhaler in the bedside dresser, she didn't understand what he was trying to say and turned around, picking up the plastic device and giving him a questioning look while holding it in her hands. Alex had never seen one before. She didn't know how to use it.

Trevor grabbed it from her fingers violently and shook the inhaler before pressing the top down and breathing the medicine into his lungs. After a few more shallow breaths he leaned back onto the single dorm bed, finally opening his eyes again to find Alex shaking worry. All the tension in the room had been sucked away, replaced by a sudden fear.

With any other person, they might have seen his fear and anguish, judged him for his inability to finish and laughed at him. But Alex wasn't any other student, she saw the parts of Trevor he never expressed in the light of day and loved him all the same. She didn't see his asthma as a weakness, but as something which made him human.

She held Trevor in a locked embrace, catching his breath while she let a few tears fall from her cheeks and buried her face into his bare shoulder. After finding his breath again, Trevor relaxed in her arms, rigid muscles relaxing and allowing her to hold him. She bent down to him, pressing their foreheads together as he inhaled and exhaled in a steady rhythm. Feeling his hot breath hitting her face settled her nerves, knowing he was able to breathe again. Alex closed her eyes as he peered up at her, curiosity written in his eyes.

Dear Alex,

Our home is so much darker without you, and your father and I miss you terribly. We wanted to give you time to settle, to grow without our hovering, but after your lack of a response to my previous letters I assume you are still angry with us. That is okay. You are allowed to be upset. I understand resentment, I understand anger. I can hold it until you are ready.

*I want you to know how sorry we are. Your father and I had no idea our actions would lead to your consequences, and if I could go back and do everything differently, I think I would. Raising you as a girl was **right**, but maybe not **smart**. You understand? As a young man, you will have so many more opportunities should you choose to accept them. As a daughter, your options were limited. But as a son, you can reach higher than I thought possible. Doors will open for you, I promise.*

I love you very much.

*Forever & always,
Mom*

Chapter 4: Acceptance

Alex began to worry about her future when she was nineteen years old. She liked her life at the school for the most part. The more time she spent at the school, the more isolated she was from the reality of life outside. She stayed safer and less exposed, like she was hiding from the rest of the world and the Guardians who patrolled it. She didn't have to worry about being sold on the street as a child slave, or struggle with housing or food insecurity, or face the family that abandoned her here. At the American Christian Academy, Alex was like a single sheep in the middle of a herd, trying to escape the slaughter unnoticed.

After her first encounter with the Guardians, she tried to learn as much as she could about them. Mostly located in large cities or settlements, she was taught the Guardians of Morality was the glue which held the country together. Anyone who was caught breaking the morality laws was taken to the "re-education" camps, the open-air prisons scattered throughout the nation. They were supposed to be righteous crusaders, protecting the children of the country and ensuring civility. Alex didn't buy it, and her nightmares told her otherwise. The fear she remembered over the years became sharper, they had become stronger in her imagination, the memory of being torn from her family twisted and warped.

Despite everything, she felt safe with Trevor. The best moments she found herself thinking about were the ones with him on the roof in the middle of the night or the old oak tree in the corner of campus.

"Do you ever think about the guys who already graduated?" Trevor asked one lazy Sunday, while they were laying in the dirt against the hard bark of the oak behind them. It was spring and there was a light breeze blowing, Alex had her eyes closed soaking in the warmth and sunlight, trying not to think about that dreadful church service they had been forced to attend earlier. The atmosphere outside was peaceful. It reminded her of her childhood, running through the lawn with her bare feet and her dresses covered in mud. Her mother had always gotten so angry at her for dirtying her clothes a minute after they had been cleaned. The memory stung like an infected wound, the love she had received in those formative years long gone.

"Sometimes I think about those guys who went into the military or the Guardians of Morality." Alex admitted some time later. It wasn't that she didn't think about the others, but since the mandatory military service for all young men ended she was curious why anyone would willingly join. Maybe it was the honor and prestige, men liked that sort of thing. After the Californian Civil War ended during Alex's grandparents time it seemed like the citizens were all still enjoying the prolonged cease-fire. War was becoming a problem of the past, experts on the

holo nets wrote. The United States of America hadn't officially declared war in hundreds of years, they lied to unsuspecting readers who should have known better.

"You just think about them because you had a crush on that one guy. You remember," Trevor's voice trailed off. "The hot one. Aaron."

"I did not." Alex playfully punched him in the arm and he laughed, turning his head against the oak tree to look at her. "Aaron was a jackass. He was just looking to get laid. And besides, he didn't enroll in the military, he went to become a Guardian of Morality."

"At least you don't have to participate in the NRP when you are in the service." Trevor was always bringing up the NRP, Alex figured he was feeling excluded. But she wasn't eligible either, and she didn't talk about it all the time. She sighed, like she always did when he would bring up the NRP.

"You don't even know what the NRP is like." Alex muttered, regretting her words almost immediately. Trevor had been developing a passion lately, Alex had been hoping he was just getting interested in his studies. Getting angry about being excluded from the NRP was a sticking point for some people, like it was an indicator a person was more likely to become a criminal or a deviant of some kind. If someone couldn't legally contribute to the federal program, the rumors said they found other illicit ways to have biological children.

"That's not true and you know it, everyone knows what goes on there." Trevor's words sounded bitter, like he was actually angry at the NRP. Alex didn't understand his anger. As far as she was concerned, the NRP was just a nightmare some other people had to deal with, if the schoolyard rumors Trevor heard were true.

"Well I don't care." Alex's eyes stayed closed. "It doesn't matter anyway, they are re-enrolled when they are discharged. No one can escape the GSDA and Guardians."

Since her first run-in with them, Alex became determined to never meet another. From what she remembered, they dressed in all black and had guns attached to their waists. Even the memory brought fear bubbling up to the surface, how her mother had bid her a tearful goodbye and the Guardians followed them all the way to the school. Maybe so they knew she didn't run off, though she had nowhere to go. She wondered who they had been protecting, what moral law they had been upholding, when they had taken her from her loving family and dumped her at school.

"Right." Trevor's words sounded false, a chord too high. Alex noticed and turned to look over at him, he was still staring at her bleakly, dark brown eyes intense on hers. Trevor was a bad liar. They both were.

"Why do you care? We won't ever have to deal with it anyway." Alex raised her voice slightly, deciding she was tired of talking about the NRP. They had this conversation before,

many times before. Alex wondered sometimes if they were lucky, not ever having to go to the NRP offices and give material. It didn't sound like something she wanted to do anyway, it didn't sound like a privilege. She really didn't understand why Trevor got so bent out of shape about it. None of the other male students really complained about going to the NRP offices, but she and Trevor had overheard gossip about what the women were forced to do for the NRP. It was just far-fetched rumors, since there weren't any female students around to actually tell them what happened.

"Never mind." He shook his head and shifted his gaze, turning back to the cloudless sky as if he was willing to drop the conversation. "I just think this whole situation is backwards."

"Yeah, I know that." Alex tried to give him a smile, he got so worked up over the NRP and she honestly couldn't understand why. It didn't matter, Alex rationalized, since ineligible people were still able to adopt children. What did it matter that they couldn't donate biological material? They could still adopt kids and get married when they were old enough and had found women who would marry them. Her voice lowered and Trevor could tell she was just trying to appease him. "But you won't have to ever do it. You can find some girl and send in an application, that's what everyone else does anyway."

Trevor shook his head slightly again and Alex wondered how many other people were like them, and just acting for appearances. How many of them were happy? How many of their children were happy? She figured this was why people ran off to live in the woods and returned back to the wild, praying to some old god no one knew the name of anymore. Thinking about the pagans in the forests scared Alex more than any ideological NRP battle where she wasn't allowed to procreate.

"Is that what you are going to do?" Trevor turned his head back to Alex, focusing his laser gaze on her nonchalantly as if he didn't realize the enormity of the question. She froze, as if dissociating while staring off into the distance past the dusty red brick gate enclosing the campus and the trees they were resting under. She took a minute, pondering his question before she finally relented and sighed, her breath exhaling from her lungs like all the hope leaving her body.

"What other choice do we have?" She asked, her lips hardly moving while she spoke. Had Trevor not heard her over the slight breeze, he wouldn't have noticed she said anything at all. Alex's face stayed frozen as if she was concentrating on something in the distance. Then again, in an even lighter voice she muttered, "You can find a real woman."

She wasn't sure where that had come from, but the truth in her words cut deep. She knew she was wrong, not a woman but not a man either. But if she couldn't play her role, what would happen? Would the Guardians come and find her again? Alex hated the thought of running from them her entire life, but she knew deep in her heart that she couldn't pretend she was a man forever either. She was something different, something dangerous and unaccounted for. Like a mutated virus.

Trevor shut his eyes and turned his face away from her, as if he hadn't heard her say anything at all. They sat in silence against the bark of the oak tree for a little while longer, mulling over the lies they had told each other in silence.

Dearest Alex,

So many things have changed that I wish I could tell you about! Headmistress Singleton has been sending home updates, but your father and I need more. I heard you have been singing in the choir! Do you like it? Have you made any new friends? I know you will probably disregard this letter, but I yearn to hear about my baby.

I don't know if you remember Ruth from Church, but she has been staying with us sometimes. A few nights a week. She and I have become good friends, and she makes missing you more bearable. She has also suffered great loss. But then again, haven't we all?

She has been helping me with the garden, and she encouraged me to plant some sunflowers because she knows they were your favorite. Even if they aren't very practical, I think they make the garden look very nice.

Your father and I miss you very much.

Forever & always,

Mom

Chapter 5: Ignorance

On that Monday, Trevor came back to see Alex when she was alone after class. After they had graduated into specialty studies at the age of sixteen, each boy was given a small, private one-room loft; as opposed to the bunks they had slept in for most of their lives. Alex wished each room would have a personal data pad so they would be able to browse the holo net in private, but there was no such luck. All the devices which connected to the holo net were in the library, unless students smuggled in the handheld data pads which were easier to carry in a back pocket or small bag. The larger desktop-sized data pads in the library were free for students to use when they wanted.

Because their specialties, Math and Biology, were so close together, both school's dorms were in the same building. Trevor was only three floors below Alex. When they snuck out in the middle of the night, all they needed to do was unlatch their windows and crawl up the iron fire escape until they got to the flat gravel roof on the sixth floor.

When Trevor knocked quietly on her door that evening, Alex figured it could only be him. They hadn't exactly left things on a positive note the day before, and she figured he was here

with some crazy rumor about the NRP. When she opened the door he practically burst inside, he smiled in an insane way, and she knew an impossible idea must be coming. She liked him better when he was wired up and ready to do something stupid, intense about something other than the NRP.

"I got the letter," Trevor was panting, after running up the three flights up to her floor, and Alex worried she might have to go hunt for his inhaler just so he could tell her his news.

"Calm down," Alex arched an eyebrow, walking across the floor over to the small mini-fridge she kept in her dorm room. "Just sit down."

"I told you." Trevor gasped for another breath and Alex hoped he wasn't going to have an asthma attack right there on her bedroom floor. "I got the letter from the administration office. It was in your file. You are so lucky they left file cabinets unlocked after transferring everything to the holo net."

"The letter from the Committee?" Alex asked tentatively and softly, she had never read the actual letter before. She hadn't even asked Trevor to find it for her. He just stole it on his own. She wandered back over to him, forgetting what she was going to offer him from the refrigerator in the corner of the room.

"Yeah, I told you," Trevor paused before reaching into his jacket and pulling out a crumpled piece of paper. It was crooked and hastily copied from some other, more official, document. The seal on the upper right corner looked like it was supposed to be centered, it was circular with a logo of the Statue of Liberty, carrying a baby in her left arm instead of the usual tablet. Underneath her, the name and logo of the Gender and Sex Development Agency.

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Norton,

We have received all the necessary genetic documentation from Dr. Dorner's office in regards to our review. In conjunction with the Agency of Gender & Sex Development, we have found your child to possess two X chromosomes, and one Y. Before the advent of the GSDA, this disorder was called Klinefelter Syndrome.

As discussed with the pediatrician, chromosomal differences can be rectified in a number of ways. If you are adamant about the viability of the child, we will not force termination or further corrective actions. There is a possibility of healthy life, but one we regret to inform you, will never have the ability to reproduce or be a parent. In the majority of studies, individuals have been shown to have the best prognosis when raised as male.

Our Committee has included a list of appropriate measures to ensure your child has the best future possible. Dr. Dorner also wishes to express his utmost concern for the child's health, wellbeing, and future.

**Best of luck,
National Sex & Development Committee**

And that was it, the whole letter. Alex wasn't sure what she had been expecting. She blinked a few times, rereading it over again to be sure. A few phrases were sticking out to her, but she couldn't seem to formulate her questions into words just yet. Luckily, Trevor seemed to be thinking the same things. His normal face was plastered with a quizzical expression, eyebrows pushed together and his eyes squinting.

"You said this letter was the reason why you suddenly became a boy and came here." Trevor said, almost as if the statement was a question. He paused, trying to make eye contact and wondering if he had gone too far. "But they don't just come out and say it, they just recommended it. See it says termination, I think they're talking about your life."

"Does this mean there are others like me?" Alex tried to change the subject, pondering aloud. Did they all become boys? She wasn't listening to Trevor, some part of her already knew where this was going. This document looked so official, she was legally registered as a male. Why did he bring this to her? There was no possible way she would ever be able to change it. Alex groaned and brought her hand up to her face, this was all too much to digest.

"Yeah, in the other cases they mention. I wonder what they mean by prognosis though." Trevor looked at her, desperate for eye contact. Maybe he just wouldn't rest until he figured out what her genetic anomaly actually was. He had seen her scars, but he had never asked questions about them or what had happened. This kind of intrusiveness from him was new, and Alex decided she didn't like it.

"They mean life expectancy." She finally responded, almost curtly and dropped her hands back down to her sides, defeated. She raised her eyes slowly, looking up at Trevor directly before continuing. "They mean, they don't know how long I'll live or what this might mean for my future. I'm a statistical outlier, it's probably hard to tell. I would bet there isn't much data."

If Trevor was surprised by her analytical reasoning he didn't show it. Alex had known for a long time she wasn't like all the other people she met, so clearly defined as boy or girl. She had suspected there was something, deep down, that was just wrong or broken. This letter was just the final proof. God was indeed proving to have a sense of humor. She really was just an anatomical, biological fluke. Alex was a mistake, who never should have been allowed to be born in the first place. Her mind was racing.

"I'll never have a kid." Alex paused, never really taking the words in before. Even if she was excluded from the NRP, she had always kind of held onto the hope that she would be able to have illegal, biological children, somehow. She knew she didn't have the internal genitalia for

it, but in her dreams it didn't matter. It was a stupid fantasy, she realized now and felt ashamed for ever having thought it was a possibility. She groaned again, "I had dreams, maybe, I thought we could..."

She clapped her mouth shut, unsure why she was telling Trevor so many things she had never said aloud before. If Trevor was surprised he didn't show it; they had never openly talked about getting married to each other or having illegal children before. They hadn't even said they loved each other. Same-sex relationships and marriage were most definitely illegal, and even if Alex decided she was a girl nothing could change her federal registration as a boy. Alex brought her hands up again, covering her face as she hunched over as if she was sobbing.

Her words trailed off and Trevor tried to take Alex into his arms, the way he had done so many times before, but Alex shoved him away and bit back her sadness with anger. She was sick of all the lying. She felt overwhelmed, like her lungs weren't getting enough oxygen.

"I should never have told you about my childhood, you can't just leave something alone can you?" Alex raised her voice, "Why did you even bring this to me?"

Trevor looked physically hurt, as if she had struck him. Leaning backwards, he blinked a few times before regaining his composure, "I wanted to show you that the choice is yours. The GSDA assigned your sex, but they could be wrong. I wanted you to see that this decision is yours alone."

"Mine alone?" Alex fumed, "This is official, Trevor. This is never going to be changed."

He shook his head, as if this was the simplest choice in the world. Alex buried her head in her hands once more, her mind conjuring up the image of the Guardians and their guns dancing in a circle around her, mocking her saying in a singsong voice, *you can't live as a woman, but you can die as one.*

THE NRP: HOW IT WORKS

The National Reproduction Program is a mandatory program which entitles all citizens the right to pass on their genes to create the children of tomorrow. Here at the Gender and Sex Development Agency, we believe humans have an ethical obligation to reproduce in order to further increase the genetic diversity of our species. Instead of maximizing the birth rate with draconian measures like arranged marriages, increased risky pregnancy, and lax promiscuity laws; our Agency has fundamentally changed the way infants are conceived. With modern science, the NRP is able to pick and choose the best genetic matches to create the healthiest and brightest children.

At the age of sixteen, all citizens are registered with the National Reproduction Program, and the typical first appointment covers the basics of sexual education, along with material covering

sexual health and wellness. Female citizens are required to visit their local NRP office or birth center biannually, and male citizens are to report monthly.

Appointments for men and women differ significantly. Men typically spend less time on their appointments, even if they must visit more frequently. All women have the option of applying for Motherhood roles, wherein they may choose if they would like to experience childbirth and pregnancy within one of our state-of-the-art birthing facilities. Both sexes are required to provide a government issue ID as well as any medical documentation of prior illness.

In order to maintain the security and integrity of the National Reproduction Program, donors are unable to ask for the whereabouts of their sample provided. Discretionary policy directs staffers to avoid giving citizens any information on their sample once the donation process is complete. The GSDA retains all rights to the biological material, once provided.

When visiting your local NRP office for genetic collection, you have the ability to meet with a regional or district manager who can personally walk you through the NRP process and answer any questions you may have.

Chapter 6: Abnormalities

During Trevor's time at the American Christian Academy for Boys, he was teased mercilessly. Things got better once he made friends with Alex. They made a good team against the bullies, united and unbreakable. It wasn't until they were in their late teens, when their peers were enrolled in sex education classes in prep for the NRP, that they began to fully understand each other.

There was a distinct shift in the attitude of their peers, once they were fully enrolled in the NRP and done with prep classes. Alex and Trevor couldn't really explain it, but they went from teasing and mocking to pity. Everyone seemed to change overnight, from boys into men. They walked into the NRP as careless boys and walked out as resentful men. It was weird, neither could seem to explain the shift. The teasing stopped oddly enough, like Alex and Trevor weren't even worthy of a sidelong glance. If anything, their peers started to actively avoid them once fully enrolled, as if the two of them were infectious.

After reading the letter, Alex started to understand Trevor's obsession with the NRP a little bit more. Officially knowing there was something wrong with her, different about her, somehow felt like a weight had been lifted. But it did nothing to settle the worry and anxiety that permeated life at the American Christian Academy. She was still an outcast. She was barred from the NRP because of her bad genes and now what was the point? Now, she officially had confirmation she was abnormal, she was wrong. She was broken and rotten to the core. A weight had been lifted, but a thunderstorm was forming.

"So, what am I?" She eventually asked Trevor in a hesitant voice after one long day of advanced calculus lectures. He hadn't ceased to leave her alone, but she had done a good job

of turning the anger into something different, something new and malleable. Her green eyes burned with intensity and Trevor turned to look in her direction before she could clarify. "Does this mean I'm really not a boy? But I'm not a girl either? What am I?"

The question had been burning in her mind for years, but the formal letter really awakened her deepest suspicions about herself. She had been questioning her role in the world for a while now, she knew her body looked different from everyone else since she had arrived at the school. But she still didn't understand what had happened when she was a little girl and she couldn't understand what was happening now. Spinning through all the possibilities and alternate realities, her mind felt like it was ready to explode. *Is it possible to be both a boy and a girl, or neither?*

"I think it means the choice is yours." Trevor paused, trying to consider his words carefully. "It's not like anyone can tell you that you are one way or the other. I think it's something you have to decide on your own."

Alex considered his words for a while, trying to not get angrier. She wanted someone to give her a concrete answer, to tell her she wasn't losing her mind by doubting everything she thought she knew about herself. Trevor was the one who had initiated this whole thing, stealing the letter from the file and bringing it to her. Trevor was the only one who validated her thinking she could be a woman in the first place. Maybe she would have been better off never knowing, never feeling the need to make a choice about something that was already chosen for her. *How am I supposed to make a decision like this? And how is it going to affect the rest of my life? Will anyone even believe me?* The hope fluttered in her stomach like a butterfly, as if when she acknowledged it would clap its wings together and fall down dead.

"Look, I don't care." She lied through gritted teeth, knowing Trevor could obviously see through her like transparent glass. Part of her was still angry at him, although she couldn't really remember why anymore. The entire life she had been building for nineteen years felt like it was dissolving into nothing around her, just like a hologram on a data pad. She partly wanted Trevor to remind her of her federal designation as a white male named Alex, which would never be changed. In stressful situations, Alex liked being reminded of the rules, the parameters. That way, she knew exactly what was right and wrong. When someone defined who she was, she thought she would be better able to accept it, even though the past proved differently. Hearing it from someone she trusted was what she felt like she needed. She wanted Trevor to help bring her back down to earth, to keep her from floating away with her own thoughts. She wanted him to keep her tethered back to the ground, a job in which he was spectacularly failing at the moment.

"Hey," Trevor hesitated and arched an eyebrow, pursing his lips defensively as if he had a lot he wanted to say, "I'm sorry I took the file. Okay? I just knew this was something that's been bugging you. You can pretend it doesn't, but I know you."

Alex didn't say anything after that. Trevor was right, she was angry. But not at him, just angry in general. Part of her was angry at everyone else for lying to her for her whole life. Her doctors, her parents, the school; it felt like everyone had been so willing to tell her who she was all this time. Another part was angry at herself, for allowing herself to have hope like this in the first place. *What does any of this even mean?* Was she acting irrationally by being mad at Trevor? Probably. But recognizing that fact didn't help her let go of the anger any easier.

Alex was still simmering with misplaced rage the next day, when Trevor came back to her single dorm after class, equipped with his own stolen file. He wasn't stupid, he knew he had done something wrong and lost some trust. But Trevor was a good person like that, he was willing to apologize and try again when he knew he had done something wrong.

"Okay it occurred to me that I might have crossed the line." Trevor started, plopping down in front of the small desk in her room and setting his file down with a smack. "So I brought all my secrets, too. That way, you can cross the line with me."

Alex rolled her eyes but didn't move to stop him. She walked casually to the mini-fridge and cracked open two glass bottles of soda as Trevor started listing off his previous reprimands from classes throughout the years. The boy was obviously vying for the seat of the class clown, but he always seemed to be getting people laughing at him and not with him. The nuns hated him, they were always giving him punishments for talking out of turn or raising his voice too loud. Alex thought all that just made him try harder. Trevor was the type to get anxiety in a room full of people, but no one would ever be able to notice as he made people laugh and danced through different circles of acquaintances. He was a good actor, but Alex could see the imperceptible shaking as he raised a hand or laughed at his own jokes. He was afraid of being seen as weak, just like Alex was; although he never seemed like he was worried.

"Oh wait, look." Trevor paused, the color slightly draining from his cheeks, leaving a cool ashy tone in his dark features. His voice was shaky and Alex raised her eyebrows expectantly. "They found my bio mom."

Alex walked back over, setting the glass soda bottles on the desk before looking at the grainy mugshot clipped in the file. The girl looked young, too young to even be enrolled in the NRP, maybe fourteen. She wore her hair out in an afro, curling around her face and displaying a fading bruise covering her left eye. She had a dark, shadowy complexion just like her biological son, and the same wide jawline. Alex had always wondered where he had gotten his thick curly hair from. Darker skin seemed to be a rarity as far as Alex knew, and Trevor's family was composed of all people with deeper complexions. Alex wondered if they picked their children on purpose, because of that fact alone.

Alex had lived a mostly sheltered life, but even so Trevor was the only person she knew who had such dark skin. Most of the other little boys at the school were white or white-passing. There were a few Hispanic looking boys, but Alex wasn't the best at judging based on appearances. There were a few Asian boys as well, about four or five in every graduating class.

She supposed it made sense his biological mother was black, Trevor's biological father probably was too. Alex wondered slightly again in the back of her mind, if the NRP bred them together on purpose knowing black children were less common, or more requested, or whatever. Alex didn't know if African Americans were a minority within the country, but they definitely were at the American Christian Academy. She caught herself wondering a lot about how the rich parents chose the children they adopted, before she stopped herself from wondering which children sold at the highest price at the street auctions Elliot Norton worked so hard to stop. Some things were best unknown, to be willfully ignored.

Alex had a theory that only the wealthiest members of society were ensured to have a healthy infant, so they would have the longest life expectancy and no likelihood for developing other illnesses. Most middle-class and low-income couples preferred to adopt boys, so that they would be able to help take on work and continue the family's name. But unlike them, Alex's father had a soft spot for the infants he knew were not being adopted out as much. For Trevor's middle-class parents, Alex figured they had probably paid off an NRP doctor or two to make sure they had an infant who matched their ethnic requirements. Maybe the NRP would just wait until the application paperwork, and then find biological parents to create the embryo after the fact. Neither Alex or Trevor knew the reality of the NRP, and that fact was becoming more and more of a disadvantage.

"Well we knew she slipped through the cracks." Alex thumbed the photo gently, the girl had a wild, strung-out look in her eyes. Her hair was wiry and stuck out from her head at all angles, forming a curly halo around her face. Alex found herself wondering about her life, about her story. Did she know she had given life to such a wonderful son? Had she only been called in because Trevor's adopted parents specified they wanted an African American child?

"Says she was abusing stimulants. And that she was terminated from the NRP." Trevor's brow knotted together his lips pursed tightly, "They like that word, termination."

"I'm sorry." Alex didn't quite know what else to say. She rested her hand on his shoulder silently, stiffly. The air in the room had suddenly gone completely still. Like the wind had been listening to their conversation and suddenly stopped blowing to better hear the silence, Alex felt the goosebumps rise on the back of her arm. Objectively, Trevor's biological mother was beautiful, and Alex found herself unable to tear her eyes from the old photograph.

"How is the whole NRP supposed to work anyway, if we are excluded and everyone else isn't?" Trevor wondered aloud, a question Alex had often asked herself late at night. If the point was to weed out the sick and defective, it certainly wasn't succeeding. There were more poor women prostituting themselves on the streets, and homeless people overflowing in prison camps, than at any other point in American history. It didn't help that visiting a doctor to actually run the tests that would exclude a person from the NRP cost more money than most people had. Trevor and Alex had gotten lucky by being placed with families who had enough money to get them the medical care and education they deserved. They had seen expensive and well known pediatricians who caught their abnormalities and were trying to treat them.

"You and I are both living proof that it doesn't work." Alex mumbled to herself without much confidence. They both knew the truth and didn't want to say so, but apparently no one else could see that fact. The stillness in the room felt suffocating, the treason they were speaking heavy in the atmosphere, wind refusing to blow the words away beyond reach.

ADOPTION FOR ALL

Adoption and child rearing are fundamental values we adhere to at the Gender and Sex Development Agency, and our federal adoption programs allow all families the right to grow as they see fit. Prior to the advent of the National Reproduction Program, childbirth was dangerous and oftentimes deadly. Families had no control over the quantity or quality of children they produced. Children were often abused and neglected, and taken by the state. The NRP and subsequent adoptions provide a safe way for families to nurture the next generation.

All married couples are automatically eligible to enroll with the NRP, and have the option to discuss parenthood with their local NRP satellite offices during their scheduled appointments.

If your family wishes to adopt, please remember the following criteria:

- *Prospective parents must provide financial reports and credit scores with their application*
- *Prospective parents must provide an enclosure no smaller than ten feet wide and ten feet tall, subject to inspection at NRP discretion*
- *Prospective parents must submit a detailed statement and written letter outlining their current/future goals during their first home interview*
- *Prospective parents must be legal citizens, and must be able to provide genetic information as well as medical reports (to be submitted at the first home interview)*

Once your family has been cleared to adopt, GSDA representatives will conduct two home interviews. The purpose of these visits is two-fold; to maintain a strong connection between the family and the GSDA, and to inspect the residence and check for any safety concerns which may be present.

Common issues during home visits include:

- *Untidy/unclean living quarters*
- *Inappropriate sleeping arrangements*
- *Inappropriate storage of hazardous/dangerous materials*
- *Insufficient space or uninhabitable areas*

Raising children is a right, and it may be revoked if necessary. The Gender and Sex Development Agency retains all rights to the biological materials and may revoke consent for adoption at any time.

Chapter 7: History

The next Sunday after services, Trevor cornered Alex with a large, physical book directly after worship. It had real paper pages and a thick leather binding, still dusty from whatever shelf he had pulled it from. It had been years since Alex had seen or read from a proper book, they were mostly stored away for academic and research use only. A few libraries still existed where people could buy physical books, but mostly everyone used the data pads that were supposedly cheaper. The development for the holo net and data pads had come with government funding and contracts to private companies, so the devices were cheaper than vintage books. At least, that's what the ads said. Some people claimed that the monthly service fee was criminal, but the fact the device was basically free helped most people jump on board with the new tech. Alex's generation had been raised browsing the holo net, even despite her fathers' protests.

"Wow, did you steal that one from the library now?" Alex half joked, wary as they made their way out to the old live oak tree past the auditorium and planetarium. The school grounds were incredibly large, and enclosed by a tall brick wall with thick iron railing spiking across the top. They were supposed to keep out the homeless and deter everyday criminals from the safety of the school, but they mostly served to keep away pigeons from landing on top and nesting on the railing. Foreboding and sharpened, it made Alex wonder if the real point was to keep the criminals out or the students in.

"Maybe." Trevor grinned slightly, a sheepish kind of half-smile. As they sat down in the dry grass under the old oak tree, he placed the book on his lap and Alex tried to make out the faded words on the cover. It looked old, very old; like the worn copy of her father's bible, with yellowed pages and a dusty spine.

"I didn't know you were interested in history." Alex squinted, the text looked like an old volume of their American history textbooks. The binding was thick and official-looking, Alex could make out a few faint logos for the GSDA and NRP along with other federal agencies fading on the front cover.

"Just the last few centuries." Trevor admitted with the same sheepish half-smile and opened the book to the title page, giving Alex a better look inside. "I was wondering, after our talk the other night, about the NRP. I know we were told about the Culling in elementary education, but we really didn't get into any detail."

