

Title Options:

Left In Your Wake

The Daughter of Ash and Embers

Not So Holy

Modern Crusaders

## Chapter 1

There reaches a point of rehearsing where it no longer feels like preparation and it feels more like a reenactment. My dad said that once. I think he was referring to Avery purposefully reading aloud her lines for a play she was in. However, I think it also applies now as we prepare for battle.

Months, maybe even years, of preparation led to this. The notes began two years ago. My dad was able to get a message to the people inside the gates after he was almost caught by a guard. He let the man know that we would be willing to help get them out if they wanted it. He said that if the guard did, to leave a white string tied to the tree they were standing at. The next day there was a string.

My dad began leaving notes there and that's when regular correspondence began.

Like wildfire, white strings became a call sign that that person wanted to be free. I assumed everyone would be in on the plan, but inspired either through terror or brainwashing, the final count we were to expect by the end of today was completely underwhelming. While I'm not in their shoes, I don't think anything would hold me back from trying to escape. If I was captured during The End like everyone else in America and forced to live inside fake utopias, I would fight like Hell everyday to break out.

In a perfect world, we would have had an earlier start on today. Phase One took twice as long than it should have. A guard on the inside was supposed to turn the electricity off.

Blocked from view by buildings, Anya begins Phase Two.

From my spot I have a clear view to the center of town where the president is. My fingers brush down the cool, honeycomb gate as I peer through the cracked binoculars at the president giving his annual Clarity Day speech. The microphone pops as his words drift into the forest.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Anya's foot bouncing as she continues to cut through the metal gate. My hand finds her shoulder in a light squeeze, but she's so focused on the plan she doesn't stop. She's rehearsed this for months, so this should be more like a reenactment, I hope.

The guard approaches slowly and without any recognition of our whereabouts. He stands only inches in front of me, yet the separation feels so permanent under the gate's authority. I don't know this man directly, but I know he's a friend and not a foe revealed by the white string tied around his index finger. The signal that he's in on the plan. I believe it was his job to deactivate the electricity to the fence.

"She needs to saw faster," he says, leaning back on the fence to lessen the distance between us.

"Just be ready when she is," I say, my eyes not leaving the president.

Phase Three will be to discreetly remove the makeshift doors to the side for a clear exit. Then Anya and I will lead those who escape the government's clutches to safety in Phase Four.

The first gate's seal is broken and the refugee on the inside grabs the door before it's able to fall inward. Anya pauses before stepping inside the first layer of fences. So much freedom is at stake now. Our lives are at stake. She pushes inward and starts on the second gate.

Phase Five was put into place to safely get down to the ground of the quarry. We tied ropes all across the ridge of it because a drop like that one while the water is down can be damaging.

“Are you ready for this?” The guard glances back at me and for a second I peek at him too. An overwhelming sense of nostalgia washes over me. His head cocks to the side as his eyes peer into mine. I know I recognize him from somewhere, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. There’s something about his eyes that spark something inside of my chest and for a moment I forget where I am. I don’t know who this man is but my heart sure seems to.

I blink back to reality.

“I haven’t been rehearsing this plan for six years to not be ready,” I say, finally breaking eye contact.

I look back out amongst the crowd. The people surround the stage in the middle of the Square. President Farley stands with his hands by his side next to the podium that holds his helmet. This is the only time of year that he is ever exposed. I see the assassin’s hand make its way to the gun tucked in his belt.

He draws the gun out. He’s too soon! The gates are not fully cut yet. If he shoots before we’re ready, everyone inside the gates will be trapped.

“Anya,” I say, my voice shaking.

“I know,” she says, sawing faster. She turns to me, her eyes wide.

The assigned assassin pulls the trigger and time stops. The sound vibrates through the still silent forest surrounding us. There’s a screech from the microphone hitting the ground. Panicked screams encompass us.

The mass of refugees run towards us. There's fifty yards between us and those trapped inside. They run for their lives.

The guard follows the crowd through the opening and stands next to me, armed and firing into the crowd. My gun isn't as big as his. It causes his shoulder to jolt back with each bullet leaving the barrel.

It's obvious who's a target at this point. Whoever is inside the gates and shooting at us are clearly loyal to the government.

Anya is thrown backwards as the metal gets bent outward as everyone escapes through the opening. Anya jumps to her feet and leaving her tools behind, she and the others take off - leading the escapees towards Myressa.

"Go with her, I got this," I scream at the guard.

"This is my battle. I'm staying until the last person is out." He says, yet I can barely hear him over the mass of people hurtling towards us.

With the rush of adrenaline, everyone stampedes towards the exit Anya created in the fence. I see a man trip and no one around him notices him fall to the ground in a fetal position. No one hesitates to trample over him to take advantage of their one chance at escape.

Bodies begin to hit the ground like sacks of flour being thrown around in a bakery. Like when the sack hits the ground and flour billows everywhere, blood splatters onto anything in its path. They are casualties of war. Not the first, and by far the last.

Fewer people decided to make a break for it than we ever expected; the last of them approaching.

I scan the people coming towards us so that I may be able to get a glimpse of Miya, but I can't seem to recognize her. I focus ahead and the president is surrounded by doctors. The crowd

around the stage is now facing us and out of the corner of my eye, I think I spot her. She disappears behind the people running towards us. The guard pulls on my arm, but my feet are cemented to the ground. I curl my fingers around the fence and try to see her again.

“We have to go,” he yells at me.

“She’s in there, I know she is,” I croak back.

The last of the runners have already disappeared into the woods. The guard guns down the men running towards us. I think I see her one last time, but she turns her face away from me. I tear my view away from her, relinquishing her to the prison, and run in the opposite direction towards freedom.

The guard trails my heels as we weave in and out of trees. I hop over sticks and navigate the roots of the trees protruding from the ground. A bullet strikes the tree on my right sending shards of bark hurtling through the air. The guard cries out behind me, I look back at him.

“Keep going,” he yells, turning around and firing behind us. The people that chose to stay loyal to the government are chasing us. Their monochromatic suits disappear into the trees. I turn and keep running and the guard returns to my side.

We approach the Ridge of the quarry. The water is down right now as the season is ebbing into winter. Without the water, it’s about a twelve-foot drop to the other side. From there they’ll have the advantage. We can’t jump until we’re sure they aren’t going to follow us. The guard keeps barreling forward. I clutch his arm and yank it back as his right foot slips over the edge. Dirt billows down into the drop-off.

“We have to jump,” he says.

“Not yet. If we jump they will have a better shot at us,” I say, stealing a glance at him. Dirt is smudged near his hairline, with streaks of sweat creating little trails down his face.

Shooters are getting closer, their bullets piercing the trees causing more splinters to cloud around us. I hear a child scream from behind. I turn and peer past the Ridge. Inside the trees, I see a woman on the ground, her face in the dirt. A toddler is above her, wailing, pulling on her shirt.

“We have to jump, now!” he says, his voice rising.

I look at him and throw out everything I’ve rehearsed. A rope was supposed to be tied to the top of the Ridge for our escape, but someone had cut it. But there was a root sticking out halfway down. I drop my gun to the other side. I put my legs over the ledge and push myself off aiming to grab the root. My fingers barely find their way around it. I let go, allowing myself to land safely. I grab my gun and yell up to the guard to jump. He drops his gun to me and I catch it. Jumping down, his fingers miss the root, causing him to collapse onto the ground. He falls over clutching his ankle.

He pushes himself up to his bottom, I reach for his hand and pull him up the rest of the way. We push back into the tree line and approach the child. The guard shows the little boy the white string around his finger and then picks him up. His clothes are covered in mud and snot is bubbling from his nose as he screams. He tries to get the boy to quiet down. The men that were chasing us pause at the Ridge. One searches for a way down, another shoots blindly into the forest that continues on the other side of the quarry.

I feel for a pulse on the woman but there isn’t one. I look back up at the guard holding the boy and he knows. Standing, I shoot at the men as they try to climb down the Ridge.

An alarm echoes through the woods causing all the birds that were hiding in the trees to swarm into the air. I gape at the guard searching for a clue as to what that sound is.

“It means retreat,” he says, bouncing the child on his hip.

The men at the Ridge stop what they're doing and start arguing with each other before they start jogging back.

"Why would they do that?" I ask.

"Something is wrong," he curtly replies.

When the last person disappears I turn and start walking the rest of the way to Myressa. The people that escaped before us were nowhere in sight. The guard is still trying to calm down the child. He appears to be only three or four years old, meaning he was born after The End. I rub the child's back and he tries to catch his breath.

"What's your name?" I ask the kid.

"Monty," he snuffles.

"My name's Lizzie. I know you're scared, but me and," I pause to steal a glance of the guard. I can't help but feel like I know him again.

"Fess," he says.

"-Fess are going to keep you safe. We're almost to your new home," I say.

Monty's crying subsides and his head curls down into Fess's neck.

"Where are we going anyways?" Fess asks.

He's limping.

"We call it Myressa," I say and he regards me furrowing his eyebrows. "Do you remember Compton Lake? It feeds into the quarry we just passed."

"I used to go swimming there every summer," Fess says.

"There's a valley there. That's where we rebuilt," I say. "It's secluded and hard to access because of the Ridge."

I glance ahead and notice we can almost see the others through the tree line. Fess and I look at each other, a smile making its way to our faces. Fess' face freezes and he stops me.

“You're bleeding,” he says, lightly wiping his finger across the top of my brow to stop the blood from dripping down. My fingers brush across his as he pulls back so I can feel across my forehead. The touch causes my head to sting and I wince back. I pull my hand back down and I see it wet with blood. Fess gingerly pushes the strands of long blonde hair that escaped my braid behind my ear as to not get it tangled with the blood.

“Now how the hell did you do that,” he asks chuckling under his breath.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” I try to hide my smile. My gaze follows his hand back to his body and I notice his shoulder is bleeding through his clothes.

“Oh my god you're bleeding worse than I am,” I say clutching his arm.

“The guard shot me in the beginning. It was a through and through,” Fess says. “Let's hurry up. We'll clean up when we get wherever it is we're going.”

I study his face for any sort of pain, but he is solid. How could a bullet penetrate his body and he really not show any pain?

“We're about a mile away now,” I say. His dark, bushy eyebrows shoot up as he looks at me shocked.

“So you're telling me that you all have been a couple of miles from us this entire time?” Fess says.

“We wanted to keep a close eye,” I say, releasing a laugh under my breath, a smirk trying to escape onto my lips. I bite the corner of my lip to keep the smirk contained.



We reach the others to find them trying to catch their breath and wiping the sweat from their faces. The crowd is eerily quiet as it pushes forward. The silence is screaming facts we already know. Some were lost in the escape. Some were too scared to even try. The rest found sanctuary.

We finally approach the perimeter of Myressa and the crowd stops at the edge. The massive trees that fill the valley reach for the sun as their canopy traps almost all the light from the ground below. The heat captures you down under and the humidity is suffocating. Surrounding all of Myressa are massive mirrors and tarps camouflaging the houses above. A rapid creek flows down the center as boulders bulge out of it. The ground is covered in the colors of fall as the leaves are still thinning up above. Today was one of those last scorching days before winter builds a fortress around us, making us captors to the frigid temperatures yet to come.

“Why are we stopping?” Fess asks looking around.

“We’re here,” I say. I push through the crowd and find Anya up front arguing with the others we came with.

“I thought she was right behind me,” Anya yells at them.

“Well she wasn’t, was she?” I hear my dad arguing with Anya.

“Travis, I...,” Anya trails off..

“Dad,” I say as I inch towards him.

He lets out a deep sigh and wraps his arms around me.

“See? I knew she would be okay,” Anya says, taking a deep breath. “I’m going to signal the ropes.”

Anya walks over to the post and pulls on the string that dings the bell. Four ropes unfurl to the ground. On the end of each rope is a loop to place your feet in. Anya demonstrates to the first group of people how to stand on the rope and the best way to hold on. Then, once everyone is secured, she shows them how to swing the rope to cue that they're ready. As quickly as they were in front of us, four bodies suspend into the air and disappear into the treetops.

"Did you make it out alright?" my dad asks, searching my face that I can feel becoming streaked with blood.

"I cut my forehead, but that's it. I trailed behind to hold the guards off," I say.

I wipe my face with my sleeve, dousing it in blood.

"Did you find her?" he asks, concern weighing heavily in his voice.

I shake my head. He goes to hug me but I wave him off.

If I think about it right now, I'll break down.

Fess appears next to me, with Monty asleep on his chest. His dark brown eyes were wide with confusion. His light gray spandex suit covered in dirt, with a rip going up the side of his leg, blood soaking his left shoulder. His pitch-black hair buzzed down to the Government's standards, but his beard is starting to shadow onto his face contouring his pointed jawline. His thick eyebrows droop from the heat as sweat drips from his crooked nose.

"Are those people just disappearing?" Fess asks, bewildered.

"How did you think we stayed hidden while being so close?" I ask, my smirk from before trying to make an encore.

"You live in the trees," he says, shaking his head.

"And you lived in a highly guarded government fortress," I say.

"In our defense, it wasn't voluntary," Fess chuckles.

“I’m Travis Abernathy, President of Myressa, and you are?” My dad reaches his hand out to Fess.

“Faysal Quinton.” He shakes my dad’s hand.

“Dad, I think Anya needed you up top,” I say, in a desperate plea to end this introduction. He pulls me into a hug and walks over to the ropes. As I watch him hover into the air I catch a glimpse of the platform up above. It’s barely visible from the ground through all of the foliage and camo nets, but if you observe intensely enough you can start to make out the houses and bridges that are entangled in the branches above.

“What happens with Monty?” Fess asks, brushing Monty’s short, curly black hair back.

“I’m not sure specifically where he’ll go, but I know a lot of homes were opened up to people that need a home,” I say.

I rub Monty’s back and his tiny fingers curl tighter around Fess’s neck as he falls deeper into sleep.

We step forward with the others as the line gets shorter to ride the ropes.

“Do you think he could stay with me tonight,” Fess asks, peering into my eyes, the corner of his mouth going up.

“Of course,” I say. “I mean, if you’re sure?”

Faysal nods and I didn’t realize I had sized him up so quickly until this moment.

We approach the ropes to finally take our turn. I stick my right foot into the loop and grip my fingers tight around the thick rope. I swing it away from me to signal I’m ready. I shoot into the air as the person in the control room pulls me up. I rise above the tree lines and I feel as if I can actually breathe now that I’m home. The rope reaches the docking station and I step out onto the platform. Fess steps out beside me and whistles a tune of impressed at what he sees.

“You all built this?” he asks, taken aback.

“We sure did,” I say. “This isn’t even half of it.”

The control room is to the right. There, four people were stationed to man the pulleys. In front of us are three bridges, one leads to the houses, the other the cafeteria, and the last leads to storage. We stand now on the wooden deck as a person is directing us all to the cafeteria. I cross the bridge and as Fess follows me through the trees, I see the cafeteria peeking through.

