

# One

“Garret!” My dad shook me back to reality. I wanted to pay attention but it was too hard. I wished I could just space out and try to pretend none of it was happening, but this one was too bad. I couldn’t just retreat this time.

“I understand this is hard, Mr. De La Cruz,” the cop tried to give my dad and I some sort of consolation, but it didn’t work. “The only thing we could find of her was her car. It was left on the side of the road.”

I snapped, “And what are you doing about it? Find her!”

“We’re trying our best, Mr. De La Cruz, but try to understand we’re looking into probably 5 other cases just like hers. And that’s just here in Santa Monica.”

None of this made sense. I started zoning out again, trying to work my way through my thoughts. Was this even real? Who’s to say I won’t wake up in a couple seconds or minutes. I touched my hands together, felt my face and my ears, and realized that this wasn’t some sick dream my mind had concocted. She had been missing for a couple months now, but there was nothing I could’ve done to prepare myself. A small part of me was hoping she just packed up and abandoned us. I wasn’t ready to hear that my mom was officially missing.

The news playing quietly on the tv drew me back. I focused on the words being said. The newscaster spoke about more disappearances. People going missing whose cases were practically identical to Mom’s. *She’s not the only one*, I thought. It was something I already knew, but for some reason hearing it again gave me a little bit of hope. Yea, it’s bad that hundreds of peoples’ families were split up, but this meant that the government would *have* to use every resource they had to find them. I looked over at the officer, who was saying his goodbyes, and wondered if he would take part in finding all those people who had disappeared.

As the front door closed, my dad sunk into the plush chair he had been sitting in since we moved into this house eight years ago. His eyes were blank and his body almost seemed limp. I wanted to say something but I couldn’t think of anything that could make it better, so I retreated to my room. I needed to try to find out what was going on. I searched up “mass disappearances 2064” and sure enough, things came up. I skimmed through probably five articles before I realized what they were all saying. Scientists and doctors and engineers. They were the ones disappearing it seemed, which gave a little bit more insight as to why Mom was taken. She was an immunologist, and some of the news articles suggested that the disappearances were related to recent events going on in the country.

About three years ago, several waves of viruses and diseases hit the U.S and China. I was part of a couple theorist forums, and most of us thought it might be a secret biological war between us and China. It was too much of a coincidence that they both started around the same time in only the two countries. Of course it did spread a little bit, but since the pandemic in the 20’s, both countries have been much stricter with international travel. I figured it was because they both knew that more sickness would come to their countries. What I didn’t understand was why they waited so long.

The first wave didn’t hit until about thirty years after the 20’s pandemic. I supposed that they might’ve needed time to create whatever attack they were planning and prepare their

country for a retaliation. Something else I couldn't figure out was who started it. Everyone had their theories, but I couldn't make up my mind on it. I was about to go to the forum to talk about the disappearances when my phone dinged. A text. From a girl. A really, *really* pretty girl. A pretty girl named Danica.

*hey did you hear about what's happening*

My heart raced. She never texts me. At least not first. The only way I was even able to get her number was because we were doing a project together. *Yea I did. 500. It's crazy huh?*

*mhm it rly is. did you know any of them*

I loved the way she texted. Minimal punctuation and no capitalizations. Simple. Nothing like her but still fitting. I was so caught up in her texting mannerisms that I hardly paid attention to the question and the weight that it held to me. *Yeah I did. My mom. The cops stopped by earlier to tell me and my dad.*

*oh shit that must've been rly hard to deal with. are you ok*

*Yeah i'm fine. We weren't close or anything.*

*oh ok. well I gotta go. hope you find her soon*

Looking back, I probably scared her away. She was such a chill and laid back person. I wanted to come off as nonchalant. Not as some little kid that misses his mommy. I should've just said how I really felt about it. But I didn't. Sometimes I wonder if things would've happened differently if I did. But it was too late. The damage was done. If I had tried to fix it she probably would have thought of me as fake. So I kept it simple. *Yea me too ttyl.*

After that short interaction with the girl I thought I was in love with, I completely ignored the task I had given myself. I went over to my mirrored closet doors and took a good long look at myself. I was short for one thing, not to mention scrawny. Probably the only thing I was okay with when it came to my face was my nose. It was pointed and not too wide. It fit my face better than my face fit my face. But good nose or not, she was out of my league. By a lot. All the guys she's ever talked to were tall and toned and had good style. I dressed comfortably. The only accessorizing I've ever done is a silver chain that I wear maybe once a month. Also, these guys were usually older than her by at least a year, while I'm a whole grade below her. I don't know if it was wishful thinking or straight up narcissism, but I still thought I had a chance with her. I was drawn out of my little pity party when my computer started beeping. I rushed over to find the forums blowing up with people's new ideas and explanations as to what's going on.