Alex didn't know what to say. She hadn't connected the dots to the Culling, which happened before the NRP was established. The GSDA wasn't even an agency back then. The Culling was a virus that had wiped out massive amounts of the population, almost every country in the world struggled with repopulation after the survivors began having fertility issues. The GSDA and NRP were formed shortly after, one right after the other. It happened hundreds of years ago. Other nations were still trying to recover to the size they had been at the height of the infection.

“So the National Reproduction Program started in 2060, after the Culling.” Trevor paused, flipping the dusty pages to somewhere in the middle at dog-eared page.

“Yeah, because the Culling had decimated the whole world’s population. It wasn’t just the USA.” Alex remembered faintly from her old history lectures. “It was a virus, if I remember right, like the plague.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Trevor paused for a moment, before reading directly from the page open in front of him. “The scope of the epidemic was unparalleled in human history. Industry leading scientists from the United States discovered that people with a specific genetic combination were more likely to get sick and die from the infection.”

Alex figured he was paraphrasing the last bit, she didn’t remember anything about genetics from her history education. They were both silent for a minute as Trevor skipped a few pages ahead and began reading aloud again from another marked page. Alex took a minute to shift over to the bark of the tree, leaning her back against it while Trevor sat in the grass just a few feet away with his legs crossed in front of him. It was a beautiful July afternoon and Alex couldn’t help but glance at a drop of sweat which glistened down Trevor’s forehead like he was concentrating hard, as he furrowed his brow and pushed the textbook between them in the dirt. He looked up to her, pulling her from her daydreaming with the serious expression on his face as if he wanted her to pay attention to what he was explaining.

“Okay, look here.” His long index finger hovered over a small black and white photograph of a group of men all standing together in front of the old Capital building in Washington DC and posing for the camera. The caption underneath the photo read ‘2053 Gender and Sex Conference’ in small print. Trevor continued reading, “North American scientists gave their findings to the newly created Gender and Sex Development Agency, which was established in order to better diversify the gene pool in the United States of America in 2053.”

“Better diversify?” Alex looked over to the section he was reading from; labeled ‘Creation of the National Reproduction Program and Subsequent Events’. The text was so small, she wondered how Trevor had even managed to find it in the first place. Each page had two columns and it reminded Alex of a printed bible. To be fair, she hadn’t seen many real physical books that weren’t bibles. She lowered her eyebrows and squinted at the small faded letters.

Trevor didn’t answer, just kept continuing with his reading on the opposite page from the photo without looking up at her or acknowledging she spoke. “The added rewards of the NRP continue to benefit humanity. Since the program’s inception, disability in youth and young adults has gone down at least seventy percent.”

Trevor paused for a moment and Alex caught him biting his lower lip in frustration. Flipping through the pages, he seemed to notice something wrong. He scanned the last few pages of the book, looking for a bibliography or an index with no luck. Alex caught on, once she realized what he was seeing. The wheels in her head started turning, wondering why any

taxpayer-funded federal agency would want to hide their official data. They didn't know the information they were looking to find was proprietary, unable to view by citizens because it was protected by the companies who had developed the technology and funded the studies.

"They aren't citing anything," Trevor muttered quietly and Alex nodded in agreement. "It's like they are refusing to say what they actually mean."

"I think it means they were able to diversify the population? Maybe they achieved their goal." Alex's brow furrowed slightly again. She wanted to be able to trust the government, to believe the GSDA and the Guardians had her best interests at heart. But if she thought about it too hard, she realized if she was in trouble neither would protect her. The Guardians in her nightmares were just as real as the ones she had met at her house all those years ago, black ghosts with the power to snuff out life as easily as firing a bullet. Alex decided not to think about it too hard, instead focusing on the obvious contradiction she was seeing. "But how can you eliminate disease and disability with more genetic diversity? Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"I'm not sure," Trevor paused, flipping a few pages ahead in the chapter again, the dust swirling in the air above the book in the rays of sunlight. "It doesn't make sense. But it's like you said, you and I are living proof it doesn't work."

"If the point was to eliminate disability and disease, yes." Alex gave him a look, as if she understood something he didn't quite grasp yet. "But you said it was in response to the Culling."

"The book says it was."

"This was hundreds of years ago, Trevor. Before the Californian secession and war! Why are you still thinking about all of this?" Alex rolled her eyes, resting her back against the large oak tree as Trevor laid down and put his head on her lap and continued reading from the textbook, lifting it above his chest. He seemed fascinated, Alex just didn't understand why. Neither of them were history students, neither had remembered much of their two years of lectures on American history in elementary education.

"I don't know," Trevor paused, tilting his head up toward the sky and shutting his eyes, closing the book and putting it on his chest. It rose and fell with the steady movement of his breathing. He looked bothered, but like he was trying his best to act content. Alex thought he looked beautiful, the sun shining down on his bronzed face with his head in her lap. "I just can't stop wondering about it all."

Alex placed her palm on his damp forehead, attempting to comfort him. There would always be something about the world they wouldn't understand, and that bothered Trevor. He had a mind that was always hungry for information. He always wanted to know more while Alex was trying to be happy with her ignorant bliss.

"When I catch myself wondering something, like why the NRP doesn't work, or why pagans are sacrificing children in the woods- I'll go crazy." Alex smiled, reiterating the story her parents had told her once when she heard coyotes howling in the night outside the bedroom window. "Sometimes it's best to just admit you don't know something and move on with your life."

"But you know they don't actually do that right? Sacrifice kids? It's all lies," he said, gazing up at her.

"Your parents didn't scare you enough," Alex joked and let out an airy laugh as he looked up to her face with a strange longing. Alex didn't want to say he was loud or talkative, but she struggled to understand how someone so alone in the world could still act so light and mellow in the face of so much pain. Trevor never acted like he was worried or in a rush, scared of the unknown. While she knew he was in fact anxious like she was, Trevor did a good job of acting like he wasn't worried, like nothing bothered him. Alex wished she could act as effortlessly as Trevor had learned to do, not initially realizing the reason he was such a good pretender was because he had years of practice while living with his family. Trevor didn't start acting when he came to the school like Alex had, he had been feigning nonchalance since he was a child and learned that having passion meant showing weakness. Alex didn't realize but when he didn't have a witty response to what she said, she started to wonder if she had said the wrong thing. His eyes stayed closed against the sunlight and he could almost feel Alex's gaze on his sullen face in her lap.

"They scared me enough so that I'll never go back." Trevor finally answered ominously, making Alex wonder how much of his childhood trauma was still unknown to her. Trevor wasn't one to talk about the things that plagued his mind, the horrors he had seen as a child before coming to the school. Maybe he's had an experience with the Guardians of Morality, too.

"I'm sorry." Alex didn't know what else to say, she apologized a lot for things which were not her fault and she couldn't seem to stop doing it. She wanted to comfort Trevor, but she didn't know how. He opened his eyes, gazing up with chocolate irises flecked with golden flames, Alex felt her heart flutter just a bit and then she averted her eyes, looking back to the looming dorm buildings in the distance like they would suddenly curb her attraction to her best friend. Every time she caught herself thinking about Trevor in a romantic way, a ball of guilt welled up in the pit of her stomach and she couldn't help but feel dirty and wrong. She lifted her eyes and Trevor opened his, wondering why she apologized like she had.

"It's not your fault," His voice was clear but Alex didn't dare look down and show her true emotions. "But the pagans in the woods aren't something my family never really joked about. They've been out there for years. They're tribes of white people who are practically feral, I can't imagine they'd be friendly."

Trevor paused, looking directly up at Alex. Her hair was starting to grow out and he liked when it was shaggy, he could easily grab a handful and get her attention that way. Although the

nuns made them cut their hair once it got too long, Alex seemed to enjoy it as long as she could get away with. As upperclassmen at the school, Trevor thought she was pushing her luck. She finally looked back down at him reluctantly when he said quietly, "I think you worry too much."

As she looked down at him, she couldn't help but feel those same butterflies in her stomach and the tingling current that seemed to run through her nerves. Whenever Trevor casually touched her, or got comfortable next to her, she couldn't help but feel like her heart was going to jump out of her chest. She knew he must have noticed it, or felt a similar way about her, but she had no idea how to ask him. His touch was a spark of electricity.

She bit the inside of her cheek tentatively, anxious. Trevor could see the wheels turning and he did the only thing he could think to do to bring her attention back to him. He brought his hand lazily upward to cup the side of her face with his palm, arching his back and leaning upwards as if guiding her lips down to his. When they connected, Alex felt the electricity consume her from the inside out, frying every cell into her body as if flicking the wrong switch had activated something inside her and was laser focused on the feeling of his lips on hers. His breath was hot, but his lips moved against hers as if he couldn't get enough air into his damaged lungs. She couldn't breathe either. *Is this how he feels all the time?*

When they had kissed and fooled around as kids, Alex hadn't ever felt like this, like her body was on fire from the inside. Never electric. Granted, most of those experimental moments were just the two of them practicing or pretending. For some reason, Alex felt as if the kiss she was sharing in that moment with Trevor was realer and more authentic than any other kiss she had in her life. Everything in her mind was screaming his name, like she had never before wanted him the way she did now. As her pulse quickened, she realized she probably wouldn't ever get a kiss like this again. *Will this ruin our friendship?*

Alex pulled herself back and pushed her spine against the tree bark harshly while her attention flicked around the empty field, as if making sure no students or nuns had seen their forbidden connection. Trevor rested his head back in her lap as if he was satisfied with his actions, closing his eyes to avoid Alex's apparent bewilderment.

Alex,

Headmistress Singleton has told us that you are still using the name Alex, but we can always change that. It feels funny, but I'm not sure what to call you now. Are you using male or female pronouns? Have you changed your name? Your hair? Your mother and I are worried, she thinks about you night and day. She loves you, and this silence is torture. I miss you terribly, and I hope this letter finds you happy and healthy.

Perhaps there is a reason beyond anger that is keeping you from responding to our letters, if that is the case, please give us a sign. I'm aware we are paying tuition at a discounted rate, but the administrators should have no reason for keeping these letters from you, despite that. We

have great respect for the American Christian Academy, and know they are trying to keep their students safe. You, included.

Your mother's friend, Ruth, has gotten me one of those fancy data pads. I don't much like it, but I will try to see if I can find a way to contact you on the holo net. We miss you very much. I understand if you wish to keep this silence, but please let your mother know you are alright.

From your loving father.

Chapter 8: Pharmacy

"We aren't sneaking out, right?" Alex's voice was hushed, as if she didn't believe Trevor. He chewed his bottom lip, eyes darting across the street as they exited the campus and walked down the sidewalk. He wanted to reach for her hand, to reassure her that they wouldn't get in trouble. But as his gaze flicked through the groups of homeless people camped on the opposite sidewalk, he couldn't think of anything to say.

"Right?" Alex asked again, her voice raising a pitch. She sounds scared, Trevor thought to himself.

"Right." Trevor led her forward, trying to avoid the staring faces across the street and project some air of confidence. "I got a day pass, come on."

Alex followed him tentatively and he couldn't blame her. Trevor only left the safety of campus when absolutely necessary, and Alex had spent her summer vacations working in the library. Neither of them had much experience on the streets where the slavers and pickpockets would find them sticking out like a sore thumb. Walking silently until the campus ended and the street opened into a more commercial area, Trevor stopped at the corner of the street and waited as if looking for vehicles that might pop out and hit them while crossing. The buildings were sharp and angular, varying in shades of grey and taupe. Salt Lake City was not an inviting place.

As they crossed the street, Alex seemed to slow down as they caught the eyes of a few curious families, huddled in the shadows over the hot exhaust grates or in half-zipped camping tents. The children looked curious, with soot-covered faces peering from behind their greasy and hardened parents. Trevor caught himself wondering about them, if the children were documented or not. They wouldn't let you keep your kids if you become homeless, right?

In truth, Trevor knew just as much about the NRP as Alex did. He remembered being a child, and the unending fear that his parents would return him back to someplace unknown. It was like they didn't care about him, just that he was another possession indicating his family's good status. When they discovered his asthma, his happiness dissolved as if an illusion. Sure

they had money, but so did everyone else at the American Christian Academy. Out on the streets, that privilege counted for a lot more.

Trevor led Alex away from the sidewalks and the families in the shadows, turning down another street empty of vehicles. He felt her hesitate as they walked quietly forward, down the middle of the asphalt street and keeping a wide distance between the groups of other people who seemed to be heading the same direction. Lacking confidence, Alex stopped moving as the pharmacy came into view. Trevor stopped, his gaze moving over all the other shadows walking before he turned and grabbed Alex's hand.

Alex looked up at him, fear obvious in her eyes. Ignoring his better instinct, Trevor squeezed her hand and flashed a grin. They hadn't spoken about the kiss they shared under the oak tree, but Trevor felt his heart skip a beat when Alex smiled back at him and for a moment it was just the two of them, the world compressed and the only face he could see was hers. Streets and unrecognizable faces dissolving, he felt an intense pull as if gravity wanted them to stick together, like a pair of binary stars alone in the universe.

Trevor never felt annoyed by Alex's lack of confidence or seeming masculinity, if anything he felt as if he needed to protect her from the real world. It was as if she was a rare colorful bird, and he needed to save her from all the other poachers who wanted to steal her beautiful feathers. Bringing her today had been a test of sorts, and he was surprised they had made it this far without incident. Usually Trevor traveled alone when he needed to, but the other men on the road had tried to rob him a few times, knowing he was leaving from the rich school and probably had cash. Deciding to bring Alex had been a difficult choice to arrive at, but he didn't have any other option and couldn't afford to be robbed at knifepoint again.

When they finally reached the pharmacy on the left side of the long street, Alex would have thought it was a casino. It didn't look like a place for healing. In big red neon were the words 'American Wellness Center' flickering above the giant store which Alex realized took up most of the side of block. The pharmacy easily could have housed all the people on the street outside, if not more. It was huge, when they stepped inside Alex noticed it didn't even have a proper ceiling, just rows and rows of rafters and insulation tubing. It looked as if it had started small, as only one storefront which had slowly expanded to consume its neighbors on either side and span out to occupy the entire facade of the buildings. *I would bet the franchise owner is probably rich enough to send their adopted children to school with us. Maybe we all know each other.*

Alex followed behind Trevor as they walked into the store as sliding bulletproof-glass doors opened automatically for them, she was careful not to knock anything over or attract attention to herself. This place doesn't look safe during the daylight hours, I can't imagine visiting after dark. There were sharp needles thrown in the gutter outside and a lone security guard leaning against the railing, who didn't seem to mind the absolute disgust of his place of employment; he looked bored by the people shuffling past. The tile floors were sticky with something, and Alex tried to focus up at the rows of flickering fluorescent tubes lining the ceiling

as they waited in a line that snaked through the aisles. They stood behind a man who looked and smelled as if he hadn't had a decent shower in a while, with one crutch under his right arm, trying to support himself as best he could without the use of his left leg. Alex caught herself wondering how he had lost his leg as one side of his pants dragged across the tiled flooring. It must have been bothering the man as well, because when he reached the register he bent down and wrapped up the vacant pant leg to tie just above where his kneecap would have been. He probably can't afford the prosthetic.

When the man finally hobbled away a few minutes later, grumbling about the price of something, they reached the front of the line at the cash register and Alex tried to make small talk with the cashier.

She was a tall and skinny looking blonde white girl, with a name tag with the word 'Lemon' scrawled across in poor handwriting. Alex wondered if that was really her name. She was pretty, Alex couldn't help but feel the pang of envy as the woman looked over at Trevor with icy blue eyes and unreadable expression. Her blonde hair was tied up behind her head in a messy ponytail, with a few strands coming loose and framing her face and a black marker tucked behind one ear. She had small, thin rosy lips but her face was framed beautifully by a pair of dark brown brows. Alex caught herself thinking they must have been dyed, or maybe Lemon just didn't care enough to find an eyebrow pencil that matched her actual hair color.

Either way, to Alex she looked beautiful. She caught herself most envious of Lemon's long hair, Alex absentmindedly missed the wavy brown curls that blew in the breeze when she ran outside so many years ago. Sometimes she still had dreams about her hair growing back to that length. Not anything unbelievable or elaborate, just a fantasy where she could pull everything back into a ponytail the way Lemon had hers, to get it out of her face. Every time Alex awoke from a dream like that, she couldn't help but fall back to sleep with a profound sense of longing.

"What's a lemon?" Alex asked in her best confident Trevor voice and the blonde girl rolled her eyes. She was probably sick of explaining it to people, even though Alex looked genuinely curious and disarming. *She is so pretty, even with the mismatched eyebrows.*

"Some old fruit from way back when. People used to make juice out of it." Lemon paused, looking over the boys standing in front of her register. "You two don't look like you're from around here. You're too clean."

"We got a day pass from the school," Trevor explained with a shrug of his shoulders. Lemon's eyebrow raised. She had hit on the exact thing Alex noticed on the walk over. Trevor gave her his name and she wandered over to the back cabinet, white against all the blue wallpaper. She punched in a few numbers and rotated a small dial and then the door swung open slowly. After rummaging through the metal cabinet for a minute, Lemon walked back to the register holding a small paper bag. She peaked inside the bag, typed something into the register and then folded the top of the paper and placed it on the counter between them.

"What school? You guys are too old for any school I know." The eyebrow stayed raised, and if trying to determine how they were lying as she looked back up to them from the screen of the register. The publicly funded GSDA schools didn't go past elementary education, only people who had enough money were able to go further.

"American Christian Academy." Alex smiled honestly, trying to disarm her suspicions again. Lemon tucked a few stray blond hairs behind her ear and rolled her eyes one last time, before her eyebrow finally lowered and she gave Alex a hint of a grin teasing at the corners of her lips. If Alex hadn't been so struck by Lemon's beauty she would have been jealous at the way she was looking at Trevor. It only occurred after that she had basically handed Trevor a real woman on a dinner plate with Lemon, she was everything Alex couldn't be. Her mind fought itself, envy for Lemon mixing with the deep urge to befriend her. *How can I ever compare with a woman like that?*

"Oh that makes sense. Why didn't y'a just send your maid for you?" The smile widened and Trevor grinned back shaking his head, handing him the small paper bag with his new inhaler inside. Lemon's nails were painted elaborately with a light blue polish and little white polka dots. Alex remembered her mother using a toothpick to make similar designs on her nails for special occasions and she smiled. "That's eighty-nine-ninety-nine."

Trevor forced out an uncomfortable laugh before handing her a hundred dollars in cash from his back pocket. He didn't even count the bills. "We aren't that rich."

Lemon thumbed the money and squinted like she didn't quite believe him. It wasn't every day two wealthy boys came to her register and tried to flirt with her. Lemon decided they were cute, if not a little naive. When the small paper receipt spit out of the register, Lemon tore it and handed it to Alex who took another moment to stare at Lemon's nails.

"I'm sorry but," Alex hesitated, "Your nails are so cute."

"Thanks!" Lemon beamed, "My little sister did them last night, she's a brat sometimes."

Lemon shifted her gaze between the two and paused. Looking down, Alex took Lemon's hand in hers and lifted her fingers up for closer inspection. If Lemon thought it was odd, she didn't say anything. But after a beat she looked back up to Trevor, "Hey, I go on break in a few minutes. Do you guys want to go get something to eat?"

Alex was quick to respond yes and they waited over by the store entrance until Lemon met them there a few minutes later. Without her little red apron, she looked as overdressed as they were. She wore all black, but that didn't dim her personality. Lemon looked totally at home, surrounded by the homeless people and trash in the gutter.

"There's a really nice guy around the corner who sells hot dogs," She flashed a half smile at Alex, and she felt her heart skip a beat. For a moment, nothing existed but Lemon's friendly face. As Alex returned back into her body and tried to breathe normally, Trevor spoke as they walked outside.

"It's not safe out here. How do you get back and forth to work everyday?" He asked as they wandered down the street and into the sunlight again. Lemon shot him an incredulous look as if she didn't believe what he was saying.

"I only live a few blocks away. And besides, it's not that dangerous on the streets during the day. They won't bother you if you don't bother them." She raised a hand and gestured to the tents on the sidewalk. Alex could feel pairs of eyes peering out at them, watching their every movement like unseen spirits. Their little group was still being observed, but Alex wanted to trust Lemon. The only thing she knew to fear were the Roaches.

On the playground, kids had often called the Guardians of Morality 'Roaches' when they weren't being watched. Alex didn't know why, or where the name had come from, but it seemed apt. Of all the terrors she had been told awaited her in the world, like the feral pagans or the illegal children, the Guardians of Morality gave her the most burning fear in her chest. She at least knew what they were, and what they were capable of.

"I don't know how you can do it," Alex felt herself speaking up before she could stop herself. "I haven't left the school in years. What happens when the Guardians show up?"

She couldn't imagine the Roaches would simply allow children to live on the streets. What happens to them, after they are caught?

"Usually everyone just packs up and moves on. The Roaches roll down here very few days and when they do, you'll hear them." As they walked back onto the main street, Lemon turned down the crowded sidewalk and Alex and Trevor had no other choice but to try and keep up her pace, weaving through the homeless who stopped and stared at them, mouths agape.

When she finally stopped in front of a bald man with an umbrella and a small metal cart, a small circle had formed around the three of them. People cleared away and moved themselves from the path, and Alex felt more uncomfortable than she had since her encounter with the Guardians. With a mob around her, she had no idea if this Lemon had just lead them into a trap. Being torn apart by this crowd would be a terrible way to die.

Alex tensed her muscles while standing beside Trevor, feeling all the eyes on her. When Lemon handed the bald man at the cart a few dollars, he produced a cardboard boat holding a hot dog from under the stand. After a few words, he squirted some yellow mustard on top and handed it over to Lemon. She turned around, as if finally noticing Alex and Trevor standing uncomfortably behind her and the throng of people surrounding them. "Do you guys want anything?"

"I'll have one, actually." Trevor stepped forward and dug around in his pocket for the bills. After he paid the man and received his hot dog, the three of them sat down on the curb and ate while looking across the street, as if trying to blend in with the crowd. People dispersed and made room for them. As Lemon and Trevor bit into their food, Alex felt the stoic crowd move and come back to life around them. It was as if they had walked into a nest of baby birds who froze in fear, only to exhale after the danger had passed.

"I can't imagine living in a school, and not seeing the outside world for years." Lemon pondered aloud as she chewed. Alex began picking at the side of her fingernail nervously. She could hear fragments of other conversations, hushed voices picking back up as their group relaxed on the asphalt curb.

"It's not that bad, I got dumped there when I was almost ten. It's basically the only home I have." Alex felt the words come tumbling out again, as if she had no filter to contain her thoughts, the only option to fling them out into the world and hope no one was listening.

"Probably better than the majority of the people out here," Lemon responded. It didn't sound like a question, more as if she was making an accusation. Alex nodded, her eyes catching a short family crossing down the street.

The mother held her son in her arms, but he couldn't be older than a year old. Trailing behind her with wary eyes, walked a heavily-bearded man who might have been the woman's husband. All three of them had faces covered in heavy black soot, as if they had escaped from a house fire, vacant stares in their eyes. When the child called out, the mother didn't seem to notice. They just continued walking down the street, as if they had somewhere they needed to be at that moment. As Alex watched them, she noticed none of them were wearing shoes.

They ate in silence for a while before Lemon spoke up again. "I don't usually do this, but if you guys ever need a place to stay, if the Roaches ever get into your bulletproof school, you can come stay with me and my sister."

Two pairs of eyes rested on Lemon's face as she swallowed the last bit of her food and turned to look at both of them. She shrugged as if to say, *we live close by*. As she put the empty cardboard boat on her lap and pulled out the marker from behind her ear, she grabbed Alex's wrist and began writing down an address on her palm.

ILLEGAL CHILDREN FACTS & STATS

Illegal or undocumented children are children who have been born outside of the legal National Reproduction Program. Due to the risky nature of these pregnancies and births, illegal children have a very high likelihood of death by disease, illness, and violence. Test your knowledge of illegal children below.

MARK X IF THE STATEMENT IS CORRECT

[] Illegal children only present a harm if you are unvaccinated.

[X] Illegal children are easily spotted due to their obvious disfigurements.

[X] Illegal children are 79% more likely to die by transmissible illness than their legal peers.

[] Illegal children are only a risk to other children.

[X] Illegal children are quarantined upon first contact.

[] Illegal children are harmless until adolescence.

FACT: Illegal children are often born in poverty, and do not have access to proper dental, vision, or healthcare. If you think you might see an illegal child, check for MBS (matted hair, teeth/breath, shoes). If you suspect you have found an illegal child, contact the number on the bottom of your screen.

FACT: Illegal children are a threat to everyone. Due to their violent dispositions and chaotic genetic makeup, illegal children often resort to a life of crime. Without intervention, illegal youth grow into hardened criminals who present a danger to everyone in our society.

Chapter 9: Outside

By the time they got back out of the crowded store again, Alex was beaming with happiness. She bounced over the needles in the gutter past the automatic doors and even smiled at a few people who were trying to get inside. Only one man grinned back, flashing a smile with so many missing teeth Alex went back to staring straight ahead at the black asphalt instead. The lack of trees or greenery gave the street a gray, concrete appearance, the illusion of privacy all but absent.

"I can't believe she actually gave you her home address," Trevor sighed, a twinge of annoyance in his voice. Maybe he just didn't like the way Lemon had been smiling at Alex. Lemon had assumed Trevor was rich the moment he handed her the cash for the inhaler, which was more money than she made in a week. It wasn't his money, his adoptive family gave him cash for his expenses monthly, but that didn't seem like much of an explanation at the time.

"I don't know what that is so surprising." Alex smiled, still soaking up the joy. If the man with the missing teeth had dampened her mood, she didn't show it. Lemon had wanted to be friends with her, she wasn't interested in Trevor romantically, Alex told herself. The idea of making another female friend outweighed her worry of losing Trevor.

"It's because you are smaller than me," Trevor hesitated, not wanting to say whiter or paler but Alex heard it in the silence anyway. Her white skin gave her the privilege of being vulnerable in public, while he felt he always needed to play protector. After a beat he continued, "You are less threatening."

"Maybe. But before I came to the American Christian Academy, I had all girl-friends in my neighborhood. Boys have always been either too nice or too mean, and I'm tired of trying to tell the difference." Alex allowed herself to explain in a hushed voice. She didn't want to offend Trevor who was basically her only friend now. But she felt somewhat better, speaking her truth outside the walls of the school. Men were difficult to read, difficult to please, and difficult to be. Sometimes she wondered how Trevor was so effortless in his masculinity, like it came naturally to him. It didn't occur to her that he was forced to put up a tougher front, which only added to the racist stereotypes he had to deal with daily.

"Roaches are coming." Trevor looked past Alex's shoulder as an armored police truck made its way down the two-lane street and turned down the block they had been walking to get back to the school. They both couldn't help themselves but to just stand and watch the carnage, killing their previous celebratory atmosphere. The truck had its' water cannons loaded on the hood, Alex could hear them give a warning through a loud and yet still somehow muffled loudspeaker to the loitering homeless before hearing the noise of the cannon roar to life. A squad of Guardians emptied from one door of the truck and started walking alongside it, dispersing the people crowded on the sidewalk with the tips of their guns like they were extensions of their own arms.

Alex could feel the adrenaline shoot through her veins, as if she could outrun the massive guns and Guardians. But luckily enough, they didn't seem to be a target. They weren't looking for her. The Guardians trained their attention to the opposite side of the street, toward the encampment of homeless stretching down the sidewalk. The two students watched for a moment, as tents were blasted away, and people scattered around like ants in an anthill after it was destroyed by the clandestine shoe. The scene was chaotic, the lone truck with it's Roaches scaring off anyone more vulnerable than they were.

She felt stuck to the ground, her feet had suddenly grown roots and she was unable to move. The only thing she could see were the armored men on the street and the long rifles slung on their backs. As if just a spectator, they watched from the other side of the street while screams and terrified yelling filled the air.

The Roaches sprayed their water cannon and a woman was knocked down onto the curb- the place they had sat with Lemon only minutes before. Her long black hair fanned around her, and disguised the blood pooling around her head for a few moments until it became obvious she wouldn't be getting back up. Alex couldn't take her eyes from the chaos, and the figure of the woman hunched over the curb. People stomped over one another to escape the high-pressured water cannon, children screamed and the Guardians kept up their assault.

Trevor grabbed Alex's hand against his better judgment and walked them both firmly back inside the gates of the school. Alex could still hear the screaming and the water cannons spraying debris across the concrete, even as they made their way inside the red brick dorm building and walked silently back up to Alex's single room. She caught herself thinking of the

little black boy she had seen in the tent outside before they had gotten to the pharmacy. *I hope he got out. Oh God, let that little boy be okay.*

When Alex plopped down in the center of the messy twin bed and crossed her legs in front of her, Trevor sat at the wooden chair placed in front of her small desk by the door. She tried to shut her eyes and breathe, removing the picture etched in her mind of the Guardians hosing down the homeless people outside the gates. She tried to focus on the softness of the sheets and the cool air blowing in from the small vent above the closet door. They were right outside, so close.

“Don’t you ever think about running away?” Trevor asked, his voice hushed as if he was afraid someone would overhear. “Don’t you ever just want to...to just get away from everything?”

Alex let herself smile, of course she had thought of it. The Guardians were practically inescapable; once they had it in their records to look for you, you were as good as dead. Alex had only head rumors about the re-education camps controlled by the GSDA and the Guardians of Morality, but she didn’t plan on ever finding the accuracy to them. They were places criminals were sent for the most horrible of crimes; things like infant murderers or pimps selling little kids for fornication. No one really knew how criminals like that could be ‘re-educated’ but not many people had the courage to question the authority of the GSDA. Alex figured most people assumed those criminals deserved whatever happened to them at the camps.

“I think about California sometimes.” Alex admitted, she hadn’t told anyone of her ideas about California yet, they were still too scattered and all over the place.

“Everyone knows the only thing left in California is radiation and death.” Trevor answered confidently, falling directly into the trap Alex had set. He turned his body in the chair to look over at her sitting cross-legged on the small bed.

“But think about it for a second with me, okay?” Alex was finally excited to flaunt some of her mathematical knowledge. “We dropped the nuke on Los Angeles a couple generations ago, less than a century ago. The state was huge, it can’t possibly have killed everything. The radius was only two miles across, it’s possible some people in other parts of the state survived. It’s possible there’s a rebellion somewhere out there.”