The cafeteria is connected by a deck between multiple trees. It is enclosed, unlike the docking station, which makes it nice to use even when it’s raining. The roof and walls were only recently added in the last couple of years. In the middle of it all is a giant fireplace for winter, which happens to be quickly approaching. Another bridge leads off to the kitchen. A diversity of salvaged chairs and tables fill the deck, as families and friends gather and reconnect. A group of new people waves down Fess. He jogs over to them and they all start hugging each other. Not wanting to intrude on his reunion, I take a lap around the cafeteria.

I see Avery out of the corner of my eye, swatting Mason’s little hands away from the food. Her floral apron is covered in food from preparing dinner. We make our way to each other and wrap our arms as tight as possible. Her height is gaining on me, but I’m still a foot taller than her. My chin sits on top of her curly blonde hair as the smell of chocolate diffuses from her locks. I push her away by her shoulders and search her eyes as I grin from ear to ear.

“Tell me you didn’t make chocolate chip cookies,” I order her.

“I’d be lying if I did,” she says, smiling proudly. “Why do you think that little stinker was actually trying to get seconds”

She reaches into the pocket of her apron and hands me a cookie. I pull it apart as the chocolate melts down my hands. I savor every single bite. “They are intended for the refugees, but I made an exception for my annoying older sister.”

“Oh, so *I’m* annoying now?” I ask, laughing at her.

“Extremely,” Avery says trying to avoid eye contact. “So, how was it?”

“It was okay. People survived and are safe and that’s all I ever really wanted,” I say.

“Did you find her?” she asks.

Now it was my turn to divert eye contact. She knows what this means.

“There’s always next time. I know you’ll find her,” she says. “I have to go hand out food, but I wanted to check on you.”

“I love you, kid,” I say, tucking a loose curl behind her ear. She scrunches her nose causing her freckles to bunch together.

“I love you too, sis,” she says. She runs back to the kitchen, leaving me alone again. I take a look around to see what I’ve accomplished.

These people now have real freedom and a feeling of safety. Something they haven’t experienced in six years. If only Miya could be here now. I saved all these strangers, but my best friend is still lost.

Fess calls my name and waves me down. I can’t help but smile as I walk over to meet his friends. Fess’s arm now has bandages covering his shoulder and his arm is in a sling.

Then there was Monty, with chocolate smeared across his face he licked his hands free of the cookie crumbs. The cuteness overload makes me uncontrollably smile.

“Lizzie, I want you to meet my friends. Friends, this is Lizzie.” Fess says.

I wave and shake hands.

“Do you know you’re bleeding?” a tiny girl with brown hair says.

I laugh and nod.

“That’s Bobbie,” Fess says.

“I’m Jayden, but you could call me *honey* if you want,” Jayden says winking at me. His dark skin makes the whites of his eyes sparkle at me.

I peek over at Fess. He readjusts Monty on his hip, shifting his feet. He winces in pain and puts his weight back onto the other foot.

“And I’m Tony,” the last guy says. His metal black hair is so dark you could barely tell it has hints of brown if the light wasn’t hitting it right. He has freckles all over his body and glasses perched on his nose.

“Wait, where’s Presley?” Fess asks.

The guys shift uncomfortably. Finally, Jayden speaks up. “They got him.”

“He didn’t escape?” Fess asks.

“He did,” Jayden says, his head hanging low. “Then they started shooting.”

Fess bites his lip and his breaths shorten. Monty pulls on Fess’s hand while searching around anxiously.

“Where is my mom?” Monty asks.

Fess and I exchange looks and I let him take the lead.

“Hey Monty, do you know where your dad is?” Fess asks.

“My dad’s in Heaven, that’s what mommy tells me. Where is she?” he asks again.

Fess looks to me for guidance, but I have no idea what to do. I shrug my shoulders in defeat.

“Hey guys,” I say to Fess’s friends, “have you checked in yet? You have to go to the sign-in table in order to get a bed.”

They leave Fess and I alone with Monty. We have to tell him how his mom went to join his dad in heaven and that he’s going to hang out with us for now. Monty asks if she’ll be back soon and it took everything in me not to think of my mom. Fess could see I was struggling and took over the conversation. We talked to Monty until most people were gone from the cafeteria and the sun was set.

I thought the scariest part about today would be if I couldn’t save Miya. I thought the most terrifying thing was dying or being captured. I never considered succeeding and not feeling like anything was really accomplished. Like all I did was get this mother killed leaving her child an orphan.

My life feels like it’s dangling on the tiniest loose thread and with one little tug, I will be in shambles. I thought winning that battle today would be the end of feeling desperately helpless, but all I feel now is suffocating guilt.

## Chapter 2

I have this thing where I never feel like I'm enough. I'm never enough for my family or friends. I definitely never feel like I'm enough for myself. Even though I almost died today I still feel like I didn't do enough. In hindsight, I wish we had done an even bigger escape plan knowing it would have most likely succeeded, but it doesn't matter because the past is the past and I'm going down a dark and twisty thought spiral that leads me to feel like I'm never enough.

I send Faysal to go finish checking in so he can get assigned a home while I recover from my spiral.

"There's no room left in the inn," he jokes, returning empty-handed.

"None," I ask. "Are you sure?"

"Some people from your side are taking people in, so the lady said she would go around and ask for us," he says.

Before I know what's coming out of my mouth I say, "You two can just stay with me."

He pauses and inspects me cautiously.

"Can we?" Monty looks up at him wide-eyed.

"As long as you're sure," Fess leads me, guarded.

"Of course I'm sure," I wave him off.

I give Rachel, the woman helping them find a place, a thumbs up. I take Monty as I lead Fess across the bridges towards my treehouse. As we walk, I feel my stomach churn with nerves.

I open my front door and realize the amount of mess I left everywhere. an old couch with a blue floral pattern loud print is so loud it almost jumps off; however, there's so much dirty laundry covering the couch you can barely see it. A coffee table sits in front of it, with a board game sprawled out from the other night. An old record player is on a stand with multiple records



stacked in no particular order. A bookshelf is on the other wall, overflowing onto the floor with books. There are three rooms in the house: the living room, my bedroom, and the bathroom. Each room, like in every treehouse, is covered floor-to-ceiling with carpets, rugs, foam, whatever to cancel noise.

In the bathroom, a stand is next to the toilet with a bucket of water sitting on it for washing hands. We don't have any running water, so you have to go collect water from the tanks that are placed around Myressa. The water we collect is from rain, which is what we use for bathing and washing our hands in general. The only other fixture is the bathtub. A pink curtain surrounds it on a metal rod, even though the showerhead doesn't work. A towel rack sits above it with a couple of raggedy towels folded on top.

Our plumbing system is strange. It's a mixture between an old outhouse and modern-day plumbing. Pipes run under all the houses and connect almost like a gutter system and everything travels down to our waste facility a couple of yards past the farthest house.

"I'm so sorry for the mess. I wasn't expecting-," I pause and stare at the two of them, wide-eyed, "company."

I scoop my laundry up and start throwing it into my room.

"Wowl," Monty says, picking up one of the board game pieces and examining it closely.

I ask Fess to get a couple of buckets of water from the spigot on my treehouse lane as I help Monty into a bath. I strip his clothes off and throw them into my laundry basket. Monty climbs into the tub and I open the stand next to the toilet. An old rubber duck my dad found one day on a search was in there. I held it out to Monty.

"What's that?" Monty asks.

"A rubber duck." I squeeze it and it lets a squeak out.

“What does it do?”

“You play with it,” I say furrowing my brows. “Monty, have you ever had a toy?”

He shakes his head staring at the yellow duck. He reaches out and squeezes it gently. The toy squeaks and he giggles. Fess walks in carrying two pails of water for the tub.

“Are you ready for your bath?” Fess asks, smiling. Monty holds the side of the tub and nods his head rapidly. Fess chuckles and pours the buckets on top of Monty, sending him into uncontrollable laughter. His thick black curls sink across his face as he plops down into the water splashing Fess and I.

Once the tub fills up Fess leaves the bathroom alone to Monty and I. As I help Monty get clean I can hear Fess wandering around my house. The thought of him discovering my personal belongings sends me into so much anxiety I can’t wash Monty’s hair fast enough.

*God, I hope I didn’t leave my bra out.*

I hear my record player turn on in the living room as old jazz music fills the house. Monty perks up when he hears the music.

“What’s that?” he asks, confused.

“That’s my record player,” I say.

“What’s a record player?” he asks. I massage shampoo into his hair.

“I use it to play music ,” I say. His head cocks to the side. I pour water washing the bubbles down his back.

“What’s music?” he asks.

My hands stop.

“Music lets you express how you’re feeling when you don’t know how to say it. It helps you feel excited, happy, and even sad at times,” I say.

“I feel sad right now,” he says, his lip puckering. “But, the music helps me feel happy.”

“See, Monty, it’s already working,” I say. I tap his nose and grab a towel to wrap him in. I cuddle him close to my chest to try and warm him up. I throw one of my small, old t-shirts over his head. We walk into the living room and I see Fess bent over the record player playing with the knobs.

“You figure it out yet?” I smile.

He jumps up and chuckles uncomfortably, scratching the back of his neck.

“You tell me,” he says, reaching out his hand. I gaze at his outstretched hand and back at his eyes that were studying me in wonder.

He wants to dance with me, yet this gesture makes me feel completely motionless.

A knock at the door echoes over the music.

His hand drops as he shifts his weight to his hurt foot and winces in pain. He hobbles over to the couch and sits down. We all look towards the door. I pull the needle off the record and the music halts.

“Lizzie,” Monty says, “Someone is at the door.”

I ruffle Monty’s wet hair, sending water droplets across my carpets. I hope to God that it’s Elena or Avery coming to visit.

I peek through the peephole and squeeze my eyes shut when I realize who it is. I open the door and before it’s even cracked his foot steps in as he all but pushes through the opening.

Evan wraps his arms around me in a big hug, leaving me trapped with my arms pinned to his chest. He starts crying in a panic. I look over his shoulder at Fess on the couch. He pulls his foot up and props it onto the coffee table. Monty jumps into Fess’s lap, but as Fess pulls him close he never breaks eye contact with me.

“Who are you?” Monty asks, breaking the sound between the sobs.

Evan turns to see the boys on my couch, his face snaps back to me quizzically.

“This is Evan,” I say hugging my arms around my stomach.

“I’m her fiancé,” Evan says, reaching his hand out to Fess. They shake hands cautiously and they both look back at me. Evan uses his sleeve to wipe his eyes.

“Can we talk?” he asks, nodding towards my room.

I let out a sigh and open my bedroom door. I follow Evan in and glance back at Fess. His gaze has fallen into another universe, it seems.

I shut the door behind me and place my forehead against it, dreading to look at Evan.

“Lizzie,” he says.

“Evan.”

“It would have been nice to know you were alive. I have been thinking the worst all day,” he says.

I turn and look at him and I go to defend myself but the words escape my brain. I start to pick up the clothes I threw in my room earlier from the living room.

“Who are they?” he asks pointing at my door.

“Monty’s mom was killed today and we found him and took him in,” I say, dumping the clothes into my hamper.

Evan sits onto my bed and rubs his forehead. “We?”

“Fess and I,” I say, playing with my hand awkwardly.

“Fess?”

I nod. “He was a guard. He helped everyone escape today. We trailed behind together to hold back the shooters.”

I kick my rug straight and sit down on my floor. I look up at Evan and he scoots off my bed onto my floor in front of me.

“So, why are they here?” he asks. He reaches to hold my hand and I let him.

“There was no more vacant housing so I offered up my home,” I say.

“Do you want me to stay with you tonight? So what’s-his-name doesn’t get any ideas,” he asks.

“I think that would be one too many for this tiny treehouse,” I say, squeezing his hand.

His shoulders sink in defeat.

“But,” I say and he perks up, “I’ll see you at breakfast.”

The corner of his mouth shoots upward. I lean over and kiss his cheek. He turns my face and his lips find mine. I kiss him back.

“I love you,” he says, meaning it with every part of his being.

I hug him and we stand together.

Evan reaches for my door, but he hesitates. He turns back to get one last glimpse of me and from his eyes, I hear him tell me the truest thing I’ve ever known. This life we’ve built together is, in one way or another, never going to be the same.

I gather myself before I go back out into the living room. The front door opens and Faysal and Monty walk in carrying more buckets of water trying to not slosh it all over the room. I hurry to help Monty before he completely soaks the floor and we can’t help but get hysterical. We fill up Faysal’s bath and I show him where everything is. Once he closes the door I dig up some of Evan’s clothes left behind and leave them folded in front of the bathroom door.

I snuggle up with Monty on the couch and try to think of a story to tell him. I think of one from my childhood. I think of Rapunzel and the millions of times my mom told me that fairytale.

I recall that story for Monty until he falls asleep in my lap. He snores pretty loud for such a little guy. I carry him to my room and tuck him into bed before changing into old sweatpants and a super oversized sleep shirt. When I return to the living room the clothes are now gone and I know he's almost done.

On top of the bookshelf is a bottle of wine I saved for today. While Miya didn't make it, today was still a successful mission. I grab some plastic cups and my wine opener and set it up on the coffee table. I begin to uncork the wine when the bathroom door opens. Fess walks out and I can't help but watch him. He shakes his head through his buzzed hair and I see a peak of his abs and... wow. The bottle pops open and I pour a hefty amount into each cup.

Fess sits down next to me on the couch and I gesture to the cup.

"I've never had alcohol before."

"Oh," I say, "Well no pressure. I was just celebrating the little wins."

"Not pressured, just enjoying a first," he says. He tips his cup to mine and I knock mine against it. "Cheers."

"Cheers," I grin.

"Don't downplay what happened today. This was a very big win. You have no idea what today means to each one of us that made it out."

"I know. I just had some personal goals that I was so close to reaching and it just didn't happen."

Silence stills around the room.

"How is it?"

"Pretty bitter, I'm just happy to be sharing this with you."

I smile at him. "Me too."

“So, we have a kid in there,” Fess says.

“I guess we do. I’m up for sharing all of the responsibility. I really like that kid,” I say.

“Oh yeah?” Fess’s corners of his mouth turn up. “I think we could make a pretty great team.”

“I think so too.”

-

“Why were you two up so early,” I ask. The sun was just now starting to paint the sky with the colors of the morning as we walked the bridges to the cafeteria.

“Every morning, five o’clock,” Monty says matter of fact.

I can’t imagine living in a world where I had to be up every day before the sun even shows its face. The ways in which the Government brainwashed them and controlled their everyday lives is beyond anything I’m able to comprehend.

“Well, here at Myressa you can sleep in as long as you want,” I say.

Fess moves his arm around in his sling, scrunching his face in pain.

“Still hurt,” I ask.

“I was shot,” he smirks at me. “Of course it still hurts.”

I roll my eyes at him playfully and he laughs.

“Can I ask a question,” he asks approaching the cafeteria.

I nod.