I skimmed through and saw that they were getting into some general groups. Some said that the government is kidnapping people and making them find cures and vaccines for problems caused by government negligence, which I thought was the most reasonable. Others

were saying that China was to blame for all of our problems, which is far fetched at best. And then there was a small group saying that there's a secret organization kidnapping people for a reason unrelated to the current events. Also far fetched but I still thought of it as possible.

Then there was one that stood alone. I knew him personally. His tag was cultcorruption72. He was my neighbor. He was always quick to come up with something strange, but still easy to get behind. Honestly, I was surprised no one ever agreed with him. The things he said were never too unbelievable. Like this time he said that there's a secret organization that's working both sides of the war, that they kidnapped all those people for research purposes. He got into a lot of detail, saying that the organization needed more people to find cures and vaccines but also to engineer new diseases and viruses. It wasn't the craziest thing i'd heard of, but for some reason the amount of detail he put into his theories made him sound kind of crazy. Maybe that's why no one ever sided with him.

I got a DM from my neighbor. *Go for a walk*. That was what he said when he wanted to meet up. I thought of it as kinda creepy at first. Really, I thought of *him* as kinda creepy at first, but we've grown to be good friends. It's a little weird being friends with some crazy 50 something year old, but I don't have many friends. I'll take what I can get.

As I passed by the houses on my street, I realized I didn't know exactly where he lived. All I knew was that he was towards the end of the street, but every time I had met up with him, we kinda met in the middle. I kept thinking, *is he actually my neighbor?* But he was. I got closer to the end of the street and saw his large, lumpy figure in the front yard watering dead grass. "You know that isn't gonna bring them back to life, right?" I shouted as I approached his house.

"Of course I know that!" his grumpy voice thundered. "Nothing can be brought back to life."

I winced a little. Something about the way he said that made me uncomfortable. As if he knew about Mom. It was a hard thing to think about, the possibility of her being dead. I tried to just bury it again. "So what'd you need to talk about?"

He gestured toward his door. "This needs to be spoken about in private. Wouldn't want to cause a panic."

"Uhm...okay?" I was *definitely* panicking. And not just because of what he said. It was hard not to think that this creepy old dude that I called my friend was about to kidnap me and sell me to human traffickers. But I followed him into the house anyways. I was trying to work on being brave.

The inside of his house was a mess. It seemed like he never left. It smelled the way a person smells when they don't shower for 3 weeks. The floor was covered with old takeout boxes, overflowing laundry baskets, and what seemed like hundreds of textbooks and papers. Also, an unnecessary amount of rugs overlapping on top of carpet. I've never understood how people could live like that.

We continued through his house and the smell thankfully improved. The deeper we went the cleaner it got, as if he hardly visited any other area but the living room. The kitchen was practically untouched, which explained the amount of takeout he ordered. We reached a kind of office area and it seemed un-lived-in too, at least compared to the messy rooms we had passed through before.

“The world is going to come to an end one day,” he plainly stated, as if it were something normal to say to some 14 year old you’ve only talked to five times. “And that day might be coming a lot sooner than anyone thinks.”

“I think that might be a little overdram-” I started.

His already serious face reached a new level of seriousness that I didn't think was possible when he said “No. I am not being over dramatic. Child, I know things. I’ve seen things. And I've done things. I know what I'm talking about and you'd be wise to listen to me. So, will you?”

This is where I decided he was crazy. But I figured I would humor him. “Okay. I'll listen.”

He nodded. “Everything I said in those forums was the truth. It was a warning. But I didn't tell everyone everything I know. It would've had a detrimental impact on the outcome of what is about to unfold. I need you to promise me that the things we discuss will never leave this room.”

I was wrong about him. He wasn't just crazy. He was a full blown lunatic. “It won't.”

“No no. I need you to say it.” He grabbed my shoulders with a grip so tight I knew it would leave bruises.

“Okay. The things we discuss will never leave this room.” I winced from the pressure he was putting on my shoulders. I looked over at the door. I didn't notice he had locked it behind us. It locked from the inside so I could still get out, but it would've slowed me down.