“No, the nuke didn’t kill everyone, but all those other bombs might have had something to do with it.” Trevor chuckled, as if what Alex was saying was funny. His voice sounded lighter now they were alone, as if he didn’t need everyone’s approval before he spoke now. “The Californian Civil War was only a month long, if I remember right. The whole state was in rebellion, and the whole state got put down. There’s nobody left, nothing safe.”

“But think about it!” Alex found herself practically begging Trevor to at least listen to her theory. “Everyone knows it’s a wasteland right? So that’s the best possible deterrent stopping

anyone from getting out there and escaping. How else do you make people believe they have no other options?"

Just as Alex had hoped, his casual expression dropped and he actually started scratching the back of his neck as if Alex had said something that required a lot of intense thought.

"That's actually a solid point. If everyone was just afraid of the fallout, the Guardians wouldn't even need to patrol the border for people trying to flee the country." The pitch of his voice dropped, as if he was actually considering the implications of her theory.

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Alex practically whispered as she looked at Trevor with an unflinching gaze. He met her eyes, unblinking with an unreadable expression behind chocolate pools flecked with gold. She couldn't tell if he hated the idea or actually thought it was feasible.

"Are you willing to test that hypothesis?" Trevor asked with a somewhat shaky voice, less confident than his usual tone. Then a switch flipped so suddenly Alex didn't have time to blink before his voice raised an octave. "You haven't left once before today, what makes you think California is a good idea?"

Alex flinched, as if his words cut her. She took a breath, "It's not about that. It's about the Guardians. California is the one place we can truly be free."

Trevor blinked a few times before he leaned back in the wooden chair, the weight of her words sinking in. He looked down before meeting her gaze again, as if afraid to say what he was thinking. Alex felt her heartbeat quicken, she had never admitted her feelings for Trevor before. *What will he think? Will he just reject me outright?*

"Alex," He paused, looking deep into her eyes. There seemed to be a longing there, threatening to engulf him and never let him come up for air again. "Alex that is literally treason."

"No it's not," She folded her arms in front of her chest defiantly. "It's repatriation. Technically we'd be refugees."

"That's not what repatriation means," Trevor smiled slightly.

"Whatever, point is we could do it." She uncrossed her arms and slid over to the side of her bed, dangling her legs off the side. Trevor had no reason to leave with her, he was already free. He didn't need to watch his back for Guardians, and he was perfectly fine living as the man he was. But in Alex's mind, she would never be free of them. She needed to escape.

The realization hit her like a ton of bricks. *I can't stay here.*

She looked around the dorm room, as if seeing it for the first time. She had spent ten years here, trying to create a life for herself that would never be real. Now, she felt defeated. Something flipped inside, as if she was just now seeing the life she had tried to fabricate falling down around her like dominos. She would never be a man. All the wishing and hoping in the world couldn't change the reality that she was, in fact, just a girl.

THE SECOND AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

The Californian Civil War, as it came to be known, began due to a variety of factors. Western economies had been in a steady decline since the outbreak of the Culling, and significant populations of cities were in danger of homelessness. Estimates say as many as 40% of the citizens west of Tucson were unhoused, and by the time the war officially started many had resorted to crime.

Unlike the days of the Wild West, Californian terrorists attempting to secede made a variety of attacks on their neighbors. This textbook has already made mention of the differing anti-Christian sects which thrived, radicalizing even the most devout. In earlier chapters, we mentioned the mass exodus of the faithful in the years preceding the war. Already, warning signs were present by the time the Gender and Sex Development Agency was created. The powder keg would take another century before detonation finally happened, leading to the destruction of the former state of California.

Many Western criminals disregarded the new morality laws, and many opted out of the National Reproduction Program in protest. Seeds of unrest were planted, and the Western United States began to reject their foundation of unity. By 2156, the road to war had been paved by numerous deadly attacks, including the Mother's Day Massacre of 2097, the subway terror attacks in 2103, the GSDA bombing of 2122, and the GSDA Capitol Complex gas attack in 2136.

United States forces began moving westward in January of 2156, slowly securing states as they crossed. After fighting stalled in early February, the United States Air Force made the crucial decision to drop 'Lolita' in the heart of the main terrorist stronghold, located in Los Angeles. 'Lolita' had been developed for use overseas, but the dropping of the 15 megaton nuclear bomb marked a final end to the Second American Civil War.

Chapter 10: Caught

Since their kiss, Trevor had been experiencing a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. He hadn't ever admitted his feelings for his best friend, unsure what it would mean for them if he did. Alex was his only real friend, the only person who really understood and accepted him.

When she brought up California, Trevor swore the planet under him started spinning faster. *She can't possibly do it. She has no idea what it takes to survive out there*, he thought to

himself. Not that he had any better understanding either, he had been raised in a gated suburb, protected from the rest of the world.

Sometimes, to him, Alex acted as if she had no real fear. Sure, she joked and psychologically understood the danger they encountered; but she never really let her fear dictate her behavior. *Is that the definition of courage?* He wondered to himself, late in his dorm after class.

He had been avoiding her, in all honesty. Their kiss had been heartstopping, but the visit to the pharmacy and the subsequent encounter with the Guardians, not to mention their conversation after about California, had all given Trevor a deep sense of foreboding in his gut. It felt as if he knew Alex was slipping away. He was losing her.

After several sleepless nights, Trevor packed an emergency go bag, reluctantly stuffing the new inhaler he had just bought inside, still afraid Alex would leave for California one night without any supplies or preparation. Now, in his mind their conversation had shifted from one where Alex asked his opinion on an idea into a fight where he had tried to change her mind. It wasn't that he made the conscious decision to stick by her and not leave her side, but rather he made a choice to be there for her, should she need him. If she wanted to go, he would be ready to follow her.

The final mistake Alex made was her decision to stop cutting her hair. She did it somewhat subconsciously, she surely knew she would get in trouble for refusing to cut her hair, but the reality seemed far away. *Surely, the nuns will give me some leeway? Not everyone needed to have the same shaved military style.* She tried to think if she could remember any other students who had gotten away with it.

During her last lecture of the day, Alex sat in the second to last row and got a good look at the two nuns who opened the door of the classroom. Black habits and long sleeves made them all have a similar matronly energy, as the fabric brushed against the floor all the speaking in the room stopped. With her pencil clutched between her fingers, Alex watched as they nodded to the sister teaching the class before turning their gaze directly on Alex.

Suddenly, after being invisible for a decade, it was as if a shining spotlight had shone directly onto Alex, illuminating her imperfections for all to witness. She dropped her pencil and stood weakly, legs becoming jelly under her weight. The entire class watched. Curious stares and questioning glares pointed in her direction, but she ignored them. She tried to walk normally, but followed them out of the classroom as if her shoes were made of lead. She could hear the whispers following.

Both nuns refused to look her in the eye as they walked through the campus and wound their way to the administration building. When they reached Headmistress Singleton's office, Alex felt her heart pumping as if ready to explode. The door opened as if magically and Alex measily followed the two sisters inside. Sitting at her dark wooden desk, the Headmistress seemed to glare at Alex as she shuffled in and the door closed behind them.

Like nothing had changed during her time at the Academy, she sat in the same chair in front of the desk. It felt smaller, but Alex knew she was the one who had grown. Everything looked exactly as it had been the first time she had stepped into the office. Even the Headmistress was unchanged, save for a few new creases above her brow.

With a wave of her hand, the Headmistress allowed the two nuns to return back to whatever duties they had been doing before escorting Alex. She hesitated for a moment as if to ask them not to leave, but moved only to sit down in the small chair in front of the desk. *No one will help me here.* Her eyes darted around the room, frantically.

"I had high hopes for you," Headmistress Singleton began in a low but controlled voice, "I had hoped you would develop into a fine young man here."

The Headmistress looked over at Alex, as if she wanted to say more but dared not. She pressed her lips firmly into a thin red line with disapproval before continuing. "I had hoped you would find some honor here, some discipline you clearly lacked at home."

The Headmistress sighed, and Alex could tell she was trying to be honest, and not cruel. She narrowed her gaze and looked back to Alex, undeterred. "Your exclusion from the NRP has made you deceitful and resentful, just as I predicted it would. You haven't been allowed to contribute to the greatness of this country, and therefor, you do not value the sanctity of childhood."

Alex was dumbfounded, she had no idea what the Headmistress was talking about, but the words 'sanctity of childhood' were familiar to the phrases in the textbook talking about the founding of the NRP. Her mind was running in circles, trying to understand why the Headmistress was telling her all this. *Am I in trouble? Did they find out about us meeting that girl at the pharmacy?*

"We reviewed the security footage from a few weeks ago. Did you happen to forget about that little robbery your friend committed?" The Headmistress gazed beyond the window, grinning smugly. "He came back twice. He even stole a book from the school library. But something tells me he was doing it for you. And now you openly defy our rules."

Alex sat back, frozen. Stunned into silence, she had completely forgotten about the stolen files, and the book Trevor had borrowed. *Why isn't he here with me? Why aren't they bringing him in too?* As her mind raced, she thought of all the dangerous possibilities. If the

school had been sitting on this information, had they already given everything over to the Guardians? Was Trevor already expelled? What was happening?

"The American Christian Academy has standards, a reputation to uphold. Our graduates are some of the most esteemed men in history," The headmistress glanced to Alex again, trying to disappear into the wooden chair. "We took a chance with the negro boy, and an even bigger chance with you. But alas, soiled genes can't be fixed. Pairing the two of you together has brought... unfortunate consequences. I should have intervened earlier."

Alex had heard this bit before, how defects like her and Trevor were supposedly more likely to be criminals of some kind. She didn't know if those anecdotes were true, but she and Trevor *had* been technically committing a crime. So in reality, the Headmistress was right. But Trevor's asthma and Alex's gender ambiguity wasn't exactly the reason why they were breaking the law. Everyone broke the laws from time to time. *Why does it only matter when we do it?*

"It would be better to just sterilize types like you." Headmistress Singleton paused and did that thing she had done the first time they met, where she seemed to look through Alex and not at Alex herself. "Instead of wasting taxpayer money having the Guardians fix the problem after it's been created."

"You understand, Alex," She paused, as if she was giving a valuable point, one that needed to be remembered. Alex blinked, overwhelmed with everything being thrown at her. "The reason this country is the best in the world, the only competent superpower left, is because of the authority of the GSDA. Without them, we would be uncivilized beasts; killing children before they are even born, girls selling themselves for sex or surrogacy, child abuse and disease was rampant! Is that what you want?"

Alex's head started spinning, she couldn't comprehend the information being thrown at her. Was anything the headmistress was saying true? She sounded angry enough to believe it. Alex began to think of Trevor again, and how he was always willing to find the truth, he valued knowing exactly what was opinion and what was fact.

"Your crimes," Headmistress Singleton paused before correcting herself, "Your *perversion*, against the boys at this school will not be left unnoticed. We have standards, as you know. We gave you several chances."

"There was no crime, no perversion," Alex pleaded in a broken voice, trying to minimize the damage as best she could. She faintly understood the accusation Headmistress Singleton was making, of being an immoral influence on the other students, of corrupting them. Her relationship with Trevor had been dangerous for both of them, this whole time and neither knew. And now with the Headmistress insinuating they were homosexual, Alex knew the Guardians would be after them. "I promise."

The headmistress narrowed her eyes again, "I don't want to hear it,"

GOD'S HOLY COUNTRY

In Chapter 19, we discussed how the cultural climate during the early 2100's became more and more hostile to Christian values. After lengthy deliberations and compromises, a holistic Party was established in order to merge both viewpoints, meant to give moderate Christians and those in the middle more of a voice in their electoral process. After decades of partisan bickering, religious unity was close at hand.

The Greater Republic Party experienced a wave of new members, thanks in part to the pick of Michigan's Governor Ronald Perry as President Duncan's VP and running mate. After President Duncan's tragic assassination, Perry picked up the reins and used his new found power to further the agenda of the Greater Republic.

His first course of action was to create a safe haven for those facing religious persecution from zealots, enacting the Christian First Amendment in 2200. After the unrest and attempted secession of California, citizens finally found a tranquil moment of peace and safety.

Chapter 11 : Runaway

By the time Alex and Trevor had managed an escape with whatever they could carry in their packs, Headmistress Singleton had made good on her threat and called the Roaches. But at least she waited a few hours first, giving Alex and Trevor the much needed time to figure out a plan and pack their belongings. Once they were on the road, and out of sight from the school, they both managed to relax a little bit.

Alex had the brilliant idea to dirty up her clothes and hair, as to not stick out from the crowds of homeless. She had a few torn items of clothing, but they were pretty obviously boys clothes, and a uniform from some sort of school. At least Trevor had ripped the logos off his jackets and thrown on a tank top with a few loose threads, they at least passed for well-fed homeless. Most would just assume they were runaways, which were fairly common on the streets after dark.

"It's down that way, I think." Alex paused, looking at the faded street signs, they were a few blocks from the school by now and it was probably safe to speak but neither had the courage to break the silence. The two of them had managed to get turned around once already, walking in a circle around the block before cursing themselves for not thinking to bring any maps. The residential areas had less camps and tents, but they still managed to see others, like them, wandering down the roads. The strangers looked like ghosts, as if they were floating through the world on drugs. It was as if they didn't know where they were going, they had no place to be. Alex figured they were homeless or drug-addicted, but her mind conjured up

images of robbers and killers lurking in every shadow. Their faces were inky black like if she looked too hard, she would be swallowed into the vast depths below.

By the time Alex and Trevor found themselves ringing the doorbell at the gate of a small one-story home three blocks from the main roadway, it was late into the night and darkness had fallen over the streets. Alex and Trevor were eager to be inside and away from the danger of the roadway. When the door opened and a nervous looking Lemon answered, she seemed surprised to see them, blinking a few times with a quizzical expression in her blue eyes. She hadn't been expecting them, and they hadn't spoken or seen each other since that day at the pharmacy. Her blond hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail and she still had on her black work clothing from earlier.

"Can we come inside?" Alex asked, fear obvious in her expression, but Lemon didn't budge from the crack in the door, still eyeing them both warily. "We ran away. We need a place to stay. Please."

Alex didn't know how she managed to lie so easily, but Trevor didn't betray anything with his expression. Lemon arched an eyebrow, as if questioning the story. She didn't seem to find any fault, and then the door casually swung open to reveal a small girl, about six or seven years old. She was skinny and had dark brown hair tied in a braid hanging down at her waist, and a tanner complexion than Lemon's pale skin. Her complexion was not as dark as Trevor but had a more olive undertone, and Alex knew the girl didn't have African ancestry like Trevor did. She might have been indigenous, or from the Democratic Republic of Mexico. Alex recognized something in the little girl's gaze.

"Doe!" Lemon hissed defensively, as if to protect the little girl from the scary men in the doorway. But Doe shook her head to Lemon, as if she knew something Lemon didn't. Doe looked up at Trevor, assessing him, before turning her chocolate irises on Alex. She blinked a few times and Alex thought maybe the little girl thought Alex looked familiar or something like that.

"They're okay." Doe said, still staring at Alex, with a slightly confused expression. Her voice was soft like a child, but she said the words as if she had some authority. Lemon blinked a few times before rolling her eyes and finally allowing them entry. Alex stepped in the house first, surprised how warm the front room was compared to the outside air. Lemon, trusting the small child, moved from the door and allowed Trevor inside as well.

"That's Doe." Lemon hastily explained, quickly shutting the door after looking behind Trevor to make sure they hadn't been followed here.

"It's safe here. LeeLee is okay." Doe smiled, plopping down on the floor in front of a double-wide couch that had seen better days. "I'm hiding from the Roaches too."

Alex sat down, intrigued by the small child, already on the run from the Guardians of Morality. She couldn't be registered, Alex realized dimly. The little girl was running because she was undocumented. She was natural-born and her parents had been fornicating illegally.

"The Guardians?" Trevor asked, coming to sit beside Alex on the couch. Lemon cleared her throat loudly before pulling in a metal folded chair from the attached kitchen. It screamed against the floor until she dragged it beside the young girl, stopping abruptly to sit. Doe nodded solemnly.

"I used to come over and babysit Doe, after my shifts at the Wellness Center." Lemon rolled her eyes, as if annoyed as she leaned back in the metal chair. She crossed her legs and then, in a more affectionate tone, "But after the Roaches showed up, she came here."

"I knew it was safe at LeeLee's house," Doe murmured, still giving a strange look over to Alex. It was starting to weird her out, all the staring from the little girl.

Alex wanted to ask if the Guardians had killed her biological parents, but couldn't bring herself to speak the words. The child was just staring at her in a way that made Alex feel uncomfortable, like she was naked. She was starting to worry they had made the wrong decision by coming here. *Surely, I can get a cheap data pad and find a way to contact my family somehow. Anything is better than getting some eradicated disease like tuberculosis from this illegal and potentially dangerous child.*

"Are you a boy or a girl?" Doe locked eyes with Alex, stunning the room into abrupt silence. Alex looked at Trevor, as if to ask for help or advice, but there was none to be had. His lips hardened into a line and darted his gaze around the room defensively. Doe's tone remained inquisitive, "You look like a boy, but you sound like a girl."

"I'm a girl." Alex said quietly, as if she had never spoken the words aloud before. In essence she hadn't, only admitting the fact to Trevor after years of building trust. Even he didn't really understand what she had gone through, or was thinking about. He tried to listen, he did his best to try and sympathize with her, but Alex had always felt strangely isolated. At least Trevor's bad genes only gave him bad lungs, they didn't make him question his entire existence. Alex felt as if she allowed everything to be stripped away; hoping to be remade only to find she was still, after all, just a girl.

"You have a boy's face," Doe squinted, looking Alex again over fully. "And boy clothes. Are you trying to look like a boy on the road?"

Trevor caught himself looking over at Lemon, who hadn't questioned them at all when they met earlier at the pharmacy; maybe she was just polite enough not to. But she didn't look too surprised, she had one eyebrow raised like she'd just heard a bit of juicy gossip.

“Actually,” Trevor caught himself quickly, coming to her rescue. “That’s why we ran away. The American Christian Academy is only for boys.”

Doe nodded, as if that made complete sense to her.

Alex pursed her lips, not wanting to correct Trevor but she also desperately wanted to tell the girls the truth. These total strangers could be the perfect people to have an objective view and tell Alex what she should do. She also didn’t want to break the little girls’ trust by immediately starting with a lie.

“Well, see, my parents wanted me to get a good education.” Alex paused, trying to tell the story in simple words a child would be able to understand. “So they told everyone I was a boy. But now, years later, people won’t believe me when I tell them that. They think I really am a boy because I am so good at acting like one.”

Doe raised an eyebrow, catching the lie. “You don’t seem like you’re very good at acting like one to me.”

Alex couldn’t help herself, she giggled and Trevor laughed too once he saw Alex doing the same. Lemon gave them a look, quizzical but also as if she was still trying to put the puzzle pieces together. Doe smiled, her candid demeanor putting everyone at ease.

“Okay you caught me.” Alex smiled at Doe, “We needed to get away because they wouldn’t believe me. I don’t know why.”

In reality, Alex hadn’t told anyone at school besides Trevor. But in her heart she somehow knew she wouldn’t be believed, she would be mocked. She wanted, in part, to prove to herself she could fully be a boy. When she failed at being a boy, she couldn’t think of anything else to do but keep pretending. *Maybe running away was just another tactic of avoiding my failure.*

“That makes sense.” Doe nodded again, “One time, my daddy said he didn’t believe me when I told him I saw a deer in the backyard. He said he came outside and saw me playing with it, and that’s why he wanted Momma to call me Doe.”

“Momma called me Lemon because I was bitter and sour.” Lemon interrupted, kicking her feet out in front of her and crossing one ankle over the other. No one said anything, partly because no one actually knew what a lemon tasted like.

“Not bitter.” Doe looked over at her, like they had this conversation before. “Just tart. And that’s not true, my Momma said lemons were yellow, like the color of your hair, that’s why.”

Lemon rolled her eyes again as Doe continued talking like nothing had happened.

“Momma always said to say ‘tart’ because it’s fancier than just sayin’ sour.” Doe explained before turning her attention back to Alex and Trevor. “So you’re a girl pretending to be a boy.”

“That’s pretty much it.” Alex agreed.

MOTHER’S DAY MASSACRE

In May of 2007, a group of Californian terrorists targeted the annual Riverside Mother’s Day Celebration. The soon-to-be-secessionists flouted a deep hatred and anger with the American way of life, angry with the United States Government’s implementation of the National Reproduction Program. Violent rhetoric had been exchanged between political factions for years, but until 2007 events had remained relatively bloodless.

The RTF (Resistance to Fascism fighters as they styled themselves) began the day by placing numerous improvised explosive devices within the campgrounds, targeting trash cans and bathrooms where victims might mingle. The initial explosions began at 10:37 am, followed by short ‘bursts’ as additional IED’s failed to detonate. Families panicked as many mistakenly believed the sounds to be from a firework or gunman.

Overall, only six of the explosive devices were found to be effective. Today we remember the victims of that heinous attack.

Johnathan Franzier, 43

Judith Cooper, 27

Trevor Anderson, 6

Michael Anderson, 14

Caroline Anderson, 33

Meridith Pinsker, 64

Larry Pinsker, 72

Samantha Blane, 8

Chapter 12: Belonging

Lemon had inherited the small, modest home after her grandmother gifted it to her in the will. It was quaint, in what had been an aging retired community. Generations later though, it felt little more than a castle in a forgotten village. Only one other house on the block was officially occupied, but that wasn’t counting the squatters Lemon reminded Alex and Trevor. A few of the rooms in the house were drafty and cold, they had holes in the walls or ceiling from previous catastrophes. Lemon and Doe were comfortable sleeping in the kitchen, right beside the warm gas stove. Alex and Trevor were given two cots and blankets in the living room by the front door.

Doe promised that was much more comfortable than the rest of the house where, she claimed, only the rats lived.

When Trevor asked how the rats knew to only use those rooms and to avoid the rest of the house, Doe giggled and said they had all worked out a comfortable arrangement a long time ago. It seemed like Lemon and Doe were starting to enjoy scaring the two of them, with all the talk of rats and squatters and Roaches. It was obvious to Lemon, how Alex and Trevor had spent the majority of their lives surrounded by wealth and comfort.

Lemon's adoptive parents hadn't much cared about her, while they were alive at least. Lemon explained one late night to Alex and Trevor in the living room after Doe had already crawled off to sleep by the stove.

"They had their stupid private jet and I had my stupid babysitters and tutors." She seemed resentful, although compared to Alex and Trevor, her family's lives had been full of opulence and riches. She confirmed Alex's theory about the NRP's adopted children, when she mentioned how her parents had paid their local birth center under the table to specifically find a baby girl who was blonde. Apparently her adopted father had a thing for blondes.

Lemon's father was the head of a large private equity firm and kept the family living in style. It wasn't until their old twin-engine jet went down over the Atlantic carrying of her both parents, that Lemon realized without her family she wouldn't be able to remain safe. Once she was evicted from their penthouse apartment in Manhattan at the age of eleven, little Lemon learned she needed a job to survive, fast. When she reconnected with her adoptive grandmother living in the suburbs of Salt Lake City a few years later, everything seemed smooth for a while. The old woman was upset the son she raised would go and behave so irresponsibly, while he had a young daughter at home who needed care and attention. Her grandmother complained about the fact that the will had left everything to his wife's family and male brothers. At least her parents had paid for her to have a good primary education, not like the publicly funded GSDA schools. The years with her grandmother taught Lemon a vital lesson about money and the cost of being a Caregiver.

Either way, once the grandma finally passed, Lemon was ecstatic to learn the house was already paid off. She felt she had earned it.

"I could stay here as long as I wanted," She smiled to Alex and Trevor. Being 21, Lemon had realized as the eldest of the group, she had some authority over everyone else in the house. Besides, it was her house. "I got a job and a free place to live, that's more than most people have."

"Yeah, but Alex has a house too." Trevor paused, knowing Alex hadn't had contact with her family in several years. "At least, last time I heard, her dad did."

"You can go to the library and check the holo net databases," Lemon offered as a suggestion, but she didn't offer the cash they would need to get there or to find the information. Alex was happy she had saved up her money from working summers at the school, even though it didn't amount to much outside.

In her first few days of staying at Lemon's home, something strange started to stir within Alex. Combating both envy and longing, she looked to Lemon as if she was everything Alex couldn't be. Lemon was beautiful. She had bright blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair that fell down her back. Impossibly thin, she moved gracefully as if femininity came naturally to her. While Trevor never gave any hint of interest, Alex couldn't help her jealousy from flashing.

Despite her conflicting emotions, Alex gravitated to Lemon and Doe. When Doe learned Alex didn't have any real clothing to wear, she set to work trying to teach Alex stitching techniques and mending recycled fabric for her. She seemed eager to show Alex her skills, and after only a week they had both constructed a simple dress for her to wear. The hem was asymmetrical and the fabric was scratchy, but when Alex pulled it over her shirt and stood in the kitchen staring at her reflection in the gas stove, she couldn't imagine ever feeling happier.

As she lifted her hand to her mouth, she couldn't help but to sway her hips and watch as the fabric moved against her skin. Sitting in the other room, Lemon's eyes widened as Alex gave a little twirl and then smiled at herself in the reflection. She must have looked like a sight for the others. With one hand covering her mouth, Alex tugged at the fabric, feeling the coarseness run against her fingers.

"Are you okay?" Trevor suddenly appeared, leaning on the side of the doorframe. When did he get here? I didn't even see him walk over. Alex pushed the thoughts from her mind, but the emotions were clear on her face. Trevor didn't move, but watched her quizzically as if trying to solve a crossword puzzle.

Alex took a deep breath and nodded, tearing her gaze from the reflection in the stove. *I look like a whole different person. I look like I could actually be a girl.*

In the weeks following, her resolve grew. It wasn't as if she suddenly decided to live as a woman, but more like she saw the possibility she had never acknowledged before. Her life had been a series of decisions made by other people, and by rejecting them all she could suddenly decide her own trajectory for once. *And, if I'm already on the Guardians radar it won't matter. Might as well live how I want to before they catch up.*

Now that she wasn't being forced to cut her hair regularly, her chestnut locks began to grow out. One evening, Lemon set to work with an arsenal of clips and pins and elastic bands as Alex sat on the floor between her legs. Doe sat beside Lemon on the couch and in the middle of all the tugging and clipping, Alex began to cry. It was as if she suddenly understood, all at once, what she had been missing for all those years while at school.

As Lemon struggled to tie the back of the hair up into a bun, Alex realized she had everything she had ever wanted. I am safe here. The feeling rushed over her like a tidal wave, and she let a sweet tear of relief fall down her cheek.

“Are you okay Alex?” Doe asked, laying a hand on her shoulder as Alex stared at the paint peeling from the wall, tears silently dripping down her cheeks. As if transfixed by the discolored water splotches, Alex was in her own little world.

“Are you crying?” Lemon raised her voice and shifted uncomfortably on the couch, breaking Alex’s trance-like mourning. “Why didn’t you just tell me I was hurting you? Oh my god, Alex.”

“No, no I’m okay I promise.” Her voice came out a pitch higher than she expected, but Alex shook her head violently causing Lemon to drop the section she had been working on. “I just...I’ve never felt this way before.”

Doe chuckled while Lemon forcibly moved Alex’s head back in position and grabbed the piece of hair she had dropped. Neither gave any sound that they truly understood, but Lemon stopped tugging her hair so hard. *God, they must think me delusional and dramatic.*

The feeling came again, while Lemon was at the pharmacy and Trevor was looking for work. He had been able to find a few paying gigs mowing lawns and pulling weeds across the neighborhood, and even the squatters paid him for his work. Alex had kept busy reading from the history textbook Trevor had stolen, managing to keep it hidden in one of his bags during their initial escape. Alex felt glad to have it now, because Doe popped her head up one morning and stared down at the pages with excitement visible on her face.

“You can read?” Doe asked, a little too quickly. “Lemon always said she was gonna teach me, but then she says she’s too busy.”

“Do you want me to teach you?” Alex asked, somewhat surprised. She figured most kids these days grew up reading on their data pads, at least all the registered children born from the NRP did. She didn’t know what to expect with Doe. Alex set the book down on the floor, flipping the thick yellowed pages back to the title page.

“I know my letters!” Doe exclaimed, excitedly. It had been so long since she had made new friends, she latched onto Alex and decided she was safe. After living around her and not getting immediately sick, Alex started worrying less and less about whatever illness Doe might have carried. “Momma taught me, before she died. She said knowing to read is important.”

“I guess your momma loved you a lot.” Alex paused, as Doe made her way over to Alex and they looked down together at the book. The air was somber. “She wanted you to be a smart girl. She was right.”

"She died, so that I could read." Doe said solemnly. For a girl of eight years old, she was saying some pretty astounding things. Alex marveled at the maturity and understanding of the child, equipped with the wisdom Alex herself was just beginning to grasp. How much has Doe witnessed in this world already? More than Alex would ever see, hopefully.

Alex had only heard stories about illegal children before on the school grounds. All the little boys grew up telling horror stories about packs of feral children, natural born, illegal kids, who could come into your house at night to rob or murder you while you slept. The adults would nip those rumors, most of the time when they heard them. But that still didn't stop anyone from joking about how dangerous illegal youth really were. In class, they had once all watched a program claiming illegal children always carried diseases and were more likely to be violent criminals, since they weren't born from the regulated NRP. Part of Alex always figured the reason the adults didn't really care about the rumors was because if they were actually true, they kept everyone afraid and in-line. If anyone saw an illegal child, they were supposed to report it right away. The Guardians of Morality were tasked with taking care of them.

In the stolen history book, she read how illegal children were treated in the same way as homeless children who had been abandoned by their placement families. Alex learned how they were all rounded up and made to surrender to the Roaches like 'foreign combatants'. The book made no mention of what happened to them after surrender, or their families, and Alex was already suspicious given it's lack of citations and sources. *How are homeless children and illegal children dangerously different if you treat them all the same?* Alex worried as she scanned the pages again. Doe didn't seem any different from a regular eight-year old, except for the sad maturity of a child who had seen the worst the world had to offer. She was thinner and smaller than most girls her age, but Alex didn't think anyone would even be able to tell she was illegal if she was dressed normally and with a regular family. It was a shame they couldn't be integrated into the community somehow, and Alex made a mental note of her questions.