“Do I know you,” he asks. “From like before?”

I shake my head, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think so.”

He bites his lip and studies my face and I don’t know how to conduct myself under his microscope.

“I could’ve sworn,” he says.

I shrug.

We walk into the cafeteria and it is the fullest I have ever seen. The anticipation of our first meal together was extremely heavy up until this point. There was a line to get food backed up to the door of the bridge.

The tables were full but I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a clear division from the newcomers. There was a lot of disagreement among the people of Myressa on whether or not to do the rescue mission in the first place. Some of the elders thought that they were beyond brainwashing and couldn’t be saved. That somehow it could lead to our own demise. I was one of the few fighting for the rescue mission. Not only was I desperately wanting to get Miya back, but I promised this one boy I would.

When the Government turned on us six years ago and everyone was imprisoned, before we started building Myressa, President Farley gave his first Clarity Day Speech. We watched from the forest outline to understand what was happening. This boy in the crowd was around my age, and he spotted me in the woods. He could have had us captured, but he didn’t. Instead, he signed something to me: help.

I didn’t know anything about sign language, but one of the Deaf members of our community does. When I showed him what the boy said to me I made it my mission to help everyone that was there against their will. I don’t know why I feel the need to help, it wasn’t like God himself asked me to help them. I think I just get tired of waiting and being the damsel. Evan always says I shouldn’t be the face of these things because I could get hurt. I wish I cared about myself the way he cares about me.



Supplies from the storage sector had been brought over and refugees were crowded around to find clothes and toiletries. Monty was still wearing my old t-shirt and Fess was wearing some of Evan's clothes that had been left at my place.

"Why don't you take Monty to find some clothes, maybe some toys too," I say. "I'll hold our place in line."

Fess smiles at me and takes Monty's hand. I can't help but smile back as I watch Monty get so excited. Fess adjusts his sling then leads the way to the other side of the cafeteria.

"I can't think of anything more attractive than tall, dark, and handsome. Who was that?" I hear Elena's voice coming from behind me as she wraps her arms around my back, leaning all of her weight on me.

"Hello Elena," I say, spinning on my heel.

Elena was trying hard to look good today. Her auburn hair was put back into two French braids. Her eyeliner was too heavy, but her bold blue eyes screamed *I'm ready to meet my future spouse*. She even wore a dress, a sight rarely seen in Myressa. I scan the room and notice a lot of women wearing dresses.

I didn't get the memo apparently. My blonde hair was thrown up in a bun, and I wore sneakers, leggings, and a Panama City Beach tie-dye t-shirt.

"That was Fess. He's one of the refugees," I say, suddenly insecure in my clothing choice.

The people that live in Myressa are the ones that escaped the abductions six years ago. There were only around seventy of us at the time, some have passed since, some we've found, and we've even had some births. Nevertheless, the choice in partners dwindled dramatically.

Thus, making this occasion not only victorious in freedom but also opening the doors to new romance.

With Evan being Elena's twin, there was no competition there, so I was lucky to have found someone back then. Elena and the other girls have been less than thrilled over the years. Today changes that for them.

"Do you think I'm his type? If so, I have to get to him before Lacy," Elena says. I look away from Fess to see Elena looking at him like a snack.

"I think he probably has his hands full with Monty right now, but he has friends I can introduce you to," I say.

She looks at me suspiciously.

Fess and Monty return with bags full of supplies. I introduce everyone as we wait in line for breakfast but while Fess is staring down the food - Elena is staring at him.

We grab our trays and search for seating; my first major decision is approaching. I could either sit with Fess and his friends that saved me a seat or I could sit at my normal table where there isn't enough room for Fess and Monty. I wouldn't even be giving this a second thought if I didn't promise Evan breakfast.

Fess looks at me and I know he can tell I'm torn.

"Hey, Monty, tell Lizzie goodbye. We'll see her later," Fess says.

"What? Why," Monty asks, panicked.

"It's okay, she will be back after we eat," Fess says looking over at Evan's table.

I toss my head back frustrated and walk over to Evan. I drop my tray to the table causing a clatter. Everyone looks up as I sink into my seat crossing my arms as I sit.

"Lizzie's married with a kid now," Elena says laughing, sitting across from me.

I throw a blueberry at her and she ducks it. I do *not* need her putting ideas into Evan's head that I'm interested in someone else.

"They are my friends," I say.

"A hot friend," Lacy says, trying to catch another glimpse of Fess.

"Oh, he's off-limits," Elena says.

Evan releases his spoon into his oatmeal and looks up at Elena.

"Why's that," Evan asks, suddenly interested in the conversation.

Elena points across the table to me, "Ask her."

Evan squints his brows at me. I shrug him off.

"Anyways, what's on your schedules for today," I ask.

Lacy points to Elena, "We are joining the supply handout. He's helping with job allocations."

"And you," Evan asks, picking his oatmeal covered spoon back up.

"Job allocations," I say looking back. "Then the funerals"

"Right," Evan says, reaching over to grab my hand. I squeeze back.

"Today will be interesting," Elena says, stretching her neck to look at the boys sitting with Fess and Monty.

After the cafeteria cleared from breakfast, the "job fair," for lack of a better term, began. The kitchen was busy with dishwashers and the smell of lunch was already wafting out into the open space. I look over as Evan takes the seat next to me and he hands me a water bottle.

"Got to make sure my girl stays hydrated," Evan winks. I feel my cheeks burn with blush.

"Thanks," I hesitate to ask what's been on my mind. "Are we okay from last night?"

“Of course. I’m sorry if you felt like we weren’t okay. Sometimes that green monster pokes its head and I just felt severely jealous. That’s not your fault though and I’m sorry. Truly.”

I lean over and grab his face, placing a delicate kiss on his lips.

I sit back in my seat and feel my cheeks even redder from the mild PDA. The lines begin to form and I open up my notebooks in preparation for the next couple hours.

At Myressa we all work. We all benefit from each other. There’s no profit or loss for a single person. We either thrive together or fall apart together.

We have gardeners, cooks, cleaning crews, carpenters, child care, plumbers, hunters, scavengers - like me, and the list goes on. They say it takes a village. They were right.

The lines were pretty heavy but going fairly fast. I see Tony next in line. I help the lady in front of me to find a job with the plumbers and then welcome Tony to my table.

Tony sits across from me hesitantly.

He’s looking everywhere but at me.

“Have you given much thought of what you might want to contribute here at Myressa,” I ask. Tony scans down the tables studying everything that’s happening.

“Tony,” I say.

“Did you say something,” he snaps back to this dimension.

“Uh- yes. I asked if you know what you want to do,” I say. I readjust my shirt in an attempt to get more comfortable.

“Is there something down on the ground,” he asks. “Heights scare me.”

“Yes actually. You could be a scavenger. We search nearby houses for supplies,” I say. “I warn you it can be dangerous.”

“I don’t mind danger,” he locks eyes with me in a blank stare.

I nod and break eye contact to fill out his paperwork. I have such an uneasy feeling with him watching me. “Be at the docking station at sunrise and we’ll leave then.”

Before I can get another word in he walks away. I look over at Evan who is looking at me trying not to laugh.

“That was the most awkward conversation I’ve ever witnessed,” Evan says letting a laugh escape.

“More awkward than when my dad found us-.”

Evan grabs my hand to stop me, his eyes wide.

“People can hear you,” Evan gestures to the people in the room.

I smile at him and he squeezes my hand.

Another lady sits in front of me as I notice Fess taking a seat in front of Evan. I watch as both of their bodies stiffen up. Promptly, their shoulders seem broader and I swear I’ve never seen Evan’s posture so upright. I try to be present in the conversation with the lady in front of me, but, I can’t help but bear witness to the *situation* next to me.

Evan leans forward placing his forearms on the table. Fess doesn’t budge.

“I was thinking you might be good at gardening, what’s your name again,” Evan asks.

“My name is Faysal, and I was actually talking to Mr. Abernathy after breakfast and he suggested I volunteer to be a scavenger,” Fess says, looking over at me.

I dart my eyes away and back at the lady in front of me. Oh God, what was her name? That’s right, it’s Petra. I think she told me she enjoys cooking, but I have no idea. She’s a real talker.

Evan is leaned back in his chair now. I try to watch with my peripheral but my eyes keep wandering over to their conversation.

Fess crosses his arm over his chest, “Ethan, I don’t want to be a gardener.”

Evan sucks his cheeks in, something I’ve observed he does whenever he is getting irritated.

“Evan,” he says, correcting Fess. “Fine, you can be a scavenger. I have to warn you it can be dangerous.”

“Why are you so adamant about me not taking on that role,” Fess asks, leaning forward.

Evan looks over at me and he catches me watching them. I avert my eyes back to Petra. I feel Fess looking at me now. I have never wanted to sink into the core of the Earth more than I do right now.

“It’s just that it’s a time-consuming task and you just took in an infant,” Evan says clearing his throat.

“I see,” Fess says leaning back into his chair.

“Be at the docking station at sunrise. That’s when they leave,” Evan says. “Also, they’re almost done for the year so in the off-season you’ll have to fill in where needed.”

“I understand,” Fess affirms.

Evan rips off Fess’s papers and hands it over to him.

Fess looks over at me once more, stands, and leaves. I finish Petra’s paperwork and when she leaves I place my hand on Evan’s shoulder.

“That was the most awkward conversation I’ve-.”

Evan gives me a look and my joke fades away.

-

I knock on the door and Elena yells for me to come in. Her treehouse is bright with murals on all the walls that she’s done over the years, my favorite being the one of butterflies.

There's no sign of her uncle Chase or Evan in the living space at all, you would think only Elena lived here.

Sitting on the floor, her legs were spread apart as she stretched to touch her left foot. I sit down in front of her and begin to stretch too.

"How many miles are you thinking today," Elena asks, finally hopping to her feet. She tightens her shoelaces again before grabbing her jacket and throwing it on.

"I'm thinking five, I've got a lot to clear from my mind," I say, opening the door for her. "We'll have to be quick though to get back in time."

She takes one last look in her mirror by the door and applies chapstick. We jog to the pulley's and ride them down to the ground. I take the lead and guide our jog over to the stream. We run down our beaten path that we made ours.

"Is it weird doing our normal routine when life is anywhere but close to normal," I ask, Elena running next to me.

"I think resuming normalcy is all you can do," Elena says.

We continue with a comfortable silence settling between us. We never feel as if we have to make conversation, the beauty of a best friend.

"Any new scavengers," Elena asks, breaking the silence.

"A couple. Faysal and his friends Tony and Jayden," I say.

"Either of them available?"

I laugh, she's always the romantic. "Tony is weird; Jayden is a flirt."

"Jayden it is," Elena laughs, picking up speed, I quicken to get back in step with her.

"You're really cool with that guy living with you?"

“He’s a good guy, *I think*,” I pause for dramatic effect and Elena laughs. “Faysal and I both kind of decided to look after Monty. Besides, he *was* shot and it doesn’t hurt having someone around to help you get through that.”

Elena grabs my arm and we slow to a halt as she catches her breath. I continue to jog in place to not lose my rhythm.

“Seriously, if he tries anything with you I’ll hand deliver him back to the Government.”

I roll my eyes playfully, “There’s nothing to worry about, we’re just friends - if you would even call us that yet.”

Elena shakes her head, “Lizzie, please realize my feelings are valid in saying this: do not mess around and end up breaking my brother's heart. If it comes down to it I will pick my brother every time.”

“You’re overreacting,” I wave her off, doubt creeping into my heart. “Race you back to Myressa?”

Elena smirks and takes off back home, her ponytail swinging side to side as I chase after her.

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My dad’s office is the closest to the Government’s headquarters and the highest point of Myressa. With his telescope, he can see across the quarry to the outer gates of the Government. I knocked on the door and it creaked open. My dad was sitting at his desk intently typing on his typewriter. I sit in the chair across from him and he looks up at me.

“Lizzie, what are you doing here,” he asks, beaming. “You’re quite sweaty”

He hands over a towel and I wipe my face



“Just checking on you. It’s been a pretty exciting twenty-four hours,” I say. “Are you documenting?”

Part of his role as President is to be a historian for future generations. Nothing major has happened in years so it’s been mainly a farmer’s almanac and an important dates list, like last night and every detail since.

He stands up and pulls the paper out of his typewriter.

“Yes I am, and I think I’m done writing about breakfast. Maybe you could give me some insight on the job fair,” he says, placing the papers from breakfast in a binder.

“That’s actually what I wanted to ask you about,” I say.

My dad crosses to the front of the desk and leans against.

“It’s never, ‘hi dad, I just wanted to see you and say I love you,’” he says laughing at himself. He ruffles my hair causing my bun to fall out.

“Hi Dad, I just wanted to see you and say I love you,” I say, twisting my hair back up.

“Too late, what do you want,” he asks, crossing his arms.

“Fess said you talked to him,” I say.

“He’s correct then,” he says.

“What did you talk about that made you suggest he be a scavenger,” I ask.

“I asked him about the mission yesterday and he told me about how you had each other’s back. I thought about how the scavengers are having to go farther than ever and I suggested he would be good next to my daughter’s side.”

Dad walks back to his seat and takes a drink of his water.

“I have Elena,” I smile and pick at my fingernails to hide my nerves.

“I know, but I always appreciate knowing there’s someone else by your side. Besides he took a bullet for you.”

I roll my eyes, “He did not.”

“He could have left you behind and escaped safely with everyone else and he didn’t. He risked taking a bullet for you, which he inevitably did.”

“Has Evan been acting weird since they’ve arrived,” I ask. My dad spends more time with him than I do since Evan is his secretary.

“Only as weird as to be expected with all of the excitement going on, why?”

“No reason.” I tuck my crazy hair behind my ears. “Are you almost ready to walk over to the funeral?”

“You go on without me, I’ll be down soon,” he says.

### Chapter 3

Being further North presents a lot of cold months for us to adjust to. The first winter was the hardest. We had just lost our homes and we had nowhere to go. We slept in vacant houses, but we moved around frequently. At night we could hear people patrolling for outliers.

Mason was so young, only a year old at the time. It was so hard to keep him quiet. He cried the majority of the winter, missing mom and never truly getting warm enough through the night. We spent that season just surviving. When spring came we started building what we know now as Myressa.

I brush my hair before using clips to pin back the hair that will fall in front of my face. I step into my denim skort and pair it with a long sleeve purple thermal top that I tuck in. I open my bedroom door and Monty squeals when he sees me. Fess gives up trying to put on Monty's sweater and let's him run over to me. I snuggle him close knowing he has no idea where we're going or what's happening. I don't even know if we're supposed to take a kid to a funeral, but it's for his mom so we have to, right? I'm learning how to parent in 48 hours and there's no *What to Expect When You're Expecting at the End of the World*.

Fess hands me the little blue sweater and I help Monty put his arms in. I stand up to grab my black leather jacket from my overloaded coat rack by the door and I accidentally cut off Fess from doing the same. We both nervously laugh and he grabs my jacket for me. He holds it up for me to put my arms in and I thank him as I do so. He grabs his jacket to layer over his button down that's slightly too big.