“Good. I used to be part of an organization. It was originally against my will but I learned to love what they made me do.” He released me from his grip and walked over to a desk that was stacked with file boxes. He removed one off the top and began flipping through it. It seemed like he found what he was looking for and handed a file to me. “I designed that for them. It's a capsule that can release an airborne virus. It's discreet and can be activated from an extremely long distance; about 8,000 miles. That device is partially responsible for the viral outbreaks that have taken place in this country.”

His confidence made what he was saying very convincing, but it didn't give any faith in his sanity. It just showed that he actually believed all of this was true.

“Uh-huh.” I took a closer look at the little drawing. He was right about it being discreet. Based on the dimensions it was probably the size of a key on a keyboard. Just as flat too. “Who made you invent this?”

“It's not my invention. It's been made before. I just improved upon it. The previous version was much bigger and bulkier. Easier to get caught with. And it held a normal liquid that was no more dense than water.” He opened a sleek metal box and pulled out what looked like a prototype. “This version is harder to detect and it holds a more condensed form of the virus.”

“So it can disperse more. Makes sense.” Even though I still thought of him as crazy, he was practically handing me proof of his little invention. So at least a part of what he was saying was true. And in all honesty, I found the concept of it interesting, even if it was actually responsible for millions of deaths like he said.

“Yes. And it can also release a controlled amount, so it can be spread to multiple areas.” He pulled the file from my hands, which made me realize the lack of technology in his house. He didn't have a TV in his living room or a computer in his office.

“Why isn't any of this computerized? Wouldn't it be a little more convenient that way?”

He looked at me as if the answer was obvious. “Hackers.” He walked over to his desk again and pulled a laptop out of a drawer. “I know hackers. I am a hacker. That’s how I know that no information stored in a computer is safe. I thought that you would know this, Garret. I must say I’m disappointed.”

I had to think about what he had just said for a second, because I could've sworn he had said my name; I had never told him my name.

“Hacking.” he tapped his forehead with one of his fingers. He probably noticed the confusion on my face.

“Well since you know my name, can I know yours?” I thought it was only fair.

He shook his head aggressively, making his cheeks and double-chin jiggle. “No you can’t. It’s best that you don’t, really. Safer for you.” He looked up for a second, probably thinking. “You can just call me Cult, after my username on those forums.”

I thought it was kind of weird, but I figured I would go with it. “Okay, Cult. Can I ask something else?”

“Of course of course. You can ask all the questions you want.”

I thought for a second. “Why me? What made you choose to tell me?” It was a genuine curiosity. I definitely felt special being trusted with all this information, true or not. But his answer wasn’t what I expected.

“I knew your mother.” A look of sympathy fell over his face, which made me feel worse than I had ever felt. Just that morning I was told that the cops lost every lead on Mom. They found her car and wallet, but nothing else that could help.

“What do you mean you *knew* her? Did something happen?” Real panic started to set in. “What happened to her?”

He looked at the ground as if he couldn’t stomach looking me in the eye. “I don’t know anything for sure,” he mumbled. “But I have my assumptions.”

“Well?” I started raising my voice. “What’re your assumptions? Tell me what happened to her!”

His eyes almost looked teary. “She was a strong woman, Ana. And she knew something bad when she saw it. And she made sure everyone knew that she didn’t agree with it.” He blinked his tears away. “She took her issues up with our supervisors, told them that what they were doing would end badly for everyone. The last time I saw her I was trying to convince her not to go against them. She did it anyway.”

The things he said weren’t enough for me. “I need you to say it.”

“I believe they killed her.”

I'm just putting my overall thoughts here like this, if that's alright....

Okay, so, this first chapter does a great job of establishing what I can assume to be the main conflict for your story; namely Garret's mother and countless others going missing and this mysterious virus/illness or whatever it is. So far I can kind of relate to Garret, for he seems to be an extremely caring individual. Not gonna lie, but I thought it was cute on how he feels for his friend that he was texting.

There wasn't anything inheritally bad about this, though I did spot quite a few spots where you should've capitalized a letter; primarily at the beginning of a sentence. I personally have some issues with how Garret narrates; i.e., I should've just said how I really felt about it. But I didn't. I am quite aware that this is likely a result of how he speaks and his own preferences, but that's just me.