The more Alex read in the history textbook, the more anxiety seemed to creep up on her when she wasn't paying attention. She loved her lessons with Doe, teaching her to read and in turn Doe teaching her different stitching techniques and ways to style her growing hair. She knew the Guardians were looking for them after what Headmistress Singleton had accused them of, but she didn't know when the final blow would land.

On their fourteenth day at Lemon's house, Alex decided that she wanted to surprise Doe by gifting her a book that was actually age-appropriate, instead of one justifying why detaining and terminating children was okay. Trevor volunteered to escort her to the library, and Lemon went into work, leaving Doe home alone with strict instructions not to open the gate unless whoever was there gave the secret knock and code word.

When Alex and Trevor reached the National American Library after a few hours of walking the crowded streets, they were grateful to have spent the majority of their lives as students. As opposed to most of the disheveled and confused looking patrons, Alex and Trevor wandered over to the furthest window and rented the large data pad facing the door. After

depositing their coins into the slot, Trevor pulled over a second chair and they began their searches. The hologram was bigger than the handheld data pads people usually kept in their homes, but it functioned just the same way the ones at the school did.

Alex used her time to type out a small letter to her father, sending it from her old student account and finding herself just hoping for the best. It had been years since she had heard from anyone in her family, but she hadn't made much of an effort to contact them either. Once at school, she went on believing her parents had just abandoned her there, they didn't want a boy anyway. *What does it look like, that I'm asking for help now?*

Alex swallowed her pride and waited for Trevor to finish his searching for maps and locations around town. He paid the extra few coins to print some information out on a few sheets of paper, before the two of them ran out of time and the hologram dissolved back into the data pad, locking the information just out of their reach.

"We at the National American Library apologize for any inconvenience, but you have run out of time!" The annoying automated voice reminded them in a sing-song voice, as they both stood up to leave. "Please deposit your dollars into the slot below, for instant holographic data-browsing at your fingertips!"

Alex guided Trevor over to the stacks, where a few elderly homeless people seemed to be hanging around and trying to read. Maybe they like vintage paper books or the privacy of the tall bookshelves. They wandered around and glanced at a few titles before realizing books were a lot more expensive than they thought. After an agonizing few minutes, Alex found a book about native plants and animals in the area. It looked as if it could be useful, and she knew Doe would be grateful for the pictures.

At that moment, a disheveled employee walked over and started telling the customers to either buy something or get out. The patrons grumbled while Alex and Trevor pooled their cash together and paid the automated cashier before walking back through the store's exit.

MOTHERHOOD AND YOU

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to experience Motherhood? Do you often dream of carrying and delivering a perfect baby? Do you wish to lie back and rest for nine months in a luxurious spa-like atmosphere, with paid benefits?

The National Reproduction Program allows for a select special few women to do just that. Here at the Gender and Sex Development Agency, we believe childbirth is sacred, and our Motherhood programs fulfill our promise to the public to provide the healthiest children.

Since Motherhood positions are voluntary and provide cash incentives, the selection process can be extensive. Not all women are physically or mentally capable of childbirth, and the

Motherhood applications vastly outnumber the available positions in our programs. From that massive pool, the NRP selects only the women with the very best criteria for enrollment.

The National Reproduction Program has birth centers located in every state, and in most major metropolitan areas. Every birth center is staffed by only the most qualified prenatal specialists, medical doctors, nurses, and technicians. With a common goal, the workers in these facilities describe a rewarding environment in which creating healthy babies is the top priority.

For the duration of their stay, each Motherhood volunteer is given her own room and data pad. Boredom? You think? Not here! Every birth center has been equipped with state of the art facilities including gyms, pools, outdoor recreation areas (tennis, basketball, hiking trails available weather permitting). Each Motherhood volunteer has a litany of options to fill her time as she chooses. Some prefer to relax and rest, others like the time away from home to start new projects, each volunteer has control over her schedule.

If you think Motherhood sounds like a good option for you, please speak with a representative at your local NPR office.

Chapter 13: Uncertainty

“Oh it’s so pretty!” Doe traced her fingers across the cover of the book with wide eyes, as if she had never seen something so beautiful. “Thank you Alex.”

She clutched the book to her chest tightly, as if to absorb the information into her skin.

“You’re welcome,” Trevor smiled as he perched himself on the arm of the couch, sipping from a glass of water.

“Did you see anything on the walk back? No Roaches?” Lemon asked, her voice booming from the kitchen though no one could see her.

“Nope, all clear.” Alex watched Doe open the book to a random page, bright purple flowers catching her attention. They curved inward as if pushed by a strong breeze, though captured still in the photograph.

“I guess that’s good,” Lemon paused as she appeared between the kitchen and the front room. Her hair was wrapped up in a tight bun, though strands fell down into her eyes and stuck out from her head as if she was frazzled. She leaned against the wall haphazardly.

Doe turned the page and her eyes seemed to glow when she saw another photograph, this one of a tall yellow sunflower turned up toward the sun.

"You can say it." Alex nudged Trevor sitting on the arm of the ratty couch. "It was my first day out as a girl. I wore the dress and no one gave me a second glance."

That wasn't exactly true and she knew it, but she wanted to espouse her victory. She hadn't been arrested or killed on sight, people mostly averted their eyes and tried not to stare at her. It's baby steps.

"It's not fair that I can dress up as a boy, but you can't dress up as a girl." Doe looked up from her book, as if remembering the world around her. "If a boy wants to play dress-up, that should be okay."

Lemon watched silently as Trevor nodded.

"Plus, you aren't even playing dress-up. I think because you have a boyish face, and people hate when girls are mannish." Doe looked back down and Lemon raised an eyebrow.

"The world isn't fair. And being a mannish girl will only get you so far," She glanced at Doe and Alex couldn't help but wonder if the comment was directed at her or not. Lemon didn't seem mannish at all.

"And besides," Alex blurted out. "Girls dressing up as boys are only doing it for protection. They are trying to blend it, most like. But a man dressing as a woman? What kind of nefarious things might he be planning?"

As Alex parroted the words she had been taught, Doe nodded as if it made sense. No one laughed.

Suddenly, the sound of a bell ringing pierced through the air. Lemon and Doe both shot upward, as if alerted by the noise while Alex narrowed her eyebrows, confused. The bell kept clanging distantly, but loud enough to be heard for miles. Before a word was spoken, Lemon and Doe burst into action.

Doe ran into the kitchen, little legs sliding on the floor as she picked up her sleeping bag from in front of the stove. She began throwing items into it, food from the cabinets, the book she had been given, clothing from nooks and crannies. Lemon was a tornado, tumbling through rooms and banging doors until she ran back into the front room with three bags over her shoulders and wide, frantic eyes.

"Doe?" She asked, as she adjusted the weight and walked to the front door.

"I'm here!" She called from the kitchen while Alex and Trevor stood and looked around, as if waiting expectantly for something to happen.

"What's going on? What is that?" Alex asked loudly, her voice cracking over the words as she tried to understand the sudden shift of the energy in the house.

"It's time to go!" Lemon yelled a moment before Doe appeared dragging Alex and Trevor's bags. She dumped them at their feet and the two began to pack and put all their belongings together as quickly as they could. Alex fumbled with the straps on her backpack, lugging it over her shoulder and looking at Trevor as if to make sure he was doing the same.

"It's the alarm. The Roaches are coming," Lemon locked eyes with Alex as if accusing the two of them. *Did I do this? Did I lead them here?* The door flew open and Lemon guided them all into the chilly night air, before Alex could think anything else. The bell kept ringing, over and over and over again as if warning the prey of poachers.

By the time the little group had managed to make it out onto the asphalt road, they seemed to be leading several other stragglers who were also trying to make it out before the Roaches got inside the community. After a few very long minutes, the bell stopped ringing and the silent night descended once more.

Alex didn't see a single vehicle, or floating helicar while walking quietly along the residential road. Once they made their way through the neighborhood and turned onto the main roadway, Lemon was able to spot the quickly moving lights from the Roaches first.

The only hiding place available was a long stretch of hedge lining the brick wall facing the street. Doe climbed in first, disappearing in the mess of branches and greenery. Three others followed, clumsily folding themselves into the bushes and scratching whatever skin was left exposed. As the transport truck rolled into the neighborhood, the sound of footfall slapped against the pavement as the other stragglers ran away from the approaching vehicle. Lemon and Trevor watched from the bushes, while Alex held Doe's hand protectively. They saw other shadows running, but the truck didn't seem to care about any of them. Once the white vehicle passed into the neighborhood, Lemon nodded silently to Trevor and they helped each other emerge from the bushes. All along the side of the neighborhood wall, other groups did the same, crawling from the tangled thicket and down from trees as if they were endangered animals afraid of hunters.

"We should try to get to my house. I remember when we drove to the school, it wasn't that far away. If we can get there, I'm sure my parents will help us," Alex whispered. Three pairs of eyes suddenly turned on her, as if asking her to reconsider her offer. *If this is my fault, it's the least I can do.*

No one objected to her plan. Alex didn't care which direction they went, as long as they got away from the Roaches. She knew sooner or later she would need to pull out the maps and actually figure out how to get to her childhood home, but with the lack of sunlight and fear of Roaches Alex didn't dare rummage around in her backpack and start making noise. She wanted to put as much distance between them and the Roaches as possible. The other groups of

people, thin and malnourished wearing rags and tattered clothing had the same idea, branching and splitting off into groups and wandering down the street, away from the Roaches and whatever carnage they had come to bring. For the first time since visiting the pharmacy, Alex felt like the stragglers and homeless weren't as big of a threat as the Roaches; she was vaguely aware everyone on the streets was just doing their best to survive. Like a mess of scurrying rats, they all moved together out onto the street and away from the residential areas.

Doe hadn't been outside the relative safety of Lemon's house for a while, maybe years, Alex remembered as the little girl clutched her hand holding a bag that looked taller than she stood. They were sitting ducks outside at night. Alex was suddenly thankful for the actual male presence Trevor provided them. While she wasn't sure if any of the other people would bother them, she knew for a fact the Roaches would kill Doe if given the chance. Doe represented exactly what they were supposed to prevent, the literal incarnation of sin and disease, chaotic uncontrolled genetic potential, like a wild animal or a mutated virus.

They walked along the side of the four lane street, the only dim light coming from the sparsely lit streetlights overhead. With Alex and Doe in the middle, Trevor and Lemon stood on either side, protective. No one spoke, as they trudged along the asphalt and listened for the sounds of approaching helicars or ground vehicles. Just like their eerie walk to the pharmacy, all the groups of people stayed quiet.

"Lemon?" Alex heard a voice whisper through the darkness, coming from the opposite side of the road. Lemon left the group to confront the voice, and when she didn't come back Doe clutched Alex's hand tighter as Trevor led them across the dark street. A single vehicle hadn't come past or overhead, but the streetlights showed their group was not the only one. A few other tents were nearby in the shadows, just out of reach of the light. Alex clutched Doe's hand tightly, worried anyone could just come over and swoop her away to some detention facility, never to be heard from again. Her guard wasn't completely down regarding the other unhoused travelers.

Alex liked that Doe was smart enough to not be the child who just ran around carelessly, but then again she was at the age for it and all her previous experiences had left a thick scar. Doe was still just a frightened little mouse. Alex started feeling a little guilty for how much trauma had actually been inflicted on the young girl, and how Alex was still using her fear to their benefit. It was for survival, but still Alex found herself wishing this little child had been somehow born within the system and placed with a legal family. She would never have known what horrible fate had befallen her birth parents, she could just be the little girl she was. Instead, she was being manipulated by adults in order to be obedient, to be afraid of the world outside. It wasn't for bad reasons, but Alex still found herself feeling guilty.

"Oh my god, how did you even get out? How far along are you now?" Alex could hear Lemon exclaim, in her best hushed voice from the shadows. When the group came into view, they saw Lemon bending down and helping a woman who was laying on the grass under a large maple tree legs splayed apart, visibly pregnant.

The woman looked sick, like she had just escaped from some confined hospital room where she should still be. She had two thick braids down her back, not unlike the one Doe wore, but her complexion was slightly lighter, as if she had been stuck inside for a long time. Her eyes had a wild look in them, and Alex couldn't help but find herself suddenly concerned for this poor pregnant woman since she had never seen one before. Pregnant women didn't wander the streets, instead they were confined to their birth center until the baby was born. The women who were selected for Motherhood were not supposed to look like this. The women who were Mothers were supposed to be the picture of health, enamored from the prestige of having worthy genetic profiles to pass onto the next generation. This woman didn't look to be much older than Lemon or Alex, and her unkempt hair was sticking out at wild angles around her face, like she hadn't been able to re-braid the front in a long time. She definitely didn't fit the picture of what Alex had imagined Motherhood to look like.

"Oh, hey guys. Uh." Lemon looked at the pregnant woman, as if she had already forgotten about the helpless little birds she was already lugging around. Alex recognized the look on her face as if she was calculating the answer to a hard math problem in her head, shifting through different solutions until she found something that worked. Trevor understood the answer Lemon had gotten to before Alex did, though. She stuttered, "This is...uh this is one of my old neighbors, Emily. Emily Davison."

Emily looked at Lemon, giving a quizzical expression Alex picked up on. Along with the unusual hesitation and way she spoke, Alex knew Lemon was lying, but she just didn't know why. Either way, this pregnant woman looked like trouble. But she also looked like she needed help desperately. Sickly skinny and obviously malnourished, Emily's gaze flitted around the group as if a deer caught in the headlights. Alex was visibly horrified, the woman's abdomen distended like the baby would pop out at any moment. For Trevor who knew more about biology, his face was less readable in the moonlight. He at least, thought he knew more about pregnancy and childbirth than they did.

"We're going to my friend Alex's house," He nudged Alex in the side but kept his dark gaze fixed on Emily lying under the maple tree. "Come with us, let us help you out."

Emily glanced at Trevor with her brows knotted together, as if she was angry at his proposal. She shifted her gaze and looked to Lemon, who nodded silently. She didn't seem satisfied with that, and instead looked Trevor up and down once again. The shadows of the street were casting darkness over their small group, illuminating only parts of the faces and it was difficult to read anyone's emotions. The air was tense.

"What's in it for you, tough guy?" Emily raised her voice and sized Trevor up pretty quickly, guessing his motives immediately. She had hardly even spared a glance to Alex, looking right to the tallest and darkest member of the group. Even dressed as a boy, she didn't fit the protective masculine tropes. Of everyone, Emily decided Trevor was the most threatening, the most likely to do her harm in just a split second. While her reaction felt racist to Trevor; Alex

thought it was because of his obvious masculinity, the harsh exterior he put up only others who didn't know him saw. She didn't consider he was tired of being pegged as the attacker, the threat just because of the color of his skin or his apparent masculinity. Of the four of them, Lemon had the most commanding presence and carried the most authority. If Emily had needed assurance, Lemon was the one who already provided it. Instead, she went directly for Trevor, calling whatever bluff she thought was being played.

"No it's not like that. We're together." Alex forced herself to speak and stop looking at Emily's stomach in the glowing moonlight, averting her eyes as if she had been caught peeping down a woman's blouse. Her voice came out as just a squeak, as if she was afraid of making any more noise in defense. Alex made a motion to Trevor and herself, as if this was already common knowledge within the group. Lemon had asked them before, but they both had come up with pretty terrible lies, independently of each other. Trevor apparently said he had a boyfriend at another school, just that he wasn't advertising the information. Alex just said she wasn't sure, and remained tight-lipped. Lemon had left it alone mostly after that. She had her suspicions but she didn't ever voice them.

Doe squeezed Alex's hand, less afraid of the reality of pregnancy since she had watched her mother endure it illegally at home with her younger sibling. For eight years old, she knew more about the world than Alex did. She was less fearful about the natural world, like she was unaware of her contaminated status. Feeling the sweat from Alex's palm drenching hers, she understood the reaction as fear, and something normal. Everyone got scared from time to time, even grown adults. She was more comfortable with the facts of life, had seen them play out before.

"I can't stay here," Emily finally relented, sticking a bandaged arm out to Lemon, who helped her wobble to her bare feet. Like an attack dog suddenly called back by its' owner, she calmed and allowed Lemon to assist her up while she eyed Trevor warily. She wasn't bleeding at least, but she looked like she had just escaped from some nearby NRP birth center. With flesh-colored bandages dotting across one hand and an angry red rash on the side of her nose, Emily looked like she belonged in a hospital where she would be cared for. She was barring her teeth and being aggressive to hide her wounds, as if she wouldn't be left vulnerable on the side of the road. Like Lemon, Emily was a fighter. She wasn't willing to give up just yet, especially not after just tasting freedom.

Lemon, Trevor, and Alex couldn't help but notice the plastic medical identification bracelet that was still attached to one of her wrists. Once standing in the shadows, Emily's entire body was easier to see as the plastic tags caught the light and reflected back. Her belly was round, skin stretched taught as if she had swallowed a watermelon seed and it had grown into a seven pound melon while gestating in her stomach. Emily took a deep breath and wobbled again on her bare feet as she placed a hand over her pregnant abdomen to steady herself and looked downward at her feet. To Alex, she looked too top heavy, like she might tip over and fall back down into the grass at any moment.

“Ugh, I’ve got to get this thing off. Do any of you have a knife?” Emily groaned. She looked down at her legs, as if she didn’t realize the enormity of what she had asked of these total strangers. Within a few seconds, she had gone from fighting to joining forces, breaching the divide and building a bridge of trust. She was wearing only a light-colored, slightly sheer hospital gown with white undergarments visible underneath. In the cold dead of night, she needed more protection from the elements and Alex couldn’t help but feel pity for her. But Emily wasn’t looking for pity, as she spoke without care of who overheard. “They put one on my leg too.”

Surprisingly, Alex was the first to start digging around in her backpack for her pocketknife. She let go of Doe’s hand and knelt down, fumbling with the knife in her sweaty grip before cutting the plastic tag wrapped around Emily’s swollen right ankle. Alex stood up and made eye contact with Emily before slicing the tag clean off her wrist. Emily flinched and withdrew her arm back to her chest, as if she had actually felt the cutting of the plastic. Flicking her eyes from Alex to Trevor, she muttered a ‘thanks’ as both white tags fluttered to the ground, like discarded candy wrappers on the side of the road. She took a deep breath, as if she hadn’t had one in a while.

“What happened to you?” Trevor was the first to ask, gently as they began their long journey to the nearest safe spot to camp for the night. He stood nearest to her, as they walked along the softly lit streets. Lemon and Emily assured the others that they knew where to make a safe camp just off the main road, where the Roaches wouldn’t be able to see them. They’d be safe for a night at least, until they could find a better solution to keep out of view of the streets. No one was ever sure when the next armored truck or hovering helicar would pull up, cannons ready to fire something more lethal than water. But at least they had an extra adult around to help watch Doe, even if it meant another mouth and a half to feed.

“The goddamn NRP happened to me, that’s what.” Emily said the words bluntly and Alex realized why Trevor was the one who offered her a safe roof over her head and traveling companions. Emily had a story Trevor had been dying to hear. Her sharp voice cut through the still darkness, “The fucking doctor and his NRP goons, that’s what.”

INCIDENT REPORT (FEMALE FORM)

CITING OFFICER NO: 906723641

INCIDENT: *Young girl claiming to be waiting at gas station for a ride from grandmother, however youth lingered for upwards of two hrs and approached several unidentified vehicles. When questioned, she said she had been dropped off in her ‘friend’s’ helicar. In possession of a large quantity of cash. Suspected prostitution. Charges for biting the arresting officer waived.*

OFFENDER NAME: L [REDACTED]

OFFENDER DOB: Unknown

ACTIONS TAKEN: *called grandmother, currently waiting in lobby for pickup*

CHECK OPTION

[] OFFENDER TRANSPORTED TO HOSPITAL

[] OFFENDER TAKEN INTO CUSTODY

[X] OFFENDER RELINQUISHED TO FAMILY

Chapter 14: Motherhood

When the small group managed to turn off the asphalt road and wander over to a vacant grassy hill, Alex offered to stay awake as a lookout while everyone else made camp. The sun would be up in a few hours and Alex couldn't imagine sleeping after the day and night they had. Now Emily was with them, Alex wanted to read up on what the NRP was supposed to actually be doing.

Before they had gone to sleep, Alex handed over the dress she and Doe had made off to Emily. She didn't look comfortable in the sheer hospital gown. Emily graciously accepted and changed while everyone was rolling out their sleeping bags on the sloped, isolated hill off the side of the main roadway. While Emily slept silently in Alex's sleeping bag, Alex felt her anxiety overcome her. Like a rat trapped in a cage, the fear gnawed at her stomach keeping her awake. *What am I even supposed to do if someone walks by?* With her knuckles turning white, she kept a tight grasp on her pocketknife mainly to help her ground herself and not for any real defense.

Once the night passed into morning again, she read the history textbook for a while under the light from her dim flashlight. Alex didn't dare attract more attention than that. She was suddenly grateful for Trevor having stolen the book in the first place, all that time ago. Having it helped make sense of what Emily was saying about the NRP. The story Emily was telling about Motherhood seemed all to different from what Alex had been told as a child.

She flipped the dusty pages until finding a small section that sounded eerily similar to the situation Emily found herself in. Titled the "Process of Deconstructing Childbirth", Alex read a few small paragraphs mentioning the optimal conditions for fetal development and childbirth. The process for selecting female candidates for Motherhood was long and extensive; some of the criteria Alex had never heard of before. The page listed potential Mothers going through intelligence and strength testing, and being made to adhere to strict diets. The process for Motherhood was definitely not this extensive now, and it made Alex wonder what happened in the years since. *Or maybe, you know absolutely nothing at all.* Grinding her teeth in frustration, she tried to remember what she had been told about Motherhood.

By the time Emily had woken up, Alex and Trevor were whispering to each other in hushed voices, the dim flashlight pointed upwards like a shining beacon in the sky.

"It just doesn't make any logical sense. Look at the criteria for selecting candidates for Motherhood, the list fills up half the page," Alex's hushed voice still sounded annoyed as she could hardly see the text anymore. All the letters were blurring together now in the early dawn

haze, words jumping out of order. Even if she could have read the words on the page, she still wouldn't have been able to understand them. "I thought all women qualified, no one ever mentioned so many rules."

"Well it makes sense, my biological mother shouldn't have qualified," Trevor lay on his stomach in front of Alex while she read, resting his chin on the back of his hands casually. Her eyes caught his in the darkness and she knew Trevor was thinking the same thing she was, had the exact same questions brewing in his mind. Like two minds completing each side of the same puzzle before looking back and seeing the whole picture, they were infinitely linked together.

"Maybe they lowered their standards," he whispered quietly, tearing his eyes away from hers. He doesn't think it makes sense either.

"It says they ended the dangerously high rates of maternal mortality and attempted abortions. That has to mean the program worked, somehow."

"It doesn't mean shit Alex," Trevor paused, suddenly finding himself on the opposite end of the annoying NRP-obsessed line of questioning. He didn't seem to enjoy it any more than Alex did, but by now their survival depended on knowing what was really going on. They needed to know how the world really worked.

"Until we can find studies citing these numbers, it's all just propaganda," Trevor said, voice low. Every few hours or so, the hum of an engine would alert them to a vehicle on the road but no one had awoken. Alex didn't know what she would have done, had a helicar flown overhead and spotted their camp in the night. Luckily, she didn't see a single one even as her eyes darted from the textbook up to the horizon every few minutes.

"What's propaganda?" Emily found herself whispering, despite her curiosity to remain silent and better understand what they were discussing. She hardly moved, Alex wasn't even sure she had said anything at all.

"It's like when the government or a company knowingly tells a lie and tries to get you to believe something." Trevor paused, trying to remember his history lectures from school. "Like when all those holo net companies claimed that using their data pads all day weren't fucking up people's heads. Then a few years later, I heard a bunch of people lost their homes because of the lawsuits and companies were forced to lay a bunch of people off."

Emily stared at him blankly, as if she still didn't fully grasp the concept, the whites of her dark eyes making her look ghostly as if emitting a low light. "I didn't know the data pads really fucked with peoples minds. I always heard they did, but no one ever seemed to know for sure."

Everything fell silent again except for the chirping of crickets, until Alex found a particularly interesting piece of information she felt compelled to share. A few minutes passed

and Emily shut her eyes again, hoping for a dreamless sleep that seemed to elude her. When Alex spoke again, she gave up and rustled as she sat up in the sleeping bag.

"Listen to this," Alex muttered quietly, still trying not to wake Doe or Lemon. "The regulatory agency, the GSDA, owns all the information about childbirth. They own the information about maternal mortality rates. It says they own the genetic engineering technology available to test embryos for disease at the cellular level. The NRP allows for the selection and growth of only the embryos with the best possible outcome for survival."

"Guess it makes sense why you can't find the information." Trevor sighed, "They can grow the fetus in a lab anyway, might as well pick out the ones that aren't all diseased and malformed."

Alex and Trevor didn't immediately pick up on the irony of what was said, but Emily did. She didn't know about Trevor's asthma or Alex's complex relationship with gender. Doe and Lemon knew about the inhaler, but Emily hadn't the faintest clue. Her genes were perfect to pass onto the next generation, and the NRP knew it.

"That's total horseshit," Emily muttered angrily and Lemon rolled over in her sleeping bag. Alex couldn't tell if she was awake or just moving around. Doe wasn't bothered by the noise, and the sun was just starting to peak over the horizon as Emily began to explain what had happened to her. "They can't grow a baby in a lab. They need a host to carry it, or at least, it's probably cheaper that way."

No one interrupted as she began with a shaky breath, "I don't know, but I didn't meet anyone in there who wanted to be there. Even the nurses avoided eye-contact with me."

"But don't you have to go twice a year?" Trevor asked, only slightly remembering how women were subjected to the NRP. "Men have to go once a month."

"Yeah, well men don't have to carry and give birth to the thing. Men can't qualify for Motherhood." Emily's attitude shocked Alex and Trevor, who had until only recently heard all good things about the NRP. Women were supposed to all love being mothers to all the children of the nation. Motherhood was a special privilege bestowed on only the most *perfect* citizens, women willing to sacrifice their time in order to bring a perfect infant into the world. Neither had heard anything about women rejecting Motherhood, or holding resentment for the procedure. Despite Alex and Trevor's personal feelings about being excluded, they didn't really have any valid reasons why the NRP was so horrible, other than the fact that it didn't let couples have their own biological children. That was better for the country, Alex remembered the Headmistress had said to her.

"I had already gone in twice this year, you saw me Lemon, you remember me complaining at the pharmacy," Emily cried, her voice raising a pitch higher as she looked over to Lemon. Lemon nodded, vouching for Emily's story. Neither seemed to realize they were

contradicting the previous lie of Emily having been her neighbor. Alex only realized when she saw Lemon's head bob up and down, that she had been awake for a while.

"And then the doctor calls me up out of the blue, almost a week after I came in after my last appointment. He said there was something wrong with my samples and I needed to come back for testing. I told him I couldn't afford any more testing! He said I needed to come in right away and made me think it was a real emergency, like I was dying. He said it could be cancer and they couldn't rule anything out, and the whole time he was just lying." Emily was seething now, her teeth set in a hard line and one hand laying somewhat protectively on her pregnant abdomen. "Once they had me back in that fucking chair, they strapped me down with my legs spread apart and then everything went dark."

She paused a moment, her body trembling slightly. When she spoke again, her voice was hardly above a whisper, "They kept knocking me out with the drugs because I refused to eat for a while after that. They forced me to, put a tube down my throat and said it was for the baby."

Alex and Trevor listened, horrified. They had heard the rumors about what women were subjected to, but they had honestly not believed anything they heard up until that night. No one had ever mentioned force-feeding and tubes, the rumors were mostly secondhand from boys who thought they knew what the experience was like. Teasing Alex and Trevor for their unenrolled status on the playground, kids said that the men were free to find a woman in the center and get her pregnant, the old fashioned way. Like an open buffet, men could just pick a room and impregnate whoever had come in that day for their appointments. In reality, neither Alex or Trevor actually knew what went on during those appointments. Not one person had mentioned insemination on women who didn't want to carry the infant however, the females were always portrayed as loving mothers. After being confronted with an innocent illegal child and finding no real danger, one would think they were just waking up and realizing the ghost stories they had been told were real all along, but somehow twisted and worse than they had ever imagined.

"I knew what happened there. You told me," Emily shot an icy look over to Lemon, Trevor and Alex realized they had avoided talking about some of the most important things during their time of relative safety in her house. *Why did we never ask Lemon about her experience in the NRP?* Alex's eyes darted between the two women in the darkness. Emily's voice lowered as if she suddenly remembered Doe was still sleeping. "I should have listened to you. But when I woke up again, huge like this, I knew I couldn't stay there and be just a bitch for their breeding."

When Emily started to cry softly, Lemon surprised everyone by being the first to go to her and give comfort. The words coming out of Emily's mouth were full of hatred and venom, but her voice shook and trembled as she spoke. A harsh juxtaposition between the violence in her voice and the trembling of her shoulders, it was as if she were a wounded animal. Wrapping her arms around herself as if trying to steady herself, Emily's eyes took on a hazy faraway look. Doe awoke slowly, yawning before looking to Alex first as if making sure she hadn't disappeared into

the night. Alex gave her a silent nod as Lemon grabbed a hold of Emily still in her sleeping bag and didn't let go.

Eventually, Emily stopped resisting and allowed Lemon to console her, with just the warmth of her body and a quiet, solemn understanding. Alex recognized the same maneuver she had initiated all those years ago, with Trevor. While Doe pulled herself up and inched closer to where Alex sat, Emily's hiccuping slowed until only her back was moving up and down against Lemon as she sobbed. They were holding each other, Emily's face burrowed into Lemon's light dress as her shoulders heaved up and down. After a few minutes, Lemon pushed her away and whispered something to Emily while the others were getting ready for the day, still holding her tightly. Emily nodded twice before Lemon dropped her arms back down to her sides and began to whisper again.