"Before we go, I think we should take a picture. Who knows when we'll all be this dressed up again," I say digging out my old polaroid camera.

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Fess says and then explains to Monty what a picture is.

I hand the camera to Fess and pick up Monty and we all smile in front of the door before there's an audible click from the camera. We giggle from anticipation as the film whirrs through and prints out the picture. While it processes we sit on the couch to explain to Monty where we are going and why. He doesn't seem to understand exactly and that's okay.

We gather ourselves and head to the ropes. There's quite a bit of people already waiting so we hang back to let them go down first. I feel surprised when I feel hands go around my sides and pull me into a hug. I freeze thinking Fess made such a drastic move but then I recognize Evan's cologne and I realize it's him.

*Why would Fess even do that anyways?*

I turn around and hug him. I formally introduce him again to Monty and remind him of Fess, *like he would ever forget who he was*. We take our turns heading down to the ground. Monty rides down, hugging Faysal tight. We all trek over to the pasture to the North of Myressa that has become our graveyard. Along the way we pick any wildflowers still alive and create a bouquet for Monty's mom. We ask Monty what his parents' names were and he says they were Winston and Bridgette Johnson. He said that she sang 'You Are My Sunshine' until she fell asleep yesterday and we found him.

I feel the tears already stinging my eyes and I see Fess's eyes going bloodshot as well as he rubs a tear away. A group of people were already gathered around the five holes already dug in the ground with the wicker caskets sitting next to each. Faysal and Evan take Monty to the front and Evan throws down a picnic blanket and they all take a seat on it. I find Pastor Devin at the front reading over his speech.

"Sorry to interrupt," I start and he shakes his head pulling me into a hug.

"Not at all an interruption, Lizzie."

I see Bridgette's coffin open and I tell Devin who she is and her name so that he can properly address her in his speech. He thanks me for telling him and reaches into his pocket.

"When preparing her, Paisley found this tucked into her suit. I thought you might appreciate it." He pulls out a thin gold chain and hanging from it is a gold ring featuring a solitaire oval shaped diamond.

"It's beautiful," I gasp, letting him pool the necklace into my hand.

I thank him and join the boys on the blanket.

"Monty, do you recognize this," I hold out the necklace to him and his eyes light up.

"That's Mommy's!"

"You're right," I say, my heart hurting. "What would you like for me to do with it? I can keep it in a box for you until you get older?"

He looks at me funny before taking the necklace from my hand and trying to open up the clasp. His little fingers get it open and he holds it up to Fess, "Will you help me put this on Lizzie? I want her to have it."

I freeze and I know a tear falls "Monty, honey, are you sure? I know this is special."

"I'm sure," he says and cuddles into my lap.

I pull my hair up in the back to allow Faysal to place the necklace on me. He delicately drapes the necklace around my neck. I feel his cold fingers against the back of my warm neck fumble to get the clasp together. I turn around and give him a gracious smile.

"It's-" Faysal starts.

"Beautiful," Evan finishes.

I feel myself heat up even more and I refocus my energy on the funeral that's about to begin.

People went through and wept and prayed over the caskets while also paying their respects before going to stand or take a seat.

Pastor Devin gives his speech before telling everyone about the five bodies that were able to be recovered and given a final resting place. He tells everyone about the list of people that we know didn't make it, including Presley, and how they will always be remembered as well. He then asked for any volunteers to help lower the caskets. I held Monty as Fess and Evan joined the others. Pastor Devin's wife, Paisley, begins to sing Amazing Grace and I curse them for choosing the saddest song in the world. Sunset is almost over as the last casket disappears. The last drop of gold fades to pink and purple in the sky and the weight of today feels really heavy all at once. I help Monty pick up our bouquet and watch him wrap his little hand around it.

We find Bridgette's casket and pause in front of it.

"Now," my throat gets dry and I have to force the next words out, "You can drop the flowers and that way your mommy will always have your beautiful flowers with her. I know she would love them so much.

Monty just stares and I feel horrible. I knew this was a bad idea and I never should have brought him here.

"Will she remember me?" Monty's voice shakes as his lower lip quivers. "I know she won't wake up again, but will she remember me in her dreams?"

I look up trying to sink the tears back into my eyes and my chest heaves. I nod, my lips pressed tight so that he doesn't know how weak I am right now.

"Of course she will," Evan says from behind me. "My mom is in the long sleep too and she dreams about me all of the time, buddy. The cool part is sometimes she will visit you in your dreams too so you will see her again."

Monty releases the flowers from his hand and they cascade six feet down and it feels like this moment is in slow motion.

Monty looks up at me with his big brown eyes and I see his tear stained face, “Can I talk to her before we leave?”

“We’ll be over here when you’re ready,” Evan smiles at him.

I place a kiss on the top of his curly hair before I walk away with Evan. As soon as we’re far enough away I completely break. I turn away and sob way too hard into Evan’s shoulder. I keep mumbling apologies and thank yous and my throat feels so tight I can’t breathe.

Evan directs me to keep breathing in and out while he rubs the back of my head trying to soothe me. I finally catch my breath and just hug him as tight as I can. He rubs circles on my back before pulling back to look at me.

He pulls out tissues and helps me clean up my face that must be putrid at the moment. I blow my nose and it’s absolutely disgusting that we both find humour in it. He kisses my forehead and I just rest against him.

“You are the strongest person I know,” he says and I can’t help but laugh.

“You have to be joking, I’m positive I just had a public panic attack.”

“That doesn’t define who you are. You are strong and you are going to be okay. Everything will be okay.”

“I love you,” I say.

“I know you do, and I love you.”

-

I walked into the cafeteria and the fire pit was lit in the center of the platform. Music was playing from a record player. Dinner was already being served and the smell of spaghetti filled

the air. Lanterns were lit along the walls of the room. Light has to be conserved at all costs in the hopes of staying undiscovered; however, the cafeteria has a net surrounding it that blocks out most, if not all, light.

As for sound, every treehouse has noise-canceling adjustments to them to help block out noise. At night, from the ground all you can see is darkness and all you hear is the babbling creek and squeaky little forest animals.

Mason runs up to me and before he can speak I ruffle his hair.

“Stop that,” he groans, swatting my hand away.

“Stop what?”

I continue poking him until it turns into a full tickle and he’s trying to catch his breath laughing so hard, pushing me off of him.

He pulls away from me and straightens his shirt, “Is Monty my cousin now?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I thought you adopted him? That’s what Av-wee says,” Mason shrugs, trying to say our sister's name, never able to pronounce his R’s.

I pause to think. Monty’s mom is really gone and Faysal and I are really all he has.

“He’s more like your nephew, but you can say cousin if you want,” I ruffle his hair again.

“Thanks for being his friend, kid.”

He straightens his hair back out and runs to join Harrison and Monty.

Evan is already at a table with Lacy where she is intensely intrigued by what he is saying. Lacy’s son is sitting on her lap struggling to get spaghetti into his mouth. He has managed to get it mostly in Lacy’s hair.



Lacy and I went to high school together, but we didn't actually know each other. I only knew her as the girl that was pregnant in the grade above me and she didn't know me at all. I met her after the Abductions. She gave birth to Harrison that first Winter.

Elena is talking to Jayden by the fire pit. He actually seems extremely into her and she is obviously into him. I haven't seen her put in this much work since she tried to date Sam. That's when he came out as gay and all prospects died for her.

Monty is playing a clapping game with the other kids, but not quite understanding what to do, but he laughs it off. It feels so good to see that little boy smile so much.

I go eat by myself near the kid's table to keep a close eye on Monty.

"It's hard to leave him alone, isn't it?" I hear Fess's voice from behind me and I turn to see him holding a teddy bear. He sits beside me.

"I already love him so much, I don't know how it happened so quickly," I say watching Mason trying to explain the pattern to him patiently.

"It's crazy how easy it is to love someone you barely know," Fess says. I look over at him and he's looking at me in a way that tells me he might not be talking about Monty, but I know that's crazy so I just nod in response rather than go down that rabbit hole.

I clear my throat and point to the bear, "Is that your new best friend?"

"It's actually Monty's, believe it or not. Mr Bearson," Fess laughs. "Another kid gave it to him. Said he heard the refugees didn't have toys and wanted to share his."

I smile in awe at some of these kids.

"Kids aren't always little shits," I say, watching Monty play patty-cake with another kid.

Fess lays the bear down on the table and I suddenly feel very uneasy. I'm not sure what to say at this moment, but he's not talking and I squirm under the thumb of silence.

“Fessie,-” I start, but he stops me.

He cringes back and scrunches his nose.

“It’s Fess or even Faysal, but I don’t like Fessie,” he says relaxing back in his chair.

“Why,” I ask, trying to stifle a laugh.

“Because Fessie isn’t cool,” he shrugs.

“Are you trying to be cool,” I ask. I’ve lost it now laughing so hard I snorted.

“Well, no, but,” he begins laughing at me now.

“Fessie, will you pass the pepper,” I ask, grinning from ear to ear.

He huffs and hands over the black shaker.

Monty runs over to us and hops into my lap.

“Can I teach you this thing I learned,” he says bouncing up and down. “It’s called Patty Cake.”

Fess lifts his slung arm, “I would but I’m down a cake.”

I place my hands up and I do the motions with him. Monty giggles uncontrollably at how silly we look. His laughter is so contagious, Fess and I can’t help but laugh with him.

Elena comes to our table and sits in front of us. She leans close to Fess and asks, “Your friend Jayden is hysterical, do you think he’d be interested in me?”

Fess’s eyebrows shoot up and his eyes go wide looking to me for guidance.

“I don’t know Elena, but I can ask,” he says laughing.

Elena’s smile brightens up. “You’re a doll,” she says to Fess. “And you,” she says looking at me, “need to host a game night with our new friends.”

“Tomorrow,” I ask.

“It’s a date,” Elena says. She spins out of her seat and runs to Evan and Lacy to share our plans.

The music stops as the records change.

“Can I go play again,” Monty asks. I nod and he runs back to the other kids.

I look over at Fess and he seems to be in another world. His brows are furrowed and his gaze falls to the middle of nowhere.

“Are you okay,” I ask.

“My parents loved this song. They danced to it at their wedding,” he says. “I almost forgot about it.”

“Last night I think you were going to ask me to dance. Is that offer still available,” I ask.

Fess looks at me, a faint yet grateful smile on his face. He holds his right hand out and I take it. We walk over to where other couples are dancing. I hold his right hand and place my other hand on his left side so I don’t hurt his shoulder. We stand two feet apart. We turned in slow circles so he didn’t hurt his ankle, but his limp was mostly gone.

“How was your day,” I ask.

“I spent most of my day seeing the doctor. He actually gave me a couple stitches then gave me some pain meds and more supplies for bandaging. He said my ankle’s fine. Just a little bruised,” Fess says. “I’m glad we decided to take Monty in with us. I know that wasn’t an easy decision.”

“Me too, I think we’re really killing it at the parenting game though.”

He relaxes and I step a little closer.

“I’m really loving our little family. We should really get to know each other more too since we’re together all the time.”

“I agree.” I feel my cheeks burning, “I’d really like to know more about you. You’re a bit of a mystery.”

“And I assume you’re a bit of a Nancy Drew?”

“You can trust that assumption.”

His hand on my lower back quickly pulls me tighter against him before spinning around with me. We let only the music speak for us now. Two more songs play. Then another.

I didn’t realize how tall he is. He’s a couple of inches more than I am. My head feels heavier than ever. I just want to rest it against his shoulder.

I feel a fire in my heart begin and I don’t try to extinguish it, curious as to what it is. He releases my hand and places it on the small of my back now below his other hand. I loop my hands around the back of his neck. He lowers his face beside mine and I think he wants to say something.

“Yes,” I whisper.

That cement feeling takes over my body again and I can’t turn to look at him. My chest is beating faster and my brain can’t keep up.

“May I cut in,” Lacy says. Where did she come from? *No*, she can’t cut in. I was dancing with my new friend and she’s being absolutely rude.

“I guess we did dance to an entire album, didn’t we,” Fess asks. He’s pulled back now, but his hand hasn’t left my lower back and I’m very aware of it. I’m fascinated by every one of his movements.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Evan standing by a nearby table glaring at us. I release Fess to Lacy.

“I’m going to take Monty home,” I stutter.

Fess's smile falters, but he nods.

I go and pick up Monty. We leave without talking to anyone else.

He falls asleep snuggled up in my bed next to me while I read next to my candle. I hear him come in and make the couch up and I quickly fake sleep. My door is still wide open and I hear him walk into my room. He takes the book out of my hands and places a bookmark in it before laying it on my side table and blowing out my candle.

I lay awake for the rest of the night. I wonder what he's thinking about.

Is he thinking about his first day tomorrow?

I wonder what he and Lacy talked about. They were together for a while.

Is he thinking about her?

Is he thinking about me?

Is he asleep or is he awake in agony like me?

-

I've become too good of friends with three a.m. My mind feels like a prison of confusion. I don't know logic from emotion anymore and the restless nights aren't helping. It holds me up in torture all night and then keeps me hostage in my sleep to where I never hear an alarm to wake up.

I'm late to the scavenger orientation from dropping Monty off at daycare. When I arrive Anya is standing in the front going over the rules. Our numbers have grown from eleven to twenty-four. This means we'll most likely break off into groups of four.

"Thanks for joining us Lizzie," Anya says, raising her brow at me. I toss a small wave her way and find a seat. Anya has been a woman I've been able to look up to since the Abductions. She worked alongside my dad rebuilding Myressa. She has experience in welding and my dad

has experience in architecture. These skills lead to Myressa. Not only has it kept us safe for years, but it's also built this beautiful fortress.

Anya was president for four years before my dad. She decided to step back to lead the scavengers into more fruitful excursions. My dad was voted into the presidency the next day.

"Beggars can't be choosers," Anya says. "Food and warm clothing is always a priority, but you never know what you might find."

Anya unfolds a map of Virginia and pins it on the tree trunk behind her. Most of the areas close to us are blacked out from already being drained of resources. Other pieces of the map have red 'X' signaling places that have been burned down.

"We haven't done a supermarket in a couple of years because we didn't have the numbers to take it on," Anya says. "However, today changes that."

Anya breaks us up into groups of four like I assumed she would. She keeps old partners together and matches them to the refugees. Elena and I have been partners since we started six years ago. I honestly wouldn't trust anyone to have my back more than her. Anya pairs the two of us with Fess and his friend Jayden.

We make our way to the docking station and ride the pulleys to the ground of the forest. As easily as the trees trap the humidity, it also traps the frigid temperatures. We all bundle up and start walking to the main roads.

"Anything special on your list today," Elena asks. A perk of being a scavenger is being able to find things for yourself. Of course, we take requests from other members of Myressa, but it's still nice to find our own things.