I am particularly interested in knowing more about the virus/disease/illness/what-have-you. What are the symptoms? What does it do? What precautions have the individual governments put in place to attempt to keep it from spreading? Cult is definitely a sketchy figure, so great job there! I'm wondering how Garret will react to what he has been told by Cult in the chapters to come! Definitely a great start!(sy)

Overall good job! I'm super curious about what actually happened to his mom. I can't actually believe she's dead. Too good of a plot point ;) Keep it up! I agree with the reader above, and I did notice that Garret seems to just...tell the reader what they should be thinking about him. Even though he's narrating, he shouldn't have to say everything about his true feelings. A bit of mystery is needed. (lauren)

## Two

"I know this is hard news to hear, but there's more." Cult softened his gravelly voice, but it didn't make anything better.

I tried to imagine what other news he could possibly give me that would match up to the level of fear and heartbreak of knowing that my mother was probably dead. "What else?" my voice broke slightly.

"It's what I was going to tell you before I got sidetracked." His voice went back to normal. "The people I worked for had a plan. To fully turn the two countries against each other. It started with the viruses. We supplied the U.S with the technology to send a discreet bio-attack on China. Then we told the Chinese government that the virus was an attack from the U.S and supplied them with the same technology to retaliate."

I remembered again that I thought he was crazy, but a part of me still believed him enough to keep listening.

"That's why there have been new viruses back to back in each country. But it won't end there." His hands started to shake. "They've convinced China to launch a much bigger attack on the U.S. It'll be irreparable damage, environmentally and diplomatically."

I thought it through and realized what he was talking about. "They're gonna A-bomb us, aren't they?" If my voice wasn't shaking before, it definitely was now.

"You're smart." he started pacing the room. "There's not much time. If they're sticking to their plan, we have about two days. I have a bunker. It can house us and two more people. I have enough food to last us a month if we ration. So you have two days to convince your dad-- Neo was it?-- to come to the bunker so we can wait out the bombs."

“How am I supposed to believe you?” I didn't have any proof so why should I embarrass myself for no reason.

“Do you really want to risk not believing me?” he raised his eyebrows. “Get back here as soon as you can and bring some non perishables just in case.”

He made a good point, but I needed more time. “I'll let you know, okay?”

“Okay, I hope you make a good decision.” He walked me out and wished me goodbye.

I threw myself down on my bed. I had a lot of thoughts to sort through. Was I really supposed to believe him? Was I supposed to risk my already unstable relationship with my dad? But at the same time, what if Cult was right? I couldn't risk it. Who cares if my dad thinks I'm crazy. If it was all a hoax, at least I did what I could.

Anything I could need in the next month, I packed into a duffle bag; two weeks worth of clothes (they can be reworn), my laptop, journal, contact lenses and glasses, toothbrush and toothpaste, and two pairs of shoes. My chain too. I could just imagine myself missing it the moment the bombs drop.

With my bag packed I worked up the confidence to tell my dad that the world was going to end. The news was still blaring downstairs and he was still slumped in the same spot as I had left him. His face so blank, I was sure he wasn't actually paying attention to what he was watching. “Dad? Can I tell you something?”

Silence.

“It's really important. Like life threatening type stuff.” I twiddled my thumbs, waiting for a response. Anything. But no. It's like he was so overwhelmed with the news about my mom that his mind just shut down. But maybe this was a good thing. Maybe he was so far gone that I could've just dragged him to Cult's bunker, but would I have been strong enough for that?

“What's so important?” he mumbled, the blank expression on his face.

I guess it didn't matter if I was strong enough. “I have this friend...” I scratched my head, trying to find a way to tell him this. I realized that I should've planned this out beforehand. “And he told me something.”

“Okay?”

“He told me that we're gonna get...bombed.” I flinched, waiting for him to shut me down.

Shaking his head, he said, “That's ridiculous. Nothing like that will ever happen here.”

And there it was. The disapproval I was so used to getting. He had never been an open-minded person, so I learned quickly not to bother him about my theories and ideas. But this time was different. This one was an almost-immediate danger that could actually be real. But I decided to drop it, for now. “Never mind, just forget about it.” I thought for a second. Maybe it'd be good to get him out of the house for a little while. I knew that he probably wouldn't put much thought into what I said, but there was a chance and that made it worth it. “Y'know, we're almost out of milk and eggs and stuff. Maybe you could get some?”

He pulled himself out of his chair and dragged his feet to the shoe rack. “Just drop this whole bomb thing, okay?”

“Yeah, I will. It's probably just a hoax anyway.” I said as he walked out the door. I looked out of the window, waiting for his car to pull out of the driveway. Once he was gone, I rushed into his room and started packing his things, once again, just enough to last a month. I dragged the

suitcase down the stairs and dropped it next to the couch. I went to the kitchen and grabbed everything we would need that wasn't gonna expire soon and put it all into grocery bags. I sat that down next to the couch too. I sat down, out of breath, trying to think of anything else we might need.