Alex and Trevor tried to look away and give Emily the privacy she so obviously needed while they cleaned up the campsite and rolled the sleeping bags back up. Opening her backpack, Alex pulled out the water bottles she had packed in her bag and passed them around the small group. They sat in a loose circle, watching as the sun rose above the horizon and illuminated the grassy hillside they had been sleeping on. As Emily sipped the water and calmed her breathing, she looked in the distance and laid a hand over her belly, as if steeling her resolve. Despite all she has experienced, she's still determined to survive. Doe shifted her gaze from Alex to Emily after taking a long gulp from Lemon's bottle.

"Can I ask you how you escaped?" Doe asked hesitantly, just as the sun began to shine on Emily's face across the circle. She basked in the warmth, leaning back on her palms and closing her eyes as if drinking in the sunlight and drying the tears on her cheeks. Lemon took a drink of her water once Doe handed it back and said nothing, burning curiosity writing obviously on her face.

"Sure, but it's probably not as exciting as you're imagining." Emily looked to Doe, giving her a faint ghost of a smile as she regarded the child. She seemed more at ease, resting in the sun and talking to Doe, like the trauma of her storytelling in the dark hadn't completely exhausted her. She wiped her hands over her tear-streaked face as she crossed her legs and leaned forward.

"Anything is exciting," Alex said while patting the top of Doe's head in front of her. "Trevor and I are excluded, we will never see the inside of an NRP facility."

Emily's eyes widened slightly, as if unsure if she had ever met someone who wasn't enrolled before her gaze flicked back onto Doe. She pursed her lips, and Alex worried how much of her story would serve to re-traumatize Doe further.

"I woke up at a few points, I think the drugs wore off after a few hours and they didn't have enough nurses to watch everyone, or to keep everyone sedated for nine months. But when they wore off that last night, I knew I didn't have much time left before..." Emily's voice

trailed off as her gaze clouded over. She looked out past Doe, as if trying to see what was beyond her and obscured in the future, before shaking her head and bringing herself back to reality. No one spoke, fearful of breaking the tension. Emily had a gift for storytelling, but she tried to keep her voice from betraying how terrible the entire experience had been. Pounding in her chest rapidly, her heart betrayed her nonchalance.

"I pulled all the tubes out and the machines started making noise, like they knew what I was trying to do. But nobody came running. When I peaked down the hall, there was no one around. There were security cameras everywhere, but I don't think anybody was actually watching." Emily paused again, blinking a few times as she turned to look at Lemon sitting beside her before continuing in a softer voice, "I didn't even know it was nighttime, because there are no windows in those places. You know, they don't want you to be able to see the world going on without you."

Lemon knew this already, but Alex and Trevor listened as if fascinated by what Emily had to say. Drinking in her experiences like knowledge they'd never be able to taste again, they gave one another matching sidelong glances as if asking the other if either had known about the lack of windows. Neither had. Emily continued, as if she hadn't registered their confusion.

"It didn't matter anyway, at the end of the hallway was an emergency exit door. So I ran into it, just praying it didn't sound another alarm. When I got through it, I found a big metal staircase leading me down to the ground floor. Lucky for me, it was totally vacant too. It probably would have been creepy, but I didn't stick around to see where everyone was." She took another breath before glancing back at Trevor and Alex on the opposite side. Her voice was less shaky now, more consistent and natural as she explained. "I made it a few blocks before I tripped in the grass and you found me. I didn't even realize I wasn't wearing shoes."

Emily glanced down at the socks and sneakers she had borrowed from Lemon the night before. Even wearing ratty secondhand clothing was better than the sheer hospital gown they had found her wearing.

Alex found herself speaking before her brain had a chance to stop it, "You got really lucky."

"Lucky?" Emily's tone was icy and dripping with anger. She narrowed her eyebrows, staring daggers at Alex.

"No, I didn't mean it like that," Alex stumbled over her words. "I just mean, you got lucky we were out there. We just happened to be running at the same time as you. You got lucky it was us and not Guardians who found you."

"That's true," Lemon cut in, diffusing the tense situation. "But I don't know how lucky we are now with two extra mouths to feed."

"I have some pre-med training," Trevor scratched at his scalp through coarse black hair, nervously as if thinking about Emily's current predicament. "Don't worry okay? We can figure all this out. I haven't ever birthed a baby before, but I'm sure I could do it. It can't be that hard."

While he was trying to be stoic and serious, offering support the only way he knew how, Emily glanced at Lemon and they both started giggling. The air lightened and suddenly the tense nerves which had been lingering since before sunrise dissipated into the breeze.

Alex smiled, unsure what was funny but she played along as their chuckles grew into hysterical laughter. Doe giggles as well, eyeing Trevor as if he had made a funny joke. He looked to Alex, eyes quizzical as if trying to figure out what he had said wrong. He was confident in his abilities, but still ignorant in so many ways.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude." Emily smiled at Trevor, her wide grin stretching across her face and alleviating any leftover tension in the atmosphere. She needed to laugh, to get the adrenaline out of her system somehow. And even if Trevor wasn't trying to be funny, the thought of this unknown teenage pre-med student staring at her genitals didn't exactly cure her anxiety. The situation was so ridiculous, she couldn't help but giggle.

"It's just that..." Emily paused and Lemon eyed her anxiously as the smile faded from her lips. "I hadn't really thought about what would happen next."

Trevor's eyebrows shot upward, surprised the birth hadn't been the main concern for her right now. He didn't say anything, raking another hand over his hair and staring blankly ahead at a patch of green grass in the center of the loose circle. It was obvious he was confused.

"That's okay, you don't have to think about it right now. We can figure it out as we go," Alex said softly, smiling across at Emily.

HOMELESS VS ILLEGAL: DANGER FOR KIDS

Due to their many outward similarities, homeless children and illegal children are often mistaken for each other. True, homeless children and illegal children can often appear to be the same breed of child, however there are crucial differences every citizen must understand.

Homeless children are just that, homeless. They may be fugitives of some other kind, they may be runaways, or they may be the victims of tragic circumstances. Homeless children are citizens, with the full rights and benefits that are enjoyed by all.

Illegal children present a much bigger problem. Since these children were not created by the NRP, they can create unforeseen conditions and illnesses which can affect the actual citizens of this country. Due to their often proximity with homeless children, homeless children therefore

can become vectors of new viral disease. Illegal children are not considered citizens of this country, as their presence and existence is quite literally, criminal.

Due to the co-mingling of both groups, the Guardians of Morality have been entrusted with their custody and care after arrest.

Chapter 15: Slaughter

When the Guardians of Morality finally caught up with the small group of survivors, no one was prepared for the bloodshed that would occur.

Lemon and Emily had guided the small group over to an outdoor shelter, sympathetic to illegals and runaways. By the time the five of them had reached the small outpost, it was almost noon and a crowd had already begun to form. It was easy to distinguish between the well shaven and bathed volunteers from the unhoused masses crowding around and waiting for a meal. Most of the patrons looked thin and malnourished, and Alex was surprised to see a good amount of children.

Alex and Lemon stayed in line to get the food, while Trevor took Emily and Doe over to find a place close-by to sit in the shade. Emily's obvious pregnancy elicited stares from some of the men wandering around and Alex couldn't help but feel slightly protective of her.

The makeshift 'shelter' was little more than an old abandoned bus stop along a long stretch of highway with several lanes running in each direction. A few tables were set up below a metal grate, serving as little protection from the sun. There seemed to be a few adult volunteers running around, handing out bags of food for the road and giving everyone a bowl of something that looked like stew before they hurried away again. Most of the people lingering around eating were looking around defensively, as if protecting their prey from vultures or other beasts. The volunteers seemed to always be running to and from their truck, never had a minute to actually take pride in feeding the community. Alex wondered how much an operation like this would cost, and a ball of pride welled in her stomach when she realized the donations were probably coming from rich families to try to give support to the homeless anyway they could. Not everyone agrees with the Guardians of Morality or the laws they enforce. *That's good to see.*

A few men caught Alex's attention. There was a young guy, not much younger than Alex, leaning up against a large metal pole with a small boy clinging to his dirty pants. He was missing an eye and was covered in soot or grime, the little boy was looking around at people with a scared gaze. Whispering upward to his older brother, the child's eyes darted around anxiously. His brother did nothing to even acknowledge his presence as he continued eating without looking up.

Alex's gaze lingered a moment too long on a small child, who was slung on someone's back in a makeshift burlap sling. It could have been a boy, but Alex knew by now that safety on the road somewhat depended on appearances. She hadn't felt comfortable reaching for Trevor in public, let alone at night when they seemed to be the most alert. Love didn't seem to be a risk anyone was willing to take right now. The little bald child tapped the adult's shoulder impatiently and Alex looked away before she could get caught wondering if the toddler was illegal too. Surely, the Roaches won't let homeless parents keep their children?

When she and Lemon made it to the folding tables and under the metal grating, they explained how many people were in their group and the volunteers quickly poured some steaming brown meat and vegetables into the disposable cardboard bowls. Alex tried to thank the elderly woman who was handing out the bowls of food, but she stared at Alex vacantly.

"She was born deaf, she can't hear you." The younger woman standing beside her raised her voice and gestured with her fingers at the woman Alex had been trying to thank. The grey-haired woman nodded and gestured with her hands in response before returning to her work. Dumbstruck, Alex watched their silent exchange.

"Oh, I just said thank you," She paused before her brain recognized exactly what she had just seen, then a combination of both embarrassment and awe flooded her senses. *They have a whole other language, just for her!*

"She said, 'you're welcome'." The younger woman responded before Lemon nudged Alex out of the line as others got their food. She trailed a few paces behind Lemon as she carried the bowls of food, the exchange of words and gestures running through her head. *How is something like that even possible?*

Lemon and Alex found their way back to Trevor, Doe, and Emily who had managed to sit down and spread out like it was a normal family picnic on the side of the road. Doe was hanging onto Emily's arm now and Emily didn't seem to mind. She was gazing up at Emily as if she was the mother who had been taken from her so long ago and Alex suddenly felt horrible for Doe, orphaned and alone in the world. She deserved to have a mother who was a Caregiver, willing to raise and love her.

"Hey Emily," Trevor polished off the bowl of vegetables and mystery meat with his plastic spoon quickly and turned to look at Emily with a somewhat ashamed expression. "If you didn't want it, why are you keeping it?"

Alex hit his shoulder, harder than she usually did and Trevor let out a yell out of surprise more than pain. He didn't realize what he had said could be taken the wrong way, but Emily laughed like she wasn't offended. What he was suggesting was considered to be a violent criminal act, worthy of getting picked up by the Roaches or worse. Alex didn't want to hear about abortion, especially with Doe right there, but she couldn't help herself. She was also

curious to hear what Emily had to say, but she didn't want to make Emily uncomfortable by prying.

"Don't think I haven't thought about it." Emily sighed, as if she was just being playful. "But now that he's here it seems rude to evict him."

Doe laughed this time, and Alex was grateful for the metaphor, despite knowing Doe was well more mature than she should have been for her age. She wondered if Emily actually knew it was a boy, or if she had grown attached to the idea of having a baby and decided to run away so she wouldn't have to watch him be adopted out by some other family. Trevor looked over at Alex with a shrug, as if she should have been the one who was embarrassed. It was a peaceful moment, Alex wished it could have continued forever.

Once Emily finished eating her portion, she took her time pulling her messy hair down and brushing it out with her fingers, before braiding her thick dark waves back in two parts and pinning them around her head with a few straightened sticks she had found on the ground. Doe watched her with amazement and Alex couldn't help but smile when she asked if Emily could braid her hair in the same way. Emily tasked Lemon with finding some more sticks while Doe sat in between Emily's legs and closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of another person playing with her hair. It was the simple pleasures like that, Doe had realized, which made life so sweet.

When Trevor took the trash and got up to find a receptacle for it, the girls chatted about braiding, for the most part while he was gone. Doe had been teaching Alex in between their sewing and reading lessons, but Alex's hair was still too short to do much of anything with. It had gotten long enough to frame her face, making her look a little bit more feminine once Lemon found the scissors and styled it correctly. Alex recognized that joy, of having someone else pulling the ends of your hair and feeling like you were getting a personal scalp massage. She could recognize the happiness in Doe's face. She looked like she was at peace with the sunlight on her eyelids and Emily running her fingers through her hair.

"Can I ask you a question, Emily?" Alex practically whispered, now is my only chance. Emily raised an eyebrow and nodded, as if she was still wary of Alex and her potential masculinity. Her voice shook slightly. "I thought since women were supposed to adopt from the NRP, and they were required to donate anyway, they were supposed to love all the kids in the nation and all that stuff. Aren't all women supposed to want to be mothers and Caregivers? Aren't you supposed to want to be selected for Motherhood?"

Alex paused and a wave of regret cascaded over her. Emily didn't show any immediate reaction as she continued braiding Doe's hair tightly. Maybe she doesn't give a shit about Motherhood. *Instead of honored like everyone always told me, I would bet, she feels disposable. How I feel if my body was being used like a cow for milk?* Alex shuddered at the thought.

"I guess I'm wondering if you have any adopted kids yet, or if you ever wanted them." Alex rambled on and looked down at her hands in her lap, shifting her gaze suddenly. Her attention turned to picking the cuticle on her thumb until it started to bleed slightly. "If you never wanted one to begin with, wouldn't it have been better to stay there and just..."

"Get it over with?" Emily looked up suddenly at Alex before moving on to the second braid on the other side of Doe's head. "I thought that after my first few appointments, I was innocent. Maybe I'm just not all that maternal, but I think in some other time or place I would have made a great mom. But it costs a lot of money to adopt a kid, and if I wanted to be a surrogate for somebody else I'd sure as hell rather be paid for the *privilege*."

Alex nodded, while Emily continued braiding Doe's hair against her scalp. Doe's eyes were still closed, basking in the sunlight and the feeling of Emily tugging her hair, as Emily wove the strands tightly down the base of her head. She looked happy and innocent, like a child should.

"I always wanted to be just like Momma," Doe smiled, voicing her input to the conversation at the exact moment Trevor and Lemon wandered back over carrying fistfuls of fallen sticks. "I wanna have a husband who will let me adopt as many kids as I can. Lots of little girls whose hair I can practice braiding with."

No one had the heart to tell Doe she wouldn't ever be eligible for Motherhood, or marriage, or getting any kind of government license, as she eched the things she had heard adults say before.

Lemon and Trevor climbed up and sat behind the girls, dropping the wooden sticks on to the grass between them.

The group had been laughing and giggling and having such a good time, they hadn't noticed the squad of Roaches turn onto the far side of the street and start rolling down towards the shelter as the sun hung high in the sky. Two armored ground vehicles were followed by a helicar above them, issuing commands and orders from whatever supervisor was stationed inside. But as the gang chatted and joked and soaked in the sun, they didn't notice anything amiss until it was too late.

A few of the able-bodied men and women took off running down the road immediately, their kids in their arms or trailing beside them. But by the time Alex heard their footfalls slapping on the pavement, it was already too late to find a place to hide. The steady beating of the blades from the helicar were enough to attract attention once the group looked up into the sky to notice it approaching. Wasting precious moments, Alex turned with wide eyes to Trevor sitting behind her. They locked onto each other.

A squad of about six Roaches who had already unloaded from one of the ground trucks reached the makeshift shelter and started unloading their rifles into the crowds of people trying

to run away down the open road or into the dense bushes off to the sides of the street. The only sounds anyone could hear were the steady popping of the gunshots, the whirring of the helicopter blades, and the screaming of people, who until moments ago, were eating a peaceful meal together. Shattering the previously calm afternoon, Alex became a bystander- watching as the bodies dropped around them and arterial red sprayed out onto the pavement.

Lemon was the first to move, up on her feet and screaming unintelligible words at the rest of the group before anyone else had a chance to react. As the trucks tore down the street, she knew they had only seconds if they wanted to survive. Doe's mouth hung open, blinking as if she had been caught in the middle of a sentence, disbelief permeating the atmosphere as Lemon scrambled over and tried to reach Doe and Emily, who were sitting the closest to the street. Like sitting targets, they had placed themselves directly in the line of sight on the side of the road. Alex hardly registered Lemon's frantic screeching, steady gunshots drowning out all the other sounds. Between each pop, anguished screams cut through the silence like the chorus at a crescendo.

The second armored ground vehicle stopped a short distance from the defenseless group and trained its' cannons directly at them, stopping only to allow a back door to open and a stream of Roaches to come running out in full body armor with helmets and riot shields. Black-booted Roaches fanned out like an urban tactical unit, rifles locked and loaded on the civilians. Alex couldn't hear anything but the screaming from bystanders and the shouting from the Roaches, as she watched an officer position the barrel of his rifle on Doe sitting in Emily's lap.

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- *Educational opportunities for young adults (including on-site job training)*

**DISCLAIMER* Mendino Cash is non transferable and only redeemable at our on-campus facilities.*

Chapter 16: Decay

"Keep fucking running!" Trevor yelled breathlessly, not needing to remind Alex. She felt the dense, dry brush underfoot and almost tripped twice, trying to evade the gunfire coming from the road. It sounded like a constant popping, defanging explosions one right after the other. When Alex and Trevor reached the clearing on the opposite side of the brush, the cannons were trained on some other group of homeless people a block up the street. Trevor fell, knees hitting the dirt ground with a painful force as Alex tried to drag him up again further into the clearing. He was struggling to catch his breath and the constant gunshots didn't cease. They beat a different rhythm randomly, sometimes rapid and sometimes just a single shot in the distance.

Alex's mind was blank as she clutched Trevor, fabric tearing under her fingernails as she fervently tried to pull him further from the sound of danger. As his breathing hitched in the back of his throat, Alex dropped down to him in the dirt. His eyes were frantic, darting around as he fumbled with his pack.

"I'm not leaving you here," The words growled from her throat more aggressive than she had meant to. Trevor shuddered, from her words or the lack of oxygen she didn't know. Still holding him by the shoulders, Alex looked up to be sure the incoming figure crashing through the underbrush wasn't a Guardian.

Lemon stumbled into the clearing, dark red soaking through the front of her dusty brown, loose-fitting dress, which Doe had sewn years ago for her. Her blonde hair was stuck down to one side of her face smeared with blood, making her hair look more auburn than it actually was. But her eyes were wild, sparkling and wide, unbelieving.

"She's gone," Lemon mumbled as Alex grabbed her hand and pulled her forward into the clearing. She wrapped Lemon up in a big bear hug, the way she had seen Lemon comfort Emily earlier, but no tears came for either of them. They were still too stunned to speak when Trevor started coughing loudly and digging around in his pack for his inhaler. He grabbed it and shook it violently, but once he inhaled the medicine he closed his eyes for a moment and took a few deep breaths before he seemed to be okay again. As he put his inhaler back into his pack with a shaking hand, he pulled out the maps he printed from the library and tried to smooth them out on the dirt and grass underfoot.

"She's gone." Lemon muttered again, numbly as if her words weren't landing where they were supposed to. Her voice wasn't lowered, even though the Roaches were still only a few

yards away. Alex pulled her down, hiding her in the clearing while the deep red blood on her dress stained the grass a rusty color. "They're both gone."

"No, I just saw Doe. She was grabbing Emily and-" Alex paused, suddenly unsure. Lemon's eyes burned with an intensity she hadn't ever seen before and Alex knew subconsciously that all the blood soaking through her dress didn't belong to her. She didn't think it was possible someone could live after losing that much blood, some patches stuck to Lemon's skin like she had been drenched.

Alex and Lemon started to fight then, not physically but with enough angry words to shake Trevor loose from his maps. Alex wanted to go back. Lemon didn't want anyone to risk getting caught over a pile of corpses. Trevor had to be the tie breaker, which Lemon called foul on because earlier Alex had finally admitted they were in a relationship. Finally, Lemon agreed to go back as long as they waited until dark and scavenged through anything that they might need for the rest of the journey to Alex's house. They watched and listened as the ground trucks and helicar departed, continuing northward as if they had more raids they needed to complete in the day. By the time they got back to where the attack had taken place, no survivors were left.

When Alex walked back to the roadway after the cover of nightfall, she was grateful for Trevor's hand clutching hers in the darkness. When they came upon the bodies of their previous traveling companions, Alex realized she couldn't feel anything except for the warmth of his palm and his fingers, tightly grasping hers. As they looked over what had previously been their friends, Alex realized it was the first time they had touched each other in days. It was nauseating.

They worked quietly and solemnly together in the moonlit darkness of the night. Trevor and Alex dragged all the corpses over to one side of the road, so they were laying on their backs and all facing the same direction. Lemon took the gruesome job of rummaging around through all the pockets and bags, looking for any valuable belongings she could find. Lemon closed Doe's eyes, and put a few disposable white napkins she had found in the bag of one of the volunteers giving out food over Doe's face. Emily didn't have much left to cover, but Lemon did her best to keep everyone together. Emily had been hit point blank at close range, and the spongey white bits on the ground turned out to be brain matter.

When they finished, Trevor was surprised neither of the women showed any kind of emotion. They had fought over coming back, but seeing what was left of Doe and Emily hadn't made anybody start sobbing or panicking. The fighting had been the extent of emotion shown by the girls. Trevor supposed Alex made sense, she was analytical and good at reasoning things out. But having never seen a corpse before himself, Trevor knew he was going to have nightmares after this night. He wondered more about Lemon. How was she doing? Doe had been like a little sister to her. How was this trauma not affecting them?

Trevor, Alex, and Lemon sat in the grass on the opposite side of the highway from the bodies once they finished their gruesome task by the middle of the night. The truck with the

majority of the volunteers have driven away, leaving the carnage on the side of the highway. The moon rose into the middle of the sky and threatened to illuminate everything they had worked so hard not to see. They could still visualize the figures dancing in the shadows, but no one wanted to talk about them. It was too soon to acknowledge the ghosts in the darkness.

Lemon pulled out everything she had managed to scavenge from the bodies. For the dozens of corpses they worked through they had only accumulated a dollar sixty-three in combined pocket change. Several people had mystery pills in their pockets, or makeshift weapons that didn't help them in their final moments against the Roaches. Lemon collected up everything useful and packed it all away into her large duffel bag. After, she dug a hole in the damp soil with her hands and tossed the mystery medicine inside before pushing a mound of dirt over them, burying them from anyone who might come looking. Alex watched her for a minute before standing up and unfurling her sleeping bag to lay down on top of it. She didn't think she would be getting any sleep for the rest of the night, but she couldn't keep staring across the road at the ghosts of her friends. Her sleeping bag still smelled like Emily from her sleeping in it the night before. Lemon watched Alex when she was satisfied with the hidden pills, silently as if she was judging.

"I lost my job, my house." Lemon said, to both of them but also to neither of them at the same time. Her voice was low, but threatening in the silence. "Now I've lost Doe."

Alex would have accepted blame if Lemon was giving any, but she seemed to look more sad than accusatory. She was just stating a fact. Lemon was right. She had lost everything again. She was homeless, again.

"Your dad had better be filthy fucking rich." Lemon stood up and unfurled her sleeping bag as well, setting it a few inches away from Alex. Trevor watched them several feet away in the darkness, incredulously.

"You two aren't actually going to sleep, right?" He shook his head, as if he was disappointed in their cavalier demeanor towards the dead and Lemon's argumentative attitude. "I can't believe you guys are okay right now."

"We're not." Alex quipped sharply, still gazing up at the stars like she had done so many times before while lying on the rooftops with Trevor. She missed it.

"You're supposed to be crying. You're supposed to be freaking out and, I don't know, sobbing because life is so precious or something like that." Trevor's voice shook as he spoke, but neither woman acknowledged it. He seemed annoyed at their apparent lack of a feminine reaction.

"You really don't know a lot of girls do you?" Lemon asked, Alex could practically see her raised eyebrows in the darkness.

“To be fair, I’m probably the only girl you know.” Alex allowed herself to smile, despite the corpses on the other side of the road threatening to take her with them. Maybe it was insensitive, but she felt like she needed to laugh. Trevor didn’t try to argue with her, exasperatedly throwing his hands in the air as if he didn’t understand women in general.

“And you hardly count.” Lemon rolled over, looking directly at Alex in the darkness. Alex could feel her staring like her eyes would pierce through her clothing. She couldn’t tell if the joke was meant to be at her expense or not. Lemon continued, “You are like fifty percent boy anyway. Doe joked about it, but you spent enough time at that school, it would drive anyone nuts.”

Alex didn’t think she was crazy, but Lemon made a good point. How much of her experience as a girl, or as a boy for that matter, influenced her?

“Maybe.” Alex paused, considering what Lemon was trying to say. “But it’s only when I’m a boy do I feel like I’m pretending to be someone I’m not.”

Lemon didn’t say anything after that, she sat considering Alex’s words. Alex figured she managed to fall asleep somehow and it made her wonder about Lemon’s life. How much violence had she witnessed so she could fall asleep after rummaging through the pockets of corpses all night? Despite her fears of the Roaches and the dead bodies across the highway, Alex also managed to drift off and get a few hours of fitful sleep before she found herself being shaken awake by Trevor.

INCIDENT REPORT (RIOT FORM)

CITING OFFICER NO.S: 907822698, 906430324, 906716577, 906568932, 906743121, 906803620, 907821764

INCIDENT SUMMARY: Advised of meeting between AXEL and handler JAX, AXEL extracted into custody. Minor bloodshed of civilians and no injuries reported to officers. Refer to individual reports for details. Nine individuals suspected to be collaborators taken into custody.

INDIVIDUALS CITED: J [REDACTED], P [REDACTED], R [REDACTED] ALIAS [REDACTED], M [REDACTED], L [REDACTED], S [REDACTED] ALIAS S [REDACTED], K [REDACTED], O [REDACTED], D [REDACTED]

ACTIONS TAKEN: Intersection cleared of loiterers, arrested individuals remain in custody awaiting further questioning. Biohazard crew en-route for cleanup.

Chapter 17: Home

“Are you sure this is the house?” Lemon looked around, the modest three-story home wasn’t at all what she had been expecting a government official’s house to look like. She was disappointed and it was obvious to Alex.

Alex explained on the walk that her adopted father, Elliot Norton, had been working in local government before Alex left for school. She had no idea if he still was, or if her family had moved since that time. Alex was starting to feel a little guilty for not keeping in contact with them, but she had been carefully keeping her emotions in check since Doe and Emily had died. She didn’t realize she was ignoring what Trevor had said about grief, and instead she was dedicated to keeping her tears in her eyeballs where they belonged. She hadn’t allowed herself to cry since she had planted a soft kiss on Doe’s cold forehead and said goodbye. In the foggy morning cold air, the corpses had only just begun the decomposition process. And instead of grotesque, Doe had almost looked ethereal, like a biblical angel who ascended to the heavens with no need of her physical body anymore. Alex preferred to remember her that way, and didn’t need to urge Trevor and Lemon to move on before the bodies began to bloat. They had no shovels and decided, unspoken, to leave the corpses unburied and visible on the ground.

The walk had only taken a few days and when Lemon heard Alex’s dad was a lawmaker, she assumed he was going to be rich. But the house was just a house, not a castle with a moat or big white marble columns. Instead of a castle, Alex’s family house was three stories with a beautiful enclosed patio that wrapped around the side of the house. It was a nice house in a beautiful gated community, but it wasn’t a mansion with a butler. The paint looked like it needed a little work, but other than that it was exactly as Alex remembered. She even recognized the tree swing in the backyard, hanging exactly where it had been years ago, like it had been forgotten there just like her. Her dad had put it up on the day they brought her home from the birth center.

“Yeah, this is it.” Alex hesitated before she stepped off the sidewalk and into the driveway, looking up at the massive structure. “I just wish I had a data pad so I could check and see if he responded yet. I hope they didn’t move away or anything.”

Alex paused, looking up at the house and trying to remember all the times she had trotted through the grass in the front yard or played with her father while pulling weeds in the garden, and for a moment she was a child again. Running and launching herself into the piles of leaves her father would rake, the ghosts of her childhood seemed to stare back at her. She remembered how her mother would gripe and moan about Alex jumping into the mess of foliage, without a care of whatever worms or insects might be hiding in the pile. Tentatively, she allowed herself to walk further up the driveway with her heart thumping in her chest like a rabbit. Chewing the inside of her cheek, Alex tried to ignore how much she had missed her home, her family, and the memories of her youth.

The three young adults made their way up to a set of large mahogany double doors and Alex took a few shaky breaths to steady herself. When she finally worked up the courage to knock on the door, a short auburn-haired woman with a red face answered after a few moments

of tense waiting. Alex felt like she had a pebble stuck in her throat as she looked at the unfamiliar face, the curly red hair sprouting around a pock-marked face. Behind her, the house looked almost exactly as it had, but the middle-aged woman was throwing Alex off. The unfamiliar scent of her perfume made Alex feel dizzy, like she had stepped into some alternate timeline where everything and nothing was the same.

She stuttered, "Oh. I'm sorry. I think I have the wrong house. I'm sorry... I'm looking for the man and his wife who lived in this house years ago, Mr Norton."

After another long few seconds, the woman gave Alex a subtle once over and pressed her thin lips together before she moved back and opened the door wider to allow them inside. As she stepped backwards, she used her legs to scoot three small dogs behind her, so they couldn't run outside. They yipped at the back of her calves, as if begging for freedom.

"Mr Norton is my husband, please come in. I'll tell him he has a visitor. Who are you?" She responded in a pinched, nasally voice. As Alex, Trevor, and Lemon crossed into the house they were immediately greeted by the throng of small dogs, all yapping and nipping at the woman's thick ankles. They looked like they were all from the same litter, with matching black snouts and wet crusted ringlets of fur around their eyes. The redhead didn't seem to notice them as she stared at the three strangers in her foyer, regarding them carefully behind a tightly unreadable expression. Alex's head was spinning. *This isn't Olivia Norton. Where is my mother? Who is this woman?*

"Um," Alex's eyebrows knotted together and she blinked a few times vacantly, trying to figure out what the woman was talking about. Alex couldn't have heard her right. Her voice trembled slightly as she answered, dropping an octave, "I'm his daughter."

The woman looked over Alex again, as if she was seeing her now for the first time. Recognition flicked over her stoic expression before it was quickly brushed away, a mask of indifference rising in its place. If she regretted allowing Alex and her friends inside, she didn't say so, but she arched one eyebrow the way Lemon did when she didn't believe what she was hearing. Her ruby red lips were still tightly pressed into a small line above her pointed chin, as if she was holding herself from saying something she shouldn't. Alex was reminded of the same way the headmistress had looked at her, where she was looked at but remained somehow unseen behind their stares. Alex felt like she was passing judgment in her mind but reserving to make her comment aloud. A moment of tense anticipation followed as Alex waited to be thrown from the property.