"Tomorrow is Avery's seventeenth birthday," I say.

"That's how old you were when the Abductions happened, isn't it," Elena asks.

I nod. "I promised dad I would find her something nice."

Elena links our arms and warms herself up next to me. We make it to the main road. It's a lonely mountain road that takes you to nearby mountain towns. Today we're going a bit farther. A Walmart is supposed to be an hour away but we haven't been to one in a while since we were almost caught in there once.

We have a van with a trailer attached that we've hidden in camo and foliage near the road. Anya and her team uncover the van and we all load up. Anya starts the drive and we settle into a road trip through the thinning trees of the mountains. Now that it's winter we only scavenge once every two weeks. The trees have thinned too much and have left us more exposed than when we are in warmer months. Even then we only go once a week to reduce the risk of being captured.

I'm wedged between Elena and Jayden in the back row now. All of the refugees are in so much wonder at how marvelous the mountains are. They haven't seen anything like this in years except for when they ran for their lives to Myressa.

Anya is trying to enter a CD into the radio and she hits a button that places it on FM. The sound from the radio haunts us as a siren plays into the car along with a message.

"The world is under attack. Don't trust government employees. Find refuge," the radio repeats over and over. The same message has been playing for six years.

Anya hits the button, switching it back to the CD and everyone goes quiet.

"Just so everyone is aware," I say, "A lot of people died during the Abductions."

"We're aware," a refugee rolls his eyes at me.

"I don't think you are," I say. "What you're about to walk in on is a lot of decaying bodies. Young and old."

Anya turns the music down now.

“The Government killed most people that weren’t willing to surrender. It gets easier to rummage in places where people have died, but,” I say, “It never gets easier when you see someone you once knew. People are mostly bone now, but some are still identifiable by clothing.”

“She’s right,” Anya says. “If you don’t think you can handle it you can stay in the parking lot as a lookout.”

She turns and talks to the man in the passenger seat. I think he was the assassin. I never met him during the planning stages, but I’m glad he made it out safely.

Most of the refugees that escaped were younger men. A few women and children, but no one past the age of fifty even attempted.

“It’s crazy how the world was fine, I mean it was bad, but we were fine. Then we woke up one morning and it had gone to total shit,” Jayden says looking across Fess and out the window. We are approaching neighborhoods now.

“How much worse was it inside the walls,” Elena asks.

Jayden leans across me and the two of them start a conversation in my lap.

“I feel like the only way to describe it is monotone. The same thing every single day. We were robotic,” Jayden says.

“I couldn’t imagine,” Elena says.

“I feel like it was all a bad dream. I went to sleep when I was twelve and woke up at eighteen,” he says.

I look over at Fess and he rolls his eyes. I roll my eyes back to show I agree with him.

“Where’s Tony,” I ask Jayden.



“He decided to stay home, didn’t feel well,” Jayden shrugs. “Elena, you’re a twin, right?”

Anya pulls onto a highway and slowly navigates through the cars deserted in the middle of the road. I rest my head on Elena’s shoulder and sleep the rest of the way there.

-

“It feels so unnatural to be here right now,” Jayden says.

“Like Anya said, you can stay outside,” I say. I push the sliding doors open as we step inside the store. We all grab a shopping cart and break off into our assigned tasks: pharmacy, food, weapons, luxury, basics, and a team for the lookout.

“It’s not that. I just can’t get over how empty this place is,” Jayden says. “It shouldn’t be this way, it’s a Walmart for crying out loud.”

We were assigned luxury scavenging per my request. We open the second set of doors and the darkness from inside blankets over us. The rancid smell of the bodies decaying has dissipated as it worked down to only the bones. We turn our flashlights on as we start navigating through the sea of bodies.

The scene here is like many others. Carts full of supplies, unbagged meaning they were most likely stealing in a desperate attempt to survive, faced towards the doors. The skeletons left behind tell the stories of how they tried.

“What kind of luxury items do we look for,” Jayden asks. He picks up an emoji pillow and looks at it with his flashlight.

“We have a list of things people have requested,” Elena says. “We always start with the back.”

We walk to the back of the store where bright TVs once illuminated the walls. We start in the farthest aisle for books.

“Do you think we need another John Green novel,” Elena asks, smiling at me.

I tilt my flashlight up to my face, “We always need another Paper Towns, my dear Margo.”

“There are records on this next aisle,” Fess says, the first time I’ve heard his voice in a while.

“You two go look, Jayden and I have the books,” Elena says.

The back of the store is less crowded with bones. Apparently The End of the world didn’t call for another Mariah Carrey Christmas album or flat-screen television.

“Vance Joy is always a must,” I say. Fess had lifted the album and was examining it with his light.

“I agree,” he says. I think in the shadows he was smiling. “I overheard you saying it was your sister’s birthday tomorrow.”

“She’ll be seventeen,” I say scanning through the records. “I actually need to find something for her.”

“Any ideas on what to get,” he asks.

“A couple,” I say. “So, where’s your family?”

I can hear his breathing hitch in the silence of the abandoned superstore.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I didn’t mean to hit a nerve. I just didn’t know if they survived the Abductions.”

“They’re alive,” he says. “Most of them anyway.”

I know I shouldn’t pry, but I really want to. I turn my shopping cart down the next aisle where there’s a row of cameras.

“We can’t use any of this, can we,” Fess asks.

I scan the aisle until I spot what I'm looking for. A polaroid camera and packs of footage. I hold it up and he flashes his light towards me.

"You know everything, don't you?"

"I like to think so," I force my smile to go away.

He pulls something out of his jacket pocket and shows it to me. Our picture from yesterday. I take it from his hand and inspect it carefully.

"That's a good looking group," I say handing it back to him.

Elena rounds the corner with Jayden and a stack of books up to both their necks. I flash my light onto the cart to help with their aim as they release them into the cart. The books smack into the metal bottom of the cart almost tipping it over.

"What's next," Jayden asks.

"Candles," Elena and I say together.

We've scavenged together hundreds of times over the years. Our routine is fairly down.

"Do you think you guys can manage some candles while Elena and I search for something," I ask. They nod and point their lights towards the 'home' department.

"Are you looking for an animal mug," Elena asks. We step over a corpse and push towards the dishes.

"Avery always needs another sloth mug," I say, folding my arms.

"You should get her something different as well," Elena says.

"What did you have in mind," I ask.

"I was thinking of some makeup," she says, passing the card isle and walking over to the Maybelline section.

"Isn't she a little young," I ask.

“Say it with me, *seventeen*,” Elena says, holding out an eyeliner.

“Fine. Grab her whatever you think she might like, but then we’re finding an elephant mug,” I say taking the eyeliner and tucking it into my pocket. I haven’t used makeup much since the Abductions.

I grab a plethora of makeup options for the others at Myressa while Elena grabs a full face of makeup products for Avery and drops it into my duffle to keep it separated. We stroll over to the mugs where I find one I haven’t seen before. It’s a giraffe mug with the neck curving in to become the handle.

We run through the list to grab the rest of the requests which are all mainly in the crafts area. Candle making, scrapbooking, jewelry creations, and tons of art supplies.

Like a thief, the rapid sound of a torrential downpour hitting the metal roof echoed through the department store.

“Let’s go find the boy’s,” Elena says.

We find them in the candle aisle with no candles in the cart yet.

“Just pick some,” Fess groans at Jayden.

I turn my light to Jayden to see him holding a vanilla candle in one hand and a cucumber candle in the other.

“We take them all,” Elena says emphasizing the all. She circles her light around the candle wall. Jayden places the candles into the cart gently as the rest of us try to clear out the shelf as fast as possible.

“Is that rain,” Jayden asks.

“Does it sound like rain,” Fess asks, pushing the cart forward.

“Well-,” Jayden starts.

“It’s raining, and honestly we need to hurry so it doesn’t get worse on us,” I say.

We go to the clothing aisle and take all the winter coats, scarves, and gloves we can find. We begin to stuff the puffy jackets into every crevice of each of our carts. As I wrap some scarves together to push down into the cart a hand appears in front of me holding a tiny yellow jacket.

“For Monty,” Fess says. He flips the hood up to show me that he thought it was cool that it had a hood.

I place my hand on the jacket and our fingers brush. I pull my hand back and Fess is standing fairly close to me. My back was against the handle of my shopping cart, the metal cold against my t-shirt.

“It doesn’t smell as bad in here as I thought it would,” Fess says.

His words catch me off guard and I lean back too far against the cart causing it to push out from behind me. I start to stumble back and Fess grabs my arm to stop me from falling.

“Well, all the flesh and food has rotted away by now so there’s nothing to really smell anymore,” I say pulling my arm back and tucking a piece of my hair back into my braid.

“Kinky,” Fess laughs.

“I try,” I say through a forced smile.

A red light is flashed by the front door, meaning it’s time to go. We all head towards the entrance and the rain is just *beating* down. We make a run for it to the trailer one-by-one. I go last and the rain hits so hard it almost feels like hail, looking at all the ice on the ground I realize it is hail. I roll my cart into the back of the one last left in front of the trailer. The assassin guy, I think his name is Silas, is standing in the back of the trailer loading the stuff from all of our carts.

I piled into the van with everyone else dripping wet. My hair sunk down my back, my braid

coming apart heavy with water. My eyelashes drip with water onto my cheeks as my teeth begin to chatter. The water is settling now causing our body temperatures to drop and we all shiver.

I was one of the last in the van so I was up front behind Anya. The trailer door shut and Silas ran around to the passenger seat. Anya counted us off to make sure everyone was inside.

“Anya it’s raining really hard,” I said leaning over into the front seat.

“I know, kid,” she says leaned forward trying to see through the rain. The wipers couldn’t go fast enough to keep the relentless rain off the windshield, and the sporadic hail. “Your dad said it would. I should’ve listened.”

“‘When the leaves are on their undersides, it’s going to be raining outside,’ he says,” I mock his deep voice.

“Those damn leaf bellies,” she winks at me in the rearview mirror. When she looks back at the road I catch Fess stealing a glance of me in the mirror. We both look away.

In a flash, a windshield wiper snaps off and flies away at the same time as a massive crack etches across the windshield. Everyone stops talking and lurches forward as Anya slams on her breaks. She shouts and slams her fist into the steering wheel. Anya takes a deep breath and turns to face us with a tired look on her face.

“I guess we aren’t getting home today guys. We will have to wait out the storm,” Anya says. She drives into a nearby abandoned neighborhood. She slowly drives all the way to the back, the pounding of rain against the roof of the van. I can’t help but shiver as the water drips from my hair and trickles down my skin.

We pull into the driveway of a house that has the least windows and doors busted out. She stops the car and turns the one wiper off. We sit in silence, no one wanting to speak first.

Anya opens her door and the interior lights turn on, basking us all in a yellow tone. Henley, the guy next to me, slides open the door to the van and starts running inside. I follow him through the overgrown grass trailing Anya to the front door that was wide open from being kicked in all those years ago. She steps in first, the sound of her foot against the old wood floor creaks into the house as everyone gathers around us on the porch. The sound of a rodent scurries across the floor and Henley groans beside me. I elbow him and shoot him a 'shut up' look.

Anya begins to check the rooms and comes back for us saying the coast is clear. I can't help but sneeze going into the house. Roots had grown up through the porch reaching across the door threshold. I break them off so that the door can shut again. Elena comes downstairs with a pile of towels that she drops on the dining room table sending dust billowing into the air. I squeeze my ponytail and the water drenches onto the floor. Fess holds a towel out to me and I take it. The smell of mildew overwhelms my nose and I decide to air dry.

"There are no other towels?"

"Beggars can't be choosers," she winks at me.

-

An older couple lived here which makes sense as to why I'm now wearing a daisy covered knee-length sleeping gown, my hair now in a damp bun.

"Would you rather," Jayden says laying on the carpet.

"No," Elena says, lying next to him picking at her nail polish. Her own nightgown had a matching robe while our clothes dry.

"Truth or Dare," he says.

"No," I say, crisscrossed on the bed.

"How about we just talk," Jayden says, turning onto his side.

“Talk,” Fess asks, shifting next to me on the bed. Jayden was wearing some old button-up pajamas and Fess is in a robe since he was too big for anything else.

“Yeah, we were never allowed to just talk inside that prison. It would be nice,” he says.

“What do you want to talk about,” I ask.

“Philosophy,” Jayden says.

Elena laughs, “You’re just going for it.”

“What about it, Jayden,” Fess asks, leaning back onto the bed, his legs hanging off the edge.

“Is there a God,” Jayden asks, laying on his back to stare at the ceiling.

“You really just went for it,” Elena says.

“Of course there is,” I say leaning back on the bed next to Fess.

“Debatable,” Fess says.

“What is there to debate,” I ask looking over at him.

“How can you justify there being a God when only bad things happen,” Fess asks.

“When, because of Him, we are precisely in this mess.”

“God is love and that’s what he intended for us to do. He told us to trust him but the president took the Bible and considered it God. He manipulated it until it mirrored his goals and that’s when he took over calling it a crusade. That wasn’t God, *that* was man,” I say.

“Easy to say when you haven’t lived in hell for the past six years,” Fess says.

“Back off,” I say sitting up, “We’ve all been in hell the past six years.”

We all sit quietly. The stuffy air in the room sucking all of the life from us.

“So, twenty questions anyone,” Jayden asks.

Fess leaves to join the others downstairs and I can’t help but wish he didn’t.



“Why is he like that,” I ask, throwing myself back down onto the bed.

“He has his reasons,” Jayden says picking at his dark curly hair.

I pull myself up from the bed and decide to go apologize. That was such a poor reaction on my part. He has the right to believe what he wants to believe.

I open the door and he’s sitting in the hallway with his back against the wall, his legs bent as they were squished against the opposite wall. I sit down next to him pulling my knees up to my chest, hugging them.

At the same time we both rush out an ‘I’m sorry.’

“Really though,” I start, “I am sorry. That was not the right reaction. It’s not an excuse, but I think I was just caught off guard because we’ve just agreed on everything else so far.”

“I’m sorry too, I was a bit harsh so I understand why you got defensive. I just have seen how manipulated religion can get and I think I’ve just been so scared from it I have no interest in it now.”

I shake my head, “That must be so hard for you.”

He shrugs, “I just try not to think about it now.”

“Well, if you ever want to talk you always have me.”

“I do?”

My eyes go wide because his voice has suddenly gotten so deep and I don’t know to what extent he is asking.

“Yeah,” my voice sounds so small all of the sudden. “You’ve got me.”

His face is serious as he locks eyes with me and I feel that fire in my chest again and it’s getting wilder. He places his thumb against my chin and I lean into it unable to stop myself from wanting to fan the flames. “You have me, too.”

He drops his hand and I can't break eye contact. My heart is beating so fast and I see his chest quickening.

A group laughter erupts from downstairs and we both jump back and I clear my throat.

"As long as we're good," I say standing up.

He quickly responds, "Yeah, we're good."