The news was still playing, but it wasn't talking about disappearances anymore. "We've gotten reports of detonations on the east coast." the newscaster read from a paper, a sense of fear and solemnity in his voice. "Nuclear detonations, all hitting major cities. All communications from New York and D.C are down. We're still waiting for a response from Miami, Orlando, Atlanta, and Charlotte." the TV started getting static and the noise started cutting out. "If you live near any major city, be cautious we don't know-" That was the last thing I was able to make out before the screen went black. We didn't have as much time as we thought. And my dad was still gone.

I got off the couch and paced the room. I had to figure out what to do. There was no other car I had access to, and even if there was, I had no idea how to drive. I could've texted my dad Cult's address and hoped he got there in time, but if the bombs dropped as soon as I suspected, he'd be safer inside a grocery store.

My phone started to alarm. An emergency alert saying that they expect more detonations soon. Ten minutes soon. I slipped my phone into my pocket, grabbed my bag of clothes, and bolted out the door. I could come back for everything else later, when it's safe enough to go back out into the world.

I ran down the street, trying to figure out how to tell Cult that I sent my dad away a mere 20 minutes before the bombs would drop. I slowed down when I realized everyone was outside their houses, and that some of them were watching me. I realized that it might not be the best idea to run around like you've got somewhere safe to go when the world is about to end. I looked out at all of my neighbors, who would all probably die if they stayed gaping outside their houses. What were they waiting for? To see a mushroom cloud firsthand? My ridicule was brought to a halt when, among all the unfamiliar faces, I saw her. Danica. And her brother. I stopped dead in my tracks and waved her over. Naturally he followed.

As they strode forward, I noticed how short she was. Maybe I just didn't pay attention before, or maybe I hadn't seen her next to someone to scale, especially someone so tall. It also didn't help that that was the first time I'd seen her up-close outside of class. The tips of her black hair were silver. Newly dyed, probably. They mixed in with her waves, which fell to her shoulders. The way the light strands shifted was mesmerizing.

"Do you know what's going on?" her usually monotone voice was shaky with fear. "We just saw one of those alert things. It was talking about a bomb or something?"

I had to stop myself from staring at her. "Yeah, I know." I thought briefly about the opportunities this situation had handed me and I didn't take the time to consider the consequences of what I was about to say. "I think you should come with me." It was too late at that point. I couldn't take it back. "I have a friend. He has a bomb shelter. You should come with me."

Her brother grabbed her wrist and gave her a look. Their facial expressions changed, almost like they were communicating without actually using their words.

Without thinking, I stuck out my hand and introduced myself. "I'm Garret."

He gave me a weird look, probably the weirdest one I've ever gotten, and said, "Dominick." His voice was surprisingly nice. Silvery. Maybe it was just the little prejudice I had made against him, but I expected it to be more grating and annoying. He looked back to Danica and shook his head. This time I could read his facial expression. *You can't trust him.* He was saying it with every part of his face.

"I...I don't know, G." Her big, black eyes were even wider than usual with fear. I *knew* she wanted to. Dominick was the only thing holding her back. It angered me enough for me to ignore the nickname she'd just given me.

"You can both come." I knew instantly that I would regret that, but it was just another thing that I couldn't take back. "There's room for four people, including me and my friend. You can both come."

"Mm-mm. Nope. This kid creeps me out." he blatantly stated. He obviously didn't care that I was standing, maybe, *two feet away from them.*

"Dom!" she slapped his arm. "Don't be an ass."

"Well we're running out of time, so you guys might wanna make up your minds, like, really soon." I realized how much time had passed, and how little we had left.

They looked at each other once more. "Fine. We'll go. We just needa grab a few things." Dominick narrowed his eyes. They were the same color as his sister's, but much smaller and cruel looking.

"We'll meet you back out here in a couple minutes." Danica turned away and followed her brother back into their house.

I checked the time on my phone. Three more minutes. Three minutes for them to get their stuff, come back out, and get to Cult's house. It didn't seem like enough time. Only two more minutes. I started to get more stressed out than I had been this whole day. Was I really going to die trying to save the girl I loved and her douche brother? One minute. They rushed out of the house, bags in tow. I was surprised they made it out in time.

"That was quick." We started half-jogging to Cult's house.