"I'll tell him."

When the red-headed woman guided them into the living room off the side of the main passageway and then left to go find her husband, her heeled pumps clicked and clacked along the hardwood floor as she walked and the little schnauzers followed. Before she left down the hallway, she gave Alex a look as if she was worried her friends were going to steal something,

but again said nothing. Having been on the road for a few days after the ambush by the Roaches, Alex, Lemon, and Trevor probably looked like they were about to steal something. Alex was still surprised they managed to get through the gate surrounding the community. They only had to wait until the single guard took a break and then Lemon found the most climbable point where they were able to shimmy over and into the neighborhood. She had snickered at Alex, struggling to find a handhold in the brick until Trevor deftly reached his hand down and hoisted Alex up to the top of the wall. No one was laughing now.

Alex's head was spinning, her worst nightmare was that Olivia had died and nobody had bothered to tell her. Divorce was unheard of these days; it was on its' way to being outright criminalized for one spouse to leave the other after being married. *Was she that disposable to my father?* No, she couldn't possibly be. He must have waited the appropriate number of years before getting remarried, somehow he just couldn't bear to tell his only daughter her mother had died. The only scenarios were bad and Alex couldn't help but freak out a little bit as her own overactive imagination ran wild. As Lemon and Trevor sat on the beige couch, the anxiety radiated off Alex like ash in the air after a wildfire.

Unfortunately the reality was worse.

When the sound of approaching footsteps alerted the three again, Alex caught a view of her father and shot upwards. As he walked through the doorway, he took sight of the scene laid out before his eyes locked on Alex. As he walked over and embraced his daughter, she seemed to fall into his arms, the way a child would after a frightening experience. Her fears only subsided slightly, knowing the man holding her was her father, just older than she remembered. But he still smelled exactly the same, like the rich aroma of a dense pine forest, and his grey beard tickled against her face the way she remembered it doing when she was a child, and she felt like a little piece of her had been returned after all the years away. Folding herself into his hug, she gave a small involuntary shudder, enveloped by the family she had lost so many years ago. Now all I need to do is find Mom.

"My baby girl, finally come home to us after all this time. Thank the Lord, your mother will be so proud," His voice was low and gravely as if he didn't want to embarrass her in front of her friends. But Mr Norton smiled and Alex felt safe, comforted by his presence as if calming all her worries. He looked professional, as he always did, with his tweed jacket and button down grey dress shirt underneath. But as she pulled back and tried to really see her farther, he placed a palm under her chin and moved his thumb delicately across her cheek. With a smile on his face, Alex noticed the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes had become more pronounced, as if he had aged much more than a decade in her absence. She felt him brushing the wetness across her face and didn't realize until moments later that she was crying now, her tears disobeying her previous order to stay directly in her eyeballs.

"Where is Mom?" Alex paused, she had so many things she wanted to say, but her mind refused to give her the words she needed to explain herself as she looked up at her father's face, with a gaping confusion written on her face like a book. "I missed you so much."

"She's upstairs with Josephine and Carrie, but wait first Alex. Let me look at you." He wrapped his arms around her again, and guided her over to the couch in the front room where Lemon and Trevor had already planted themselves and were trying to eavesdrop into their conversation and be invisible at the same time, sitting rigid like statues. He sat across from the trio in the large leather armchair she remembered from her youth, and lowered his voice. "I need to tell you some things."

"Good news?" Alex asked, hopeful. She sat in between Lemon and Trevor, still holding onto her father's hands, hardly noticing how awkward her friends suddenly felt. As if they noticed the tense atmosphere but Alex herself did not, her gaze stayed locked on Elliot Norton.

"Of course, good news. When I was elected to lead the city council I started being able to afford more luxuries, and well, you know your mother. She wanted us to use the money to do something good with it. We sent you to school, but I always felt we could do more." He sighed, as if he was about to say something he didn't want to and brushed a hand through his hair. Alex recognized his voice, the official one he used while at work or in public, less emotional and more factual. As if explaining an unpopular but necessary policy to a constituent, Elliot Norton had long-ago perfected his professional, informational manner.

Alex figured they might have adopted another child or two, having more children seemed like something Olivia might want after losing her first daughter. It was something she had always talked about doing too, giving Alex a sibling to play with and keep her company. Alex felt a flutter in her stomach, thinking she had a sister or brother hiding somewhere and her parents hadn't been ready to tell her about it yet. *What if they replaced me? What if they just had a bunch of daughters and I was just the failed experiment? What if I am coming in and ruining their perfect family?* Alex physically shook her head, as if to force her intrusive worries to disappear.

"You understand, I've taken another wife." Elliot explained slowly and enunciated the syllables as if he were reading from a document, Lemon and Trevor stayed motionless while Alex digested this new twist she hadn't seen coming. What did he say?

"Another wife," Alex repeated, blinking a few times like she didn't understand what he was saying. Polygamy was perfectly legal, in fact, most of the elected officials had more than one wife. But for some reason, Alex had never considered Elliot Norton would be interested in another woman. He always had been so happy with Olivia.

"Three, in fact." He smiled, like he was beaming with pride. "Carrie is the youngest, a decade older than you are. I think you two would get along, if you give her a chance, that is."

"Of course I'll give her a chance, Dad. But why three? Weren't you happy with Mom?" Suddenly Alex was a child again, her voice raising a pitch as if pleading with her father for a chocolate before dinner. Lemon shot an indecipherable glance over to Trevor, who hardly noticed it while staring wide-eyed at the painting behind Mr Norton's head.

"Your mother is the most beautiful woman in the world to me. You know that." Elliot Norton lowered his voice, countering her attitude with the authoritative voice he used while at work. He paused, making sure Alex was listening to him. "But when I see a woman in trouble, you know I have to help her."

"That's who opened the door? A woman in trouble?" Alex tried to control the volume of her voice but this was a shock she had not expected. She probably should have seen it coming as Lemon and Trevor had, but she didn't. *How is my mother okay with sharing her husband with three other women? How is any of this okay?*

"That was Ruth, yes." His voice was monotone and he paused again, but as if he was thinking back to something else with fond memories before remembering he was still sitting across from his estranged daughter and her two friends explaining how he had married three separate women. "We met through your mother. She needed help getting away from her first husband. You should ask her about it, if you would like to learn a thing or two about marriage."

"And mom is perfectly okay with this." She didn't bother to lower her voice. It didn't really matter what Olivia thought about it, Alex knew but she couldn't help the annoyed tone from creeping into her voice. He is legally allowed to have as many wives as he can provide for, who is going to begrudge him for that? Surely, not all the other men he works with. Certainly not his genetically defective daughter who is running from the Guardians of Morality.

"Your mother was the one who suggested the idea." He said softly before his voice grew a sterner again. "Your mother also knows her place in this world."

It wasn't a threat, although it sounded like one to Lemon and Trevor, who both reflexively sat up a little straighter. To Alex, it was a subtle reminder women were supposed to be subservient, that she needed to understand how to maneuver in this world in order to survive. *This is what I have to look forward to.* Women still weren't legally allowed to vote, but at least they could own property without a man's approval. *Maybe they were right, I should have tried harder to pretend I was a boy. But to what end?* Alex grit her teeth together, biting back her thoughts as she inhaled slowly, the scent of her pinewood father distracting her from his harsh words.

"Alex?" A woman's voice came from the hallway they had walked in from and Alex bolted upright again and ran over to a woman who had just appeared from upstairs, tearing her hands from her father's grip as she moved quicker than Trevor or Lemon had ever seen. The woman had shoulder-length blonde hair and stood just a little bit shorter than Alex herself, but she had kind, motherly eyes full of concern. Wearing a long grey frock, she matched her husband well as she descended the staircase and her heeled clogs smacked against the hardwood floor. The reunited daughter and mother hugged each other for a few minutes while no one spoke, the tense atmosphere diffusing as if a knot being detangled.

After Olivia Norton joined the conversation, Alex seemed to cool down about her father's new wives. She agreed to meet Ruth again, along with Josephine and Carrie. When Alex softened she apologized and finally introduced her friends who had been sitting rigid on the couch the entire time. They had a good awkward laugh before Alex asked if it was possible for them to stay for a little while. Mr Norton looked Trevor over and decided it would be fine, as long as they all slept in the same room together with the door open. That way, there wouldn't be any 'funny business' as he explained. But first, he wanted to know what had happened at the school.

Alex told them everything. At least, she told them more than Lemon had ever heard about it. She still neglected to mention the theft and instead said Headmistress Singleton had seen a writing assignment where Alex had used the wrong pronouns. That was enough justification, Alex explained, to be an immoral influence on the other students and worthy of expulsion. It was an all boys school, after all.

Olivia Norton wiped away a tear from her face and began hugging Alex once more once her story was finished, like she never wanted to let her go again. Alex felt slightly disoriented, her parents seemed so happy to have her back home. The more she hugged and cried and sat with them, the more confused she got about why they had left her at the American Christian Academy in the first place. Did they want her to become a boy like the letter said? Or had they been forced by someone higher up, to abandon their child at an all-boys school? The more she turned it over in her head the more unhinged she felt about the whole situation. Her memory was hazy, but she distinctly remembered the Guardians sitting in the living room with her mother before having to leave.

After an awkward family dinner and nighttime prayer with Elliot and Olivia Norton and all the new wives and children, the poor group of three was ready for bed. Alex never thought the house could have ever been so full, there were at least ten people crowded around the dinner table. With three new wives, new dogs, and new children, Alex had never seen her home so full of life before, as if the ghosts of her childhood were actually memories of her loneliness all along. A pang of regret hit while she watched the family eat, all the new faces surrounding her, wishing she had been a part of this family the whole time, wishing she had never been made to go away. It's like I left, and they just kept on growing. *Did they even take a minute to remember me? Or did they just move on the moment I was gone?*

Alex felt conflicted, a storm of emotions brewing that she had no way to express. She wanted to talk to Trevor, or Lemon, but had no idea what she would even say. It would be callous to complain while both of them had no family to return to, she didn't want to unload on them so soon after losing Doe. This whole 'multiple wives' thing is too much, it doesn't make any sense.

Alex worried into the night, her mind shooting new anxieties and fears at her every few minutes as she fitfully rolled around and tried to get comfortable on the floor of the guest room.

Remembering back, Alex thought of when her parents had told her how they wanted to adopt only daughters. Olivia had promised her a little sister once, and her father's actions did make sense when taken in the context of trying to help women. But then again, Olivia and Elliot had always talked about helping children by adopting them from the NRP, not 'saving' them from bad marriages. Maybe I've developed a similar method, trying to gather the chosen few rejects to safety across the border somehow.

The next morning before Trevor and Lemon had awoken from their sleeping bags, Alex quietly tiptoed downstairs to corner her mother in the kitchen without any other witness. She had desperate questions she needed answers to, and Olivia was the only person who could help her unravel the mysteries.

THE BOOK OF RUTH **A REPORT BY ALEX NORTON**

Ruth has always been my favorite woman in the Old Testament. In the Book of Ruth, we are told how an Israelite woman, Naomi, lived with her two sons in the city of Bethlehem. Both her sons married pagan women, but when a famine struck and her sons died, Naomi told both women to return to their homelands. Ruth, her-daughter-in-law, refuses to leave.

"Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God..." (Ruth 1:16). Instead of returning to her pagan heritage, Ruth vows to stay beside Naomi until her dying day. The two concoct a plan for Ruth to enchant Boaz, a relative of Naomi and local landowner. Two eventually marry and are blessed with a son, thereby allowing Ruth to remain beside her mother-in-law's side until death.

In Hebrew, the word 'reuit' translates to 'friendship'. While the name Ruth may be a translation error, we can never know the true depth of loyalty between these two women. Ruth's promise to Naomi is more important, and given more notice than her commitment to her two husbands. Given that she could have just left Naomi to find a new rich husband, her dedication and love for her mother-in-law goes above and beyond devotion.

To me, this devotion parallels what a true Christian should feel about the Lord. We should strive to dedicate ourselves, to love God unconditionally. The love between these two women serves as a testament to the undying friendship and companionship found within Christianity.

Chapter 18: Truth/Mothering

When Alex finally got a chance to speak to her mother alone, her head was full of questions she had been wondering about for years. But in the morning sunrise reflected through the windows inside the kitchen, she looked exactly as she did when Alex was a child and she couldn't help but to just stare at Olivia for a moment before she noticed Alex was there. Mrs Norton threw her head back carelessly and laughed when she saw her daughter's head peaking at her from behind the doorframe. Alex forgot her worries, rushing and falling into her mother's arms as if she was a little girl again. And for the second time in two days, the tears came streaming unimpeded down her face.

"Oh sweetie," Olivia Norton paused, her hand tenderly stroking the back of Alex's head. Her mother inhaled deeply and murmured, "Your hair is getting long again."

"Is it bad?" Alex suddenly found herself asking. It had been so long since she had seen her mother, some part of her was craving the small validation only Olivia could give her. "Do you hate it? Is it awful?"

"Absolutely not." She smiled, kissing Alex's damp cheeks. Alex felt like a little girl again, crying in her Olivia's arms. The contact restored a small part of her, warming up her cold mind from the darkness that had permeated life recently. She hadn't allowed herself to cry since losing Doe, and once the tears came they were hard to stop again. Mrs Norton didn't seem to mind. She didn't ask what was wrong, only holding her daughter in her arms until Alex used up all the tears she had. "I never wanted to see your hair cut short. I've regretted it for a long time. Leaving you at that school was the hardest thing your father and I have ever had to do."

"But why did you?" Alex choked out, asking almost in a whisper. Her voice felt unattached from her body, shrill and needy. "Why did you leave me there and let them turn me into a boy?"

"Baby, they couldn't turn you into a boy even if they tried." Olivia Norton smiled, knowing exactly what her daughter needed to hear somehow, as if on a mother's instinct. One of her warm hands wiped away a strand of hair that had fallen in Alex's eyes before she cupped her face gently. Her mother looked deep into her eyes and whispered, "If we could have kept you with us, believe me, we would have. But that old pediatrician we went to- you remember Dr Dorner don't you? He didn't like the fact that we were raising you as a girl. Every time he gave you an exam, he would tell me that I was inviting the GSDA into our family. The letter that came from the Committee was just the final straw."

Mrs Norton paused, still holding her daughter tightly. There was a fear in her muscles, as if relaxing would allow Alex to slip right through her fingers again.

"I read the letter actually," Alex tried to smile past her hiccuping sobs. After a few moments she was able to compose herself before she asked in a whisper, "Did the GSDA threaten to have me killed?"

Alex and Trevor hadn't exactly figured what the word 'termination' meant in regards to the GSDA and the NRP. But after all her reading and research, she had figured the context most likely meant to kill. It was used to talk about illegal and unhoused children as well. Alex had figured a long time ago that it couldn't refer to anything good. Asking her mother was just a way to confirm her suspicions.

"They came to the house to deliver that letter with a squad of Guardians." Alex's mother nodded and suppressed a shudder thinking back to the day when their family had been torn apart by the Roaches. Her voice shook slightly, "We didn't want to put you in any more danger, so we did what they told us to do. They were worried we were raising a deviant, they accused your father and I of childhood perversion. But we had a... different view."

She paused again for a moment before looking back at Alex with a ferocity in her eyes. "I couldn't stop thinking of the Virgin Mary, and how she must have felt, unable to keep her son safe. I wanted you to be safe from the torture."

The pain comment confused Alex, but she filed it away while considering the rest of what her mother said. It had been decades since anyone had been actually persecuted under the old 'perversion of childhood' statutes alone, mainly the perversion charge was one that would be used to beef up prison sentences. Just like how no one got arrested for illegal fornication unless they had an illegal child to prove it, the system was rigged once you had racked up enough charges. The idea of her parents in a prison labor camp was too much to bear, and Alex shook her head as if to try and alleviate her mother's decade of guilt.

Part of Alex couldn't blame her mother for doing what she was told to. She was trying to keep her child alive, by whatever means possible. If it had been safer to take Alex and flee the country, Alex wondered if she would have taken the risk. As Mrs Norton led her into the carpeted living room to sit down, Ruth walked past the doorway with her three little yapping schnauzers and shot a look over to Alex that was a mix of pity and daggers. Ruth looked at Alex as if she was dirty, like she was tracking mud all over the nice clean house. Alex made a mental note to ask later what her problem was.

Olivia Norton wiped a tear from her face, as if remembering the horror before she continued, the words falling out of her mouth before Alex had a chance to ask her to explain. She grabbed Alex's hand protectively, "Your father and I went over it again and again, it didn't seem fair tell you that you were a boy without any warning. You always were our little baby girl, we didn't know the GSDA was going to force us to send you away, we thought we had a choice in the matter."

Alex felt slightly better, knowing her parents had fought on her behalf as much as they did, even though Olivia seemed to be delusional in thinking the GSDA would ever give them a choice in the matter. Alex had no memory of the surgery she had undergone at birth or the one Dr Dorner had been pushing her parents into when she was a toddler, and her mother neglected

to mention it. The secrets of her birth and girlhood were just beginning to be excavated from behind the thick foundations of secrets of her youth.

“After they took you away, I just couldn’t go back to the NRP for my appointments. I just kept seeing my baby’s face that they took from me.” Her voice broke into a tangle of sobs and hiccups while Alex tried to hold her mother’s hand to calm her. Mrs Norton looked down at the blue apron covering the bottom of her dress, while wiping away a few tears that had fallen from her cheeks quickly. She seemed genuine. Alex wondered if Olivia had ever birthed a child for the NRP before, because what she was saying would have made more sense that way. Alex had wondered if mothers ever got resentful for the NRP taking away their infants before they could even apply to adopt them. Maybe Olivia was just compounding all the trauma into one, or maybe she was actually telling the truth. There were still so many things Alex didn’t understand about the NRP. Still so many questions she had no idea how to ask.

“I didn’t know you could just stop donating.” Alex paused, thinking of Emily. Emily didn’t seem to think she was able to say no, the doctors hadn’t given her a choice in the first place. She wondered, thinking back to how Emily had said she couldn’t even afford to run tests for her appointments. She looked at Mrs Norton with a quizzical expression and a slight frown on her face. “Did you go through menopause already? I thought that was the only way women could get out of donating.”

Mrs Norton lowered her voice and explained, “Well no, not yet. But it’s not too difficult. NRP doctors won’t write you an exemption unless you’ve gone through the change, but other doctors will. Better doctors will.”

Alex blinked for a few seconds as she sat down next to her mother on the same couch she had sat in yesterday. Mrs Norton looked back down and started picking at a loose thread at the corner of her apron nervously. Alex had an exemption from the NRP, but what did that mean? If rich women were able to get out of donating too, did that mean more young girls like Emily had to do it? Alex couldn’t shake the thought that Emily had been the one to take her mother’s place at the birthing center for some reason. Olivia stopped going, why did Emily have to die?

The house had been redecorated, probably by one of the new wives, and Alex still hadn’t gotten used to the feeling. If anything, she resented the woman who felt she was entitled to move around everything in Alex’s childhood home, hanging up new pictures and reorganizing the kitchen cabinets. But then again, she could have been just projecting. She was back at home with her parents, but she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that everything was just a little bit off, every aspect of her childhood home slightly different. It was as if someone had broken in and moved every piece of furniture and artwork hanging on the walls twelve inches to the left, and added three little black and silver dogs to the litter.

“Actually.” Mrs Norton paused and looked around the room as if she was afraid someone else might overhear them talking. “I’m not sure it’s legal, but Elliot is a miracle man. He really is my knight in shining armor.”

Alex raised an eyebrow, she hadn’t realized some of the things her mother said were so off-color sometimes. The comment reminded Alex of the conversation she initially wanted to have with Olivia Norton in the first place. She cleared her throat nervously, “That’s the other thing I wanted to ask you about, Mom.”

Mrs Norton cocked her head, as if she was unsure what Alex was referring to before she let out a loud chuckle. When she finally looked at Alex she was grinning and he didn’t bother to lower her voice again. It was clear nothing she said now was a secret, as she spoke at her usual volume. “I definitely wasn’t the one who gave him the idea, but I didn’t ever oppose it. I know how your father gets sometimes, with his wild crusades to save the less fortunate. I suspect you and I are not all that different.”

“Yeah but…” Alex couldn’t argue with her logic, but it just felt so backwards. Her mind drifted back to the volunteers who had been distributing food to the homeless next to their big truck. It was obvious they had some wealthy benefactors. Alex shook her head slightly, her hair falling to the front of her face from behind her ears again. “If all they need is a place to stay surely you guys can do that without…polygamy.”

“Oh sweetie,” Her mom started, in a patronizing tone Alex recognized from her youth. She couldn’t help but roll her eyes, acting like a sullen teenager. Spending so much time with Lemon had started to effect Alex’s mannerisms and she felt herself getting bolder with her questions and behaviors. “I can’t expect you to understand the complexities of our marriage, your still only a child.”

“But I’m not, Mom. I’m not a child anymore.” Alex said quietly, as if she said it any louder she would break her Olivia’s heart. She squeezed her mother’s hand softly as a few moments passed.

“No, you are not,” Mrs Norton agreed, correcting herself. “You are a young woman. But as a young woman, you still have a lot to learn in terms of love and marriage. Your father has his reasons, and as my husband it is my duty to support him.”

“And his duty to all the rest of the wives? And their kids?” Alex asked, she could feel her temper raising again. She knew her mother was a Caregiver, but she had hoped that extended only to her family. Was she now responsible for the three extra women and their adopted children? Alex tried to lower her voice, not wanting to wake up either Trevor or Lemon sleeping upstairs. “How are they your responsibility?”

“Because, Alex, I am their mother and sister.” Olivia paused again, and Alex tried to really listen to her mother. She sighed, as if explaining something simple to a child, “Just like

how I'm your mother. All of us women, we are mothers to all the children in the country. One of those adopted children, or even you or that little Lemon, could be a biological child of mine. No one knows, and so we are all mothers. All of the children living under your father's roof are my children, just as how all his wives are my sisters. And that's why I am a Caregiver for everyone living in this home. It's not because it's my role as a woman, but because I value and love my family. Do you understand Alex?"

"I guess." Alex couldn't think of anything else to say. She hadn't ever found herself wondering if boys at her school were genetically her brothers. But she had never really been prepared for a career or life as a Caregiver either, as most young girls did in adolescence. Alex shrugged and looked down at the carpet under her feet. "I've never felt that way."

"You were excluded from the NRP, it makes sense you wouldn't feel that way. The system was designed for woman to be able to have the freedom to choose, to decide when and if they wanted to take on the responsibility of adoption." Olivia Norton paused again, and sighed like she was sad for Alex, never being able to contribute to the program. It was less of a condescending sigh and more one that sounded suspiciously like pity.

"So it's not because of my bad biology?" Alex almost bit herself from asking, but she couldn't seem to stop the words from tumbling out of her throat. "I thought it meant that...that I wasn't really a woman."

"Baby I love you, but you shouldn't ever think like that. Women all have different feelings and ideas and morals, they aren't just a homogeneous group all thinking the same thing. We can't all be Caregivers." Mrs Norton grabbed Alex's other hand and squeezed them both tightly. She whispered fiercely, "No one can tell you that you aren't really a woman. God made you who you are for a reason, just as he made grapes and wine; but not wine or bread. So that you can divinely recreate yourself in his image."

Hearing that comforted Alex, for some reason. Knowing her mother had complete faith in her womanhood was like giving her a boost of confidence, remembering who she always was. She wanted to get back to the girlhood of her youth, to rediscover what it meant to be feminine and free. She wanted to feel the carefree breeze in her long hair and remember what it felt like to be her authentic self. It seemed like being at home and seeing her family again was exactly what she needed to truly begin to live again.

Ever since the deaths of Doe and Emily, Alex, Lemon, and Trevor had been living in a daze. It was easy to be dazed in the street, everyone else seemed to be wandering aimlessly and just trying their best to survive. But now being home, Alex felt like she was able to rip off the bandages and let her wounds start to heal in the open air. Lemon felt the change too. After the conversation with her mother, Alex found Lemon curled into a ball in the shower with the water running and woke up Trevor to help her. She was still wearing the dress Doe had made for her, and the running water helped disguise her tears as the rusty stains in her dress swirled with the water running down the drain.

Alex and Trevor didn't know how long Doe had lived with Lemon at her house, but Lemon was broken up enough for Doe to have been her little sister. After getting her out of the shower, Alex and Trevor helped dry her off and change into some dry clothes, before Alex helped her into the old bed in the guest room. The sheets smelled like laundry detergent and dust. Alex and Trevor sat on the floor, looking through the textbook and Doe's book about flowers while Lemon lay motionless. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep and Alex and Trevor decided not to wake her, for fear of interrupting a good dream about Doe.

CONNECTING YOUR DATA PAD TO THE HOLO NET: USER GUIDE

INSTRUCTIONS

Please get started by pressing and holding down on the power button of your data pad. The light should begin to flash green. IF the light flashes red, please connect to the power source and wait until it turns green.

When your device powers on for the first time, it will ask for you federal identification numbers and identity verification. After the identification process, your new data pad will be registered to you and you alone. Only your biometrics will be the passcode into your device in the future. No need to log in or out.

To open the HOLOGRAPHIC NETWORK, please select the icon at the bottom of your touchscreen. The icon will glow, before scanning your surroundings in order to better map out the visual field. The HOLO NET will boot up, and you will be able to access services easily from the swipe of a finger. If the HOLO NET does not boot up upon installation, or shows an error code please contact customer support.

Please be advised, use of the HOLO NET is not recommended for individuals suffering from epilepsy, dimension sickness, or migraine headaches. Serious complications may arise.

Click the green "I Accept" button in order to agree to the Terms and Conditions.

Chapter 19: ??

Trevor, Lemon, and Alex spent about three months living in Alex's childhood home. The house seemed a lot more crowded than it had ever been before, with the three new women and their three new children, plus Ruth's three little schnauzers. Three was the magic number lately. Alex found herself getting annoyed by the dogs most, of which Lemon also hated with a passion. Lemon didn't hate all dogs, just the small ones that were somehow louder and more annoying than the big ones. Ruth had never bothered to train the little black and silver pups, and Alex hated when she found herself walking right into a puddle of piss in the early morning hours while stumbling to the guest bathroom.

Ruth was never kind to Alex, she went out of her way to avoid or ignore her as best she could. While Lemon and Alex gossiped about her in the backyard while they harvested carrots and peas, Alex still hadn't been able to figure out why the woman seemed so angry with her. It was like every fiber of Alex's being annoyed the woman, somehow. She tried her best to ignore Ruth, but it still bothered her. Of all the new wives and children, Carrie was the nicest and friendliest one to Alex and her friends. She was in her thirties and had short dark hair and a small, plump frame. With a large port-wine birthmark on her forehead, Alex thought her beauty was special. Carrie wasn't ugly, but her birthmark made her face recognizable and memorable, framing her features distinctively like a mole.

Of all the adults living in the home, Carrie was the only one who owned a data pad. It wasn't the desktop kind, but rather a small handheld one with a cracked screen. When Carrie found out the trio hadn't had access to the holo net in a while, she flashed the small hologram to life and browsed state-run news databases, catching them up on everything that had happened since they had left the school. Alex learned Carrie was also the only woman who still had employment outside the Norton family home. Elliot hadn't wanted her to continue working, as he feared for her safety. But as a public school teacher, Carrie couldn't imagine leaving the children she had grown to adore. They were like her own, despite their varieties of ethnicity and ages. To Alex, Carrie seemed like the perfect role model of a Caregiver, the perfect mother figure even though she was only in her thirties. She cared for her students like they were her own children.

"Another public school had to shut down in New York," Carrie murmured as she read from the blue holo net page and Lemon sat in front of her, looking up at the display and watching one evening after supper. The guest bedroom was dark as night fell and the only light came from the blue pinpricks from the hologram above their faces. "A whole community of parents were arrested by the Guardians and their children were placed back into NRP custody."

Lemon shifted uncomfortably, still gazing up at the hologram floating in the air. Alex thought she could see the small pinpoint of light, reflected in Lemon's blue eyes. It was like the stars dancing around in her irises at different points, like the way a bug has different hexagonal segments in their vision. Listening to the news made Alex think of her father, and how he didn't want Carrie working outside the home to begin with. Maybe he was trying to protect her still.

"Wonder what they did," Alex muttered, sitting across the room from Carrie and Lemon with her long legs stretched out across the carpeted floor. Carrie's index finger still hung in the air as she motioned for the page to scroll down to the full article. "It doesn't seem fair to punish the kids for what the parents did wrong."

Lemon shot Alex a glance, as if she was worried Alex was going to start talking about Doe while Carrie nodded thoughtfully and continued moving her finger in the air to make the hologram scroll down to the next article in the database.

It was relatively easy to find information using the data pads, as the holo net was the only network available. There was no other option if you wanted to access the holo net without a

data pad, and vice versa. Since everything on the holo net was approved and allowed by government officials, everything you found was supposed to be true. But Alex had long since grown out of the phase where she believed everything she read on the holo net. When she had access to the data pads at the library, she remembered finding an old database full of ancient movies filmed with cameras and played for audiences in the times before the Culling. The plots and stories were familiar, and more than a little entertaining during her time in the summer when she didn't have classes during the day. There was one film she had enjoyed more than the others, but it wasn't a film of real people, the characters looked like they had been made from clay or something moldable. Alex thought she could see how fingers could be used to manipulate the figures and realized one day that it was an old form of animation, where each shot was a picture. When she watched it a second and third time, she realized how many shots and how much time the film had taken to make. Just the idea of someone spending years creating the figurines and sets, and then taking thousands of different photographs in order to tell a story; it seemed like so much work for an eighty minute film. Every time Alex saw a data pad flash on, she remembered the little clay figures and how someone had probably spent their entire life to create the film she enjoyed so much. Sometimes the data pads had their advantages, she admitted.

While Ruth went out of her way to avoid Alex or give her dirty looks, Alex tried her best to be polite, against Lemon's better attitude. She was more comfortable with confrontation than Alex was. In the time they had spend together at Alex's house, their friendship had gotten closer, despite Doe's absence. They often did chores together in the afternoon, enjoying the quiet comfortable silence that came with their duties.