I help him stand and we are once again standing way too close.

"Good," I say.

"Good."

-

I wake up next to Elena on the squeaky twin bed that she has stolen all of the covers off of. I look over the edge and Fess is already awake on the floor next to me. He sees me waking up and I nod my head towards the bedroom door. He gets up and I follow him out. We try to not wake everyone in the house as we make our way down the stairs. I wave at him to follow me out the back door and I see Anya in the kitchen already rustling up breakfast.

On the back porch are tons of potted plants that have either embraced their new free life and grown rapidly or they are completely barren. I take a seat in one of the rocking chairs and Fess takes a seat in the one next to mine. We silently take in the sunrise as steam rises from the ground. Everything is soaked from yesterday and there's random puddles formed all across the backyard.

Once the sun has fully appeared in the sky I notice all of the chatter inside. We decide to join the others inside and find our friends in the kitchen.

"Do you really need to make those noises," Jayden asks squirming in his chair.

“Well, yeah. High-quality coffee is an aphrodisiac for me,” Elena says, shooting him a sly smile. Without breaking eye contact she moans as she takes another long sip of her coffee.

“Jayden,” Fess nods for him to follow him out of the room.

I shove Elena’s arm, “Play hard to get why don’t you.”

“Last night he said I had a cute laugh,” she giggles, both hands grasping her mug as she takes a sip.

“When was this,” I ask, taking a sip of my coffee.

“Around midnight. We were up all night talking and I think I’m in love”

“I’m glad he thinks your laugh is cute,” I say.

“Who’s laugh is cute,” Anya asks, entering from the kitchen carrying the kettle. She pours more coffee into Elena’s cup.

“Mine, Jayden told me last night,” Elena says grinning from ear to ear.

“Don’t go soft on me, kid,” Anya says smiling.

“There’s a difference in emotional and soft,” Elena says pouring sugar into her coffee, “I’m just a badass looking for love and the Lord has finally granted me a male specimen to infatuate myself with.”

“This badass needs to get home to her lover,” I say looking at my watch.

“Do you think he’ll be mad we missed game night,” Elena asks, downing the last sip of her coffee.

“The real question is how long do you think it’ll take him to get over it,” I smirk.

Elena laughs knowingly.

“What’s got you all laughy today,” Jayden asks, walking back into the kitchen with Fess.

“We were just talking about my brother,” Elena says blushing.

“That’s your fiancé, right,” Jayden asks me.

I nod and start to pick at my nails.

“He just gets antsy whenever we’re gone longer than expected,” I say.

“I’ll say,” Fess murmurs, but I catch it.

“Do you have a problem with my brother,” Elena asks, never afraid of confrontation.

“Nope. Just ready to get home and see Monty,” Fess says.

I shake my head knowing that Fess is still not Evan’s biggest fan and I understand they aren’t always the nicest to each other. Everyone breaks apart to get ready for the drive home. I retire my nightgown for my damp clothes from yesterday. Everyone is back to normal except for Jayden who decided it would be funny to wear the robe Fess had on last night.

Chapter

“Monty,” I squeal as Fess and I walk into the daycare.

“You’re back,” he jumps up from his blocks and runs into our arms.

Fess holds him as we wrap him in a hug. One of Fess’s arms moves from Monty’s back and finds its way around me.

I hug them both tighter.

“Too tight,” Monty gasps.

We lessen our hug and I step away as Monty giggles.

“Can we go home now,” Monty asks.

“How about some breakfast first,” I say.

“I already had breakfast,” he frowns.

I look at Fess because I know he’s hungry too. All we’ve had is coffee today and that was three hours ago.

“How about a super special secret second breakfast,” Fess asks in an excited voice.

“Okay,” Monty nods his head smiling.

We walk the bridges to the cafeteria where the other scavengers already have plates. Evan was sitting with Elena. He looks up at me and smiles. I sent Fess on to get his food to join them.

I walk over to Evan and he stands to give me a big hug.

“I missed you last night,” he says.

“I really missed you too,” I say and he spins me around.

“It was a brutal rainstorm. We almost lost the Porter’s house again. Your dad is requesting new supplies to reinforce their home,” he says. He always makes me internally chuckle when he

does this. He knows that I don't need to know about the Porter's house but he tells me like he knows a big secret that I get to be in on because I'm his girl.

I sit down next to Elena eating her oatmeal.

"Oh, let me go get your food, you have to be starved," Evan says. I smile at him and he goes to get me a tray.

"He seems chill today," I say shocked.

"Well, he and Lacy had a game night last night without us," Elena says, her eyebrows perched high.

"Excuse me, what," I ask, leaning towards her, my fists clenched and eyebrows equally high.

She gives me a smile and takes another bite of her food, "I love him, but sometimes he's a little shit."

A tray is sat in front of me and I look up to see Fess and Monty. Fess had gotten us all three breakfasts. I can't believe he thought about me and the thought of him thinking of me causes a smile to sneak onto my face and I want to smack it right off.

"Monty thought we should get your food too," Fess says sitting across from me, Monty on his lap.

"Thank you Monty," I say, reaching across to boop his nose.

Evan walks up and stands next to me, banana and oatmeal in hand. He rolls his eyes when he sees me eating.

"At least I got you a banana," Evan says trying to laugh it off, setting a banana next to the bowl Fess got me.

"I have to go to work, I love you, Lizzie," Evan says kissing the top of my head.

“You too,” I say watching my spoon stir.

-

I was one of the lucky few. I lived despite it all. Despite the Government and the anarchy. Despite all the odds, I lived.

Somewhere in this timeline I live on I began to hope again. Hope gave me strength and that combined with the bravery that my mom instilled in me made me who I am. I promised myself I would never become someone the world was forcing me to be. Yet, despite all of this, I don't remember who I was before this all began.

In another six years, will I remember who I was today?

If I chose someone six years ago, do I have to keep choosing them? I'm no longer the same person, yet I feel an obligation to honor the commitments I made when I was the stranger I once knew.

“Lizzie,” Monty says peeking out from my bedroom door. He rubs the sleep from his eyes as he drags a blankie behind him to the couch.

My feet are perched on the coffee table, a blanket covering my legs as I read a book. Monty pulls himself onto the couch next to me.

“I miss my mommy,” he says sniffing.

“I know you do,” I say. I pet his hair back and try to soothe him back into his nap.

“Where's Fessie,” he says and I can't help but smile when he calls him that.

“He went to see his friends, baby. He'll be back soon,” I say.

I close my book and I pull Monty into my lap. I rock him until he goes to sleep.

The front door creaked open without a knock. Elena peeks her head in and spots me on the couch with Monty. She smiles really big and quietly shuts the door behind her.

She pulls my blanket around her legs as well and snuggles up to a pillow.

“Is there a reason your baby daddy is sitting outside your house,” Elena whispers.

“Fess?”

“I didn’t stutter,” she tries to stifle her laugh.

I hand Monty over to her and she rocks him.

I try to keep my door quiet as I sneak out.

Sure enough, Fess is sitting on the bridge outside my house, his feet hanging off the edge as he hugs one of the rope railings. The snow was drifting down from the sky and he was covered in it.

I sit down next to him, the bridge sinks a bit causing me to start up a sweat despite the cold. I cling onto the rope with dear life.

He looks over at me and smiles so softly I can hardly tell that he did.

“I can’t stop thinking about what must be going on back there,” he says.

“What do you mean,” I ask, trying not to look down.

I try very hard to ignore the fact that we live in the treetops and hanging over the edge of a bridge is just flat out not helping.

“I just thought some of my friends were going to try and make a break for it. I just wonder if they stayed, or died trying like Presley,” he says.

“Tell me about them,” I say and swiftly hate myself for sounding so dumb.

“Another time,” Fess places his hand on my shoulder and I stiffen up.

“Sure,” I say.

He looks at me and down at his hand as he slides it off my shoulder. I slide back to stand up.



“Truth is,” he says and those words settle me back down next to him, “I feel like I’m falling in love.”

My breath ceases to exist. I feel nothing and everything all at once.

He notices my abrupt facial expressions and his face goes red, “I mean with the world. I never got that opportunity and now I have the world at my fingertips and I just feel selfish to be so in love with a world not everyone gets to experience.”

I shake my head at him trying to hide relief from my face.

“Love is selfish when you love wrong, but at its core, it is also patient and kind, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs,” I say standing up.

I take a deep breath to calm all the nerves that are causing a fuss in my head.

“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres,” Fess says, looking up at me. “1 Corinthians?”

I nod.

He looks back out into the forest, “Love never fails, but sometimes we fail those we love.”

I can’t tell who he’s talking to now: himself, the Earth, or someone he loves.

“Have you ever been in love before,” I ask.

He hesitates, looking at me and then back into the forest. “I thought I was for a long time. I sort of met this one girl on the first Clarity Day. I never got her out of my mind. I think about her all the time and wonder if she even remembers me. Looking back though, I realize now that that was more of an infatuation than love.”

“How do you know the difference?”

“An infatuation is short-lived. Nothing became of it and I think I just got swept up in the hope of it all. I was infatuated with the idea of her.”

“Evan will be here soon to help set up for Avery’s party and Monty should be up by now. Come in whenever you’re ready,” I say, my heart clenching so tight I can’t breathe.

-

“I know you would rather read your book but if you could pick up the other side of the banner that would be lovely,” I say to Evan, smiling.

He shoots up from my armchair and laughs. He goes to the other side of my living room, “Sorry, I was distracted.” We pick it up together and pin it to the wall with tape.

“Do you know what that says,” Fess asks Monty.

Monty shakes his head mischievously. Fess is showing Monty how to wrap presents. They are looking a little rough, but Avery won’t mind.

“It says ‘Happy Birthday Avery,’” Fess says excitedly.

“Who’s A-vuh-wee,” Monty asks shyly, struggling with her name.

“That’s Lizzie’s sister,” Fess says, smiling.

I can’t help but grin at the boys. I look across at Evan and I know he saw me watching them.

Evan sits back down, but doesn’t grab his book.

“So, how old are you Faysal,” Evan asks.

“It’s just Fess,” he says. “And I’m the same age as Lizzie, 23.”

Evan nods.

“I’m three,” Monty adds proudly.

“Do you guys have a wedding date yet,” Fess asks tickling Monty causing an eruption of giggles.

Evan looks back at me and I try to sink into the Earth, but apparently I’m lacking that skill.

“Miss Indecisive hasn’t chosen one yet,” Evan says a small, yet playful smile attempts its way onto his face.

“I hadn’t pegged you as indecisive,” Fess says to me. He adjusts his sling and I see him wince.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about her,” Evan says.

Faysal smiles, “And I can’t wait to know more.”

They both look at me and the tape falls out of my hand and to the floor with a loud, hollow clatter.

“Nobody ever wants to get to know me,” Elena says licking her finger and poking it in Evan’s ear.

“Seriously,” Evan questions, wiping off the side of his face in disgust.

“We’re gonna go change your clothes now,” I narrate in an animated voice picking up Monty. I shut the door behind me so I can breathe.

The amount of testosterone in my living room is draining and I wasn’t prepared emotionally to deal with that today. I pull the clothes off of Monty and change him into a green thermal long-sleeve and jeans.

“Promise me you won’t grow up into a meathead,” I say picking Monty up.

“I promise,” he says, hugging my neck.

I hear the front door open. A knuckle raps on my bedroom door. Elena opens it.

“Hey there, cutie,” Elena says, picking up Monty.

“Hey there, cutie,” Monty echoes back to her giggling.

We laugh at his chubby cheeks smiling at us. He reaches over to Elena and I let her take him. I’m so glad to see him building relationships with people outside of our home. Not that I think of my house as an ‘our home.’ I meant Fess and I. Not that there’s a Fess and I. Fess. And. I. Two separate entities. Okay I’m going to stop overthinking now.

“Lizzie,” Monty says.

“Yeah?”

“You’re making a funny face,” he says giggling into Elena’s shirt.

“I think that’s her face all the time, Monty,” Elena says, tickling him.

We regretfully go join the others in the living room. My dad and little brother are talking to Evan and Fess and I have never felt more uncomfortable in my life. What would these four men have to talk about? Anya walks in a while later with Avery and I can suddenly breathe again.

Something about my sister’s presence makes everything ten times better. Sister’s make life tolerable when you’re stuck in cringe worthy functions like the one that’s occurring.

“I invited a boy,” Avery whispers in my ear as we hug.

“A boy,” I say, a little too excited and a little too loud.

“Shhhh,” she laughs.

“What about a boy,” Elena says pinching Avery’s cheek.

“There’s a boy that came with the others. His name is Tony,” Avery says, a blush appearing on her cheeks.

My shoulders drop and I can’t help but look at her like she’s crazy.

“What’s wrong,” Avery asks her eyes filled with worry.

“How old is that guy,” I ask, annoyance slightly in my tone.

“Nineteen,” Avery says, taken aback.

“Let her live a little, she hasn’t seen a cute boy in six years,” Elena says pinching my cheek now.

“Hello ladies,” my dad says, giving me a hug.

Elena starts the music and Anya takes Mason to go dance.

“Would you like to dance,” my dad asks Avery. She smiles at him and takes his hand.

Evan moves my coffee table against a wall. Dance parties are a staple in our society.

There’s no other group activities besides monopoly but that’s only up to eight players.

Elena sets Monty down and tries to teach him how to Twist. He’s so cute shaking his little booty.

I look around and notice Evan and Fess sitting next to each other on the couch. Both leaned back with their arms crossed. Both watching me.

They look at each other and I try not to literally die from hyperventilating. Evan releases a sigh and pulls himself off the couch. He smiles at me slightly and I can tell he’s trying to push through the tension in the air and just enjoy tonight. I breathe and I smile at him for the first time in what feels like forever. He reaches out for my hand and I give it to him.

“Would you pretty please dance with me,” Evan asks and I nod.

He holds my hand and slides his other hand to the small of my back. We stand inches from each other and he kisses my forehead.

“Lizzie,” he says and I look up at him. “You know I chose you, right? I never saw you as an ‘only option,’ I truly fell for you. End of the world or not, I think I always would’ve found my way to you.”

“You really think so,” I ask. I can’t make eye contact with him because I know if I do he will somehow be able to read my mind and I can’t break his heart. He can’t know the doubt that’s seeping and intertwining into my every thought.

“Oh, baby, I know so. Don’t ever doubt how much I love you,” he says smiling at me.

I kiss him. His lips warm against mine, slightly chapped from the winter air making its way into our lives. I put my head against his chest to dance and play the part of everything being okay, but over his shoulder I see Fess. The feelings I get when he looks back at me don’t make sense and I don’t know if I’m alone in this. The fire keeps getting stronger and I’m starting to lose control. Fess gives me a reassuring nod and I close my eyes.

“What about next month,” Evan says to me.

“What,” I ask, confused. I open my eyes and I watch as Elena dips Monty.

“We can get married next month,” Evan says.

My dad twirls Avery and I can tell she loves it.