"Yeah, we're always kinda ready to leave." she said, seemingly reluctant.

I wanted to ask why, but I was too out of breath already, so I stayed quiet, save for my gasps for air. Thankfully, we were coming up on our destination. I knocked on the door. No answer. Dominick pushed me to the side and aggressively hammered at the door. I heard rushed footsteps from inside.

When Cult opened the door, he looked shocked to see two teenagers with me instead of my 40 something year old dad. He let us in anyways, no questions asked. Yet.

We moved through the messy house quickly. I looked over at the two siblings, whose faces were overcome with disgust.

We passed by the office and entered a strangely clean laundry room. There wasn't a single piece of clothing to be seen. Cult pushed the washing machine to the side, revealing a hatch, like the ones you see in submarine movies. He got down and turned the hatch.

"Get in." he demanded, pointing to the creepy hole in the ground that seemed to lead nowhere. I looked at everyone in the room, and they all looked at me like they expected me to go first. I wanted to tell someone else to, but then I remembered that I was trying to be braver, and with Danica there, I had to stick to it.

I lowered myself onto the ladder and started descending into the darkness.

This chapter is, in my opinion, a decent addition to the story. I don't actually have much to say about the chapter, but I did spot the same issues that I noticed in chapter 1. I can continue editing for you if you'd like, however I might not edit everything. I think that a writer should become aware of their own mistakes and fix them on their own; it can help one grow as a writer. (Though it does help to know what to look for.)

I'm still curious about the virus. Do the characters live in or near a major city? (sy)

Okay but I'm just worried about his dad??

All around good developments to the plot, but I will say that IOts of the exposition given in chap 1 could have been saved until they were bunkered down. That could have amped up the drama and the tension, for Garret to not really know why or understand. He seems to have a good grip on the situation--too good of one.

But hey!!! I really like reading this! G is an interesting one...I'm still trying to understand his emotions. He seems to be constantly trying to suppress them, but not when it comes to Danica. (lauren)

## Three

The ladder was much shorter than I thought it would be. I jumped off into a pitch black room. It smelled dusty, as if no one had set foot in here in months. It was also cold. I got goosebumps instantly. I heard someone else coming down the ladder.

"Are there lights in here?" Danica asked as she jumped down from the ladder. She felt around, probably looking for a light switch, and accidentally patted me a couple times.

"Um, no." I felt nervous. I didn't want her feeling my bony chest anymore than she already had.

Someone else came down the ladder, pushing me aside. Dominick. Even before I officially met him, I didn't like him. I'd seen him around school, loud and aggressive, always with a large group following him around. He was popular among the people I'd hated the most. The dumbass punks whose only hobby was smoking or playing the sports that no one actually enjoyed, like cross country or track or swimming. I didn't hate them because they were popular or "fun". I hated them because they acted like they were better than everyone around them. At least the popular kids faked being nice and humble. But I probably shouldn't have hated on them so much. They were Danica's friends too. It was weird to think about, though. I never understood why people would be friends with anyone that's not in their grade. Why would she, a sophomore, be friends with a bunch of upperclassmen? I had a feeling that it was just because her brother was there. They were inseparable. Another thing I never understood.

Cult was the last to come down. His fat body made a louder noise than anyone else had when he jumped down. His knees made a concerning cracking noise. He didn't seem to be hurt, though, as he moved through the cold dark room, like he knew exactly where he was going. He

turned the lights on, revealing a room much larger than I had imagined. It had a small kitchen area, like what you might see in a studio apartment, a dining table, a couch, and four stalls with twin sized beds in them and curtains for doors. At least we'd have some small amount of privacy.

He whipped around and faced us all from across the room, eventually landing his eyes on me. "Would you like to explain this?" He fumed, gesturing to Danica and Dominick.

"Well..." I tried to figure out how to explain it. "I thought there was more time and uhh...I sent my dad to get groc--" I was interrupted by a loud boom. The floor shook. Plates and cups rattled together in the cabinets. Dust fell from the ceiling. We all struggled to keep our balance.

"The bombs..." Danica clung to her brother. "It was real."

I had never seen Cult so angry. "Where did you send him?"

My eyes started tearing up. "Grocery shopping."

"What?" he thundered. "Why would you do that?"

"I thought there was more time! I was just trying to distract him!" I turned away from everyone, just in case any tears fell.

"For what?" he asked, though I didn't see why that would be relevant.

"Milk and eggs. Why?" I questioned, my eyes getting blurry.