"It's such a waste of food." Lemon murmured one afternoon while they had been working together planting vegetables into the garden in the backyard. She groaned, "Those little dogs eat better than I did when I was on the streets."

"You never really talk about that," Alex paused, not wanting to pry. The neighborhood was mostly silent, with only the sounds of birds chirping in the trees high above them. But the heat was starting to affect Alex, the collar of her dress was damp with sweat. "What living on the streets was like."

"What's to tell? You and I and Trevor were living on the streets before we got here." Lemon wiped her hand on her beige linen dress she had gotten from Carrie.

Elliot Norton had been right about Carrie, everyone seemed to love her. When she met the girls and realized they didn't have any decent dresses, she went to work immediately sewing garments from old curtains for Lemon and Alex. In the time they had been living there, she had made two dresses for Alex and three for Lemon from a few scraps of fabric. She had even made a pair of black pants for Trevor, despite him never asking. Lemon tried to pay her, but Carrie wouldn't take the money.

Trevor was the only one out of the three who had managed to find a temporary job, helping to fix up a neighbors' roof for a few weeks with a gang of other men. After they had finished, Trevor decided to keep helping the crew, and was now working on another house on the other side of the gated community. He told Alex and Lemon he wanted to try and save up as much as he could, for when they decided to leave. They still hadn't come up with a good plan, but Alex wanted to try California, like she had told Trevor before. They hadn't talked about her idea since they had left the boys school, which felt like a lifetime ago. But Alex reasoned, the whole state couldn't be a nuclear wasteland since Los Angeles was the only city to be nuked. She tried to reason it out, but Trevor didn't want to hear about it. Lemon was the only one willing to hear Alex out when she had brought the subject up.

"Yeah, but Trevor and I," Alex paused and shot Lemon a look while shading her eyes from the bright sunlight, "We looked like men. When you were in New York you were alone, and just a little bit older than Doe was."

Lemon looked up to the sky, as if she was remembering Doe for a minute. She made a good effort to put on a hard front, but she was just as vulnerable as everyone else, Alex realized. Alex wasn't one to talk about her problems, but neither was Lemon. Alex figured that's why they had become so close over the month spent together at the house without Doe. Doing chores and housework had made them into a quiet, but dependable team.

"I was so happy Doe came to me, instead of somewhere else." Her voice was low and slightly ominous. Lemon paused before looking back over to Alex, who was hunched over trying to pull a weed from the carrot patch. Lemon shook her head, ignoring whatever internal battle was waging. "Doe wouldn't have lasted a minute alone out there."

Alex nodded in agreement, she missed Doe, but she knew a world that was so harsh had no place for a girl as sweet as Doe had been. She was like a little flame of hope, snuffed out before fire could properly catch. They sat in silence for a few minutes before Lemon decided to speak her mind again.

"The streets are tough, they make you grow up real fast." Lemon kept looking at Alex, a vacant sadness in her gaze that spoke of not just vague horror, but personal experience. "But I didn't get sold into slavery or picked up by the Roaches, so it's safe to say I had a better time than most."

Alex didn't say anything, in her mind she already knew what Lemon was going to tell her. Little girls were rare on the street, and they were really only paid well for doing one thing. *I bet they either have to get good at that one thing, or die trying. It's just survival, after all.* Alex shuddered, trying not to imagine the life she had just narrowly avoided.

"I think you're smarter than most." She gave Lemon a weak half-smile. "You aren't just lucky, Lemon. You're smart and you know how to keep yourself safe."

"Yeah well I wasn't always like that." Lemon pursed her thin lips together and looked like she wanted to say something else before continuing. "After the first few pimps, I learned that working for myself was smarter; but not exactly safer. Then I learned some more. And you wanna know what the lesson was, in all that learning?"

Alex nodded, marveling at Lemon's candor.

"Being a girl fucking sucks."

Alex hesitated, blinking a few times and narrowing her eyebrows at Lemon. She didn't know where this was going, but she felt like the comment had been directed at her.

"That's why I don't understand you, I think. I keep wondering, why would anyone in this world wanna be a girl? It makes sense why a girl would try to pass as a boy, but not the other way around." Lemon paused, the words falling out before she could even manage to think about them. Her voice was hurried, rushed sentences falling on top of each other without time for Alex to digest them all. "And everybody knows you can get picked up by the Roaches for 'indecent' clothing, but you don't even seem to care."

"I care." Alex paused, trying to find the right words to explain what she was thinking. She inhaled slowly, "It's not that I 'want' to be a girl, that's not the right word. I know I am a girl, in my heart that's who I've always been."

"Even when you were pretending to be a boy at school." Lemon raised an eyebrow, as if Alex wasn't making sense. She didn't use the upward inflection indicating that her statement was a question, but rather just a statement itself.

"Even when I was pretending to be a boy at school." Alex raised her eyebrow to match Lemon's challenging glare. "If you ever dressed as a boy for safety, you would probably understand. It's like everyone sees you, but they don't really see you. Like they aren't really looking."

"I dressed up as a boy a few times." Lemon admitted after a minute of awkward silence, "I didn't like the feeling. Everyone treated me different, they ignored me. As a girl, you hardly ever get left alone. But at least I didn't feel like I was being watched all the time."

Alex blinked, wondering about Lemon's experience. Maybe she was right, in her own way. Men weren't supposed to want to be women, or to be seen in any way as 'feminine'. Men were supposed to be strong, women were supposed to be weak. The only reasons a man would pretend to be a woman would be to evade his responsibility to his family or country; it was a cowardly, criminal act. But a woman dressed as a man? That wasn't perverted, that was just a woman trying to blend in and survive.

"I wonder sometimes if you were right though, when you said all that time at a boys school would mess anyone up. Maybe you're right, and all those years affected me. Maybe I am, somehow, both." Alex practically whispered while sitting her knees down in the dirt, what she was saying sounded ludicrous. How was it possible to be male and female at the same time? She hated admitting that she didn't actually know as much as she let on, but she had known Lemon enough to feel like she was a safe person to unload on.

Lemon didn't say anything, she continued pulling the weeds that had gotten into the garden and tossing them to the side into the freshly-cut grass. Only a few carrots were beginning to grow, taking root in the dirt on the other side of the garden where they had planted them two weeks before. Little green buds sprouted forth from the ground and emerged like flowers blooming, only a few feet away from where they sat.

Alex had been pondering the idea for a few weeks, by the time she managed to work up the courage to talk to Ruth. After asking Olivia gently about why Ruth seemed to be ignoring her, Mrs Norton admitted Ruth had come to her asking questions about Alex when they first arrived. Her mother had explained everything, but Ruth didn't seem convinced by her reasoning. Mrs Norton tried to explain how Ruth felt about Alex, how Ruth had taken offense to her.

Apparently, Alex was just downright wrong. Ruth didn't approve of her clothing, her voice, the way she walked, the way she sat with her legs crossed; everything offended Ruth. Ruth seemed to believe Alex was playing pretend, 'masquerading' around as a woman, flaunting some sort of deviance she was convinced Alex possessed. Alex didn't know why, but she couldn't change everything about herself. Ruth's presence in her childhood home had darkened an otherwise beautiful reunion, as if Ruth herself was an officer for the Guardians of Morality. Alex felt like she had to tiptoe around, not wanting to give Ruth any more reason to be upset with her. But after nine years of imitating masculinity, Alex wasn't exactly ready to back down either.

Because of Ruth's coldness and the lack of space in the home, the three runaways needed to make a plan quickly to figure out what they could do next. Lemon told Trevor and Alex she was thinking about trying to get back to her grandmothers house, kicking squatters out and trying to get her old job at the pharmacy back. But Alex wanted to try their luck with California or rather, anywhere the Roaches wouldn't be looking for them. Trevor tried to get her away from that idea but Alex refused to believe her math was wrong, she knew her theory was possible. After a few discussions, the trio packed their bags and decided to map their way to the nearest heavy roadway, just in case. Without any further planning, Alex worked up her nerve and decided to talk to Ruth.

When Alex walked down the stairs and into the kitchen where she knew Ruth would be, she took a deep breath before stepping inside. Ruth turned, raising an eyebrow when she saw Alex standing in the doorway. She had a cup of black coffee in her hand, the steam rising in the air and curling around in the sunlight like it had a mind of its' own. The three little dogs were

laying at her feet, but started yawning and barking the minute Alex put her foot down on the tile flooring.

“Do you need something?” Ruth asked before she went to the back door and opened it a crack, letting out the three small dogs who seemed to be always clamoring around her ankles. Alex was glad to be rid of them for a few minutes, they could get so loud with their barking.

“Why do you hate me?” Her voice shook slightly. Alex hadn’t meant to just come out and ask it, she had prepared a whole list of talking points with Lemon and Trevor before she had even walked down the stairs. Her brain stopped functioning and she was only able to remember that, for some reason, this woman hated her.

“I don’t hate you.” Ruth sighed before leaning back against the kitchen countertop, placing her mug on the counter behind her. “I love your father, and I love our children. I’m sure I could love you, too.”

“So then what is it?” Alex found herself asking, shaking her head as if she didn’t believe Ruth. “Why don’t you like me?”

“It’s because you are committing a sin, child.” Alex felt the sting of her words, but it felt strange as Ruth reached a hand out to cup her face gently, as if she was her mother instead of Olivia. She stepped closer to Alex, looking directly into her eyes. “You have let yourself be tempted into a life of sin. Maybe Olivia thinks differently, but I see a young man who is struggling and confused.”

“I’m not confused, you don’t even know me.” Alex responded, trying to keep her temper from flaring. She didn’t want to get in a shouting match with one of her father’s new wives, especially one with strong religious convictions like Ruth. In reality, Alex was confused. But she didn’t want to show any validation and accidentally confirm Ruth’s suspicions.

Ruth continued as if Alex hadn’t said anything at all. Her voice was clear and solid, as if she had practiced saying everything Alex was now hearing. “I know you and that boy are laying together, I know you are both unwed, and I know that young woman who is traveling with you is scared out of her mind.”

Ruth moved her hand below Alex’s collarbone, over her heart. Alex felt extremely uncomfortable and she couldn’t understand how Ruth had made up her mind so quickly after just one meeting. She tried to pull away but her back was already pressed against the cabinet doors with Ruth standing in front of her. Her voice lowered slightly, “You can help her, that’s what young men do. Give her a good, happy life.”

“You want me to marry Lemon?” Alex found herself almost laughing by the time Ruth pulled her hand back and scowled at Alex. This was serious.

"You can laugh, but that girl is more of a woman than you will ever be." Ruth's words stung, but Alex tried to make sense of what she was actually saying. "That Lemon understands her place is beside a man, she understands the reality of the world we are all living in. She isn't trying to lie to herself or live in a fantasy where everyone can just act as they please. You are no better than God, to deny the life he has chosen for you. You think you are smarter than *He* is?"

Alex didn't know what to say to that. Ruth was wrong, but some part of her Alex feared was hitting on truth. *Am I just ignoring reality? Would everything be easier for everyone if I was a boy?* Ruth didn't have access to her medical documents, and even then Alex knew she wasn't in a position to truly make a distinction. If Alex was right, then why was Ruth so convinced she was wrong?

"I'm not playing dress-up, or pretending to be a woman." Alex finally managed to respond as Ruth turned around and opened the back door allowing all three dogs to come back inside, their nails scraping against the tile floor of the kitchen. They instantly started barking and Alex watched as they circled around Ruth's slippered feet. She raised her voice slightly, "I am a woman. Maybe I don't look like one to you, but I am. I don't need to prove myself to you."

Ruth raised her eyebrow, as if she didn't believe Alex was actually convinced she herself was a woman. She turned to pick her mug of coffee back up. "Women are more than dresses and long hair. We don't need you mocking us while we are doing our duty to our husbands and to God. We aren't a joke."

"Women are also more than wives and mothers, more than Caregivers." Alex didn't realize Trevor had found his way into the kitchen, as he hung lazily from the doorway leading into the living room. Ruth and Alex both turned defensively when he spoke, startled as if the man had come to punish them for arguing too loud. "They are sisters, and lovers, workers and healers, and people. Who are you, to define what a woman is?"

Ruth raised an eyebrow, "I am an actual woman."

"Oh, I apologize, I didn't realize Alex let you examine her genitals to make sure."

"You are both fooling yourselves." Ruth huffed angrily and quickly hurried out of the kitchen, carrying her mug of coffee back upstairs with the three schnauzers trailing behind her. Alex grinned at Trevor, as if in victory. She had never felt more proud to have him as her best friend. He smiled back, pulling his arms down and reaching for her the way he had so many times before. She folded into his hug, letting him kiss her softly on the forehead- a more intimate gesture than she would have liked but she was elated after feeling like she had won an argument with Ruth. I missed him so much.

In that moment, she was grateful to have his presence. Even if Ruth was just walking back upstairs to tell Elliot his daughter was not allowed to stay there anymore, and that she was

a perverted deviant, Alex felt satisfied with Trevor's arms wrapped around her. She felt like she was home.

Chapter 20: random Lemon POV

"You had it right when you asked Emily before, it's only twice a year," Lemon spoke softly, resting her shoulders against Alex's legs as Alex wove her fingers through Lemon's blonde hair, sectioning off parts for a braid after detangling each strand carefully. "But I never experienced what Emily did at the NRP. If they ever took genetic material, I didn't know it. Nothing ever hurt."

That's not entirely true. Lemon flicked her gaze to Trevor, sitting across from him on the floor. Her appointments were uncomfortable, invasive, intrusive, but not physically painful. She remembered the dark windowless rooms, the way the doctors and nurses wouldn't look her in the eye, and the feeling of her thighs and abdomen clenching when she walked home afterwards. Something about those appointments felt inhumane.

"With that being said," Lemon paused as Alex pulled a chunk of blonde hair from her face. "It wasn't exactly a pleasant experience. If I could choose to be unenrolled, like you guys are, I totally would."

Lemon regretted the words as soon as she had spoken them, but neither Trevor or Alex made any sign they were offended. She often wondered about them, and their inability to donate or have kids. Hell, she thought, Alex probably can't even get married.

"Twice a year still seems like a lot, considering." Trevor's nose was scrunched as if he had smelled something rotten. To Lemon, it seemed like his attitude had changed in the short time they had known each other. After the deaths of Doe and Emily, Trevor became quieter as if he was a different person than the boy who had started this journey months ago, more traumatized and less optimistic.

"You don't ever have to go," Alex reminded him curtly. "You can tell him to shut up, I promise he won't get upset."

"No it's fine," Lemon waved a hand over her face as she heard distant voices arguing downstairs. She cocked her head to the side, much to Alex's frustration, listening. It sounded like a man and a woman, maybe Alex's parents were having a heated discussion in the kitchen. "But now that I'm on the run, I'll be missing my next appointment. If the Roaches aren't after me now, they will then."

"That's so stupid," Alex lowered her voice as she tied off the bottom of Lemon's long braid. "If you had the money, my mom said you can just get a doctor to write you an exemption."

“The rich don’t have to follow the rules,” Lemon paused as she looked down at the fading carpet. “I remember it. Your family isn’t even that wealthy, probably because they are actually good people. If your dad wasn’t so caring, you’d definitely be richer.”

There was a tense moment of silence as the couple downstairs stopped arguing at the same time Lemon finished speaking. Trevor watched her from across the room, trying to understand before he cleared his throat awkwardly and asked, “So you approve of all this?”

Alex put her hands in her lap, and Lemon hesitated as she chose her words carefully. “Not really. But what’s the alternative? Just go back to my grandma’s house and pray I don’t become the next Emily?”

Lemon paused again as she watched the look of hurt cross Trevor’s features at mention of Emily. She shook her head, dropping her eyes to the carpet again. “I can’t go back there now. Not now that they killed Doe, too. She didn’t deserve that, she was innocent.”

The comment came out before she had a chance to stop it, but the look of resignation that passed over Trevor’s face made her realize she hadn’t been the only one thinking it. Doe was innocent. Doe didn’t do anything wrong and they still killed her for the choice her parents made.

“That might never happen,” Alex said quietly from behind Lemon, her hands moving to rest on Lemon’s shoulders as if reminding her she was still in the room. As she whispered, Trevor’s gaze flicked to the cracked door as the sound of footsteps on the stairs alerted them to another approaching presence. After their escape from the Roaches, all three of them had remained jumpy for months, unable to properly rest or relax even when staying inside the house. Lemon sat up, and Alex’s hands fluttered as if she wasn’t sure where she should put them.

As the door opened fully and the light from the hallway illuminated the shadows in the guest bedroom, Alex’s father stepped into the room and immediately eyed his daughter sitting behind Lemon. Trevor seemed to stiffen, rising to his knees and standing up as he entered the room.

“Dad what’s going on?” Alex lifted herself up and Lemon followed, standing by Trevor in the shadows. He pulled his daughter into a tight hug but flicked his gaze to Lemon and Trevor, eyes bright with intensity.

“Can either of you drive a car?” His eyes shot from Trevor to Lemon, as if pleading with them. Lemon stiffened, she recognized the immense threat before the others.

“A helicar?” Trevor asked incredulously, blinking like a spotlight had been shined on him. Lemon almost pitied him, as she watched him. She didn’t know a lot of men, and she had never known a black man before. She couldn’t help but confront her prior ideas of black men as a

danger, much like the vocal way Emily had. Trevor and Alex were not something she ever expected.

Elliot Norton shook his head as Alex stared at him, mouth agape. To Lemon, it looked as if Alex was still trying to understand what was happening, the wheels in her head turning.

"I can, I used to drive my grandma to her doctor's appointments." Lemon's voice was clear, authoritative. Elliot Norton locked eyes on her, as if she were a shining beacon of hope.

"Dad!" Alex's tone shifted into something more urgent as she watched her father and Lemon share a silent, unbroken gaze. "What is happening?"

Elliot looked to his daughter, he smiled and his eyes sparkled as if on the verge of tears. A harsh pang of jealousy ricocheted through Lemon, the same as when she had seen Alex embrace her mother after ten years of separation. She hated admitting it, but Lemon missed her family too.

"Alex, I am so sorry. I love you." He hesitated, cupping her cheek. "Ruth is going to call the Guardians tonight. You need to leave, now."

Alex stared at her father, blinking as if she hadn't heard him correctly. Fumbling in his pockets, he pulled out a wad of paper bills, not bothering to count them before handing them over to his daughter who stared at them awkwardly.

"You need to get somewhere safe. Go west, go anywhere the Guardians can't find you." He gave a weak smile to Alex as she began shaking her head in refusal. "Yes Alex. You can't stay here anymore."

"Dad..." Alex hesitated, looking back up to her father and Lemon could tell she was on the verge of tears again. Childishly, Alex sounded broken, like a toddler refusing to accept responsibility. She choked back her tears as Elliot pulled her into another hug.

Lemon felt as if she should look away. The intimacy being shared between father and daughter was too much to bear, it was too personal to watch. She looked down at her feet, mind racing while thinking of their previous plans for escape. With gasoline and a car, we might actually be able to get someplace safe. We could cross the border into Nevada.

"Baby, do you remember what I told you when you left for school?" Elliot only had eyes for Alex now, but she said nothing so he continued. "I told you that you'd always be Alex. No matter what anyone says or thinks, you will always be my Alex. I will always be your father. And I will always love you."

"I'm sorry, Dad." Lemon watched at Alex sobbed, like a child, into the front of her fathers' shirt. "I'm so sorry."

"No, no, no, Alex this isn't your fault. None of this is your fault." Elliot rubbed his palm over Alex's shuddering spine and shoulders, her head hunched down to hide her tears.

Trevor stepped forward, as if to comfort Alex before he stopped himself. Lemon glanced at him, the concern written clearly on his face as he watched. He is used to comforting her.

Suddenly curious, Lemon allowed her mind to wander, drifting to the questions she still had about her two traveling companions. I wonder if he knew about her, before they fell in love? *How would I react if the person I fell in love with told me they were actually a different gender?* She watched Trevor's expression, the way his eyes softened when Alex straightened up to face her father. *He really is smitten with her.*

By the time Alex had calmed down, Lemon had already mentally planned their route out. They worked slowly and methodically, packing up their bags and noting the nearest gas stations on the foldout maps. The group waited until nightfall before beginning to load their belongings into the Norton's old family van. Dented and rusted, the vehicle had been maintained as best as possible although all three if them plus Alex's parents had to push it down the street until they reached the guard's post.

Elliot made small chatter with the guard as Alex gave her mother a tearful goodbye, finally sliding open the back door and climbing inside as Lemon turned the key in the ignition and the engine rolled over. Cautiously, Lemon eased her foot off the brake as the van lurched forward into the unknown.

Part 2

Chapter 21:

During their first day on the road, Alex decided she wanted to stop for a hitchhiker. She wasn't usually so trusting, but the hitchhiker had a child at his side and he reminded her of the little boy who had been clinging to his one-eyed older brothers' leg back at the shelter before the raid.

His sad face reminded her a little of Doe, too.

When Alex opened the sliding door of the van, the man pushed the boy behind his back defensively and Alex recognized the fear in his eyes. He looked how Alex had felt when she was with Doe, trying to keep her safe, willing to do anything to protect her. Lemon had initially argued with Alex over stopping, but once she saw the fear in the little boy's face she softened up quickly. Her mouth snapped shut the moment the side door slid open.

"It's okay." Lemon said to the man, who was glancing wildly between Alex and Trevor sitting in the front driver's seats and Lemon who had been trying to nap in the back row. She

adjusted herself, sliding into the middle row to allow the man and boy to see she meant them no harm. "I'm Lemon. Do you guys need a ride somewhere?"

The man didn't say anything at first, but Lemon bent down and opened a bag of food they had packed at Alex's house. It had been supposed to last the entire trip to Nevada, but Lemon could see the little boy needed it more than they did. Peeking out from behind the older man's legs, presumably his father, he looked to be just a little bit younger than Doe was. Lemon pulled out a sandwich that had been wrapped up in the plastic cooler and offered it in an outstretched hand to the child.

"Are you guys going to the border?" The man finally asked as the child poked his head into the van and the back again, as if he was afraid the door would shut on the top of his sandy blonde head. He had been expressly told never to accept food from strangers in vehicles. But he looked hungry and willing to do whatever the stranger asked him, had the gruff-looking man not been there protecting him. The little boy looked up to the man, presumably his biological father, for permission before moving.

"Yeah," Lemon nodded as the man gave a nudge to the boy, letting him step up inside the van hesitantly.

"Daddy?" The little boy practically whispered to his father as he crawled in behind the child and plopped down beside Lemon in the middle row of the upholstered seating. "Is this a spaceship?"

The man gave his son a weak smile and Lemon let herself relax as the door slid closed and Alex shifted the van back into drive. The two were wary, but they needed rest and food more than anything else. They couldn't afford to not trust strangers. Slavers looking for kids often used women to disarm potential victims. But the father thought two women and one man looked less alarming than most travelers on the road.

"I'm Mark, that's my son, David." The father gestured his arms protectively around his son. He looked like he relaxed slightly but Lemon could tell his guard was still up. She handed the little boy the sandwich and he started to unwrap the plastic like it was the best gift he could have ever received. Mark murmured back down to David, "No, this is a car. I've told you about them, remember?"

Mark was tall, almost the same height as Trevor was, but he looked older and had a slight beard growing in, brown stubble dotting his chin like ants had crawled onto his face. Mark had dark brown eyes and a crooked nose that looked like it had been broken before and never healed properly. He was whiter than Trevor was, but the little boy had a darker complexion than his father did, with undertones of gold and copper while Mark's was more pink. David's hair was a lighter shade than his father's brown locks, but the similarities were obvious even to the untrained eye. Alex wondered if the child was illegal but didn't turn around to ask. She was doing her best to focus on driving and not making any sudden movement to freak out their new

passengers. What was the point in confirming what she already knew? Everyone was just trying to survive and there was little point in judging the actions of others after everything she had seen.

“We’re trying to get to the desert.” Trevor offered in a soft voice, hoping Mark had information he would be willing to share. That was just as good of a trade if nothing else, the group had realized. “Have you seen any Roaches around lately?”

“Guardians?” Mark looked confused. “They don’t come out here all that much unless they have to.”

Alex and Trevor shared a look discreetly, that was good news. Maybe they would be able to find some safe place to stay, some way to make money and contact Alex’s family to let them know they were alright. Alex knew Mr Norton wanted to help them more than he had, but they didn’t have the expenses for it. All her father’s extra money went to his wives and kids, to make their lives more comfortable. Alex supposed that made him a good man, he was a loyal husband and father. Despite her personal thoughts about polygamy, she had to admit Elliot Norton was trying to be a good man the only way he knew how.

David was too busy inhaling his sandwich to talk, but if he could he would have mentioned he hadn’t seen a Roach since his mother had been killed. David was six years old, a few years younger than Doe had been when she died. Mark and David had been on the run for a while, only recently trying their luck in Nevada after fleeing from the state of Washington after the Guardians of Morality killed Mark’s wife and David’s mother a year before.

Mark explained hastily, he needed to find a good job somewhere. No one was hiring in the big cities anymore, the only options were black markets or slave wages. But he had a young son, and he wasn’t able to leave David alone even while out looking for employment. He couldn’t bring himself to imagine selling himself into indentured servitude just for the sake of David, although sometimes the idea was tempting. He didn’t mention his wife’s death, but Lemon heard it in the silence. Mark was determined to keep his son close, protected. She was starting to be able to recognize the stone-faced expression everyone on the road had, like shell shock. Lemon saw it herself when she looked in the mirror. Everyone had suffered some horrible, traumatic loss.

Mark and David made good traveling companions once everyone started talking. For the first few hours, everyone seemed pretty wary of each other. But by the next evening after sleeping in the car together once already and smelling each other’s fowl odor for the day and a half, the group seemed a little more trusting of one another. Mark knew how to drive, it turned out, and offered to take them across the border. Having Trevor and Mark made it look like they were just two normal couples out for a road trip. David immediately attached to Lemon and asked to sit in her lap in the front passenger seat while his father was driving. His trusting attitude with Lemon reminded Alex of the time she had spent with Doe; how Doe had almost instantly decided Alex was trustworthy despite her looking like a boy at the time they first met.

By the time the small group of five managed to turn into a rest stop for a nap, Mark offered to stay sitting with David in the driver's seat and keep a lookout. It was difficult to fall asleep, with the little boy pretending he was driving a starship in deep space. But after David managed to dose off, everyone else did too. No one had wanted to interrupt David playing pretend, maybe they were wishing the van had actually been a spaceship so David could have really gotten them away from GSDA jurisdiction and launched somewhere into deep space.

By the third day, the group starting running low on food. That also happened to be the afternoon they made it across the Nevada state line and the van broke down. Once they managed to get it running again they had wasted six hours at the rest stop waiting in the heat and conspicuously looking around for any Roaches who might decide to drive by. After Mark drove them through the Nevada state border, they stopped again along the side of the road for Lemon to switch back to the driver's seat before the group heard a noise coming from the bushes off the side of the highway.

David immediately jumped to hide inside the van, using a small blanket to throw over his head before a scared and thin looking couple walked out of their spot, hidden in bushes next to the side of the highway. Further under the thicket of branches and fallen leaves, the couple had two sleeping bags and their dwindling provisions of food. The only reason the woman came out from her hiding despite her husband's judgment was because she had seen David, sticking his head out of the van talking excitedly to his father and Lemon. It had been weeks since she had seen a child.

"I'm sorry, we didn't mean to scare you." The woman's voice caught Alex's attention first and she turned to find two people, thin and hungry looking standing a few feet away from where the van was parked. The woman had short brown hair and bags under her eyes, matching her husband standing beside her. They looked to be in their late twenties, and Alex caught herself wondering what had happened to them and how long they had been on the run for. They looked like they could have been from somewhere in Asia, with matching almond shaped eyes and a porcelain skin-tone. They hadn't met any Asians on the road so far. The couple stood just a little bit shorter than Alex and Lemon, but they both had the same straight dark hair. The women spoke up again, with a shaky nervous voice. "My husband thought you were Roaches."

"Are there Roaches out here?" Mark was the first one to speak up, seemingly not intimidated by the couple who had emerged from the bushes. It was two versus four and a half, that was including David who was currently hiding in the van with a blanket over his head. Mark was sure he could fight the couple away, if he had to. He wasn't sure what the woman's intentions were just yet. While he had warmed up to trusting Alex, Lemon, and Trevor, this was an entirely new set of people and he didn't want to push his luck. Lemon was also squaring up her shoulders, ready to tackle the woman if anyone dared make an aggressive move. She had only been with David for a few days, but she was ready to throw herself on the line to protect the child just like Mark had been doing his entire life. Lemon was fierce, like that. If Mark had any

doubt about trusting her, seeing the fire in her eyes made it clear that she was just as strong as he was.

“A group came by yesterday, they raided the homeless shelter a few miles away.” The man spoke with a feeble voice, but hesitated like he had more he wanted to say. “We’ve been looking for a way to get down to the Mojave desert.”

“Join the club.” Alex smiled, being the first to stick out her hand and welcome the couple into their growing traveling group. Alex felt the tension in Lemon and Marks’ posture, and she was quick to try and diffuse the situation, not seeing any risk in the couple. She was the most trusting of the group, and Trevor admired that about her. The couple seemed just as hungry and tired as Mark and David had looked when Alex had picked them up. She stuck her other thumb out, pointing to each person as she named them. “I’m Alex. That’s Lemon, Trevor, and Mark and his son David.”

“He’s hiding in the car.” Mark explained, sticking his hand out after Alex finished with the introductions. Mark and David had much better odds of surviving if they had more people around to watch each others backs. He made a mental note to watch the couple, to make sure they didn’t try to steal or attempt anything while the others slept. But Mark didn’t need to worry, the man and woman were desperate. They had lost their home when the husband was fired from his job, with no place to go once they were evicted. They were forced to sell their only handheld data pad a few weeks ago just for a box of disposable tampons.

“I’m Joseph, that’s my wife Eliza.” The man paused before clearing his throat and speaking again in a louder cadence. “Do you have land out there too?”