“That’s fast,” I say, my palms beginning to sweat.

Anya and Mason do the twist and it absolutely does not match the song.

“Not when we’ve been wanting this for years,” he says, taking my hand. He looks at my ring and smiles. “I can’t wait to finally be married to you and I think we’re finally in a place where it’s possible.”

“But-“ I start, Evan rolls his eyes so I stop.

“I don’t understand why there’s always a ‘but.’ It’s a yes or no,” he says frustrated.

“No,” I say, “it’s too soon.”

“Fine,” he says.

“Did you really have to have this conversation at my sister’s birthday party,” I huff.

“Well, I didn’t expect you to say no,” he said.

The record stops and jolts on repeat.

“I need to go flip it over,” I say, jutting my thumb behind me at the record player.

“I got it, you go ahead,” Fess says getting up from the couch.

“Of course you do,” Evan says.

There’s a knock at the door.

“Must be Tony,” I say, releasing Evan.

I open the door and Tony’s standing there.

“Am I in the right place,” he asks, trying to mask how uncomfortable he is with a smile.

I open the door a bit wider for him to come in.

“Hey man,” Fess says, clapping his shoulder, “What are you doing here?”

“Avery invited me,” Tony says, searching the room for her.

The music turns down and I look over at Avery standing next to the record player.

“So it’s my birthday and I nominate that we do presents now,” she says prancing over to a seat on the couch.

I close the door and take Monty from Elena to give her a dancing break.

“It’s time to show off your wrapping skills,” I say to him excitedly.

I sit next to Avery with Monty on my lap. He holds out the bag filled with all of her presents from us. She lifts the tag and smirks.

“From: Literally Everyone,” she reads.

“First,” I say, “I want to make a toast to the woman that you’re becoming.”

“You make a toast to the woman I’m becoming every year,” she says burying her face in her hands.

“And I mean it every year. Now, hush,” I laugh. “Avery you are now the age I was when the abductions occurred. Somehow, you grew up in this world that was filled with so much fear and yet, you somehow never let it affect who you are on the inside. I see so much of our mother in you,”

I choke back the tears welling up in my eyes. My mom should be giving this toast, not me.

“So much kindness and hope. You are so brave. Mom would be so proud of the woman you are. This world may change, and so may you, but those traits our mother instilled in us will never leave you. Happy Birthday,” I toast.

“I second that,” my dad says in the corner chair, tears rolling down his face. Avery hugs me, her tears soaking my shirt.

“I thought you’d be immune to my speeches if you hear them every year,” I joke.

“I’ll never not cry,” she says, wiping her eyes.

I smile at my dad while everyone cheers as Avery tears into the old wrapping paper.

“I needed a giraffe mug,” she said proudly holding up her new mug.

“Need,” Tony questions.

“Everyone needs an animal mug,” Avery blushes.

“Of course,” Tony smiles.

I can’t help but wonder what it is about my sister that makes this guy instantaneously not so weird.



“I wrapped these,” Monty says tugging on Avery’s shirt.

“You did a fantastic job,” Avery says ruffling his hair.

Monty smiles over at Fess proudly. Fess winks at him and something about that interaction makes my heart all mushy. I have to pull myself together.

“You didn’t get me makeup,” Avery asks, squealing.

“Oh yeah we did,” Elena says, matching her excitement.

“We did what now,” my dad asks sitting up in his chair.

“Come on Dad, I wore makeup at her age. Soften up,” I say. Elena and Avery give me a thankful smile.

Dad huffs sulking back down into his chair muttering something under his breath.

“Can I try that stuffs,” Monty asks looking at the shimmery eye shadows.

Avery opens a pack up and rubs her finger across a shimmery blue color. She swipes it across his hand.

“Do you like it,” Avery asks.

“It’s so pretty,” Monty exclaims and everyone laughs.

“Do you like it,” I ask Avery.

“Love it, thank you,” she says, hugging me.

## Chapter

The next morning I wake up to a crash in my bathroom. I shoot out of bed and notice Monty isn't next to me anymore and I instantly feel panic lurching in my chest. I throw my blanket off and rush out of my room. I swing my door open and the lightness of it causes it to slam into the wall. I find Monty sitting on the coffee table. His face shoots up to look at me as if he had been caught.

"Oops," he says. He looks next to me toward the bathroom.

Standing in the doorway is Fess laughing hysterically. My hand makes its way up to my mouth as I twist my bottom lip. Fess is standing in a towel. Water is navigating its way across his chest all the way down to the towel wrapped around his waist. I gulp back and notice I'm staring. The fire flickers in my chest rapidly. I blink my eyes rapidly to get them to focus and I see what all the ruckus was about.

He had kicked over a water pale and water was flooding out into the living room. I let out a laugh, masking my relief. I point to a chest sitting outside of the bathroom. He flips the top open to find a heap of linens and towels.

He starts to crouch down then remembers he's in a towel.

His eyes dart back to me, "I'm gonna put on some clothes first."

"Good idea," I giggle. I feel my cheeks begin to burn and I hide my face refusing to blush. If no one sees it, then it never happened. I take towels out and soak up all of the water.

A couple minutes later he comes out in some sweat pants and I notice how hairy his chest is and how toned he is under that hair. I know he sees my staring, but I just can't look away. He looks the guy on the cover of a novel I would never take in public and I silently beat myself up for thinking this way about him. I drop onto the couch and pull a blanket over me and his scent

washes over me as I realize the blanket I grabbed is the one he sleeps with at night. He finishes cleaning up the mess he made then plops down on the couch next to me and tries to wrap his arm back up.

“I’m sorry we woke you, I was trying to take a bath and when I stepped out I didn’t see the bucket. There’s no lights in this place, you know,” he says.

I sit criss-crossed next to him. His bare shoulder exposed the gunshot wound and my chest tightens. I peek up at his eyes and he catches me. I dart my eyes back to his wound he was wonkily wrapping up.

I take the gauze from him and undo what he has already done. He watches me carefully as I wrap him up.

“Does that hurt,” I ask, pulling the gauze a bit tighter.

He shakes his head as he watches my hands.

“Well it sure looks like it does,” Monty says wide eyed.

I look at Monty and his face is turning white.

“Do you want to go make our bed,” I ask Monty.

He nods his head and runs into the other room.

I look back at Fess and I feel my whole body stiffen. The way his eyes were searching my face made me subconsciously hold my breath. Sitting this close to him, watching his eyes trail over me sent me back into that feeling of nostalgia. He winces back to reality and I realize I had let my hand rest down on his shoulder. I’m suddenly exceedingly aware of how much my morning breath smells.

Monty runs back into the living room and throws himself into my lap. Fess and I flip him over and attack him with tickles. Monty laughs and wiggles uncontrollably sliding to the floor.

I scoop Monty up and place him between Fess and I.

“What do you want to do today,” I ask ruffling Monty’s hair. “Your pick.”

“Really,” he asks, looking between the two of us.

Fess and I nod curious as to what he might say.

“Can all your friends come over again,” Monty says hiding his face.

“Yeah, buddy. Did you like hanging out with them,” I ask. I look at Fess confused as to why Monty was being so shy. Fess shrugged his shoulders.

“Elena,” Monty said trying to hide his smile.

“You like Elena,” I tease and Monty nods his head, burying his face into Fess’s chest.

“We can finally have game night then,” I say.

“Let’s get going for breakfast. Dad called a meeting with everybody this morning,” I say picking Monty up to go change his clothes.

“You might want to put a shirt on,” I tease Fess.

I swear he winks at me, but I play it off as a twitch. Him winking at me would be too much to process. The thought of this man is already complicating every part of my being. I can’t have him confusing my feelings for him. I need to keep part of my sanity. We’re just two pals that are watching a kid that we found the first time we met running away from people shooting at us, nothing more. It can’t be anything more. We can’t be anything more.

But he winked at me.

-

The smell of pancakes snuggle our noses when we walk into the cafeteria. Monty runs off to play with Harrison and Mason. I notice our table is merged with a second today. Elena is leaned over, deep in conversation, with Jayden. I follow Tony’s gaze to the kitchen and I see him

watching my sister serving food. Evan and Lacy sit as far as they can from the others on the other side of the table. On the other end Bobbie is so small it's almost like she's hiding behind Jayden's shoulder. She sees me looking at her and I jump my eyes back to Fess.

"Everyone's getting cozy," Fess says grabbing a tray.

"I wouldn't quite say *cozy*," I say thinking of how distant Evan and Lacy were being.

I take Fess's tray from him, but he tries to hold it for me as I load our plates onto it, "You have one arm, I got this."

He smirks at me.

"So," I start, "This morning I'm going to church."

Fess looks at me curiously, "Church?"

"Yeah, we still have church every week," I wave at Avery down the line.

"Do you think Monty is going to enjoy it," he asks.

"I just thought he could just stay with you," I say.

"Were you not just inviting me to go with you," he asks.

I force myself to not look at him so I can hide the confusion on my face.

"If you want to," I say, shock a little too present in my voice.

"Of course I'll go," he nudges me with his good arm, "thanks for asking."

We join the others for breakfast and the boys run over to eat with us. Fess and I were wedged between Lacy and Bobbie. Evan knocked my foot under the table with his. I give him a knowing glance and pour syrup onto my pancakes.

"I'm exhausted," I yawn.

"Yeah, well, Harrison was up all night with a stomach bug," Lacy says fake yawning back.

“You being tired does not invalidate me being tired,” I force a smile at Lacy and she rolls her eyes at me. “We’ve been over this.”

“I have been informed by my boy Monty that there is to be a game night in the Common Room,” Elena announces, trying to break the awkward silence I somehow created. Again.

“Only if there’s Twister,” Jayden winks at Elena.

“Oh, there will be Twister,” Lacy says and I swear she’s looking at Evan when she says it.

“Now is this an actual game night or is everyone going to get stuck in a hailstorm in the middle of nowhere again,” Lacy continues.

Evan snickers but catches me furrowing my brows at their little inside joke as if we didn’t know what was so funny.

“What’s everyone’s plan today,” Tony asks.

“We are going to church,” Fess says, knocking me with his elbow, I can’t help but grin.

“Didn’t know there was a ‘we’,” Evan says in a deep sighed whisper.

I ignore his comment.

“Good morning,” my dad announces in a booming voice. Conversations dull as everyone turns to look at him. “It’s been brought to my attention that the housing arrangements may have to be a bit more permanent for a while. Construction has been brought to a halt because of temperatures and the need for stricter noise cancellation. This is only for the time being, but expect things to be back to normal by the beginning of Spring.

“It also seems as if this winter is going to be a tough one. The snow began yesterday and shows no signs of stopping so we are cancelling all runs for the time being. We prepared for a rough winter so don’t worry about that. My door is always open if there are any questions.”

Somehow tensions rose at the table. I don't know which was worse: semi-permanent housing situations or being stuck here for a couple more weeks.

Conversations started back up around the cafeteria but no one at my table dared to speak. My dad walks over to me and places a hand on my shoulder.

“So glad to see you all getting along so well. It really shows a unity to the rest of Myressa,” my dad says, smiling.

“Anything for you, sir,” Evan says nodding at my dad.

“See you in a few,” my dad says, leaving the table and heading towards the church.

I shove a whole pancake in my mouth and hope I choke so I don't have to go anymore.

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Church pews hold history. They remind me how humans are all creatures of habit. No matter how old we get or how many times we file into this little church we always go to the same exact seats we always have. It's like school. On the first day you pick wisely because even if you didn't get assigned seats everyone respects first day seats. It's fascinating how comfortable we get in repetition.

I imagine these church pews before they were at Myressa and the creatures of habit that sat in them every week. Families have grown here. People have grown up on a pew and stayed until they died. The continual iteration of having “your” seat has created a history for these pews.

So when the new people navigate the church in order to create their space to continually return to every week, I can't help but influence where Faysal sits.

With Monty next to me and Faysal on the other side of him. Avery is on my other side with Mason next to her, per usual, but it leaves Evan and Elena out. Elena already moved on to

sitting with Jayden. Evan sits on the dreaded first row and I know it has to kill him, but I have no choice with Monty to think about.

And then the preacher preaches and it makes it worse. It feels like his words are targeted at me and I swear Pastor Devin looks at me when he says what I need to hear and I want to hide.

“It’s interesting how every time things change, every time ‘something bad’ happens we always blame God. We accuse him for not knowing what he’s doing and that for some reason we’re just being tortured, as if we’ve forgotten he is an omniscient God. If you think for a minute about those hardest seasons of life you might notice that those are the seasons we grow the most in life. We mature through what’s hardest on us.

“Most importantly you have to realize that growth doesn’t look the same for everyone. Sometime’s growth isn’t about *becoming* someone, but sometimes it’s about *unbecoming* everything you thought you were supposed to be. It’s like breaking a bone that healed wrong so that it can finally heal right.

“So when you are going through those particularly rough points in life try to think about what lessons you can learn from life because if you get stuck in the ‘woe is me’ you’ll realize that the devil is in the details.”

Pastor Devin takes one last look at me before turning to look at another poor soul and I sink into the pew. I don’t know if I’m searching through the details or if I’m growing or if I’m just bulldozing to not deal with a single issue.

-

Elena’s head is tilted so far to the side her ear touches her shoulder. I match her stance as I watch Lacy bend backwards on the twister board catching her right hand on a blue circle underneath Evan. I look down and Monty’s head matches ours.



“How is she doing that,” Monty asked wide-eyed.

“Yoga,” I say, picking him up. He instantly reaches over to Elena and she takes him as he giggles in excitement.

Avery is playing a game of Go-Fish by the bookshelf with Mason and Harrison. I can see frustration setting in with her as Harrison rips a card in half and throws a tantrum.

Fess and his friends are playing a game of Jenga at the table. He gets a block out successfully and places it on top. He looks up and smiles at me and I smile back. I turn my attention back to Twister and wonder how Lacy is bending like that. The mega-twister board isn't small and there is no need for her to be so up-close and personal.

Evan's foot slips and he topples down on top of Lacy, her head thudding to the ground. She tries to laugh through the pain.

“I win,” Lacy says through a pained smile.

“Your ass hit the ground first. I think that qualifies as a win for Evan,” Elena says.

Lacy and Evan walk over to us stretching.

“I have never seen you bend like that before,” I joke to Evan remembering his arched back as Lacy snaked her way under him.

“I bring out that flexibility in him I guess,” Lacy says winking at him.

I snap my head to look at Elena and then at Evan, “Did she really just say that?”

“I think she did,” Elena said.

Evan shakes his head at Lacy trying to get her to stop when Harrison runs over. He pulls her away to help him with something and I'm left with Elena and Evan.

“I can’t deal with her sober,” I say walking to my bag on the couch where I hid my tequila handle. I unscrew the top and tilt the bottle up as the disgusting and acidic taste fills my mouth. I hold it in my mouth as I try to swallow and gag as it goes down.

“You really took that like a champ,” Evan says winking at me.