He sighed. "You better hope he got more than that. If he was in a store when the bombs fell, he'd be safe, mostly. But if he was on his way back..."

There they were. The tears. I couldn't bare to say anything. One day. In just one day I found out my mother was dead and that my dad might've been too. What was I supposed to say?

The floor had stopped shaking. Danica moved over to me and put her hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?" she softened her voice.

I closed my eyes, hoping it would make the tears go away. Or at least hide them. "I... No." I'd already made the mistake of seeming emotionless to her. I wasn't gonna do it again. "I'm not. I lost everyone." I was honest this time. I opened my eyes and looked at her, her full lips formed a frown.

She wrapped her arm around my waist and we sat on the couch together. Under any other circumstances, this would've been a dream come true. "I'm sure he's fine. I mean, who goes to the store and *only* gets what they need, y'know?"

I looked back up at Cult. His face was ridden with sympathy, but there was still a tinge of anger left. "I know it's been a rough day, but I would still like to know who these two are." he gestured to the siblings.

"This is Danica and her brother Dominick." I informed him.

Sourness came over her face. "Danica?"

I panicked. Did I really get her name wrong? There was no way. "What?"

"It's Dani," she shook her head. "Never call me Danica again."

Her brother chuckled in the corner. "Call me Nick. We don't do full names in this family."

I was really embarrassed. I knew there was no way for me to know that, but it didn't make me feel any better.

"I don't care about names." All the sympathy was gone from Cult's face, and all that was left was the terrifying anger. "Who are they?"

Dani's grip on me tightened for a second before she removed herself from my side and marched up to Cult. "Don't worry about who we are! For all we know, you're some creep that's gonna keep us down here forever."

Cult chuckled, as if he found her disrespect amusing. "If you really thought that, why would you come here?" He stepped a little closer, getting more in her face.

At this point, Dominick moved between them, pushing Cult away from his sister.

They all continued arguing amongst themselves, but I couldn't make myself pay attention. Everything started settling in. Nothing would ever be the same. The whole country was probably destroyed by now. I would never walk into my classes, or the quad, or anywhere I used to frequent. I would probably never see my friends again. I didn't even know if they were alive. I was so used to seeing their faces almost every day, and then all I had was Cult, who was creepy, awkward, and at least forty years older than me, Dani, who I had only talked to several times in class and likely only saw me as a friend, if that, and Dom, who I was convinced hated me. I was stuck with these strange, unfamiliar people. I couldn't help but wonder why I put myself in this situation. Those last minute decisions I made would likely determine at least the next month of my life. Oh, God. The rest of my life. The world I knew was a wasteland now. I would either be living the rest of my life in this bomb shelter or in an irradiated disaster zone.

"What'll it be like?" I asked, trying to imagine it. "What's the world gonna look like when we leave here?"

The arguing stopped and they all looked at me. Realization came over Dani and Dominick, like they hadn't realized how different life would be.

Cult shook his head and sat down in a chair. "Hard." He twiddled his thumbs. "There'll be destroyed buildings, corpses and carcasses, and people fighting over the little resources left. Nowhere will be safe." He got up from his chair and walked over to a desk with a computer on it. "That's why you'll all need to learn some things before we go out there. Now, without arguing, what are your names?" He looked at the siblings. "Full names."

"Danica Ikeda and Dominick Ikeda." Dominick told him, his voice empty as if he was still processing Cult's description of the apocalypse.

Cult started typing, and typing, and typing, for a painful five minutes until he let out a loud sigh. "Where on earth did you find these two?"

"On the side of the road." Dani chuckled.

He glared at her, brows so furrowed they were practically touching. "Shoplifting, arson, B and E, vandalism. And that's just the girl."

I closed my eyes and put my face in my palms. Dear lord, she was a criminal. When I looked back up, her lips were pursed. Guilty.

"And for the boy, shoplifting, assault, vandalism, B and E, larceny, should I go on?" He was standing now, holding his arms out in disappointment. "They've both been on probation for two years. They've spent a collected total of 4 years in juvie!"

"Well only one of those was mine." Dani said, smiling as if that exonerated her from being a terrible person.

He started walking towards me. "You brought them here with no clue to their history? They can't be trusted and clearly your judgement can't either." He walked away, sighing. He went into one of the sleeping stalls and closed the curtain.

We all looked at each other. "You know...all that would've been great to know beforehand." I said.

"The arson was only third degree so I don't think it's that big of a deal." She scratched her head.