When the couple climbed in the back row of the van, David hesitantly crawled out from under the blanket and was warily looking at the new strangers from Lemon’s seat in the middle row. As everyone struggled to get comfortable, Alex caught Eliza making faces at David. She stuck her tongue between his lips and crossed her eyes and the child was just staring at her, like he had no idea how she could possibly be making such a face. He didn’t look scared, but rather perplexed. Alex tried to focus on the road, but she couldn’t help but notice from her rearview mirror when Eliza folded her tongue and puffed up her cheeks, looking even sillier for the amazed David. He laughed loudly.

“You have land? Wow.” Alex raised her brown eyebrows, not all that surprised, wondering if the couple had real money or not. She was wishing one day the van would run into a kind and friendly rich person, willing to let the group of contaminated homeless people live on his yacht or guest house in return for work. Yeah, they would be technically slaves, but the whole point was to survive. Although the thought of leaving behind Trevor or David made her somewhat fearful, but she continued anyway. “We were just trying to put as much distance between ourselves and the Roaches as possible.”

“The Mojave is the best place for that.” Eliza spoke softly before giving a smile to David who was still sitting on his father’s lap in the row of seats in front of the couple, still watching her face warily. She kept her gaze fixed on him when she said, “You should come stay with us.”

Joseph elbowed his wife and she gave him a scowl. He turned his head back around and gazed uncertainly out the window, as if he was worried. It occurred to Alex that Eliza only offered the information once she had seen the little boy again. Maybe Eliza had a soft spot for kids, like Lemon and Alex did. Alex was still learning the homeless and illegal children were not actually a threat, just a sad reminder of a broken system. Most people on the road took pity on them. Alex wondered what kind of person would actually call the Roaches on a child, it seemed so inhumane even if they were genetically inferior. At this point, they were no different from her.

“In the middle of the Mojave desert?” David raised an eyebrow incredulously. Since making it to the border, he hadn’t given anyone any ideas of what to do next. He seemed just as directionless as the rest of the group. The only thing he wasn’t willing to do was leave David for any reason. The two of them had gotten this far without being separated, Mark was eager to give David some semblance of a normal childhood. But he had no idea how he would be able to do such a thing, David hadn’t been able to make friends or go to school. He had no other children his own age to confide in. Mark knew as David grew older that would become a bigger problem than it was at present.

“It’s really not much.” Joseph quickly tried to walk back his wife’s statement. “It’s just a few acres, there’s no buildings or outhouses or anything yet. It’s just desert.”

“Well I know how to repair roofing and stuff, I could probably help build a house or two if I had somebody who knew what they were doing.” Trevor spoke up from the front passenger seat before turning his body around to look at everyone sitting behind him. His gaze landed on Mark being the likely candidate for that task. Mark rolled his eyes nonchalantly but didn’t interrupt to say he wasn’t capable. “Besides Alex and Lemon have been helping in the garden, they know how to grow food and forage for stuff we might need.”

“Yeah, let’s just build our own commune in the middle of nowhere.” Mark said sarcastically, as he rolled his eyes but at present there were no better ideas to be had.

~~time skip?~~

Chapter 22: Fertilization

Lemon became like a surrogate mother for David, who had lost his own mother years before they began to settle in the desert. Mark hadn’t been looking to meet anyone new, he felt like some part of himself would never learn to love another person the way he had his wife. But in the time spent growing and building their little community on their spot of land in the Mojave, Lemon and Mark had become good friends. They were similar, in the way they both reserved talking about the horrible things that had shaped them growing up. Only after building trust and

the actual foundations for the structures which would dot the landscape, had Mark and Lemon began to allow themselves to be vulnerable each other fully. They were secretive about their relationship, Lemon just starting to understand why Alex and Trevor had hid theirs for so long. Love was a precious thing, easily wiped out in the barren desert tundra.

The first building to be erected on the land owned by Joseph and Eliza was a large communal room. It started as an informal mess hall, where sleeping bags would be spread out under the thatched roofing before the rest of the cabins were built. During that first year of construction and growth, Trevor had managed to find two other families with young illegal children to move in and set up residence. Most were mixed couples, but he had also brought back a few runaways, like he and Alex had once been. Although she hated when he left to go scouting, a ball of pride would well up in her stomach when she would catch sight of him trudging back to the little camp with a few strays trailing behind him.

After the communal garden and latrine were created, the atmosphere shifted into something more akin to play than actual work. By the end of the long days, everyone was tired from exhaustion, men and women alike. After a few weeks of construction, more small two room homes sprung up accommodating the new and old families alike just in time for the seasons to start shifting.

The land was big enough for several more people, but growing food in the desert turned out to be harder than Lemon or Alex had suspected with winter fast approaching. Luckily, they still had Doe's book which gave them enough knowledge to find edible plants growing in the area. A few times a week, Alex would lead little nature walks with the children, showing them how to spot wild prickly pear and agave growing in the dirt within the borders of the small, fenced-in community. After the cold evenings, Alex began to take the older kids outside of the border, hiking deeper into the desert and creating small trails in the brush. Even in the short days of the winter months, they were still able to forage and scrounge up enough food to keep the entire community satiated.

The fence had been the first real structure to be erected before the informal dining room, standing tall around the perimeter of the land and made of thick aluminum and hardwood that Eliza and Joseph had bought with the last of their cash from the local hardware store. The fence had been the most costly structure too, with three openings and exits, only one large enough to accommodate the van. The adults patrolled the entrances in shifts, each night on lookout for stragglers or Roaches. In the time since setting up, they had fielded off one attack by a group of homeless trying to set fire to the fence itself. Luckily, Rocky and Leon, who had made home in the community came armed, and preached the importance of understanding how firearms worked. Children were also instructed on how to fire guns and hunt small game like roadrunners and jackrabbits, once they were old enough and had the maturity to understand how death and killing worked. When Alex or Lemon took their little hunting parties past the fence, they'd typically catch a jackrabbit or two before finding their way to an old scraggly Pinyon Pine tree that twisted before the hillside.

A few little girls were upset with the idea of hunting, and were set on having the boys protect them. One family in particular, had three young girls which apparently believed they didn't need to learn any valuable skills because they would always have a man around to protect them. They had been raised thinking they needed to only appeal to men, in order to have their needs fulfilled and kept safe. They weren't exactly wrong for believing such, but they valued the wrong things. While the other adults in the community didn't seem to know how to react to those beliefs Alex was able to get through to the youngest sister, little doe-eyed Molly. She became the first child of Alex's informal cross-dressing educational lessons.

As well as foraging and firearm education, the little girls of the community learned how to walk, talk, dress, and act, as little boys. The adults knew the horrible reality for unhoused children, and were determined to have their children understand the danger they faced when they had no adults around to protect them. When Alex propositioned the adults with her idea, most of the parents jumped on board willingly. Long hair was shaved short and tears were shed, but the lessons Alex taught the little girls went a long way to teach them how to survive, if they were ever to be caught alone and unprepared. At least they could avoid a life of sexual slavery on the street, although such a fate wasn't reserved for female children alone. When the kids began to fully play into their roles as boys, the little girls found they enjoyed the freedom of contact sports and hunting small game with the other children. It was like a switch was turned, and they allowed their fierce competitive attitudes to overwhelm feminine duties. The other little boys didn't seem to mind or comment, when previously pretty classmates showed up covered in mud to the dining hall. As long as they understood who they were on the inside, Alex facilitated the play and exploration. Most of the boys enjoyed teaching their fellow 'new boys' and had developed quasi-apprenticeships where they taught each other how to do various tasks in a masculine way. Mark's son, David, had been hanging around with Molly and enjoyed teaching her to yell obscene words; which he swore was something men did all the time.

The children seemed to keep arriving. Joseph and Eliza were the first to finish construction on their cabin, and likewise Eliza was the first to get pregnant and welcome a beautiful set of twin girls, which they named Poppy and Ivy. Joseph was as excited as anyone had ever seen him to be, with one girl under each arm introducing them as the newest members of the small community. The men clapped him on the back and the women fawned over Poppy and Ivy, showering the new parents with all kinds of handmade presents and gifts. Alex was astonished when Trevor announced he had made Eliza a proper rocking chair and they went into Joseph's small two room home where it had already been secretly placed before the couple could notice. It was a beautiful piece of furniture, made of expensive white birch Trevor had bought with the leftover roofing money he had earned while staying at Alex's house with her family. Eliza was the first to sit in it, a small tear shimmering at the corner of her eye when she looked up at Trevor and thanked him for the most beautiful gift she had ever received. While Alex had been busy helping with the planting and harvesting during the days, she hadn't noticed Trevor busy constructing something over by the communal dining hall with the other men. As well as the white rocking chair, some of the other fathers and children had helped construct a double-wide crib for the two babies to sleep comfortably in, separated only by a few thin pieces of dark wood. When Joseph finally put the little girls down in the new crib, Ivy immediately

reached her hand through the wooden bars to grab her sister protectively. Poppy started to cry, noticing her sibling was imprisoned in the crib just as she was before Eliza rushed over and pulled them both out after the sounds of crying.

One of the first families to be offered refuge in the community was an African American couple with their three young adopted sons. With tight dark coiled hair and deep brown eyes, the family looked almost related.

The husband, Leon, had been previously employed at the NRP, he wasn't a geneticist but he was one of the employees who helped select women for Motherhood within their local community. He had been employed for fifteen years and had been married with his wife for the last thirteen, they had adopted three boys together and seemed like the perfect family to an outside observer. No one could tell they were hardly making it by each month.

It wasn't until Leon searched for his wife's information in the GSDA database one lazy afternoon he came to the horrifying realization they were both half siblings. He had actually married someone he was related to. They had the same biological mother who donated genetic material, or who had birthed them both just a few years apart. When Leon learned the truth and confronted his sister-wife, Rocky, a weeks-long fight ensued. She refused to believe what she knew already to be true, trying to avoid the reality of her husband also being her brother. But then a part of her began to understand the reasons why fornication was illegal under the NRP. God forbid they had tried to have their own biological child without ever knowing the truth of their parentage. She loved her husband but in the back of her mind, Rocky worried if that love had always been familial.

Leon went searching for answers and found them in the Mojave, with Alex and Trevor. He spent a few days with them, trading what he had for fresh vegetables before heading back home to tell Rocky what he had found. Coming home with a cheerful attitude was a rarity while the family struggled so much to pay the bills each month. Rocky was intrigued by what her husband said he had found. The whole family didn't come immediately but once Rocky knew Leon had found a safe place to take their three sons, they starting planning. Even after the turbulence she trusted her husband/half-brother more than she trusted anyone else, knowing the family they built would survive against the odds. The community being constructed in the Mojave had food and fresh water, protection from Roaches and other children their sons ages. Leon saw it as the perfect escape route, away from the forbidden knowledge that he had discovered and wanted nothing to do with now. Rocky agreed, thinking any future away from the fear of Roaches was better than the one they were losing now. She was aware that their complex relationship and problems would follow them across the desert.

Leon and Rocky brought their three boys with them for a new future after Leon stopped reporting into work at his local NRP office and the couple abandoned their generational home without being able to continue making payments. Once Leon broached the idea of raising their children away from the watchful eye of the GSDA, Rocky relented partly because she wanted to get her boys out of the area where they might accidentally fall in love with their blood relatives without knowing, as she and Leon had done. It was a morbid, but proved realistic, fear. Rocky

thought the best way possible to avoid that fate was to get them away from the GSDA and their Guardians. Since they were going to lose their house anyway, she couldn't think of a better plan. They decided to come to the small desert community where they were welcome.

When the whole family first arrived, all five skinny and malnourished, they had all of their worldly possessions on their backs. The kids hauled whatever they could carry, but with the foresight of the danger they would face on the open road the family had walked the trek well-armed. Rocky made jokes about the community not having any good way to defend themselves, before she and her husband came and joined bringing two rifles and several more handguns with them. Alex and Trevor came to appreciate Rocky and Leon and their guns, if not for the fact the boys had already been incredibly well trained around firearms and they already knew how to use them. The boys were mature enough, they knew not to play with guns or try and bring them out to show off to the other kids. Rocky and Leon had raised them well, showing them enough discipline for all three children to understand what was expected of them in the world.

Leon and Rocky set a good example for their three boys by always helping out whenever work needed to be done. If a roof caved in after a storm or part of the fence got ruined, Leon and Rocky would be the first to volunteer aid or assistance. Over time, their three boys Moses, Jonathan, and youngest Kieth (who preferred to be called 'KD') became the best students in Alex's small nature walks and lessons. Moses was always sitting in the front of the group and yelling out answers to questions before the question had been fully spoken, Alex adored his inquisitiveness. Moses reminded her of Trevor, not just because they had the same chocolate skin tone and dark curls, but because of their similar scientific curiosity about the world.

KD was the youngest and quietest, but he was no less intelligent than his brothers, Alex realized one afternoon during their bi-weekly nature walk. Some of the other children had gone ahead on the trail to scope out the hillside while everyone else was resting for lunch under the Pinyon Pine tree. The old Pinyon Pine became an informal picnic spot, where the majority of the small trails away from the community led under its thick branches. That day, they had made their way up the path in order to bury some important provisions within its massive root system. In case something happened to the community, they would have food and water buried in the desert under the old Pinyon Pine.

Suddenly cutting through the silence came a shrill shriek from up the hill and Alex bolted upright. Several little kids came running back down the hillside and she jogged to meet them as they all started excitedly yelling at the same time, about a snake coiled in the dirt. The only word she could hear was 'snake' as she made her way up the path to try and find it. The path curved upward when she reached the cursed reptile, KD had already started poking it with a long bent stick he had found in the bushes. He hunched down closer to it than any of the other kids dared, crouched on his knees with the branch extended from his arm confidently pointing toward the pale devil in the dirt.

“Careful KD!” Alex couldn’t help but raise her voice as she saw the pointed horns above the eyes of the snake as it coiled menacingly. It’s head was shaped like an arrow and Alex felt an immediate jolt of adrenaline. “That thing is poisonous!”

KD looked at Alex as if she had said something stupid, before he turned his attention back to the snake. It was lightly colored, with little dark diamond patterns on it’s back. As the snake coiled itself tighter and started shaking its tail menacingly, Alex immediately recognized the rattling sound as danger. It was louder than she thought it was supposed to be, serving its’ intended purpose of scaring her backwards.

KD poked the snake fearlessly and it lunged foreword without warning, trying to strike at the branch to no avail. Alex jumped at the sudden movement and tried to go forward to KD to stop him before he spoke. KD hadn’t expected the strike either, but he recovered quicker than the rest of the kids or Alex did. “It’s not poisonous.”

“It’s a rattlesnake KD, stop touching it.” Alex pleaded as she watched KD step a little closer to the coiled snake. It kept rattling its’ tail as a warning and Alex didn’t want to find out how deadly they actually were. She had no clue how much anti-venom would cost them, most definitely more than they had saved up by trading with other families and communities in the year since they had settled down in the desert.

“It’s a sidewinder.” KD shrugged, like that was an important distinction which needed to be made. “He’s not poisonous. He’s venomous. If you bite it and you die, its poison. If it bites you and you die, that’s venom.”

Little Molly walked closer over to KD, like she was trying her best to be brave. Her hair was growing back and Alex recognized it from her awkward days staying at her parent’s house with Lemon and Trevor. It was just long enough to get into a small ponytail at the base of the girls’ neck. She looked slightly afraid, but as if she was trying to bite back her instincts by learning about what scared her. The snake rattled its’ noisemaker loudly again, kicking up dirt where it lay.

Molly asked quietly, “What happens if it bites you, and then dies itself?”

“Then you should probably cook it up and eat it.” KD answered nonchalantly as Alex managed to get behind him and pull him away by the shoulders. “It’s free food.”

Molly giggled but Alex could tell that wasn’t the answer she had been expecting to hear. Alex grabbed the stick from KD’s grip and flung it down the hillside away from the trail where he couldn’t find it again, while he was distracted and walking down back to the path. He looked at Alex as if he was upset, but then thought better of saying anything. KD looked down at the ground, as if he had done something bad while Alex led the group back down to the rest of the kids who were still chatting and finishing their lunch. Shaded from the afternoon sun, the other

kids lingered under the Pinyon Pine Tree with concerned expressions seeing KD walking with Alex and looking downward like he was in trouble.

“How did you get so good at knowing who is poi-“ Alex stopped and corrected herself before continuing, the dirt crunching beneath their footsteps. “I’m sorry, venomous. How did you know exactly what kind of snake that was?”

KD shrugged as Alex guided him and the other kids back down the hill and away from the rattlesnake. When they got back to the safety of the Pinyon Pine, he responded quietly, “I don’t know. I’m good at snakes. I like reptiles.”

Alex made a note of this and decided she would ask Leon and Rocky about his affinity for snakes later.

Chapter 23: Harvest

“Oh he’s always been into snakes, ever since he was little.” Rocky pushed a strand of her jet-black hair behind one ear and smoothed the creases in her cream colored handmade dress. Her dark hair was chemically relaxed, hanging down to her shoulders as if it had been flattened by an iron. The couple was a decade older than Alex and Trevor, in their late thirties with a seemingly more mature attitude. “Leon and I caught him outside with a gopher snake when he was just a toddler. He didn’t even cry when it bit him. But then again, Kieth has never been much of a crier.”

Alex was surprised but she shouldn’t have been. KD was quiet but he wasn’t any less smart than any of the other kids Alex had been informally teaching. It seemed obvious to his parents that he was ‘different’ from the other boys. He had excelled in math and life science at the public school they attended before coming to the desert community. But he had a hard time reading and writing, he explained, the letters got all mixed up in his head and he couldn’t understand the words. Alex taught him to read with a paper bookmark, using it to underline each sentence they were reading so he didn’t have too many letters dancing around in his head. KD said it seemed easier that way, but he still had trouble focusing on the tasks he didn’t enjoy doing. Despite being an outcast for the majority of her life, Alex was enjoying teaching the kids and taking them on nature walks.

Once Alex knew his weakness, she wrote out a little story on some tanned sheets of paper about a snake family needing to move out of their burrow to search for something bigger, she planned to read it to Eliza and Joseph’s twins once they were old enough to understand. Alex asked KD to proofread it, just to make sure his snake expertise was sharp. After he corrected a few mistakes, Alex asked him to use his memory to draw out the pictures. His illustrations were incredibly detailed for a children’s book, and she asked him after if he wouldn’t mind helping her to create a sort of ‘reptile manual’ for the adults to check and see if or when they found a venomous snake.

Originally, the adults were killing anything that crawled within the borders of the community but KD offered to relocate non-venomous reptiles and release them back into the desert. After checking with his mother and father about the idea, KD became the community's first and only herpetologist. Whenever he was called for a snake or other reptile, he brought Alex with him so she could write down everything he told her about it into the new 'reptile book' while he would fearlessly trap and relocate the animal away from the community. After they got back, KD would take his time illustrating each page to make the reptile as identifiable as possible for others who might want to read about them. If anything happened to him, or if his family decided to ever leave, Alex reminded KD it was important to make a record and provide knowledge to help anyone who might come after. Part of him wanted to keep the book, since he had worked so hard on the artwork, but he listened to Alex and understood it wouldn't be fair to everyone else who might one day want to learn about reptiles the way he had done. In his mind, he was teaching new people he would never meet or know about his favorite subject, the thing he was most passionate about. After he realized that he was a teacher, just like Alex was, he seemed more comfortable with his role in the community.

Rocky and Leon's middle child, named Jonathan, was only ten years old. He also had a milk chocolate colored skin tone like the rest of his family, but he looked so similar to his parents Alex wondered if he had possibly been bred using one of their genetic profiles. Since Leon had mentioned his wife was also his half sister Alex didn't want to pry by asking more, but she was still curious how the couple were trying to make it work, rather than divorce and send the children back to the NPR adoption agency to be separated and placed into different homes again. She overheard Lemon and Mark discussing it through the thin aluminum walls of their cabin as she and Trevor were walking to the main building for dinner one evening.

"I can't even imagine what I would do if I found out you were related to me, or David for that matter. Don't you think it's awful they don't tell the donors what happens to their genetic children?" Alex could hear Lemon asking from inside the house. Her voice was loud enough to be overheard outside. "They should at least tell us."

"Or they can just make fornication illegal and let people find out the hard way." Mark's voice sounded further away and harder for Alex to decipher as she tried to relay the conversation back to Trevor. He shrugged, only catching part of what was said between the two voices inside the cabin.

"That just seems like so much extra work." Alex could hear Lemon mutter as Trevor dragged her away from the house and toward the dining hall where other people were already lingering and waiting for food to be served. A group of children were playing around in the dirt with a few of the stray cats who had also come to call the desert community home. Alex didn't know if they had initially been brought by someone, but they multiplied fast and after the first year the community had several live-in vermin catchers, free of charge. They weren't feral but they weren't always friendly either, but they stuck around for scratches and table scraps from the humans.

When Alex and Trevor served themselves a helping of some kind of vegetable and spicy bean chili, they took their food and decided to sit over with Rocky and Leon who were alone at their own table. Trevor smiled at Leon and Leon pulled out the folding chair beside him, inviting the two to come join him and his wife for dinner. They were the newest full family to move into the community and they hadn't made many close trusted friends yet. Trevor was trying to get closer to Leon, and Alex was developing a friendship with Rocky.

Most of the other folks who stuck around for meals either lived within the fenced community or were day visitors from outside. The community had developed a reputation in some of the local towns of being helpful, of always welcoming people who needed food or shelter. They were polite and made good barter with the locals, helping to grow the community into a fully self-sustainable camp. Once they were able to build a water storage and purification outhouse, the community had access to clean, safe drinking water. That fact alone attracted desperate travelers in this part of the Mojave, and the community tried their best to help who they could but also stay small enough to not attract attention from Roaches. It was a strange balance. Harboring illegal children and fugitives was a sure-fire way to get raided, Alex had already learned.

"Alex, this chili is delicious. You have to tell me the recipe." Rocky lied with a big smile on her face. If Alex hadn't known what the chili tasted like, she might have believed her. Lying seemed like second nature to everyone in the world they inhabited. For Alex's palette, she thought the extra spice was a bit overboard, but everyone else seemed to like it.

"It's not a secret." Alex turned her head to look over at the two sisters who were helping to serve everyone. Luna and Nova weren't really opening themselves up to people either, but they were willing to work and help out so they had been staying in the community for the last few weeks. In their small plot of land in the Mojave, Alex had befriended more people of color than she ever had before. She didn't mind, but Trevor felt better knowing he was surrounded by folks who looked more like him. "You can ask Nova, I bet she would teach you how to make it. She sells it sometimes to the other camps and villages. It helps all of us survive out here."

Leon nodded, still just beginning to understand how the community functioned after being there less than a month. Knowledge was free, the kids could be safe and the adults could focus on doing what they were good at or whatever needed to be done around the community. They were free to learn new skills like gardening, teaching, nursing, carpentry or metallurgy, and even leisure activities like knitting or sewing. For Leon, who had brought an old acoustic guitar, the setting was perfect to practice. One of the younger girls was a pretty good singer, and she had organized a play for all of the young kids to perform for the parents. She was even trying to teach a few people to sing in harmony with her. It was a strange feeling, not needing to worry every moment about the safety of their family, but Leon and Rocky were still adjusting.

Leon had been learning woodworking with Trevor, helping him to craft a few tables and chairs that would be sold at the nearest town to a woman who had ordered them for her husband's fiftieth birthday. Trevor was a good teacher and Leon genuinely enjoyed the work. All

of the adults living in the community had more than one job, like how Alex was teaching the children and helping with the accounting and inventory whenever they went into town to sell extra produce or handmade goods. It was nice for some of the new women, who had been pushed into caregiving positions all their lives when they had other useful skills and talents. They enjoyed having the freedom to choose what their role in the community was. Only a few jobs were rotated so everyone had at least one shift a week, but those were usually the jobs no one wanted to do anyway like patrol or latrine digging. It seemed fair to break up the shifts, so everyone had a small share regardless. Trevor was the official carpenter and a very informal doctor with his medical background from school and growing up with his physician parents. Eliza was the only woman without several assignments, as she had the twins to take care of all day. Alex tried to do more to make up for Eliza's inability, picking up shifts working in the gardens in her free time. Doing so made Alex feel useful.

Rocky had begun to take up knitting after she saw the four sheep in the enclosed pen behind Lemon and Mark's small house. Lemon had wanted them during the winter for the wool when she and Mark spotted them on the side of road on the way back from trading with the local town one day, still just little baby lambs. The man who owned them said he couldn't afford to feed them anymore, they just kept reproducing no matter how many of them he paid to get neutered and fixed. Mark had paid the owner just to see the sparkle in David's eyes when he brought the four little lambs home and nursed them into adulthood. Mark built a small pen with an aluminum sheet over the top, attached to the side of the house where the animals could lay in the shade from the desert heat. Once they grew older, Lemon had shown David how to cut the wool away during the summer and how to brush it and spin it into yarn that could be used to make valuable, albeit itchy fabric. David wasn't much interested in the wool, but the little boy could always be counted on to be outside early in the morning feeding and cuddling with his four sheep. Mark joked in another life, his little boy had probably been a shepherd. As opposed to all the other adults and children, the sheep never seemed to be afraid of innocent little David.

When Rocky finished eating before Leon did, she looked up at Trevor and Alex as if she wanted to ask a question. Her eyes darted between them, like she was nervous. Alex could tell she was confused, maybe Rocky thought Alex was too masculine to be a woman. Alex's hair had grown out to her shoulders and she fit in a lot better when she was wearing the same dresses with her hair braided like all the other women. She hadn't met anyone willing to say they were uncomfortable with her presence like Ruth had done, but Alex was offering food and shelter. She wasn't in a position to be questioned. Even so, Alex braced herself for the question which was most definitely coming.

"So what's up with you two?" Rocky pointed her fork lazily in Trevor and Alex's direction and waving it between them. "Are you both gay? Running from the Roaches?"

Trevor laughed without hesitation, but Alex had honestly found herself wondering about Trevor. She had been his only sexual partner, back at the boys school. She didn't particularly enjoy those experiences, but she enjoyed making Trevor happy. She wondered if he was gay. They had never discussed it before.

"I never really thought to put a label on it." Trevor shrugged and gave a smile to Alex, who was still trying to decipher his meaning. "I fell for Alex in school, when she was pretending to be a boy. So, I guess if that makes me gay, then I'm gay."

Alex found herself blushing as he wrapped his free arm around her waist and pulled her forehead in for a kiss. He wasn't usually so affectionate or honest. She found herself thinking back to the years they spent at school together, lying and pretending even to each other. It felt like they had been wearing masks the entire time. He never said he loved her, or had fallen in love with her at school before. Part of Alex's head was swirling, realizing they had never actually defined their relationship before. They never had the opportunity until now. Was he just lying for Rocky and Leon's sake? Did he actually fall in love with her all those years ago?

Alex tried to roll her eyes, just a beat too late after Rocky looked over to judge her reaction to Trevor's romantic response. Alex tried to play it off, like they had talked about this many times before, but she found herself faltering trying to explain herself. "Okay but I'm actually partly a boy. It's hard to explain, but my parents made the choice to raise me as a girl, until the GSDA got involved and decided I was a boy for sure. If you believe the federal government, then yeah, he's probably gay."

Trevor laughed again and Alex giggled along with him, happy he didn't seem offended or bothered. Leon shrugged, as if he had never heard of such a thing. He took a sip from the metal cup of water in front of him before shaking his head once he began to understand what Alex was saying. Alex believed she was a woman, but the GSDA didn't. Leon couldn't imagine the confusion, but since he worked for the NRP previously, he had a pretty good idea of what Alex was referring to. He put the cup back down on the table quietly as the dining hall began to empty of patrons. "I'm surprised you're alive at all. Usually infants born with atypical anatomy are immediately killed. The only option is surgical intervention, from what I've read."

Alex cocked her head to the side, as if she didn't quite register what Leon was saying. Trevor grabbed her hand under the table as if he knew something she didn't. He had seen the scars, and whether Alex wanted to admit it or not, Trevor knew what he saw on Alex's body wasn't normal. He knew something had been removed, but he didn't want to admit it out loud by asking about it. Part of Alex was missing, and she still didn't know what it was. She didn't immediately realize it, but that something had been missing her entire life. She narrowed her eyes, confused. After Trevor's revelation and now this, she felt as though she couldn't keep track of everything, like the floor had dropped out from under her feet.

"Surgical?" The wheels in Alex's head started spinning, everything was starting to make sense. The pieces were all starting to click together. Rocky's face turned sour as if her husband said something which ruined the nice meal. Rocky turned her head back to Alex and Trevor with a hopeful expression, looking to one of them to change the conversation. Trevor was trapped, still clutching Alex's damp palm under the table. He was squeezing so hard Alex had no choice but to confront the reality of what Leon was telling her.

"They call it 'normalization' surgery," Leon added. His wife shot him another dirty look before Trevor interrupted.

"What about asthma, or like, color-blindness?" Trevor asked, looking genuinely curious. "I have it, and I've met a few other guys who have it too. One of the guys who worked with us swore he couldn't see the colors red or green. I thought the NRP was supposed to stop stuff like that from happening."

"Asthma is a tricky one to catch," Leon admitted and wiped a hand through his dark black hair before glancing over to Rocky to see how upset she looked. She was sipping from her metal cup of water silently, looking less bothered now they weren't talking about mutilating children. Alex wondered how much of the truth Rocky had been deliberately avoiding, and she recognized the trait from when she had been at the boys school, willfully ignorant of the world around her and not wanting to know about the true horrors of the NRP. Trevor was the one who had dragged her into reality by finding the letter from the Sex & Development Committee. If he hadn't ever discovered the truth, where would she be now?

"The pharmacy was packed when we went there," Trevor mused aloud, still trying to allow Alex time to calm her racing thoughts. "I wonder how the NRP is even able to keep track of everyone."

It was Leon's turn to laugh next, and Rocky placed a hand on her husband's bronzed arm as if to stop him from saying what he wanted to say out loud. She answered in a soft voice instead, "It's not possible. The local birth centers can hardly track the people in their own towns, let alone the federal databases. If they knew we had gotten married, I'm sure they would have told us."

"They?" Leon raised his voice and pulled Alex out of her meditative trance. The couple had already fought this fight before. His tone rose an octave higher, "I was 'they', 'they' didn't do anything, because 'they' didn't know anything. The GSDA has enough money funding their Guardians of Morality, I don't think they care much about what the rest of us do to survive."