“Tequila was all I could find on such short notice,” I say with a hiccup. “Round 2.”

The Jenga tower falls by Jayden’s hand and the others join us for another game of Twister.

We start getting tangled pretty quickly and soon enough I’m face to face with Faysal. His arm has to go on the red spot under me and like a clandestine meeting we’re pretzeled together. My next move would have to be placing a foot under his body and I don’t think I could do that without us being on top of each other in a friendly way so I drop. I make it look like an accident and shrug in defeat.

Slowly, one by one, everyone else starts falling. Monty’s arms can’t reach another red and he falls down, his leg wiping out Lacy’s arm.

I set up a new game of Jenga and Fess follows me.

“You gave up so easily,” Fess whispers to me.

“I fell.”

“You had plenty of room to keep going,” Fess says, placing the next set of blocks on the tower.

“You got me, I chose to fall,” I say and he smiles big like he knows something.

Monty rushes over to us and decides to join our game. We finish building the tower together knowing one of us is going to make it fall. Evan comes over and sits between Fess and I and Monty tells him he can join our game. One by one we take out our blocks and stack them as

high as they will go on the wobbling tower. Everyone starts to watch as it turns into the most-tense game yet as the tower is taller than it's ever been, even with a toddler playing.

It's my turn but after Evan placed his last block down; the tower started leaning to the side. I start thinking in damage control mode on how to save it. Everyone got extremely quiet and all eyes were on me to see my next move. I can't win here and the only option is to allow the tower to fall so that we can rebuild it. I just stare though because no one wants to be the one to cause the Jenga tower to collapse. Then Evan reaches over and slightly nudges it over and all the piece's clatter to the floor. I look at him with my eyebrows raised.

"Why did you do that," I ask.

"It should have fallen over on my turn," Evan shrugs, scooping the blocks into a pile.

"But you lost," I say, helping him put them back in the box. He went to say something else but decided against it as he helped me up to my feet.

Avery picked up Monty and took Mason's hand, "I pulled the short straw and I'm on babysitting duty. Monty can sleep at the house, but I have to be up early."

She calls for Harrison and the four of them leave for the night.

The silence settles in the air like the snow on the roof. No one really knows what to do now and Evan reaches down to hold my hand.

"I heard you have tequila," Jayden says walking over to the bottle on the table.

"Yeah, go ahead. Pass it around," I say pointing to the bottle. I pick up the box of Jenga and place it back on the board game shelf.

"Did they have alcohol inside the gates," Elena asks.

"Of course not," Jayden says, tipping the bottle back. "Not even hooch"

I reach out my hand and he gives me the bottle as I try to take another swig. The fuzzy feeling starts to break up my thoughts and Evan squeezes my hand and gives me a, 'You okay?' look. I take another shot and give him an affirmative smile.

"We also didn't have games. I used to play chess in my head with my step-dad," Fess says, leaning against the wall. "He won every time."

The room got even quieter with that comment as the people from inside the gates choke back the thick air settling around us.

"Faysal," Bobbie says.

He waves her off, "I shouldn't have said that. Ignore me."

"Did your step-dad not make it," Evan asks delicately.

That was the knife. I could feel him slicing the air with a knife and I have no idea why the room is so tense.

"No," Fess says, picking up a deck of Uno, "No, he didn't."

"I'm sorry," I say, picking up the stack he dealt me.

"Don't be," Bobbie says annoyed.

"Excuse me," I say in defense of Faysal, my words leaving my mouth before thought by the influence of tequila.

"She's right. My step-dad was the worst," Fess says, laying down the first card. "Draw four."

"I know how you feel man, I lost my step-dad in all this shit too," Evan says drawing four.

"You really don't know, man," Fess says.

Evan shoots me a ‘seriously’ look as everyone takes turns laying down cards. I don’t know why Fess is being so rude. My dad’s always been like my best friend so I never really understood strained parent relationships. I know something more has had to have happened but I can ask him that another day. Now is the time to take him down with the draw four – color changer in my hand.

“Look, all I’m saying is, don’t ask me for help with the plumbing if you don’t want to find me eating a banana while painting my nails on your toilet,” Elena says crying laughing. The game of Uno long forgotten, we all sat around telling stories as we got more and more drunk.

It was probably three in the morning and my mind was fleeting.

“Okay,” I hiccup, “But you forgot the part where I found you in the tub, a foot deep in Jello. That’s why I asked you to fix the tub in the first place.”

“Where did you find a bathtub amount of Jello,” Jayden manages to ask through snickers.

“It’s the end of the motherfucking world. You can find anything,” she says, raising the bottle of tequila. I stand up to take it from her and stumble.

Faysal grabs my elbow to steady me, “I think it’s time to go home.”

“You are very correct,” I say.

“I can take you,” Evan says getting up.

“I got it,” Fess says, taking my arm in his, “We do live together.”

Evan rolls his eyes, “Trust me, I know.”

Faysal puts my jacket on me and we step out into the cold. The snow has stopped falling, but the bridge is frozen in ice.

I shiver in the cold and try to take another sip to warm up my mouth.

“Give me that, you have had a little too much tequila,” Fess says putting his hand on the neck of the bottle.

I reach out and boop his nose, “No, you’ve had too much tequila, mister.”

I trip forward and giggle.

“I didn’t peg you as a drinker,” Fess says as I let the bottle slip from my hand to his.

“Being drunk is better than thinking of you the way I do,” I say with a hiccup. “I rather feel like I’m on fire than feel the fire.”

He shushes me, “Lizzie, be careful what you say. Sober thoughts become drunk words.”

“How is it that I’m this wasted and you are still the only thing on my mind,” I say, stopping to look at him. “I think about you all the time. And I wonder if you are thinking of me. I wonder if you ever think about me the way I think about you. I think about you in a way where I just really, really like being with you.”

He sighs and caresses my cheek, “I think you mean Evan. I’m Faysal.”

I place my hand on top of his and lean my face into his hand.

“I keep telling myself the fuzzy feeling I have around you is fine and that I’m fine, but I’m not, you know, fine,” I say.

“Drunk poetry,” he says, dropping his hand from my cheek. He locks my arm to walk me home.

“I’m trying to tell you something,” I say with annoyance tinted in my voice, my drunken tears welling up for no reason.

“Just don’t,” he says. “Tell me whatever you want when you’re sober. If it takes alcohol to tell me, I don’t want to know.”

“Faysal,” I say. He looks at me and in a blink I’m waking up in my bed.

I lean over and start gagging and immediately there's a trash can by my face that I hurl into. I try to roll back up under my covers, but Faysal makes me sit back up handing me water. I drink as much as I can before my head is back on my pillow. Before I fall asleep I see Fess sitting on the floor next to me and I reach over the side of the bed and grab his hand. We lock eyes and I'm back in my dream world.

I wake up but my eyes are still glued shut. Someone is stroking my hair and from the calluses on their hand I think it's Faysal. I roll over to face him and he doesn't stop stroking my hair.

"The Tequila Queen has finally awakened from her slumber," he laughs taking his hand away. My head winces from the noise and I shush him. He grabs my water and makes me drink some more.

"How much do you remember about last night," he asks me.

I retrace my memories and they stop at the bridges when I was about to confess something to him. I think I tried to confess my feelings to him. I groan and shove my face into my pillow.

"The last thing I remember is you and Evan deciding who was walking me home. Thanks by the way," I say sitting up, the heel of my palm pressed against my forehead as I try to get rid of this impending headache.

He locks eyes with me and I feel like he knows I'm lying. I peel at my nails as I try not to look away first.

"I should tell you, you confessed some things last night on the way home and I think you have a right to know what they were," he says.

“Faysal,” I say taking another sip of my drink, “for the sake of my sanity, please do not tell me what I said when I was drunk.”

He nods and then climbs into my bed and sits next to me, taking my hand. I think he wants to say something else but he doesn't. We just sit there, my hand in his while my other hand tries to suppress my headache.

I lay my head down in his lap and he continues to stroke my hair again and all I can think about is how much I wish I hadn't drunk that much tequila.

“Oh,” I sit up, instantly more memories come rushing back, “Monty.”

Fess chuckles at my panic, “I already picked him up this morning. He's sleeping on the couch. Apparently the boys were up all night.”

“You are a dream come true,” I sigh.

“I know, now go back to sleep. I'm going to run a few errands.”

“Errands?” I raise a brow at him.

“Jayden and I are going to get Monty a bed so you don't have to worry about waking him when you go to bed later than him.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No,” he says standing from my bed. “Jayden and I have some catching up to do so I think it'll be good for us. I'll be back in a bit.”

A little while later I decide that I have to get out of bed at some point. I can tell Monty is awake because I can hear him talking to himself as he's playing. I realize I'm still in the same clothes as last night. I decide to put on my favorite sweats and a giant hoodie. Monty was so excited to see me to tell me all about his night with the boys and all the things they played, but



all I could think about was going to pee. I crack the door and mumble “yeah” and “mhmm” as he tells me these really loud stories.

When I get to brushing my teeth I help Monty do so as well and continues to talk through the toothpaste in his mouth. He’s getting it everywhere and the mess is making me grin. I clean him up and help him put on a sweatshirt since it's starting to get really cold.

“It’s quiet time now kid, what book would you like for me to read?”

Monty runs over to his stack of books on the bottom shelf of the bookcase and pulls out “Are You My Mother?” and hands it over for me to read.

After the fifth read through I hear someone coming up to my house. I hop up to open my door. Jayden is walking backwards and almost crashes into me as he steps into the door carrying the bottom end of the bed while Fess is on the other side helping navigate him. Jayden isn’t listening to instruction and Fess is clearly agitated as he keeps raising his voice. Every time Fess snaps, Jayden laughs because he thinks it’s hilarious and I can’t help but snicker alongside him.

“You think this is funny?” Fess asks, his jaw dropped.

“Kind of, yeah,” I laugh and Monty joins me.

“You got it, Fessie,” he shouts at him.

The guys turn the corner to my room chipping a piece off of my door frame and I hide my eyes so I can’t see their path of destruction. Jayden appears in my bedroom door with a large smile on his face. He salutes and then scurries out the front door. Faysal steps out, rubbing the stress out of his eyes.

“Voila, you’re very own bed kiddo,” Fess gestures for Monty to go check it out. Monty hops up running to our room. Faysal replaces him, taking Monty’s spot on the couch removing his backpack. He digs around inside it and hands over a thermos to me.

I open it up and I instantly recognize the familiar scent of coffee. I take a deep breath and instantly feel giddy. “I love you so much.”

“Um,” Fess hesitates. I look up and notice his eyes bugging out and his face completely white.

“No,” I stopped him abruptly. “Not you, the coffee. I mean, you’re great and I really appreciate you and you’re amazing for getting me coffee, but I definitely love the coffee.”

Monty runs out of the room holding his box of racecars, “Can I play cars on my new bed?”

“Of course,” Fess agrees.

Monty runs back into the room and Fess gets up from the couch taking the children’s book from me and putting it back on the shelf. He grabs the books we have been reading and hands me mine. Fess finds a massive sherpa blanket and throws it over my head. I drag it down over my face and my hair is standing up on all ends from the static. Fess sits down next to me and I throw a corner of the blanket over his lap.

“That’s all you’re going to share? I bring you the love of your life: coffee, and you give me a sliver of a blanket?”

I dramatically roll my eyes at him and give him an inch more and he pulls the full blanket off of me and tucks it around himself.

I open my book and try to focus my eyes on the page, but my headache is impeding my focus. I look over at Fess and he seems to already be lost in a fantasy world. He peeks up at me and I turn my eyes back to my page trying to read again.

I reread the same sentence what feels like fourteen times and sigh out loud with frustration. I steal a glance of Fess again and watch as his eyes shift across the page like a typewriter.

“Can I help you,” Fess asks without looking up.

“I don’t feel like reading.”

“That sounds like a ‘you’ problem.”

I sigh even louder and with more dramatic effect. I get no response. I do it again and this time I throw myself onto his lap and on top of his book.

“Lizzie,” he groans looking down at me. I can’t help but grin from ear to ear.

“Does this mean you’ll talk to me now?”

Fess closes his book in defeat. I sit back up and face him on the couch with my knees folded in. He pulls one leg back on to the couch to turn towards me and the other one is outstretched on the floor.

“I’m curious, who were you like in high school,” I ask, rubbing my chin detective style.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he starts. “You first.”

“I was a bit of a brat,” I confess pulling my hands inside my hoodie. “At least Avery used to think so. I wasn’t popular, but I wasn’t unpopular at the same time. I kept a tight knit group of friends and I even had a boyfriend that I thought was going to be the love of my life.”

“The love of your life,” Fess questions and chuckles at the same time.

I put on a thick valley girl accent, “Like totes. I thought he was just the cutest thing and he was a total jock and all the girls at my school were obsessed with him because he could grow a beard before any other guy.”

“Sounds like a catch.”

“Oh, he was,” I giggle. “Jude was also one of my best friends. I really did love him, but I don’t think I was as in love with him as I thought I was.”

“Comparison can make you realize things,” he says.

“It’s also the thief of joy,” I add. “Your turn. Who were you in high school? Did you have all the girls fighting over you? Did all the guys want to be you?”

“Why would the girls be fighting over me?”

I feel my face turn red and I shut my eyes to hide.

“You know.” I look him up and down.

“Are you saying that you think I’m good looking,” Fess asks with his hands on his cheek ‘Home Alone’ style.

“You know you’re hot, let’s just move on,” I attempt to dig myself out of this.

“*Hot?* Now you think I’m hot?” Fess is smiling so big I know his cheekbones have to be hurting. “Are you saying I’m your type, Elizabeth?”

“I don’t have a type. I’m just saying, objectively, you are not bad to look at. Let’s move on,” I groan.

“First you date a jock - what sport did he play?”

“He was on the swim team. He actually won a national championship once.”

Fess bites his lip trying to stop from smiling, “First you date a jock who won a national championship on his swim team, then you date scrawny Evan, now I’m hearing you think that I’m *hot*. Sounds like you have a type and Evan just doesn’t fit it.”

“Did you play any sports,” I ask, changing the subject.

“I was on the track team, I preferred to be a loner, I only had one girlfriend before the abductions, and I was a pretty quiet guy.” Fess rushes out. “Now back to your type.”

I huff not wanting to talk about myself anymore, “What’s your type?”

“You,” Fess says with full certainty.

“Me?”

“Funny - you’re my type, I’m obviously your type-”

I cut him off, “Not my type.”

“Do you think we would have hit it off in high school?”

My smile fades and I shake my head, “I was really committed to my boyfriend. Once I commit to someone I’ve never changed my mind.”

Fess shrugs it off, “If he wasn’t a factor?”

I lock eyes with him and I feel like he’s not asking about high school anymore.

“If he wasn’t a factor,” I pause, not sure what to say. “possibly.”

His smile returns with a sense of satisfaction and he reopens his book, “Just as I suspected. I’m totally your type.”