I was speechless. I held my head in my hands once more. They apparently realized that I wasn't going to hold a conversation because I heard one of the curtains close and then faint whispering. Even if I could make out what they were saying, I didn't want to. How could I have brought them here when I don't even know them? Did I put Cult and I in danger?

One of the curtains opened, interrupting my thoughts. Cult stepped out and waved me to the kitchen in the far side of the room. "I thought about it," he whispered. "They might be useful."

I was confused, to say the least. No more than ten minutes ago he was fully against the idea of them being here. "What do you mean 'useful'?"

"When we leave this basement, everyone will have turned into a criminal. There's no other choice out there. It would be nice to have some of them on our side, not to mention they're going to be a little more experienced than most others. We'll need that."

"Uhh... I don't know about this." I usually made an effort to *not* associate with bad people.

"Well, it's not like there's any choice," he said. "We can't just kick them out into the radiation and chaos. They would never survive on their own, in case you needed moral conviction."

He was right. Even if I didn't agree, they would be useful. Not to mention, kicking Dani and her brother out wouldn't help me win her over. So I would have to deal with it.

I realized that their whispering had stopped. Likely eavesdropping on our conversation.

Cult must have noticed too because he pulled me closer and whispered even quieter. "All we need to do is ensure that they'll stay loyal to us, which might prove to be difficult."

"Would it even be possible?" I rolled my eyes. As much as I loved her, Dani couldn't be trusted. She would probably stab us in the back the moment it became convenient.

Cult thought for a second, his brow furrowed. "I'll figure something out. We have time." He started digging through the cabinets and pulled out a box of instant rice and poured it into a bowl. "It's not like they can just leave into the radiation and there's not much they can do in here. At the moment, they need us. I think they know that. So try to play nice with them. We need them to trust us." He put the rice into a microwave and poured a can of beans into another bowl.

"Yeah...I guess you're right." I looked at the meal he was making in disgust. "That's just for you, right?"

"No, of course not. This is our dinner." He seemed surprised that I would have a problem with that.

As he poured the room temperature beans onto the rice, I considered starving until we could get better food. "Actually, I'm not really hungry." Temporary escape would have to be enough.

"That's fine," He said, grabbing bottles of water from a plastic crate. "The less you eat, the longer we can ration for."

I tried not to be hurt by his lack of care as I walked to one of the unoccupied bed stalls. When I sat down, the bed squeaked and I could feel the springs under my body. *How old is this*

*thing?* I thought. I tried to ignore my discomfort so I could focus on my thoughts. With everything going on, I hadn't had a chance to really process everything that happened.

My mom, who I hadn't seen in months, disappeared into thin air, her abandoned car being the only trace, and was probably dead.

Nuclear bombs fell, probably a mere twenty minutes after I sent my dad to get groceries. He was probably dead too. Just like that, my whole family wiped off the earth. Is it even possible to process something like that? Is it possible to believe it? That part was the hardest. Believing. Complete aloneness felt impossible. The idea that the universe, that God, would take so much away in such a small amount of time. The idea that I would have to survive the apocalypse with three people that, honestly, I barely knew. It couldn't have been real. Thinking about all of it one after another, the apocalypse was sadly the most believable part of my life.

My thoughts were interrupted by Cult calling everyone to the table. I heard a curtain open as Dani and her brother walked to the eating area. Chairs squeaked against the concrete floor and I imagined them all sitting around the table, awkwardly eating in silence. Based on the lack of conversation, I was right.

My thoughts kept circling through the recent timeline of my life, hitting me with pangs of loneliness every time. I couldn't tell what hurt worse; the pain of losing my parents, especially my mom, or the realization that nothing in my life would be the same. I would never have my usual routine again, see my usual people, or go to my usual places. I knew that when I left that bunker, I would probably be walking into a wasteland. It was just a matter of what it would look like. I fell asleep thinking about life after the bombs, no doubt setting myself up for a night full of bad dreams.

Okay.... So this chapter gives us a new plot location. One that I can assume that we'll be seeing again. I love that you gave a scene of Cult being mad, addressed Garret's remorse at sending his dad out, and the ever present question of what happened to his mom. However, I would rather see this than be told it by Garret's narration. I especially enjoyed the part where Cult looks up and covers Dani's and Nick's rap sheets and they're just like "Eh, no big deal." (sy)

Alrighty, so this entire story was actually really good. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it ;). I am really excited to read more when it comes out. Also, maybe you could introduce his crush more before the plot thickens. . . ? (calm\_writer\_gal)

## Four